

Capital in the Capital: Democracy in the Neoliberal City

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Abstract

This thesis examines the democratic deficits emerging from Ottawa's local governance in the context of neoliberal urbanism. It argues that while private investment is often framed as essential to urban development, it simultaneously undermines democratic principles of accountability and transparency and the equitable redistribution of power and resources. Tracing the historical political-economic conditions that have driven austerity and privatization, the study analyzes their impact on municipal governance, citizen engagement, and political imaginaries. Focusing on housing as a central site of analysis, it explores how the influence of private real estate developers contributes to the displacement of low-income residents and deepens inequities in democratic representation while eroding substantial democratic rights. It further demonstrates how local government bureaucracy is increasingly weaponized to suppress dissent rather than facilitate inclusive civic debate. The current democratic crisis extends beyond voter apathy to include the structural limitations that prevent citizens from shaping the economic and social systems that govern their lives. Ultimately, it argues that addressing this crisis requires not just policy reform, but a fundamental reimagining of democracy itself—one that challenges the depoliticization of economic life and reclaims collective decision-making as a democratic imperative.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Capital Cities.....	1
<i>Canada’s Neoliberal Turn: Economic Restructuring and Austerity</i>	5
<i>Interrogating the Urban: Cities and Democracy</i>	8
<i>Neoliberalism, Democracy, and “Common Sense”</i>	10
<i>“Ottawanthropology”: Contributing to a Developing Anthropology of Ottawa</i>	13
<i>Structure of the Thesis</i>	17
Chapter One: “The Status Quo Fights Back”: Obstacles in the Way of an Otherwise.....	20
<i>Institutionalizing Conformity: The Watson Club</i>	23
<i>Neoliberal Affects and the Politics of Stability</i>	28
<i>Shaking the Status Quo: On the Use of Political Humour</i>	35
<i>Conclusion: Amalgamated Publics</i>	41
Chapter Two: Housing for Whom? The Socio-Political Consequences of Housing Privatization.....	45
<i>The Privatization of Housing: From “Home” to “Real Estate”</i>	47
<i>What Democracy? Socioeconomic Inequality and the Democratic Process</i>	53
<i>Conclusion: The Limits of Liberal Inclusion</i>	64
Chapter Three: Bureaucracy: Weapons of the Neoliberal State.....	68
<i>The Town Meeting as an Exercise in Direct Democracy</i>	70
<i>“The Political Route Was Not Working”: Suing the OPS Board</i>	75
<i>Conclusion: Dissent and Democracy</i>	87
Conclusion: We’re Not So Polite After All.....	90
Works Cited.....	96

Introduction: Capital Cities

In the waning days of 2022, the judicial inquiry investigating Ottawa's light-rail transit (LRT) system was officially published. The report had been long anticipated by members of the public who had been demanding greater transparency from City Hall after years of tolerating the train's recurring service failures. Since its much-heralded debut, mechanical and technical issues plagued the LRT, sometimes forcing passenger evacuations and, at other times, leaving service suspended for weeks on end. The frequent breakdowns were only made worse by the city's poor communication, with information about the issues being as scarce and unreliable as the transit system itself.

Following an alarming train derailment in September 2021, then-city councillor Catherine McKenney fiercely advocated for a judicial inquiry, echoing the demands of transit riders and community organizations seeking answers. Much to their dismay, the motion for an independent investigation was defeated in a council vote in favour of an internal audit — a decision justified on the grounds of fiscal prudence and expediency. The stakes in choosing between a judicial inquiry and an internal audit went beyond procedural differences; it posed a fundamental question about how thoroughly the city was willing to investigate its transit woes. While McKenney's motion called for a more meticulous, independent review, an internal audit, conducted by the City's auditor general, was limited in its investigative scope. Resistance to the former led members of the public, including some councillors, to question whether there was more behind the problems than they had been led to believe. When the motion for the inquiry failed to pass a second council vote amid ongoing service failures, several councillors criticized the decision, arguing that this was no longer just about the LRT, but about restoring public trust, accountability, and

transparency—key democratic values that some felt had been compromised to protect private interests.

Despite numerous attempts to stall the investigation, the Government of Ontario eventually intervened and enforced the inquiry, mirroring McKenney’s assertion that Ottawans had a “right to know” what was really going on. After a year-long examination, the final report (2022) revealed what many had already suspected. It found that the city staff responsible for overseeing the project engaged in “egregious violations of public trust” by deliberately misleading city council throughout their management (28). Most damning was the discovery that staff had altered the trial testing requirements to rush the LRT’s launch without notifying the rest of council, effectively obstructing their capacity to exercise proper oversight. This not only compromised the technical integrity of the transit system, potentially endangering riders, but also demonstrated a problematic disregard for democratic principles of transparency and public accountability. In fact, the investigating judge himself claimed that “because the conduct was willful and deliberate, it leads to serious concerns about the good faith of senior City staff and raises questions about where their loyalties lie” (ibid., 29). Adding to public frustration, those named in the report had quietly vacated their positions before its publication, evading potential consequences. With trust in local government shattered and the city entangled in lawsuits with its private partner, Ottawa was left grappling with the fallout of a transit project marred by deception and mismanagement.

The story of Ottawa’s LRT is not simply one of broken infrastructure; *it offers a lens through which to examine the deepening divide between citizens and their political institutions in the era of neoliberal urban development.* This case draws attention to the tensions that arise in public-private partnerships (P3s) at the municipal level, where private investment is imagined as necessary for development but also threatens public accountability and transparency. In our present

age of neoliberal governance, democracy has withered into little more than a procedural shell – its vital organs of redistribution and collective decision-making are hollowed by economic policies that enshrine the primacy of market rule. Consequently, the democratic crisis we face today runs deeper than voter apathy but refers to the structural mechanisms that limit the capacity of citizens to shape the economic and social forces that govern their lives. Thus, this thesis title provokes the double meaning of “capital”: referencing both its setting in the City of Ottawa, the *capital* of a liberal democratic country, while alluding to the democratic deficits that emerge within a context where the accumulation of *capital* is prioritized above all else. Addressing this crisis requires not only policy reforms but also a profound rethinking of contemporary democracy itself—one that actively challenges the depoliticization of economic life and restores the collective decision-making and redistributive power of democratic governance.

The work of Antina von Schnitzler (2016) on post-apartheid South Africa, urges us to see infrastructure and infrastructural provisioning as nothing less than “materiality of democracy.” Using pre-paid water metre as her object of analysis, she shows how seemingly “neutral” administrative technologies can both erode substantial democratic citizenship rights and perpetuate patterns of historical marginalization once they are subjected to market mechanisms. As such, the water metre is not merely an apolitical tool for service delivery, but a part of an active political terrain where citizens directly engage with and confront the state. The failures of such technologies to foster broad-based social inclusion underscore a deeper disjuncture between South Africa’s democratic aspirations and the lived reality of its citizens, who find their democratic rights curtailed by the very infrastructures meant to serve them. Von Schnitzler’s insights extend beyond the context of South Africa, illuminating a broader crisis afflicting late liberal democracies, where institutions ostensibly committed to equality and social welfare are increasingly hollowed out by

market imperatives that exacerbate poverty and precarity. This crisis is especially visible in development projects that claim to enhance residents' quality of life yet frequently fail to deliver on their promises. Marie Kolling and Martijn Koster (2019) capture the lived experience of these failures through the concept of *betrayal*, defined as a sense of deception and failure to fulfill promised commitments. (327). This betrayal, they argue, also operates at an institutional level, where institutions themselves become “active agents of violent betrayal through their protocols, policies or *failures to fulfill the promises of these procedures*” (Gentile, 2018, 649, cited in Kolling & Koster, 2019, 327; emphasis added). Where development initiatives are promoted with powerful visions of a better future—promising reliable infrastructure, economic opportunity, and social mobility – some citizens find themselves excluded from or, in some cases, directly harmed by the very projects meant to uplift them. Their disillusionment deepens beyond mere disappointment, manifesting instead as a profound sense of abandonment and betrayal by the state.

While marginalized communities have a long history of experiencing such betrayals and forms of abandonment, if not outright harm from the institutions meant to govern them, what seems new is that this sense of disaffection is now much more generalizable. It affects, notably, middle class city residents, who have previously enjoyed greater privileges. These traditionally influential stakeholders find themselves increasingly sidelined as municipal priorities shift toward courting global capital and corporate investment. When even the professional class – those with cultural capital, political literacy, and presumed access – experience systemic exclusion from meaningful participation, it lays bare the extent to which democracy has been eroded, stripping even privileged citizens of their influence and deepening the democratic deficit.

In Ottawa, the growing influence of private enterprises over urban development has fuelled public skepticism regarding the integrity of political officials and their ability to represent

their constituents' needs. Neoliberal governance has systematically prioritized market-driven growth over democratic accountability, transforming urban planning into a process where corporate interests dictate the future of the city, often at the expense of the local community's needs. Some residents in Ottawa experience a deep sense of betrayal when their elected officials fail to represent their interests in planning and decision-making. They are doubly betrayed by the lack of meaningful opportunities for participation, leaving some to wonder if their lives are being accounted for at all. This research seeks to unravel the conditions that have empowered private enterprises to exert disproportionate influence over the production of urban space, undermining democratic values of public accountability and socioeconomic redistribution. In doing so, it explores the forms of local resistance that emerge against this democratic backsliding, where residents seek to reassert themselves as primary stakeholders in urban development and reclaim the centrality of their voices within political decision-making. Through grassroots mobilization, advocacy, and direct engagement with decision-making processes, they not only resist continuing forms of capitalist urbanization but strive to restore democratic government as a site of public participation, accountability, and transparency.

Canada's Neoliberal Turn: Economic Restructuring and Austerity

Neoliberalism gained prominence as a reigning political and economic ideology in the wake of the financial crises of the 1970s and 1980s. At its core, neoliberal capitalism sought to replace the redistributive policies of the Keynesian welfare state with those that emphasized individual entrepreneurial freedoms and the supremacy of market rule (Harvey, 2005). In this context, the role of the state is reduced to ensuring the institutional arrangements conducive to market functioning and capital accumulation. As such, the neoliberal state is one characterized by market deregulation, service privatization, and increased individual responsibility for one's successes and

failures through market participation (Harvey, 1989). While David Harvey has described neoliberalism as a global class project that seeks to reassert the dominance of capital, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (2002) explore the context-embedded and more locally specific expressions of neoliberal transformations. Their work inspires questions about what neoliberalism looks like in practice; how it is tangibly experienced in the “real world.” Indeed, they argue "actually existing neoliberalism" manifests differently across various social, political, and historical contexts.

Neoliberal transformations in Canada have largely focused on reducing public spending and shifting responsibility for social services from the federal government to lower levels without the matching financial capacity to manage them (Walks, 2009). In 1995, the federal government replaced the more redistributive Canadian Assistance Plan and the Established Programs Financing with the Canadian Health and Social Transfer. This effectively revoked the 50/50 cost-sharing agreements with the provinces and resulted in less funding for social and health services (Fanelli, 2018). At the same time, the Province of Ontario experienced a second wave of economic reforms led by the newly elected Conservative Premier Mike Harris (1995-2002). Spearheading the "Common Sense Revolution," Harris sought to address the provincial deficit by further slashing funding for public education and health services while also promoting less taxation, small government and deregulation (Keil, 2022; Basu, 2004). Municipalities bore the brunt of these cuts, where services like public schools, infrastructure, and emergency services became increasingly reliant on property taxes. Alongside these aggressive budget cuts and to satisfy his commitment to less bureaucracy, the Harris government initiated a series of municipal amalgamations across the province, including the contemporary City of Ottawa. Despite widespread contestation and community concerns about eroding democratic representation, amalgamations were justified on the grounds of improving government and economic efficiency by minimizing bureaucracy,

reducing costs, and removing barriers to private investment (Fanelli, 2018). However, these expected benefits failed to materialize in the following years, as municipalities faced recurring budgetary shortfalls and were ultimately forced to rely on unchecked urban growth to expand their property tax base in the absence of other revenue-generating mechanisms (*ibid.*).

With limited fiscal capacity, cities in Ontario often turn to privatization or outsource public services. In the case of the latter, these often take the form of public-private partnerships (PPPs). In such arrangements, the government contracts private companies to design, build, finance, and operate new public infrastructures and services that had previously fallen under the sole responsibility of the government. In the case of Ottawa, public-private partnerships "serve as a vehicle for the injection of private sector financing while allowing governments to maintain their fiscal targets and avoid taking on additional debt" (City of Ottawa, 2002, p. 4 cited in Krawchenko & Stoney, 2011). Importantly, the strategic term "partnership" sought to avoid the criticisms associated with privatization, instead seeking to promote the benefits of the private sector (resources, knowledge, efficiency) into public services in a mutually beneficial relationship (Heame, 2014; see also Miraftab, 2004). In their study of the Lansdowne Park revitalization project in Ottawa, Tamara Krawchenko and Christopher Stoney (2011) explain how the confidential nature of PPPs and its reliance on private expertise undermines democratic principles of transparency and accountability and limits opportunities for citizen participation. Where such channels for public participation exist, they are often hollowed out and made superficial, serving merely as "therapeutic" processes that provide the form of democratic participation without the substance (Arnstien [1969], cited in Krawchenko & Stoney, 2011).

Interrogating the Urban: Cities and Democracy

Cities have long been central in the exercise of democratic governance. Dating back to ancient Greece, cities pioneered the practice of citizens gathering in public forums to deliberate and vote on decisions that shaped their daily lives and collective futures. As different categories of people sought to lay claim to society's resources, cities were also spaces where democratic inclusion was" continually contested, reimagined, and transformed. Urban geographers Nigel Thrift and Amin Ash (2017) understand urban spaces as complex and adaptive assemblages, a "mangle of machines, infrastructures, humans, nonhumans, institutions, metabolisms, matter and nature, where the coming together is itself constitutive of urbanity" (11). These various independent yet interconnected elements, both material and immaterial, interact with one another to produce a particular urban experience. Importantly, the relationships between these elements are not static but in an ongoing process of construction, constantly shifting in form and trajectory over time. This fluidity allows cities to serve as arenas for experimentation and innovation in organization and governance, with the potential to influence broader global trends and bring forth novel societal transformations.

Similarly, James Holston and Arjun Appadurai (1991) illustrate how cities have disrupted traditional notions of national citizenship and its associated political rights, expanding the boundaries of democratic participation. Historically, citizenship was tied to territorial belonging, granting members a formal status imbued with a principle of equality. However, while all members of a nation may hold legal citizenship, the substantive experience of citizenship—access to civil, political, socioeconomic, and cultural rights—remains deeply unequal (4). As localized sites of global economic forces, migration, and transnational rights discourses converge, cities can produce new forms of membership and solidarity that challenge the primacy of national identity (3). Holston and Appadurai look to the collective struggles of the urban poor amid industrial expansion

as an example of this transformation. These movements, rooted in shared conditions of precarity rather than nationality, redefine political belonging, demanding inclusion not just as citizens of a nation but as legitimate participants in urban life. Beyond destabilizing conventional citizenship, these struggles also broadened the very notion of rights. Political rights are no longer limited to voting or legal recognition; instead, they become a claim on the material and political resources necessary for a dignified life. In this way, cities serve as laboratories of democratic expansion, where movements for housing, labour protections, and public services push for a more inclusive model of social belonging.

Cities, like infrastructures, should not be understood as the passive backdrops against which political struggles unfold. Instead, they actively reflect the contradictions and tensions of the current social, political, and economic climate, as they are deeply embedded in and shaped by these larger forces. A protest in the city is often not just a political demonstration, but a demand for a different way of experiencing urban life itself. By examining how cities are organized, governed, and lived in, we gain crucial insights into how larger social processes take tangible, material form, embedding power dynamics into the very "texture and fabric" of human experience (Low, 1996, 384).

Already back in the 1970s, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1970 [2003]) argued that we are entering an emerging era of planetary urbanization, where capital's expansive logic dissolves the traditional boundaries between city and countryside. His theoretical framework centres on the social production of space, revealing how urban space is produced in relation to the organization of capitalist economies. Just as industrial capitalism reconfigured settlement patterns from villages to factory towns, today's financialized capitalism continues to remake cities through processes of deindustrialization/outsourced manufacturing and the concentration of the creative

class, producing new forms of social stratification and inequality. Perhaps Lefebvre's (1996) most profound contribution to critical urban studies lies in his conception of "le droit à la ville" (the right to the city). This right transcends mere claims on resources or space; it represents a radical vision of collective governance in which urban inhabitants reclaim control over the production and governance of urban space (158). David Harvey (2008) builds on this framework, describing the right to the city as one that allows residents to exercise direct "power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way" (5). He emphasizes the dialectical relationship between city-building and social conditions—we shape cities, and they in turn shape us. As a result, as Harvey has profoundly argued: "The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic values we hold" (4). Strong local democracies, in which urban planning and development are driven by the needs of the people rather than the demands of private capital, have the potential to challenge capitalist power structures and promote more equitable governance.

Neoliberalism, Democracy, and "Common Sense"

The "Common Sense Revolution" led by Premier Mike Harris deserves further semantic investigation, especially as its use has been resurrected by the present Conservative Party of Canada, along with other right-wing politicians across the world (see Muehlebach, 2016). The notion of "common sense" implies a lack of space for debate – we supposedly do things in specific ways simply because it's "common sense." Not only does this have effects on the social imaginary and its perception of policy alternatives, but it ignores the very fact that common sense is not naturally occurring, but something that is taught.

Michael Herzfeld (2015) approaches "common sense" not as a universal truth but as knowledge that is historically and culturally contingent, appearing as self-evident to members within a particular social group. He advocates for ethnographic approaches that critically analyze the taken-for-granted aspects of social life. By doing so, we can begin to investigate the ways in which power operates through seemingly neutral and natural assumptions. Herzfeld asks: "Why are some things obvious, and to whom? Who has an interest in maintaining that state of affairs? ... How, in short, is obviousness used to maintain or subvert dominant ideologies?" (259). His approach not only identifies common sense as culturally constructed but also interrogates the power dynamics that sustain those "obvious" truths, making the analysis of common sense inherently political. There is a lot of ideological work that goes into constructing common sense, and it is in our best interest to understand what ends it seeks to satisfy. As such, a common sense informed by neoliberal principles is one that rejects alternatives to market rule as unrealistic, utopian, or simply impossible. Put simply, it is an assault on human creativity and imagination.

Canada's federal politics have long been dominated by the Conservative and Liberal Federal Parties, along with the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois as secondary forces. In the 1990s, the major parties converged around a neoliberal policy regime, one that reinforces market rule (Evans & Albo, 2018). Indeed, while economic restructuring at the federal level was ushered in by the Conservative Government under Brian Mulroney, it was continued by the succeeding Liberal Government under Jean Chretien, who hammered the metaphorical final nail in the coffin of the welfare state. The retrenchment of the welfare state ultimately forged a new national consensus, reshaping the Canadian state into a neoliberal structure that both facilitates capital extraction and limits direct public control over economic decision-making. While the political parties maintain some differences in rhetoric and emphasis, Canadian political scientists

Bryan Evans and Gregory Albo (2018) argue the fundamental “de-contestation” of neoliberal governance has made them less substantially distinct in practice (7). As such, neoliberal policies have become increasingly depoliticized within Canadian political systems.

