

Introduction

Rent Unrest: From the 1915 Rent Strikes to Contemporary Housing Struggles

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Britain and Ireland are in the grip of an entrenched and escalating housing crisis. This book exposes the causes and consequences of that crisis, revealing its more permanent character, and showing how tenants and residents have been challenging it. The book was inspired by the centenary of the 1915 Rent Strikes in Glasgow, which played a decisive role in establishing rent controls in Britain for the first time and ultimately forcing the government to introduce public housing provision in 1919. It re-examines this formative moment of tenant organization in light of new empirical research and new theoretical understandings, exploring its relevance through a largely hidden continuum of tenant struggles following 1915 and through multiple contemporary case studies from the most significant housing struggles in Britain and Ireland today. The primary focus is on the particular context of Britain and Ireland,¹ but given the depth of the housing crisis across multiple borders, these studies will resonate with those attempting to comprehend and contest housing tyranny internationally.

Here, I provide a brief historical overview of rent unrest in Britain and Ireland, focusing initially on the 1915 Rent Strikes in Glasgow but also on the many, largely hidden, tenant and resident struggles in the sphere of social reproduction before, during and after 1915. Such a summary is politically vital because the labour movement and related trade unions have often viewed the housing question as merely secondary to workplace struggles in the sphere of direct production (see Moorehouse et al. 1972; Sklair 1975; Englander 1983; Bradley 2014). Yet, as Bunge (1977) observes, it is precisely on the ‘second front’ of social reproduction that the everyday life of the working class (in all its diverse dimensions) is located. Exploring this blind spot is all the more crucial because the capacity for radical change in the workplace

has been deeply undermined by industrial decomposition and automation in Britain and Ireland, and housing is now more central to contemporary forms of capital accumulation than ever (Harvey 2012; Aalbers and Christophers 2014; Madden and Marcuse 2016; Gray, this volume).

Providing a material basis for this argument, I outline the prominent role of housing in what has been an epochal transformation from industrialization to urbanization since the early 1970s (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]; Harvey 1985, 2012; Christophers 2011), in conjunction with a resurgent financialized rentier economy (Hudson 2006a, 2010; Vercellone 2010; Harvey 2012; Fields and Uffer 2016). Yet merely describing this systemic context would be of limited political value if it did not allow us to comprehend the central importance of housing as a field of immanent political struggle (see Fields 2015, 2017; Gray, this volume). As Harvey (2012, 65) contends: ‘If the capitalist form of urbanization is so completely embedded in and foundational for the reproduction of capitalism, then it also follows that alternative forms of urbanization must necessarily become central to any pursuit of a capitalist alternative.’ The need for such a challenge is underscored here by an examination of contemporary housing conditions and the stark injustice and inequality that has become normalized through the hyper-commodification of housing in the last few decades. In conclusion, I outline the plan of this book and its potential utility for tenant movements in Britain, Ireland and beyond.

GLASGOW 1915: ‘A MASS CONCERN WITH THE FACTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE’

[W]ithout the 1915 Rent Strike in Glasgow, there would have been no 1915 Rents and Mortgage Restrictions Act, and without the 1915 Act, there would have been no 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act.

—Damer (1980, 103)

The 1915 Rent Strikes in Glasgow are now widely acknowledged as a decisive event in a wider national struggle that shaped both the British tenants’ movement and British housing policy dramatically (Damer 1980; Melling 1983; Castells 1983; Englander 1983), with few historical events exhibiting such a close causal link between urban struggle and state intervention. The crucial historical impetus for forcing the establishment of the Housing and Town Planning Act 1919 (the ‘Addison Act’)—which made state provision of housing a right ‘for the first time in history’—was undoubtedly the rent strikes and the rent restrictions act it impelled (Castells 1983, 27; Damer 1980, 103). The Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions)

Act 1915, besides immediately ameliorating a vicious rent burden for tenants, established rent controls in Britain for the first time (fixed at prewar levels) and made the revival of speculative building unprofitable for decades (Damer 1980). With contemporary tenant and resident movements in Britain and Ireland showing signs of a long overdue resurgence, probably the greatest lesson from the 1915 rent strikes is that the threat and practice of collective tenant organization and direct action is a prerequisite condition for radical housing transformation, and indeed, any wider claims for the ‘right to the city’ (see Gray 2017).

The First World War generated a massive influx of people to work in Glasgow’s munitions industry, exacerbating an already acute and well-documented housing crisis. By 1914, the city had the highest population density in Britain, with ‘colossal’ profits being extracted from slum housing by rentier landlords in near monopoly conditions (Damer 1980, 81; Melling 1983) and evictions taking place on an unprecedented scale in the British context (Englander 1981). Compounding these affronts, under the ‘Law of Urban Hypothec’ Scottish landowners were permitted to seize the property of those who were unable to pay the sharply escalating rent (Damer 1980; Melling, 1983). Even at the end of the nineteenth century, it was self-evident to housing campaigners that private enterprise could not and would not solve the housing problem, and agitation on the housing question became widespread in Glasgow and across Britain in the early twentieth century (Damer 1980; Melling 1983; Englander 1983; Grayson 1996).

