



Review of Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities

Barbara Oomen, Martha F. Davis, and Michele Grigolo, eds., *Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities*. 2016. New York: Cambridge University Press. 336 pages, ISBN 978-1-1071-4701-0 Cloth (\$110.00).

Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities highlights the urbanization of human rights struggles simultaneous with the urbanization of humanity in the 21st century. Despite the ongoing polarization of wealth and power in the global system, the language of human rights continues to shape public discourse and political practices. In her “Introduction: The Promise and Challenges of Human Rights Cities,” Barbara M. Oomen provides a useful overview of the state of play. With the continued urbanization of the global system, there are a host of initiatives, such as the World Human Rights Cities Forum in 2014, where some 500 participants came together in Gwangju, South Korea, legendary for its role in that state’s democratization, to discuss a “Global Alliance of Human Rights Cities for All.” At a time when the majority of the world’s population, for the first time in history, lives in cities, and the numbers and proportion of the urban population is expected to significantly increase in the next quarter century and beyond, the potential role of cities in forwarding emancipatory human rights struggles and discourses is critical.

The question here is framed in the context of the larger human rights revolution since World War II, as well as the related question of what is often called “the right to the city.” Of special importance here, are struggles to localize human rights in urban spaces. While recognizing salient features of the present urban moment, Oomen is simultaneously sensitive to the historical importance of cities, from the birth of democracy in Athens to subsequent protest movements in Europe, North America, Latin America and Africa, and to the expansion of human rights discourse



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from civil, political and social rights to the rights of children, migrants and women, including the right to be free from domestic violence.

Quite a few chapters in the volume examine the North American and Western European experiences. Martha F. Davis, in “Cities, Human Rights and Accountability: The United States Experience,” looks at various grassroots initiatives to hold the U.S. government accountable for human rights monitoring and implementation, localizing this trend with examples from Chicago, Boston, Eugene, Oregon and Berkeley, California. In her chapter, “From Principles to Practice: The Role of US Mayors in Advancing Human Rights,” Joann Kamuf Ward underscores the lack of commitment on the part of the U.S. to human rights as a whole, and the strategic possibilities for political action at the municipal level. She pays special attention to the formation of the U.S. Coalition of Cities Against Racism and Discrimination formed in 2013. Members of the Coalition draw on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, interpreting it in ways that forward an intersectional approach to questions of racial domination and injustice. She also discusses the U.S. Conference of Mayors, representing populations of cities with 30,000 or more persons.

Esther Van Den Berg, in “Making Human Rights the Talk of the Town: Civil Society and Human Rights Cities, a Case Study of the Netherlands,” and Benoit Frate, in “Human Rights at the Local Level: The Montreal Experience,” round out the first part of the book, focusing on actors and their shifting capabilities by highlighting two very different experiences, including cities such as Utrecht, the Hague, and Amsterdam in developing the human rights agenda, and Montreal’s development of its Charter of Rights and Responsibilities.

One question that is not fully explored here is the potentially powerful role of cities in independent and transformative political initiatives that expand the realm of rights for all of humanity. For example, before becoming a Senator and then Democratic Presidential contender in 2016, Bernie Sanders, an independent Socialist candidate, pioneered what he called “socialism in one city” as mayor of Burlington, Vermont (home to the radical ice cream makers, Ben & Jerry’s). Sanders’ book, *Our Revolution: A Future to Believe In*, chronicles his experiences in Burlington as part of a larger narrative about the rise of the progressive movement. The fact that Sanders is now considered the most popular politician in the U.S. suggests that a younger generation has a more favorable view of the possibilities for socialism today as compared with actually existing capitalism.

