

The Housing Monster

Friendofzanetti

“We may call such a monster the ‘beast of property’. It now rules the world, making mankind miserable, and gains in cruelty and voracity with the progress of our so-called ‘civilization’. This monster we will in the following characterize and recommend to extermination.”
Johann Most, cited in *The Housing Monster* (p.3)

Just as Marx set out to de-mystify the commodity form in the first chapter in *Capital* Volume 1, *The Housing Monster* by prole.info sets out to de-fetishise housing as a commodity form by means of an illustrated book. That we have waited so long for such a clear and compelling introduction to this subject says much about the aporias of the productivist Left which has traditionally relegated reproductive issues, including housing, behind workplace issues¹. The book’s arrival provides an opportunity to discuss housing in a way that does not merely replicate the dull compulsions of social democracy, which assumes that distribution always follows behind production, and thereby implicitly accepts the capitalist relation in the wage-labour form². Of course, Marx’s writing is replete with monsters. The ideal workplace for the capitalist, he relates, is a “House of Terror”³, and vampires, werewolves and ‘the Furies of private interest’ populate *Capital* throughout. In the preface to the first edition, he describes how Perseus, slayer of monsters in Greek mythology, wore a magic cap so that monsters could not see him, yet in our times, “We draw the magic cap down over our own eyes and ears so as to deny that there are any monsters”⁴. This book is an attempt to lift the cap from over our eyes again – the monsters must be slain!

By necessity there is something *universal* about our relation to housing that makes it such a crucial subject. Excepting deepening homelessness and destitution⁵, we live in different types of houses, but we all live in homes. Thus the opening ‘Foreword’, in the form of a narrative vignette, tells an everyday tale of alienation, tiredness and compulsion – commuting and working to pay a constantly increasing rent. The book is notable for its attention to the individual forms of stress and estrangement that the vast majority of us experience on the capital-deficit side of property relations. However, these problems reflect a wider context of subsumption under the tyranny of rent, and the relation between subjective observations and wider objective social relations are what gives the book a critical pedagogical form. Like Marx, prole.info takes nothing for granted in an elaboration of real, material social relations and a certain repetitive turn is concomitant with this approach. Given the normalisation of extortionate property relations in the present climate, however, ‘don’t understand me too quickly!’ could serve as the book’s coda. The review here thus intends to tease out some of the main arguments with particular reference to the UK context of the housing crisis.

Part I. The Construction Site

Construction labour, the dirty end of the production of commodities, has all but disappeared from view behind hoardings promising ‘safe construction’, and nylon sheets advertising capitalist consumption on scaffolding (often fetishising the finished form of the building itself before it has even been built). Meanwhile hymns to ‘immaterial’ and ‘affective’ labour’ on the Left sometimes obscure the fact that workers are still working and still producing surplus value. The first section, ‘The Construction Site’, sets out to rectify this incomplete view, itself embarked upon as a corrective⁶, by emphasising the labour relations of production in the construction phase. The chapter opens with a quote by Isaak Illich Rubin, a Marxist value theorist, who, reclaiming Marx from vulgar political economy, noted that capitalism was not a science of “the relation of things to things”, but the relation of “people to

people in the process of production” (p.10). Like Marx, Rubin assumes that labour is the basic element of human society, and he emphasises Marx’s theory of fetishism as the basis of Marx’s critique of the economic system, and his theory of value⁷. This simple, yet often mystified, materialist analysis forms the core of the book, challenging the arbitrary ‘value’ of the home as commodity. That prole.info performs the difficult task of deconstructing value-form theory in the popular form of a highly-readable illustrated book – freely available to download⁸ – is highly commendable. The book approaches the housing commodity in a clear, straightforward manner that both demystifies the ‘social hieroglyphic’ of housing as a commodity, and suggests a form of critique that is widely applicable – though rarely applied with the same lucidity as found here⁹. This is no doubt down to the deployment of the graphic form, with a series of excellent illustrations complementing the economic use of text.



