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Human Rights, Not Corporate Rights

Contribution to GTI Forum [Corporations in the Crosshairs](#)

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Allen White's [analysis](#) of corporate social responsibility shows that today's systemic crisis requires "corporate redesign." But what will it take to realize the fundamental changes we need? And is the corporation all that needs to be redesigned in order to realize a world where all beings can enjoy lives of dignity and well-being? How can we move from a system organized to maximize profits to one that prioritizes human and ecological well-being?

The principles for a different global order and the roadmap to realizing systemic transformation are evident in the social movements that have long challenged capitalism and its effects. A lesson from these movements is that the key to social change is concerted work by diverse groups of people to shift power from states and corporations to communities. The hard work of building movements to defend the commons and shaping institutions designed to prioritize community well-being over individual competition and profit-taking is critical. Important groundwork has been laid by social movements that have struggled over centuries for human rights.

Although the multilateralism of states and corporations may be in crisis, this is not the only multilateralism available for the project of global transition. If we look closely at the work of grassroots movements across time and place, we can see an emergent strategy for "human rights globalization" that has progressed even as it has been overshadowed by the corporate globalization that now threatens planetary survival. Attention to the project of human rights globalization illuminates a roadmap for reining in corporate power and recentering people and ecosystems in the project of global governance.

From Corporate Globalization to Human Rights Globalization

The growth and concentration of corporate power is one that deserves far more attention and critical analysis than it has received in academic and policy circles. Capitalist globalization policies over recent decades have helped corporations grow and consolidate wealth on a global scale, which they have used to further concentrate market and political influence. The number of transnational corporations in the top 100 economic entities—including both corporations and governments—jumped to 69 in 2015 from around 50 at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹ National governments are no longer the most powerful entities, and their position is continuing to slide as corporations grow. Alarming, among the leading industries are those most in need of governance for the sake of the common good: namely, those dependent on the perpetuation of our carbon-intensive economy, financial speculation, wasteful consumption, and the commodification of health care.²

While corporate power has grown, the power of workers and communities has been steadily eroded by neoliberal globalization. The decline of trade unions and the growth of precarious work, fueled by the evangelization of neoliberal principles by economists and political leaders in governments and global institutions like the World Bank, have reduced the ability of people and communities to come together to advance a different vision of how the world could be organized.³ Cities have been hamstrung by budget constraints as they contend with effects of neoliberal globalization such as rising housing costs, effects of climate change, and social polarization. At the same time, critics of corporate globalization in the academy have been neutralized by the corporatization of universities and the polarization and commodification of political and media discourses. Indeed, we might say that today, global hegemony is exercised not by a national state or collection of states, but by the owners and managers of global corporations.⁴

It is imperative, then, that scholars and activists do far more to focus on this critical issue and help find ways to challenge more directly the role of corporations in society today. Corporate concentration and market monopolization—enabled by US international economic policies, weak antitrust laws and implementation, corporate taxation, campaign financing, and other policies—undermine human rights in cities and communities worldwide. By supporting human rights globalization as a counter-movement to corporate globalization, we can advance people-centered policies and build upon earlier work of transformative movements worldwide.

Bringing Human Rights Home

The United Nation's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process gives local human rights defenders one way of fighting back. US human rights defenders have recently challenged predatory corporate practices in a report to the United Nations. The report highlighted the impacts of corporations on local human rights, democratic political participation, housing, health, and racial and gender equity. It documented at great length the extent to which corporate practices violate government commitments in both national and international legal instruments.⁵

While the UN process is limited in its ability to change behaviors of recalcitrant governments, what is powerful about international human rights treaties and institutional processes like the UPR is their ability to help social movements come together across various divides and promote a shared vision of the world we wish to see. Paraphrasing Frederick Douglass, human rights activists like to remind skeptics that those in power have never ceded power without popular pressure: "Human rights don't trickle down, they rise up!"

The process of compiling UPR reports and then working to follow up with them helps groups and activists articulate shared priorities and visions of justice that account for global and historical omissions in local and national discourses. The UPR does not simply track violations but centers concrete remedies in the formal reports it makes to national governments. It is here that local activists have found opportunities to forge alliances with local government officials, who see value in using the international stage to amplify their pleas for federal funding to support social welfare needs. Thus, the UPR process helps build new community collaborations and foster public discourse and consciousness-raising around human rights as an alternative framework.

Corporate hegemony has constrained the political discourse and the political imagination we need to envision and fight for a world that prioritizes people and communities over economic growth and endless consumption. Although the odds seem daunting, global ideals and institutions that have been slowly and steadily advanced by human rights advocates over centuries may provide tools for advancing new projects and strategies that can realize human-centered policies and a more just and sustainable world.

Endnotes

1. "10 Biggest Corporations Make More Money than Most Countries in the World Combined," *Global Justice Now*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/news/2016/sep/12/10-biggest-corporations-make-more-money-most-countries-world-combined>. For a more detailed analysis, see *Journal of World-Systems Research Symposium on Corporate Power and Local Democracy* (Winter 2019), <http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/74>. See also, Susan George, *Shadow Sovereigns: How Global Corporations are Seizing Power* (Boston: Polity Press, 2015).
2. "10 Biggest Corporations"; Nicholas Freudenberg, *Lethal But Legal: Corporations, Consumption, and Protecting Public Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
3. Leo Baunach, "World Bank Rankings Promote Deregulation at the Expense of Working People" *Inequality.org*, November 1, 2019, <https://inequality.org/research/world-bank-deregulation/>.
4. Ben Manski and Jackie Smith, "Introduction: The Dynamics and Terrains of Local Democracy and Corporate Power in the 21st Century," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 25, no. 1: 6–14, <http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/article/view/919>. See also Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2001); William I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
5. "Corporate Influence Threatens Human Rights in Communities Nationwide," *Stakeholder Report submitted to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of the United States by the US Human Rights Cities Alliance*, October 3, 2019, http://wiki.humanrightscities.mayfirst.org/images/4/49/UPR_US_Cities_Stakeholder_Report_2019_Final_Submission_with_summary.pdf; Jackie Smith, "Corporate Influence Threatens Human Rights in Communities Nationwide," *Common Dreams*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/10/28/corporate-influence-threatens-human-rights-communities-nationwide>.

About the Author



Jackie Smith is a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and the editor of the *Journal of World Systems Research*. Her research addresses the relationships between economic globalization, social conflicts, and popular struggles. She is involved locally with Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance and coordinates the Pitt Human Rights Initiative, which engages in educational and research activities aimed at promoting and defending human rights locally and beyond. Her books include *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.); and the *Handbook of World Social Forum Activism* (with Scott Byrd, Ellen Reese and Elizabeth Smythe, eds.).

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