

Housing in Common: in Search of a Strategy for Housing Alterity in England in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Based in England in 1872, Engels wrote that the ‘housing question’ – that is, the appalling and exploitative housing conditions of the working class – could be solved not through housing reform but only through the ending of the social system of capitalism that produced housing scarcity (Engels 1887). More than 130 years after Engels first laid out his anti-reformist revolutionary polemic, both the housing question and the social relations of capitalist exploitation are still present, with no real alternatives in sight.

Nonetheless, in late twentieth and early twenty-first century England - the context examined in this chapter¹ - housing conditions have much improved from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This has happened less from revolutionary change ushered in by the working class and more due to the pressures ‘from below’ from tenants, trades unions, and other groups that gradually forced the state to clear slums and directly provide mass public rented housing. The resultant collective-provision model of council housing came to be seen as an unsatisfactory albeit

¹ Although Wales comes under the general remit of English housing policy, there are key differences with England. Housing policy in Scotland and Northern Ireland is likewise devolved. This chapter chooses to focus exclusively on England with only occasional references to the wider UK context.

necessary and politically expedient alternative to the private market and, for that matter also, revolution.

However, in 1979 there was a sharp 'neoliberal turn' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) in British policy ushering in market-based forms of 'social' provision. In the housing sector, these forms promoted home ownership over renting, decimated the social rented stock through privatisation, and created a precarious private market in the social sector with dire consequences for tenants' rights and affordability. By the late 1990s, this had provoked the emergence of a strong anti-privatisation movement led by Defend Council Housing, an alliance of tenants, trade unions and left-wing MPs and political parties. The Labour Government's 2007/2008 Housing and Regeneration Bill promises more neoliberal policies, yet also proposes reforms of the existing social housing sector including a return to council housing and giving tenants more choice and control over the management and, significantly, *ownership* of their social rented homes (Great Britain. DCLG 2007a).

This chapter argues that the policy shift has split the tenants' movement in England, but that this split opens up opportunities for rethinking housing alterity strategically in relation to the longer-term housing question. On the one hand, the campaign group, Defend Council Housing, opposes the Labour Government's plans on the grounds that it amounts to yet more privatisation. On the other hand, the official tenants' representative groups are pushing the Government to go further in its promise to devolve power to local communities through 'bottom-up' transfer of council housing to mutual ownership. The divergence within the tenants' movement cuts to heart of debates about alterity, where alterity can be defined as the pre-figurative praxis of creating spaces of social commons against the enclosing logic of capital. In terms of the

housing question, should efforts focus on retaining and expanding the state provision of mass affordable and secure rented housing or, instead, take advantage of the retreat of the state in order to strengthen the not-for-profit 'social housing' economy and encourage self-management of housing solutions?

The chapter's argument unfolds as follows. After a brief discussion of alterity, it offers a stylised history of the transition from the post-war mass public housing commons in England to the so-called 'property-owning democracy' constructed under the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher. While the Labour government's housing agenda likewise aims to marketise social rented housing, it is sympathetic to new alternative models such as the Community Gateway and Community Land Trusts. These new models could lock land assets for the community's benefit, restrict market forces and create mutual home management and ownership at affordable levels. However, while these new models of community management and ownership are genuine forms of housing commons praxis, when placed in a strategic context they create a number of conundrums for notions of housing alterity. The chapter concludes that a strategy for housing alterity must focus on uniting tenants within a broader social movement for 'housing commons'.

Alterity as Commons

Deriving from the French word *altérité* (translated as 'otherness'), alterity has hitherto been employed in philosophy and post-colonial literatures to refer to ideas and struggles against *inter alia* hegemony, colonisation, totalising narratives and systems, cooptation, reductionism, essentialism, and alienation (see Schehr, 2003). Despite its rich intellectual pedigree, the concept has only recently been employed in debates on

alternative economic spaces and oppositional strategies to global capitalism (Leyshon et al 2003). In these debates, alterity is used to refer to particular value-practices, relationships and institutions that are understood as *alternative* to those supposedly dominant under capitalism and its current neoliberal direction. Such alternative economies encompass systems of production and distribution ‘not based exclusively on the commodity relationship and profit maximisation... [and which] ... incorporate social, environmental, equity and health issues into... production and consumption’ (Kirwan 2004, 398). However, given that these and similar ‘warm words’ can also be found in government policy documents, what matters from the vantage of radical praxis is the analysis that underpins them and the political project(s) they seek to empower.

