ABSTRACT

Drawing on the idea of the right to the city, this paper focuses on the challenges facing the transportation disadvantaged in Syracuse, N.Y. This paper will begin by focusing on two programs aimed at transporting welfare recipients to work: the Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs. This paper will then examine transit activism in Syracuse as it emerged, first in debates over wheelchair lifts on public buses in the 1980s and second as it has emerged in more contemporary organizing efforts aimed at promoting transit awareness. Through these four case studies, this paper argues that urban transportation policies necessarily shape the terms under which the transportation disadvantaged can assert their right to the city.

Key Words: public transportation, right to the city, neoliberalism, urban geography, welfare reform

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, geographers and other social scientists have shown an increasing interest in Henri Lefebvre’s (1996[1968]) idea of “the right to the city.” Scholars have invoked the idea in debates over homelessness (Mitchell 2003), housing policy (Marcus 2008), urban citizenship (Dikec 2005), globalization (Purcell 2003), urban planning (McCann 2005) and even in debates over the aesthetics of the urban environment (Mattila 2005). The right to the city has been understood as a right of the homeless to occupy public space (Mitchell 2003), a right of urban citizens to engage the urban planning process in non-trivial ways (McCann 2005) and at its broadest, as a general right against urban policies that are seen to be either exclusionary, anti-democratic or that ban individuals or groups from participating in urban life.

While scholarship on the right to the city has touched on a number of issues, little has been said with respect to public transit or
urban transportation more generally. This paper contends that the idea of the right to the city can and must be brought to bear upon questions of urban transportation policy. In parsing the relationship between urban transportation and the right to the city, this paper will look specifically at public transit in Syracuse NY. In many ways, public transit in Syracuse has faced many of the same challenges that have afflicted other mid-sized formerly industrial cities—from the operational challenges associated with urban sprawl to the financial burdens associated with capital flight and uncertain revenue streams. Following a brief overview of literature in geography on the right to the city and on urban transportation, this paper will examine two transportation programs in Syracuse: the Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs. In addition to reinforcing neoliberal imperatives of contingent work, persistent job readiness and labor discipline, these transportation programs, I will argue, stand counter to the expansive set of rights encompassed in the notion of the right to the city; instead they hold paramount the exclusive and individual right to work.

The last section of this paper will focus on transit activism in Syracuse. This section will look at the efforts of disability advocacy groups: Disabled in Action (DIA) and ARISE as well as the activism of a group called the Alliance of Churches Transforming Syracuse (ACTS). Transit activism in Syracuse, whether over wheelchair lifts or increased Sunday service, has served to highlight transportation’s role in securing not only a right to work but a broader set of rights, including the right to the city. Whether we define the right to the city as right to public space (Mitchell 2003), or a right to organize collectively (Harvey 2008), implicit in asserting these rights, for many, are questions of transportation and mobility. Urban transportation policies, I will argue, ultimately, set the conditions under which the transportation disadvantaged can assert their right to the city.

This paper is largely a theoretical one. It is an attempt to intervene into recent debates within scholarship in geography on the right to the city and scholarship in geography on urban transportation. I will draw upon interviews that I conducted in 2007 and 2008 with the director of the Wheels for Work program, the director of the Rides for Work program and an activist involved with the Alliance of Churches for Transforming Syracuse. These interviews were conducted as part of Master’s thesis. The arguments forwarded in this paper will be built around a series of case studies. While the explanatory and descriptive power of case study research has often been the subject of debate (Yin 2003), case studies are undeniably useful in both raising new research questions and retaining what Yin has called, “the holistic, and meaningful characteristic of real life events” (Yin 2003, 2). Taken together, the case studies referenced in this paper raise a set of fundamentally new questions for scholars interested both in urban transportation policy and scholars interested in further parsing the idea of the right to the city.

TRANSPORTATION AND THE CITY

Both within and beyond geography, scholars have long been interested in questions of equity and justice in urban transportation (Meyer 1968; Kain and Meyer 1970; Altshuler 1979; Meyer and Gomez-Ibanez 1981; Pucher 1981; Hanson 1995; Bullard et al. 2004; Hanson and Kwan 2008). Scholarship has ranged from more policy focused and quantitative studies, to studies like those of Elliot Hurst (1974), Marshall Feldman (1977), David Hodge (1990), and David Harvey (2006 [1982]), all of whom have focused on the relationship between urban transportation and the political economy of cities. More often than not geographers and other social scientists have approached questions of equity and justice in urban transportation by looking specifically at the impact of urban transportation investments on traditionally marginalized groups. Scholars have looked at issues ranging from the impact of highway construction and pol-
The Transportation Disadvantaged and the Right to the City in Syracuse, New York

The problem of transportation on poor communities (Lewis 1997; Freilla 2004; Bullard et al. 2004) to urban-suburban disparities in mass transit subsidies (Pucher 1981; Hodge 1988; Cervero 1990) to the importance of transportation policy in mitigating social exclusion (Church et al. 2000; TRaC 2000; Dibben 2006). Even more common in the scholarship on urban transportation and equity has been a focus on groups traditionally identified as transportation disadvantaged including (Battalino and Hensher 1995) the elderly (Hilderbrand 2003; Schaie and Pietrucha 2000), the disabled (Grant 1992) and the poor (Kain 1968; Karger 2003; Dombroski 2005; Wachs 2010). Along these same lines, there has been a great deal of scholarship on the transportation plight of welfare recipients and the various initiatives that have arisen to address their needs (Ong 1996; Orski 1998; Ong and Blumenberg 1998; Waller and Hughes 1999; Schintler and Kaplan 2000; Harbaugh and Smith 2000; Reidy 2000; Blumenberg 2002; Cervero et al. 2002; Ong 2002; Ong and Houston 2002; Lucas and Nicholson 2003; Blumenberg and Manville 2004; Amedee 2005).

