

Book review

In Defense of Housing - The Politics of Crisis

David Madden and Peter Marcuse
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In Defense of Housing is a co-authored work by sociologist David Madden from the London School of Economics and urban planner Peter Marcuse, emeritus professor at Columbia University. The book starts with a topic that most people in the US and the UK are all too familiar with: the housing crisis. An increasing number of residents in many cities on both sides of the Atlantic are faced with rising housing costs and unaffordability, to a large part due to inflating property values against stagnant income growth. The results of this are well known: gentrification, displacement, evictions, homelessness and poverty to name only a few. However, while many recent analyses of the various dimensions and outcomes of the housing crisis are predominantly understood in market terms and hence as an interplay of supply and demand, Madden and Marcuse take a refreshingly different approach, rooted in the political economy tradition.

Their key method of analysis draws on Marx's dual nature of commodities as having both a use value and an exchange value. It is within this dialectical framework that the authors develop their critique of housing, with on the one hand housing as home (use value) and housing as real estate (exchange value). More precisely they argue that we are witnessing a process whereby housing is increasingly seen in its exchange value, a process also described as commodification. In order to understand the housing crisis, the book argues, we need to look at this transformation, which is not the outcome of an interaction between rational actors but fundamentally shaped by the sociological categories of social class, power, race and gender. This conceptual framework also explains the structure of the book, which is not ordered thematically, but in terms of the struggles and processes that result from the contradictions of housing as home versus housing as real estate, including commodification, residential alienation or oppression and liberation. The book also contains a chapter on the myths of housing policy and concludes with a historical analysis of housing struggles and movements in New York City. All together there are five chapters, plus a conclusion which offers suggestions for a radical right to housing.

Chapter one sets the scene by providing a short history of processes of commodification and decommodification, ranging from the enclosure movement in early modern England to today's hyper-commodified world of real estate. The authors however do not understand this process of commodification as a linear one but also highlight the various attempts to decommodify housing, via for example the

introduction of rent regulations, building standards or more generally via the provision of public or social housing. Crucially, these reforms towards decommodification were not the result of a benevolent state but often an attempt to contain or neutralise unrest resulting from exploitative and squalor housing conditions. Despite these various attempts towards decommodification the chapter argues that commodification has increasingly gained ground in recent decades via the back doors of state-led policy changes, or, as they put it 'the commodification of housing is a political project that refuses to acknowledge itself as such'.

Chapter two turns to the personal experiences of the increasing number of people who experience housing as a precarious place in an insecure world, rather than as a stabilising factor. This is what Madden and Marcuse describe as residential alienation. The experience of residential alienation, which they posit in opposition to the experience of housing as a home, is manifest in a variety of ways, including feelings of fear, stress, anxiety, disempowerment, forced mobility or eviction but also in terms of the health consequences of insecure and bad quality housing. Crucially, the ontological security of experiencing housing as home assumes a particular class position. Apart from those able to afford this sense of security, there is a growing number of individuals and households who experience ontological *in*security and precarity instead. A way towards residential disalienation, the authors suggest, will not be achieved by trying to move people into homeownership, as has been the attempt of successive governments both in the US and the UK, but rather by decommodifying housing and by focusing on providing secure housing options, regardless of tenure.

In chapter three the authors look at the oppressive and liberatory potential of housing and in particular of housing policy. In doing so they build on their critique of homeownership as the primary tenure of choice. Over the last decades, housing policies in both the US and the UK have primarily aimed at expanding homeownership to move towards what Margaret Thatcher famously described as a 'property owning democracy'. Importantly, this focus on homeownership has led to an individualisation of housing and serves the interests of the dominant classes in the sense that private homeowners henceforth have a 'stake in the system' by for example aligning their interests with those of the real estate industry in rising property prices. However, the oppressive element of housing most clearly comes to the fore in relation to issues of race and gender. Examples include the long history of racial segregation, in particular in the US, but also in terms of the home as a site of gender performance and the continuing unequal distribution of domestic work between men and women. Of course, there is also a long history of housing as a site of potential liberation, for which the authors offer a broad range of evidence, ranging from the expansion of social housing during the period of the Red Vienna in the 1920s to the Glasgow rent strike of 1915.

The fourth chapter turns a critical eye on the role of the state in the formation of housing policy. Madden and Marcuse aim to deconstruct the myth of the benevolent state, that is, the idea that government is acting primarily out of a concern for the welfare of its citizens. Specifically, they go so far to say that housing policy is rather about maintaining the current order by supporting the accumulation of private profit than about the state intervening in order to ameliorate the housing crisis. They illustrate this point by discussing the origins of social housing in New York, which, they argue, became an increasingly important element of housing policy mainly due to attempts to integrate immigrants and other workers into the war time industry of World War I, but also because of fears about an uprising of the working class. Social or ethical issues were, at best, secondary in this regard. Moreover, they suggest that a similar logic is at work in many other areas of housing policy, including for example in processes of urban renewal.

The final chapter of *In Defense of Housing* then turns the lens on questions of agency by discussing the history of New York's housing movements more specifically, in particular the resistance to various rent increases. The authors draw a line from the mobilisation of renters in the 1930s and 1940s, which saw a strong involvement from leftist political parties, to the stronger emphasis on questions of race and social class in the 1960s and 1970s up to more recent uprisings, such as the 1988 Tompkins Square Park riots as well as the Occupy Wall Street movement. In its broadest terms, the common thread of the majority of these movements is the fight for the decommodification of housing, that is, for viewing housing primarily in its use value rather than in its exchange value. The way in which the analytical part of the book finishes then also leads to the recommendations for the radical right to housing that Madden and Marcuse suggest. This right includes not only include the demand to decommodify and definancialise housing via rent controls, the expansion of social housing programmes or secure tenancies, but also the necessity to democratize both housing management and the formation of housing policy.

Overall, Madden and Marcuse's work is a valuable contribution to the field of housing policy and research, a field that is too often left to scholars from the field of economics. By infusing the field of housing policy with the categories of social class, power, race and gender, they not only add an important sociological dimension to housing debates but, crucially, they also ask who housing policy is made for and why. However, it is probably the breadth of all these issues raised that is also one of the shortcomings of the book. Many of them would benefit from being set in relation to other theoretical debates. These include the links between processes of commodification and broader shifts in the provision of welfare, such as the increasing turn to asset-based models of welfare or, as Crouch called it, the move towards privatised Keynesianism (Crouch, 2009). Similarly, their discussion on the ideological underpinnings behind the promotion of homeownership would have benefited from a contextualisation or reference to existing literature such as for example from Roland's work on the ideology of homeownership (Roland, 2008), in which he talks about the discursive polarisation of tenure, or from Bourdieu's work on the social structures of the economy (Bourdieu, 2005), in which he puts forward a critique of the de-socialised understanding of the (housing) market as a field of rational agents. Nonetheless, the book is not only an important academic contribution to all those interested in the politics of housing, but also an inspiration and a reminder to a broader audience that a move towards more inclusive and equal access to housing is a matter worth standing up for.

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