

# Lives matter!

Can black, indigenous, worker, farmer, ecological, women, queer uprisings come together?

13 JUNE 2020, ASHISH KOTHARI



The turn of events in the USA following the horrific killing of George Floyd

The amazing turn of events in the USA in the two weeks following the horrific killing of George Floyd, cradled within an even more astounding turn of events across the world in the last few months, offers us an occasion for stunned reflection.

Humanity's deep faultlines – racist, masculinist, classist, casteist, and more – have been sharply exposed in both. As have the faultlines between humanity and the rest of nature, and those of what we have mistakenly come to call 'democracy'. A series of responses across the globe, from resistance to solidarity actions, are showing that people want to act on redressing these schisms... but will they manage to change the disastrous course we have charted so far?

[Global solidarity](#) with the Black Lives Matter (and related) movements in USA has been [significant](#). Remarkably, it has transcended the barriers of race (artificial in any case), with people of varied ethnicities and backgrounds and cultures and geographies and genders taking part. Where lockdown situations persist, people

have issued statements or defied the law to come out on the streets. Equally remarkably, it has generated [support](#) from within the echelons of the [state](#), even if marginally so.

Even if not in a coordinated, coherent manner, this groundswell of expression is unified in at least one thing: utter disgust, anger, frustration at the inequalities that characterize all societies, and have been deepened by state-sponsored capitalism. Sections of society that have been marginalized and brutalised for centuries or millennia have joined in the protests: various gender and sexual persuasions (LGBTQ+) persecuted by the dogmatic 'straight', indigenous peoples whose territories have been snatched and generations stolen, religious and ethnic minorities imposed upon by majoritarian (and often culturally homogenising) forces, and many others.

Increasingly we are realizing that the fires raging in the USA have global significance, both because they have resemblance and links to oppressed peoples elsewhere as also because they clearly show that a nation that has imposed its imperial power on the rest of the globe is so deeply, nakedly vulnerable from within.

But the outpouring of these solidarity protests cannot by itself be a force for global transformation. What is needed is the interlinking of these with movements that have for long been seeking fundamental, systemic change in political and economic structures, and in our relations with each other and the earth. Many of these movements have in turn become more vocal or active amidst the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, showing how this crisis too has exposed the deep faultlines I mentioned above. Showing also how people – often 'ordinary' [people](#) whom no-one otherwise notices – have demonstrated a range of viable alternative ways to meet human needs and aspirations without trashing the earth and without creating abysmal inequality. The ecological, climate justice, feminist, worker, indigenous, peasant, self-determination, food sovereignty, peace, nature rights, ecospiritual, radical faith, youth-for-future, and many other such movements may not necessarily have all stood up in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, but their articulations and demands are inextricably linked.

But do they – or rather, we - all realize this? Are we, in whatever part of the spectrum of 'progressive' movements we consider ourselves in, a 'class-in-ourselves', to paraphrase Marx? Do we see a common cause?

If our diagnosis of the problems we confront is emerging from a political economy and political ecology perspective, it should be coming up with what we are up against. There are deep structural forces for the mess we are in, variously located in masculinist, statist, capitalist, racist, casteist, and anthropocentric relations... and arising from these, in the 'develomentality' of the last few decades, busily homogenising an incredibly diverse biocultural world into clones of western modernity. Simply reforming society, e.g. by 'greening' economic growth, or by corporations and governments behaving in a more welfarist mode, is not going to challenge these forces.

A Monsanto that suddenly switches to 'climate-smart' agriculture is still going to push hundreds of millions of small-holder farmers off the land, or turn them into contract labour. A BP that turns away from fossil fuels to embrace solar and wind energy is still going to create massive ecological and social impact with its mega-projects as it attempts to maximize profits. Welfarist governments in Scandinavia have been undoubtedly better at creating economic and social security than have many other nation-states, but their consumption patterns continue to cause enormous ecological damage across the earth.

Without addressing the inequities in how land and nature is governed and managed (and related to), or without questioning infinitely rising demand for energy and products (spurred by the awesomely clever advertising industry), injustices of various kinds will continue. Even a relatively radical [Green New Deal](#), of the kind that has become politically mainstreamed in USA, Europe, and South Korea, will remain neo-colonial if it does not tackle deep-rooted inequities between the global North and South.

We have plenty of common cause with regard to what we confront, whether we work on the environment or human rights or gender equity or whatever other struggles for justice. And while we promote or embrace a huge diversity of alternatives for solving problems of hunger, deprivation, health, education, conflict, alienation, homelessness, loneliness and much else -- a [pluriverse](#) of ways of being and doing and dreaming -- we can still see that there are common threads in the ethics of life: solidarity, love, interconnectedness, reciprocity, autonomy, freedom, responsibility, rights, diversity, non-violence, and others.