As The Situationist International used to say, capitalism is separation perfected¹⁰, and for prole.info “the biggest obstacle” (p.27) to forming political groups which develop their own collectivity is the division of labour. The construction site is the shared workplace of different types of workers with different types of bosses, and with different work schedules. Specialised subcontracting, which separates activity even more, means that collective socialisation across these different roles is difficult (pp.23-28). These divisions are also overlaid with cultural differences such as class, race and gender. Divide and rule, as ever, is both the method and outcome of surplus value extraction. The pressure to build houses for profit means that the work process is constantly being intensified¹¹. De-skilling means that employees need less training, get paid less, and are easier to replace. A familiar tale of alienation and erosion of autonomy then, but as prole.info usefully points out, rote tasks are less evident on the construction site than elsewhere (in factory production, telesales, cashier work, etc). Limits to growth, due to the durability of existing buildings, and land costs, means that there is an incentive to build small and quickly, and the need to create at least the appearance of choice in design for the consumer market means that production is rarely completely standardised over a large amount of units. This means that workers on construction sites have a certain degree of autonomy in their work, which must be performed with a certain degree of skill (p.35).

The book makes clear that workers’ interests (to work less for more money) are diametrically opposed to the bosses’ (more profit for less outlay). This antagonism is the foundation for solidarity, and the *inversion* of socialised separation is posited as the formation of workers groups amidst a range of different collective tactics including theft,

skiving, mutual support, and playfulness (p.28, p.42). While these observations counter a typical Left narrative of woe and alienation for workers – finding instead moments of craft pride, relative autonomy and banter in a kind of workers ‘history-from-below’ – they sit contradictorily (as may be expected) with the hierarchies and divisions so convincingly evinced as “the biggest obstacle” to mutual solidarity elsewhere in the text. Prole.info acknowledges the extent of specialisation and separation in the work process, but continues to deploy the collective “we” (as a means of designating ‘the workers’) in a way that is sometimes problematic. Divisions *within* the working class are most evident between skilled and ‘non-skilled’ workers (apprentices, agency workers and casual or ‘illegal’ labourers). Talking of “we” in this context tends to flatten out very real differences – in much the same way that the ‘we are the 99%’ slogan of the Occupy movement, or Hardt and Negri’s concept of ‘the multitude’ does. Perhaps the problem is the assertion of this “we” anecdotally, without adequate evidence of the forms it takes in organisation. Maybe this is deliberate: the book works very well as an abstract depiction around the relations of production and reproduction in housing, and ‘templates’ for radical activity were generally scorned as ahistorical by Marx for instance. However, the deployment of some kind of ‘workers’ enquiry’¹² into the conditions and experiences of construction site workers would have been useful, as a means to counter the sometimes god-like character of the narration, and as a means to actively engage the workers as subjects of research and action.

As Marx noted long ago, the development of the division of labour for the enhanced extraction of surplus value takes, as its necessary corollary, a “purely despotic” form through an enhanced regime of supervision¹³, and the book clearly expresses the everyday contradictions between workers and management. While construction work is not regulated by an assembly line, the drive for profits ensures that the pace of work is constantly being monitored and sped up by bosses. Piece work, a form of performance related pay, is just one way in which labour is enjoined to accelerate, at other times the methods are more crude and disciplinary:

“The fewer breaks we take, the faster we work, the more work we get done in a day, the more surplus value the company squeezes out of us. The faster we work, the more likely we are to have accidents or to get repetitive injuries. The harder we work, the more work is likely to eat up our free time. When we get home from work we’ll be too tired to do anything but take a shower. The less time we spend talking to our co-workers, the more boring the work is. We push in the exact opposite direction as the company. We’re constantly trying to slow down the pace of work as much as possible” (p.40).

Time and work-discipline are not trans-historical as the historian E.P. Thompson noted. ‘Saint Monday’ (a day for avoiding work) was ‘honoured’ by workers almost universally in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, with Tuesdays sometimes thrown in too. Even in 1967 it was still apparently kept by “a few coopers in Burton-on-Trent”¹⁴. The drive to increase work time and intensity is always being met with an opposing force that seeks to reclaim lived time from work time. The Glasgow dock workers, for instance, mobilised a collective slow-down with the innovative ‘ca canny’ movement in 1889. Returning strikers (funds exhausted) replicated the slower and inefficient labour practices of imported scab labour as a means to re-assert the worth of their



All images, illustrations from *The Housing Monster*, prole.info



skilled labour. With profits affected, the ‘ca canny’ action got the wage increase that the dockers had failed to get by striking. The strike-breakers could neither work as fast or as safely as the long-term dockers and thus the balance of forces had shifted towards their return¹⁵. This “balance of forces” is the territory that is constantly disputed in prole.info’s account of the contradictions between labour and bosses on the construction site. The book does not neglect the smaller details. Even though work is harder to come by, most people are still compelled to be there, and all the little methods – skiving, talking gibberish, singing, mimicry, pranks – by which the day is made less boring are evoked with a degree of solidarity and understanding that is often absent from sociological accounts of labour practice. However, as John Holloway argues, the transformation of the struggle against time at work to a struggle *about* time at work has rarely been elucidated. The struggle over the length and intensity of the working day is crucial, but we should not forget that this struggle is inseparable from the imposition of capitalist labour. When we represent ourselves as workers we tacitly accept the capitalist wage labour relation¹⁶.