Across scholarship on the transportation disadvantaged, many studies have rested their analysis on the metrics of accessibility and mobility—where accessibility is defined as the number of opportunities within a given distance or travel time and mobility is defined as the capacity for individuals or groups to reach such opportunities (Hanson and Kwan 2008, xv). As early as Kain’s (1968) work on the spatial mismatch hypothesis, social scientists and geographers have been interested in understanding the relationship between the geography of cities and the poor’s access to jobs and other resources. Whether in relation to the federal subsidization of urban sprawl in the postwar decades, the subsequent decline of urban mass transit, or the passage of welfare reform in 1996, researchers have attempted to take seriously the range of challenges that beset the transportation disadvantaged. The language of mobility, accessibility and equity has been important for both critiquing urban policies and providing solutions to such challenges. Accessibility measures remain important for studies ranging from those on transportation and urban food security (Mead 2008) to those on urban transportation and public health (Renne and Bennett 2010). Looking at much of the work on urban accessibility and the transportation disadvantaged, one can make a fairly straightforward observation. How we approach accessibility and equity in urban transportation often is a product of how we understand cities more generally. When, for example, we emphasize the role of cities as job centers and places of employment, as many scholars have done when talking about the transportation needs of welfare recipients, accessibility, mobility and equity are undoubtedly seen in those terms. Alternatively when we define cities by way of a discussion on public health, or food security, or the place of the elderly, how we understand accessibility and mobility may shift again. In sum, how we define and talk about cities matters deeply for how we think about urban transportation needs, how we define equity and, ultimately, the terms under which urban accessibility is evaluated.

Of course, cities can be defined in all manner of ways and there exists a broad corpus of literature that reflects such differences. The ecological approaches of the Chicago school differ from those of Jane Jacobs (1961), and for that matter they differ sharply from those of a more Marxist persuasion like Castells (1979) or Harvey (2006[1982]). While many of the conceptions of cities and urban life implicit within literature on the transportation disadvantaged have led to a number of creative and laudable policy initiatives, such conceptions of urban life appear quite narrow when contrasted with the work of someone like Henri Lefebvre whose broad view of the city has become increasingly popular with scholars interested in questions of equity an urban social justice. For Lefebvre, the city was defined less as a place of work, economic opportunity or commerce and rather as an oeu-vre, or as a work produced through the labor
and the daily actions of urban inhabitants. Scholars have taken up Lefebvre’s view of the city to critique neoliberal urban policies that they believe increasingly stand counter to the democratic rights of urban citizens and the use value of urban space. For transportation geographers and other scholars interested in transportation equity or in the plight of the city’s transportation disadvantaged, to draw on Lefebvre’s notion of the city is not only to raise questions about the priorities underlying urban transportation policies, but it is to raise questions about the terms under which the transportation disadvantaged can access the city and whether such terms run counter or support the rights of urban citizens to have a hand in shaping the city as an oeuvre.

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

In the wake of the Paris uprising of 1968, and alongside his longstanding interest in urban life under capitalism, Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city emerged as a demand for a more just society (Lefebvre 1996 [1968]). For Lefebvre the right to the city signified a great many things; it signified the right to inhabit the city, the right to produce urban life on new terms (unfettered by the demands of exchange value), and the right of urban inhabitants to remain unalienated from city life (1996[1968], 158). The right to the city was for Lefebvre a refutation of urban policies that sought to erase urban space’s use value. Lefebvre’s writing on the right to the city is notoriously vague (Purcell 2005; Blomely 2008) and his notion of rights remains under-theorized (Attoh 2011). Despite this, scholars and activists have largely embraced Lefebvre’s broad concept of urban life and have gone on to offer varying ideas of what a right to the city might or should entail (Right to the City Alliance 2010).

As some note, the right to the city is a rather capacious concept (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009) and necessarily encompasses multiple rights (Marcuse 2009). Scholars have brought the concept of the right to the city to bear on issues of aesthetics (Mattila 2005), participatory planning (McCann 2005), globalization (Purcell 2003, 2005), public space (Mitchell 2003; Van Deusen 2002), housing (Marcuse 2009) and community access to municipal land (Staeheli et al. 2002). In his essay “The Right to the City,” David Harvey (2008) defines the right to the city as a right in direct contrast to the rights of property and individual liberty so central to capitalist development:

[F]ar more than the individual liberty to access urban resources, [the right to the city] is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is [...] one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights (Harvey 2008, 1).

The right to the city, for Harvey, is fundamentally a human right and a collective right over how the city is to be produced. Like Lefebvre, who argued against conceiving of the right to the city as a “simple visiting right” (1996 [1968], 158), Harvey argues that the right to the city is not merely “a right of access to what already exists” but more crucially a right to transform the city, and “a right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban society” (Harvey 2003, 939). The right to the city must if anything, Harvey states, be a right to change the city after our “heart’s desire.”

