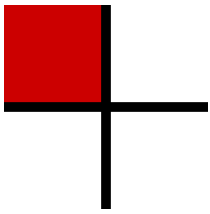This is an author produced version of an article published in **Ephemera: theory and politics in organization.**

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The return of the housing question[*]

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abstract

The global financial crisis, rooted so fundamentally in the private market model of housing provision, reminds us that neoliberal housing policies work primarily in the interest of the powerful capitalist property sector and not the public. In this essay, I address the political question of what anticapitalists should *do* about housing by returning to the stage of an often ferocious debate between Marxists, socialists and anarchists that dates back beyond Friedrich Engels' famous 1872 polemic, *The housing question* (Engels, 1872). In what follows, I draw on the various insights as well as the commonalities and tensions present in these debates to devise a set of 'ethical coordinates' (Gibson-Graham, 2006) that might guide an anticapitalist housing politics. These coordinates are built out of recent theoretical discussions of Peter Linebaugh's concept of 'commoning', and particularly the work of Massimo De Angelis (2006, 2007), and they rest on three ethics of commoning: the prefigurative desire to 'live-in-common' and solve our housing problems collectively in the here and now; the strategic need to defend and produce 'anticapitalist commons' (Kamola and Meyerhoff, 2009) that impose limits to capital and open up an outside to accumulation; and the hegemonic quest for an alternative world in which commons and commoning can be generalised at the expense of capitalism.

Introduction

On 2 April 2007, New Century Financial, one of the largest corporate lenders of so-called 'sub-prime mortgages' in the United States, filed for bankruptcy after an unusually high number of homeowners defaulted early on their mortgages. Although the warning signs had been there for almost a decade, with the high rate of foreclosures particularly among low-income African-American home owners (see Rivera et al, 2008), New Century's collapse heralded a major escalation in the US housing crisis. Within months, the housing bubble – responsible for average house prices more than doubling between 1997 and 2006 – had burst spectacularly. New tent cities sprang up overnight as millions lost their homes, unable to meet their mortgage payments or refinance their borrowing amid plummeting house

prices. In many cities, now stripped of public housing or emergency support thanks to decades of neoliberal roll-back policies, the new homeless simply displaced the existing homeless from the hotels and hostels back into the streets (see Immergluck, 2009).

We know only too well what happened next. The shock waves from the US soon hit Europe as the global scale of toxic mortgage debt was unveiled, causing jittery investors to withdraw from the securitized mortgage market and banks to stop lending to each other. In Britain, the main reference point for this article, the leading sub-prime lender, Northern Rock, was forced to seek an emergency loan from the Bank of England, prompting a run on the bank by savers and its eventual nationalisation in February 2008. More state buy-outs and bailouts of banks followed, but they failed to stop the contagion infecting the UK housing market as mortgage availability dwindled, house prices crashed and homelessness increased with repossessions at their highest since the tail end of the previous housing market crash in the 1990s. The unfortunate losers merely swelled the ranks of the 4 million people on official housing waiting lists. By September 2008, the crisis had become truly global as international credit markets froze, sparking fears of world economic meltdown. Governments engaged in large fiscal stimulus programmes to offset the reduction in private sector demand caused by the crisis, while at the same time injecting money into the banking system through purchasing debts and assets (see Harvey, 2010, for a cogent Marxist explanation of the crisis).

Fast forward to 2011 and under the dubious cover of needing to 'cut' the public deficits incurred by the bailout of capitalism, we are seeing almost everywhere the radical re-imposition and extension of neoliberal policies temporarily questioned during the height of the crisis. In Britain, housing budgets are taking a pronounced dose of austerity primed with the discourse of what Neil Smith (1996) has called 'revanchist urbanism'. Grant Shapps MP, the Conservative Housing Minister of the new Coalition Government (and one of reportedly 22 millionaires in the Cabinet), is justifying large cuts to the housing benefits of more than one million private tenants with a Dickensian take on what Soja (2010) calls 'spatial justice':

> Just because you are on housing benefit, that shouldn't give you the ability to live somewhere, where if you are working and not on benefit you can't. We'd all love to live in different areas, but I can't afford to live on x street in y location. The housing benefit system has almost created an expectation that you could almost live anywhere, and that's what has to stop (Shapps quoted in Ramesh et al., 2010).

The global financial crisis and its aftermath provides a sobering reminder, if ever one was needed, that the private market model of housing provision, so forcefully re-imposed by neoliberalism since the late 1970s, works primarily in the interests of the powerful capitalist property sector and not the public (Marcuse, 2009). This essay is not, however, about the failure of capitalism to provide decent, affordable, secure housing for the majority of the world's population; nor does it seek to make the case for alternative housing models. These assertions rather form its *starting assumptions*. Instead, this essay addresses the political question of what should anticapitalists *do* about housing. What is our alternative? Do we have one? Should we? If so, what does it look like and what is it alternative to?

Such questions are not new; they were at the heart of Friedrich Engels famous 1872 polemic against both reformism and anarchist self-help housing in *The housing question* (Engels, 1872). Over time, this classical Marxist orthodoxy that only proletarian revolution can solve the housing question has sparred with both socialists - who have come to place great faith or strategic importance in state intervention - and anarchists - who have championed local control, autonomy and self-organised solutions in the here and now, such as small-scale cooperatives and mutual ownership. In what follows, I want to draw on the various insights as well as the commonalities and tensions of Marxist, socialist and anarchist thinking on housing to devise a set of 'ethical coordinates' (Gibson-Graham, 2006) that might guide an anticapitalist housing politics. The need for such a political compass is particularly pressing in the current British context where the Conservative-led Coalition government is taking an axe to public services and the welfare state whilst simultaneously promising an unprecedented transfer of power and assets – including public housing – to local communities as part of its Big Society-Localism programme (see http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/big-society). For many, defending the state from government cuts is the priority; but others see the Big Society as too good an opportunity for generating community control to pass up. How should we respond? Building on recent theoretical discussions of Peter Linebaugh's concept of 'commoning', and particularly the work of Massimo De Angelis (2006, 2007), I believe we need to ground our activism in three ethics of commoning: the prefigurative desire to 'live-in-common' and solve our housing problems collectively in the here and now; the strategic need to defend and produce 'anticapitalist commons' (Kamola and Meyerhoff, 2009) that impose limits to capital and open up an outside to accumulation; and the hegemonic quest for an alternative world in which commons and commoning can be generalised at the expense of capitalism.