Building on Foucault’s concept of governmentality, Wendy Brown (2017) argues neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies but a governing rationality that transforms all aspects of life—including democracy itself—into economic terms. By extending market logic beyond the economy, neoliberalism depoliticizes democratic institutions, reducing citizenship to economic participation and governance to market management. In hollowing out the substance of democracy, neoliberalism reshapes political expectations so that people accept rule by experts and markets as normal, rather than something that could be challenged or changed. This shift does not require overt force; instead, it operates through soft power—legal and institutional tweaks, best practices, and cultural norms that render market-driven governance common sense (35)¹. As a result, the public ceases to think in terms of shared political concerns, and democracy is undone not by outright dismantling but by being subtly reconfigured into a system that legitimizes inequality, individualizes responsibility, and forecloses alternative political imaginaries. Put differently, the depoliticization of economic affairs systemically “stamps out” the desire and capacity for radical thinking (Wilson, 2017, 71).² When people are dis-imagined, they lose the “utopian impulse – that sensibility that another, better world is possible – and thus stay stuck in capitalist realism” (ibid., 72). Liberation from the neoliberal “common sense” requires not only

¹ “Soft power” typically refers to the ability to influence others through appeal rather than direct force or coercion. Brown (2017) expands on this, showing how the spread of neoliberal logic beyond the economy is achieved not necessarily through overt violence, but through subtler forms of influence that make market-driven governance something to be desired.

² Wilson (2017) refers to dis-imagination as an inability to imagine an alternative to the (neoliberal) status quo. It is “[t]he destruction of our capacities for critique and radical thinking” (51).

confronting the institutional structures that overtly constrain our actions, but also turning our gaze inward to examine how our own imaginations have been quietly disciplined.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony helps explain how elite classes maintain their dominance not through outright coercion, but by presenting their interests as aligned with the common good, even as it keeps the masses disadvantaged (Jackson-Lears, 1985). Nancy Fraser (2015) builds on this framework, showing how neoliberalism shapes common sense. By divorcing the economy from the polity, neoliberalism undermines democratic processes, privileging individual market choices over collective decision-making aimed at addressing broader social needs and injustices. Further, it conditions people to accept economic crises as mere setbacks rather than symptoms of systemic contradictions in (financialized) capitalism. As a result, neoliberal capitalism sustains itself by framing its failures as isolated issues rather than the product of deeper structural flaws. Indeed, many scholars have shown that the term "crisis" often obscures the fact that recessions and economic downturns are not anomalies but intrinsic to the normative functioning of capitalism, which perpetually requires rescue from its own contradictions (see Roitman, 2013). This, Fraser suggests, creates a crisis of legitimacy, as capitalism is repeatedly portrayed as the most efficient or "natural" way of organizing society, despite regularly failing to deliver its supposed benefits to the majority.

"Ottawanthropology": Contributing to a Developing Anthropology of Ottawa

As a resident and frequent public transit user in Ottawa, I experienced the frustrations of unreliable public transit firsthand and, like many others, felt disillusioned by the City's mismanagement of the LRT. Before the judicial inquiry was published, I began to closely follow the work of local journalists and community groups to keep track of the news surrounding the project, before eventually stumbling upon the social media accounts of Horizon Ottawa.

Horizon Ottawa is a grassroots community advocacy group with a mission to promote robust democratic representation and participation in Ottawa's local politics. Formed in 2019, the organization was led by a group of citizens overwhelmingly frustrated by the City's perceived susceptibility to private influences and its apparent lack of concern for public transparency and accountability. In response, one of the group's initial efforts included developing a database that monitored campaign contributions to elected officials, with special attention to donations from private industry sectors. This tool allowed them to analyze potential correlations between these financial contributions and the subsequent voting patterns and policy decisions made by officials once they took office. They found that those who received the highest proportion of donations from developers were the most likely to vote in ways that protected their donors' interests. This pattern provoked questions of to whom elected officials feel most accountable and whose interests they represent: that of their constituents, or private corporate donors. Admittedly, the questions guiding this research are not entirely my own but extend the ongoing inquiries of Horizon Ottawa, reflecting a broader commitment to producing engaged scholarship. This work seeks to examine the influence of private capital on local political decision-making, explore how this shapes the city's approach to urban development, and assess the broader consequences for the democratic process. As a supporter of their cause, this study compliments Horizon's efforts to challenge prevailing power dynamics and advances their goal of fostering a more equitable and democratic local government, in which diverse citizens' experiences are heard, represented, and accounted for in the shaping of the city.

Luke Lassiter (2005) calls for a collaborative approach to anthropology and ethnographic writing that considers the researcher and participants as equals "working together toward a common goal" and promotes the deliberate integration of participants' thoughts, feedback, and

knowledge at every stage of research, from fieldwork to writing (84). He advocates for a shift away from extractive research models, instead promoting reciprocity, transparency, and shared authority in knowledge production. Additionally, engaged anthropology focuses on the lived experiences of marginalized groups, with an emphasis on amplifying their voices and supporting their goals (see also Loperena, 2016). My methodological approach was heavily influenced by the work of David Bond (2023), who employs a collaborative model that integrates ethnographic research with active community engagement to amplify the concerns of working-class neighborhoods in the state of New York affected by emissions from nearby chemical plants. His approach emphasizes the need for anthropology to be publicly relevant, advocating for a form of research that not only documents societal issues but actively participates in dismantling harmful systems such as petro-capitalism.

Following this lead, I sought to conduct research that was not only academically rigorous but also meaningful beyond the confines of the university. My approach is an attempt to make our academic discipline publicly useful – to use anthropology as an instrument of social and political transformation (Borofsky & De Lauri, 2019). For a thesis that takes democracy as a central focus, it seems only fitting that its production *and* consumption be democratic as well. This “public” orientation bridges the gap between “expertise” and public knowledge through accessible communication, a focus on contemporary issues, and diverse forms of engagement. Beyond merely identifying the market logics that shape Ottawa's evolving political economy on an abstract level, this research seeks to practically stimulate public discourse and inform policy considerations.

It took time to figure out how to successfully incorporate these approaches into my fieldwork. I naively believed that writing a thesis on Horizon Ottawa alone was enough to qualify it as collaborative. Originally, I planned to complete my fieldwork as an observer: attending Horizon's monthly meetings, taking notes during discussions, and analyzing their efforts from a

distance. However, my requests to do fieldwork in this way were met with disinterest. This indifference turned out to be a blessing in disguise, forcing me to critically reflect the utility of my research to the organization. Rather than taking the position of passive observer, my presence needed to contribute meaningfully to their cause. As a result, I began to volunteer for the group, joining them twice a week over three months to distribute their petition calling on City Hall to invest in affordable housing. It was only after I expressed my willingness to participate in a more useful way to their overall goals that Horizon Ottawa embraced me as a researcher.

As a volunteer, I worked under the direction of Rosa, the organizer responsible for coordinating the canvassing initiative. Every Wednesday evening and Saturday morning through the summer of 2023, we would gather in public space, usually a neighbourhood park, where Rosa would assign us our routes and distribute the necessary materials (clipboards, petition sheets, pens, pamphlets) that we would need for door-to-door canvassing. Prior to sending us off, she briefed us on key budgetary details that we could refer to in our conversations with residents. Our interactions at the doors were meticulously tracked: we recorded how many doors we knocked on, how many people answered, and how many signed. We also noted if there was potential interest in volunteering or donating to Horizon Ottawa. The signed papers would later be sent to other volunteers who would enter it in electronic form and forward it to the City's office.

Beyond my involvement with Horizon Ottawa, I also attended the Ottawa Urbanism Book Club to gain further insights into residents' perspectives of urban development. The book club created a space for deeper democratic dialogue that contrasted sharply with the city's formal, often repressive public meetings. Here, community organizers, residents, students, retirees, urban planners, architects, and even city councillors and staff gathered to exchange and debate diverse perspectives on governance, planning, and community development. The book club was also

useful for orienting me in relation to the relevant literature. Each monthly discussion revolved around a collectively chosen book, exploring topics that varied from housing, public transportation, “people-centred” spaces, and zoning/planning. This, too, helped form a more collaborative approach as the books we read and the topics we discussed factor into this research. From both canvassing and the book club, I was able to make friendly connections and request interviews with residents for further discussion. I conducted seven semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 1-2 hours, and which took up topics of democratic participation, public accountability and transparency, and developers’ influence on local political decision-making. I also attended public meetings, budget consultations, and other city-organized outreach initiatives to better understand municipal operations and listen firsthand to citizens’ concerns.

Structure of the Thesis

Today, democracy stands at a precarious crossroads, its foundations eroded by the relentless encroachment of market logic – its gospels of competition, efficiency, and individual self-interest – into virtually every dimension of social and political life. Financial elites have effectively captured public institutions, shifting their concerns away from collective welfare and towards protecting the vitality of the market at any and all costs. The aggressive privatization of public services, dismantling of regulatory safeguards, and insulation of economic decision-making from democratic oversight have together constricted the space for meaningful civic engagement. In this context, democracy had become a mere performance, emptied of its promise, let alone substance.

To that end, chapter one takes as an analytical object the idea of the “status quo”—a term repeatedly used by my interlocutors to describe and critique the current political practices of the local government. “Status quo” politics frames alternatives to current conditions as unrealistic while presenting itself as neutral and balanced. As such, the status quo also has much to do with

cultivating a certain “common sense.” I conceptualize this as a kind of *affect* that shapes residents' political dispositions—not merely an overt, manipulative tactic leveraged by political officials, but something internalized by Ottawa's citizens themselves. The analysis interrogates the tension between residents' stated desire for change following LRT mismanagement and their paradoxical reluctance to challenge established neoliberal frameworks. It concludes by exploring how one mayoral candidate strategically deployed political parody throughout his campaign to critique both Ottawa's political institutions and the broader electorate, both of which seem constrained in its capacity to imagine and embrace political alternatives.

The following chapter shifts to a concrete analysis of neoliberal urban development through Ottawa's ongoing affordable housing crisis. It examines the disproportionate political influence of property developers through means of campaign financing and corporate lobbying, revealing an unspoken alliance between government officials and financial elites. This relationship directly contributes to the displacement of low-income residents, housing unaffordability, and the exclusionary nature of politics. The infamous Heron Gate evictions serve as a case study illuminating the broader consequences of housing financialization, which has reshaped housing policies to prioritize profit-making over local housing needs. The chapter further demonstrates how housing scarcity generates antagonisms between citizens, eroding the potential for broad-based class solidarity and making more inclusive forms of social justice difficult to achieve. As affordable housing stock diminishes, residents' grievances are often displaced onto immigrant newcomers rather than the underlying structural forces that have made housing unaffordable.

The final chapter brings us to the corridors of City Hall, describing citizens' experiences participating public meetings hosted by the Ottawa Police Services (OPS) Board. The decision to attend these public meetings was driven by my interlocutors' ongoing lawsuit against the OPS

Board, whom they have accused of arbitrarily leveraging bureaucratic procedures to minimize dissent. Police board meetings had become especially politicized following the tragic death of George Floyd by police officers in the United States and the events of the 2022 Freedom Convoy, prompting Ottawa residents and community organizations to mirror broader calls to de-task and defund of the police. In response, the OPS Board deliberately crafted excessive bureaucratic procedures to restrict public participation, ultimately undermining the democratic function of these meetings.

Returning to the 2022 Freedom Convoy, the conclusion considers the precarious state of liberal democracy in Western nations. It situates the events of the Convoy within scholarly debates about democratic tensions and popular mobilizations, showing how tolerance for difference and dissent is limited even amongst so-called liberals. It concludes by reasserting cities as potential spaces for political renewal, emphasizing the need for substantive economic and political reforms that will allow democratic governance to stand the test of time.

Chapter One: “The Status Quo Fights Back”: Obstacles in the Way of an Otherwise

The evening air was crisp as I made my way to the Sunnyside branch of the Ottawa Public Library to attend the Ottawa Urbanism book club, a meeting space for “city nerds” to gather and discuss urban planning. The decision to host the club at the library was intentional, a nod to the enduring spirit of libraries as sanctuaries of learning while also affirming the organizers’ commitment to preserving one of the city’s few remaining non-commercialized spaces. The evening’s discussion centred on *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution* (2016) by Jannette Sadik-Khan and Seth Solomonow, a transformative manifesto that sought to reimagine city streets, challenging decades of car-centric planning paradigms by repurposing underutilized roads into vibrant public plazas, expanding protected bike networks, and implementing dedicated bus lanes to enhance mobility for millions. Around the room, book club members nodded in agreement with the authors’ conclusions; they took turns recounting personal experiences travelling through the multi-modal streets of Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, even Montreal. Others voiced their frustration with Ottawa’s fractured transportation planning, where disconnected bike lanes ended abruptly at dangerous intersections, unreliable and inconvenient public transit reinforced car dependency, and territorial battles between pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers have resulted in tragic fatalities.

One member raised the issue of Ottawa’s failed bike-sharing program as emblematic of the city’s broader resistance to alternative modes of transportation. He argued these initiatives did not fail due to any inherent flaw in their design or concept, but instead due to the city officials lacking both the “political will” and long-term vision necessary to bring it to fruition. He explained how

City Council had balked at the financial investment – \$4 million in startup costs and \$3 million in annual operations – ultimately deeming it too expensive. Yet, he continued, the tens of millions spent annually on road maintenance, widening, and parking infrastructures remained largely unquestioned. Another member added that most efforts to integrate better cycling infrastructure were often met with resistance. The prevailing belief was that Ottawa's sprawling geography, coupled with its car-dependent suburbs and harsh winter conditions, made cycling an impractical mode of transportation year-round and thus not a worthwhile investment. For book club attendees, however, the failure to adequately integrate cycling infrastructure into the city's transportation planning represented just one manifestation of a municipal culture chronically resistant to urban transformation – one that gestures toward progress but routinely dismisses deviations from the norm as impractical. Indeed, attempts to reform the existing state of things are often met with systemic obstruction or, as was the case with the bike sharing program, outright resistance and cancelation. One member captured the pattern succinctly: “The status quo fights back.”

I quickly scribbled his words in my notebook. As the conversation continued, I noticed how often we returned to the same underling theme: the way seemingly technical decisions (in this case, concerning road use) were, in fact, deeply political acts. What was presented as objective or neutral often embodied specific assumptions about who and what space was for, reflecting deeper ideological commitments that privilege certain people, perspectives, and models of urban organization over others. While expanding roadways and parking facilities is framed as necessary and pragmatic, investments in cycling networks, pedestrian plazas, or dedicated transit corridors must continually justify their merit and fight for legitimacy within the planning process. This pattern extended well beyond the book club's conversations about transportation. Throughout my fieldwork, the “status quo” emerged as a powerful analytical lens, not only used as a shorthand to

capture the essence of Ottawa's atmosphere, but also speaking to a deeper ideological framework that informs political decision-making and urban planning in Ottawa. The technical veneer of planning decisions, I came to understand, often concealed the normative assumptions that made alternatives to the "status quo" seem unrealistic or undesirable.

The Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communications (2020) defines the status quo as "the existing social, economic, and political systems, or the current power relations." Importantly, it is not something that persists inevitably, but is actively upheld by institutions, policies, and actors with a vested interest in its preservation, requiring constant reinforcement. Maintaining the status quo, however, does not necessarily mean resisting change altogether but directing it in ways that avoid fundamentally disrupting existing structures, leaving deeper questions, such as those of redistribution, for example, largely unaddressed. As such, the status quo reproduces itself through a "politics of the reasonable," in which "radical" alternatives are dismissed as impractical and unrealistic, thus unworthy of serious consideration. In this way, it is as much concerned with preserving capitalist institutional arrangements as it is with defining the boundaries of what is considered possible and impossible. How does Ottawa's specific cultural-political atmosphere shape the contours of possibility in local politics? What forms of dissent, alternative imaginaries, and "radical" reconfigurations are foreclosed in the institutional and ideological maintenance of the status quo? If expanding bike lanes is too "disruptive," what hope is there for projects that demand a more fundamental rethinking of land use, economic redistribution, or democracy itself?

Building on Laura Nader's (1972) call to 'study up'—to critically examine institutions and those in positions of power—the first part of this chapter explores the institutional cultures that shape governance in Ottawa. Beginning with an examination of City Hall power dynamics, it investigates how informal political networks—particularly the "Watson Club"—deploy tactics of

intimidation and exclusion to suppress dissent. What should be a democratic, participatory arena instead functions as a controlled ecosystem designed to preserve existing power structures rather than debate their merit. The following discussion examines how residents in Ottawa come to embody and sustain the status quo, showing how power operates not simply through formal institutions but also through everyday practices and dispositions. I conceptualize the status quo as a pervasive form of affect that conditions daily life, subtly shaping how citizens perceive political possibilities and their own agency. This affective dimension is often captured in descriptions of the city's "character"—a shared, social mindset shaped by risk aversion, deference to institutional expertise, and a resigned acceptance of "that's just how we do things." I then examine the campaign of an unconventional mayoral candidate and his use of humor as a tool for political mobilization. By deliberately challenging the boundaries of "reasonable" political discourse, this candidate illuminated and critiqued the often-invisible mechanisms that render certain urban futures unthinkable. Though ultimately unsuccessful electorally, his campaign summoned voters to expand their imaginative horizons and envision the possibility of an otherwise. Finally, I discuss Ottawa's amalgamation and its negative impacts on local political representation and highlight how more recent provincial legislation continues to weaken the authority of local councillors and consolidate decision-making power solely in the hands of the mayor.

Institutionalizing Conformity: The Watson Club

To understand how certain ideas come to feel impractical or impossible, we might consider the challenges involved in transforming them. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2012) conceptualizes institutions not as static entities but as dynamic processes constantly requiring reproduction and maintenance. She describes institutionalization as the processes through which institutions gain the appearance of permanence and emphasizes how their apparent rigidity masks their contingent

nature: the fact that they could be organized differently. Central to her argument is how institutions achieve their power precisely by “becoming background,” by transforming into what is taken for granted, what recedes from conscious attention as merely routine features of everyday life (21). Yet, as she convincingly argues, institutions reveal their force most vividly in moments of resistance; she describes the experience of confronting institutions as “coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible” (26). In these moments of friction, the apparent naturalness of institutional arrangements dissolve, revealing instead their active role in preserving particular distributions of power, resources, and recognition.

