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Editorial

Cyprian Piskurek and Mark Schmitt

On June 14, 2017, a fire broke out on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower in West London. The fire quickly spread to the adjacent floors and killed 72 people, the vast majority of whom came from a migrant and/or lower-class background. Quickly after the immediate shock subsided, it became clear that not only had this catastrophe cost too many lives, but it also laid bare the social divide in 21st-century Britain and showed how mismanagement of the built environment threatened people of migrant background and of lower social classes more than others. Sam Wetherell summed up: "Perhaps not since Engels traipsed through the shattered courtyards that cluttered the banks of the Irk in Manchester or since the Glasgow police conducted midnight raids to monitor the overcrowding of tenements have the conditions of British housing been so unequal, with devastating, fatal consequences." (2020, 135) Even if Grenfell is just the most extreme recent example alerting people to this fact, it is no secret that "class is built into our landscape in the form of housing" (Hanley 2007, ix).

During the COVID-19 pandemic this became obvious once more. While early responses often claimed that everyone is the same to the virus, it quickly transpired that when assessing people's risk to catch COVID, to be hospitalised, and to die, social class and ethnic background were decisive factors; this was due to a complex interplay of generally bad health and medical conditions, workspaces without the possibility of physical distancing, but also because of housing conditions. Concerns were soon voiced about high-density estates or tower blocks as drivers of the pandemic; a subtext of such concerns was that the kind of people living in such quarters were too reluctant to observe the new rules. This conviction failed to acknowledge that

the architecture of such quarters with its communal spaces and walkways makes it often impossible to keep the distance in the way private property owners can. The patronising assumptions about the estates' inhabitants during the pandemic echoes Tony Blair's speech about the "forgotten people" at Aylesbury Estate in 1997.

The idea of the built environment as fertile ground for spreading a virus is nothing new. A model of infectiousness, not limited to physical diseases but extended to values, virtues and learned behaviour, has informed the politics of housing for centuries: philanthropic reformers in the 19th century called for improvements in workers' housing because of the spread of diseases, but the reforms in itself also claimed that one's built environment and one's neighbours would infect people with certain forms of behaviour. This idea lay at the bottom of the building of garden cities and suburbs in the early 20th century, as well as Le Corbusier's ideas of the radiant city, but it was also the reason for preventing Commonwealth migrants from moving to council estates in the 1960s, as well as disciplinary sociology which stigmatised housing estates as breeding grounds for crime and drug abuse. The gated community, with more than 1,000 examples popular in the UK as well, is only the most extreme form of upper-class entitlement attempting to shut themselves off from the Others, thus preventing any form of infection with the undesirable.

The Grenfell Tower inferno and the COVID-19 pandemic throw into sharp relief the fact that housing as a spatio-social issue is expressive of the dynamics of social class in Britain. Discussions of British housing, as this editorial as well as many contributions in this issue of *Hard Times* testify to, quickly and almost reflexively turn into discussions of *social* housing and matters of the working class. It is easy to see why when one takes a glance at developments in post-war Britain and throughout the 20th century alone. As part of Labour policies after 1945, "homes fit for heroes" were built in a systematic effort to provide adequate housing for the working class. Such efforts were continued throughout the 1960s and 70s which saw the building of the first tower block council estates – an architecture that was supposed to be a step into the housing and living of the future. This "Concretopia" (John Grindrod), however, fell flat. The ambitiously huge buildings proved hard to maintain and were situated in a poor infrastructure – a spatial recipe for social exclusion. The stigmatisation of council housing remains infectious to this very day, as stigmatisations such as the derogatory term "chav" indicate: claimed by many to be an acronym for "Council-

Housed And Violent" (even though the etymology of the term remains ambivalent and mostly obscure), "chav", as an infectious or "sticky sign" (Sara Ahmed) demonstrates how social housing in Britain is situated at the nexus of symbolic and material exclusion. Simultaneously, the notion of homeownership as a middle-class ideal of social and cultural belonging remains dominant in Britain, amplified by Margaret Thatcher's "Right to Buy" policy of the 1980s. However, not least due to the fallout of the Financial Crisis 2008 and the subsequent austerity politics of the Cameron government since 2010 which have also affected parts of the middle classes, this ideal has for many increasingly become unattainable.

The contributions in this issue address housing in Britain from a variety of angles that reflect these complex issues. In our interview, Lynsey Hanley, author of *Estates: An Intimate History*, talks about her own experience as a child of working-class parents growing up on an estate and about how the situation of housing has changed since the initial publication of her book in 2007. Nadja Rottmann examines the origins of early housing policy and the continued financialisation of housing. Sophia Möllers traces the history of land enclosures as the spatialisation of early British capitalism and how this has affected notions of property and housing in British cultural history. In her article on Newcastle politician T. Dan Smith and the Northern Building Fraud, Victoria Allen explores further issues of social housing and social exclusion. Johannes Schlegel's essay explores notions of housing and dwelling under neoliberalism and the paradigm of self-optimisation, while Kieran Harrington turns his gaze on the Republic of Ireland in a critique of recent Irish social policies that fail those living in abject poverty and sleeping rough in a post-Celtic Tiger nation. Sarah Heinz explores how the recent COVID-related lockdowns affect and amplify issues of home and housing through the lens of recent lockdown fiction. As a whole, the articles in this issue emphasise that the experience of housing and home is most central to our sense of self and our position in society. Looking at the often fragile and ruinous structures of contemporary housing policy reminds us how important an intervention into this symptom of social inequality is.

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"It's Building Up This Massive Inferiority Complex Inside You"
An Interview with Lynsey Hanley

Cyprian Piskurek and Mark Schmitt

Lynsey Hanley was born in Birmingham and lives in Liverpool. She is the author of Estates: An Intimate History (Granta, 2007) and Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide (Penguin, 2016). In her books, she explores the history and cultural meanings of council housing in post-war Britain, blending autobiographical writings about her own experiences with sociological research. Hanley also wrote the Introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of Richard Hoggart's The Uses of Literacy (2009). She is a regular contributor to the Guardian, the Financial Times and the LRB blog, and is a visiting research fellow at Liverpool John Moores University. Hanley was interviewed by Cyprian Piskurek and Mark Schmitt (Dortmund).

What compelled you to write *Estates* in the first place?

Well, I grew up on a very large council estate, nine miles outside Birmingham, called Chelmsley Wood. It was one of the last examples of a sort of mass planned housing estate in Britain, before the post-war housing programme was completed. So much new housing was built in Britain in the 25 years after the war that by the 1970s, there was technically a surplus of housing. The programme, on some sort of metrics, had been incredibly successful, in terms of numbers and, in some cases, the quality, and in terms of the general raising of living standards for people.

But Chelmsley Wood, where I grew up, was very large. It was the size of a town, but it never had the identity of a town. In Britain, there were two New Towns Acts after the war, one in 1946 and one in 1965, that established two waves of new towns that were designed to be entirely self-contained. But a lot of what you might call third-wave new towns weren't

actually designated new towns. They were basically really massive housing projects. And so, I grew up in one of these. And I think I wasn't aware that it was council housing. It was just where you lived. I wasn't aware that there was a dichotomy or that there was a sort of class discrepancy between private housing and council housing. I was just aware that this was where we lived. And I was also aware that the estate had a poor reputation in Birmingham, and among people who lived there, or people who lived just outside it.

And so, I think I was always yearning after something. I was always yearning to come from a place that had more of a strong identity. My grandparents, they married just after the war and lived in lodgings with multiple families, sharing. They raised my mom in one room, and had to share a cooker and a toilet and so on, with other families. And so they went on the waiting list for a council house, and eventually got a flat next to a gas works in inner-city Birmingham, that gave my mom asthma and terrible chest problems. So they went back on the waiting list, got a slightly better flat, slightly further out of town. But it still wasn't the best. My grandma was from the Welsh valleys, and always dreamed of having a house with a garden. It was a lifelong dream. So they spent 25 years on the waiting list and eventually, when Chelmsley Wood was built, they got a house with a garden, in 1970. And because my mom was an only-child, people with no children or only one child were at the bottom of the waiting list, because, obviously, the more children you had, the higher your housing needs, the higher up the list you were. So they were right at the bottom. But there was so much housing built in Chelmsley Wood that they struggled to fill it. There were a lot of empty homes, and so they got one quite easily. But by that point my mom was seventeen. So she was already working, and I was born a few years later. And my mom and dad lived just around the corner.

It's funny, the way a combination of the landscape, the very sort of planned and laid-out nature of the landscape, is coupled with the fact that it made people long for Birmingham, to identify with Birmingham and to have this constant tension between being amazed and pleased and gratified that they had the best housing that they'd ever lived in, but also really wishing to be back in Birmingham, where there was more life going on. The perception was that you knew your neighbours better, that everybody was happier, basically. Whether that is actually the case is another matter, but that became sort of the folklore of the new place, which is that it's better than the old place in some ways, but in some crucial emotive ways it was not the same.

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Would you say that it might have been easier to develop an identity of their own if Birmingham had been further away, that 'real' new towns like Milton Keynes, for example, would be more prone to develop their own identity because they didn't have something like Birmingham in the vicinity?

I don't know, actually. Possibly. It was like Chelmsley Wood was this kind of problem child that nobody wanted, because Birmingham city council went straight to central government and said: "Can we have this big piece of green belt land on the edge of town? It's going to cut up half of the ancient forest of Arden, but can we have it anyway?"

And the housing minister at the time, Richard Crossman, was very gung ho. He said: "Yeah have it, build all the housing you need. Do it." And they built it and then within a few years they were like: "This is very expensive to maintain, we don't know what to do with it."

And then there was sort of a local government reorganisation in the early 70s, and so Chelmsley Wood stopped being part of Birmingham all of a sudden. It became part of Solihull, which is like the Surrey of Birmingham. It's like 'the home counties of Birmingham'. So, it became what is known as "North Solihull", which basically is a way of saying that Solihull is a completely segregated county, in that the southern part is extremely affluent and very snobbish and aspirational and the north part is almost exclusively council houses.

It's visibly very different. It has none of the amenities, it's really cut off, it's hemmed in by the airport and all these

motorways. It's this place that nobody wants to have to deal with, rather than a place in its own right.

You said that when you lived there, you weren't aware of the differences immediately, that there were different spheres, and that this was just the place where you grew up. Later in *Estates*, you describe the stigma that is connected to growing up in a council house. One of the areas where this becomes visible is school education. Can you tell us a bit more about the role of education in Britain, and how it also maintains or creates this kind of stigma that is related to housing or class?

I went to school all the way through from four to sixteen in Chelmsley Wood, so primary school and secondary school. In Solihull, there was no selective system, so everybody went to a comprehensive school, whereas Birmingham had a grammar school system. I think the thing that I became aware of is that, we would do these clubs. There would be a maths club and there would be quiz club and a netball club and so on. You would always be sent across the invisible border into other parts of Solihull to do these clubs. We were always shorter, we were thinner, none of us had any confidence. We just used to sort of sit there, kind of really meekly, even though the ones that were in these clubs were the ones that had been selected for being quite good at what they did, whereas the kids from the schools of the south of the borough were always very chatty, very confident. They would speak to adults like they were peers. They were very rosy cheeked and healthy looking, and about a foot taller. You don't know this at the time, but it's building up this massive inferiority complex inside you.

The issue in Britain is that there are some selective schools, and there are some private schools, but the reality is that most people go to comprehensive schools, most people go to non-selective schools that allegedly take all comers regardless of their socio-economic or academic background. But the reality is that you have a sifted and sorted system according to your immediate geography. So, class still plays out even within a nominally equalising school system. And the thing is that those differences are visible from very early on. This was a subject that really preoccupied me so I went on to write about it in *Respectable*, about language use and the right to speak.

One of those things that I was always aware of when I was at school, is that kids, in a comfortable environment, would be really noisy and chatty and just talk about whatever came into their minds, but whenever we entered a space where we suddenly became aware of our difference, then

everybody would just clam up, deny themselves the right to speak.

The question of how housing and geography and class and the educational system all collude with each other to make these differences more and more pronounced over time is something that always obsessed me.

You also mentioned the issue of health. Merthyr Tydfil in Wales got some attention mostly in the tabloid press for its supposed low healthy life expectancy on certain estates. How has that developed over the decades – the connection of housing, class and health?

My family background is from South Wales, not from Merthyr but from further into the valleys, from the pit villages, the mining villages. And I think it comes down to the sheer rapaciousness of British capitalism. The kind of lives that my great-grandparents, as a mining family, lived are an example of this. My great-grandad died when he was 31, from a combination of coal dust and mining accidents, and he left four children. They were left destitute by the death of my great-granddad. You're always told that the miners looked after each other and developed these strong mutual aid institutions very early on in response to how vicious and brutal the conditions were and how brutal the pre-nationalisation coal industry was. This produces a poverty that doesn't come from a set of unavoidable circumstances, this was completely avoidable suffering, fully in plain sight and knowledge of the people that were sending you out to work and getting incredibly rich. Britain industrialised so early, got absolutely giddy off the prospect of making money off the backs of people, and that established this incredibly deep-seated mutual antagonism and resentment. The poor health that comes from not only having to work too hard for too little money, but also just knowing that things aren't right, that gets into your soul and affects relationships. Capitalism has become a world-wide system, but I think in Britain, it's the rapidity of it and how early it happened that just set everything up for the dysfunctionality of British society now and the inequalities of it.

If you're involved with the Labour Party in Britain, there's such a strong attachment and such a huge amount of significance attached to Nye Bevan, who was from Wales and established the NHS on the same principles as the miners' subscription health service in the valleys. Basically, everybody put in a penny and created a clinic that was free at the point of use, and that's how they developed the NHS.

I always say, I'm completely mystified, but then again not mystified, that we are such an incredibly capitalist country but we have some of the most socialist institutions as well, such as the NHS and the census, how diligent we are about collecting data about people that we say will help them, will help us to be more equal, but that's not what's going to make us more equal.

Even in the architectural history of council estates, you can find this socialist vision because Le Corbusier envisioned high-rise tower blocks as a socialist utopia, even if the social stigma now attached to these blocks has reversed this completely. What are your thoughts on this chicken-and-egg question: Would you say that there's something in the architecture itself, in brutalist tower blocks, which brings about this stigma, or is it rather the ills of the capitalist system which are then attached to this type of architecture as the epitome of everything that has gone wrong in Britain?

I think it's a combination of factors of things. Immediately after the war, there was a genuine understanding that society could and must be rebuilt in a different and more equalising fashion. I think a lot of people of the middle class that had served in the army with working-class soldiers realised that working people deserved better and realised how it needed to be played out in terms of better housing.

The problem arose out of the fact that after the war, lots of council housing was built, and lots of private housing. Private housing was always houses with gardens. Post-war council housing started out also as houses with gardens. Labour won the election in 1945, and Aneurin Bevan was the Housing Minister as well as the Health Minister at the same time. So, he established the National Health Service, but also wanted to build the best housing for working people that ever existed. So, lots and lots of houses with gardens were built as council housing immediately after the war. But then Labour lost the following election, and the Tories had an inbuilt prejudice against council housing. They believed in the property-owning democracy, and by implication weren't prepared to put thought and care into what council housing should look and be like, just as long as there was lots of it. So, the Tories were saying, "pile it high, make it cheap", and started giving subsidies to local authorities to build above four storeys. Local authorities were incentivised to build flats rather than houses for council tenants, whereas the private developers just carried on building houses with gardens. If you had the money, you would buy a house and have a house with a garden. But if you were on the council waiting list, it

became increasingly more likely that you would get a flat instead, whether you wanted a flat or not.

Of course, there's much less of a history of living in flats in England and Wales than there is in continental Europe. It's always been cottages or little houses, basically. So, the stigma developed out of the growing, visible disparity of what council housing looked like and what private housing looked like. Bevan's idea was to build council housing that was so good that class distinctions in housing could be erased just through sheer quality.

It's like with the NHS. The NHS is so good that everybody uses it. It's not like the majority of middle-class people have private health insurance. Everybody uses the NHS in Britain because it's so good and there is no stigma attached to using it. Bevan wanted to do that with housing. But because Labour were only in power for five years after the war and because the Tories had an entirely different vision of housing, all of these different factors came in, where you had local authority leaders wanting to make their towns look a lot more modern.

So, they would go on these fact-finding missions, to see the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille and the same one in West Berlin, and they would say: "We want our towns and cities to be remade for our people, looking as futuristic as possible". And so, they were really, really taken in, particularly in Scotland. In Glasgow and Edinburgh local authority leaders were just absolutely enchanted by the Corbusian vision, that working-class people would move as entire communities into tower blocks and it would be amazing.

The reality is that the Tory government weren't prepared to put the money or the care into it. And people started moving into tower blocks and immediately found various problems with them, to do with poor quality building methods, lack of ability to send your kids out to play, because there was no green space at the bottom of the flats, people were scared to send their kids downstairs to play where they couldn't see them; mould, draughts, and in blocks where lifts were built local authorities quickly discovered how expensive it is to maintain lifts, and so they wouldn't get maintained.

And so, people sort of voted with their feet, as many council tenants who were moved to flats said "we don't like living in these flats" and would go straight back on the waiting list and would stay on the waiting list until they finally got given a house with a garden. And so, tower blocks always really struggled to be filled with people,

and they became very transient because people didn't like them and would only stay in them for as long as they'd have to.

There are some examples of really successful tower block communities, where almost just by luck, people who moved into them really liked them, and then a strong community was established who collectively were able to put pressure on the council to get lifts fixed and to have concierges and to improve the green space outside. But generally speaking, people didn't like them, and this immediately added to the stigma because the people who were sent to live in tower blocks tended to be the people who didn't have much choice in the matter, and they were always perceived to be rougher, poorer, less worthy.

And then, in 1968, there was a gas explosion at Ronan Point, a tower block in East London, and for a lot of people that just cemented the idea that they were a bad idea in peoples' minds, that they were fundamentally unsafe to live in. But then, when the fire at Grenfell Tower happened in 2017, this happened precisely because of a collusion between a Tory council that doesn't like to think that it has tower blocks and council tenants in its remit, and the sort of neoliberal reforms of the 90s and 00s, where repairing and maintaining council housing was no longer the job of the council,

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but various layers of unaccountable private firms. The reasons why the fire happened ultimately come down to class and race, to class and race stigma, and devaluing in Britain.

But people were really surprised, and shocked, to find out that the people who lived in the tower block lived perfectly ordinary, functional, in many cases very happy working lives. People literally from all walks of life lived in that block. And people were staggered, people thought it was just a feral underclass living in tower blocks. They were amazed to find that people had jobs and raised families in them and their kids would go to university and they were absolutely staggered to find out that a genuine cross-section of society might wish to live in, or still be able to make good lives living in a tower block.

The first edition of *Estates* came out in 2007 just a couple of months before the financial crisis hit, then was re-published in 2012, and then 2017, just a couple of months before Grenfell Tower happened. Looking at all these things, and with all the other books having come out in the past few years, like John Boughton's *Municipal Dreams* or John Grindrod's *Concretopia*, what would a new edition of *Estates* look like, or would you tackle the subject differently, were you to write this book again in, let's say, 2021?

Actually, I want to do a new edition next year, because the report of the inquiry into the Grenfell fire is coming out next year, and I want to include a chapter about the fire, the aftermath and the inquiry. How little it's changed, to be honest, in terms of perception of council tenants and housing.

Also, there is a housing crisis in general from which probably 50% of people are completely insulated. And if people are insulated from that crisis, they don't see what the problem is.

There are lots of people, and myself included, who live in areas like Liverpool where housing is relatively cheap. I own my house, it's a nice house, it's really solid, I don't have any money worries relating to mortgage or rent payment, because our mortgage was really low.

So, we're completely insulated from that and also, you have a much older generation over 50, who own their house completely outright, so they have no housing costs. And they just don't see what the problem is.

And so much of this is related to voting Tory, voting Brexit. There is this crisis going on before your very eyes, and it probably affects your

children and will certainly affect your grandchildren, but you still don't see what the problem is because *you* are alright.

So, there's so much to write about. When I wrote *Estates*, it was the very height of home ownership in Britain, because New Labour so vigorously promoted home ownership. About 75% of people were home owners around 2007. Then the crash happened. No affordable housing, or very little affordable housing was being built, so there's been a declining proportion of home owners and a declining proportion of council tenants and a rising proportion of people paying money to private landlords for their housing. And it's back up to the kind of levels that we last saw in the '50s and '60s, where over 20% of people now are private renters.

