

The right to housing in theory and in practice: going beyond the West

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The struggle for housing beyond the West

During the last three decades processes of urban development have spread speedily across the globe, transforming hundreds of cities into primary sites for the implementation of a neoliberal agenda. As expected, this global phenomenon brings with it a number of negative consequences for the lives of disadvantaged urban residents. Privatization and commercialization of public space and housing stocks, increasing gentrification of neighbourhoods and deregulation of the housing sector are only a few examples of the adverse scenario that people from less well-off backgrounds have to face. These processes constitute capital-driven strategies that have been enforced by displacing, evicting, marginalizing and criminalizing communities who are, at the same time excluded from any participation in the decision-making process of the urban restructuring. These actions, carried out by corporations, investors and developers and closely backed up by entrepreneurial governments (Mayer, 2009) or “centaur-states” (Wacquant, 2012) are embedded in an accelerated process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2008) that has exacerbated inequality and widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The effects of this growing polarization in the distribution of power and wealth can be easily observed in the spatial forms of the cities, in which gated communities, glittering city centre developments and privatized areas under non-stop surveillance coexist in sharp separation with favelas, precarious and informal settlements and impoverished working class neighbourhoods (Harvey, 2012; Lipman, 2011).

If the aforementioned strategies are essential for the neoliberalization of the city, it is important to clarify that this process does not only rely on the implementation of economic and urban policies. Understood as a “network of policies, ideologies, values and rationalities that work together to achieve capital’s hegemonic power” (Miraftab, 2009, p.34), neoliberalism usually combines coercion and state violence with softer tactics aimed at engaging the citizens in its ideological agenda. Therefore, cities become a fertile ground for the emergence of neoliberal subjects who embrace individualistic ethics, define themselves as consumer citizens and firmly rely on their individual responsibility for attaining well-being (Leitner et al., 2007) and meeting their basic social needs (such as education, food, healthcare, housing, transportation, utilities and so forth). However, despite the attempts of hegemonic control coming on both the material and ideological fronts, the strategies of capitalist

accumulation in the cities have been disputed and challenged by communities which no longer accept the commodification of their urban spaces by reclaiming their power over the ways in which the cities are made and remade (Harvey, 2012; Künkel and Mayer, 2012). By embracing slogans such as ‘the right to the city’ (Lefevbre, 1991; Harvey, 2012; Marcuse, 2009) or ‘the struggle for a dignified life’ (Pérez, 2017, Reynoso, 2009), different collectives, social movements and communities, both within Western and non-Western contexts, have rejected the individualistic neoliberal ethos and mobilised for the “exercise of collective power over the process of urbanization” (Harvey, 2012, p.4) in the fields of housing, public spaces, services, transparency, information and access to the city, amongst others.

Although several similarities can be found between the struggles in the global North and global South, it is also essential to acknowledge the diversity of geographical, physical, economic and social realities in the analysis of urban neoliberalism and its contestations. The challenge, then, is to reinterpret critical thinking in light of the specific realities and historical experiences shaping these expressions of resistance (Zibechi, 2016). In line with this purpose, this special section tries to go beyond the understanding of non-Western territories as merely sources of data, reclaiming them as “sites of theorization in their own right” (Parnell and Robinson, 2012, p.596).

Drawing on the need for contextual and situated knowledge in the field of housing, this special section brings together examples from Latin America (Uruguay and Mexico), Middle East (Ankara in Turkey), Southern, Central and Southeast Europe. Altogether, the pieces presented here seek to contribute to the ongoing theoretical and political debates about the struggle for housing in under-researched geographical regions and/or in countries displaced to the periphery of Europe (as the case of Italy, for instance). Six original papers documenting housing struggles in Uruguay, Poland, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia and Hungary are part of this section. These articles are followed by the transcription of an activist panel with four housing organizations from non-Western contexts (Mexico, Turkey, Poland and Hungary), where activists debated the contextual, political and organizational challenges encountered in their collective praxis.

In spite of the rich diversity of cases presented in this section, a similar trend is common to all of them: those who are squatting, resisting evictions and displacement, mobilizing against rent increases and housing shortages, organizing around homelessness or planning and building housing co-operatives; in different ways they are all embodying experiences of exclusion, marginalization and oppression. However, these positions do not stop them from resisting neoliberalism and fighting for a more dignified life in the city. Interestingly, they all seem to agree on the way in which they challenge neoliberalism. Rather than relying and waiting for top-down solutions coming

from governments, political parties or other traditional institutions, they embrace a political approach ‘from below’ (Motta, 2013) that emphasizes the power of the communities to provide solutions to their own problems, either by creating autonomous projects or by mobilizing and pushing the governments to negotiate the housing policies through force. According to Cox and Nilsen (2014), movements from below can be understood as:

...the organization of multiple forms of locally generated skilled activity around a rationality expressed and organized by subaltern social groups, which aims either to challenge the constraints that a dominant structure of needs and capacities impose upon the development of new needs and capacities or to defend aspects of an existing dominant structure which accommodate some of their specific needs and capacities (p.72)

Following Cox and Nilsen’s definition of movements from below, it can be argued that the experiences of housing activism discussed in this section represent clear attempts to challenge the constraints imposed by the hegemonic neoliberal project. By developing their own local rationalities, the communities mobilizing for the right to housing engage with novel repertoires of action in order to fulfil their needs and enhance their capacities. For example, many contributions in this section highlight the importance of democratic organizational structures and political strategies developed by collectives and movements in resistance. Consensus decision-making, direct democracy, self-management, horizontality, grassroots networking, non-violent direct action and the use of assemblies for fostering participation, among others, are some of the key features defining the political practice of squats, social centres, tenants’ and homeless’ associations, cooperatives and urban platforms analysed throughout this section.

Paradoxically, these inspiring experiences coexist with equally subaltern sectors of the population which choose to accept the individual responsibility for housing and to avoid engaging with oppositional politics, possibly because of the internalization of the neoliberal ideology or the disenchantment with the current economic and political system. In the specific context of post-socialist countries, a third element is also explanatory of people’s disengagement with collective struggles: the discredited memory of the former state socialist regimes and their elites, and the attempts to eradicate this political legacy has led to the consolidation of a culture of de-politicization that distrusts collective projects linked to socialist beliefs. Drawing on this tendency, and as some of the cases in this section illustrate, emerging groups are reacting to the past and present functioning of civil societies in their countries by embracing non-conventional and non-institutionalized ways of political organizing (Jacobsson, 2015;

Polanska and Chimiak, 2016). These contextual elements, essential for understanding the expressions of resistance in post-socialist regimes, remind us the importance of engaging with the historical and cultural specificities of each region, so our analyses do not get trapped in categories coined and informed by the West.

In the case of Latin America, for instance, housing struggles from the Southern Cone cannot be analysed without acknowledging the long history of repression and resistance experienced by movements of the urban poor during the dictatorships of the mid-twentieth century. The crucial role and political experience gained by urban movements in their fight for democracy is clearly a legacy that has transcended to the new generations of South American housing activists and urban poor dwellers. A good example is found in Chile, where in practically every emergency camp established by families that lost their houses after the earthquake in 2010, people set up community kitchens. Here, the communities recuperated the tradition of ‘collective cooking’, popular in disadvantaged settlements during the dictatorship period, reclaiming their capacity to deal efficiently with shared problems in a collective way (Simon and Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2017). Another particular feature of housing struggles in Latin America has been the occupation of land and construction of large squatter settlements. In her analysis of the cooperative housing movement in Uruguay, Marta Solanas (in this section) emphasises the occupation of land as a strategy carried out by this movement in the late eighties. Similar is the experience of the *Frente Francisco Villa de Izquierda Independiente*¹ from Mexico City. As an activist from this organisation (also in this section) explains, in the context of a state that has proven incapable of providing housing solutions, this movement created in the eighties has been occupying for decades disused land in order to build autonomous neighbourhoods.

The authors and activists gathered in this special section take on the challenge of developing analytical frameworks more attuned to the specific territories where the housing struggles are taking place. They provide a rich account of the dynamics, political practices and contextual background of local struggles for housing in different “non-Western” territories, and in so doing they offer a significant contribution to the fields of critical urban theory and social movements studies in general, and housing activism in contexts outside of the Anglo-American world, in particular. Furthermore, their inductive and, in many cases, insider approach to inquiry, opens a debate about the importance of changing not only the content but the “terms of the conversation” (Mignolo, 2009, p.4), through the development of more collaborative forms of knowledge production and the commitment to research that is ethically and politically

¹ Best known as *Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente* (former name).

oriented, and useful to current processes of resistance.

The transcription of the panel with housing activists and urban critical scholars, available in this section, is a small attempt to move towards that direction. Here, the organisations do not need ‘experts’ to speak on their behalf. They are able to posit their own cartographies, vocabularies and concepts of the world, articulating their own categories of analysis (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008) and engaging in a politics of dialogue with critical researchers.

Altogether, the pieces presented in this section fill in empirical and theoretical gaps in the field of housing activism. They also show how different cases of housing struggles across the globe concur in their resistance against global dynamics of capital accumulation, in spite of the particular forms taken by global capitalism in their local contexts (Harvey, 2016). Finally, we hope that the debates, political strategies and challenges discussed in this section can offer inspiration to both critical scholars and housing activists and can contribute to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

In this section

For this special section we asked for contributions seeking to shed light on the development of housing activism in under-studied geographical areas. We looked for pieces responding to questions such as:

- How neoliberalization is contested at grassroots levels in the field of housing?
- What are the historical backgrounds of these contestations and how do they emerge?
- What are the main strategies of action and challenges encountered in housing activists’ praxis?
- How do housing activists cooperate and deal with coalition-making?
- Which radical, informal, non-institutionalized and marginalized forms of activism are emerging in the field of housing?
- What are the methodological challenges for the study of housing activism?

Drawing on these themes, we accepted the following pieces that enable us to move the conversation forward:

Our section on housing activism opens with the article of Joanna Kostka and Katarzyna Czarnota, who explore the potential of activist research for bridging

academia and urban activism in Poland. By presenting a co-owned collaborative research design developed in the city of Poznan, the authors criticize the model of knowledge production employed by academics studying urban resistance practices in Poland, arguing instead for the development of “engaged scholarship” able to build on and learn from experiences of resistance and community knowledge.

In the study of the Hungarian grassroots homeless group ‘The City is for All’, Bálint Missetics analyses the social context in which the group operates and the main features of its internal organization, offering some theoretical interpretations of the role of non-homeless members and the group’s internal and external politics. The paper provides an insider, self-reflective, and theoretically inspired view on the group with the aim of contributing to the work of other social scientists interested in the role of the ‘ally’ within homeless activism.

In her contribution to the special issue Ana Vilenica develops a contextual analysis of experiences of housing activism in Serbia, focusing on the challenges, failures and achievements of the movement. Moreover, she discusses the potential of bringing forth a prototype model of affordable housing in the post-transitional and peripheral circumstances of Serbia by developing a hybrid self-organized cooperative model based on experiences from both Eastern and Western Europe.

By looking at the example of cooperative housing in Uruguay, Marta Solanas outlines the historical, political and social background that has shaped the creation and consolidation of FUCVAM (Uruguayan Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives). In her paper, Solanas explores the ways in which processes of self-management, mutual-aid and cooperation between social organizations of different countries can build a counter-hegemonic alternative to defend the right to housing.

In his paper, Klemen Ploštajner explores the housing issue and the neoliberal ideology of homeownership in Slovenia. Who is to be organized? Who is to be challenged or attacked? What kind of new and better institutions do we need? By addressing these three important theoretical and practical questions, the author attempts to unravel the main challenges in the field of housing activism in Slovenia, positing cooperativism as a practical answer to the socialization of the housing issue.

Focusing on the Italian case, Andrea Aureli and Pierpaolo Mudu examine the implications of squatting for housing in current neoliberal trends, arguing that squats in general and residential squats in particular, are good sites for prefiguring new modes of political agency, which not only seek to resist neoliberal governmentality but may also open up the possibility of a polity beyond the state.

Finally, this special section closes with the original transcription of the activist panel held as part of the international conference “Housing Activism: Beyond the West” held at Södertörn University, Sweden, in May 2016.² The transcription includes the presentations of four housing organizations from non-Western contexts: The Committee for the Defence of Tenants’ Rights, Poland; The City is for All, Hungary; The Office of Housing Rights in Dikmen Vadisi, Turkey; and The Popular Organization of Independent Left “Francisco Villa”, Mexico. In this panel, the activists summarise the history, organizational strategies and challenges of their organisations, identifying differences and similarities in their processes of struggle and drawing lessons from their political praxis.

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