Researching the Global Right to the City

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Why research the global right to the city?

In March of 1968, the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre published a short book called *Droit à la Ville* (*Right to the City*). Lefebvre was a professor at the suburban University of Nanterre, located on the periphery of the Paris region. Two months later, students from Nanterre were occupying universities across Paris, leading general strikes, and bringing the entire French economy to a halt with their demands for a radical transformation of French society and state. These students were the instigators of the famous May 1968 movement. Their banners and graffiti featured slogans such as "Be realistic, demand the impossible", "Boredom is counterrevolutionary", and "It is forbidden to forbid".

Some of the student leaders of the May 1968 movement were students of Lefebvre; as he himself described it, "the movement began in a big, crowded amphitheatre where I was giving a course" (Ross 1997: 82). And the movement as a whole can be understood as a collective attempt to claim a right to the city—what Lefebvre (1996: 158; emphasis in original) called "a cry and a demand….a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*". In the nearly fifty years since Lefebvre first published *Right to the City*, the concept has served as a rallying cry for social activism, an inspiration for urban policymaking, and an organizing concept for critical urban research. It unites questions of inclusion and exclusion, social reproduction, the use of public space, social movements and urban development.

And, in the wake of the worldwide urban upheavals of the last decade—from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, from the *indignados* of Spain and Greece to Black Lives Matter in the United States—the right to the city has arguably taken on new, more urgent and more global dimensions. The global right to the city also now faces more formidable foes, from the profiteers and austerians of the worldwide financial crisis of 2008 to the more recent surge of far-right nationalist politics in the United States and Europe. So, what does the right to the city mean today, for political practice or scholarly research?

Challenges of researching the global right to the city

Over its fifty-year history as an intellectual, political, and policy concept, the right to the city has served as a container for many different specific ideas and agendas. But there has arguably been a relatively stable core within this diversity: a connection between, on the one hand, "agentic" questions of urban social movements and political struggles, and, on the other, "structural" questions of political economy, the state and power relations. We see this core within the three major "eras" of right-to-the-city scholarship and activism (Table 1).

Table 1: Major "eras" of right-to-the-city scholarship and activism

ERA	EMERGED	KEY REFERENCES
Concept development	1960s	Henri Lefebvre (1968) *Right to the City*; Manuel Castells (1977) *The Urban Question*
Neo-Marxist and post-Marxist renewal	2000s	David Harvey (2003/2008) The right to the city Neil Brenner et al. (2012) *Cities for People, Not for Profit*
International urban policy debates	Mid-2000s	UNESCO (2006) *International Policy Debates: Urban Policies and the Right to the City* UN-HABITAT (2010) *The Right to the City: Bridging the Urban Divide*

Although this academic and policy discourse on the global right to the city has defined a reasonably coherent object of analysis and political practice, there are nevertheless a number of challenges or tensions inherent to the concept. These can be productively analyzed by scrutinizing each of the keywords in the phrase "global right to the city". To begin with, as critical legal scholars have long recognized (Olsen 1984; Kennedy 2002), the concept of "rights" is problematic to the extent that it elides questions of who has rights, who grants them, and which rights get priority. As David Harvey (2003: 940) has remarked, "We live in a society in which the inalienable rights to private property and the profit rate trump any other conception of inalienable rights you can think of." And, as Karl Marx (1976: 344) famously argued, "Between equal rights, force decides". So who grants the right to the city? The state, in some capacity, as the international policy community would have it? Or inhabitants on their own behalf, as radical urban scholars and social movements claim? This is a tension that remains to be properly explored in research and in practice.

Less recognized outside the community of critical urban studies, the concept of the "city" is in some senses just as problematic as "rights". Contemporary public discourse is pervaded with variants of the "urban age" idea—whereby the quantitative expansion of human settlement space, particularly across some putative "50% of the world now lives in cities" threshold, is meant to signal a profound global social transformation. But, paradoxically, this urban age discourse tends to simultaneously overemphasize the significance of this demographic shift while underplaying the extent to which urban regions, apparently non-urban hinterlands, and the relations between the two have been politically, socially and economically restructured in recent decades—what some scholars now call "planetary urbanization" (Wachsmuth 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2014; Brenner 2014). Just two years after writing *Right to the City*, Lefebvre (2003: 57) argued in *The Urban Revolution* that "The concept of the city no longer corresponds to a social object. Sociologically it is a pseudoconcept." Reconciling the truth of this statement with the idea of the right to the city remains a significant tension in scholarship on the latter concept.