Undergirding much of the work on the right to the city is a belief that urban policies are increasingly implemented in ways that are undemocratic, that exclude the poor and that create cities that “prioritize the ‘needs’ of business and the wealthy” over the marginalized (Wastl-Water and Staeheli 2002, 2). Whether focused on public space, housing, aesthetics or broad notions of collective action, at the heart of scholarship on
the right to the city are issues of access, participation and a rejection of capitalist urban development. In the face of urban policies that exclude the poor from public life, the right to the city exists simultaneously as a right to access public space, a right to access socioeconomic goods like housing, a right to organize collectively, and a fundamental right of the poor and marginalized to produce a more just city.

Curiously absent from the literature on the right to the city is an analysis of urban transportation policy. This absence is particularly startling given the importance of public transportation, for many, in accessing and participating in urban life. The following case studies in Syracuse not only seek to bring questions of the right to the city to bear on public transportation policy but to make the following argument. Transportation policies, it will be argued, shape the terms under which welfare recipients, the disabled and other transportation disadvantaged individuals in Syracuse can access and participate in urban life, and ultimately the terms under which they can assert their right to the city.

RIDES FOR WORK AND WHEELS FOR WORK

The story of Syracuse is one of industrial decline, population loss and a dwindling tax base. Once a manufacturing hub, many of the industries that sustained the community have left. Syracuse’s fiscal and economic challenges, which are not dissimilar from those that face other post-industrial rustbelt cities, have also impacted the city’s provision of public transit. Suburbanization, a loss of tax revenue and federal cuts in transit aid, particularly in 1995 and 1996, have led Syracuse’s Central Regional Transportation Association (Centro) to threaten and enact route cuts or fare hikes. While often neglected by those who own cars, shifts in urban transit policies nonetheless have an enormous impact on the lives of transit-dependent populations, like the disabled and welfare recipients. Following welfare reform in 1996, social service agencies in Syracuse paid increased attention to both the challenges facing welfare recipients in securing employment and the inadequacy of public transit in Syracuse in meeting this need. This section focuses on the Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs, two programs in Syracuse aimed at transporting welfare recipients to work. This section examines these programs in the context of debates over the right to the city.

Welfare reform legislation in Syracuse, as elsewhere, marked a radical transition in the allocation of aid to the poor. Particularly drastic were the changes to Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), an entitlement program targeted, predominantly, at single mothers. In 1996, AFDC became Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a block grant funneled to states, which tied aid to work performance and imposed time limits on those receiving aid. Currently, TANF offers temporary financial assistance for impoverished families for a maximum of 60 months. Those receiving benefits must enter the labor market as soon as they are job-ready and no more than two years after they have entered the program (Wolch and Dinh 2001).

With welfare reform, the central goal of local social service agencies became connecting welfare recipients to the labor market. In Syracuse, as with many other places, social service agencies confronted a number of obstacles, not the least of which was transportation. In 1999, it was found that only 5% of Syracuse’s welfare recipients had access to a car (Mulder 1999). Equally troubling was the realization that Syracuse’s bus transit system was wholly ill-equipped to deal with the transportation needs of many welfare recipients looking for work.

The limitations of public transit in meeting the needs of welfare recipients are well-documented (Blumenberg and Manville 2004; Rogalsky 2010). In Syracuse, a study conducted in 1999, the Regional Mobility Action Plan, focused on three of these limitations. First, Centro’s transit system, it noted, was “primarily designed to bring suburban...”
residents to downtown jobs” not the other way around. Second, Centro’s traditional transit schedules, the report added, “were designed for weekday nine-to-five workers” and not for employees in the service and healthcare industries who frequently work nights and weekends. Lastly, suburban workers in particular, the report stated, “often have schedules that conventional transit services cannot easily accommodate” (CNY-TRA 1999).

Such a system makes little sense for welfare recipients. Welfare recipients in Syracuse are often slotted into jobs with non-traditional hours in suburban locations far from any bus route. Entry-level jobs in retail, food service, or hospitality, it was noted, often have hours that do not correspond to bus services (CNYRTA 1999; SMTC 2001). In Syracuse the very jobs for which welfare recipients are most eligible are jobs that fall off the map and timetable of public transportation. The limitations of urban transit in Syracuse reflect not only what many refer to as a spatial mismatch between suburban jobs and the inner city’s poor (Kain 1968), but what a number of scholars have gone on to label a modal mismatch, in which the scheduling of mass transit and the schedules of low wage workers are misaligned (Blumenberg and Manville 2004; Grengs 2010). In response to both welfare reform and the limits of public transit: the Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs emerged as efforts by social service agencies in Syracuse to get welfare recipients to work by offering individualized transportation solutions.