The second part of the book focuses on renegotiating rights in urban space. Eva Garcia Chueca, in “Human Rights in the City and the Right to the City: Two Different Paradigms Confronting Urbanization,” explores the intersections and differences between these frameworks, one coming from the international human rights movement and international law, and the other

coming from the work of Henri Lefebvre and urban social movements across the time and space of the global system, most especially in what is today called the Global South. In the latter view of the city as battleground, contestation over urban space and development takes the foreground. Though it would strengthen the arguments forwarded here, unexplored is the language of urban music, from the classic words of the high priestess of soul, Nina Simone's "Baltimore" ("cause the city's dying, and they don't know why. Oh Baltimore, ain't it hard just to live, just to live?") to the contemporary sound of the prophets of the hood, such as one-time Baltimore resident, Tupac Shakur, to the Middle Eastern bard of revolution in North Africa that Tupac helped inspire, El Général, who provided the musical soundtrack of urban uprising in Tunisia ("Your People Are Dead"), and helped inspire the wave of protests in 2011 that became the Arab Spring.

Jonathan Darling, "Defying the Demand to 'Go Home': From Human Rights Cities to the Urbanization of Human Rights," deals with the increasingly important question of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers across the globe, at a time when we see the resurgence of racism, xenophobia and quasi-fascist movements targeting the most vulnerable of city-dwellers. Darling here deals with questions of citizenship, rights and social change, echoing David Harvey's argument that the right to change ourselves by changing our cities may be among the most important of human rights. Catherine Buerger, in "Contested Advocacy: Negotiating Between Rights and Reciprocity in Mima and Maamobi, Ghana," highlights the importance of African cities for human rights struggles, especially salient given the degree to which Africa is a key site of future urban population growth. Here, she draws on the United Nations' important reports on slums, highlighted too by Mike Davis. There is also a focus on implementing human rights in cities, with Cynthia Soohoo exploring "Human Rights Cities: Challenges and Possibilities," and Michele Grigolo, in "Towards a Sociology of the Human Rights City," highlighting the relationship between the making of cities and the making of human rights.

This book is an important intervention in debates about urban social justice, urbanization and cities in the world-system, as well as the question of human rights and human rights cities. The quality of scholarship is consistently high throughout. At the same time, there are serious lacunae, as might be expected, given the proliferation of issues and movements in our urbanizing world. One especially large gap is the lack of attention to religion generally from liberation theology to contemporary populist Islam in the rise of urban social moments, something explored by a host of authors, including the powerful work of Asef Bayat. There is also not much theorization of the combination of urbanization and industrialization that produced the emancipatory social movement theorized by Marx and others, and the decoupling of this today, or the intersection of this with uneven processes of secularization or religious revival. This is unfortunate because for

world-systems scholars, such comparative world-historical analysis is critical for grasping the possibilities of the present moment. As Mike Davis (2004: 30) wrote in “Planet of Slums,”

Indeed, for the moment at least, Marx has yielded the historical stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost. If God died in the cities of the Industrial Revolution, he has risen again in the postindustrial cities of the developing world. The contrast between the cultures of urban poverty in the two eras is extraordinary.

Such theorizations, drawing on a more historical sociological approach, are largely absent from the book, and the important empirical materials assembled thus suffer from a lack of comparison and contrast that the world-systems perspective, at its best, offers. The book would have also benefited from engaging much more centrally with the intersection of debates surrounding Seyla Benhabib’s *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*, regarding the growing global crisis of refugees, internally displaced persons, and immigrants in the context of the resurgence of narrow forms of nationalism. Another area worthy of further exploration is the whole question of what Robert Sampson and others have termed neighborhood effects. Missing, too, is engagement with Saskia Sassen’s emphasis on the intersections of globalization and urbanization, and work by a host of recent authors articulating the intersection of race, space and what is called punishment’s place. Practices such as stop and frisk, and related modes of urban policing that give rise to movements such as Black Lives Matter, are setting off urban uprisings in the U.S. and across the world, but the volume provides very limited discussion of this. Despite these missing themes, many of which are deserving of future exploration in subsequent works, the volume offers an important introduction to rethinking the state of cities in the world-system. Such rethinking ought to be on the top of the agenda for world-systems scholars and activists, and more generally for all humans working for a more just, sustainable future for our urban dwellings and planetary inhabitants.

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