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## Free Public Transit and the Right to the City

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in  
Sociology

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## Abstract

In recent years there has been a surge in support for free public transit across Canada. This thesis tracks the rapid changes to the free public transit movement through content analysis and interviewing activists at the centre of the struggle. I find that people come to free public transit organizing to address poverty, reduce emissions, end police violence, and create a safer workspace. With the increase in support for free public transit, it has become a policy supported in one way or another by politicians across the political spectrum. I argue that in order for free public transit to address poverty, reduce emissions, end police violence, and create safer workspaces, free public transit must move beyond demands for free publicly owned transit and move towards demands for free publicly controlled transit under the ethical framework of the right to the city.

## Keywords

Free Public Transit, Right to the City, Henri Lefebvre

## Summary for Lay Audience

During the 2018 Ontario municipal elections, Councillor Shawn Menard was elected to Ottawa City Council with free public transit as a central campaign plank. In April, 2019, Victoria, B.C., became the first major Canadian city to endorse free public transit and a few months later the Federal New Democratic Party included free public transit in their federal campaign platform. During the summer of 2019, Mont-Tremblant, Quebec, and Canmore, Alberta, made their local transit systems free. In a matter of months, free public transit had come front and centre in Canadian transit discourse. While the increase in support for free public transit caught many off guard, there is a long history of movements pushing for free public transit in Canada dating back to the 1970s.

This work examines the rise of free public transit in Canada. It engages with community organizers, union activists, and politicians who are fighting for free public transit and examines the challenges that they face. I find that while free public transit may appear to be a radical left wing demand, it is supported in various different forms by people across the political spectrum. As a result, while people may think they are pushing to radically change the capitalist system in which we live, they may be reinforcing it. I argue in order for left-wing activists to address issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, police violence, and unsafe workspaces, we must utilize Henri Lefebvre's right to the city. We must fight for free publicly controlled transit. It is only through the people controlling public transit and making it free that we can begin to recreate our public transit to address poverty, environmental degradation, police violence, and unsafe workspace.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

Free public transit, also referred to as fare-free public transit or zero-fare public transit, is a designation given to public transit systems where any person can use public transit and not have to pay for it at the time of use. Instead, public transit is paid through a variety of other means such as reallocating the budget or increasing taxes. Free public transit can be subdivided into universally free or partially free initiatives. Universal free public transit is public transit that is available for free to *all* riders *all* of the time on *all* transit lines regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic status. Universal free public transit was first documented in Commerce, California, in 1962 and today there are around 100 cities that have free public transit worldwide (Kębłowski 2019). The first instance of free public transit in Canada occurred in 2014 when four Montreal suburbs made their local bus routes free. In 2019, Canmore, Alberta, and Mont-Tremblant, Quebec, made the total number of Canadian municipalities with free public transit six.

Public transit can also be partially free, mainly consisting of three distinct forms: group-specific, location-specific, and time-specific (Kębłowski 2019). Group-specific free public transit is the most common form and typically encompasses either youth, students, seniors, or low-income people. These groups tend to already be a disproportionate representation of public transit users and they are among the identified groups for whom fares are identified as a barrier (Miller et al. 2018). Seeing as mobility is a necessity, most cities give these groups a different fare structure than other riders in

order to help them be mobile. In some cases, this is a free fare structure. Location-specific free public transit is when a city decides that a certain area of their public transit system should be free for one reason or another. Often, these free fare zones are located in the downtown core in an attempt to dissuade local residents and businesspeople from using automobiles (Ray 2018). Even though all riders within location-specific free public transit are able to ride for free, it is not considered universally free because it is only for designated areas, not the entire system. Time-specific free public transit is public transit that is free at a certain time. This could take the form of “off-peak” meaning that public transit is free to take outside of rush hour. It also takes the form of certain days throughout the year that are free. These days are mostly confined to holidays, elections, pollution days, or national emergencies. Without a sense of permanence, these free fare days are not considered universal even though all riders are able to ride for free.

This thesis focuses on universal free public transit and where the term “free public transit” is used, it should be understood to mean universal free public transit. Partial free public transit will be used throughout the thesis to get an understanding of the extent of where and who has access to partial free public transit in Canada. It will be clearly noted when I am discussing partial free public transit.

## 1.1 Research Objectives

In recent years there has been a surge in political activism around free public transit. Community groups are forming around free public transit, and existing groups are recognizing that free public transit could fit within their existing work. Politicians from across Canada and the political spectrum are running on, endorsing, or researching how

free public transit could benefit their communities. Most recently transit unions such as CUPE Local 2 and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) are tying free public transit to strike campaigns. This thesis sets out to:

1. Catalogue the rise of the free public transit movement in Canada and understand the justifications used to support free public transit;
2. Understand the unique challenges faced by the free public transit movement in Canada;
3. Critically examine the free public transit movement and the potential utility of Henri Lefebvre's idea of right to the city.

Free public transit in Canada is a largely hidden phenomenon, yet approximately 900,000 Canadians, excluding children twelve and under, have access to public transit free of charge every day. This work looks at how we got to this point and why there are a growing number of politicians, unions, and political activists looking to make public transit free. Next, I will identify the challenges that these movements face and how they seek to overcome these challenges. Lastly, a critical examination of free public transit through an evaluative framework of the right to the city will attempt to challenge the movement to grow beyond calls for free public transit and public ownership to calls for free publicly controlled transit.

## 1.2 Method

This project consists of a content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Documents such as newspaper articles, political platforms, and campaign materials were collected to identify the rise of free public transit. They were used to get a broader

understanding of the free public transit movement across the country and general themes and locations of the movement. They were gathered using Google, Twitter, and Facebook searches with keywords such as “Free Public Transit” and “Free Public Transit Canada”. In total, I gathered over 80 documents from all regions in Canada that helped form the groundwork for this study.

Through examining the documents, I was able to identify eighteen potential participants to partake in semi-structured interviews: nine politicians, seven community groups, and two unions. Three criteria were needed to be contacted as a potential participant.

1. Publicly endorse universal free public transit.
2. A public figure associated with a political party or organization.
3. Be situated in a city of over 75,000 people

Participants had to have publicly endorsed universal free public transit. This excluded potential politicians or activists who would support free public transit when talking about it over a coffee but would not introduce a motion for it or organize a rally around it. It also excludes those who only advocate for partial free public transit. They had to be a public figure or part of an organization so that it was not a blogger or twitter handle putting words out onto the internet. I wanted to speak to people who are in their communities organizing in greater than words. Lastly, I wanted participants to be situated in a community of over 75,000 people because the overwhelming majority of free public transit systems across the world are in small villages. Here in Canada, free public transit only occurs in municipalities with less than 35,000 people. I wanted to see how the fight

for free public transit was happening in large cities. Places with smaller populations such as Mont. Tremblant are used to catalogue the rise of free public transit, but not to look at the actual fight for it.

I reached out to potential participants via emails and direct messaging on social media. If I did not receive a response to the original message, a follow-up message was sent approximately one week later. Of those that were contacted, eight agreed to participate in the study: four politicians, three community groups, and one union activist.

As each of the participants are public figures or associated with an organization that is publicly calling for free public transit, they were given the option of having quotes attributed to them and/or their organization. Waiving anonymity was given as an option to more effectively catalogue the rise of free public transit across Canada as well as give future organizers contacts within the movement. If participants chose confidentiality, they were given a pseudonym. Participants were informed prior to the study that while I would do my best to ensure confidentiality, it was not guaranteed, as support for free public transit, while growing, is still relatively small. After compiling the interviews and documents, I analyzed the collection of works for broad themes surrounding free public transit in Canada which helped fill out the past, present, and future aspirations for those advocating for it.

Through examining documents, policies, transit and student union websites, and interviews with activists and politicians, I identified at least 900,000 people in Canada that have access to free local transit. Only 100,000 of these are as a result of universal

free public transit while the rest are partial, the majority of which are student bus pass programs. These findings will be further discussed in chapter 3.

### 1.3 Limitations

I designed this study to understand why politicians, unions, and community groups have begun advocating for free public transit. From the start, my intention was to understand their stories, not the stories of their detractors. As a result, this study does not examine the debates for instance at Victoria's City Council when it decided to endorse free public transit. Instead, it aims to understand why Victoria City Councillors proposed the motion in the first place. Likewise, this study does not examine in depth the debates that have resulted from proposed motions or political campaigns. It is looking at why those campaigns began and the goals that it is trying to accomplish. I am looking at whether these goals can be accomplished as a result of free public transit.

Second, this study briefly outlines where and who has access to free public transit. There are six communities in Canada that have free public transit, all of which have a population under 35,000. These communities are used to show that free public transit has been implemented in Canada, but they are not the primary focus of this study. I briefly mention some of the reasons why these communities implemented free public transit, but this is used more as background information for readers and is by no means the focus of this study. Studying how free public transit has benefited these communities would be a beneficial future study, but that is for another time.

Lastly, this study focuses on people who are publicly pushing for free public transit and have some level of organizational capacity. While a recent Abacus (2020) poll found that \_\_\_% of Canadians would be in favour of or go along with free public transit, I am not examining the average persons justifications for doing so. I am strictly looking at those who are actively organizing which is a much smaller percentage of the population. The majority of the population supports a wide range of policy proposals, but that does not mean that those people would actively pursue the implementation of those policies. I am looking to understand the aspirations and goals of who are looking to shape the political discourse around public transit and free public transit as opposed to those that support it but are not actively doing so.

## 1.4 Public Sociology

From the start I would like to make it very clear that this is a work of public sociology. Public sociology “strikes up a dialogic relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table, in which each adjusts to the other. In public sociology, discussion often involves values or goals that are not automatically shared by both sides” (Burawoy 2004:267). There are two ‘publics’ or audiences that I wish to engage with. The first public is the political “left” more generally. In Canada, I am aiming to address members of political parties such as the NDP and the eco-socialist wing of the Green Party, as well as community groups and the labour movement. This thesis will introduce these factions to the free public transit movement and encourage them to join the fight for free public transit. I hope that it will

also give ideas for how they can begin pushing for free public transit in their own communities.

The second public is people who are fighting for free public transit. This thesis is a dialogue between this public and me. I came to the table to discuss free public transit with these activists and the findings that I lay out are their stories. It is their reasoning for fighting for free public transit. My response to this public, for which I am a member, is to lay out where we go next in our fight for free public transit.

Throughout my work I take a value-laden approach. Largely, my goals align with members of the free public transit movement. I want to create a better public transit system that is free to use. I saw riders who were denied service because they could not afford a fare, and others who jumped the turnstile and were given a \$250 fine because they could not pay a \$2.50 fare. When I began researching free public transit, I believed that it would be a good way to merge environmental activism and poverty reduction. I believed that making public transit free would be one way that we could begin to challenge capitalism in our cities. What I should have known is that it is never that easy.

What I discovered from studying the political context surrounding free public transit nationally and internationally is that it is a “big tent” proposal. It has been supported by politicians from across the political spectrum. Free public transit could be used to transform the city and challenge capitalism, but it could just as easily be used to further entrench capitalism. In order to create a public transit system that addresses climate change and poverty, I argue that we should embrace Henri Lefebvre’s radical notion of the right to the city and demand free publicly controlled transit.



I start this thesis in chapter two by laying out the international historical context of free public transit. It looks at the reasons why municipalities around the world have implemented free public transit and how they are able to pay for it. Chapter three examines the national context of free public transit in Canada. It lays out the history and justifications for why people are advocating for free public transit. It introduces the community groups, unions, and politicians that have advocated for free public transit. Chapter four examines the challenges that free public transit faces in Canada. It identifies the two main barriers to free public transit: embedded neoliberal structures, and minimal powers of municipal governments. Chapter five examines Henri Lefebvre's right to the city. It lays out what Henri Lefebvre meant by the right to the city and why it is appropriate to use this today. I do not use the right to the city as a theoretical or analytical framework. I am using it as an ethical framework. I argue that the right to the city is how we ought to discuss free public transit as activists. I do not use the right to the city to analyze my research questions, but rather as a possible solution to some of the problems that the free public transit movement is facing and as a way to accomplish the goals that we have set out to achieve.

I invite free public transit activists to join me in this journey to use free public transit to retake and recreate our cities. To my fellow sociologists, we have a long history of being at the forefront of political protests (Burawoy 2004). It is time that we put down our pens and take up that mantle again. It is time to not only interpret the world, but to change it (Marx 1976).

## Chapter 2

### 2 The International Historical Context: Justifications for Free Public Transit

In this chapter, I outline the international historical context of how free public transit came to be. I layout the funding and ideological models that dominate the narrative around free public transit. Through this I break the common misconception that free public transit is solely housed in left-wing ideology and find that it is supported by a big tent across the political spectrum.

#### 2.1 International Context

Free public transit originated in Commerce, California, in 1962. By 2000, 27 cities worldwide had made public transit free; and in 2019, that number reached 100 (Kębłowski 2019). In March 2020, Luxembourg became the first country in the world to make its public transit systems free (Lo 2019). Most free public transit systems can be found in Europe, with France and Poland leading the way, followed by the United States and Brazil (Kębłowski 2018b). Every year, free public transit continues to grow.