Rides for Work

Since 2001, Syracuse’s Rides for Work program has used the federal Job Access Reverse Commute Grant (JARC) and matching money from New York State’s Community Solutions for Transportation grant (CST) to offer transportation services to welfare recipients going to and from work. The Rides for Work program offers free curb-to-curb transportation to eligible clients by subcontracting out rides to local taxi companies. While bus routes may offer access to many employment sites, many buses stop running after 8 pm on weekdays and even earlier on weekends. It is in this situation that programs such as Rides for Work make a difference. The program director noted in an interview that Rides for Work is particularly beneficial for home health aides who must commute at odd hours to private residences scattered across the city (Rides for Work 2007). Rides for Work, at its most basic, can be understood as an adjunct to the fixed route bus system. It offers more flexible transportation to workers with non-traditional schedules. Those eligible for the Rides for Work program are adults who are currently receiving or have recently received TANF benefits, adults whose household income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, single adults without children whose household income is at or below 150% of the federal poverty line, or households without access to a car (Rides for Work 2007). Potential clients are referred to Rides for Work from a number of human service agencies in the area. The goal of Rides for Work is quite simple. The program offers free curb-to-curb transportation to eligible clients who need to get to jobs not serviced by the bus system. They offer this service 24 hours a day, seven days a week by brokering trips to one of a number of private taxi or livery companies under contract with the Centro.

While the goals of Rides for Work are quite simple, the implementation of Syracuse’s Rides for Work program has faced a series of obstacles. Particularly troublesome is the task of contracting out taxis. While the majority of Rides for Work clients are women with children, due to issues of liability that come with contracting out private taxi companies, children cannot be brought along on Rides for Work trips. For many mothers, using the Rides for Work program thus entails first dropping children off at day care by foot and then waiting for a Rides for Work cab (Rides For Work 2007). As a number of scholars have pointed out, if ignoring the childcare needs of low-income working parents make
programs like Rides for Work workable, they also make them ineffective and utterly blind to the needs of women to access the city as mothers as well as worker out (Henle and Kinsella, 1996; Presser and Cox 1997; Blumenberg and Manville 2004).

**WHEELS FOR WORK**

Wheels for Work began in 1999. Like the Rides for Work program, the goal of Wheels for Work is to help welfare recipients move into the labor market and off assistance. At the present, Wheels for Work is coordinated through Syracuse’s JOBSplus! Office -- a partnership between Onondaga Community College and the Onondaga County Department of Social Services -- and provides an interest-free car loan to eligible applicants who face substantial transportation barriers. Designed for parents for whom transportation is an issue, Wheels for Work is based on the premise that having one’s own vehicle can better allow individuals to keep employment, seek out better employment opportunities, or increase work hours. Wheels for Work, unlike Rides for Work, does not receive JARC funding. Rather, it is funded through an assortment of state grants aimed at social service agencies.

In comparison to Rides for Work, the eligibility requirements facing potential applicants to the Wheels for Work program are far more stringent. Eligibility for the Wheels for Work program encompasses a number of factors. Participants must be current residents of Onondaga County. Participants must either be an active recipient of family assistance, a former recipient whose case has closed within the last 90 days, an individual employed by a health care provider and who makes under 200% of the federal poverty level, or an individual who currently receives food stamps and does not own a car. In addition to meeting at least one of the aforementioned requirements, applicants must have children, must work an average of 30 hours a week, must be insurable, and must have a New York State driver’s license. Following acceptance into the program, participants are expected to either close their family assistance case or increase the hours they work. The review of potential participants is quite stringent, and a seven-member selection committee reviews all applicants. The selection committee reviews a participant’s motor vehicle and employment history, reviews recommendations submitted by job coaches and employers, and also checks if applicants have outstanding debts to the Department of Social Services. Applicants must also meet for an hour-long interview with the director of Wheels for Work. This interview is written up and reviewed by the selection committee. Only after the selection committee is confident in an applicant’s ability to make car payments, increase work hours, or potentially leave temporary assistance is the applicant approved for a low-interest car loan (Wheels for Work 2007). The director of the Wheels for Work noted to me that, despite receiving 50 applications each month, Wheels for Work has only purchased 288 cars since its inception in 1999. The director attributes this to the fact that many applicants maintain debts to the Department of Social Services and thus do not qualify for the program. If applicants owe money, they are deemed ineligible. Wheels for Work, in the director’s own words, can be understood as a “reward for working more than six months” exhibiting “good behavior” and keeping up with bills (Wheels for Work 2007).

**ACCESS ON NEOLIBERAL TERMS**

Public transit’s inability to address the challenges facing welfare recipients are well documented. As a result scholars have thus focused on different ways of providing recipients greater mobility. A number of studies have shown that demand-response services or programs such as Wheels to Work that provide welfare recipients with private automobiles, are the most successful in meeting the needs of the urban poor (Cervero et al. 2002; Rogalsky 2010; Blumenberg and Manville 2004; Grengs 2010). While the Rides
for Work and Wheels for Work programs, in this light, may appear reasonable responses to the mobility needs of recipients in Syracuse, they are programs that mark a sharp departure from traditional public transportation in several important ways. Unlike traditional public transit, the Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs make transportation service and mobility contingent solely on the urban poor’s relationship to the workplace. The Rides for Work program, which provides trips to welfare recipients by subcontracting livery companies, restricts trips to those to and from work. Trips to buy groceries, attend classes or pick up children from daycare are not supported. The Wheels for Work program makes cars loans contingent on “good behavior” at work. Since applicants to the Wheels for Work program must get recommendations from an employer or a job coach, “good behavior” translates to accepting whatever job is available, accepting work conditions however exploitative, striving to work longer hours, and working to leave public assistance. To the degree that programs like Rides for Work and Wheels for Work act as adjuncts to public transportation in Syracuse, they are programs whose goals are far narrower: to get poor people to poor jobs located in out-of-the-way places.

