

Neil Gray (ed), *Rent and Its Discontents: A Century of Housing Struggle*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-78660-574-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-78660-575-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-78660-576-4 (ebook)

Rent struggles are back on the political agenda across Europe and beyond. In the UK and Ireland, in the context of public housing decline and the rapid and unfettered expansion of the private rented sector, activists and scholars are looking back at key victories and strategies in tenant struggles. The 1915 Rent Strike in Glasgow, Scotland, is one of those defining moments. One of the most successful rent campaigns in Western Europe, its impact on British housing cannot be overstated: not only did it set the first rent controls in Britain, but it was fundamental in demanding the introduction, in 1919, of public housing provision for rent, a key (if wobbly) pillar of the post-war welfare state. The collection *Rent and Its Discontents. A Century of Housing Struggle* takes as a starting point the contemporary re-assessment of this strike and of rent strikes more broadly to examine historical and contemporary rental struggles in the UK and Ireland. The chapters, by housing activists and interdisciplinary urban scholars, are organised in response to three different theoretical and political challenges: critical historical re-interpretations, in Part 1: “History Against the Grain”, an homage to Walter Benjamin; dispatches from contemporary housing organising, in Part 2: “Reports from the Housing Frontline”; and, finally, more strategic and theoretical reflections in Part 3: “Rethinking the Housing Question: Theories, Aims, Tactics and Strategies for Today”.

The book aims to intervene in orthodox Marxian approaches to rent, rent struggles and their protagonists, by challenging and expanding existing frameworks for critical and political urban analysis. Neil Gray’s framing introduction and conclusion draw on insights from autonomous Marxist feminist concerns to place a spotlight on the significance of social reproduction, reframing and politicizing rent as key to forms of capital accumulation and to contemporary housing enclosures. Through the wide range of themes discussed, the book encourages comparisons between diverse issues and

conditions for tenants' organising, offering both grounded accounts of the intensification of rental issues and protests since 2012 and a critical re-reading of historical campaigns. The variety of approaches by engaged researchers is reflected in the writing styles, with chapters ranging from calls to mobilisation, to reflections on praxis, to terse analyses of political discourse and longer histories of inequalities. Overall, the book manages to weave multiple discontents around rental struggles, examining processes and histories of building power to construct and develop defensive and constitutive housing movements, and will appeal to critical geographers, housing scholars, activists and all those seeking to understand and learn about radical praxis beyond critical analysis of housing crises.

The most striking feature of the collection is the way in which it holds together, without fully resolving them, two key "discontents" about the category of rent and rent struggles. The first "discontent" or tension that cuts across the book concerns the transformative scope of "rental struggles" – from resistance to reform and, to a certain degree, complete transformation of existing housing systems. Most contributions to the collection take a broad lens to rent as something more than a tenure: it is a set of power relations and a starting point for struggles for better housing. Such a broad approach is not without complications. In the context of the UK and Ireland, *rent* names the relationship between tenants and three main types of landlords: small property-owners (in the private rented sector); municipal administrations (the councils); and third sector organisations (housing associations). A reader unfamiliar with the local histories of these typologies may not appreciate how different, politically, tenants' positions and strategies have historically been. Examples of contemporary organised resistance bear witness to this varied landscape: while some tenants are defending municipal rented public housing from demolition or privatisation, others are struggling in the quagmires of the fragmented, unaffordable and under-regulated private rented sector. "Success" for rental struggles can thus range from stopping evictions (Chapter 5 by Vickie Cooper and Kirsteen Paton), to establishing rent control and "rent pressure zones" (Chapter 6 by

Michael Byrne), to lobbying for the reintroduction of indefinite rental contract (Chapter 7 by Living Rent [Emma Saunders, Kate Samuels and Dave Statham]), to resistance against privatisation of social rented public housing (Chapter 8 by Paul Watt). The 1915 Rent Strike shows that campaigning for the regulation of private rent accompanies demands for affordable, secure and high-quality housing through a radical transformation of the system, raising the possibility of housing commons (Chapter 12 by Tim Joubert and Stuart Hodgkinson). Could public housing remain a shared demand (Chapter 11 by Sarah Glynn) when the public sector has been increasingly neoliberalized and when successive governments have been systematically complicit in the wilful production of ignorance around solutions to the housing crises (Chapter 9 by Hamish Kallin and Tom Slater)? Across the book and in the conclusions, the possibility of cross-tenure tenant organising and the forging of new solidarities are welcomed recent developments; the question of what vision would drive a common struggle, however, remains unanswered.