Free public transit is a highly political proposal. That is not to say that free public transit is a policy solely housed within one end of the political spectrum and despised by the others. In fact, socialists, greens, centrists, and neoliberals have all proposed and implemented versions of free public transit (Kębłowski 2018b). What makes free public

transit political is the complexity of ideological reasonings behind the implementation and funding models that are proposed.

The ideological and funding models for free public transit have material effects on how it is implemented. For neoliberals and centrists, free public transit tends to be an economic policy. They advocate for free public transit as a way to boost the local economy by getting people out into their community to spend money (Ray 2018). In turn, the added state income from sales taxes and income taxes as a result of a boost to the economy pays for eliminating fares. The implications of this type of model is that this funding largely falls on the working class. Sales taxes are a form of regressive tax where working class people pay a disproportionate share of their money as everyone pays the same tax percentage on goods irrespective of income (Newman and O'Brien 2011). Under this model, free public transit mainly occurs because the economic benefits outweigh the cost of free public transit. For greens and environmentalists, free public transit is predominantly an environmental policy (Kębłowski 2019). They argue that free public transit will enact a modal shift from automobiles onto public transit which in turn will see a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. This model could have any form of funding to support its goals of free public transit as long as the end goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions is met. For socialists, free public transit is a class issue and a policy designed to bring social and material benefits to the working class and those who rely on public transit every day (Jäggi 2018). Socialists will tend to target businesses to fund free public transit as opposed to the working class.

Naturally, there are overlaps between the economic, environmental, and social justice approaches to free public transit. Even if the primary focus of free public transit

may be economic, there will likely be some social or environmental benefits. Likewise, if the focus is on environmental or social benefits, there will likely be some benefits to the local economy. There is no uniform method of implementing free public transit and the different ideological and funding models result in conservative countries such as the United States and Poland having free public transit alongside countries such as Brazil and France, which historically have been further to the left.

## 2.2 Funding Models

Public transit is already heavily subsidized by taxpayer dollars, and rarely do public transit agencies turn a profit. The fare box recovery ratio is the percentage of a transit system's budget that is funded through fares. Free public transit aims for a fare box recovery ratio of 0, which would signify that none of the transit system is paid for through fares. Fare box recovery ratios across the world vary significantly. For instance, of the three largest public transit systems in Canada, Montreal has the lowest fare box recovery ratio of 46 percent, followed by Vancouver at 56 percent. Toronto has the highest fare box recovery ratio in Canada at 70 percent (TTC Riders 2019). The remainder of the funding for these public transit agencies comes from a mix of taxes at the federal, provincial, and municipal level. There are three primary ways that transit agencies are able to get the funding needed to implement free public transit: cutting operational expenses, reallocating municipal funding, and taxation.

The first method of funding free public transit is through cutting operational expenses. When a city implements free public transit there will be immediate operational savings. These savings come from no longer having to purchase, maintain, and license

swipe card programs or having to insure the cash in the fare box (Ługowski 2018). Fare systems can be very costly. For example, in 2018, it was reported that Metrolinx had spent \$1 billion, and anticipated spending \$200 million more, to bring the Presto system to transit agencies across the province, well above the original \$700 million that was budgeted (Spurr 2018). This does not include the yearly operating costs of Presto, which are not known at this time. If free public transit was implemented, these costs to implement card swipe programs along with yearly upkeep would not be necessary.

There is also the potential for operational savings when it comes to staffing. Free public transit would no longer require fare collectors. Savings could be made by eliminating these positions. This is contingent on how transit agencies decide to implement free public transit. Public transit jobs are heavily unionized, and unions as they should be already preparing to advocate for those workers to be re-trained (Rockarts 2020). In other instances, free public transit could be funded by cutting services and employee. For instance, during COVID-19, 20 Canadian cities made public transit free (Leedham 2020). While free public transit during COVID-19 greatly benefitted front line workers who had to get to work and limited contact with high-contact areas, it harmed transit workers, as those with less seniority who were laid off. Transit systems were largely able to make transit free during COVID-19 by cutting routes and staff and taking the guaranteed money from city hall to fund the bare-bones system that remained.

In other instance, free public transit could be implemented through a change in priorities and reallocating budgets. On university campuses across the United States, it was found that the construction of new parking spaces and their upkeep was more expensive than giving students a free bus pass (Brown et al. 2001). One example from

UCLA found that the university paid \$150 per new space per month. This was largely subsidized by the university. If that same money had been allocated to providing free bus passes, there may not be the need to construct new parking space (Brown et al. 2001). Road widening, parking construction, and maintenance is a large financial burden on cities, and if abolishing fares is able to see even a minimal modal shift from cars to public transportation, the money typically spent on road construction could instead be put to lowering or eliminating fares.

Free public transit can also be used to mitigate injuries and fatalities resulting from different modes of transit. Public transit is by far the safest mode of transportation. In 2014 road accidents claimed the lives of 1,249 automobile passengers, 304 pedestrians, and 42 bicyclists across Canada (Transport Canada 2019). In that same year, only 3 bus riders in Canada died from road accidents (Statistics Canada 2019). While accidents such as the Ottawa bus crash in 2019 make national headlines, the fact remains that public transit accidents are extremely rare. Free public transit is a popular alternative to active transit, such as walking or biking. Given the danger of active transit in many places, free public transit can make roads safer. In Templin, Germany, fare abolition cost 90,000€. Depending on the chosen value of reduced environmental and safety costs, free public transit brought benefits ranging from 33,000€ to 115,000€ (Storchmann 2003). Especially in instances where walking or biking on dangerous roads is done out of necessity, free public transit could be used as a public safety initiative until adequate biking infrastructure is built to accompany free public transit. In many instances, especially in large cities, eliminating the fare box or reallocating budget lines will not provide enough funding for free public transit and increasing taxes will be necessary.

Around the world, free public transit has been implemented through a variety of different tax structures and it is highly contingent on a country's tax laws. Free public transit has been brought about through federal funding, corporate taxes, and flat fees.

In 2013, Tallinn, Estonia, became the largest European city to make public transit free, following a referendum which saw 75 percent of votes cast in support of free public transit (Alaküa 2018). Tallinn was able to make public transit free thanks to a federal law that allocates funds to municipalities based on the number of people registered in their city. They knew that many residents who lived in Tallinn either chose not to register as a resident so that the federal funding could benefit their hometown, or they simply forgot to register (Alaküa 2018). For this reason, Tallinn decided to make public transit free only for those who were registered residents of the city. Using this existing tax structure, a large enough number of people registered as residents that the resulting increase in money coming from the federal government more than paid for free public transit (Cats et al. 2017). Utilizing existing tax structures such as in Tallinn is unlikely to be possible elsewhere, but in places where it is possible it should be investigated.

France is one of the leading countries when it comes to free public transit, and over 20 French cities have made public transit free as a result of the *versement transport* (Kębłowski 2018a). The *versement transport* is a tax that is levied on all companies with over eleven employees that goes directly into funding local public transit projects. Originally, the *versement transport* was created to modernize and expand public transit infrastructure in Paris. Over time, it has been expanded to include all cities with over a population over 10,000. Now that much of the public transit infrastructure has been built,

cities are beginning to use the *versement transport* to offset the costs of taking public transit (Kębłowski 2018a).

Governments can also make public transit free through a flat fee which every resident in the city would pay. This is best exemplified through the Universal Transit Pass (UPass). The UPass is an agreement between student governments and local transit agencies across Canada. It is a mandatory fee that all students pay each semester to get unlimited access to public transit. Like other universal programs, since all students pay but not all students use public transit, the monthly cost of a UPass is drastically less than a monthly bus pass. The UPass is mutually beneficial for students and transit agencies. For students, it is cheaper overall, and students with a UPass have been found to graduate with less debt (Brown et al. 2001). As for transit agencies, the UPass is a guaranteed source of income. They may make less money per rider, but they know that every month they will have a sustained level of funding. While some may argue that the UPass is not a form of free public transit, I would disagree. The UPass is essentially a flat tax on all students that they have democratically elected to pay. I see very little that differentiates this practice than any other government body being given a mandate to increase a certain type of tax, the only difference being that this flat tax is on students as opposed to the broader community. For this reason, I categorize the UPass as a form of free public transit.

While some tax codes make it easier for cities to make public transit free, others make it more difficult. In the 1970s, the communist government in Bologna, Italy, made public transit free on workdays, among other infrastructure projects to make the city benefit the working class (Jäggi 2018). Today, it is impossible for Bologna to have free



public transit as federal funding for local transit projects are contingent on achieving a fare box recovery rate of at least 35 percent (Tiara and DeRobertis 2018). In other places, election results have quickly eliminated successful free transit programs. Hasselt, Belgium, one of the most widely known cases of free public transit reinstated fares in 2014 after having free public transit for 15 years. Following the 2012 local elections, the Social Democrats and Greens no longer had enough seats to hold a majority and were forced into a coalition with the Christian Democrats (Brie 2018). One of the requirements for a coalition from the Christian Democrats was that fares would be reintroduced. Additionally, the company that operated the local transit system wanted to lower operating costs to make a higher profit (Brie 2018). As a result, fares were reinstated.

While at first funding free public transit may appear to be straight-forward, there are many different ways to pay for it. On the more conservative end of the spectrum, free public transit could be implemented through cutting fare collector jobs and a flat tax. From a left-wing perspective, free public transit could be funded through defunding the police and taxing the rich. The funding model that is chosen will have material consequences. A conservative approach to free public transit will be paid for by the working class. This is not to say that it will adversely affect the working class. Free public transit will likely cost less money than is currently spent on transit by members of the working class if they can access public transit. A left-wing approach, however, will not only benefit the working class by making transit cheaper overall, but will do so off of the backs of the rich. By taxing the rich and/or defunding the police, the cost of free public transit will not fall on workers. So, while people from across the political spectrum

may come to agree that public transit should be free, the funding models will have different material outcomes.

## 2.3 Economics

At first glance, free public transit would appear to require massive public investments to make up for the money that is lost from fares. In large cities with large transit systems and high ridership levels, this is the case. However, when it comes to places with small public transit systems and low ridership, resort villages, or college towns, there is often little to no money that is required to make public transit free (Kębłowski 2019; Volinski 2012; Perone 2002; Hodge et al. 1994). In these instances, there is little debate that free public transit is not only beneficial but is easily attainable (Perone 2002).

Most municipalities require some level of public transportation for people who either cannot afford to, are unable to, or choose not to own an automobile. When it comes to more rural or suburban areas where ridership levels are extremely low, free public transit has been found to save money. As discussed previously, insuring the fare box and the operational expenses of swipe card technology are costly. In some instances, particularly when there are only one or two people on a bus at the busiest times, the funds recovered through the fare box do not cover the expenses of collecting a fare (Ługowski 2018). Likewise, resort towns across North America are quickly implementing free public transit as a way to keep prices lower for local taxpayers (Volinski 2012). Breckenridge, Colorado, is a perfect example of a ski village with free public transit. During the off-season, Breckenridge has a population of roughly 3,400 people; but during

the busy season, that number goes up to over 50,000 on the weekend. Free public transit is seen as essential in Breckenridge to control congestion on its streets (Volinski 2012). Without free public transit, the cost of maintaining public infrastructure would be too high on the local population. Breckenridge determined that it was cheaper to abolish fares than it was to widen roads and build more parking spaces. In addition, if tourists are able to travel around town for free with less congestion, they may be more willing to go out for the night after skiing and spend more money at local restaurants and shops. This has the potential to increase the local tax base, benefitting locals more than a fare would (Ray 2018).

At many colleges and universities across the United States, students are either given a bus pass or are mandated to purchase one through their student fees. In towns where this practice occurred and where universities and colleges are the primary economic driver, universities and students were found to be massively subsidising public transit for the area. As a result of these programs, many towns that are dominated by universities have been able to abolish fares. In 2011, Corvallis, Oregon (pop 54,000), the home of Oregon State University, voted to increase utility bills by \$2.75 per month and abolish fares (Volinski 2012). They were only able to do so because roughly 50 percent of the existing riders were already a part of a group transit pass through the University. Corvallis decided that making transit free and adding the minimal increase to utility bills was well worth the price.

Free public transit can also be implemented as an economic development tool. This is seen more on a partially-free basis than universally free, but could easily be extended to encompass an entire transit system. Free transit zones began in the 1970s as a

way to get shoppers to explore the downtown shopping districts. It was a way to get people to shop at multiple retail stores without being discouraged by fares (Ray 2018). Many of these free zones can still be found across the United States.

The economic approaches to free public transit range from a neutral position within capitalism to a position that actively works to support it. On the one hand, free public transit zones are seen as a way to actively support capitalism and prop up businesses. The neutral position, on the other hand, keeps all funding the same and does not eliminate public services, but it does not challenge the private sector either. It becomes the equivalent of public education, something that is necessary to have, but not something that will radically challenge the private sector. If that results in free public transit so be it, but if it does not result in free public transit, there is no disappointment either. Under the economic approach, free public transit is unlikely to be brought forward by politicians if they believed it would radically challenge the status quo.

