



The Housing Question Revisited

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Abstract

Talk given at the Association of American Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting 2012 in New York City (New York), February 24 – 28.

Panel Discussion (on February 27): “*The Housing Question Revisited*”

Source: an edited version of <http://vimeo.com/38981359>

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Reading Frederick Engels’ *The Housing Question*¹ today, one is astonished by how much of it is still contemporarily relevant. The polemics may be specific to the time, yet what we can draw from them, especially the ones against French political economist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, is that there is a series of themes showing that Engels, in a sense, was out of his time: his critiques of Christianity, of Malthusianism, of the supposed beneficence of paternalistic reform and his understanding that liberal reformism is part of the bourgeois strategy in the first place; the idea that one’s appeals to moral justice are themselves expressions of socioeconomic relations; and his indictment of so-called socialists who think that the solution to the housing question is home ownership. All of these issues were quite remarkable moves for Engels to have made at the time.

¹ Frederick Engels, *Zur Wohnungsfrage*, a series of three articles for the Leipzig *Volksstaat*, 1872. Republished as a pamphlet, *The Housing Question*, ed. C. P. Dutt, Moscow: the Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers, 1935. Transcribed by Zodiac, 1995 <https://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/housing-question>.



Let me now focus on a few decisive issues: we are aware of Haussmannisation,² the pure luxury city, and the fact that the bourgeoisie only has one method of solving the housing question, which is to move it elsewhere. However, the first point I would like to make is not just that this is a presage of gentrification, but rather an opportunity to start thinking about what gentrification looks like. Because notorious right-wing counter-attacks are: if there is no displacement, then there is no gentrification really. Or that gentrification is only about the narrow process of rehabilitating buildings, not about erecting new ones. Gentrification has evolved since the 1960s and 1970s and become exactly the kind of process that Engels was talking about in his articles about the class retake of space, which is what he's alluding to with Haussmann. If we don't recognize that this shift has already taken place and if we do not apply the language of gentrification—which of course has the added advantage of a class language to it—we haven't yet caught up with what Engels was saying 140 years ago.

Next, a central point to understand is the ways in which gentrification or the housing problem is embedded in structures of capitalism. Engels is very useful for figuring this out. He says that the housing problem is not a problem of workers being exploited as workers. It affects workers being exploited as consumers of housing and, as such, it affects more than just the workers. And for those living in the United States at least—but for me it is broader than that—we immediately think “subprime crisis.” And of course Engels' angle would have been: who is hit hardest by the subprime crisis? The working class, no question, and there is the point at which the politics should focus. What has happened in the subprime crisis and the austerity crisis in Europe is precisely that the nexus between housing, construction, and finance has been totally exposed. So it is not just a question of housing in the narrow sense, but it is the way in which housing is embedded within the capitalist system. It is embedded in a way that even Engels could not have foreseen: mortgage financing is a fitting example. In the United States from 2009 through 2011—for three years—there were almost nine million homes in some sort of foreclosure proceedings (not all of them were foreclosed, though). And there are movements that are beginning to deal with this. So the question becomes very clear and it is echoed throughout Engels' text: how do we fit the housing question, or more generally, the urban question, into a question of class struggle?

At one point Engels says—and you have to remember this is 1872: “One thing is certain; there is already a sufficient quantity of housing in the big cities to remedy immediately all real housing shortage.” Picture the Homeless, one of the Right to the City groups in New York, two or three weeks ago published a study titled *Banking on Vacancy* that showed exactly that. The estimates of the Coalition

² E.N.: Georges-Eugène Haussmann (27 March 1809–11 January 1891) was chosen by Emperor Napoleon III to carry out a massive program of new boulevards, parks, and public works in Paris in the 1860s, commonly known as Haussmann's renovation of Paris.

for the Homeless³ say that around 120,000 people are homeless in New York. On the other hand, there is enough vacant housing being held by landlords and banks to house these people. Engels was saying something that is now empirically true in New York City 140 years later, and probably has been true for much of the time in between.

However, I want to be a little critical of Engels, too. He states that the solution to the housing problem is going to require the abolition of the distinction between town and country and that secondly and related it is going to require the abolition of what he calls the modern big cities. Now, I take this as a contextual statement. Engels in *The Housing Question* talks about how the housing shortage is rooted very much in the transition to capitalism. Thinking about the Soviet experience of trying to create something that resembled even-keeled development, which did have a lot to do with dispersing urban centers, we know that there is some veracity in the political tactic of breaking down the power of urban centers. However, it is not obvious to me that breaking down the distinction between town and country is feasible or even desirable; especially when you look at what now one may take to be the leading edge of urban change—and this I borrow from urbanist Ananya Roy among others. The global cities of today are not so much London, New York, or Paris; they are Mumbai, Shanghai, Mexico City, São Paulo, etc. So what does the solution to the housing problem look like now if we decide to break down the distinction and abolish the big cities?