The politics of alternative housing dissonance

Today's housing activists follow in the footsteps of a long lineage of popular struggles that have attempted to both improve housing conditions and create alternatives to the private market. In Britain, the mass squatting movement that met the post-1945 housing crisis followed in the footsteps of the dispossessed peasants who resisted the long and uneven period of land enclosures by building 'illegal' cottages on village wastes, commons, or in the forests (Ward, 2002: 107). In the 19th century, workers set up building societies to pool their savings and build their own homes (Whelan, 1998). As public housing began to emerge in the early 20th century as a genuine alternative to the injustices of private landlordism, so too did inspiring alternative urban visions such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (Howard, 1902). Today, housing alternatives are enjoying another revival with growing interest in cooperative and co-housing schemes (CDS Cooperatives, 2005), low impact developments like eco-villages (Pickerill and Maxey, 2009) and Community Land Trusts (Community Finance Solutions, 2008).

But what exactly do we mean by 'alternative'? In their innovative work on alternative economies, Fuller and Jonas (2003: 57) suggest that alternatives can be conceived as representing one of three different forms: the *alternative-oppositional* that consciously tries

to offer a rival praxis to the 'mainstream' as a pole of attraction and opposition; the *alternative-additional* that provides a supplementary choice to the mainstream without any attempt to replace or contest it; and the *alternative-substitute* that provides a direct replacement to the mainstream but not necessarily in an oppositional or ontologically different way. In other words, alternatives can either happily co-exist with or substitute for dominant social configurations, or seek to transform and transcend them. To exemplify this typology more concretely, Table 1 below identifies three different alternative forms to the current housing systems of most western capitalist democracies that are dominated by private market provision and propped up by a residualised public or subsidised housing safety net.

Table 1: Mainstream and alternative housing

Mainstream	Market provision	Individual home ownership or private renting backed up by some form of state-regulated or funded safety net for those unable to access private market
alternative-oppositional	Squatting	Overtly politicised act of defying private property and creating (temporary) autonomous living spaces outside of market and state control as part of a squatting movement
alternative-additional	Housing cooperatives	Creation of a legal membership association to live and manage housing more collectively while reducing the cost of housing within the existing private property system
alternative-substitute	Self-build	Buy a plot of land, gain planning permission and build your own individually-owned private home

However, each alternative example could arguably fit into either rival category as well. Take squatting, for instance. Through the eyes of 'non-state theory' (Parson, 1987) we see squatting as constituting an act of refusal and autonomy, a counter-cultural prefigurative alternative to the everyday dictates of state and capital. But for many squatters, squatting is not a politically conscious expression of autonomy, but a last resort in the absence of alternative adequate and suitable housing (Crisis, 2004). Similarly, some housing cooperatives form due to the desire of tenants to build up a genuine cooperative alternative and thus rival to the mainstream system, while self-build housing could be motivated by a love of DIY, financial cost, or the strategic next step for squatters in defiance of the law. In other words, the value practices that infuse 'alternative housing' are inevitably shaped by our ideological outlook (see Silver, 1991). It is this reality of political divergence that

explains historical and contemporary dissonance within left social movements about how to approach the housing question. In what follows, I briefly highlight three such moments of dissonance before critically reflecting on their ideological roots and how the respective insights and tensions between them might inform the ethical coordinates of housing activism today.

The late 19th century 'housing question'

During the early 1870s, ideological warfare erupted in German left circles over how to politically respond to the acute housing crises endured by the working class in many European urban centres. [1] German followers of the French anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, proposed outlawing private landlordism and converting tenants' rents into purchase payments on their dwellings. This, they believed, would end the exploitative relations between landlords and tenants and transform the propertyless poor into a 'totality of independent and free owners of dwellings' (Engels, 1872 [1997]: 28). Bourgeois social reformers like Emil Sax (1869), meanwhile, believed that extending home-and-garden ownership would transform workers into capitalists by enabling them to generate income or credit from real estate in hard times of unemployment. Ownership would also provide a powerful means of improving the morality and behaviour of the working classes, which was seen as one cause of their poor housing conditions by social reformers.

In response, Friedrich Engels penned a series of polemical articles (eventually published as *The housing question*) critiquing the very notion of alternative housing models within the capitalist mode of production as 'bourgeois socialism' (see Bell, 1975). While Engels was acutely aware of proletarian housing misery from his 1844 study of working class living conditions in England (Engels, 1845 [2005]), he argued that there was no such thing as a *housing* crisis, only a crisis of *capitalism* in which housing conditions formed just 'one of the innumerable *smaller*, secondary evils' caused by the exploitation of workers by capital (Engels, 1872 [1997]: 18). The contradictory and uneven processes of capitalist development would, therefore, continue to generate housing questions at different points of the business cycle. The bourgeoisie's only solution to these housing questions was what Engels called 'Haussmann' after the French civic planner infamous for the rebuilding of Paris in the 1860s – large demolition and regeneration projects for inner city working class areas that simply displaced the working class and their housing crisis to the next neighbourhood. From this flowed two inescapable political conclusions: the first was that workers, not tenants, were the agents of change in capitalist society; and, secondly, the only real alternative to the housing question was 'to abolish altogether the exploitation and oppression of the working class by the ruling class' (*ibid.*: 17) through working class revolution and expropriation of private property.

