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# Embryonic alternatives amid London's housing crisis

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In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a fire broke out on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower in the north Kensington area of west London. The blaze spread rapidly to the rest of the building, and within minutes the entire 24-storey tower block had been engulfed by a terrifying inferno. To date, 80 deaths have been reported, but the figure is expected to rise significantly; a month after the fire, over 100 people are still missing.

At the time of writing, the precise details of what happened are still unfolding, but what is clear is that the tragedy is profoundly political. Originally built as council housing in 1974, Grenfell Tower had undergone a £10 million refurbishment in 2016. The management of the building, which housed a mixture of council tenants, owner-occupier leaseholders and private renters, had been outsourced to an 'arm's length' Tenant Management Organization (TMO) by the local council, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. For years, residents had raised concerns about fire safety in the building, but no action had been taken by the local authority (Foster 2017). The tower had no sprinklers, an inadequate fire alarm system and, most damningly, appears to have been fitted with highly flammable cladding during its refurbishment. It is thought that this cladding, cheaper than the fire-resistant variant the council opted not to use, is the reason the fire spread so quickly.

Until recently, public debates about London's housing crisis have largely centred on questions of affordability. And while it is true that affordability is a major problem in the city – the average cost of a home in the capital now ranges from between 15 to 23 times the median salary (ONS 2016) – the tragedy at Grenfell makes it clear that exorbitant house prices merely signal a much deeper set of problems. Since the early 1980s, a succession of policies has eroded the availability of public housing, removed rights and protections in the private rented sector, aggressively gentrified inner-city boroughs and privileged the interests of developers and speculators over the needs of working-class residents. In an era of austerity, these trends have been worsened by deep cuts to the budgets of local authorities and a cap on housing benefit, the state subsidy that covers shortfalls in rent for those on low incomes.

Since the cap was introduced in 2013, the number of evictions and homelessness applications in London has risen dramatically. There are currently 54,170 registered homeless households in the city (DCLG 2016), and it is estimated that around 150,000 people have been forced out of inner-city boroughs in the past four years (*The Independent* 2016). In this sense, the horror at Grenfell is not an aberration, but rather the outcome of what David Madden (2017) terms 'the deadly inequalities of safety and security that characterise contemporary urban life'.

In this article, I examine London's housing crisis from the perspective of grassroots activists and precariously housed tenants who mobilize to prevent evictions and establish new

forms of solidarity-based communities. In doing so, I aim to provide an ethnographic glimpse into the ways in which political contention around housing offers an embryonic alternative to both the politics of austerity and the deeper histories of dispossession that underlie the present moment. As a locus point where care, personhood, citizenship and property rights all coalesce, the home occupies a unique political and moral position. By demanding the universal right to decent, secure and affordable housing, the activists I work with struggle simultaneously amid the politics of austerity, debt, class exploitation and social reproduction. I argue that their efforts constitute the fragments of an emergent form of class struggle in which models of collectivized care anchor resistance to contemporary modes of enclosure.

### **Enforced scarcity: The making of a housing crisis**

For a city that has become a global hub for speculative investment in real estate, it is perhaps difficult to imagine the London of 1981, when over 870,000 homes in the capital – or some 34.8 per cent of all properties – were classified as ‘socially rented’. This is compared with around 1.2 million owner-occupied homes and just 378,000 properties in the private rented sector (Watt & Minton 2016: 208-9). A massive programme of state housebuilding following the Second World War had given millions of working-class Britons secure and affordable homes in the form of council housing.

But with the election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1979, the UK’s housing sector began to be dramatically transformed as privatization, deregulation and speculation became central pillars of government policy. Championing the creation of a ‘property-owning democracy’ as part of a drive to promote individualism and win over traditional Labour voters (Murie & Jones 2006), Thatcher’s government instituted the right-to-buy (RTB) policy in 1980, giving council tenants the right to buy their homes at a discounted price while failing to replace these with equivalent properties (Hodkinson et al. 2013). Between 1999 and 2010, London lost around 85,000 council houses to RTB (DCLG 2015).

Many of the units sold under RTB ended up in the hands of buy-to-let (BTL) landlords, and as the availability of council housing steadily diminished, more people found themselves forced into a private rented sector that was itself being rapidly deregulated. Two further housing acts passed in 1988 and 1996 removed a system of rent controls in the private sector and replaced secure tenancies with shorter ones that could be ended at just two months’ notice. These changes shifted power significantly in favour of landlords, so that London’s growing number of private renters – projected to constitute 60 per cent of the city’s overall population by 2025 (Fraser 2016) – now face rents that consume more than 50 per cent of their earnings (Osborne 2015).

