Claiming the Right to the City: A Question of Power

By Gihan Perera

In January 2007, 30 organizations from seven cities got together in Los Angeles and adopted a framework to “urbanize” human rights. The goal is to ground human rights in the real lives and struggles of communities of color in United States cities and to utilize the human rights framework to unite and elevate our organizing.

The “Right to the City” Alliance is informed by a power analysis of what we’re up against in urban spaces, recognizing the role of United States cities in the global economy. Our analysis sees working class communities as central to the fight for human rights in the city while embracing a vision of life and democracy for all city dwellers.

All of the groups that assembled are facing huge pressures of displacement and gentrification of their communities. We explored the ways that neo-liberalism and the privatization of land use have turned our cities over to developers. We discussed how we’re fighting struggles for housing, use of traditional space, and against predatory development. We discovered how putting forward a proactive and simple assertion of our rights made a huge difference in how we understood our ongoing work. And we quickly recognized that so many of the issues we’re fighting for in our cities: housing, transportation, education, LGBT rights to space, and rights of culture, are inextricably interrelated. We just need a common way to talk about it, strategize, and develop our power in common terms. Toward that end, the Right to the City Alliance was initiated so that we can build local power toward a national agenda for our cities. So that, one day, we can build enough power to stand with our brothers and sisters in the global South and demand global justice for humanity.

Demanding Change

Systems of power do not change unless they are forced to. The question for me in organizing has been how do we actually translate a moral assertion of rights into a practical demand on power. Effective demands do two things. They weaken the power of existing systems of inequality and strengthen the rights and conditions of those whose rights are at risk.

The difference between a universal assertion of what’s right and a practical demand is that effective demands recognize current power relationships. To be useful, organizing demands must be winnable by our forces and the target of the demands must be capable of conceding and delivering on its promises.

As organizers of poor people, workers, women, immigrants, LGBT people, and formerly colonized and enslaved peoples, one of our most basic understandings is that we organize those who are most directly impacted by oppression to directly confront the powers which deny them of their rights. This is not just a reflection of an organizing method but an indication of a political principle. It’s a question of leadership of the oppressed, of the working class, and people of color in particular. We’re not just all humans. We are people, classes, races, ethnicities, genders with distinct and varied relationships to power. We believe that those whose power and rights are most crushed must be central to leading the fights for their own liberation. The struggle for human rights is then a struggle for them to directly claim their humanity against oppressive systems and institutions.

While the human rights framework’s main tenet of universal humanity is incredibly powerful as a
uniting force across nation states, class, and race, it must be grounded in a theory of power and social change to be effective. Even if we look back at Malcolm X’s strategy of utilizing human rights to be able to get around the domination of the United States, successful execution is ultimately tied to the potential power of countries in the Third World and others to exert the power of the United Nations in relation to the power of the United States.

Malcolm spoke at a time when Third World liberation struggles were growing in power and the possibilities of overturning white supremacy and colonization were inspirational and almost definite. In the decades since Malcolm’s words, those movements have subsided and the United States has become the sole global superpower. The United Nations and other international bodies have lost their influence and power. The United States not only has veto power, it can completely sidestep, overstep, or step on the United Nations with its demands and generally win. The point here is that both internationally, nationally, and locally, the tool is only as strong as the power that is behind it.

Ironically, with the historic slide of progressive power the significance of human rights grows. Its strength now is as a tool for power building. For both Malcolm and the Right to the City Alliance, the importance of human rights is as a vision.

Malcolm’s vision of human rights challenged the legitimacy of the United States government as the arbiter of justice. In the context of a fractured political left, and the dearth of progressive mass movements the human rights frame provides possibilities of putting forward bold, radical alternatives while appealing broadly to a common interest in the future of humanity.
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