



What makes a good tenant?

Squatters and migrants resisting housing discrimination in Warsaw

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Abstract

In this paper, I pose a question of whether it would be possible to build an alliance of the migrant tenants and squatters in Warsaw to resist housing discrimination. The socio-political framework for my answer includes housing, financial, and asylum crises. By referring to the ideas of “political hegemony” (Mouffe) and “the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière), I show that housing discrimination is the result of the neoliberal narrative that puts the owner of a flat in a position of power. An intersectional perspective allows me to examine how different identities (gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) are embodied by tenants searching for flats. Finally, I interpret the relations between squatting and migrant communities as “a critical alliance” (Butler) based on the idea of “nonheroic disobedience and weak resistance” (Majewska).

Keywords

refugees, housing, squatting, resistance, alliance

Introduction

Scholar-activism can be a fraught and frustrating process; so too activism and scholarship in general. In the same way that the results of ‘failed’ scientific experiments are rarely reported in spite of their utility to the ‘field’, writing on activism and resistance is broadly critical yet tends to focus more on the positive and productive experiences as though it is these that provide the most insight. Our experiences in a struggle over a public housing estate in Sydney were to the contrary; the failures—our failures—have been more instructive than the successes. In this paper, we consider the processes and outputs of our research-resident-activist work. Our aim is not to dissuade or to caution; while housing justice is a

prevalent theme in the scholar-activist and participatory action research literature (e.g. Arthurson et al. 2014; Martínez López 2013; Oldfield 2015), too many social researchers have problematically built and continue to build their careers by studying the lives of people who have been socio-economically disadvantaged while eschewing their struggles (Chatterton et al. 2010). Therefore, our aim is to illuminate some of the hazards that scholar-activists can face when deeply involved in housing activism and provide routes for how they might work through them.

“We don’t have a refugee crisis, we have a housing crisis,” said Peter Cachola Schmal the curator of the German Pavillion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2016 (Dullroy, 2016). This opinion goes hand-in-hand with concerns related to growing housing exclusion voiced by the major European organization that focuses on homelessness (FEANTSA, 2018). How does it translate into the Polish context?

I am currently conducting dissertation research that aims to understand how migrants are discriminated against as they attempt to access to housing in Poland following 2015. It is intended to help migrant tenants find and furnish flats. I have already performed qualitative analysis of the landlord-tenant law in Poland. The next stages of my project include focus on group interviews with migrants and an open space workshop on housing conditions in Poland. Aside from my academic activities, I am also a volunteer for one of the non-profit organizations *Chlebem i Sól* (Bread and Salt) advocating for the refugees’ rights.

In this paper, I seek to answer a question that arose during the first stage of the aforementioned project. Namely, would it be possible to build an alliance between native and immigrant tenants based on their housing struggles?

1. Three crises

The structural crisis of access to adequate housing in Poland dates back to the 1970s, when the country was under the Soviet-backed regime. In 1978, the density ratio was 8.1 dwellings per 1,000 residents (Salamon and Muziol-Weclawowicz, 2015, p. 21). This directly led to a dozen or more years of waiting time for a council flat. Moreover, most of the state-owned housing stock was technically in poor condition (*ibid.*, p. 23). The economic and social struggles Poland faced after the revolution of 1989 stood in the way of modernization.

Market reforms in the 1990s focused upon supporting new investments in housing across Poland, which resulted in systematic growth of housing for sale or rent built by developers, and low market share of social housing (*ibid.*, 2015, p. 24-31). In other words, a housing shortage persists, and Poland has the third highest rate of overcrowding in the European Union (EUROSTAT, 2017).

Since the financial crisis in 2008 and the Europe 2020 Strategy, social housing has gained more recognition within the European Union. It is often considered to be effective in counteracting social exclusion of underprivileged groups (Salamon and Muziol-Weclawowicz, 2015, p. 58). However, this is not the case for Poland, which is one of the very few countries in the region that weathered the recession. Polish banks remained

profitable and liquid, which strengthened the neoliberal hegemony understood as “the result of political construction and struggle” rather than “the expression of a common underlying essence” (Mouffe and Laclau, 2001, p. 65). An important point to note is that this political construction concealed the fact that steady economic progress between 2007 and 2011 was matched by growth in social inequality (Toynbee, 2011). In this context, questionable housing policies founded on the neoliberal concept of property were discursively difficult, as Poland was seen as a country where free-market solutions worked.

Even though the past two years have brought a change in the discourse, and some neoliberal thinkers admitted that they may have been incorrect in adopting Hayek’s and Friedman’s ideas in their political agendas (Rydliniski, 2017, p. 60), the impact of neoliberal hegemony on housing issues still has not been widely discussed.

The influx of migrants into the European Union also contributed to the perception of housing issues in Poland. According to research done by Gorny et al. (2017), migrants are seen as a “suspect community” (ibid., p. 73) that represents a threat not only to national security, but also to limited social resources in work and housing. Polish hostility to migrants (CBOS, 2017) perpetuates the social antagonism (Mouffe, Laclau, 2001, p. xiv) between migrant and native tenants as rivals for the mentioned resources.