Alongside these critical shifts in tenure, gentrification has played a major role in both driving up prices and reducing the supply of low-cost housing across the city. Together with RTB, a cornerstone of Thatcher’s legacy was the curb on local authorities’ ability to borrow money in order to build new homes. Under pressure to meet targets, since the 1990s London’s local authorities have turned to private developers as they undertake the ‘regeneration’ of older council estates: in 2015, for example, just 2,500 of the 171,000 new homes in the UK were built by councils (Evans & Gapper 2017). In many instances, this has involved the wholesale demolition of existing council housing and its replacement with new developments that maximize profits for developers by skewing units towards the high end of the market (Elmer & Denning 2016; Lees 2014).

In one infamous case of this ‘state-led gentrification’ (Watt 2009), 3,000 council homes on the Heygate Estate were demolished by Southwark Council to make way for a new development. Of the 2,535 new properties on the new site, just 79 are classified as social housing (Minton et al. 2016: 265). A report by Lord Adonis (2015), the former Labour peer, advises that there are some 3,500 council estates in the city that could be reclassified as ‘brownfield sites’ and ‘densified’ through redevelopments along these lines.

The net result of these long-term trends in housing policy is that a growing number of Londoners now find themselves either struggling to pay exorbitant rents, unable to find a genuinely affordable home or forced into insecure living conditions with little recourse to justice. As local authorities use gatekeeping practices to manage diminishing stocks of social housing (Wilde 2016), local self-help groups have become vital sources of support for those with housing problems. It is to one of these groups in east London that I now turn.

### **Sunday afternoon**

On a crisp autumnal afternoon, I arrive at a church hall located on a quiet residential street in Walthamstow, east London. I’m here to attend a training day for local people interested in establishing a new Eviction Resistance group in the borough. Eviction Resistance is one branch of the Radical Housing Network (RHN), an umbrella body for the 30 or so housing groups that are now active across London. In the past few years, housing activism has grown significantly in the city as more people turn to campaigning and direct action to confront skyrocketing rental costs, displacement by private developers and the host of daily miseries associated with predatory landlordism.

Some groups in RHN are comprised of council estate tenants fighting regeneration projects that they fear will force them out of their communities. Others, like the Haringey Housing Action Group and Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth (HASL), organize in support of those making homelessness applications to local authorities. There are also private renters’ groups such as Hackney Digs and squatters’ networks like the Squash Campaign. As well as working on their own local actions and campaigns, each of these groups sends delegates to monthly RHN meetings, which are used to share ideas, discuss strategy and plan London-wide actions.

As I enter, a few people are already sitting in a circle of chairs arranged in the centre of the hall. On the chairs are leaflets for various anti-austerity events and housing struggles. In the corner, an area marked ‘crèche’ has been set aside with children’s books, toys and a mat. I’m greeted by the one of the workshop’s conveners, Catherine, who tells me she’s a community organizer in Walthamstow. Catherine explains that her role is very much about facilitating collective action and about empowering people to stand up for themselves. The second convener is Louise, a delegate from RHN, who spends much of her time travelling to different parts of the city to help local boroughs set up their own Eviction Resistance groups.

The seats gradually fill up and there are eventually around 40 people present. Once everyone is ready, Catherine and Louise explain that the aim of the day is to provide the practical skills required to launch an Eviction Resistance group in the area. Catherine recounts some of her own experiences over the past year. She says that her local group are often dealing with ‘life and death situations’. Private renters in particular can be very isolated, she explains, and the increasing numbers of people being evicted from their homes is leading to the break-up of families, a mental health crisis and street homelessness. Generally, the main aim behind preventing evictions is to alleviate the immediate crisis and buy the tenant some time. Since

it often takes landlords several months to obtain a new possession order, the tenant can use this period to seek advice and either reach a compromise with the landlord or find somewhere else to live. 'It gives them some leverage', says Catherine.

Before going into the training itself, the group is shown a documentary about the Spanish housing movement, *Si se puede* (Yes we can). The film charts the experiences of housing activists in Spain, who formed La PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca) in response to the country's mortgage crisis of 2008 and the wave of evictions that followed (Palomera 2014). It shows how La PAH established local groups in the empty buildings left by the crisis, using them as bases from which to organize resistance to evictions and mount legal challenges against banks and mortgage lenders.

A key part of La PAH's organizing strategy is that individuals with housing problems must listen to others before presenting their own case to the group. This is designed to instil an ethic of mutual obligation: in order to receive support from the group, people must also commit to supporting others. Louise explains that although RHN and La PAH do not organize in exactly the same way, this principle of mutual support is also central to what groups in London are trying to establish. *Si se puede*'s fast-paced music and stylish montages make for a rousing spectacle, and several of those assembled are visibly inspired.

