

Act Globally

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I. Introduction

For decades, "think globally, act locally" has been used as a slogan for primarily environmental movements and organizations.¹ It is generally received as a sensible distinction, if not a reasonable call to action. As such, use of the slogan has spread to educational and political contexts that are not directly tied to environmental issues.

Rather than outline or examine the nearly forty-year history of the slogan, I propose to explore its semantic implications and to interrogate the implicit criticisms of it that are found in a work of social criticism by the Guardian journalist and noted writer on environmental issues, George Monbiot, entitled Manifesto for a New World Order.² Monbiot's project, which he inscribes within what he calls the "global justice movement," is, stated briefly, to describe the means necessary for producing the first "global democratic movement" and, no less, to incite the reader to contribute to it. As nation-states have progressively seen their powers usurped both locally, by special interests, and globally, by undemocratic institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund, the power and influence of democracy has retreated from the world stage. However, rather than oppose "globalization," where this refers to global systems of communication and trade, Monbiot argues that globalization needs to be democratized just as individual nation-states have been democratized, albeit imperfectly. The main argument for this is that, whereas regimes of trade and trade barriers are precisely what helped to make the rich nations rich, limiting trade today would only prevent poor nations from similar benefits. Thus the current system of exploitative trade that benefits the rich countries and wrecks the economies and destabilizes the governments of poor countries needs to be replaced with an internationally brokered and mutually solvent system of fair trade along the lines of that proposed by the eminent English economist John Maynard Keynes in 1944, supported widely by many nations, but ultimately rejected by the United States. In seeking to democratize globalization,

¹ Eblen, R. A. and Eblen W. 1994. Encyclopedia of the Environment, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. The expression is claimed to have originated with David Brower, the founder of the environmentalist group Friends of the Earth, in the year 1969; however, some dispute this claim. It has also been attributed to Rene Dubos, who worked as advisor to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972.

² Monbiot, George. 2003. Manifesto for a New World Order, New Press, New York. All parenthetical page references are to this book.

Monbiot reveals himself to be an ardent anti-nationalist. He writes,

We must harness the power of globalization, and, pursuing its inexorable development, overthrow its institutions and replace them with our own. In doing so, we will, whether or not this is the intended outcome, bring forward the era in which humankind ceases to be bound by the irrational loyalties of nationhood. (15)

Loyalties of nationhood risk depriving us of the means to address the planetary financial and ecological issues that bear upon us all. Similarly, Monbiot's project implies rejecting the implicit logic of "think globally, act locally" and preferring, instead, a single call to action for individuals as well as organizations. I would put the call to action in this way: "act globally." It will thus be my task to explain what "acting globally" would mean for Monbiot and why, at this age more than ever, he believes it is not only possible but also necessary for members of the "global justice movement" to "act globally."

II. Examining the Global Slogan³

The spontaneous interpretation that adheres to the utterance, "act globally, think locally," appears to be that one should act locally because doing so is feasible, while keeping in mind larger consequences of one's actions: consequences large enough as to envelope the globe itself. However, moving beyond this spontaneous understanding, I note that the recommendation or command harbors, in fact, numerous implicit assertions:

- i) acting is a clear and evident idea;
- ii) thinking is a clear and evident idea;
- iii) acting and thinking are distinct from one another;
- iv) the distinction between thinking and acting is clear and evident;
- v) the global is a clear and evident idea;
- vi) the local is a clear and evident idea;
- vii) the global and the local are distinct from one another;
- viii) the distinction between the global and the local is clear and evident;
- ix) thinking can be done globally;
- x) thinking cannot or should not be done in a way that is merely local;
- xi) action can or should be taken only locally;
- xii) action cannot or should not be taken globally.

³ Google searches in May of 2008 netted roughly 6,000 citations of the exact English slogan in German, over 1,000 in both Spanish and French, respectively, and about 20,000 in Japanese. Without drawing large conclusions from this, I think it suggests that the well-traveled slogan has thus been swept up in the very process of "global thinking" that it seems to call others to engage in. It in this sense that I call it a "global slogan."

