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How Movements Learn

Contribution to GTI Forum [What's Next for the Global Movement?](#)

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As we reflect on the state of the global citizens movement, we can draw insights from the field of social movement learning. Social movements have been learning from one another throughout the modern era. In recent decades, this learning has become increasingly global, through a proliferation of activist gatherings, media, and networks for sharing insights across movements, and through the emergence of an academic field that is systematizing this learning process.

Successful movements operate in a learning mode—learning not only from other movements but also through the generation of new knowledge. Much of this knowledge is localized and context-dependent. Yet, from the growing body of contextualized knowledge being generated across movements, we can discern patterns and principles with universal relevance.

One of these is that successful movements tend to advance through the steady multiplication and diversification of actions within a unified and coherent framework. Such frameworks tend to embody a perspective on history that imbues collective action with meaning and hope; a theory of change that guides action; forms of consciousness raising and training that foster the capacity to initiate creative, context-appropriate actions that are consistent with the framework; and the practice of reflecting on action to learn from it. Many movement activists and scholars also believe that to be effective and enduring, a movement's framework must include moral or spiritual principles that motivate, inspire, and sustain actions that are principled, sacrificial, and focused on a greater good. Indeed, some movements view moral or spiritual transformation as the foundational imperative of this age—a prerequisite for the construction of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable form of civilization that values, and is enriched by, human diversity.

In light of what is being learned about the elements of effective frameworks for movement

action, an important contribution to the global movement of movements would be the articulation and diffusion of a coherent, meaningful, hope-inspiring, and action-informing historical perspective on the great transition itself.

A growing number of movements today appear to see the need for civilization-level transformation, even if some movements focus more on urgent short-term imperatives, while others focus more on long-term imperatives. If we are to foster greater levels of coherence and efficacy among a wide diversity of such movements, it may be helpful to view the great transition as something that will need to unfold through two broad phases, each with its own imperatives.

A sober reading of our historical moment suggests that the initial phase will need to involve the construction of some minimal architecture of global stability and survival, in the context of increasingly cataclysmic threats such as climate change, war, pandemics, economic instability, and other existential challenges. We currently lack the basic political architecture to respond to any of these challenges in a globally coordinated manner. Constructing such systems is arguably the most urgent imperative of this historical moment. The enlightened self-interests of every nation and class will prove a motivating force in this regard. Effective movements, operating in a learning mode, should be able to appeal to this motivation and mobilize growing numbers of individuals, communities, and institutions around the construction of a minimal architecture for collective security and survival.

However, even if minimalist systems of global self-preservation are constructed, they will not be able to address the much more deeply rooted social and spiritual problems that have, for millennia, been the cause of violence and exploitation, of suffering and trauma. These problems arise perennially because of harmful susceptibilities deeply woven into human nature through our long evolutionary struggle to survive. Foremost among these are egoistic and self-interested instincts, tendencies to construct in-groups and out-groups through processes of othering, and the competitive or conflictual behaviors that arise from the combination of these.

Of course, humans are also endowed with remarkable capacities for cooperation, selflessness, inclusivity, and altruism. But humanity has not yet learned how to systematically and universally cultivate these capacities—these powers of the human spirit—which can subordinate our susceptibilities toward egoism, othering, competition, and conflict. Thus, if the first phase of the

great transition must be focused primarily on constructing the minimal architecture of global self-preservation, the second phase will arguably need to encompass these much broader and deeper transformational imperatives. Otherwise, any global architecture of human survival will just become a global architecture of exploitation and oppression.

If this historical perspective is valid, it has implications for the second element of effective frameworks for movement action, alluded to above: their theory of change.

Theories of change that derive from modernity's hegemonic culture of contest tend to promote counterhegemonic forms of political contestation. In other words, they tend to divide populations into good and evil, left and right, or other in-groups and out-groups—and they suggest the need to prevail over “the other” in contests of political power. Paradoxically, such theories of change reinforce the culture of contest that gives rise to most of the problems that motivate struggles for change. Nonetheless, when viewed in the light of a great transition that proceeds through two phases, it is reasonable to assume that contentious theories of change might play a role in advancing the immediate minimal imperatives of the first phase. But contentious theories of change are incommensurate with the imperatives of the second phase.

Implicit recognition of this latter problem has given rise to a discourse, stretching back many decades, on the ends and means of change. Within this discourse, those who recognize the long-term imperative to move beyond the prevailing culture of contest tend to conclude that our means of social change need to be coherent with our ultimate ends. Such a recognition leads away from protest, resistance, and other contentious modes of action, and toward radical forms of constructive agency—or toward struggles to proactively construct the world we want, rather than simply protest or disrupt the world we no longer want.

The first phase of the great transition may require some combination of contentious and constructive means—if only because humanity has been so slow to adopt the radically constructive means needed to supplant the current world system. Radical constructive agency is more difficult and more complex than political contestation. With that said, the more movements learn how to develop capacities for radical constructive agency during the first phase, the more fully and universally this capacity can be exercised during the second phase.

About the Author



Michael Karlberg is Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. His interdisciplinary scholarship examines prevailing conceptions of human nature, power, social organization, and social change—and their implications for the pursuit of peace and justice. He authored the books *Beyond the Culture of Contest* and *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* along with numerous articles and book chapters on related themes. His most recent community-engaged research focuses on the role of radical constructive agency in the creation of more peaceful and just social forms.

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