After a short break for tea and biscuits, the workshop then turns to the logistics of establishing a new group. Louise explains that Eviction Resistance groups tend to operate as local networks who communicate via text message, social media and email. When someone learns that a possession order has been granted, messages will be sent out asking for support. People gather outside the tenant's front door from early in the morning, using non-violent direct action to prevent the bailiff from entering the property.

County court bailiffs are allowed to use 'reasonable force' to evict people, but tend to be put off if there's a large group blocking the doorway, since the definition of 'reasonable' becomes legally problematic. The police can only intervene if those resisting are inside the boundaries of the house, or if there has been a breach of the peace (i.e. a violent act has been committed). It is only a high court possession order that allows the police to take part in the eviction itself. Louise advises that each action should have an assigned person who knows the case to deal with the bailiffs and the police, and another who deals with the media. She also explains that a major part of eviction resistance is providing emotional support to the tenant.

After a lengthy discussion around the legalities of non-violent resistance, the training turns to a case study. Debbie is a private renter from Walthamstow who was faced with eviction after falling into arrears when she lost her job. 'I always thought of myself as a good person', she tells the group. 'I was someone who always paid my rent, you know? A good tenant. But I suffer with mental health problems and that led to me losing my job during a bad period. Then the arrears built up and I couldn't get on top of it'. Debbie explains that when the possession order came through, she didn't know where to turn. She sought advice from the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), but found that all they could give her was 'very generic' guidance which didn't really help her situation. She then contacted Shelter, who proved more helpful but still couldn't prevent the eviction.

It was only when she met members of RHN that she really felt she received the support she needed. The network mobilized to prevent her eviction in the summer, which gave her the time she needed to find a solution. Debbie explains to the group how this moment of crisis was transformative: she went from 'absolute desperation to a position of strength', and then

became an activist herself. She now extols the virtues of collective action and emphasizes the need for empathy, solidarity and a change in policy. She concludes her talk by urging that we approach housing justice ‘as human beings who have a right to a roof over our heads’.

While Debbie has been speaking, there has been a lot of movement outside the circle. Catherine keeps leaving to answer phone calls and beckons Louise out of the room on several occasions. As Debbie finishes, Catherine stands up and announces that there is a ‘live case’ for the group to deal with. She introduces Disanka, a single mother of two children who is due to be evicted this coming Tuesday. Breaking into tears on several occasions, Disanka explains that she has lived in the same rented property for the last 10 years.

The property is in terrible condition, but the landlord has refused to make anything other than minor repairs, most of which have now fallen back into disrepair. Disanka has spent her own money on repairs because she was concerned for her children’s welfare. She says she deducted these costs from her rental payments, which led to a build-up of arrears. She’s been to the local council to register as homeless (tenants are entitled to do this when they receive a possession order), but so far, has only been offered a single room in a bed and breakfast on the other side of London, which she says is not appropriate for a family of three.

She apologizes for taking up everyone’s time, but is comforted by Louise, who puts an arm round her and says, ‘no no, this is the whole point of this’. Disanka is led outside to discuss the specifics of her case with Catherine and a few others. When they return, Catherine asks for people to sign a sheet with their emails and phone numbers if they can come along to stop the eviction on Tuesday. Contacts are exchanged and the workshop’s organizers are thanked for their time before people head to the pub.

## **Tuesday morning**

It’s 7.30 in the morning and supporters are already gathering outside Disanka’s house. Catherine is there with a number of local supporters, drinking tea, sharing biscuits and singing songs as other housing activists begin to arrive. Since most people are unable to stay for the whole day, various ‘shifts’ have been arranged, while updates are provided to the wider group via email.

As is often the case in these situations, the mood hangs somewhere between cheerful defiance and nervous tension. Catherine explains that Disanka was hospitalized yesterday with extremely high blood pressure – a direct result, she thinks, of the stress the eviction is causing. Around 9.00am, the bailiff arrives and a forthright discussion begins as around 10 people block his passage to the door. Shortly afterwards, two police officers also arrive and ask Catherine to explain the situation. She goes back over Disanka’s story, arguing that the council’s offer is inappropriate and that the family needs more time to find something suitable.

‘They’ve made an offer for one bedroom in a bed and breakfast in Harlesden [northwest London], and the cost is £72 over and above housing benefit. So she would have to find £72 a week, but she’s a student completing a business degree who’s trying to improve her situation. All we want is time. The family want to leave. They want decent housing; they don’t want to live in a slum like this.’

At this moment, the bailiff responds and makes his own case. His intervention attempts to separate Catherine’s argument into two separate spheres: one being the legal and moral duty the council may owe to the tenant, the other being the landlord’s right to repossess the property regardless of the tenant’s needs.