Finally, "global" as a modifier of the right to the city contains several tensions of its own. The right to the city is generally interpreted as pertaining to "local" struggles over social reproduction and daily life. There are some systemic structures which potentially unite such struggles (Harvey 2008), but even these structures are variegated. The result is that the global right to the city needs to be understood in the context of uneven spatial development: even "global" processes take concrete form in highly differentiated ways.

These tensions concern the right to the city as a concept for research rather than a slogan to motivate political action. As a political slogan, the power of the right to the city in fact lies in these ambiguities, which allow it to evoke different dimensions of urban justice and struggle in different specific circumstances. From a research perspective, however, the conclusion is that the right to the city is an evocative concept that needs to be specified precisely if it is to have analytical traction.

Techniques for researching the global right to the city

So how can we productively research the global right to the city? A wide variety of specific methods (e.g. interviews, participant observation, or spatial analysis) are appropriate for specific research questions, but in this section I want to argue in favour of a common set of underlying methodological approaches.

Just as each of the keywords in the phrase reveals certain theoretical and methodological tensions, each also suggests some principles for resolving those tensions in empirical investigation and analysis. The first principle —implied by the word "right"—is to focus on contested claims for rights, rather than rights which have already been achieved. After all, in Lefebvre's original formulation, the right to the city is "a cry and a demand". Since rights are always tied up in power relations and social struggles, and since the city is a key site of social reproduction and "collective consumption" (Castells 1977) in the contemporary world, the right to the city can be a helpful concept for analyzing and decoding competing conceptions of social justice and social priorities. Concretely, urban researchers can investigate the claims that social actors make over urban space, and the actions they take in support of those claims. The political actions that individuals and groups undertake to contest the production of urban space can reveal what they believe the right to the city *should* be. Lefebvre (1996: 178-179) himself thought of the right to the city in these terms: he described it as one of a number of "rights in the making…rights which define civilization (in, but often *against* society—*by*, but often *against* culture)".

The second principle is implied by the world "city". In the face of the ongoing transformation of urban regions into larger, polycentric, and more suburbanized forms—as well as the ongoing transformation of spatial divisions of labour, consumption and regulation which have changed the relationship between urban centres and their hinterlands and frontier zones—it is increasingly difficult to answer the questions of "what city?" or "whose city?" implied in the concept of the right to the city. I have elsewhere argued that it is therefore more tenable to approach the concept of the city as a *category of practice* instead of a *category of analysis* (Wachsmuth 2014). The "city" is how people make sense of their everyday spatial practice; it is a phenomenological category. Urban researchers should take this idea seriously—that the city is a meaningful concept for everyday life— but that does not mean naturalizing the city as an adequate *analytical* concept. Urban researchers can investigate how the city is constructed as a social entity through social action, and how that entity in turn constrains individual and collective action undertaken in the name of the "right to the city". After all, as Robert Park (1967: 3) declared, "if the city is the world which man [sic] created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself."

Research that uses the concept of the city as an analytical lens for understanding processes of urban transformation which are not limited to the city (in other words, a focus on the city as a site, as opposed to urbanization as a process) falls into the trap of "methodological cityism" (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015). Accordingly, the final principle—suggested by the word "global"—is not to artificially limit research on the right to the city to the boundaries of the city itself. This means, first of all, that researchers should investigate the more-than-city geographies and social networks which are coproduced with the city through urban political action. Many of the things which constrain city inhabitants' ability to enjoy the right to the city originate outside city borders (global financial markets, national political structures, regional economic restructuring), and many of the resources which inhabitants can draw upon to claim their right to the city reach outside the city too. Methodologically, this means that research on the right to the city must often travel along relatively far-flung pathways despite the apparently "local" nature of social reproduction, daily life and urban public space which the right to the city tends to evoke.

Secondly, a global approach to researching the right to the city should explore its *variegation* across contexts (Peck and Theodore 2007; Brenner et al. 2010), which is to say the *systematic* unevenness in how the right to the city is claimed and contested worldwide. One of the distinctive features of the right to the city as a political demand is that it has found prominence in cities and regions across both the Global North and Global South. It does not follow that the right to the city is some sort of aspatial and ahistorical universal; but this fact does establish the importance of investigating both the convergences and divergences across these contexts, and the social, political, economic and cultural factors which give rise to each (Morange and Spire 2015).