And in Britain, to be a private renter is really different to being a private renter in Germany, or most other places in Europe. It's terrible. It's expensive, landlords are under no particular obligation to give you any kind of security or do your repairs. You can get chucked out, tenancies have to be renewed every six months. It's a horrible situation. And you've got an increasing proportion of the population at the mercy of landlords.

And most young people can't afford to buy. In the New Labour period it was still quite cheap to buy your first house, but now nobody can do that, because you need tens of thousands as a deposit before you can even get a mortgage. Added to that, in the last 15 years, kids have been charged insane amounts of money to go to university. So, people are just stuck with these stupid university loans that they'll never pay off and they've got no chance whatsoever of getting any kind of housing security in that situation. It's just a mess.

One other aspect if I were to re-write the book: I was asked recently when I was speaking to master's students in Liverpool who are in their early twenties and a few of them were from working-class backgrounds, from council estates themselves. And they were shocked and quite angry at what a negative portrayal I had given of council estates in the book. And I said to them, "look, I'm aware that it's very negative, ultimately. But I thought I had to be honest about my own experience because if you're going to write a book that's based on personal experience, you can't be untruthful about the emotional impact of it. Otherwise, if it had been completely positive, I probably wouldn't have bothered writing the book. It's the negativity that fuelled the writing of the book in the first place. And they were saying "but you said

that people feel shame to come from council estates. What about people who are proud to come from council estates?" But the thing I pointed out to them was that I wrote it 15 years ago, I was in my twenties, I was very angry at the time. Now I'm in my 40s, there is some degree of distance from those particular experiences. But some of the anger has subsided, and I've sought to understand a lot of the drivers of it.

But I wouldn't write the book entirely differently again, because it's the book that I wrote at the time, and it's obviously resonated with a lot of people, because it's still in print 15 years later.

The majority of people in Germany are renting flats from private landlords. But historically there has also been a focus on things like cooperatives (German: Genossenschaften), for lack of a better translation. Especially in the late 19th century or early 20th century, especially in industrial cities, you would have working-class people and lower-paid staff who organised their own cooperatives and invested in housing, which has been popular to this very day. Is that a model that has any kind of future in Britain?

I think in urban areas, there are some pockets of cooperative housing, especially in Liverpool. In Liverpool and Manchester, there are lots of cooperatives, and Bristol and Leeds. But cooperatives have a very particular connotation in Britain, that you have to have lots and lots of existing cultural and social capital to know what to do, how to establish one, or to want to be involved with that. It's regarded as very geeky, very kind of eco-y and therefore very middle class, because so much eco discourse and so much participatory and activist discourse in Britain is related to class. If you take an interest in things, then that's regarded as very suspicious. Very suspicious and very classed. That you think you're better than everybody else.

In Liverpool, there are some examples of cooperative housing where there is a genuine class mix. In the centre of Liverpool, there's a number of cooperatives that offer housing to tenants on the council waiting list. So, there's much more of a class and race mix than you might get in self-established cooperatives.

On a large scale, the Labour Party's manifesto in 2017 and 2019 explicitly stated support for alternative models. The founding document to those manifestos was 'alternative models of ownership'. It included collective ownership of housing and co-housing and making it a lot easier for people to develop housing cooperatives.

What has the development been like

in times of Brexit and now Covid? How has that amplified issues with housing, especially when we look at private renters who may or may not be able to pay during the lockdown. How has that affected the situation?

There was a temporary ban on evictions during the first lockdown. It has now been lifted, and so people technically can still get evicted. It's difficult to get evicted, but particularly in London there's been a number of cases where people have lost their jobs or have been put on furlough, or been put on reduced hours, and have fallen behind on their rent and are basically having to seek legal advice to avoid getting evicted immediately.

If you're a council tenant or a housing association tenant, it is pretty hard to get evicted. You can go into a really long time of arrears, of rent arrears. In the social housing sector rent arrears are regarded as indicative of other issues that people then need help with, undiagnosed learning difficulties or mental health problems, addiction and so on. So, people don't just get chucked out easily like that in Britain. But then again, it can happen.

In sheer terms of street homelessness basically the government said "everybody needs to come indoors during the lockdown", and so people were put in hotels or underused council blocks temporarily. And I think what it proved was that housing and rough

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sleeping are entirely political. It can be solved at a stroke. You know, the underlying problems, the symptomatic problems of rough sleepers and so on can't be solved overnight. That will need a lot of care and sustained attention for people who are in that situation. But in terms of people having somewhere safe and having proper shelter every night, it's obviously something that can be solved overnight, and so the existence of rough sleepers is entirely political rather than some kind of weird, natural occurrence.

In Germany, there was some scapegoating and stigmatisation of people in tower blocks because they allegedly "can't keep their distance" and spread the virus. Do you see this discourse in the UK as well?

I think there is a lot of prejudgement of people being seen to break the rules and that is very classed. There's a pious middle-class discourse of "don't touch anybody, don't go anywhere near anybody, don't even go to the park unless you're going jogging, and so on". It really was a case of one lockdown for the rich, one lockdown for the poor, because if you're middle class and you've got comfortable living environments, you're going to be more likely to be close to a park, you're going to be infinitely more likely to be able to work at home, to take time off, probably to have savings to take time off if you do have to go to work, things like that. It was just assumed that there are lockdown rules and they have to be observed by everybody, and any variation from those rules is basically a matter of personal choice rather than a simple inability to keep body and soul together.

There's a racialised element to this as well, because, particularly in the north-west of England, there are areas of small terraced housing where quite a large family might live in, and share bedrooms and so on. Partly that's because of poverty, but also partly because if you're from a South Asian family, you're more likely to have three generations living in a house rather than just two generations. And so, there was so much judgement going on about the fact that in some areas, the case-load rate hasn't gone down, just completely refusing to acknowledge the role of poverty and poor housing in that.

Your books are very interesting in terms of their setup. There is the dimension of memoir, of autobiography, subjective personal experience, which is then connected to a general issue, and also to scholarly aspects of it. How did you approach this when you started writing *Estates,* and later *Respectable*?

Both times it's been really, really difficult. Thinking back to writing *Estates*, it took a few years to write, probably like three or four years all together. And what I realised in hindsight was that I was approaching a social history topic as primarily a piece of creative writing. I started out writing just fragments of my own experience, and I think, because I was so interested, I studied politics and history at university, and so I was dead interested in how it came to be. And so, in a way, it was quite difficult, but at the same time it happened quite naturally, so I was just following my nose the whole time, so I would write a bit of memoir to find out why might this be the case at a family level? Why might this be the case at a socio-political level? And so I just did a lot of independent research. Not because I felt I needed to, but because I had a really geeky interest in it, as well. I was really, genuinely interested.

And it's the same thing with *Respectable*. I always start out from the personal experiences, but I always want to know the context, I would get obsessed with placing my experiences and experiences of people around me into a wider context. It just seems to be how my brain works.

So, it wasn't easy, but at the same time quite a natural process. I didn't go to an editor with what I'd written and they said "no, you need to put more history in it". This is how I wrote it anyway. But they needed to work with me on synthesising the two approaches a bit more, to give it more of a narrative arc: telling the story chronologically, telling the story through a series of anecdotes that I'd then give evidence to. So, the editor's job was to make it less fragmentary, and to make the joints a bit smoother.

You explicitly mention Richard Hoggart as an influence, especially in *Respectable*, but between *Estates* and *Respectable,* there was also Didier Eribon in France, *Returning to Reims* (2009) and *La Société Comme Verdict* (2013), inspired by Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy.* Why do you think these particular kinds of narratives of leaving a class and a milieu and an environment and transplanting yourself in a completely different one is so fascinating to people?

I think that this is becoming more of a fertile ground for writers. I think in the context of the last 40 years the end of the post-war project, of a dream of collective improvement, of a dream of collective economic and social mobility, of a dream of a class rising together. And it instead becomes this kind of tortured individual who is 'the one who got out', and feels absolutely dreadful about it, who is having a great life in their own, you know in their

present-day milieu, but is absolutely haunted by the reality of the fact that the dream of collective improvement never happened.

And it's unbelievably fertile ground because it leaves you with a compulsion to try and make sense of it. It's also in writers like Annie Ernaux and Elena Ferrante. Ferrante is talking about a time where she left Naples during the post-war era. But you don't understand why you're the one who got away. You're having qualms that it was because you had certain tendencies that fitted in better with the dominant class. You know, literary tendencies, or being 'a bit quiet'. That was always the thing I was told at school, "why are you so quiet?"

Reading Bourdieu and the writers that have come out of the Bourdieusian school, you realise these extraordinary similarities in how class expresses itself in France and in Britain. You tend to think that France and Britain are very different societies, but then French writers can write so incredibly resonantly for British, and it sounds like for German readers as well.

The Financialisation of Housing – From Human Right to Tradeable Asset

Nadja Rottmann

Taking her cue from the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights which ratified adequate housing as a human right, Nadja Rottmann (Dortmund) examines the origins of housing policies in the United Kingdom. She identifies the 1970s and 1980s as a turning point when housing came to be increasingly seen as a financial asset. This financialisation of housing culminated in the global financial crisis of 2007/8, the repercussions of which can still be observed in the housing market today.

Ever since the global financial crisis of 2007/8, many countries all over the world face a severe housing affordability crisis. The UK, and England in particular, is certainly no exception. Given the fact that access to adequate housing was ratified as a human right in several international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948), it is hardly surprising that the UN published three special rapporteur reports since 2009 that are all concerned with the growing affordability crisis of housing and its effects on ordinary citizens. However, the UN is not the only organisation concerned with this issue. In fact, access to adequate housing – or rather lack thereof – seems to be on everyone's lips right now, be it in academic circles, in newspapers, on blog websites, or on social media. The Guardian, for instance, dedicated an entire series of articles to this issue in the spring of 2021. While some scholars and journalists argue that the housing crisis is a result of a mere disequilibrium between supply and demand, most accredit the crisis to the increasing financialisation of housing, meaning, in very simplistic terms, treating and managing housing as a fund. In the UN's most recent special rapporteur report, Leilani Farha describes this phenomenon as occurring when housing is "treated as a commodity –

a vehicle for wealth and investment – rather than a social good" (OHCR, "Financialization of Housing"). Rather than originating in the financial crisis of 2007/8, this development can be traced back much further than that. In fact, it was made possible and is still supported by a string of government policies that instrumentalise housing as an incentive to fuel the economy and date back at least to the beginning of the 19th century. Through century-old policies, housing progressively turned from a mere place to call home into an internationally tradeable asset which now leaves the UK and many other nations with an affordability crisis that mostly affects the poor, as is the case so frequently.

Housing as a Human Right

As mentioned above, the right to adequate housing is an essential part of various international human rights treaties, most notably of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was ratified in 1948, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified in 1976. In the ICESCR, for instance, the right to housing is defined as "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions" (OHCR, "Adequate Housing", 11). What is important here is the fact that this declaration does not only grant all human beings the right to a roof over one's head, but the right to adequate housing. In order for housing to be considered adequate, it must meet certain criteria, such as security of tenure, affordability, and accessibility (cf. OHCR, "Adequate Housing", 4). While human rights are generally open to interpretation concerning their exact meaning and scope, and cannot be seen as fixed rules that define how to implement these rights, they are still relevant guidelines for those states that signed the respective declarations. By ratifying the various treaties, the signing states committed themselves to ensuring these rights for all citizens. When it comes to housing, states therefore "do not have an immediate obligation to ensure housing for everyone [… but] a fundamental duty to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, and a failure to do so constitutes a violation of these rights" (Leijten and de Bel 2020, 99). Over recent decades, however, this human right to housing "has now been eclipsed by the right of investors to speculate over property values" (Blakeley 2021, 81).

A History of Housing Policies: 1800-1970s

Contrary to popular belief, housing crises are not a recent

phenomenon that originated in the global financial crisis of 2007/8. In fact, housing crises in various shapes and forms and corresponding government policies to combat them have been around at least since the beginning of the 19th century. Despite the fact that state-provided and subsidised housing is often presented as one of the great pillars of the British welfare state, housing policies have never been simply charitable but always served a purpose. Even when the right to housing was ratified in 1948, that did not change. From the beginning, as Jessie Hohmann, law professor and human rights expert, points out in an essay on the right to housing, housing policies have been designed to create and manage productive citizens, therefore benefitting the economy (cf. Hohmann 2018, 7).

In the 19th century, almost 90 % of the British population lived in privately rented homes. Only the extremely powerful and wealthy were able to own a house. The poorest, on the other hand, were huddled in gravely overcrowded poor housing, where housing conditions were quite atrocious and insanitary. Therefore, the poor houses and their residents were regarded as posing a threat to the overall health of society, which is why the conditions were supposed to be in need of improvement. It was mostly private investors that attended to this matter. This policy was hardly charitable, though, but rather grew out of self-interest of the more privileged citizens who feared contagion. Moreover, people feared that physical decay would also lead to moral decay. Thus, by improving the living conditions for the poor, the elite hoped to be able to contain the threat of moral and physical decay that the poor presented: "Housing thus supported a stable, profitable economy, and it can be argued that its 'use value' to its occupants was only 'tenuously connected to its function as an 'investment in a healthy and productive labour force'" (Hohmann 2018, 9).

Despite all efforts, living conditions for the poor remained dire, which led to social unrest at the beginning of the 20th century. When the turmoil threatened to get out of hand, the Westminster government decided to step in and to invest in state-provided and subsidised housing. Ever since then, council housing took up an ever-growing part of Britain's housing options until its peak in 1975, when approximately one third of the population lived in state-owned or subsidised housing (cf. Wetherell 2020, 107). This popularity partly stemmed from the 'Homes Fit for Heroes' programme that was launched after World War II and was targeted at returning servicemen. While housing

policies had been directed at the poorest of society before 1945, social housing was now designed for the better off among the working classes and turned into the housing tenure of choice for all classes of society. Since private rents were still controlled by the state and therefore still affordable, that also presented a viable option, though. Once again, however, housing policy, despite improving the standard of living for the poor, primarily "catered to the creation of a peaceful and productive workforce" (Hohmann 2018, 11).

The Financialisation of Housing

The 1970s and 1980s are nowadays often accredited with laying the foundations for the financialisation of housing. Financialisation in general can be defined as "the increasing dominance of financial actors, markets, practices, measurements and narratives, at various scales, resulting in a structural transformation of economies, firms (including financial institutions), states and households" (Aalbers 2016, 2) and as "a pattern of accumulation in which profit-making occurs increasingly through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production" (Krippner 2005, 174). By now, it has become an important pillar of any capitalist economy. The financialisation of housing, then, describes

> *structural changes in housing and financial markets and global investment whereby housing is treated as a commodity, a means of accumulating wealth and often as security for financial instruments that are traded and sold on global markets. It refers to the way capital investment in housing increasingly disconnects housing from its social function of providing a place to live in security and dignity and hence undermines the realization of housing as a human right* (Farha 2017, 3, italics in original)

What was once considered to be a human right has turned into a commodity, made possible, mostly, by policies of the Thatcher government in the 1980s.

While renting had been the housing tenure of choice among the working classes prior to the 1980s, the Thatcher government put into place policies that promoted home ownership and increased the privatization of social housing. Similar to the 'Homes Fit for Heroes' programme that was supposed to make rented social housing appealing, the government now implemented the 'Right to Buy' scheme that both enabled and encouraged council tenants to purchase their homes by simplifying the bureaucratic process and providing financial incentives (cf. Wetherell 2020, 107). Home ownership was now presented as the

ultimate goal for any respectable citizen. In the introduction to her book Estates (2017), Lynsey Hanley, who grew up on a council estate herself, describes this exact development. She argues that before 1980, living in rented council homes was the 'golden standard'. It did not matter if one owned the home one lived in. However, that drastically changed with aforementioned Thatcher policies that now facilitated the idea that "the only way to feel fully anchored to society, and therefore to be fully a citizen, was to own the property you lived in" (Hanley 2017, 11). Not only did this mean that housing was now fully recognized as a commodity, rather than simply a place to live, but, moreover, by presenting the ownership of a home as the ideal everyone should strive for, the understanding of the dweller changed as well. Individuals were – and still are – increasingly understood as consumers that are characterized by the purchases they are able to make. To put it in Jessie Hohmann's words: "If we come to identify, or even give identity to, individuals through the commodities they purchase, those without their own commodities, or without purchasing power over commodities, are relegated to a lesser subjectivity through their lesser or 'failed' consumer status" (13). Hence, "they are not considered, or accordingly, protected, as human beings of equal dignity and moral worth" (Hohmann 2018, 14).

In order to make home ownership accessible for more people, the government deregulated the mortgage market – as it did with basically the entire financial sector – and as a result, credit became much easier to obtain through loosened mortgage requirements. Other than solving the problem of excluding the less fortunate, this incentive had the opposite effect. While, in the beginning, easier access to credit did indeed mean that more people from different social classes were able to become home owners, demand and therefore competition rose as well. Therefore, house prices have been increasing tremendously ever since (Lund 2019, 4-5). Additionally, the deregulation of the mortgage market also meant that homes quickly turned from private assets for wealth accumulation into tradeable assets. Now that mortgage borrowing had increased significantly, banks started to securitise these mortgages, which means turning regular mortgage contracts into tradeable assets (financial securities) that are then traded on financial markets, also known as mortgage backed securities (MBS). While mortgages have been around for significantly longer than the 1980s, the securitisation process was certainly a new occurrence and, for some, embodies the financialisation of housing as it connects the mortgage market to the stock market. Mortgage markets therefore were transformed

from markets that were simply designed to enable home ownership to financial markets in their own right (cf. Aalbers 2016, 42). Ever since, speculating on these mortgages has become extremely popular and the UK is now "in absolute terms the largest European MBS market" (Aalbers 2016, 48). In fact, "mortgage lending and securitization has become central to the business models of most international banks and has deepened the links between housing and finance" (Blakeley 2021, 81). By the end of 2017, residential estate became "the biggest asset class in the world" (Leijten and de Bel 2020, 102).

Enabled by government policies, the financialisation of housing entirely changed how people view their homes in neoliberal societies. Instead of a secure and adequate place to live – to which humans have a fundamental right – people now see housing as a status symbol and, more importantly, as a source of wealth creation. The policies that promoted this development were thereby "never designed to enable homeownership; [they were] first and foremost designed to fuel the economy" (Aalbers 2016, 55). As in the decades and centuries before, the policies that were implemented followed a specific agenda. By making people dependent on mortgages and therefore subjecting them to periodic payments, it is ensured that "a discipline of regular work" (Hohmann 2018, 12) is in place.

The financialisation of housing seems to have created an endless and self-perpetuating cycle. With the wider availability of credit, demand for houses rose quicker than supply could keep up with, which increased house prices significantly. Additionally, the securitisation of mortgages enabled domestic and foreign investors to trade with and speculate on these mortgages. The fact that many investors now buy up property without any intention of ever living in it but simply for speculation purposes, significantly limits the supply while, at the same time, keeping prices high. As long as house prices keep on rising, those that are aiming to buy a home, encouraged to do so by the government, are forced to take out even larger mortgage loans. In turn, that means that banks have more money available that they can then turn into even more loans, which once again drives up house prices and closes the cycle. This process continues for so long until people's incomes can no longer match up to their debt repayments, which is exactly what happened during the global financial crisis of 2007/8.

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The Global Financial Crisis of 2007/8

There is plenty of evidence that the global financial crisis of 2007/8 and housing are closely intertwined. It is not for nothing that many people use the terms 'subprime mortgage crisis' and 'global financial crisis' interchangeably. Although initially a national phenomenon starting in the US housing market, the global interconnections of the stock and mortgage system quickly threw housing markets across the world into crisis. Explaining in detail what exactly led to so many housing markets collapsing would go beyond the scope of this article. In a nutshell, however, "the crisis originates in selling risky loans to risky borrowers (sub-prime lending) and in selling exploitative loans to all exploitable borrowers (predatory lending)" (Aalbers 2016, 52). These kinds of mortgages were specifically targeted at those that would usually not be able to obtain a mortgage. As one can imagine, they did not come without any strings attached, though. In fact, these mortgages that were targeted at poorer households often came with outrageous interest rates and most disadvantageous terms. Hence, despite being marketed as beneficial and generous for the borrowers, since, after all, they enabled poorer citizens to obtain a mortgage for the first time, they actually further discriminated poorer and minority households in the market. Even though home ownership was now made possible for basically

anyone, the relaxed mortgage policies expanded "the debt taken on by individual households" while, at the same time, making "various financial actors increasingly powerful" (Leijten and de Bel 2020, 101).

It was mainly due to speculating on and trading with these risky loans that house prices were artificially driven up so much that once some of the risky borrowers defaulted on their mortgages, prices started to drop and the entire housing bubble went up in flames. Millions of households were affected by the housing bubble bursting. Countless foreclosures expelled families from their homes and sometimes even resulted in homelessness. Yet, despite the grave repercussions for ordinary citizens, the 2007/8 crisis is hardly ever seen as a crisis for individuals and their homes but rather as a crisis for the system (cf. Hohmann 2018, 18), as can be seen in policy responses to the crisis. Not only did many families face overwhelming amounts of debt due to the pre-crisis mortgage policies, but they, other than most financial institutions, also received little to no support from governments after the bubble had burst. Many banks were considered 'too big to fail' and were therefore saved with extensive bailouts while austerity measures were put into place that, for instance, substantially cut housing programs and promoted the further privatization of social housing (cf. Leijten and de Bel 2020, 103). Additionally, overall spending power decreased significantly. In the UK that led to bankruptcies of large retailers such as Woolworths and MFI, which, in turn, evoked widespread redundancies that resulted in a significant tax drop. Thus, while tax revenues collapsed, the government was forced to raise welfare spending which created a significant increase in the budget deficit. Ultimately, the GDP fell for six consecutive quarters and the UK found itself in the severest recession since World War II (cf. Akinsoyinu 2015, 4).

Repercussions and Possible Solutions

Over the recent decades, housing in the UK – and elsewhere – has been transformed from a human right to a consumer product to an internationally tradeable asset. The 1980s and the 2007/8 global financial crisis are thereby "critical junctures in the development of housing" (Aalbers 2016, 75). Government policies that date back to the 19th century made this development possible and have always been designed as "a tool to achieve greater societal aims, driven from the top, and aimed at producing certain kinds of individuals, who will contribute in particular ways to society" (Hohmann 2018, 15). By now, it is not only home ownership that is affected, though, but increasingly also rental housing. Through financialisation,

housing prices have been inflated so much that both buying a home and renting on the private market have become absolutely unattainable for many. While the 2007/8 global financial crisis did interrupt this movement for a short period of time, it had no lasting effect on the proceeding financialisation of basically all sectors. In recent years, the term 'generation rent', which describes the phenomenon that young adults are no longer able to afford homes and instead are living in overpriced rental housing for extended periods of time, has gained much attention. A prominent, recent example is the Bristol Rent Strike of 2020, which was the biggest among many similar campaigns across the UK. Over 1,900 students at the University of Bristol alone went on a strike against unaffordable student housing and unfair rental policies, facilitated by the outsourcing of student housing from universities to big corporations, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Boroumand 2021).

The gradual change of housing from a place to call home to private asset for wealth accumulation and ultimately to a tradeable asset has had many repercussions, particularly for the already disadvantaged. As of 2015, "UK average house prices are nine times incomes across England and Wales, and up to 20 times incomes in London and the South East" (Martin 2015, 1). These increasing house prices disproportionately affect low-income households. "In 2017, 38 % of poor households in the EU (as opposed to 10,4 % of all EU households) spent more than 40 % of their income on housing costs, leaving limited money for them to spend on basic necessities of life" (Leijten and de Bel 2020, 102). Additionally, families living in social housing are being evicted due to the land their homes sit on being sold to wealthy developers. Since 2010, "there has been a 55 % rise in street homelessness" (Martin 2015, 5). Gentrification and displacement are certainly no new phenomena, and neither are buy-to-let landlords, for instance, but because of the financialisation of the housing sector, these phenomena have increased disproportionately. At the moment, the consensus in newspapers, on blog websites, on social media and elsewhere seems to be that the UK is still facing a serious housing crisis. On Twitter, the hashtag #housingcrisis is currently, on 09 June 2021, trending in the UK, the London School of Economics's blog lists several articles that talk about an 'ongoing housing crisis' (Cheshire and Hilber 2019), and newspapers such as The Guardian or The Independent published several articles with headlines reading, for instance, 'UK Housing Market on Fire' (Inman 2021) or 'Housing Market is Totally Broken' (Hannah 2019). Some even say that the next market crash is

close, considering that the COVID-19 pandemic further widened the gap between supply and demand. What people cannot agree on, however, is what the origins of the housing crisis are and how it can be combatted best. While some argue that governments simply need to raise supply by building more in order to meet demand, others claim that this option is not feasible and instead demand a reversal of policies that enabled the financialisation of housing. If the latter is more feasible than the first remains up for debate. What is hardly debatable, though, is the fact that over the years, people have lost sight of the fact that housing is also a basic human right. Treating it as such again, instead of a financial asset, would be one step in the right direction.

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Land Enclosures and Philosophical Radicalism

Discussing Property Rights in the Long 18th Century

Sophia Möllers

The political and economic conditions of housing and living in contemporary Britain are shaped by notions of property that have been significantly shaped in early-modern times. In her contribution, Sophia Möllers (Dortmund) traces the history of contemporary housing back to the land politics of the Long 18th Century and the Enclosure Acts. In her reading of the radical philosophy of William Godwin, she identifies political responses to the question of property, the belonging of land and housing rights that also have repercussions for the 21st-century present.

The discourse on housing in Britain can be traced back centuries, to the earliest beginnings of societies in which individuals were pressed to give up some of their natural rights, such as perfect equality and freedom, to become part of communities. While several different points in time could be used to illustrate early instances of this discourse, this section singles out the latter part of the Long 18th Century as a time of political turmoil, revolutions, and philosophical visions of prosperous futures for all. In its discussion of property rights as markers of personal liberty and agency, the Long 18th Century prefigures issues of ownership and housing that are still unresolved today.

In *The Country and the City* (2011), Raymond Williams presents the Industrial Revolution as the decisive transformation of country- and cityscapes. When thousands of individuals were forced to abandon their agrarian existence due to early systems of capitalism, it gave rise to "an extension of cultivated land but also a concentration of ownership into the hands of a minority." (Williams 2011, 97) Industrial hubs emerged, placing factories and their inhumane working conditions at the centre,

which essentially ran counter to moral values such as benevolence and virtue. These values, often circulated in philosophical and poetic writings of the Long 18th Century, strongly opposed "the growth of a system which rationalised greed and pride" in its reliance on the exploitation of the lower orders (ibid. 101).

Overall, poets of the Long 18th Century engaged vigorously with the impact of industrialisation and capitalism on the natural world, and, more specifically, the natural human being, given that its place in the drastically changing world was as insecure as ever (cf. Pinkney 1999, 411). Since capitalism desires the accumulation of profit, often at the expense of the individual worker, poets feared a universal devaluation of non-economic values such as benevolence and morality. An "ecological poetics of responsibility" (Pinkney 1999, 414) emerged as authors came to discuss the role of the individual in a rapidly transforming environment and envisioned futures in which capitalist exploitation was abolished and individuals could come together once more in harmony. Thus, Romantic texts are political insofar as that they unveil the underlying power structures of British society and illustrate the detrimental effect of capitalist developments on individuals.

Tradition versus Progress: Are Natural Rights Inherited Rights?

Several authors significantly shaped the political sphere of 18th-century Britain, especially in their discussions of property, ownership, and agency. In the wake of the French Revolution, conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke feverishly tried to uphold the dominance of the *ancien régime* by proposing to view all rightful possessions as based on inheritance. Especially with regard to the transferral of property, Burke openly favoured the system of primogeniture and assured his readers that "the people of England well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement." (2004, 470) According to Burke, true socio-political progress was only possible if well-established structures were upheld and the domestic ties of both family and country were respected. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* remain one of the most notable conservative approaches to property rights since they illustrate the state as functioning, in essence, like a family run on a system of primogeniture. In this fusion of the private and the public, Burke communicated the necessity to pass down not only property from father to son, but also the rights to political participation, which meant that the establishment of

a republic for all was, to him, out of the question. These conservative views sparked outrage in the public with frequent riots throughout the 1790s. They were also harshly criticised by revolutionaries such as Thomas Paine, who famously contested that "[m]an has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. […] It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated." (1791, 11-12) Paine thus sought for legal changes in the discussion of property, given that property laws create intersections between the public and the private and give rise to the "hereditary despotism" of kings (1791, 21), who bend laws to their needs and openly exploit marginalised individuals.

This bending of the laws to favour those in power can be illustrated by the Enclosure Acts, which are exemplary for the relentless advance of capitalism in the 18th century. The term 'enclosure' refers to the occupancy of common land, which inhibits the right of ordinary people to access and work the land for their benefit. From the 17th century onwards, these enclosures were not only facilitated by field owners and proprietors, but also enforced by parliamentary acts, catalysing the displacement of labourers and tenants, who were forced to search for work in the city. Described by Raymond Williams as "a capitalist social system [that] was pushed through to a position of dominance, by a form of legalised seizure" (2011, 98), the Enclosure Acts facilitated a transferral of communal land into the hands of private people, sometimes in exchange for land of much poorer quality, which outlawed open-field farming and thus put an immense strain on the already suffering small tenants or landless labourers. Most of those land reassignments were done via private enclosure bills under the guise of 'improvement' necessary for optimal use of the land – when it was clear that only those who were eventually given the land improved their situation. While Williams criticises how the image of "independent and honourable men, living in a working rural democracy, who were coldly and 'legally' destroyed" by the Enclosure Acts has often been used to emotionalise the socio-political conflict (2011, 100) and create an idea of a magical pre-industrial time of peace and prosperity in Britain, he nonetheless retains that the enclosure of public land constituted landowners as a political class (2011, 103) and served as a "visible stamping of power" (2011, 106) in its concentration of property in the hands of a select few.

Discussions of property rights are inherently connected with the discourse on housing in Britain and constituted a key component of socio-political thought in the Long 18th Century. Unlike the Romantic

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poets whose writings often remained lamentations of long-lost rural bliss, Jacobin[1] authors employed their texts to criticise the legal exploitation of the propertyless in their discussions of human rights. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson notes a particular "Jacobin hatred of the landed aristocracy", which made them supportive of "land nationalisation" and the re-distribution of common goods (1966, 230). Jacobins naturally also opposed the enclosures, as they "destroyed the scratch-as-scratch-can subsistence economy of the poor" (1966, 217) and therefore serve for Thompson as "a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers." (1966, 218) This 'class robbery' was even given a firm ideological basis in the assumption that enclosures meant increased or at least secured social discipline. In a manner analogous to Edmund Burke, those in favour of the enclosures professed that British dignity could only be upheld if the transferral of property was based on primogeniture. Should further (property) rights be given to the poor, barbarianism was said to lurk around the corner, so that "[i]t became a matter of public-spirited policy for the gentleman to remove cottagers from the commons, reduce his labourers to dependence, pare away at supplementary earnings, [and] drive out the smallholder." (Thompson 1966, 219)

The First Political Anarchist: William Godwin and Property

Commonly described as the forefather of political anarchism, Jacobin author and radical philosopher William Godwin was amongst those who most harshly criticised the exploitation of the poor by a denial of property rights. In his magnum opus *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793), fittingly published just days after the beheading of King Louis XVI of France, Godwin accuses the British government of abusing the legal system and contributing to the downfall of individuals. Inspired by the events of the French Revolution, Godwin draws parallels between the French monarchy and the British government and proposes socio-political changes based on reason. The philosopher dedicates an entire book in his *Political Justice* to the complex discussion of property rights and takes great care to explain the intersections between natural rights, property rights, the ownership of the body and political participation. Godwin understands property, of which habitation is a core element, as "the key-stone that completes the fabric of political justice." (2015, 623) Countering the assumption that certain individuals have more rights to the common stock than others based on the laws of primogeniture, as proclaimed by Burke and the supporters of the enclosures, Godwin states that "[e]very man has a right to that, the exclusive possession of which being awarded to him, a greater sum of benefit or pleasure will result than could have arisen from its being otherwise appropriated. […] If man have [sic] a right to anything, he has a right to justice." (2015, 624) With regard to the Enclosure Acts, Godwin's statements can be interpreted as follows: Should a man profit more from the use of the common land than another, for example in the case of a landless labourer who needs the common land to support his family, that man derives more 'benefit or pleasure' from it than the greedy landowner desiring to enclose the land to increase his profits. Anticipating Marx, Godwin also demands that "every man is entitled over the produce of his own industry, even that part of it the use of which ought not to be appropriated to himself." (2015, 631) Unlike other philosophers of the period, William Godwin directly engages with the issue of landownership in England by stating that "the rent-roll of the lands of England is a much more formidable pension-list than that which is supposed to be employed in the purchase of ministerial majorities." (2015, 648) He notes the immense imbalance between the few who own and profit from English soil versus the masses who rely on the 'charity' of the rich to survive, leaving workers "famished with hunger, exposed half naked to the inclemencies [sic] of the

sky, hardly sheltered". (2015, 650) Since the Jacobin author is certain that a redistribution of property by force will not be feasible (2015, 643) and therefore does not propose a system of social ownership, he hopes to destroy "the inequality of conditions" (2015, 636) by truthful reasoning. By stressing the need to improve the underlying conditions of the exploited masses, Godwin precedes Marx' later critique of capitalist economies and the social inequalities they produce, given that the labourer stands in opposition to the owner of the means of production, which provokes structural contradictions and class struggles.

At the time of its publication, *Political Justice*, which is now considered a prime example of philosophical anarchism, was an immediate success in intellectual circles but due to its length, cost, and use of complicated language it failed to connect with those who suffered most.[2] Granted, this meant that Godwin was exempt from political persecution in the famous Treason Trials of the 1790s, in which authors like Thomas Paine, Thomas Holcroft and John Thelwall were tried for agitating the public. To nevertheless engage with the radical political landscape of the time, Godwin then resorted to fictionalising his ideas and highlight issues of property, ownership of the body and political participation in his *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). The novel was published during the 1794 Treason Trials and he used some of the proceeds of the well-received work to bail out former revolutionaries – a commendable habit which would, however, soon come to engulf him in a vicious cycle of creditors and debtors for the remainder of his long life. In *Caleb Williams*, the eponymous protagonist narrates his life story as an orphaned poor coming to work at the estate of the wealthy Falkland, who harbours a dark secret. The inquisitive Williams is determined to seek out the truth regarding the role of his master Falkland in the murder of fellow landowner Tyrrel and is soon engaged in a life-threatening game of flight and pursuit.

In recounting the experiences of a marginalised individual such as Williams, Godwin lays bare how the lack of property leads to a lack of subjectivity, since the benefits of all natural and civil rights were commonly denied to economical dependents. As a result, their lack of property prohibits them from fully participating in the political body, which in turn means that they were not considered full subjects (cf. Johnson 2004, 17).[3] *Caleb Williams* serves as a prime example of Jacobin novels which dealt with the interconnectedness of property (or the lack thereof) and political subjectivity. According to Nancy Johnson, these novels unveiled the exploitation of

propertyless and thus dependent individuals by relaying that "[a] discrete, independent self was a pre-requisite to citizenship, to proprietorship in the social contract, [and] to the avoidance of a subjecthood that was a carryover from formal patriarchalism." (2004, 17) However, the economic dependence of women was much more acute given that in marriages, females were not allowed to own property at all and quite literally became the property of their husbands. Consequentially, Godwin also illustrates the suffering of propertyless females who "were ultimately not considered beneficiaries of all natural and civil rights in the body politic." (ibid.) Being denied their natural and civil rights, women were stripped of agency and ultimately remained in a liminal "state of formal non-existence" (ibid. 18).[4]

By presenting the life stories of marginalised individuals, Godwin shows how political power is a consequence of family property, and, more specifically, landownership. The relationships between individuals mirror the relationship between subjects in a political body, relaying that "[t]he state is more than just an image of a family relation, it functions in direct socio-economic connection to the management of familial estates and the laws governing family property." (Johnson 43) In other words, those who are excluded from the laws of primogeniture, therefore do not own property and cannot 'ground' themselves by landownership, are simply disregarded by society as they do not count as proper citizens. Criticism of landownership and property rights lies at the heart of Jacobin novels such as *Caleb Williams*, which shows how the systematic exclusion of certain individuals from owning land and property similarly excludes them from becoming independent selves, profiting from the social contract and exercising their political agency. Given that rights were viewed by those in power as inheritable, traditionally transferred according to the laws of primogeniture from one generation to the next, orphans, women, or the poor were necessarily excluded from even obtaining basic human rights.

21st-Century Enclosure Acts

Overall, this dive into the philosophical and fictional endeavours of Godwin and his fellow thinkers reveals how the Enclosure Acts sparked far-reaching discussions about property, ownership, and the law, especially concerning those who were systematically disfavoured by British politics. The enclosures relayed how much people depended on common land, not only for the support of their livelihood, but also in terms of creating a sense of self. If the land of the common stock is simply taken away from them, often with meagre compensation or without

any compensation at all, individuals were marginalised further and did not stand any chance of becoming proper citizens, as the prerequisite to enter and engage with political society remained the acquisition of property, with landownership as the most common denominator of power. As the Enclosure Acts, amongst other factors, triggered the relentless advance of capitalism and truly showed how inherently connected property and subjectivity were in Britain's legal system, it was only natural to discuss them as part of the larger picture of housing in Britain. To this day, enclosures of land remain a much-contested issue among landowners and those fighting for a minimisation of capitalist exploitation. Matthew Thompson, research fellow at the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, refers to housing as "the political battlefield of our time – a field in which the contradictions and injustices of capitalism are once again socially and materially manifest." (2020, 177) In a predominantly neoliberal formation, the housing market in Britain has revealed that privatisation of common land is still a common practice among the rich, veiled by the sugar-coating call for 'improvements' of land usage while systematically driving the needy to the margins. This circumstance can be read as a contemporary version of 18th-century land enclosures, in which the needs of the general public are overruled or even nullified to increase the profit of those in power. In his *The New Enclosure. The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain* (2018), Brett Christophers discusses how the era of PM Margaret Thatcher and her exploitative system of neoliberalism enabled Britain to sell large portions of its land to private owners – a severe case of land privatisation of which only few are aware. These present-day enclosures of public land have massively damaged Britain's social cohesion and will further threaten Britain's housing crisis should governments continue to look the other way and sell public land to private developers. Hauntingly mirroring the enclosure movement of more than 200 years ago, contemporary British economy is again building on land alienation under the pretence of 'improvements', which then take the form of shopping malls and car parks rather than communal gardens or affordable housing space to create revenue and once again benefit those in power.

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Endnotes

1 The term 'Jacobin' originally referred to the *Jacobin Club,* a political organisation established during the French Revolution in favour of a French Republic. In late 18th-century Britain, those English radicals supporting the Revolution came to be known as Jacobins. Leading politicians felt increasingly threatened by the radical societies, prompting PM William Pitt the Younger to systematically infiltrate different societies with spies and informers (see Johnson 2004, 153). As a number of these societies were also founded by labourers from different trades, workers were able to connect with each other on a much larger scale, which is why the societies are often understood as productive of the creation of a working class consciousness (see Anderson 2000, 624).

2 While E. P. Thompson notes that Godwin's *Political Justice* was only read by a small literary elite (98), Godwinian scholars like Isaac Kramnick argue for a widespread popularity of his work, or at least of the communicated ideas (xv). Still, it remains contested whether people knew of him and his work based on having read his work or based on the following he inspired among younger radical poets like Robert Southey or Percy Shelley.

3 See Johnson 17.

4 In the character of orphaned Emily Melville, Godwin relays how propertyless females remain at the mercy of their male relatives and, in extreme cases, may face life-threatening consequences should they dare to rebel against the patriarchal system (see Godwin 2005, 60).

The (High) Rise and Faults of the 'Mouth of the Tyne'

T. Dan Smith and 1960s North-East Housing

Victoria Allen

In her contribution, Victoria Allen (Kiel) focusses on the controversial Newcastle builder and politician T. Dan Smith, who in the 1960s attempted to refashion Tyneside as the "Brasilia of the North". Examining both autobiographical material and a thinly veiled fictional representation of Smith in Peter Flannery's Our Friends in the North, Allen contextualises the impact of Smith's building policies from today's perspective.

"It's all T. Dan Smith's fault," they told me. Ambling down Northumberland Street from Haymarket, looking up at the starkly angular concrete block buildings, I considered how much of these architectural representations of a city had been influenced by one man. This, in turn, led to a consideration of how one man could be recognised and represented in differing, often contradictory, ways. Representations[1], both fictionalised and apparently authentic, of the North East Labour politician Thomas Daniel Smith and the series of high-rise tower blocks he 'built' on Tyneside provide the malleable material for this article. More commonly known as T. Dan Smith, he is infamously remembered for his involvement in the Poulson scandal for which he was sentenced to six years in prison in 1974.[2] Prior to his influential political position as Newcastle City councillor and head of Housing and Planning, he had gained expertise in housing and construction through his housing and decorating business, Smiths Decorators (Smith 1987: 48). Following his political career with the city council, Smith started a public relations company that helped 'oil' the communication between construction businesses and council for the commissioning and planning of council houses. These houses were designed as part of the regeneration of post-war Newcastle, with the city

envisioned to be the political, retail, cultural and economic capital of the English North.

Smith's unpublished autobiography, part of the material he deposited in the Amber Films archive from his own collection, is the main source I look at in terms of how Smith presents himself. Yet, while self-description can be the epitome of the unreliable narrator, anything said about Smith is prone to refraction as any 'truth' is passed through layered representations. For example, text from the autobiography appears, script-like, in Smith's responses heard in the Amber Collective's documentary *T. Dan Smith: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia* (1987), which, even more bewilderingly, sees footage of a real-life Smith juxtaposed with his fictional representation. This article also draws on a thinly veiled depiction of Smith in the BBC drama series *Our Friends in the North* (1996), and there is a particular focus on Smith's intriguing political engagement with and advocacy of the 1960s social housing policy in the North-East of England that saw the clearance (and utter demolition) of slum dwellings, replaced by modern tower blocks.

Larger than life: representing T. Dan Smith

Before we discuss the depictions of T. Dan Smith in film and television, who was the man? To give him the chance to (re)present himself, let's look at some of his own recollections in the notes of his unpublished autobiography. While autobiography is, *prima facie*, "non-fictional (factual) in that it proposes to tell the story of a 'real' person, it is inevitably constructive, or imaginative, in nature and can be a form of textual 'self-fashioning'" (Schwalm 2014, n.p.). This blurring of the lines between fact and fiction should be considered when reading "Childhood Days", the first chapter of the notes for Smith's unpublished second autobiography. Typewritten on yellowing paper he opens with the following lines: "It was on May 11th 1915 when I was born in a downstairs front room of a typical working class terraced flat, 62 Holly Avenue, Wallsend on Tyne" (Smith 1987, 1). In addition to informing the reader that he was born into a traditional Tyneside community, this opening also situates Smith's roots in working-class culture; a culture that, notably, he sees epitomised by the style of housing. The involvement of his family in local politics and his father's lectures on "personal freedom and issues of human emancipation" made a marked impression, ingraining Smith with a scepticism toward the ruling classes (Smith 1987, 17-18), and this clearly imbued him with an acute sense of class consciousness.[3]

Smith's politics are variously noted as Trotskyist, communist and socialist (Vall 2011, Griffiths 2019). Through the 1950s, his personal politics now aligning with the democratic socialism of the Labour Party, he took up various posts, culminating in election as Chairman of the Housing committee (Amber 2021), and positioning himself as a progressive campaigner on housing and environmental issues (Griffiths 2019, 107). Vall notes that Smith "joined the Newcastle Labour Party and his political acumen and charismatic personality facilitated his rapid rise to dominance in the party, both in the city and at regional level" (Vall 2011, 65). It was during this rise through the ranks that he claims he was made acutely aware of the 'influence peddling' between council members (both Tory and Labour), committee members, major contractors and local builders' lobbies (Smith 1987, 48-63). Also known as 'legal bribing', this lobbying was a kind of political influencing Smith became adept at – "his political acumen and charismatic personality facilitated his rapid rise to dominance in the party, both in the city and at regional level" (Vall 2011, 65) – while finally becoming his undoing when he over-stepped a notional line.

What is striking throughout his autobiographical writing and in interviews for the Amber documentary film is Smith's astute scrutiny of power structures. Indeed, he employed this critical astuteness to his advantage when becoming Leader of Newcastle City Council in 1959, creating a powerful autonomous local planning department "crusading to sweep away the slums of Newcastle and create in its place a 'Brasilia of the North', a capital of arts, science and leisure beyond Westminster's reach" (Phipps 2016, 51). Smith instigated an aggressive programme of regional development as a means of implementing his vision of highways and high-rise flats in the sky, swirling around the brutalist Swan House hub, a vision made feasible through the revolution in building and concrete construction (ibid). He was later appointed chairman of the Northern Economic Planning Council (NEPC) and set up his own public relations company, T Dan Smith Associates (TDSA). During this period, his "labyrinthine dealings" (Durham and West 2014, 68) eventually led to his involvement in the Poulson corruption scandal and his imprisonment. While this ruined his political career, his close association with Newcastle and the local council meant their reputation – and by proxy, their representation – was also sullied (ibid, 68; Vall 2011, 66). This can also be said of the perception of the housing developments that came from his time of influence.

Smith's functions as a political representative gave him the power to act on behalf of others. Natasha Vall reflects on Smith's representational capacity as a politician stating: "T. Dan Smith is often regarded as a politician who more than any other shaped the region's sense of self-awareness both culturally and politically" (Vall 2011, 65). She further contextualises his political *standing in for* the people of Newcastle, concluding: "He was also a politician of his period. Like many in the Labour Party nationally he was in favour of corporatist-style politics and a continental-style planning process both national and regionally" (Vall 2011, 65). His career came to a halt in 1970 amongst allegations of corruption and bribery when his company's public relations work appeared to have been dealing in the indeterminate area where lobbying overlaps with the provision of inducements.

It is the wheeling and dealing of Smith in relation to the 1960s building policies and culture that is key to both the fictional and 'actual' representations of T. Dan Smith in both the Amber documentary film (*T Dan Smith*, 1987) and the BBC television series (*Our Friends in the North*, 1996), and they have overshadowed his other achievements for the city of Newcastle. Tom Draper writes about history not being kind to Smith and how, mythologised as the "villain of

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Tyneside", all the 'bad' things about the 1960s redevelopment of Tyneside were attributed to him: "Every hole in Newcastle's 19th century architecture, every ugly building ever assembled in the city, has become the work of that notorious Labour leader of the City Council (1959-1965), Mr. Dan Smith. Smith, it is said, not only destroyed significant portions of our architectural heritage for political reasons, he did so while lining his own pockets" (Draper 2016). This image of the corrupt city boss, and the stories of council bribery – reminiscent of US city leaders such as Boss Tweed in New York – created a neo-noir feel for political drama which was not only taken up by the local tabloids, but also inspired the Amber documentary and *Our Friends in the North*.

Before this, in his halcyon days, Smith's left-wing anti-war activism was not in favour in patriotic Newcastle, a city whose core industries and prosperity are undeniably linked to the economy of war. In terms of housing and Newcastle's town planning, this can be seen in many of the workers' dwellings that characterise the cityscape of Newcastle. These were built along the River Tyne to house the workers in industries specialising in the manufacturing of arms and shipbuilding, such as Armstrong and Whitworth (later Vickers-Armstrong) in Elswick and Swan Hunter in Wallsend. These industries on the banks of the River Tyne were also the reason why these areas were most affected by the bombing during WWII, another factor for the post-war need for new builds.

Making a drama out of a (housing) crisis: 'Tyneside Terraces' representing working-class housing

Can housing policy make for good drama? The playwright and script writer Peter Flannery thought it could and sought to demonstrate it in both theatre and television. Indeed, the housing policy and politics in post-war North East England of the 1960s provided material that inspired, changed, and in turn contributed to creating lasting representations of Tyneside. Flannery's screenplay portrays the experiences of four friends (Nicky, Geordie, Mary, and Tosker) from the North East of England beginning in 1964 up until middle age in 1995. The characters' lives are intertwined with local and national politics, showing how they were affected by political events and policies and the various ways in which they became engaged and embroiled in politics.

Housing is a central theme of *Our Friends in the North* from the start. For instance, in the first episode, "1964", at a family gathering at Nicky's home, Labour politician Eddie Wells,

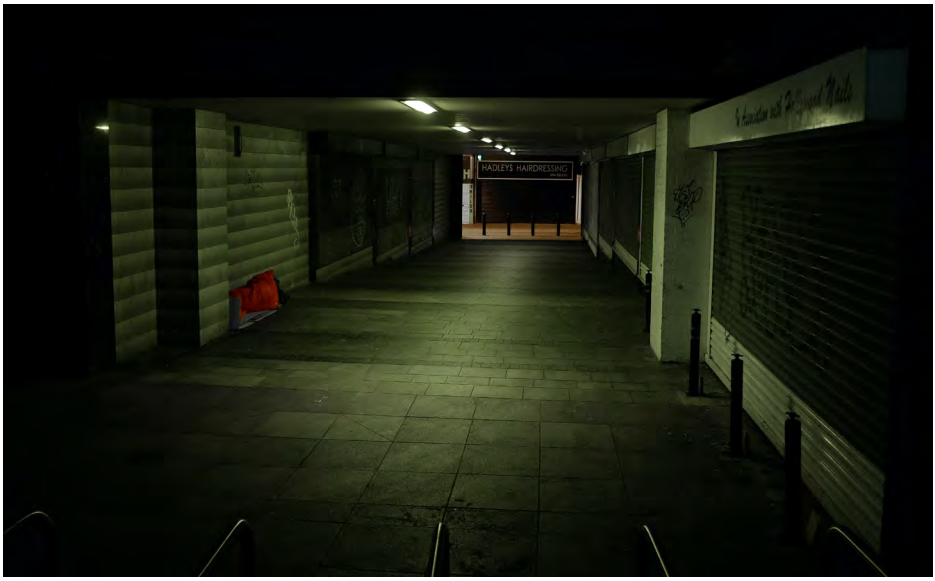
between mouthfuls of cake, answers questions from Geordie on the need for the clearance of the existing, mainly council and social, houses, to be replaced by new, improved housing – "we need 20,000 new houses up here" – on which Labour depended for re-election in the upcoming council elections. The houses that were about to be demolished that Geordie refers to – "ya kna wit' the Lane" – most likely would have been red-brick Victorian or Edwardian terraced housing. Variations of this architectural type of urban housing are prevalent throughout Britain (Muthesius 1982), though, as architectural writer John Grundy notes, terraced housing is particularly associated with the north of England (Grundy 2004, 186); these rows upon rows of brick terraced houses have since become one of the iconic backdrops to British working-class community and culture.

In Newcastle, the majority of these terraced houses were built between 1850 and 1914, a period of great population growth when

large numbers of grid-like terraced streets, built of brick and slate, sprang up around the older central zone. These were almost invariably laid out by industrialists for their workers or by other private developers. Thus, Byker, Heaton and Walker, in the east, and Benwell, Elswick and Fenham in the west still have extensive areas of 'artisan' housing (Faulkner 2001, 234).

Describing the architectural style of these terraced houses that characterised the cityscape of Newcastle, Faulkner notes about the housing built in this period that they "are in fact flats and the distinctive 'Tyneside Flat' is an ingenious two-storey terraced arrangement whereby one household lived above another, each having its own individual front and back door" (Faulkner 2001, 234). The private backyards initially were the space for the coal bunker and toilet, commonly referred to as the 'netty' (Durham and West 2014, 4). By the 1950s and 1960s, these pockets of terraced workers' dwellings were branded as slum housing and poverty areas, being unsanitary, damp and in disrepair. They represented the old working-class ways, culture and living standards – a blight on an ambitious city. Yet, there are voices that, far from this derogatory opinion, viewed this housing as being fundamentally sound and readily adaptable (Grundy 2004, 187), a versatility that was ignored in favour of large-scale demolition and new-builds.

There are other strands of discord with T. Dan Smith in the series, such as Nicky's father Felix, who, Eddie explains, now dislikes "his old comrades" from the Labour party who "are corrupt nowadays".



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When asked whether this extends to "even Austin Donohue" (the Smith-based character), Eddie emphatically responds: "Especially Austin". Felix's dismissive attitude toward unchanging corrupt power structures and political machinations aside, it cannot be disputed that the 'real life' Austin Donohue, T. Dan Smith, did bring about visible and lasting transformation on Tyneside during his time in power. His vision of cultural regionalism was to make post-war Newcastle the economic and political capital of the North of England. Smith fostered a culture of change (cf. Faulkner 2001; cf. Griffiths 2019, cf. Durham and West 2014) through art (Northern Arts and initiatives that saw art commissioned for the newly built Civic Centre), architecture (iconic brutalist buildings include Swan House, Newcastle Civic Hall, and the carpark often referred to as Gateshead 'Get Carter' carpark), town planning (motorways through the city centre, the redesign of Eldon Square where Georgian buildings were removed to create the modern retail centre of town), and education (the elevation in status of Newcastle Polytechnic to Northumbria University with a campus in the city centre in proximity to Newcastle University). Enduring slogans, created as part of his building and regeneration work around and for Newcastle, such as 'city in the sky' or 'Brasilia of the North' still resound today. Smith's vociferous campaigning led to him being known as 'Mr. Newcastle', or, by those who

were not so enamoured of his pushiness and seeming self-promotion, 'The Mouth of the Tyne'.

Smith was adamant that the future industry of the region would have to change from the traditional and struggling heavy industries of coal mining and ship manufacturing. Vall reflects on the revitalisation and development efforts of a post-industrial economy on Tyneside, claiming Smith was "[k]een to rid the North East of its heavy industrial mindset" (Vall 2001, 64). She quotes Smith's autobiography telling us he "spoke fervently" (ibid.) of "the greater number of working people who … were beginning to shine in the fields of science and technology" (Smith 1972, 80). Vall further comments that Smith's "views on regionalism similarly endeavoured to sweep fresh air into the city" (Vall 2001, 65) and that reflected "the consciousness of an age of increasing leisure" (Smith 1972, 80). Housing was central to Smith's modernisation plan of Newcastle. These would be modern houses, built with modern materials to modern designs to house the people who would be working in modern jobs linked to the new science and technology industries or expanding retail and leisure branches that Smith and his associates' regional politics aimed to attract and develop as the North East's new economic future.

To make room for these new builds, which were to signal a new era, rows and rows of the old, terraced houses, the dwellings built for the workers of this once industrial melting pot which connoted outmoded working-class life and culture, had to be cleared. Faulkner notes that the Tyneside visionary put his vision into action and "rushed through much of the redevelopment of Newcastle" (Faulkner 2001, 243). He further comments on the modernisation drive that the success which was linked to creating new representations of Newcastle no longer hinged on the industrial, working-class image: "Smith and his associates – principally his Chief Planning Officer, Wilfred Burns – were seeking what they saw as a clean, new, international image which, they believed, would dispel unfavourable industrial myths and attract new business" (Faulkner 2001, 243). In light of this modernisation and rebranding of Newcastle as the beacon of a new North, the removal and replacement of the terraced housing in working-class areas appeared to be the most feasible approach to both rid the city of its less desirable past and further provide a more modern vision and much-needed jobs and housing fitting for a rejuvenated city with an upward trajectory and modern heating and sanitary facilities, climbing away from the years of economic hardship and ill health in the overcrowded and poverty-

riven so-called slums. Smith reiterates how much of his own life was spent in these poor living conditions (Smith 1987). In the Amber Studios interview, he provides vivid impressions of poverty and the abysmal living conditions in these overcrowded dwellings along the Tyneside river bank. He details first-hand recollections of rat infestations, outbreaks of TB and the hundreds of personal, tragic letters a week he recalls receiving from tenants asking to be rehoused (*Interview with T Dan Smith at Amber's Office*).

Slum clearances and their replacement with tower blocks was a widespread practice, promoted by planners and architects throughout post-war Britain (Grundy 2004, 188). Grundy points to the 1960s demolition of the Tyneside terraced community in Byker: "But the Byker terraces were not slums. They were working-class houses, part of a vibrant Tyneside community, and what caused them to be pulled down was not desperate need, or overcrowding or extreme poverty, though there might have been pockets of all of those things, but a new planning philosophy which saw terraced houses as outmoded" (Grundy, 2004: 188). In Newcastle, the promotion of this philosophy and the instigation of these 'slum clearances' is frequently and solely attributed to Smith's doing, as can be seen in Durham and West's account: "In 1960, when T. Dan Smith was elected as the leader of Newcastle City Council, he set about launching a sweeping programme of slum clearances and compulsory purchase orders that would turn Newcastle into a renaissance city, his envisioned 'Brasilia of the North'" (Durham and West 2014, 68). Smith's utopian vision, as detailed by Amber's documentary, purported to achieve this feat by building high-rise tower blocks.

High-rise hopes of regeneration and social mobility

The first episode of *Our Friends in the North* ends with Nicky announcing that, instead of returning back to university in Manchester, he will stay up in the North East as he has been offered a position working for Austin Donohue, a position in which Nicky feels he can contribute to real societal change. The second episode, "1966", catches up with the friends' lives two years on. Nicky, still working for Donohue, appears to be somewhat jaded by Donohue's smooth PR antics, and Mary, first introduced as Nicky's romantic interest, has been courted and wooed by Tosker. At the start of the second episode, Mary and Tosker appear as an ideal young couple in a promotional film reel which Nicky is shown projecting to a meeting of local city councillors hosted by Austin Donohue. The scene starts with an extreme close-up of the black-and-

white film footage of the promotional film depicting the modular-built concrete tower blocks, their towering quality accentuated through a low angle shot, as the narrator, with a notably non-north-eastern dialect, comments:

> And these quickly fabricated units can be quickly assembled, in this case into lovely homes towering above the dilapidated pre-war houses. Edwards System Building is replacing the old slums of the north with these fine streets in the sky. We offer you and your council the chance to sweep away old mistakes and cheaply and quickly provide your people with clean and spacious places to live. This young couple, Mr. and Mrs Cox of Newcastle are looking forward to the birth of their first child and a beautiful flat with all the modern conveniences. And as you can see, they like it (Our Friends in the North 1996: 00:02:40-00:03:15).

The promotional film captures how the high-rises were advertised to the councillors and community of Newcastle. Similarly, Durham and West comment on the marketing of the now controversial high-rise flats in Cruddas Park: "New residents were reassured by the modern facilities offered, including: 'kitchens with electric cookers and washboilers, with tiles around the working areas and above the stainless steel sinks'" (Durham and West 2014, 69). The high-rises, thus, represented upward social mobility with people moving from the terraced housing up into the modern modular-built tower blocks. Moreover, what the scene also captures, is the smooth and cosy manner in which these promotional events were conducted and how they functioned to facilitate the introduction of further invested parties (Edwards Housing being the fictionalised version of Poulson architects). This is encapsulated during Austin Donohue's fielding of the councillors' questions at the end of the promotional film:

> *Councillor 1: Austin, I won't claim to have understood all the technical horse shite, will this system actually allow my committee to make cuts in our housing bill without cutting quality?*
>
> *Austin Donohue: Yes.*
>
> *Councillor 2: Haven't there been second thoughts in Sweden about this system's suitability for high-rise building?*
>
> *Austin Donohue: Can I suggest we discuss this over a meal … and you'd best sit beside me.*
>
> *(Our Friends in the North 1996: 00:03:24-00:04:32).*

Thus, it appears the construction of the modern tower blocks was waved through by unknowledgeable councillors with an interest in cost cutting; critical questions are quelled by implied bribery and conspiratorial closeness.

The fictional depictions of the (faulty) foundation of the jerry-built high-rises were realised in the actual results of Newcastle's housing solution. In the Scotswood and Elswick area, ten tower blocks were "built by Wimpey to a Swedish modular design" (Durham and West 2014, 69) in Cruddas Park. Named after trees and bushes, "[t]hese blocks replaced the small park and a community of terraced housing" (ibid.). As Durham and West note, these high rises "[…] were to become part of the city's skyline for over fifty years and a monument to T. Dan Smith's vision of a 'city in the sky' to replace slum terraces" (ibid.: 69-70). Instead, the Cruddas Park tower blocks became known as a monumental failure. The inferior quality of the concrete and construction materials meant that amongst other issues, which arose due to cost cutting, the buildings quickly became plagued with damp. This is visualised in the third episode of *Our Friends in the North*, where Mary and Tosker are seen trying to battle the effects of the mould in their newly built flat. Just as the cracks and faults appear in the high-rise they live in, Mary and Tosker's relationship also begins to fracture and over the course of the following episodes their marriage crumbles (*Our Friends in the North* E3, "1967"). In "1979", the same episode where Tosker asks Mary for a divorce, the symbolic demolition of their Willow Lane flat tower block is announced.

The sinking hopes of tower block estates as modern-day slums

So, what do Smith and his constructions stand for today? The high-rise optimism of the 1960s tower blocks did not last long and became quite different to T. Dan Smith's vision of the high-rises. The concrete constructions did not weather well in the English climate – though, as Smith pointed out, he did not stir the (substandard) concrete. Also, the format of the estates did not foster a sense of community and "the sweeping changes were a mixed blessing and many lamented the passing of traditional Tyneside life and all it stood for" (Durham and West 2014, 71). Yet, as Smith claims of those who mourned a community, "decanted into high-rise flats and newly-built council estates" (ibid.), that was lost with the clearances:

"If you talk to some of them now – I've talked to some of the very people, that nostalgically have gone back and lived in the flats. They dream of it differently. The people that lived there [in the 'slums'] had the highest incidence of illness, of crime – not a single one of them passed the 11 plus in 1956 of any river school, from West Walker right along to Cruddas Park, not a single youngster passed the 11 plus. They were

the victims if you like. So, all the talk about the community that was its reality, leaving aside the death" (Interview with T Dan Smith at Amber's Office 1987: 00:16:02- 00:16:42).

Smith's defence of tower blocks and critique of nostalgia was no façade with him walking the walk as he had so often talked the talk: he spent his latter days living in one of the blocks. That said, Smith claims he wanted to save the old houses in a project called 'Operation Revitalise' but legislation at the time prohibited such a scheme, and he claimed he wept about it, perhaps a revisionist self-representation or even a repenting of sorts. There were no tears, though, for the changes he was key in implementing: "I don't weep when people blame me. Because I'd rather they blame me for something I'm not guilty of, so that they don't repeat the mistakes in the future" (17:45-17:55). This positive influence was seen in the Byker Wall estate that is noted by town planners and architects to have had its community base taken into consideration.[4] But media and popular representations mean that his legacy and that of the architecture associated with him are still mostly negative. There is a fictionalised scene in the Amber documentary when Jeremy Maudsley-Long, the local MP, visits the apartment blocks, and upon asking a local tenant about the conditions she is living in, finds himself rebuked: "You wanna try bringing your kids up in the muck and shit around here! If I got my hands on the bloke who built it, I'd wring his bloody neck!". If she had known that T. Dan Smith lived alongside her, she may have got her chance. Then again, if Smith had got his chance to wield his gift of the gab, he would have perhaps been able to convince her of his vision, faults and all.

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Endnotes

1 For the notion of 'representations', I follow Raymond Williams' and Stuart Hall's conceptualisations.

2 The Poulson scandal centred around the bribing of public figures to win contracts, estimated at around half a million pounds, including cash, and gifts such as suits, holidays and flowers. The affair embroiled police officers, health authorities and civil servants, and members of parliament, most notably the then Conservative Home Secretary Reginald Maudling. Maudling's escape from imprisonment particularly rankled with Smith, with the "little men" taking the fall for the rich and demonstrated his claims of corruption going up to the very top.

3 His father was a miner and his mother took on cleaning jobs to supplement the family income, following the post-war recession, the General Strike and 1930s depression when his father's employment became increasingly "spasmodic" (Smith 1987, 7). As early political influences, Smith notes that his parents were pacifist Christian socialists (10); his uncle George was locally known as "the miners['] lawyer" (15) and his family's heroes were "rebels" (17).

4 Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen's iconic photo-documenting of the Byker area and the Byker Wall estate at times contradicts, at times supports T. Dan Smith's assertions (Konttinen 1983, 2009).

"Little Boxes on the Hillside"

Tiny Houses and the Predicament of Private Life

Johannes Schlegel

Tiny Houses are an expression of the current paradigm of self-optimisation and efficient reduction. As neoliberalisation of social and private life also yields new trends in housing and living, are Tiny Houses a mere effect of this trend or are they the solution to the problems of modern housing? Johannes Schlegel (Würzburg) discusses Tiny Houses and their wider implications as a new style of dwelling in its wider ideological, philosophical and aesthetic contexts.

Itsy-bitsy living spaces appear to have a big moment. So-called tiny houses are dwellings with a maximum of 37 square metres of floor area – often even less ¬–, which nonetheless have the character and functionality of a permanent house. In contrast to these, however, tiny houses are not necessarily stationary and can, in some cases, even exist off-grid. At least in the global north, they seem to meet an increasing demand since they are marketed as key to overcoming several recent crises – some more severe than others. As micro-dwellings, they promise to be sustainable, to offer unconstrained mobility, to simplify one's life, and, last but not least, to bring mindfulness to an ever stressed-out clientele. These are the tiny houses that can be found in the youtube-pinterest-instagram-rabbithole. Others are put forward as a modest neoliberal proposal for how to deal with the penurious precarity. The German architect Van Bo Le-Mentzel, for instance, recently suggested building what he coined co-being houses in the city centres – shared living spaces for the not-so-well-off. The smallest of these tiny units should measure 6.4 square metres, thus approximately equalling the average UK prison cell. This raises a question that is only seemingly superficial: How do we actually want to make ourselves at home, how to make ourselves a home?

"Eigentlich kann man überhaupt nicht mehr wohnen," Adorno claims in his "Asyl für Obdachlose", a short essay in his epochal Minima *Moralia* (Adorno 2003, 42). Due to the initial position of the adverb and the importance that is thus attached to it, the sentence, at least in the German original, makes its readers expect a Kafkaesque turn of sorts – 'Eigentlich kann man überhaupt nicht mehr wohnen – *noch eigentlicher aber…*' (Adorno 2003, 42). This would allow for at least two possible semantic movements: the first an inversion, that, as in Kafka, lets its statement change completely into its very opposite; the second, as comparative degree, would render the state of affairs even more dire by transposing the observation into the metaphysical. "Dwelling, in the proper sense", as the English translation of *Minima Moralia* puts it, might now be impossible (Adorno 2006, 38). In 'the more proper sense', however, we are already transcendentally homeless. Adorno, true to the spirit of critical theory, is neither convinced by potential improvements, nor is he unambivalent towards metaphysics, though.

While the question of dwelling, of making oneself at home, is an entirely worldly one, it does not lose any of its bleak outlook – quite the opposite. Sites of living are the arena in which the predicament of private life is exhibited. This holds true for both the (infra)structural and spatial extensions that constitute housing as well as for seemingly banal choices of interior design and furnishing. When one still has a choice, the aporia of private property dissolving in the abundance of possession is unavoidable. *If* one has a choice. Those without, who live in 'bungalows that by tomorrow may be leaf-huts, trailers, cars, camps,' (Adorno 2006, 39) are not an exemption from the general rule, but merely more advanced positions of the same precarious development, in which the sheer possibility of residence is annihilated. It is precisely in the reduction and erosion of the exterior form to the smaller, to the fragmented, that the horror of being shows itself. The momentous insight of Adorno's brief reflection on damaged life, then, lies not so much in a nostalgic narrative of loss, longing for the traditional homes we grew up in, but much rather in seeing that, and how, the fundamental impossibilities of residence inevitably affect the individual: 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' (Adorno 2006, 39). Tiny houses, then, constitute a cultural trend that further articulates the diagnosis of a precarious individual and a precarious self, by re-evaluating the very forms of dwelling, which brings about a re-evaluation of these very forms themselves.

When the singer-songwriter and political activist Malvina

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Reynolds wrote and composed her song "Little Boxes" in 1962, the living circumstances she describes could have signified something completely different than they did for Adorno. The track quickly became famous in the rendition of Pete Seeger, who recorded a cover version the following year. Accompanied by a folky three-chord-progression in three-four-time, the lyrics satirize the development of suburban areas and associated attitudes of middle-class conformity: "Little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes made of ticky-tacky / Little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes all the same / There's a green one and a pink one / And a blue one and a yellow one / And they're all made out of ticky-tacky /And they all look just the same." Any supposed differences between individual houses is a mere matter of surface – in the more proper sense, however, they are just the same. The lack of spiritual meaning corresponds to a lack of material worth, since they are built with material that is cheap and of low quality.

It is for this reason that the 'little boxes' in Reynolds's song can not only stand in metaphorically and metonymically for their owners and occupants, but also establish a causal relation between them. The small-mindedness of the occupants is the direct outcome of a formative living experience. All of them apparently university-educated – and thus, according to Reynolds, the product of a huge levelling machine –, all of them enjoying the same hobbies and pastimes, all of them working as doctors, and lawyers, and business executives. Any perceptible difference is, again, just a matter of appearance: they seem just as shallow as their homes. The lack of variety in this lifestyle is emphasized by Reynolds by the somewhat monotonous guitar playing that repeats the same three cords over and over again, without any bridges, breaks, or solos as well as by the excessive use of anaphora and alliteration – only 5 out

of 32 verses feature neither of them. What is signalled by the rhetoric and musical repetitiveness is not a return of the repressed, but rather the return of a perpetual sameness. Making oneself at home in the little houses thus equals furnishing one's life in a simulacrum, the sole purpose of which is just to conceal the very absence of any meaning from it.

What Reynolds suggests, therefore, in a sanctimonious gesture that only seems appropriate in the world of a middle-aged singer-songwriter in the nineteen-sixties, is that it is still possible to live life rightly. Just not here. After all, the lyrics insist that what is decisive about the houses is not only that they are extremely similar, but, first and foremost, also that they are – little.

This constitutes a sustained line of thinking, in which suburban housing environments are constructed as a foil against which one's own, presumably independent, self is fashioned, and which serves either as a target of a trite *Kulturkritik* or as the clichéd arena of adolescent discontent. This is the only explanation for the very existence and cultural currency of an album cover art that is as iconographic as the one for Bad Religion's *Suffer*. It depicts a teenage boy, who, aflame, stands in front of a line of small, monotonous houses, which, due to the use of perspective and vanishing point, appear unusually tiny. Teenage angst and anger are almost literally fuelled by and directed against the tininess of middle-class dwellings.

There are, of course, notable differences between Reynolds's song and the cover artwork. While the former presupposes and establishes an unsurprising, self-confident us/them dichotomy, the latter also self-consciously articulates the powerlessness of a still somewhat privileged self. And while both seem to presuppose a notion of passivity – they are *put* in boxes –, they voice different affective reactions: content in one case, discontent in the other. In their shared, striking emphasis on the unbearable smallness of being, however, lurks the ideological spectre of grandeur.

For a long time and in a specific tradition of thought, the stately and spacious residencies of the nobility served both as manifestations of moral promises and as touchstones thereof. This is a notion that is key, for instance, to the negotiation of character in the 19th-century novel, ranging from Jane Austen via the Brontës to Frances Hodgson Burnett. Again and again, houses only prove to be homes if their outer appearance and inner life can be reconciled. It is not least for this reason that Raymond Williams describes the grand country mansion as 'a visible

stamping of power' – a power, that is, that articulates and sustains itself in dominant, hegemonic notions of class, taste, morals, the accumulation of capital, and their accompanying socioaesthetics. Even in the gothic novel, which, as a genre, has always been a decidedly conservative form, an ideological impetus comes to the fore where small spaces of confinement are represented as being constituted by operations of restriction and constriction. This narrative carries over to the beginning of the 21st century, where it is embodied in the cultural obsession with the hyperreal nostalgia porn of *Downton Abbey*, in which the progressing demise of the eponymous building is the swan song of a dissolving upper class and its moral habitus.

All in all, the narratives sketched above take on a comforting and restituting function. Their fictional evocations of alternative, at least hypothetically available options of dwelling aim at self-assertion not by annihilating, but rather by displacing possibilities of residence either into a nostalgically remembered (recent) past, or into a (satirically evoked) 'somewhere else.' However, the self that is asserted here is, of course, a somewhat restricted, hegemonic one that at least theoretically is offered choices. It is, in other words, the self-assertion of a bourgeois middle class that orients itself towards the idealized, if not even fetishized, upper classes and distinguishes itself from the abject lower ones. A re-evaluation of housing conditions can thus be read as manifestation of a change in the cultural semantics of this bourgeois self, its self-observations, and self-descriptions, which is rendered visible in two intertwined, yet complementary movements: the devaluation of the spacious and large on the one hand, and the simultaneous increase in appreciation of the little on the other.

For quite some time now, popular culture has witnessed this development. In 2018, for instance, Netflix streamed the series *The Haunting of Hill House,* a loose adaptation of the famous Gothic novel of the same title, which was written by Shirley Jackson and published in 1959. While the plot of the TV adaptation takes place in two temporal frames, with a span of 26 years between them, the narration jumps back and forth on these timelines. In the earlier timeframe, the Crain family buys and moves into a stately, yet somewhat shabby mansion – the eponymous Hill House – in order to renovate and then sell it. Due to several complications with the renovation, they are forced to repeatedly delay their plans of selling the house. At the same time, they increasingly experience supernatural phenomena, which ultimately force them to flee the house. The mother Olivia, however, is left

behind and tragically dies within the mansion. Almost three decades later, the remaining family Crain returns to Hill House in order to work through their past and present traumas.

During the show's ten episodes it becomes increasingly clear that the house is not merely a symbol for several desires and fears, both latent and manifest, or the arena in which the return of the repressed is acted out. It is all those things, for sure. At the same time, however, it is positioned as an agent in its own right, with its own desire, power, and possibly even consciousness, which becomes manifest in some of the house's architectural features.

Maybe the most profound of its many mysteries is the so-called Red Room. Introduced already in the first episode as a chamber that is conspicuously located at the top of a picturesque spiral staircase and hidden behind a locked door that seemingly has been resisting all attempts of opening it for several years, it is revealed in the course of the series that the room in fact was entered by individual family members on several occasions, each of which experienced it differently. "Mom says that a house is like a body and that every house has eyes and bones and skin and a face. This room is like the heart of the house. No, not a heart, a stomach. It was your dance studio, Theo. It was my toy room. It was a reading room for mom, a game room for Steve, a family room for Shirley, a tree house. But it was always the Red Room. It put on different faces so that we'd be still and quiet while it digested. I'm like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside." The anthropomorphism of the house that is invoked here forcefully underlines its agency. The real horror of the house, though, lies not in its agency, or at least not only. Rather, it is to be found in the uncontained, uncontrollable, and transgressive largeness. By presenting the Red Room in several forms to individual family members, the house is larger than it appears, rendering the occupants 'tiny'.

Similar motifs also come to the fore in *Locke & Key*, a TV show that is based on the comic book series of the same title. The adaptation links violent family trauma to an immensely spacious building. After the brutal murder of the family patriarch, the surviving members of the Locke family move to his ancestral home – Keyhouse. While the mother is overly obsessed with renovating and redecorating the house – that is, making it their home – the three children successively discover several keys that literally unlock Keyhouse's secrets, most of which are ways of spatially extending and expanding the house. The so-called 'mirror-key', for

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instance, opens up vast dimensions within any mirror in the house, whereas the 'head-key' allows access to the mind of any individual, which significantly is represented as a sequence of walkable rooms. While *Locke & Key* is thus overtly concerned with the dialectics of mobility and constraint and its related power struggles, the threat of the house stems from potentially being spatially unbound. In a way that not even Freud would have dreamed of, the narrative of uncanny largeness constitutes something unheimlich about the respective homes.

However, this is not exclusive to popular culture, as also the contemporary novel becomes a site where this phenomenon is negotiated. Mark Z. Danielewski's postmodern masterpiece *House of Leaves* prominently features a house in which the internal measurements are larger than the external ones. While initially the difference amounts to less than an inch, the interior of the house increasingly expands in the course of the plot. The exterior proportions, however, remain unaltered. Eventually, a dark hallway opens up in an exterior living room wall, not leading outside – as would be expected – but inwards, into a vast, labyrinthian abyss. The space that opens up thus ends up threatening not only the novel's protagonist, but also any notions of order, representation, identity, and

meaning.

Less experimental in its formal capacities but not less striking is Susanne Clarke's *Piranesi*, arguably the best novel that was published amidst the pandemic in 2020. In it, the eponymous hero and narrator sets out to explore and cartograph a Borgesian building simply called The House. He seems to share it only with an ominous man he calls the Other, whom, however, he rarely encounters. The gargantuan building consists of three storeys – clouds and birds in the upper halls, the sea and fish in the lower ones respectively – and is so expanding that one could take weeks wandering through its almost endless halls and vestibules. While Piranesi is ultimately rescued from this almost solipsistic solitude, he has to realize that The House proves to be a *pharmakon* that, simultaneously being remedy and poison, will cause the dissolution of the self.

The perilous self turns inward – not necessarily to introspectively fathom the depths of the immaterial psyche, but the material structures of private life. This is done, first and foremost, in the mode of renunciation, which is evident in the currently ubiquitous enthusiasm for rearranging, even minimizing the interior, of which Marie Kondo's *Magic of Tidying Up* is perhaps the most prominent example, but by no means the only one. But it is also evident in the tiny houses and their promises. A certain paradox is articulated here, because they seem to embrace a lifestyle that appears simple, yet simultaneously ostentatious. Accordingly, tiny houses are predominantly marketed at environmentally conscious consumers, who share most of the cultural values and social habitus of previous generations, but lack their financial power, access to undeveloped areas, and the assurance of a settled way of life.

Indeed, tiny houses possibly can contribute to a reduced ecological footprint of their owners, as they enforce a necessary reduction in consumed resources and commodities. What is more, they usually rely considerably on recycled construction material, renewable energy sources, and the reprocessing of water. It would be a fallacy, however, to assume that this would constitute an avant-garde movement that pushes a sustainable dwelling agenda. Instead, and quite similar to Kondo and other contemporary advocates of minimalism, they represent a class that has come to understand its minimalist socio-aesthetics as a continuous, egomaniacal expression of its own joyful, accomplished, sophisticated, and problem-solving ways of life. As a performative practice, this set of

behavioural patterns brings about what could be called the cultural politics of singularities, in which the social logic of a common standard loses its hegemonic status to the social logic of the uniquely individual. Tiny dwellings instead of terraced houses.

To some extent, this can explain why tiny houses predominantly occupy rural spaces, and not the densely populated urban ones, which would profit more directly from such spatially economic building. The brilliant individual would be overshadowed in a typical city setting. What is more, opposed to high-rise buildings which, by necessity, must provide big and functionally anonymous apartment structures, tiny houses tend to be single-family homes. In relation to the outer surface, they provide comparably little living space, which not only renders their alleged savings in energy futile, but also indicates that, at its core, the structure of feeling underlying this dwelling reform is ultimately conservative. Tiny houses, in other words, become the medium in which a privileged class almost re-enacts and thus almost desperately upholds a status quo that, so far, assured their well-being and affluence. However, several crises of late modernity put pressure on the conventional middle class, which finds it increasingly hard to make itself a home that befits its cultural imaginaries. In the face of the annihilation of the possibilities of dwelling, the retreat to the small and the managerial reorganisation of interior spaces is by no means about self-optimisation, as is occasionally claimed. Rather, it is sheer self-defence.

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Housing and Homelessness in 21st-century Ireland

Kieran Harrington

Ireland took a particularly hard hit during the Financial Crisis 2008, exacerbating the problem of homelessness. Despite various efforts such as the "The Way Home" strategy 2008-2013, which was supposed to tackle the reasons for homelessness and to end rough sleeping by 2013, almost a decade later, the issue have not been resolved. In his article, Kieran Harrington (Dortmund) evaluates several governmental strategies to address the housing crisis, and comments on the contemporary Irish attitudes towards the underlying societal problems.

Prologue

As I went down Aston Quay toward the Ha'penny Bridge, the last time I visited Dublin, just before Christmas 2019, there were people sleeping in almost every doorway. I was shocked. When I was growing up in the poverty-stricken Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s, I swear I can't remember having seen anyone sleeping in the streets of Cork. There *was* homelessness, we were told in school, but that was the alkies and the junkies, and the Simon Community[1] put them up for the night.

At the end of January, 2021, there were 8,313 people homeless in Ireland.[2] This number does not include the hidden homeless – the women and children in domestic violence refuges, the sofa surfers, the squatters and the rough sleepers. So, there are a lot more out there. But the most shocking aspect of this figure is that it includes 966 families with 2,320 children.

Family homelessness was unheard of in the second half of twentieth-century Ireland, in large part due to the post-1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty extension of the social housing campaign first

introduced by the British Government. That golden age of social housing reached its peak in the late 1950s when it accounted for 55% of all new housing in the state (Norris 2018). The Celtic Tiger brought it to its knees.

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The main cause of family homelessness in Ireland is the housing crises and personal indebtedness, both, ironically, spill-over consequences of the Celtic Tiger, the economic boom which made Ireland, in most Irish people's illusion, one of the wealthiest nations on earth. Illusion because while the GDP per capita rated Ireland as one of the wealthiest nations in the world in the boom years, the economic truth was better reflected in GNP, which excluded the money transnational corporations sent home. The GNP put us in our place as just average in the EU (O'Toole 2010). Another illusion under which most Irish people live is that the Celtic Tiger was attributable to *laissez-faire* economic policies and particular politicians, such as Bertie Ahern, the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) from 1997 to 2008. The truth is that Ireland and Bertie Ahern were just in the right place at the right time. Not much to do with *laissez-faire* economics at all, Ireland was simply climbing up to the heights of the rest of Western Europe on the scaffolding of the £8.6 billion that the EU injected into Ireland between 1987 and 1998. Then came the mid-1990s world economic boom which sent American companies scampering to the quaint English-speaking little Cayman Islands on the colder side of the Atlantic.

Unfortunately, when things were getting better, Bertie Ahern and Fianna Fáil, who inherited the Celtic Tiger in 1997, missed the opportunity to invest the new money to create an equal society. When the economic growth began to slow down after 2000, still trying to make us believe we were rich, the government aggravated the situation with its "false economy of facades and fictions" (O'Toole 2010), instead of listening to the economists who were warning of a fast-approaching housing-bubble prick. Morgan Kelly (2007), for example, a professor of economics in University College Dublin, made his prediction based on his examination of 40 previous housing booms and busts. Bertie Ahern was not amused. His response, in a speech given at a conference of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in July 2007, was that he did not know how people like that "don't commit suicide." The government, though, knew that the foundations of the economic edifice were compromised, but hoped that their fostering of building over manufacture, continued spending, and dependence on international markets

to finance the greedy developers, would break the fall from the façade. These policies ultimately led to a further surge and peak in house prices in early 2007. According to a report by the Department of the Environment Community and Local Government (DECLG) in 2014, the overall house-price increase between 1991 and 2007 was 429% in Dublin and 382% in Ireland as a whole.

When the shit hit the fan in August 2008, it was the lower-paid who got splattered. Household debt had risen from €47.2 billion in 2002 to over €139.8 billion by the end of 2007 (Kitchin et al. 2015), and with the exception of the civil service and higher private sector, incomes had not grown exponentially – second-hand house prices, for example, had risen to 11.9 times the average industrial wage (ibid.). The thousands of people who had taken out unsustainable mortgages or had been forced into rental agreements well beyond their means, were also the people who were targeted in the post-crash austerity programmes, not the developers, not the bankers, and not the rich friends of Fianna Fáil.

In the early hours of September 30th, 2008, the new Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, and the Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, had a crisis meeting with leading Irish bankers. Cowen and Lenihan agreed to a bailout guarantee to save their favourite bank, Anglo Irish, whose shares had dropped by 46% during the previous day, 'Meltdown

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Monday', although the government later claimed that the objective was to rescue the whole Irish banking system. All Irish domestic banks had their deposits, loans and obligations guaranteed by the government under the emergency Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act 2008. The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General estimated the cost of the bailout to the Irish taxpayer at €42 billion in the *Report of the Public Services 2018*. The economists talked about future generations having to finance the bailout. But it was the present generation that really had to pay, many with their lives, as recession-related-suicide studies have revealed (Corcoran et al. 2015).

The austerity measures that were introduced by the government in October 2008 to finance the bailout of the banks, on top of the existing rates of income tax (20-42%), included the introduction of a household charge with successive increase, the reduction of the minimum wage, the slashing of public sector jobs, the halving of social welfare payments for people under twenty, the reduction of child benefit payments, the introduction of a universal social charge, a massive increase in third level education fees, the lowering of personal tax credits, the introduction of a property tax, the treatment of maternity benefit payments as taxable income, and a pension levy on civil servant pay which increased from year to year until 2016.

From their peak in 2006, Irish house prices fell by 50% in the next seven years. Those who had bought their first homes at exorbitant prices, many of whom had now lost their jobs or were faced with massive wage cuts, were trapped by negative equity. By 2013, 12.9% of first-time mortgages were in arrears (Central Bank of Ireland 2013) and repossessions and evictions were the order of the day.

In 1999, there were 39,176 people on social housing lists; by the mid-point of the recession (2011) there were 98,318 (Housing Agency 2011). The country was totally unprepared for the catastrophe. The social housing stock had plummeted from 18% of all residences in 1961 to 8% in 2011 (Kitchin et al. 2015; Central Statistics Office 2012). Capital expenditure for social housing was reduced by 80% (from €1.3bn to €275m) between 2008 and 2013. The 230,056 vacant (the Celtic Tiger over-supply) housing units available in 2011 (Kitchin et al. 2015; Central Statistics Office 2012), which were put forward by many as a solution to the homelessness crisis, were mostly unsuitable due to poor planning and the de-regulation of building standards. The estates were built in the back of beyond and many of the suburban apartment blocks were constructed

poorly. Yes, the population had risen by 20% (704,000 people) between 1991 and 2011 (Central Statistics Office 2012), but most of these people worked in the larger cities, not in Leitrim, the most under-populated and under-industrialized county in Ireland. Of these vacant houses, only 3,200 were deemed as usable for social housing by the DECLG (Housing Agency 2012). Although local authorities have purchased houses in some of these residential estates, and have tried to use them as part of an extension of the Government scheme of mixed-tenure and master-planned estates[3] (which allowed a local authority to require developers to set aside up to 20% of new developments for social housing with the two-fold aim of providing affordable housing and facilitating social mix), considerable tension has been generated in these neighbourhoods (Kenna & O'Sullivan 2014).

The result of all this was and is the present homelessness crisis. There was an increase of 68% in homelessness between 2008 and 2011, and strikingly, despite the economic recovery from 2013 onwards, with a growth of 4.8% and a return to Celtic Tiger employment levels, making Ireland the fastest growing economy in the European Union, the number of homeless families has increased by 232% since July 2014.

The Irish government has published various strategy documents, known as *White Papers*, on homelessness and the housing crises since 2008. *The Way Home* (2008) aimed to end adult homelessness by 2013. It failed, but the general strategy itself demonstrates how out of touch the government was with reality. Most of the strategic aims focussed on the improvement of *services* to the homeless. There were 3,000 people homeless in Ireland at the end of 2013.

The document was revised and replaced by the *Homeless Policy Statement*, which promised the eradication of homelessness by 2016. The strategy failed, and in fact, the figures released by the CSO that same year, showed an 81% increase in homelessness since 2011. The next strategy, *Rebuilding Ireland* (2016), an action plan on housing and homelessness, made no promises, and made no inroads. All of these papers emphasized a housing-first approach, but they were all doomed to failure, precisely, because of one sole housing fact: the lack of suitable units. There were 6,061 people homeless in Ireland in mid-2016.

Painstakingly, the advice from the economists and charitable organizations such as Focus Ireland and the Simon Community seems to have got through to the government: the

solution to the present homelessness problem is to build more social housing. In the budget of October 2019, the government pledged €1.1 billion. The aim was to build 11,000 units by 2020 and a further 12,000 by 2021.

There were 8,278 people officially homeless at the end of August 2020. At the time of Budget 2020 only 1,055 houses had been constructed. There were 8,313 officially homeless people at the end of January 2021. The renting sector is the other hurdle. Consumer Price Index (CPI) control, security of tenure, the possibility of long-term contracts, and third-party deposit-retention work quite well in most continental countries; however, successive Irish governments have been slow to introduce serious regulation, mainly due to the pressure of vested interests. A clear indication, however, of the positive impact (for the homelessness problem) of rent regulation, was right in front of their noses in 2020. After the government introduced a short-term ban on rent increases and a short-term ban on evictions when the first pandemic lockdown began in March 2020, there was a short-term decrease in homelessness figures, which reversed again in September 2020 following the lifting of the restrictions.

Epilogue: The Politicians and People of Ireland

After gaining independence in 1922 through the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Ireland has been governed off and on by the two parties that were subsequently formed, one pro-treaty and one anti-treaty. The present government is a coalition of those two parties, coalesced for the first time, not against any particular principled philosophy, but against petty parish-pump politics. But Sinn Féin, the party who were the real winners of the 2020 election, had to be stopped. It was not Sinn Féin's egalitarian agenda at all that was the problem. It was, allegedly, their connection with the IRA and violence, which is still not far enough away enough in time to be contextualised as just a part of history, as are the murders and atrocities perpetrated in the 1920s by the precursors of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Generally, modern-day Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael politicians and anyone who goes into government with them, are far removed from the ordinary people; they have greater concerns than simple social justice and do not see clearly where their allegiances should lie. In the summer of 2000, for example, Mary Harney, *Tánaiste*, second in command to Bertie Ahern at the time, delivered a speech to the American Bar Association

explaining that Europe stood for social inclusion and governmental regulation while America's thing was the freedom of the individual and minimal government. 'Spiritually,' she said, 'we are probably a lot closer to Boston than Berlin' (Brennock 2000). Eight years later, ironically, it was mostly Berlin money that bailed out the unbridled bankers and developers who had brought the country to its knees.

When Ireland's finance minister, Michael Noonan, was asked to comment on the 6,000 young people leaving Ireland every week in 2012, in the fourth year of the recession, he commented that it is 'a free choice of lifestyle.' In 2014, Bertie Ahern, the former Taoiseach, speaking to John Humphreys on BBC4's radio programme *Today*, said that the financial meltdown in Ireland had been caused by the availability of easy credit to cocky 'Joe Soap and Mary Soap, who never had a lot' and 'got the loans for the second house and leveraged the third house off the second house and the fourth on the third' and 'what are you having yourself.' When Leo Varadkar, the subsequent Taoiseach, was asked in a parliamentary debate in January 2018 where people would get the deposit for a new government mortgage scheme, he answered that they could go to their parents – *the Bank of Mum and Dad*.

On the 24th of January, 2020, only thirteen of one hundred and fifty-eight *Teachtaí Dála* (members of parliament), turned up for a *Dáil* debate on child homelessness. There were 3,752 children homeless in Ireland on that day, the 24th of January, 2020.

What about the reaction of the ordinary man and woman in Ireland? Well, there were 92 people sleeping rough in the centre of Dublin in November 2019 (Focus Ireland), so my eyes had not deceived me that night I stood on the quays aghast at the number of people freezing in the doorways. But nobody else seemed in anyway perturbed. People were just heading in and out of the Temple Bar area with only one thought in their minds: the *craic*. But it is not just the revellers who are not interested, a cursory look at the news and social media will tell you that those of us who have a roof over our heads in Ireland don't seem to care that much about those who do not; we have cooler causes.

On the 13th of January, 2020, only two-hundred people marched in Dublin from the Garden of Remembrance to O'Connell Bridge, in protest against homelessness. Most of the protesters were the homeless themselves. In contrast, on the 21st of March, 2015, there were two hundred protest marches alone against water charges – something that other Europeans take for granted – all

around the country. On the 7th of June 2019, several thousand people marched in Dublin to protest against the vacation of President Donald Trump at his own golf resort nearly 300km away in County Clare. On the 1st of June, 2020, ignoring the danger of COVID-19 infection, more than 5,000 people marched through the streets of Dublin to protest the death of an African-American man, George Floyd, at the hands of the police in Minneapolis.

To be fair, as people we have grown somewhat in the first twenty-one years of the twenty-first century. We have risen up for issues such as LGBT rights, same-sex marriage, gender equality, and the repeal of the cruel 8th Amendment of the Constitution on abortion. However, despite the irony of Bertie Ahern's attack on cocky Joe and Mary Soap, he 'might be onto something there' – as we say in Ireland. Facebook will tell you that the people of Ireland can't wait for the pandemic to be over so that we can jet back over to New York on a Friday afternoon with the girls on the hen and the boys on the stag and *whatever you're having yourself*. And a Sunday drive will set you straight on how not only the politicians and the developers and the bankers were building castles in the air: the garish gated estates in the suburbs, the abandoned mansions along the country roads, and the wishful-thinking cast-iron gates in front of the little *tigíní*,[4] are the tell-tale signs of the Irish Napoleon complex run amok.

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In the twentieth century, the people of Ireland turned a blind eye to the terrible repression of unmarried mothers and their children: we were afraid of the Catholic Church and de Valera. In the twenty-first century we are still turning a blind eye, not only because we are running scared and think that homelessness and poverty are catching, but because we have, as Fintan O'Toole (2010) calls it, a fragile morality. How else could Micheál Martin, a minister in the government that sold us down the Swannie in the early 2000s, be the present prime minister? How else could former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ray Burke, get his highest ever vote after *Hibernia* magazine had demonstrated that he had taken a bribe from developers? How else could Michael Lowry, after resigning from his position as Minister for Transport because of his involvement in a tax evasion scam, get an extra 4,000 votes in the subsequent election?[5] Because we love the *cute hoor*[6] who can manipulate the system for our benefit. We have played along with parish-pump politics and voted into power people who are, ironically, more suited to *cute-hooring* the ol' planning permission for us, than making sure that everyone in the country has a roof over their heads. At the end of February 2021, there were 8,238 people officially homeless in Ireland.

The degradation of these real human beings can be ended once and for all by the government getting its act together with serious rent-regulation and with the construction of the council houses that were promised in the budgets of 2019 and 2020. But we the people also need to get our own house in order. We have romanticised the hunger and homelessness of the Great Famine of 1847 into a picturesque fantasy poverty, posting on our Facebooks and Instagrams the lovely deserted cottages and villages in Connemara and the sculptures of the poor emigrants, the most famous one placed, ironically, right in front of the International Financial Services Centre in Dublin. Twenty-first century Irish homelessness is anything but picturesque. And we're not going to find it down the Wild Atlantic Way, another fantasy, another illusion. It is right in front of us in the city streets. As I write these final sentences, there are 2,624 children homeless in Ireland. They are not only deprived of the normal developmental milestones of the child and of being just kids; they are hungry because their parents do not have the facilities in the rooms of the shoddy emergency hotels to cook them a proper meal. They are hungry. Again.Today, the Irish people need to forge not just the conscience of a race. We need to forge a modicum of reality, morality, humility and empathy. We need to get fucking real.

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Endnotes

1 The Simon Community, first established in London in 1963, is a charity that supports homeless people in the UK and Ireland.

2 All data for homelessness come from monthly reports released by the Irish Government Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and from the Central Statistics Office.

3 Ireland's Planning and Development Act (2000)

4 *Tigín* is an Irish Gaelic word for a tiny house. The plural is *tigíní*.

5 For a full account of the Ray Burke and Michael Lowry scandals, see O'Toole, 2010.

6 *Cute hoor* is an Irish-English term derived from the Irish pronunciation of *cute* and *whore*. It refers to parochial politics and the idea of getting ahead or getting things done depending on who you know (connections) rather than what you know (education).

Lockdown!

Re-Assessing Home in COVID-19 British Fiction

Sarah Heinz

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted issues of housing, people's sense of home and dwelling. With a majority of the British population confined to their homes during lockdowns, the pandemic and governmental responses to it have made glaringly evident the social inequalities inscribed in and expressed through the way people choose or are forced to live. Sarah Heinz (Vienna) addresses the cultural politics of home – or domopolitics – during the pandemic in a close reading of one of the first fictional texts published during the pandemic addressing lockdown measures, Peter May's novel Lockdown. (*2020*).

When COVID-19 hit countries in Europe at the beginning of 2020, most governments reacted by imposing a range of restrictions to slow the spread of the virus. Chief among these restrictions was putting societies into lockdown, a measure that included social distancing, staying inside, or working (and schooling) from home. Slightly later than other European countries and amidst a hot debate about their necessity, the UK installed lockdown measures starting on 23 March 2020, with Boris Johnson telling people in a ministerial broadcast: "You must stay at home." (BBC News 2020)

The lockdown forced people, under threat of police penalties, to remain in their private homes, an experience that made many re-evaluate this seemingly familiar space. Instead of a warm, cosy space of retreat, home became associated with tedium and dullness at best or isolation and imprisonment at worst. This changing sense of home during the lockdown had several, often immediate effects within British society. Studies conducted in the UK showed a surge in health anxieties and mental health problems (see Rettie and Daniels 2020), a slowed experience

of time with increasing age and decreasing satisfaction with the levels of social interaction (see Ogden 2020), and increasing educational inequalities, with students from less well-off families having less access to study space and time at home (see Andrew et al. 2020). It became obvious for many people that home is not 'their' private refuge but open to public interference and a site of negative feelings and social disparities.

The pandemic thus highlighted problematic aspects of home as a space of isolation and inequalities but also government control and public, even police intervention. The article takes this re-evaluation of home as its cue. I assume that COVID-19 and the ambivalent experiences of home spaces and practices during the lockdown bring into sharp focus already existing but often hidden ambivalences and anxieties within widely shared positive notions of home. I will focus on Peter May's thriller *Lockdown*, published in April 2020 and set in a London under strict curfew. The novel allegedly is the first English-language COVID-19 novel. Written in 2005 during the bird flu epidemic, publishers had rejected the novel then because they found it unrealistic, stating that this "could never happen" (May 2020, x). Telling his publisher about it in 2020, May reports that "my editor just about fell out of his chair. He read the entire book overnight and the next morning he said, 'This is brilliant. We need to publish this now.'" (Elassar 2020). My thesis is that, by showing a society confined to their homes, the novel fosters a sense of home as a space of imprisonment and control. This awareness uncovers ideals of a bounded private home as a construction and questions positive associations of home as warmth, belonging, and safety.

Re-assessing Home during Lockdown

Framing my analysis of May's thriller, I want to contrast positive notions of home with their re-assessment during lockdown. So, what is home, then, in the first place? In spite of the intuitive easiness with which most people approach the idea of home, it is notoriously tricky to define as soon as you look closer. Home is a multidimensional term that may refer to physical structures, social units, a place of origins, concrete practices, or affective ties. It is a place, a performance, a feeling, or a sense of self, all at the same time (see Mallett 2004). However, what most associations share is their seeming stability. Morley describes such an understanding of home as part of a sedentary discourse that focuses on being there, on staying, rather than on movement (see Morley 2017). This stability of home as a place of staying is usually assessed as positive, because the boundedness of home offers

safety, privacy, even cosiness. This often takes the metaphoric form of home as warmth. As Amy, one of the central protagonists of Peter May's *Lockdown*, remembers, before the pandemic, she used to think of her home as a warm, bounded space to which she could always return after being outside: "Cold days when you wanted to be out walking, striding out with the wind in your face, the cold sting of rain on your cheeks. Hurrying home for a bowl of hot soup, curtains drawn against the night, curled up on the settee with a good book and a glass of soft red wine." (May 2020, 210) Home is associated with staying, but for this staying to be assessed as positive, we need the sense that we can also leave and return.

However, with the inability to come and go as she pleases, Amy's sense of home has changed. She reflects: "And here she was, huddled bleakly in her wheelchair, cold and depressed and letting dark thoughts creep in to cloud her usual sunny disposition." (May 2020, 210) Warmth turns into cold and the inability to go outside and come back in creates a sense of isolation and even claustrophobia. Lockdown had this effect for many people. William Walters' concept of domopolitics is highly useful in grasping this change that home underwent. Taken from the political sciences, domopolitics "implies a reconfiguring of the relations between citizenship, state, and territory. At its heart is a fateful conjunction of home, land and security. It rationalizes a series of security measures in the name of a particular conception of home" (Walters 2004, 241). In short, Walters attempts to explore contemporary governance and security through an analysis of aspirations to "govern the state like a home" (2004, 237). He shows that the justification of this aspiration cashes in on widespread positive associations with home as "hearth, a refuge or a sanctuary in a heartless world" (Walters 2004, 241), while playing on the fears and anxieties underlying a conception of home as "our place, where we belong naturally, and where, by definition, others do not" (Walters 2004, 241). Playing on positive imaginaries of home while mobilizing the fear of losing this home is then, ultimately, used to explain to the individual citizen why the will to control or 'securitize' the homeland will also require measures that will impact the home life and practices of individual citizens. This governmental strategy was key to explaining and justifying the lockdown to the public, and a couple of years previous it was at the heart of pro-Brexit propaganda to 'take back control'.

Home arrangements are thus sites upon which ideas and ideals of a community are acted out without assuming that these home arrangements are natural or unchanging. Rather than

a private space or respite from social norms, home is "intensely political both in its internal relationships and through its interfaces with the wider world over domestic, national and imperial scales" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 142). What lockdown thus made obvious is that home is and always had been open to public interference, even before the pandemic. In a sense, the closure of home showed its openness to intervention and power politics.