The issue you've got with regards to being rehoused is obviously a council issue. The problem we're up against here is that we're repossessing this for a private landlord. The private landlord actually wants to repossess this to move back in herself. Your issues seem to be with the council rehousing the person that's in there at the moment, which is not under the same jurisdiction as the claim that we're talking about.

Catherine, however, refuses to accept this separation and instead makes the moral case that both the landlord and the council are at fault. 'We think there's a moral issue that also needs to be considered. The landlord at the moment has a roof over her head. She's not looked after the property for 10 years and [Disanka] has raised a family of three here'.

'There's four and a half thousand pounds of rent arrears', replies the bailiff.

'Because she had to address the leaking roof, the leaking toilet, the kitchen and the bathroom sink that are falling away from the wall', says Catherine.

'At the end of the day, the claimant is prepared to move back into the premises on them [*sic*] grounds, so now what we're talking about is that we need to follow the judge's order and repossess the property'.

'We are following what we believe to be natural justice and we are moved by what we believe to be the moral situation here', reaffirms Catherine. She then politely asks the bailiff to leave and returns to her position in front of the door. After a tense stand-off and further discussions, the bailiff eventually leaves, giving this fledgling Eviction Resistance group its first victory. Concerned that he may return later, a small group resolve to stay until the end of the day. I'm relieved to receive an email in the evening confirming that the bailiff didn't reappear. 'We stayed until after 6 as the bailiff was such a prick and we were worried that they would come back', explains one of the cheerful but exhausted activists.

### **Fragile possibilities**

These vignettes provide a brief snapshot of the work that housing activists in London undertake. A striking feature of this activism is the merging between established forms of direct action and civil disobedience – pickets, protests, occupations – and the kind of quasi-legal advocacy that would traditionally be undertaken by lawyers or public sector caseworkers. Austerity policies in the UK have not only cut access to benefits, they have also cut the advice and support services that help those in poverty to navigate an increasingly punitive and restrictive welfare state (Forbess & James 2014). Housing activists in London attempt to fill in these gaps, while at the same time also levelling a broader political challenge to the property relations that privilege a landlord's right to extract surplus value over a tenant's right to have a home.

As the ethnography above indicates, a key element to eviction resistance is the act of taking collective responsibility for an individual regardless of whether that person is deemed legally culpable for her arrears in the eyes of the state. This position advances a moral critique of capitalist social relations that understands debts to landlords as a systemic problem rooted in social inequality rather than an individual failing on the part of the tenant (see Davey, this collection). That these mobilizations are also grounded in principles of collectivized care is not coincidental: since the home is precisely what is threatened by eviction, the values and practices associated with social reproduction become integral to its defence. As they self-organize in places of traditionally feminized labour, housing activists therefore also produce

emergent forms of collectivized citizenship and personhood (Lazar 2013) that challenge the paternalistic imposition of the ‘property-owning democracy’ (see Bear et al. 2015).

London’s nascent housing movement thus highlights the shifting terrain of class struggle in the 21st century, as sites of social reproduction become central to political contention amid myriad ‘spatialized social relationships of inequality, power and extraction’ (Kalb 2015: 14) that intersect in everyday life. In this sense, while recent austerity measures have undoubtedly sharpened existing contradictions, the politics of housing in London can be considered as a fragmentary part of a wider global movement for urban justice (Holston 2008; Palomera 2014; Zhang 2004), in which diverse expressions of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre 1996) anchor a shared struggle against enclosure.

As Susana Narotsky observes, ‘the commons that are being enclosed in this period are the historical gains of working-class struggles’ (2016: 85). To this end, the challenge that faces London’s nascent housing movement is the question of how to move beyond short-term defensive mobilizations and establish institutions that can wage offensive struggles against the latest round of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005). While practices of collectivized care offer a compelling model of organizing and a crucial means of alleviating immediate crises, they also take their toll on individuals. Activists cannot possibly hope to prevent every eviction, and in the meetings of local housing groups, concerns about collective capacity and individual ‘burnout’ are common topics of discussion (James & Killick 2012).

In the hope of carving out a stronger institutional basis to their struggles, some activists have invested their energies in establishing a renters’ union, while others have resolved to work on community land trusts that might siphon off small pockets of land for self-managed social housing. Though such projects remain embryonic for the time being, the horror that unfurled at Grenfell illustrates in the starkest possible terms how high the stakes are. To establish a movement that might eventually force changes to primary legislation, the urgent task is to find ways of scaling up these fragments of resistance so that guaranteeing safe, secure and affordable homes is a genuine political priority once again. •

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