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Review

David Madden and Peter Marcuse (2016) *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, London and New York, Verso: London and New York, 240pp. 9781784783549 £16.99

This book is a well-thought out and thought-provoking read. Although the focus is firmly on the US context, it does draw upon international examples with several mentions of UK movements and issues.

There are 5 main sections to the book along with an introduction and conclusion. The contributions are well-researched and draw upon copious amounts of evidence to argue their case for a systemic overhaul of the contemporary housing landscape. It has an easily accessible and readable format and is arguably a 'call to action' as much as it is a factual reading.

'The residential is political' is the introductory section and sets both the scene and tone of the book. The use of the term "housing crisis" is somewhat argued against as it "implies that inadequate or unaffordable housing is abnormal" (p.9) when it is, in fact, the norm for the oppressed, globally. The authors also insist that they are not defending the housing system in its current formation, as it is woefully inadequate, but seek to defend the idea of housing as a "home" and a place in which to live one's life.

Chapter 1: 'Against the commodification of housing' skilfully illustrates one of the central issues of the book: housing being used for the accrual of wealth rather than as residential accommodation. Luxury housing - which the authors label as "antisocial" (p.38) - is built to the detriment of "affordable" housing. Several examples are given of real estate "attacking housing" (p.16) – sometimes quite literally, as residents are forced out of their homes to make way for investor purchases.

The roots of this commodification and of early capitalism can be found in early modern England's enclosure movement . The linkage between housing and work is also pointed

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to at several points throughout the book. Around the 1840s early examples of social housing appeared as a reaction to segregation, industrialisation and "slums" in the West.

The authors assert that the early twentieth century saw governments trying to minimise the impact of unrest following the commodification of housing (deemed to be a "social disaster"). They correctly point to the "grim" social housing situation in the UK and highlight the nearly 3 million units of council housing having been sold since 1981 (at the time of writing). More and more tenants are turning to private landlords and paying higher rental costs for the same properties (ironically often this shortfall comes from the public purse). In London (at time of publishing) 36% of formerly public housing units were privately rented (p.41). Council tenants in England still have the "Right to Buy" their council tenancies at a discounted price, but the scheme ended in Scotland in 2016 . Scotland is however still feeling the effects of this, with charities such as Shelter Scotland campaigning for more social homes to be built .

Chapter 2: 'Residential alienation' considers feelings of being "at home" in opposition to the alienation and insecurity of housing, historically and contemporarily. The authors examine the impacts of neoliberalism and its "assault on the social safety net" (p.55). They also reiterate their arguments on commodification of housing and violence towards tenants.

Madden and Marcuse assert that the housing system as it stands promotes insecurity as opposed to ontological security – which they spend time defining and exploring. They also acknowledge that homelessness is "a major segment of the housing system" (p.69).

Interesting observations are made regarding homeownership – which in itself does not equate with having greater housing security or quality of life. In fact, homeowners often have the same (or increased) economic burdens. They are "still living within an inhumane housing system – they have simply used their resources to construct a more liveable corner within it" (p. 81). It is only those with more financial resources who can mitigate the effects of housing instability.

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For the housing system to be humane in every sense of the word, it would mean that all living within it are afforded quality of life and a base from which to thrive.

Chapter 3: 'Oppression and liberation in housing' outlines two "approaches" to understanding contemporary housing issues. The first is to "cast them as the special concerns of particular populations that are ill-housed, in the context of an overall housing system that is held to be functioning well" (p. 86). This silences systemic inadequacies or (at worst) blames the "victims". The second approach reduces issues to economic concerns, i.e. supply and demand. The reasons for housing issues in this context are restrictions on house building and low wages.

Left out of these two approaches are issues connected to segregation, gender bias, tenant organising and "the full ideological significance of the glorification of homeownership" (p.87) – a side effect of neoliberalism and capitalism. Housing as a political issue is re-enforced and a call is made for housing to be repoliticized and brought back into public discussion by looking at "whom housing is for, whom it oppresses, and whom it empowers" (p.118).

Chapter 4: 'The myths of housing policy' opens by outlining the "myth" of the state acting in the best interests of all citizens. It states that when interventions are unsuccessful, the onus of responsibility is placed on "lack of knowledge, countervailing selfish interests, incompetence, or lack of courage" P.119). The authors argue that housing policy itself is "an ideological artefact" (p.119) as the motivation is maintaining the status quo (historically to control labour) rather than solving the "crisis".

Historically significant events are outlined, such as the slum clearances (from 1949 onwards) in the US which actually decreased housing stock (despite agreements to build one public housing unit for every one destroyed).

What the authors call "the myth of the meddling state" is defined as a Conservative narrative and a "mirror image of the tale of the benevolent state" (p.140). Arguments have been made against state intervention as "unneeded and counterproductive" (p.140) necessitating full privatisation and decreased regulation to produce the best housing

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outcomes. This standpoint does not acknowledge that US federal money spent on public housing is far less than the subsidies provided to wealthier homeowners. It also ignores the fact that housing and the state are inextricably linked – planning, building, supplying utilities and materials, legal contexts etc. Therefore, the state cannot be removed from issues of housing - and it is nonsensical to call for this.

Chapter 5: 'Housing movements of New York' provides a useful overview of significant historical movements and events. The chapter concludes with reflections and pointers for the future. The authors acknowledge the stereotypical image of a housing activist being a negative "angry tenant shouting "NO"!" (p. 188). But "no" can often be the only tool the powerless have against those in power in an unequal society. There is a history of the same activists proposing positive plans, but these are often disregarded as being uneconomical or affording too much freedom to tenants.

The conclusion wraps up the main arguments coherently. It dispels the argument of housing for everyone being "a hopelessly utopian goal" (p.191) but disagrees that simply having a policy or agreement for the universal right to housing is enough - because actions are needed to back this up. In order to achieve this, the authors say that we need to change the "political and economic structures of contemporary society" (p. 198) in which the state is part of both the problem and the solution.

The authors are against marginal "system-maintaining" (p.199) changes, advocating instead changes that are achievable in the meantime whilst pointing the way to more radical, transformative "system-challenging" (p.200) change.

Potential directions of travel are outlined (pp. 201-217):

- Decommodify and de-financialize the housing system
- Expand, defend and improve public housing
- Privilege inhabitants
- Promote housing alternatives
- Democratize housing management & policy
- Broaden housing struggles
- Globalize housing movements.

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The illustration of historical context is very useful, but it does appear to jump around somewhat (i.e. individual chapters rather than the entire book begin with the farthest back point of historical significance and run up to the present day) and is not chronological throughout. Perhaps this is due to the discursive tone of the book, which I feel would have benefitted from a summarised timeline for clarity's sake.

Subject areas also are not clearly defined (e.g. home ownership is covered in chapters 2 and 3) but, again, this is perhaps an effect of the style of narration.

Some concepts might be harder to grasp for those not familiar with housing (and other relevant) issues. An example of this might be neoliberalism – a term which not all are familiar with and could have been expanded upon and defined (as with ontological security).

Although there was good coverage of social movements, there was little acknowledgement of the role and successes/failures of charities. This might have been a useful addition.

Something particularly striking from the book is the belief that the housing system is in fact doing what it was designed for i.e. making investors wealthier, with little regard for those who need homes in which to live their lives. In this sense current housing systems are successful.

All in all, this was an informative and in places very powerful read.

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