In sum, the methodological approach to researching the global right to the city which I am advocating is one which focuses on 1) competing claims social actors make over the production of urban space; 2) the different practical conceptions of the city which social actors articulate through the claims they make; and 3) the more-than-city geographies which are mobilized in claims for the right to the city, and the globally variegated forms that these claims take.

The Vancouver housing crisis: A case study

How can we put these various analytical considerations into practice in concrete research into the global right to the city? In order to illustrate some of the possibilities, I offer here a brief case study of ongoing research into the crisis of housing affordability in Vancouver, Canada. The results so far are based on 18 interviews conducted with policymakers, community leaders, and real estate agents in 2016; documentary and media analysis; and GIS spatial analysis.

Thanks in part to its temperate climate and natural amenities, Vancouver frequently tops lists of the most livable cities in the world (e.g. Economist Intelligence Unit 2016). But this "livability" has paradoxically made it difficult to afford to live in Vancouver; relative to household incomes, Vancouver is currently among the world's three most expensive cities (Demographia 2016). Indeed, three distinct housing crises can be observed in contemporary Vancouver. The first is a longstanding crisis of homelessness and poverty, which has it roots in 1980s federal cuts to social housing programs and the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and has intensified in the following decades. The second is a crisis of homeownership affordability for the middle class in the Vancouver

region, apparently driven by high-end housing purchases from speculative overseas investors in China. The third is a general shortage of rental housing in Vancouver—the region-wide rental vacancy rate was a shocking 0.8% in 2015, almost an order of magnitude under the 5% vacancy rate which is usually taken to indicate a healthy rental market. (The rate in the city itself was even lower.)

Partially corresponding to these crises, three distinct social movements have mobilized around housing affordability issues in Vancouver. First of all, there is a longstanding poor people's housing movement in Vancouver. Focused mainly on the city's Downtown Eastside, this movement has advocated for the homeless, struggled against private developers and the government to resist gentrification, and argued for the construction of new social housing (Blomley 2004). Second, there is a loose movement organized under the hashtag #donthave1million, referring to the minimum amount of money necessary to buy a house in Vancouver. Initiated in 2015 by a Vancouver resident (and renter) in her late 20s, this movement has drawn attention in particular to the intergenerational implications of Vancouver's rising housing prices, which can be interpreted as a massive transfer of wealth to the house-owning older population from the house-renting younger population. The #donthave1million movement has also sought to frame Vancouver's housing affordability problems as an economic drain because it is driving talented young professionals out of the city. Finally, an organic opposition to speculative housing investment has emerged in Vancouver, aimed above all at the spectre of foreign ownership of housing. The major target of outrage here has been absentee property owners from China, who have bought houses in Vancouver as financial investments but keep them empty, relying on rising property values rather than tenants to achieve their rate of return.

What we find in Vancouver, in short, is not a single affordable housing movement, or even a single "cry and demand" for affordable housing. Instead, a diverse set of groups and actors are attempting to articulate a right to the city in opposition to the commodification and financialization of housing, but in ways which sometimes fail to overlap and other times are directly contradictory.

To establish the basic historical parameters of Vancouver's housing problems, my research team analyzed the full text of 1,146,061 articles in the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Province*, the two main Vancouver newspapers, between 2000 and 2015. Figure 1 shows the proportion of these articles which include the terms "housing affordability", "housing crisis", and "foreign ownership", and "vacant housing" What this figure indicates is that, while there was a general uptick in media discussion of housing problems in the run up to the 2008 global financial crisis (which originated in housing markets), since 2011 there has been an explosion of discussion about housing affordability in general, and about the problems of foreign ownership and speculation in vacant houses more specifically. There has also been a smaller but noticeable increase in discussion of Vancouver's housing problems as a "crisis"—very strong language which is rare to encounter in the mainstream media.

