

Inclusive Placemaking: Localizing Human Rights in Response to Global Urban Crises and Right-Wing Populism

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Abstract

Human rights are under increased threats as the world faces continued challenges of economic insecurity, financial volatility, climate change, and the rise of right-wing populist movements. At a time when global interdependence demands more intensive cooperation among national governments to address economic and environmental crises, nationalist tendencies are polarizing politics within and between countries. Although news headlines have focused on the rise of exclusionary and racist movements, there is evidence of significant popular mobilization around more inclusive, human rights claims. Because these movements challenge basic elements of the capitalist system, they get less traction in electoral contests and remain marginal to mainstream media and scholarly discourses. This paper explores the emergence of translocal networks of human rights advocates articulating place-based human rights claims in communities around the world. Amid new threats to human rights from far-right advances such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, there are rising demands for “the right to the city,” as people seek to reconcile the tensions between global and local politics and between economic globalization and community survival. I provide illustrations from this emergent right to the city movement, and consider its implications for our understandings of the evolution of global human rights.

The late 20th century saw a tremendous expansion of the international human rights regime, characterized by a wide range of global and regional treaties and expansive institutional machinery aimed at strengthening treaty compliance and assisting victims. Essential to these developments has been the work of international networks of human rights advocates who have long struggled to define and institutionalize human rights norms and practices. Nevertheless, serious gaps remain in terms of actual improvements in human rights practices (Hafner-Burton and Ron 2009, Hafner-Burton 2013). More importantly, global financial and ecological crises, the rise of right-wing nationalism and militarized responses to terrorist threats, and recent developments such as Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and his threats to withdraw U.S. support from the United Nations and major treaties, and the withdrawal of several states from the International Criminal Court threaten to erode previous human rights gains.

Beyond the widespread failures of states to comply with human rights treaty commitments, there are a number of other impediments to the realization of human rights in practice. A leading one is the hypocrisy of the United States, which criticizes others' failures on

human rights as it remains one of the world's biggest laggards in terms of human rights treaty ratifications. In addition, the legal articulations of human rights have failed to generate mechanisms for holding accountable those actually responsible for the most serious rights abuses. States are signatories to international treaties, and they are responsible for ensuring the rights of their citizens, yet the actors most directly impacting human rights practices are other states, corporations, and more localized police and public authorities over which national authorities may have little if any control (Gerald E. Frug and David J. Barron 2006, Gibney 2008, van Lindert and Lettinga 2014a).

Responding to closing opportunities in the global institutional arena and to the intensified threats to human rights in local settings around the world is a growing trend of locally-based human rights advocacy that is working to implement global human rights norms in urban and other local contexts. I argue that this movement builds from the organizational networks and strategic lessons of earlier global justice movement organizing as well as local community organizing. I discuss the global developments that are shaping local human rights initiatives and examine some of these to explore their implications for our understandings of contemporary global human rights activism. With a global framework, the emerging strategy of global human rights activism reflects what Tsutsui and Smith (Forthcoming) refer to as a “sandwich effect” that presses national governments to comply with human rights from above and below, combining appeals to global human rights norms and institutions with grassroots mobilization. Such local strategies may become increasingly central to human rights enforcement as far-right movements win influence in national polities. To account for the increasing visibility of localized struggles for human rights, it helps to consider how cities have fared amid globalization, since it is in cities where the impacts of economic globalization policies are most keenly felt.

Globalization, States, and cities/ Urban Conflict

Today a majority of the world's population lives in cities, as processes of capitalist expansion have long supported processes of depeasantization and urbanization to provide land and resources for capital, workers for industry, and concentrated bases of consumers. More recently, economic globalization has transformed cities into the “managerial centers for the global” (Borja and Castells 1997:3), where global capital can find hospitable environments and supportive infrastructures for capital accumulation. In the “entrepreneurial city,” municipal governments act as cost-saving business actors that run their cities like corporations as they compete with other

cities for investment (Peck 2015). At the same time, neoliberal pressures lead national governments to devolve their authority to municipalities while also squeezing municipal budgets through cuts to national social welfare spending. Frug and Barron (2006) describe how such global processes are defining “international local government law,” or the possibilities for cities to govern themselves, advancing what they call the “private city”—a model of governance that “envisions city power principally as a mechanism for promoting private economic development” (2006:3). Thus, as a result of neoliberal globalization, cities have become sites of extreme concentrations of wealth, as well as poverty and environmental decay.

“Dual cities,” have thus emerged to serve the needs of global capital, but they still rely upon the work of people displaced from other places and/or from other modes of livelihood (Sassen 1991; Borja 1997; see also Espino 2015). Created by a global political project of economic growth, they are oriented outward to the global centers of wealth and power. But this vision is not one that is prioritized or shared by all residents. As Evans points out, neoliberal globalization’s focus on growth and capitalist markets separates urban public officials, business elites, and more privileged residents from large segments of local communities, which are largely focused on the basic needs and quality of life of residents and communities (Evans 2002b). The rational bureaucratic emphasis of neoliberal globalization, moreover, has produced a further division between community residents and professionals charged with operating and supporting municipal governance, who are typically selected for their technical expertise rather than their familiarity with the local community and conditions. Technical professionals tend to underestimate their need for communities and the information they can provide, and they avoid closeness with the community in order to maintain an image of professionalism or objectivity (Evans 2002a:245). Such divides inhibit effective governance, since they limit information flows and prevent the development of trust. This complicates many tasks that are essential to effective governance, and it can be especially problematic amid polarized and uncertain conditions like we’re seeing today.