Whether acting and thinking are, indeed, clearly distinct from one another is a philosophical question whose vastness places it outside the scope of my present concerns; however, the upshot of the distinction, as it is evoked here, appears to be that, by nature, thinking is wide-ranging and abstract, whereas acting, by nature, is concrete, immediate, and thus satisfactorily exercised within the confines of a single locale. On this assumption, "act globally, think locally" would be a request or command that one do only what is possible and not attempt to do what is impossible. A curt paraphrase would be: "do not attempt the impossible." Indeed, the easy assent with which the assertion "think globally, act locally" is often met seems to stem from the judiciousness of the proposal when rendered in this light. In other words, people find it easy to agree that, since it is not possible to act globally, one should not waste efforts to do so. A second implicit element to the assertion is that, since thinking is a broad, generous, and far-reaching process, it is best to apply it generously. Applying it merely to regional, immediate, or readily perceptible matters-at-hand would deprive thinking of its proper virtue. It would confine a process whose nature it is to roam. Moreover, it would obscure distant factors or presumed consequences that should inform the movements one makes within a necessarily limited range of action. In this latter implication, it can be seen that the relation of the global and the local is one of dependence, if not interdependence. For the local action to be worthwhile, it needs to be shaped or informed by an understanding of forces or issues that are global in their reach. The fact that the words "think globally" come first in the double-barreled command underscores their predominance in this respect. The implication appears to be, "first think, then act." These presumably distinct processes would thus have a proper chronology. It would therefore be inadvisable or rash to first act locally and only subsequently to think globally about one's actions. However, the chronology is not steadfast or categorical, for when one thinks globally, it should always be with respect to actions taken locally and, in this way, the two moments are in fact interdependent. Thinking globally for its own sake would be a luxury or diversion that would leave one's local actions unguided.⁴

Rather than analyzing by turns each of the assertions localized within the global slogan, I will emphasize two that are most relevant to my reading of Monbiot. The first is that one should not think in a way that is merely local. That is, insofar as the local is to be engaged,

⁴ An analogous relationship holds between the part and the whole as conceived by hermeneutics, the study of theories of interpretation. One cannot understand the part without some grasp of the whole, and vice versa. The analogy falls short, however, in that the global slogan appears to cast thinking and acting as distinct operations rather than as different moments within a single process.

it should be done so at the level of action primarily. Anything suspected of qualifying as "local thinking" should be bracketed and neutralized; it should be mistrusted and perhaps rejected entirely if it has not been examined or reworked in light of global thinking. A certain denigration of local thinking is apparent here, as if thinking and local matters were an insufficient and suspicious pair. This reveals how far the saying participates in forces of globalization. The saying evokes a world situation in which anyone daring to employ their own thoughts locally, without regard to "the global," may now be stigmatized. Legitimate thought itself is no longer to be deemed readily, sufficiently, and unconditionally available within distinct localities of the world. No matter where they reside nor in what conditions, the peoples of the world must always submit their thoughts to a global measure. A thought generated in some specific locale, for local reasons or purposes, must now proceed through the global market of thinking if it hopes to deploy itself in local actions legitimately. George Monbiot, for his part, explicitly acknowledges this state of affairs and accepts that a certain irreversible degree of globalization has already imposed itself upon the world. As Monbiot notes, the fact that global warming or climate change affects potentially all peoples of the world is the most compelling reason for which certain types of actions should no longer be thought of outside the range of their global consequences. The second implicit assertion that I will emphasize is that one cannot or should not act globally. That is, the slogan may be read as an acknowledgment of the impossibility of global action or as a prescription for desired behavior. It is not possible to assert that only one of the two modes is intended or implied. However, depending on the context in which it is used, one can identify one mode or another at work. Rene Dubos, an advisor to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment whom some identify as the originator of the slogan, was an ardent supporter of local solutions to environmental problems and, by the same token, an opponent of internationally brokered solutions. It is clear therefore that Dubos would have favored the prescriptive assertion, "act locally," along with its implicit prescription, "do not act globally," because he saw global actions as being meddlesome and unnecessary, and not because he saw them as being unfeasible. Monbiot would be uncomfortable with any injunction not to act globally because he believes globalization is irreversible and that, to date, it has been largely monopolized by powerful groups representing wealthy nation-states and corporations. Calling upon others not to act globally would thus amount to asking them not to obstruct the self-serving and, in many cases, deleterious actions of a privileged economic and political minority. This is the "implicit logic" of the slogan that I believe is seldom acknowledged.

III. George Monbiot on Global Actions and Actors

To counter the implications of "think globally, act locally," one has to keep in mind the two possible implications of the slogan that I discuss above: namely, that one must think globally and act locally either because acting globally is not possible or, conversely, because it is possible but not desirable. It is clear that, for Georges Monbiot, acting globally is both possible and desirable. That is, it is desirable if it is undertaken in a way that respects principles of democracy and thus obtains legitimacy from the support of the world's populations. It is desirable if it reverses the current trend of globalization exercised in the service of the few and at the expense of the vast majority.

