



## Local Responses to Right-Wing Populism: Building Human Rights Cities

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**ABSTRACT** *Today economic vulnerability, heightened inequality, and reduced government capacities have fueled nationalist and xenophobic movements in many countries. Such movements threaten democracy and human rights within countries and globally. Less visible amid these disturbing trends – but no less important for the future of democracy – is the simultaneous expansion of locally-organized human rights initiatives around the world, especially since 2000. A proliferation of place-based movements claiming “rights to the city” is becoming increasingly visible and trans-locally networked. After outlining some of the global dimensions of this development, I discuss work happening in the U.S. city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and explore the broader possibilities for locally based human rights initiatives to address contemporary threats to social justice and peace.*

**KEYWORDS** human rights cities; local activism; democracy; globalization; social polarization

The recent growth and electoral success of right-wing populism can be attributed to economic insecurity resulting from the competitive, market-oriented processes of economic globalization and consumerist culture. Global economic policies, known as neoliberalism, emphasize global trade and finance over local and national economies, reduce government regulation and welfare spending, and privatize state functions. Such policies have encouraged the redistribution of wealth from working people and communities to global corporations and a growing transnational capitalist class, exacerbating economic inequality both within and between countries (Evans & Sewell, 2013; Harvey, 2005; Robinson, 2014). The privileging of economic expertise and the lack of transparency and public engagement in trade negotiations further undermines the democratic legitimacy of states and

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international institutions (Da Costa & McMichael, 2007; Evans, 1997; Markoff, 1999).

Changes in the global economy, communications, and the practice of warfare have thus fundamentally altered the structural and cultural bases of national identities and notions of belonging. Globalization has produced what Kaldor calls “spectacle nationalism,” which “requires passive participation, watching television or joining a crowd but its capacity to mobilise active participation such as paying taxes or risking one’s life in wars is greatly weakened” (Kaldor, 2003, p. 168). Citizenship thus mirrors other forms of consumption, emphasizing individual gratification over social responsibility and group solidarity. This undermines the democratic values and empathy that help generate social cohesion and support effective governance, and it sets the stage for the kinds of exclusionary mobilizations we see today.

In the early 1990s Benjamin Barber argued that the consumerist and market emphasis of neoliberal globalization would render democratic institutions meaningless and fuel movements defending traditional values and nationalist identities against perceived global threats (Barber, 1992; see also Moghadam, 2012). Kaldor and her colleagues likewise anticipated that neoliberal globalization would encourage a variety of “anti-globalist,” nationalist, and xenophobic backlashes while hollowing-out democratic institutions (Kaldor, 2003). Since the persistent advance of neoliberal policies has fueled inequality and widespread corruption in government and business and prevented the emergence of responsive political leadership to address urgent social crises, today’s surge of right-wing populism should come as no surprise. Seeking to fill this governance vacuum are populist movements advancing parochial defenses against economic globalization.

At the same time other actors, many emerging from earlier human rights and global justice movements, are also organizing locally to advance a more inclusive and progressive form of globalization grounded in widely recognized values of human rights and dignity. Mobilizing around claims of the “right to the city,” growing numbers of people in cities and communities around the world are seeking to defend peoples’ and communities’ access to basic needs such as water, housing, a healthy environment, and access to food, health care, and transportation. These movements for social inclusion have been less visible than those on the right, in part because of their incompatibilities with the discourses of capitalism and consumerist culture and their marginalization from mainstream media and politics. In addition, much of the work of these movements happens outside the realm of what is typically defined as “politics” – that is, outside the sphere of political parties and electoral politics. Or their emphasis is on municipal and local politics, which are marginalized in the worldviews of neoliberal globalizers. Yet, in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump, more are paying attention to these local initiatives, recognizing their potential to challenge the dangerous rhetoric and policies of the right (see, e.g., Barber, 2016; Gerken, Bollier,

Gerstle & Alperovitz, 2016; Goodman, 2016; Heinberg, 2016; Hoxie, 2016; Katz, 2016; Norberg Hodge & Read, 2016).

This paper documents the emergence and spread of local human rights initiatives and considers their potential role in helping communities address pervasive problems of economic stagnation and the polarizing and exclusionary politics they have generated, while helping build local capacities for addressing basic human needs and strengthening community resilience. I begin by discussing the global emergence of place-based efforts to realize human rights in localized settings. I then provide a more in-depth look at one such initiative, the human rights city initiative in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to show how this sort of project can counter the critical threats from right wing populism by promoting cross-cutting ties in communities, cultivating human rights and democratic values, bringing structural racism and violence into public consciousness and debate, and advancing human rights-oriented practices and policies.

The methodology I employ is “observant participation,”<sup>1</sup> stressing my role as an active participant in this movement as well as a researcher. This method draws heavily from critical feminist scholarship, emphasizing reflexivity and “strong objectivity” (see, e.g., Harding, 1992) to engage in what Santos (2014) refers to as the sociology of absences and emergences. In other words, this method can help uncover the people and experiences as well as the subaltern transformative practices and projects that are silenced and made invisible by mainstream culture and institutions. Here the researcher is not seen as an outside observer, but rather as a social being whose identity and involvement in a social context impacts the questions asked, the methods of analysis used, and the content of the observations or responses obtained. I use practices of “active listening” to uncover the various ways that power relations manifest themselves in individual and group behavior (see, e.g., Doerr, 2009).