The commodification of land and housing lies at the basis of communities’ efforts to generate economic growth, and this has intensified conflicts around the world, as cities have been pressed to become “growth machines” (Espino 2015; See also Logan and Molotch 1987; Borja 1997). As Logan and Molotch observe, such dynamics generate irreconcilable contradictions between the interests of elites and less powerful residents of cities:

Any given piece of real estate has both a use value and an exchange value.... Individuals and groups differ on which aspect (use or exchange) is most crucial to their own lives.... The sharpest contrast... is between residents, who use place to satisfy essential needs of life, and entrepreneurs, who strive for financial return... *The pursuit of exchange values in the city does not necessarily result in the maximization of use values for others. Indeed, the simultaneous push for both goals is inherently contradictory and a continuing source of tension, conflict, and irrational settlements.* (1987:1-2, emphasis added)

Economic globalization has thus contributed to social polarization and fueled potential sources of inter-group conflicts in cities around the world, and it has also impacted the capacities of municipal officials to govern in the interests of residents. Over recent decades, global economic and political elites have generated incessant pressure on cities to develop policies that attract international investments and otherwise prioritize economic growth.¹ Over time, municipal officials have been drawn into what Gotham and Greenberg (2014) have called “urban growth coalitions,” which are policy networks shaped by the interests of increasingly globalized capital.

Urban growth coalitions exclude most residents and any of their agendas that don't fit within the dominant growth paradigm. The practices they reinforce privilege real estate developers and business elites, insulating public officials from constituents and limiting their ability learn about the impacts of these policies on neighborhoods and preventing the development of policies more responsive to community needs.² Moreover, they marginalize most residents from decisions about development priorities and the uses of land and resources. Many policy decisions center around questions such as whether 10% or 20% of new residences will be made “affordable,” and about how “affordable” will be defined, rather than questioning whether housing markets can address the growing demand for affordable housing. The net effect is that affordable and public housing units have been replaced by privatized, market-rate housing.

By organizing out most residents, urban growth coalitions have reduced municipal policymakers' access to feedback and ideas about how to address these critical challenges economic changes are impacting people and neighborhoods. They have also failed to mobilize the public as partners in urban design and governance. This diminishing of local democracy and autonomy, moreover, has been accompanied by shifting labor markets, rising inequality, growing social polarization, aging urban infrastructure, and shrinking government budgets. As the environmental, fiscal, and social crises deepen, this lack of public involvement in local

government will become increasingly problematic (Evans 2002a; Evans 2002b). Indeed, greater public participation in earlier debates about urban development would have fostered communication across diverse groups of residents and demystified policy and market processes in ways that are likely to have reduced the appeal that contemporary right-wing populism finds today.³

An important consequence of these transformations in local governance is widening inequalities in cities. Most of the research on cities attributes growing inequalities to the policies and practices associated with economic globalization, namely the emphasis on market-oriented growth, reduction of government services, privatization, and deregulation (See, e.g., Davis 2006; Gotham and Greenberg 2014; Harvey 2004; 2005; Logan and Molotch 1987; Marcuse and Van Kempen 2000; Sassen 1991; 1998; 2014; Storper and Walker 1989; (Marcuse 2000; Holston 2009). These inequalities are contributing to residential segregation and urban displacement along class, race and other divisions, as market forces determine more and more decisions about land use and development choices (Fullilove 2010; Madden and Marcuse 2016). Coupled with the problem of the growth coalitions' displacement of public voices from policy making, the structural segregation of cities—reinforced by housing markets and development strategies—further erodes social cohesion and complicates the work of democratic problem-solving. “Sorted out cities” don't allow residents with diverse experiences to encounter one another, appreciate each other's daily experiences and struggles, and to learn perspectives that differ from people like themselves (Fullilove 2013).

Furthered through the practices of urban growth coalitions, capitalist globalization is thus systematically exacerbating structural violence⁴ in cities around the world, creating conditions ripe for the outbreak of overt violence in moments of crisis, such as in response to police killings, shortages of food and water, or to disasters—natural or otherwise. In addition to heightening conflicts over land and resources, it has also reduced community stability and cohesion in a number of ways. First, neoliberal policies have enabled firms to become more mobile and therefore less committed to remaining in a given community. This contributes to the expansion of an increasingly mobile global labor market that is also less embedded in and committed to what have become disposable local communities. The need for workers to remain mobile in order to survive in this globalized economy undermines what Storper and Walker refer to as “territorial social solidarity” (1989:179), or social cohesion linked to a given place. Indeed,

the processes of globalization depend upon severing people's connections to place and community. While this loss of locally grounded solidarity might be seen as helping reduce xenophobia and nationalism, it also means the loss of community that can increase resilience and nurture values of tolerance, cooperation, and environmental stewardship. It also raises the question of whether and how the growing ranks of de-territorialized workers find other sources of social solidarity and inclusion that foster commitments and values consistent with peaceful societies. For many, the promises of populism are most visible and appealing.

The loss of social solidarity in communities is also problematic for local governance in that it is not only being driven by the commodification of land and the mobility of jobs and workers, but it also results from the reduction of interdependence and interactions between elite and low-status groups (Reich 1992). This lack of cross-class interdependence is due in part to the spatial distancing of sites of production and consumption and greater reliance on technology. In addition, residential segregation in cities contributes to racial and ethnic tensions, as more privileged groups rely less on direct interactions with less privileged groups, who are often people of color and immigrants. As Marcuse and van Kempen's analysis of "globalizing cities" concludes,

Cities have always shown functional, cultural and status divisions, but the differentiation between areas has grown and lines between the areas have hardened, sometimes literally in the form of walls that function to protect the rich from the poor. What is more: the relation between these stronger spatial differentiations is a double one. On the one hand, walls, literal or symbolic, prevent people from seeing, meeting and hearing each other; at the extremes, they insulate and they exclude. Contact across the walls is minimal, and if it takes [place it is] business-like and commodified. (Marcuse and Kempen 2000:250)

Goldsmith argues that labor and housing market policies have made racial segregation an essential characteristic of U.S. cities, especially since WWII. This physical separation has, moreover, combined with free-market ideology to enhance social polarization: "US leaders and the public have accepted deep social inequalities as though they were God-given, and they have embraced an exaggerated belief in the efficacy and fairness of the market" (2000:41).

