

Winning the Right to the City In a Neo-Liberal World

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The Political and Economic Context

Across the globe, social movements are rising up against neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is a political and economic philosophy that came into practice nearly 40 years ago. At the height of global oil and financial crisis, the world's ruling powers, led by the United States, looked to get out of the crisis by ending the social welfare state. With the help of powerful international banking institutions, they forced Third World governments to cut public subsidies and social programs and stop protecting local economies and businesses. Instead, Third World countries have been forced to invest their limited resources in creating infrastructure and tax breaks for multi-national corporations.

The neoliberal idea is also grounded in the notion of liberal democracy, which historically has been defined in the United States as “free elections and a market economy.” The idea of equating democracy and market economics took root at the same time as independence in this country. It promotes private property and ownership as the bedrock of liberty and freedom and insists that voting and consumerism (buying things) are the two the hallmarks of prosperity and democracy.

We know that the history of the United States, at home and abroad, has been to systematically deter democracy in the name of the economic interests. At every turn, liberty is undermined for the sake of private property rights. Free elections have never been a strong enough democratic counterpoint to the free market's ability to exclude entire classes of people from benefiting from the economy. For that very reason, democracy needs to be wherever the decisions that affect people's lives are made. But those decisions are barricaded in board rooms, back rooms at city hall, and fancy restaurants, mostly beyond the reach of where people make decisions together. In fact, it outside the political machine that the reality of social, political, and economic life is played out.

The fight for democracy is in the community, in the streets, in the newspapers, in the churches, in the corporations; everywhere we force government to be responsive –and yes, in the voting booth as well.

The Right to the City and Democracy

In our cities, the neo-liberal project has resulted in privatization of too many government structures and processes. Corporations drive development and the market determines value and use. More than ever, we find that public processes –from elections to land use– have been high-jacked by corporate-driven budgets and developer-driven election campaigns. Too many end up as ATM's for private interests and corrupt politicians.

The Right to the City is about power for working people, for people of color, for queer people, for immigrants, youth and for all others committed to a truly democratic society —one where all city inhabitants have the power to shape the decisions and the conditions that affects our lives.

We fight for concrete improvements that result in stronger communities and a better state of being for our friends, families, and for our children's futures. Our organizations take on campaigns to win housing, education, transportation, and jobs. We struggle for community safety and security, neighborhood sustainability, environmental justice, and the right to culture, celebration, rest, and public space. These are the material results of our fights to take back the city. These are the goals of the Right to the City frame.

But the Right to the City is not just a moral assertion for these basic material results. We fundamentally recognize that these rights have to be won through struggle, passion, and strategy. Our ability to win rests squarely on our capacity to build and wield power. Only building and exercising deep democratic power can make our right to the city a reality. The right to housing, education, public space, and transportation will only be secured when we are able to exercise the right to plan our city's development, claim our cities culture, decide our cities' economic and social priorities, and invest in the developmental potential of our people and organizations. Essentially, it is a question of achieving self-determination of people and communities, establishing rights among communities and developing true regional strategies. In essence the Right to the City must be a strategy for power, and our work must be a practice in building and exercising democratic power.

Sources, Forms, and Strategies for POWER

If this is true, we must begin to look to the long term processes of envisioning and articulating what the Right to the City looks like in practice. There are several arenas that are part of a strategy for power, a big enough strategy to encompass the Right to the City, understood at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Our practice in organizing is for our own leadership in fundamentally democratizing society:

1. Race, Class, Gender and Consciousness

The key to the kind of power we are talking about is our Base. Building a bigger, stronger, politically conscious membership Base is fundamental. Building the largest, and broadest direct relationship of our core constituencies to organizations, to our campaigns and our vision is the foundation for the type of changes we're talking about. Without a growing base, a strategy for the Right to the City fails. With it, other avenues for power become available. Our base, poor and working class immigrants, African-Americans, and women have historically been the backbone of the economy. We are the ones whose labor, whose reproduction, and whose consumption the economy has relied on to survive and prosper.

As our cities increasingly play the role of being 'command and control' centers for the globalized economy, our members serve the financiers, mass media creators, technologists, and military. They exist at the margins of the global economy. They are the service workers, the underground economy, and the growing marginally employed. As such, their role is critical, to our cities and for humanity. In organizing for their rights they are not only challenging the city officialdom, but neo-liberalism itself. Through organizing, our members develop a sense of their collective identity and their collective power. They expand their understanding of our society and of social justice strategies to change it. Building the base is about building an understanding of how racism, economic exploitation and gender oppression work in our society.

2. The New Majority Movement

As important as our members are, we cannot win alone. In terms of numbers, resources influence, and making the deep change we need, we have to be able to build true majorities of city dwellers in support of our frame—and we can. The hollowing out of the cities, the destruction of public participation, privatization, job loss, structural racism, and the loss of the very soul of the city has affected many sectors and constituencies. The Right to the City isn't a set of policies for one or another group of people: it is a fundamental approach to reorganizing our cities, to the leadership of the city, and to the future of the city. Over time, and with leadership from the base organizations and from the movements for social justice, many other groups can be brought into a deeper alignment on the Right to the City.