My involvement in this social context results from particular relationships with people and with a community, and I am attentive to these relationships – and to status and power imbalances they represent – in my analysis. My fellow-activists, moreover, are also co-investigators. I actively involve them in my ongoing questions about our work, we discuss emerging ideas or hypotheses about what actions might move us towards the changes we’re seeking, we generate thoughts about the institutional changes required to remedy the failures of existing arrangements, and I share conclusions and results of my study in varied formats that are accessible to diverse audiences. Such methods make visible the knowledge that grows from activists’ work for social change. They also illuminate complex dynamics of coalition-building and social struggle amid long-standing social divisions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. This movement is explicitly attempting to transform these social identities and the conflicts they manifest, and I am able to use my

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jeffrey Juris for introducing me to this concept.

own positionality and experience to try to better understand the various ways individuals might respond – through their thoughts, feelings, as well as actions – to new perspectives or challenges to their pre-existing conceptions of self and community.

I first became familiar with this emergent movement while doing research on the World Social Forums. There, I saw that many groups were using human rights language in their efforts to build coalitions to resist economic globalization. Despite some academic critiques that have dismissed the transformative potential of human rights, I saw activists embracing this language in an emancipatory way (see Santos, 2007; Rajagapol, 2006). Moreover, the use of human rights framing did not seem to be linked to a particular place or issue-focus; activists from both the global North and South and groups working on trade, environment, or other issues seemed just as likely to be speaking in human rights terms. What stood out, however, is that it was the people and groups who were most harmed by economic globalization who were leading the effort to mobilize around human rights and dignity.

To understand activists' strategies in the World Social Forums and to learn how groups build and manage coalitions across national, cultural and other differences, I began engaging in more local work to implement ideas from these global movement spaces where I lived, including South Bend, Indiana and later Pittsburgh. When I moved to Pittsburgh and learned that the city had just passed a local proclamation naming it the fifth Human Rights City in the United States, I became engaged in work to build a coalition of groups to help actualize the proclamation. Co-organizers and I formed the Human Rights City Alliance in 2013, and the observations I report here are made as a leader in this effort. I do not attempt here to evaluate the actual impacts and effectiveness of the work we are doing, but rather to demonstrate how activists use the idea of "human rights city" to expand political and legal imaginaries and to make possible conversations and relationships that would otherwise be unlikely. In doing so, I argue that such initiatives help address the highly polarized ideological divisions that plague our society today and counter dynamics that encourage right-wing mobilization such as social segregation and dehumanization of marginalized groups. Documenting how local groups are working to overcome divisions and to transform public discourses in their communities can help us identify policies and strategies that can reduce the appeal of reactionary leaders and help strengthen social cohesion and democratic institutions.

### **Rethinking Urban Governance: Social Movements and Political Imagination**

Neoliberal globalization has remade cities and fundamentally altered local power structures in ways that favor transnational corporations and investors

over local residents. Around the world, capitalists and corporate elites are increasingly influential in urban planning (Sklair, 2017). As capitalists seek new opportunities for profit-making, they are increasingly acquiring urban land and property and financializing real estate markets (Sassen, 2014). This process has fueled growing tensions between residents – for whom the city is home and community – and entrepreneurs, who view the city as a commodity desired for its exchange value rather than use value (Logan & Molotch, 1987). Thus, in cities worldwide we see similar processes of dispossession and social exclusion of poor and working class people – especially people of color – as development for elite consumption transforms urban landscapes (Harvey, 2012).

Many analysts privilege states and other elite actors as the central players in governance. Yet, most analyses of conflict and transformative social change point to the essential roles that civil society plays in promoting effective governance, such as catalyzing policy change; monitoring governments', parties', and corporations' compliance with the law; and mobilizing public support for government programs (Appadurai, 2002; Bell & O'Rourke, 2007). Studies of post-war settings show that civil society participation in governance is essential to building lasting peace; as such participation helps with intermediation between citizens and the state, advocacy for marginalized groups, monitoring powerful actors such as states, political parties, and corporations for accountability, socialization for a culture of peace, and fostering social cohesion (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2010; Paffenholz, 2010). Such functions are central to reducing polarization and building stable communities even where large-scale violence has not (yet) occurred. Thus, greater attention to how civil society actors mobilize and carry out these functions is needed so that these efforts can be better supported.