The physical separation of diverse groups and the ideology of individualism and market-competition contributes to a lack of understanding and empathy and to intolerance, which in turn provides fodder for right-wing mobilization. As Goldsmith observes, "Whites observed failure at a safe distance, which made it easy to excuse the society and blame the victims" (2000:45). Such

conditions undermine democratic politics (and, by extension, peacebuilding) which rely upon a sense of shared community, cooperation, and compromise. In this context of restricted direct interpersonal exchanges and experiences, people—especially Whites and those from more economically privileged groups—must rely more upon mass media stereotypes for their knowledge of racialized others (Marcuse and Kempen 2000). And as globalization has expanded the global reach of U.S. media, the ideologies of individualized competition and white supremacy have reproduced racist ideologies and patterns of exclusion in other parts of the world (Goldsmith 2000:48-49; Goldsmith 2016).

The persistence and indeed the exacerbation of racial tensions in cities today should be a primary concern for policymakers and analysts.⁵ Abu-Lughod's study of urban riots in three U.S. cities concluded that racial inequities in prisons and policing, coupled with white prejudice and/or indifference heightens the risk of urban violence (Abu-Lughod 2007). Indeed, the rise in race-based insurrections in the United States in recent years bears out this expectation. The general social isolation of white people in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces contributes to a pervasive lack of white residents' reflexivity on their relative privilege, and it makes the lived experiences of African Americans largely invisible in the larger public discourse (2007: 290). Such racial division and exclusion, moreover, must be seen as an inherent feature of the prevailing global economic and political order, which is based in racialized, colonial hierarchies and a long and enduring history of conquest (see, e.g., Robinson et al. 2016; Escobar 2004; 2008; Farmer 2004).

Globalization thus complicates the task of local governance in a variety of ways. The devolution of national state authority has placed greater responsibilities for social welfare programs upon local governments, while reductions in state spending have limited the resources available for meeting these enhanced obligations. As municipal leaders compete with other cities for financial investment and growth, they are pressed to lower corporate tax rates and increase public subsidies to attract investment. Given this situation, the "solution" of displacing low-income residents who require higher levels of social support—through what some cities see as economic revitalization or, in other cases, what Detroit mayor David Bing called "downsizing"—can look both attractive and even necessary. Abu-Lughod observes that today the "police state is being substituted for the welfare state as the preferred mechanism for regulating the poor," and this intensifies a vicious cycle of racial division and segregation that escalates

over time (2007:283; see also Wacquant 2015). The prevention of future violence requires significantly more federal spending on cities to address welfare needs, the enhancement of economic opportunities for the urban poor and excluded, and the enforcement of stricter national regulations against discrimination (Abu-Lughod 2007:292-295). Such policies are at odds with those prevailing under neoliberal globalization, and the prospects for cities have become markedly worse with the rise of even more regressive and exclusionary policy agendas in the United States and elsewhere.

Yet, analysts are also observing that today's globalized context gives municipal leaders unique sources of leverage. Businesses need effective educational and transportation systems as well as social stability and cohesion in order to operate. They also must attract professional employees who seek desirable communities in which to live. This strengthens the social mandates of local governments, since creating stable, diverse and "livable" cities is seen as "good for business." Local authorities are also more directly accountable to voters, and thus have greater legitimacy, and they have seen less erosion of their capabilities for action than have their national counterparts (Barber 2013, Evans 2002, Harvey 2012). Moreover, given the substantial governance challenges they face and the enhanced autonomy resulting from the devolution of national authority, "local governments themselves also find incentives to experiment" (Dear and Dahmann 2011:75). This can provide openings for more progressive forces advocating for greater local democracy and public welfare.

The Localization of International Human Rights Activism

The history of international human rights activism reveals that, historically, much of this work has involved transnational activist alliances working to define and strengthen international law and norms and to encourage national governments to participate in and adhere to global human rights regimes. In addition, transnational advocacy networks gain leverage and legitimacy from this growing international human rights architecture, and they have appealed to international law and norms to bring pressure on national governments to improve their human rights records—a strategy known as the "boomerang effect" (Keck and Sikkink 1998). While these strategies remain important aspects of the international human rights movement, the experiences and accomplishments of the international human rights movements have nurtured what Tsutsui has called "local social movement actorhood" for human rights (Forthcoming). As a result, we're

seeing a growing number of locally-based initiatives to use international human rights to shape policies and practices in localized settings.

This turn toward the local can be traced at least in part to the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, which brought attention to human rights implementation and localization and which strengthened monitoring mechanisms to better protect human rights, including the development of national monitoring bodies and action plans for human rights promotion and protection (van den Berg and Oomen 2014:11). The attention in Vienna to human rights implementation pointed to the need to engage actors other than national governments—including civil society groups, businesses, state service providers, and sub-national governments. In the wake of the Cold War, the discussions in Vienna also helped draw more attention to economic, social, and cultural rights as foundational to achieving other rights and to improving human rights implementation (van den Berg and Oomen 2014).