Reading Home in the Pandemic: Peter May's *Lockdown*

Turning to Peter May's novel *Lockdown* now, I would claim that literary imaginings of home play a crucial role in how we can make sense of this re-assessment of home. Reading a literary text in which home spaces are represented is an act of performing our identification with or distancing from evaluations and uses of home. As readers, we are spectators of a narrator's or protagonist's home spaces and home-making practices, and each text mobilises pre-existent knowledge about norms of behaviour, decorum, and social position. Fictions of home can thus help to make explicit the categories, or, in Stuart Hall's terms, the 'regimes of representation', that we as readers use to make sense of home. If home is a construction with real effects on individual lives and communities, it becomes crucial to scrutinize how media like literature bring notions of home into being and how such representations can both reinforce and question existing power structures.

Lockdown cover © hachette.com.au

It is therefore interesting to look at the role of reading during lockdown. While in most sectors, one decisive effect of the pandemic was a steep drop in household spending, fiction sales, in the UK, "climbed by a third […] in the final week of March [2020]" (Charlton 2020). Staying at home in self-isolation made people turn to reading, an activity that enabled those affected to both escape their four walls and "understand what is happening around us" (Charlton 2020). At the same time, authors rushed to publish the first novel dealing with the pandemic. With May being among the first to pull off this feat, I think it is telling that his text zooms in on the politics of home specifically, embedding his crime story in detailed descriptions of home spaces

and practices and their dark side. The novel thematises people's changing sense of home on several levels, and I want to take a closer look at two of these. First, I will trace how interior spaces are presented, concentrating on how unhomely or even uncanny houses become. Secondly, I will shortly look at the novel's problematic depiction of specific home places as inherently deficient, even before the pandemic, and the intersection of class, racialisation and ideas of home in May's representation of a housing estate in Lambeth.

So, to start with interior spaces, *Lockdown* begins with a prologue narrated from the perspective of a female protagonist, a little girl who is first unnamed. The short chapter is told in the present tense and printed in italics, separating it from the rest of the novel. With this prologue, the thriller begins in medias res and with the murder that will set off the plot of the rest of the novel: "*Her scream echoes through the dark, squeezed through a throat constricted by fea*r." (May 2020, 1) Right in the first sentence, the novel uses images of darkness and confinement, experienced in the body of the victim. These images are then taken up to describe the house, when the narrator muses upon the fact that no one will hear her scream: "*But the thick walls of this old house wrap themselves around the horror of the night, to ensure that the only ears to hear her are deaf to her plight.*" (May 2020, 1) The motif of being wrapped up does not conjure up the cosiness of a blanket you use to snuggle up on the couch. It rather expresses that she cannot get help because she cannot get out, and the house is cold, frightening, and, ultimately, a dungeon. While the girl is unable to get out, inanimate objects like the walls or the cold air take on an uncanny agency: "[…] *the cold, damp air wraps itself around her.*" (May 2020, 3)

The rest of the prologue gives the reader a detailed tour of the house, describing rooms, carpets, the stained glass window of the front door, or the stairwell. In the acknowledgements at the end of the novel, Peter May thanks "Graham and Fiona Kane for letting me plagiarise their home" (2020, 399), which is yet another indication that this 'tour' of the house attempts to create the sense of a real, lived-in home space only to undermine this feeling in the same moment. This tour, therefore, is not a pleasurable journey through a cosy family home, but the girl's frantic flight from her killer, and the sentence "*There is no way out.*" is repeated twice (May 2020, 2; 4). She is finally apprehended in the bomb shelter that the former residents built during WWII. The scene again inverts positive associations with home, this time through the use of terms of endearment and family

relations: "*The handle turns, and she presses herself back against the wall as slowly the door opens.* […] *He crouches slowly and reaches a hand towards her. She cannot see his face, but she can hear him smile. 'Come to Daddy,' he says softly.*" (May 2020, 4) The ending of the prologue with this gesture of reaching out towards the child and the emphasis on the slowness and softness of the killer approaching, turns positive associations with home and family upside down. The parent is the ultimate danger, and the family home is a prison and a slaughterhouse. In the context of the genre of *Lockdown*, the thriller, home becomes the prime setting for the radical uncertainty at the heart of the genre, and the claustrophobia of a space that is familiar to the reader, maybe even the place where we are reading the novel itself, adds to "the *intensity* of the experience [the thriller] delivers" (Glover 2003, 138).

May's re-assessment of home is not entirely unproblematic, though. In spite of the novel's awareness of the openness of home to inequalities such as gender and ethnicity, first and foremost in the backstory of the victim, who is a Chinese girl brought to the UK, May nevertheless repeats well-established stereotypes of specific home spaces (and the people living there) as inherently deficient and dangerous (see Heinz 2016). This naturalisation of improper, deficient homes becomes most obvious in a scene set on a "1960s council estate on the southern edge of Lambeth" (May 2020, 148). Biological and nature metaphors dominate the description, with the "detritus of abandoned households" described as "seaweed on a beach after the storm" and burned-out cars as "the carcasses of so many dead animals" (May 2020, 148). When D.I. Jack McNeil, the investigating officer in the murder case, visits the council estate, he finds it "hard to believe that anyone still lived here. And yet, he could see, along the covered walkways on each floor, freshly painted doors, and windows with clean, white net curtains." (May 2020, 149) The adjectives 'fresh', 'white', and 'clean' imply an unspoken, white, and middle-class ideal of home-making that sets the standards for what a 'good' home is in the first place. The acceptance of this implicit ideal is underlined by the following sentence that again uses a metaphor connected to biology, likening the freshly painted doors and clean curtains to "the occasional good tooth in a mouth full

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of decay" (May 2020, 149). McNeil's astonishment that "anyone still lived here" can therefore be read as the novel's corroboration of naturalised ideals of 'good' homes, in spite of its previous problematisation of positive associations with home outlined above.

The depiction of the council estate's inhabitants emphasises this problematic naturalisation and normalisation of unspoken ideals of home. The "hell" of the council estate (May 2020, 148) is peopled with characters who are assigned to an unsavable underclass of lethal-minded chavs, whose features are assessed as "the genetic inheritance of generations of poverty" (May 2020, 150). When McNeil is attacked by a mixed-race group of chav lads, this is one of the very few scenes in the novel when the reader feels that the officer is in real danger of dying. Taking into account that, at the end of the novel, McNeil has caught the deadly virus and will most probably die soon, this near-death scene on the council estate creates a parallel between the virus and the underclass masses living in this deficient home space: "These kids were like wild, wounded animals. They were armed, and they meant to kill him." (May 2020, 158) In this depiction, *Lockdown* reinforces rather than questions social inequalities based on class and race and presents the broken, disorderly council estate as the natural habitat of a deficient, racialised underclass (for an analysis of the racialisation of class and notions of the chav, see Schmitt 2018). The danger emanating from the council estate and its inhabitants is not presented as an effect of the pandemic or the virus, but rather brought out, in all its extremity, by the extreme situation that the whole of Britain finds itself in.

Conclusion

To conclude, home is a contested concept, but for most people it used to be a stable, bounded, and mostly positive place of warmth. This positive sense of home can be re-assessed due to experiences of lockdown. Being confined to home, *having* to stay rather than *being able* to stay, brings out the negative side of home, its unhomeliness, as well as its openness to public intervention in practices like curfew, social distancing, and police control. Peter May's thriller *Lockdown* does not simply use this scenario as a background for a crime story, but rather works through the unhomeliness of home spaces in order to show that human agency, the freedom to move, and the privacy and safety of our houses and bodies is fragile and open to interventions. Thus, the novel critically revisits conceptions of home as "our place, where we belong naturally, and where, by definition, others do not" (Walters 2004, 241), while also, on levels like class, going

with rather than against naturalisations of home as a space of belonging and ideals of 'good' home-making practices.

The one protagonist, who, ultimately, is most comfortably at home in the London of the novel, is the virus. Accordingly, it is the virus' agency that ends the novel: "In the distance, the first glimmer of light in the winter sky reflected all the way upriver from the east, and McNeil felt the first tickle at the back of his nose, and the first roughness at the back of his throat." (May 2020, 398)

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The Emptiness of British Politics:
Loss, Melancholia, Hauntings

Mark Schmitt

Current British intellectual discourse committed to a left politics seems to be obsessed with loss and the concept of hauntology. Melancholia appears as the prevalent affect. It seems that the political moment can only be meaningfully grasped in the figure of the spectre. In this political column, Mark Schmitt (Dortmund) reviews a number of recent publications which seem to point towards an emptiness in current British politics that can be traced to issues of class and national identity.

Whose Fish?

Jacob Rees-Mogg gushing over Britain getting its fish back might be a good place to start when thinking about the emptiness of British politics. In January 2021, after Brexit was completed, when asked about the fishing disaster and whether Scotland's fishing industry would be compensated for it, Rees-Mogg evaded the issue by arguing that what's important was that Britain got its fish back and that they're now "British fish" and "better and happier for it". Rees-Mogg, who might be a bizarrely comedic figure but is not necessarily known for his intentionally comedic talents, apparently meant this to be a joke, but then again, you can never be too sure about that. What his remark does show, though, is a desperate desire to localise British politics. As Solvejg Nitzke has pointed out, fish do not get issued passports and won't bother about anthropocentric and speciecist obsessions with human national belonging (2021).

So, Rees-Mogg's statement is less about the belonging of the fish, but about "having" the fish. And, what is more, it is about British citizens' belonging. Rees-Moog's claim on fish is more about the empty signifiers of Britishness, and thereby, British politics

itself have become empty. British politics is so empty that its noncontent must be vaguely localised in the sea, in nonhuman species who don't care about arbitrary human-made political and ideological borders. The maritime farce is reflective of a wider sense of emptiness, loss and longing in British politics that has also occupied the contemporary left. While Paul Gilroy already diagnosed a "postcolonial melancholia" (2006) that found its expression in a right-wing clinging to long-lost past ideals of Empire and nationhood quite some time ago (and his diagnosis is still very much valid today), we can now see the left in the grip of a special kind of melancholia. This melancholia is more wide-ranging and complex.

An Island of Loss

If the publisher Repeater Books is any indication for current trends in left intellectualism, the left is in a constant state of political and cultural mourning. Melancholia is the affect of the times. In *New Model Island*, Alex Niven addresses the "nostalgia for a country that no longer exists" (2019, 7). The British islands are an "archipelago of loss" (14) and England, its supposed ideological centre, in a "sullen, soulless state of unbeing" (21). No wonder it needs to claim the fish! Niven proposes a radical regionalisation of England which at the same time avoids unionism and nationalism. Building on Tom Nairn's classic argument about the break-up of Britain, Niven opts for the break-up of England – an antidote to England's political emptiness. As radical and future-oriented (he calls it a "sci-fi conjecture" at one point, cf. 126). The underlying thesis of Niven's argument is that current Anglo-British nationalism centres on the melancholic attachment to a void.

Tommy Sisson pursues a similar argument with regard to Anglo-British masculine working-class identities. The systematic erosion of working-class communities and subsequent "liquidity imposed on class by neoliberalism" has led to a withering of class-based identity that has led to a "distinctively masculine, regressively nostalgic and nativist vision of the country, […] an act of desperately grasping at nationality in order to fill the void of an unconscious mourning of class consciousness and identity" (2021, 5). The resulting "Small Man's England" is equally emptied of actual substance. While, again, Sisson starts with the diagnosis of a melancholia and nostalgia, that is, an unhealthy attachment to something long lost, as the cause of right-wing sentiments, it is indirectly, again, the diagnosis of a long-lost content of left-wing politics as well. For what is there to do for the left if one of its main aims, the forging and enactment of a working-class

consciousness that will form the basis for a socialist politics, can no longer be grounded due to the lack of a coherent working-class sense of community and consciousness?

Class and Melancholia

The resulting "melancholia of class" (a phrase recently proposed by Cynthia Cruz and yet another recent Repeater title) is a particularly difficult sense of loss and mourning: a mourning of something that is not precisely lost, but *officially considered* to be lost: the working-class person knows full well that class still exists, that not everyone is "middle-class" now, nor that they're living in a "classless society". The lived reality of class exists in stark contrast to the official discourse of class, and this is what might account for the melancholic relationship to class. Much like Englishness, which is, as Niven argues, experienced as a "condition of loss" (Niven 2019, 25), class is experienced as a paradoxical void. Perhaps it is because of this chasm between the lived material reality of class and the symbolic sphere of class that we're currently seeing a surge in publications which address the working-class experience in the genre of autoethnography. A couple of contemporary writers have turned to Richard Hoggart's seminal urtext of British cultural studies, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (1957) as a model for their own approach to convey autobiographical experience of and academic research on working-class life today.

In Britain, Lynsey Hanley's *Estates: An Intimate History* (2007) and *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide* (2017) are representative of this trend, while in France, Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (*Retours à Reims*, 2009/2018) and *La société comme verdict* (2013), demonstrate a similar move towards using personal experience of growing up in the working class, but transitioning into the middle class through academic education. Cynthia Cruz, who writes about her experience in the American context, describes the "specter of what the middle class imagine as 'working class'" as her "double", her "working-class self, the ghost of who I left behind when I left my home town, now hidden behind a palimpsest of tropes the middle class invented" (2021, 1-2).

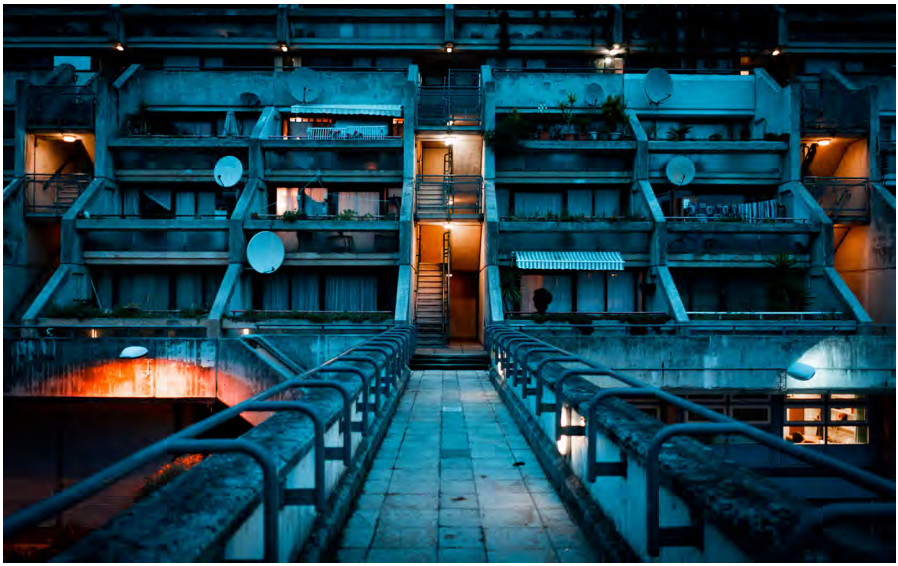
Hanley, Eribon and Cruz might originate from different national and cultural contexts, but they share the same sensibility when it comes to working through the mental bruises and internal conflict resulting from crossing the class divide and facing the challenge to reconcile different class-based identities. It is here that the emptiness and loss of class can be located. This sense of loss and

melancholia is exacerbated by the fact that traditionally socialist parties like Labour no longer offer a politics based on a coherent shared working-class identity. This is where Sisson identifies the danger of losing working-class voters to the lure of right-wing parties which fill the void with a sense of identity. Dead, empty signifiers trail behind all of these concepts. It is no wonder, then, that the concept of hauntology is ubiquitous in recent political writings.

Is Everything Haunted?

Many of the writers discussed here are companions or students of Mark Fisher, who co-founded Repeater Books in 2014. Fisher's use of hauntology, based on his reading of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, has proven fruitful for these writers. Everything seems haunted and ghosts of the past and the future are omnipresent: the spectres of class, hauntings of nationalism, the "spectres of revolt" (cf. Gilman-Opalsky 2016), the spectres of the late Mark Fisher himself (see Matt Colquhoun's *Egress: On Mourning, Melancholy and Mark Fisher*, 2020). So, is everything haunted? I recently attended a conference in Cornwall where a speaker proposed that even Keir Starmer might be an embodied haunting, reflecting the deadness of current Labour politics.

While one might cynically suspect the concept of hauntology to be a trend that risks becoming a cliché, it might still be worth



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contemplating why left-wing thinkers in Britain and beyond feel compelled to express their ideas in terms of mourning and hauntings. Is it self-pitying, overindulgence in pretentious theorising? Is it the intellectual fashion of the day, as empty as the phenomena it tries to describe with fancy terminology? Does it testify to a lack of new, vital ideas for an alternative left politics? Is left thinking condemned to working through the debris of the past rather than looking towards the future? Has British politics finally become its own Gothic novel?

If instead taken seriously on its own terms, the current preoccupation with hauntings and loss can point towards melancholia as a dominant political affect or, in Raymond Williams' term, a structure of feeling. It is a means to come to terms with a pervading sense of cognitive dissonance and alienation stemming from the experiences of social class and national (un)belonging that is reflected in the emptiness of a politics that needs to resort to fish as the carriers of political meaning. In that context, it is also worth noting that in the wake of Mark Fisher's seminal books *Capitalist Realism* and *Ghosts of My Life*, depression as an individual mental condition as well as a collective symptom of neoliberal culture has increasingly been politicised. Perhaps this is most accurately reflected in the recent Sleaford Mods song "Mork n Mindy" and accompanying music video directed by Ben Wheatley which shows the band and featured singer Billy Nomates haunting the deserted rooms of a council estate flat, playing with abandoned toys and staring out the windows like ghosts, sometimes accompanied by their own uncanny doubles which appear behind them in the frame. Jason Williamson's lyrics underline the melancholic and hauntological aspects: "I live in a really depressing cul de sac / Where couples get divorced / And people come up that you'd never seen before". Billy Nomates seconds this: "The state of it is alarming, so don't presume anything / Or blue Monday will someday become you." In the video and song, the council house becomes a haunted house that embodies the melancholia of class. Like autoethnographic writings on the experience of working-class life, the song and video thus become a means to culturally reinscribe oneself in the cultural and political imaginary of Britain and to replace emptiness with new meanings.

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"Ghosts Never Leave You":

Remi Weekes' *His House*

Mark Schmitt

By its very nature, horror cinema is a confrontational genre that, apart from dealing with taboo subjects such as death and violence, often addresses uncomfortable social and political issues. Remi Weekes' recent debut film His House is no exception. In this film column, Mark Schmitt (Dortmund) illustrates how Weekes' film allegorically explores issues such as the refugee crisis, racism and housing through the haunted house topos.

Haunted houses are a reliable topos in gothic fiction and horror films. As the case of Shirley Jackson's landmark novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) demonstrates, the haunted house can, as it were, itself become a revenant within the genre: Jackson's story has been returning to haunt audiences in three adaptations for the big and small screen: Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), Jan de Bont's 1999 eponymous remake and Mike Flanagan's serial re-adaptation for Netflix, *The Haunting of Hill House*, in 2018. Whether it is fancy manors such as Hill House, the plain home of the Thatcherite nuclear family haunted by kinky BDSM demons in Clive Barker's novella *The Hellbound Heart* (1986) and his film adaptation *Hellraiser* (1987), or the run-down Liverpudlian council estate haunted by the urban legend "Candyman" in Barker's short story "The Forbidden" (transplanted to the US and turned into a story of racial tensions located in the real-life Cabrini-Green projects in Chicago in Bernard Rose's adaptation *Candyman* in 1992): haunted houses can be much more varied than clichés might suggest. In all of them, however, the idea of home and dwelling is unsettled by a return of the repressed, whether it be individual neuroses, suppressed sexual desires, or the traumas of class and race. Recently, council houses and tower blocks featured frequently in the "hoodie horror" subgenre in British and

Irish films such as Ciarán Foy's *Citadel* (2012), Menhaj Huda's *Comedown* (2012) and Joe Cornish's *Attack the Block* (2011). These films feed on and ironically play with the fears and stereotypes of a feral "underclass" of hoodie-wearing juvenile delinquents populating Britain's forgotten estates.