I argue that human rights cities are an example of locally-rooted initiatives to mobilize community residents into the work of local governance and to help overcome the polarizing tendencies reinforced by national and global politics. Human rights cities are distinctive in that they advance a conscious political project that re-envision and re-orient the social order around principles of human rights, rather than globalized markets. This involves a fundamental transformation of social relations in order to ensure that the means of survival are available to all human beings and protected for future generations. They stress an attachment to place that directly counters globalization's footloose logic. Whereas the dominant ideology holds that globalized markets are best at producing economic growth that then produces other social goods, activists advocating for human rights point out persistent failures of this logic. They argue that policies should be crafted with the primary aim of protecting and advancing human rights, rather than treating rights as a by-product of growth. Thus, these initiatives activate residents' political and legal imaginations – that is, their ability to envision possibilities and strategies for achieving a society very different from what exists in

practice and in prevailing discourses and imaginaries.<sup>2</sup> For if a group cannot imagine such a community, it will never realize it.

Given the entrenched political and economic power of corporate and financial elites and the (related) increasing marginalization of growing numbers of people from access to secure livelihoods, it is clear that those seeking to protect and advance human rights must somehow radically alter the larger political and economic order if their needs are to be met. Of course, the rise of right-wing movements reflects one response to growing economic inequality. But to challenge prevailing power arrangements, those wanting a more inclusive society need to come together around a different social and political project that provides a distinct counter-narrative to the competitive individualism and consumerism of market-based globalization. I argue that human rights can provide the language and inspiration for such a political project. Existing representative democratic institutions and economic policies that privilege markets and large corporations systematically exclude the voices of people most harmed by corporate globalization. Structural unemployment, displacement and criminalization of communities of color, and anti-immigrant policies marginalize and exclude globalization's "losers," while the "winners" amass more wealth and translate that into political influence – corrupting democratic institutions (see, e.g., Sassen, 2014). To address the underlying forces polarizing societies and undermining the viability of institutions and communities, activists are calling for efforts to "change the music," or "flip the script," and engaging in forms of "insurgent citizenship" to demand basic rights and social inclusion (Holston, 2009; see also Harvey, 2012).

Human rights cities advocates are trying to counter "spectacle nationalism" and its exclusionary and violent tendencies by helping redefine public discourse to include the voices of marginalized groups and articulating inclusive collective identities, values, and priorities that counter those of mainstream culture and institutions. For instance, rights advocates argue that "no human being is illegal," and that human rights have no borders in response to today's anti-immigrant rhetoric. By organizing public activities where such ideas can be articulated and where people can discuss ideas for making change, these movements engage residents as active participants in advancing this political vision.

The human rights city model might be seen as a form of what Fetherston (2000) calls transformative peacebuilding, which targets the underlying power relations and exploitative, competitive relationships that fuel conflict and violence. Transformative peacebuilding focuses on conflict as a *system*, and works to address its root causes by fundamentally confronting power inequities in ways that alter existing relationships and identities and that generate shared projects that support more equitable and just social relations. For instance, by mobilizing residents around claims to the right to housing or

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<sup>2</sup> On political and legal imagination, see, e.g., Khasnabish (2008) and Desai (2015).

the right to water, these initiatives point to the contradictions between market logics that drive economic policies and widely shared assumptions about what it means to be human. Such discourse can undermine the legitimacy of the system, or at least impede further efforts to marketize basic human needs. Shifting the discourse in this way challenges the privileged position of capitalism and corporate elites in democratic policy making. This work is advanced in part through what Habermas (1981) calls communicative action, which involves

intersubjective dialogue between a community of actors which enables [people] to reconstruct common understandings of their lifeworld and, therefore, renew the shared basis for culture, social integration, and socialization that underlie a mutual existence.... Communicative action does provide a means of renegotiating the bases of mutual existence distorted by [...] cultures of violence. (Fetherston, 2000, p. 212)

Communication and transformative relationship-building across major social divides is at the core of the work of human rights cities.<sup>3</sup> As the following examples illustrate, human rights city organizers work to bring diverse groups together and challenge prevailing politics, discourses, and agendas. The practices of human rights city activists nurture relationships that are obstructed by prevailing policies, helping overcome the segregation of affluent from poor communities and the sorting out of cities by race and ethnicity and other divides. The human rights framework provides an alternative normative foundation that can unite residents around collective identities and projects and foster mutual understanding, respect, equity, and cooperation while actively contesting the hegemony of capitalist principles of individualism, exploitation, hierarchy, and competition.

### **Human Rights Cities Movements**

A “human rights city” is a municipality that refers explicitly to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards in its policies and programs. There are growing numbers of such cities since 2000 (Oomen, Davis, & Grigolo, 2016; van den Berg & Oomen, 2014). Barcelona is a leading human rights city in Europe, and San Francisco became an early U.S. human rights city with its 1998 adoption of a city ordinance reflecting the principles of the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (Grigolo, 2011). Below I explore another kind of human rights city, namely those that are explicitly designated as human rights cities under a growing global initiative launched by the

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word “transformative” here because the aim is not to simply create new friendships based on prior inequalities and assumptions, but to reconstruct social relations in ways that acknowledge past harms and put forward new bases for reconciliation.

