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Research Report

Human Rights, Politics, and Globalization from Below
Professor Jackie Smith, University of Pittsburgh
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HUMAN RIGHTS, POLITICS, AND GLOBALIZATION FROM BELOW

A Lecture by Professor Jackie Smith

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On Monday the 26th of September 2016, Professor Jackie Smith of the University of Pittsburgh delivered a lecture on “Human Rights, Politics, and Globalization from Below” to a large group of faculty, staff, and students, who also engaged with her extensively after the talk.

The professor of sociology also serves as editor of the Journal of World-Systems Research, the official journal of the Political Economy of the World-System Section of the American Sociological Association. She is an internationally recognized authority on social movements, transnational social movements, and the World Social Forum, and is the author of numerous books and articles that address questions about how diverse groups form alliances across race, class, and other divisions in order to advance social transformation. Her publications include single-authored, edited volumes, and co-authored books such as:

- Social Movements and World-System Transformation (forthcoming with Michael Goodhart, Patrick Manning, and John Markoff, eds.)
- Social Movements in the World System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation (with Dawn Wiest)
- Social Movements for Global Democracy
- Coalitions across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order (with Joe Bandy, ed.)
- The Handbook of World Social Forum Activism (with Scott Byrd, Ellen Reese and Elizabeth Smythe, eds.)
- Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State (with Charles Chatfield and Ron Pagnucco, eds.)

More recently Professor Smith has shifted her macrosociological perspective to the local level. Her current research agenda focuses on how global analyses, networks, and models of action are “translated” into local settings. She is involved in work with Pittsburgh’s Human Rights City Alliance, which was a focus of her talk at Northeastern. She described the importance of translating international treaty language for use in local politics around, for example, the right to affordable housing. In this connection, the discourse of human rights, and of dignity, she said, helps to bridge the domains of international policy-making and community organizing. She noted that both UN policy circles and the World Social Forum have promoted the notion of “the right to the city”, and has been theorized by the Marxist geographer David Harvey, among others. Referring to feminist sociologist Manisha Desai’s notion of “trans-local fields of action”, Smith noted that the right to the city has been adopted by many cities across the world, including several in the U.S., and it has become both a working slogan and a political ideal.

Cities have become important spaces for social movements, for the articulation of new ideas about citizenship and human rights, and for tolerance of difference. At the same time, many cities across the globe have become polarized, reflecting gaping income and social inequalities, the high cost of living,
and the lack of affordable housing. Displacement and dispossession – side effects of gentrification – are features of such cities in this era of neoliberal globalization. The “global cities” that Saskia Sassen has analyzed are where we find what Leslie Sklair aptly called the transnational capitalist class, segments of which form the “urban growth coalitions” that include developers, financiers, and politicians. The branding and marketing of cities – for tourism, corporate location, or foreign direct investment – is among the tasks of this class coalition.

Cities are also crisis-ridden, whether by the effects of austerity, crime, natural disasters, or climate change. Neoliberalism has devolved authority and financing to local authorities. Many cities – and certain communities within them – find themselves with shrinking resources and aging infrastructures. In the United States, for example, crumbling bridges and roads, deteriorating public transit systems, and corrosive water supply pipes are among the major problems facing city dwellers.

The social movements and community action campaigns that have emerged to challenge these “urban growth coalitions”, income inequality, and inadequate resources in low-income areas have thus made the city into a field of contestation over rights and belonging. “Development” is being reframed from denoting growth exclusively to prioritizing human development and human rights. In the United States, Eugene, Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Washington D.C. are among the cities that have taken the lead toward a more people-oriented approach to urban life – the right to the city. The world’s pioneer, however, is Rosario, in Argentina, which became a human rights city in 1997. (For more information on human rights cities, see [http://www.ushrnetwork.org/our-work/project/national-human-rights-city-network](http://www.ushrnetwork.org/our-work/project/national-human-rights-city-network).)

Professor Smith then described the initiatives in Pittsburgh for affordable housing, racial justice, and ratification of CEDAW (the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women). Among other activities, Pittsburgh will be hosting a Housing Summit, 10-12 November 2016 (see [http://housingsummit.wikispaces.com/](http://housingsummit.wikispaces.com/)), co-sponsored by the Global Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh, the local Steelworkers Union, the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, among others. Activists there – as in other cities – are also involved in the UN’s Habitat III conference, convening in Quito (See: [https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda](https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda)).

Finally, Northeastern University’s College of Law, specifically the Program on Human Rights and the Global Economy (PHRGE) will be dedicating its 11th Annual Human Rights Institute to the theme of "Global Justice Goes Local: The Emergence of Human Rights Cities", 8-9 December 2016. (See [www.phrge.net](http://www.phrge.net).)

Professor Smith’s lecture, as well as the informal luncheon with her that a small group of faculty and students had earlier in the day, was both instructive and inspiring. Smith herself exemplifies the new model of scholar-activism. At Pittsburgh University, she teaches courses on global sociology, globalization and social movements, climate change and society, cities in a global context, globalization and public health, and human rights and democratization. In addition to her teaching, dissertation supervision, research, and journal editorship, she is an advocate for the right to communication and Open Access publishing and serves on the Leadership Committee of the internet and media justice advocacy organization, *May First/People Link*. She is also a key part of the International Network of Scholar Activists.