



To Claim The Right to the City, Turn Left

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Five weeks ago, a small group of committed activists went to Zucotti Park, a “privately owned public space” in New York City. At first, Occupy Wall Street was ignored. Then it was dismissed as just another protest by a few people on the far left fringe. No. This is a fringe of 99 percent. Occupations have spread to more than a thousand cities in a hundred countries around the world.

Can you hear us now?

In a thousand cities, millions of voices claim the right to the city. For the first time in human history, we live in an urban world. The population of the world’s cities today is more than the total population of the entire world fifty years ago. Our future is urban. It is a future of the left. It is a future of the giant kaleidoscope of the 99 percent -- all the alliances and friendships that bring us all together, to draw strength not only from our numbers, but also from our differences. Iris Marion Young once described city life as the art of living together with strangers. But now we’ve been properly introduced. Now we’re friends.

Look around. Friend request accepted!

In Canada, the top 1 percent has been grabbing an increasing share of society’s total income since the early 1990s. The top 1 percent share is now the highest it’s been since 1940. And the richest of the rich -- the top one hundredth of one percent -- now control total income that is more than 189 times their share. The last time it was this high was in 1936. In the United States, if you want to join this club -- the top one percent of the top one percent -- the ticket price of

entry is now at least \$6.4 million. This is more than three times the admissions price on the eve of the Great Depression in 1928, even after adjusting for inflation.

For half a century now, the top one percent has held on to privilege with an iron grip, and has grabbed more and more every year. They have been able to divide everyone else by geography and by identity. The 99 percent have been divided between men and women, and between people of different racial and ethnic identities. Christians have been divided from Jews, Muslims from Sikhs, religious people from agnostics and atheists. Immigrants who arrived recently are divided from immigrants who arrived long ago, and they are all divided from the first nations peoples from whom we stole the land under our feet. Middle-class people who call themselves “average taxpayers,” people who fight for their unions, young people and old people, straight people and LGBT -- everyone is divided from one another, and told that we are competing in a global economy, and there is always someone, somewhere in the world who will work for less. This is how the 1 percent -- and the top one percent of the top one percent -- has taken more and more every year.

But this strategy won't work much longer. It won't work because you won't let it. It won't work because you know that you are not alone. It won't work because you know that you're part of a multitude of different peoples around the world, people who can see what they share, and people who refuse to be divided. This is an urban multitude. And with the world now majority urban and continuing to urbanize, the world is on the side of the 99 percent a little bit more every year, every month. Every single month, the world's cities add the equivalent of about two of Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. Now, the one percent will tell us that many of these new

city people are part of the world's "bottom billion," and so those of us in wealthy cities like Vancouver should stop complaining. But more and more of those new citizens of cities know they are in the 99 percent, and every month, more of them are challenging the 1 percent. The right to the city will bring us together.

Let me illustrate, by reading from a text that should inspire us.

[We] "have been fighting against systems of repression, disenfranchisement, and the unchecked ravages of ... a system that has made a world that is dangerous and cruel to its inhabitants. As the interests of government increasingly cater to the interests of private, transnational capital, our cities and homes have become progressively more abstract and violent places, subject to the casual ravages of the next economic development or urban renewal scheme.

... as things stand we will all work ourselves raw, our backs broken by personal debt and public austerity. Not content with carving out the remnants of the public sphere and the welfare state, capitalism and the austerity state now even attack the private realm and the people's right to decent dwelling. ...

So we stand with you not just in your attempts to bring down the old but to experiment with the new."

Who wrote these words? It could have been Saul Alinsky writing about Chicago or Cleveland in the 1960s. It could be Jean Swanson, writing about the poor-bashing and gentrification that goes

on today in the Downtown Eastside. It could be written from London or Athens, and if it could get encrypted past the censors it could have been written from Beijing or Shanghai. But these words were written on Tuesday from those who call themselves “Comrades from Cairo.”

“Having received so much advice from you about transitioning to democracy,” they write, “we thought it’s our turn to pass on some advice.”

Their advice? “...continue, keep going, and do not stop. Occupy more, find each other, build larger and larger networks, and keep discovering new ways to experiment with social life, consensus, and democracy.” Their advice comes from what they learned in their long struggles against violence, until, as they write, “at the end of the day on 28 January, [the police] retreated, and we had won our cities.”

Do you want to win your city?

You have the right to the city. All of us have this right. The problem is that some people believe this is an **individual** right -- the right to buy and sell property, and the right to make money from the growth of cities at the edge -- suburbanization -- or the remaking of working-class communities at the urban core -- gentrification. This is wrong. It’s not that developers or investors or gentrifiers are bad people -- many of them are very nice people. But that’s beside the point. In an increasingly unequal market system, these people are forced to behave like corporations. And as my colleague Joel Bakan reminds us, the personality of the corporation is predisposed to be a sociopath. If corporations really are people, a lot of them should be put in jail.

So the right to the city is not just for individuals and corporations, but a shared right.

Urbanization is about society, and the Latin word *socialis* also leads us to *socialism*. Cities are about community, and it only takes a single letter to get from the Latin *communis* to *communist*.