To illustrate his point, Engels subjected different housing alternatives to the logics and laws of capitalist society to demonstrate their impotency. Working class property ownership, for

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1   The debates took place in Der Volksstaat – then the main organ of the German Social Democratic Workers Party – following a series of anonymous articles in the same organ (later claimed by a Dr. A. Mülberger).

example, required workers to take on long-term mortgage debt, which far from liberating them from capital would merely transfer the ownership of their future labour product to their creditors and physically chain them to place. Indebtedness and immobility would in turn increase capitalists' social power to intensify labour exploitation, and render the working class far more vulnerable to the sudden shocks and turbulence of economic crises by threatening repossession, devaluing their property, and making living off the real estate impossible (*ibid.*: 46). Engels similarly dismissed the idea of factory owners themselves supplying workers with housing or helping them to build or own as simply another form of class control that rendered resistance self-defeating. Self-help through building societies would only work for the better off workers who could afford to save and repay mortgages. Nor could the working class rely on the state to improve its housing conditions while capitalism and the ruling class remained in place.

> It is perfectly clear that the existing state is neither able nor willing to do anything to remedy the housing difficulty. The state is nothing but the organized collective power of the possessing classes, the landowners and the capitalists as against the exploited classes, the peasants and the workers. What the individual capitalists (and it is here only a question of these because in this matter the landowner who is also concerned acts primarily as a capitalist) do not want, their state also does not want (*ibid.*: 65).

As Barton (1977) argued, Engels believed that the collective experience of capitalist production would eventually generate the objective and subjective conditions for both revolution and a new cooperative society. This convinced him that alternative housing discourses obstructed this process by taking political struggles out of the production sphere, and creating aspirations among the proletariat 'to small property ownership and individualism rather than cooperation' (*ibid.*: 33). This merely submerged irreconcilable class antagonisms that underlay housing crises within a fantastical social order in which 'all wage workers can be turned into capitalists without ceasing to be wage workers... a bourgeoisie without a proletariat' (Engels, op.cit.: 42).

The self-help housing controversy in developing countries

During the 1970s, a debate of equal rancour emerged within Marxist and anarchist writings on 'Third World urbanisation', specifically on the role of 'self-help' solutions to the housing crises in developing countries. The debate was sparked by a shift in the World Bank's urban housing policy away from state-led slum clearance towards incremental improvement by slum dwellers themselves (Davis, 2007). These programmes had been inspired by the so-called 'anarchist architect', John Turner, whose Latin American studies suggested that housing shortages and slum growth were primarily caused, not by capitalism or market failure, but by bureaucratic, heteronomous systems based on hierarchical structures and centralized, large-scale technology that underpinned slum clearance and new housing development (Turner, 1968; 1972; 1976). Turner argued that such approaches were failing for three interconnected reasons. First, removing dwellers themselves from the decision-making process of their housing alienated them from the end product. Second, this alienation rendered dwellers less interested in investing in, maintaining and paying for this housing, which added more costs to an already expensive process of mass redevelopment

that relied on non-renewable resources (Turner, 1978: 1141). Third, the unaffordability and unpopularity of these schemes, and their frequent bankruptcy and closure, simply fuelled mass squatting, which contributed to the growing chaos and loss of administrative control over urban and economic growth.

In contrast, Turner argued that autonomous self-help systems based on squatting and self-build produced housing that was locally self-governing, lower in cost and higher in use-value, and generated wider economic and political benefits. The cheapness was derived from self-employment and avoiding the finance and credit costs of land and construction (*ibid.*: 1110). Enhanced governance and use-value came through *dweller control* of the housing process because housing was not just a physical 'thing' or 'commodity' but a 'verb', an essential human activity, an empowering process in its own right (Turner, 1972). It was these incontrovertible qualities of self-help housing that led Turner to call on Third World governments, NGOs and international agencies like the World Bank to support the creation of autonomous housing systems in which local people controlled the design, construction and management of dwellings and settlement, the assembly of land, infrastructure, and services; and the state provided infrastructure and support at the *municipal level* (basic site and services), while ensuring equal access to, and the planning and management of, essential resources (e.g. building materials such as cement, land and the provision of credit and finance) at the *central* level. Fundamental to this state support was the legalization of tenure of land and dwellings illegally occupied by squatters.

Turner's Marxist critics, however, accused him of providing capitalist interests with a useful neoliberal discourse and model to facilitate massive cuts to state programmes at a time of global crisis and help pave the way for privatisation and deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s (Burgess, 1978; Davis, 2006; Harms, 1982; Ward, 1982). The most comprehensive critique came from Rod Burgess, who argued that self-building squatters had not escaped capitalism but were 'merely in another part of it' – the petty commodity production of housing (Burgess, 1978: 1111-2). This meant that they remained vulnerable to the real causes of the Third World housing crisis – the general conditions and contradictions of capitalist development that Engels had originally outlined. The conversion of the World Bank to the philosophy of self-help housing thus represented nothing less than an attempt by 'capitalist interests to palliate the housing shortage in ways that do not interfere with the effective operation of these interests' (*ibid.*: 1120). Indeed, self-help housing posed new opportunities for capital accumulation by creating 'an easy way of facilitating the capital valorization of huge areas of land, property and finance in an area where previously there were severe blockages and bottlenecks' (*ibid.*). It was here that Burgess saw specific dangers in Turner's self-help housing model, such as his call for the legalisation of ownership tenure for squatted land, which would enable commodity relations in land and 'the lucrative business of urban land speculation and development' to penetrate self-built settlements creating displacement pressures and a whole new housing question. In a similar vein, the more radical aspects of Turner's model – to guarantee local access to raw materials, finances and land – could never be won through Turner's political method of appealing to the conscience of the capitalist state: 'does he seriously expect that

the interests of industrial, financial, landed and property capital are going to legislate against themselves?' (*ibid.*: 1119).

Housing privatisation in Britain: threat or opportunity?