Peoples Decade on Human Rights Learning (PDHRE) following the UN Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993. According to PDHRE's website:

A Human Rights City is a city or a community where people of good will, in government, in organizations and in institutions, try and let a human rights framework guide the development of the life of the community. Equality and nondiscrimination are basic values. Efforts are made to promote a holistic vision of human rights to overcome fear and impoverishment, a society that provides human security, access to food, clean water, housing, education, healthcare and work at livable wages, sharing these resources with all citizens – not as a gift, but as a realization of human rights. (PDHRE International Office, 2006, p. 3)

PDHRE organizers have worked to promote human rights city initiatives in different parts of the world, including at the World Social Forums and in other movement and UN venues. Rosario, Argentina became the first human rights city of this kind in 1997, and since then at least two dozen more cities have followed.<sup>4</sup> There is no single pathway to a human rights city: some cities, like Barcelona and San Francisco, incorporate elements of international human rights law into local legislation. Others adopt formal human rights city ordinances. Some of these initiatives have involved cooperation between public officials and civil society groups, but the key leadership and impetus is typically from non-governmental human rights advocates.

Formally designated Human Rights Cities are bottom-up, civil society-led efforts to re-envision communities' role in local governance and to prioritize human rights in local policies and practices. Rather than looking to national governments to enforce human rights or confining themselves to conventional political discourses and tactics, human rights city advocates seek to change the entire frame of policy reference. They begin with the radical assertion that the point of governance is not to promote the interests of business, but rather to protect and advance all human rights (including economic, social and cultural rights) for all residents (including noncitizens). This form of "insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2009) points to the often significant gaps between human rights ideals and community realities, and engages in various forms of action to reduce those gaps. As the growth model exacerbates problems of structural unemployment, gentrification and other forms of forced displacement, declining social services, and environmental damage, the notion of a human rights city offers residents a chance to reclaim and re-build community as they address deepening crises that are most keenly felt in local settings. It provides an opportunity that is lacking in conventional political spaces for residents to engage in explicit thinking and

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<sup>4</sup> Among these are Alexandria, Egypt; Nimamobi, Ghana; Korogocho, Kenya; Mogale, South Africa; Nagpur, India; Gwangju, South Korea; Edmonton, Canada; Washington D.C., USA, and Jackson MS, USA (for a full list see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_Rights\\_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Rights_City), a Wikipedia site I created with my students when we realized that no entry had yet been written).

discussion about shared goals, values, and notions of place, identity and belonging.

These kinds of conversations reflect work to expand residents' "political and legal imaginations" and they directly challenge hegemonic notions of politics, citizenship, and economy, which privilege national and global sites of power. By mobilizing and engaging residents around notions of place, human rights city activists are offering a radical alternative to globalizing forces that require the subordination of local and national communities, economies, and ecosystems to globalized markets. Such conversations also generate uncomfortable realities as they expose what are often vast inequalities in the experiences of residents from diverse racial and economic backgrounds. To the extent that such conversations are successful at fostering empathy while altering people's social relationships and understandings of place, they open the way for new models of politics and creative insights that can generate support for redistributive solutions that strengthen social cohesion and local democracy.

Below I provide selected examples from my work with Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance (HRCA) of how human rights city initiatives can help reduce social polarization and strengthen communities' capacities to address social, ecological and financial crises. I focus on how the HRCA has worked to address structural racism in a highly segregated city with a history and present of racial tension and exclusion. Racism in the region's steel mills and unions confined African American workers to the most dangerous and low-paying jobs, and the effects remain today in the large and persistent racial inequities in income and other measures of well-being. Pittsburgh has among the highest rates of Black poverty (33%), infant mortality (13.7%), and unemployment (16.6%) in the United States. African American median household income is less than half that of white residents (Smith, 2017; Center on Race & Social Problems, 2015). The political marginalization of African Americans, moreover, has led to repeated displacements, and Pittsburgh has seen more than 20,000 African American residents pushed out of the city since the 1980s (Fullilove, 2016).<sup>5</sup> As in other U.S. cities, Pittsburgh police have also been implicated in numerous killings, maimings, and other discriminatory practices violating the basic human rights of African American residents. Yet, the city's revitalization around the higher education, health care, and technology industries has enabled public officials to celebrate the claim that Pittsburgh is a "Most Livable City."<sup>6</sup> Activists and many low-income residents have countered, "livable for *whom*?"

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<sup>5</sup> While white residents were also displaced as Pittsburgh's steel industry declined, they had more resources to allow them to move to new economic opportunities outside the region. Displaced African Americans, in contrast, tended to move to neighboring suburbs of Pittsburgh, where they have had less access to jobs and public services.

<sup>6</sup> The designation of "most livable city" has been given to the city by numerous commercial media entities, including *Forbes* in 2010, and most recently The *Economist's* Intelligence Unit

In response to these conditions, HRCA and its allies have made it a priority to address racial inequalities as a first step towards making Pittsburgh a true human rights city. A key aim of the HRCA is to help create spaces for diverse organizations and community members and leaders to come together to engage in dialogue and creative thinking – communicative action – about how to address the gaps between human rights ideals and practices in our city and region. At the same time, the Alliance works to amplify the language of human rights in the public discourse by communicating with public officials, encouraging activists and organizations in various sectors to frame their struggles in human rights terms, and supporting varied opportunities for human rights learning. A Human Rights City Action Plan outlines major priorities and proposals for changes, drawing from work by groups around the city and from other human rights cities (Human Rights City Alliance, 2014). Below I describe some of this work to provide a foundation for further comparative research on how local movement initiatives like this can help address critical social conflicts.