Varied understandings of the above have motivated a number of attempts at creating a global movement towards transformation. In recent times the most prominent has been the World Social Forum (WSF), now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year. The world's largest gathering of civil society for all these years, its slogan of 'another world is possible' has inspired or involved micro- and macro-movements across the planet. However, it still searches for its potential to become a critical mass for macro-systemic change, with frequently poor representation of black, indigenous or other such communities, and an explicit orientation against taking collective positions. Many of its constituents wonder whether it has run its course and something different is needed. These issues are not lost on all its leadership and hopefully will lead to its resurgence in some form at its forthcoming session in January 2021 in Mexico (COVID permitting!).

Meanwhile, a number of others have sprung up, just before or during the COVID crisis. In mid-2019, several people linked to movements for radical alternatives grouped together to initiate a [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#), gathering endorsement from around 30 global or regional networks and many more prominent individuals. Its aim is to weave together, in non-hierarchical ways, networks of movements that are practicing and espousing radical transformation; and stimulate more such networks where they do not exist. In early 2020, several organizations initiated a [Global Dialogue for Systemic Change](#), starting with a series of webinars to feature movements and aiming to stimulate people's assemblies in

many parts of the world, culminating in one or more global assemblies. Around the same time, a [Progressive International](#) has been launched by several 'highly-placed' individuals and linked organisations, including some former heads of state and prominent leftist scholar-activists. It too aims to unite progressive movements around the world. The COVID crisis has also prompted several statements of alternative agendas, for specific regions or countries or for the planet as a whole. An example of the former is the unique [Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19, for Hawai'i](#), or a manifesto for long-term alternative actions for [India](#). At broader scales, there is a statement about the need to decommodify work and democratize the workspace issued by 3000 researchers from [600 universities](#), and another to five ways to move to sustainable, equal [societies](#); for industrial society as a whole by the [Degrowth movement](#), and for a social, ecological, economic and intercultural [pact](#) for Latin America issued by nearly 300 organisations.

These are of course quite different from each other in detail, but they do share a commitment to socio-economic equity, ecological sustainability, human and collective rights. Most of them also recognize that even as we search for democratizing the polity and economy such that people and collectives can determine their own lives rather than be at the mercy of nation-states and corporations, for the immediate future we also have to demand that governments regain their role of guaranteeing basic needs and rights. This includes reclaiming health, education, water and another provisioning into the public sector, given the enormous numbers of people that privatization of these sectors has rendered vulnerable, as shown in the current pandemic.

But will all these movements seize the moment to weave a tapestry that changes the macro picture? This is not so clear. In the spectrum listed above, there are those who feel that change will come from 'capturing the state', bringing back leftist governments. Given the fact that so-called revolutionary parties that took over in many countries of Latin America, in Greece, and elsewhere, were unable or unwilling to replace unsustainable patterns of industrial growth (or even the dependence on fossil fuels), as also to trust in radical democracy based on local self-determination, this approach does not inspire much hope. Far more radical are the movements towards genuine people-centred and feminized governance, and earth-centred economics prioritising the commons.

These are shown, for instance, in the Zapatista and Kurdish autonomy movements, in strands of the environmental justice movements currently taking part in the anti-racist struggle in USA, in the degrowth movement in Europe, in territorial self-determination movements of indigenous peoples in Latin America, Canada, and Australia, in the Africans Rising and other women or youth based movements in that continent, in self-rule or swaraj initiatives in South Asia, and so on (for a dialogue on what 'planetizing the movement' could be, see [Planetize the Movement!](#)). A new political imagination that recognizes the locus of power in the hands of people and collectives, questions both nation-states and private corporations, imagines a re-alignment of political decision-making along ecological

and cultural contiguities, is urgently needed. Equally necessary is a new economic vision focused on producer and consumer sovereignty, open localization, recognition of ecological limits, self-restraint, and the commons.

Perhaps most important, however, are the cultural shifts that need to take place. A sad reality of our times is that authoritarian, neo-fascist, or elitist governments and figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Putin have a solid support base, and this is not only amongst the elites of the world. Economic globalization has disempowered or impoverished millions of people amongst the 'majorities' in many countries (whites in USA, Hindus in India), and the right-wing nationalist parties are able to give them convenient scapegoats (blacks, Muslims) to blame, thereby diverting attention from their own failures and from the underlying structures of oppression. Creating spaces for dialogue and collaborative action amongst members of different ethnicities and faiths and amongst different systems of knowledge and ways of being is crucial ([Darryl Davis's](#) inspiring example, supremely Gandhian, comes to mind).

Creating opportunities for children and youth to learn in and from diverse cultures, highlighting stories of solidarity across existing divides to deal with COVID or other crises, enabling greater spiritual and ethical reflection; these and many other ways to shift minds and hearts have to be a core part of any progressive process.

Processes that bring these together, based on commonly held values while respecting and celebrating their diversity of approaches and strategies, are desperately needed if we are to convert the opportunities provided by COVID, the Floyd tragedy, and many others around the world, into a lasting global movement for transformation.

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