RE-POLITICIZING DATA

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Limiting access to property data is both an attack on citizens' right to information and an attack on their right to the city as a whole.

The dominant discourse around data today is one that tends strongly towards the post-political. That is, data is seen by everyone from government bureaucrats to Silicon Valley techno-utopians as a primary means by which political contention and disagreement is replaced with a drive towards consensus, and the erasure of claims that do not fit into such a consensus. Influenced by neoclassical economics' preoccupation with the need for perfect information, contemporary understandings of data have led to social problems being recast as information problems. The many ills facing society, and especially cities, are seen to stem from a lack of good data, which has in turn led to irrational, inefficient and suboptimal policies and decisions.

But through the increasing availability of new sources of data – whether taken from social media feeds, smartphone traces, or sensors attached to buildings, roads and water pipes – municipal governments can allegedly overcome these issues, identifying the optimal way of approaching any given problem. As the adage goes, people may be entitled to their own opinions, but they aren't entitled to their own facts.

Of course, the facts embodied in data are anything but universal. The acts of producing, analyzing and interpreting data can give rise to wildly different understandings of the world and any given phenomena within it. Decisions about what data to collect, how to collect it, how to code it, store it, analyze and interpret it, are fundamentally subjective, particular to the given individual or institution involved. Even though people might not be entitled to their own facts, this is no guarantee that the use of data will produce a single, universal answer to any given question or problem.

Nonetheless, any acknowledgment that data isn't always an appropriate solution to any given problem is largely absent from 'smart cities' initiatives being adopted around the world. Instead, urban governance is increasingly oriented towards the philosophy of "what gets measured, gets managed", finding new ways to quantify and data-fy any range of social processes. These methods are deployed by ostensibly non-ideological municipal regimes (e.g., Michael Bloomberg's New York City or Martin O'Malley's Baltimore) that are simply interested in good governance. Their view of data as always apolitical and objective provides cover for what are always intensely political

and normative decisions. From privatization and cost-cutting, to union-busting and the punitive policing of marginalized communities, these data-driven policies tend to be stereotypically neoliberal.

And while these uses of data for nefarious ends help to expose the inherent politicization of such technology, many critics have failed to grasp what the geographer Elvin Wyly calls the historically contingent linkages between methodology, epistemology and politics. That is, even though data of all kinds is being used for politically reactionary means under the guise of objectivity, data itself isn't necessarily tied to these politics. Data is, has been, and can continue to be used for more liberatory purposes.

Data can not only help us to uncover previously unforeseen manifestations of unjust social practices so as to contest them, but can also be used to explicitly push back against problematic representations and understandings of urban problems such as gentrification and neighborhood change. Similarly, public policies can be contested not only through conventional political claims about who wins and who loses, but also based on the very data being used to arrive at such policy recommendations. As Greg Fischer, the mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, once opined, "Great cities embrace the data. They are not defensive about it… they improve". But if governments are to truly 'take data seriously' without getting defensive, they must take all data seriously, even if it advances an oppositional viewpoint, thus providing a point of leverage for those seeking to claim a right to the city.

Yet the ability to use data in order to create alternative representations of the city remains limited. One the one hand, the necessary skills to collect, analyze and interpret data are unevenly distributed. On the other, even for those with the requisite skills, the necessary data often remains inaccessible. Some cities around the United States have adopted open data ordinances and cumulatively opened up thousands of datasets for the purposes of promoting transparency. Yet, in an era of austerity and shrinking budgets, many municipalities are unable to devote the resources to maintaining open data repositories, making this rollout of openness uneven both topically and geographically.

This is especially true of data about one crucial facet of urban life: property. For a variety of reasons, the ability for citizens in American cities to access information about property ownership remains incredibly limited as compared with their access to data on restaurant inspections or any number of other municipal functions. While dashboards, maps and

analog reports provide some access to basic information about property transactions, access to the underlying raw data remains restricted. For instance, a citizen attempting to understand speculative activity on the part of developers in a gentrifying neighborhood might be confronted in many cases not with the names of individuals or business entities with which they're familiar, but a bevy of different pseudonymous limited liability companies (LLCs): a type of incorporated business that allows proprietors to differentiate their personal assets from those of the company. Were a property-owning LLC to be sued by the municipality or by a tenant, the proprietor's personal assets would be unavailable as a potential remedy. In effect, LLCs are used to distribute liability and, at least in practice if not intent, hide the traces of predatory activity from the public. Many properties may be owned by the same individual, but with multiple LLCs each only owning a single property, making it difficult to discern any broader pattern of speculative buying. Even in those instances where someone does happen to do business under their own name, many property assessment offices require a paid account to search records by the name of the owner, rather than by a single address at a time, making it difficult to understand (and quantify) the exact scope of the problem.

In most cases, the underlying data can not only answer pressing questions about who owns property, but also about where this property is owned. This additional data-point can help to upend conventional narratives about the twin processes of neighborhood decline and gentrification being natural processes inherent to the places they take root in, and instead show them to be the result of speculative activity by outsiders – whether from wealthy enclaves elsewhere in a city, or even a different city altogether. Tying many pseudonymous LLCs back to the same owner address is a key way of identifying this kind of secretive and predatory activity. Being able to combine this ownership data and synthesize it with other data can reveal that many vacant and abandoned properties in cities might not only be owned by people who live quite far from the properties that

Absentee & non-local property ownership.
Map shows all properties in Lexington, Kentucky with registered owner addresses outside of the city. Of Lexington's 109,929 properties, 10% are owned outside of the city, representing 18% of the city's total land area.

they've let fall into disrepair, but also that these individuals and companies own dozens of other properties. In other words, this data can point towards the fundamental connection between processes of absenteeism, gentrification and neighborhood decline, as well as the mutual interdependence of rich and poor neighborhoods. Instead of seeing these places as separate and apart from one another, such maps can reveal that property ownership is one of the key means through which distinctions of rich and poor are produced in the first place. Data can help to produce understandings of urban problems that don't further stigmatize already marginalized neighborhoods, but instead situate them and their problems within a broader historical, geographical and political-economic context.

Intentionally or otherwise, limiting access to property (or any other kind of) data prevents any large-scale analysis of these processes by citizens, further disempowering them by curtailing their ability to couch their claims in the necessary language of data. Keeping such data closed isn't simply a problem because public data is paid for by citizens, or because governments should strive to be as transparent as possible. Instead, we should see limiting access to data as representing both an attack on citizens' right to information and an attack on their right to the city as a whole. In order to attain the right to both participation in, and appropriation of, the city, citizens must be free to understand the city and construct their own knowledges and representations of it; this process of knowledge production is fundamental to their ability to in turn produce an alternative, more just and liberatory future for the city itself.