#### *Promoting a Human Rights Constituency and Culture*

One of the biggest challenges for human rights advocates in many U.S. cities is to convince political activists and leaders to view human rights as a useful organizing framework. Our experience has revealed an “American exceptionalism” where many see the language of human rights as referring only to places outside the United States – not to situations in this country (Finnegan, Saltsman & White, 2010). Most U.S. residents don’t know much about how international institutions and treaties operate and what prospects these mechanisms offer for local activists. This is changing, however, in light of the new U.S. administration, which promises to deny the traditional strategy activists used of mobilizing federal entities to enforce human rights against state and local authorities (ESCR-Net, 2016). In addition, the U.S. political system encourages a focus on electoral politics and an issue-based orientation to advocacy that marginalizes human rights principles and dismisses or stigmatizes internationalism. Thus, much of the work in the early years of the HRCA has been to help *translate* information about global processes for grassroots audiences. The aim here is to increase local knowledge, demonstrate how a human rights framework can facilitate organizing, and highlight connections across issues and intersecting human rights.

By inviting people to visualize how our city could look if it was organized around human rights, we were asking them to imagine a very different place. Participants quickly learned about the intersecting nature of human rights,

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2014 livability survey. City officials often celebrate this label as they advance policies and projects that displace poor residents.

and recognized that we needed to change people's mindsets as well as public policy and government practices. For instance, politicians and the public are accustomed to thinking of local politics as mainly about attracting new revenues for the city and limiting taxes, and in the process they ignore – or simply pay lip service to – questions about equity, quality of life, and community. In our work to advocate for the right to housing or the right to healthy food, we have sought to engage a larger public in thinking about what these rights mean and whether market-oriented policies can achieve them. If large segments of voters hold local politicians accountable to human rights as opposed to market standards, these public officials will find new ways to address the lack of affordable housing or the presence of food deserts in our city.

One general observation from this work is that all of HRCA's activities have been explicit in their intention of creating spaces for building cross-cutting connections across social divisions – especially race, class, and gender. Each of our events has helped connect people of different backgrounds, providing spaces for learning and strategizing as we strengthen the local constituency demanding and supporting human rights claims. In this work to build bridges across groups, we have found that despite the radical implications of human rights, the language appeals to both mainstream and radical groups as well as politicians. While the vagueness of human rights can lead to its co-optation by elites, if used right, it can be a political advantage. Very quickly people have tended to see (if they hadn't already) that the privileging of economic growth in public policy meant that human rights would always be neglected. The human rights lens helps clarify how economic growth systematically undermines the ability of some groups in the city – in Pittsburgh, as elsewhere, this is especially African Americans, immigrants, people with disabilities, and youth – to enjoy even the most basic rights. From here, we can invite residents to consider not just different policies but also new practices and institutions that could better accomplish the aims of our human rights city.

The major activities of the Alliance have included work to spread human rights values in our community and to inspire people to take action. Annual celebrations and mobilization around International Human Rights Day, participation in a locally organized Summit Against Racism, and celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day on October 12<sup>th</sup> each year have been central to our organizing strategy that seeks to shape a human rights culture and to build and activate a broad human rights constituency. I describe each of these activities briefly to illustrate how they can contribute to transforming social conflicts by highlighting democratic values, building shared local identities, and advancing cooperative actions centered on human rights.

The HRCA uses the annual International Human Rights Day celebration (December 10) to raise consciousness in the city about our Human Rights City status and about the gaps between this vision and the experiences of residents. Such work promotes a *human rights culture* that supports mutual

understanding, respect, and empathy among residents. Many residents remain unaware of our status as a human rights city, and like cities everywhere, physical segregation often prevents residents from appreciating the experiences of less privileged residents. Such separation contributes to the silencing and dehumanization of marginalized groups, which in turn enables the rise of politicians promoting racist and exclusionary policies. As one of the only explicit human rights groups intentionally seeking to mobilize a broad base of residents, the HRCA has organized annual press conferences and rallies with representatives from diverse human rights groups in the city to reflect on the state of human rights in our city and to lift up some of the leading struggles of the time. In the last two years we have expanded the work to mobilize Human Rights Days of Action in the days surrounding International Human Rights Day. We invited various activist, community, and church groups around the city to take some action recognizing International Human Rights Day. We listed these events on a shared calendar on our website and social media as a way to show the connections among our diverse struggles. This activity has helped build connections among activist groups, show the intersectionality of human rights, and encourage a wider range of groups to consider their own work within a human rights framework. It expands human rights discourse and supports the growth of a human rights culture in our region as more activists and residents use explicit human rights language.