Remi Weekes' debut film *His House* (2020), which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival right before the pandemic hit and which was released on Netflix later that year, uses the haunted house story as an allegory on the refugee crisis, migration, post-imperial amnesia and race in contemporary Britain. The film's intricate and suggestive narrative centres on Rial (Wunmi Mosaku) and Bol Majur (Sope Dirisu), a South-Sudanese couple who have escaped a massacre during civil unrest in their home country. The first scenes already complicate the reliability of the film's narrative by merging different diegetic levels of time. We see Rial and Bol boarding truck, carrying a little girl – their daughter? – whom Rial vows to protect; then we see them on a packed boat on the English Channel during a storm, the boat overturning, then a cut to Bol waking up in a British detention camp. "You're dreaming", his wife tells him, alerting the audience to the compromised reliability of much of what is about to be shown.

Rial and Bol are called in front of a hearing board which will decide on their status as asylum seekers. "Don't get your hopes up", a fellow detainee demoralised by the necropolitical terror regime of the British and European border warns them, "they'll send you back to die like the bastards always do." Despite this warning, the following hearing – a demeaning experience resembling more a court trial than the treatment of people who have just escaped a war – is a turning point for the couple. The board tells them that they're "on bail" as asylum seekers, but "not as citizens". The white board members are not impressed when Bol assures them that he and his wife are "good people". The Majurs need to prove themselves fit for what Home Secretary Theresa May vowed in 2012 to make a "really hostile environment for illegal immigrants". They might have fled certain death in their home country, but they have entered what Orlando Patterson calls "social death" – the ontological condition in which Black bodies exist as objects constituting the white subject in (post-)colonial societies. Rial and Bol are granted accommodation – a shabby, insect-infested council house in the suburbs of London which their case worker Mark (Matt Smith) calls a "paradise." Since their behaviour and treatment of the property is strictly monitored and may result in sanctions or refusal of asylum, their possibilities

are limited. Bol and Rial are expected to simulate "proper" dwelling and thereby assimilate into British culture. As socially abject non-citizens – people who even the curate of the local church merely refers to as "some of them refugees" – , they are allowed to inhabit an abject space.

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The abandoned council house as the epitome of social rejection and stigmatisation is the fitting setting for Weekes' allegorical horror film. Even before the Majurs are being visited and threatened by a supernatural apparition which Rial identifies as an "apeth", a "night witch" of African folklore, it seems like they themselves are haunting the run-down house and the surrounding estate. Through Rial and Bol's eyes, the viewer experiences the district as a threatening white space. In a particularly impressive sequence starting with an extreme long shot and continuing with dizzying camera movements that convey her sense of disorientation, Rial is walking the neighbourhood in search of a local surgery, getting lost in what seems to be a dead-ended maze of tower blocks and plain concrete, a spatial manifestation of the UK Home Office hostile environment policy, populated by mean-spirited teenagers who tell her to "go back to fucking Africa." Meanwhile, Rial's husband makes every effort to adapt to British culture by mimicking local customs (an awkward scene shows him joining the chant of a bunch of white football fans) and constantly reasserting himself of the new place they inhabit now: "we're in London."

As if the constant threat of racist abuse, alienation and deportation wasn't enough, however, the couple start to antagonise each other as the nocturnal visits of the "apeth" become more and more intense. The apparition triggers a conflict around the loss of their daughter during the passage of the English Channel. The apeth urges Bol to confront his repressed guilt about what really happened on their escape from South Sudan. Gradually, the narrative reveals the harrowing truth of what happened to the Majurs to its full extent. The haunting as the return of the repressed not only functions as a personal, subjective story.

Considering the historical context – British colonial rule in what used to be Anglo-Egyptian Sudan until 1956, the troubled history of British-Sudanese relations in recent times and the series of violent conflict in the region as a product of its conflicted colonial history – the haunting assumes a more wide-ranging allegorical function. As Adam Lowenstein has argued, in a nod to Walter Benjamin, confrontational horror films can use allegory to "blast open the continuum of history" (2005, 12) to confront the audience with the historical trauma embedded in their culture. In that respect, *His House* works through Britain's post-imperial amnesia about its impact on the African continent as well as its current role in diplomatic conflicts. Bol's eagerness to assimilate into British (i.e. white) culture to forget and leave behind his past actions thus equally becomes representative of a more wide-ranging identity crisis that is marked by the histories and present manifestations of racism and post-imperialism. While his wife says about the Sudanese Civil War that she "survived by belonging nowhere", Bol desperately wants to belong somewhere. But he can't even, in a Freudian inflection, be the master in his own house as long as he doesn't confront his own responsibility and trauma.

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No More Playing in the Dark:

Assembly by Natasha Brown

Harald Pittel

The pre-publication praise Natasha Brown received for her debut novel *Assembly* (2021) from renowned writers like Bernardine Evaristo or Ali Smith is quite remarkable.[1] The author had been virtually unknown to the larger public before winning one of the London Writers Awards in the literary fiction category in 2019. As a young Black British woman of Jamaican descent, Brown meets the criteria defined by Spread the Word, the organisation behind the Awards helping underrepresented writers to develop and publish their work, with an overall aim of reflecting diversity and creating inclusivity.[2] *Assembly* highlights the discriminating intersections of race, gender and class in today's Britain and tells a story of social ascendancy, of a Black female narrator-protagonist who has overcome her lower-class background and has managed to obtain a top position in a London-based finance company. While this partially invites an autobiographical reading – Brown, who holds a Cambridge degree in mathematics, also made her career in the finance industry – *Assembly* is a far cry from celebrating the glory of making it to the top and instead exposes this goal as utterly questionable.

The first striking thing about the book is its length, just a bit over 13.000 words, mostly presented as vignettes, with much blank space in-between. This format, not untypical of millennial fiction, might help make the work easily consumable just like social media posts. But then, this approach also asks the critical reader to close the gaps on her own, to figure things out for herself – a strategy of walking the line between prose and poetry which Brown shares with Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* (1985) as well as more recent 'gappy' works by Patricia Lockwood and Jenny Offill. Reminiscent of the subjective narrative voices of Virginia

Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, but also resonating contemporary novelists and poets like Rachel Cusk and Claudia Rankine, the fragmentary story told in *Assembly* is presented as a process of recollecting and reflecting, bits of memory and insights popping up in the mind and connecting into larger units in which self and reality are scrutinized. The reader is positioned to become involved in this process of associative introspection and actively co-construct the unnamed narrator's outlook, a sharp analytic voice that is both tormenting and lucid. The story departs from three snapshots setting a dark note that looms over the whole narrative. Memories of sexual harassment and everyday racism add up to portray the painful experience of intersectional discrimination, aggravated by a more ominous hostile climate whose origins *Assembly* explores in detail.

At first sight, the narrator's overall situation would appear not so hopeless at all. We see her give "inspirational" motivational talks at schools to encourage young underprivileged students to follow her example and reach out for the better-paid jobs.[3] Moreover, the narrator is not alone: we learn about her best friend Rach, "a Home Counties, Kate-loving, Jaeger-shopping, Lean In-feminist" with whom she is able to access an "un-storied and direct" level of herself.[4] The reader also gets to know that the narrator has recently moved to a better home in a gentrified part of London, has a white English boyfriend from a wealthy, respectable and influential family, and, on top of that, is unexpectedly promoted to a leading position in her company. Seen in this light, there would be some reason for optimism indeed, as the narrator cannot help but notice that she has got "everything".[5]

However, there is a dark undercurrent from the very beginning which soon comes to the fore to overshadow the whole story. The narrator is diagnosed with cancer and refuses to undergo therapy, leaving her doctor puzzled and helpless; she also keeps it secret from her boyfriend. More and more clearly, every aspect of her life comes to appear in a questionable light. The promotion in her finance company will have to be shared with a male (white) colleague who has shown less commitment than herself, to say the least. The everyday micro-aggressions of misogyny and racism are not going to stop. As it becomes despairingly obvious to the narrator during a train ride to her boyfriend's parents, who live in a posh English countryside estate, her ascent on the social ladder will not bring about a process of integration into a community of equal citizens. Her success story turns out to be a one-way ticket towards assimilation without

the prospect of real acceptance. Still being asked where she is "originally from", being profiled according to her skin colour even in the most harmless everyday situations – all this means that she is not seen as a "real Brit": "This is not home".[6] It is in the wake of these reflections that the narrator feels like a traitor for her motivational talks given at schools, fearing she might have set a false example for people like her younger sister who are now walking in her footsteps.

More than once, one is reminded of Jordan Peele's 'assimilation horror' classic, *Get Out* (2017). Whiteness becomes increasingly 'strange' as the narrator's half-paralysed gaze reduces humans to body parts, for instance, when overseeing her naked boyfriend's "[c]ock pink against his thigh",[7] or when observing his mother's machine-like movements while chewing a buttered toast:

> The entire side of her face is engaged in this elaborate mechanical action until, climactically, the soft-hung skin of her neck contracts familiar and the ground-down-mushed-up toast, saliva and butter, worked into a paste, squeezes down; is forced through the pulsing oesophagus, is swallowed.
>
> She lifts the mug to her mouth, and drinks.[8]

This denigrating gaze, however, all but mirrors the narrator's own status as object rather than subject, as she perceives herself as the product of 'othering', "the stretched-taut membrane of a drum, against which their identity beats".[9]

Brown's short narrative is not quite as loosely organised as it might seem. In fact, its well-devised structure is constructed around the central and ambivalent concept of 'assembly', a key word that first pops up in the school assembly halls where the narrator gives her inspirational talks. The word 'assembly' according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* has among its definitions an emphatic political meaning in terms of "a gathering of persons for the purpose of deliberation and decision"; however, common uses of 'assembly' refer more generally to a coming together for organisational, ritual or entertainment purposes. It is in the latter sense that the narrator thinks of her Jamaican relatives in terms of an idyllic family-like gathering of storytellers, now far removed from her in space and time. By contrast, 'assembly' in a western and corporate context would often entail the subordination to a pre-given order, problematically verging on the etymologically related word 'assimilation'. There is yet another widespread use of 'assembly' signifying, like 'assemblage', a construction of wholes

from parts, which might refer to a bricolage of the self. Thus understood, the primary meaning of 'assembly' in the book would be in terms of an unsettling awareness of a problematic constructedness of identity, which is actually *dissembled* by the narrator as she feels her semblance having lost its ties to her real sense of self, an "untethering of self from experience": "To protect myself, I detach".[10] This insight comes quiet and self-effacing at first, an example of what W.E.B. Du Bois called 'double consciousness', yet a dim sense of a more critical self-awareness slowly awakens as the narrator comes to understand the price paid for her social ascendancy:

> *Be the best. Work harder, work smarter. Exceed every expectation. But also, be invisible, imperceptible. Don't make anyone uncomfortable. Don't inconvenience. Exist in the negative only, the space around.* Do not insert yourself into the main narrative. *Go unnoticed. Become the air.*
>
> *Open your eyes.*[11]

The scrutiny of the compromised and questionable assembly of the self might result in a deconstruction of identity, to an alternative assembly from the analysed parts, a new articulation from elements. While such an outlook is manifest in the narrator's ambiguous wish to "transcend", it does not simply lead up to an overcoming of her fraught identity in terms of a new subject position.[12] A turning point is reached when the narrator visits a garden party at her boyfriend's family estate (a classically English and very 'Woolfian' *locus* for societal reflection): leaving the scene and re-entering "from the periphery"[13], the narrator now becomes more sovereign in controlling

English Country House © Dorsetinman

her gaze and language; still, her critical subjectivity is only beginning to unfold. Instead, the novel ends in a note of openness and uncertainty, as the boyfriend begins to dimly realize that his love is ultimately the result of a clever calculation or trade – his wish to marry the narrator might be nothing more than an attempt to pride himself with a fashionable air of diversity, just like the narrator's chief interest might be fusing her 'new money' with 'old money' in terms of established wealth and recognition, accumulated over generations. The all-encompassing hunt for symbolic capital leads all parties to an impasse, as foreshadowed in the novel's biblical opening epigraph: *This too is meaningless, / a chasing after the wind*.[14]

The darker note prevails: the narrator's cancer mirrors her ubiquitous feeling of "*dread*" that her social position will remain existentially precarious after all, realising that white elite culture "becomes parody on [her] body".[15] Her refusal to undergo medical treatment reflects her indelible awareness of the deeper social and historical reasons underlying her condition – the consequences of colonialism, whose tumerous repercussions would demand a therapy even more complex than the fight against actual cancer's metastasis. The unsettling insight reached in the book is that not only an individual but collective awareness process is necessary, as British society will have to critically engage with its colonial past to work rigorously against racial discrimination with its overlapping oppressions in terms of gender and class. The all-encompassing dimensions of this condition are made clear in the novel's nearly manifest-like final sections, which see everyday racism as

I can't breathe © Cooper Baumgartner

the result of a hidden agenda, taught in schools, propagated via governing institutions, and daily reproduced in discriminatory practices. This (not so) hidden agenda is aimed at reproducing the binary opposition of white vs black that is deeply engrained in the norms and values of (not only) British culture. The narrator's intensifying revulsion at assimilation is thus stirred by the deeper insight that a society unwilling to face the implications of imperialism and colonialism is never really going to accept, but will continue to "protect" itself from, people like her.[16] The inability of the British society to confront its colonial past is summarized, as it were, in a reference to a quickly deleted tweet sent out by the Ministry of Finance in 2018, which celebrated British taxpayers for having "ended" slavery in 1833. This view of history is grossly misleading, as the money borrowed and paid back from taxes for the Slavery Abolition Act was used to compensate slave owners,[17] and Black citizens often feel little accepted even today *despite* paying their taxes.

These things said, it would be simplistic and misguided to grasp the novel as an objection to black people's endeavours to climb the social ladder in a well-adjusted and 'unadventurous' way – in fact, the author has indicated in an interview that she is considering returning to her finance job after her literary breakthrough. Rather than condemning investments in upward mobility, *Assembly* is out to argue that social ascendancy is not "everything" after all, pointing towards the wider dimensions of integration that must be taken seriously to effectively work against the specific sense of alienation experienced by specific groups. To put it bluntly: it's not just about getting a piece of the cake – it's about changing the recipe to make it more wholesome. What the book ultimately argues for, then, is to grasp integration as a political and not just a social process. It would be unrewarding indeed if more people of African, Caribbean, or South Asian heritage continued to acquire high positions in a society that relentlessly keeps up the white vs black binary at its core and remains largely immune to change. By contrast, political integration would not be content with endorsing diversity for its own sake but would be aimed, more fully and decidedly, at enabling a sense of belonging for all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity and social class. To achieve that, the fundaments of society should be exposed to rigorous critique and change should be promoted on discursive, institutional and governmental levels.[18] *Assembly* thus not only captures a deeper crisis but aims to overcome it.

It should be added that Brown's timely intervention also engages with the literature of its time. A

Goodreads reviewer has convincingly referred to *Assembly* as a "state of the black British nation debut",[19] and it is crucial to grasp the way in which the novel is related to that specifically British tradition of political fiction commonly identified as the 'State of the Nation' or 'Condition of England' novel. This literary strand is having a revival in the wake of the 2016 EU referendum and has found its latest incarnation in the guise of so-called Brexit Fiction or BrexLit, penned by authors like Jonathan Coe, Amanda Craig, or Ali Smith. Their recent works typically question one-sided constructions of national identity; some go a bit deeper in terms of a social critique analysing the proliferating gaps of social alienation – and providing cues to bridge them in solidarity. It is in this sense, for instance, that Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* takes a pearl-diving approach to the past, aimed at unearthing resources of hope from historical memory and advocating a story-telling ethic to envision more authentic connections between individuals and pave the way for a more committed sense of citizenship. Britain's colonial past, however, is of only marginal interest to these works, and black experience is little represented among their casts of characters who are predominantly white middle-class. One might think of encouraging Smith and other writers to include more Black voices. Yet such a straightforward approach might run into difficulties as well. Seen in the light of *Assembly*, the near absence of black protagonists in the BrexLit novels might stem from a deeper postcolonial incompatibility of outlooks and experiences, in terms of how people of non-white descent relate to history, and more generally, how they relate to society and themselves. A communitarian ethic of storytelling as celebrated by Smith might hence appear questionable as it tends to assimilate experience to established – which is: predominantly white – models of identity, whereas Brown's dissembling narrator seems to arrive at an authentic voice precisely by telling a 'non-story' of herself. But on the other hand, as Brown has suggested in an interview given to *British Vogue*, the story of dissatisfaction with wealth and success is not so uncommon after all – it's only that "[a]s people of colour, we don't get that narrative, because it's so rare we even see a character who has all of those things – let alone is dissatisfied with them. I wanted to say, 'We can have a dissatisfaction story, too.'"[20]

It is in such paradoxical fashion that *Assembly*, underpinned by insights from bell hooks' seminal essay on "Postmodern Blackness", articulates a scintillating position that both complements and challenges dominant narratives, including literary ones. In another interview, Brown has stressed her overall aim to engage in conversation

and "meaningful communication",[21] and Ali Smith's exuberant praise of *Assembly* would seem to underwrite this aspiration – confirming, as it were, that there are levels of experience that go beyond the borders of her own work and resist a straightforward approach of 'including voices'. It is by insisting on this dialogic, or dialectical, approach that Brown's narrator writes herself "into the main narrative" after all – precisely by exposing its limitations.

Endnotes

1 2019 Booker Prize winner Bernardine Evaristo's praise is conspicuously presented on the novel's front ("A stunning new writer") and back covers ("Natasha Brown's exquisite prose, daring structure and understated elegance are utterly captivating"). Ali Smith has recommended *Assembly* in the *Guardian* shortly before its publication, stressing its political edge ("Dreaming of a better future? Ali Smith, Malcolm Gladwell and more on books to inspire change". *The Guardian*, 29 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/29/dreaming-of-a-better-future-ali-smith-malcolm-gladwell-and-more-on-books-to-inspire-change [accessed 15 November 2021].

2 See Spread the Word's website: https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/projects/london-writers-awards/ [accessed 15 November 2021].

3 Natasha Brown. *Assembly*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2021, 9.

4 Brown 21.

5 Brown 33.

6 Brown 5, 88.

7 Brown 19.

8 Brown 71.

9 Brown 96.

10 Brown 41.

11 Brown 58.

12 Brown 41.

13 Brown 75.

14 Ecclesiastes 4:8, NIV translation.

15 Brown 28, 50.

16 Brown 85.

17 See David Olusoga. "The Treasury's tweet shows slavery is still misunderstood". *The Guardian*, 12 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/12/treasury-tweet-slavery-compensate-slave-owners [accessed 15 November 2021].

18 Brown's story thus articulates a perspective that is markedly different from a typical social ascendancy narrative that celebrates the chase for social and cultural capital and tends to glorify

Britain as a functioning meritocracy. An example would be the BBC Radio 4 broadcast aired in 2017, "Adventures in Social Mobility", about barrister Hashi Mohamed who came to the UK as a child refugee but managed to climb the social ladder to the very top. Mohamed, like Brown's unnamed narrator, gives motivational talks in schools to show up possible career paths. However, the norms and values of British society, along with its history, remain exempted from critical reflection (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08lh7gf [accessed 15 November 2021]).

19 Paromjit. [Review of Assembly by Natasha Brown]. *Goodreads*, 4 May 2021,

https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3982219910 [accessed 15 November 2021].

20 Zing Tsjeng. "Author Natasha Brown On Writing The Debut Novel Of The Summer". *British Vogue*, 18 May 2021, https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/assembly-natasha-brown [accessed 15 November 2021].

21 Natasha Brown and Victoria Adukwei Bulley. "In Conversation: A discussion about exhaustion, refusal and the beginner's mindset." Granta.com, 11 June 2021, https://granta.com/in-conversation-brown-adukwei-bulley/ [accessed 15 November 2021].

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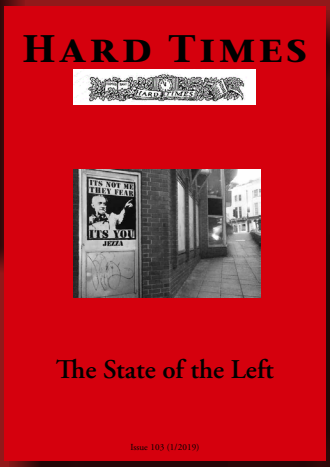

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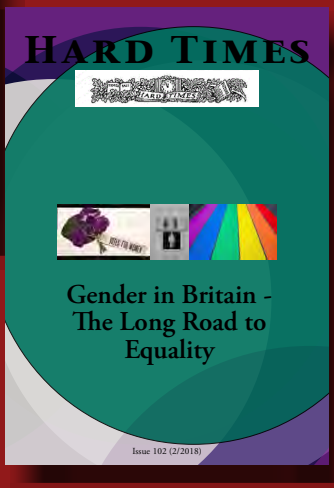

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