While acknowledging the need to find an exit from capitalism, the ‘Blue Collar Blues’ chapter re-affirms the compulsion we face to drag our hides to work for sale: “We have to spend our time working for someone else to be able to exist on our time. We both need and hate work” (p.55). This basic antinomy – the need to accept waged work at one level, even if we may violently reject it in principle – creates a situation whereby we resign ourselves to our identification as workers: ‘the working class’. From a Left point of view, one of the more interesting discussions in the book is over ‘working-class’ identity. As prole.info notes, ‘working class’ in the context of capitalist relations can soon become a stereotype of itself, defined internally as a sign of ‘authenticity’, and externally as a sociological category defined by income and lifestyle choices that can be marketed to and pandered to by politicians. But escaping from this ‘role’ is not as easy as changing ‘lifestyle’ options, a notion which prole.info describes as the “the ideology of the wage labourer who can’t imagine any way out of wage labor” (p.57). It is

not working-class pride or a sense of identity that keeps workers working, but the class relationships within capitalism where we are reproduced as ‘workers’ (and non-workers) on a daily basis. Wage labour and surplus value are the foundation of capitalist relations. Waving the flag for ‘the working-class’ sometimes obscures the need to escape from the wage labour relation in order to exit our designated roles (pp.50-59). The object of the everyday struggles prole.info depicts is clear: “We are not just the working class; we are the working class that struggles to do away with work and class, and the society built around them”¹⁷.

Part II. The Neighbourhood

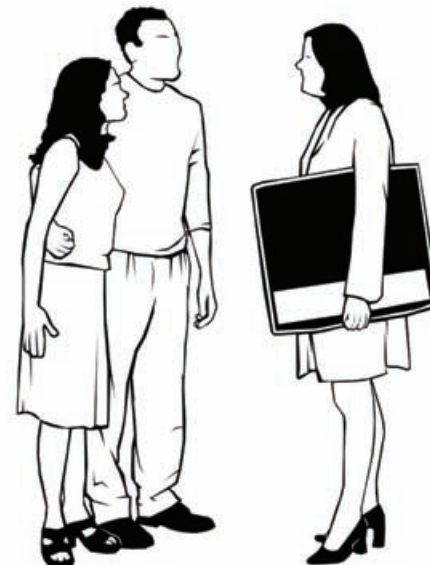
Part II of the book looks at capital flows in land and property and their impacts on labour, ownership, class and gender. Credit is essential to the flow of capital in construction, allowing investors to keep their capital in constant circulation, and avoiding devaluation through under-use. The loan capital of banks is based on interest. Unlike value derived from exploiting labour, this capital is fictitious, based on future claims to wealth generated from the loans it distributes. Crucially, the credit is predicated on continual growth, but as repeated cyclical downturns and the ‘sub-prime’ mortgage crisis has shown – with its defaults, ‘delinquencies’ and foreclosures – the miracle of continual growth always turns out to be a fallacy. Repayments are never guaranteed: “When the crash inevitable comes, last year’s (or last week’s) confidence looks like stupidity. Prices that had built-in assumptions of a profitable future pop or deflate like balloons” (p.65). Here, ‘fictitious capital’ disappears or becomes ‘toxic’ (if it wasn’t already), businesses can’t sell their commodities (houses in this case), and capital loses its liquidity (essential to its functioning), getting ‘stored up’ in unsold houses that become subject to devaluation and decay.

