Practicing Hope: Macro and Micro Perspectives in Global Studies

Author's Statement

I wrote this paper as a kind of act of self-improvement, seeking to explore my experience studying history in a tumultuous global context. As part of the first generation to be born into the internet age, I started to think about how an oversaturation of information affected my outlook on the world as well as the changes I viewed as possible. In Professor Noah Theriault's Introduction to Global Studies course (79-275), we studied frameworks for approaching global systems, particularly utilizing Antonion Gramsci's concept of hegemony. This idea provided such a useful lens for approaching my experience with disillusionment in regards to improving global systems. Thus, in my final paper, I returned to the course material with the goal of overcoming that disillusionment and finding evidence for hopefulness. In publishing this, I hope to share these findings with others, understanding that the belief in the possibility of change is the first step toward realizing it.

Jennifer

Introduction

Friends and I used to joke about the moment we became disillusioned with the world. For some, it was in history class or in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. For me, it was when I could no longer read the news. For years, I was convinced I would grow up to be a journalist, excited to unleash my curiosity on global affairs. I poured over articles with a thrilling fascination. It felt surreal to have access to all of this information as a child. But before I knew it, what once thrilled me about current events broke me down. At sixteen, my school followed the rest of the world and shut down due to the coronavirus. I turned to the internet for connection, knowledge, and distraction, but came away exhausted. Instead of itching to learn about the crisis, I retreated into nihilism. My optimism and understanding of the world felt completely undermined by my new reality. Flooded with headlines about death and corruption, I restricted my awareness. Tangible change felt out of my grasp and, quite frankly, hopeless. I looked at the world on a macro level and was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of tragedy.

When I arrived at college, I resolved to rediscover my passion for global journalism. To my surprise, the classes that most energized me often addressed the world on a micro level, examining local action and research. I was moved by communities that reclaimed their relationships with global systems of power through their local institutions. Through these case studies, I found that community and individual agency were much more significant than I realized. This provided me with a profound sense of hope, hope that had felt lost among the distressing state of global affairs. Seeking to harness this hope more tangibly, I found my way to American activist Mariame Kaba, who explains, "...hope is a discipline and that we have to practice it every single day ...in the world which we live in, it's easy to feel a sense of hopelessness…I choose to think a different way" (Sonenstein and Wilson 2018). I've learned

that, for me, practicing hope means starting with problems at a micro level then linking those projects to address the macro scale.

Hegemony and Macro Perspectives

When viewing the world through a macro lens, impending doom feels inevitable because dominant systems and institutions seem both all-powerful and self-sustaining. Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci was fascinated by this dominance, coining it *hegemony*. Gramsci's hegemony explores the interplay of coercion and consent to enable a domineering social system reliant upon structural inequality (Theriault 2023). Hegemonic, or dominant, ideas frame the way each of us understands reality and interacts with the world. Likewise, hegemonic actors are those who work to enforce dominant social systems like global capitalism. Contemporary global institutions tend to follow Western hegemony, creating systems of power that exploit and repress many communities. Hegemony's implications reach so far into both social systems and cultural concepts of personhood that it can feel herculean to challenge the status quo.

Indigenous communities, in particular, understand the titanic impacts of Western hegemony. As colonialism spread through the globe, the subjugation of Indigenous people and expropriation of their resources produced a hegemonic system that continues to exert its power economically, politically, and culturally. Considering the implications of Western cosmology, the Indigenous author and scholar Waziyatwain explores the ways in which the global dominance of Western concepts and practices becomes self-destructive. She explains that Indigenous Peoples have repeatedly warned Western invaders about their destructive practices, yet they have been ignored to the point in which self-restraint is virtually impossible "because the society's very nature, its internal dynamic, is to consume" (Waziyatawin 2012, 79). This is

at the core of why the contemporary world looks so dire as consumption has led to a "triple crisis" of climate, energy, and food (Waziyatawin 2012, 77). While Indigenous scholars like Waziyatawin and Vandana Shiva – who coined the concept of the *triple crisis* — have argued for solutions, perpetrators of crises have instead chosen to "protect the existing system, even at the expense of the rest of creation" (Waziyatawin 2012, 77). Acting under the Western hegemony of the existing system, our institutions have become reliant on the very consumption that causes these crises in the first place. Because this reliance is so structural, it can seem too overwhelming to be countered.

Constrained by the flawed logic of this enormous global system, we come to see destruction as an inevitable tradeoff for progress. Waziyatawin explores how the resulting destruction has paradoxically created the possibility for structural change, but only for those who manage to survive it. On average, the world is already 1.2C warmer than the preindustrial era — a leap in temperature that has almost never been seen in human history (Milman et al. 2021). While 200 countries signed the Paris climate agreement, aiming to keep the rise in temperature "well below" 2C, very little has been done in the years since to tangibly achieve this goal (Milman et al. 2021). Natural disasters like heat waves, floods, wildfires, and crop failures rapidly increase in number, yet the status quo remains intact (Milman et al. 2021). Since this information is readily available, it often seems as though our society knows exactly what it needs to change yet continues to ignore it. Considering these problems from a macro perspective, many resign themselves to a sense of hopelessness, believing that disaster is inevitable. However, the impossibility of change is a fallacy, and the evidence lies in local action.

