

## **Toronto *Alles Uber*: Being Progressive in the Age of Progressive Conservative Urbanism**

Roger Keil<sup>1</sup>

“I’ve said to the cab industry, ‘You should get yourselves modernized.’” – John Tory in Peat 2015

“The guiding tenet in inner-core regime analysis (its “iron law”) is that for any governing arrangement to sustain itself, resources must be commensurate with the agenda being pursued.”

– Clarence N. Stone 2015

### **Introduction: Tory Rides the Subway**

A sweaty Toronto Mayor John Tory emerged from a Kipling subway station in the west end of the Ontario city in the morning of September 7, 2016 to declare that the ride that he had taken along the entire Line 2 subway was “uncomfortably hot”. He had experienced, first hand, what thousands of commuters had to endure through the scorching summer of 2016: The Toronto Transit Commission was failing to maintain a state of good repair of the air conditioning units of some of its subway cars while the city was involved in extensive plans, many of them on the mayor’s behalf and insistence, to expand the sorely underperforming rapid rail and bus system in the metropolitan area. Tory’s mayoral campaign and reign had previously been focused less on fixing existing problems and had talked about a wholesale revamping of

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the transportation system, especially through the implementation of an ill-conceived SmartTrack transit plan (a scheme that would have seen a combination of existing track with newly built rail aimed at building a new east-west connection through the city at allegedly lower cost and in faster time; while the scheme found early backers among the transportation engineering crowd, and played a big role in getting Tory elected, it was later considered too costly and complex to be put into practice; CBC 2016; Tory 2014). This was a remarkable admission by a man who had so far banked on “disruption” and innovation where there is really only one way forward. Instead, he conceded that he was not able to fix even the most mundane of technical problems (Spurr 2016). In this paper, I will examine the emerging mayoral regime of John Tory in light of two connected critical lenses: Tory’s infatuation with technological and economic disruption and the consequences of such a politics for progressives in Toronto.

For now, Toronto is stuck in the middle between a short term recovery from an aberrant mayoral regime representing the margins (of various kinds) and the reconstitution of institutional elite power after 2014; and it is stuck in the middle between its ward parochialism and an expanding sense of regionalism. The new mayoral regime signals modernization through technological shifts and market mechanisms. This new mode of operation both reestablishes centralized elite power and normalizes roll-with-it neoliberalization in the city. It also meshes with what is commonly assumed to be “progressive urbanism”. In this situation, progressive politics in Toronto – usually needs to reassemble itself along different lines than in the past, when it could align itself along social justice, environmentalism and diversity. My intervention here asks what those new markers of progressivism might be, what stands in their way, and how they can lead to an alternative to the conservative hegemony and ultimately more systemic change in the city.

The election victory of John Tory in November 2014 in the race for the mayor’s office signaled the end of a four-year circus around the

mayorality of Rob Ford. The late maverick councilor, turned populist mayor, had shaken up elite and common perceptions of what urban politics is about: embracing underdog positions dressed in a language of suburban exclusion and anti-elitism, the Etobicoke millionaire ran the city on a platform of austerity, savings and anti-government rhetoric. At the same time, the Ford mayorality is identified with a single-minded plan to expand the city's subway system into Scarborough (over the recommendation of most transit experts and in contradiction of most budgetary projections). Ford's personal issues around drug use, misogyny and racism and potential criminal activities added colour to his policies but they are not what concerns me here. We can look at the Ford years as an aberration or as a fulfillment of trends, as a protest vote of the unheard or as the expression of a solid bloc of voters on the political right that are emboldened to throw their weight around when needed. After four years of never ending chaos, John Tory appealed to Toronto's voters as a voice of reason. The fast spoken, articulate, groomed, expensively dressed and urbane Tory appeared as the exact opposite of his incoherent, bumbling, sloppy and track-suited suburban predecessor. Both political conservatives, both wealthy, those two men were nonetheless light-years apart.

The two other significant candidates in the 2014 election, the NDP heavyweight Olivia Chow and the former mayor's brother Doug Ford after Rob had to undergo treatment for cancer were unable to influence the outcome of the vote in any decisive manner. But the older Ford brother still pulled 34 percent of the popular vote city-wide. The candidate of the Left (unopposed on her side of the political spectrum) only drew 27 percent. As a basis for any consideration of an organized progressive political pathway for Toronto, these numbers are important as they reveal the willingness of a broad majority of Torontonians to throw their support behind a spectrum of extreme to moderate political programs fashioned by outspoken right-wingers. Any progressive position in Toronto proves to be minoritarian at least at the ballot box (a pattern that was also borne out in more recent provincial and federal

elections during which New Democratic Party candidates were almost entirely wiped from the political landscape in Toronto and its suburbs; a large majority of the electorate threw its support behind the Ontario and Federal Liberals, and selectively even the Conservatives who made inroads for the first time in decades into the core of Toronto).

