



Special issue introduction

Tenants organizing: precarization and resistance

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Let us start this introduction by asking the question; why is contemporary and historical knowledge of tenants' struggles important? Tenants' mobilizations are covered unevenly in research and few attempts connect tenants' mobilizations as transnational or globally linked phenomena, despite the clear connections between national tenants' associations and international links between tenants' organizations (i.e. International Union of Tenants, or the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City) (see also Stringer 2019). Moreover, tenants' mobilizations and movements often stand in the shadow of more spectacular mobilizations and movements and are rarely depicted by researchers, however often richly documented by movement historians. There is also a tendency to study tenants' collective actions in retrospect and there are some significant contributions to this body of literature presented by historians and historical sociologists (Bradley 2014; Chisholm, 2016; Gray 2018a; Gold 2014; Mattern 2018; Rolf 2020). A few recent works, published mostly in the last decade, focus on contemporary struggles of tenants (Brickell et al. 2017; di Felicianantonio 2017; Flesher Fominaya 2015; Gustafsson et al. 2019; Huron 2018, Listerborn et al. 2020; Martínez López 2019; Polanska 2015; 2017; Polanska & Richard 2019; Thörn 2020) exposing the inequalities and exploitation of the current urban capitalist development.

Among both the social movements of the 20th century and the research community, housing struggles have tended to be overshadowed by the interest in struggles taking place in the labor market and the workplaces (Grey 2018b: xvii). The two dominant perspectives on tenants' issues: the Marxist tradition departing from class struggles and the one represented by social movement scholars, have failed in giving attention to the issues of

Figure 1

Demonstration
organized by tenants in
Stockholm, 2019.

Photo: Dominika V.
Polanska



collective action, collectively undertaken actions with common goals, devoted to housing matters (cf. Damer 2018). It seems that social movement researchers have been late in realizing the significance of tenants' collective actions for the development of public housing and the rights of tenants in our contemporary societies (Castells 1983; Pickvance 2001; Reick 2020). As we write, these rights are being circumscribed by neoliberal policies and the increasing financialization of housing (Aalbers 2016; Aalbers & Christophers 2014), making the struggle for dignity and recognition among tenants ever more important to document and study. Historical studies can illuminate the ways in which tenants organized in the past, tease out best practices of collective action and elaborate on successful cases from which to learn, and they can also help in developing ideas and perspectives that can inspire future struggles. Research on tenants' collective action can contribute to documenting and recognizing the importance of this kind of collective mobilization for the development of affordable housing, improved housing conditions, rental housing policies, and in the end: livable cities (Madden & Marcuse 2016). It can also contribute to the legitimization of tenants' struggles, as well as to their critical examination and elaboration of the problems that tenants encounter in the capitalist system. It is after all the purpose of critical urban researchers to expose contradictions, crises and lines of conflict in the current system (Brenner et al. 2012: 5).

Overall, it seems that the studies of tenants' struggles are unevenly covered across the globe and that North American and British contexts are dominating. There is a plethora of studies on rent strikes in England, Ireland and Scotland (for instance; Bradley 2014; Englander 1983; Grey 2018; Melling 1983) and tenants' organizations in the US (Fogelson 2013; Gold 2014; Heskins 1983; Huron 2018, to mention only some). There are also quite a few historical studies of the German tenants' movement (for example Führer 2000; Lengemann 2015; Mattern 2018; Rada 1991). Other contexts, and especially those in the Global South are still under-studied when it comes to resistance and collective action among residents (Brickell et al. 2017; Chatterjee 2014; Ngwane et al. 2017). Moreover, the prevalence of research produced in close connection or in collaboration with tenant activists is still quite rare.

Figure 2

Conference “Tenants organizing” in Stockholm, 2019.
Photo: Dominika V. Polanska



In September 2019, we, a group of activist-researchers, organized the conference *Tenants organizing: precarization and resistance* in Stockholm, Sweden. Following the critical urban theorist Peter Marcuse’s (2009; 2010) appeal to: expose, propose and politicize, we aimed to cast a light on the housing crisis, as well as the historical and contemporary mobilizations of tenants resisting the commodification of housing. By placing housing struggles and tenants’ organization at the center of the debate, we wished to expose and politicize current development and, hopefully, propose different perspectives and insights by discussing how tenants’ resistance can be formed, with what effects, and how it can be connected to other struggles in other places.