For an analysis that emphasises labour processes, *The Housing Monster* could say more about the role of off-shoring in production. Graham Turner¹⁸, in his analysis of the roots of the housing bubble, argues that the credit bubble was the direct result of companies moving jobs abroad for cheaper labour and the maximisation of profits, leading to the reduction of consumer spending in the UK through unemployment and a more ‘competitive’ job market. The rise in debt was the flipside to jobs being lost to the East: property inflation was a “necessary stimulus” for economic growth in the West, with cheap interest rates and easy credit fostering “money illusion” and “property mania”; a short term, myopic bid for growth. Debt was the major factor in the housing bubble. No wonder that the UK government publicly understated the importance of the housing market to the economy: the economy was supported by record levels of borrowing, and the spectres of chronic debt deflation and negative equity haunt our debt-ridden homes. A recent *Shelter* report¹⁹ suggests that almost seven million people in the UK are relying on “unsustainable” credit with extortionate interest rates to help pay their housing costs, including payday loans, unauthorised overdrafts, other loans or credit cards. According to Credit Action²⁰, the average household debt (including mortgages) in January 2012 was £55,988, and the average amount owed per UK adult around 122% of average earnings. Every 15 minutes a household is repossessed. Every 4 minutes someone is made bankrupt or insolvent. As Michael Hudson argues, mortgage loans, by far the biggest form of debt, are increasingly a form of peonage; a “new road to serfdom”²¹.

But while prole.info may neglect the links between financialisation and property, there is a thorough analysis of land ownership and the rentier economy. As David Harvey explains, land is a unique non-fungible resource which cannot, as a rule, be produced or built anew: there is a limited supply and it already has owners²². This is what Mark Twain meant when he said, “Buy land, they’re not making it any more” (cited, p.68). Without contributing to ‘development’ the landowner can profit off other developments such as a new train station or a large ‘regeneration’ project, as with the multiple land-grabs via the London Olympics 2012 and Glasgow’s

Commonwealth Games 2014²³. As prole.info puts it, landowners are in the position “to charge us a fee for the right to live on earth” (p.72). For Michael Hudson, the important category is *economic rent*, “which is the profit one earns simply by owning something”; an “unearned increment”, which to the financier or capitalist is, “earned in their sleep”²⁴. But the ‘right to rents’ in the rentier economy depends on the type and location of the land. Claims to future rents are predicated on the use of that land. Zoning laws are introduced to separate out land uses for effective planning, but these are constantly under threat as developers manipulate planning as an adjunct of economic development. Land speculators are not concerned with the most useful use of land, but the most profitable, and they actively intervene in the process of development through a phalanx of opaque quasi-autonomous bodies that supposedly form the public interest in regeneration projects and urban planning in general (pp.68-73)²⁵.

Changes in the urban landscape are not natural processes. The economic boom in the US after the World War II, for instance, was heavily state-supported. The G.I. bill subsidised home ownership by giving out loans to veterans with no down payment necessary (p.91). This was, in effect, a debt-financing strategy that helped derail public housing, prioritise private home ownership and individualism, and stimulate the commodity-economy²⁶. The economic boom sustained demand for housing and allowed for the expansion of huge development firms. ‘Levittown’, for instance, a symbol of post-war US suburbia, was the fiefdom of William Levitt, the ‘King of Suburbia’, who ran both a development firm and a construction company, utilising standardisation and prefabrication methods which allowed him to build the first model mass-produced suburb (p.75). This is the type of American landscape which Theodore Adorno might have meant when he said it was, “as if no-one had ever passed their hands over the landscape’s hair”²⁷. Costs of machinery and labour were reduced massively through Fordist production methods, enabling the construction of a homogenised landscape of tens of thousands of homes. ‘Dumping’ money into urban infrastructural projects is one way in which capital attempts to resolve its frequent crises. David Harvey, has written of Robert Moses, the urban planner, who updated Hausmannisation for the post-WWII US context, by embarking on a huge process of debt-financed suburbanisation as a means to resolve a capital surplus problem arising from the economic crisis of the 1930s²⁸.



Land speculation is even more profitable than construction and the developers' main interest is in making sure the value of the land rises. Gentrification is one of the chief mechanisms for this revaluation. Transport links make an area attractive to affluent incomers and often serve to separate an area from poorer neighbourhoods nearby, while state subsidies make the area more alluring for developers. Increased investment creates a vicious spiral of higher rents, higher house prices and higher taxes, all of which price out poorer people in the neighbourhood, changing its character and making it more acceptable for higher band tax payers. With huge amounts of money to be made, state intervention and policing assist the process – often violently. As prole.info notes: “Quick, speculative development is an obvious attack on us” (p.78). Urban theorists like Neil Smith and Rachel Weber have pointed out the role of disinvestment, defamation and stigmatisation in creating the conditions for wholesale makeovers of urban areas, and prole.info insists that the decay and development of neighbourhoods are, “both automatic market processes and the result of conscious action by developers and city planners” (p.79). This is not a rational process from a social point of view, but it is from an economic one: whatever use value we might want to make of urban space, exchange value dominates as the privileged motor of social change under capitalist relations.