If Ford was perhaps an anomaly in the history of Toronto politics, it remains open whether John Tory's mayoralty will be able to shift things significantly or whether he will be incapacitated by the contradictions he inherits. The latter possibility may have more to do with his own baggage than with those contradictions. There is nothing in Tory's background that suggests he would aggressively pursue an agenda of social and spatial justice that could heal the divisions that have ravaged the city. His more recent blunders in the Black Lives Matter file and his decision to push City Council to vote for the drastically unjust one-stop subway solution have confirmed that suspicion. But he also is up against structural limitations. He is wedged between a 35 percent hard right opposition that largely coincides with the geographic confines of the Etobicoke and Scarborough "Ford Nations" and the 25 percent progressives downtown and elsewhere in the city that voted for a candidate with a decidedly different agenda than the newly elected mayor. It is inconceivable that he will reach the first group who see him as a guy born with a silver spoon in his mouth, an elite representative who talks too fast and is unaware of the problems of the small suburban homeowner and renter.

The Toronto "progressives," by which I mean in the context of this paper a broad spectrum the traditional inner city social democratic left, the liberals and "Red" (social democratic) Tories in the tradition of 1970s urban reform, the middle class environmentalists and most labour groups,<sup>2</sup> are more likely to give the Tory agenda a try, especially as

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<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of this "progressive" or "reform" tradition in Toronto politics see Kipfer and Keil 2002: 238-240. When using progressive in the context of this paper, I refer specifically and predominantly to these political constellations, not to an aspirational, radical position outside the mainstream political spectrum, although the

supporting him aligns itself with the urbanist dreams of density and creativity espoused by a downtown millennial population raised on recipes popularized by iconic Toronto urbanist Jane Jacobs and her epigones and carried forward through discourses of urban creativity and maker economies.<sup>3</sup> But given the left-liberal leanings of these communities, they will likely tire quickly of the more or less vacuous repetitions of Toronto as 'one city' and corporatist conjurations of class unity and unity in diversity. Tory can count on the full support from his corporate friends who were unhappy that the conservative torch had lately been carried by someone like Rob Ford who was hard to control and representative of marginal economic sector largely unconnected to the creative globalized money economy they envision to make its home in Toronto.

Apart from a Chicago stint, Ford's only business trip was to Austin, Texas, to seek advice on (and ultimately copy) strategies for making Toronto a location for live (rock) music. That is likely going to change under John Tory who also traveled to Austin in early 2015 to promote all manner of music related technology and start-ups (Rider 2015a). But the suave business man he is, he also already hobnobbed with his London counterpart (during the reign of Boris Johnson) and financial executives in that global city to drum up business for his city's financial technologies industries (Galang 2015) (as his neighbours in Markham and Mississauga are quite used to do in more far flung locations in China and India) (Belina and Lehrer 2016). It is not apparent yet what new business regime will form to place its demands on the Tory mayoralty, but it will clearly go beyond the small and marginal, often suburban petty bourgeoisie that had Ford's ear. But this article will concern itself more

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progressive reform tradition in Toronto often entailed radical elements that pushed class, race and gender issues to the front of the debate.

<sup>3</sup> An example of mild to enthusiastic support from this group of voters would be the positive reaction most progressive urbanists displayed when Tory unveiled his plans to begin collecting road tolls on major highways, a measure uniformly considered progressive among urbanists and environmentalists (Keenan 2016).

with the condition for progressive politics than the ambitions of the city's and region's elites. This is where we will now turn.

### **Progressive Politics in the Uber Age**

"But if such technologies, such as computer cabling and communication networks, provide a new right to consume information, they fail to grant a right to produce the latter. At most, this happens only through the contemptible charade of communication that is labeled 'interactivity'. The consumer of information does not produce any information, and the citizen is separated from the producer. Yet again, the forms of communication have been changed in the urban milieu, but not its contents" – Henri Lefebvre 2014: 205

"I am ready to lead" – John Tory in Keenan 2016

"[T]he city is under new management" (Hui 2015) is one of the statements we have gotten used to under new Mayor John Tory, who was elected in 2014 in Toronto. As generic as such a statement sounds, it has been quite foundational for the new regime since its inception, actually already since its election campaign. Municipal affairs in Tory's Toronto – for which the mayor says he is "the chief salesperson" – have decidedly shifted since he swept up the shambles left by the disastrous Ford intermezzo. This shift, which follows a similar radical landslide in voting patterns, as I will explain shortly, also altered significantly the landscape of progressive politics in Toronto. In so far as this altered stage is representative (or even productive) of larger tendencies, the Tory regime signals the arrival of a souped-up urban neo-liberalism, a true example of the kind of roll-with-it neoliberalization which has been the hallmark of our times that are characterized by perpetual crisis and open-ended constant *bricolage* we have come to call progress (Keil 2009). In this

context, the agendas of urban progressivism have been both redefined and reduced, often to the point of making progressive politics itself difficult to maintain as a separate distinctive sphere of the polity. While there are several layers and terrains on which the altered stage of politics is performed, I will focus here on a particular intersection of the political and the technological that I find especially defining for the Tory mayoralty. Hence the title of this contribution: Toronto “*Alles Uber*”.

