

Why Forgiving Ourselves and Each Other is the Path to Global Justice

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When we protest against transnational corporations, politicians and unaccountable global institutions such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank; when we protest against those we regard as causing or exacerbating global warming, ecological destruction, pollution or the widening gap between rich and poor, we inevitably blame them. Often, we go further to blame individuals who may shop at supermarkets, or who fail to buy Fair Trade or organic foods and so on. In protesting against them, or in decrying their behaviour, we inevitably point our fingers at them: “YOU are the ones who are destroying our world!” In fact, it’s not too much of an exaggeration to say that the Global Justice Movement’s principal mode of action is protest; a mode which inescapably implies the blaming of one section of society or another, or one institution or another, for our global ills. And to be fair, there’s a lot to protest about and without protest these important issues would never come to wider public attention.

But dire as our global problems undoubtedly are, should not the question be asked as to whether, in some sense, we are not *all* to blame for our present predicament, NGOs and global justice activists included? After all, who amongst us is so utterly de-linked from the global economy as to be able to honestly claim not to be contributing in some way to present problems, be it by driving when we might walk, by buying the products of transnational corporations when something more eco- or socially friendly might be better, or by failing to buy organic food when cheaper non-organic alternatives better suit our budgets - or by flying to holiday or conference destinations and thus contributing disproportionately to global warming emissions? Because for any of us to pretend that we are beyond reproach is not only likely to be untrue, it leads inexorably to a kind of “eco-fascism” whereby self-styled “eco-warriors” vilify and victimise the rest of us who, for one reason or another, apparently fail to live up to their criteria for what is required to “save the planet”. Indeed, the reality is that through our individual and collective choices, lifestyles and socio-economic system, all of us play a part, to a greater or lesser extent, in exacerbating our increasingly dire global predicament. So to pretend otherwise is not only divisive and untrue, it ultimately serves only to divert us from what should be a common effort to find solutions and instead leads us into an endless loop of factional, ‘us and them’ blame and counter-blame.

And if we are all to blame, perhaps we should take the further step of asking ourselves whether the corporate executives or market traders we commonly regard as being in positions of power are really in any position to significantly alter their polluting or socially irresponsible behaviour? It should after all be clear that in a competitive global market any corporation single-handedly taking on a greater measure of social or environmental responsibility - and thus increasing its costs in the process - would only lose out to its competitors causing a loss of its profits, a reduction in its share value, a consequent loss of jobs and, ultimately, the prospect of it becoming the target of a hostile takeover. You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to conclude that, in a global market, corporations can generally only afford to behave as responsibly as the aggregate behaviour of their major competitors permits and, since they cannot reliably count on them to simultaneously take on higher standards, it is virtually impossible for one or a restricted number of market players to make the first move. So while it’s clear that corporations could take some small steps towards more responsible behaviour and should be encouraged to do so, we shouldn’t fool ourselves into thinking that they have the power to make the really substantive and fundamental changes needed to solve our global problems. Indeed, they manifestly don’t.

As George Soros points out, the same goes for global investors and fund managers. With respect to his own role he explains that: “As an anonymous participant in financial markets, I never had to weigh the social consequences of my actions. I was aware that in some circumstances the consequences might be harmful but I felt justified in ignoring them on the grounds that I was playing by the rules. The game was very competitive and if I imposed additional constraints on myself I would end up a loser. Moreover, I realised that my moral scruples would make no difference to the real world, given the conditions of effective or near-perfect competition that prevail in financial markets; if I abstained somebody else would take my place.”ⁱ So it’s not corporate execs or fund managers who are destroying our world, it’s *the system* in which they - and we - are all implicated. WE – *all* of us – are destroying our world.