Fuller and Jonas (2003, 57) differentiate between three kinds of alternative institutions and relate these to strategic practices involved in building alternative economies. First, there are institutions and practices that are actively and consciously different in value or operational terms to ‘mainstream’ forms and their identities and which Fuller and Jonas call ‘*alternative-oppositional*’. Second, there are those that represent an additional choice to other dominant institutions without seeking to replace or challenge them; these are ‘*alternative-additional*’. Third are those that ‘can act as a form of substitute (or even institutions of last resort) for other institutions that are no longer present, and which may or may not be engaged in *being* alternative’, or ‘*alternative-substitutes*’ (*op cit*, 57). In a similar vein, Amin, Cameron and Hudson (2003, 31) suggest that the so-called ‘social economy’ or Third Sector, which is championed by many who are opposed to neoliberalism, is ‘seen as an alternative to the mainstream... but importantly not one that replaces or reforms it’. In other words, there is a major difference between so-called ‘not-for-profit’ activities and anti-capitalist

politics. There is a danger that radical alternative discourses become de-linked from the forms of strategic thinking and agency required for such alternative visions to become 'transformative in action'.

Another useful conceptualisation of alterity can be found in De Angelis's (2007) framework of 'value struggles' (or class struggles) between capital and the social body, or what he terms the struggle between 'enclosures' and 'commons'. The land enclosures (from 1500 to 1800s) that transformed Feudal and common land into private property and created a majority class with only their labour to sell to survive gave birth to capitalism. De Angelis (2007, 144), however, sees the process of capital accumulation as a process of constant enclosure, a process with 'totalising drives' to 'forcibly separate people from whatever access to social wealth they have which is not mediated by competitive markets and money as capital'. In contrast, he holds up the ancient notion of the 'commons' as providing a possible alternative to capitalist enclosure. The dominant understanding of the commons is of a natural 'resource-pool' containing 'all the creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations' (Friends of the Commons website). In England, the Magna Carta of 1215 established forests and fisheries as *res communes*, which following Roman law, designated natural things used by all (air, water, animals etc.) as common property. As McCann (2005, 7) has argued, this primary, material, notion of the commons underpins a secondary, more spiritual approach which emphasises the 'uncommodifying' nature of human interaction, of 'social relations that are constituted, at least in part, by an ethic of interdependence and cooperation'. Building on this conceptualisation, De Angelis puts forward a definition of commons for neoliberal

times as ‘social spheres of life [that] provide various degrees of protection from the market’ (De Angelis 2007, 145):

It is either capital that makes the world *through commodification and enclosures*, or it the rest of us – whoever is that ‘us’ – that makes the world through counter-enclosures and commons (ibid: 135).

The above discussion is designed to move beyond conceptions of alterity as a choice between *either* non-capitalist *or* non-state forms of economic and political praxis (*or* for that matter also the post-capitalist idea of ‘participatory economy’). Instead, we need to think of alterity as an undefined future emanating out of everyday struggles for commons. Grounding this discussion of the housing question, a utopian ideal might be a society in which all housing and land is de-commodified, held in common ownership and collectively self-managed. In other words, the process of enacting housing alterity is better guided by value practices and strategic struggles and not by pre-given alternative systems. In this perspective, housing alterity might further embody two key principles:

1. A pre-figurative praxis in which people try to meet current social needs through the creation of collective, solidaristic, direct democratic and egalitarian forms of housing in their everyday lives;

2. A series of strategic and tactical interventions that directly undermine the private housing system, challenge the hegemony of capital accumulation, and open up more spaces for alternatives to flourish.

The next section situates this alternative way of thinking about the housing question in England, especially in the wake of the neoliberal assault on public housing after 1979.