We felt the need to bring both activists, researchers and above all activist-researchers together as an injection of energy to the growing local resistance against market rents that interlocks with three decades of housing deregulation in Sweden—a country that has been internationally renowned for its generous and neutral housing policy, but which in the last decades has turned into a ‘monstrous hybrid’ of residual protective legislation and neoliberal deregulation (Christophers 2013; see also Gustafsson et al. 2019). The recent decades have given rise to local resistance groups fighting renovations, tenure-conversions and market rents in Sweden. Together with the internationally renowned half-million members strong Swedish Union of Tenants, *Hyresgästföreningen*, they are a considerable force, but are facing an uphill battle against the Center-left government, keen to further liberalize the housing market (read Polanska & Richard in this issue for more details on the relation of these groups and the Tenant Union).

By organizing our conference in connection with the annual national meeting for Swedish housing activists and initiatives, *Bostadsvrålet*¹ (The Housing Roar), our international guests were able to network with representatives of the Swedish housing movement. Topics such as rent strikes, organizing precarious renters, and squatting were discussed in a context where these methods have been heavily repressed from the usual repertoire of tenant

¹ <http://www.bostadsvralet.se/>

Figure 3

Bostadsvrålet's poster for the meeting in 2019.
Author: Malin Skogberg



struggles. Given the historical development of housing policies in Sweden and other countries, resulting in the introduction of public housing and rent regulations, among others, perhaps their efficiency was reconsidered in the wake of increasing neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization.

The conference brought together a wide variety of researchers and activists. This issue contains some of the many interesting contributions on collective struggles of tenants in the past and in the present. Dominika V. Polanska and Åse Richard's contribution 'Resisting renovations: tenants organizing against housing companies' renewal practices in Sweden' deals with the trend of renovations in contemporary Sweden, and the individual and collective forms of resistance used by tenants facing extensive housing renewal forcing residents to move due to steep rent increases. In their article, Polanska and Richard seek to expand the concept of contentious repertoires, by also including covert and individual forms of resistance and listing several ways in which tenants have resisted housing renewal in the country.

Tenant organizing and collective action has, as previously stated, been the subject of some research but there is a lack of comparative studies that would allow for better understanding of it as an international phenomenon. Lucas Poy's 'A Tale of Two Cities: The Tenants' Strikes of 1907-1908 in Buenos Aires and New York. Exploring the Global Historical Roots of Tenants' Organization' is thus a very welcome addition to the history of tenants' collective action. Poy examines two almost simultaneous rent strikes in Buenos Aires and New York, drawing conclusions by comparing housing situations, class relations, gender, ethnicity, and political support for the strikers.

Hannes Rolf's contribution 'A Union for Tenants: Tenant Militancy in Gothenburg as a Historical Example' describes the rise of the Gothenburg tenants movement in the first half of the 20th century and the beginning of its transformation from a street-level grassroots organization with deep connections to the militant labor unions into a more institutionalized and centralized organization. Despite its historically and perhaps internationally unparalleled strong position within the Swedish rental system, the Swedish Union of Tenants has been the subject of a surprisingly small amount of research. This contribution shows that the roots of the movement's position and its collective bargaining lie in the collective mobilization and the struggles of the mid-war period.

The reluctance of parts of the historical socialist movement to include housing struggles alongside industrial struggle in a wider class struggle analysis was, according to Monica Quirico, one of the reasons for the rise of the revolutionary Lotta Continua in the 1970s. In her contribution 'Lotta Continua and the housing movement in Italy in the 1970s: ancient history or present challenges?' Quirico describes the group's campaign for social revolution through actions such as housing occupations and other methods. By drawing from the insights provided by Italian 'workerism' and its most direct heirs, Quirico argues that the 'southernization' of Italy, meaning the growing disjuncture between the highly advanced regional development centers and semi-feudal areas, is in fact visible on a global scale today in the wake of monopoly-finance capital and the division of labor in the world economy. If La Lotta Continua can serve as an inspiring example of resistance and the establishment of self-determined housing, education and social services that 'creat[ed] their own democratic forms of struggle from below', the question of how to link these struggles to a unified and overarching anti-capitalist project remains a relevant one.

