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World Order Transformation from the Grassroots: Global South Social Movements and the Transcendence of Established Approaches to International Change

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In contrast to traditional top-down perspectives, this article aims to shed alternative light on the prospects for change in global order through evaluating how perspectives offered among social movements located in the Global South consider how change can take place beyond established approaches. With reference to perspectives offered among the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, the article elucidates a model of global political change that transcends reformist and revolutionary dynamics, and which bypasses dominant state and intergovernmental institutions. The analysis highlights the ontological divide between these approaches and reformist and revolutionary perspectives, given their pluriversality drawing on concepts that to date have received inadequate attention in the study of international relations. The article further considers how these approaches—given their deep roots in long-established communitarian practices and their pluriversality—may be addressing today's crisis of global order from the bottom-up in ways that may avoid limitations of previous change agendas.

Par opposition au point de vue descendant traditionnel, cet article vise à présenter les perspectives de changement de l'ordre mondial sous une lumière nouvelle, en évaluant comment les mouvements sociaux situés dans l'hémisphère sud envisagent l'intervention du changement au-delà des approches établies. Par référence aux perspectives proposées dans le réseau Global Tapestry of Alternatives, l'article explicite un modèle de changement politique mondial qui transcende les dynamiques réformistes et révolutionnaires, et qui passe outre les institutions d'États dominants et intergouvernementales. L'analyse souligne la division ontologique entre ces approches et les perspectives réformistes et révolutionnaires, étant donné leur pluriversalité qui s'appuie sur des concepts qui jusqu'ici n'ont pas reçu l'attention qu'il faudrait dans l'étude des relations internationales. L'article envisage en outre comment ces approches, étant donné qu'elles sont profondément ancrées dans des pratiques communautaires établies de longue date et leur pluriversalité, peuvent répondre à la crise actuelle de l'ordre mondial, de manière ascendante et de façon à éviter les limites des programmes de changement antérieurs.

En contraste con las perspectivas tradicionales, que tienen un enfoque de arriba hacia abajo, este artículo tiene como objetivo ofrecer una visión alternativa sobre las perspectivas de cambio en el orden global a través de la evaluación de cómo las perspectivas ofrecidas entre los movimientos sociales ubicados en el Sur Global consideran que el cambio puede tener lugar más allá de los enfoques establecidos. El artículo, tomando como

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referencia las perspectivas ofrecidas en el marco del Tapiz Global de Alternativas, dilucida un modelo de cambio político global que trasciende las dinámicas reformistas y revolucionarias, y que pasa por alto las instituciones estatales e intergubernamentales dominantes. El análisis pone de manifiesto la división ontológica entre estos enfoques y las perspectivas reformistas y revolucionarias, debido a su pluriversidad, a partir de conceptos que hasta la fecha han recibido una atención inadecuada dentro del estudio de las relaciones internacionales. El artículo considera, además, cómo estos enfoques, debido a que se encuentran enraizados en prácticas comunitarias establecidas desde hace mucho tiempo y a su pluriversidad, pueden estar abordando la crisis actual del orden global de abajo hacia arriba de manera que puedan llegar a evitar las limitaciones de las agendas de cambio anteriores.

Introduction

The crisis of contemporary world order has been a recurrent theme in recent literature (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020). Diagnoses of the challenges have encompassed a wide range of features, including the decline of democratic institutions and the resurgence of authoritarianism (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017), the exacerbation of global inequalities (Chase Dunn and Nagy 2017), the weaknesses of intergovernmental institutions (Prakash and Dolšák 2017), and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brands and Gavin 2020), to name just a few examples.

Prognoses of the prospects for world order transformation in international relations literature have frequently focused on state-centric explorations of the global strategies of emerging powers such as the “BRICS” nations (Stuenkel 2020) and the interrelated dynamics of globalization and fragmentation (Acharya 2017). When social movements have been considered in recent world order literature, they have often been viewed as threats to global order, especially when the focus is on populist and nationalist movements in dominant states (Cooley and Nexon 2020). Some other analysts of twenty-first-century social movements have decried their lack of a progressive agenda, with Krastev (2014, 17) claiming in respect of the mobilizations of the early 2010s that “none of the major protest movements has come out with a platform for changing the world.” The Global South-based social movements considered in this article, by contrast, offer a wide range of positive agendas for a transformed global order.

In recent years, there has been a notable efflorescence of social movement initiatives aiming to put forward a “Global South” perspective on the possibilities for a transformed world order. Long-established initiatives have experienced renewed interest, with, for example, the 2021 World Social Forum taking place online for its longest-ever meeting in January 2021. At the same time, new initiatives have aimed to extend beyond the “alternative globalization” agenda of earlier mobilizations. The Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA), established in 2019, for example, aims to bridge a great variety of perspectives, encompassing, *inter alia*, “the revival of ancient traditions and the emergence of new worldviews that re-establish humanity’s place within nature, as a basis for human dignity and equality” (GTA 2021a). Groups such as the GTA are part of a wave of international networks advancing systemic alternatives in the third decade of the twenty-first century, leading examples of which are surveyed in table 1. In many cases, these combine Global South mobilizations with sympathetic movements (and funders) based in the Global North, but the focus in this article is on the perspectives specifically identified among these movements as emanating from the “Global South.”

As this article will seek to elucidate, these agendas offer significant alternatives to the predominant understandings of social movements’ contributions to change

Table 1. Leading international networks among the movements for systemic alternatives

Network	Formed	Aims*	Composition; webpage
Adelante: Dialogue of Global Processes	2021	“confront the current multiple global crises, while at the same time trying to build people-centric alternatives”	Seven international networks of movements for systemic alternatives in North and South; adelante.global
Global Dialogue for Systemic Change	2020	“to share analysis, experiences, ideas and alternatives, in the face of growing health, social, economic, political and environmental crises”	82 organizations and networks in Global North and Global South; globaldialogue.online
Global Tapestry of Alternatives	2019	“to create solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst movements and networks of alternatives on local, regional and global levels”	Led by Vikalp Sangam (India) and Crianza Mutua (Mexico and Colombia); 63 supporting organizations and networks; global-tapestryofalternatives.org
Intercoll	2016	“to develop economic, social alternatives, and environmental policies to rethink the world in the paths of emancipation and solidarity”	Network of activists, researchers and journalists; intercoll.net
Multiconvergence of Global Networks	2020	“building a more humane, balanced, ecological and democratic world of solidarity” through “a process of multiconvergence” among participating networks	A “metanetwork” of 13 international networks from Global South and Global North; prensa.com/pt-pt/tag/multiconvergencia/
Systemic Alternatives	2014	“to build an interactive dialogue to deepen the analysis and strengthen the alternatives that are being developed by grassroots movements and thinkers”	Lead organizations: Focus on the Global South, Fundación Solón, and Attac; systemicalternatives.org

*Notes:**The quotations of aims are taken from the websites of each listed network, cited in the fourth column of the table and last accessed on June 29, 2022.

in world politics. Change in international relations may be understood in terms of both (1) systemic changes, often considered with reference to aspects such as power transition (Organski 1968), the role of war (Gilpin 1988), and developments in capitalist economic relations (Halperin 2004), to name a few examples, and (2) incremental changes such as reforms to international law and global governance, often understood in terms of the dynamics of norm evolution (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Historically, social movements have been interpreted as contributors to systemic change such as through revolutionary dynamics (Halliday 1999), or to incremental change such as through lobbying for new intergovernmental agreements and international norms (Khagram, Riker and Sikkink 2002). The perspectives put forward among Global South movements considered in this article, by contrast, go significantly beyond traditional approaches such as these.