Public Housing and the Neoliberal Turn in England in the Twentieth Century

Access to decent housing has always been central to social struggles in England. Throughout the long and uneven period of land enclosures between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the dispossessed peasantry took to building ‘illegal’ cottages on occupied village waste, commons, or in the forests (Ward 2002). During the mid-nineteenth century, the insanitary and overcrowded privately owned inner city ‘slums’ were challenged by a radicalising labour movement and by middle-class Victorian social reformers, such as Octavia Hill, who lobbied for protective legislation while providing affordable ‘model dwellings’ on a small scale to the ‘deserving poor’ (Whelan 1998). Eventually, the ruling elite’s fears that tenant uprisings would eventually precipitate a revolution led to the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act. This Act introduced powers enabling local authorities to clear slums and build public housing. Nonetheless, slow progress in implementing the Act’s provisions was met with mass rent strikes and squatting. Eventually, the Labour government of 1945-51 ceased relying upon the private market and invested in building millions of council homes offering affordable rents. Successive Conservative and Labour governments stuck broadly to the post-war public housing consensus and by 1979 England had accumulated a precious asset of some 5.1 million council homes. Council tenants were awarded Security of Tenure, which meant access to a low-cost rented home for life (Balchin 1996; Great Britain. DCLG 2007b).

The 1979 election of Thatcher's Conservative government heralded the end of the Keynesian Welfare State in Great Britain. It was no coincidence that housing was one of the first targets for privatization, eventually becoming the single largest privatisation of state assets. Determined to create a 'property-owning democracy', the Conservatives immediately gave council tenants the statutory 'Right to Buy', encouraging the sale of council houses at huge discounts. In 1988, various 'stock transfer' initiatives were introduced, which encouraged cash-starved local authorities to sell their housing to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) (later, housing associations). RSLs were not-for-profit social enterprises and given subsidies to build new 'social housing', empowered to charge market-style rents, and even evicted tenants in exchange for the responsibility of assuming 'the risks of the capital markets' (Lowe 2004, 57). By 1997, nearly two million council homes had been sold off, leaving much of the remainder to deteriorate due to a council-housing repair backlog amounting to nearly £23 billion (Great Britain. DCLG 2008a; Moody 1998).

Since 1997 and New Labour's rise to power, there has been an acceleration of the housing privatisation process, with nearly 1.5 million homes sold off by 2007. The majority of these homes (some 890,000) have been transferred to RSLs (Great Britain. DCLG 2008b). In 2000, the Labour Government introduced the 'Decent Homes Programme', which obliged local authorities and RSLs to bring all 'social rented housing' up to a minimum standard by 2010, making £19 billion available to help (Great Britain. DTER 2000). While a welcome shift away from Thatcherite austerity, New Labour's housing policy has nonetheless been target driven. Local authorities only receive extra funds if they implement various marketisation options. These options include the creation of 'arms-length management organisations' (ALMOs) to run their

housing stock and Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) where a private consortium takes on the regeneration and management of a specific housing estate for 20 to 30 years in return for a large profit (see Spoehr et al 2002). While PFIs are notorious for expense, delays and poor quality, their real significance lies in the accompanying policy and financial guidelines, which encourage gentrification and a reduction in both the amount and proportion of council housing relative to the private market (see Hodkinson, forthcoming).

Overall, in the context of housing policy in England the 'neoliberal turn' (see Peck and Tickell, 2002) has meant that private home ownership as a proportion of all tenures has grown from 56 to 70 per cent. In the meantime, across England there has been a *net* loss of nearly two million social rented homes (Great Britain. DCLG 2007b). Social housing is now seen in mainstream policy circles as a 'tenure of last resort', and through RSLs the social housing sector has been corporatised with 95 per cent of RSL activity controlled by just a third of the industry sector (Day, 2007). Landlord accountability has been further removed from the local community and elected tenants on the RSL board are powerless to act as they are bound by company law to support the RSL (Cairncross 2004; Lowe 2004, 58).