Local Action and Community Agency

Perpetrators of crises profit from the idea that these crises are inevitable, but in reality, people have the ability to transform their communities through the ways in which they interact with global systems and philosophies. When we pay attention to how people both resist hegemony and reclaim its systems, local solutions seem increasingly powerful and poignant. There is a lot of hope to be found in the change people have already enacted, hope which energizes others to engage in their respective communities. People in the Global South are often misrepresented as passive victims of exploitation, left to the whims of Western dominance. Yet when we actually look at these places, we see that people find creative ways to use hegemonic systems to their advantage. In the northern Philippines, for example, women have transformed the West's discarding of clothing into their own industry of "personal statements of identity and new livelihood opportunities" known as *ukay-ukay* (Milgram 2004, 189). This localization has become "...a 'constitutive ingredient' of the changing configuration of global commodity movements" (Milgram 2004, 198). *Ukay-ukay*, a term that refers to the practice of shopping for pre-owned goods, is more than just secondhand shopping in the Philippines; rather, it has become a crucial cultural practice of self-expression, gift-giving, and bargaining. While *ukay-ukay* is still implicated in large-scale global capitalism and consumption, it demonstrates the material agency of communities, giving me hope for other forms of local action.

Similarly, in Papua New Guinea, Gimi-speaking peoples are not passive actors in the coffee industry but have instead found ways to incorporate it into their culture — despite its ties to exploitative Western hegemony. Paige West explores the complications of this, describing how "the cultivation of coffee…is fundamentally different from other forms of cultivation" (West 2012, 127). Gimi cosmology emphasizes social relationships between "people, ancestors,

spirits, animals, and plants" (West 2012, 126). Gimi consider these relationships as generative through movements between *auna* (life force) and *kore* (spirits) which exist in those social relationships (West 2012, 116). However, as the coffee industry was introduced, it took on a role outside of these cultural relationships. To Gimi, "the shared labor of families and the social life connected to that labor" is what makes coffee valuable (West 2012, 128). Gimi see coffee as a connection to the wider systems within the global economy, but that connection is two-fold (West 2012, 128). As part of the global capitalist system, the coffee industry has imposed neoliberal concepts of value and personhood (West 2012, 128). In particular, coffee production relies on individual producers who are alienated from their product which not only pushes Gimi away from an economic sense of collectivity but also from a collective sense of personhood (West 2012, 129). However, Gimi peoples still retain agency in their interactions with the coffee industry. The act of working together in a coffee garden is now a foundational part of the marital bond and "connects Gimi with other people and places which are decidedly not Gimi" (West 2012, 128). Despite the many impositions the coffee industry inflicts upon Gimi peoples, the ingenuity they bring to their interactions with hegemonic industry demonstrates the sheer strength and will of local practice.

Resisting Hegemonic Systems

Beyond reclaiming hegemonic tools and systems, many communities seek to resist hegemony directly. In Namibia, young activists have fought to decolonize public space by acts as simple as renaming streets and as fundamental as centering intersectionality in their action (Becker 2022, 71). In an interview, Namibian activist Hildegard Titus explains: "...although one of the demands was the removal of the Curt von François statue, we were protesting

interrelated things. We were protesting gender-based violence (GBV), racial oppression—we were protesting police brutality" (Becker 2022, 74). Acts like renaming streets demonstrate change that is ostensibly small, but in reality has a much larger impact. Namibian activists started by challenging how colonialism has permeated their public spaces and continued to build upon their activism. As they furthered their campaigns, these activists "imagine a decolonised Namibia, which is ordered differently to the hierarchies which have been inherited and reproduced from colonial legacies" (Becker 2022, 83). It is the strength of these movements that demonstrate the existence of tangible actions which challenge dominant structures.

By addressing hegemonic issues on a local level, we are also able to form organizations and initiatives that carve out alternative spaces within overarching systems. One example is the Solidarity Economy (SE) movement. SE is a framework that looks at community initiatives which "prioritize ethical considerations over profit maximization and aim to reorient economic activity towards norms such as equity, sustainability, cooperation, inclusive democracy, and community-based development" (Borowiak et al. 2017, 4). SE activity includes initiatives such as community gardens, cooperatives, credit unions, and volunteer collectives (Borowiak et al. 2017, 8). Developed in Chile and France in the 1980s, communities around the world have embraced the capacities of SE to foster "values-based economic practices" while also "building linkages across geographies and economic sectors" (Borowiak et al. 2017, 5). These initiatives have the transformative potential to refocus local capitalism and foster community through a network of counter-hegemonic activities (Borowiak et al. 2017, 23-24).

At the same time, frameworks like SE are unproductive when they do not take larger, interconnected issues into account. SE initiatives have been criticized for reproducing racial

and class divisions by contributing to gentrification or lacking inclusive and supportive action (Borowiak et al. 2017, 4-5). While often created with the best of intentions, these initiatives can also do harm. In Philadelphia, for example, SE innovations — such as hundreds of community gardens and large amounts of community supported agriculture — are spread throughout the city but lacking in poor neighborhoods of color (Borowiak et al. 2017, 7). This perpetuates many of the inequalities SE purports to address. In this case, the specific intentions and actions of these communities are impressive, but they also demonstrate the importance of confronting macro structures. As we take local action, we need to be intentional about our solutions and explore the deeper intersections of the problem. In terms of SE, the initiatives themselves can only serve the whole community's interests if "the needs, experiences, perspectives and leadership of marginalized populations" are central to SE goals and daily practices (Borowiak et al. 2017, 7). In order to make meaningful change, local projects must account for the larger systems in which they operate. Finding hope in local improvement is contingent upon understanding and tackling those systems.

Conclusion

As we each come to grips with macro problems, it is vital to practice hope. Macro and micro perspectives share a space in this discipline. I find agency in starting with projects at a micro level, but that can only be a useful lens when we examine and link those projects to larger systemic issues. We should not be passive victims of inequality and crisis, but rather use our knowledge and capacity to do what we can. As the flaws in our larger institutions repeatedly come to the surface, we can start with our own communities to lead by example while keeping macro perspectives in mind. The state of the world can only be improved if we

reclaim our agency to think and act counter-hegemonically. Finding ways to practice hope in our everyday lives is the first step toward improving our world.

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