Following the formal constitution of local and national tenant organizations from the 1890s, municipalization of housing became a primary objective in Glasgow (Damer 1980). By 1898, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) had ten members on Glasgow’s Town Council, where tenant grievances were expressed on a range of issues throughout the 1910s. In 1911, the Glasgow Labour Party was founded, with housing a ‘central plank’ of their activity (Damer 1980, 90). In 1913, the Scottish Federation of Tenants’ Associations was formed by the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), following agitation over rent increases. The Glasgow Trades’ Council was also very active, and most significantly, the Glasgow Women’s Housing Association (GWHA) was established in 1914 through the auspices of the ILP Housing Committee and the Glasgow Women’s Labour Party (Damer 1980; Melling 1983; Smyth 1992). The composition of the rents movement was marked by gender and party diversity with mutual cooperation between different strategies and tendencies: women led on the ground in the sphere of social reproduction; the ILP, at that time a very broad church, performed an important ‘networking’ and coordinating function; and workers in the shipyards and munitions industries offered vital support (Damer 1980; Melling 1983; Foster 1990).

The key events in the 1915 rent strikes have been described in depth elsewhere (Damer 1980; Melling 1983; Castells 1983; Smyth 1992), necessitating only a brief summary here. In Spring 1915, following several recent rent hikes, up to 25 percent in some districts, groups of tenants in Govan began to refuse the rent increases (Damer 1980), ultimately leading to an estimated 25,000 tenants on rent strike across Glasgow by November 1915 (Melling 1983, 107). As noted, evictions for non-payment of rent were a major issue in Glasgow in this period (Englander 1981), and the harassment and ejection of women and children while male soldiers were at war was a central rallying point because tenants and the labour movement associated high rents with 'unpatriotic' wartime profiteering. The eviction of serving soldiers' families in Govan and Shettleston—in April and June 1915, respectively—was capitalized on by the rents movement to generate a strategic 'patriotic' uproar that served as vital propaganda for the movement. 'RENT STRIKE: WE ARE NOT REMOVING' and 'WE ARE NOT PAYING INCREASED RENT' notices targeting landlord tyranny by 'THE PRUSSIANS OF PARTICK' were plastered over thousands of windows across the city (Melling 1983; Smyth 1992; Currie, this volume). Factory and shipyard gate meetings and mass public meetings addressed by Marxist revolutionaries such as John McLean incited workers to direct action, while public meetings were held throughout the city by the official Labour movement with the goal of parliamentary reform via petitions and deputations to the City Chambers.

A celebrated incident occurred in October 1915 when a group of women attacked a factor's clerk² with bags of peasemeal (pea flour) and chased him from the street after an eviction attempt in Govan (see Currie, this volume). By November 1915, around 20,000 people were on rent strike in Glasgow, including five Labour councillors (Damer 1980, 1990; Melling 1983; Castells 1983; Smyth 1992). Rent strikes are reported to have occurred in the districts of Govan, Partick, Parkhead, Pollokshaws, Pollok, Cowcaddens, Kelvingrove, Ibrox, Govanhill, St. Rollox, Townhead, Springburn, Maryhill, Fairfield, Blackfriars (Gorbals) and Woodside (Damer 1980, 93), indicating the mass character of the movement and illustrating how rent was seen as a general problematic rather than a mere secondary concern behind the workplace. Following a massive women-led demonstration on St. Enoch Square in October 1915, the decisive flashpoint came when eighteen rent-striking munitions workers were put on trial on November 17 at the Small Debts Court (Damer, 1980; Melling, 1983; Foster 1990). Thousands of men and women marched to the court, with a demonstration of 10,000 to 15,000 workers and tenants demanding a wartime rent freeze and that all defendants be released on threat of general strike. The next day it was formally announced that a rent-restriction bill would be passed in Parliament. On November 28, the Rents and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Bill was introduced at the

House of Commons, receiving Royal Assent and becoming law on December 25, 1915 (Damer 1980; Melling 1983; Smyth 1992).

THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF ORGANIZED TENANTS' MOVEMENTS: HISTORICAL RENT UNREST IN GLASGOW AND BEYOND

The 1915 Glasgow Rent Strikes are deservedly renowned, but rent strikes were widespread before, during and after the war throughout Britain. More generally, housing contestation has been a continual, if often overlooked, feature of political activity across Britain since the 1880s. In Scotland alone, Dundee was another 'storm centre' of housing struggle in 1915 (see Cox, this volume), and it is rarely mentioned that contemporary rent strikes were also enacted with varying degrees of intensity and scale in Aberdeen, Kircaldy and Leith (Edinburgh) on the east coast of Scotland (Petrie 2008); Mid-Lanark, Clydebank, Greenock, Cambuslang and Hamilton on the west coast; and Annan and Gretna in the south (see Cox, this volume; Petrie 2008). As Seán Damer stresses, such militant anti-landlord struggles cannot be detached from the historical enmity built up by the violence of eviction and displacement in the Highland Clearances of Scotland and enforced preventable famine and land wars in Ireland in the nineteenth century. This hatred of landlords provided a volatile and unruly proletarian presence in cities like Glasgow, whose slums were multiplied by dispossessed Highland and Irish workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1997, 35–36).

As Englander (1983) observes, prewar rent strikes and rent agitation occurred throughout England between 1912 and 1914. He cites Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Leeds, Bradford, Liverpool and several districts in London as key examples, with such struggles escalating in 1915 during wartime (see also Ginsburg 1979; Grayson 1996; Bradley 2014). There were genuine and well-documented fears within government circles that such disputes, especially in areas of munitions production, where the fiercest struggles occurred (Englander 1983, 195), could potentially transform themselves into a unified challenge to government authority across Britain (Swenarton 1981; Englander 1983; Foster 1990; Glynn 2009). Englander (1983) surveys numerous examples of rent strikes and rent unrest in England in this period, including, but not limited to: Newcastle, Barrow-in-Furness, Manchester, Liverpool, Warrington, Birmingham, West Bromwich, Burton-on-Trent and Luton. In London alone, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Hammersmith, Camberwell, Tooting and Woolwich were all active centres of rent resistance. Yet for all this militant class organization across Britain, it is widely agreed that it was ultimately the scale, intensity and strategic power of the Glasgow Rent

Strikes that was the decisive factor in forcing state intervention and formal rent restrictions (Damer 1980; Castells 1983; Englander 1983; Melling 1983). But if the 1915 Rent Act was undoubtedly of great political significance, it did not ultimately solve the housing question. Crucially, rents did not *decrease* (which was a compelling necessity at the time) but were only restricted from rising above prewar levels; housing supply remained negligible (at a time when overcrowding and slum conditions were rife); and evictions remained frequent (Englander 1983).

It is crucial to recognize today that the retention of rent restriction gains and the slow development of housing reform in Britain after the war were dependent on the sustained threat of militant working-class organization and antagonism rather than state benevolence (see Gray, this volume). In the US context, Madden and Marcuse (2016, 119–20) show how the ‘myth of the benevolent state’ masks the fact that state action in the housing sector has always been premised on supporting the accumulation of private profit while channelling ‘system-challenging’ housing demands into ‘system-maintaining’ forms. Similar constraints have faced radical or progressive housing movements in Britain and Ireland, with any housing reform requiring concerted direct action and campaigning from tenant groups, often but not always, in isolation from the labour movement and trade unions who tend to fixate on the workplace. In Scotland, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), at that time a relatively militant party affiliated to, but independent from, the Labour Party, pushed for municipal housing for all workers, skilled or unskilled, throughout the 1920s (Horsey 1990). In the same period, as Damer (2000a) has shown, the largely under-acknowledged Clydebank Rent Strike (1920–1927) formed a sustained and significant campaign involving thousands of tenants against rent increases, and for municipal housing at a time when the depression had sapped much of the militancy and bargaining capacity from Clydeside’s industrial workers. Innovatively marrying direct-action tactics and legal activity, the campaign prevented persistent attempts to decontrol and raise rents, while blocking multiple evictions in Clydebank between 1920 and 1927. The significance of the Clydebank Rent Strikes remains to be fully acknowledged, yet without them, Damer (1997, 94) contends: ‘rent control would have been removed by the mid-1920s.

Englander (1983) documents how tenants in Barrow, Newcastle, Birkenhead and Workington agitated for ‘special area’ status in 1917 to avoid housing evictions in munitions areas and how tenants in areas of heavy industry in the Scottish Clyde Valley—Airdrie, Coatbridge, Hamilton, Motherwell, Wishaw and Mid-Lanarkshire—organized against housing shortages and overcrowding in the same year. Additionally, he observes, Rosyth, Coventry, Woolwich and Dudley all maintained rent strikes and rent unrest in the 1917–1918 period. Rent struggles in the interwar years have been given

less attention, but Englander cites the Scottish Labour Housing Association, Glasgow Council of Tenants' Associations, the War Rents League, Birmingham & District Tenants' Federation and the Stepney Tenants' Defence League as active bodies in the period. There were also significant rent strikes in Birmingham and Leeds in the 1930s (Ginsburg 1979; Bradley 2014), and Englander (1983, 306) cites an article in the *News Chronicle*, suggesting that 60,000 tenants throughout Britain were on rent strike in June 1938.

For the government, the 1915 rent restrictions were an emergency measure hastily enacted to quell and mediate tenant and worker agitation to maintain munitions production in wartime and reassert control over the housing question. From their position, the repeal of rent controls would be undertaken at the first available opportunity in peacetime (Damer 1980; Englander 1983). Yet, continued rent agitation in the interwar period made this return to the prewar status quo an intractable problem for the government in the immediate and long term, with rent restrictions only being substantially repealed with the Housing Act 1988. Housing unrest was also central to defending and maintaining public housing gains from the postwar period to the present era (see Bradley 2014; Grayson 1996; Johnstone 1992, 2000; Moorhouse at al. 1972; Sklair 1975). This history embraces rent strikes in St. Pancras, London (1959–1961); East London (1968–1970); Kirkby, Merseyside (1972–1973); the Gorbals, Glasgow (1976–1982); and more recently the University College London (UCL) 'Cut the Rent' strikes over exorbitant student accommodations bills. It also includes a series of under-acknowledged but successful challenges to 'housing stock transfer' from public housing (or 'council housing') to housing associations (HAs) by ballot (see Robbins 2002; Mooney and Poole 2005; Watt 2009a; Watt, this volume), which still await their chronicler. There is not the space here for a full account of these postwar struggles and campaigns, but Johnstone (1992), Grayson (1996) and Bradley (2014) provide excellent summaries elsewhere.

RETHINKING THE RENT STRIKES

We are fortunate to have some compelling and well-researched accounts of the 1915 rent strikes, yet these were largely produced in the early 1980s, with little substantive new research being undertaken since. This is therefore a deeply opportune moment to reassess the rent strikes and their ongoing significance with reference to subsequent transformations in housing policy and housing experience: the Conservative Party's infamous 'Right-to-Buy' (RTB) scheme enacted in 1980; the repeal of rent restrictions in the 1988 Housing Act; and the inception of large-scale 'stock transfer' programs beginning in the late 1980s. Notably, tenant-purchase schemes comparable to

RTB were introduced in Ireland as early as the Housing Act 1966, with more local authority homes being sold to sitting tenants than being constructed during the 1970s. Moreover, rent controls were abolished in 1982, six years before Britain (McCabe 2011, 31–32). RTB was the most substantial of all British privatization schemes during the 1980s, and the privatization, commodification and financialization of housing—alongside numerous programmes of large-scale social housing demolition and welfare retraction of an enormous magnitude—have been central to the political economy of Britain since then (in Ireland, since the 1970s). Such transformations in the political economy of housing necessitate a significant reappraisal of the perennial housing question.

The recent centenary in 2015 of the rent strikes produced widespread interest and numerous public events in Glasgow, including a welcome reconsideration of women's involvement in the rent strikes (Burness 2015; Orr 2015), and the 'Remember Mary Barbour' campaign, which 'successfully campaigned for a statue in honour of one of the principal leaders of the rent strikes, one of only four statues of women in Glasgow.'³ Yet the centenary has generated little in the way of original new *housing analysis* and has been marked by a somewhat nostalgic register that has made little attempt to relate the rent strikes to the contemporary housing question. By contrast, this volume deploys an interdisciplinary approach—using analyses from housing studies, urban studies, history, sociology, geography, gender studies and activist/scholar-activist positions—that aims to reinterpret the rent strikes in ways that might inform and incite contemporary housing mobilization in relation to wider transformations in urban political economy. This involves a mix of contributions, revisiting historical housing movements and documenting contemporary housing struggles from below—often from an engaged position within those struggles—and more theoretical interventions which contend that the housing question must necessarily be placed at the forefront of contemporary political struggles given the centrality of housing to the national political economies of Britain and Ireland. Such a diverse range of contributions allows for several points of entry into the housing question, revealing the continuity and relevance of housing contestation across both time and space.

As Jameson (1991, 5) once noted, of all the arts 'architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship'. It should come as no surprise then that much, but certainly not all, housing research and journalism has been compromised by proximity to this economic nexus (see Kallin and Slater, this volume). In mainstream debates, housing has tended to be treated as a separate specialized domain for experts like developers, architects, planners and economists, eschewing a perspective on housing as a wider political-economic problem that is riddled with class, race and gender

conflict (Madden and Marcuse 2016). As Johnstone (2000, 140) observes in an earlier attempt to reclaim the hidden history of tenants' movements, historians and 'housing experts' have typically regarded the development of progressive housing policy as 'part of a legislative and administrative process somehow separate from broader social and economic struggles which inevitably take place within class divided societies'. This perpetuation of the 'myth of the benevolent state' (Madden and Marcuse 2016) is compounded by the fact that housing struggles historically—typically undertaken by tenants and residents without institutional funding or support—have been poorly recorded, discussed and analysed as a result of a lack of institutional support from the labour movement and trade unions (Moorhouse et al. 1972; Sklair 1975; Bradley 2014). Political focus has routinely been placed on typically male workplace relations at the expense of predominantly women-led community and tenant organizations (Grayson 1996, 6), with tenants' movements in Britain and Ireland far too often being hidden from history.

Challenging the actions and discourse of powerful government agencies, construction and landlord lobbies, estate agents and media discourse, and more troublingly the aporias of the labour movement, associated trade unions and certain strands of academic research necessitates an unapologetically critical, partisan and situated response. Most of the contributors in this volume are distinguished by their housing activism or support of housing activism, their membership of tenant and resident organizations and their critical academic and journalistic work around the housing question. All seek a more equitable, radical approach to the housing question, taking their cue from a fundamental need to address the processes of capital accumulation, hypercommodification and state retrenchment that have led to the current housing crisis—an exacerbated moment in a much longer continuum of housing crises—and the everyday needs and desires of tenants and residents at the sharp end of housing privatization. This embedded critical activist and scholar-activist approach is a crucial and necessary corrective to what Kallin and Slater (this volume) call 'agnotology': the strategic production of ignorance. Yet, to gain wider political traction, this subjective side of the housing question must necessarily be premised on a deeper understanding of the structural changes in the economy which have placed urbanization and housing at the centre of Britain and Ireland's political economy.

THE URBANIZATION OF CAPITAL AND THE RETURN OF THE RENTIER

Grasping the current housing crisis in its material reality and its full amplitude requires comprehending a long-term transformation of capitalism

from industrialization to urbanization since the early 1970s, a shift most presciently diagnosed by the French Marxist urban theorist, Henri Lefebvre. With an emerging global economic crisis and militant workers' demands blocking profitability in industry, he argues, capital 'found new inspiration in the conquest of space . . . in real estate speculation, capital projects (inside and outside the city), the buying and selling of space. And it did so on a worldwide scale' (Lefebvre 2003 [1970], 155). Central to this transition for Lefebvre is a process of 'capital switching' from the primary sector of industry and manufacturing to the secondary sector of land, real estate, housing and the built environment (Harvey 1985; Beauregard 1994; Gotham 2009; Christophers 2011). In a key section of *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre (2003 [1970], 160) explains how the secondary sector provides capitalism with a crucial 'buffer' in times of industrial slowdown and economic depression.

As the principal circuit . . . begins to slow down, capital shifts to the second sector, real estate. It can even happen that real-estate speculation becomes the principal source for the formation of capital, that is, the realization of surplus value.

Such processes have clearly not been universal because they are premised on particular historical, material and institutional contexts in Western Europe. Moreover, tracing capital switching in the built environment is extremely complex given the expanded role of financial intermediaries and data-protection laws related to private companies (Christophers 2011). Yet grasped as a *general tendency*, the process of capital switching certainly resonates at an empirical and subjective level in the British context. Crucially, Lefebvre (2003 [1970], 160) conceives of such processes as being intimately bound up with socioeconomic crisis, noting how classical economists and critics of political economy alike have long understood that overinvestment in real estate is an 'unhealthy situation' for capital. As Harvey (1985) observes, following Lefebvre, when capitalist production edges towards periodic crises of overaccumulation, capital routinely switches from the primary circuit to the secondary circuit as a means to absorb capital and labour surpluses and avoid crisis. But such capital switching is also crisis switching. Real estate investment tends to dampen investment in the productive economy, becoming 'fixed' in land and property when it really requires constant movement and flow for the continual realization of surplus value (Harvey 1985, 2012; Weber 2002; Christophers 2011; Madden and Marcuse 2016). With the central role that housing and urbanization increasingly play in the national political economies of most major Western countries—in symbiosis with the proliferation of forms of rent and the exacerbated financialization of housing and property markets (Aalbers and Christophers 2014; Fields and Uffer 2016; Vercellone

2010)—the link between capital switching and socioeconomic crisis has only become clearer over time (Hudson 2010; Christophers 2011; Harvey 2012).

As Hudson (2010, 419) contends, the interrelated processes of financialization and rentier capitalism form a ‘counter-Enlightenment’ that has usurped the predictions of Marx and the classical economists of the nineteenth century, who thought that rentier interests would be subordinated to the needs of industrial capitalism in the long run. Even proto-capitalists like Adam Smith and Stuart Mill, Hudson observes, argued that rent is a parasitic ‘unearned increment’ (2010, 429), a monopoly price based on extraction rather than productive investment, garnering economic rent for the financier or capitalist by virtue of simply ‘owning something’ (Hudson 2006b, 40). Yet, far from the ‘euthanasia of the rentier’ that Keynes envisaged in the 1930s, rentier activity is central to contemporary capital-accumulation strategies, reproducing and magnifying socioeconomic inequality via incessant cyclical forms of looting from the wider economy.

The point here is not to extol the virtues of the halcyon days of industry and manufacturing, which came with their own forms of exploitation and injustice,⁴ but to illustrate that the rentier economy puts money in the hands of even fewer people than the ‘productive’ economy. Rentier income is invested back into real estate or ownership rights, inflating prices for assets and making further speculation more attractive to investors. These rental incomes are an unproductive ‘free lunch’ gouged from the economy at large, forcing an ever-higher proportion of wages to be spent on rent and basic social subsistence (Hudson 2006a, 2010). While the rentier economy cuts across the entirety of socioeconomic relations, Hudson (2006a) shows that most rentier wealth is generated by rent-yielding property, with real estate the economy’s largest asset and land accounting for most of the gains in real estate valuation. Hudson is referring primarily to the United States, but as Glynn notes (this volume), dwellings also accounted for £5.5 trillion, or 62 percent of the UK’s total net worth in 2015 according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The results of this restructuring of the economy for rentier interests have been all too evident in the housing market: the ‘subprime’ housing crisis, housing commodification and privatization, the travails of ‘generation rent’, spiralling house prices, mortgage debt, gentrification, foreclosure, eviction, displacement, homelessness and overcrowding.

THE CONTEMPORARY HOUSING CRISIS

For most oppressed people there is always a housing crisis; and most people are oppressed within the deeply unequal global relations of capitalism. As Madden and Marcuse (2016, 10) observe, housing crisis is a predictable,

consistent outcome of capitalist spatial development: housing is not produced and distributed for the purpose of dwellings for all; it is produced and distributed as a commodity to enrich the few. Housing crisis is not the result of the system breaking down but of the system working as intended.

But what marks this particular post-2008 crisis moment out is how middle-class homeowners and investors have become subject to the crisis-laden vicissitudes of the housing market, and in relation to the previous section, the sheer extent of speculative capital liquidity operating in the housing market. The most important housing tendencies in Britain and Ireland over the last decade have been the virtual decimation of public and social housing, the rapid expansion of the private-rented sector (PRS), the liberalization and financialization of mortgage markets and the end of the ‘homeownership dream’ for many people. The ideology of homeownership and its potential attainment appeared to be intact and secure pre-2008, but the bursting of the property bubble and resultant austerity policies has made homeownership unattainable for many in ‘Generation Rent’ (Robertson 2015; Byrne, this volume). The shift to private renting—disingenuously mis-sold as a lifestyle choice by letting agents and advertisement agencies—involves an increased transfer of wealth from low-income households to housing-market investors. The former are denied the formation of housing-asset wealth through ownership, and the latter are increasingly driven by financialized dynamics, with global financial institutions targeting the private rental sector to profit from the postcrisis context via such agents as private equity firms and real estate investment trusts (REITs) (see Beswick et al. 2016; Fields and Uffer 2016; Fields 2017; Robbins 2017).

The dramatic shift in housing tenures from public to private has led to a shift in the politics of housing. Rent increases, household debt and evictions have become key issues alongside security of tenure, housing standards, overcrowding and homelessness. Historically, the PRS in Britain decreased from 88 percent of total housing provision in 1914 to as little as 14 percent in 1974 (Stafford 1976, 3), seeming to confirm, albeit it in gradual form, Keynes’ ‘ethanasia of the rentier’ thesis. Yet successive reforms in public and social housing since then—especially the Right-to-Buy Act, the repeal of rent controls in 1988 and mass ‘housing stock transfer’ from public housing to HAs from the late 1980s—have reversed that process through widespread housing privatization (Ginsburg 2005; Watt 2009a; Hodgkinson and Robbins, 2013). More than 1.8 million local authority homes (council homes) have been sold through RTB in England alone since 1980 (Murie 2015). Once renowned for its public housing provision, social-housing construction has dwindled massively, and social-rented tenancies in Britain now account for just 16 percent of the housing stock, of which local-authority housing makes up only half (Robbins 2017, xix). In Ireland, where social housing accounted

for between 52 and 65.2 percent of total Irish housing construction in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, less than 10 percent is now local-authority or voluntary association housing (Byrne and Norris 2017).

The definition of ‘social housing’ and ‘affordable housing’ has been deliberately distorted through government redesignation (Robbins 2017; Watt, this volume). ‘Affordable rent’ now means up to 80 percent of market rent in England and Wales, and ‘intermediate housing’—homes for sale and rent including ‘shared equity’, ‘part-buy’ and ‘market rent’—has increasingly come to be recognized as ‘social housing’ but is far removed from the notion of public housing that was accepted for most of the twentieth century (the term *social housing* is itself obfuscatory, compounding public housing with HAs and a whole host of intermediate rental and purchase forms). In England, for the year 2016–2017, only 8.2 percent of HA housing construction completions were for social rent, with 61 percent of starts and 48 percent of completions built outside the Affordable Housing Programme (AHP), without any government investment (National Housing Federation 2017). HAs, once heralded as a community empowering solution to the housing question, are no more likely to solve the British housing crisis than the private market.⁵

Meanwhile, terms like *mixed tenure* and *mixed communities*, supposedly predicated on planning more sustainable, cohesive, fairer and ‘affordable’ neighbourhoods, have long been understood by critics as a Trojan horse for introducing more private housing into poorer neighbourhoods (Lees 2008; Glynn 2009; Robbins 2017; Watt, this volume). There is no evidence to back up the benefits of imposing mixed communities through such policies. If anything, imposed mixing of communities and tenures tends to exacerbate socio-economic divisions rather than mitigate them (Lees 2008; Robbins 2017, 3). In the British context, it is a sick joke among housing activists that ‘mixing’ never introduces social rented housing into predominantly private housing neighbourhoods but always private tenure into predominantly social-rented neighbourhoods. In Ireland, where social housing is markedly more limited, a dramatic decrease in social-housing funding and output between 2008 and 2014 (88 and 91.5 percent, respectively), alongside the deepening financialization of social housing, means that the tenure has more recently functioned to exacerbate the boom-and-bust dynamics of the Irish housing market rather than acting as a counterbalance within it (Byrne and Norris 2017). It remains to be seen whether new social-housing models in Ireland, sorely lacking at present, could address the dominance of homeownership and the PRS, but the British experience provides a cautionary tale.

Overall, such processes have involved a fundamental direct and indirect tenure switch from public to private or intermediate housing, with the latter in reality entailing a privatization process.⁶ In Glasgow, the birthplace of UK rent restrictions, social-rented housing decreased from 70 to 36 percent

of citywide housing provision overall between 1975 and 2015, and the PRS, widely acknowledged as the worst of all possible tenures, increased from 5 to 20 percent, more than doubling in the last decade alone (Glasgow City Council 2017). In the United Kingdom overall, 20 percent of all housing is now in the PRS, exceeding the 18 percent of housing in the social-housing sector (Robbins 2017). Similarly, Ireland's PRS, which has doubled in size within a decade, now represents 20 percent of all households. Rents have spiralled by 60 percent in Dublin since 2010 and are now 15 percent higher than at the peak of the boom (Byrne, this volume), which, lest we forget, resulted in a massive property-led crash and brutal austerity programmes post-crash (O'Callaghan et al. 2014; Byrne, this volume).

In the 1950s, British residents typically spent 10 percent or less of their income on rent (Robbins 2017, 27), but the average tenant in England now spends almost 50 percent of their take-home pay on rent; a figure that rises to more than 70 percent in London (Osborne 2015) where the average monthly rent on a new tenancy in July 2016 was over £1,500 (Jones 2016). Following the 2008 global financial crisis, wages have been either frozen or extremely limited, with any minimal gains offset by higher living costs, especially related to housing. This gives substantive credence to Bunge's (1977) contention that a 'double-front' of resistance is required in both productive and reproductive spheres. The toxic social results of the transition from public to private housing in Britain and Ireland in terms of affordability, debt, poverty, health, security, building conditions, overcrowding, homelessness and evictions are detailed unsparingly in this volume and by numerous commentators, charities and even local authorities. Yet, the recent Housing and Planning Act 2016 will only exacerbate these already profound problems, which found their culmination in the criminal negligence that led to the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire disaster in London in June 2017, when seventy-one tenants lost their lives. Chronic underinvestment, neglect and deregulation of social housing are widely regarded as the culpable factors in the tragedy, and such desperate housing conditions, often ignored until something like Grenfell happens, stoke understandable rage. The contributors in this book share that rage; what concerns us most here is how tenants, residents and social movements are transforming that rage into coherent transformative forms of critique and housing organization.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book has a three-part structure, comprising four chapters in each part. Part I, 'History against the Grain', revisits and rethinks the 1915 rent strikes, with a focus on questions of social reproduction, class agency and the

strengths and limits of previous accounts. Overall, it records and affirms a tenant's 'history-from-below', contending that proletarian men, women and children, often but not always operating outside the control of formal Left organizations, were primary, not secondary, agents in the prewar, wartime and interwar tenants' movements in Britain. Part II, 'Reports from the Housing Frontline', provides a series of situated, participatory accounts, self-reflexively exploring the composition, strategies, development and concrete articulations of some of the most significant housing movements across a multiplicity of tenures in Britain and Ireland today. Part III, 'Rethinking the Housing Question: Theories, Aims, Tactics and Strategies for Today', takes a step back to examine and deconstruct the political, discursive and economic factors contributing to the current housing crisis, and at a wider level of abstraction, to explore the potential strategic, theoretical and practical direction of contemporary housing movements.

In the first two chapters of Part I, the role of women in the rent strikes is explored and documented in depth in the prewar and interwar eras, respectively. In chapter 1, Pam Currie situates the rent strikes within a wider tendency of women's activism, from the suffrage campaigns and emergent socialist movements of the prewar period through to the food protests and Women's Peace Crusade in the latter years of the war. She suggests, in contradiction to previous discussions on the subject, that there is a direct line of continuity between prewar suffrage campaigns and the rent strikes and, moreover, that these campaigns were clearly separated by social class (with the rent strikes being led by a broad faction of working-class women). She also contrasts the quasi-religious and reductive characterization of female rent strikers—'woman-as-mother' doing her patriotic duty by defending hearth and home—with the actuality of female activists' militancy, class consciousness and participation in the public sphere.

In chapter 2, Annmarie Hughes and Valerie Wright explore what the rent strikers did after 1915 in a discussion on the implications of the rent strikes for women in the interwar period. Arguing that women's involvement in housing disputes has been consistently marginalized at the expense of male workplace studies, they contend that the pragmatic 'politics of the kitchen' espoused by many working-class women from their situated material conditions in the interwar years has been largely ignored because such issues have been pejoratively considered 'domestic'. They consider the ways in which women were involved with the housing question throughout interwar Scotland and how a 'politics of the kitchen' was employed to create a space in political discourse for women to participate. 'Against the grain' of mainstream historiography, they argue that much can be learned from women's hitherto largely ignored housing and social-reproductive struggles in the interwar years.

In chapter 3, Tony Cox explores the 1915 rent strikes in Dundee, opening up the discussion of rent strikes beyond the exemplar case of Glasgow. Edwardian Dundee, he observes, was dominated by jute industry barons and rack-renting landlords, where wages were among the lowest in Britain, yet rents in many tenement flats were equivalent to those in London. During the First World War, Dundee witnessed the eruption of mass struggles against toxic working and living conditions, with rent strikes sweeping across the city in 1915. Examining the causes and consequences of these rent strikes, he deviates from previous accounts, contending that they were primarily organized informally at the street level, with women and adolescent workers leading the way, often in opposition to formal representatives of the labour movement.

In chapter 4, I take a broader, more theoretical view of the 1915 rent strikes in Glasgow, situating them within wider concerns over social reproduction and rent, concerns that have historically been obscured by the theoretical and practical separation of productive and reproductive spheres. Contesting a prevalent, but by no means unchallenged (see Bunge 1977; Damer 2000a; Harvey 2012) tendency within Marxism to see housing struggle as a ‘secondary’ contradiction behind the ‘primary’ contradiction of workplace struggles (inaugurated by Engels’ *The Housing Question* in 1872), I reconsider the ongoing relevance of women-led housing and social-reproductive struggles by 1915 rent strikers in the context of a resurgent rentier economy and the marked tendency towards the urbanization of capital since the 1970s. Deploying the autonomist Marxist method of ‘class composition’—which considers subjective political organization in dialectical relation with the objective factors of capitalist development—I employ a ‘spatial composition’ analysis to show how the rent strikes can be seen as part of a continuum of struggles around housing, rent and social reproduction that has only become more relevant over time.

In chapter 5, which begins Part II, Vickie Cooper and Kirsteen Paton discuss the resurgence of everyday evictions in the twenty-first century, paying particular attention to forms of collective tenant organization resisting these punitive processes. They describe how large-scale evictions are driven by the market in tandem with government policy and practice in a context where housing is increasingly viewed as a global financial product, and austerity is enacted as an eviscerating process of welfare reduction and debt transfer to the individual. Such economic and social policies have forced thousands of households into rent arrears, leading to the widespread rollout of state-led evictions. In response, they document how anti-eviction alliances in England have responded to these processes as part of a wider mobilization of collective anti-austerity struggles.

In chapter 6, Michael Byrne reflects on crisis and austerity in a reflexive inquiry into tenant self-organization with the Dublin Tenants Association (DTA), which he cofounded with colleagues in 2015. He describes the rise of the PRS in the context of diminishing mortgage availability, insecure employment and the eradication of social-housing funding and provision. The unregulated and deeply dysfunctional nature of the PRS, he contends, has created a perfect storm, with rents increasing by 40 percent nationally since 2011, a chronic supply shortage, frequent evictions and one-third of tenants residing in rent arrears. Situating the DTA and wider networks of housing activism in Dublin in dialogue with the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* ([PAH] or ‘Mortgage Victims’ Platform’) housing movement in Spain, he examines the challenge of inventing organizational forms in housing activism that *produce* tenants as a community and as a political subject, thus aiming to counteract the individualizing and profoundly precarious nature of PRS tenancies.

In chapter 7, Living Rent (LR) members, Emma Saunders, Kate Samuels and Dave Statham, describe the movement’s practice in Scotland, drawing extensively on interviews with fellow LR members. A dearth of social housing, the impossibility of homeownership and an ingrained resistance to progressive redistributive regulation, they argue, has left tenants with a housing market characterized by spiralling rent levels, tenancy insecurity and the growth of a usurious PRS. They survey the development of the organization from its origins in the Edinburgh Private Tenants Action Group (EPTAG) to the present day, paying particular attention to tensions between formal claims to the state for tenant recognition and the development of grassroots direct action. They document significant recent successes as well as their limits—including forcing the Scottish government to introduce rent controls in the recent Private Housing (Tenancies) Bill 2016, albeit in limited form—while reflecting on the emergent practices and possibilities of LR and PRS housing activism.

In chapter 8, Paul Watt surveys a sample of contemporary housing struggles in London, with a particular focus on the struggles of tenants and residents against displacement from their homes and communities as a result of galloping rent rises, evictions and housing benefit cuts. In the early 2000s, he argues, issues in council housing tenure dominated London’s housing activism, but in the last five years, there has been an explosion of housing-based campaigns encompassing a wide diversity of tenures (private tenants, council tenants, cooperative tenants and leaseholders) and a similarly diverse range of practices. Discussing political occupations of empty properties, anti-privatization and anti-eviction campaigns, ‘resistance by design’ (the critical dissection of planning documents) and legal challenges to regeneration, he

shows how a multiplicity of struggles across diverse tenures address significant demographic changes in tenure across London.

In chapter 9, the first intervention in Part 3, Hamish Kallin and Tom Slater discuss struggles for rent control against the deliberate production of ignorance through the concept of ‘agnotology’. They argue that housing activism in Britain must reinvent itself to respond to a raft of politicians, economists, landlord-lobbyists, journalists, lawyers and conservative think-tank researchers who deploy stigmatizing images of social housing and free-market rhetoric to divert attention away from the political-economic relations responsible for the exorbitant cost of housing. For them, ignorance of the achievements of the 1915 rent strikes is typical of concerted attempts to quash resistance to extreme housing injustice and must therefore be resisted by counternarratives which simultaneously stress the brutal inequities of the current housing market and the real achievements of tenant organization.

In chapter 10, Rory Hearne, Cian O’Callaghan, Rob Kitchin and Cesare Di Felicianantonio discuss the ‘relational articulation’ of housing crisis and activism in postcrash Ireland, paying acute attention to the specific local conditions of capital accumulation and governmental intervention that generate particular forms of housing activism. They trace the evolution of housing activism in Dublin in response to specific cycles of structural crises in Ireland’s housing model over the course of the Celtic Tiger property bubble, both in the crash and postcrash era. They provide an overview of new housing campaign groups in Dublin—including nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, tenant groups, direct-action housing groups, anti-eviction groups, older ‘social housing’ community groups and Left political parties—analyzing the merits of these diverse forms of activism in relation to conjunctural phases of contemporary economic and governmental reality.

In chapter 11, Sarah Glynn makes a case for municipal public housing in a contemporary context where that project has been much denigrated (see Kallin and Slater, this volume) and where the political, economic and institutional context differs significantly from the period of the postwar public housing boom. Elaborating a link between the 1915 rent strikes and the contemporary era, she argues that a claim for public housing should be a minimum demand for contemporary housing movements as part of a new approach to housing policy that aims to minimize the exploitation of housing as a vehicle for speculation and exchange, focusing instead on the use value of housing as a home (a central plank of a decent, affordable quality of life for everyone). She also advances proposals for avoiding a repeat of previous problems with public housing—such as overcentralization, bureaucracy and tenant marginalization—through the auspices of local control and tenant-management schemes.

In chapter 12, Tim Joubert and Stuart Hodgkinson argue for what they term ‘the housing commons’, seeking different forms of housing activism that can be politically articulated within what Dyer-Witford (2006) has called the ‘circulation of the common’: the production and extension of collective-sharing processes beyond market exchange. Questioning the contemporary viability of the rent-strike tactic, as well as claims for public housing, in the context of four decades of housing-privatization policies, ongoing transformations from the welfare to the workfare state and the growing global financialization of housing provision, they argue that the rent-strike tactic may have been neutered as an effective response to the housing question today. Proposing a subtle dialectic between defensive and offensive housing struggles, they problematize forms of housing activism that merely rest on defending the status quo or demanding the state intervene, without forsaking such forms of struggle as an important defensive strategy. Instead, they suggest that housing movements radically repurpose housing activism as a form of resistance that can generate its own alternatives based on forms of commonwealth and collective power.

Overall, this book’s objective, summarized in the Afterword, is to explore the continuing significance of the 1915 rent strikes for today, teasing out the continuities between then and now, while being attentive to what has changed in the interim period. Rethinking the rent strikes in relation to the contemporary housing crisis and the multiple and varied organizational responses to it, we believe, can contribute significantly to addressing the current housing question, providing an urgent and meaningful reference point for contemporary housing struggles.

NOTES

1. This book was initially intended as a close cross-sectional study of tenant and resident movements in Britain, but was later extended to include Ireland. Broadly similar geographically and culturally, Ireland has both interesting similarities and notable differences in housing policy and practise in comparison to Britain that seemed worthy of further comparative exploration.

2. A *factor* is an agent who manages land or property for its owner or holder.

3. <https://remembermarybarbour.wordpress.com/>

4. The ‘golden era’ of state-Keynesianism in the UK, we should recall, was propped up by colonial and imperial exploitation and a pronounced sexual division of labour that consigned women to the domestic sphere, dependent on the male-headed ‘family wage’.

5. I will address the question of HA marketization, and what that means for housing activism, in more detail in the Afterword.

6. Intermediate housing is homes for sale and rent provided at a cost above social rent but below market levels, subject to the criteria laid out in national affordable housing definitions.

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