Unlike public transportation, whose goals are quite broad, these programs are more akin to what Bourdieu (1998) deemed neoliberal “techniques of rational domination that impose over-involvement in work.” Such programs mirror what Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002) characterize as the goals of “rollout” neoliberalism:

[The] normalization of contingent work, and its enforcement through welfare retrenchment, workfare programming, and active employment policies represent a comprehensive reconstitution of the boundary institutions of the labor market. Following the blue collar shake-out of the 1980s and the white-collar downsizing of the 1990s, the attention of policy makers has focused with increasing insistency on the challenges of reproducing regimes of precarious work and mobilizing the poor for low wage employment. Market discipline, it seems, calls for new modes of social surveillance, and a range of micro-regulatory interventions to ensure persistent “job readiness” (Peck and Tickell 2002, 391).

The Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs are aimed at exactly this: normalizing contingent work, mobilizing the poor for low-wage employment and ensuring job readiness. In the context of welfare reform, the Rides for Work and Wheels Work programs reflect a very narrow understanding of urban transportation and urban citizenship. While such programs provide welfare recipients greater mobility, they do so under decidedly neoliberal terms, where the city is reduced to a workplace and where the urban poor are recognized only in their capacity as low-wage workers. If such programs allow recipients to assert what some might call their “right to work,” they ignore a whole bundle of other rights associated with urban living.

TRANSIT ACTIVISM IN SYRACUSE

As laudable as they appear, implicit in the Rides for Work and Wheels for Work programs are rather narrow conceptions of urban life and urban public transportation. To reiterate, they are programs that provide mobility on exclusively neoliberal terms. Far from Lefebvre’s notion of the city as oeuvre, implicit in both programs is a conception of the city merely as a site of exchange, in this case labor power for a wage. To argue for a broader approach to urban transit, one that takes seriously Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city, is not an easy position to take. Admittedly, such a position runs the risk of sounding utterly disconnected from the realities and fiscal constraints of providing public transportation in world where resources are scarce. Urban public transit cannot, as is clear to all, be everything, to everyone, all
the time. The history of struggle over transit policy in Syracuse, however, shows that despite such constraints, groups have often pushed for transit policies that provide access on new terms that give credence to a broader spectrum of rights and that foreground the use value of urban space. The following section will examine activism around transit in Syracuse by focusing on the work of disabled advocacy groups, Disability in Action and ARISE. This section will conclude by looking at the campaign for public transit waged by the Association of Churches Transforming Syracuse (ACTS).

In the mid 1980s, the topic of wheelchair lifts on public buses in Syracuse was one of heated debate. On one hand, advocacy groups for Syracuse’s disabled like Disabled in Action (DIA) and ARISE argued for the inclusion of wheelchair lifts on all of Centro’s public buses. On the other hand, Centro officials, wary of the costs, argued that expanding Centro’s “door to door” paratransit service, Call-a-Bus would be sufficient to meet the mobility needs of wheelchair riders (Kelly 1984; Andrews 1987). In Syracuse, as in many cities prior to the Americans with Disability Act, the transportation options for the disabled were primarily restricted to paratransit services. These services, more often than not, required that clients call ahead of time, get a doctor’s note, and justify their trips with transit supervisors. As editors Mary Johnson and Barrett Shaw (2001) document in their book To Ride the Public Buses, national organizations like the Americans with Disabilities for Accessible Public Transportation (ADAPT) saw such services as insufficient and exclusionary. In proscribing what places the disabled could go, when they could go and how long they could stay, paratransit services were a far cry from traditional public transportation (Johnson and Shaw 2001, 15). In critiquing paratransit services, organizations like ADAPT, ARISE, and DIA argued that disabled riders should not have to ask for permission or justify their trips. Wheelchair lifts, in short, promised to give disabled people the same rights as those afforded to “regular” bus riders. The debate over wheelchair lifts was not merely over increasing the mobility of the disabled, but altering the terms of that mobility (Johnson and Shaw 2001, viii).

Prior to 1987, when Centro’s board of directors finally voted to install wheelchair lifts on a number of its regular bus routes, debates had long raged over the relative benefits of wheelchair lifts versus Centro’s Call-a-Bus service. In the midst of these debates, Carol Tucker of ARISE wrote an op-ed piece entitled “The Right to Get from Here to There,” summarizing the problems with Call-a-Bus:

Call-a-Bus requires that riders be certified medically eligible, register in advance and give advance notice of trips. Employed people with regular schedules must still call each day enduring long telephone delays to arrange the following day’s ride. Furthermore Call-a-Bus operates fewer hours than does public transportation, and only serves the suburbs from one to three days a week. . . . Call-a-Bus also perpetuates the stigma of disability by keeping people with mobility impairments separate from the rest of the public. It is harder to go out with a date if he or she must travel separately. It is harder to accept your right to mobility if you must tell where and why you are traveling and restrict it to important events or even convenient time frames. In order to receive symbolic “superior” door-to-door service, people with disabilities are forced to give up genuine mobility—the freedom to go where and when they please (Tucker 1987).

In her critique of Call-a-Bus, and her advocacy of wheelchair lifts on public buses, Tucker not only appealed to the disabled’s right to mobility but their right to greater spontaneity, to anonymity, to ride collectively as opposed to individually, to be visible members of their communities, to travel on the weekends and their right to ride with the
able-bodied. Call-a-Bus service rendered all such rights moot. While Call-a-Bus services provided the disabled with greater mobility it did so on terms that violated a set of rights deemed important by the disabled. Arguably the same logic applies to the right to the city. That is to say, urban transportation policies, whether they encompass paratransit service, or wheelchair lifts, or whether they include programs like Rides for Work or Wheels for Work, shape the terms under which transportation disadvantaged populations can — and cannot — assert their right to the city. This point is made evident in the case of ACTS.