The approaches to world order transformation offered by the Global South social movements evaluated in this article require reconsideration of how change in world politics is traditionally understood. This article seeks to unpack this argument in three stages: (1) through elucidation of how these approaches rooted in pluriversal ideas go beyond the traditional reformist-revolutionary binary to offer transformationist alternatives to established world order change processes; (2) by

considering how these approaches require going beyond traditional domains of action from local through to international levels; and (3) by exploring how these approaches involve cooperative action crossing traditional sectoral divisions and taking a longer-term and potentially more sustainable perspective on change.

It is important to avoid essentialising “Global South” social movements, exaggerating their differences from “Northern” counterparts or assuming universalism of approaches among them (Sharma 2021, 29). Social movements in the Global South are immensely diverse, and—like in the Global North—there are nationalist and populist mobilizations in the Global South that promote agendas that are far from progressive in their approach to world order (Destradi and Plagemann 2019). There are also numerous Global South social movement mobilizations, the activities of which may be considered reformist or revolutionary in the traditional senses outlined later in this article. However, acknowledgment of the diversity of approaches among Global South social movements does not justify neglect of the significant alternative approaches to world order put forward among them, the dynamics of which this article seeks to elucidate. As will be considered towards the end of this article, these alternatives may offer a more promising approach to world order transformation than those that have attained prominence before, including both historical anarchist and utopian socialist approaches as well as more recent global justice and alternative globalization mobilizations.

This article seeks to complement the increasingly rich literature on how Global South approaches require reconsideration of analysis of international relations. While this literature has done much to elucidate the importance of alternative ways of understanding world politics (Querejazu 2016; Blaney and Tickner 2017; Trownsell et al. 2021) and the multiple and diverse origins of international theory (Thakur and Smith 2021), the specific focus of this article—on social movements in the Global South and their alternative transformationist approaches to world order—remains under-explored in the study of international relations.

This focus also complements the growing literature on Indigenous Peoples in international relations, which has to date explored, *inter alia*, Indigenous Peoples’ diplomatic and paradiplomatic practices (Beier 2009; Álvarez and Ovando 2022), the advancement of Indigenous Peoples’ rights through transnational advocacy (Brysk 2000), and forms of local resistance to globalization (Hall and Fenelon 2009). Rather than concentrating on diplomatic practices or reform and resistance within and against the dominant order, the focus here is on how new social movement networks in the Global South have sought to advance diverse approaches, including among Indigenous Peoples, that may offer transformative potential in international order beyond traditionally dominant institutions.

Through this focus, this article also seeks to go beyond earlier critical literatures on the emancipatory potential of social movements, which in many cases were rooted in the “Western” canon (Eschle and Stammers 2004, 347), or eschew consideration of the concrete experiences of building alternatives offered among the movements considered in this article. This focus on deep-rooted practices of alternative order-making offers a distinctive contribution in contrast to a focus on early twenty-first-century alternative globalization movements’ promotion of new visions for the world over deep-rooted experience (Munck 2005), or consideration of Global South social movements through the analysis of their frames, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structures (Johnston and Almeida 2006; Engels and Müller 2019).

The approaches considered in this article encompass those put forward among social movement networks that explicitly define themselves as advancing perspectives from the Global South. The leading case explored in this article—the GTA (2021c) describes itself as “weaving systemic alternatives from the Global South”—and given the very diverse array of Global South mobilizations encompassed within

its Tapestry, it offers a helpful window on a wider range of perspectives. The GTA was established in January 2019 as “an initiative seeking to create solidarity networks and strategic alliance amongst... an immense variety of radical alternatives” (GTA 2019) and the leading “weavers” of these alternatives are Vikalp Sangam in India, “an ongoing process that... aims at bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance,” and Crianza Mutua in Mexico and Colombia, a “network process” aiming to “identify, document and connect groups through communal webs that are actively dismantling hierarchies in everyday life, putting principles of sufficiency into practice and constructing and extending their autonomy from the market and the State” (GTA 2022d).

As an example of one of the further groups considered in this article, one of the leading endorers of the GTA is the Association Consortium for Indigenous Peoples’ and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA Consortium), which (2021a) notes that “more than half of our Member organizations identify as Indigenous Peoples’ and/or local community organizations [and] the majority of their work is happening in the Global South”—so examples identified by this organization as representing perspectives from these communities are included in the focus of this article.

Through its focus on self-identified proponents of agendas from the Global South, this article seeks to elucidate conceptions of Global South social movement approaches developed among the movements themselves rather than imposed from outside. Moreover, the principal source materials are the documents and resources developed by the movements themselves to communicate their practices and approaches. While the approaches may be united in being considered as emanating from the Global South—and although this article will identify some commonalities among them—the diversity among these perspectives, as acknowledged, for instance, in the GTA’s self-description as serving as a “tapestry,” is taken into consideration and indeed is critical to the pluriversity that will be elucidated in the pages ahead.

In the next section of this article, an alternative transformationist model of change offered in the agendas of these movements is identified, elucidating how it contrasts with traditional reformist and revolutionary approaches. The article then proceeds to outline how the transformationist agendas put forward among these movements advance change dynamics beyond dominant state and intergovernmental institutions with reference to diverse concepts, several of which have as yet been insufficiently studied in international relations. The article concludes by considering how the deep-rooted practices embedded in Global South social movements’ transformationist approaches may offer more sustainable means of addressing contemporary problems, while also considering limits and risks of these approaches.

Transcending the Reformist-Revolutionary Binary

Traditionally, the change agendas put forward among social movements have been disaggregated between those that promote “reformist” goals and those promoting “revolutionary” objectives (Snow and Soule 2010). Both such perspectives are generally considered with respect to goals in relation to the governments of states or similar political authorities, with revolutionary movements commonly considered to constitute those seeking “the takeover of political power, whether the main site of political power is a state, city-state, empire, kingdom, or principality” (Lawson 2019, 3), and reformist movements seeking merely reforms within the existing structures and processes of these sites. A similar distinction between “revolutionary” and “reformist” approaches to international order is also to be found in international relations literature, with the former seeking system change and the latter seeking change within existing international institutions (Falk 1968). The reformist-

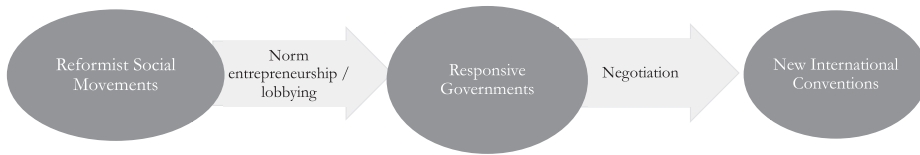


Figure 1. The reformist model of social movements in international normative change.

revolutionary binary stands in contrast to conservative and counter-revolutionary approaches (Bob 2012; Allinson 2019).