All-in-all, property ownership in England has become dangerously fetishised as an aspirational lifestyle good, an investment vehicle and as a pension supplement. This has fuelled an unprecedented rise in average house prices across the country. Prices rose 307 per cent between 1993 and 2004, contributing to an increase in levels of inaccessibility on the part of first-time-buyers by a factor of three and half times over the same period (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors 2008). Rising house prices increase the demand to rent, which in turn puts upward pressure on private rents. The

latter have more than doubled since 1994. This also raises social housing rents, in part, due to the Government's 2002 'rent restructuring formulae' that reflects increases in property value. As a result, council housing waiting lists have nearly doubled since 1997 to four million people, with projections that this will rise to five million by 2010 (Local Government Association 2008). By the same token, the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation more than doubled between 1997 and 2004, from 41,000 to 97,000 (Office for National Statistics 2005), and a million children are now living in overcrowded housing (Shelter 2007).

Tenant Empowerment and the Future of Social Housing

I cannot promise to implement the fourth option on council housing today but what I will tell you is that councils will be allowed to build homes again.

Gordon Brown, Speech to UNITE (Amicus) conference, 18 June 2007
(quoted in Hencke, 2007).

The affordability crisis that began to be felt during Labour's second term (2001-2005) has posed a major dilemma for its housing privatisation agenda. A key concern in mainstream policy circles is how to sell off (or marketise) the remaining public housing stock and boost home ownership whilst at the same time dramatically increasing the supply of low cost rented housing. This apparent contradiction is reflected in the groundswell of competing political pressures on Government. The housing industry is pushing for more private house building and influential lobbyists advocate the proactive gentrification of housing estates and the end of security of tenure (Dwelly &

Cowans 2006). Official tenants' representatives demand tenant-controlled stock transfer (Confederation of Co-operative Housing 2001; Zitron 2004). Meanwhile, Defend Council Housing -- a coalition of cross-party MPs, local councillors, tenants and affiliated trade unions -- want a 'fourth option', which amounts *de facto* to a return to the post-war consensus policy of direct investment in new council housing (Defend Council Housing 2006). It is important not to underestimate the significance of Defend Council Housing, a ferocious campaigning outfit that has successfully fought the government's stock transfer programme with strong roots inside the Labour Party and the wider labour movement. Led by the Labour MP, Austin Mitchell, and a number of Socialist Worker Party organisers, and funded by the trade union movement, Defend Council Housing has managed to persuade three consecutive Labour Party conferences (2005 to 2007) to back its demands, as well as all six candidates for the Labour Party's Deputy Leadership contest in 2007 (Osley, 2007).

In response to these new demands, the Government launched a comprehensive review of the 'future of social housing' in 2006 (Cave 2007; Hills 2007). The resulting 2007/08 Housing and Regeneration Bill² is in many ways a compromise between market idealism and those other competing political demands. As expected, the building industry has been rewarded by the Government's stated intention to increase the supply of new private house build, with a target of three million new homes by 2020.³ These include building ten new 'eco-towns', with a portion offered for 'affordable ownership' under a variety of discount, shared or part equity schemes to help meet the target of 75 per cent home ownership by 2016 (National Housing and

² At the time of writing, the Bill was still before Parliament and being amended by MPs and Peers.

³ It is widely believed that this target will not be reached, especially in light of the US and global sub-prime mortgage crisis and, subsequently, the UK housing market downturn in 2008.

Planning Advice Unit 2006, 4). However, the Government has also promised 100,000 new social rented homes by 2011, and wants local authorities to become directly involved again by building council housing. Moreover, the rights and powers of social tenants are to be boosted through the creation of an independent social housing regulator, the Tenant Services Authority.⁴ Council tenants' 'right to manage' their own housing will be made easier (RSL tenants do not have such rights), a ballot of tenants prior to stock transfer will be now mandatory and binding by law, and councils will be forced to cooperate with tenant-led stock transfers (see Great Britain. DCLG 2007a).

Despite the new policy discourse of 'tenant empowerment' and talk of a 'new era for council housing', the existing neoliberal housing regime (the Right to Buy, stock transfer, ALMOs and PFI) will remain and arguably consolidate its place in shaping the mainstream. Profit-making companies will be allowed to register as social landlords under a lighter burden of regulation. Along with proposals to eventually replace the current grant-based system for building social housing with a risk-based model seeking returns to investment, the fear is that RSLs will be forced to compete with large corporations and encouraged to become developers in their own right (Social Housing 2007, 5). This could lead to even greater centralisation of the social rented sector into larger and fewer mega-companies that have no accountability to tenants or communities. Above all, councils will not be empowered to build council housing offering secure tenures. Instead, the Government is allowing a select number of local authorities to bid for Social Housing Grant on the proviso that they set up either ALMOs or joint venture companies with RSLs (to be called Local Housing Companies) or private developers into which the local authority will invest 'surplus

⁴ Significantly, local authorities are initially excluded from coverage but are expected to come under the TSA's regulation by 2010.

public sector land'. Only 50 per cent of the new homes have to be for social rent, and these will have 'assured' not 'secure' tenancies and be let at higher RSL rents. Councils wishing to directly build council housing must bear all the costs themselves and this is likely to yield only 2,500 homes a year (Great Britain. DCLG 2007c; for more detail of problems, see House of Commons Council Housing Group 2008).

A major factor inhibiting the Defend Council Housing campaign is that it lacks universal buy-in from within the English tenants' movement. During the national debate on the future of social housing, the official national tenants' organisations⁵ failed to endorse a new era for council housing, prioritising instead 'tenant empowerment' within the *current* social housing sector as the basis for long-term transformation:

What is needed is a gradual but wholesale redefinition of housing provision, where community housing becomes available for people of all incomes and is an attractive sector of choice firstly through it being a more affordable alternative to traditional homeownership and secondly through it being based on tenant and community ownership, control and membership (TAROE et al 2007, 4).

Central to the divergence between Defend Council Housing and the 'official' tenants' movement is the issue of stock transfer. While the former is resolutely opposed to all transfers of council housing, the official tenants' movement sees it as a major opportunity to promote the 'third sector' as the solution to the failures of state and market. As the Confederation of Co-operative Housing argues, 'the debate should not

⁵ The Tenants and Residents Organisations of England (TAROE), the National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations (NFTMOs) and the Confederation of Co-Operative Housing (CCH).

be about whether transfer takes place – it should be about what transfer should take place to’ (Bliss 2006, 9). It wants the Government to adopt its Community Gateway Model as part of its response to the affordability crisis. Partly a reaction against the undemocratic and alienating tenant experience of stock transfer, it is also inspired by a belief that ownership transfer from the ‘bottom-up’ could lead to long-term tenant empowerment. The Community Gateway represents an extremely detailed and complex model guided by a simple principle that stock transfer is merely the start of a devolution of power in which residents, organised in their own self-defined neighbourhoods, collectively decide whether they want a standard tenant/landlord relationship with more accountability, or instead a sliding scale of managerial and ownership rights, ranging from tenant management to mutual ownership of their community’s housing stock (Confederation of Co-operative Housing 2001, 2).

Linked to this is the idea of Community Land Trusts (CLTs). Popularised in the USA and gaining ground in rural Britain, a CLT is a ‘community-controlled organisation, which owns the freehold of land, and which leases properties to other organisations or people according to a community orientated agenda’ (Confederation of Co-operative Housing 2001, 5). This has three main benefits: first, by taking land out of the private property market, CLTs stop speculative and inflationary forces driving up property prices and rents for the existing community; second, by controlling the use of land in perpetuity, the local community can democratically decide what the land is used for and so as the community (and its infrastructure) improves, the increase in value (or equity growth) stays with the local community and does not become private profit (Community Finance Solutions 2008, 34); and third, communities can build their own their own permanently affordable housing geared to individual income levels and

available on all tenures. Most relevant to the discussion here is the Mutual Home Ownership Cooperative (MHOC) model devised by CDS Co-operatives (2005). The CLT would grant the MHOC a lease of its land at peppercorn (very low) rents and a developer (an RSL or private sector builder) would then build the desired housing for an agreed maximum price in return for taking on the development risk and potential profit. The MHOC would then buy the housing on a 30 year corporate mortgage and residents would finance the debt repayments through buying equity stakes through their monthly rents, which would be fixed at 35 per cent of net income. Vacating residents would sell on their units of equity to existing members and the incoming member using a formulae based on a local housing market value index and average earnings, taking 90 per cent of any 'profit' with the remaining ten per cent going into an asset reserve that could drive down borrowing costs (see CDS Co-operatives 2005).