**ACTS AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY**

In the wake of federal retrenchment from Syracuse’s public transit system, the Alliance of Churches Transforming Syracuse (ACTS) has advocated for improved public transit in the city. Founded in 2000, ACTS describes itself as an interfaith, interracial, urban-suburban coalition of faith communities that organizes with the expressed mission of addressing the social, economic, educational and political concerns of the Syracuse community (ACTS 2008). Comprising two synagogues, a mosque, and churches of every denomination, ACTS currently has 21 dues-paying member congregations. Over the course of eight years, ACTS has focused on issues of economic development, workforce development, neighborhood development, transportation, criminal justice, healthcare and immigration. ACTS has specifically addressed issues of public transportation in Syracuse on several occasions. One particular event, however, stands out: the Transit Sabbath.

The general idea of the Transit Sabbath was to encourage member congregations within ACTS to ride the bus or carpool to church on Sunday, February 1, 2004. Using mass transit, members from suburban churches would join their downtown counterparts for worship and vice versa. Organized by Pastor Craig Schaub of the Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, the goals of the Transit Sabbath were to both personalize issues of local public transportation for ACTS members and catalyze greater activism around issues of public transportation both locally and federally. For many who participated in the Transit Sabbath, the challenges of bus travel were put in plain view. As Sunday bus service is sparse, getting to member congregation’s worship service via public transportation involved long waits, finding poorly marked stops, and waking up extra early. For Gregg Wilson and Chuck Trexler of the Christ Community United Methodist Church in Van Buren, a Syracuse suburb, the Transit Sabbath entailed first driving to Drumlins Conference Center before 8 a.m., taking the only available 20-minute Centro bus downtown, only to arrive 90 minutes before the 10 a.m. service at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ (Gadoua 2004). The Transit Sabbath put into plain view the inability of mass transit in Syracuse to connect suburban congregations with urban congregations in an efficient manner. The Transit Sabbath made clear to members of ACTS that public transportation in Syracuse remained a barrier, if only a partial one, to what Harvey might deem a collective right— in this case— to worship, to commune with others and to foster a politics that crossed religious, racial and spatial boundaries. While the Transit Sabbath sought to bring issues of public transportation to the attention of public officials, the Transit Sabbath also made clear that ACT’s own ability to organize across congregations could not have occurred if members were restricted solely to mass transit (ACTS 2008).

As struggles over urban transit in Syracuse show, public transportation policies, can impact what types of collective actions are possible. The lack of public transportation service in Syracuse on Sundays and the absence of wheelchair lifts on public busses, not only matter for individuals trying to access jobs, places of worship, or reach doctor’s appointments, they matter for those who wish to assert their right to the city, and who wish to collectively have a hand in shaping urban life or in laying claim to urban space.
If we understand Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city as a claim right over the production and use of urban space, public transportation policy matters. For groups like the handicapped, church goers or welfare recipients the ability to have a hand in the “process of urbanization” is predicated on accessing the city in ways that support collective organization. To the degree that the handicapped must rely on paratransit services that dictate what trips are worthwhile, and to the degree that welfare recipients must rely on programs like Rides for Work and Wheels for Work, programs that tie mobility to the dictates of the labor market and job coaches, and to the degree that organizations like ACTS must rely on a public transportation system organized around weekday travel, the right to city is a right that, for many, remains inaccessible.

Harvey has argued that the right to the city is not merely a “right of access to what already exists” but a right to create a “qualitatively different kind of urban society” (Harvey 2003). While this is correct, the work of ACTS and DIA also suggest that the very ability to remake a “qualitatively different urban society” not only hinges upon a right of access but the very terms of that access. Where access is defined purely along neoliberal terms or along terms which make collective organizing impossible, struggles to assert one’s right to the city must also be struggles over the terms of access and against transit policies which narrow the conditions of political possibility.

These case studies, of course, raise a number of questions for the practical-minded. How should programs like Rides for Work or Wheels for Work better reflect broader democratic ideals? In what ways should transit planners take seriously Lefebvre’s conception of the city as an oeuvre? If programs that tie transportation access to job readiness are unsatisfactory, what types of policy solutions are preferable? In sum, what sorts of transit policies should those sympathetic to the idea of a right to the city stand behind?

In Syracuse, expanding the transportation opportunities for the transportation disadvantaged and broadening the terms under which they access the city would arguably require more federal support for transit. Efforts could be made to push the federal government to allow local transit agencies to once again use federal funds for operating expenses. After years of decline, such federal operating aid was ultimately phased out in 1996. Efforts could also be made to reform the Federal Transportation Administration’s overall funding formula, which is slanted toward highway funding over transit capital funding at a ratio of 80/20. These proposals, which have been at the top of the agenda for organizations like the Transit Equity Network (TEN 2012) or Transit Riders for Public Transit (TRPT 2012) might go a long way toward expanding service for the transportation disadvantaged and allowing transit systems to do more.