Figure 1: Proportion of articles in Vancouver newspapers to reference housing problems (source: David Wachsmuth and Shunyao Chen)
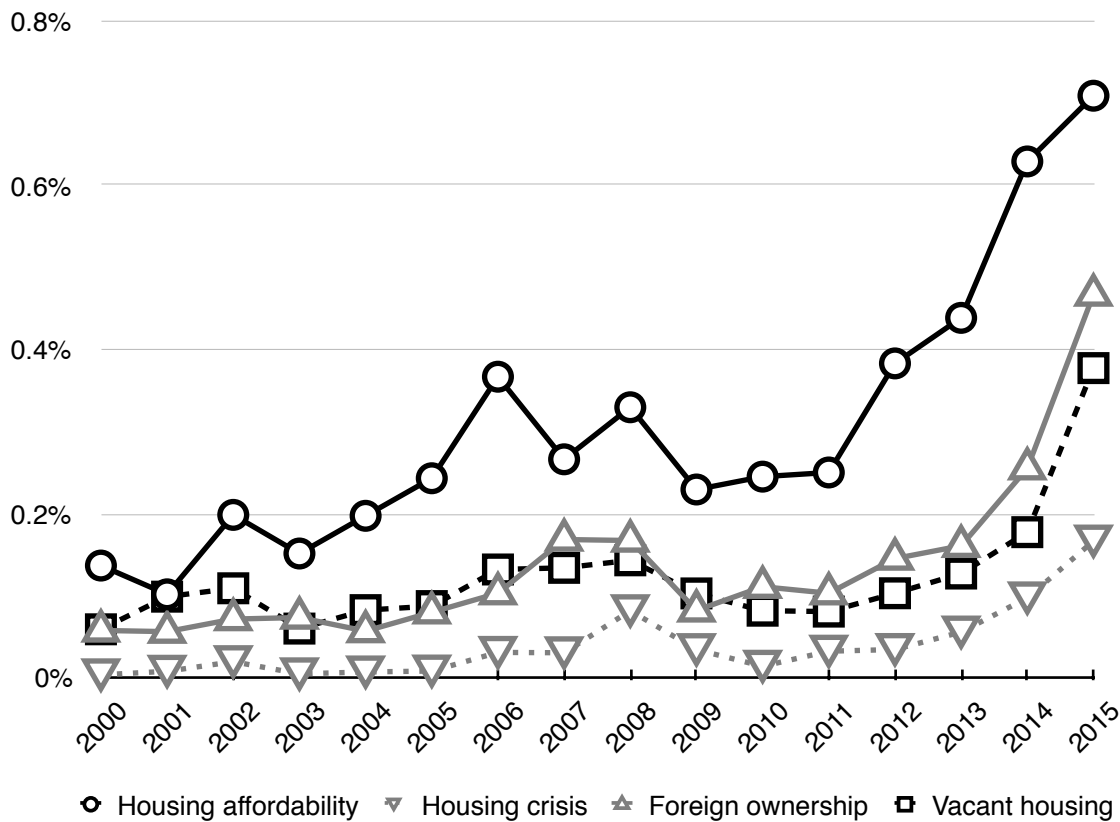

From a mainstream perspective, therefore, the story of Vancouver's housing problems is effectively a story of the last five years. There is undeniable truth to this perspective; as Figure 2 shows, since 2011 housing prices have risen to incredible heights across the region. Of particular note are the west side of the City of Vancouver and the inner suburbs to the south. The former is where absolute house prices are the highest and where there is general agreement that overseas Chinese ownership of housing has surged in recent years. The latter, however, is where the homeownership affordability problem is arguably most acute. Unlike the west side of Vancouver, where prices have increased from already extremely high baselines, houses in the inner suburbs of Richmond and Surrey here have historically been reasonably affordable for middle-class and even working-class families. The high benchmark housing prices combined with the large percentage increase in prices in the last five years demonstrates that this is no longer true, and this fact has been particularly important for motivating the #donthave1million protests.