## 2.4 Environment

For some, free public transit is the next big policy to mitigate climate change. In order to keep global temperatures below 1.5°C, emissions must be reduced 45 percent by 2030, and reach net zero by 2050 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018). Transportation accounts for a quarter of all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Dellheim 2018) and it is common knowledge that automobiles are a large percent of that. With less than a decade left to reduce emissions by 45 percent, some climate activists have begun looking to free public transit as a way to enact a modal shift. A modal shift is a change between two or more modes of transportation. For example, the modal shift desired by environmentalists

is a shift from private automobiles to public transit. Free public transit will see an immediate increase in public transit use, but there are mixed results when it comes to a decrease in automobile use (Kębłowski 2019, City of Ottawa 2011, Perone 2002, Hodge et al. 1994).

Since 2010, student governments at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University have participated in the UPass program with OC Transpo, the transit system in Ottawa, Ontario. A study conducted by the City of Ottawa (2011) shortly after the implementation of the UPass found that Carleton's public transit modal share increased from 50.1 percent to 69.7 percent (+19.3 percent), and its automobile modal share decreased from 35.3 percent to 23.6 percent (-11.7 percent). At the same time, the University of Ottawa saw a similar increase in public transit modal share from 43.6 percent to 59 percent (+15.4 percent) but did not see any changes in automobile modal share which remained at 25 percent (City of Ottawa 2011).

There are a few observations that can be drawn from the City of Ottawa's (2011) study. First, it should be noted that Carleton University began with a higher percentage of automobile users, and the UPass brought Carleton's automobile modal share in line with the automobile modal share at the University of Ottawa at around 25 percent. Second, the public transit increase at the University of Ottawa came entirely from active transit users, unlike at Carleton where the increase came from both active transit and automobiles. This suggests that there is a certain percentage of people in each student population that are likely to use a car regardless of whether there are free fares or not. This could be due to a number of factors such as distance, transit accessibility, or personal preference.

Regardless of the reasoning, 25 per cent of students at the two universities continued to use automobiles to get to school.

From a modal shift perspective, free public transit for Carleton's students was a success while, it was a failure at the University of Ottawa. Even though Carleton saw a large drop in active transit users, there was still a significant modal decrease of 11.7 percent among automobile users. If the goal of free public transit is to eliminate the use of automobiles, then the money spent at Carleton was worth the cost, whereas at the University of Ottawa, the cost of the UPass would have been better spent elsewhere.

Students are already a disproportionately high percentage of public transit users (Miller et al. 2018). While they were able to get their automobile modal share down to 25 percent, it should not be expected that the broader population would do the same. In Tallinn, Estonia, free public transit saw an increase in the public transit mode from 55 to 63 percent (Cats et al. 2017). This increase in public transit use largely occurred among people ages 15-19 and 60-74, those who were unemployed, and those who were low income. Subsequently, there was a decrease in public transit use among the wealthy.

These increases in public transit use are seen as problematic because they are not attracting the "choice riders" (Perone 2002). "Choice riders" are the people that a policy such as free public transit is trying to attract. In the case of modal shift, "choice riders" tend to be automobile drivers that the transit agency is trying to lure onto public transit, as well as people who otherwise couldn't get where they need to go (Perone 2002). Automobile drivers are often identified as the "choice riders" because largely, transport policy focuses on sustainability and is looking for ways to reduce greenhouse gases

(Kębłowski et al. 2019). As a result, active transit users, joyriders, and people who are unhoused are labelled “problem riders”. It is claimed that these “problem riders” overwhelm the system and scare away the “choice riders” who have another method of transportation (Perone 2002). If modal shift is the primary goal most studies have found that increased gas prices, parking and road restrictions, increased quality and frequency of public transit, and road pricing would all be more effective than lowering or eliminating fares (Kębłowski 2019, Miller et al. 2018, Hess 2017).

These mixed results as to whether free public transit will bring about a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions have brought pause to the free public transit movement. They question why free public transit does not bring about the environmental benefits that we would expect. Ultimately, environmentalism is not an ideology in and of itself. It is still constrained by the political system within which it is housed. We can have eco-socialism, eco-capitalism, or eco-fascism. The belief by many, especially in North America, that environmentalism is an ideology is flawed. Free public transit will take on the type environmentalism of the political system in which it is housed. In order for free public transit to be an environmental policy, it must take into account larger societal issues than the cost of fares.

## 2.5 Social Justice

The third reason that people support free public transit is for social justice. Proponents of free public transit that focus on social benefits do so because they believe that free public transit will reduce poverty, increase mobility, and encourage engagement with the democratic process. Those who advocate for free public transit for the social

benefits tend to argue that the social costs of not having transit be free outweigh any financial costs that may arise (Kębłowski 2019).

The most evident social benefit of free public transit is the financial savings of existing and future public transit riders. Making public transit free would immediately put the money spent on public transit back into the pockets of those who take public transit. In some cities, this could account to thousands of dollars a year, depending on how many people take public transit in a family. In the U.K., the Freedom Pass, a free transit pass for all people over the age of 65, has made pensions last longer (Green et al. 2014). The financial savings for riders depends on the city in which they live but can exceed \$100 a month. On a pension, that \$100 can make a very big difference.

Low-income groups disproportionately use public transit. They also have more difficulty affording public transit. Free public transit makes it easier for low-income people to take public transit. It is unlikely that fares will stop low-income people taking public transit because mobility is a necessity, but lower or free public transit will make mobility easier (Perotta 2017). Without having to pay a fare, people may be able to be more mobile. In Milton, Ontario, free public transit on Mondays for seniors led to an increase in social capital, as they were able to see friends without having to worry about the cost (Mah and Mitra 2017).

Local governments have used free public transit in an attempt to get residents more involved in the political process. Governments often make public transit free on election day to help get people to the polls (Chan 2019). During major political moments such as the student climate strikes, Montreal even made public transit free to ensure that



students could get to the protests in an environmentally conscious way (Henriques 2019). An extension of this logic would be that free public transit would also have the ability to bring people to city hall during key debates to have their voices heard.

Free public transit not only benefits riders, it can also be a way to improve health and safety for transit workers. An internal survey by the Amalgamated Transit Union (2016) found that the two leading causes of assaults on transit workers was fare disputes (73 percent) and inadequate service (35 percent). With free public transit, fare disputes would no longer occur, greatly reducing the number of assaults. Free public transit would not only benefit transit operators; it would benefit the entire labour movement by enabling people to take public transit to work. If workers did not have to worry about paying for transportation to and from work, it would put hundreds of dollars back into their pockets to pay for other necessities in life.

Free public transit has also been used by communist governments to restore humanity to the city (Jäggi 2018). This most notably occurred in Bologna, Italy, in the 1960s (Jäggi 2018). Bologna's communist government used free public transit to prize public over private. "Even if a car cannot move any more because of traffic, it still guarantees the private economy more profits than all other alternatives" (35). They used free public transit among other infrastructure changes to combat car culture in the city.

There are many different social justice reasons that people support free public transit. While these social justice positions are more firmly situated on the left, they can range from more social democratic reforms to revolutionary communism. Regardless of the political ideology backing social justice changes, there remains the common theme that the price of inaction outweighs the financial costs. This can range from using free

public transit to reduce poverty up to using it as a revolutionary demand to reclaim the city from capitalism.

## Chapter 3

### 3 The National Context

This chapter catalogues free public transit in Canada from the first mass movement for free public transit in the 1970s until 2020. It outlines how free public transit began in Montreal and the student movement and in recent years has been embraced across the political spectrum. Finally, I lay out the ideological justifications that politicians, union activists, and community organizers have endorsed and used to fight for free public transit in their communities.

#### 3.1 1970 Montreal

The Canadian free public transit movement dates back to Montreal in the 1970s. During the 1970 municipal election, Mayor Jean Drapeau won 92 percent of the vote and his centre-right party won every seat on the city council (Prince 2018). In 1973, the *Rassemblement des citoyens et des citoyennes de Montreal* or the Montreal Citizen's Movement (MCM), was formed to challenge the municipal elections. Free public transit for seniors, with a gradual implementation for everyone, was a central demand throughout the campaign (Raboy 1982). In an effort to unite riders and public transit workers, the MCM's plan was to pay for free public transit through increased taxes on wealthy corporations. This way, workers would not be affected by a decrease in decrease in pay or benefits, and at the same time, riders would not be harmed through decreased service (Raboy 1982). When the ballots were counted, the MCM won 45 per cent of the vote and became the first organized opposition in a decade.

In April 1975, the MCM moved a motion for free public transit for seniors. This motion was supported by the signatures of 75,000 people and 150 civic groups (Prince 2018). In October 1975, a 42 per cent fare hike was announced. Students protested the hikes by jumping turnstiles and paying with pennies. Pennies made it impossible for drivers to know how much each rider was paying and the sheer number of pennies filled up the fare boxes making it impossible for riders to continue to pay (Prince 2018). On October 23, 1975, 15,000 – 20,000 people marched on city hall calling for free public transportation for seniors and students. While it appeared as though the movement may have been growing, there was discontent within the ranks. What began as a coalition of unions, students, communists, tenants, the Parti Québécois, and the New Democratic Party quickly fell apart (Prince 2018). Shortly after the march on City Hall, the movement crumbled and by January 1976, the movement for free public transit had disappeared (Prince 2018). By the time the MCM would come to power in 1986, free public transportation had been removed from their platform.

### 3.2 2000 - 2015

It would be nearly three decades after the march on the City Hall in Montreal before free public transit would again become a rallying cry. This time it was among the student's movement. Throughout this study I was able to identify at least 40 colleges and universities across the country voted to negotiate with local transit agencies for UPasses. As a result, over 750,000 students have access to free public transit on a daily basis. Councillor Shawn Menard was a key organizer behind the 2009 UPass campaign at Carleton and the University of Ottawa while he was a graduate student at Carleton. He

states, “look we all pay for libraries, we all pay for the gym in university, but we may not use those things so public transit seems like a public good that should be treated the same way in university and that was one of the concepts we ran with in terms of how do we decide which goods need to be part of our payments versus a service fee” (Councillor Shawn Menard Interview). This method of thinking has expanded beyond university and college campuses, but has not yet resulted in any large Canadian cities implementing free public transit.

The UPass has proven to be a popular program. The UPass at Carleton proved to be a popular initiative as a follow up referendum was passed overwhelmingly (Peric 2012). When the Ontario Conservative Government announced the student choice initiative, the UPass was on the chopping block. After student outcry and support from transit agencies who would not be able to function without the UPass revenue, the UPass was deemed an essential service that students would have to continue paying (McInnes 2019) Recently, students at Western University almost lost the bus pass because of COVID-19. After backlash from students, the University Students Council reversed order and offered the UPass to virtual students as well as those that will be on campus (Mahood 2020).

In 2009, free public transit became a central campaign of the Greater Toronto Worker’s Assembly (GTWA). The GTWA was formed in an attempt to create an independent anti-capitalist voice for workers, the unemployed, precariously employed, unionized, and non-unionized people (Greater Toronto Worker’s Assembly 2016). It was an attempt to create an alternative to capitalism in Toronto as opposed to short-term strategies which unions and other groups were taking to protect their members at the

time. Along with a number of other committees, the GTWA formed the Free and Accessible Transit Campaign. “The campaign was developed in the spirit of the Right to the City campaigns being organized in some U.S. cities. The idea is that public transit — central to the needs of working people across the city, and a key strategic element in creating good jobs, dealing with climate change, and structuring life in the city — should be free of fares and treated as a non-commodified right for all people” (Greater Toronto Workers Assembly 2016). While the GTWA dissolved in 2015, the campaign for Free and Accessible Transit has continued on through Free Transit Toronto.

### 3.3 Campaigns

Over the last number of years there have been a number of different campaigns that have popped up around free public transit. What these campaigns show is that the free public transit movement goes beyond making public transit free. Free public transit is the flashy demand that gets thrown around and it gets people’s attention. It especially gets the attention of the media. The free public transit not only wants to make public transit free; they want to expand transit, ensure that it remains publicly owned, and in some cases bring it under public control.

When they launched their campaign in Edmonton, Free Transit Edmonton was challenged by city council. They asked whether they wanted free public transit or good public transit. They responded by saying “good transit or free transit? We reject the ‘choice’. We need both” (Kruse and McIntosh 2020). Free Transit Edmonton does not just want to make public transit free; they want to make it available to people throughout the city who currently do not have access to transit because they live in a transit desert.

In Ottawa, Free Transit Ottawa is pushing for not only free and expanded publicly owned transit, they are pushing for the democratization of transit. Their campaign includes demands such as expanding the Ottawa Transit Commission from an eight person committee made up of counsellors to a twelve person committee made up of four elected community representatives, two transit workers, and six counsellors (Free Transit Ottawa 2020). This will not only make it that people no longer have to pay for public transit, it will ensure that the people who are riding and working on public transit have a say at the table.