This is a reference, in the first instance to a signature conflict that has been festering since Tory campaigned in the summer of 2014: the question of whether and under what conditions Uber, the corporate ride-sharing service – let’s call it that for now – should be allowed to operate. Since its existence in the city, Uber operated in a legal grey zone in which the company (and its drivers) set their own rules of operation while, as one analyst noted “Mayor John Tory has consistently and blatantly winked at Uber’s open law-breaking” (Valverde 2016). This all changed in May of 2016 when City Council voted to implement rules for the operation of Uber vehicles.<sup>4</sup> Toronto is of course not alone in having to make up its mind about the sharing economy and mediated services but it now has a chief executive who has made the question of technologies a major plank of his still evolving platform (he has made it known that he is considering a two term mayoralty already). *Alles Uber* includes a reference to not just making Uber part of the mobility solutions for a congested city.

The adverb “*alles*” entails the notion that Uber might stand for more than just mobility but rather extend to becoming a principle of organizing modern urban life itself. While this is not the place for a detailed discussion of the sharing economy, it must be pointed out that it has been argued that Uber should not even be counted as part of that economy (Valverde 2016). Mariana Valverde (2016) explains: “Carpooling and car sharing are in the sharing economy and so are the local websites that facilitate the buying and selling of second-hand goods.

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<sup>4</sup> This included among other things fleet insurance, a 30 cent per ride fee the drivers have to pay to the city (Powell 2016; Valverde 2016).

But Uber is not an arrangement among citizens, and it is not a company that facilitates such arrangements. Uber is an extremely profitable and aggressive American company with global reach that deliberately opens illegal operations – taking advantage of commuter frustration on the customer side and of the precarious economic situation of many groups of male workers on the driver side – and then hires swarms of professional lobbyists to persuade or pressure local politicians to legalize it after the fact on favourable terms” (see also Slee 2016).

Most importantly, some observers have speculated whether “the privatization of city governance” is “Uber’s ultimate goal” (Sadowski and Gregory 2015). If that is the case, the installation of Uber and its ostentatious support by the new mayor can be interpreted as a moment in the establishment of a new modality of governance, a step up in the register of roll-with-it neoliberalization in Toronto (Keil 2009). This new modality, in turn, marks the conditions under which progressive politics in Toronto will be shaped. Progressive politics in Toronto as elsewhere runs up against the opportunity structures offered by the urban regime. Building on previous work with Julie-Anne Boudreau and Douglas Young (Boudreau et al., 2009), let me quickly remind ourselves of the regimes that preceded the current one in the past few decades. Progressive politics in Toronto needs to define itself in relation to historical precedents and future possibilities but also in relation to its own past and reputation as a traditionally progressive place.

### **Five Political Periods in Toronto, 1972-2016<sup>5</sup>**

*The reformist period* (1972-1995), from the first election of reformists at City Hall in the former City of Toronto, to the election of Mike Harris’ Tories in the province of Ontario in 1995. During this period, despite the continued significance of the regional two-tier Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, the central city was dominant in city-regional politics. The main line of conflict was between developers and local residents (who were represented at City Hall by reformists).

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<sup>5</sup> Based among other sources on Boudreau et al 2009.

*The anti-statist neoliberal period* (1995-2003), from the election of Mike Harris to the defeat of the Tories in 2003. During the long 1990s, Toronto experienced the suburbanization of city-regional politics with the dominance of pro-growth, neoliberal, and suburban interests. The main line of conflict was between economic growth (not only land development, but economic growth understood more broadly) and the quality of life.

*The neoreformist period* (2003- 2010), starting with the election of Mayor David Miller and Paul Martin's New Deal for Cities. This period is characterized less by a suburbanization of city-regional politics, and more by the creation of a city-regional consensus (between globally and locally-oriented capital, labour, and politicians) on the necessity to focus on the quality of life in Toronto as a competitive asset for city-regional economic development. At the same time the contradictions of the neoliberal regime in Toronto deepened, especially after the so-called Great Recession in 2008 (Boudreau et al. 2010; Fanelli 2016).

*Populist intermezzo* (2010-2014). The preceding three periods in the timeline of Toronto regime change end in 2010 with a bang or a whimper depending on your perspective when Rob Ford is elected mayor. The Ford years concluded 15 years of major territorial rearrangement, local state restructuring, and popular realignment. In many ways the events between 2010 and 2014 ran counter to the time-space dialectics of the prior two decades. This stripped down political narrative belies the fact, of course, of deeper processes of restructuring at work during which Toronto went through a shift towards a regime of roll-with-it neoliberalization, combining the formation of a continentally articulated global city-economy featuring a core creative economy surrounded by an "arrival city" periphery (Boudreau, Keil and Young 2009; Saunders 2010).

To some degree, of course, Ford's election, which led to a whimsical constellation, not quite a regime, an unstable conjuncture of (more or less conservative) councillors circling around an increasingly shifty mayoral core, was just a moment in a series of cyclical political

conjunctures and realignments that produce regular backlash – in this case from a perceived tax and spend, labour-friendly leftwing regime to a fiscally conservative, common sense, common people administration. Ford's constructed opposition to the "gravy train" of municipal politics under David Miller that benefitted the downtown elites with their cycling habit and streetcar infatuation. Ford's time in office has plausibly been explained through a critical reading of rightwing populism as Kipfer and Saberi (2014: 128) have done in a recent intervention. They argue that during that period Toronto was "under the spell of a populist theatre" in which "the people' often appear as a political football, not a formed subject-in-struggle or a coherent object of rule". Those populist constellations are fickle, not stable regimes. Kipfer and Saberi (2014: 134) continue: "Where populists govern, directly or indirectly, it does not necessarily function as glue to solidify political regimes". Rob Ford and his stand-in during the mayoral election, his brother Doug, brought a "deeply racialized form of authoritarian populism" to Toronto City Hall".