After all, do global justice activists really think business leaders are any less aware of our environmental crisis than anyone else? Of course they’re not! But they’re caught in a vicious circle of destructive global competition which systematically prevents them from behaving in the way activists – and they themselves - would like. In his book, “*When Corporations Rule the World*”, David Korten astutely observed that “With financial markets demanding maximum short-term gains and corporate raiders standing by to trash any company that isn’t externalizing every possible cost, efforts to fix the problem by raising the social consciousness of managers misdefine the problem. There are plenty of socially conscious managers. The problem is a predatory system that makes it difficult for them to survive. This creates a terrible dilemma for managers with a true social vision of the corporation’s role in society. They must either compromise their vision or run a great risk of being expelled by the system.”ⁱⁱ

That’s not to say, of course, that some corporations or CEOs aren’t greedy or careless, or that we should become apologists for poor corporate behaviour. But more often than not, it is destructive competition and the fear of losing out, rather than pure greed for profit, which daily drives the socially and environmentally detrimental decisions of business executives. For as they rightly point out: “If we don’t do it, our competitors will” – and in a globally de-regulated market, they’re right! So what is the point in blaming them when they’re caught in a system which effectively prevents them from behaving otherwise? And are global justice activists and NGOs in any position to point fingers when, were we in the shoes of corporate executives and subject to the same competitive demands, we’d likely be behaving in much the same way? So it is not corporations or their CEOs at whom we should be directing our primary fire, but at the destructively competitive global market system of which they are merely its most high-profile prisoners.

And what about governments; the institutions who are responsible for “the system”; our leaders who are supposed to regulate markets to balance social and environmental interests with those of business? In a world where capital and employment quickly move to any country where costs are lower and profits therefore higher, what chance do governments have to impose increased regulations or taxes on business to protect society or the environment when doing so will only invite employment and investment to move elsewhere? Environmentalists commonly decry government laxness in properly regulating corporations but what choice do governments have when they cannot count on other governments doing likewise? Any government making any significant move to tighten environmental or social protection regulations would face the prospect of uncompetitiveness, capital flight, a loss of jobs and a resulting loss of votes. Again, that’s not to say that governments are powerless to do anything at all to improve matters or that we should stop pressuring them. But it *does* mean that their room for manoeuvre is extremely curtailed to the point where they, too, are largely caught in the same vicious circle like everyone else. So, governments of whatever party are now constrained to pursuing only those narrow policies they know will not displease world markets; a pathetically narrow range of policies which reduce democracy to a hollow kind of *pseudo*-democracy; an electoral charade in which whatever party we elect, and whatever the party’s manifesto may have stated, the policies actually delivered inevitably conform to market demands and to each country’s need to maintain its “international competitiveness”.

So activists should ask themselves whether they would act greatly differently were they to be sitting in government instead of our politicians? When significant strides to protecting society or the environment mean losing jobs and votes, would we really behave much different to the politicians we so commonly decry?

As I have hinted, at the root of the present world predicament lies a vicious circle of destructive competition which no-one can be said to be in control of and no-one can therefore be held wholly responsible for. Furthermore, the global institutions of the WTO, IMF and World Bank whom we might expect to be in control of the global economy are, in fact, operating under the delusion that competition is always a beneficial phenomenon; a delusion forced upon them by their understandable inability to control the free movement of capital and corporations. For in having no control over their free movement, and thus in accepting that state as a “natural given”, they are necessarily lead to prescribe yet *more* competition (i.e. more structural adjustment, more privatisation, more tax cuts, more fiscal austerity, etc) as the cure to our global ills and not less. In failing to realise that economic competition becomes destructive when it fails, as at present, to occur within the framework of adequate global regulations that protect society and the environment, the WTO, WB and IMF serve only to exacerbate the very problems they think they’re solving. Those in charge of the institutions we expect to exert beneficial control over the global economy and whom we commonly believe to be “in power” are, therefore, relatively powerless to influence its out-of-control competitive forces.

