

20 May 13 **Locally, Globally**

Whether it was coined by David Brower, as I've always thought, or by Patrick Geddes, as Wikipedia suggests, the directive to "Act locally, think globally" has been a guiding principle in my career as an environmentalist, as it has in the thinking of many others.

But since the first Earth Day in 1970, when it became an instant slogan for the new environmental movement, the meaning of the term "global" has changed faster than the movement's understanding of it. And though there's a lot to be said for spontaneous action and acting from the gut, if we don't see the reality of today's "global", if we don't have the terminology to describe it, we can't apply it's lessons to our local situations.

This has become particularly noticeable with the advent of the climate movement. It lies behind the plea Michael Moore and Jeff Gibbs make in *Planet of the Humans* for us to move beyond the incrementalist "conscious capitalism" approach of mainstream environmentalism, and it is becoming increasingly apparent as the Covid-19 pandemic plays havoc with the health, social, ecological and economic conditions worldwide.

While fighting the good fights locally continues to be a necessary focus, I (like most of us, I think) have found it increasingly difficult to see our struggles in global perspective. A principal reason for this is that the global situation is not what it was 50 years ago. We no longer live in a world structured by traditional nation-state (or superstate) power games.

The neoliberal world of rule by the one percent is not the cold war world of 1970. The world of globalization (= triumphant neoliberalism) is not the world of comparatively simplistic desires of corporate capitalism.

Rather, the world situation today truly is global in a sense never known before. It is a world in which the sectarian and ethnic wars of nationalism and imperialism as well as dreams of international law and peace are atavistic pangs of a world already largely past. The world today is in a sense projected from the fever dream of post-WW II finance capitalism and structured on the model of cyber-dollars and matrical networks of power.

It is, in fact, a postmodern world that transcends the traditional structures and definitions we are most familiar with. It requires new vocabularies, new imaginaries and new understandings of domination-subordination, sovereignty-independence, profit-labor, global-local and the like.

Some of these needs are being addressed head-on in the past few years by thinkers who speak the postmodern language(s) developed precisely to cope with the new realities. Those languages are largely obscure to me when not entirely opaque. (For instance, when I think of climate change and immigration, I think I almost understand what Foucault means by "biopolitics".)

Presumably our colleges and universities have been teaching them to the new generations who are inheriting this globalized world and will have to deal with it (if climate change or new

pandemics have not destroyed their vantage).

Among the more engaging works grappling with these issues I've come across, is the trilogy by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri entitled *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009) [all from Harvard UP]. Already ten to twenty years old (which is to say, already dated as time flies today), these seem to me to be the kind of reading required if we're to understand our current interconnected human ecology and what it takes to maintain what's left of humanity and the natural world we're part of.

To give a flavor of that reading (among other difficulties, Hardt and Negri, like other postmodernist authors addressing our current societal conditions, presuppose familiarity with a number of other authors from Marx through Deleuze and Guattari), here's the passage from p.45 of *Empire* that set me to writing the above:

". . . many defenses of the local adopt the terminology of traditional ecology or even identify this 'local' political project with the defense of nature and biodiversity. This view can easily devolve into a kind of primordialism that fixes and romanticizes social relations and identities. What needs to be addressed, instead, is precisely the <production of locality>, that is, the social machines that create and recreate the identities and differences that are understood as local. The differences of locality are neither preexisting nor natural but rather effects of a regime of production . . . It is false, in any case, to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense <outside> and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire."