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'Stay Home Without a Home': Report from a webinar on the right to housing in Covid-19 lockdown times

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Abstract

This Update reports from a webinar on the impacts of lockdown measures put in place globally amid the Covid-19 pandemic on the right to housing and linked political struggles. Three main threads emerged from the conversation: the impacts of the pandemic are deepening pre-existing housing inequalities, while governments' responses are largely insufficient; activists and contentious actors worldwide are changing their framings and repertoires to adapt to lockdown measures and attempt to radicalize their action; possibilities, albeit limited, are opening for the construction of global networks of struggle.

Keywords

social movements, housing politics, Coronavirus, global activism, rent strike

This Update reports from a webinar on the right to housing vis-à-vis Covid-19 lockdown measures. It took place on April 16, 2020, organized by Guya Accornero and Simone Tulumello in collaboration with the Research Committee 47, ‘Social Classes and Social Movements’, of the International Sociological Association.¹ Short interventions by Guya Accornero, Mona Harb, Alex Magalhães, Felipe G. Santos, Giovanni Semi and Samuel Stein kicked off the webinar, followed by two rounds of responses to questions posed by the audience via the chat of the streaming service. The goal of the webinar was to share local and national experiences (from Portugal, Lebanon, Brazil, Spain, Italy and the USA) on how lockdown measures—and particularly ‘shelter in place’ and ‘social distancing’ orders—imposed by governments to slow down the spread of Coronavirus are affecting housing rights and struggles. During the discussion, which lasted slightly more than a hour and a half, three main threads emerged: the way the Covid-19 pandemic is deepening pre-existing housing inequalities and the insufficiency of governments’ responses; the reframing of local and national forms of political and activist organization; and openings for the construction of global networks of struggle. In what follows, we will summarize the discussion following these threads.

Deepening housing inequalities and insufficient government responses

The first thread that emerged from the conversation was the perception that the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in the housing sector should be overtly understood as the simultaneous addition of further layers to, and the deepening of, pre-existing injustices and inequalities. In Portuguese cities, impacts may be particularly strong due to the dependency of recent economic growth to tourism and real estate, resulting in processes of displacement that have socially weakened many urban fabrics. In Lebanon, the pandemic is piling up on a national system already affected by a long oligarchic rule, a rentier economy and a financial breakdown. In Brazil, ‘staying at home’ is almost impossible for the millions living in informal settlements, and an incomplete welfare system is hardly providing all the answers needed. In Italy, where 30 per cent of households already live in overcrowded conditions (compared to the European average of 15 per cent), the impacts are particularly strong for populations already made vulnerable by ten years of homelessness crises, and growing housing problems for minorities, refugees and asylum seekers.. In Spain, new problems are building on top of the long wave of evictions that started during the 2008 economic crisis (mostly due to foreclosures) and continued during the following rebound (mostly due to rent arrears). In the USA, the Covid-19 pandemic is making even more evident the explosion of homelessness in many cities, the increasing number of working poor who struggle to pay for housing, and the deadly expressions of racial capitalism.

Granted, governments—local and/or national, depending on multilevel governance arrangements in the various countries—have been enacting some measures, particularly where the potential for social conflict is more acute. Evictions have been frozen and moratoria on mortgage instalments have been allowed in Portugal, Spain, Italy and several

¹ The recording of the webinar is available at RC47 Youtube page: <https://youtu.be/TIAWnZwqDdk>.

US states.² Portugal and Spain have allowed those tenants who have lost part of their income to suspend or postpone rent payments. Italian funds for rent/instalment subsidies have been increased. Bailout funds for real estate investors and recipients of federal housing subsidies have been offered in the US. Select measures have been adopted virtually everywhere in support of homeless persons and households living in precarious settlements. However, we all agree that these interventions are largely insufficient to cope with the scale of the impacts of the pandemic for a number of reasons. They are not generalized, geographically and socially (for instance, protections have been particularly weak for tenants), and they have often arrived late (with many cases of evictions just before the approval of moratoria). Maybe most importantly, measures have been designed to postpone, rather than solve, growing housing problems. This is the case for temporary moratoria of evictions, but also for suspensions of rent payments when not accompanied by measures to automatically allow the renegotiation of instalments in line with income losses or the cancellation of the debts that will pile up during the emergency.