Our third moment encompasses the past 40 years of neoliberal restructuring in the British housing system that has seen the gradual privatisation of large parts of the public housing stock (known as 'council housing') to sitting tenants and alternative providers amid a wider marketisation and commodification of housing. The question of how to respond has generated highly divisive debates within the left over, for example, tactical questions of resistance, and the relationship between the tenants' movement and the Labour Party (see Sklair, 1975). The most divisive issue, however, has centred on whether or not council housing is worth defending at all from privatisation, and what the progressive alternatives might be. This debate arguably began with the 1974 publication of Colin Ward's anarchist manifesto for dweller control and self-help housing, *Tenants take over* (Ward, 1974; see also Ward 1976, 1985, 1990). In contrast to the Left's generalised demand on the incoming Labour Government for more council housing, Ward condemned socialists' continuing defence and advocacy of state housing, or 'municipal serfdom' as he called it, with its paternalism, bureaucratic social control, segregation and sub-standard housing that people did not want to live in, and state officials had no desire to save or improve (Ward, 1974: 17).

For Ward, the task of progressives was to find a housing system that simultaneously enabled three freedoms denied by the state – to move at will, to stay put and to control one's own home (Ward, 1985: 41). This housing alternative, he argued, could be found in the model of 'mutual home ownership', which allowed for a form of collective ownership that simultaneously recognised individual autonomy and control. Tenants would become members of a housing society that bought existing public dwellings (or land to build new homes), and would be directly involved in the collective management of their homes with the freedom to physically modify their individual dwellings as they wished. Rents would be set at a level necessary to service any debts incurred and build up an equity share in the property so that when a tenant left, they would receive capital returns based on their share. Ward (1974: 131) argued that this was necessary to make mutuality as attractive as individual home ownership. For the local state, the burden of administration would be lifted; for tenants, 'it would extend the psychological, social and financial benefits of independence much more widely' (*ibid.*: 40). Ward's 'pragmatist anarchism' (White, 2007) decreed that this model could not be achieved through militancy or insurrection, but through a strategy of 'encroaching control' that prioritised coalition politics to gradually build up a favourable legal and financial framework so that cooperative ownership and self-management were no longer the preserve of the few with the income, specialist knowledge and social networks to get their schemes going (Ward, 1974: 52-3). Once a proper legal and financial framework was in place, the only obstacle would be tenant mistrust.

During the early 1980s, debates on socialist housing strategy exhibited, albeit in different ways, these tensions over state housing. Sidney Jacobs, for example, saw tenant control as a

red herring but agreed with Ward's critique of the inhuman bureaucratic management of council housing and argued that at its heart, the political economy of council housing, like the wider public sector and welfare state, served capitalist interests in multiple ways. Raising living standards whilst cheapening housing costs bought political security, enabled the reproduction of labour power, and restrained wage demands. The production of council housing had also 'been of considerable benefit to loan capital and the large construction companies and… an effective mechanism for social control' (Jacobs, 1981: 39). Opposing sales of council housing to sitting tenants as an anticapitalist position was therefore not only inaccurate, it was a strategic mistake that would alienate and attract hostility from existing working class home owners and would-be council home buyers. On this point, Jacobs received much criticism from those socialists who believed that preventing housing privatisation was vital to defending the material position of those for whom ownership would always be untenable or precarious, building a political movement beyond the workplace that recognised the importance of class and feminist struggles in the sphere of reproduction, as well as protecting a key bulwark against wider neoliberalisation (Ginsburg, 1981; Karnavou, 1981).

This tension between fighting privatisation and pushing for tenant control resurfaced during the passage through parliament of the Labour government's 2007 Housing and Regeneration Bill. The Bill, which became an Act in 2008, was principally concerned with increasing the supply of new private house building, but it also represented a further assault on the public housing model (see House of Commons Council Housing Group 2008; Hodkinson, 2010 for an overview). As a result, it was opposed by Defend Council Housing (DCH) – a coalition of mainly left-wing Labour MPs and councillors, tenants, affiliated trade unions and organisers from the Socialist Workers' Party – who sought to rally support from within the English tenants' movement for a return to the post-war consensus of direct investment in new council housing (Defend Council Housing, 2006). However, the three official national tenants' organisations – Tenants and Residents Organisations of England (TAROE), the National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations (NFTMO) and the Confederation of Co-operative Housing (CCH) – would neither endorse a new era for council housing nor oppose the government's Bill, prioritising instead 'tenant empowerment' within the *current* social housing sector as the basis for long-term transformation towards a community housing model 'based on tenant and community ownership, control and membership' (TAROE et al., 2007: 4).

Central to the divergence here was the issue of ownership. While Defend Council Housing resolutely opposed to all sales or transfers of council housing, the official tenants' bodies saw this as a major opportunity to promote the 'third sector' as the solution to the failures of state and market: 'the debate should not be about whether transfer takes place – it should be about what transfer should take place to' (Bliss, 2006: 9). Their vision was embodied in the Community Gateway Model (CCH, 2001) in which the transfer of council housing to an alternative provider would be the start of a devolution of power in which residents, organised in their own self-defined neighbourhoods, would gradually and collectively move from a standard tenant/landlord relationship to a tenant management model to co-ownership of their community's housing stock. The Community Gateway Model was partly

a reaction against the undemocratic and alienating tenant experience of stock transfer, but was also inspired by a belief that ownership transfer from the 'bottom-up' could lead to long-term tenant empowerment. However, Defend Council Housing claimed that regardless of 'empowerment' rhetoric, these mutual models would be run as businesses dependent on open market borrowing, making tenant control (and housing need) ultimately subservient to debt viability and delegated 'professional' management decisions (Defend Council Housing n.d.). In other words, Community Gateway and CLTs would mean yet more privatisation of council housing.

Discussion

Running through these three moments of dissonance in Left housing politics are four main dividing lines. The first and most important concerns the underlying cause of housing crises. Marxists and socialists see the housing question as inseparable from capitalist social relations; while many anarchists share this view, they also emphasise, often to a greater extent, the harmful role of the State and other large-scale, bureaucratic forms of that provision. A second division centres on the nature of housing itself. Marxists view housing as a commodity like any other in capitalist society between sellers and buyers; whilst not denying this, socialists and anarchists have brought to the surface its use-value both as an essential human activity and as a sphere of productive non-market activity. A third divergence concerns political forms of action needed to improve housing conditions. Marxists see housing activism as futile in isolation from a wider class-based movement to abolish capitalism; socialists and anarchists want to improve housing in the here and now, not in some far distant future. The fourth focuses specifically on the nature of State versus self-help housing. Despite Engels' rejection of the State, Marxists and parliamentary socialists have come to view it as a vehicle for improving working class conditions (as well as overseeing socialist transformation) whilst seeing self-help housing as another kind of capitalist commodity that generates dangerous political illusions that workers can opt out of capitalist social relations or solve the problems they create by themselves. For anarchists and cooperative socialists, state housing is another form of alienation whereas the process of housing oneself is empowering, efficient and ecologically superior.

These recurring positions and tensions are obviously not representative of all Marxist, socialist or anarchist thinking or action, but nevertheless they provide a useful platform to reflect on what anticapitalists can do about housing in today's context. An obvious starting point is to recognise that the ongoing global financial crisis has reasserted the explanatory power of Marxian political economy. Indeed, Engels' original thesis on late 19th century housing conditions reads at times like a prophecy of the contemporary urban experience in capitalist society, particularly in the waves of disinvestment-demolition-displacement-redevelopment-gentrification cycles that have occurred in response to overaccumulation crises, and the structural incapability of the private house building industry to build affordable, decent housing for all. The passage below, with some slight modifications, could have been written about the experience of most British cities over the past 30 years.

> The growth of the big modern cities gives the land in certain areas, particularly in those which are centrally situated, an artificial and often colossally increasing value; the buildings erected on these areas depress this value… They are pulled down and replaced by others… The result is that the workers are forced out of the centre of the towns towards the outskirts; that workers' dwellings, and small dwellings in general, become rare and expensive and often altogether unobtainable, for under these circumstances the building industry, which is offered a much better field for speculation by more expensive houses, builds workers' dwellings only by way of exception (Engels, 1972 [1987: 18]).

This ever-presence of housing crises under capitalism suggests that regardless of the use-values we attach to our homes and housing process, exchange-values of land and property as commodities ultimately dominate as long as capitalist social relations exist. This is not just the case for private housing as the 20th century experience of public housing provision was heavily circumscribed by the private ownership of land and the political and economic power of the commercial building industry. Nevertheless, however alienating the experience of public housing, the post-1979 retreat of the state from housing provision in the West has had a particularly devastating effect on housing conditions in all sectors (see Hodkinson, 2011). And far from enabling more local, self-managed housing to emerge, housing privatisation has worked alongside other neoliberal urban policies to inflate urban land values and thus impose further barriers to tenant control and community ownership. During this time, cooperativism and mutual housing have remained at the periphery of housing tenure in the UK (just 0.6% of all housing according to the Commission on Co-operative and Mutual Housing, 2009), while it has come under attack in its strongholds of Norway and Denmark.

We can better understand the constraints on, and contradictions of, self-help housing solutions in the British context by briefly considering the Mutual Home Ownership Cooperative (MHOC) model currently championed by the cooperative movement (CDS Co-operatives, 2005). The MHOC model works hand-in-hand with a Community Land Trust (CLT), a community-controlled organisation that buys the freehold of land (and existing properties) and legally binds its use to providing affordable housing (Confederation of Co-operative Housing, 2001: 5). By supposedly removing the land from the private property market and controlling its use in perpetuity, the CLT stops speculative and inflationary forces driving up property prices and rents for the existing community while any increase in value (or equity growth) stays with the local community and does not becomes private profit (Community Finance Solutions, 2008: 34). The CLT grants the MHOC a lease of its land at peppercorn (very low) rents. Should the MHOC wish to build new housing, it contracts a developer at an agreed maximum price and then purchases the housing using a 30 year mortgage from a commercial lender. MHOC residents (who are simultaneously tenants, owners and coop members) finance the debt repayments through a combination of an upfront deposit and monthly rents, which are fixed at 35 per cent of net income and include equity stakes. Vacating residents sell on their units of equity to existing members and the incoming member using a formulae based on a local housing market value index and average earnings, taking 90 per cent of any 'profit' with the remaining ten per cent going into an asset reserve that can help to drive down borrowing costs (CDS Co-operatives, 2005).

It all sounds great, but there are three fundamental and interrelated problems with the MHOC-CLT model that undermine its potential to be a genuine housing alternative and explain its failure to grow. The first concerns the question of access – who is it for? To borrow affordably and create capital gains for residents means that all MHOC members must financially contribute and not pose a risk to the MHOC's financial model. In other words, the MHOC model is not open to the poor and low paid who usually are the most disadvantaged in housing terms, a point Ward (1974: 121) himself conceded: 'Self-interest obviously leads to an inbuilt prejudice in favour of those who can undoubtedly pay their way. An assessment of housing need points in the opposite direction'. We can see this dilemma in the example of LILAC, an ecologically low-impact, co-operative, co-housing project in Leeds (http://lilac.coop/). A key aim of LILAC's intended 20 home radical community is to 'respond to the housing crisis by providing permanently affordable housing' using the MHOC model (*ibid.*). However, the table below makes clear that with average net household incomes in Leeds around £25,000 (and falling), and despite wanting to be an affordable housing model, LILAC is really only accessible to middle income households who come with personal savings.

Table 2: An example of the affordability constraints on mutual home ownership in Leeds

	Net household income required		Deposit required	
	From	To	From	To
1bed	£15,547	£21,036	£6,625	£9,180
2bed	£23,372	£30,484	£9,974	£13,285
3bed	£33,347	£41,657	£14,337	£18,206
4bed	£40,146	£49,410	£17,272	£21,586

Source: Lilac's website, http://www.lilac.coop/concept/affordable.html

The potential inequity at the heart of the cooperative mutual links to a second question – how does the CLT (or in its absence, the MHOC) come to acquire the land in the first place? Either the CLT must purchase the land at open market value from the private owner, which would almost certainly make the MHOC unviable without either government financial support or it becoming even more class exclusive; or, the CLT must depend on the discounted sale or gifting of *public* assets (Community Finance Solutions, 2008). The problem here is that this inevitably involves using the opportunities of privatisation, and thus amounts to a separation of tenant control away from the wider class injustices that could result from privatisation. This brings forth a third problem – the MHOC does not actually take housing out of the market, it just moves it to a different part of the market, working within the confines and logic of private property and not challenging the root causes of housing need. Returning to Fuller and Jonas's (2003) framework, the mutual

home ownership model is best understood as an alternative-additional form of private ownership *within* but not *opposed* to a wider private property system that effectively relies on discounted or free gifts of land/housing from the local authority. Should this land be made available at the expense of public housing, it would transfer the risk and responsibility for providing affordable housing from the public to the local community level within a micro-level commercial enterprise, which is far more vulnerable to the power of finance capital and the instability of financial markets.

However, if Marxian political economy explains how capitalist social relations engender crisis in housing conditions as well as make housing alternatives both difficult and potentially reactionary, we can equally argue that such capitalocentric thinking leads us to a political dead-end. As poststructuralist feminists, JK Gibson-Graham[2], have argued, by conceiving of capitalism as a unified, singular system with the capital-labour relation and accumulation at its centre encompassing the totality of society as a singularity with no outside, we theorise away the possibility of capitalism being 'chipped away at, gradually replaced or removed piecemeal' (Gibson-Graham, 1996 [2006: 256]). Any project aimed at creating alternative housing in the here and now is thus discouraged because it cannot transform the entire system – it's either revolution or nothing. As Midnight Notes Collective (1990: 11) has argued, this thinking not only denies the humanity of people living in poor or precarious housing conditions, it ignores the strategic question of how the spatially defined class composition of a city might determine working class power and the role that defending working class housing and improving housing conditions might play in that. For those socialists, meanwhile, who see state intervention as the only game in town, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence from the past 100 years to support Colin Ward's assertion that state housing within capitalism has been a disempowering and alienating experience for tenants through the top-down and paternalistic welfare relationship it has created between provider and client.

We seem to be going round in circles, pushing up against the same limits time and again. The relations of capital, labour and land under capitalism make housing alternatives difficult and politically tenuous. Yet, the experience of state housing as well as the precarious life of private homeownership and renting, along with the perceived impossibility of total systemic change, makes any alternatives seem desirable and worth pursuing in the here and now, regardless of their impact on capitalist social relations. It is a dilemma captured perfectly by John Holloway's (2010: 83) invitation to 'crack capitalism': 'Our only option is to fight from the particular, but then we clash against the force of the whole'. In British housing politics, it is a tension that has produced the ultimate perversion with one part of the tenants' movement defending state housing as a democratic, affordable and secure tenure and the only alternative to the market; and another defending the privatisation of housing to individual tenants and seeking to exploit any opportunities for transferring public housing to tenant cooperatives and other organisations under tenant control. This divergence has weakened both causes and strengthened the hand of the privatising state. How can we get out of this mess? In the remainder of the essay, I want to

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2   JK Gibson-Graham is the pen name of two Marxist geographers, Kathy Gibson and the late Julie Graham.

try to answer this question by drawing on ideas generated more recently within autonomist and feminist Marxism about commons and the politics of commoning.

Towards a housing common(s)?

In Massimo De Angelis's groundbreaking 2007 theoretical contribution to autonomist Marxist thought, *The beginning of history*, we are presented with an analysis of capitalism that potentially reconciles the diverging approaches to the housing question discussed above. Capital, he argues, is not 'a totalised *system*, but… a *social force* with totalising drives that exist together with forces that act as a limit to it' (De Angelis, 2007: 135). This drive to colonise all realms of social and ecological life with capital's '*mode* of doing' (*ibid.*: 37) stems from the inherent potential for crisis at each point in the circuit of capital accumulation, which Marx set out in the formulae $M - C\ (LP/MP)\ .\ .\ .\ P\ .\ .\ .C' - M'.$ [3] Significantly, De Angelis (op. cit.: 52-53) does not simply restrict this crisis potential to the sphere of production (e.g. in the form of workplace wage struggles), but, drawing on feminist analysis (e.g. Federici, 2004), highlights capital's continuous and fundamental dependence on both the biological reproduction of labour power as wage-labour (e.g. through unwaged labour by women in the home), and the ongoing separation of people from the means of (re)production. Put simply, capital can never take the *a priori* basis of its own expanded reproduction for granted because people not only resist but also 'identify and struggle to reclaim social spaces that have previously been normalised to capital's commodity production and turn them into spaces of *commons* (*my emphasis*)' (*ibid.*: 139). Capital, with the state as its ally, must therefore continuously seek to 'forcibly separate people' from these commons through new enclosures that 'fragment and destroy them' (*ibid.*: 145).