In Victoria, Councillor Ben Isitt is calling on the people to use their power to push for free public transit for youth, a key first step in making the Victoria Metropolitan area entirely free (Isitt 2020). In Victoria, city council has been a strong advocate for free public transit, but without the grassroots support of the surrounding communities, it will be difficult to make free public transit universal. This is why he has called on students, parents, and families to work together to “lobby your municipal and provincial elected officials to make fare-free public transit a reality for every young person in this region” (Isitt 2020). Without this people power free public transit in the region has stalled and limited to only youth under the age of 18.

### 3.4 Free Public Transit in Practice

Free public transit is not a purely theoretical idea in Canada. There are six municipalities, five in Quebec and one in Alberta, that have free public transit. Beginning in 2014, Sainte-Julie (pop. 30,000), Candiac (pop. 21,000), Saint-Philippe (pop. 5,500), and La Prairie (pop. 23,300), four South Shore suburbs of Montreal, became the first

Canadian municipalities to implement free public transit on local routes (CBC 2014). They were joined in 2019 by Canmore, Alberta (pop. 13,000), and Mont-Tremblant, Quebec (pop. 10,000) (Conboy 2019; CBC News 2019). It is important to note that in each of these cases, free public transit does not extend beyond the municipality's limits. Regional buses and commuter buses to adjacent towns or cities still require a fare. Even though it is only local routes that are free, these six municipalities account for over 100,000 people who do not have to pay to get transportation to school or the grocery store.

There has also been a surge in partial free public transit initiatives across the country. These partial schemes are most prevalent among children under the age of 12, with Victoria being the lone municipality with free public transit up to the age of 18. In recent years, London, Burlington, Toronto, GO Transit, and Whistler are just a few of the cities to expand free transit to ages 12 and under. Vancouver has also passed a motion to expand free public transit for youth, but it has not yet been implemented (Chan and Plana 2019).

Elsewhere, free public transit can be found for seniors, low-income people, or in certain areas of the city. In February 2020, St. John's Newfoundland announced that they would give approximately 10,000 free bus passes to income support recipients (Antle 2020), while Ottawa has had free public transit for seniors on Wednesdays and Sundays for many years. Meanwhile, Calgary's C-Line has had a stretch in downtown that has been free since it was constructed in the 1980s (Oldridge 2012).



In each instance where free public transit has expanded in Canada there has been no dominant ideology pushing it to happen. Often, the implementation of free public transit has caught members of the community off guard. It has not been something that was widely campaigned on during elections, and it is often as a result of not having to drastically alter budgets.

### 3.5 Big Tent

Recent expansions of free public transit have shown that it is a big tent issue. Free public transit in various different forms has been supported by politicians from across the political spectrum. The centre-left Federal New Democratic Party (NDP) became the first major political party to endorse free public transit by including it in their 2019 platform (New Democratic Party 2019). That same year the Ontario Conservative Party extended free public transit on all GO Transit services from ages six and under to ages twelve and under (Westoll and Shum 2019). During the 2020 Ontario Liberal leadership race, runner up Michael Coteau, included free public transit in their leadership platform (Coteau 2019; Benzie 2019). To some extent, politicians from all three major political parties have endorsed universal free public transit or expanded it on a partial basis.

City councillors and candidates across Canada are running on free public transit or are researching the costs and methods of implementation. During the 2019 Ontario municipal elections, Shawn Menard (Ottawa City Council) and Saron Gebreselassi (Toronto Mayoral Candidate) put free public transit at the centre of their platforms (Menard 2018; Engler 2018). Shawn Menard would go on to become the new city

councillor for Capital Ward; and although Saron Gebreselassi came in fourth place, the idea of free public transit came to dominate debates (Engler 2018). In January 2020, St. Albert, Alberta, began offering free public transit to seniors at a cost of approximately \$44,000. When the mayor and councillors discovered it would only cost \$286,000 to make the entire transit system free, they began to propose the potential of making the entire system free (Lawson 2020).

In April 2019, Victoria, B.C., became the largest Canadian city to formally endorse free public transit. Victoria, like most Canadian municipalities, does not have political parties, but the motion to endorse free public transit was by politicians from across the political spectrum. Ben Isitt, one of the city councillors to introduce the motion on free public transit said that “It was the more conservative councillors who didn’t support moving forward with the youth pass but they had voted in favour at an earlier phase, but I do believe we were unanimous in the advocacy motion calling for fare-free public transit for everyone” (Councillor Ben Isitt Interview). While conservative councillors did not support the method of moving forward with free public transit, they supported the idea. One could say that this is a political move, but regardless of the reason, they still voted in favour at one point in the process.

Across the country, a growing number of public transit advocacy organizations such as Free Transit Toronto, Free Transit Edmonton, and Free Transit Ottawa are beginning to support free public transit or are forming with free public transit as their main focus. Community groups that support free public transit can be found in Ottawa, Edmonton, Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, and London, not to mention the countless organizations pushing for free transit for children 12 and under. These groups have a mix

of political positions. While they are heavily dominated by centre-left to left wing political ideologies, centrists can be found as well. “Within Free Transit Ottawa there are a whole host of centrist liberals there who are in favour of it, and they go to that group because they want to see it as well. To some extent, it’s not just, you know, a left idea” (Councillor Shawn Menard Interview).

Trade unions across the country have begun advocating for free public transit as well. In May 2019, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1505 (public transit workers in Winnipeg) escalated their job actions by stopping fare enforcement for a day. It is estimated that the city lost between \$40,000 and \$45,000 as a result of the action (Glowacki 2019). In July 2019, CUPE Local 2 penned an open letter titled, “TTC electrical workers call for FREE PUBLIC TRANSIT and a campaign of mass strikes and protests to BRING DOWN DOUG FORD” (CUPE Local 2 2020).

It has not only been politicians, community organizations, and unions that have begun calling for free public transit. Members of the community who are not affiliated with any specific group have begun to turn their attention towards free public transit. As one member of Free Transit Toronto put it, “I think now it’s like we are seeing a lot more people from other movements or people who are not involved in movements who are talking about it” (Joan, Free Transit Toronto). This would be supported by a recent poll which found that 53% of people would favour free public transit and another 30% would “go along with the idea” (Abacus 2020).

In one form or another, free public transit has been supported by politicians from across the political spectrum. While this may be the case, free public transit remains a

politically charged topic. It may be supported across the political spectrum, but the funding and implementation models differ greatly.

While at first one might expect free public transit to be a radical left-wing demand, we can see in practice that it is much more nuanced than that. Free public transit, both nationally and internationally, has taken many different forms. It has been used by communists to combat the power capital holds over the city. In other instances, free public transit has been used by centrists to save money in the municipal budget. The funding and ideological backing for free public transit will have differing material outcomes. While the free public transit movement in Canada began as a left-wing movement in Montreal, the demand for free public transit has become a big tent policy promoted by differing sides of the political spectrum to suit their agenda.

### 3.6 Solving Poverty and Environmental Degradation Go Hand in Hand

Free public transit is often an attempt by people in the local community to address larger societal issues. There are many different reasons that people dedicate their time and energy to advocate for free public transit; chief among them being poverty reduction and the climate crisis. Secondly, but of no lesser importance, activists cite that police violence and racial justice along with labour struggles for good jobs and a safe working environment brought them to advocate for free public transit.

Free public transit is being spurred on by a generation that has seen both the 2008 financial crisis and the more recent Friday Climate Strikes led by Greta Thunberg. Many

of these activists are people who care deeply about economic inequality and climate change and trying to find a campaign that is able to address both. Dru Jay from the Courage Coalition states, “The point is it marries redistribution of wealth with reduction of fossil fuel consumption” (Bankuti 2019). For those seeking to reduce poverty and decrease greenhouse gas emissions, free public transit is an opportunity to do just this.

It is also an attempt to go beyond the current climate movement and push for more broad changes than just saving the planet. There are underlying critiques of the current environmental movement and free public transit is an attempt to broaden the scope of environmentalists.

If you’re not careful with climate change rhetoric it goes quickly into some sort of eco fascism where we have to do population control or where you see things like during that coup in Bolivia where Tesla stocks surged because they have an access to lithium now that they didn’t before and that’s not what I want to see either. I want to see like a more broad-based socialist reform than kind of a green capitalism. ( Laura, Free Transit Edmonton)

For activists, this ability to combine the climate movement and other ideological motivations such as socialist reforms or reducing poverty is a key reason to push for free public transit. It is a way to benefit working class people while at the same time protecting the environment, two groups of people that are often put at odds with one another.

### 3.7 The Labour Movement

Recently, there has been a surge among labour activists advocating for free public transit. In July 2019, CUPE Local 2, the electrical workers on the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) penned an open letter titled, “TTC electrical workers call for FREE PUBLIC TRANSIT and a campaign of mass strikes and protests to BRING DOWN DOUG FORD” (emphasis in original). CUPE Local 2’s open letter was written by blue collar workers who feared for their livelihoods. Workers feared that the Ontario Conservative Government was going to privatize the transit industry. It was not a call for free public transit as a part of the Green New Deal or some other environmental campaign; it was included as “part of a strike campaign which was unapologetically pro union” (Tynan Liebert Interview). The goal was to show that free public transit, and the expansion of public transit, would not harm the workers by decreasing salary or benefits, but instead that campaigns such as this would unite transit riders and workers in a common struggle.

When Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) 1505 was in a legal strike position, they decided to stop enforcing fares as a form of job action as opposed to going on strike. ATU 1505 president Aleem Chaudhary said “We’re not going on a full strike. We’re not walking the picket lines. One of the main reasons we don’t want to do that is we don’t want to inconvenience the public” and “rather than disrupt the lives of many thousands of people, who go to work and go about their daily business, we would rather provide the service, but at the same time, we want to take job action” (Kives 2019). This action by ATU 1505 created an opportunity for drivers to show their riders that while they needed

better working conditions, they also recognized the strain a strike would place on their riders.

Labour activists are turning to free public transit to not only to protect their jobs, but to create more unionized jobs. “As a union we are about something bigger than just our own members. We are part of the labour movement. We stand for good jobs for all. Together we have the power to defeat the employers’ agenda of cuts to vital services” (CUPE Local 2 Statement). Public transit in Canada is heavily unionized and any increase in jobs will mean that more Canadians are employed in highly paid unionize fields. Free public transit will also help other workers get to their jobs at a reduced cost.

Lastly, labour activists see free public transit as a form of health and safety. During COVID-19, at least 20 Canadian cities made public transit free in order to eliminate riders interacting with high touch surfaces and to ensure social distancing from transit workers (Leedham 2020). Fare boxes are high touch surfaces and many transit agencies did not want to risk the possibility of community transmissions. There is also the belief that free public transit would lead to less assaults on bus drivers. “Fare-free transit may support a safer workplace. Because most assaults on operators arise because of fare disputes, eliminating fares may make the job safer for transit operators” (Burt-D’Agnillo 2020). The logical argument here is that if fare enforcement no longer occurs, there is a lower possibility that riders will get angry with workers and assault them.

Free public transit has the potential to help the labour movement unite with the broader community. That is contingent on how the campaign is conducted by unions. If free public transit is used as a strike technique, it will only occur during the strike. The

case of CUPE Local 2, their call appears to be a broader campaign than just during a strike. However, once the government backed off on privatization, CUPE Local 2 stopped agitating for a general strike. Free public transit is a new demand among unions and the future will tell how it will look.

### 3.8 Police Violence and Racial Justice

For an increasing number of people, free public transit is about racial justice and the police state. They argue that free public transit is a way to reduce interactions with police that disproportionately affects BIPOC. For decades, public transit police have been randomly stopping transit riders to see if they paid a fare. “Imagine how empowering free transit would be: No more barriers between you and your destinations. No more fare gates. No more harassment from ‘fare police’” (Free Transit Toronto 2018). Transit police get their power from being able to stop people without cause to check for a ticket. Not being able to stop people in this way will greatly diminish their power (Wilt 2020). Fare checks are a common tactic used to identify undocumented workers and unlawfully search people on public transit. For example, in 2013, Vancouver Transit Police reported 328 undocumented people to the Canadian Border Services Agency (Wilt 2020). Without the ability to stop people to check for a ticket, many of these people it is argued would never have been identified by the police.

There is a history of violence from police on public transit. In 2011 a UBC student was violently beaten by Vancouver transit police after police did not believe he had given his proper name or paid for a ticket (Robinson 2020). In 2020, two Toronto Police officers were charged with assault after beating a man who refused to get off a



TTC bus the previous year (Fox 2020). Free public transit would not eliminate all interactions with transit police on public transit, but it is argued that they will be minimized due to no longer having fare checks. As a result, the hope is that public transit will be safer for BIPOC who will no longer be harassed by police.

Free public transit it is argued would also greatly benefit indigenous people in both urban and rural areas. For some, free public transit is not just about public transit in cities, but between cities as well (Tynan Liebert Interview). “The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls also identifies lack of transportation as a critical factor in endangering Indigenous women. Making transit fare free would be an enormous step in making our community safer and more accessible to everyone” (Kruse and Macintosh 2020). A lack of affordable public transit infrastructure, especially with Greyhound leaving Western Canada and the selling off of the Saskatchewan Transportation Company, has made it difficult for women to access supports and is endangering women across Canada on a daily basis. Free public transit accompanied with expanding public transit is desperately needed to keep Indigenous women safe.