Shifting contentious framings and repertoires

How did activists and other contentious actors react in the face of the impossibility of using a crucial instrument of their repertoires—that is, public space? ‘Staying at home’ has become both a necessity and a political argument, even as the slogan ‘how to stay at home without a home?’ has spread worldwide. But, once again, it has spread with significant geographical differences as pre-existing experiences and resources seem to be playing a crucial role in new struggles. Among the experiences shared, Spain seems to be the country where organization is the fiercest. Rent strikes have been called globally, but only in this country have they reached a national scale, with some 15 thousand households refusing to pay April’s rent in an organized way. This is linked to the long and steady growth of housing movements, from the emergence of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; Platform for those Affected by the Mortgage) during the economic crisis of 2008 to the growth of tenants’ unions afterwards, the strength of left-libertarian housing organizations across the country, as well as the wide coalitions built up during these years. While Spanish movements had discussed the possibility of widespread rent strikes for many years, the outbreak of the pandemic has readied people more to take such action. In Lisbon, struggles have reorganized among two main axes. While activist groups have shifted online to keep supporting households with the greatest housing distress, activist scholars have produced reports to push governmental action. In the USA, while rent strikes are in preparation and workers fight to halt construction on luxury real estate projects for the duration of the public health crisis, mutual aid networks have re-emerged to cover gaps in institutional action through provision of relief to populations most in need. In Italy, social movements have suffered several decades of state repression. Organization has been stronger in fields other than housing, particularly logistics and delivery, that have already been at the forefront of

² In Brazil, federal laws on the matter are being discussed as we complete this report (late April 2020). In the meanwhile, the suspension of payments and evictions, the free provision of utilities to poor households, depends on the action of local authorities or judicial decisions.

struggles in previous years. In Brazil, social movements have seemed quite weak and forms of ‘weak resistance’, like unorganized rent strikes, have emerged even as local authorities have been stepping in. In Lebanon, with its fierce street politics against the government between 2015 and 2018, protests calling for rent strikes took place before the lockdown, but housing movements have been pretty fragmented.

A crucial dimension of future struggles will be changing patterns of criminalization. On the one hand, lockdown measures criminalize any type of street politics and new forms of digital policing may be on the horizon. On the other, the moratorium on evictions and the expected delay in civil court cases after they reopen will delay, if not ultimately write off, the repressive consequences of actions like rent strikes. Extraordinary periods and social fear often encourage states to be more heavy-handed with groups challenging the status quo but these organizations have more time to strategize and prepare for this in turn.

Toward global (housing) politics?

The third thread emerging from the conversation—pushed by the audience in the form of questions and comments, we should admit—has been an attempt at reflecting on existing openings for the construction of global activism and networks of struggle.

Different opinions emerged about the possibility of scaling up housing struggles *per se*, as some of us see other fields of struggle—like the environment and wider urban rights—to be more useful in developing transnational cooperation. Others, however, pinpointed areas of potential cooperation that are emerging from the proximity of social movements with international housing studies networks, and above all from the transnational nature of housing economics. Real possibility exists, for instance, to create international networks of tenants of global institutional investors and funds as the exploitation of the very ambiguities of the socio-spatial organization of capital has long been a strategy of radical politics.

We all agreed, however, that, to fully exploit such openings, it is crucial that we build relations with other fields of struggle. Some are directly connected with housing—above all, urban planning and mobility—and others connected more loosely. One such indirect connection lies in the unexpected ecological impacts of the pandemic, as people in some of the most industrialized areas of the planet experience, even through the hardships of lockdowns, fresh air and bits of nature offered by wild animals wandering in the streets. This may create a space for a wider awareness of the intersection of social and ecological inequalities. We are doing anything but romanticizing the present conjuncture here. Indeed, housing, with all of its many inequalities, is a perfect space from which to understand that ‘we are NOT all in this together’. Yet this seems to be a particularly fruitful moment, if anything, to visualize, and possibly make common sense of, the very contradictions of capitalism that radical movements and scholars have denounced for so long. The challenge ahead is triggering those contradictions before they—or, possibly better while they—are exploited to justify doubling down on long-term trajectories of increasing authoritarianism, policing and repression.

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