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The Long View

Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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A proper world civilization thinks at least two hundred years ahead. This is the temporal horizon in which we should be seeing the transition from the world of geopolitical states and capitalist world economy to planetary forms of organization based on global solidarity. It is not only that ethical and political learning takes time but also that the process may involve dramatic crises and tragic catastrophes. Moreover, world-historical developments are not linear. Not all tendencies point to the same direction, developments can be contradictory, and world-historical nodal points include saddle points inducing periods of stasis and regression. From this perspective, I find Richard Falk's last [question](#) the most salient: "Do we have the time?"

In the early twenty-first century, we are facing anthropogenic risks such as nuclear weapons, climate change, and pandemics. We are all part of the same industrial civilization and interconnected through its mechanisms and processes. All this would seem to require a planetary perspective, encouraging and facilitating the adoption of a moral viewpoint, which is based on the ability to see one's self, understandings, and surroundings in a wider context and also from others' viewpoints.

The problem is that our world consists of organized social systems. Organizations are complex responsive processes of relating. Modern sovereign nation-states are organizations, but so, for instance, are their ministries. Other relevant organizations include international organizations such as the OECD, multinational corporations and banks, associations of radical Islam, and the Brazilian movement of landless workers, as well as attempts to build a global populist or alt-right movement. Organizations—as complex responsive processes—are not only responding but also

learning. Learning processes may also lead them to revise their identity, goals, and strategies. Not all learning is progressive; learning can also be regressive, even pathological.

Modern humans are positioned in multiple organized social systems simultaneously, and these positionings condition and shape their habitus and responses to various global processes and risks. Because of the way the world is currently organized, there are structurally induced illusions about how the world works, and these play a key role in economic and political processes. These illusions, as sub-varieties of ideological thinking, include illusions as local and particular knowledge, in contrast to understanding the totality of social relations and processes and from seeing things also from the point of view of others. Things may appear to a particular, positioned actor in a way that reflects the essence only from its limited point of view, which may be distorted or one-sided. At worst, the characteristic modes of responsiveness may include narcissism of collective memory, Manichean dualism of good and evil, and fallacy of composition.

Learning can of course occur within existing systems, and new organizations—such as a world party or global greenhouse gas tax organization—can be created. Dramatic crises and tragic catastrophes can trigger or generate progressive learning, but the point is also to avoid crises and especially global catastrophes, to prevent them from happening. An alternative path is to revise the existing and construct new global institutions in order to tackle common problems in an adequate way. The revised and new institutions should be more open to differences and revision than the post-WWII institutions have been. Self-transformative capacity generates dependable expectation of peaceful changes and qualifies the sense of community, fostering malleable, tolerant, and pluralist group-identities (assuming sufficient socio-economic security, absence of unfair privileges, and other contextual factors). What emerges is a dialectic of global institution building and reorganization of social systems and politics. Falk's question remains acutely relevant—"do we have the time?"—but attempts to rush the process may be counterproductive. Since this is a long and complicated process of institutionalization of mutual acceptance, trust, and procedures and practices of peaceful change, and since it is always vulnerable to escalation of conflicts, an unthinking attempt at global transformations may be disastrous.

Finally, we should also try to anticipate the consequences of planetary unification and the emergence of a global political community. A world political community—perhaps a world state in

some sense—is unlikely to emerge, or be sustainable, without a “civilizing” and storytelling process appropriate for the identity of world citizens. A key question is, would this “civilizing” and storytelling process resonate with deep tendencies underlying actual geo-historical events, episodes, and trends? Are there reasons to believe that world history is somehow—inevitably or otherwise—taking humanity in this kind of a cosmopolitan direction, and that attempts to “civilize” humankind further and cultivate planetary stories about the common fate of humanity are thus grounded on deep non-contingent logics or mechanisms? How contested will this process be? World history is an open-ended process, and, indeed, the process of planetary unification will not result in a harmonious end of history, where everything is tranquil and nothing happens.

About the Author



Heikki Patomäki is a social scientist, activist, and Professor of World Politics at the University of Helsinki. He has published widely on such topics as the philosophy and methodology of social sciences, peace and futures studies, and global political economy, justice, and democracy. His books include *Disintegrative Tendencies in Global Political Economy: Exits and Conflicts* and *A Possible World: Democratic Transformation of Global Institutions* (with Teivo Teivainen). Patomäki is a full member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences and Letters and Life Member of Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge. He is a longtime activist of the international Attac movement and a member of the Steering Committee of EuroMemo and DiEM25. He holds a PhD from the University of Turku.

About the Publication

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