In his landmark article on social movements and world politics, Walker (1994, 670) highlighted how traditional international relations discourses excluded social movements by affirming “the priority of the principle of state sovereignty over all other claims to political possibility.” In the period since, a diverse array of studies have considered the operation of social movements in world politics, including consideration of how they have globalized (Della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht 2009) and the notion of global civil society (Kaldor 2003; Chandler 2004). However, many international relations studies have limited their evaluation of the influence of social movements within the constraints of a state-dominated world order, unpacking an array of reformist approaches among social movements, including those seeking to ensure states adhere to established international norms such as through the “boomerang” and “spiral” models (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 2013) and those aiming to advance new international norms and legal regimes (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Price 1998). In the former case, the principal change process in response to international social movement action takes place at the national level, as states are socialized into the normative expectations of international society. In the latter case, the principal change process takes place at the international level, as illustrated in figure 1, with social movements contributing to international change by serving as norm entrepreneurs pioneering new international standards and lobbying for their adoption by states. Case studies of this reformist approach in practice are numerous, and include the creation of the International Criminal Court (Glasius 2006) and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Müller and Wunderlich 2020). Besides serving as norm entrepreneurs, social movements have been understood to enhance global governance through, for instance, monitoring states and participation in initiatives with states, potentially providing forms of democratic accountability to global institutions (Scholte 2002).

Studies of revolutionary movements’ influence on world politics have been less prominent in the post-Cold War era, although notable exceptions include Halliday (1999), Anievas (2015), and Lawson (2019). In theory at least—as argued by Lawson (2021, 345)—revolutionary movements “run counter to many of the ground rules of international order (sovereignty, the sanctity of international law, and diplomacy), proclaiming ideals of universal society and global insurrection.” However, the way in which these principles are promoted by revolutionary movements has tended to retain the state as the central driving force of change, especially in the immediate term, with the seizure of state institutions seen as the core first step in bringing about the end of a previous order and the building of an alternative, even if in the longer term the transcendence of a society of states is sought (Halliday 1999, 12). As illustrated in figure 2, in the traditional revolutionary model, while new international structures may be the envisaged long-run outcome, in the short term it is state-level regime change that is sought, with global transformation the envisaged product of similar transformations in other states and/or revolutionary war.

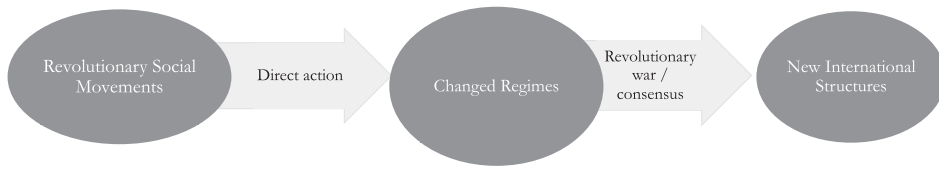


Figure 2. The revolutionary model of international political change.

Reformist and revolutionary approaches are undoubtedly frequently identified among social movements in the Global South. For example, approximately half of the agendas identifiable in the publications of the Third World Network and Third World Network Africa over the second decade of the twenty-first century may be described as having promoted reform within existing institutions.¹ Revolutionary perspectives seeking system change are also to be found across a wide range of movements, including Marxist approaches such as those associated with the work of Samir Amin and promoted through bodies such as the Third World Forum (Amin 2008), Fanonist approaches to anti-imperialism (Rabaka 2011), and the revolutionary agendas of Islamist jihadist mobilizations (Adraoui 2017), to mention just a few well-known examples.

However, to focus on a distinction between movements seeking reform within established institutions and those seeking to seize control of or to overthrow those institutions is to maintain a focus on the established institutions as the target for the bringing about of change—all that differs between such approaches is how far-reaching a change is promoted in respect of those institutions. As illustrated in figure 1, in traditional reformist approaches, it remains states that are the crucial actors in bringing about international normative change through negotiating new international agreements, albeit in response to social movement pressure. Similarly, as illustrated in figure 2, in traditional revolutionary models, it remains states that are the immediate targets for revolutionary action, even if in the long run the aim may be their transcendence—the latter of which have tended to be confronted by counter-revolutionary mobilizations by other states (Bisley 2004). Moreover, as Halliday (1999, 12) argued, “in practice, revolutionary regimes are the more determined defenders of the authority of states within... and [i]n the international sphere, the same applies... revolutions deploy their powers to seal their own frontiers, and, in time, come to be among the strongest defenders of state sovereignty.”

Given their immediate-term focus on the state as the core site of global political change, both reformist and revolutionary approaches may be alleged to reproduce rather than challenge dominant discourses concerning the significance of established institutions such as states to political change. As just noted, even revolutionary mobilizations may in the long term seek to entrench state-centric institutions rather than go beyond them. More significantly, concentration on reformist and revolutionary agendas obfuscates the centrality to many contemporary Global South social movement approaches, including those put forward by the GTA, which promote global change through the *bypassing* of established institutions rather than through their reform, seizure, or overthrow. It is these approaches that are the core concern of this article, and they are built on the premise that state institutions—even purportedly “democratic” ones—are “oligarchic and oppressive” and should therefore be bypassed through promotion and adoption of approaches to “living beyond the “democratic” nation state” (Esteva 2019).

A turn to agendas for change bypassing states and the institutions of international society requires rejecting the traditional “reformist” and “revolutionary” binary. A range of possible labels might be applied to designate a further category of

¹This is based on a survey of every issue of *Third World Resurgence* and *African Agenda* from 2011 to 2020.



Figure 3. Transformationist social movements and international change.

approaches—for instance “outsider,” “grassroots,” or “alternative.” For the purpose of this article, the label “transformationist” will be used to encompass approaches to world order transformation that bypass established institutions rather than seeking their reform, seizure, or overthrow. This terminology draws from approaches developed among mobilizations such as the GTA and its leading organizing group Vikalp Sangam through which has been proposed a “flower of transformation” encompassing interrelated ecological, democratic, economic, social, and cultural agendas seeking change through the practices of communities outside state and capitalist institutions (Kothari 2020b, 29).

Some of the core elements of the transformationist approach to social movements and international change are summarized in figure 3. In contrast to the emphasis on lobbying for reformists or direct action for revolutionaries, both of which are largely directed at states, for the transformationist approach bypassing states, horizontal exchange facilitating mutual learning, strategizing, and cooperation among communities is critical to facilitating change (GTA 2021a). The GTA’s first “line of action,” for instance, emphasizes “mutual learning” facilitated by its “platforms and spaces of exchange,” while its subsequent lines of action include, inter alia, connecting, stimulating and supporting mutual cooperation and strategizing among networks (GTA 2022c). Rather than state institutions, it is societies that are envisaged as responsive in these processes of mutual exchange, learning, strategizing, and cooperation, ultimately envisaged as enabling pluriversal practices to flourish. The subsequent sections of this article will expand further on these processes and the GTA’s diverse lines of action. Although figure 3 illustrates a linear trajectory, as with figures 1 and 2, it is merely indicative of an ideal type, with the trajectories of real-world cases shaped by numerous contextual factors—a rich area for further study beyond the scope of this article, which concentrates on setting out the lineaments of transformationist approaches.