3. Building the World We Envision

The kind of power we are talking about is deeply democratic: participatory, popular power that goes beyond the ballot box. That power should be expressed in the institutions that are in our communities, or that should be there. Communities can gain control over resources and decisions that affect our lives by building democratic institutions.

a. At Home:

The institutions we have the most control over and that our members rely on the most are our own organizations. Our organizations must model and demonstrate the type of democracy, leadership development, political struggle, and vibrancy that we want for our cities.

b. Community Economics and the Economy:

The abandonment of our communities leaves behind both dire need and opportunity to organize and build community-controlled institutions: worker centers, housing cooperatives, day-care cooperatives, adult learning programs, hiring halls, labor/community alliances, parents' groups, community policing, alternative credit associations, community health centers, community-run after-school programs. These are all examples of how we can 'serve the people,' but they are also a source for us to build our own financial independence. Building community economic institutions strengthen the capacity of our communities, and it gives our organizations and our members practice in self-reliance and operating economic enterprises.

4. Governance: Taking back the Public Domain

The global economy and the banks, corporations, and media powers that are running our cities are so powerful that *just* starting our own businesses is not an alternative to fighting for systemic change. We must determine where in the **economy** we are going to locate our fight for decisions and what democratic structures and processes we are going to utilize to do so. In essence, we are taking back what it means to be *public*. We are reclaiming and fundamentally recreating public government, public space, and public processes.

According to the dictionary *public* means:

1. concerning all the people: relating to or concerning the people at large or all members of a community

2. for community use: provided for the use of a community

If this is so, then what neo-liberalism has really done is to distort the definition of public to mean things *relating* to the benefit of big business and *for the use of* business for its own pursuits. The function of government powers, resources, and influence for true public good has been abandoned.

Our fight for the Right to the City then is to reclaim and expand the public domain. We do this by: forcing our planning and zoning departments to be accountable to our community's needs; challenging and expanding tenants rights over those of property owners; winning legal rights to organize and secure due process; taking over the boards that control Community Reinvestment Act dollars; forcing them to include our members on the tenant council of public housing projects; setting the rules and deciding which developers get public dollars; and controlling public parks and piers.

As we imagine what it means to expand the public domain, we must imagine new ways to practice democracy. What are the forms, methods, and processes that get more people making decisions together? After all, that is essentially what democracy is about. In Cuba, in 1994, thousands and thousands of people participated in discussions about new national economic policies. In Porto Alegre in Brazil, the participatory budget engaged thousands and thousands of the poorest of the poor in decision-making about allocation of local public resources. It doesn't matter that the Brazilian Workers Party and the Cuban government are not perfect. It matters that mass participation in decision-making is possible, and we must learn how to do it. Many think it's not possible, but that is the road we must make by walking. Our task is the practice of making it possible by preparing for opportunities that allow us to make major advances.

5. Elections

At the beginning of this paper, we said that liberal democracy –and neo-liberalism itself– was founded in this country on the idea that free elections and a free market make for a perfect solution. We are routinely bombarded with the idea that elections equal democracy, but many of us see that elections often seduce our people into thinking there is true democratic participation, ignoring other more direct forms. We witness the continued systemic disenfranchisement of African Americans, immigrants, and criminalized youth and cannot ignore the reality that elections are so stacked against us in terms of money and media. And we turn away from electoral work all together.

Yet, if we just look at the present presidential election, we see that it dominates the political discussion in the papers and often in our own living rooms. More importantly, it is moving millions more people into this part of the political process; people that we should be pulling into our movement. Even in smaller, more local elections, voter turnout, dismal as it is in this country, often far surpasses our mass mobilizations and membership meetings. Like it or not, elections are a major form of mass political participation. And finally, we all have had experiences of issues on which we spend years working being fundamentally changed by a corrupt or inept politician or a terrible ballot initiative.

Because this is an area with so much money, promises, illusions and disillusionment, we need to be clear in developing an appropriate approach to it. It is hard to imagine how we will achieve a true and full Right to the City without electing more of our own people, in large numbers, to public office — or without having more power among elected officials we cannot number among our

own. We already are forced to be re-active in struggles against bad ballot initiatives, amendments, and propositions, but we can be pro-active as well. In some cities in the United States, and in many places around the world, we can see where powerful movements and base organizations have helped elect people to office. Those elected officials have provided resources to institutions at the base, have opened the door to more significant victories for popular struggles, and have reinforced the leadership and the strategy from the base. More often, though, we hear stories about elected officials playing a very different role — succumbing to pressures and inducements because the base and social movements are just not strong enough to hold them accountable

At this point, we need to look at best examples —from the United States and from our friends in Brazil, South Africa, Venezuela and elsewhere— of ways to proceed, experiment and learn from each other as we work out an urban electoral strategy.

Conclusion

If the Right to the City is essentially a frame for us all to plug into a strategy for democratic power, then we need to begin painting a picture of what that strategy looks like. Our present practice and all of our histories are the starting point and best examples of what it could be, but first we must collect and stitch those experiences into a theory of democracy and democratic change from below. We must go beyond our own experience and imagine a more powerful movement: bigger, stronger, broader, and more diverse; a movement where more of us are making more decisions together to wield the type of power that can make our vision of the Right to the City a functional reality