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A Flowering of Radical Change

Contribution to GTI Forum [Which Future Are We Living In?](#)

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As always, Paul Raskin stimulates with his [opening reflections](#). I acknowledge that in the art of analyzing the present (“Which future are we in?”) and predicting the future (“Which future are we heading towards?”), others are much more capable. I would like to therefore restrict my response to the radical transformations taking place right now towards greater justice, equity, and sustainability, and comment on what I think is the potential of these to save life (human and non-human) from the perils of regression and complete collapse (for which Raskin’s use of the word “barbarization” is rather unfortunate, given that it was a derogatory way that the Greeks and Romans referred to those who did not speak their tongues, were foreign, and considered “uncivilized”).

Over the last decade, I have been trying to document, understand, and be part of many such transformations in India (through the Vikalp Sangam process) and globally (through the Radical Ecological Democracy and Global Tapestry of Alternatives processes).¹ This is not the place to explore these initiatives in any detail, but I would like to mention a few to show what is happening and illustrate their potential. The Zapatista autonomy movement in what is today known as “Mexico” is well-known to many; not so well-known but equally exciting and radical is the Kurdish freedom movement in the quadri-junction of what are today known as “Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey.” In both of these, there is a strong rejection of the “state” as a power-centralizing institution, inevitably doomed to be alienated from the “citizens” it claims to represent and work on behalf of. In both, democracy is radical, exercised from the ground up, and encompassing both political and economic dimensions, with a firm rejection of statism and capitalism. Also, in both, ecological limits and respect of the earth are part of the worldviews on which practice is

based, as is a deep commitment to the freedom and emancipation of women from various forms of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. The assertion of cultural identity and diversity, and education systems that are suited to all the above rather than homogenized schooling that creates clones to fit into currently dominant systems, are also in both. Finally, both are now a few decades old, and while they are by no means perfect, and face enormous challenges from the nation-states within which they are located (including an ongoing and globally neglected war waged by the Turkish state on the Kurdish region), they show the potential of a radical present and future.²

In central India, the Korchi Mahagramsabha, a federation of ninety village assemblies has asserted self-determination, the sustenance or revival of community-governed commons, tackling internal challenges such as gender inequality, and much else.³ It does not reject the Indian state, but attempts to move towards relative autonomy from it, while also engaging with it to make it more accountable to people's rights and welfare.

The potential of holistic transformation that these and other initiatives show can be represented by a Flower of Transformation, with five petals: radical political democracy, radical economic democracy, social justice, cultural (and knowledge) diversity, and ecological wisdom.⁴ There are, of course, many dimensions of these and a bewildering *pluriverse* of practices and worldviews across the world, but many or all of them encompass ethics and principles that may be in common (albeit with diverse manifestations): solidarity, interdependence, dignity of labor, diversity, autonomy, human rights and rights of nature, and peace and nonviolence, among others.

We are, of course, very far from such holistic transformations, locally to globally. But I contend that not only the seeds, but also the saplings and trees (or, to not forget the seas, the polyps and reefs) of a radical change are very much present; they are only much less visible than the acts and ideologies of devastation and regression. We tend to focus much more on the bad news than the good: pick up any newspaper or watch any 24/7 news channel as evidence. Despite so much Indigenous and modern scientific knowledge to the contrary, we think of the "fittest" as those who can compete to the death, rather than those who can collaborate to thrive in situations of both plenty and scarcity. Both ancient paradigms (*swaraj*, *buen vivir*, *sumak kawsay*, *kyosei*, *ubuntu*, *minobimaatisiwin*, commons, and many more, including radical reinterpretations of mainstream religions) and new ones (degrowth, ecofeminism, ecosocialism, and more) exist as substrata under

what is more visible, many manifested in practice now, many waiting to erupt.⁵

Will these grounded and conceptual alternatives lead us to a better collective future? I have no idea; the forces of regression and domination are way too powerful for this to happen with any ease or any time soon. I also do not doubt that we will see—indeed, are already seeing—various collapses. But let us recall that in the late nineteenth-century, Europe’s colonial nation-states seemed like they would continue to rule the earth for many more centuries; within the next few decades, most were overthrown as undercurrents and sporadic freedom movements coalesced into major eruptions. Let us also note how, within a century, the feminist movement has transformed situations of deeply entrenched patriarchy going back a few thousand years, into much greater freedom for women (and other persecuted sexes/genders), though of course there is a long way to go. If movements of resistance and alternative transformation can come together from the local to the global, to achieve the “scale” that individual movements cannot, we may yet follow in the footsteps of these inspiring movements to create macro-transformations in the five spheres of the Flower over the next few generations.

Grounded movements continue to struggle against the tide, but do not lose hope. The Kurds lose comrades every day to Turkish bombing, but continue to dream a just world and practice what they can to achieve it. Despairing and losing hope is, to my mind, a luxury only the urban Global North can afford. These grounded movements do not indulge in future scenario-building (which does not mean it is not important!); rather, they envision scenarios they want to head towards and act in the here and now to achieve what they can of these scenarios, modifying them along the way if necessary. Along with such movements, why not dare to hope that the ecological and social revolutions for which millions aspire, powerful signs of which already exist, will arise from amidst the crises and collapses?

Endnotes

1. See www.vikalpsangam.org, radicalecologicaldemocracy.org, and globaltapestryofalternatives.org.
2. Much is available on the Zapatista movement online; on the Kurdish movement, see Ashish Kothari, "The Flower of Transformation Blooms in Kurdistan," *Meer*, September 13, 2022, www.meer.com/en/70676-the-flower-of-transformation-blooms-in-kurdistan.
3. Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai, and Mukesh Shende, "On the Cusp: Reframing Democracy and Well-Being in Korchi, India," *Beyond Development*, 2020, beyonddevelopment.net/on-the-cusp-reframing-democracy-and-well-being-in-korchi-india/.
4. See again Kothari, "The Flower of Transformation."
5. Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/pluriverse.

About the Author



Ashish Kothari is a founder of the Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh. He has taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process, and served on Greenpeace International and Greenpeace India boards. He is active in such people's movements as Vikalp Sangam, Global Tapestry of Alternatives, and Radical Ecological Democracy. He is co-author of *Churning the Earth: Making of Global India* and co-editor of *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled* and *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*.

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