Ford, then, may just have been a bridge, a cleansing, a front for a more permanent shift that we see emerge now. Viewed in this light, the rather absurd time warp the city's regime has been in since the Fords got elected may come under a different spotlight:

- 1) We can see the Ford years as a period of hypermodernization of the socio-economic base and total retreat into raw and rabid political superstructures. Ford tried and succeeded a souped-up austerity regime based on union-bashing and service cuts;
- 2) Ford's antics and reactionary politics did nothing to slow down the frantic development pace in the city, especially in its downtown core;
- 3) But it also didn't do anything to produce much needed urbanity in the so-called inner suburbs: The city's school board and housing authority stumbled from crisis to crisis, the Tower Renewal project was thrown into almost-obscure; the priority neighbourhoods were largely left to their own devices; dialogue with educational institutions (schools, universities) was non-

existent, etc. (the latter is particularly noteworthy in light of the intended expansion of such institutions in the sub/urban region (Addie, Keil and Olds 2015).

- 4) At the same time, and paradoxically, the progressive urbanist projects of the city came to a complete halt (with the exception of those projects that were initiated by the newly hired Chief Planner of Toronto, Jennifer Keesmaat). Bike lanes were ripped out and painted over in an imaginary “war on the car”, ambitious plans to build LRTs across the city’s expanse were haphazardly cancelled without replacement; no ideological or material support was given to the many smaller scale regime-building efforts between the newly important “ed & med” sectors in the city and the municipality. Ford was oblivious to the challenge and, apart from individual activities, the various schools efforts to remake their neighbourhoods – such as Ryerson University’s continued forays into real estate politics – very little of note happened during the Ford regime.<sup>6</sup>

*Elitist resurgence and post-political modernization* (2014-). In assessing the possible outcomes of a Tory regime, we might, revert to Karl Marx’s 18<sup>th</sup> *Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*. John Tory, the upper class corporate leader and political operative might have this verdict hanging over his head: “Bonaparte would like to appear as the patriarchal benefactor of all classes; but he can give to none without taking from the others.” Tory will try this patriarchal approach to politics but will run into problems as the dissent grows stronger. He will be prepared to counter this dissent on the left and the right with a post-political stance that will disempower critical challenges from the Left and populist sniping from the Right all at once (Swyngedouw 2010). There will be, as

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<sup>6</sup> This analysis builds on an insightful piece by Clarence Stone (2015) who notes that large scale coalitions of the Post WW2 kind cannot be expected today but classical city-business power blocs (with the powerless on the sidelines) are replaced by mini-regimes based largely on the emerging ed&med sector – of course we need to pay particular attention here to the magnetic effect of the creative class which is increasingly coming into its own as a “class for itself” in our cities.

he is wont to say, “no right and no left, just forward” (Powell 2014). Of course, Tory himself owes his political success to a smooth political move to the centre in a major provincial political realignment which was anything but post-political. The former head of Ontario’s progressive conservative party is, by all intents and purposes, a tory in a Liberal suit. This realignment may, in itself prove unstable, as the Liberal government in the province is shaky and under attack from both the political left and right. At a by-election for a seat in the provincial legislature in September 2016, the provincial conservatives won their first victory in Toronto in a generation; at the same time, the provincial New Democrats under Andrea Horwath (who had all but abandoned the issues that matter to urban voters in the 2014 contest) have shown signs of life. At present, though, a political axis of Premier Kathleen Wynne and Mayor John Tory represents a centrist political fortress outside of which very little political space exists as long as they both remain in power.

### **Progressive Politics *Quo Vadis?***

Now where does urban progressivism stand in this context? In the historical antecedents of today’s progressivism, we can count waves of revolutionary or reform politics without which we would not be able to use the term progressive politics the way we do today.<sup>7</sup> Toronto politics has been identified with a version of progressivism that made it the envy of many cities on the continent if not in the world. The “city that works” was the moniker that referred to the integration of growth pressures into a state spatial strategy of a two tier government that

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<sup>7</sup> The use of the term “progressive” does not refer to the significant tradition of the Progressive movement in the United States from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century that was mostly a managerial reform movement introducing market rationality to the governance of cities which were considered mired in corruption and class politics. Instead, we can count traditions from politics on the political left among guideposts here: E.g. working class politics, municipal socialism (Frankfurt, Vienna, Manchester); Progressive politics in North America (Burlington, Santa Monica); African American autonomy movements (often paired with the politics of movements and protest); Brazilian movement towards participatory budgeting.

distributed the benefits of urban expansion across the metropolitan area. During the heydays of the 1950s and 1960s but even into the 1970s, housing and transportation infrastructure as well as ancillary services were deliberately provided to the outskirts as well as key redevelopment areas of the inner city. Parallel to this metropolitan state spatial strategy, Toronto experienced two decades of sustained reform politics under mayors Crombie and Sewell that undergirded the core city's reputation as a forerunner and pacesetter of urban reform in education, multiculturalism, urban planning, etc. (see Kipfer and Keil 2002 for a history of this tradition). This coalition made way to a more managerial regime during the 1980s and 1990s but it retained a certain significance in civil society institutions that persisted as progressive beacons even during the emergence of decidedly more neoliberal conditions.