In addition to annual activities around International Human Rights Day, the HRCA has worked to promote a human rights constituency and culture through network-building. For instance, in 2016 we worked with a coalition of activist groups coming together to fight displacement of poor and largely African American residents to organize a Housing Summit at a local university. This event aimed to shift the public discourse around housing from one based on market logics, which focused on negotiating with policy makers and developers to allocate affordable units in planned developments, to one based on the human right to housing. Summit content – including keynote speakers, workshops, and a website with films and other learning resources – was designed to help residents understand the global factors shaping Pittsburgh’s housing market and to enable residents who did not experience housing insecurity to learn about how the affordable housing crisis impacts families and neighborhoods as well as the larger city.<sup>7</sup> An important emphasis here was on how global economic forces contribute to the “serial forced displacement” of communities of color (Fullilove, 2016), which helps link conceptually today’s widespread urban housing crises with international migration and the genocides against indigenous peoples. The Summit also provided opportunities for networking and for residents to learn about the work happening in Pittsburgh and other cities for housing justice.

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://housingsummit.wikispaces.com/>

Most voluntary coalitions flounder where there are no resources to support basic communication and coordination work across groups that are not organized to work together. The Housing Summit is one important example of how coalitions like the HRCA can provide such resources, drawing from universities and local expertise and volunteerism to nurture and sustain relationship-building among diverse groups in the city. But this project was only possible because key leaders (myself included) could devote extensive time to building relationships in the community.

In addition to work with activist groups, and to help expand the base of resources available for human rights work, the HRCA has been working to engage faculty and professionals at the city's numerous universities in work to promote human rights and human rights education. We created a University Human Rights Network to connect university faculty, staff and students interested in human rights and to help link Pittsburgh's activist community with researchers and centers that can provide information and other resources to support human rights advocacy, education, and organizing in our region. The network also works to support advocacy for human rights on the city's college campuses. Building a human rights city requires changes in more than city government, and the university network seeks to press universities to engage in policies consistent with human rights norms. Universities affect the region's labor practices and economic development plans, including the displacement of low-income and African American residents from neighborhoods near campuses. This network helped support a student neighborhood tour on universities and affordable housing in Pittsburgh to follow-up our Housing Summit and enable students to connect with local organizations.

The University Network itself grew from collaboration between HRCA and the University of Pittsburgh's Global Studies Center to convene local, national, and international human rights city leaders for a conference to explore how the Human Rights Cities model has been used in other communities. The conference generated ongoing connections, a follow-up meeting hosted by Washington DC's Human Rights City Steering Committee, and led to the development of a National Human Rights Cities Alliance within the framework of the largest grassroots human rights organization in the United States, the US Human Rights Network. These national connections link Pittsburgh with other human rights city leaders and with the global human rights movement, inspiring and informing our local activism.

### *Fighting Institutionalized Racism*

The Alliance's work has benefitted from pre-existing efforts of Pittsburgh residents to fight racial injustice, which include most notably an annual Summit Against Racism where hundreds of participants learn about the

priorities and concerns of African Americans and other people of color, learn about the work being done by existing groups, organize panels, identify allies, and build networks to support the Human Rights City initiative and its racial justice component in particular.<sup>8</sup> In keeping with the intentionality of our “people-centered human rights” agenda,<sup>9</sup> we have sought to organize panels with African American leaders in the city, jointly identifying key priorities for work to address the needs of residents who have been denied the ability to enjoy all their basic human rights. Our panels have sought to reinforce working relationships with different groups in the community and to highlight local human rights struggles as they relate to racial inequalities and discrimination. Participants had the opportunity to learn about how institutionalized racism impacts the daily lives of fellow Pittsburghers, reproducing racial inequalities in education, working conditions, neighborhoods, housing, and civil liberties. They also met organizers working to change these conditions, often gaining new information about their city and about activism within it. Panels we organized thus helped raise consciousness about the forms of institutionalized racism in Pittsburgh and local strategies for addressing it.

In the 2016 Summit against Racism, we built upon our prior work and our networks with other activist groups to more explicitly engage residents in thinking about how international human rights treaties can be used as a tool for advancing human rights locally. Specifically, our collaborative panel highlighted work being done by several local groups as part of the national “Cities for CEDAW” initiative, which encourages cities to adopt legislation that implements the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). We also helped educate participants about the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and its review process, which encourages grassroots participation in local monitoring efforts to inform the US Human Rights Network’s shadow reports. The panel helped connect Pittsburgh groups with the larger human rights movement and to familiarize residents with international legal mechanisms that can become part of our local human rights strategies.

These sessions also help strengthen relationships and build support for other collaborative initiatives, including the annual May Day march for immigrant rights and the Housing Summit described above. They help raise

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<sup>8</sup> Our website – [www.pghrights.org](http://www.pghrights.org) – includes a report from the 2015 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Summit Against Racism. The report may be accessed directly at <https://pgh-humanrightscity.wikispaces.com/file/view/Summit%20Against%20Racism%202015%20REPORT%20and%20Agenda%20Priorities.pdf/539653736/Summit%20Against%20Racism%202015%20REPORT%20and%20Agenda%20Priorities.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> The HRCA draws from previous antiracism organizing through its work with the US Human Rights Network. The USHRN promotes a “people-centered human rights movement” that emphasizes lived experiences and leadership on those most directly affected by human rights violations, rather than a strictly legal approach to human rights. Another key document in this tradition is the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing (see [www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf](http://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf)).

consciousness in a larger activist community and reinforce a human rights framework for thinking and discourse. While it is difficult to assess the quantitative impacts at this early stage in the HRCA's work, over time, repeated exposure to sessions like these have increased the responsiveness of local residents to the human rights messaging we use, and more community leaders have become engaged in our work. For instance, leading organizers who were part of the various projects described here have agreed to join the HRCA Steering Committee. Since the Human Rights City model doesn't fit prevailing conceptions of politics, it is often difficult for people to fully understand how to participate. These gatherings enable repeated exposure to human rights language, helping expand the human rights constituency in our city while deepening working relationships among antiracism activists.