George Monbiot's argument consists of two main gestures. In the first, he notes that, to date, the world's significant global actors have been anti-democratic institutions that serve to benefit wealthy nations and exploit poor nations while at the same time reinforcing both corporate control of world markets and American hegemony over international politics. In this context, acting globally means primarily conducting business and engineering global markets with little or no regard for the constraints traditionally imposed by nation-states or for the welfare of local communities. Monbiot's second gesture is to argue that, rather than resist this movement of increased globalizing by retreating into "localization" campaigns or opposing international trade, those interested in furthering justice and democracy on a global scale should capitalize on the global networks that have opened in recent history to organize their efforts on a global scale precisely to counter-act the anti-democratic and elitist global actions that have been pursued for years. That is, rather than content themselves with a notion of action as being local in nature, however well-informed such local action may be by an awareness of global issues, those hoping to promote justice and democracy throughout the world should take actions that are global in scope, much as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the International Monetary Fund have done for the benefit of those who created or support them today. However, in this sense, their global actions would be meaningful and desirable only if they responded to the democratically expressed views of the world's population. In other words, rather than override the interests and concerns of local communities so as to best serve themselves and their patrons, as the currently dominant global actors do, their actions would raise these interests and concerns to the level of global negotiation.

Before considering specific examples of global actions, I note that Monbiot's challenge to the idea of "consumer democracy" should undermine anyone's faith in the comforting idea of acting merely locally. "Consumer democracy" is the idea that one can influence corporate

policymaking and thus exercise a positive influence over environmental and other issues by employing one's purchasing power in line with one's principles. Monbiot points out that while consumer democracy is not simply to be excluded in principle, since it has achieved limited results, in some contexts it serves as a means of avoiding the necessary political confrontations. Much like the slogan "think globally, act locally," it may present itself as a call to action but in fact encourage complacent and short-sighted measures. The notion of consumer democracy is in fact an embodiment of the slogan "think globally, act locally." Not surprisingly, "consumer democracy" has been embraced by certain national green parties and adherents to a strategy known as "localization." These movements often take "anti-globalization" as their mantra. Summarizing the arguments of David Korten in his book, The Post-Corporate World, Monbiot writes,

Consumer democracy means, in Korten's words, that, 'in good market fashion, you are voting with your dollars.' By 'starving the capitalist economy,' you can 'nurture the mindful market.' By using your money carefully, in other words, you can help to create a world in which other people are not exploited and the environment is not destroyed. (55)

There are several reasons that Monbiot gives for being skeptical about the overall effectiveness of this approach. The first is that it leaves the greatest number of "votes" in the hands of the wealthy, which is to say, with those who are least motivated to bring about the changes desired by the localizers. The second is that refraining from purchasing a product does not send a clear message to a given company. As Monbiot writes, "unless I go to the trouble to explain to the biscuit manufacturer [whose packaging is wasteful] why I chose not to patronize, the company will have no means of discovering why I made it, or even that I made a decision at all (57)." A third reason is that, in today's globalized markets, many products have already been purchased and traded several times over before they are made available to the public. This fact weakens the ability of consumers to express their preferences via purchasing decisions. As an example, Monbiot discusses the copper found within the electrical equipment of his home. Although Monbiot may wish to protest the inhumane treatment of the indigenous peoples of West Papua in Indonesia at the hands of the operators of the copper mine at Tembagapura from which he suspects much of this copper has come, he is in fact several transactions removed from the original purchaser and the operators of the mine. Thus, it would be exceedingly difficult for him to convey his displeasure up the chain of commerce from which it arrived. That is why Monbiot concludes that a form of global action is the only that will have the desired effect:

If we wish to prevent exploitation, it surely makes more sense to start at the other end

of the purchasing chain, the end at which the exploitation takes place. If local people want to close the mine at Tembagapura, then let us campaign to help them to close it, so that we no longer have to fret about whether or not the copper we are buying is produced there. (59)

The question, however, arises whether individuals have the time and fortitude to confront every crooked or misguided corporation in the world that may directly or indirectly offer goods, logos, or services. On this point, it is important to have a general understanding of the sort of global and democratic institutions of the sort George Monbiot would like to see emerge; for it would be mostly through their collective efforts that legitimate democracy could be revived and that individuals could participate in global democracy. Three main institutions are proposed in Manifesto for a New World Order. The kingpin of the three is the International Clearing Union. This idea was originally proposed by John Maynard Keynes during the 1944 Bretton Woods negotiations with the U.S. representative Harry Dexter White. Since White's proposals promised economic world hegemony for the United States and the United States was in a position of preeminent world power at the end of the Second World War, it was White's proposals that were adopted. White's proposals later morphed into the current world economic regime, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It is precisely because these latter institutions have failed woefully in their mission to maintain global economic stability that Monbiot proposes that they be replaced with Keynes's idea of an International Clearing Union. To the detriment of the current United States stranglehold on the economies of all affiliated states, Keynes's proposal would allow poor nations to emerge from their poverty without being saddled with debt; restore political autonomy to nations intimidated by creditors; and slow but not put end to global trading by taxing trade surplus and collecting revenues to support the second institution, namely, the World Parliament. Many models for a world parliament have been offered; the one that Monbiot embraces is based on the principle that every adult possesses one vote. Each voting bloc would consist of 10 million voters, and there would be approximately 600 total voting blocs. Moreover, the constituencies would not be defined by national borders. These basic features would pull power away from the narrow confines of nation-states and the current elitist global institutions. The organization would have its primary purpose to review and pass judgment on decisions made by governments and financial institutions via global research and referenda. Its chief lever of power would be that of moral authority, which is to say, the legitimacy it would receive from the fact that it represents world opinion. The third institution proposed by Monbiot is a Fair Trade Organization, whose main