The Toronto political system is remarkably open to a brand of progressive urbanist politics that resonates with a particular majority of business, middle class and inner city interests. This majority has sometimes been in charge of matters at City Hall (or in the past in Metro Hall, but rarely in the suburbs). This brand of politics is currently dominant in Toronto and Ontario. John Tory, a politician trained in the backrooms of the regime of former mayor Mel Lastman<sup>8</sup> and in corporate boardrooms and law offices, represented Civic Action before he ultimately won the mayoral election. This hard-to-define organization, founded by the late David Pecaut as the Toronto Summit Alliance acted as an unelected shadow government under Mayor David

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<sup>8</sup> Lastman, a flamboyant former owner of a major appliances and furniture retailer, was a longtime mayor of the suburban municipality of North York before he was elected the first mayor of the amalgamated city of Toronto in 1998. Lastman's regime was characterized by clientilism and patronage politics directed at suburban homeowners. He also managed to build a civic and residential centre and a peripheral subway line in North York that became the trademarks of the modernist suburb north of Toronto. His time in office as mayor of the new Toronto was characterized by a continuation of clientilism but also by some delegation of key areas (environment, welfare) to progressive members of city council. His tenure ultimately was marred by a series of spectacular gaffes and errors in judgment.

Miller and stayed mostly on the outside of Rob Ford's ill-fated right-populist regime. Now, the kind of business-based neoliberalization pushed by Civic Action is in full flight in the city and beyond. But in the long perspective it also needs to be taken into account that erstwhile radical anti-amalgamation activist Kathleen Wynne is now the Premier of the Province of Ontario (Boudreau, Keil and Young 2009; Boudreau and Keil 2010).

A more left-wing version of this centrist coalition was behind the two times electoral success of New Democrat David Miller, mayor from 2003 to 2010, (who also had strong union support and won in the suburbs). More recently, the Miller coalition, which was elevated to more than municipal significance during the McGuinty-Martin years at Queens Park and Ottawa, and importantly under Jack Layton's presidency of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and leadership of the federal New Democratic Party, has been more difficult to reproduce. Toronto voters rejected a rather non-urban platform of the Ontario NDP in 2014 – Olivia Chow only won a quarter of the votes in the 2010 mayoral election – but most devastatingly, for the party-political Left of Toronto, the Federal election of 2015 signaled a dramatic shift away from NDP MPs who, without an exception, had been instrumental in forging progressive political alliances in what their White Paper on urban issues called an “urban nation”. The serious and substantive move(back) by voters to the Liberal Party turfed, among others, NDP Urban Affairs Critic Matthew Kellway and author of the party's urban White Paper, who had systematically used his eastern Toronto base to forge a progressive urban coalition much in the same way Layton had used his position at the head of the FCM to do the same in the early 2000s.

A decade after the inception of Miller's mayoralty and the heyday of a federal-provincial-municipal “new deal for cities”, the very notion of ‘progressive’ has blemishes from skirmishes over the right to inhabit the neoliberal city and from fraying edges of the left-liberal project, especially in terms of its questionable politics of policing, labour relations and

poverty reduction through place-based-strategies (Fanelli 2014). “Progressive” under the current regime is now defined as:

- Geographically (as inhabiting downtown)
- Historically (by the post-1968 political culture)
- Generationally (by the baby boomers and their children)
- Culturally (by official doctrines of ethnic harmony)
- Economically (by the creative class)
- And most importantly in urbanist terms (a class of professional planners who have decided which urban future will be best for us). About this brand of urbanism Lefebvre wrote disparagingly: “what we today term ‘urbanism’ (*l’urbanisme*), which amounts to extremely rigid guidelines for architectural design and extremely vague information for the authorities and bureaucrats. Despite a few meritorious efforts, urbanism has not attained the status of a theory (*pensée*) of the city. What is worse, it has gradually shrunk to become a kind of gospel for technocrats” (2014: 204).<sup>9</sup>

In Ontario, of course, the curse of the progressive includes the province’s political legacy of progressive conservatism, a brand of right of centre politics to which the current mayor has mostly subscribed, although he has recently begun to surpass the compassionate groundswell of the “Red” Tories, the historical flag bearers of a more welfare state oriented brand of conservatism, for a more aggressively business-style – disruptive – approach.