In Laura Barrio and Tom Youngman's "Housing is not a crime. Madrid's post-crisis squatters tell their story through research by social movements" we learn of contemporary squatters in Madrid by two of the activists involved in the neighborhood housing groups. The article touches upon the contemporary situation for the Madrid squatters and gives some helpful advice on social movement research. Furthermore, the authors argue that the banks' strategy to keep houses and homes vacant during the crisis, in order to not flood the market, did not take one important factor into consideration: "if the houses are there, then the informal economy, the economy of the street, will step in to balance the market", once again highlighting how collective action is crucial in the development of affordable, or in this case, common housing, improved conditions and livable cities. Through qualitative action research, interviews with squatters, and long-time participation in the Madrid squatting movement, Barrio and Youngman tell their story through four lenses: speculation, poverty, criminalization and legalization, and present a mini-manifesto for social movement researchers to take into consideration.

For the last few years, the rent struggle has intensified globally. There have been clear signs of an increased organizing over the rent issue. In "Staking out Territory: District-based Organizing in Toronto, Canada" Ashleigh Doherty and Cole Webber, both active in the organization, Parkdale Organize, discuss local militant non-sectorial and non-institutionalized organizing as a way of building class power. As vacant apartments in

Toronto are exempt from rent-regulations, an incentive to evict tenants has led to the displacement of the working-class from large areas of the city. Instead, a plethora of NGOs and state-funded organizations are trying to fill the void left by the reclining Canadian welfare-state, but often fail to include the people most affected by the city's rapid gentrification. Doherty and Webber argue that the NGOs' legalistic approach is a dead-end, and instead the tenants' collective action confronting the landlords carries the potential for "working class authority in all areas of life in Parkdale", witnessed first-hand by the authors in a successful rent-strike in 2017 in which hundreds of tenants partook.

Last but not least, Karina Villacura's review of *Urban design under neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago* by Francisco Vergara-Perucich describes a book on how urban design during neoliberalism has become a tool for capital accumulation, generating spatial inequalities, but also on how urban design instead could be based on solidarity and collective thinking. Vergara-Perucich's work highlights how the ideology and false promises of homeownership intersects with the design of residential areas based on consumers' purchasing power and helps in establishing private property as the ideological device dominating the development of Santiago. This process, recognizable in most neoliberal cities -- thus makes the book a must-read for researchers, students and general readers interested in the penetration of neoliberalism in urban planning and design.

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that tenants organizing in common struggle against capitalist market forces and "predatory rule of landlords" (Poy in this issue) have been successful in changing the landscapes of cities, putting pressure on power holders, having a say in the creation of policies and contributing to a formation of a common identity, as workers and tenants. Whether the tenants used action repertoires of strikes, squatting, or occupying public spaces, shaming/banning/blockading of landlords, or providing collective education and services and opening of meeting spaces, these actions have met repression from the landlords as well as from the governments. Durability of tenants' struggles sometimes transformed into social movements and collective identities and have left clear marks on the urban development of cities, housing policies, and the social dynamics of neighborhoods facing displacement. Although many of the cases included in this issue are separated by geographical and temporal distance, tenants' mobilizations have shared some significant similarities in their goals, methods, and achievements in the past, as well as in more contemporary struggles. Their anti-capitalist agenda, even though not always explicitly expressed, has been evident. The involvement of migrants (internal or external) and women has been emphasized in some of the pieces included here, a feature of tenants' struggles that has been insufficiently covered in previous research and deserves special attention in future research.

We would also like to encourage researchers, especially those interested in the power relations permeating our societies, to give more attention to the collective struggles revolving around housing issues. Housing is a fundamental human need that all societies must deal with, it is a political issue, and a field where socioeconomic hierarchies and economic inequalities are manifested clearly, and where hidden resistance and understudied forms of collective action are taking place. These struggles can point us to the most urgent

shortcomings in the current system, if we are ready to explore the cracks it has produced (Lancione 2020), and most often also propose possible solutions. While economy and labor markets experience recurring crises in capitalism, “For the oppressed, housing is always in crisis” (Madden & Marcuse 2016: 10) and is thus always a field of struggle.

We hope that the mix of historical and contemporary research and discussions will inspire the readers of this special issue and contribute to more attention being given to the struggles carried out by tenants in the creation of livable, diverse, and equitable cities. We also hope to spark some energy and encouragement to the ongoing struggles of tenants worldwide organizing against the processes of commodification and financialization of housing.

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² www.cyklopen.se

³ www.skarpnackskulturhus.stockholm.se

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