A summary of some of the main contrasts between the transformationist approach to global political change considered in this article and reformist and revolutionary approaches that have preoccupied previous literatures on social movements and international relations is provided in table 2. It disaggregates several principal points of difference, including the principal targets for change and the types of change promoted in respect of them: for traditional reformist and revolutionary approaches, the targets are primarily governmental, with the primary difference between them being whether political reforms or regime change are sought, whereas for transformationists, the principal site of change is societal. In consequence of the focus on social change through the practices of communities, the principal methods of transformationists include mutual exchange facilitating horizontal learning and cooperation, in contrast to the prominence of government-oriented lobbying for reformist approaches and direct action for revolutionaries. Relatedly, as will be elucidated towards the end of the article, the focus on mutual exchange, learning, and cooperation entails an emphasis on long-term social change over the short-term governmental change in the form of the legal agreements or regime changes sought by reformers and revolutionaries, respectively.

As indicated in the final row of table 2, central to the contrast between the transformationist approaches considered in this article and traditional reformist and rev-

Table 2. The transformationist alternative to reformist and revolutionary approaches to international change.

	Reformists	Revolutionaries	Transformationists
Primary Targets	Governmental		Societal
Primary Goals	Political reform	Regime change	Social change
Primary Methods	Lobbying	Direct action	Horizontal exchange, learning & cooperation
Primary Timeframe	Short term		Long term
Ontology	State-centric/“one-world world”		Pluriversal

olutionary perspectives is the distinction between a state-centric “one-world world” ontology and the pluriversal approach to be found among transformationist movements. The aims of the GTA, for instance, explicitly refer to a pluriversal approach in the goal “to bring together the collective envisioning of... pluriversal alternatives by creating a space for sharing and dialoguing” (GTA 2021b). The problem Blaney and Tickner (2017, 293) highlighted in the wider study of international relations—assumption of “singular world” logics introduced by colonial modernity”—applies also to analyses of social movements that limit their focus to the influence of social movements—whether through reform or revolution—upon a world of states and intergovernmental institutions. Pluriversalist approaches recognize instead—as embodied in the Zapatistas’ Fourth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle—that “many worlds are walked in the world” and that “In the world we want, everyone fits. In the world we want many worlds to fit” envisaging a future “where all communities and languages fit” (EZLN 1996). Such an approach therefore involves not merely the bypassing of state and intergovernmental institutions, but as de la Cadena and Blaser (2018, 4) highlight, “refracting the course of the one-world world” and facilitating change instead through “the practice of a world of many worlds.” As elucidated in the next section, in the work of the GTA, this practice includes the dissemination of a great variety of perspectives from diverse cosmologies extending beyond those assuming singular world logics.

Given the pluriversal approach of the transformationist perspectives considered in this article, there is a significant contrast between these approaches and those considering the development of a “global civil society.” Kaldor (2003, 12,107), for instance, defined global civil society as “the medium through which social contracts or bargains between the individual and the centres of political and economic power are negotiated... at global, local and national levels.” Not only is such an approach alleged to be “prone to elitist rather than inclusive consequences” given its global focus (Chandler 2004, 313), but as Walker (1994, 696) noted, the concept of global civil society “depends on the assumption that the world itself can be constituted as a bounded political community modelled on the state writ large,” in effect reproducing state-centric conceptions of the possibilities of political and social change. Transformationist approaches, by contrast, recognize a vastly more diverse set of possibilities embracing multiple worlds and diverse ways of life, as outlined in the next section of this article.

The pluriversal approach of the transformationist movements considered here therefore also extends much further than forms of “politics beyond the state” that aim to bring about change through consumer pressure on corporate actors rather than through the lobbying of governmental and intergovernmental bodies, as considered, for instance by Wapner (1995) and Chen (2016). While the latter approaches to international change bypass states, they must be distinguished from the transformationism considered in this article since they are reformist in charac-

ter, seeking incremental changes through established institutions, albeit institutions that are corporate rather than governmental in constitution.

The Global South social movement transformationism considered here also differs significantly from some of the principal approaches to “alternative globalization” that were widely heralded in the opening years of the twenty-first century. One of the problems identified in respect of some of those mobilizations was that although there was clarity as to what was being opposed (neoliberal economic globalization), the alternatives being put forward were much less clear (Clark 2013, 75). The open approach of the World Social Forum and its emphasis on in-person assemblages resulted in over-representation of well-resourced Northern NGOs in its meetings and allegations of descending into an “NGO trade fair” at which reformist approaches crowded out more radical alternatives (Worth and Buckley 2009). As for the more radical components of the early twenty-first century alternative globalization movement, a frequent refrain was the aim to build alternatives from scratch—in some cases even aiming “to create a completely new society” in the words of Argentine activist Ezequiel Adamovsky (quoted in Sen et al. 2004, 134)—a sharp contrast to the deeply-rooted experiences emphasized in the mobilizations considered in this article, which draw on long-standing Indigenous knowledges and community practices, as the next section will highlight.

Rethinking Domains of Action

Besides requiring looking beyond the reformist-revolutionary binary, a turn to transformationist perspectives also requires reconsidering traditional understandings of domains of action from the local through to national and regional/international levels. In evaluating historical perspectives on world order from the Global South, there has traditionally been an emphasis on the contrast between “continentalist” perspectives centered on regional unity such as Pan-Africanism, “sovereignist” perspectives considering states as the means to liberation from previous imperial ties, and “nativist” perspectives envisaging “a world of distinct races or authentic groups of people each inhabiting their own territory and living according to their own traditions, cultures, and religions” (Abrahamsen 2020, 67). While of some use in understanding aspects of twentieth-century mobilizations in the Global South, approaches such as this neglect wider interhuman and interspecies dimensions that are evident among transformationist perspectives frequently to be found among the movements considered here.

Rather than change through identity politics, states or regional bodies, the Global South social movement perspectives considered here include those that put forward interhuman and communitarian approaches to change that are not well recognized in traditional typologies and that are embedded in knowledges that received inadequate attention in the study of international relations prior to the ontological turn (Blaney and Tickner 2017; Blaney and Trowsell 2021). Central to the approach of groups such as the GTA is the transformation of vocabularies and recognition of the value of deep-rooted Indigenous concepts that offer alternatives to dominant approaches to development (Kothari et al. 2019). The great variety of these concepts circulated by the GTA include, among many others, *comunalidad*, *sentipensando*, *ubuntu*, *kawsak sachá*, and *kametsa asaike*, which offer examples of approaches rooted in diverse cosmologies that transcend a local, national, regional or global focus. In the subsequent paragraphs, these concepts are introduced, and their contrast with statist, regionalist, and nativist approaches is highlighted, considering how they offer examples of a pluriversal array of alternatives to dominant discourses as bases for social change.