While national governments, international institutions, and activists working in international arenas were shifting their gaze to more localized settings, in multiple places around the world we began to see the rise of “place-based, transnationalized strategies” that were articulating human rights claims in various forms, often revealing intersections across struggles over race, class, gender, and the environment (Desai 2016, Escobar 2008). The end of the Cold War likely encouraged such developments, as did the presence of vibrant and growing transnational networks of human rights and related movements. As activists learned about international treaty processes through their participation in UN global conferences, and as they engaged in regional and other trans-local encounters surrounding these global conferences, they developed strategies to improve their effectiveness and influence in these settings as well as to address the gaps between international norms and actual practices. They also developed skills at working with activists from a variety of diverse backgrounds and experiences through these opportunities for encounter and exchange.

As a result of these past experiences, as Appadurai observed, “grassroots movements are finding new ways to combine local activism with horizontal, global networking” (2001:23).⁶ Escobar refers to this development as “subaltern strategies of localization,” whereby activists stress attachment to place/territory and cultures while enacting transnational “network strategies that enable social movements to enact a politics of scale from below” (2008: 32).

The politics of place can be seen as an emergent form of politics, a novel political imaginary in that it asserts a logic of difference and possibility that builds on the multiplicity of actions at the level of everyday life. Places are the site of dynamic cultures, economies, and environments rather than just nodes in a global capitalist system. (Escobar 2008: 67)

By integrating international discourses, treaties, symbols, and activist networks into local struggles, subaltern groups are globalizing their struggles and expanding their resources, while also feeding back information into translocal networks. Such a strategy is critical to the negotiation of both local and global power relations, since “[i]t is a strategy that moves the poor into the horizon of legality on their own terms” (Appadurai 2001:34).

Rather than taking as given the neoliberal globalization project articulated by national and global elites, place-based transnational movements are articulating their own visions of development and community. Starting from the actual lived experiences in places, people are asking how international alliances and institutions can be mobilized to advance these visions. Moving from global to local terrains, the commitments embedded in international treaties become more concrete, and networked local activists can identify responsible local parties whom they can hold accountable—whether or not those authorities are aware of international treaty obligations, or even if the national government is party to the treaty. The legitimation that comes from the international community’s support for a particular treaty or set of principles can be a crucial resource in local struggles, as has been the case, for instance in Detroit activists’ international work on the right to water.⁷ Moreover, the international networks that are often associated with these kinds of activities can also attract resources and political leverage for local initiatives.⁸

Desai (2016) uses the concept of “translocal fields of protest” to examine local struggles that are connected across time and place. Her analysis of multiple struggles against “development” projects in India that disrupted and displaced local communities revealed that

each set of mobilizations left behind social imaginaries, social movement organizations, NGOs, advocates, and supporters that constitute the translocal fields of protest, leaving ... ‘long term ripples’ on political culture (Desai 2016: 42).

These “long term ripples” involved *discourses* about rights and about what constitutes legitimate claims, *analyses of the systemic connections* between the grievances of diverse communities and

the global neoliberal project, and *relationships with activists and networks* in other cities and countries who were increasingly seen as part of the same struggle.

Thus, a long-term and global perspective on the transnational human rights movement reveals an expanding movement that is adapting to a changing geopolitical context characterized, for instance, by the end of the Cold War, which opened the way for new discourses and optimism for expanding work on economic, social and cultural rights; by the experiences of global conferences and their limitations; by changing technologies and organizational capacities for transnational organizing; and by the post-9/11 period of rising state surveillance and rollbacks of established rights. Amid these changes, transnational activists have been developing their knowledge and skills in global arenas, expanding their networks, and deepening their analyses of the causes of human rights violations and about effective strategies for action (see, e.g., Desai 2009). While the UN global conferences helped begin this process, the rise of the global justice movement and the World Social Forum process starting in the late 1990s provided more autonomous, movement-centered spaces for activists to meet each other, envision alternatives to neoliberal globalization, and develop networks and strategies to advance global movement projects. Also fueling the expansion of transnational human rights networks and the global imaginaries they help carry are the proliferation of information and communication technologies and of the skills and capacities of organizers themselves. This strengthened infrastructure for global human rights advocacy has helped deepen connections between global and local, and it facilitates work at grassroots levels to incorporate global analyses and projects into local activist work.

In previous writing, I have argued that transnational movements have long been working at the global level to articulate alternative visions about how the world should be organized to those being put forward by states and corporate elites. That work was largely oriented around defining and developing international legal frameworks for human rights and shaping the boundaries of state authority (Smith 2008). The experiences of global conferences helped broaden and deepen transnational networks and foster greater understandings across the global North and South as well as of the overlaps and intersections among issues (Smith and Wiest 2012). For instance, the end of the Cold War helped bring more activists from the global South into global political arenas and also created space on the global agenda for greater attention to economic and social rights. Experiences in transnational environmental campaigns deepened

activists' awareness of the connections between human rights and the economy and ecology, contributing to the emergence of new frames oriented toward political ecology, environmental justice, and the intersections of human rights and global economy (Rothman and Oliver 1999, Taylor 2010).⁹ These networks have generated ongoing conversations and relationships that are continuing to advance activists' analyses of the global structures that generate many of the grievances around which they organize. They also are helping increase the flows of information and the relationships that connect global political arenas with local ones, enabling local and grassroots actors to become more direct agents in global level politics. Significantly, conversations in many of these networks signal a lack of confidence that global institutions are effective tools for social change, and activists and government leaders are looking to alternative avenues for addressing critical global problems.¹⁰

Analysts operating from locally-grounded case study research come to similar conclusions about the proliferation of global-local connections. For instance, Manisha Desai's work on translocal activist networks working to defend communities from the more destructive aspects of global capitalist "development" demonstrates how activists operating in multiple spaces and at different scales link local actors with global networks in "translocal fields of protest" (2016). Tsutsui (Forthcoming) demonstrates how transnational networks and ideas transformed the organizing strategies of diverse local minority groups in ways that enhanced their work for human rights. Appadurai also observes that the global circulation and legitimation of the discourses and politics of human rights has provided "a powerful impetus to democratic claims by nonstate actors throughout the world [... and] a huge boost to local democratic formations" (Appadurai 2001:25). Thus, while assessments of the impacts of international human rights treaties and activism on state behaviors may suggest that such work has had limited effect, considering their impacts on local movements and activism (and subsequently on state practices) may tell us a different story.