The housing market and the labour market are inextricably interlinked: ‘Levittown’ is only an extreme example of a ‘company town’; every town is really a company town (p.95)²⁹. Without property we are forced to sell our labour power on the market to those who already have property and capital. We make just enough to reproduce ourselves as workers for the next day, covering all our essential costs such as housing, energy, transport costs and food. We need housing to survive, to reproduce ourselves, and the need to keep up rent and mortgage payments keeps us going back to work every day – because landowners have the right to charge us money for a place to live (p.81). The tendency of the labour market is to push down wages; the tendency of the property market is to push up the cost of housing. We get squeezed in between. Rent rises, de-regulation, overcrowding, fewer repairs, damp housing have been our lot, except when sustained pressure from below has resulted in gains. While the traditional Left has tended to emphasise struggles in production over wages as opposed to reproductive struggles over everyday living conditions, capitalists have understood that higher house and rent prices lower the real value of our wages. Inflation is just as effective a means to subdue the worker as strike-breaking, and Heinrich Zille, who as an illustrator portrayed the desperate overcrowding of the ‘tenement barracks’ in Berlin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is quoted judiciously here: “You can kill a man with an apartment just as easily as with an axe” (p.80). With little or no public or social housing available, the market for private letting and home-buying has escalated out of control. The ludicrous house-building booms in Spain and Ireland are exemplary cases. What is notable here is that neither country has a tradition of public housing, meaning that housing production has been completely dominated by a private sector that acted like the boom would never end. Now that the crash has come, whole ‘ghost estates’ lie empty (as of January 2012, 400,000 properties lay vacant in the Republic of Ireland alone³⁰), negative equity is rampant and construction workers are made redundant, not because there is nothing to do, but because capital cannot do it profitably.

Good public housing is anathema according to the capitalist imperative of growth – “Accumulate, Accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!”³¹ The disinvestment and defamation of public housing has been no accident: public housing, without the intervention of strong left-wing movement³², is meant to be shit – private property depends on it (p.93). The landlord is a capitalist. Exchange-value will always trump use-value in the class relationship between the landlord and the renter. As Thatcher understood, promoting a ‘property owning-democracy’ (an aspirational working class) through the ‘right-to-buy’ scheme in council housing was an important

link in developing class cleavages and divisions and tying a new group of atomised consumer citizens more thoroughly into capitalist relations. Home-ownership is tied up with respectability, individualism and hierarchy. By owning a house, we largely relate to it as exchange-value rather than use-value, becoming our own landlords (p.92), and scanning the housing market ourselves for (now vastly diminished) profitable opportunities. But how much respectability is there in owning your own home when, as Michael Hudson argues, in the odd logic of the real estate bubble, debt has come to equal wealth? In the UK the bait on ‘the new road to serfdom’ was low interest rates, access to subsidised public housing (a one-off fire sale) and easy credit. While some got in on the property ladder and made money, the trap for most is a lifetime of work to pay off debt on an asset rapidly dwindling in value³³.

As prole.info argues, the terrain of reproduction (housing, health, social services, transport, leisure) is as significant as the terrain of the workplace in challenging capitalist relations. This argument was hammered home by the Italian autonomous feminist movement in the early 1970s through key figures such as Selma James, Maria Dalla Costa and Leopaldi Fortunati, but these different terrains suggest different problems of organisation. The workplace has traditionally been built on co-operation. As Marx noted, this created the possibility of “a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one”³⁴ – although this tremendous potential power has more often been harnessed for the production of surplus value within an elaborate division of labour. In housing, especially when the working-class has been weak, the tendency is towards separation and privacy, creating an in-built set of divisions and hierarchies to overcome (p.84). While at work, on the bosses’ time, it may be possible to squeeze something out of ‘their time’, at home after work, we’re on ‘our own time’, facing tiredness and other threats to our already diminished leisure time. On the other hand, prole.info argues, neighbourhood struggles over housing or community services help break down the atomisation of communities and create the potential for new modes of face-to-face communication over direct needs (p.85). As the urban theorist Henri Lefebvre has argued, when it comes to alienation, there really is no substitute for participation.³⁵

Part III. Pushing, Pulling, Breaking

“Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.”
Bertold Brecht, cited in *The Housing Monster* (p.108)