The issue of a shared vision brings us to a second discontent – the unresolved question of the subject of rental struggles. It is clear from the many and diverse examples discussed in the book that pressure from organised tenants, particularly direct action, has been the key single force that pushed for radical transformations, rather than top-down reforms under the “myth of the benevolent state” (Madden and Marcuse 2016). A shared vision for housing justice requires both resistance and the formulation of political demands by those affected by it; but how to discuss tenants’ struggle without presuming a unitary and undifferentiated political subject? Reading the history intersectionally and taking those lessons into the 21st century means rethinking the politicisation of tenants and their emergence as political subjects. Many contributions do precisely this by bringing to the fore the protagonists that had been made invisible not only by orthodox accounts but also by much political theory “on the left”, which has historically subordinated housing struggles to those over production. The book encourages us to deconstruct dichotomies such as formal/informal,

structured/unstructured and the gendering of domesticity, which have all worked to invisibilize women and local organizing that did not fit neatly into the categories of political militancy. In Part 1, greater attention is given to women's role before, during and after the strike (Chapter 1 by Pam Currie; Chapter 2 by Annmarie Hughes and Valerie Wright) and to practices of street-by-street solidarity alongside and beyond trade unions and the party (Chapter 3 by Tony Cox; Chapter 4 by Neil Gray). Critical understandings of processes of politicization, at individual and collective levels, are also extended in the discussion of contemporary examples and the politicization of the antagonism between property as a financialized asset and home as a site of social reproduction (Chapter 6 by Michael Byrne; Chapter 10 by Rory Hearne, Cian O'Callaghan, Rob Kitchin and Cesare Di Feliciano).

It is therefore something of a surprising omission that in most contributions on contemporary examples, the subjects of rent struggles, the tenants, remain implicitly represented as socially and culturally homogeneous. Extending the "against the grain" approach to contemporary rental discontents could have better acknowledged the complex, multiple and intersecting positionalities of those organizing against rent extractivism and for housing justice today. Exploitative forms of housing provision are always intertwined with histories of discrimination, exclusion and racialisation, as powerfully argued by another recent book covering "100 years" of housing struggles, Andrea Gibbons' *City of Segregation* (2018). While geographies of housing and its struggles are clearly specific and distinct, contemporary examples, particularly in globalized cities, cannot be written without acknowledging racialisation and the positionality of minorities and migrants, as some of contributing authors have done elsewhere (see, for example, Glynn 2005). Moreover, beyond the "long overdue resurgence" of tenant struggles in Western Europe, the discontents of rental relations run deeper and have a much wider geographical and political reach than contained in this book. *Rent and Its Discontents* sets an ambitious framework, whetting rather than satiating a growing appetite for historical, politically situated and intersectional analyses

of rental struggles worldwide. The two discontents outlined above are an indication of the ability of the book to raise important theoretical, methodological and political issues for understanding both new and old modes of rent extraction. It places the issue of social reproduction at the core of contemporary urban and housing debates, politicising conditions of oppression, the production of subjectivities and the question of what to struggle for.

References

- Gibbons A (2018) *City of Segregation: 100 Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso
- Glynn S (2005) East End immigrants and the battle for housing: A comparative study of political mobilisation in the Jewish and Bengali communities. *Journal of Historical Geography* 31(3):528-545
- Madden D and Marcuse P (2016) *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*. New York: Verso

Mara Ferreri
Institute for Government and Public Policy
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Founding editor of the [Radical Housing Journal](#)
Mara.Ferreri@uab.cat

May 2019