

Beyond liberal rights: lessons from a possible future in Detroit

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Chris Grove

Cutting off access to water and sanitation should cause moral outrage in any country, particularly amid global wealth and productive capacity that are sufficient to meet the basic needs of all people. It is particularly shocking in the US, in a city that was the global center of auto manufacturing and is surrounded by 20% of the world's fresh surface water. As an urgent response to over 30,000 Detroit households being denied access to water and sanitation, the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), Detroit People's Water Board Coalition and other allies organized the International Social Movements Gathering on Water and Affordable Housing in May 2015. The gathering ultimately drew 200 human rights advocates and grassroots leaders to Detroit from across the US and several other countries.

The City of Detroit filed the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history on 18 July 2013. Although Michigan residents had voted down the state's emergency manager law in a 2012 referendum, the state legislature and governor passed and utilized a similar law (Public Act 436) to impose an [emergency manager](#) on Detroit, in March 2013. With almost unlimited power to negotiate the city's future, the emergency manager [contracted the services of Veolia North America](#) to guide restructuring of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

By October 2014, some 30,000 households had faced water and sewer disconnections, prompting the visit of two United Nations Special Rapporteurs. Their [statement](#) stressed that "thousands of households are living in fear that their water may be shut off at any time without due notice...and that children may be taken by child protection services as houses without water are deemed uninhabitable for children." Despite their critique and substantial media coverage, unpaid water bills are now being attached to overdue property taxes, exposing thousands of homeowners to [property tax foreclosure](#).

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In Detroit, water shutoffs prompt grassroots groups to respond: "Water is a human right!" This conception of human rights moves beyond the narrow liberal rights tradition.



Warning US and global allies of deepening trends, Maureen Taylor, State Chair of MWRO, often begins presentations on Detroit by proclaiming: "Welcome to the future!" Established in 1918, the Ford River

Rouge Complex eventually employed over 100,000 Detroit residents. Today, technology and outsourcing have eliminated tens of thousands of jobs. River Rouge remains Ford's single largest manufacturing complex, yet it employs only 6,000 people. Detroit provides an important vantage point for examining the liberal experiment in democracy, individual rights and free markets represented by the US. This model drove technological innovation, increased productivity and lower labor costs in the pursuit of profit. For a time, liberalism also created space for labor organizing, and many Detroit auto workers—both white and black—were able to secure steady wages sufficient to afford decent homes and comfortable retirements. Yet the future looks bleak from Detroit.

The liberal rights tradition promotes individual freedom and formal equality before the law, but it does not promise to end substantive inequalities. By 2013, 39% of Detroit's rapidly shrinking population lived below the official poverty line; 83% of residents were African American. The liberal rights tradition promotes individual freedom and formal equality before the law, but it does not promise to end substantive inequalities. Neither classical liberalism nor neoliberalism guarantees the right to water, housing, or other public goods and services.

Ultimately, neoliberal economic policies deepened material inequality and laid the groundwork for the recent economic crisis, tipping Detroit into insolvency. Growing economic and political inequalities now threaten to undermine liberal rights. As inequality fuels social dislocation and resistance, the government's response often undercuts civil rights. Detroit reflects a nationwide trend of militarized police forces, surveillance and mass incarceration, disproportionately impacting black communities and undermining rights to life, privacy, political participation and freedom from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The state government usurped the democratic control of Detroit residents. The emergency manager embarked on a series of public-private partnerships; for example, Homrich Wrecking, Inc. was given a two-year, [\\$5.6 million contract](#) to execute residential water disconnections.

A grassroots struggle is resisting shutoffs, running water hoses from home-to-home, protecting children from unjust removal, working with economists to create alternative water affordability plans and with lawyers—including [ESCR-Net Members](#) from several countries—to insist that the right to life must encompass social rights. Throughout their struggle, grassroots groups continue to insist: "Water is a human right!" This conception of human rights moves beyond the narrow liberal rights tradition.

First, demanding water as a human right suggests that the liberal focus on freedom and formal equality should be complemented by attention to substantive equality and the common good. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was built on diverse philosophical and faith traditions and struggles for justice, emphasizing the interdependence of political, economic, social, civil and cultural rights.

Second, individual violations of human rights should be a starting point for systemic analysis of impoverishment, dispossession, and repression, which deny rights to people around the world. Following the lead of Detroit residents, human rights advocates might ask: should certain goods and services be taken out of the competitive market? If individual gain has often driven innovation and hard work, is it possible to imagine societal advancements based on values of cooperation, sustainability and empathy? In a global society characterized by abundance and endless opportunities for communication, but also facing existential challenges of climate change, poverty and militarization, we arguably need new models for living together.

Finally, the call made by Detroit organizations for an international gathering of grassroots groups and NGOs—confronting similar struggles across the US and the world—highlights their analysis that a global movement for human rights is vital. If liberalism posited sovereign individuals democratically governing nation-states, there is growing recognition that global economic forces are shaping Detroit and communities worldwide. This does not mean denying the particularity of different contexts, but rather

examining how these interact with global forces and common structures of oppression and exploitation. In this regard, human rights are not merely legal standards created by UN processes, ratified by governments and litigated in courts. Human rights are also a basis for common demands and the moral legitimacy of grassroots struggles, which insist on social justice in the face of global power imbalances.



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