If you're my age or older, of course, you were taught that communism is about central committees, coercion, and economic collapse, while capitalism was all about democracy, growth, and freedom. But today the most dynamic economy on the planet is China's strange combination of political authoritarianism joined with aggressive, enforced capitalist entrepreneurialism. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the capitalist world the central committees of all the central banks opened the floodgates of money to bail out the banks, and now tell the poor and working classes that you have to give up your schools, your health care, your retirement, your rights to organize yourselves into unions. We have been living with communism for a long time now. It's communism for the 1 percent, and for the top one percent of the top one percent. Everyone else has the capitalist freedom to lose a job, the freedom to lose a home, the freedom to go hungry.

The right to the city is a common right. This city, all cities, are collective human creations.

You can't have a city by yourself. All urban space is public space. All transportation is public transportation. All health care is public health care. All housing is public housing. It's just that we allow some people to take these public resources, and to privatize all the benefits while pushing the costs on to the rest of society. If you're a renter living in social housing and taking public transit, you're reminded at every turn that you're on public assistance. You're made to feel guilty for it. But you get pennies compared to the gigantic welfare programs for bankers and

executives, and for all those people in those luxurious mansions and penthouse condos who think they live in private housing. They live in public housing too.

When the real estate market booms and home values rise, rich people have a strange word for the difference between the market price and the outstanding balance on the mortgage. They call it “equity.” But there’s nothing equitable about it. Increases in real estate values are not just about individual work and effort. Values are also produced by urbanization. Real estate equity is socially produced. It belongs to all of us. All of us are building the city, and we all have the right to the city.

This is your city. Do you want to claim this right?

Me too! I am proud to say that as a professor, I am taught by my students. Some of my teachers are out at UBC. And you are my teachers, and, trust me, I am taking careful notes. And we all have many other teachers -- Comrades in Cairo, Carnegie colleagues from the Downtown Eastside, and the multitudes of city people from the Bronx to Beijing, from Detroit to Dubai, from Memphis to Moose Jaw. And all of us, all of us city people are learning about the right to the city by coming out into the streets.

This is our syllabus.

This coming together is what the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre meant when he wrote a book about the right to the city a few months before the wave of uprisings in cities around the

world in 1968. Lefebvre helped us to learn that by changing our cities, we change ourselves. We have to, because the essence of the city is bringing all sorts of different people together. Living in a city means learning to live with strangers, working out our differences to find common ground, and turning strangers into friends. This is what cities are all about. When we work out our differences about how to live in the city, we are changing ourselves, and our entire society. Cities are civilization. And everyone must have the right to participate in this process of constantly making and remaking civilization -- hopefully for the better. The city is a work of art, and we are all artists.

For half a century now, the top one percent of the top one percent have denied the right to the city, by confusing people that individual rights were all that mattered. They turned us all from citizens into consumers, and told everyone that you have the freedom to choose what music to listen to, what television shows to watch, what low-wage job to accept or what good job to compete against a hundred other applicants, what tiny basement suite or SRO to rent if you can't afford anything better. But you're told that when it comes to the true right to the city, you only get a few small choices every few years. And these choices will always have to get prior approval from the 1 percent, and the financial markets, and the real estate markets, before we're even allowed to make any choice at all.

Demand more. Demand the right to the city. It belongs to all of us.

This doesn't mean we're always going to agree. In fact, it means we're going to disagree all the time. But a true right to the city is a constant engagement with difference, a never-ending

negotiation to work out solutions. The danger of the last fifty years is that worsening inequality gave a trump card to the top 1 percent in every negotiation. They buy their way out of any negotiation with difference that they don't like. They've bought so much that now they don't even have to pay anything at all, because all the rules and laws have been written so that freedom itself has a market price, and the richest are the only ones who can afford what they need. Rich people have the freedom to pocket capital gains and stock options. Middle-class people get the freedom to laugh at the joke that if you're looking for an affordable middle-class home in Vancouver, it's beyond Hope. Young people struggling to get into the middle class here now have the freedom, as *Vancouver* magazine puts it, to call themselves Generation F. And middle-class people are taught to dream up, blame down -- to blame the poor and homeless. The homeless are denied their human rights to housing and home, and then they are denied the right to sleep on the street, or to ask for money to survive. Whenever you hear phrases like "safe streets" or "civil city" or "quality of life," you know that someone is working to destroy the right to the city. When you privatize the city, and when you restrict the remaining public space so that people who don't have their own private spaces are not allowed to do all the things that we all have to do as human beings, then you destroy the right of homeless people to be, to exist.

Do you want the right to the city?

The city is an *oeuvre*, a creative work, a work of art, a masterpiece of literature, a beautiful symphony, and the finest work of scholarship ever known to humanity. We are all artists, composers, writers, and scholars. One of the best scholars here is Bud Osborn, a professor at the best school in town, the University of the Downtown Eastside. When Osborn writes "we resist," when he writes that

“we are all that stands between our vast
community
and those who would
gentrify and displace it and replace it
replace with greed”

When Professor Osborn writes these words, he puts us in solidarity with comrades in Cairo, with Lefebvre in Paris in 1968, and with the worldwide metropolis of mobilization, the occupations of a thousand cities around the world. We are communities, not commodities. We are citizens, not consumers. We will not be divided, bought, and sold. We are citizens, and these are our cities. In a thousand cities, millions of voices ring out, peaceful but loud, so let's make sure the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent can hear us.

Cities for people, not for profit! Cities for people, not for profit! Cities for people, not for profit!