On the surface, these options do appear to create alternatives housing solutions to the market and have growing support. For example, the Community Gateway has been adopted by Preston City Council, and a handful of other local authorities are now showing interest (Chartered Institute of Housing 2006). The governing body in Wales, the Welsh Assembly, has adopted a Community Housing Mutual Model; and the government is providing assistance to 14 pilot CLT schemes, allowing them to bid for Social Housing Grant (Great Britain, DCLG 2007d). However, Defend Council Housing is implacably opposed to Community Gateway and Community Mutual models, describing them as 'stock transfer with a fancy wrapper'. The group claims that regardless of 'empowerment' rhetoric, these mutual models will be run as businesses dependent on open market borrowing, making tenant control (and housing need) ultimately subservient to debt viability and delegated 'professional' management

decisions (Defend Council Housing n.d.). In other words, Community Gateway and CLTs will mean yet more privatisation of council housing. This divergence has divided the tenants' movement, weakening both causes and strengthening the hand of state and corporate initiatives to privatise what remains of the social rented housing stock. The next section critically assesses these issues within the framework of alterity.

Bringing alterity back in

Tenants and community activists across England appear to have a straightforward choice between mobilising against housing stock transfer to keep the status quo in the hope of future improvements or exploiting stock transfer in the hope of getting real community control and ownership. In terms of the quest for housing alterity, how should we understand this dilemma? While no definitive answer is possible here, we can at least form an impression from analysing these competing visions against the two principles of housing alterity set out at the beginning of this chapter.

Principle 1: a pre-figurative praxis in which people try to meet current housing needs through creating collective, non-hierarchical forms of housing in their everyday lives in spite of capitalism.

Council housing has functioned as a historically necessary but deeply imperfect form of housing commons praxis. It was a direct response to the failure of the market, including the philanthropic housing projects, to provide decent affordable housing for the working class (Power 1993). Public ownership allowed for a municipal form of collective control, took land and housing out of the private property market, and by

1979 provided a decent home at affordable rents for more than a third of the population. It also had egalitarian credentials by raising the necessary finance through redistributive taxes and borrowing, and reinvesting surpluses from rents back into local public services. In practice, as Cole (2007, 7, 9) argues, the quality of England's public housing 'has always been a variable product, dealing with quite different contexts, and with considerable variability in the quality and condition of stocks, rates of turnover, management performance... [...] which cannot be put down solely to lack of resources from central government'. Council housing's main historical weakness has been tenant disempowerment. Although the struggle for collective mass provision of housing was won, once the state intervened empowerment was quickly replaced by a top-down and paternalistic welfare relationship between provider and client. The paper accountability between landlord and tenants as realised through the ballot box is in reality akin to a 'feudal relationship, where the landlord grants the tenant a tenancy agreement, where in return for money and compliance with the tenancy agreement, the tenant can remain in the home' (Confederation of Co-operative Housing 1999, 2). Both landlord and tenant view housing as assets owned by the local authority but not by the tenant-citizen, and there is no in-built incentive for the tenant 'to take any active responsibility for their home, environment or community' (ibid). Although 250 Tenant Management Organisations exist in England, research suggests that such 'tenant participation compacts' only improve services not tenant involvement (see Oxford Brookes University 2002; Aldbourne Associates and IRIS Consulting, 2003).