As prole.info notes, it is not always possible to tell when real gains or losses have been made, a ‘defeat’ can be demoralising, but it can also lead to reorganisation and regrouping. For what may be considered a radical ultra-left perspective, in terms of a fundamental critique of capital, prole.info is careful not to succumb to the hoary old dichotomy of reform versus revolution. In the balance of forces that makes up the capitalist relation, unified militant action can extract real concessions, yet ‘victory’ can easily be mediated by top-down union bureaucracies whose unity is decidedly self-interested. This much we know. The push for reforms is partly about achieving gains but must also be about developing strength from the bottom-up, and revealing the contradictions and the shifting terrain of interconnected forms of capitalist social relationships. The demand for ‘more public housing!’ – a necessity given the acute shortage of available public housing – is only one aspect of the struggle: what about the location of these houses; their insulation; their interior spatial arrangement; connections to the city, town, countryside; transport and amenities? The question is qualitative as well as quantitative.

Yet beyond the problems of the ‘numbers game’ played by previous administrations who have sought to control unrest in times of crisis through the provision of mass public housing, there is clearly a need for a more universal provision of affordable public housing. The privatisation of housing epitomises the separation and atomisation of individuals inherent to the capitalist system, and various early experiments in collective living incorporated, in some cases, integrated collective



kitchens, gardens, laundries, sport facilities, libraries, day care, schools, etc. These experiments collectivised housework and freed up women to participate in other activities – for this they were routinely demonised and denounced as ungodly and dangerously socialist (p.117-118). This reaction may point to collectivised living as a model for living outside capital relation – the threat of good example – but self-management of housing does not free it from capitalist relations, even if it might mitigate some of the worst aspects of those relations for small groups of people³⁶. As prole.info points out, where collective living has really taken off *en masse* is when governments have been pressurised by strong movements with a commitment to public housing. Marx made clear the problem of co-ops and mutual forms of organisation that concerned themselves more with the distribution of resources rather than their mode of production³⁷, and this question cannot be elided in the housing problem: “Detached from a militant workers movement, collective housing easily becomes a marginalized commodity” (p.118).

While the workers’ movement, mediated by the trades unions, has traditionally relegated reproduction in favour of production issues, it is no surprise that lifestyle experiments in collective living are still explored, even if they are ever more subject to the constraints of the market³⁸. However, prole.info cites the US practice of Union ‘hiring halls’ as one reform, whereby employment is mediated through the unions rather than a direct capital-labour relation, meaning that: “The amount of crap we have to take from asshole bosses is greatly reduced” (p.122). This would seem to compare favourably with the casual employment agencies that operate in the UK context, yet the hiring halls also perform the function of “labor brokerages” – mediating agents who tend to accede to membership concerns, reify craft separation, and control militant and disruptive workers with the threat of exclusion from work (p.123). Gilles Deleuze asserted that ‘recognition’ is the lowest form of philosophy, and the need for legitimation that the unions crave – both from the workers and the bosses – puts them in a position of compromise whose negotiating position can be summarised as the guarantee of a workforce that’s ready to work (p.124). For instance, Ken Loach’s ‘Days of Hope’ (1975), written by Jim Allen, shows precisely how the UK Labour Party and the Trade Union Council (TUC) were willing to sacrifice workers to the pyramids of accumulation in the General Strike of 1926, in order to maintain legitimacy at parliamentary level (to the scorn of even the Conservatives)³⁹. Unions have failed to escape commodification themselves, and routinely take part in managing capitalist relations, and

undermining rank and file struggle. As prole.info argues, at a time of intense struggle, the need to go beyond the control of the union quickly makes itself felt (p.125).

State mediation and support is a normative function of the 'free market': a wealth of subsidies, guarantees, zoning laws and exemptions prop up the housing market (p.127). The state has only had an interest in controlling rents when they rose to a level that required an unacceptably amplified demand on wages, but these concessions were typically nominal, partial and inadequate. What is required to lower rents, as has been proven time and time again, is a major "threat from below", and prole.info discusses the rent strikes of New York and Glasgow in the 1910s and early 1920s that led to rent control and tenant protection in the first example, and, eventually, the beginnings of government funded public housing on a large scale in the second example (p.127-128). While this legislation was passed to *prevent* the further development of tenants' movements, they must be seen as a real gain from below. Rent control on a large scale limits profitability in the housing commodity and leads to disinvestment by private capital, forcing state intervention as a means to stave off a housing shortage crisis (*ibid*).



