



The Housing Question a century and a half later: Notes from New York City

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Abstract

New York City serves as an entry point for a brief reflection on today's housing question. Drawing on Friedrich Engels' inspiring work in the late 19th century, it is argued that some issues he pointed out are still present and have become endemic to the capitalist city, while others have emerged amidst recent economic and health crises. In the US economic growth machine and in one of the global capitals, working-class, vulnerable, and unemployed populations still suffer precarious and unworthy dwelling conditions, and finding a place to live is gradually becoming more complex. With many people struggling after the pandemic, homelessness is also growing. The situation comes after decades of defunding public housing, dismantling rent regulations, and neglecting welfare protections in an increasingly financialized housing market that privileges profits over human rights. However, these issues are not unique to NYC; similar accounts can be found throughout urban geographies worldwide. We need to think locally and globally about the current housing question, improve cooperation across housing justice groups and social movements, and prompt a debate about ways to rethink the tenancy regime alongside the capitalist system that has proven incapable of providing housing for everyone.

Keywords

Housing crisis, rent regulation, housing justice, social movements, New York City

“What is meant today by housing shortage is the peculiar intensification of bad housing conditions of the workers as the result of the sudden rush of population to the big cities; a colossal increase in rents, still greater congestion in the separate houses, and for some, the impossibility of finding a place to live in at all.” It is shocking how, 150 years later, Friedrich

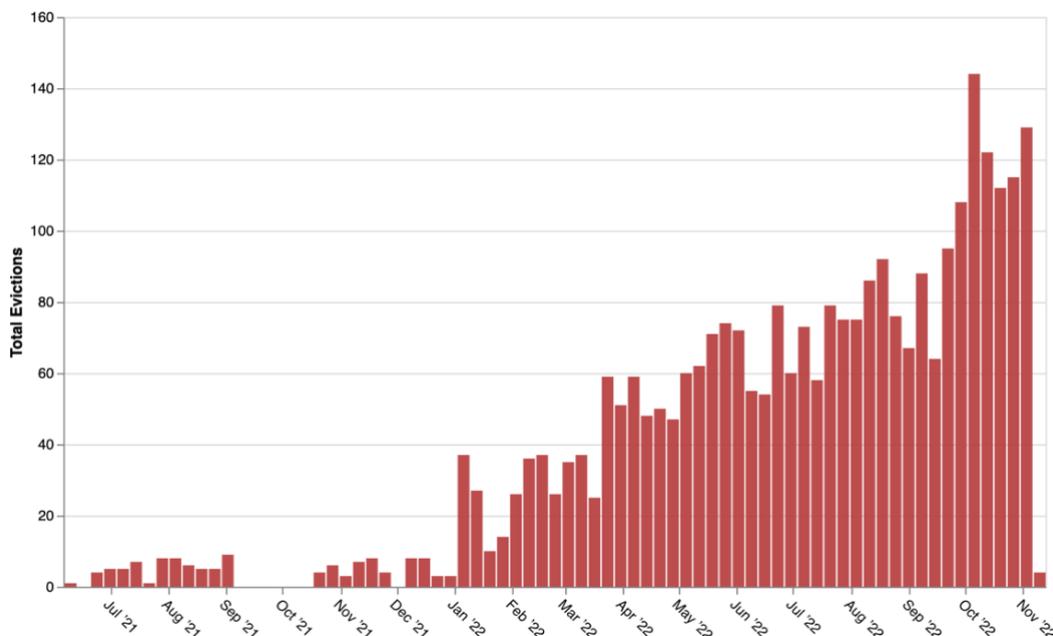
Engels' (1872, p. 18-19) words still resonate with us. Although people do not rush to urban centers anymore, cities keep growing because urbanization has become a primary mode of capitalist production. Across cities worldwide, rents have suffered another colossal increase in the past decade, most recently following inflation in the context of war and energy crises, illustrating how the built environment's exchange value is decoupled from its use value. The housing shortage is a problem alongside the precarious (and informal) conditions of part of that housing and homelessness. Working-class, vulnerable, and unemployed populations suffer from them. Drawing on examples mainly from Manchester, Engels reflected upon these and other issues surrounding the difficulties for many people to have a roof above their heads.

The situation has improved a century and a half later, yet it is far from being solved. Here I use New York City (NYC), arguably the backbone of global capitalism and US imperialism today, as an example to briefly revisit the housing question. Housing has become a primary commodity in contemporary capitalism, even more so in a volatile and financialized context that has driven the planet's wealthiest people to invest in real estate in the past few decades. In contrast, we all need a house to live, a place to call our own, which is why housing is a human right. The scale is however tipping all in one direction: states and cities elevate the financial economy, encourage real estate businesses, look away or even foster speculation, and roll back or eliminate housing regulations that protect large populations. Though my arguments focus on NYC, the issues I cover are common throughout urban areas around the world, which magnify other issues that Global South cities may already suffer. Some solutions should thus be global in scope even though their implementation aims at restructuring state institutions and political relations.