purpose would be to redistribute wealth so as to prevent the untimely deaths of millions of people who currently live in poor nations.

One needs to read Monbiot carefully if one is to pass judgment on the new world order as he has thus conceived it. For my purposes, it is important keep in mind that Monbiot's main view, and the reason for his pursuing the creation of these global institutions is that

if we can - as most people do - agree that democracy is the best way to run a nation, it is hard to think of any reason why it should not be the best way to run the world. Indeed, it is surely demonstrable that many of the most pressing global and international problems arise from an absence of global and international democracy. (46)

Furthermore, "global and international democracy" is a power that, along with the supportive institutions that Monbiot describes in detail, is necessary because it is the only means for preventing nation-states, controlled by special interests, from waging wars of aggression and imposing their will on others as well as for addressing global issues such as nuclear proliferation and climate change outside the framework of narrow national politics. (46-49) In short, "without a global transformation, national transformations are impossible" (49). One could put this point differently by saying that, if democracy is to be given a fighting chance of survival on either a global or local scale, acting globally must take precedence over acting locally. Without global governance that responds to the will of the world's populations, global actors such as the narrowly controlled and undemocratic World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations Security Council will continue to trump all efforts at democratic reform on the international, national, and local levels.

IV. Revising a Standby Slogan

As political and economic power has migrated to a number of institutions over which there is no democratic control, a number of approaches have been undertaken to oppose them. Whereas localizers have called for a halt to global trade and imagined the turning back of history to a pre-colonial age, consumer democrats and ethical consumers have put their trust in the power of their limited and diffuse resources, and reformists have dreamt of a kindlier and friendlier World Bank or International Monetary Fund, Monbiot has called for nothing less than a new set of global organizations. While it has not been my purpose to describe or assess the plans for these organizations in detail, I underscore that they all are designed to provide the peoples of the world with access to global action. If their revolutionary import is acknowledged and the means of achieving it deemed to have a chance - Monbiot concedes they entail a large risk of global economic instability - then the implications of the slogan

that has served activists of many stripes over the past three or four decades appear self-defeating. That is not to say that these implications are necessary. Nor is it to insinuate that those who employ the global slogan in good faith intend a defeatist posture. It is, rather, to point out that the implications haunt the slogan by providing convenient cover for the most steadfast and influential opponents of global democracy and the spread of justice. If action can or should be taken only locally, then clearly the quest for democracy on a global scale is doomed to fail. Moreover, in the wake of this failure, the whole idea of democracy is likely to shrivel up among the browning pages of future historical tomes.

Slogans are meaningless if not backed up by analogous actions, and if there is to be a slogan that corresponds meaningfully to the present state of affairs in the world, it is surely "think globally, act globally," where "thinking" does not imply passive contemplation but, rather, taking into account the democratically expressed opinions of the world's population. Monbiot makes the case that this would be best managed by means of a World Parliament, and he explains how such an institution could be financed through the holdings of an International Clearing Union as proposed by John Maynard Keynes. Readers of Monbiot may decide if his suggestions for global action seem reasonable and effective; what I have tried to show in light of his work is that, at the very least, calls to action for the sake of global justice need updating. Following the dictum that Voltaire places at the end of his novel Candide, ou l'Optimisme - il faut cultiver son jardin - is clearly insufficient when one's garden is exposed not only to industrial pollution and climactic chaos but also to the super-national forces of global trade agreements that devalue and ruin local markets. Although self-reliance has indisputable virtues, the pre-corporate, pre-globalized age of Henry David Thoreau is now behind us, and it is no longer possible to secure virtue and justice through self-isolation or the mere cultivation of one's immediate environment. In a world where the local is no longer entirely local, acting globally is an imperative for anyone who believes that justice and democracy require more than a resounding slogan.

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