Among the most influential concepts circulated by the GTA is the Zapotec concept of *comunalidad*, which to date has received very little attention in the study of international relations despite its importance as an example of successful pluriver-

sal practices as will be outlined subsequently. The concept has been described as “a community-centred approach to life based on reciprocity” practiced in Oaxaca, emphasising “altruistic action taken on behalf of the community” (Coon 2019, 247), as well as mutual hospitality, sharing, and communal assemblies, obligations, and non-remunerated collective labor for the common good (Osorio 2019, 131). In campaigns addressing problems including mining interventions and energy farm building, *comunalidad* has underpinned movement approaches in Oaxaca that emphasise mutual cooperation among diverse communities to sustain alternative ways of life (Lucio 2018; Morosin 2020). This emphasis on cooperation among diverse communities to sustain deep-rooted social practices contrasts significantly with the regionalism of continentalist perspectives, the state-centrism of sovereigntist approaches, and the exclusionary identitarian emphasis of nativist approaches.

A further prominent approach emphasized by the GTA that has also been overlooked in the study of international relations is *sentipensando*, rooted in ancestral knowledge of Abya Yala and encompassing “the process of recognising and valuing the knowledge of the other—rejecting dogmas and absolute truths, learning to live together with our differences, knowing how to communicate and share what we have learned” (Fals Borda, quoted in Rodríguez Castro 2021, 67). Mutual understanding is central to this approach, stressing the valuing of alternative knowledges and belief systems and the need to facilitate both their coexistence and reciprocal learning. The emphasis on valuing others and sharing contrasts sharply with approaches emphasizing separation and conflict—and the domain of action is communitarian rather than focused on state and region. The term was enunciated by Afro-descendent fishermen among Colombian coastal and river communities who “referred to themselves as *sentipensantes*, people able to master simultaneous use of two forms of intelligence: sensory and intellectual knowing” (Rendón 2021). However, the term has since been adapted to refer to pedagogical approaches aiming to bring about transformation through mutual learning and the construction of alternative political subjectivities, including in the Sistema Educativo Rebelde Autónomo Zapatista de Liberación Nacional in Mexico and the *Pedagogia do Movimento* in Brazil (Barbosa 2019, 36).

A more familiar concept in the study of international relations is the Nguni Bantu term *ubuntu*, which has become one of the principal reference points for those developing alternative “relational” approaches on account of understandings of its meaning referring to how “a person is a person through other people” and its implication that “everyone is responsible for everyone else” (Smith 2020, 91). South African shack dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo has put forward a “revolutionary *ubuntu*” approach that distinguishes its methods from traditional revolutionaries through its emphasis not on regime overthrow but rather on the need to “pull all the different people together and make sure everyone fits in... a different approach from normal kinds of politics,” based on the “new spirit of *ubuntu*, from the spirit of humanity, from the understanding of what is required for a proper respect of each person’s dignity” (Zikode 2009, 34). Moreover, *ubuntu* is not merely anthropocentric—as Le Grange (2019, 324) highlights *ubuntu* “suggests that our moral obligation is to care for others, because when they are harmed, we are harmed. This obligation extends to all of life since everything in the cosmos is related; when I harm nature, I am harmed.”

“Removing the human-nature divide,...taking care of life, .. [and] bringing back respect for Mother Earth” are central distinguishing features for the alternatives identified by the GTA in contrast to dominant anthropocentric approaches (GTA 2023a). One of the initiatives the GTA has highlighted is the Kawsak Sacha (Living Forest) declaration, rooted in the cosmology of the Kichwa People of Sarayaku, Ecuador, and encompassing “the beings of the animal, vegetable, mineral, spiritual and cosmic worlds, in intercommunication with human beings, giving them what is necessary to reanimate their psychological, physical and spiritual facets,

(Kichwa People of Sarayaku 2018). The approach embedded in this declaration explicitly rejects approaches to conservation that fail to address “who controls the land, who lives in these areas, or what activities inhabitants engage in to sustain themselves”: whereas prevailing approaches to conservation may aim to separate the human and non-human, the approach put forward in the Kawsak Sacha agenda emphasises “Indigenous Peoples or other forest communities as key agents in the preservation and care of forests” given the symbiotic relationship between these communities and the forests they inhabit (Santi 2020).

Relatedly, the kametsa asaike approach to well-being among the Asháninka people from the Peruvian Amazon “in knowing the world as a network of mutually constituted of human and other-than-human actors,... implicitly questions the modern notion of the disembedded individual and the nature-culture dualism” (Caruso and Sarmiento Barletti 2019, 220). Kametsa asaike is an approach to well-being (or *buen vivir*) that “argues that the well-being of one subject depends on the wellbeing of the community and nature” (Flood 2020, 5). As Caruso and Sarmiento Barletti (2019, 220) emphasize, kametsa asaike challenges dominant individualistic and anthropocentric approaches to well-being in two ways: “(1) subjective well-being is only possible through collective well-being, and the collective includes humans, other-than-human beings and the Earth; and (2) it is a deliberate practice—to live well everyone has to work at it.” *Central Asháninka del Río Ene* (CARE), representing several Asháninka communities, has put forward a manifesto embodying these principles, and mutual respect for these principles has been a basis for cooperation of these communities with external agencies, indicating their potential as a medium between worlds (CARE 2011).

Approaches that go beyond reform and revolution of established institutions and that recognize the importance of interhuman and interspecies cooperation require reconsideration of the political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural sectors of transformation. Among the leading movements supporting the GTA, Kalpavriksh (2017, 3) states that it works towards a “more in-depth understanding of alternative transformations on political, economic, social, cultural and ecological fronts, and of the worldviews that underlie and inform such transformations,” spanning a considerable array of sectors. The agroecological approach of La Via Campesina, on the other hand, bridges economic, social, environmental, and cultural sectors in its emphasis on “feeding the world with healthy, local food, good stewardship of the rural environment, the preservation of cultural heritages and the peasant or family farm way of life, and resilience to climate change” (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2013, 4). The far-reaching panoply of sectors bridged in approaches such as those of Kalpavriksh and La Via Campesina extends significantly beyond the limited “frame bridging” for instance between human rights and development movements (Nelson and Dorsey 2008) or the “environmentalization” and “genderization” of reformist social movement agendas since the 1980s (Quimbayo Ruiz 2018).

Moreover, the significance of transformationist approaches across multiple sectors involves much more than simply their bridging, given the emphasis on pluralism and diversity and the rejection of agendas that propose one purportedly “right” way of advancing political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural change. The Global South transformationism considered here does not merely bridge sectors but offers an array of pluriversal approaches “based on a multiplicity of worlds and ways of worlding life” (Escobar 2020, 26) through which can be advanced “a politics of another civilization that respects, and builds on the interconnectedness of all life” (Escobar 2018, 12), aiming to facilitate the coexistence of multiple worlds through diverse approaches rather than assuming a singular set of possibilities within which to advance reform or revolution.

