



Occupy Vancouver, October 2011 (Elvin Wyly)



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## The Right to the City

Urban Studies 400: Seminar in Urban Studies

January-May, 2012

Mondays, 1:00 - 4:00 pm, Geography Room 201

<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/u400.html>

“In the 1960s, when the majority of people on Earth were still rural dwellers, the ‘right to the city’ was theorized as a radical ‘cry and demand’ by the French urbanist and philosopher, Henri Lefebvre. Fifty years on, now that Lefebvre’s urban revolution has largely consummated itself, how does the ‘right to the city’ fare?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Merrifield (2011). “Crowd Politics.” *New Left Review* 71, September/October, 103-114, quote from p. 105.

This course is an interdisciplinary exploration of social justice and urbanism. Cities are inherently and inescapably *collective* human creations: you can't have a city by yourself. City life, therefore, is defined by encounters with difference, negotiations of conflict, and political struggles over who gets what, when, and where. Cities intensify the human experience. Cities force societies to make difficult choices in defining and honoring principles of social justice. For the past half-century, however, these tough choices have been delayed and denied. The inescapably social, collective essence of urbanization has been hidden by theories and politics that reduce every process to the individual -- the heroic, risk-taking entrepreneur, or the rational, utility-maximizing consumer. Planetary urbanism is now finally shattering the myths of an increasingly aggressive, violent form of global capitalism that makes Hobbes seem like a utopian optimist. Now, for the first time in human history, a majority of the world's people are living in cities. More people are living in cities today than lived in the entire world when Lefebvre first wrote about the "right to the city" a few months before protests broke out on the streets of cities across the world in the spring of 1968. Now, every day, reading the headlines makes one wonder: is this a return to the revolutionary times of 1968? If those in positions of power and privilege resist reasonable calls for reform and social justice, will the echoes of 1968 become the violent screams of 1848?

In this seminar, we'll read six books that analyze cities in light of Lefebvre's ideas. The books are listed below (Davies and Imbroscio, 2011; Dorling, 2011; Harvey, 2009, 2011; Fainstein, 2011; Brenner et al., 2011). You may choose to purchase these at the UBC Bookstore, or you may choose to resist UBC, Inc.'s coercive consumption regime by reading the copies I have placed on reserve at the Geographic Information Centre, Room 112 of the Geography Building.

This is an interdisciplinary, research-intensive seminar -- not a transactional information-processing enterprise with infinite emails and electronic messages substituting for real, live, human scholarly discussion and exploration. This means you should show up, read, participate in discussions in a friendly, constructive, and intellectually rigorous manner, and meet the deadlines that are necessary to accomplish (your, our) course objectives. Email maximization is not a course objective. If  $A$  is the attention span available for human thought and reflection unmediated by electronic devices and commercial advertising infrastructures, and if  $E$  is the proportion of time spent on electronic substitution of face-to-face communication, then

$$A = \lim_{E \rightarrow \infty} \left( \frac{1}{E} \right)$$

Send me an email if it's necessary. Just consider that in the last decade, the ratio ( $R$ ) of unproductive, transactional emails to useful, productive communication has come to be defined as

$$R = \left( \frac{E}{A} \right)$$

Course marks are based on seminar participation (25 percent) and a final paper (75 percent). The final paper should be about twenty-five pages double-spaced, not counting references and other supporting materials. It is due, with no exceptions, on the last day of examinations as specified

in the UBC Academic Calendar. I recommend that you start reading, thinking, and taking notes on ideas for this paper on the very first day we meet. One suggested sequence (among other possibilities) begins with a freewrite/brainstorm, then a topic description, problem statement, literature review, research design, methodological description, presentation of results, and then however many drafts it takes you to achieve a final paper that accomplishes (your, our) objectives. Beginning in the second week, each time we meet, I have a “deadline” and you have an “opportunity”: I will read whatever is placed on the table in front of me at the very beginning of class, typed, on one side only of standard 8.5” x 11.0” paper, and I will return it with comments as soon as possible. (I also encourage, but do not require, that you bring a few additional copies to circulate to a few of your colleagues in the seminar for their comments and recommendations). These weekly deadlines are firm and non-negotiable, but there is no positivist, Comtean observable-measurable penalty for failure to submit. The penalty will be your own self-imposed, Foucauldian phenomenological experience late at night before the day the final grades are being prepared, when you realize your freedom as an individual consumer to disregard the optional deadlines has left you confronting that last, final, non-negotiable final deadline while feeling isolated and fearful in a scholarly enterprise that should be collective, shared, exciting, and transformative. That’s what it *will* be if you remind yourself what Peter Gould taught me: “learn” is not a transitive verb.

Various resources and other information will be posted to the course website, at

<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/u400.html>

All other necessary details and recommendations will be provided in class. Please join us. Let’s claim our right to the city by building one together.

## **References**

Jonathan S. Davies and David L. Imbroscio, editors (2011). *Critical Urban Studies: New Directions*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Daniel Dorling (2011). *Injustice: Why Inequality Persists*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

David Harvey (2009). *Social Justice and the City, Revised Edition*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press.

David Harvey (2011). *The Enigma of Capital and The Crises of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Susan S. Fainstein (2011). *The Just City*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer (2011). *Cities for People, Not for Profit*. New York and London: Routledge.