Another theme that emerges in this work is the importance of place. Whereas dominant institutions privilege the global scale, thereby diminishing the values of place, local cultures, and communities, subaltern movements are working to valorize the local, along with the ecological and cultural meanings encompassed therein (Santos 2004). In doing so they make visible what development discourse has hidden: the stories of what is lost when people and communities are displaced and ecosystems are destroyed in the name of "progress" (Escobar 1988; 2004; Quan

2012; Sassen 2014; Farmer 2004). While such place-centered activism has always characterized resistance to capitalism's expansion, what is distinctive today is the intersection of a much stronger international human rights regime and a more developed and inter-connected transnational human rights movement. Local movements are now able to connect with trans-local networks in ways that complement and help strengthen their potency. As Desai observes:

Subaltern struggles important locally where they address issues of survival and justice and trans-locally where they contribute to problematizing the dominant vision of development and progress. (2016:217)

Information technology and deliberate organizational strategies have advanced the logic and practice of networking in movements across scales (see, e.g. Juris 2008). This enables movements to reduce the distance between the sites of global production and consumption and to expose the exploitative human relationships, the social and ecological costs, as well as the hypocrisies of the global capitalist order. As economic and ecological crises unfold, place appears to become even more central to movement discourses and strategies, even as these movements remain global in their analysis and in their scope.

Another critical lesson from the history of transnational human rights advocacy regards the relationships between civil society and states. Frequently, activist and scholarly discourses portray social movement contestation in binary oppositional terms, pitting popular movements against state agents. However, in the human rights area in particular, the state becomes a crucial resource for vulnerable groups and a guarantor of human rights protections, even as its agents may be perpetuating rights abuses. Women, workers, refugees and immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and others need state protections. As Desai observes, "Unlike the anti-statist and state-centric perspectives, feminists of the autonomous movements have always argued for working with, against, and through the state as a necessary part of a multi-pronged approach to democratizing society" (2016: 11).¹¹ Thus, a number of human rights initiatives have advanced relationships between movements and national and international authorities. The history of transnational activists' relationships with international officials in the United Nations human rights field, for instance, demonstrates the centrality of such connections to strengthening human rights protections and institutions.

In his analysis of “livable cities,” Evans speaks of the need for us to think in terms of “ecologies of agents,” that is, overlapping networks that connect the state with members of civil society. Successful change strategies are, according to Evans and his collaborators, outcomes of synergies and interactions among actors concerned with making cities more “livable.”

Cooperation and complementarity between state and civil society actors working to improve residents’ livelihoods and sustainability made the most difference in the cities they examined:

For cities to become more livable, groups and individuals inside and outside of the state must become more conscious of the necessity of looking for complementarities, forging alliances, and bridging differences that separate the multiple agendas that are part of livability. Bureaucrats must be open to direct democratic demands, regardless of how inconvenient and unreasonable they might be. Communities must be willing to provide political backing for increasing the capacity of state agencies, despite the risk that the capacity might be misused or captured. NGOs must use their greater political and institutional flexibility to build ties in both directions. Perhaps most important, *actors both inside and outside of the state must be on the lookout for new institutional forms...that hold the promise of transcending old impasses.* (Evans 2002a:245, emphasis added)

These kinds of relationships should be described as an emergent, hybrid form of state-society relations, since local activists are engaging states with the aim of disrupting dominant projects of market-oriented development and enacting new forms of politics that can better address human needs (Appadurai 2001:25, Rajagopal 2003; Desai 2016). Analysts have suggested that movements help inspire and create space for political and legal imagination (Khasnabish 2005, Rajagopal 2003) as they work to “develop culturally legitimate ways of conceiving social and political progress” (Rajagopal 2003:23). Such place-based human rights work has been described as “legalism from below” (Desai 2016; Rajagopal 2003).

Below I explore the development of human rights cities, which are place-based struggles that help make visible those most impacted by economic globalization. They reflect efforts to redefine membership in the city and in the economy (Holston 2009). Mobilizing at local levels but connected to translocal networks, activists are working to ensure people’s survival and to help put into place alternative norms and institutional arrangements that draw from global human rights norms, discourses, and legal frameworks to protect and prioritize human rights. As national and global human rights mechanisms are increasingly threatened by far-right electoral

victories, such local initiatives may become the new focal point of global struggle for justice and emancipation.

Right to the City & the Radicalization of Human Rights

The widespread nature of urban problems affecting peoples' everyday lives and survival have generated similar mobilizations in places around the world, contributing to the consolidation of claims to the "right to the city." As Harvey points out, "to invoke rights to the city means 'to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade and to do so in a fundamental and radical way'" (Harvey 2012: 5, quoted in Oomen 2012:5). What has come to be known as the right to the city movement first emerged in the 1970s, inspired by Henri Lefebvre's 1968 book, *Le Droit à la ville*. The movement has expanded and gained momentum around the world since the mid-1990s (Oomen et al. 2016).