### 3.9 Anti-Capitalism

Lastly, there are activists for whom free public transit is part of the broader anti-capitalist struggle. They use free public transit as an educational and practical tool to show what an alternative to capitalism could be.

I think that it becomes a place where you can also kind of expand people’s understanding of what they should be entitled to enjoy in their life. We shouldn’t be subsidizing our public services with cash, right? Those should be collectively

paid for by people who own property and businesses and landlords and all those people. We should be sharing that burden collectively with them and give it to the people that need it. (Laura, Free Transit Edmonton)

This educational tool is a way to help people imagine an alternative future. Free public transit is an effective way to discuss these larger anti-capitalist narratives because public transit is daily requirement for many people. In order to talk about how we can collectively work together to create a better world, it is ideal to be able to paint a picture of what that would look like.

In practice, free public transit can also play a role in the anti-capitalist struggle. “As someone who already ultimately, ultimate goal is a society where private property and money no longer exist, free public transit was a no brainer” (Tynan Liebert Interview). This sentiment for Liebert runs deep as a transit worker. As transit workers, they are running the system, but have no control over it. If the ultimate goal is a world without money and private property, free public transit is a practical tool to advance those goals.

### 3.10 Many Areas at Once

One of the biggest attractions of free public transit is that you can address all of these areas at once.

Obviously you can't be involved in everything because of time constraints, but I thought it was a really good cross section of a lot of things that I cared about and care about, I guess. You know, it's like it's not just about mobility, it's really a

huge equity imbalance, I guess. It's like an issue with everyone being able to access mobility, but also kind of keeping out public spaces truly public. It's got a huge sort of racial justice component to it, fare enforcement, and it's obviously related to climate justice and then just in terms of like the social benefits of free mobility around the city as kind of from an urban planning perspective, I think there are just a lot of things that free transit kind of encompasses. (Joan, Free Transit Toronto)

Time and time again, participants brought up the fact that free public transit covers so many different topics that they care about. There are many issues happening in our world, and for many of those who are advocating for free public transit, it is a way to address all of those areas that they care about all at the same time. In certain instances, different justifications take precedence, but often, activists are attracted to free public transit because they are not constrained to one topic.

## Chapter 4

### 4 The National Context: Challenges and Potential

In this chapter I lay out the challenges that face the free public transit movement in Canada. I find that the two major challenges that free public transit faces are the embedded neoliberal structures in Canadian politics and the minimal powers of municipal governments. I then examine how free public transit is being commodified by businesses to supply an endless stream of customers. Finally, I argue that in order to overcome the challenges that face the free public transit movement, we must go beyond free publicly-owned transit.

#### 4.1 Challenges

One of the biggest challenges for free public transit is “convincing people of the benefits of allocating tax dollars to remove user fees. Essentially building public support for the idea that transit should be paid for through the tax system rather than the fare box. You are pushing up against right wing ideology, neoliberal ideology that we should have less government services rather than more” (Councillor Ben Isitt Interview). Politicians and the general public alike are constrained by neoliberal ideology. For decades, neoliberal ideology has dominated the Canadian political landscape. Entire generations have never known an alternative to neoliberalism.

Even within transit activism, capitalism has stifled the imagination of activists. Outside of Quebec, free public transit is a relatively new idea within transit activism and

at times is outwardly rejected as too unrealistic and expensive. Transit activists generally push for affordable fares and increases to the existing system.

I think the biggest challenge at least in Toronto is that there are so many transit issues that it's something that we've heard a lot and something that I guess the number one thing lately is that people are saying that it's not — that we don't have the capacity to implement free transit because we can't even operate our transit system currently at — its bursting at the seams pretty much and there hasn't been proper funding and there is like all of these shortages and it's a total mess and people are fixated on that. So, I think some people balk at the idea of like why would you ask for free transit when we can't even have proper transit that works? (Joan, Free Transit Toronto)

Free transit activists do not differentiate free public transit and expanded services. They argue that both are needed in order for either to work effectively (Kruse and McIntosh 2020); but there remain underlying doubts from outside of the movement about the efficacy of free public transit as we have not seen a massive expansion of public services within Canada for decades.

The expansion of free public transit both universally and partially in Canada has occurred up to this point because it fits within the neoliberal framework. As highlighted by Suzanne Roy, mayor of Sainte-Julie, “we were able to do it without extra spending” (CBC News 2014). Presumably, this is due to the fact that having fare box technology costs more than the amount Sainte-Julie was bringing in through fares. In other instances,

charging for parking was able to offset the cost. As Canmore Mayor John Borrowman put it,

parking has never been free. It's always been a cost that has been borne by the local taxpayer: the cost of providing that infrastructure and maintaining it. With paid parking and those paid parking revenues going toward our transit fares, our visitors are helping to pay for those costs, rather than 100 percent of them coming from local residents (Rieger 2019).

Charging a fee for parking fits takes the cost off of the taxpayer and placed onto the tourist who is visiting the town. Canmore is a tourist destination, and this proposal will cost the same amount of money on the taxpayer as the previous system, but with the priority moved from the car owner to the local transit user. Investments in public transit do not necessitate anti-neoliberal sentiments.

In St. John's, NL, 10,000 free bus passes for people on income support were offset by savings in the health care industry. Patients were calling the hospital for ambulances when they couldn't afford other methods of travel, and doctors were filling out excess paperwork to help reimburse patients for transit costs (Antle 2020). By taking a more holistic approach to paying for community services, the taxpayer can potentially save money by giving free public transit passes to people who otherwise would take an ambulance for non-emergency calls.

Even in instances where free public transit may cost the transit agency a lot of money, the case can be made for it to fit the neoliberal framework. The Ontario government and City of Toronto expanded free public transit to children 12 and under on

GO Transit and the TTC. As the Ontario Conservative Government put it, expanding free public transit to children 12 and under is “a program that generates money” (Westoll and Shum 2019). It limits the costs of families going out into the city where they are more likely to spend money than if they stay home. While the transit system and by extent the government may have to invest extra money into public transit, they view it as a business subsidy.

The ability to fit free public transit within a neoliberal framework made free public transit possible. Regardless of the reasons, expanding free public transit in these instances has not cost taxpayers or businesses millions of dollars a year, which made it possible for the local governments to make public transit free with limited opposition. Additionally, in the instances of universal free transit, none of these programs occurred in places with over 35,000 people, meaning that they remain very small initiatives, and the cost structures do not radically alter a city’s budget or the status quo of transportation on a national level. If free public transit were to occur on a larger scale, such as in a city of over 100,000, there would likely be larger conflict with capitalism. As discussed in chapter two, there is little academic opposition to free public transit for these smaller municipalities (Perone 2002). In large cities on the other hand, free public transit will be a significant financial expense. While Mont-Tremblant may be able to afford the minimal cost of \$400,000 a year to make public transit free, cities such as Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto would likely need anywhere from one to three billion dollar a year, depending on the increase in demand.

## 4.2 Political Structures

The second major challenge to free public transit is political structures. Under Canadian law, municipalities are the responsibility of provincial governments and municipalities are unable to run deficits. In all provinces with the exception of British Columbia, public transit is a municipal issue. In British Columbia, public transit is run by provincial crown corporations. While the federal and provincial governments are able to create and impose taxes, the only significant way for a municipality to create revenue is through property taxes.

Without federal and provincial funding, cities would likely have to increase property taxes to have sustained funding. When Councillor Shawn Menard was elected in the 2018 Ottawa municipal election, he was lambasted by Mayor Jim Watson for endorsing free public transit. Watson said that the only way to make public transit free was a 12% increase in property taxes. “So, everybody says woah, 12% but for the average household with an assessed value of \$500,000, that would be \$600/year. A transit pass costs \$1,300 a year for transit now and for \$600 they could have free transit” (Donald, Free Transit Ottawa). While a 12% increase in property taxes may be beneficial for riders, that 12% increase will require political will from politicians at city hall.

If there was political will in Ottawa to make public transit free, then there is a possibility that free public transit could come about through increasing property taxes. The political system at the municipal level is not set up to make it possible for people who live in the city to have a say in government decisions.



Harris who reconfigured the government the city of Ottawa so that it is now dominated by the suburbs and rural parts of the area. There is a kind of a right-wing majority built into the council that are very pro-business, pro car, all of that. They are an enormous obstacle to doing anything. It's not that there aren't transit issues and poverty issues in the areas that they represent; but they are newer areas and there are certain parts of the local population that are organized around the Conservative Party and the right wing of the liberal party and other parts of the population are not organized at the community level. Until that happens those people are not going to be turfed. (Donald, Free Transit Ottawa)

The amalgamations of the 1990s created larger city councils and larger cities, which has limited the ability for people in the community to have a say over how their government runs. While councillors in one area of the city may favour free public transit, the suburbs, which are dominated by automobiles, will continue to overrule these types of decisions.

In April 2019, Victoria City Council became the first Canadian city to endorse free public transit (Zussman 2019). The barriers that Victoria faces differ than those in Ottawa because the province runs public transit through BC Transit, a provincial crown corporation. In order for transportation changes to happen in Victoria, the city must get the greater Victoria region to support it. Members of the board of directors for the Victoria Regional Transit System are from Saanich, Sooke, Oak Bay, North Saanich, Colwood, and Victoria. While Victoria may have endorsed the motion, the surrounding municipalities did not. Neither did the B.C. NDP, as Premier John Horgan quickly said that "I believe Victoria's ideas are all well and good, if they want to raise the money in Victoria to pay for it" (Zussman 2019). While there are a few councillors throughout the

region that support free public transit, it will require a broader movement across Victoria and likely British Columbia to implement free public transit (Murray 2019).

In a tied 4-4 vote, the Victoria Transit Commission effectively voted down free public transit in the region. “To have supported the motion would have detracted from where we are putting our focus,” said Victoria Transit Commission Chair Susan Brice, “At some point, when we’ve reached a system that meets the needs of the greatest number of people, I say sure, let’s look at it” (van der Zwan 2020). In addition, one of the main reasons cited to strike down the motion was that the Victoria Transit Commission believed that other options such as expanding service would have a bigger environmental impact than free public transit (van der Zwan 2020).

This did not stop Victoria from beginning to look at expanding free public transit for their residents. In December 2019, the city purchased 11,000 passes with taxpayer money from the Victoria Transit Commission to distribute to youth 18 and under. In theory, with this program and the UPass, the overwhelming majority of youth under 25 living within Victoria’s city limits will have free access to public transit. The expansion of free public transit to youth 18 and under was paid for through charging for on-street parking. Even in a city such as Victoria that pushed for free public transit for reasons relating to poverty reduction and the environment, they continue to be constrained by capitalist structures.

As municipalities are currently set up across Canada, it is difficult for people to have a large impact in their local community. Municipalities do not hold a lot of power and in the few areas where they can make changes, they are blocked by suburban

politicians. In order to implement free public transit, the movement must account for these systemic challenges that limit the power of the people.

### 4.3 Free Public Transit as a Commodity

Many free transit advocates come to the free public transit movement because they want to see a better future. They want to create a city where everyone can go where they want to go. They want to create a city where people are cared for. They have come to free public transit because they want to see a city that is environmentally friendly, that reduces poverty, ends police violence, and where workers will be good and decent work. This begs the question; will free public transit be able to accomplish the goals that are bringing people to the free public transit movement, especially the overarching goal of removing a money transaction from transit? “I’ve always supported replacing user fees with Universal social programs as part of a broader policy of decommodifying elements of our lives and removing services from the realm of profit making” (Councillor Ben Isitt Interview). This is the central belief on the left of the free public transit movement. It is the belief that free fares will bring an environmentally-friendly, poverty-reducing, racially-just, and safe working public transit system. What if instead of decommodifying elements of our lives, free public transit itself just becomes a commodity?

In recent years we have seen an expansion in free public transit across Canada and it has taken the free transit advocates off guard.

One thing we’ve found confusing is that for example the current mayor made transit free for children 12 and under and yeah so I think that kind of shows in

some way that its not really yeah— so it's definitely someone who has been the leader of the Conservative party of Ontario has somehow made this happen in Toronto without much discussion or opposition or anything like that. (Joan, Free Transit Toronto)

This expansion of partial free public transit has entered mainstream politics, particularly the expansion of age specific free public transit to the age of 12. Children 12 and under riding transit for free is quickly becoming the norm across Canada and it has not challenged capitalism. The reason for this, and what we must address, is that free public transit could become a loss leader instead of a revolutionary proposal. A loss leader is a strategy where a product, in this case public transit, is sold or given away for free. This in turn attracts people to other products such as businesses or the city itself.