In contrast, the Community Gateway Model has, on paper at least, the potential to create a more horizontal praxis of housing commons. It promises a new self-empowering tenant culture by enabling local communities to define themselves, enter

into a ‘bottom-up’ deliberation over their aims, needs and desires, and make informed decisions about what kind of community housing they want to be implemented. Tenants could initiate the process through the Tenant-led Stock Options route, or challenge traditional stock transfer by insisting on a Community Gateway approach. If tenants chose to pursue a Mutual Home Ownership Co-operative, underpinned by a Community Land Trust, land would be removed from the private market and its use placed under democratic community control, enabling mutual management and affordable housing based on income, not market value. Giving people direct *collective* ownership of housing and land assets would potentially solve the lack of responsibility encouraged by council housing without succumbing to the individualism of private ownership.

Principle 2: housing alterity is one of many strategic and tactical interventions that directly undermine the private housing system, meet wider social needs and challenge the hegemony of capital accumulation, class power and market rationality per se.

When placed in a strategic context, the case for mutual ownership over council housing becomes less attractive for several reasons. First, while there is no doubt that committed community activists could make community ownership work for *their* communities, it is not a genuine alternative to council housing for meeting mass social needs. Past experience shows that the RSL/co-operative ‘third sector’ as a whole will not have the capacity to deliver the *scale* of development required – millions of social rented homes – in the next decade, particularly in light of the global credit crunch. This means that Community Gateway Associations or CLTs would at best play a similar role

to the philanthropic housing trusts of the nineteenth century, whose failure to provide working class housing led the state to intervene in the first place.

This leads to a second related point about the risk of co-optation. Community Gateway advocates have been lobbying the Government for more support by presenting it as a way of achieving public support for stock transfer ‘even where there is opposition to conventional forms of transfer’ (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2005, 1). This is an extremely dangerous tactic because there is no guarantee that a Community Gateway process would lead to mutual ownership. Tenants may decide that they want a traditional landlord-tenant arrangement. Self-management might appear too onerous for many households in the social housing sector, especially when over 40 per cent contain a member with a serious medical condition or disability (Hills 2007, 47).⁶

Third, the mutual ownership model put forward appears to be a clear case of what Fuller and Jonas (2003) call ‘additional’ or ‘substitutional’ alterity, not an ‘oppositional’ form; it is housing alterity *within* and *complementary* to a commodified land system. The architects of CLTs in England acknowledge this: ‘A CLT recognises and works with the operation of the market, but seeks to capture value for the good of the community as well as for individual residents’ (ART Homes et al 2002). By directly replacing council housing, it would transfer the risk and responsibility for providing affordable housing from the public to the local community level within a micro-level commercial enterprise, which is far more vulnerable to financial markets. As with RSLs, Bliss (2006, 6) concedes that the ‘power that a Gateway tenant membership has is very limited. The membership is more about process and perception than legal

⁶ In 2003, Glasgow council tenants voted for stock transfer on the premise that within ten years the ‘second stage transfer’ of ownership would take place from a single RSL to small-scale, locally based, tenant controlled organizations. Research suggests that not only do tenants continue to feel disempowered but the prospects for second stage transfer now look bleak, having been removed from the business plan (McKee and Cooper 2008).

issues'. Moreover, the benefits to the local community involved could be at the expense of others: there is an implicit notion that prospective members will be means-tested to ensure they qualify for affordable housing, but can also meet the rents (i.e. mortgage repayments), and neighbourhood control of tenancies could replicate the NIMBYism that has been identified in some Tenant Management Organisations who are 'reluctant to take homeless applicants and "difficult" tenants' (see Oxford Brookes University 2002, 9).

Finally, proponents of Community Gateway and Community Land Trusts openly acknowledge that their favoured approaches depend almost entirely on the discounted sale or gifting of *public* assets. So, they accept and do not challenge the under-funding of council housing in order to exploit the opening for stock transfer. They look to local authorities to sell them surplus or underused land and buildings (Community Finance Solutions 2008). While the release of small, pre-existing development sites for community – instead of private – development could be beneficial, growing demands for CLTs alongside the government's own preference for councils to transfer land to Local Housing Companies and RSLs could incentivise local authorities to declare large amounts of valuable public land and buildings 'surplus' to requirements in order to plug holes in local authority finances caused by neoliberal retrenchment. Yet, private property itself remains untouched, making the community mutual approach distinctly un-transformatory.