Meyer (2009) describes four earlier phases of right to the city organizing, which refers to "the conflict over who should have the benefit of the city and what kind of city it should be" (Meyer 2009:367). Each phase of right to the city mobilizing has been defined by the nature of neoliberal challenges to people's daily lives, and by popular capacities for resistance. The earliest articulations of right to the city struggles emerged in the global South, as growing numbers of people pushed out of subsistence agriculture and rural economies moved to urban centers ill-equipped to accommodate so many new residents (Chueca 2016; Holston 2009). In the global North, the right to the city idea grew from 1960s anti-war, student, and civil rights movements, articulating demands for community spaces and public services and critiquing consumerist culture (Meyer 2009). The next phases of right to the city claims were shaped by the austerity policies of the 1980s and the rise of neoliberal welfare programs, which channeled many popular groups in the United States towards service-provision and fragmented the movement. By the 1990s there was a turn to more critical mobilizations against the effects of neoliberal policies and programs, and grassroots movements like "Reclaim the Streets" emerged in various places to defend the urban commons and critique the growth-oriented development model. These protests helped frame and fuel the emergent global justice movement, which generated the slogan and idea that "another world is possible." Very quickly, the World Social Forum that popularized that slogan encouraged a proliferation of urban forums which envisioned

other types of (non-capitalist or at least non-neoliberal) cities that were deemed possible (Meyer 2009:365). In Europe, mobilization by municipal officials pushed to prioritize human rights principles in European integration, and in 1998 the European Conference of Cities for Human Rights met, launching what became the [European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City](#),¹² which has been signed by more than 400 cities (Oomen and Baumgärtel 2012:6).

Revolutionary potential of Human Rights

Conventional understandings of rights presuppose the capitalist economy, denying the possibility that this system itself could be a source—much less the leading source—of rights violations. Counter-hegemonic human rights politics names the capitalist system as the main source of rights violations, and calls for the recognition and recuperation of rights to alternative knowledges, to solidarity-oriented transformation of the right to property, the right to endow nature and future generations with rights, and rights to participation and self-determination (Santos 2007:31; see also Escobar 2008).¹³ In doing so, it constitutes an “exercise in retrospective radical imagination” that can see those rights that were suppressed by capitalism and envision them as a foundation for an alternative social order. Such work contributes to “building new architecture of human rights” (Santos 2007:29).

Similarly, Rajagopal discusses the counter-hegemonic potential of human rights, which he sees as requiring projects like the human rights cities to advance it:

A fourth possibility for a counter-hegemonic international law includes the emergence of coalitions of smaller states and social movements, forming tactical alliances with larger states in particular negotiations, *while increasing the prominence of sub-state actors in international law more broadly*. Some of this is happening: ...there is the emergence of city-level political activity in international law, as seen in the adoption by the City of San Francisco of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Convention (not ratified by the USA) into its city code. (Rajagopal 2006:781, emphasis added)

For Rajagopal, a critical element of counter-hegemonic strategy is to challenge the monopoly of states in international law. Efforts to mobilize sub-national actors and form alliances between social movements and local and national state actors are critical to this strategy. At the same time, like Meyer, he warns counter-hegemonic forces to avoid the “fetishism of institutions,” which allows the consolidation of hegemony while also demobilizing popular resistance

(Rajagopal 2006:781). Attention to culture and to local relational dynamics is therefore key to counter-hegemonic international law.

Present in these various discussions of radical human rights struggle is the idea that diverse collections of people must be involved in helping articulate and carry out counter-hegemonic human rights. For Santos, global justice networks helped shape and expand counter-hegemonic human rights discourse by enabling dialogue across diverse groups mobilized in opposition to neoliberal globalization.¹⁴ Rajagopal considers the strategic need for a diversity of state and non-state actors to realize the transformation of human rights law. It is not surprising then that the human rights cities that have emerged have been brought about by the mobilization of broad and diverse coalitions of local actors, which tend to also have translocal ties to national and international organizations and networks (van den Berg and Oomen 2014). In my research on transnational activism, I have been struck by how often I see organizers working around different issues and from different social and cultural backgrounds using human rights language and framing in their work (see also Petcheskey 2003). Moreover, those leading with such frameworks are not typically among the more privileged groups, but rather are those most impacted by capitalism and environmental damage.¹⁵ For them, human rights can provide an emancipatory and empowering framework for action that also helps attract a broad array of allies.

Human Rights Cities

Human rights cities are one example of what Merry (2006) refers to as the remaking of human rights in the vernacular. The spread of human rights requires intermediaries who help adapt general principles and international codes to local settings. They are cities that make human rights principles explicit in municipal policies and programs. Cities like Barcelona, Utrecht, Porto Alegre, San Francisco, and Jackson Mississippi are among a growing number of such cities.¹⁶

These are efforts to re-invent within cities collective, place-based life projects, similar to what has been seen and documented in other places where traditional communities have seen their local traditions and cultures uprooted by capitalism's development project, and where their traditional means of survival have become threatened (see, e.g., Escobar 2008). As noted above, urban residents are finding their ability to survive in the globalized city is increasingly

precarious. Structural unemployment, gentrification/ forced displacement, declining social services, and changing environmental conditions all create obstacles and uncertainties for growing numbers of urban residents. Human rights city initiatives reflect efforts of people to redefine the kind of cities they live in, community priorities and visions, and the nature of political decision making. They are, in other words, engaging communities in work to expand the “legal imagination” in a way that takes seriously international human rights law (Rajagopal 2003: 264).

Because human rights cities initiatives have not been well documented, I have been involved in efforts to compile information about these initiatives and to support a network of Human Rights Cities leaders in order to better document the forms these initiatives take and the models of local action that have been employed in different settings.¹⁷ Most Human Rights Cities work falls into four categories: popular human rights education and consciousness-raising; integration of human rights into local government practices and policies; building or supporting diverse alliances to support the realization of human rights in a range of policy areas; and enacting human rights projects.