Forward-thinking companies already know this to be true. On weekends, residents of downtown Toronto are able to take free buses to Ikea which is situated in Etobicoke and North York (CityPlace Residents' Association). While the buses costs Ikea money, the sales that they make from transporting shoppers to the front doors of their store is well worth the cost. For over a decade, Google has provided coach buses from San Francisco to Silicon Valley, transporting hundreds of workers a day to their jobs free of charge. This benefit of being a Google employee is a key recruitment tool and a program used to increase the satisfaction of workers (Helft 2007). Let us not forget one of the most well used and famous free private transit systems in the world at Disney World Resorts. While Disney's transit system is often seen as an extension of the park, it is used to boost profit margins. When tourists to Disney step off the plane, they are whisked onto Disney-owned buses that take them to a Disney-owned resort. From there, tourists can

take buses, trams, boats, and monorails to Disney Parks. When they are finished at the parks, tourists can once again take a complementary shuttle out to dinner or go shopping in Downtown Disney, where they can use their Disney card to make any number of purchases. Disney's free transit feature connects all aspects of Disney World creating a controlled experience safe from the outside world (Kunstler 1994). Disney has commodified the utopia of small-town USA held together by free transit. While these are instances of private mass transit, it can be seen how a similar situation could arise if free public transit was treated similarly at the municipal level, especially if companies have the power to determine the routes. You could already make the claim that this occurs with public transit as malls and other shopping centres frequently have bus terminals where multiple routes intersect.

#### 4.4 Is Free Public Transit the Answer?

The problem arises, then, that free transit could be implemented and address none of the reasons that people came to the free public transit movement. We could in fact see environmental degradation, poverty, police violence, and unsafe workspaces become even worse as free public transit is commodified. While we may advocate for free public transit as a way to reduce poverty, what if free public transit has the opposite effect? Yes, free public transit will put money back into the pockets of riders, but what if those riders are not the same riders as today? What if free public transit has a similar effect to public transit investments which have been found to gentrify neighbourhoods (Pollack et al. 2010)? For over a decade Google has been using free buses to work as a job incentive. Couldn't landlords do the same? Instead of free public transit as a policy that would help

the working class, we could see mass gentrification occur around free public transit, pushing low-income people into transit deserts where they would be required to spend more on a car than they would have if they had stayed and just paid for transit.

While free public transit may limit the ability for police to stop riders to search for a ticket, there are sure to be other reasons that police will give to randomly stop Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC). Throughout history there have been a multitude of reforms targeting police agencies to reduce instances of police violence and racial profiling. Why should we expect the inability to check for transit fares to stop this from happening? They are sure to find other ways to do so. This is especially the case if free public transit results in gentrification. If free public transit does lead to gentrification or results in a modal shift of middle class white riders I would expect these riders to call the police on BIPOC whether there is a fare structure or not.

As for the environmental aspect of free public transit, if companies use free transit as a commodity, they will attempt to outdo one another. This could result in even more vehicles on the road than what we already have. Regardless, as discussed in chapter 2, there are already doubts as to the efficacy of free public transit reducing greenhouse gas emissions and decreasing the modal share of cars. Free public transit can only reduce the modal share for people who are able to access public transit, and if current riders are pushed into transit deserts due to gentrification, the overall modal share is unlikely to change drastically.

As for labour issues, the belief that free public transit will bring good jobs and increases to health and safety is predicated on the assumption that unions will continue to

have a foothold in public transit. As shown, free public transit has the potential to become glorified shuttles for businesses. If the free private mass transit of companies like Google is put into competition with public transit, governments may just let Google take over. Public transit is already heading down the path of privatization through public-private partnerships and outsourcing. What if governments make public transit free at the expense of workers? During COVID-19 at least 20 municipalities in Canada made public transit free (Leedham 2020). In many cases the cost was laying off workers, cutting the number of buses, and ending certain underperforming routes.

#### 4.5 Is Public Ownership the Answer?

Public ownership, the second major demand of the free public transit movement, has made these issues better to a certain degree. Public transit is by no means as focused on the financial side of things as publicly owned companies. However, publicly-owned systems have not been able to handle problems around public transit for many years. Publicly-owned systems continue to outsource work (Pike 2020, Alcoba 2012). Publicly-owned systems continue to put the lives of transit workers at risk. Every year hundreds of transit workers are assaulted with little governmental assistance to address it (Amalgamated Transit Union 2016). Publicly owned transit systems have threatened UPass programs. Winnipeg, Manitoba, nearly canceled the UPass agreement with student unions in early 2020. After outcry from students, the city backed down from the cuts, but will require an increase in funding from students (Thompson 2020). In light of COVID-19, students in Calgary have had their UPass program suspended until at least the end of 2020 (Koehler 2020). This has sent students scrambling to find alternative transport

methods if they cannot afford the added costs. All of the problems that participants identified as needing changes with public transit have largely resulted while those systems were publicly owned. I hardly believe that those issues will be adequately addressed by making public transit free.

Public ownership and free public transit are good first steps, but they must be built upon. Free public transit must build upon its demands for free and publicly owned transit. It should be about more than reducing poverty and greenhouse gases. It should be more than about more than getting people to their jobs and to shopping centres. “While issues of modal diversity, increased sprawl, and environmental sustainability are deeply important, the stakes involved in urban transportation policy also extend yet further. They extend to issues of urban democracy, of who is part of the public” (Attoh 2019:11). I see free public transit as an opportunity to create a city of the future, a city where we do not have to worry about poverty, environmental degradation, police violence, or dangerous workplaces because we have addressed the root problem that is causing these: capitalism. I see a future where the people are a part of the public. The people are not part of the public and because of this, they have no say in how the city operates.

The city is for homeowners. . . homeowners and very much a car culture. . . It’s definitely also for fucking Daryl Katz, the owner of the Oilers. Displacing thousands of people and jacking up their rent like crazy. Putting in an arena right in the middle of downtown, so it’s definitely for him. There is a really great book about Alberta’s arena deal, like the ones that were both in Calgary and Edmonton, about how many hundreds of millions of dollars have gone directly into



subsidizing billionaires and capital in general so definitely for them. And landlords you know? (Laura, Free Transit Edmonton)

It will not be until the city is reclaimed by the people that they can begin to create a place that works for us. For this reason, I argue that free public transit must turn its focus to Henri Lefebvre's radical notion of the right to the city.

## Chapter 5

### 5 The Right to the City

In this chapter, I introduce Henri Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city. I begin by laying out the historical context of Post-WWII France in which Lefebvre wrote. This context will set the stage for the unique Marxist outlook that Lefebvre had on the city. I then take a step back and examine what Marx identifies as alienation, a concept that Lefebvre would take up 100 years later in the context of the city. Then I will discuss the right to the city as Lefebvre developed it. Finally, I will discuss why the right to the city is as appropriate today as it was 50 years ago when Lefebvre conceived of it.

#### 5.1 Historical Context

Henri Lefebvre coined the term the right to the city just prior to the political uprisings in France during 1968. His writings on cities and everyday life were influential in the May '68 struggle. Lefebvre defined the right to the city as a "cry and a demand" to a "renewed right to urban life" (Lefebvre 1996:158). The historical context of his writings is important in understanding what is meant by the right to the city.

Following World War II, there was a rapid economic expansion that is often referred to as the golden age of capitalism. Countries were looking to rebuild after the war and there were massive public investments in infrastructure and technological innovation. For white workers, this capitalist expansion brought material wealth. They

were able to move out of cities and into the suburbs where they bought big homes with yards and garages.

To speed up commute times, governments began investing heavily in automobile infrastructure. Entire neighbourhoods were demolished to make way for three lanes of traffic going in each direction (Kunstler 1994). These neighbourhoods, which had previously been sites of politicized working-class people, were decimated. They had lost many of their residents to the suburbs, and now they were being displaced as their homes were destroyed. Working-class solidarity in these neighbourhoods was destroyed as the city continued to rapidly change.

As for those who moved out to the suburbs, they were now able to remove themselves from the public and political sphere (Attoh 2019). They could travel to work in the city and come home without interacting with any of the people in between. Ad men pushed the newest and greatest gadgets onto consumers who threw out the old for the new. It did not matter who was consuming or what they were consuming; as long as someone was consuming something the capitalist system could continue to expand (Maycroft 1996). This historical context gives an understanding as to why Lefebvre necessitated examining alienation as identified by Marx beyond the realm of the factory. The factory had been the focus of the U.S.S.R. and the French Communist Party, but Lefebvre sought to move beyond the confines of the factory and examine how one could be alienated from the city and in everyday life.

## 5.2 Alienation

In the foreword to the second edition of *The Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1*, Henri Lefebvre (1991) lays out that “the *Critique of Everyday Life* was built entirely around a concept which Lenin had left aside or neglected, the concept of *alienation*” (3). The concept of alienation originates in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. To understand Lefebvre’s identification of alienation in everyday life, we must first understand the emphasis that Marx places on alienation.

Marx (1964) identified four ways that the worker is alienated. First, the worker is alienated from the product of our labour. The worker is alienated from the product that they produce because they are not the owners of the product that they are making. Instead, there is private property which is owned by the capitalist. The worker’s labour is a commodity that is bought and sold on a daily basis for a wage. The worker’s labour becomes an object, external to themselves. Secondly, Marx (1964) tells us that the worker is alienated from the act of production. The activity that the worker is performing belongs to someone else and the worker becomes a cog in a machine. The worker has no control over how the product is created. There is no creativity or experimentation. The worker is at the sole control of the person who has power over the production.

Over time, our labour becomes hostile to us (Marx 1964). We continuously are producing new products for someone else and are unable to control how or what we are producing. The more that we produce, the further we are controlled by the capitalist because the capitalist keeps getting more and more at our expense. We do possess a double freedom. Either we work and contribute further to our alienation, or we starve.

Starvation is not an option, so we continue to work in order to survive. The cost to survival is a life of alienation. We become alienated from our fellow worker because our labour has become a commodity. If our fellow worker agrees to sell their labour for less, then we will not be hired, and we will starve. This competition between workers makes it impossible for us to have solidarity with one another (Marx 1964). The alienation from our fellow workers leads us to alienation from our species being. Humans are the only creatures that have the ability to envision themselves as a member of a species (Marx 1964). When we are alienated from our fellow worker, we lose the ability to see ourselves as a species. All that we are able to see is competition. We have no camaraderie with our fellow species. As a result, we lose our species being and we begin to lose what it is that makes us human.

Lefebvre wanted to seriously contemplate alienation. Writing in France, Lefebvre saw that capitalism had begun to move beyond the confines of the factory and begun to consume everyday life (Attoh 2019). For Lefebvre then, it was insufficient to seek a revolution based solely in the factory, but instead the revolution had to take place within everyday life (Goonewardena 2012).

Everyday life encompasses the aspects of life that are not work (Elden 2004). It is areas such as homes, transportation, neighbourhoods, and the environment around us. It is those ordinary parts of our lives and the acts that we do in our lives every day that begins to shape society. As the realm of work had become entirely dominated by capital, it had to expand. It began to expand into our homes and neighbourhoods in haste. This then began to create a dialectical struggle between leisure and capital (Lefebvre 1992). Over time, capital won this struggle which has resulted in alienation between the citizen and

the city. Citizen here is not a sense of national citizenship, but is referring to someone who resides within the city (Holston 2019). Lefebvre spent much of his time examining alienation in the city. The traditional Marxist conception of alienation could account for the physical city, but Lefebvre wanted to encompass the social aspects of the city as well.

Just as the worker is alienated from the product of their labour, the citizen is alienated from the city that they have created. Similarly to the way that the worker creates a product with their labour, the citizen creates the city through everyday life. The citizen helps create their neighbourhood by participating in the life of the neighbourhood. They produce urban life in bars, backyards, and community centers (Harvey and Wachsmuth 2012). It is through this everyday life that neighbourhoods become identifiable and unique.

Over time, capitalism has begun to colonize those spaces. Instead of a home to live in, real estate agents sell a neighbourhood. They are selling a subculture that the people living in that area have helped build. The neighbourhood's experience becomes something that is sold to tourists and before long the city begins to gentrify. The city that people have helped create are no longer for their enjoyment, but instead for the pursuit of capital.

Eventually, the citizen who has helped create the city becomes alienated from the act of producing it. Just like the owner of the means of production controls the act of production, government officials and their capitalist partners come to control the act of production. If the neighbourhood is a product to be sold, the "owners" do not want that product to be unpredictable. The experience of the city becomes manufactured.

Spontaneity is dissolved in favour of predictable outcomes. Permits become a key tool used to control who can do what where. Those who do not follow the rules are rounded up by police and locked up.

Instead of creating a city for ourselves, everyday life begins to reproduce alienation from the city and the act of production. If we step out of line, we are disciplined. We are programmed to live our everyday lives for the benefit of capitalists instead of ourselves because just like the worker, we are given a double freedom. We are free to choose either to live a life of alienation or starve. As a result, the citizen becomes alienated from their neighbour. In order to survive, they are put into conflict with the neighbour. The city has become a commodity and if we are to survive and remain where we are we have more money and more items than the people around us. This competition makes it impossible for us to live in solidarity with our neighbours and as the city becomes further commodified, this alienation deepens. As the worker is alienated from their species being, the citizen is alienated from their urban citizenship. They are unable to envision themselves as a member of a citizenship with their neighbour. As a result, the citizen loses a part of their humanity.