NYC, like countless other cities, is suffering a housing emergency. The pandemic triggered a profound decline in housing prices, but they are rapidly escalating again, growing up to 70% in some neighborhoods (Egkolfopoulou & Ballentine, 2021). NYC is the most expensive city in the United States: the monthly median rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$3,860 (Gopal, 2022). That amounts to a total of \$46,320 a year for a (usually small) space, which is half the average city salary of \$83,000 (Payscale, 2022). Here we must consider the vast gap between wages in global companies and the salaries of most workers, especially those on precarious jobs, who are often (undocumented) migrants. Many New Yorkers are rent burdened, paying more than 30% of their income in rent. Low-income families are sometimes forced to squeeze into tiny apartments or cellars, which is dangerous, as last year's Hurricane Ida showed when 11 people died (Holpuch, 2021). After the peak of the pandemic, it is estimated that about 685,000 New Yorkers are behind on rent. Following Governor Hochul's decision to lift the pandemic-related eviction moratorium in January 2022, proceedings have soared, especially in non-white neighborhoods where tenants are less likely to seek legal counsel, which overlaps with the fast proceedings and the lack of attorneys to absorb the high demand (Rabiyah, 2022). Homelessness is consequently on the rise. The city's response, commanded by mayor Eric Adams, has been to criminalize those who only have the street to live on (Moses & Brendlen, 2022). Poverty and inequality continue to grow

Figure 1

Pandemic evictions
in NYC until
November 2022.
Source: NYC Eviction
Monitor Crisis, NYC
Right to Counsel
Coalition:
www.righttocounselny.org/nycrisismonitor



in a city that competes to attract global real estate investors and supports developers (Stein, 2019).

Housing in NYC is thus a battlefield, though that is only partially new. Fogelson (2013) narrates the working-class struggle against evictions and skyrocketing rents in the early 20th century that managed to introduce rent-regulation policies by which landlords could not freely increase rental prices, instead being subjected to a municipal commission. These rent regulations still allow about 42% of low-income tenants to make ends meet, but it is increasingly under pressure. Real estate corporations and landlords’ associations lobby for the elimination of controls, dooming them as inefficient. Their principal argument is that it negatively affects free market dynamics, discouraging landlords from maintaining their properties (because they supposedly do not make enough profits) and developers from building rental housing, especially so in a context of inflation. However, these are widespread myths not sustained in any serious research (Slater, 2021). On the one hand, most rent-regulated buildings were built between 1947 and 1974, i.e., landlords have already recouped their investment. Plus, the development of new housing, especially for affordable or rent-regulated schemes, is highly subsidized. On the other hand, landlords are always pictured as middle-class homeowners with a second property that they rent out to have an extra income, while data shows that most rent-regulated buildings (each with at least more than six units) are owned by landlords with more than 60 buildings (Rabiyah, 2020). This concentration comes partially after predatory equity firms acquired up to 90,000 apartments before the 2008 recession (ANHD, 2008). Housing financialization has continued in the past years, where the city has fostered luxury developments that have triggered gentrification (Lauermann, 2021).

Figure 2

Housing justice protest in front of Governor Kathy Hochul's office in August 2021.
Source: Author



The narrative war on rent-regulated housing stands in sharp contrast to the material conditions tenants in these buildings experience. Despite regulation, rental prices are a recurrent problem. Tenants denounce that landlords refuse to sign or renew leases, jack up rents illegally or hide the fact that the price is regulated, taking advantage especially of migrant tenants, who do not have family ties in the country or do not speak English. Furthermore, a recent report has shown that landlords of rent-stabilized apartments are choosing to leave them vacant to reduce the offer and gouge rents, a practice called “warehousing” (Frishberg, 2022). That comes after a landlord’s victory in the Rent Guidelines Board, the city’s commission establishing the annual fluctuation of prices in regulated apartments. During the pandemic, the board agreed to freeze rents to help tenants cope with the crisis. Although the economic recovery is slow, many tenants are still struggling and social movements are claiming a rent roll-back. Yet the Adams administration has allowed the highest increase in a decade: 3.25% in one-year leases. However, that is not all: complaints also point to a lack of repairs, lead poisoning, or insect and rodent infestations. Tenant harassment couples with displacement pressures that homeowners suffer, especially in neighborhoods of color; these are too often related to land rezonings to develop condos that residents in those neighborhoods cannot afford. Frauds and deed thefts have also happened; for instance, a recent case in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn sparked a large-scale mobilization (Guerguerian, 2022).

In these struggles for the right to housing, housing justice collectives and tenant unions champion community rights, a way to value urban land that focuses on the social value that residents create daily rather than economic value (Mironova, 2019). On these grounds, those collectives have tried unsuccessfully to pass a bill on good cause eviction at the New York State Legislature. That law would have helped rent-regulated tenants as well as all renters in the state. Similarly, public housing helps to contain real estate prices across the city, but the

New York City Housing Authority has schemed a privatization plan, which is highly contested (Hackett & Robbins, 2022). Social movements' efforts did achieve a victory when stricter norms were adopted to rent apartments on Airbnb, which will probably have to be overhauled since the number of short-term rentals is now larger than residential leases (Velsey, 2022), contributing to the lack of housing.

The question then is: are we doing enough? In the short term, all these fights are fierce, and everyone putting their bodies on the line is more than necessary to reverse the deeply unfair and pressing situations many find themselves in. Thinking long-term, however, we must remember that housing issues have persisted for decades, some even for centuries. In the same passage that started this essay, Engels (1872, p. 18) wrote: "to put an end to this housing shortage there is only one means: to abolish altogether the exploitation and oppression of the working class by the ruling class." Today we could supplement the argument by advocating for abolishing the private property regime as it has severely failed to worthily house large populations in NYC and elsewhere. Housing is a human right, because everybody needs shelter and privacy, a refuge to develop their lives and feel safe. The current system is not interested in satisfying that need, therefore it should be entirely reframed. Housing justice entails not only fighting the current emergency but also imagining new futures that decommodify dwellings, challenge classic tenures, and overall reshape human-land relations.

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