2. What makes a good tenant?

Migrant tenants experience intersectional discrimination. They are socially excluded not only because of their economic, but also because of their legal, status. For example, while there is a registration requirement in Poland, most lease agreements contain a clause that does not allow foreigners to register themselves at a rented premise. My qualitative analysis of landlord-tenant law demonstrates that while no financial penalty is imposed for not having a registered address, it does increase the difficulty of obtaining a loan or admission to kindergarten for a particular household’s children.

I have also examined different types of lease agreements in Poland, concluding that lease agreements legally disadvantage tenants with migrant background. This is because such agreements require enclosing a declaration from the tenants, in which they agree to the eviction if the landlord demands it (Tenants Protection Act, 2010). The tenants indicate the address of a place where they can live in case of eviction. Polish citizens use the address they are registered under (which is usually their birthplace). This is not an option for foreign tenants, as they are not registered under any address in Poland. Hence, they cannot sign an occasional lease agreement.

Aside from legal disadvantages, migrant tenants are also differently hierarchized based on nationality, ethnicity, and gender identity. According to a discrimination test done by Kinga Wysienska (2014), Polish landlords are most likely to rent a flat to Polish men. Next in line are Polish women, then Chechen women, Belarusian men, Belarusian women, and Chechen men. Wysienska interprets this hierarchy in the context of the statistical discrimination and expectation theories, which brings her to conclude that a preference for men may relate to the gender stereotype of men as breadwinners, ergo solvent tenants. Such

a stereotype does not apply to Chechen men, as they are perceived through the lenses of both gender and religion. Islam is the predominant religion in Chechnya, and young Poles often consider Muslims a threat to national security (Hall and Mikulska-Jolles, 2016, p. 63).

Since there are no laws addressing manifestations of sexism, racism, or xenophobia in housing policies in Poland, it is impossible to prove that the landlord's decision is biased. At this point, all of the discussed forms of discrimination – whether based in the lack of legal framework or identity-driven hierarchizations – conjoin. This reveals that “the distribution of the sensible,” as Jacques Rancière describes, makes the migrant tenants’ needs “invisible, unsayable, and inaudible” (2006, p. 89). Property owners lay down the principles to protect their privileged position, which is justified by neoliberal hegemony.

3. Squatting as “a critical alliance”

One could point out that the sorts of exclusion mentioned above concern – at least to some extent – not only people with migrant backgrounds, but also economically disadvantaged Poles. This brings me to the question: Would it be possible to build “an alliance” between different vulnerable groups to resist housing inequality? Judith Butler writes, “There can be no entry into the sphere of appearance without a critique of the differential forms of power by which that sphere is constituted, and without a critical alliance formed among the discounted, the ineligible – the precarious – to establish new forms of appearance that seek to overcome that differential form of power” (2015, p. 50-51). Access to housing for everyone can be a unifying cause that would allow “a critical alliance.” A great example of such a coalition is a squatting community in Warsaw that has been advocating for access to adequate housing.

The political agency of the collective is established on the action of occupying a building it does not own. These social practices can be described as “everyday nonheroic disobedience, or weak resistance” (Majewska et al., 2016) against policies founded on the concept of property. The ideology that is generally shared by the squatters is anti-capitalist, inclusive of social minorities, and environment-friendly. Their activism – originally focused on cultural activities – has leaned toward cooperation with tenants’ movement since 2010, when the aforementioned increasing socio-economic inequalities played a big part in this shift (Polanska, 2014, p. 339). Another issue squatters have been trying to tackle is Polish hostility to migrants (CBOS, 2017). This made the collective one of the very few safe housing environments in Warsaw.

A refugee mother of a large family with seven children has said: “We had only the suitcases with our personal belongings. We got everything we own from the squatters. They have been very helpful. My husband fixes stuff, if we need something, he does it. The bigger issues are handled by the collective” (Chrzanowska et al., 2015, p. 50). The squatters not only provide shelter, but also organize language classes as well as skills workshops (bowling, singing, bicycle repairs, massage instructions) (Polanska, 2014, p. 339), and run a café-club in the city center. Migrants are involved in these activities on an equal footing, which helps them find their way in the new community. As for engagement in local issues, the squatters

support tenants' rights by conducting debates on housing policies and participating in various protests (e.g. demonstrations against the murder of Jolanta Brzeska, who was a community worker and defender of evicted tenants). The coalition between the squatters and migrants extended beyond housing-related issues. Members of the collective helped coordinate a hunger strike in the refugee centers in Poland in 2012 (Lemondzawa, 2017).

Squatting, if understood as a social movement, is clearly related to left-wing political theories. As such, it is more likely to be open to people with a migrant background than other groups in Polish society. It may be one of the reasons why “a critical alliance” between the squatters and migrants is possible. Political exploitation of the fears and anxieties of the poor (Bauman, 2016) has been used by the ruling party in Poland to raise tension between economically disadvantaged Poles and people with migrant backgrounds. Bringing these two groups together, and enabling them to realize the political potential they may have as allies, is a great challenge for Polish thinkers and activists. What we all should have in mind when taking up this challenge is, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: “The groups are not unified under any single authority but rather relate to each other in a network structure. Social forums, affinity groups, and other forms of democratic decision-making are the basis of the movements, and they manage to act together based on what they have in common” (2005, p. 86).

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