Popular education and consciousness-raising in human rights cities often begins with helping familiarize residents with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights treaties, using opportunities such as the annual celebration of International Human Rights Day (December 10) to create spaces for people to consider the overall gaps between vision and reality that become quite apparent when one reads such documents. It also involves effort to help make visible for residents the diversity of experiences in their communities, exposing inequalities along racial, class, gender, and other differences in the enjoyment of human rights. Such popular education also challenges globalization’s politics of scale by reclaiming local identities in the face of global challenges, but doing so in an inclusive way that makes explicit communities’ connections with global networks and norms. Beyond helping familiarize residents with international human rights principles, Human Rights Cities like Seattle and Pittsburgh have advanced public education by formally recognizing October 12 as Indigenous People’s Day. This directly challenges the historical myths about the U.S. origins and calls attention to how past abuses contributed to today’s unequal distribution of wealth and privilege. It points to the need to address the enduring impacts of the country’s imperialist, genocidal and racist past on indigenous people and other communities of color as part of any effort to build a Human Rights City.

Indigenous People's Day engages communities in "truth-telling" similar to that encouraged in international peacebuilding work. Human rights educational efforts help popularize notions of human rights and encourage residents and community leaders to internalize global human rights principles and to reflect them in public discourses and actions.

Human rights cities also involve efforts to integrate international human rights standards into local policy. Often, they work through or in cooperation with local Human Rights Commissions.¹⁸ One example of such an initiative is the "Cities for CEDAW" campaign, which is a bottom-up effort to have the United States ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). So far six U.S. cities have passed local CEDAW ordinances, and dozens more are in the process of developing such legislation.¹⁹ In addition to explicitly working international legal commitments into local legislation, community initiatives are also helping monitor local-level compliance with national human rights commitments. For instance, the US Human Rights Network coordinates the compilation of civil society shadow reports to submit to international reporting mechanisms such as the National Periodic Review in the UN Human Rights Council and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), one of the few international human rights treaties to which the United States is a party. Such local work to hold local officials accountable to international human rights principles serves an important and under-staffed function in the institutionalization of U.S. treaty commitments.²⁰

What is clear in all human rights cities is considerable effort to bring together diverse alliances and to facilitate networking and communication among groups working on different issues (e.g., Oomen et al. 2016). Because effective policies must address the intersecting nature of human rights, analysts have pointed to the critical role of cross-issue alliances in human rights city organizing. It is worth noting that by integrating diverse civil society groups, human rights city projects can facilitate norms and practices that support democratic governance such as interest-aggregating across diverse groups, amplifying the voices of more marginalized groups, and helping craft more inclusive, effective, and responsive policies. Two illustrations of such coalition work in Pittsburgh include the annual organizing work for the annual May Day (May 1) march for immigrant rights, through which we aim to familiarize residents with the experiences of diverse immigrant groups in our community. This work has helped mobilize support for the current effort to make Pittsburgh a Sanctuary City. Another example is our recent Housing

Summit,²¹ which brought together community leaders working on housing, immigration, and labor rights along with other community activists, students, and members of the university community.

Finally, human rights cities initiatives help enact projects to directly realize human rights in communities. One of the most ambitious such efforts is in Jackson, Mississippi, which has incorporated into their human rights city program a vision of “just transition,” that incorporates racial equity and justice into efforts to transition to a post-carbon society.²² Their work includes a model for realizing a sustainable human rights economy by supporting and building economic cooperatives and supporting Black economic empowerment in the city. These short illustrations aim to demonstrate just a small aspect of the work happening to defend and advance human rights in local communities. These initiatives are becoming increasingly urgent with the rise of the far-right and with the economic vulnerabilities and displacement that characterizes today’s globalized economy (Sassen 2014).

Conclusion

Basic processes integral to global capitalism such as depeasantization and commodification have contributed to the rise of concentrated urban populations and have generated contradictions that the system is increasingly unable to manage. Urban residents are among those rising up to resist the loss of land/place, community, and livelihood which has intensified with global financial and ecological crises. These struggles take the form of opposition to urban gentrification and to struggles over rights to basic needs such as food, water, and living wages. In addition, place-based movements are coming together around claims to the right to define how decisions are made and how their communities are “developed.”

In doing so, they are building upon the networks, organizational infrastructures, and knowledge generated by previous human rights movements. Not only do the organizing infrastructures and legal and institutional accomplishments provide the ‘hardware’ for communication and collaboration, but the lessons activists have learned about how to work across divisions of race, nation, class, and gender provide critical ‘software’ that has facilitated the development of broad, trans-local alliances and networks working for large-scale transformation. These kinds of networks and knowledge are critical to building human rights constituencies that are indispensable to the realization of universal human rights. There is no

natural constituency within communities for human rights, and rights advocates need to devote conscious efforts to build such a constituency, observed Anja Rudiger of the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative ([Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance 2015:3](#)). More localized human rights initiatives such as human rights cities are places where such work is happening in a deliberate manner.

Critical to these movement alliances are the connections they have been able to make (and increasingly so) with counter-hegemonic states and sub-national authorities, whose interests are becoming more consistent with the transformative goals of social movements as the system's contradictions make their governance obligations untenable within the existing status quo. Place-based movements such as human rights cities have been working to cultivate connections with local authorities and sympathetic states to advance human rights claims against the prevailing neoliberal policy framework.