The GTA considers its role in relation to these diverse approaches in part as a medium of exchange, serving through horizontal processes—like weavers of a

tapestry—to facilitate mutual learning, strategizing, and cooperation, as well as inspiring others, with a view to “eventually converging into a critical mass” of alternatives and ultimately enabling “radical systemic change” through the flourishing of pluriversal practices (GTA 2021a). The resources of the GTA—examples of which will be elaborated further in the next section—seek to advance what Demaria and Kothari (2017, 2588–9) have termed a “post-development agenda” going “beyond critique” by “articulating the narratives of those struggling to retain or create diverse ways of life against the homogenizing forces of development,” prospectively “truly ‘transforming our world’” by “breaking down many of the dualisms that Western patriarchal paradigms have engendered, such as between humans and nature.” A “synergic articulation of these alternatives” Demaria and Kothari (2017, 2592, 2589) argue “should investigate the what, how, who and why of all that is transformative,” and to this end, the GTA (2023a) has developed a set of “criteria to identify and weave ‘alternatives’” in order “to strengthen and support the work of Weavers at the local level.”

The GTA’s criteria encompass four principal features: (1) “breaking with patriarchy, racism, casteism, [and] classism”; (2) “breaking with the hegemony of the nation-state and the system of liberal democracy”; (3) “breaking with the capitalist system”; and (4) “breaking with the culture of anthropocentrism” (GTA 2023a). Moreover, the GTA’s resources have sought to “make the pluriverse visible” through concrete examples of approaches meeting these criteria enabling alternatives to flourish in practice in the face of the challenges of the state, the market, and anthropocentrism (Kothari et al. 2019, xxxiii).

One example described by Kothari et al. (2019, xxxiii) as “paradigmatic” is *comunalidad*, exemplary of many of the GTA’s criteria, notably “communitising life as an alternative organization of social life to the State” and “the construction of localized autonomy” (GTA 2023a). As practiced in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, *comunalidad* has been effective in enabling the persistence of pluriversal practices despite the attempted intrusions of mining operations. As outlined by Zapotec anthropologist Jaime Martínez Luna (2010, 85, 94–5), daily practices of *comunalidad* have long enabled communities in Oaxaca “to survive even in the face of an asphyxiating globalizing process” dating back to the Spanish conquest and before, through “the creation and functioning of the communal assembly,” practices of “communal work” aimed at “satisfying common needs” rather than individual remuneration, and collective ownership of territory, recognizing that “human beings are not the center, but simply a part of this great natural world.” These practices have been effective in ensuring that despite the issuance of mining contracts by Mexico’s Ministry of Economy, permission from local authorities and the agrarian sector for mining operations to commence in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has not been forthcoming (Morosin 2020, 924). Practices of *comunalidad* have underpinned unity across social and cultural divisions in resisting the incentives offered by mining corporations to commence operations and in gaining recognition of Zanatepec as a mine-free community (Morosin 2020, 928). As Osorio (2019, 131) also highlights *comunalidad* facilitates pluriversal co-existence (“We harbour the Truth of the Other, while the Other hosts ours”), reflected in the coexistence of Indigenous self-governance practices (*usos y costumbres*) within Oaxacan official municipal structures, with the majority of Oaxacan local authorities governed by these rather than political parties. It is through these structures by which mining operations have been effectively resisted through refusal to grant access (Raghu 2022, 105, 108, 133). Besides providing examples of successful resistance and of pluriversal coexistence, *comunalidad* also dovetails with the broader—global—agenda of the GTA in that, as Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado (2010, 371) notes, *comunalidad* “comprises a complex experience that in no sense implies keeping everything local. Instead, it implies the ability to extend the experience, to take it into the world,” implying possibilities for

“global comunalidad” based on reciprocity and not merely solidarity (Meyer and Maldonado Alvarado 2010, 390).

Gradual, Deep-Rooted, and Sustainable Transformation

Traditional reformist and revolutionary approaches have both tended to emphasize change in the short term, whether the development of new international norms and standards within established institutions in reformist approaches, or the capture or overthrow of established institutions in revolutionary approaches. A turn to transformationist perspectives, on the other hand, may also involve a turn towards approaches that emphasize longer-term processes of change, the pace of which may need to take place gradually and incrementally. The [Vikalp Sangam Core Group \(2020\)](#), for example, has emphasized the importance of “creative, long-term alternatives,” most recently in responding to COVID-19. The [GTA \(2019\)](#) similarly emphasizes a gradualist approach in its emphasis on how “it starts in the local interaction among alternatives, to gradually organize forms of agreement at the regional, national and global scale, through diverse and light structures, defined in each space, horizontal, democratic, inclusive, and non-centralized, using diverse local languages and other ways of communicating.”

Central to these gradualist approaches to change is the role of horizontal learning processes, with the approaches of the Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra) being especially influential to the GTA through its co-weavers, Crianza Mutua Mexico, which emerged from Unitierra. The learning processes they aim to develop—“through observation and experience” rather than hierarchical pedagogies—aim “to create or support autonomous ways of living,” ensuring “the learners will not become dependent on being hired by public agencies or private businesses or rather be at their mercy for an income” ([Esteva 2006](#), 12). Moreover, as is evident in the approach of Crianza Mutua Colombia, another of the GTA weavers, there is an emphasis on “rooted education” that “assumes that no one knows the problems and potential of the territory better than those who live and work in it” as put forward for instance at the Ala Kusreik Ya Misak University of the Misak Indigenous community of Colombia ([Villareal 2022](#)).

Given the significance of mutual learning for autonomy in transformationist approaches, these also require rethinking the role of cooperation and confrontation in agendas for change. Traditional reformist approaches tend to emphasize either cooperation with established institutions (for instance, participation in governmental and intergovernmental committees developing new legislation and standards), or confrontation with established institutions with a view to pressuring them to institute change but without challenging the persistence of these institutions. Revolutionary approaches, on the other hand, have traditionally emphasized confrontation with a view to the overthrow or capture of established institutions. Neither of these approaches to cooperation and confrontation is central to the transformationist perspectives considered here. Instead, there is a focus on social cooperation by-passing established institutions. Based on interhuman and interspecies cooperative practices drawing on knowledges rooted in the contexts of these practices, transformationist approaches encompassing “Buen Vivir and related “transition discourses” such as “Ecological Swaraj” in India or “Eco-Ubuntu” in South Africa are calling for a significant paradigmatic or civilizational transformation” through the practices of communities outside established institutions ([Salazar 2015](#)).

The GTA was designed to address a gap in that prior to its creation there was “no systematic, ongoing process linking” these approaches, to enable them “to learn from each other,” network and develop “critical solidarity” and ultimately forge a “critical mass for macro-economic and political change” by “building collaborations,” strategizing for resistance and “changing the macro-situation,” “dialoguing among diverse worldviews, ontologies and epistemologies,” stimulating further net-

works, and “collective envisioning of alternative futures” (Kothari 2020a, 246). To this end, the GTA’s lines of action include not only enabling mutual learning by documenting and disseminating information on initiatives but also practices that “connect, stimulate, support and advocate” on their behalf (GTA 2022c).