During his tenure, former Mayor Jim Watson was frequently criticized for cultivating a culture of secrecy and exclusivity within City Hall. Residents, community organizations, and even some city staff coined the term “Watson Club” to describe the informal political faction of loyal city officials who, they alleged, reliably and unquestioningly advanced the mayor’s agenda in exchange for political support and patronage. This inner circle was said to foster an atmosphere of conformity, where dissent was discouraged and those who challenged the mayor’s authority were systematically sidelined. Accusations extended to claims of intimidation, bureaucratic obstruction of unfavored motions, and the strategic withholding of information from those outside the group. As a result, the Watson Club is widely understood as having undermined democratic processes by concentrating power within a narrow circle and preventing real deliberation amongst councillors.

As a regular public transit user, I was profoundly disoriented by the lack of information provided by the City and OC Transpo regarding disrupted LRT service. Like many others, I turned to Twitter (now known as X) for updates, where I eventually came across the voice of Sarah, one of four volunteer citizen transit commissioners on the Transportation Board. The role was intended as an additional democratic mechanism to enhance public accountability and representation,

bridging the gap between ordinary residents and political officials while ensuring that residents' transit concerns were properly considered in planning and decision-making. However, by fulfilling her responsibilities, Sarah became a target of Watson Club, who resented her critical scrutiny.

Sarah described the Watson Club as something akin to an “old boys' club”—an exclusive network of social and professional relationships among a select few who hold power and influence, often excluding others from opportunities to influence decision-making:

[Jim Watson] posed a culture within City Hall, which then permeates into the city itself - you're either with him or against him. That's where the term 'Watson Club' comes from ... The people in the Watson Club, they had to do what they were told, otherwise, they were out and the infrastructure projects that were perhaps promised or in planning would just disappear... So, you have that group of people that are basically just drones, doing exactly what they're told. Then you have more independent councillors. These are the ones that are not just going along, they don't do what they're told, they're doing what's best for their residents which is what they should be doing.”

In Sarah's view, the "Watson Club" was more than a group of like-minded officials. By describing its members as “drones,” she emphasized their willingness to follow orders unquestioningly, usually in exchange for political favours and the security of their own positions. Indeed, Watson exploited the instability of the 2022 Freedom Convoy to overhaul the Ottawa Police Services Board, removing Councillor Diane Deans, an outspoken critic and frequent adversary of the mayor, from her position as chair, prompting the resignation of other sitting councillors in solidarity and which led to calls for the mayor's resignation from others. As a citizen transit commissioner, Sarah, like Councillor Deans, gained prominence for her willingness to question senior city staff amid the persistent failures of the Light-Rail Transit (LRT) system. According to her account, her calls for greater transparency and accountability from City Hall were met with significant disdain from the Watson Club, which preferred to minimize attention toward the system's flaws rather than address them publicly.

Before becoming acclimated to the position, Sarah admitted to feeling like a “babe in the woods” navigating the politics of City Hall. “I had no idea what was going on,” she tells me, “I didn’t know how City Hall worked, and I didn’t know about the Watson Club. I knew nothing.” Just a month after its grand opening, Sarah boarded the new “world-class” trains for her homebound commute from work only to be caught on a stalled train stuck between two stations. With nothing but the intercom’s robotic assurance that service would resume shortly and a perfunctory thank-you for passengers’ patience, she turned to social media, directly tagging OC Transpo in posts requesting information. “I wasn’t even thinking at the time, ‘Oh, I’m a citizen transit commissioner.’ In that moment, I was just Sarah on the train.” An hour passed before emergency crews arrived, guiding stranded passengers off the stalled LRT. Still, no one knew what had caused the disruption. Eventually, a member of the media noticed Sarah’s online pleas and reached out for an interview with her. Despite lacking media training, Sarah accepted their request: “I was just honest with them, I was just me. I was really frustrated and critical of OC Transpo. I guess my honesty was rare because then everyone wanted to talk to me. But I still didn’t know what was going on.”

Sarah hadn’t anticipated the politicized nature of her role as citizen transit commissioner. When she first stepped into the position, her intentions were simple: she wanted to volunteer and be more involved in her city’s local politics. Sarah's experience as transit commissioner took a negative turn when she received an unexpected call from John Manconi, the General Manager of OC Transpo at the time, basically telling her to “stop talking crap about OC Transpo.” Manconi likened her outspokenness on transit issues to a board member criticizing their company's product while holding its stock. "John," she recalls retorting, "This isn't a company and you're not the CEO. You are not the boss of me." He, along with Mayor Watson, further accused her of spreading

misinformation, “attacking” city staff, and deliberately undermining the public’s faith in the system in her demands for information. As we shared a reflective pause, I couldn’t help but chuckle at the idea that demands for transparency were somehow equated with “talking crap.” Sarah importantly clarified: “There’s a *very* big difference between attacking people and being critical of a public institution.” Sarah faced escalating challenges as she continued to publicly denounce the lack of transparency surrounding ongoing issues with the LRT. She told me about attempts to jeopardize her public servant job, with unknown individuals writing to the Federal Ministry of Health (her employer) in an effort to have her fired: “That’s why I should be fired?... Because I’m speaking critically about the mayor? It was incredibly stressful. Watson and his crew definitely have what I call acolytes. That’s the only word I can use for them. They constantly trolled and attacked me on Twitter.”

Amid the year-long public inquiry of 2022, scrutiny at last turned sharply towards the covert political maneuvers of the Watson Club. The shocking revelation of a clandestine WhatsApp group chat among senior City staff laid bare a troubling truth: critical details concerning the LRT prior to its public launch had been deliberately withheld from Council and the Transit Commission, details that explained the dysfunctionality of the LRT system. It was also revealed that the Watson Club’s quietly sought to remove Sarah as citizen transit commissioner for her critical comments. In a candid interview with CTV News Ottawa in July 2022, Sarah expressed a profound sense of betrayal and disbelief at the lengths senior city staff were willing to go to silence her:

"In my opinion, that was the most pathetic display of political fragility I’ve seen in a long time. I knew that Mayor Watson and Councilor Hubley and John Manconi didn’t like me. I didn’t realize their disdain for me was so great that they would conspire in a WhatsApp chat to contrive reasons to remove me simply because I was telling the truth. An inconvenient truth for them, albeit, but the truth nonetheless... [T]he reality is that this is a mayor who has displayed on previous occasions that he does not take kindly to criticism and dissent from his opinion. That was evident in the recent past where he’s muted microphones of colleagues

during council meetings because he didn't like what they were saying, or they were disagreeing with him." (CTV News Ottawa, 2022)

Their attempt to remove Sarah for voicing her perspective as a transit rider—which she rightly saw as central to her role as a citizen transit commissioner—exposes a fundamental contradiction in participatory governance. These positions are designed to signal democratic inclusion, yet when citizens use them to challenge authority, they often encounter institutional suppression. Far from passive, the Watson club actively fortifies the status quo against change, wielding influence and stifling challenges to preserve existing power structures. What's perhaps even more telling is that, in the wake of these controversies, the city's new administration voted in favour of removing the citizen transit commissioner position from the transit board altogether, further silencing critical voices in decision-making.

Neoliberal Affects and the Politics of Stability

In 2022, the City of Ottawa hosted its regular municipal elections. This election cycle, however, bore greater than usual significance, seeing that Jim Watson, Ottawa's longest serving mayor, would not be seeking re-election this term. This news emerged in the wake of numerous blows to his reputation following the findings of the LRT judicial inquiry and the controversies surrounding the events of the 2022 Freedom Convoy. Consequently, some residents in Ottawa began to lose faith in his leadership and the integrity of City Hall more broadly. Thus, the 2022 election signaled the a new beginning for the city; it was an opportunity to elect a fresh city council that could not only correct the errors of the past administration but earn back residents' trust. Of the fourteen candidates, the race ultimately came down to two: Mark Sutcliffe and Catherine McKenney³.

³ Catherine McKenney uses they/them pronouns.

Sutcliffe, a former businessman and journalist with no prior political experience, centred his mayoral candidacy on offering a “fresh perspective.” This strategic move not only distanced himself from established politicians like Watson and McKenney, both of whom had served multiple consecutive terms in office but portrayed him as someone capable of thinking outside the box, someone who could breathe fresh air into the city. Despite this, some residents in Ottawa struggled to discern any substantial difference between Sutcliffe’s style of governance and that of Watson’s. Sutcliffe, hailed as a “centrist” promoting a “balanced approach,” campaigned on increasing funding for law enforcement as part of his 'tough-on-crime' approach, improving road conditions, and keeping property taxes at a minimum. That his approach so closely mirrored that of the previous mayor led him to be dubbed “Watson 2.0” by some in the city, a moniker that gained further traction after local reports revealed Watson’s financial contribution, and thus unofficial endorsement, to Sutcliffe’s campaign. On the other hand, McKenney was a prominent voice against the Watson Club and proposed bold policy initiatives in their eight years as a city councillor. They campaigned on promises of protecting and increasing urban green spaces, prioritizing climate-change action, and increasing funding for social services, affordable housing projects, and public/active transportation infrastructure.

Herein, then, lies the peculiarity: following numerous scandals during Watson’s tenure, and in a climate ostensibly ripe for a change in leadership, how did the candidate most resembling the former Mayor manage to win the election? And by a landslide, at that. While discussing Sutcliffe’s election win with my interlocutors, they overwhelmingly agreed that his success was tied to what he symbolically represented – he was “*the most status quo guy.*” What intrigued me was the apparent widespread appeal of his "status quo" campaign. What about his policies

resonated with Ottawa voters in ways that McKenney's did not? With the city left in disarray by the previous administration, why did the majority of voters ultimately choose more of the same?

In Ottawa, support for the status quo is not simply a matter of personal preferences but the product of entrenched systems that normalize certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. This ideological work produces what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) might term a "habitus"—a set of internalized, embodied dispositions that shape how citizens perceive political possibilities and their own agency and influence within governance. It might also be understood as a kind of *affect* that shapes citizens' political sensibilities in ways that often go unnoticed. Affect, like Bourdieu's "habitus," is both subjective and social. It allows for a closer examination of the fundamental relationships that shape human experience—the dialectic between individual subjectivities and collective identities, between personal habits and broader social behaviors, and the subtle yet powerful forces that unconsciously shape how people think and act in the world (Skoggard & Waterson, 2015). This interplay between institutional norms and embodied dispositions finds further elaboration in Nigel Thrift's (2004) work on affect and urban life, which explores how affect operates beyond the individual to become embedded in the material and spatial organization of cities. Crucially, Thrift identifies the political deployment of affect—how emotional currents are deliberately cultivated to produce specific types of urban subjects and experiences.

The turn to affect in anthropology reflects a growing recognition of the significance of emotions in constructing social worlds. Anthropologists often describe affect as "the [capacity] to act and be acted on" (Seigworth & Greg, 2010, 1; see also, Skoggard & Waterson, 2015). It is portrayed as a kind of intensity that moves between bodies, guiding individuals towards specific ways of thinking and acting in the world. Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckj (2009) draw on their respective fieldwork to emphasize the role affect plays in producing specific kinds of

economic subjects in the context of neoliberal transformations. This framework aids in understanding how the status quo reproduces itself not only through direct persuasion or overt institutional limitations, but through the cultivation of particular forms of affect that shape citizens' political behaviours and imaginations. Like Michel Foucault's (1978) discussion of governmentality, what makes the affect particularly powerful is that it operates largely below the threshold of conscious awareness, "in all the minuscule and molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra-" (Seigworth & Greg, 2010, 2). These insights also help us understand what Sarah might mean when she claims that status quo is "not just with governance itself, *but also within the hearts and minds of a lot of people in Ottawa*" (emphasis added).

In my video chat with Sarah, who was living outside of Ottawa during the time of our interview, she, like many others, identified the status quo as central to her understanding of Ottawa's political culture. In Sarah's eyes, the term represents "two branches of the same tree." On the one hand, the status quo speaks to a "state of being" for the city – a way of doing politics where the goal is to keep things exactly as they are, deliberately voiding any drastic changes that might "rock the boat:"

"We're just going to keep things the way they are. Literally the definition of the status quo. We're going to keep things the way they are, we're not going to raise taxes... We're not going to be too progressive. We're just going to keep doing the things that we've *been* doing. Because people in Ottawa aren't really good with a lot of changes. Humans, in general, aren't – but Ottawa is a pretty stuffy, stodgy town. It's quite conservative in terms of how much progressive it allows - a little bit but not too much. Don't change things too much"

Here, the status quo operates as a latent force that keeps systems, policies, and structures locked in place, often justified, when required, on the grounds of maintaining order and stability. Greg, who ran for mayor in 2022, similarly described the status quo:

"Being 'status-quo-ist' is not just keeping everything exactly as it is, but it's also moving down the same path you've always been moving down, at the same rate you've always been moving. And when the time comes [when] maybe quicker changes are needed... nothing can happen. It's completely sclerotic."

Both Greg and Sarah foreground a temporal dimension of the status quo, framing it not simply as inertia, though it feels this way to some, but a more structured mode of movement, one that maintains a predictable rhythm of governance and urban life that produces a certain kind of stability for certain kinds of people. This brings us to Sarah's second conceptualization of the status quo. She also mobilized the term to refer to the interests of specific residents in Ottawa, namely, the home-owning professional middle-class, of which she considers herself a part:

“When you look at the other branch, in my mind, the status quo is about a group of people that the city is very focused on serving. So, while in a perfect world, the city should be forced on serving the entire city - and the first group of people that should be served are those who need the services the most. In reality, the City of Ottawa for as long as I can remember is serving middle/upper-middle class and above. So, we're talking public servants”

When I asked Greg to describe the status quo in Ottawa, he also pointed to the kind of people of which it is comprised:

“It's a sleepy government town. It's midsized. There's just not a lot to say about it, right? It's very average. It's not too big, not too small. Nightlife exists but it's not big. The people... The people that it attracts have a certain fluoride-like stare in their eyes.”

Greg's evocative descriptive of residents' “fluoride-like stare” suggests a glazed, uniform outlook permeating the city. Greg elaborated that Ottawa seems to attract “stability-oriented people” whose risk-averse political sensibilities favour the familiar and predictable. This deep-seated desire for security manifests in electoral patterns that ultimately favour centrist candidates and moderate policies, which seems more palatable and sensible compared the seemingly impractical idealism of more progressive platforms. Developing his description of Ottawa's status quo, what exactly it means and to whom it was referring, Greg added:

“I just think as a whole it's fair to describe [the city] as status quo. It could be partially because the people that it attracts are stability-oriented people. Those people are nice, they're fine. But that's the kind of policies that stability-oriented people like, I guess. It's not like Catherine [McKenny] was a communist. But very small change... Like this inch is too much.”

Greg notes that McKenney’s proposals—adding bike lanes, protecting green space, investing in existing social services, limiting annual police funding increases—were not extraordinarily “radical.” And yet, the fact that these priorities topped McKenney’s agenda seemed unacceptable to many. Both Greg and Sarah interpret this reaction as symptomatic of a broader status quo defined by inflexibility: an inclination by both the municipal government and the public more broadly to resist even modest, potentially “disruptive” change. This is precisely what Greg sought to challenge in his mayoral campaign. When I asked why he chose to incorporate humour in his approach, he offered two explanations. On one hand, he simply wanted to be funny, to create a spectacle and draw attention to municipal politics. On the other hand, his use of absurdist humour had much to do with challenging the conservative nature of the city:

“It’s so much more fun to fuck with them [the people in Ottawa] than it is to run an unironic campaign... They’re not going to go for it anyways because they don’t like anything outside of the norm of the status quo. That’s the way they are. The most conservative town on the fucking planet... the most status-quo-ist, which is worse.”

Both Greg and Sarah characterize Ottawa as “socially conservative,” not necessarily along traditional left-right lines, but as a broader *disposition* toward preserving the familiar.

After returning from the World Social Forum in 2002, Clive Doucet, a former Ottawa city councillor, reflected on his attempt to introduce more participatory budget processes to the city, inspired by what he saw in Porto Alegre, Brazil. He described feeling a sense of caution, an unspoken resistance even, recognizing just how “impermeable North America seems to be to new governance ideas of any kind” (2007, 190). Doucet’s reflections capture a central tension at the heart of the today’s world: the coexistence of imaginative, hopeful discourse about the possibility of another, better world alongside entrenched systems that actively resist transformation. He points to the powerful interests of global corporations that thrive by preserving economic and political conditions favourable to them, coupled with politicians who romanticize a return to the “security”

of the 1950s (ibid., 192). But unlike that era, Doucet argues, the median income has stagnated, and “the rising economic tide which lifted all boats back in the 50s and 60s now lifts only the yachts” (ibid.). The simultaneous decline in median income and collapse of corporate taxation has hollowed out public services and deepened economic insecurity. This insecurity, he suggests, “*feeds the status quo*. When people feel threatened, they are much less willing to risk change. So, the corporations feed the fear beacons because *fearful people are compliant*, anxious only to get ‘value’ for their shrinking amount of money” (emphasis added, ibid.). When people feel insecure, they cling to what they know. They are less willing to take risks, less open to change, and more susceptible to messages that promise stability, even if that stability is illusory. His insights help explain the inclination of residents in Ottawa to stick with the familiarity of Sutcliffe’s campaign. As the old adage goes, “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.”

Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) helps illuminate why people remain attached to such forms of familiarity, even when they no longer serve their interests. Neoliberalism, she argues, doesn’t just reshape economies or institutions—it reorganizes how people feel, what they hope for, and what they believe is possible. This emotional engineering forms the foundation of what Berlant terms “cruel optimism,” a longing for something that is, in itself, an obstacle to one’s flourishing (1). These affective structures aren’t accidental but carefully cultivated; they represent a sophisticated form of social control where subjects police their own desires and possibilities. Berlant argues that people invest in an idealized vision of “the good life” (characterized by “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy”) even as these promises become increasingly unattainable under current conditions (3). These attachments are not just emotional on an individual level but are built into the affective structure of everyday life under neoliberalism. By positioning the good life as an aspirational ideal,

neoliberalism conditions people to perceive existing social and economic structures not only as inevitable but as inherently desirable. In this context, clinging to the status quo becomes less a personal failing than a politically conditioned response. People are led to see alternatives not as hopeful but as risky, not as emancipatory but as destabilizing. As a result, alternatives to the neoliberal status quo are not only dismissed but actively condemned by the people themselves: they threaten deeply ingrained attachments to a way of life that people are conditioned to believe is their best hope, even when it repeatedly fails to deliver on its promises.

Shaking the Status Quo: On the Use of Political Humour

In 2022, Greg, better known by his online persona “jREG,” gained local attention by running for mayor of Ottawa. I first encountered Greg from a distance at a mayoral debate hosted by the city. I was immediately struck by his outrageous responses to questions. Intrigued, I later looked him up online and quickly found his YouTube channel, where I deep dived into his content. I became especially captivated by his web series *Centricide*, in which Greg personified various centrist political ideologies as individual characters, including radical centrists, horseshoe centrists, political nihilists, "ape-political" figures, anti-radicals, and moderates, all united under the banner of the "League of Anti-Anti-Centrists." The coalition was desperate to preserve the status quo and felt threatened by the character jREG and his anti-centrist movement, which they saw as a destabilizing social force. What made *Centricide* particularly compelling was Greg's masterful layering of profound political commentary and elaborate absurdist comedy – a combination that was strategically mobilized in his mayoral campaign.