Yet, as a measure forced on the ruling class, state housing has often been constructed as an inferior complement to private housing – with notable exceptions at points of organisational strength – serving to remind a precarious class of where they might end up. The decimation and ghettoisation of the UK's public housing stock over the past 30 years is apposite. To compete with private housing, historically there generally needed to be a serious crisis, and a very strong working-class movement (p.129). Moreover, access to cheap land to build on is essential; a need that has been increasingly undermined by land speculation and continual rounds of primitive accumulation and enclosure. The re-appropriation of public wealth – a wealth generated by labour after all – in the form of subsidies for housing is a real material gain, but is considered expensive by government and therefore always prone to cuts. This is why there is a need for constant agitation by independent tenants and residents groups to both protect previous gains and demand more gains in the present. Of course, state housing is only a concession wrung from the capitalist system. Housing remains a commodity, but the most brutal aspects are in this way attenuated, and more people, at least, can reclaim more lived time (p.130).

While the kind of Keynesian economic solution that has traditionally secured public housing may seem tempting, in a historical digression prole.info warns against an over-identification with this solution to the housing problem. In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution, the central plan guaranteed a continuous source of demand for housing within Soviet state productivism. Large governmental capital outlay and prefabricated mass production techniques brought the cost of housing down massively with workers often paying less than 5% of their income towards it (p.135). Workers received a large part of their wages in a socialised form through free healthcare, education, transport and housing, but this didn't preclude the wage-labour relation, which was subject to the same

Taylorist/Fordist principles that dominated the US-American production system⁴⁰. Experiments in collective living took place within this context of productivist ideology and capitalist development: "Social life was being radically reorganized but the changes were more the result of building modern capitalist society than of dismantling it" (p.137). Keynesianism, as Negri has reminded us, was a solution to working-class antagonism *within* the capitalist relation⁴¹. In the Soviet case, as elsewhere, as long as the value form was left intact social gains would be under attack through competition and the restless need of capital to expand and flow: thus the needs of the workers were increasingly squeezed out by the "needs of the economy" (p.138).

The tension between the need to create immediate gains through the existing system, while at the same time understanding the *necessity* to move beyond inherently contradictory and destructive capitalist relations, is carefully navigated in the book. By locating these wider contradictions within everyday social relations from the starting point of a seemingly simple object, the home, 'the housing problem' is not just posed as a question for well-meaning reformers, but as a central problematic in our everyday existence.

Getting Rid Of Monsters?

By emphasising actual social relations between people, prole.info goes some way to undermining the "magic and necromancy" that surrounds the production of housing as a commodity⁴². Getting rid of monsters involves unmasking the social relations that produce them and dissolving pseudo-critiques of capital for more fundamental ones: "All the critiques of immoral businessmen or the attempts to set up ethical businesses do not make value flow through the economy according to ethical rules. Clichéd criticism of capitalism only works to make criticism of capitalism into a cliché" (p.141). By explaining capitalism only through its worst aspects we risk conjuring monsters everywhere, creating a binary between our own actions and a fetishised world 'out there'. The basic capitalist relationships reinforce monstrous relationships: in a commodity economy, everything costs money; we have to buy what we need to subsist. In order to buy what we need, without capital or property, all we have to sell is our ability to work (p.144-145). We might make our own housing, but we do not make it as we please; we do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The solutions we seek are immanent to the capitalist relations we want to exit:

"This is not about comparing the present to an imaginary classless, moneyless future and finding it lacking [...] It's about developing our everyday struggles to the point where we're in a position to break capitalist social relationships once and for all. We need decisive ideas and elegant actions" (p.146)

The substance of these "decisive ideas and elegant actions" is not made clear beyond the need for a critique of capitalist relations *tout court*, and an emphasis on reproductive relations long subdued in Left discourse. But with the cap pulled from over the eyes, there is at least the possibility of addressing our real material relations. This was the core of Lefebvre's 'critique of everyday life', first elaborated in the 1940s; the 'dead gestures' of organised religion, and the Surrealist 'theme of the marvellous' were seen as mystifying ideas that demoted everyday life and served to obfuscate its potential greatness⁴³. In the late 1960s, interrogating new modes of capitalist production, Lefebvre speculated that urbanisation was beginning to supplant industrialisation in advanced capitalist economies:

"...capitalism has found itself able to attenuate (if not resolve) its internal contradictions for a century, and consequently, in the hundred years since the writing of *Capital*, it has succeeded in achieving 'growth'. We cannot calculate at what price, but we do know the means: *by occupying space, by producing a space.*"⁴⁴