These localized struggles represent efforts to define human rights 'in the vernacular,' translating international human rights codes into local policies and practice. But they also show that local civil society engagement does not simply adapt supra-local norms to local settings, but rather they show "the bottom-up contribution of city actors within and outside the local government" to the articulation and implementation of concrete human rights policies (Grigolo 2011:1762). Popular movements are thus essential actors in the process of advancing international human rights, which has proved to be far from an automatic outcome of states' treaty ratification. What we can learn from this account is the importance of understanding international human rights law as the outcome of popular struggle and the mobilization of local human rights constituencies. Human rights requires attention to processes of 'international law from below,' and the rise of human rights cities represents a promising model and site of experimentation around what such processes might look like. Given the closing of opportunities in national political arenas, such local initiatives seem particularly promising.

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End Notes

¹ Beyond cities, similar pressures are manifested in “land grabs” as global financial entities, including national governments, purchase territory within sovereign states, further eroding the access of local residents to basic resources and development opportunities (Margulis et al. 2013; White et al. 2012).

² For instance, in regard to affordable housing, even when public hearings allow residents to voice concerns, the policy options on the table remain within the framework of marketized housing, which is the fundamental cause of residential displacement (Madden and Marcuse 2016). Public officials may feel powerless to stop processes of gentrification simply because they are not exposed to—or more likely deem impractical—policy options outside the market framework.

³ This is the key premise of Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad Vs. McWorld*, and an argument I have made earlier in *Social Movements for Global Democracy*, building upon work of world-systems and other analysts of global political economy (see, e.g. Kaldor 2003).

⁴ For a detailed discussion of structural violence, see Farmer (2004).

⁵ Readers outside the United States may ask why I use race to define the predominant conflicts in U.S. cities, rather than the more general concept of “ethnic conflict.” Although much ethnic conflict is based in racial hierarchies, I believe it is important to focus explicitly on race as a mechanism for organizing institutions and the distribution of resources in society. Global capitalism is based in racial hierarchies that systematically exclude and marginalize people of color while privileging the perspectives and interests of whites. The U.S. history of slavery and Jim Crow has exerted a strong influence on contemporary race relations, and this is the major factor influencing conflict in U.S. cities today. For a more detailed discussion see the symposium on “Race in the Capitalist World-System” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22(1) (<http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/64>).

⁶ Similar patterns are seen in, e.g., the work of von Bülow (2010) on transnational networks around international trade of Pleyers (2011) on alter-globalization movements.

⁷ See, e.g., <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/25/detroit-a-s-disconnection-of-water-services-violates-human-rights-says-sun.html>.

⁸ For instance, because Detroit was the site of the 2010 U.S. Social Forum, activists there could draw upon extensive ties across the U.S. as well as global networks tied to the larger World Social Forum. Following the USSF, a number of Detroit organizers participated in the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, enabling them to expand their ties to global activist networks.

⁹ Global movement networks have also helped communicate ideas and perspectives of Indigenous communities—especially as these networks mobilized around the UN process that led to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and around transnational movement processes like the World Social Forums—which helps to account for the recent upsurges of Indigenous activism in Idle no More and in the Standing Rock and related protests against corporate intrusions on native lands.

¹⁰ Exemplifying this is Bolivia’s effort to build pressure for more concerted international action in response to climate change by organizing two World Peoples Conferences on Climate Change: one on the Rights of Mother Earth (April 2010 in Cochabamba), and a second on the Defense of Life (October of 2015 in Tiquipaya Bolivia). These meetings convened an estimated 30,000 and 7,000 people, respectively from social movements as well as local and national governments. Bolivian President Evo Morales has used the Peoples Declarations from these meetings to inform his country’s international work on climate change (see Smith 2014; <https://pwccc.wordpress.com/support/>; and <http://climate-i.iisd.org/news/peoples-world-conference-calls-for-structural-change-to-fight-climate-change/>

¹¹ On the connections between workers and the state, see, e.g., Tilly (1995); Seidman (2004). On children’s rights, see Guidry (2000).

¹² <http://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/right-to-the-city/european-charter>.

¹³ See, e.g., the People’s Declaration of the World Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, in addition to movements on food sovereignty and rights of Mother Earth (Smith 2014).

¹⁴ In his own words, “the networking of mutually intelligible and translatable native languages of emancipation finds its way into an insurgent cosmopolitan politics.” (Santos 2007:35)

¹⁵ For instance, the Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign was led by homeless and low-income residents of Philadelphia and other cities, and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference has used international human rights machinery to challenge the U.S. for its contributions to global warming, which threatens the Inuit culture, traditions, and lands (Smith 2008, chapter 8). Right to the city struggles have also tended to be led by low income and homeless residents.

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Rights_City

¹⁷ This network is organized within the US Human Rights Network, the largest U.S. grassroots human rights organization, which helps link local human rights activists with regional and global human rights treaty bodies and review processes. See: <http://www.ushrnetwork.org/our-work/project/national-human-rights-city-network>.

¹⁸ For instance, Eugene Oregon's human rights initiatives have emerged through the leadership of the local Human Rights Commission (Neubek 2016), and Seattle's Human Rights City ordinance was passed following the initiative of their city Human Rights Commission. In Pittsburgh, we are working with our local Commission to help support their public outreach and to better integrate human rights into government policies, discourse, and programs.

¹⁹ <http://citiesforcedaw.org/>

²⁰ This was evident in a meeting with U.S. government officials responsible for local implementation of U.S. treaty obligations that was part of the national human rights city convening hosted in Washington DC in May of 2016 (<http://pgh-humanrightscity.wikispaces.com/file/view/Conference%20summary%20-General%20Version%203%202.pdf/555558739/Conference%20summary%20-General%20Version%203%202.pdf>).

²¹ <http://housingsummitpgh.org>

²² <http://www.cooperationjackson.org/blog/2015/11/10/the-jackson-just-transition-plan>