In contrast to his fellow contenders, Greg adopted a distinct approach to his mayoral candidacy, one that drew upon “post-ironic” forms of humour. In our personal conversation, Greg explained “post-irony” as a claim that “takes the form of something ironic, but the content of

something sincere.” It allows someone to express a genuine idea in a way that makes others question whether it’s meant to be taken as a joke (see Figure 1.1).

The role humour plays in posing political critique is often reduced to an instrumental level, wrongfully overlooking its broader influence on political discourse and engagement. In her exploration of the use of media and the spread of disinformation in Italy, Noelle Mole-Liston (2020) explores how political satire and news parody became vehicles for public critique amid widespread disillusionment with traditional political institutions under Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s administration. Humour, in this context, served as a form of relief – a means to navigate and express real political anxieties through laughter. By leveraging satire and irony, ordinary citizens found a platform to voice their frustrations and expose the hypocrisies of those in power in an otherwise restrictive media landscape.



Figure 1.1: A screenshot from jREG’s (Greg) YouTube channel illustrating the layers of irony. At Layer 0, a statement is entirely sincere, with no irony. Layer 1 introduces conventional irony—saying one thing but meaning another. Layer 2 represents post-irony, where a statement appears ironic but is, in fact, sincere. While its delivery differs from Layer 0, the underlying message remains unchanged.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsuSveDAIpI&t=87s>

Greg’s mayoral campaign bore striking resemblance to the late socialist *stio*, a sophisticated form of satire that challenges the monopolization of political discourse (Boyer &

Yurchak, 2010). Just as late socialist states standardized political discourse through "overcrafted, repetitive, and frequently esoteric" language to limit subjective interpretation and consolidate ideological control, contemporary liberal democracies have developed their own rigid political scripts centered around neoliberal principles (ibid., 182). In both contexts, the emphasis shifts from the literal meaning of political messages to the performative manner of communication, rendering politics largely pro forma. This quality of contemporary politics catalyzes novel forms of critique like *stiob*, where the actor over-identifies with the proper form of political communication to such a degree that audiences struggle to discern whether the performance constitutes "sincere support or subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mix of the two" (181). Greg's campaign exemplifies this ambiguity perfectly—his adoption of campaign rhetoric, participation in debates, and theorizing of policy proposals all adhere to the formal requirements of political candidacy while simultaneously subverting them through exaggeration. In this light, the ultimate irony of Greg's campaign may be that it represents a post-ironic form of political engagement perfectly suited to an era where authenticity itself has become suspect. His way of "doing" politics reveals the performative nature of *all* liberal political discourse, offering both entertainment and a profound critique of a system that increasingly values adherence to form over substantive engagement with civic issues.

Greg's approach to his mayoral campaign closely mirrors that of Gnarr's Best Party in Iceland in that it transcends more orthodox forms of political critique and action by deploying this kind of *stiob*-like satire (Boyer, 2013). Like Greg, the Best Party replicated the appropriate form of political communication and engagement while also campaigning on obviously outrageous points, such as openly engaging in corruption as a means to combat corruption (278). Interestingly, and most relatable to Greg's approach, is precisely the suspension of meaning. In both cases, the actual goal of these candidates remains intentionally ambiguous; no one really knows where the

joke ends, and the truth begins. Despite the uncertainty regarding what they actually sought to accomplish, Dominic Boyer (2013) highlights that “[the] performative suspension of literal meaning may be precisely the locus of hope (and play) for the possibility of radical political transformation” (284). At the very least, it provides ground to think about politics differently. In Ottawa’s case, this element of play may be exactly what is needed to shake the city from its “boring” character, to entertain new ideas and materialize alternative possibilities for the city.

In the months preceding the election, Greg and a friend of his set up a fold-up table at the University of Ottawa courtyard, inviting passersby to engage in discussion about his campaign and broader city politics. These conversations, documented and shared on his YouTube Channel, featured Greg making extravagant promises and proposing radical changes for the city if elected mayor. One of his most striking proposals was the construction of a wall around Ottawa—dubbed the “Ottawall”—alongside a campaign for the city’s secession from Canada (#Ottawexit, a play on Brexit). Following this proposed independence, Greg explained his intention to annex neighbouring municipalities, eventually absorbing all of Canada, and declaring Ottawa the new national capital. Under this autonomous regime, Ottawa would introduce its own currency and enforce new naming conventions for international businesses operating within its newly drawn borders. Companies like McDonald’s, Walmart, and Loblaws would be required to rebrand as “McOttawa’s,” “Ottawalmart,” and “Ottaloblaws.” The city would also establish two official languages: Frenglish—a fluid blend of English and French used interchangeably in conversation—and ‘GS’ (Government Speak), a system in which communication consists entirely of abbreviations, supposedly to enhance efficiency.

Continuing to play on the city's role as the seat of government, Greg promised a public servant job to every resident, where they could "pretend to shuffle papers around for an hour," effectively reducing the unemployment rate to 0%. He further proposed a new regional anthem:

We love the Government
 We love our giant wall
 We don't take risks
 No, we take none at all!

Ottawa! Ottawa!
 SSC and DND!
 Ottawa! Ottawa!
 CRA, RCMP!

Ottawa! Ottawa!
 FAC and IRCC!
 Ottawa! Ottawa!
 TBS and GAC!

While these proposals unmistakably draw on elements of trolling to capture the attention of voters – especially younger people, who Greg believes connect best with this kind of humour – his platform cleverly incorporated serious social commentary beneath a satirical veneer. For instance, the "Ottawall," complete with "thousands of beds for the homeless" that produced the feeling of a "giant sleepover," used absurdist imagery to spotlight the city's escalating housing crisis while offering an unconventional solution.

His economic policies demonstrated similar duality. While international chains would face mandatory Ottawa-centric rebranding, local businesses were exempted, revealing a genuine commitment to supporting the local businesses against corporate homogenization. Perhaps most tellingly, his mockery of government workers' productivity represented a sophisticated critique of both bureaucratic inefficiency and economic inequality. This proposal effectively functioned as an unorthodox form of universal basic income, addressing Ottawa's affordability crisis through

satirical means. Throughout his campaign, Greg maintained this delicate balance between absurdist humor and substantive critique, most of which was lost on many audience members.

In another video he posted while campaigning, Greg identified low voter turnout as a significant issue in the city and questioned who stands to benefit from it: “Who benefits from low youth voter turnout? *The people in charge already. The centrists. The status quo.* As long as people run on platform policies that people aren’t interested in, things aren’t going to change. If we need radical change, then we need to push big ideas (JREG, 2022, 20:11, emphasis added). His friend expanded on this, suggesting that typical City Councillors may not necessarily be running to instigate change, but simply to “get elected [and] keep their jobs.” This perspective resonated with others I spoke to. Despite cities being the closest level of government to citizens, and therefore having a more direct impact on their lives, there persists a recurring pattern of low voter turnout in municipal elections across the province. This trend enables incumbent councillors to secure re-election solely on the basis of name recognition, irrespective of their performance in office. The voting process itself becomes routine, a hallow act with little critical reflection on the candidates and their platforms. The re-election of such "status quo" councillors and mayors has led some to suggest that democracy in the city is fundamentally flawed.

In our conversation, Greg took his critique further, pointing to what he saw as a deeper sense of systemic inertia: the seeming inevitability that elected representatives, no matter how promising, will ultimately always default to the status quo:

“You get a status quo candidate, and they just sit on the vine and rot. There’s a rot from the inside out. Then you get the same guy, but he’s just a new polish. They’re like, okay, we’ll wait for this one to rot, then we’ll get sick of him, and we’ll get a new guy. And then he’ll rot.”

The issue is not simply a matter of individual shortcomings, but something baked into the very architecture of liberal democratic governance. Greg captures a deep disillusionment with the

cyclical nature of electoral politics, where each new representative—though appearing fresh or new—ultimately succumbs to the same institutional limitations as their predecessor. What emerges is merely an appearance of renewal that ultimately keeps the underlying status quo intact. Possibly becoming wary of his analysis becoming too serious, he added: "Being a politician is hard. Maybe we need a big robot instead. I'm just spit balling here, but maybe we replace Mark Sutcliffe with Mark Sutcliffe GPT."

While he asserted in public forums, including official mayoral debates hosted by the city, that he was running a "very serious campaign," he admitted to me during our interview that he was not serious about winning—a contradiction that further blurred the already indistinct boundary between his satire and sincerity. Throughout our conversation, his continuous oscillation between sincerity and irony created a disorienting effect for me; I found myself unable to discern with any true confidence which statements were meant to be taken seriously, and which were only performative. Only once during our extended interview did the façade appear to slip. When discussing methods to improve civic engagement among Ottawa's youth, he momentarily spoke with uncharacteristic directness before catching himself being "too sincere" and swiftly retreating. Yet even this apparent glimpse behind the curtain felt suspect; it could just as easily have been another layer of performance. Perhaps it is precisely because the character has become so thoroughly integrated with his "real" self that the inability to tell the two apart is exactly what makes him so compelling.

Conclusion: Amalgamated Publics

Throughout my fieldwork, the topic of Ottawa's amalgamation surfaced repeatedly in conversations, particularly regarding its impact on local political representation. These concerns echoed broader critiques that have circulated across the province since the restructuring took place

(see Horak, 1998; Kushner & Siegel, 2003; Spicer, 2012). Under former Premier Mike Harris, the *City of Ottawa Act, 1999* merged eleven previously independent municipal governments into a single city, formally established on January 1, 2001. Amalgamation aligned with broader neoliberal policies aimed at increasing government efficiency, reducing bureaucracy, and lowering taxes — all central tenets of Harris’ “Common Sense Revolution.” However, the expected savings failed to materialize, and with additional provincial funding cuts and limited revenue-generating mechanisms, cities across Ontario faced repeated budget deficits and turned to rapid (sub)urban growth to expand their property tax bases. This not only locked the city into a planning paradigm that prioritizes low-density expansion over sustainable urban development, but also had severe ramifications for political representation, including fewer elected representatives, larger ward sizes, and a city council overwhelmingly dominated by suburban and rural representatives.

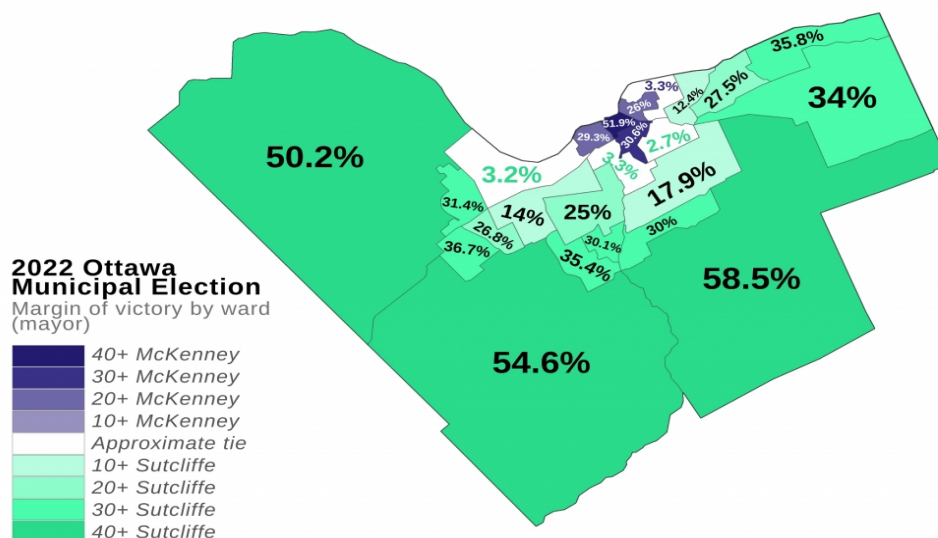


Figure 1.2: Michael Buttel’s “Poll-by-poll results of the Ottawa 2022 Mayoral election. Source: <https://leveller.ca/2023/02/stuck-with-the-suburbs-how-amalgamation-handcuffs-progress-in-ottawas-downtown/>

The spatial politics of the amalgamated city came sharply into focus during the 2022 municipal election in Ottawa: Catherine McKenney emerged as the candidate of choice for urban wards, while Mark Sutcliffe drew overwhelming support from suburban and rural areas (see Figure

1.2). These voting patterns reflected more than just differing policy preferences, they revealed divergent, often times conflicting, political priorities. Despite McKenney's overwhelming popularity in the urban core, they could not overcome the structural imbalances of Ottawa's electoral geography, making Sutcliffe's victory hardly surprising.

These electoral dynamics reveal deeper theoretical issues within Ottawa's public sphere. Nancy Fraser (1990) argued that in late-capitalist societies, the public sphere remains fundamentally exclusionary, concealing structural inequalities beneath a cloak of liberal equality. My interlocutors' descriptions of the "status quo" align with Fraser's concept of hegemonic publics—where dominant interests shape public discourse while others remain marginalized. Fraser challenges the idea of a singular public sphere, instead recognizing multiple, often conflicting publics vying for recognition. Embracing this pluralism fosters more inclusive democratic participation, allowing marginalized voices to meaningfully engage in public discourse. As Sarah explained, Ottawa's fixation on a privileged subsection of its population systematically overlooks other people and experiences that deserve equal attention and resources. This also means recognizing that what feels like stability for some is, for others, a condition of ongoing exclusion. Transforming the status quo requires moving beyond the habit of prioritizing the interests of a select few, and instead advancing policies and practices that actively include marginalized voices and confront the power structures that maintain exclusion.

If the Watson Club maintains the status quo by silencing dissent, then recent provincial legislation under Premier Doug Ford has further diminished citizens' ability to influence governance. The 2022 *Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act* centralizes authority in the mayor's office, granting near-total control over budgets, senior appointments, and veto power on bylaws that conflict with provincial priorities like housing and transit. While council can override such

vetoed with a two-thirds majority, its willingness to do so may be undercut by the tactics of the Watson Club. By diminishing the power of local councillors, the Act short-circuits the already fragile mechanisms through which communities can shape municipal decision-making. At a time when there is an urgent need to revitalize democratic structures, the Strong Mayors Act essentially codifies a technocratic logic that prioritizes expediency over representation and risks further alienating residents from the institutions meant to serve and represent them, allowing the status quo to persist with even less resistance. Just as amalgamation undermined local representation two decades ago, these new legislative changes threaten to further centralize power and dilute community voices. If Ottawa is to realize its democratic potential, it must not only resist legislative overreach, but also actively champion models of governance that are grounded in equity, inclusion, and real representation of the publics that make up this city.

Chapter Two: Housing for Whom? The Socio-Political Consequences of Housing Privatization

Amidst a scorching summer in Ottawa, I began my journey volunteering for Horizon Ottawa, a local community advocacy group. Armed with my clipboard and water bottle, I ventured through the many residential streets of Ottawa with a mission: to circulate Horizon's petition calling on City Hall to double the budget for affordable housing (a budget which, despite the rising cost of living across Canadian cities, had remained staggeringly low). As a novice canvasser, the idea of approaching strangers' doors to engage in conversation, let alone to request something from them, filled me with nerves. The lasting effects of the COVID-19 lockdowns had surely chipped away at my social confidence and, as a young woman, I couldn't shake a sense of unease navigating unfamiliar areas alone, especially as the days grew shorter and took with it the safety of daylight.

On my first day, I was greeted by Rosa, a young student in glasses sporting basketball shorts and a Western University t-shirt. Tasked with organizing Horizon's summer canvassing series, Rosa arrived prepared, pulling from the trunk of her car a large plastic bin filled with clipboards, pens, and copies of the petition sheets. As a seasoned canvasser for many different progressive political campaigns, Rosa was our guide, imparting volunteers with the necessary knowledge and scripts for persuading residents at the doors to sign the petition. "Make sure to tell them how much we're spending on things like temporary housing and shelters... Compare the numbers with them." After this brief training, all volunteers were sent off on different routes.

Approaching the door of a rental townhouse nestled in a suburban enclave, I squared my shoulders and neatened the papers on my clipboard before ringing the doorbell. As the door creaked open, a man, likely in his mid to late thirties emerged, his demeanour stern and serious, almost unfriendly. His probing gaze met mine as I nervously launched into my rehearsed script. A flood of relief swept over me as his furrowed brows softened. "Give me that," he eagerly reached

for my clipboard, admitting he almost shut the door in my face before he heard me say the words “affordable housing.” Sitting on the steps of his front porch, he filled out the petition sheet while candidly sharing with me his struggles keeping up with his monthly rent, bemoaning the stark rise in living expenses since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. His voice almost trembled as he considered the very real possibility of one day ending up in one of the city’s homeless shelters. “I could handle it,” he shrugged his shoulders, “but what about my kids? They can’t live there.” At his words, a hesitant little blonde head poked out from the door behind him, shyly waving as their father urged them to “say hi to the nice lady.” His tale of financial strain and parental concern for his children, I would come to learn, encapsulated the widespread plight echoing throughout the city related to the growing affordability crisis. We exchanged a few more friendly words before he returned my clipboard. “Hopefully something changes... and soon.”

The City of Ottawa, once praised as an affordable, family-oriented haven between the metropolitan giants of Montreal and Toronto, has seen a dramatic rise in housing costs, driven by growing demand as more people seek to settle in the city and invest in real estate. Contributing to the affordable housing shortage is the rise in "reno-victions," where landlords evict tenants to carry out extensive renovations, only to reintroduce the property at inflated rental rates in hopes of attracting higher-paying tenants, effectively displacing lower-income residents. Despite consistent calls for action on affordable housing from community organizers and the city's own declaration of a housing crisis, there appears to be a lack of serious initiative to address the issue.

To better understand this situation in Ottawa, it is essential to explore how changing housing policies throughout the 20th century have contributed to the scarcity of affordable housing and the implications of these changes on the right to adequate housing for all. In this chapter, I begin by examining the increased reliance on markets for housing provision and how this has

changed housing's role from a social good to a commodity. I then shift focus to explore how socioeconomic inequality impacts the democratic process, particularly by examining how lobbying efforts from real estate developers have shaped policies that prioritize the continued accumulation of private profit. These policies have, in turn, limited the availability of affordable housing, placing the financial interests of developers ahead of the well-being of the broader population. I conclude by analyzing the broader social consequences of housing insecurity, where blame is attributed to immigrant newcomers, rather than the underlying market dynamics and corresponding government policies that have created and continue to exacerbate the crisis.