### *Historical Truth-Telling*

Another example of local work to translate global human rights thinking into local contexts is our effort to confront historical and ongoing human rights violations through public recognition of Indigenous Peoples Day. The idea for this day first arose in 1977 at the International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas. A handful of cities in the United States have recognized the day, but in 2014, the Human Rights City of Seattle became the first large city to do so. It adopted a resolution renaming October 12 Indigenous Peoples Day in that city, explicitly linking the decision to that city's status as a Human Rights City. One of our group members attended a rally organized by local activists honoring Indigenous Peoples Day in October of 2014, and he brought ideas from that rally to an HRCA meeting. Given the recent news about Seattle's Indigenous Peoples Day, the group was especially enthusiastic about the idea of moving this initiative forward in Pittsburgh.<sup>10</sup> We reached out to relevant groups in our community and drafted a text to submit to City Council. The text was based on Seattle's Resolution and it incorporated a demand made by local activists for "the teaching of Indigenous peoples' history as recommended by Indigenous communities in our public schools."<sup>11</sup> The City Council of Pittsburgh passed a non-binding Will of the Council recognizing the 12th of October as "Indigenous Peoples' Day" on the eve of Human Rights Day in 2014, and residents continue to refer to this legislation as we recognize Indigenous Peoples Day each fall.

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<sup>10</sup> Organizers in Seattle were likewise elated to hear that their work inspired action elsewhere (personal communication with Seattle Human Rights Commissioners, August 18 2016).

<sup>11</sup> The text of the legislation is available at: <http://pgh-humanrightscity.wikispaces.com/file/view/Indigenous%20Peoples%20Day%20Will%20of%20the%20Council.pdf/533004498/Indigenous%20Peoples%20Day%20Will%20of%20the%20Council.pdf>.

Subsequently, we have continued to work with the local Native American Council and Native American student organizations as well as other local organizations and activists to organize celebrations of Indigenous Peoples Day, and to raise public consciousness about the violent history of Western colonization and its lasting impacts on people of color. One innovation introduced in 2016 is to encourage participants to reach out to educators, congregation leaders, and other community groups to encourage them to take some action to recognize Indigenous Peoples Day. In 2017, we built upon this idea to encourage residents to read and organize neighborhood or larger group discussions of a book by a Native American activist, and we provided a discussion guide to support such action. This draws from a recognition of our group's limited capacity as a volunteer organization as well as of the need to decentralize the work of building a culture of human rights. HRCA provides educational resources to support this on our website and via regular communications with participants, as well as through the events it organizes.

Indigenous Peoples Day challenges the celebratory accounts of Christopher Columbus's encounter with the Americas and the subsequent European settlement. Pittsburgh does not have a large population of Indigenous peoples given its history of forced migration, relocation and genocide against the people who initially lived on this land. Thus, the voices of those displaced from this region are not prominent in the public discourse and consciousness. But our principled commitments to the people-centered human rights approach sensitized us to the work of Indigenous social movements and human rights organizers around the world, convincing us of the centrality of historical "truth telling" about this country's imperialist, colonial, and genocidal history as a key initial step in our work to build a city based in human rights. Such truth-telling both acknowledges the enduring impacts of past human rights abuses – including the erasure of Indigenous histories and voices from public discourses – and creates space for healing and for the rebuilding of more just relationships and communities. Indeed, as we witness the rise of right-wing populism and the spate of hate crimes following the recent U.S. election, it is clear that such truth-telling about history is critical to fostering a more cohesive, inclusive, decolonized democratic culture here and elsewhere.

By supporting annual Indigenous Peoples Day celebrations, HRCA helps create spaces for more public scrutiny of the prevailing accounts of U.S. history. As we know from other human rights work around the world, truth-telling is essential to promoting healing, to address ongoing trauma and its consequences for individuals and communities, and to realizing a broader culture of human rights. Thus, the transformation of consciousness and culture we are seeking with the Human Rights City initiative requires that we tell new stories about our past so that we can imagine a different future that advances "dignity and justice for everyone." Indigenous Peoples Day work and related historical truth-telling – such as the UN's International Decade of People of African Descent and the International Day of Remembrance of