Figure 2: August 2016 benchmark house prices by neighbourhood (source: Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver and Fraser Valley Real Estate Board; map by David Wachsmuth and Shunyao Chen)
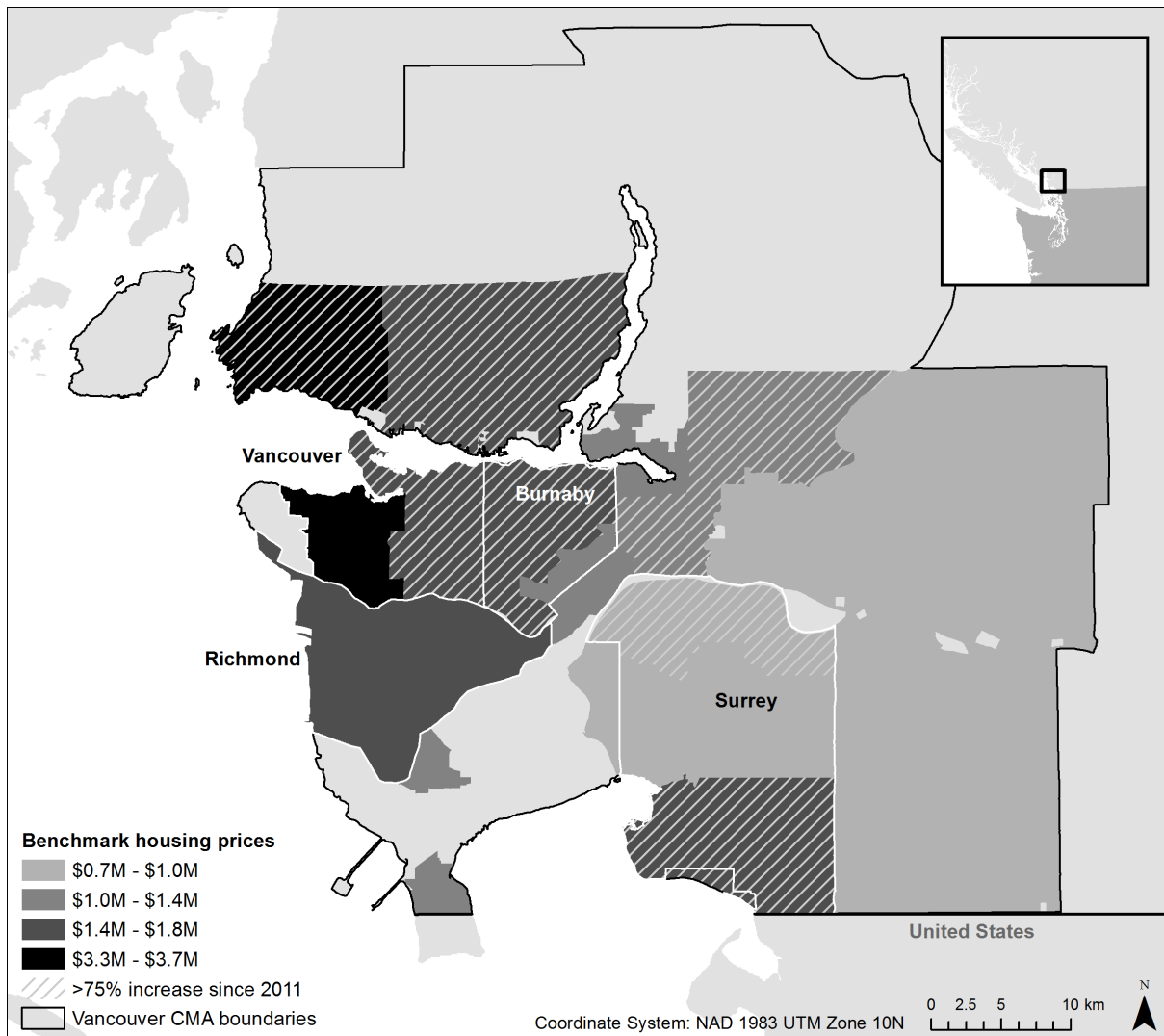
However, another perspective on Vancouver's housing affordability issues can be seen in Figure 3, which shows the incidence of "core housing need" across the region. A household is in core housing need if it is unable to afford decent housing, and the map shows that there are census tracts where more than a third of the population is in this situation. They are concentrated in the Downtown Eastside (where a majority of households are in core housing need), in the east of the city, and in the eastern suburbs—a very different geography from the high house prices portrayed in Figure 2.