The Privatization of Housing: From "Home" to "Real Estate"

Cities have long been at the heart of neoliberal transformations, serving as laboratories for creative destruction, where the redistributive policies of the welfare state are dismantled and replaced with market-oriented frameworks. (Peck, et al., 2019). Importantly, these transformations do not occur uniformly across all urban spaces; rather, they are shaped by the existing social and institutional conditions from which they emerge. The "path-dependent" nature of restructuring diverges from a theoretically abstracted model of neoliberalism to reflect the varied and localized expressions of its policies (ibid.). As such, cities offer rich contexts for exploring the diverse experiences of "actually existing neoliberalism." How has neoliberal restructuring influenced the availability of affordable housing across Canada? And in what ways has the prioritization of market solutions undermined the notion of adequate housing for all?

Federal housing policies in Canada in the early 20th century largely encouraged private sector housing provision, specifically promoting homeownership. By contrast, public investments in housing required intense justification on the basis of economic benefit (i.e., its impact on economic growth, employment, market stability) rather than being recognized as part of the

broader social safety net (Harris, 1999). Despite some marginal progress in building low-rental public housing in the previous decades, it was not until the 1960s that the federal government began building public housing on a broader scale, mirroring global trends towards Keynesian welfare state policies in the post-World War II period (Suttor, 2016). This shift, which took place during Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's tenure, was consistent with his vision of a "Just Society," where he argued "no one in society should be entitled to superfluous or luxury goods until the essentials of life are made available to everyone" (cited in Trudeau & Graham, 1998). Public housing initiatives emerged alongside other redistributive policies, including subsidized post-secondary education, the Canada Pension Plan, public health insurance, and federal cost-sharing for provincial social programs through the Canada Assistance Plan (Suttor, 2016).

By the late 1970s, as neoliberalism gained traction and governments reduced their regulations on the market, new financial instruments like mortgage securitization and subprime mortgages again promoted homeownership as the preferred form of tenure, where taking on debt was perceived as "part of a sensible, entrepreneurial approach to life" (Jaffe & deKoning, 2022, 126). Concurrently, public housing policy began to shift away from direct housing provision toward income-targeted support measures, such as rent supplement programs, where the government covered the gap between what low-income tenants could afford and the market rent. This transition reflected a broader move toward market-oriented affordable housing solutions. By the early 1990s, under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's conservative government and in line with the global retrenchment of social welfare programs, the federal government eliminated all remaining funding for the production and maintenance of public housing, marking the "sharpest, most abrupt curtailment seen in any affluent country" (Suttor, 2016, 7). In 1995, under the liberal administration of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, the Canada Assistance Plan was terminated,

resulting in significant reductions to provincial transfers in areas such as social assistance, post-secondary education, and healthcare (Evans & Also, 2018; Suttor, 2016). The devolution of welfare responsibilities, including housing assistance, onto lower levels of government coupled with reduced federal funding resulted in a decline in the quality and scope of public services. This has led to increased competitive pressures and greater demands for austerity.

Government deregulation and the growing privatization of social services have created a void the private sector has filled, turning service provision into a more profitable venture for corporations. With private industries now leading the housing market, David Madden and Peter Marcuse (2016) argue there is a fundamental tension between understanding housing as a lived social space (a home, necessary for unlocking a broad array of social, economic, and political goals) and housing as an instrument for profit-making (as real estate; an asset to be traded, invested and speculated upon) (22). The growing reliance on the market for housing provision undermines the idea of housing as a basic human right. The increased commodification of housing — where its role as a profit-generating asset takes precedence over its social function as a space for living — is also closely tied to globalization and financialization. For this reason, Madden and Marcuse (2016) suggest that addressing the housing question of today compels us to ask “who and what housing is for, who controls it, who it empowers, [and] who it oppresses. It means questioning the function of housing within globalized neoliberal capitalism” (16).

Raquel Rolnik (2019), who served as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing from 2008-2014, similarly examines how global financial systems have "colonized" the real estate market, further eroding the concept of housing as a human right. She argues that this transformation is driven by a global housing policy model that prioritizes private ownership and credit-driven markets, where housing's value is increasingly defined by its potential for rent

extraction and investment (32). The use of housing as an investment asset has resulted in the “growing domination of Canadian rental housing market by landlord investors” (Crosby, 2023, 119). In a housing system driven by market logic, real estate firms often acquire buildings with the goal of maximizing rents, leading to gentrification, evictions, and the displacement of low-income tenants. Financialized gentrification occurs when investor landlords deploy strategies aimed at maximizing the value of their acquired properties. Sometimes referred to as “gentrification-by-upgrading” (Clifford & Walks, 2018 cited in Crosby, 2023) or “reno-victions” (Polanska & Richard, 2021), this process allows landlords to use renovations as a “soft tactic” for eviction, effectively displacing low-income tenants by replacing relatively more affordable rental units with more expensive ones in high-value locations (Baeten et al., 2017, 632). While protections for tenants against renovictions are incorporated in the *2006 Ontario Residential Tenancies Act*, which specifies that tenants have a right to return to their units at the original rent prices (though this rarely happens), no such protections exist for cases involving *demolition* (Crosby, 2023). This results in landlords intentionally neglecting the maintenance of their properties to the point where they are no longer viable, and, in the process, bypass tenant protections when evicting them on the grounds of extensive renovations (ibid., 142). A high-profile example of this reno/demo-viction occurred in Ottawa’s own Heron Gate neighbourhood, emphasizing the tension between corporate real estate profit-driven strategies and low-income residents’ need for housing.

In 2012, Timbercreek Asset Management, a large-scale real estate corporation, purchased a significant amount of property in Heron Gate, becoming the largest property owner in the area. (see Figure 2.1). By 2015, Timbercreek announced plans to “revitalize” the neighbourhood by demolishing older, deteriorating townhomes and replacing them with a “diversity of home types, sizes, and affordability.” This revitalization project, however, required evicting hundreds of

existing tenants, many of whom were low-income, racialized, and new immigrants. The move sparked public outcry from tenants and housing activists in the city, who described the event as the “largest mass eviction in modern Canadian history” (cited in Subramaniam, 2017). While Timbercreek followed the legal protocols outlined in the *Ontario Residential Tenancies Act*, many believed that the townhomes had been deliberately neglected and left to deteriorate to justify the demolitions. Many also doubted Timbercreek’s promise of a “right to return,” suspecting that the new units would be priced far beyond their means. Despite receiving financial compensation—including three months’ rent and a \$2,000 moving allowance—tenants feared they wouldn’t be able to find comparable housing in Ottawa’s increasingly expensive rental market, let alone in the neighbourhoods where they’ve built their communities and support networks.



Figure 2.1: Property owners in Heron Gate: red is corporate landlord, yellow is municipal social housing, purple is private condos, and blue is private non-profit. Image retrieved from: <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/the-battle-for-heron-gate>

In her study of the redevelopment of Regent Park in Toronto, Canada’s first public housing development, Sharon Kelly (2013) examines how the concept of “social mixing” sought to

alleviate the consequences of concentrated poverty and “normalize” public housing. While this policy appears progressive, Kelly argues that “it is precisely this progressive veneer that makes it insidious. The language of ‘regeneration’ and ‘revitalization’ neutralizes politics of class and race” (181). Framed as a remedy for urban decline and economic inequality, social mixing often escapes criticism, even as it indirectly drives the displacement of low-income residents. As land values rise and neighborhoods are reoriented to attract higher-income tenants, original residents are priced out, and public resources increasingly cater to the preferences of more affluent residents. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, there is a significant concentration of relatively more affordable/low-income housing in the Heron Gate community. Thus, the revitalization poses a threat not only to the tenants of Timbercreek but to the surrounding neighbourhood as well.

In addition to the provincial regulatory mechanisms and “social mix” policies that ultimately benefit landlord investors, urban sociologist Andrew Crosby (2023) shows how Ottawa’s municipal actors and administration played a fundamental role in permitting the redevelopment-induced displacement: “By granting demolition permits, rezoning properties, and approving large redevelopment projects—such as the Official Plan Amendment in 2021 that authorized the demolition of 559 additional Heron Gate homes—the City of Ottawa actively contributes to gentrification.” (144). The Heron Gate renovations, while not the first or only instance, stand out as the largest case of tenant displacement through demo/reno-viction in the country. As housing markets become increasingly corporatized, policies must adapt to uphold the right to adequate housing. This brings forward a critical second point of discussion: the commodification of housing has negative implications on the democratic process as decision-making around housing becomes increasingly controlled by powerful global investors and developers, rather than being driven by the needs and desires of local communities. Consequently,

policies and developments that should ideally serve the public good are often overshadowed by the profit-driven interests of those with financial stakes in the housing market.

What Democracy? Socioeconomic Inequality and the Democratic Process

As David Harvey (2013) has argued: “From their very inception, cities have arisen through geographical and social concentrations of a surplus product. Urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomenon of some sort, since surpluses have been extracted from somewhere and from somebody, while control over the use of the surplus typically lies in the hands of a few” (5). These socio-economic dynamics are reinforced by a state apparatus that aligns itself with market rule.

The widespread adoption of neoliberal governing principles has fundamentally transformed the role of the government and their approach to service provisioning. Where neoliberalism is characterized by market deregulation, the privatization of welfare services, and the ‘responsibilization’ of individuals, who are left to manage their own welfare through market participation, the role of government is reduced to protecting the political conditions that enable the continued accumulation of capital (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Wilson, 2017). These transformations signal a broader shift in government responsibilities, from a managerial model focused on public services and promoting collective welfare to an entrepreneurial approach where the state acts as an agent of neoliberalism, promoting private-sector-led growth, market-oriented policies, and economic competition (Harvey, 1989).

The neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s and early 2000s, which devolved welfare responsibilities to municipalities without adequate fiscal support, forced cities to adopt austerity measures and increasingly rely on private markets to fill the gap – markets characterized by instability, speculative finance and global economic trends (Peck et al., 2019). As cities competed

to attract private investment, local governments frequently worked to create favourable business conditions by offering incentives, such as tax abatements or rezoning, to encourage private businesses to invest in the city. Their reliance on private companies stems not only from the need to fund public services and urban development, but also from a desire to be seen as competitive and entrepreneurial in the global market and, in doing so, increase the value of their land. However, this pursuit of economic success often has negative consequences for residents, particularly lower- and increasingly middle-income earners, where the value of urban land rises beyond that which they can afford. As Asef Bayat (2012) explains: “the ‘neoliberal city’ ... is a market-driven urbanity; it is a city shaped more by the logic of the market than the needs of its inhabitants; responding more to individual or corporate interests than public concerns” (cited in Jaffe & deKoning, 2022, 117). The right to the city is both a “cry and demand” for urban inhabitants to reclaim democratic control over the production and governance of urban space (Lefebvre, 1996, 158). It goes beyond access to urban resources; it is a collective call to shape the city around the needs of the many, not the privileged few. As it stands, the right to the city is confined to a small political and economic elite who design urban spaces to serve their own interests (Harvey, 2013).

Democracy is often imagined as a radical and revolutionary project that saw the masses of ordinary people – rather than kings or elites – as the holders of power and central to political decision-making. This ideal, of government for the people and by the people, has shaped modern political imaginaries to emphasize equality, freedom, and popular participation even as it routinely obscured underlying exclusions. But where does this ideal stand in relation to the reality of contemporary society, where power again seems skewed by the influence of wealthy elites?

While acknowledging that no perfect democracy has ever existed, with each era of democratic history being marked by its own exclusions based on race, gender, or property

ownership, English political scientist Colin Crouch (2004) maintains that “it is always valuable and intensely practical to consider where our conduct stands in relation to an ideal, since in that way we can try to improve” (3). This process of self-reflection, he continues, is far more effective than adjusting democratic definitions to fit into what is easily attainable, as doing so fosters complacency, self-congratulation, and a lack of concern for the subtle erosion of democratic principles (ibid.). Using the parabola as a model, Crouch explains how the democratic forms established at the “peak” of democracy (that is, the immediate post-WWII period, when political participation was at its height and Keynesian intervention policies had temporarily secured a democratic economy) continue to exist; however, they are increasingly threatened by contemporary processes that strip them of their substance (see Figure 2) (22).

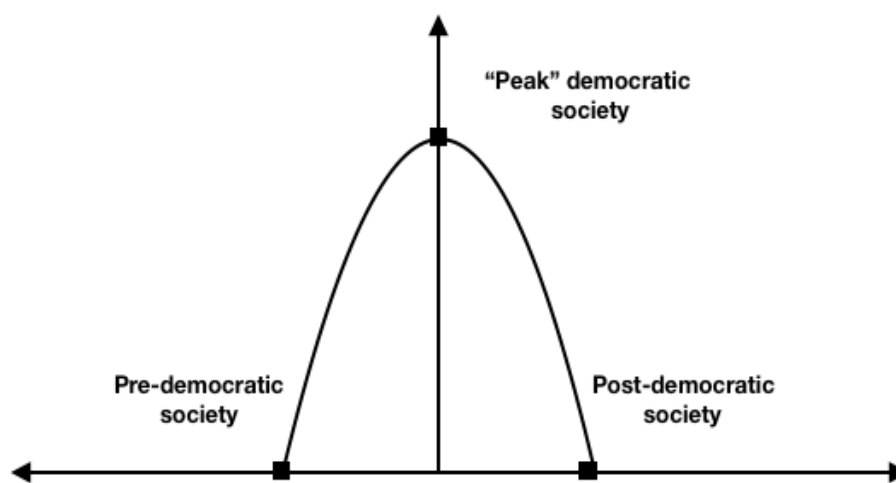


Figure 2.2: The Parabola of Democracy

In this context, elements of pre-democratic societies reappear, including: the residualization of the welfare state; less distributive tax policies; politicians increasingly catering to the special interests of elites which are then crafted into public policy; and the gradual disengagement of the poor from political participation (23). Crouch labels the emerging era as “post-democracy.” This is not to imply the end of democracy, nor does it suggest that democracy had once reached a perfect or ideal state (even at its peak) from which it is now departing. Instead,

"post-democracy" refers to a decline or erosion in democratic practices, where the systems and structures of democracy remain, but their effectiveness in representing the masses have weakened.

In Canada and the United States, the tendency to define ourselves as *liberal* democracies has important ramifications for democratic processes. Liberal democracies promote electoral participation (i.e., voting) as the primary avenue for civic engagement. Importantly, democracy requires certain "rough equalities" to ensure that all citizens have the same amount of influence in political processes, preventing any specific group from wielding disproportionate power (ibid., 16). Liberalism, by contrast, emphasizes free and diverse opportunities to affect political outcomes, including lobbying by individuals and interest groups. The coexistence of democracy and liberalism is thus marked by a fundamental tension: efforts to prioritize equality in participation, such as implementing rules and restrictions to reduce inequality, often conflict with the core values of liberalism, which emphasize freedom and minimal constraints. This tension plays out clearly in the influence of corporate and business lobbies, which wield significantly more power than average citizens through two key strategies: first, by suggesting that opposing their interests would harm the broader economy (a major concern for governments); and second, by leveraging vast financial resources to lobby officials for policies that align with their interests (ibid., 18).

While it is true that we are living in the most democratic of times, where ordinary citizens have more influence and are accounted for more than they ever have before, former American White House Press Secretary Bill Moyers (2008) argues that Western democracies have "fallen under the spell of money, faction, and fear," where the pursuit of self-interest by powerful elites has overridden fundamental democratic principles of governing for the common good (9). He critiques the systemic forces that intensify socioeconomic inequality and their damaging effects

on the democratic process. Moyers further highlights the sacrifices imposed on both humanity and the natural world by speculators whose primary goal is to maximize personal profit. This exploitation is enabled by the disproportionate influence of wealth and a government administration and Congress that serve as "political marionettes" for these speculators, who are then rewarded with exorbitant campaign contributions for advancing their interests (12). Moyers argues that no society marked by extreme disparities of wealth and poverty can sustain a genuinely democratic politics. In such conditions, the state becomes "the guardian of power and privilege to the neglect of justice for the people as a whole... (14). Influenced by campaign donations and the looming threats of economic instability, the state prioritizes protecting the privileges of the wealthy, often at the expense of the democratic ethos that empowers and accounts for the masses of ordinary people.

This is, in turn, what David Nugent (2012) refers to as the "twin crises of global capitalism and representative democracy" (281). The "capture" of political representatives by economic elites, and the former's tendency to represent the interests of financial institutions and major corporations, has critically undermined the democratic institutions originally designed to protect vulnerable groups and ensure their influence in political affairs (*ibid.*). Importantly, this is not a new development but is deeply rooted in the very functioning of liberal democracies. Nugent explains that liberal democracy is structured around a separation between the political and economic spheres, allowing democratic input only in the political realm. The economic domain, regarding property and wealth, is excluded from democratic discussion. This separation of spheres, which "tames the radical potential of electoral systems," is fundamentally embedded in the structure of liberal representative democracies (282).

It is this susceptibility of public institutions to private interests that some citizens and community groups in Ottawa work against to hold their elected representatives accountable to the broader public and ensure they safeguard the promises of democracy. Horizon Ottawa, the community advocacy group I volunteer with, gained local attention after publishing a report revealing the amount of developer donations each councillor and the mayor received in the 2018 election, as well as outlined the city committees they served on and the impact these donations had on their decisions once elected. By doing so, Horizon Ottawa sought to direct public attention to developer influence over City Hall and rally support for a municipal government that prioritizes the needs of local residents over private profit.

Sam, a co-founder of Horizon Ottawa, is deeply involved in grassroots organizing across the city. As one of the more visible figures of the organization, Sam has earned the ire of certain members of the city's administration, who see him and the organization's efforts as disruptive to the status quo. Leading up to the 2022 municipal election, Horizon Ottawa formally endorsed candidates who shared their progressive values and demonstrated a commitment to tackling key issues in the city, particularly housing affordability and public transit. As they did in 2018, they also continued to report on the amount of developer donations each candidate received for their campaigns. Their endorsements drew criticism from some corners of City Hall, with accusations that Sam and Horizon Ottawa were "politicizing" municipal politics and fostering divisiveness within Council and the broader public. Mayor-elect Mark Sutcliffe, along with other representatives who were not endorsed, accused Sam of "shaming councillors" into adopting certain positions, comparing their public denunciations to an "American-style smear campaign."

For Sam, the irony was hard to ignore:

"It's funny when big liberal councillors feel a bit threatened by us. They'll say 'oh, there's all this influence from [groups like Horizon] pressuring councillors to act in particular ways as if

groups like us have nearly as much influence and power as say a developer who has millions of dollars at stake in the city. That's a false equation that's always made in terms of influence."

When I asked Sam about the implications of these dynamics on public participation in the city, he explained that the pervasive sense of powerlessness is what may precisely discourage one from engaging in local politics. He argued that those who suggest residents and grassroots organizations wield the same influence as developers and other corporate elites are misleading: "Assuming [residents] have the same amount of influence as developers is wrong. We don't. You'll see developers donating the maximum to specific councillors [campaigns]. The average person doesn't have an extra \$1,200 to donate to a political campaign." Equating the influence of the two obscures the true impact of powerful economic interests on political decisions. Through his efforts, Sam not only advocates for more progressive local policies but seeks to empower ordinary citizens to reclaim their voice in a system where their influence often pales in comparison to wealthy elites.