The best-known of the documentary resources disseminated by the GTA is the *Pluriverse* dictionary aiming to provide “a broad transcultural compilation of concrete concepts, worldviews, and practices from around the world, challenging the modernist ontology of universalism in favour of a multiplicity of possible worlds” (Kothari et al. 2019, xvii). This has subsequently been complemented by the *Weaving Alternatives* journal, envisaged not merely as a newsletter among weavers of alternatives but “a process of knowing each-others’ work, engaging with ideas, facilitating collaborations and initiating co-writing and co-learning processes” (GTA 2020). The GTA has assembled numerous further documentary resources as well as webinars on the successful practices of alternatives in the face of COVID-19 envisaged as a means of both mutual learning and strategic networking (GTA 2023b, 4). It supports online resources on initiatives including an online “meta-map of alternatives” enabling participating weavers to assemble a virtual tapestry of their diverse approaches based on P2P open design principles (GTA 2023c), and it has facilitated a wide range of events bringing together practitioners of alternatives on themes that in 2023 included gender diversity and pluriversality as well as facilitating dialogues among weavers (GTA 2023d). Besides activities linking practitioners of alternatives, outreach work has encompassed engaging with diverse constituencies, including in European capitals, to promote a manifesto on ecosocial energy transition (GTA 2023e) and deliberating on the pluriverse in conjunction with other initiatives such as at the Re-Imagining Education Conference (GTA 2023f).

The Manifesto for an Ecosocial Energy Transition from the Peoples of the South, which has achieved the signatures of diverse Global South social movement organizations besides the GTA, is an example of how the concepts circulated by the GTA underpin cross-border advancement of alternatives in mediating between worlds. The manifesto condemns the resource extraction on which North-based “clean energy transition” agendas are based, calling instead for the advancement of practices rooted in harmony with nature rather than its extraction—an “ecosocial alternative” connecting in the words of the manifesto “the lived experience and critical perspectives of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities, women, and youth throughout the Global South... inspired by the work done on the rights of nature, buen vivir, vivir sabroso, sumak kawsay, ubuntu, swaraj, the commons, the care economy, agroecology, food sovereignty, post-extractivism, the pluriverse, autonomy, and energy sovereignty” (GTA 2023g).

The January 2023 GTA dialogue among weavers in India and Southeast Asia, on the other hand, provides evidence of the impacts of the GTA’s transnational weaving processes among practitioners of alternatives, in this case forming new links between groups such as the Movement for Alternatives and Solidarity in Southeast Asia (MASSA) and Vikalp Sangam in India, enabling participants to “exchange their stories, campaigns, and sustainable practices,” “to learn about common themes of struggle,” [and] “to take note of activities where they can converge” in future joint work (GTA 2023d). While each of the GTA’s actions may mark incremental steps, as Kothari (2020a, 248) argues, “if we want to forge pathways towards a pluriversal world... living in harmony with each other, there is no option but to try to confluence the movements for radical, emancipatory transformation.”

The aim of advancing radical change through autonomous social action beyond the society of states is not unique to the Global South mobilizations explored in this article. As was noted earlier, literatures on “politics beyond the state” in the Global North has emphasized processes such as consumer pressure in facilitating change—albeit change that does not challenge established capitalist economic norms (Wapner 1995). More radical approaches in the Global North, by contrast,

have encompassed diverse approaches to change through autonomous social action, including the utopian socialism of early nineteenth-century social reformers such as Robert Owen (Davies 2014); later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European anarchism (Pritchard 2013); and twenty-first-century degrowth movements (Asara et al. 2015), to name a few examples. There are, however, significant contrasts between radical Northern approaches such as these and the transformationism of the Global South social movements considered in this article.

One key difference relates to the comparatively deep-rooted nature of the approaches put forward among the Global South social movements considered here, evident in respect of both the concepts and the practices that constitute these approaches that draw on long-standing community endeavors. This contrasts substantially with the emphasis on rejecting the past and starting from scratch in many of the Northern radical approaches, whether Owen's (1837) emphasis on building an entirely "new moral world," or more recent efforts such as those of the US-based Next System Project (2022), with its emphasis on "new... institutions and approaches" that are "radically different in fundamental ways from the failed systems of the past and present." For the Global South approaches considered here, on the other hand, while there is renunciation of established dominant political, social, and economic practices, the alternatives put forward are not necessarily new, but rather built upon long historical experience. For the GTA (2019), its original mission emphasizes "respect for history" as well as "ancient traditions" besides more recent approaches, and among its supporting organizations Kalpavriksh (2017, 18), for instance, advances "multiple forums of learning, rooted in local cultures, histories and ecologies but open to others." Whereas approaches in the Global North have often emphasized new concepts such as "degrowth," Global South transformationist approaches include those that invoke concepts such as *comunalidad*, *ubuntu*, and *kametsa asaike* that are rooted in long-established practices, as noted earlier.

A second significant contrast relates to the role of confrontation and the potential for coexistence with other approaches, including those of the established dominant order. For some early anarchists in the "Western" tradition, there was little scope for such coexistence: at the Anarchist International (1907), for example, Emma Goldman advocated no less than "the destruction of society as it now exists" and "the integral emancipation of humanity and the absolute liberty of the individual" through violent insurrection. For the contemporary degrowth movement in the Global North, on the other hand, while such insurrection is not advocated, there is emphasis on reversal of much of what characterizes capitalist modernity, including "overcoming growth, competition and profit" in this "movement explicitly focused on the highly industrialized countries of the Global North" (Burkhart et al. 2016, 1–2). For the Global South mobilizations considered here, by contrast, there is a greater emphasis on pluralism, diversity, and the possibilities for harmonious relations with others—for the GTA (2022a), for instance, "some kind of link with capitalist markets and the State" may be admitted among its alternatives, even though "they prioritize their autonomy to avoid significant dependency on them and tend to reduce, as much as possible, any relationship with them."

The greater emphasis on learning from and building on past experience, rather than starting from scratch, as well as on diverse autonomous communitarian action rather than confrontation with established institutions, may underpin—at least in part—the comparative versatility of these approaches and their adaptation to changing and challenging circumstances. There is a sharp contrast here with the experience of many of the aforementioned Northern historical and contemporary approaches, with Owenite communities such as New Harmony proving extremely short-lived, and the approaches of Goldman and the Next System Project being largely limited to declarations of aims rather than projects that have been implemented in practice. By contrast, even in the context of the challenges of the COVID-

19 crisis, numerous examples have been put forward by groups including the ICCA Consortium and the GTA as indicative of the versatility of deep-rooted approaches to autonomous social action in the Global South.

