

## Housing the elderly: between crisis and resistance

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### **Abstract**

Rising rents have a drastic impact on the everyday lives of older people. As pensions are fixed, elderly renters are faced with the constant fear of losing their home, which often also means losing their social community and self-determination. In my research, I am concerned with ways in which older people can be politically active in public spaces in order to raise awareness for their struggles with rising rents. I consider the conditions of political and embodied action (Arendt 1958; Butler 2011, 2018) and claim that, in times of rent struggles, the older female body, in particular, becomes a site of rent politics

### **Keywords**

embodied politics, elders, housing crisis, practices of resistance

### **Introduction**

A group of 20 older people in the age between 75 and 90 appeared in front of their house in Berlin, which was sold in 2007 to a private global acting investor. Some of them have been living here for over 40 years. They are sitting on their walkers or folding chairs. One can hear them chant the first tones of the melody of 'Bella Ciao' –the hymn of the Italian resistance in World War II. With a collective voice, they performed their own lyrics, conveying the struggle for visibility in the face of rising rents, which they could not afford with fixed pensions. Germany is facing a 'grey' housing shortage. In 2035, more than 24 out of 80 million people will be older than 65 (see Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019). Many will be faced with old-age poverty, especially in cities, where more than half of all seniors need support from the state to pay their rents. In Berlin, where over 80 percent of inhabitants rent their homes, tenants have faced rent increases of 76 percent since 2008 for newly rented space (see SenStadtWohn, 2019). This has a drastic effect on the everyday lives of older

people. They are faced with the constant fear of losing not only their home but also their social community and self-determination, due to rent increases.

Senior dwellers appear to be new actors in the field of urban social movements, while gender plays an essential role in their ageist discrimination. These protest groups consist mainly of older women, as most of their husbands died before the age of 80 or during World War II. The older women mount resistance against their landlords, squat in their homes to protest neoliberal housing developments, organize flash mobs and online petitions, and seek to be part of the citywide network of urban political initiatives that fight for tenant rights in Berlin. More attention must be paid to the rent struggles of older female tenants as the specific challenges of dwelling in insecure conditions become increasingly crucial in old age. We need to understand with what conditions and strategies elders can arise as politically mature urban residents, and what it takes to act politically in urban space as an 80-year-old woman who might need a wheelchair or walker and have limited time left.

### **The body as a site of rent politics**

*For politics to take place, the body must appear.*

Judith Butler, 2011: n.p.

To make their demands about rising rents and insecurity heard, the older women practice a specific, ‘embodied, plural performativity’ of resistance in public urban space (see Butler, 2011). The body is a resource and precondition for gaining access to the political public sphere but receives little attention in the constitution, conditions, and outcomes of rent struggles. For older people, the body is often a critical variable in coping with housing insecurity. Elderly urban communities seeking to oppose the effects of the housing crisis are subject to particular conditions, e.g. the mobility of their bodies. Their appearance in the public sphere, and therefore, the space of discourse and politics, is linked not only to physical ability but also to gender. The conditions of elderly bodies in political engagement in public space, and their challenges and dilemmas must be taken into serious account. How can ageing bodies be politically active in public spaces as renters to raise awareness of their issues within the housing crisis? What strategies are needed for a renters’ movement of older female bodies with limited mobility?

To answer these questions, I consider the conditions of political and embodied action (Arendt, 1958; Butler, 2011, 2018) and claim that, in times of rent struggles, the gendered and ageing body becomes a site of rent politics. For Arendt ([1958] 2002), the public sphere is attributed to the male and the private or ‘pre-political’ sphere to the female. The group of older female protesters I refer to here have not only challenged their own limited mobility but also appropriated a public sphere that is dominated by male bodies and the creative class. On the threshold of the public sphere, the pre-political evaporates.

In addition to gendered discrimination, older women are generally rendered almost invisible in the media and the public sphere. This binary logic of public and private, of male and female, forms the conditions of political actions and the generation of a critical public

for rent issues. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, older female protesters draw much attention with their actions during demonstrations. As actors “out of place,” as Roger Sanjek (2014, p. xiii) described the elders in his book on the Gray Panthers movement, they surprise by their presence at demonstrations against rising rents. This element of surprise further reveals a general understanding of politics and activism and, in particular, assumptions about who can publicly emerge to stand up for their right to the city.

### **Figure 1**

The ‘senior rebels’ on a protest wagon during a demonstration against the commodification of housing in September 2014 in Berlin.