Reflecting on the status quo, Sarah, who we met in the previous chapter, similarly claims that those with money are essentially the ones who "actually run the city":

"There's this sort of inner cabal, a circle of people that are sort of shadowy, you don't really know who they are but they're influencing all the major decisions in the city. And that influence and those decisions affect the lives of so many other people who have no say."

In addition to her role as Citizen Transit Commissioner, which gave her deep insight into the inner workings of Ottawa's City Hall, Sarah also volunteered as a campaign manager for a local progressive candidate's campaign in 2022. As a campaign manager, Sarah learned first-hand the difficulties of organizing and financing a campaign. One thing she took pride in however was running a campaign free of developer donations. She suggests these types of campaigns are closer to the people, enhancing a sense of trust that the candidate is interested in serving public interest and cannot be swayed by private elites:

"[Corporate campaign donations] give the sense that these individuals, the councillors who've taken so much money from developers, they're bought and paid for. Whose interests are you

really serving? Like you'll do the bare minimum for your ward but you're really serving the interests of the people who paid for you to be there. Right or wrong, I don't know if that's the mindset for all of them, but you can't help but think, most councillors don't want just one term. They want to continue. If all your money in the first term came from developers and you want that money again, it's easy. You don't have to fundraise. You don't have to struggle."

Sarah expressed anger with the tendency of council members to accept donations from developers, which she claims is a clear conflict of interest. Public policy scholar, David Kaufmann (2018) reveals that, while property developers have a strong influence over Ottawa's City Hall, they are not politically organized as a collectivity, such as business associations, that advocates for specific policies or actions. Instead, they operate with a "diffuse form of power" (83) that is maintained through building good and supportive relations with the City's administration – mirroring a kind of "shadow lobbying" where influence is exerted without official registration or transparent disclosure as a lobbyist (see Fang, 2014). Sarah takes issue with how campaign financing influences the decisions about their projects, where developers donate to the campaigns of specific political officials who then sit on city committees and approve developers' project proposals. Sarah understands the dependence of political officials on developer donations essentially "buys the loyalty" of elected officials, resulting in policies that disproportionately benefit developers:

"If you looked at the more progressive candidates' campaigns, little to none of their donations were from developers because they refused to take their donations. It was a grassroots campaign. It was people like you and me. Whereas, if you look at others, including the mayor, their campaign donations come from developers. In the case of one councillor, 87% of their campaign donations were from developers. He doesn't even need to go out there and fundraise. He gets all his money upfront and doesn't need to do anything."

In her study of democratic disenchantment in two English estate councils, anthropologist and legal scholar Insa Koch (2016) claims politicians must actively involve themselves in the communities they seek to represent and cultivate personalized relations with citizens in order to gain their confidence and support. By convincing citizens that they are "one of them" (i.e., that they, too, are members of the local community), political candidates can gain the support of those

who are cynical about politicians and politics at large. In a context where the most basic needs of citizens are often unmet, aspiring politicians must exercise what Koch refers to as a "bread-and-butter" strategy whereby their campaigns appeal directly to voters' most basic and immediate needs. In refusing to accept developer donations, many progressive candidate campaigns sought to emphasize their personal connection to residents and centre their needs above those of the real estate and development industries.

Chris, whom I met while volunteering with Horizon Ottawa and who also serves on the Board of Directors for his local community association, similarly believes that corporate financing heavily influences political decisions. He frames his understanding of developer lobbying within the broader context of Ottawa's status quo:

"I think the status quo is like 'business as usual.' It means protecting vested interests. I might be a little jaded but, to me, the status quo is just kind of ensuring that certain groups that have done well in Ottawa, stay doing well. I wouldn't go as far as to say Ottawa is necessarily corrupt, but it does seem that certain groups tend to prop each other up"

Chris understands the status quo as a system that reinforces benefits for the powerful, particularly property developers and other economic elites, who sustain their advantages by funding the political campaigns of city councillors and the mayor. Like Sarah, he suggests local councillors may feel a sense of loyalty or indebtedness to these corporate donors and thus resist crafting or supporting policies/project proposals that go against the interests of those to whom their careers are credited. As Chris puts it, there is a prevailing attitude of "don't bite the hand that feeds you." It is important to note Chris's recognition that these practices do not necessarily constitute corruption in a legal sense, as campaign donations are not direct bribes. While such donations may undermine democratic ideals by indirectly granting developers disproportionate influence, they do not break any law, provided they adhere to established regulations, such as donation limits. It is, recalling Crouch (2004) and Nugent (2012), a normative aspect of how liberal democracies

function, where the ability of economic elites to leverage the political class in their favour is embedded within the structure of the system itself.

When I asked Chris what he believed were the most pressing issues in Ottawa, he immediately pointed to the housing affordability crisis. Like myself, Chris heard many residents at the doors express concerns about their own and others' housing security, particularly the fear of being priced out of neighbourhoods they had long lived in or their children being unable to find affordable housing in the city. When I asked him about potential solutions to the crisis, he raised two key points. On one hand, he argued that the City's consistent refusal to increase property taxes for homeowners in line with inflation limits its fiscal capacity, making it harder to invest in essential public services like affordable housing and public transportation. On the other, he stressed the need for all levels of government to start investing in public housing or alternatives to for-profit housing, like co-ops: “We need a more hands-on approach to the housing problem, whereas right now, it's left up to developers and private interests.” In the context of the increased commodification and financialization of housing, concerns about accessibility and affordability are often not shared by developers focused on maximizing their investment returns. Chris' concern with relying entirely on developers for affordable housing is that there is no financial incentive for them to build below-market rate or nonprofit rentals and homes:

“In Montreal, they had put in a tax or something to [incentivize] developers to build more affordable housing units, but they just opted to pay the tax instead of actually building those units. So, the City and each level of government will actually have to get physically involved in building [housing] because the private sector is simply not going to build affordable units if they can build other kinds of housing.”

The City of Ottawa has implemented different policy initiatives, such as inclusionary zoning, public subsidies through tax breaks, and expedited project approval processes, to incentivize developers to build affordable housing units. While policies like inclusionary zoning are theoretically designed to produce a mix of housing types at different affordability levels, David

Madden and Peter Marcuse (2016) argue that they often serve as tools to legitimize state support for luxury developments (131). In exchange for the right to build more market-rate housing than would be allowed under existing zoning law, private developers agree to construct some number of more affordable units. However, the price for an affordable unit is based on the area median income, which includes the entire metropolitan region, which means it factors in detached suburban single-family homes along with more affordable housing (ibid., 139). As a result, many of the so-called affordable units are not actually affordable for lower-income communities. For this reason, Madden and Marcuse (2016) argue that when affordable housing programs produce units priced virtually the same as "non-affordable" units, it becomes clear that the term "affordable" is more ideological than descriptive (138). As Chris explained it, when developers do build affordable units, it's not necessarily out of requirement from the city, but as a "courtesy" for allowing them to build bigger projects. For Chris, the "watered-down" nature of current affordable housing initiatives, combined with the lack of pressure from politicians to ensure they produce real benefits, highlights a broader issue of political will:

"I don't think we have the political will from pretty much anyone to make that drastic change to not piss some people off, or someone who isn't afraid of the housing market. Nobody wants to potentially do something that will drastically break the market."

While there is ostensibly widespread support for increased housing construction, this support doesn't usually extend to affordable housing for low-income communities, which is often perceived as a threat to surrounding property values. This reflects a broader neoliberal tendency, in which the democratic ideal of shared responsibility is undermined as policy preferences are shaped more by individual market interests than by collective social needs.

John, a resident I met at the local Ottawa Urbanism Book Club, similarly understands the status quo as something akin to an insider's club, where decisions made about projects tend to benefit economic elites and their political allies. At a time when urgent social needs, such as

affordable housing and public transit, are underfunded, projects like the Lansdowne 2.0 Revitalization serve as a glaring example of misplaced priorities. He criticizes the City's choice to assist in financing the revitalization, including the construction of a new arena, with the goal of boosting the area's commercial viability. While the City claims the project will create long-term benefits, John believes that public resources are being used to support private development that largely benefits developers:

“Look at Lansdowne, we're in a time where the mayor is saying we have to be careful with money, we have to cut costs, we have to do this, we have to do that [and yet] we're spending \$400 million on this. We're spending this debt until 2070 on what is, in my opinion, almost a private handout. Those are people who know the political system, who know how to work it, who hosted fundraisers for the mayor and are benefitting from it. ... That just feels like small-town cronyism.

To John, these decisions reflect a governance model that prioritizes the interests of well-connected insiders over the broader public good. The issue, in John's opinion, is not necessarily with developers themselves, but with public money being used to subsidize projects that developers can afford to fund themselves. John's perspective highlights the need for stronger regulatory frameworks to ensure that public resources are directed toward projects that serve the public interest rather than subsidizing private profit. He argues that public investment should be reserved for initiatives with clear, tangible benefits to the community, such as affordable housing or transit infrastructure, rather than projects that merely enrich developers under the guise of urban revitalization.

Conclusion: The Limits of Liberal Inclusion

Continuing in conversation, the man's pen hovered over the petition sheet as he completed his signature, momentarily binding us in the shared cause of affordable housing. Our discussion had meandered through the frustrations of limited housing options and the city's inadequate focus on temporary shelters—solutions that do little to address the systemic forces driving housing costs

skyward. We found common ground in our belief that all levels of government needed to do more to provide long-term, sustainable solutions to housing insecurity. But just as I thought we were aligned in our perspectives, the man paused and looked up from the clipboard to provide another analytical lens – one that quickly shifted the tone of our discussion. “You know what, I’ll tell you what’s really going on... It’s all these fucking immigrants we’re letting in... What’s left for *us*?” A wave of discomfort washed over me as he gestured between us, implying a shared identity, while I silently reflected on my own status as the daughter of an immigrant parent. However unsettling, his words were hardly surprising. Once celebrated as a pillar of Canada’s multicultural identity, immigration has become an increasingly contentious political issue, with a growing segment of the Canadian population supporting tighter border controls and stricter selection processes.

As discussed in this chapter, the neoliberalization of government policies and the increased privatization of welfare services have transformed the housing sector into a more lucrative and speculative industry. The man’s personal analysis, however, directed blame toward an easier, more accessible target: immigrants, particularly newcomers, and especially those from racialized backgrounds. His perspective is emblematic of a broader phenomenon, in which the “ontological insecurity of neoliberalism” is projected onto the foreign “Other” rather than the market dynamics that perpetuate socioeconomic inequality (Ayers, 2024, 425). This process has become increasingly facilitated by right-wing authoritarian and populist leaders, who capitalize on economic fears to promote ultra-nationalist and xenophobic immigration policies (ibid.). In this context, the definition of “the people” becomes more exclusive, shifting from a broad focus on class to one centred on identity. This shift determines who is seen as rightfully belonging to the national community and, as a result, who is considered most deserving of resources.

Nancy Fraser (1997) argues that social justice claims are increasingly divided into two types: redistribution and recognition. Redistributive claims focus on achieving a more just distribution of resources, addressing inequalities rooted in political-economic structures such as exploitation, economic marginalization, and limited access to resources. Recognition, on the other hand, concerns cultural representation and the acknowledgment and acceptance of difference. Fraser contends that treating these issues as separate spheres disassociates the cultural politics of difference from the social politics of equality. Justice today requires a comprehensive framework that can integrate both redistributive and recognition claims.

The anti-immigrant sentiment expressed by the man I encountered illustrates the consequences of divorcing these two dimensions of justice. Housing insecurity, fundamentally a redistributive issue rooted in neoliberal policies that have commodified shelter and dismantled social housing programs, becomes misdiagnosed as a recognition problem—who "belongs" and therefore deserves access to limited resources. This dynamic plays out in contemporary politics where right-wing parties in both the US and Canada have effectively channeled economic anxiety into cultural grievances. Neither Conservatives in Canada nor Republicans in the United States offer substantive solutions to address the socioeconomic crisis gripping both countries—they propose no meaningful alternative to the neoliberal consensus on housing, healthcare, or labour policy. Instead, they successfully mobilize voters by attacking liberal tenets of inclusion, which primarily operate within the politics of recognition focused on the language of rights and representation. Meanwhile, centrist parties (the Liberals in Canada, and Democrats in the United States) increasingly emphasize recognition politics while retreating from the redistributive commitments that once defined social democracy.

This substitution of identity-based antagonism for class-based solidarity serves powerful economic interests by redirecting public anger away from wealth concentration and toward perceived cultural threats. Fraser's call for integrating both redistributive and recognition claims into a unified framework of justice offers a path forward. To effectively counter the anti-immigrant backlash witnessed in my field encounters and reflected in broader political trends, progressive movements must reconnect cultural politics with economic justice. This means not just affirming diversity and inclusion in principle, but vigorously pursuing redistributive policies—like robust public housing programs—that materially improve conditions for all working people regardless of background. Without this integrated approach, we risk perpetuating a politics where economic grievances find expression only through the toxic channels of xenophobia and exclusion.

Chapter Three: Bureaucracy: Weapons of the Neoliberal State

By August 2023, months had passed since I first timidly began canvassing for Horizon Ottawa. Stepping into each neighbourhood in Ottawa felt like venturing into different worlds, each with its own unique experiences within the city. At this point, the script my canvassing organizer once prepared for me was no longer necessary. Conversations freely flowed as I engaged with people from all walks of life, from young people to retirees, renters to homeowners, urban dwellers to suburbanites, new immigrants to lifelong residents. Of course, the primary purpose for my being out there was to collect signatures for Horizon Ottawa's affordable housing petition, but my experience quickly evolved into something more profound. Nearly every opened door resulted in meaningful conversations with residents, uncovering a wealth of perspectives, desires, and aspirations. Parents shared their warranted anxieties about their children's prospects in a city where affordable housing seemed like an elusive dream. Renters feared being priced out of neighbourhoods they had long called home. Residents both nearby and from afar expressed concern about the neglect of the ByWard Market, specifically the city's failure to address rising rates of violence, housing insecurity, and drug use in the area. Listening to citizen testimonies provided crucial insights into the myriads of ways local politics affect and are entangled in residents' daily lives.

Out of the hundreds of people I spoke with, one encounter encapsulated a common theme shared with me by many residents at the doors and my own interlocutors. Approaching a large, single detached home in an urban neighbourhood, I spoke with an older gentleman, the homeowner, who had taken a keen interest in both the petition and, upon further conversation, my own research. "It's so good to see young people going out and doing stuff like this," he responded after I explained my reason for being at his doorstep, his voice tinged with admiration and perhaps a hint of nostalgia. Seated on the sun-warmed steps of his front porch, he shared with me snippets

of his own experience volunteering in his youth. “I’m old now. I’m jaded. I can’t do stuff like that anymore. But I think it is important. It *is* important.” As we continued in conversation, I glanced past the tree line adjacent to his property, where the tip of a residential tower at Lansdowne Park, just across the Rideau River, peeked into view, prompting me to ask for his thoughts on the City’s plans to revitalize the park. He reminisced about past citizen mobilizations in the area, recalling how the local community rallied to defend the Aberdeen Pavilion, now a cherished historical heritage site and gathering space in the park, from the City’s plans to demolish it.

Given his proximity to the park and his history of community involvement, I couldn’t help but wonder if he had voiced his present concerns about the project at the recent community consultation meeting hosted just a few weeks prior, a meeting I had attended myself. “Hell no,” he chuckled, “what’s the point? It’s already a fait accompli.” Having attended this meeting myself, I noticed how his comments mirrored similar frustrations expressed during the consultation, pointing to a prevailing sense of futility surrounding this kind of public engagement. I distinctly recalled one participant's pointed remark at the meeting in which he criticized the City's attempt to collaborate with the public: "It feels like you're selling something to us, not consulting." Turning to the homeowner for his thoughts, he responded by pursing his lips and shrugging his shoulders, “Exactly.”

The contradictions of our conversation were not lost on me. Here we were, passionately discussing the importance of community engagement while simultaneously dismissing the very platforms meant to facilitate dialogue. It is crucial to recognize that his decision not to attend the meeting stems not from apathy but frustration, from feeling consistently unheard and powerless in decision-making processes. It wasn't necessarily that residents did not care about participating in consultations, though that might be true for some. My canvassing experience showed that many

people do care about the issues affecting their city and have different ideas about possible solutions. However, some citizens I spoke with questioned whether it was worth participating at all, given the perceived lack of open dialogue between community members and leaders and the seemingly predetermined outcomes typical of public meetings.

Despite the democratic ideals underpinning public consultations, there is a disconnect between how democracy is imagined and how it manifests in practice. How does a lack of faith in the efficacy of democratic institutions and processes impact citizens' perspectives of governance? Is democracy solely defined by the act of voting in elections, a duty fulfilled by only 44% of residents in the last municipal election in Ottawa? What forms of political actions and affects emerge in response to this sense of disillusionment with formal institutions and processes?

To answer these questions, I begin by examining critiques from local community organizers and activists regarding the municipal government's civic engagement protocols, particularly highlighting the performative nature of democratic participation, where bureaucratic processes are leveraged to suppress dissent. These critiques are contextualized within an ongoing class-action lawsuit against the Ottawa Police Services Board, where the restrictive measures imposed on participating citizens exemplify the systemic barriers faced not only by those advocating for progressive policies but also by individuals simply asserting their fundamental right to participate in democratic decision-making. I conclude the chapter with a renewed call to embrace dissent as a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, and to value the diverse perspectives of citizens as essential to fostering a more equitable city.

The Town Meeting as an Exercise in Direct Democracy

Scholars of urban processes have previously characterized city meetings as a particular expression of governmental power, turning the otherwise more abstract and complex configuration of "the

state” into a more tangible form, thereby making its authority more visible and interactive (Vine, 2020). City meetings are also crucial venues in which citizens assert themselves as political subjects. Anthropologist Michael Vine (2020) draws our attention to the affective charge of these settings: “the ways in which people draw on ritualized public performance, on the circulation of affect and emotion, and on the exchange of material objects to establish themselves as socio-political subjects in a number of ways that bolster and push at the edges of liberal statehood” (281). Put simply, city meetings are a stage on which the state and citizens perform the rituals of liberal democracy.

In his exploration of American town meetings, Jonathan Beecher Field (2019) similarly emphasizes how the traditional town meetings — a space in which local citizens gather as equals to discuss and deliberate local issues — does away with the theoretical nature of democracy to offer a more practical form. While these early town meetings were predominately organized by and for white male property owners, they are often esteemed as exemplary models of democratic participation as they provide citizens with opportunities for collective decision-making, the outcomes of which had a direct impact on the laws and regulations that shaped their communities. Drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville's study (1835) of American democracy in New England townships, Fields adds "the very act of participating in a town meeting teaches Americans how to be a citizen of a democracy" (18). These meetings make democracy not just something that happens "out there" but a tangible practice that requires active citizen participation.