Those highlighted by the [ICCA Consortium \(2021b, 9\)](#) as “adapting rapidly to changing contexts” and playing “an outsized role in the governance, conservation, and sustainable use of the world’s biodiversity and nature” include Komon Juyub in Guatemala, Yoglobou in Guinea, Sarayaku in Ecuador, Kisimbosa in Congo, Fokonolona of Tsiafajavona in Madagascar, Tana’ulen in Indonesia, Adawal ki Devbani in India, and Chahdegal in Iran, among others. The Bambuti-Babuluko Indigenous guardians of Congo’s “fertile forests,” for example, have achieved this through “(1) a sustained and secure traditional governance structure; (2) a land use plan; (3) a monitoring plan defined and regularly re-evaluated by community assemblies; and (4) a system of intergenerational transmission of knowledge” ([ICCA Consortium 2021b, 33](#)).

The [GTA \(2022b, 4–5\)](#), on the other hand, has argued “COVID-19 and the problems it has highlighted in society... have solutions—already demonstrated by communities, initiatives and civil society” that are evident “in innumerable actions of solidarity, cooperation, love, and care... rooted in the aeons-old articulations of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.” Examples include the collective resource provision practices of groups such as *Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI)* with its “culture of solidarity also known as *Gotong Royong* (mutual cooperation)”, which have provided models of resilience established prior to the pandemic adaptable to the new challenges of the COVID-19 crisis by ensuring that “marginalized and vulnerable populations—have power over the means and ends of production” and “ordinary people play an active role in shaping all dimensions of human life: Economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental” ([GTA 2022b, 18, 20](#)). The *Gotong Royong* approach is a form of “wisdom... passed down from generation to generation even in modern times through the spirit of social responsibility and sincerity in working together in society” with similarities to the practices of *comunalidad* in Mexico in its emphasis on autonomous mutual cooperation ([Basir and Prajawati 2021, 25](#)). The *Gotong Royong* approach has underpinned the ability of KPRI to provide health and community services addressing the particular needs of the COVID-19 crisis such as health equipment, sanitisation facilities, educational resources, and food distribution outlets in the face of mobility restrictions preventing other actors—whether governmental or non-governmental—from providing such services ([Tadem et al. 2023, 62–63](#)). In highlighting the complementarities between practices such as these and related experiences in other contexts, the [GTA \(2022b, 4–5; 2023b, 4\)](#) has sought to identify how in contrast to the “unsustainability of dominant practices of “development”” these initiatives “give important lessons and pathways for just, equitable, and ecologically resilient futures,” prospectively enabling these initiatives not only “to learn from each other but also to promote solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst all these alternatives on local, regional and global levels”

Avoiding Pitfalls

Given that the transformationist approaches considered here of necessity coexist with established state and capitalist institutions, this coexistence poses multiple threats, two of the most important of which are (1) cooptation and (2) displacement, both of which are problems commonly faced by social movement actors ([Tarrow 2022, 170](#)). One of the most prominent examples of the first of these has been the cooptation of *buen vivir* by state authorities in multiple countries, most notably Ecuador with its National Plan for Good Living, as well as by multilateral development agencies investing in these countries, with *buen vivir* alleged to have served as an “empty signifier” legitimating establishment approaches to sustainable

development (Domínguez et al. 2017). Besides the problem of potential cooptation by states, there has also been cooptation in the corporate sector, with—for example—ubuntu discourse being coopted by Virgin brands with their “bespoke Ubuntuism products” and promotion of a spirit of “Ubuntupreneurship”—“a hybrid of social entrepreneurship and capitalism 3.0” (Kelly 2015), and Robins (2008, 4) noting that ubuntu has been “appropriated by consultants who work for business corporations seeking to instill unwavering company loyalty and solidarity that transcends racial and class divides in the workplace.”

The second major risk is to avoid displacement by the encroachment of state and corporate institutions, infrastructure, and exploitative practices into the territories in which transformationist approaches are practiced. As the ICCA Consortium (2021b, 17) noted, the challenges include “exclusionary conservation measures” as well as “direct threats from harmful industries such as mining, oil and gas, logging, monoculture plantations, illegal and unregulated fisheries, road infrastructure and dams, and sometimes multiple overlapping claims” and “violent threats to their lives and wellbeing, including harassment, physical attacks, criminalization and even murder.” It has therefore been necessary to combine the practicing of transformationist approaches with various resistance strategies, including legal approaches such as advocacy for national and international recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ rights, as well as active resistance to corporate and state intrusions into territories in which transformationist approaches are practiced. In the short term, at least, transformationism may require coexistence with the techniques of more traditional reformist and confrontational approaches as a consequence of their coexistence with the established state and corporate institutions.

Significantly, the practicing of the alternatives put forward among these movements in itself can be a powerful form of resistance. The previously discussed resistance against the intrusions of miners in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has therefore involved both the practice of *comunalidad*, which in itself was facilitated through practices of Indigenous self-governance within Oaxacan local government structures, while at the same time seeking the external support of groups such as the Tepeyac Human Rights Center and undertaking direct actions against miners (Morosin 2020, 932). Similarly, the “territories of life” of the ICCA Consortium combine deep-rooted communitarian practices with the seeking of land rights, supported by the work of bodies such as the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) that has the reformist agenda “to support local communities’, Indigenous Peoples’, and Afro-descendants’ struggles... by promoting... policy, market and legal reforms that secure their rights to own, control and benefit from natural resources, especially land and forests” (RRI 2020, 3). The coexistence with established state and capitalist institutions that is enabled in this manner facilitates the survival of the alternative practices while in the longer term for the GTA the aim is “to reduce, as much as possible, any relationship” with these institutions and to enable “the process of dismantling most forms of hierarchies, assuming the principles of sufficiency, autonomy, non-violence, justice and equality, solidarity, and the caring of life and the Earth” (GTA 2022a).

Conclusion

In order to better understand the prospects for world order transformation, there is a need to go beyond the reproduction of established hierarchies and discourses centered on “great power” transitions and the dynamics of the market economy. A focus on the apparent rise of the BRICS, transformed institutions of global governance, or the dynamics of global capitalism is to limit one’s perspective to changes within established political and economic institutions, which have been proven inadequate to manage today’s ecological and social crises.

A focus on agendas put forward among social movements in the Global South requires rethinking previous approaches to disaggregating agendas for world order transformation. Whether reformist or revolutionary, national or international, approaches concentrating on established dominant institutions as the focus for agendas for change may serve to reproduce rather than effectively to address contemporary problems.

The foregoing discussion has emphasized the significance to change of alternative “transformationist” approaches promoting interhuman and interspecies non-hierarchical cooperation. These should serve as a starting point for an agenda for studying world order change extending beyond previous binaries of reformist and revolutionary, statist and internationalist, to encompass approaches that emphasize pluralism, diversity, and cooperation within and beyond humanity and that draw on concepts rooted in communities’ practices in the Global South.

Transformationist approaches envisage the prospects for peaceful yet radical change, potentially transplanting existing institutions not through revolution, but instead through rendering these institutions gradually obsolete. While such a process may be interpreted as having been envisaged in the work of earlier “utopian socialists” and anarchists, today’s pluriversal agendas may better meet basic needs (North 2020, 94) and are more firmly rooted in long-developed social practices attuned to their contexts (Kalpavriksh 2017, 18). Moreover, in their pluriversality, they put forward approaches in which many worlds are intended to fit, rather than assuming the prospects of a singular universalistic approach.

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