So, by blaming governments or corporations or international institutions, we actually accord them far more credit than they really deserve. For in blaming them and in holding them responsible, we imply that they have the power to substantially change the system when we should instead be recognising that the lunatic herd mentality of global markets has already taken over the asylum. Disconcerting though that realisation may be, all those we think of as “in power” are in fact as much prisoners of the system as the rest of us. And were the leaders of the Global Justice Movement to take their place, would they be in any better position, given the radical and global free movement of capital, to take greatly different decisions? I think not. Of course this should not mean that our protests should stop – far from it! But what it *does* mean is that we should not fool ourselves into thinking that protest or other conventional forms of NGO action can ever be adequate to bringing about lasting, substantive and beneficial solutions; it means that each of us who truly cares about this world must earnestly seek for another way.

Surely, therefore, the greatest mistake we can make in our fight for global justice is to blame others for our sorry global predicament as if we ourselves were blameless or as if we could do any better? All the while we fail to recognise that we are *all* to blame, or that we would *ourselves* likely behave in much the same way as those we presently vilify, we perpetuate division, discord and resentment; we build adversarial barriers instead of removing them and we thus make impossible the atmosphere of cooperation, understanding and forgiveness needed to foster an atmosphere of global community; an atmosphere in which the productive negotiation necessary to finding appropriate solutions could evolve.

When - finally – we take all this on board, far from being overcome by a feeling of desperation and despair, paradoxically we reach a crucial and fundamentally important intellectual and spiritual turning point. A point at which we can move to a new and liberating level in our thinking and being. We move from what the prominent American philosopher, Ken Wilber, calls ‘first tier’ thinking to ‘second tier’ thinking; from nation-centric thinking to world-centric thinking; from what he calls ‘flatland reductionism’ to integral holism.

So once we stop blaming others, we start to see that, in reality, no single person, group, organisation, country, religion or culture can be singled out. We start to see that even those who benefit hugely from the status quo are in no position to actually *change* the system and we start to see that we are all caught – to a greater or lesser extent – in the vicious circle of globally destructive competition: a “prisoner’s dilemma” from which there is, ordinarily, no way out. In short, we start to see – finally - that we are all in the same boat.

From a collective realisation such as this, we would have gone a long way to creating the pre-conditions for building a genuine global community: the conditions of *forgiveness and non-judgemental acceptance* of ourselves and each other; the *inclusiveness* necessary to beginning our collaborative search for global solutions. After all, it is upon such a state of genuine Global Community that any properly functioning global democracy must surely depend. In short, we would have created the conditions in which we could recognise the reality that we are ALL ONE; all one in the recognition of our common human fallibility and ‘brokenness’; all one in the celebration of each others’ differentness, all one in the brother/sisterhood of humanity and all one in the eye of our respective God.

Fortunately, this latest and most essential of humanity’s evolutionary journeys has already begun through the work of a number of organisations around the world whose perspective has moved beyond the ‘first-tier’ mode of protest, blame and ‘either/or’ thinking to the ‘second-tier’, non-judgemental, world-centric, ‘both/and’ thinking needed to solve global problems. For as Einstein rightly suggested, “no problem can be solved with the same thinking that created it”.

One organisation that seeks to embody this new thinking is the International Simultaneous Policy Organisation (ISPO) which offers us all – activists and business executives alike – a means by which we can firstly take back control of our present, hollowed-out pseudo-democratic processes and, secondly, how we can co-create the policies necessary to achieving environmental sustainability and global justice. Finally it offers the crucial means for citizens the world over to bring our politicians and governments to implement them without any nation, corporation or citizen losing out. It thus turns the destructive, competition-led politics of globalisation on its head by offering global citizens a practical and peaceful way out of the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’; a veritable way for all of us to take back the world with a new politics of citizen-led, international co-operation for our emergent - but yet-to-be-born - sustainable global society.

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ⁱ *The Crisis of Global Capitalism – Open Society Endangered*, George Soros, Little, Brown and Co. 1998.

ⁱⁱ *When Corporations Rule the World*, David Korten, Kumarian Press & Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1995.