Over time, with the rise of neoliberalism and the subsequent “hollowing out” of democracy (see Brown 2017), Field (2019) contends that the nature and purpose of town meetings have undergone a significant transformation. He contrasts the idealized town meeting with contemporary town *hall* meetings, in which citizens become mere recipients of information passed

down unilaterally from leaders, mirroring the organizational structure of private corporations. While these modern meetings may offer a veneer of democracy by including a Q&A session, they do not facilitate the same level of active participation in shaping decisions. As such, this model effectively reduces public engagement to “glorified press conferences,” where citizens have limited influence on political decisions and policies, thereby rendering democracy a superficial exercise rather than a substantive practice (11).

While canvassing for Horizon Ottawa, I met Chris, who also volunteers with his local community association. As a member of the association's Board of Directors, Chris regularly communicates with the city's administration and collaborates with local councillors to advocate for the needs of residents in his ward. His frequent participation in public meetings on behalf of the community association has made him well-versed in their dynamics. Chris described public meetings as rigidly structured and one-sided, often leaving many participants feeling they are being “talked at” rather than engaging in meaningful back-and-forth dialogue. As a result, while formal channels for citizens to participate in decision-making processes exist, these opportunities often feel trivial, more symbolic than impactful:

“Sometimes it does feel kind of hopeless [to participate in meetings] because it feels like ... they're just doing it as a formality, you know? Crossing their T's and dotting their I's... They say 'Hey we're offering public programs but how willing are they to actually do it? How much information do they actually use? It really feels like sometimes they already have an idea in mind, and they just want the public to accept it, maybe tweak it a little. The people who are building and proposing these projects, it's already pretty much baked in their minds.’”

The perception that meetings are merely procedural rather than substantive fosters a sense of futility among citizens, making public consultations feel more like a box-checking exercise than a core component of democratic governance. This sentiment, expressed by others at the doors, highlights a critical issue in Ottawa's municipal governance: the disconnect between the appearance of participatory democracy and the reality of its execution. I brought these insights

into conversation with another resident whom I met at the book club on urban planning, John, also a member of his community association. Like Chris, John regularly attends public meetings and voiced similar comments on the nature of public meetings:

“I don’t want to say delegations are useless, but what I’ll primarily use them for is to get a message out. To show people [councillors and the broader public] that *we’re here*. If you’re using the delegation to actually change something, well, it’s already been decided.”

John’s experiences further suggest that formal meetings often serve as procedural formalities rather than real opportunities to integrate citizens’ input into projects and policy. He also pointed to the consultations surrounding Lansdowne 2.0 as an example, where, in the case of one meeting he attended, despite most delegates opposing aspects of the proposal, the project continued with very little adjustment. John explained to me that the extensive planning and detailed nature of such projects, often in collaboration with a private sector partner, leaves little room for amendments by the time proposals reach the public.

“In [the Lansdowne revitalization] case, you end up in a situation where there would’ve been like a bazillion amendments. This is a plan [the city] has been putting together for years... At that point, they can’t really just change everything. Will these amendments work for the city? Will it work for [Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group, the private partner collaborating on the project]? They might see those changes and be like ‘This doesn’t work for us. We’re pulling out!’ If you want to really change things, you have to get to those meetings way ahead of time. A delegation is just used for messaging ... [but] I don’t think it really makes an actual difference.”

While delegations are theoretically designed to include the public in decision-making, they often devolve into an illusion of democratic participation, where public engagement is largely symbolic. This is something Horizon Ottawa sought to challenge as a community advocacy group. At the heart of this group is Sam, a founding member whose repeated calls for greater accountability and transparency in municipal politics have attracted significant attention to the organization—both positive and negative. During our conversation, Sam described local politics as being “closest to the people,” ideally providing them with more direct influence over its

trajectory. Despite this proximity, he noted that municipal politics often receives the least attention, allowing political officials to operate with little collaboration with the public it represents.

Sam specifically criticized the technocratic nature of City Hall, where an overreliance on staff opinions relegates public input to secondary importance. While he acknowledges the critical role city staff play in managing services, Sam argued that their narrow evaluations of project proposals largely dictate the scope of what is considered "possible and realistic" for the city. He pointed to the city's annual budget as an example, explaining how budget draft directions are written months in advance by staff in the mayor's office before being presented to the public. City Council then votes on the draft directions before any formal public input is sought, effectively setting the budget's framework in stone. Following this, staff and local councillors may host consultations where they present the budget directions and provide relevant information, such as which services the budget covers, how it is funded, the city's current financial status, and previous budget allocations. Like most consultations, time is typically allocated at the end of the session for answering questions and inviting comments from the public. While Sam acknowledges that some councillors genuinely aim to collaborate with the public and even challenge initial budget directives, he believes the overall structure of the budget process is exclusionary, alienating residents from meaningful decision-making:

"There are different ways that we can do budgeting that hasn't been explored because we had a city manager for a long time who thought it was a bad way of doing things even though they do that in different cities and have done it well, where at least part of the budget is actually set aside and people vote and have conversations on how that money gets spent. There's certainly a distrust in people and their ability to advocate for themselves and rather than asking people what they want, the city basically tells them what's good for them and what they want... It's more like 'This is what you're gonna get. And if you don't agree with it, well maybe we'll hear from you, but we won't integrate whatever you say into this [project].'"

In critiquing the exclusionary character of local politics, where governance often rests in the hands of officials and their staff, Sam advocates for a more direct and accountable democracy,

rather than one that is merely superficially institutionalized. In her analysis of Chile’s transition to democracy after the dictatorship, in which democracy’s contradictions and tensions become more visible, Julia Paley (2001) describes how the institutionalization of democratic processes can become an end in itself, detached from broader goals of economic transformation, and reduced to electoral procedures and representative institutions. Under this limited definition, policy decisions are deemed democratic simply because they were made by elected officials. Paley, working with the community health group *Llaretta*, highlights how their vision of democracy, which encompasses both political and economic rights, diverges from that of politicians; it emphasizes the influence “ordinary people” can exert on decisions affecting their everyday lives (4). The *Llaretta*'s vision of democracy included the right to think, express ideas, and be heard—to have one's voice acknowledged and taken into account. This broader, more direct version of democracy is similar to that which Sam seeks to promote, emphasizing that true democratic governance does not begin and end with elections, but requires ongoing collaboration with citizen collaboration and their substantial power to shape policies:

“All in all, it’s about fighting for a more democratic City Hall in general. When you do that, a lot of other things you’re fighting for will flow into it — more politics of inclusivity, fighting for campaign financing that doesn’t benefit the incumbent, fighting for better transit, for more democracy at the local level. They all flow together, and the more people understand that the more they understand these processes and get involved, the better.”

“The Political Route Was Not Working”: Suing the OPS Board

In November of 2022, the Ottawa Police Services (OPS) Board hosted their regular monthly public meeting. This meeting provided one of the first opportunities for citizens to address the newly elected mayor and Police Chief, both having assumed their positions after the tumultuous events of the 2022 Freedom Convoy. The meeting also unfolded amid the City’s budget season, providing additional opportunities for residents to engage with their local representatives concerning the forthcoming year’s budget allocations. The chairperson introduced herself and guided the room

through the procedural formalities – reviewing agenda items, minutes from the previous meeting, committee reports – most of which were so full of jargon and abbreviations that I had trouble deciphering what they all meant. With a nod of agreement from the rest of the Board, the floor opened to public delegations, but not before the chairperson made a few emphatic comments on “decorum.”⁴ She reminded citizens to abide by the meeting’s guidelines: to respect their allotted speaking times, avoid using “unparliamentary language,” and refrain from making accusations against the Police or Board members, lest their speaking time be cut short.

Upon the chairperson’s invitation, the first citizen approached the podium-like table directly in front of the Board. A veteran of public delegations, he confidently launched into a passionate appeal for greater transparency and accountability from the police in dealing with complaints from the public. After five minutes, the chairperson interrupted to inform him that his time was up and requested his closing remarks. With a chuckle, he acknowledged his tendency to overextend and expressed hope for question or comments from the Board. One member requested the information be emailed to them, to which the delegate agreed as he gathered his papers and left the stand. Four more citizens followed, addressing similar themes. One proposed an online public portal to track complaints against the police, citing successful examples from cities in the United States. Another, speaking on behalf of a community advocacy group, highlighted police failures in addressing gender-based violence and advocated for de-tasking the police and exploring alternative, non-violent interventions. A third participant urged the mayor to reconsider his campaign promise to build a new police station in the ByWard Market, suggesting instead to put

⁴ A public delegation is when a member of the public (a delegate) speaks to the mayor, city councillors, and/or city representatives at a committee/board meeting to provide comments/feedback on a motion. Delegates may also speak on behalf of an established group such as an advocacy group or community association.

forward better policies that address the growing rates of housing insecurity, drug use, and violence in the downtown core.

At last, the final delegate, another frequent attendee and outspoken Black activist against systemic racism and police violence, approached the table. He spoke slowly, seemingly unconcerned with the time limit compared to other delegates. He expressed his ongoing disappointment with the outcomes of monthly meetings, which he felt rarely amounted to any substantial change in policing and governance: “You Board members listen to our five-minute delegations, ask no questions, and continue to do the opposite of what almost every public delegate asks of you, including approving multi-million-dollar budget increases for the Police Services.” As he began to target his critique specifically towards the new Police Chief, taking issue with his involvement in the violent dispersion of Indigenous land defenders in Wet’suwet’en, the chairperson interrupted him, asking him to “be more respectful.”

“Sure,” he brushed her off, taking a moment of silence before continuing, “We’re done being instructed as we have been so many times to say anything we want as long as we’re ‘respectful’ and don’t exercise our democratic right to critique Board members or the OPS. We’re done being ignored while you ignore basic democratic principles, so this evening things are going to happen a little differently.” Before elaborating, he returned to his delegation to criticize Board members for their handling of the Convoy, specifically accusing them of scapegoating Ottawa’s first Black police chief while actively undermining his authority throughout the protest. He was again interrupted by the chairperson, this time telling him that his five minutes were up and asking for his closing comments. He refused: “That’s what I meant when I said things are going to be done differently tonight. Tonight, we’re asking the questions and we’re not leaving until you answer them. We’re following in the footsteps of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and engaging in some

good ol', non-violent, civil disobedience." The eyes of Board members darted between each other as they processed the unconventional moment unfolding before them. The chairperson, visibly irritated, reiterated the meeting's agenda and procedural rules, urging the delegate to vacate his seat so the meeting could proceed as scheduled. He refused once more, instead inviting a former delegate to join him in his disruptive act while he presented further questions to the Board.

The Board offered no response. The chairperson half-heartedly thanked them again and attempted to resume the meeting, but the two delegates stood firm in place. A tense back-and-forth ensued as the chairperson pleaded for them to leave and the delegates still refused, prompting a five-minute recess to help diffuse the situation. Fifteen minutes later, the Board returned, and the citizens, whose microphones had now been turned off, were still seated in place. One of the delegates began to play a tin flute, escalating the frustration of Board members with each haunting note as they struggled to continue the meeting. Not long after, as the disruption persisted, the agenda was hastily amended and the meeting called to a premature end. The activist who led the initial disruption spoke to the media after learning of another citizen's arrest for refusing to leave once the meeting had ended. He stressed the need for City leaders to recognize the depth of the frustration felt by some members of the community: "The Board needed to see that they've pushed a certain group of people far enough that they're willing to risk arrest... They [the board] got to see what democracy looks like tonight" (Duffy, 29 Nov 2022).

The aftermath of the event seemed to ripple through City Hall leading to significant changes in how public engagement is managed. After witnessing the citizen-led disruption at the OPS Board meeting and the subsequent amendments to the bylaw regarding citizen participation in meetings, Sam decided to join the class action lawsuit against the Board. Those involved in the

case understood these changes as an affront to democratic participation, where the city effectively leveraged its bureaucratic arm to intentionally silence “inconvenient” voices.

Bureaucracy intricately shapes our lived experiences in both subtle and profound ways. Everything from seeking medical care to applying for welfare or even something as simple as obtaining a driver’s license, everyday life is deeply entangled in bureaucratic systems that control access to resources, define specific eligibility criteria, and regulate behaviours through complex procedural logics. These structures are often viewed as neutral and objective, serving as necessary mechanisms for maintaining order and efficiency, and therefore rarely questioned. However, this passive acceptance obscures the underlying power dynamics at play. The ways in which bureaucracy shapes social relations and access to resources reveal that it is far from neutral; indeed, bureaucracy both facilitates and embodies a particular arrangement of power. In his study of bureaucracy in India, for example, Akhil Gupta (2012) explores how government services, though intended to alleviate poverty, often perpetuate systemic violence against the poor. This violence, he argues, does not stem from mere malice but from the arbitrary outcomes of welfare programs, where some qualify for assistance while others equally in need do not. He argues these exclusions aren't accidental but "systemically produced by the very mechanisms that are meant to ameliorate social suffering" (24). To access services, the poor must meet specific eligibility criteria, provide documentation, and, in some cases, leverage social connections—requirements that many struggle to satisfy. By critically examining the frameworks on which modern government bureaucracies are built, we open the door to questioning, and challenging, the very systems that govern our lives.

Renowned political and economic anthropologist, David Graeber (2015) sought to challenge the supposed neutrality of government bureaucracy in modern society, revealing them as complex systems of neoliberal control and domination. Despite the neoliberal emphasis on

deregulation, Graeber mobilizes his “Iron Law of Liberalism” to highlight a paradox: any attempt to reduce government regulations and promote market forces ironically necessitates the creation of even more bureaucratic structures to maintain it (9). This is because, despite the myths we are told, markets left unchecked do not automatically maintain themselves but require specific regulatory frameworks to sustain the conditions that allow them to continue functioning. As a result, he argues we are now living in an “era of total bureaucratization” in which rules and regulations pervade all aspects of everyday life (18). At the core of this system is the “gradual fusion of public and private power” into a single unit, with rules and regulations whose goal it is to create and extract profit (17). Where corporate structures are shaped by government regulations, those same corporations often play a key role in shaping the regulatory environment in which they operate through lobbying and campaign financing, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter. Graeber crucially acknowledges that governments effectively manage and perpetuate structures of inequality through the implicit threat of violence, enforced most notably by police officers whom he provocatively describes “bureaucrats with weapons” (73). As governments develop infrastructure to support market functioning, they simultaneously expand surveillance, oversight, and regulation deeper into daily life, increasingly subjecting individuals to potential coercion. Perhaps Graeber’s most compelling argument is his claim that in societies where structural inequality is backed by power and violence, bureaucracy is destined to be “stupid.” Bureaucratic systems are not required to make sense or justify themselves through reason, they compel compliance through the implicit threat of force. The unquestioned entrenchment of bureaucratic rule forecloses on the possibility of more imaginative or just forms of social organization. They are, Graeber argues, “instruments through which the human imagination is smashed and shattered”

(99). If this is the case, then transformative moments arise precisely when these established systems are disrupted, opening a broader range of possibilities and new frameworks for action.

In Ottawa, individuals who seek to challenge the entrenched "status quo" are often dismissed as "vocal minorities" keen on promoting their own personal political agendas. However, Sam points out that, despite presenting as ostensibly politically neutral, some members of City Hall are themselves pushing a specific (neoliberal) agenda. Rather than being valued for their contributions in decision-making processes, those who challenge the status quo are often viewed by some members of the city's administration as "nuisances" – obstacles disrupting an otherwise seemingly unified public. Kregg Hetherington's (2011) ethnographic study of Paraguayan campesinos reveals a similar pattern of exclusion from democratic processes despite their efforts to participate. Hetherington argues that democratic governance and capitalist economies are ideally designed to empower citizens to make informed political and economic decisions through access to information. He likens information to "the grease of both the market economy and democracy" (4), highlighting its critical role in ensuring fair participation and advancing liberal equality. However, despite grounding their claims in legitimate information and learning to navigate the bureaucracy to make those claims, Paraguayan campesinos are dismissed as threats to democracy. Their participation is cast off as populist, shaped by entrenched stereotypes of their supposed economic irrationality and illiteracy, and framed as a potential trigger for the return of authoritarian rule. Their exclusion reinforces the idea that only certain voices "belong" in civic discussions, while others are filtered out as irrelevant, disruptive, or unqualified to contribute. This kind of exclusion is also familiar to the more vocal residents of the city of Ottawa.

Prior to the bylaw changes, Sam already questioned the extent to which City leaders appreciated citizens' diverse contributions at public meetings. He referenced an example of a

meeting he attended in 2020, in which one city councillor at the time admitted that while it was “nice” to see so many people in attendance, the likelihood of their participation amounting to any substantial change was very slim. Knowing this, however, did not deter Sam and others like him from participating:

"When I go to speak at some of these meetings, I don't do it because I think they'll listen to me. I do it for anyone else who might be listening, and I do it essentially to shame [leaders]. To let them know *we're here* and to make them think about things in a different way. It's not like the things I say are outrageous, but I've certainly tried to push the envelope a bit when I go in. It's important for a lot of other people, not just me, to speak in planning."

Sam leverages shame in a dual capacity: first, as a tool to show what democratic discourse *ought* to look like, embracing the capacity to challenge and rejecting tokenistic forms of engagement. Simultaneously, he uses the opportunity to shame councillors as a means to mobilize the public, urging disillusioned citizens to channel their dissatisfaction into active participation and demand better representation.

While there is a logical tendency to associate citizens' disappointment with political apathy and disengagement (see Greenberg, 2016), Jessica Greenberg and Sarah Muir (2022) offer an alternative perspective, highlighting its potential to stimulate participation. They show how disappointment “explores the embodied and affective ways that people inhabit unmet expectations, desires, and demands [and] reveals the power of comparison as a form of judgement and a strategy for political mobilization” (308). In his ethnographic exploration of anti-highway activism in Tampa Bay, Florida, Michael Vine (2020) shows how “ugly feelings” – such as disappointment, anger, resentment, etc. – can mobilize political participation, providing otherwise differently oriented actors with an “affective boundary object” through which they can overcome questions of social and political differences and make claims to the state as a collective. In this way, a shared cynicism may not strictly produce absence but also presence (288). Sam’s use of shame isn’t merely punitive; it’s a call to action, a reminder to both leaders and members of the public that

democracy isn't just about securing and casting votes every few years but about fostering continuous, active participation.

Sam thus took issue with the restrictions on public participation in OPS meetings as it limits citizens' opportunity to directly communicate with the Board and make demands. "At least before the bylaw changes," he explains to me, "[meetings] provided a space where we could hold these individuals accountable and make them uncomfortable." In her study on the redevelopment of the Berlin-Tempelhof airport in Germany, Hannah Hilbrandt (2017) explores how citizens involved in state-led public planning sessions object to their "tokenistic" forms of participation, which they argued did not allow them to debate and discuss options freely, but only to select from a pre-approved list of choices provided to them. Building on James Holston (2008), Hillbrandt's "insurgent participation" is a rebuttal against the assumption that citizens are incapable of providing their own rational political contributions. Aware of their limited influence in political decision-making, some citizens may insurgently participate in public consultations. They participate not because they believe their contributions will be seriously considered, but because they refuse to be silenced. They use meetings as opportunities to "reframe planning debates," rejecting the agenda and pre-set options presented to them and asserting their own alternatives (ibid.).