One of my favorite lines from Engels is: “Social revolution will have to take things as it finds them.” He means by this that there are no fixed strategies or tactics. And in many ways it is a critique of the left itself, and a critique of the organized left in particular when it makes a move toward some kind of sectarianism by taking verbatim the reading and rereading of texts. I think it is important that we now think about the housing crisis not so much as tied to the transition into capitalism, as Engels did, but as totally integral to the capitalist mode of production, regardless whether we’re dealing with Mumbai or Montreal.

A further issue and one related to the last is how to integrate the larger housing question into the question of revolt. Here I want to offer a different argument to the previous one, which is to say that we have made a lot of progress.

³ E.N.: Picture the Homeless is a grassroots organization founded and led by homeless people. It focuses on social justice around issues like housing, police violence, and the shelter-industrial complex. See <http://picturethehomeless.org>. Right to the City is a national alliance of racial, economic, and environmental justice organizations that seeks to create regional and national impacts in the fields of housing, human rights, urban land and community development, civic engagement, and criminal and environmental justice. See <http://righttothecity.org>. Coalition for the Homeless is the USA’s oldest advocacy and direct-service organization helping homeless men, women, and children. It is built on the belief that affordable housing, sufficient food, and the chance to work for a living wage are fundamental rights in a civilized society. See <http://coalitionforthehomeless.org>.

We could think about Henri Lefebvre,⁴ whose exit from the French communist party in the 1950s had very much to do with the fact that he was trying to focus on the urban. The response he was getting from a very narrow Stalinist communist party was exactly that: never mind the urban, it is all about class. But Lefebvre was right. We now have a much better sense of how the urban is integrated into the development of capitalism. But now we need to take it even further, because it seems to me that after what has happened since 2011 with the Occupy Movement, people of my generation need to retool. How do we view the urban question more broadly and put the housing question in particular into the mix? How do we integrate housing into new kinds of political strategies?

What has happened in the US since Occupy was disbanded, to put it politely, is that a coalition has already emerged between Occupy, the Right to the City, which was all about anti-gentrification and housing questions, and groups like Take Back the Land.⁵ In the past, Take Back the Land has been very good at putting people back into foreclosed housing. In the case of Florida, in fact, the cops and even the courts refused to move in and kick people out. Why? Ultimately, I think, because, as one magistrate said: “Where the hell else are people going to live?” As to the cops, well, their mothers, sisters, brothers, fathers and their next-door neighbors were all being foreclosed as well. There is decay in the state apparatus and I think we need to take that seriously. The state is not all-powerful and nor is the ruling class.

All in all, the point is not to focus on particular forms or solutions to the housing problem. The solution is to build the power politically so that at a future point, when it is a viable and feasible possibility that solutions to the housing problem can be created, the people are in the position to push them through. However, I think that given how radically open-to-change things are now, it is actually very important to think about issues like transitional forms for housing. This is obviously a slippery slope, for it mirrors exactly what Proudhon was doing. When we think about transitional forms and transitional demands, the point is not to think of them as ends in themselves. In the first place these are means to get people into housing, but at the same time to organize them. And to the extent that the possibility of a revolutionary shift—an appreciation that housing is embedded into questions of the exploitation of workers and the necessity of abolishing the capitalist mode of production—stays up front in the political equation, it seems to me that there is no problem with transitional or transformative strategies that in themselves can be a kind of magnet for political organizing. The value of Engels is

⁴ E.N.: Henri Lefebvre (1901–91) was a French Marxist philosopher and sociologist. He is best known for pioneering the critique of everyday life and introducing concepts such as the right to the city and the production of social space.

⁵ E.N.: The Take Back the Land movement is a national network of organizations dedicated to elevating housing to the level of a human right and securing community control over land. See <http://takebacktheland.org>.

precisely to have taught us, as regards the housing question, the kind of dialectic between the follies of utopianism on the one side, and the necessity of revolutionary strategy on the other. But what we don't understand from Engels and what we need to begin to fashion ourselves is: what does the middle ground look like? How do we maintain that momentum for transformative projects around housing at the same time as we keep in mind the larger goal of overthrowing the capitalist mode of production?