Understanding alienation as identified by Marx is key to understanding how Lefebvre saw alienation with the city. It is the same concept, but instead of alienation from the factory and the product that is produced in the factory, Lefebvre examined alienation from the city and everyday life. With this understanding of alienation, we are now able to move beyond the confines of the factory and understand how this applies to the city.

### 5.3 The Right to the City

For Lefebvre (1996), the right to the city was “a cry and a demand” to a “renewed right to urban life” (158). The right to the city is an inspiring phrase and has been used around the world as a rallying call, but with its renewed interest, there have been attempts to coopt the right to the city by wealth elites particularly at the United Nations World Urban Forum (Kuymulu 2013). From the very beginning we need to recognize that the right to the city is for the marginalised, the oppressed, and the working class (Lefebvre 1996; Marcuse 2009). It is for the people who the city has left behind as it was consumed by capitalism. It cannot be thought of as a visiting right (Lefebvre 1996). It is not something for tourists or capitalists who travel from penthouse to penthouse in cities across the world. Nor is it for the sociologist and architect to create their own city, although the academic may play a supplementary role (Lefebvre 1996).

The right to the city is a framework that is used to challenge and ultimately put an end to the alienation that the working class experiences in the city. The cry that Lefebvre is referring to is that realization by the people that they are facing alienation within the city; and the demand for a renewed right to urban life is the demand for that alienation to end. The right to the city is not a cry and demand for the basic necessities of life such as housing or food (Schmid 2012). Even the capitalist is able to recognize that hunger is bad, but the capitalist addresses hunger by donating to food banks or volunteering at a soup kitchen once a year. They perform superficial acts to feel good about themselves. Those struggling for the right to the city recognise that food banks are a by-product of the capitalist system and that the only way to end hunger is to end alienation within the city



and create a place that benefits everyone. While it is important to provide food to those that are hungry, the right to the city recognises goes beyond foodbanks and instead fights to make foodbanks obsolete.

The cry is accompanied by a demand for a “renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre 1996:158). This renewed right to urban life is a future city. Lefebvre was not looking to return to cities of the past. Instead, we should look to create a radically different city. One that is not controlled by capitalist interests, but one that has endless possibilities for everyone. We should not have a stagnant endpoint for what this future city will look like, but a moving vision of a city free from alienation (Harvey and Potter 2009). If we have a stagnant endpoint, we may fail to recognize that while we have victories in one area, those victories are causing problems elsewhere.

Once there is a recognition that alienation is occurring and that the current capitalist system is what is driving that alienation, the right to the city can begin to address that alienation. The right to the city is a constant struggle to reclaim the city and everyday urban life for the people who reside within the city. The right to the city is an ethical claim, not a set of legal rights (Marcuse 2009). It is not something that will be won in the courts. For over 70 years, the right to housing, food security, and medical care has been written into law through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, today, there continues to be millions of people around the world who are evicted from their homes, go to bed hungry, and go bankrupt because of medical expenses. Even though a right to housing, food, and medicine, has been enshrined in law, these laws have not address homelessness, hunger, and healthcare. We should not expect a right to the city enshrined in law to be upheld either.

The constant struggle to reclaim the city takes place within our everyday lives. Everyday life has built the city, but everyday life has been colonized by capitalism and been turned into a tool to further alienate us from the city that we have built. If everyday life is causing alienation, it is also a site where we can begin to dismantle alienation by reclaiming everyday life.

There are two goals that should be in mind during our struggle, to decommodify the city and to democratise it. When I use the term decommodify here I refer to the elimination of a monetary transaction at the point of use. In the short term this still requires a monetary transaction behind the scenes, but the goal is that eventually we would have a society that is based on helping one another and contributing as Marx put it “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (Marx 1972:531) We are alienated from the city because the city and our everyday life has become commodified. The city that we are producing does not belong to us. Through decommodifying the city, we can begin to take back spaces created to benefit capitalist “utilizers” and replace them with spaces for community “users” (Lefebvre 1992). At the same time we need to break our alienation from the act of production. The act of production is controlled by politicians and their capitalist friends through a broken democratic process. Democracy itself is heavily commodified. Capitalists are lining the pockets of politicians to get favours that will benefit them. While city councils may have consultations when a new building or zoning changes are announced, that consultation is often a formality as opposed to an actual process for the people to have their say. When we can take back the city as a place that is created for community “users”, and when we take back the democratic process so that the people have control, we can begin to

recognise our species being and urban citizenship. At that point we can begin to have solidarity with our neighbour because we will be in the struggle together as opposed to in competition with one another.

It is important to expand our understanding of alienation beyond the confines of the factory and into the city. Capital adapts to the historic setting in which it is situated. As socialism and the labour movement limited the power capitalism had in the factory, it mutated to commodify the city and everyday life. By focusing on the factory and not the city, we miss this mutation of capital and fail to recognize the hold it has on our lives. This is why we must use the right to the city when discussing alienation.

## 5.4 Why use this Framework?

It has been over 50 years since Henri Lefebvre coined the term the right to the city and it is arguably more relevant today than it was back then. We are in a time of mass urban rebellions (Holston 2019). Movements such as Black Lives Matter are changing the discourse around policing in our cities. The student climate strikes have engaged a new generation of young people to the environmental struggle. And across the world, more and more cities are choosing to abolish transit fares and coalitions are forming to demand free public transit where governments are not enacting change. While not always explicitly connected, the rise in urban rebellions shows that large parts of our society are unhappy with how our cities are run and want to see change.

All of these movements are largely based in urban centres. It is not the traditional political parties and labour unions that are leading these campaigns, but rather the

average person who resides in the city. If we look at the recent movements to defund the police, we can clearly see this. It was the people in the streets demanding change that pushed unions and politicians to take a stand. More has been done in the span of a few months than in decades of electoral campaigning. This is the vision of the right to the city. It is everyday people in constant conflict with the system in which they reside.

It is movements such as this that have reinvigorated discussions surrounding the right to the city. “Cities continue to be defined by exclusion, alienation, and injustice” (Attoh 2019:13). As long as cities continue to be places of alienation, it is necessary to use a framework that combats alienation. We can begin to do this with the right to the city. Public transit connects us to the city, thus reducing alienation, but only so long as we have access to public transit. The struggle for public transit is central to ending alienation from the city.

Free public transit can exist within the framework of the right to the city, but it could also serve the role of reproducing the current capitalist system. Free public transit activists have embraced free public transit in the hopes of creating a better city than the one they inhabit today. In order to be a successful, free public transit must seek to break the alienation that we experience. Otherwise, it will become a band-aid solution to immobility just as food banks have become a band-aid solution to hunger. They may address the issues for a period of time which is necessary, but they will be unable to stop those issues from occurring in the first place. This is where the right to the city is key. The right to the city aims to give us the ability to create a better city. Without the power to create the city that we want to see, free public transit will be unable to accomplish the goals that drew us to it in the first place.



## Chapter 6

### 6 Free Public Transit and the Right to the City

In this chapter, I lay out how the right to the city can be used to build upon the free public transit movement as a way to limit the appropriation of free public transit by capitalism. I argue that it is only through a constant struggle and moving beyond the level of public transit and towards the city level that free public transit will be able to address the issue that its supporters want to address; poverty, environmental degradation, police violence, and unsafe workspaces. Finally, I lay out why free public transit needs the right to the city to overcome the challenges that it faces.

#### 6.1 Free Publicly Controlled Transit

When it comes down to it, organizers come to free public transit in the hopes of creating a better city. They recognize that the city has not been created for them and they want to change that. “The city is currently for homeowners and cars. It should be for everyone. It should be for working people and for people to move together through” (Laura, Free Transit Edmonton). This desire for the city to be for everyone was shared widely amongst the participants of the study. They want to create a city without pollution, poverty, and police violence. They want to create working conditions that are safe for transit operators. They see that the city has not been built for them and they are looking for a way to change it. What they are expressing is a sense of alienation. They want to change the city, but because the city is not built for them, they have very little ability to change it. Even those who are elected representatives have little ability to implement

changes because of jurisdictions and a lack of political will from other elected representatives.

I argue that we ought to place the demands of the right to the city at the centre of the movement for free public transit because it can begin to address the alienation that we are facing. Free public transit gets us halfway there. The focus on making public transit free begins to address our alienation from the city. It does so by decommodifying public transit. With free public transit we will have access to transit that we may not have been able to afford, and we have access to other areas of the city that we might not have been able to get to because of the cost of transit. Free public transit addresses the alienation that we have from the product of our labour. The product being the public transit system itself, but more generally being the city that we inhabit.

In the short term, free public transit will give a major boost to those living along transit corridors. The problem is that over time, if the second aspect of alienation, the act of production, is not addressed, capitalism will slowly reabsorb the decommodified product. A prime example of this is public parks. Public parks are free to access and serve a public good. Public parks are areas to walk dogs, have picnics, and play sports with our friends. On the other hand, public parks increase property values to surrounding homes (Crompton 2007). While the public park may cost homeowners more money in taxes, it more than makes up for it in the increase in property value. Public parks are an example of how something could be public, but serve the wealthy disproportionately. We could see a parallel situation occurring with free public transit. While privately owned, Google buses are used as a key recruitment tool and have resulted in increased rent prices around bus stops in San Francisco (Henderson 2015). We could expect a similar result to occur

with free public transit where rental prices surrounding transit stations could skyrocket. This is especially the case in cities that already have a wealthier ridership.

The way to stop free public transit from being used to raise rental prices and gentrify neighbourhoods is to address the second aspect of alienation, alienation from the act of production. In the case of the city, we are talking about democracy. The call to reclaim the city must go beyond current calls to keep public transit publicly owned. As laid out in chapter 4, public ownership is not enough. Even though public transit is publicly owned, it still suits the needs of the capitalist class, not the workers. Right now, we have a government that “doesn’t value taking on climate change, doesn’t value closing the gap on inequality and achieving economic justice, and therefore doesn’t value key issues like free public transit and public investments in our transportation infrastructure that could lead to free public transit” (NDP MP Niki Ashton Interview). If the government does not value solving these problems under the current system of publicly owned transit, they are unlikely to create a public transit system that addresses these issues, even if they do decide to make it free. Our current system of public ownership also limits the ability of many people within the city to have a say. It especially limits the voices of youth and immigrants who are unable to vote but disproportionately take public transit.

The best way to address alienation is to reclaim public transit by having transit workers and riders coming together to determine what our transit system looks like. While transit workers and riders build the physical and spiritual nature of public transit, they have no real say over what it looks like. Transit workers know the intricacies of the transit system. From personal experience they know what works and what does not work.



Transit riders and those who wish to be riders know where the system fails. By democratizing public transit and having a publicly controlled transit system, we will be able to decide where to place new routes and where to build up infrastructure. We will be able to put these routes through “underperforming areas” because people in those areas need public transit. We will be able to purchase electric buses and streetcars and create an eco-friendly transit system. We will be able to limit the power of transit police or remove them entirely from our transit system. We will not have to wait for the transit commission to ensure health and safety is up to code or deal with regressive labour practises. We will be able to finally address the issues that brought people to free transit organizing.

At this point, and throughout the process, the free public transit movement must be collaborating and forming coalitions with movements doing similar work across the city. Capitalists will not go down without a fight. If we can get free publicly controlled transit, they will do all in their power to minimize it or use it to their advantage. By working with these other movements, free public transit can limit the spread of the commodification of free public transit. By working with groups such as tenant unions, free public transit can limit the ability of landlords to capitalize on free public transit. This is why the right to the city is a constant struggle. The moment that we recreate parts of the city to be for the people, capitalists will seek to take it as their own. Once we have gained free public transit we cannot allow it to be reclaimed by the capitalist. We must always be prepared to defend the gains that we have made. There are people within the free public transit movement who recognize this. A prime example is Free Transit Toronto which has long advocated for not only free and expanded public transit, but also has advocated for democratic planning (Free Transit Toronto 2020). The problem is that

these demands have not emerged publicly in broader discussions on free public transit. This is especially the case among newer organizations and people starting out in free public transit organizing. I understand why. Abolishing fares is seen as a radical position but if we do not address the potential for capitalism to use free public transit to suit its needs we may win the battle for free public transit, but lose the war for a better city.

Free publicly controlled transit can and should be emulated in other areas of the city from housing, to food, to parks, and education. The power that I see in putting an emphasis on free and publicly controlled transit is that it brings us to those other gates of power that we have to tear down. We cannot storm the offices of power if we cannot get to the offices of power.

## 6.2 Mass Transit is the Answer

One of the biggest debates that I anticipate is why there is a need for public transit to do this as opposed to universal car ownership. One could argue that if we had universal free car ownership that it could decommodify and democratize the city. One could also claim that universal car ownership, just like free publicly controlled transit could get us to the gates of power. The problem with this argument is that it ignores the concept of space and the inherent alienation of the car. Henri Lefebvre recognized this 50 years ago when he wrote *The Urban Revolution*. Lefebvre (2003) notes that “The invasion of the automobile and the pressure of the automobile lobby have turned the car into a key object, parking into an obsession, traffic into a priority, harmful to urban and social life. The day is approaching when we will be forced to limit the rights and power of the

automobile” (18). The obsession of automobiles is harmful to both the city and our relationships with our neighbours.