If we can understand enclosure as the *modus operandi* of capital, the notion of the 'commons' as its antithesis appears a little more difficult to grasp. What exactly does De Angelis mean by 'commons'? The term, after all, conjures multiple meanings. Most obvious is the *natural commons* gifted by the planet such as land, water, atmosphere, wind, plants, forests, minerals, fuels and solar energy that forms the common material basis of our existence and the common property of humanity. Customary and common law rights of people to freely use and subsist on these natural commons have been understood as the system of *common right* (Linebaugh, 2008; Neeson, 1993). Similarly, we can think of *public or social commons* as broadly goods (including services, information, knowledges and skills) whether material or immaterial, that are collectively produced, owned and managed for 'shared use' based on the satisfaction of needs not the realisation of exchange value (Dyer-Witheford, 2006). How such natural and social commons are collectively managed and used suggests a fourth conceptualisation, that of the *relational commons*. Here we might mean the operation of *common property regimes* (Ostrom, 1990); or Jean-

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3   Where Money (M) is used to purchase commodities (C), including labor power (LP), and the means of production (MP), that are thrown into production (P) to create new commodities (C') that are sold for more money (M'), part of which is retained as profit, part of which is used to purchase more means of production to make more commodities)

Luc Nancy's (1992) idea of 'being-in-common' to mean 'the sociality of all relations', emphasising how we necessarily depend on, shape, and live with each other, and thus how we cooperate in the everyday (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 82). This *relational commons* is embodied with the value practices of cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity, horizontality, non-hierarchy and equality. Finally, to come back to resisting enclosure, we have what Kamola and Meyerhoff (2009: 11-12) call the *anticapitalist commons*, those compositions of people and projects defined and organised along the value practices of being-in-common, defending natural commons and/or producing social commons as a conscious act of creating limits to capital.

In reality, De Angelis's conception of commons encompasses all of these different meanings, for commons are 'social spheres of life… [that] provide various degrees of protection from the market' (De Angelis, 2007: 145). But De Angelis is most interested in emphasising how commons are created, and to this end employs Peter Linebaugh's (2008) concept of 'commoning' as a *verb* to describe the active, continuous and collective production by proletarians throughout the history of enclosure as the 'means of survival in the struggle against capitalism' (Linebaugh, 2010: 16)[4]. For De Angelis, commoning does not end with the enclosure of land but in fact constitutes our daily acts of producing alternative forms of sociality that protect against enclosure and accumulation. In this way, commons are not just things, spaces or networks that protect people from the market or enable us to survive independently of wage-labour; nor are they just forms of resistance to capital and its value practices and modes of doing; they are also, simultaneously, composed of alternative social relations based on *commoning* where individual interests and differences are articulated into common interests and people produce to share and share what they produce: 'it is through (re)production in common that communities of producers decide for themselves the norms, values and measures of things' (De Angelis, 2006: 1). Dyer-Witheford (2006) usefully conceptualises this process as 'the circulation of the common'. Mirroring Marx's circuit of capital, he sets this out in the formulae $A - C - A'$ (where C represents not a Commodity but Commons, and A stands for Association) to capture how associations of people 'organise shared resources into productive ensembles that create more shared resources which in turn provide the basis for the formation of new associations' (*ibid.*: 4). The point, he argues in a later contribution, is to keep multiplying these commons until they become socially hegemonic (Dyer-Witheford, 2010).

By placing the housing question within this wider framework of capitalist enclosure and anticapitalist commoning, I want to sketch out three ethical coordinates of commoning that might guide our political activism around housing: prefigurative commoning; strategic commoning; and hegemonic commoning. I take each in turn.

#1. Prefigurative commoning: living-in-common

To pursue 'living-in-common' means to act prefiguratively, to try to meet our housing needs and desires through the creation of non-hierarchical, small-scale, directly democratic,

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4   I want to suggest that we also think of 'commoning' as an intellectual praxis that seeks to continuously find or create common ground between ideologies and practices on the left.

egalitarian and collective forms of housing in our everyday lives, what we might think of as the essential value-practices of Nancy's notion of 'being-in-common'. Rather than confrontational and consciously anticapitalist, living-in-common is instead based on the idea of life *despite* capitalism, taking action in cooperation with others directly in the particularities of our everyday lives to create the kinds of housing relationships, material forms and aesthetics that not only reflect our being-in-common, as opposed to our status as wage-labourers, but also our immediate needs and desires as human beings. These principles of 'living-in-common' find real expression in the pragmatic anarchist approach of solving our housing conditions in the here and now through the extension of 'dweller control' and 'mutual aid'. Colin Ward's vision of mutual home ownership combines the need to co-manage with the freedom for individual autonomy through possession rights. By controlling the use of land in perpetuity, the local community can democratically decide together what the land is used for, but inside the walls is our own personal space to do with what we want.

#2. Strategic commoning: housing-as-commons

But, living-in-common is not enough because enclosure is always imminent, always threatening. Therefore, we must also think about how housing can act simultaneously as an anticapitalist commons. By calling this principle 'housing-as-commons', I am deliberately de-emphasising the prefigurative and instead accentuating the strategic and tactical interventions required to resist enclosure by both defending and creating housing commons as forms of protection against the market, however 'corrupted' they are, to borrow Hardt and Negri's (2009) term. The gradual enclosure of land that produced wage-labourers is replicated in today's re-privatisation of public housing, forcing more and more people out of a quasi-secure housing space that constrained the exploitative power of capital through its mix of low rents and legal protections, and into the private housing market where, through fear of mortgage defaults or evictions, people are more susceptible to capitalist exploitation (see Glynn, 2008). The loss of this social commons opens the door to more aggressive enclosures, and thus should never been abandoned by anticapitalists. But *all* forms of housing and tenure contain residues of commons at risk of enclosure and thus represent important sources of resistance to enclosure. For example, individual home ownership, and the mortgage-bondage it usually requires, might form an essential pillar supporting capitalism in many countries, but when a household is repossessed for failing to meet mortgage payments or is compulsory purchased by the state to make way for a new housing or commercial development, a new round of enclosures are taking place that can only be resisted by defending the home owner. Indeed, whoever owns or manages your home, it is where you live and it thus connects you into the 'neighbourhood commons' produced out of the spaces and places of everyday shared experiences, interactions and cooperation (see Blomley, 2008). Strategic commoning, therefore, defends everyone's 'right to stay put' (Hartman, 1984), regardless of tenure, whether against privatisation, demolition, repossession, eviction, commodification or displacement.