Examining the two principles outlined above within a strategic context suggests that tenants and community activists should prioritise the defence of existing council housing and be extremely cautious of the community mutual approach because in order for this latter form of housing commons to work, there must be enclosures elsewhere.

But defending council housing as it is currently financed and managed is not enough as council tenants remain disempowered and starved of investment, leading to demobilisation the next time a stock transfer is proposed. This is where Somerville's (2004, 10) model of a 'two-tier mutualisation of council housing' is potentially useful. He argues for a Community Gateway process that retains public ownership of council housing but within a new local authority trust structure that has secondary mutuals at the neighbourhood level, each with tenant representatives as the majority on the board. This would give tenants responsibility for managing their housing 'both at a local authority level and at a local community level' (ibid: 11). However, as Somerville concedes, the sustainability of such a model 'must be accompanied by a substantial improvement in the economic and social well-being of council tenants (ibid: 12). The outstanding problem, therefore, remains how to unite tenants to fight for community-controlled council housing within a wider struggle against privatisation and poverty.

Concluding thoughts: a strategy for alterity

This chapter has argued that the Labour Government's vision for the future of social housing is a continuation, not break, with the Thatcherite revolution, making the need for housing alterity more urgent than ever. However, neither council housing as historically imagined nor 'bottom-up' visions of stock transfer meet what have been identified here as the principles of creating housing commons. These principles underpin the everyday creation of, and struggle for, collective, self-managed and egalitarian solutions to housing need, and would form part of a wider strategy to challenge the hegemony of capitalist social relations and open up spaces for alternative futures to market forms of provision. The co-operative desire 'to be alternative' often

clouds the strategic context, and can even end up being a form of market choice itself as exercised by a relatively privileged group albeit adopting utopian visions of independence and separateness. Yet those who claim to oppose housing privatisation or, for that matter, alternative community enterprise models often offer no real solutions at the community level.

Nonetheless, there are some grounds for optimism in terms of building a viable alternative to the drift towards market-based social housing provision. Both Defend Council Housing and the official tenants' organisations share a commitment to creating housing commons; they just differ about how to get there. The argument here is that, while defending existing models or proposing alternatives is necessary, the emphasis should be on building a mass *movement* for housing alternatives, one that underpins a broader alliance against enclosures and for commons. As Engels once argued, housing reforms alone cannot solve the housing question unless accompanied by the emancipation of people from capital. Any strategy for housing alterity must link up issues of housing with the wider private property system that includes the commodification of labour.

Without being overly prescriptive, a strategy for uniting tenants around a common housing agenda might, as a starting point, set out to build a broad-based campaign of council/RSL/coop tenants, home owners, community activists, trade unionists, existing councillors, anti-capitalists, academics and others. This campaign would push for affordable, tenant-controlled public rented housing as part of anti-poverty coalition at the local and regional level. Building unity could be achieved by a dual commitment, one the one hand, to the defence of *existing* council housing provision from stock transfer, PFI and ALMOs, as well as homeowners and tenants

under threat of compulsory purchase or eviction in regeneration areas and, on the other hand, to endorse the ‘bottom-up’ spirit of the Community Gateway and CLT models by agreeing to support such processes where they involve the *retention* of council housing under Somerville’s ‘two-tier mutualisation’ model or the mutualisation of *private* property. Empty or misused private land and property could be occupied to provide free squatted housing, and public meetings would be held to highlight the contradiction between private property and housing waiting lists, demonstrating the power of everyday commons in praxis.

To conclude, in the struggle for housing alterity, a strategy must be developed that recognises that oppositional alternatives will almost always involve simultaneously relations with, to use terms advanced by Fuller and Jonas (2003), additional and substitutional social housing alternatives. The long-term aim of such a strategy would be to create a critical mass of diverse strategic and tactical interventions, from blocking privatisation and gentrification, stopping the closure of community facilities, and occupying land to winning seats on the local council. These tactics would force periodic concessions from state and capital, and help to re-energise the housing campaign and keep it going until such point as it reached an as-yet undefined future guided only by principles of the commons.

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