Sam's concern about restrictions on public delegations is that they eliminate a vital space where people can actively challenge the state and confront the status quo. This is especially critical in Ottawa, where, as discussed in chapter one, the city's electoral geography makes public meetings one of the only remaining avenues through which marginalized groups—those excluded from the status quo—can have their concerns heard and addressed. That challenges to the status quo so often come from already disenfranchised groups (along racial, gendered, and class lines)

underscores another exclusionary and troubling dimension of Ottawa's governance. Given that police violence disproportionately impacts these communities, it is particularly disheartening that the City has chosen to further minimize them rather than collaborate with them to better address their concerns.

With the new bylaw changes, no other Board or committee imposes rules as strict as those of OPS, indicating a lack of precedent behind the amendments. The bylaws introduced a new procedure, specific to OPS board meetings, which would shorten the registration timeframe and require individuals to submit their written comments to the Board “for approval” before being permitted to participate. What’s more, public delegations would not occur during the meeting itself; instead, they would be held in a separate one-hour session, scheduled from noon to 1 PM, prior to the meeting. Additionally, delegates are restricted to addressing only agenda items set by the Board and cannot raise any concerns outside of these predetermined topics. Furthermore, once an individual has participated as a delegate, they are barred from presenting again for the next 90 days. Sam immediately took issue with the changes, arguing that they not only prevented the public from fully engaging in these meetings but also granted the Board the power to suppress criticisms.

Following the tragic murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the United States and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, Sam felt this tactic by the OPS Board was intended to suppress the growing number of people who had signed up to speak at meetings to advocate for freezing or defunding the police budget. He also noted that the number of people who had signed up to speak at OPS Board meetings had drastically increased following their management of the 2022 Freedom Convoy. Although nearly 100 residents had initially registered to speak at the OPS meeting following the Convoy events, continuous delays, restricted participation options, and stringent regulations led to only 10-15 people attending when the meeting finally took place two

months later. Sam understood this a deliberate move to wear down public resistance, minimizing the amount of public criticism directed at the City and the police.

Frustrated by what they perceived as deliberate obstacles to public engagement, those involved in the lawsuit accused the OPS Board of purposefully designing and exploiting procedural rules to hinder citizen participation and critique, thus encroaching on fundamental freedoms of expression and association. The citizen who performed the disruption at the November meeting and who is also a plaintiff in the lawsuit against the Board, condemned the new delegation approval processes, arguing that it “forced the public to jump through hoops just to get the chance to speak” (Lebrun, 6 Sept 2023). His discontent was specifically exacerbated by the limitations on participation frequency, which he emphasized has led to a significant reduction in public delegates altogether: “The last three months, there’s been no delegations,” he told *PressProgress*, “Before that, it was just me because I managed to get through... they’ve been successful in completely eliminating public delegations” (ibid.). Similarly, Sam also recognized the limitation on participation frequency as a direct tactic aimed at individuals like himself who regularly speak at these meetings.

The City defended the new restrictions by claiming they would "open up meetings to different perspectives" and argued that these were not true restrictions since there are alternative methods for public input, such as using the OPS complaint portal or writing letters to councillors. However, Sam is skeptical of these methods, believing they do not genuinely influence decisions or provide a clear, open process for addressing public concerns:

“They claim it's to make meetings more efficient, and I suppose if rubber-stamping every single thing that's on the agenda is their idea of efficiency, then I guess it is. At the end of the day, they're simply proving our point. They're doing this to avoid scrutiny and push through as many decisions as they want. They don't care, they're trying to silence dissent.”

Referencing the City's statements about broadening the meeting's perspectives, Sam points to the manipulative rhetoric employed, revealing that the City's true intention is to limit the engagement of particular groups, particularly those who advocate for de-tasking and defunding the police:

"If they didn't think it was making a difference, they wouldn't have restricted it. You know, people will say 'Oh, it won't make a difference' and I think that's true in a lot of ways. I don't think we've made monumental differences, but we are certainly changing the discussion and the public discourse around policing because we're going to those meetings so often and mobilizing a lot of people to go to them, and then they get restricted. So, what I mean is, it's not just that city hall is inaccessible to people; they're actively trying to make it more inaccessible at times."

Sam suggests they've created a Kafka-esque scenario, where the bureaucracy functions as an oppressive, labyrinthine system with excessive, arbitrary rules that ultimately seek to alienate individuals from decision-making processes. This, Sam argues, sets a bad precedent for the other public meetings hosted by different Boards and committees. What troubled Sam most was the City's assertion that public participation is not a legal obligation for the Board – it is treated as a privilege rather than a right. The changes reflect a problematic attitude by city officials in which public participation is trivialized, treated as something that must be hurried through before the “real” decision-making occurs. Sam and others involved in the lawsuit challenged this and advocated for a more robust understanding of public participation as a fundamental right, absolutely essential in democratic decision-making. In doing so, they sought to hold the Board accountable but also to set a precedent for future public meetings, ensuring that community voices are not merely tolerated but actively sought and valued.

In Ottawa, while channels for public participation exist, the city's administration frequently seems to prioritize expediency, often resorting to rubber-stamping and hastily conducted public consultations instead of fostering a deeper form of democratic engagement. This approach effectively marginalizes citizens' voices and limits opportunities to express their opinions, visions, and critiques. Echoing the analyses of Gupta (2012) and Graeber (2015), the bureaucratic

mechanisms ostensibly designed to “diversify” citizen contributions and improve public meetings have had the opposite effect: by introducing excessive rules and arbitrary participation criteria, the City nearly succeeded in eliminating public consultations altogether, worsening issues of representation rather than addressing them.

Conclusion: Dissent and Democracy

As I moved from one house to the next, circulating Horizon Ottawa’s petition in support of affordable housing, a sense of energy propelled me forward. I felt a quiet pride looking down at the petition form, where signatures had overflowed onto the reverse side of the page. As I approached the next house, a woman greeted me curiously before I launched into my script. Before I could finish, she stopped me mid-sentence, her voice firm but still polite: “I’m sorry, we vote in our elected officials to run the city and trust them to do the right thing.” With a quick thank you, she closed the door. As discussed in the first chapter, her words brought to light another mechanism of the status quo: not just how it is sustained by institutions, but how residents themselves accept politics as something distant, predetermined, and beyond their substantial influence (see Greenberg, 2010). Reducing democratic governance to a periodic act of voting, she, perhaps unconsciously, reinforced the notion that governance is the exclusive domain of elected officials and their advisors. This belief, not at all unique to Ottawa but deeply ingrained in representative democracies, renders politics as something that is done *to* citizens rather than something that is formed *by* them.

Many with whom I spoke pointed to a profound asymmetry in political participation. Those who benefit from the status quo—often white, middle-class residents with stable routines and access to private transportation—may feel less compelled to engage in politics after voting. Those whose interests *align* with the status quo do not need to actively advocate for their positions, they

already feel adequately represented. Those whose lives and experiences are *not* captured in the status quo must advocate more fiercely for visibility. That participating in public meetings so often seems futile is extremely problematic as they remain one of the only direct avenues for otherwise marginalized residents to engage with the state and demand recognition.

Municipal governance provides a vital opportunity for residents to directly influence the decisions that shape their daily lives. However, throughout this chapter I have shown how systemic barriers and entrenched power dynamics limit residents' ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making beyond the act of voting. Bureaucratic red tape, the lack of accessible channels for feedback, and exclusionary decision-making processes effectively alienate citizens, often leaving them feeling powerless. Supporting innovative participatory practices can create pathways for more equitable governance and fundamentally transform the relationship between citizens and their political institutions and representatives. A notable example of this can be found in the study of participatory urban planning in Brazil by Theresa Caldeira and James Holston (2002). They explain how the implementation of the City Statute in Brazil's constitution serves as a groundbreaking law that “embodies a democratic project of great ambition to redefine not only the priorities of urban planning but also the role of the state and society in governing cities and addressing their inequalities” (pg. 2004). This legal framework mandates public consultation, making it a legal requirement rather than a mere formality, and allows citizens to hold the state accountable if it fails to meet certain standards (i.e., not providing citizens with sufficient information to enable participation, failing to host public consultations, not providing enough time to consider the proposal, etc.) (pg. 2012).

But it is also about more than just strengthening existing participatory channels; it is about understanding their very purpose in the first place. French political philosopher Jacques Rancière

(2001) has written on the distribution of the sensible – that is, what can be seen, heard, and recognized within a society and by whom. This distribution not only determines who is included or excluded (i.e., *who* is seen, *whose* voice is heard, *whose* needs are recognized, etc.) but also influences how individuals interact within that framework. This is also where his discussion of *dissensus* becomes especially crucial. According to Rancière, dissent is the “essence of politics,” compared to the “post-political” regime which seeks to exclusively foster *consensus* (ibid., Thesis 8). Importantly, consensus is not achieved through deliberation, but by the “annulment of dissent... [and] the annulment of surplus subjects” (ibid., Thesis 10). In such contexts, politics no longer involves debate but the suppression of opposition—it becomes a matter of “matching [of] sense with sense” (Rancière, 2010, viii). For Rancière, politics should ideally provide a contentious space where marginalized voices can express dissent, disrupt the dominant order, and demand recognition, ultimately reconfiguring the dominant distribution of the sensible.

This understanding of politics stands in stark contrast to the way Ottawa’s bureaucrats typically operate, where the primary aim is to avoid friction, streamline processes, and pass projects without disruption. In such an environment, dissensus is seen as a threat, not a necessity. Democracy thrives in moments of disagreement and contestation. If Ottawa’s municipal government is to move toward a more inclusive and equitable political system, it must embrace the value of active citizen engagement even, or *especially*, when it disrupts the status quo. This process requires an understanding that democracy is inherently messy, disruptive, and resistant to the kind of consensus-driven decision-making that often stifles transformative change.

Conclusion: We're Not So Polite After All

On a bitterly cold morning in January 2022, I made my way from the Parliament LRT station to my downtown job. Ottawa's urban core had been eerily quiet since the Ontario provincial government reinstated COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings. On this particular day, however, downtown was alive with a flurry of activity that stood in contrast to even the usual pre-pandemic urban rhythm. Instead of the once familiar hustle of suit-clad office workers moving between buildings, students making their way to class, and tourists snapping photos of the Peace Tower, Wellington Street resembled something between a truck rest stop and a carnival. Surrounding streets were teemed with an array of weather-beaten pickup trucks parked alongside massive 18-wheeler semi-trailers. Barbecue grills dotted the sidewalks, filling the icy air with the nostalgic scent of summer cookouts, while rogue fireworks shot up sporadically and lit up the otherwise grey winter sky. The festive aura and cheering crowds may have led any casual observer to believe the city was gearing up for an early Canada Day celebration — if not for the countless posters emblazoned with the words “FUCK TRUDEAU.”

As the country's capital city, Ottawa is no stranger to large-scale mobilizations and prides itself as a symbol of Canadian democracy, where citizens can freely express their opinions, gather in groups for protest, and criticize their government without fear of repression. But this protest lingered longer than usual; it grew louder and less contained, eventually becoming more serious than anticipated, even by some of the participants themselves. While ostensibly triggered by COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine requirements, the protest had already evolved before reaching Ottawa into a deeper expression of discontent with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal administration, which protesters characterized as elitist, corrupt, and authoritarian. This sentiment was only exacerbated by their almost immediate dismissal, with some problematically portraying protestors as uneducated, “redneck” thugs. In response, participants in the convoy described

themselves as “freedom fighters,” echoing an almost wartime rhetoric and framing their actions in militant terms. They set up camp across Ottawa, though concentrated in downtown, and demanded an end to all restrictive COVID-19 measures and, eventually, the resignation of the Prime Minister.

While initially framed as an expression of pandemic-related grievances, the visual landscape of the protest revealed some of its less savory elements: swastikas, Confederate flags, QAnon symbols, and MAGA merchandise appeared alongside upside down Canadian flags, while key organizers with documented connections to white nationalist groups assumed prominent roles in coordinating activities. That these symbols were explicitly American should not be lost on us. The considerable funding from MAGA supporters in the United States also makes clear that Canada is not immune to far right forces operating just south of its border.

Failing to meaningfully address the economic hardships felt by Canadians during the pandemic ultimately left a void that the far right exploited, radicalizing those disenchanted with the current administration, and doing so under the guise of a working-class movement to garner broader public support and legitimacy. This dynamic helps explain the seemingly contradictory public response: despite widespread condemnation of the protesters' tactics—including the desecration of the National War Memorial, public urination and defecation, relentless overnight honking in residential neighbourhoods, harassment of local residents, the waving of racist insignia, etc. – some polling indicated that a significant number of Canadians still recognized the legitimacy of and sympathized with the protesters' frustrations (Al-Hakim, 2022 Feb 11).

It's important to recognize that the convoy was also a particular reclamation of public space. Branded early on as a “small, fringe minority,” convoy protesters embraced the label as a badge of defiance. However, their widespread dismissal warrants critical examination. The convoy laid bare a distinct apprehension towards specific forms of confrontation and protest tactics, one that

the city was clearly not equipped to handle, and which downtown residents would not tolerate. Residents' reaction to this unprecedented disruption in their typically tranquil city crystallized in the telling slogan: "Make Ottawa Boring Again" (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: A resident of Ottawa holding a "Make Ottawa Boring Again" sign as people join in a counter-protest blocking a wave of convoy vehicles from entering the downtown core.
Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/make-ottawa-boring-again-fundraiser-1.6360646>

While Western nations, including Canada, often position themselves as exemplary liberal democracies for others to emulate, the Freedom Convoy highlights tensions that anthropologists have long observed in transitional democracies across Latin America, South Africa, and Eastern Europe (Paley, 2001; von Schnitzler, 2016; Greenberg, 2016, among others). Canada's struggle to accommodate this form of dissent is not an anomaly but rather part of a broader tension between procedural democracy and substantive political participation. It exposed how quickly liberal tolerance can transform into calls for state intervention when faced with persistent, disruptive protest—even as it *simultaneously revealed how right-wing movements have learned to appropriate the language and tactics of democratic movements to advance their agendas*. It

reflected a broader pattern in liberal democracies where protest is accepted, celebrated even, but only when it remains within carefully prescribed boundaries that don't fundamentally challenge or threaten existing power structures. When protest moves beyond performative gestures into sustained occupation and disruption of daily life, liberal tolerance quickly gives way to demands for restoration of "order." The Freedom Convoy, whatever its problematic aspects, broke this unspoken contract by refusing to conform to the liberal script of "acceptable" protest. The protesters themselves represented inconvenient voices that challenged the status quo through forms of dissent that liberal democracies struggle to accommodate, revealing how quickly calls for dialogue and tolerance can transform into demands for police intervention when protest becomes too disruptive, too persistent, or too threatening to established order.

Liberalism remains the fundamental framework shaping legal and political discourse in contemporary Western societies. David Westbrook (2016) describes it as a "house ideology"—a set of "manners" that guide our interactions, relying on tacit understandings. These shared, unspoken norms, which once made liberalism "comprehensible and indispensable," are now increasingly rare in today's political landscape. The ascendancy of right-wing populist leaders, such as Donald Trump in the United States, has cast a shadow of doubt over the state of Western democracy and (political) liberalism at large, leading some anthropologists to suggest both to be in a state of crisis (see Boyer, 2016). His exclusionary rhetoric and disregard for democratic norms have challenged a long-standing liberal consensus that has shaped Euro-American societies, posing a significant threat to fundamental liberal principles and raising concerns about the prospects of creeping mainstream *illiberalism*. Of course, it would be naive to portray Trump as an extraordinary threat to an otherwise stable liberal framework. Indeed, Lilith Mahmud (2016) reminds us that instances of illiberal behaviours have always been prevalent in Western

democracies, though often dismissed as exceptions or accidental transgressions rather than systemic features (see also Povinelli, 2021).

If we are indeed in the late stages of neoliberal capitalism, the question of what will replace it has become a subject of intense debate. Perhaps even more daunting is the question of *who* will determine its successor, by what means, and for what ends. This is a political struggle—one that will shape power relations and social organization for generations to come. Democracy faces an existential crisis as market forces have permeated nearly every sphere of social life, reshaping governance in their image. The relentless expansion of market logic has not only eroded but actively subordinated democratic values—equality, redistributive justice, and collective deliberation—to the imperatives of capital accumulation. In this vacuum, populist leaders have risen to power, exploiting widespread disenchantment and channeling public frustration into exclusionary visions of society that deepen social divisions rather than address the structural inequalities at the heart of democracy’s decline.

As such, enhancing democratic politics requires a critical examination of who makes up “the people” to which political institutions and officials are accountable – whose voices are heard, whose interests are prioritized, and who is left out of the conversation. More specifically, it requires political thinking and action that disrupts dominant narratives which normalize inequality, challenging the deep-rooted assumptions of the prevailing “common sense” and questioning which peoples’ interests are upheld by the status quo. The task at hand is not simply to defend existing democratic arrangements but to expand them; to make democracy more robust, more inclusive, and more resilient against the powers that seek to dismantle it. We must remember that democracy is not an "inevitable destination of history [but] only survives like every facet of culture, so long as it is valued and practiced" (Eller, 2021,14).

Realizing this vision of democracy requires concrete institutional change. It demands both expanding and deepening democratic citizenship, broadening formal political rights through equitable voting access, representation, and legal protections, while also securing its substantive rights, including the right to adequate housing for all. This dual emphasis shifts democracy from a superficial electoral exercise to an ongoing practice of collective self-determination, where citizens actively shape resource allocation, policy priorities, and institutional accountability. Above all, democracy must be re-centered on the *demos*—not as passive recipients of governance but as active architects of the political, social, and economic structures that define their lives. This also requires expanding participatory channels and embracing dissent not as a threat, but as an essential democratic force. The frictions and contestations that arise from meaningful engagement must be understood not as obstacles but as the very essence of democratic life, shaping the future of our cities and the country as a whole.

Nowhere is this struggle more visible than in the city. Cities function as microcosms where abstract theoretical paradigms—liberalism, democracy, neoliberal capitalism—materialize into concrete realities that directly shape residents' daily experiences: in the housing affordability crises and the displacement of communities in the relentless pursuit of profit; in the deteriorating quality and availability of public services and infrastructures; and in the exclusionary decision-making processes that concentrate power among the privileged few. If cities are where these tensions are made more visible and felt more acutely, then it is within the city that solutions must be imagined and established. Revitalizing democracy requires urban residents to reassert their right to the city, to reclaim ownership and agency over their lived spaces, transforming them into spaces of deep democratic engagement in pursuit of more equitable futures.

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