In a world thus encumbered with ideologies of progress, there is little left for the Left to carve out a distinct space along a register of progressivism itself. A broad neo-liberal coalition of the willing has stepped in to fill this void, engineering the shift through material and discursive technologies of power. But it is certainly the key to understanding the forces making up John Tory’s liberal-conservative elite coalition which replicates much of the conservative hegemony of Art Eggleton’s and Mel Lastman’s political brands that resists radical

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<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre’s characterization also casts a light on the progressive or reformist positions I have evoked throughout this paper.

political change and consolidates power at the geographical centre and in the elite networks whose power lines come together there.

### **The Politics of *Alles Uber***

The politics of “*Alles Uber*” suggests we can all share everything as long as there is an app for it. Urban progressives are not equipped to find a way to debunk the promise of opportunity. It is hard to argue against the promise of disruption as revolution. The claims are keen and overwhelming in their audacity. Lyft co-founder John Zimmer promised recently: “Ridesharing is just the first phase of the movement to end car ownership and reclaim our cities” (Zimmer 2016). As one conservative observer notes: “[W]hat if Uber, and more broadly the sharing economy it has become synonymous with, were treated as an opportunity instead of a problem?” (Csanady 2015). Urban progressives have few answers to this challenge. Stuck, for the most part, in a mindset of defensive struggles against roll-back-neoliberalism, the classical urban political communities on the Left are stuck in a time-warp of broken promises and reminiscences of the welfare state. Newer and younger progressives tend to sympathize with tactical urbanist ideas that come in more or less radical shapes (Brenner 2015), and they take UberX home from the yoga studio or the community meeting at the organic café. The traditional principles of pro-union, egalitarian, collectivist imaginaries are often compromised by newer forms of emerging economic models which, as the political Right has begun to understand, capture “small community tool-sharing programs and even small, locally grown start-ups” (Csanady 2015).

I don’t want to belabor or overplay this point but while much of urban progressive thought and practice is mired in defensive struggles and nostalgia for a more Keynesian and social democratic capitalism, the alternatives to current neoliberalism are presented as a more shared form of opportunity which will ostensibly exist in a parallel universe to the precariat that is swelling the ranks of the urban workforce in Toronto and elsewhere. As one political observer close to the NDP has noted, the

“embittered young voters” of today will not be buying into the vision of a socialist or social democratic position that operates in the political world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century filled with “treasured fairy-tales” (Sears 2016). In contrast to the era of municipal socialism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American separationist protest in the 1960s or middle class radicalism in Santa Monica or Burlington in the 1980s, today’s progressive politics has not charted another urban world. True, there have been many instances of right to the city movements here in Toronto and elsewhere but with few exceptions, these initiatives have not gelled into a coherent alternative vision for a post-capitalist city.

This void left by progressives today, is amply filled by a technology-based, free-market imaginary ripe with real and imagined opportunity. A recent article summarizes this shift:

“Civic engagement today is different than in the past. Many contemporary activists eschew sit-ins, picket lines, and paper petitions, stalwart organizing techniques of 1960s civil rights activists. Instead, today’s civic innovators push us to “like” neighborhood associations on Facebook, tweet at elected officials during city council meetings, send feedback to government agencies via new mobile apps, and donate funds through online crowdsourcing platforms. Unlike their counter-culture predecessors, they don’t shun private-sector ideas but instead borrow concepts and language from the business world. Civic innovators self-identify as entrepreneurial, innovative, and efficient” (Savell et al. 2015).

The lack of a horizon worth fighting for in a city that changes too fast to fathom is a critical obstacle to progressive politics in Toronto and other cities. The role of technology, while never determining by itself, is critical to the realization of this apolitical or post-political constellation. As the political theorist David Graeber has noted, the children of the revolution of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were brought up with the idea that technology was on their side. But “the conspicuous absence, in 2015, of flying cars”

(2015: 106) that were promised in the utopias of the 1960s is stunning. What we get in the era of “*Alles Uber*” is a mere authoritarian charade, says Graeber: “Where once the sheer physical power of technologies themselves gave us a sense of history sweeping forward, we are now reduced to a play of screens and images” (Graeber 2015: 111). This is the world that Uber and its prospective regulators inhabit. Mobility is almost a side product of a shift where progressive perspectives are pushed into a legitimacy crisis where the state is guided into the future by techno-fixes and business opportunity. The real state of affairs in a land of *Alles Uber* is more far-reaching than changing the rules of the taxi economy: “the company wants to be involved in city governance – fashioning the new administrative capacities of urban environments. Rather than follow government rules, like any other utility, Uber wants a visible hand in creating urban policy, determining how cities develop and grow, eventually making the city itself a platform for the proliferation of “smart”, data-based systems” (Sadowski and Gregory 2015). The progressives have found few answers to this challenge so far.

John Tory’s Toronto is a playground for new ideas that anchor these seductive visions in a local state administrative logic that is designed to lock “disruptive” business-led progress in for the long haul. Says Tory himself: “if you said to me, ‘What’s in the best interests of the city?’ It’s to have as much valuable, disruptive technology coming in here as possible because that’s what pushes you to be on the leading edge” (Nowak 2015b). Tory’s love affair with disruption extends back to his days at the telecommunications giant Rogers where he oversaw the technological shifts of the early 2000s. The term has since become buzzword and magic formula that is rarely criticized.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The work of Bernard Stiegler is instructive in this context. See, for example, his interview with *La Liberation* newspaper, July 1 2016; available at [http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/07/01/bernard-stiegler-l-acceleration-de-l-innovation-court-circuite-tout-ce-qui-contribue-a-l-elaboration\\_1463430](http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/07/01/bernard-stiegler-l-acceleration-de-l-innovation-court-circuite-tout-ce-qui-contribue-a-l-elaboration_1463430); last accessed on September 18, 2016.