There is a popular photo that illustrates the amount of space needed to transport 50 people by different methods. In the first panel is a single bus with 50 people standing beside it and the second panel is of 50 bikers standing beside their bikes. The third panel is of fifty people standing in front of four lanes of traffic heading off into the distance. It is a striking visual of the amount of space that automobiles inhabit on the road. Now, imagine that all of the that are standing beside the bus were given an automobile. We could respond in one of two ways. Either we have 100 people now sitting in traffic for twice as long, or we make twice as many lanes so that traffic remains the same as before. No matter which option we choose will have negative consequences. Either everyone sits in traffic for twice as long which erodes their ability to enjoy the city that they are creating, or we make twice as many lanes which would require us to tear down the buildings that make up the city. Either way, if we are not able to enjoy the city because we are stuck in traffic or are required to tear down the city to avoid traffic, we have destroyed the city. We cannot ignore the fact that automobiles take up an awful lot of space and are not conducive to creating a cohesive city.

Cars are inherently alienating and are the antithesis of the right to the city and a cohesive society. For decades, the car has been promoted as a way for people to gain freedom when in actuality, automobiles are a key tool used to alienate people within the city. Public transit brings us together while cars further alienation. For those who are not car users, alienation occurs from a lack of mobility. There are many reasons people are unable to use an automobile. Youth who are not old enough to drive, seniors or people

with disabilities who are unable to drive, and people who do not have enough wealth to afford an automobile are pushed to the periphery of society (Sheller and Urry 2000). Public transit on the other hand gives us a shared act of mobility. Regardless of age or ability, public transit can be accessible to everyone if we design our transit systems accordingly. Universal car ownership is unable to accomplish this. If people are unable to operate an automobile, they are stranded even with universal car ownership.

Alienation also takes its toll on those who are automobile users. Automobile users spend hundreds of hours a year in iron cages driving from one destination to another. Automobility takes a psychological toll on those who spend countless hours by themselves in iron cages going from one destination to another (Newman 2016). We have become a society where automobile users drive from their garage in the suburbs, to the garage in the city, work a few hours, and drive back to their garage in the suburbs. All the while, the only interaction with their neighbours and the people who inhabit the space between their home and work takes the form of road rage. This lifestyle, often affiliated with the “American Dream,” is incredibly harmful to our psyche (Newman 2016). Instead of a system of cooperation, automobiles turn roads into a place of competition. Instead of a wave and a smile, the language of the road is the car horn and the middle finger. This system is one where we do not see our neighbour as a neighbour, and instead all we see is a barrier to our destination. Even when people do not interact with other passengers on public transit the shared act of mobility connects us to one another. When there are stoppages, or traffic, it is a shared experience, not an experience of conflict with other drivers as in the instance of the automobile. That shared experience minimizes conflict with one another and results in a smile or nod as opposed to outward aggression. This rise

of the automobile was not a democratic choice. Cities were not built to accommodate the automobile as many believe they were, cities were destroyed and rebuilt in order for the automobile to fit (Kunstler 1993; Dellheim and Prince 2018). Often it was working-class and Black neighbourhoods that were bulldozed to let highways run through cities to make it quicker for businesspeople to get from the suburbs to their place of employment. We didn't have a debate one day to decide whether we wanted automobiles, we were told they were a necessity and forced to adapt (Newman 2016).

In an attempt to create car-dominated cities in the United States, General Motors (GM) bought electric streetcar companies across the country. They proceeded to rip up the lines and replace them with buses made by GM (Kunstler 1993). In Ottawa, Ontario, a city with uniquely high rates of public transit ridership at the time, the introduction of automobiles resulted in collisions with streetcars and congestion. Ottawa's streetcars were slower in 1956 than they were in 1901 as a result of automobiles (Scott 2013). With the reduction in speed and ridership, the city was given an excuse to destroy the streetcar system instead of implementing policy decisions that could have seen streetcars continue to be successful. While some may argue that we chose automobiles, the choice was made for us. Neighbourhoods were destroyed and transit lines were removed. We were not given a choice to use automobiles, we were told it was the only way.

If we see the commodification of public transit as problematic it pales in comparison to automobiles. Automobility is the quintessential object of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism (Sheller and Urry 2000). The automobile industry gave us Fordism, changed capitalism, and fundamentally altered our conception of work. The recent rise of companies like Uber, Lyft, and Tesla points to a further intensification of commodifying

transportation as they aim to displace publicly owned transportation networks (Wilt 2020). At least for workers at Ford, General Motors, and Chevrolet, the United Auto Workers kept wages relatively high with good benefits and pensions. With dwindling union numbers and right to work laws in North America, it will be difficult for unions to enter the future of transportation.

The future of transportation is bleak and the “three revolutions” of automobility, ridesharing, electric vehicles, and autonomous vehicles, will make it even worse (Wilt 2020). It is automobiles that are the problem, not the form that they take. Lefebvre was no fan of automobiles. He categorized streets as “a place for the passage of pedestrians (hunted) and automobiles (privileged)” (Lefebvre 2003:20). Lefebvre is right in asserting that streets are a dangerous place for pedestrians. In 2014, 304 pedestrians were killed in Canada by automobiles (Transport Canada 2019). Evidence suggests that while there is an overall decline in roadway deaths in recent years, it is drivers and passengers who are benefiting, not pedestrians (Robertson and Pashley 2015). This is largely due to the sale of larger vehicles which sweep people underneath the vehicle, causing more damage when hit as opposed to smaller vehicles which knock pedestrians onto the hood of the car.

The “three revolutions” will be unable to create more space in the city. Instead of being able to reduce the number of vehicle miles travelled (VMT), ridesharing has been found to produce 83.5 per cent more VMT than if ride-hailing had not existed (Henao and Marshall 2018). This is largely due to “dead miles,” the miles travelled while drivers are waiting for their next customer and the miles travelled getting from one customer to the next. It is expected that autonomous vehicles will see a similar increase in VMT as

instead of parking, autonomous vehicles will return home during the day as a way to avoid parking fees (Millard-Ball 2019). If parking is made free to reduce this practice, it will divert the space taken up by automobiles off of the roads and into parking structures which also take up vast amounts of space.

While electric vehicles may be more environmentally friendly than their gas-powered competitors, they fail to tackle the issue of space. Additionally, electric batteries which are powered by lithium will see a spike in demand for the materials. While it will eliminate the need for petrol, lithium is not an efficient replacement. It still requires mining, much of which is done in unsafe locations with child labour and will require proper recycling techniques. While electric vehicles are a step up from gas powered vehicles, they by no means should be seen as the future needed in transportation (Wilt 2020).

Instead of putting our faith in the “three revolutions”, the right to the city should set out to create a radically different city made up of active and public transit networks. Public transit will not address all of the problems of alienation in our city, and neither will free public transit, but it will be a start. Streets used to be places where people could play, socialize, and learn from one another (Harvey 2012). If we move away from automobiles, it will be one step closer to recognizing the right to the city.

### 6.3 Conclusion

We are in an unprecedented time. At the same time as unions, politicians, and community groups began to turn their attention to free public transit, we were hit by

COVID-19. Due to the schedule of my program, all interviews for this project took place prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns and I was unable to capture the decisions and campaigns that have emerged as a result. This does not change the central argument of my thesis which is that we need to move beyond free public transit as a tool to reduce poverty, climate change, and police violence, and see free public transit as a tool to reclaim the city and enact the right to the city. It is through enacting the right to the city and ending alienation that we can in turn address poverty, climate change, and police violence. If anything, COVID-19 has enhance the arguments that I have set out. The pandemic has opened the eyes of many people to how municipalities are funded. We saw in a heartbeat cities across the country make public transit free (Leedham 2020). At the same time, many of us have come to realize that these municipalities hold a lack of power when it comes to the recovery of COVID-19.

Free public transit is at a crossroads. Upwards of 83% of people in Canada are in favour or would go along with making public transit free. The question is, what will this look like? On the one hand, forward thinking companies are acknowledging that private mass transit is one way of attracting workers and customers. In other areas, such as Ontario, Conservative Governments are realizing that partially free public transit is “a program that generates money” (Westoll and Shum 2019). Yet, these same governments are the ones that are looking at conditioning COVID-19 bailout money for the TTC and other transit agencies on public private partnerships with microtransit companies, such as Uber, to replace little used bus routes (Spurr 2020).

I advocate however that we push for something different. Instead of the same old same old with free buses, we should fight to radically alter the city. We should be



fighting for a city that is free from alienation. A city where our every interaction and every decision is no longer bound by our wealth. A city where we as working class and oppressed people have a say in determining what our city looks like.

In the recovery from COVID-19, we need the right to the city more than ever and the free public transit movement should be a leader on this front. Throughout the pandemic it has been working class people that have borne the brunt of the losses. We have lost our jobs and many of us have lost our homes. We should not be looking to go ‘back to normal’ because ‘normal’ was not good enough. We know where the system has failed us, and we can fill in the gaps and solve those issues. What would this city look like? Ultimately, that will be up to the people, but broadly speaking, it will be ordinary people coming together to decide what they want their city to look like.

It will not be an easy struggle. The right to the city is not as simple as voting for a certain politician or political party. At times, voting can play a role in the struggle, but it is not the primary element of the right to the city. To push for free public transit and the right to the city, will require mass mobilization of the working class. It will require thousands of people in the streets actively struggling against capitalist interests. It will require a reimagination of our democratic institutions. It will be new uncharted territory.

The future is in the hands of the people, and the city is up to all of us to help redesign. When I think of free public transit and the right to the city I see the following. I envision a tree lined street with a park on the corner across from a housing co-op. I see a streetcar coming to pick up children on their way to school. Instead of paying with money, the children pay with high-fives and smiles. Their parents are heading off to work

where they will be working to better the city. Maybe they upkeep the community gardens or are heading off to the workers council to have their say on a newly proposed subway line down to the beach. I see grandparents getting up early in the morning to take transit across town where they are meeting their friends for coffee before a stroll through the park. They get up early in order to take transit as they enjoy watching the children in their excitement head off to learn.

Public transit does not have to be the way it is. We do not have to pay for it and it can be extensive and reach all corners of the city, including the suburbs. It can also be used to connect rural areas to the city and to one another. A better future is possible, but I don't just want a transit system that is free and takes me to a meaningless job out in an office park. I want to help create a public transit system that suits the needs of the people who use it and would like to use it. In order to do that the working class needs to be making the decisions that affect our lives. For this, we need to focus our movements on the right to the city. We have nothing else to lose.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics Certificate



**Date:** 16 October 2019

**To:** Prof. Scott Schaffer

**Project ID:** 114351

**Study Title:** *Fare-Free Transit and the Right to the City*

**Application Type:** NMRIB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 01/Nov/2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 16/Oct/2019 13:27

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 16/Oct/2020

Dear Prof. Scott Schaffer

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMRIB) has reviewed and approved the WREEM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMRIB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMRIB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Email Script	Recruitment Materials	09/Oct/2019	Clean
Interview Script	Interview Guide	31/Jul/2019	
Letter of Consent	Written Consent/Assent	09/Oct/2019	Clean
Website Script	Recruitment Materials	09/Oct/2019	Clean

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMRIB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMRIB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TC132), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMRIB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMRIB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Harris, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMRIB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Semi-structured interview script.

- 1) Who is the city for and maybe more importantly, who should the city be for?
- 2) What should the city look like? If you had to picture the city of the future, does it look like something from the past, more or less the same as today, or is it something different? If you had to make a utopian vision for the future of your city, what would it look like?
- 3) We live in a society that talks a lot about rights. If we were to talk about a right to the city, what would that mean to you?
  - a. What kind of a right is it?
  - b. What is it a right to?
  - c. Who possesses the right?
  - d. What city?
- 4) How does this tie into your position on fare-free public transit and public transit more broadly?
- 5) Take me through how we got to where we are today. How did you first hear about fare-free public transit?
- 6) Why is this such an important (or is it?) policy for you? Why FFPT and not something else?
  - a. We have a housing crisis, in many places a water and food crisis, and an opioid crisis, why not focus on those aspects of the city instead of something such as fare-free public transit which many would say is too expensive.
- 7) What is your motivation for supporting fare-free public transit?
  - a. Economic? Environmental? Politically transformative?
- 8) Fare-free public transit has been around since the 1960s. Why do you think it has taken until now to get serious consideration in Canada? Over the last year it seems as though fare-free public transit has become a hot topic issue. Is this a fad in Canadian politics or do you see it continuing?
- 9) What are the biggest challenges for you to implement fare-free public transit?
- 10) Do you experience bi-partisan support for fare-free public transit in Canada or is this an ideologically motivated policy?



## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Ari Vangeest

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Calvin College  
Grand Rapids, Michigan, United States of America  
2012-2016 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
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