In terms of programs like Wheels for Work and Rides to Work, one rather simple reform might aim at shifting eligibility requirements away from a “work first” model toward a human capital approach which would focus more on skill and capacity building and less on pushing welfare recipients into poor jobs with little room for upward mobility. This, of course, would require a more widespread transformation in welfare policy. As most utopian ideals, the right to the city loses much of its luster when translated into prescriptive policy solutions. The implicit calls for an urban revolution that we find in many debates on the right to the city become rather hollow in policy debates. Calls for more federal funding for transit or calls to tweak the incentives in programs like Wheels for Work seem rather quaint when placed against calls for an urban revolt.

Similarly, policy solutions that promise to lower the average transportation costs of the poor by deregulating taxi licensing or loosening restrictions on jitneys or private dial-a-ride services (Cervero 1985), are policies that would challenge advocates of the right to the city on quite fundamental
grounds, given that such policies are often viewed as anti-labor. Against the rather utopic pronouncements of Harvey and others, many of the transportation policy reforms that advocates of the right to the city might latch onto either seem quaint, reformist or they come at the expense of other rights deemed important, such as the rights of labor.

Rather than an inspiring call for transit policy reform, at best the language of the right to the city might serve as call for a reinvigorated research agenda. For scholars who have enthusiastically taken up Lefebvre’s notion of a right to the city this paper suggests that debates over urban transportation policy matter. For more traditional scholars of urban transportation, this paper has argued that literature on the right to the city offers a compelling notion of urban life that can only add to discussions of accessibility and the transportation disadvantaged. By fostering some degree of cross-pollination between transportation geographers and scholars interested in the right to the city, one can imagine a research agenda that takes seriously the relationship between urban transportation policies and the rights people have to access public space, to organize collectively or to access the city on more expansive terms than those defined by work or medical need. Such an agenda would not only look closely at the legal and legislative debates that shape urban transportation policies it would look at how the transportation disadvantaged themselves understand their rights and when they are violated. Apart from incorporating more ethnographic methods into geographic research on urban transportation or the right to the city -- which are sorely lacking -- such an agenda might also take a page from the work of Torsten Hägerstrand (1970) whose work combined qualitative and quantitative methods to understand questions of individual mobility and what constraints to mobility might mean for how individuals engage political and socially with the world around them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to argue that urban transportation policies shape the terms under which the handicapped and the poor in Syracuse can assert their right to the city. There arises in this paper, however, a tension between viewing public transportation policy in relation to the immediate needs of the city’s marginalized and viewing public transportation as necessarily connected to a broader and more radical set of rights. On the one hand, paratransit services like Call-a-Bus or programs like Rides for Work and Wheels for Work remain important initiatives for those who cannot access jobs or doctor’s appointments. On the other hand, such programs are far too narrow in how they conceive of urban life and they provide mobility on either exclusively neoliberal terms or terms, according to ARISE and DIA, which exclude the disabled from the public. To bring questions of the right to the city to bear upon urban transit programs such as these, of course, raises its own problems. To argue for an approach to urban transportation that takes seriously Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city may appear to some as either starry-eyed or misguided. Public transportation, of course, cannot be equally accessible to all people all the time. In cities with limited resources, improving transit services will come with trade-offs and transit policy makers, many might argue, should not be burdened with securing the broad and quite utopic set of rights encompassed in the idea of the right to the city (these were, in fact, the same arguments made against putting wheel chairlifts on buses). However idealistic the idea of the right to the city appears, it serves to reframe debates over urban transportation in important ways. In taking seriously the idea of the right to the city, so too do we come to take seriously and debate those instances when urban transportation policies ostensibly violate people’s right to organize collectively, to participate in urban life, to occupy public space and to produce a more just city. We ignore such rights, and the role of transit in securing them, at our own peril.
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ENDNOTES:

1. Part of my interest in programs like Rides for Work and Wheels for Work arises not from their intrinsic value as programs, nor the fact that similar initiatives exist in other cities-- rather my interest in them arises for what I believe they say about the state of public transportation in cities like Syracuse and the implications such programs have on how we understand accessibility.

2. This is largely a question of degrees. The effects of urban transportation polices are not limited to the transit disadvantaged. When we debate transportation policy we are also, in effect, debating issues ranging from traffic congestion to air pollution which are issues that touch the lives of almost all urban residents. Given this, when we are debating urban transportation polices, it is the transit dependent and the transportation disadvantaged-- who by definition have little recourse but to use transit-- that arguably have the greatest stake in such debates which for them are not abstract debates about climate change but tangible debates about accessing jobs and food.

3. Based on the definition provided by the Government Accounting Office report on transportation disadvantaged populations (GAO 2003) the term “transportation disadvantaged” refers broadly to groups who because of age, income or disability must rely on public transit or other subsidized transportation programs given their inability to acquire or operate a private automobile.

4. Measures of accessibility are not without their critics. In his work on disability, Brendan Gleeson has eschewed more quantitative measures of accessibility for definition that highlight accessibility as a site of struggle, a point of contestation and fundamentally tied to what Feldman, Hodge or Harvey might argue is the socio-political context of cities (2001, 252).

5. David Harvey’s invocation of “our heart’s desires” is admittedly vague and thus opens to all manner of interpretations. As in much of his work, Harvey is more articulate when describing what he is against than what he is for. Like Lefebvre, Harvey draws on the right to the city to talk about urban policies which he views are antidemocratic, exclusive and that serve the interests of a moneyed minority at the expense of society’s most marginalized. A generous reading of Harvey’s rather vague notion of “our hearts desires” should be framed in such a context--that is to give voice to those formally or informally excluded from the democratic process.