The problem extends beyond Toronto. It is central to the “Urban Age”. Instead of finding the new politics of the urban revolution for an urban society of mediation, centrality and difference as Lefebvre might have hoped (Schmid 2014), we are left with a techno-utopian blueprint that is drawn by post-political subjects that operate in a strategic state space in which capitalism remains the ultimate innovation machine. Adam Rogers writes for *Wired* magazine:

“A century, plus or minus, after human beings started putting their minds toward designing cities as a whole, things are getting good. High tech materials, sensor networks, new science, and better data are all letting architects, designers, and planners work smarter and more precisely. Cities are getting more environmentally sound, more fun, and more beautiful. And just in time, because today more human beings live in cities than not.”

In an entirely un-ironic appeal to planning by a thousand decisions (perhaps the flipside to urban austerity’s death by a thousand cuts, <http://cura.our.dmu.ac.uk/>), Rogers concludes:

“The cities of tomorrow might still self-assemble haltingly, but done right, the process won’t be accidental. A city shouldn’t just happen anymore. Every block, every building, every brick represents innumerable decisions. Decide well, and cities are magic” (Rogers 2015). Clearly, this technocratic-decisionist democracy disciplined by the market is a world in which social and environmental progressives are a mere afterthought. Who needs radical politics if you have a business model? Let’s then give the last word to Mayor Tory, who recently professed: “So why should the job of people in public life or for that matter in business be to try and stop change? Everybody has a self interest, some people have an interest in stopping the advance of these disruptive technologies, but probably you’re going to be unsuccessful. Stopping it only buys you time, it doesn’t save whatever it is that you’re doing that’s out of date or on an old business model” (Nowak 2015b).

### **Disrupting Disruption**

Ultimately, the class formations and modernizations of the past that had created the playing field for an urban progressivism centred on the local state and especially the long march through the unionized bureaucratic institution of municipal planning and service delivery have dissipated to make way for a new game of innovation and shifting political allegiances. The Left and its progressivism are, of course, not buried. They are the *undead* of the political terrain. Like zombies, they seek relevance in a theatre where their alternative visions are performed like shadows on the walls of a cave that is furnished by techno progressivism and market opportunities. As Zoe Williams has argued in a short if polemic commentary, the Left ceded the territory of innovation unnecessarily to the Right. Progress and innovation were, in fact, once associated with collective ideas, not market individualism: “There is no discovery in human history that wasn’t created by pooled resources, demonstrably the pooling of public money, but beneath that, the pooling of expertise. Never mind, could socialism produce the iPad? Socialist principles already did” (Williams 2015). Appeal to the “real” issues of social justice (did anyone say polarization and segregation?) and environmental crisis (did anyone say climate change?) is a losing proposition in a political space where smart design and apps solve problems.

John Tory wants to be Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses at once. He said so much himself in a recent interview: He wants to be “sympathetic” to people but also aims to bring in “disruptive technologies” in order to position the city better in international competition (Nowak 2015b). This does not leave much space for a splintered progressive community to find discursive room to maneuver; and it crowds the terrain for the kinds of strategic alignments the Left traditionally had to make to succeed, usually middle class/working class coalitions that combine the social and the cultural critique of capitalism in some form.

But not all is lost. There are several areas in which progressive politics can make a comeback in this age of Tor(y)onto.

- *Spatial justice, transit justice and equity* are taking on a new significance as the system of transit is about to see a major upgrade across the region and as new technologies such as the Presto Card are introduced. Activists and researchers are concerned about equity consequences of such changes (see these reports:  
[http://suburbs.apps01.yorku.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Switching-Tracks\\_9-March-2015.pdf](http://suburbs.apps01.yorku.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Switching-Tracks_9-March-2015.pdf);  
[http://www.metrolinx.com/en/regionalplanning/rtp/research/Next\\_Stop\\_Equity\\_Routes\\_to\\_fairer\\_transit\\_access\\_in\\_the\\_GTHA.pdf](http://www.metrolinx.com/en/regionalplanning/rtp/research/Next_Stop_Equity_Routes_to_fairer_transit_access_in_the_GTHA.pdf)).
- *Housing justice* (tower renewal; rental rebirth; reform of Toronto Community Housing) (see a recent special edition of *Alternatives Journal* on the topic of housing affordability, for example, edited by Sean Hertel and Markus Moos).
- *Environment* (While the time honoured politics of the Toronto Environmental Alliance continues to lead the way, a new sub/urban political ecology has emerged around the Greater Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt; Keil and Maconald 2015).
- *Social justice* (Tied to the work on housing and transportation, traditional social justice work continues, especially as the polarization of neighbourhood incomes and community resources continues to widen).
- *Labour and community*. New alliances have been forming between labour and urban groups as was the case in the fight against the Smart Centre development in the Film District (Lehrer and Wieditz 2009), and is currently the case in the struggle to regulate homeshare businesses such as Air BnB (a group called Fair BnB ([fairbnb.ca](http://fairbnb.ca))).
- Lastly, the *fight against police brutality* and carding has perhaps become the signature struggle of the times; Black Lives Matter

have become synonymous with a radical challenge to the status quo in race relations and complex, intersectional injustices.