#3. Hegemonic commoning: circulating the housing commons

So far, the concept of commoning enables us to see how the value practices of living-in-common (prefigurative) and housing-as-commons (strategic) are not inherently opposed or mutually exclusive. Those who prioritise the desire to live-in-common need to recognise that resisting the privatisation of public housing or the repossession of individual homes also involves people engaging in the value practices of solidarity and self-organisation that bring people together and compose new subjectivities based on commoning. In the same manner, those who prioritise fighting housing privatisation need to recognise that the process of tenants mobilising for community control is an essential part of building an anti-privatisation and anticapitalist movement. As Barton (1977: 28) argued:

> Tenant control enables people to create community social relationships among people in a building and often in the surrounding neighbourhood as well. It enables people to use non-market means of maintaining and repairing their building… It provides an example of what a society based on use value could be like and helps create the social and moral basis for a movement to bring that society into existence. Engels was correct to say that self-help cannot solve the housing problem without control over capital, but it is essential to building a movement… It is through co-operative productive activity that a material basis for a co-operative ethic is created.

Producing housing commons, therefore, takes place at the apex of resistance and creation. In the very moment of struggle to defend the existing housing commons, we must seek to transform it along the principles of living-in-common wherever possible but *without weakening the protective shield that strategic housing commons provide*. Similarly, in the very moment of creating cooperative forms of housing, we should ensure that these new spaces of commons *actively support existing housing commons and undermine enclosure and accumulation*. This approach can be perfectly illustrated by the famous case of tenant takeover on the central London council housing estates of Walterton and Elgin during the early 1990s (see WECH, 1998). Back in 1985, these tenants had learned that the Conservative-controlled Westminster City Council intended to sell their homes to private developers who would demolish and displace the existing community in order to redevelop the site as part of a gentrification process. Tenants initially responded by forming the Walterton and Elgin Action Group (WEAG) to campaign against the sell-off. However, the Council held the upper hand by slowly emptying the estate through not re-letting any flats which became vacant. So, in 1988, WEAG decided to use the government's privatisation legislation against itself in order to transfer ownership of the estates to the community, and pre-empt the sell-off to private developers, and in April 1992 the residents of Walterton and Elgin estates took over ownership and control of 921 homes under a resident-controlled housing association. In short, tenants fought off displacement, gentrification and the commodification of precious secure, affordable housing by collectively taking over and holding their homes in common.

There is no reason why this localised form of commoning could not be extended to the city scale through a concerted campaign to realise Nevitt's (1971) 'communal tenant ownership' vision in which all public tenants are made joint-legal owners of public housing. This would give them rights to security of tenure, to improve their homes, to be represented on local housing management committees, and to enjoy the lowest possible

rents based on collective sharing of costs and risks via the state and foregoing the financial stake in the capital value of their homes. In the same vein, existing home owners trying to resist repossession by banks or compulsory purchase by public authorities, can look to the mutual home ownership model as a means of resistance through creation. By selling their homes to a new housing cooperative, individual owners could swap their existing mortgages for rents that built up an equity stake in the now collectively-owned asset. Significantly, these homes could no longer be bought and sold in an anonymous competitive market place: tenants who wanted to leave their existing home and coop and thus realise their capital gain would sell their shares back to the coop at an agreed value. Coop members therefore create a collective shield that protects them from the speculative and competitive forces driving up the high and inflating prices in the private housing market. This enables a form of social ownership that opposes commodification but not individual ownership.

Here we see tantalising glimpses of how housing commons can be (re)produced through different forms of commoning. But how can these singular, one-off circulations of housing commons become, like the circulation of capital itself, 'aggressive and expansive: proliferating, self-strengthening and diversifying' (Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 110)? The answer lies in the creation of a 'common housing movement' that brings together public tenants, home owners, private renters, squatters and the homeless around a political agenda to take all housing out of private property relations and into a form of 'commonhold' that would provide affordable, secure, collectively-controlled housing for all. Following the proposals of Peter Marcuse (2009) for the US context, at one level, this would be a movement making radical demands to ameliorate the effects of the housing crisis and tackle its root causes. These would include:

- a moratorium on all evictions, repossessions, compulsory purchases, privatisations, demolitions, and benefit cuts;
- the 'Right to Sell' (Dorling, 2010) – the government purchase of any property that has been or in danger of being repossessed and the previous owner allowed to remain in occupancy as a secure public tenant;
- full funding to enable the existing public housing stock to be refurbished and maintained at a decent standard;
- stronger rent regulation.

To complement these protective measures, the common housing movement would also support all forms of cooperative and mutual home ownership schemes as long as they do not involve the undemocratic privatisation or transfer of public housing, or a net loss of affordable housing in a locality. Empty or misused private land and property could also be occupied to provide free squatted housing and social centres, as well as allotments to grow food. The long-term aim of such a strategy would be to create a critical mass of diverse strategic and tactical interventions, from blocking privatisation and gentrification, stopping the closure of community facilities, occupying land, standing in local elections, to force periodic concessions from state and capital, to re-energise the housing campaign, to create and defend housing commons and bring them into articulation with prefigurative and

strategic commoning in other spheres of production (e.g. cooperative food growers), exchange (e.g. people's shops) and reproduction (e.g. community schools). To return to the problem of enclosure, these actions to commonise public and private housing cannot by themselves mean the end of capitalism and thus the end of the housing question, but they can help to circulate and expand the commons to improve life in the present and provide the basis for post-capitalism in the future. As Dyer-Witheford (2010: 112) argues, achieving this would mean two things:

> …first, that the movement of movements had won something, averting harms to, and bestowing benefits on millions; and, second, it would mean that we were winning: these altered conditions would create opportunities for new collective projects and waves of organising that could effect deeper transformations, and the institutions of new commons.

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