Figure 3: Incidence of core housing need by census tract in the 2011 census (source: Statistics Canada; map made by David Wachsmuth and Shunyao Chen)
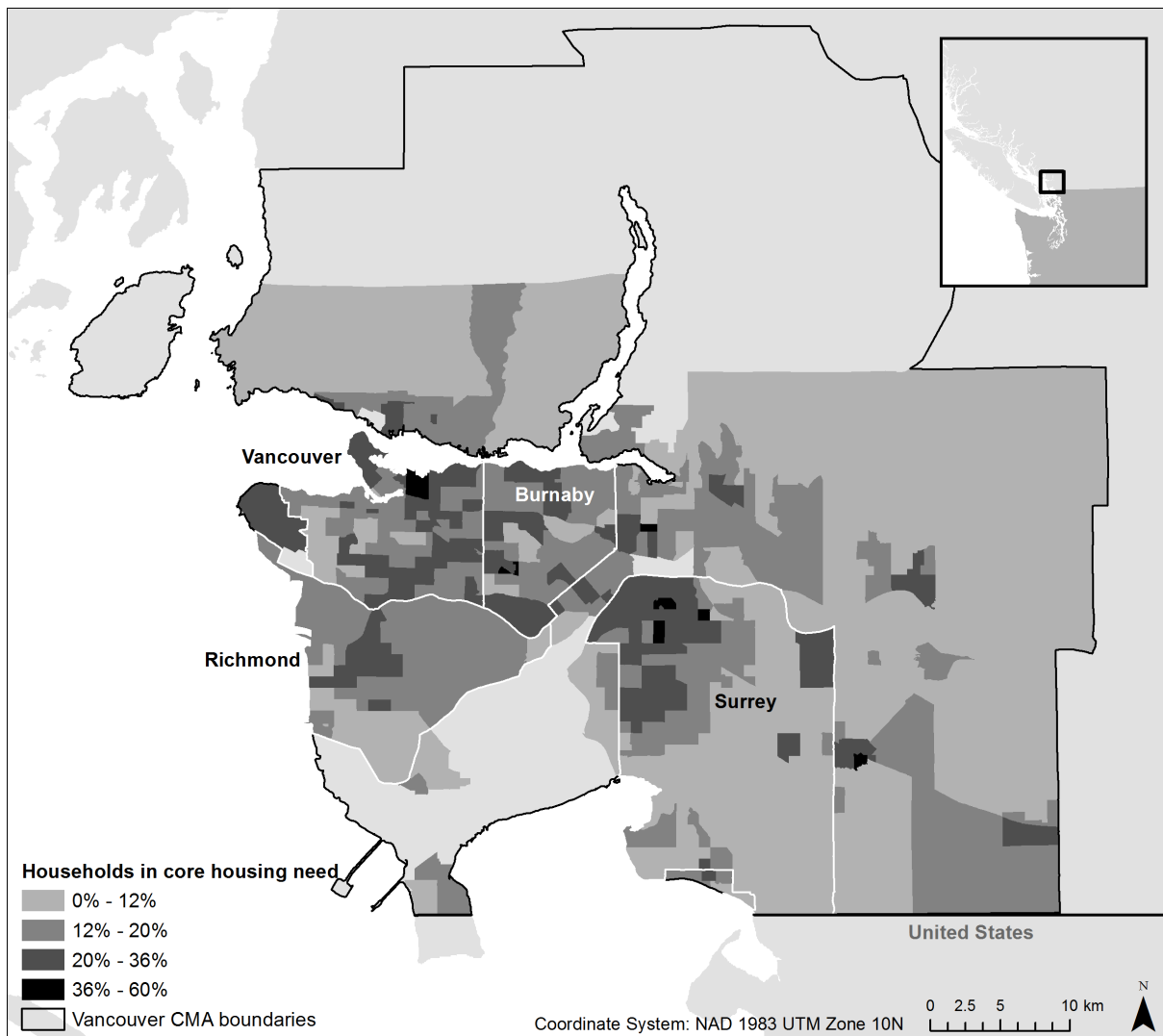
The research director at a large British Columbia housing nonprofit organization explained one way that these apparently distinct housing crises are related through governmental housing policy:

> As long as we've had housing policy, it's always prioritized homeownership…. But I think that's starting to change a little bit municipally where we're seeing…the City of Vancouver and the City of New Westminster…incentivizing rental development…. You know, we also look at policy around homelessness, and a shift towards housing first philosophy within a lot of funding programs. Well that requires a fairly strong [rental] vacancy rate.

And yet in the popular imagination these housing problems remain strongly compartmentalized, according to a staff member from a province-wide anti-poverty organization:

> Vancouverites tend to think that [poverty]…is only an issue for the Downtown Eastside, and are in denial that poverty is actually in all of our communities in Vancouver, in Metro

Vancouver and in BC. Even in somewhere like West Vancouver that we would think its protected from poverty, it's there for sure.