6. The list of industries that have left Syracuse is notable, these have been: Allied Chemical in 1986, General Electric’s Inland Fisher Guide in 1993, The Carrier Corporation in 2003, and New Process Gear in 2009 (The Post-Standard 2009).

7. Where the central goal of social service agencies before 1996 had been to ensure basic income support for children, following welfare reform that goal was shifted toward ensuring the job readiness of their parents.

8. The number of welfare recipients without cars in Syracuse matched the national figures from 1998. In 1998 it was reported that 95% of welfare recipients in the nation did not have access to a car (U.S. House of Representatives 1998).

9. In 1995 to 1996, Centro was hit with both a cut in federal aid to operating costs and a drop in local tax revenue. Between 1995 and 1996, Congress cut federal transit aid by 50% (Rivera 1996). In response, Centro increased bus fare
by 25 cents marking the first fare hike since 1989. Centro was not alone. In 1995 40% of transit systems in the United States raised fares and cut service. Welfare legislation was pushed through congress at the exact moment when Centro, along with many other transit agencies, faced a budgetary crisis (Rivera 1996). While 1995-1996 were particularly difficult years for Centro, problems remain. Facing a 4.8 million dollar deficit in March of 2011, Centro embarked on its second fare hike in three years raising the fare from $1.25 on local trips to $2.00. In addition, Saturday scheduled routes were shifted to mirror the more limited Sunday service route schedules (Moriarty 2011).

10. Many of these jobs are what Jamie Peck (2001) labels flexible or contingent jobs. Such jobs refer to short-term or temporary contracts in employment, low levels of training, freelance work, temporary and seasonal work, a lack of employer commitment to job security, low pay, low benefits, irregular hours and high turnover rates (Haskell et al. 1997; Michie and Sheehan 2003; Schwab 1995; Peck 2001; Hannagan 1998; Fine 1998).

11. In Syracuse, many welfare recipients have been directed to the home health aides industry, an industry where base wages are low, workforce stability fragile, and the transportation demands high. In 2006 the base wage for home health aides in Syracuse was between $8 and $9.84 (Mulder 2004; Brieaddy 2006). Home health aide jobs are a good example of jobs that often require that workers travel at odd times and into areas poorly served by public transportation.

12. The mismatch between public transportation and the flexible work schedules of welfare recipients was not exclusive to Syracuse. A 1998 study of public transportation in Boston revealed a similar disjuncture (Lacombe 1998). The Transportation Equity Act’s Job Access Reverse Commute Grant represented the federal response to this mismatch (TEA 1998).

13. As a program funded by a federal grant, the Rides for Work program is unable to contract out services to unionized taxi companies. As the program is supported by a federal grant, wages could not be guaranteed to continue indefinitely. As a federally funded program, Rides for Work can only contract to taxi companies that hire drivers who have been drug tested. These requirements placed limits on the pool of livery and taxi companies available for Rides for Work to contract with.

14. Contingent work, in this instance, refers to jobs with short-term or temporary contracts, low levels of training and characterized by freelance, temporary and seasonal work as well as low pay, low benefits, irregular hours and high turnover rates.

15. The idea of the right to work is most commonly understood as a right against collective bargaining and unionism. It is the individual liberty right of a worker against the collective rights of unions to dictate work conditions. Right to work states, are thus those states in the US where unions are weak and where the individual liberty to work are strong. Nicholas Blomely notes the role of the rights to work discourse in the 1984 coal miners’ strike in Nottinghamshire, England (Blomely 1994). In this essay the idea of the right to work, is also understood as an individual right, although not one that stands directly counter to unionism. The right to work in this instance is understood merely as a right that welfare recipients be able to access jobs.

16. Disabled in Action of greater Syracuse was founded in 1975 to advocate for the rights of the disabled. ARISE was founded in 1979 and characterizes itself
as part of the independent living movement. It runs one of New York states eight original independent living centers (ARISE 2010).

17. Here again we must reference Gleeson’s argument on access. Accessibility, for Gleeson, is never a fixed quantity, a la Kwan or Hanson (2008), but a site of struggle and debate. Beyond questions of convenience or utility, for activists like Carol Tucker at stake in such debates over access were the rights of marginalized groups to organize collectively.

REFERENCES


Syracuse (/ˈsɪrəs/ is a city in and the county seat of Onondaga County, New York, United States. It is the fifth-most populous city in the state of New York following New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, and Yonkers. At the 2010 census, the city population was 145,252, and its metropolitan area had a population of 662,577. It is the economic and educational hub of Central New York, a region with over one million inhabitants. Syracuse is also well-provided with convention sites, with Key Words: public transportation, right to the city, neoliberalism, urban geography, welfare reform. INTRODUCTION. In recent years, geographers and other social scientists have shown an increasing interest in Henri Lefebvre's (1996[1968]) idea of "the right to the city." In parsing the relationship between urban transportation and the right to the city, this paper will look specifically at public transit in Syracuse NY. In many ways, public transit in Syracuse has faced many of the same challenges that have afflicted other mid-sized formerly industrial cities- from the operational challenges associated with urban sprawl to the financial burdens associated with capital flight and uncertain revenue streams.