All of these have traditionally been domains of inner city politics but they are now also inspired by suburban sensibilities as cities are increasingly governed through regions. Whether this continues to mean making city politics more conservative will remain to be seen (Addie and Keil 2015; Keil et al, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can speculate at this juncture that Toronto is stuck in the middle. This has a spatial meaning as the city is increasingly defined in its relationship towards the suburban ring that surrounds it, where new centralities are emerging; it is institutional as the city continues to struggle in its minor role in the multi-level state architecture of the Canadian state; and it is temporal as the regime seems to have lost its way and we appear to be entering a period of elite reconstruction. The city, and the province that regulates all its constitutional affairs, were a poster child for the most aggressive form of raw neoliberalization during the 1990s, which led to the competitive city with its dimensions of entrepreneurialism, difference and revanchism. After the pendulum swung left towards a third way-type neoliberalization in the first decade of this century, neoliberal governmentalities were both pushed back and came into their own. During what now appears like an intermezzo, the city took another hard right turn under late Mayor Rob Ford, this time not supported by the all important oversight government at the provincial level.

With the election of Conservative John Tory, who was endorsed by the governing Liberal party, sandwiched between a hard right 35 percent opposition and a regrouping 25 percent on the left, we can expect that Toronto will be rolling with neoliberalism in the region (Keil 2009). The new mayor has placed himself on a continuum of a long term trajectory of elite rule in the city. This constellation of power, space and class has lasted for more than a century, and has shown mostly

impenetrable to (right wing) populist or (left wing) popular challenges. The reform period of 1970-1982 was a bit of an exception, although it was also firmly anchored in the white, upper middle class core of the city. Toronto's *haute bourgeoisie*, mostly Anglo and always white, has kept the reins of power firmly in hand. The Miller years created partial openings towards the creative city of millennials and towards a more progressive and diverse polity; the Ford years shut down those possibilities but did redefine what a diverse electorate might mean for Toronto.

The Tory victory is, at first glance, a return to the continuous temporalities of the past: modernization in moderation will be the motto. A sclerotic regime shakes off some of its dust and the dirt it acquired during the tempestuous Ford era. While the Ford years were all about the inequalities of *space* – suburbs versus the city – we will now hear a lot of terminology that uses *temporal* metaphors. Even before he had entered office, the mayor-elect burst on to the morning radio scene with promises of modernization and a verdict against the “old fashioned” ways of the past. The new slogan is modernization through high tech, procedural innovation (against the ‘old ways’ of the unions and for ‘working together’; against the syndicalist cab drivers and for the business model of Uber). He has since come out in favour of other technological innovation although experts bemoaned his steadfast opposition to taking down the East Gardiner which was considered by many to be the real progressive solution by opening up a pathway for urbanist technologies of a new generation. Words like Big Data, hackathons and the like are dropping like honey from the Mayor’s mouth at any occasion (Hardy 2015a). Startups will be welcomed ostensibly (Hardy 2015b).

Toronto is seen part of “Silicon Valley North” and Tory has been seen as a champion of that idea (Freeman 2016; Pagliaro 2016). We shall see more of that discourse of moving forward as long as it is good for business, customers and as long as it uses high tech. The architect of SmartTrack commuter rail has already made the Smart City his slogan of choice and recently told an interviewer he would be “pushing the city to be smarter because if you have a city that looks like it’s in the 1960s, you

won't attract anything new... I want this place to be the most friendly place in North America for startups and I think it can be" (Tory quoted in Hardy 2015b). Tory specifically touts the multifarious characteristics of Toronto as an advantage: " 'We have here something that is quite unique,' Tory said. 'You are going to be in both the financial and the innovation capital of the country' " (Armstrong 2015).

This is ironic, of course, in more than one way: now the blandest, most elite and WASPish business elite representative who stands for the most longstanding privileges in the city's history, is calling upon others to give up their "oldfashioned" ways in favour of some uncharted course of progress into a high tech, proto-capitalist future of individual accomplishment, corporate welfare handouts, post-political community consensus and economic deregulation. The alternatives of collective consumption, welfare state provision in housing and transportation, democratic decision-making and responsible economic development will, for now, be taken out of the timeline of progress and parked in some temporality of yesteryear. It was suggested that Tory may be a "compromise candidate" (Radwanski 2014). This begs the question, what the compromise would consist of? For now, I interpret it as the continuation and another episode in the sclerotic governance of Toronto. Tory is not going to bring in change that matters. His ticket will be modernization, technocracy and deregulation but it will be in the confines of the elite notions of what the city is about. In Toronto the talk is about space, but the material consolidation of its regime is about time. It is the eternal time of elite reconstruction.

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