In part as a result of this fact, she went on to explain, different groups claiming a housing-based right to the city haven't yet managed to connect their struggles:

Last year there was this rally in Vancouver for #idonthave1million and it was all focused on home ownership. The low-income community felt excluded; they weren't involved in the organizing or on the day speaking. I would say there is an opportunity here but we haven't managed to take it yet.

Housing and anti-poverty organizing continue to look for creative ways to connect low-income housing problems to broader (global) issues, though. The Syrian refugee crisis, to which the Canadian government responded in part by accepting 25,000 refugees in 2015, created an unexpected opportunity in this regard, as the staffer from the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition explains:

In some ways the refugee housing issue has given us a bit of a way to talk about the issues of homelessness and housing for the folks that are here…. Everyone's been welcoming refugees in to either their own private homes or recognizing the government needs to play a role in this. And it's been dicey because some homeless folks have been angry about this, and there is a potential for tension obviously. But there is also an opportunity to say, okay if we can do this for refugees…then we can also make these commitments and kick in government resources for the folks that we have here that are homeless. So I have seen those conversations, and they seem to have been more productive.

A major fault line that has emerged in public discussions of Vancouver's housing problems is the spectre of anti-Chinese racism. On the one hand, there is ample evidence that Vancouver's local housing market is being distorted by inflows of foreign capital, and that the overwhelming majority of this capital is coming from mainland China. Particularly galling to many housing observers is that a sizeable portion of this investment appears to be taking the form of absentee ownership of vacant houses, which is a perfectly rationale strategy in a city where any potential cash flows from renting the house would be dwarfed by the appreciation from property prices increasing by 30% or more a year. But this speculative ownership has the double impact of first driving up housing prices through competing demand for existing inventory and second driving up housing prices further by reducing the effective supply of housing in the city when an occupied house becomes unoccupied.

On the other hand, even if one accepts the role of Chinese buyers in driving a large portion of Vancouver's housing unaffordability problems (and, to be clear, some observers do not accept this), there is no necessary reason why nationality should be a major point of policy or political interest. The real problem is a disjuncture between Vancouver's labour market and housing market. Housing prices are rising thanks to demand coming from outside the local economy, and local economic growth isn't keeping up with the cost of living. From the local perspective, there is not much difference if the demand comes from Beijing or from Toronto, from Hong Kong or from Seattle. The result has been a fierce and at times acrimonious debate about, effectively, who should be able to claim a right to the city, and at whose expense.

One Vancouver real estate agent (a relatively recent Chinese immigrant who works mainly with the Chinese population in the city) downplayed the impact foreign ownership has had on Vancouver housing prices, while stressing instead consumer choice and the realities of the free market:

> I think the media exaggerates the impact of Chinese people for its own benefit. The percentage of homeowners among the Chinese is high because they save their money for buying a house, while local white residents tend to spend all their income every month or even go into debt. So they can't afford the downpayment. Housing prices are high in Vancouver, but people don't have to choose to live here. They can go somewhere else with lower prices. If people really want to live here, they need to earn it; they should work hard for it. Vancouver is a beautiful place where everyone wants to stay, but only those who can afford the living cost can stay.

But another Chinese real estate agent, while also arguing that Chinese immigrants should not be blamed for the housing crisis, inverted the free-market script to make this argument by raising the agency of *sellers* as well as buyers.

> It is not reasonable to blame the Chinese. It is [the existing residents] who decide to sell their houses; they could decide to keep them instead. And they gain huge profits from selling their house because one little house on the west side of Vancouver can sell for 3 million. They think selling their house is profitable, and they prefer to get the money instead of staying in the City of Vancouver.

A community organizer who works with the low-income Chinese population in Vancouver's Chinatown made a similar point, while also identifying the real cost of racism in current discourse over Vancouver's housing problems:

> A lot of people in my group have lived here a long time—decades—but to someone walking down the street, they're not going to know, they're going to assume, "oh you don't speak English, you must have come here recently", just driving this issue of a lot of racism…. I think as the media continues to play on this sort of thing and keep bringing it up and signalling a particular ethnic group's [responsibility for the housing crisis]…you're going to have these stereotypes where when you see Chinese people you think they're going to be rich, and you're not going to associate Chinese people needing social housing…. I think this stereotyping is more divisive, whereas I think the main issue is just look at the market and look at the money. There are people that speculate here that are residents and what difference does that make? Are they off the hook because they're residents?

