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## Why Universalism Matters

Forum contribution: [Planetize the Movement!](#)

Francine Mestrum

In a recent [article](#) on the coronavirus pandemic, Yuval Noah Harari writes that we are facing two simple choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. Progressive forces will naturally take the second choice: citizen empowerment and global solidarity. Problem solved? Not so fast.

### The Lack of Global Movements

Social movements all over the world are working on citizen empowerment. They are teaching human rights and the right to have rights. They are teaching about capitalism and globalization, inequality and poverty. They picture a better world. About twenty years ago, they even saw the need to organize globally and started to organize World Social Forums as an answer to the World Economic Forum. They strengthened their networks and agreed to reject neoliberalism. Their slogan was “another world is possible,” but they never succeeded in making clear what this other world would look like or how to get there. They claimed a million-person march against the war in Iraq, all over the world, as their major success. But the war started a couple of weeks later. Apparently, the objective did not go beyond the mobilization...

Today, there are hardly any global social movements, let alone global political parties. The only structured civil society organizations at the global level are the trade unions, though their potential for actual agency is limited. Another group, structured though fragmented, is women. They have more capacity to mobilize: see the marches in all major cities of the world in March 2020 on International Women’s Day, and the global strike one day later. Another movement with some power to mobilize is the peasant movement, with La Vía Campesina. Environmentalists

certainly also have to be mentioned, though they are very fragmented, with part of the movement following the institutional agenda while another part remains strictly apolitical.

At the level of political parties, the “internationals” of the major political families can hardly be considered political forces.

The most obvious reason for this sad state of affairs is clear: democracy remains in the very first instance a matter of states. Social contracts are national contracts. Citizens are loyal to their states and follow what happens in their immediate environments. Solidarity hardly goes beyond borders.

The international order that was put up after World War II is now slowly disintegrating. Globalization has grown rapidly, our interdependence has indeed developed at unknown speed, but our organization, our citizenship, our solidarity did not follow. But there certainly are more reasons than just the overwhelming influence of the nation-state.

## The Demise of the Left

An important first argument to mention is the lack of analysis of the left after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The happiness of the peoples from behind the wall may have surprised many, though the hard lessons of capitalism did not wait to manifest themselves. However, the theoretical basis of the left has not changed: there was no serious reflection on what went wrong or on why people, in general, are not waiting for “socialism.” The current demands for “socialism” from millennials in the United States do not go beyond traditional social democratic agendas, with welfare states and mixed economies never developed beyond nation-states. In short, while the radical left failed in its self-criticism, social democracy failed in its practice. The left did not renew its thinking and is divided over many crucial political topics, such as globalization, states, and social justice.

A second argument is that although left-wing parties and movements did reject neoliberal globalization, these “alterglobalists” never made clear what this “alter” stood for. What was to be globalized and what not? Lacking a convincing political project, many groups withdrew from the global scene and went to work at the local level. There, concrete results were possible: another world for real people was in the making. However, at the local level, there is no possibility to tackle the root causes of problems (lack of development, wars and conflicts, financialization, external debt, etc.), unless one is at the same time organized at national and global levels. Social movements kept

saying demands had to come from the bottom up, but these bottom-up demands never concern the global problems that are making life at the local level so difficult. And while movements were doing their good work at city level, the Davos people kept meeting and talking, multinationals continued to produce their toxic pesticides, and financial markets dominated the world. In the best of cases, some philanthropist financed some local project.

A third argument concerns the erroneous political choices of those who did want to organize globally. The World Social Forum, which started with a lot of enthusiasm and a real political potential, soon drowned in the fear of hard political choices. The “fathers” of the Forum thought and still think they have to be pure “civil society,” pure mobilizing, and that the Forum should never have a collective political voice. As its twentieth anniversary approaches, total collapse is near.

Finally, my fourth argument may explain it all. Based on an understandable though wrong analysis of history and a bizarre confusion of practice and discourse, many social movements now basically reject modernity and development. In their eyes, colonialism gave birth to capitalism and slavery, and modernity developed alongside, with patriarchy one of its results. While all of these elements clearly have to be criticized, their conflation leads to identity politics that are dangerously close to the extreme right. One does not have to reject modernity in order to condemn racism.

The major problem lies with universalism which is wrongly understood as uniformity, when it is precisely the opposite. Because we are all different, we need to emphasize our common humanity, and therefore we need universal rights, equal for all. We need universalism if we want to protect minorities. The inversion of this reasoning leads post-developers to cheer for fragmented identities which cannot be represented. It makes global organization unthinkable.

The rejection of modernity, in the end, leads to a lost belief in the possibility of change, in the foregone possibility of progress and emancipation.

### **Back to class politics?**

Colonialism surely has to be criticized. Capitalism surely has to be condemned. Modernity should indeed be subject of a serious reflection on its failures and shortcomings. Fortunately, we have anthropological research to help us conduct this exercise. One of the most telling lessons from the past half-century is that there is a clear demand for modernity, all over the world, but that people

should get an opportunity to define it themselves. Development and modernity cannot be brought in and imposed from the outside.

The second lesson obviously is that nature cannot be overlooked. Humankind is part of it, and we have scientific knowledge to help us understand it better. The theoretical thinking on “buen vivir” in Latin America can be extremely useful in envisaging a more balanced future.

The third lesson is that class analysis remains important, but that it cannot be separated from race and gender. The intersectionality analysis does not have to lead to fragmented and exclusive identities but can help to better understand the connectedness of multiple identities.

This brings us back to global agency. I can see only two movements which can “save the world” and develop into powerful global political forces with convincing alternatives for the current destructive policies: trade unions and the women’s movement.

With a rejection of the *homo economicus* and putting care in the center, feminist ideas should shape the core of new economic thinking. The feminist and women’s movements should try to better organize and seek their commonalities, which should not be so very difficult. If ever there existed a shared identity based on common experiences, it is in the gendered world of women.

Trade unions still are a well-organized political force, even if the past crises have seriously weakened them. Their international structures, however, did do a lot of research into the possibilities of integrating environmental topics. If trade unions succeed in overcoming their national and sectorial blinkers, if they can take into account the interests of all workers, including platform, informal, and domestic workers, they can indeed become a leading political force for shaping “another world.”

When the World Bank started to promote globalization in the 1990s, it knew very well how this would make resistance to it extremely difficult. Human beings are still able to make progress by cooperating in large numbers, but dominant forces today will do everything to hinder and make that cooperation impossible at lower class level. With the coronavirus pandemic, we now see how the many emerging movements, from Santiago de Chile to Hong Kong, via Baghdad and Paris, are killed before they can bank in on their success.

The current pandemic may provide us with new insights and help us to reorganize at the national and local level, but it may take a lot of time before global forces can restart to build new power relations. This is the irony of the current crisis: never before has our interdependence been so crystal clear, and never before have its solutions killed so dramatically all efforts to unite us. Maybe it is only in times of utter despair that people discover their collective identities, the common concerns, their hidden discourses that can feed the resistance. This is what we have to believe in if we ever want fundamental change to happen.

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## About the Author



Francine Mestrum is the chairwoman of Global Social Justice, an association for transformative universal social protection and the common good. Her research concerns the social dimension of globalization, poverty, inequality, social protection, public services, and gender, with a special focus on the social commons. She is an active member of the International Council of the World Social Forum and of the International Organizing Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum. Her latest book is *The Social Commons: Rethinking Social Justice in Post-Neoliberal Societies*.

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