Victims of Slavery and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – is a form of communicative action and an “exercise in retrospective radical imagination” (Santos, 2007, p. 29) that enables a re-orienting of relationships in our community by making visible the history of systematic violence that reinforces difference and denies some groups’ full enjoyment of human rights.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The growing political influence of right-wing populist movements indicates a broader “crisis of legitimacy” for prevailing political and economic institutions linked to economic inequality, financial instability, and ecological crises (Chase-Dunn, 2013). Fundamental changes in the economy and labor markets as well as in communications have undermined national identities and diminished the meaning of citizenship. This destabilizes social cohesion and local community resilience. Exclusionary movements have arisen within this leadership vacuum, as those excluded from the benefits of globalization seek alternative policies that will address individual and social needs. Nevertheless, especially since 2000, movements for “the right to the city” have been growing around the world as people face growing threats to their individual and community well-being. I have argued that these locally-based, rights-claiming movements offer a model of politics that can counter the divisive tendencies of capitalism and reduce the appeal of exclusionary populist rhetoric. They do so by actively engaging residents in constructive work to redefine citizenship and transform their communities to prioritize human rights over material wealth.

In their latest annual report, Human Rights Watch (2017) focused on the global threats from rising authoritarian populism. These authors conclude that the only way to stop the spread of demagoguery and defend basic human rights principles is to build broad popular constituencies that are organized to defend and demand human rights:

Civil society organizations, particularly groups that fight to uphold rights, need to protect civic space where it is threatened, build alliances across communities to show the common interest in human rights.... The demagogues [build] popular support by spinning false explanations and cheap solutions to genuine ills. The best antidote is for the public to demand a politics based on truth and the values on which rights-respecting democracy has been built. Populists thrive in a vacuum of opposition. A strong popular reaction, using every means available...is the best defense of the values that so many still cherish despite the problems they face. (Roth, 2017, p. 13-14)

Such work to transform public discourse and consciousness has been happening largely outside the broader media coverage, through a growing global movement that is building human rights culture and demanding the

actualization of human rights principles. Movements for human rights in cities and communities are helping connect diverse groups and deepen analyses of the intersections of economic and other human rights and of how economic globalization impacts these rights. In doing so, they are cultivating the broad popular constituencies for human rights that are necessary to defend and enhance democratic governance.

I have argued that the human rights city model provides a framework for a political and institutional culture fundamentally different from globalized capitalism. Human rights cities are attempts to re-define community identities, priorities and values and to re-design local institutions in ways that help achieve those. Using various strategies to enhance community dialogues, translate ideas and models across locales, and build relationships across diverse groups, they seek to “flip the script” of economic globalization subordinate market ideologies to the values of human rights, inclusion, dignity, and community well-being. Expanding political and legal imaginations, building networks among community groups and neighborhoods, and making visible the impacts of economic policies on the human rights of residents is critical to changing the political culture from one that fuels competition, conflict, and violence to one that privileges well-being and equity. The global expansion of human rights treaties, norms, and institutions is a resource for transforming national identities and notions of citizenship, effectively re-defining citizenship and governments’ obligations regarding human rights (Koenig, 2008). By examining the work of local human rights activists, we can better understand both the mechanics of how such global-local transformations can occur and the potential of human rights as a foundation for a more just and peaceful society.

By building connections, consciousness, and platforms for collective action, human rights cities initiatives can help communities address deep structural inequities of race and class segregation while fostering social cohesion and building broad bases of support for collective identities and projects centered on human rights. Working to change the language and priorities of politics in ways that de-emphasize the city as an economic “growth machine” (Logan & Molotch, 1987), and instead accentuate the city as a place where residents live lives sustained by vibrant neighborhoods and healthy communities, human rights city initiatives make space for residents to engage in building a different kind of city.

Yet, the challenges to this work are significant. Globalization’s corporate-friendly policies contributed to media monopolies that limit the media space and public attention available for critical analyses and perspectives. This is where work in the “sociology of absences” is key for reversing the omissions and silencing that helps legitimate an unjust social order. And a chronic problem all voluntary groups face is the challenge of recruiting and sustaining active volunteers. Fatalism in the face of today’s enormous crises and trying daily struggles for survival makes apathy and consumerist escape a preferable option to activism for many (Eliasoph, 1998; Schor, 1992).

My observant participation in this work convinces me that academic workers can – and I believe we *must* – use our privilege in reflexive and strategic ways to support these kinds of transformative social movements. Scholars can help inform a “sociology of absences and emergences” – by attending to people and processes marginalized by mainstream academic and other institutions. We can, for instance, provide our time, expertise, organizational support (such as note-taking and report writing), and access to university resources such as space and financial support. By helping tell the stories of these movements in both scholarly and more general audience writings, we can help bring legitimacy to residents’ human rights claims and broaden the audience attentive to human rights issues. Scholars can also contribute to the important work of critical public education by organizing public events and building websites that nurture community scholars who understand the complex global forces impacting their communities. We can help train residents to do research on and write about urban policies and their disparate outcomes and to expose corporate human rights violations. We can help local residents learn about activism in other locales and cultivate both intersectional and translocal connections among activists and groups. Finally, we can support the critical work of documenting and broadcasting the vital local knowledge that is emerging from the work of people who are striving to transform our world.

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