A common charge among progressive critics of Vancouver's development-gone-wild urban growth politics, which is that developers have attempted to aggressively reframe any criticism of unrestrained foreign money in Vancouver real estate as racist criticism of foreigners. But this fact has made actual productive discussion of issues of foreign ownership difficult, according to a prominent newspaper columnist who has covered real estate connections between China and Vancouver for a number of years:

> Cries of racism have helped muzzle that debate…. I think there are very valid concerns about racism, but to an extent, I think that by muzzling the conversation about foreign money as

opposed to foreigners, what is happening is that the only people left in the discussion are going to be racists…. I think that Vancouver in particular—although it's probably a Canada-wide problem —struggles to talk about race and ethnicity and immigration without being seen as a confrontation about racism. And I think you can particularly see it Vancouver, and particularly when you're talking about real-estate. Because it's an all too easy thing for wealthy, white property developers to quickly say "Oh, this is racist."

The middle-class crisis of homeownership and its accompanying tensions around foreign ownership generated sufficient political pressure that in the fall of 2016 both the provincial and municipal governments introduced sharp new financial controls on housing which would have seemed unthinkable just a year or two earlier. In August, the provincial government introduced a fifteen percent transaction tax on foreign nationals buying property anywhere in the Vancouver region. And then in November, the City of Vancouver passed a $10,000-a-year fee on owners of vacant properties in the city as a means to discourage speculative ownership. And, as it turns out, a senior member of the mayor's office had told me several months earlier that one of the appeals of a vacancy tax as a means to address housing supply was that it avoided any appearance of racism:

It appeals to a lot of people because it's not seen as potentially xenophobic, it's whoever. It doesn't matter where you're from, you know, citizen, non-citizen.

It is too soon to know if these measures will significantly alter dynamics of housing affordability in the region, but at a minimum they make it clear that the cries and demands for a right to the city are not going unheard.

Reflections on researching the global right to the city

Returning one more time to the three keywords of "right", "city", and "global", the Vancouver case study shows, first of all, multiple conflicting claims for the right to the city through the housing system. The longstanding anti-homelessness and anti-poverty movement has found some new resources for its struggle from the advent of middle-class housing problems, but has not been able to significantly broaden its basis of support into the middle class. Meanwhile, the rising cost of homeownership in Vancouver has created a new demand for the right to the city on behalf of the middle class, and *against* the right of foreign nationals to buy property as speculative investments. We thus see something like a spectrum of housing-based claims on the right to the city, from a right to shelter to a right to property ownership to a right to property investment.

This Vancouver case study also demonstrates multiple "cities"—as imaginative communities or categories of practice—at work in these different claims on the right to the city. Is the city a community of Canadian homeowners? A region where people who work for a living should be able to afford a decent place to live? A destination for foreign immigrants, or foreign capital? With Vancouver's housing affordability problems now extending deep into the city's hinterland, where can we draw the city's boundaries?

Lastly, as the case study makes clear, the right to the city in Vancouver is in part a function of the operations of Chinese capital originating overseas, and researching this right thus takes us far outside the boundaries of the city. While my research team has only begun to explore the Vancouver

housing crisis as it is experienced and interpreted in mainland China, it is already clear that a resolution to the crisis does not lie only within the control of "local" political and economic interests in Vancouver.

These characteristics, I believe, could offer some inspiration for research into the right to the city in other sociospatial contexts. At the same time, this brief case study was unable to address other important dimensions to the right to the city. Above all, many inhabitants claiming a right to the city worldwide do so in the face of violence or the strong threat of violence. While there has been significant state and police repression of anti-poverty activists in Vancouver over the years, the severity of that repression is not comparable to the circumstances confronting African American communities and Black Lives Matter activists in the United States today, to say nothing of communities facing off against authoritarian regimes and corporate power elsewhere in the world.

In fact, it is precisely this interface between urban social movements on the one hand and capital and the state on the other which the right to the city calls on us to attend to—both for researchers seeking to better integrate politics into their study of urban space, and for the activists claiming this right as "a cry and a demand" in public spaces, streets, and the halls of power.

Acknowledgments

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