**Source: Tenants Community from Hansa-Ufer, Berlin Moabit.**



Additionally, urban space is highly competitive (Butler, 2011; Arendt, [1958] 2002), and the freedom to move in the political public sphere is ‘tied to privileges and regulations’ of the abled body (Haschemi Yekani & Gunkel, 2012, p. 59). This means that not everyone can participate in urban public space or appear visible to the same extent. Public space must be appropriated as a political space during demonstrations (Butler, 2011), for example, through the arrangement of bodies in space and the act of speaking. Older people with limited mobility cannot always move with the flow and rhythm of these demonstrations. Questioning the ‘privileges and regulations’ of mobility makes it possible to identify shifts in power relations in public space. Who is capable of becoming politically active and under what conditions? Who is mobile enough to claim public space and who therefore has access to urban discourses on rising rents? The female rent protesters have developed their own strategies to expand their range of action despite their physical limitations.

### **Strategies**

As the physical limitations of the ageing body reduce the acting radius and with it the possibility of political participation, senior dwellers must creatively adapt protest strategies to make their rent struggles seen and heard. For example, they rebuild old wagons and rickshaw bikes as mobile protest vehicles (Figure 1). They also use material artefacts (like chairs or walkers) to support their bodies for more extended periods, leading to denser and reconfigured protest practices through which their issues become more visible and audible

(Figure 2). As a result, the potential to contribute and place their urban political issues on rent amongst related discourses increases.

### Figure 2

Older female protesters against rising rents at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin in September 2014. Source: Tenants Community from Hansa-Ufer, Berlin Moabit/change.org



Further, the elders have expanded their actions into digital spaces to guarantee the spatial and temporal mobility of their issue, via online petitions and the performance of their protest song on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Through these online petitions, their concerns gained public attention and legitimacy with a broader public. Thousands of online signatures evoked medical and political attention to their issues. These actions countered stereotypes about older people's abilities to make use of digital media to become politically engaged. They might not have used Facebook or Twitter consistently, but the older tenants used digital tools to overcome the issue of large spatial distances. The public within rent struggles is not only generated via media and digital representation of the actors and their collective (plural) protest bodies but, in the case of older people, also through existing attributions of age and gender, which can generate counter publics (see Schachtner & Winker, 2005; Fraser, 1990).

To develop these strategies, the seniors needed the support of specific actors, whom I refer to as *hidden allies*. These allies are not visible immediately and function as 'social infrastructures,' which McFarlane and Silver define as a "practice of connecting people and things in socio-material relations that sustain urban life" (2017, p. 6). Referring to AbdouMaliq Simone (2004), these infrastructures are 'peopled' and evolve as a 'connecting tissue' of encounters (McFarlane & Silver 2017, p. 6). The elders and almost every protest group involved in rent struggles rely on *hidden allies* as 'social infrastructures' to become a visible part of renter movements and navigate various networks in which they can make their specific issues and uncertainty as renters heard. In the case of the female rent protesters, the *hidden allies* appear as institutional organizations, which facilitate media and digital representation of tenants' concerns to raise political and public attention. For example, providers of online petitions' platforms, supporting the elderly protesters to establish social

<sup>1</sup> The older women and 'senior rebels' in Berlin-Moabit performed a flash mob presenting their protest song to the public. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otOptAciDhM> (Accessed 31 March 2019).

and digital infrastructure for their protest. It is essential to point out that on the one hand, this support only evolves if the elderly protesters internalize the logic of these digital means. For example, the elders prove that they are many by creating protest signs showing the current amount of online signatures of their online petition. Thus, these digital means are connected to the physical space and embodied practices of resistance. On the other hand, it is essential that these ‘peopled’ social infrastructures lead to a broader critical public.

## **Conclusion**

There is limited research on the effects of the housing crisis on older people. Scholars and politicians should develop a broader critical perspective on elders and their dwelling conditions. It would enable them to think about sustainable solutions and mechanisms that could overcome an ageist housing market in urban societies in the long run. Cities must adapt to the needs of senior dwellers. Global private investors in rental markets hinder the right for older renters to maintain long-term, secure homes. Elders, as a growing demographic group, are enormously affected by the insecurity evoked by rising rents and currently left behind by contemporary housing policies.

I have highlighted a vulnerable group of actors who are affected by rent struggles and act politically in urban space to make their voices heard among a broader critical and political audience. The notion of time is especially crucial when it comes to dominant tactics and resistance for these actors: against the elderly female protesters, global investors use tactics such as ‘waiting it out.’ While five years of waiting is merely a bother for an impatient investor, it can mean everything for an 80-year-old person nearing their life’s end. What I consider radical is that they make the remaining time of their lives count – and actively decide to resist. Despite their vulnerability as renters, they have developed creative strategies to become visible in public space.

With the help of *hidden allies* and digital means, they have managed to overcome limited spatial mobility in rent struggles. As one of the growing actor groups of the ageing society, elders influence the political discourse on the rising rents and housing crisis by generating a critical public on rent issues amongst urban citizens.

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