Despite resistance to this thesis, his central idea that we have "passed from the production of things in space to the production of space itself", seems less fanciful when considered in relation to the

urban roots of the financial crisis, and the obvious links between capitalist accumulation and the production of urban space⁴⁵. The housing bubble, as Graham Turner argues, was the direct result of capital's accelerated flight to Eastern economies in the 1970s for access to cheap labour. To retain consumption levels in the so-called advanced capitalist economies – increasingly without jobs and with a yawning wage gap – it was necessary to create liquid wealth through debt (cheap credit). The housing bubble, in both the US and the UK, was the necessary component of the incessant drive to expand profits through the exploitation of a global labour force⁴⁶. The huge capital surplus generated by the simple expedience of not paying the price of labour greatly assisted the expansion of the credit system, which Marx had described in *Capital*, as "a new and terrible weapon in the battle of competition"⁴⁷. Enormous wealth differentials, financialisation on a vastly increased scale and the expansion of the 'rentier economy' ran in parallel with these processes⁴⁸. Important differences between countries and continents suggests the need for caution regarding this thesis, but the link between property bubbles, capitalist crisis and social reproduction suggests a requirement to focus on a politics of space as a key terrain of anti-capitalist struggle. Cities have become more than ever "the ultimate of exchange"⁴⁹ since Lefebvre's time, and the "beast of property" that Johann Most recommended for extermination won't disappear by merely pulling the cap down over our eyes again. It's about time, as Lefebvre advocated, that the urban realm, with housing foregrounded as a universal category, became an explicit locus of political organising alongside the workplace.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Dalla Costa, Mariarosa and James, Selma, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*: <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james>
- 2 Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* skewered this social democratic fallacy decisively in 1875: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>
- 3 Marx, Karl, *Capital* Volume 1, Penguin Books, pp.388.
- 4 Marx, Karl, Preface, *ibid*, pp.91-92.
- 5 In England, homelessness applications are up 18% this year, In London 36%: http://england.shelter.org.uk/news/march_2012/homelessness_up_18. For more news on the destitution crisis facing rejected asylum seekers, see the Glasgow Destitution Network: <http://destitutionaction.wordpress.com/>
- 6 For a good critical overview of these discussions within the autonomous Marxist tradition, see: <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-14-2006/keep-on-smiling-questions-on-immaterial-labour>
- 7 Rubin, Issak Illich, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, Aakar books, 2008
- 8 <http://www.prole.info/>
- 9 Prole.info is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. See for instance, 'Abolish Restaurants: A Workers Critique of the Food Industry', *Ibid*. See also, Wu Ming, 'Fetishism of Digital Commodities and Hidden Exploitation: The Cases of Amazon and Apple': <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/wumingblog/?p=1895>
- 10 Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, 1994. Available at Situationist International Online: <http://www.cdcc.vt.edu/sionline/si/tsots00.html>
- 11 Broadly speaking, Marx described this process of intensification as the extraction of 'absolute' surplus value (extending and intensifying the hours of work) and 'relative' surplus value (increasing productivity by mechanization and rationalization).
- 12 See, for instance, Emery, Ed, *No Politics Without Enquiry*, Available at: <http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/material/cs18inqu.htm>
- 13 Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, Penguin Books, p.450
- 14 Thompson, E.P, 'Time, Work, Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, Number 38, pp.73-74. Available as PDF at: <http://libcom.org/library/time-work-discipline-industrial-capitalism-e-p-thompson>
- 15 <http://libcom.org/history/1889-glasgow-dockers-go-slow>
- 16 Holloway, John, *Crack Capitalism*, Pluto Press, p.227. For a good summary version of the main themes in the book, see, Holloway, John, 'Cracks and the Crisis of Abstract Labour', *Antipode*: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00781.x/pdf>
- 17 <http://www.pmpress.org/content/article.php?story=Prole>
- 18 Turner, Graham, *The Credit Crunch: Housing Bubbles, Globalisation and the Worldwide Economic Crisis*, Pluto Press, 2008
- 19 http://england.shelter.org.uk/news/january_2012/millions_rely_on_credit_to_pay_for_home
- 20 <http://www.creditaction.org.uk/helpful-resources/debt-statistics.html>

- 21 Hudson, Michael, 'The New Road to Serfdom: An Illustrated Guide to the Coming Real Estate Collapse': http://www.outstutute.org/blog/download/MichaelHudson/Hudson_RoadToSerfdom.pdf
- 22 For a detailed examination of how land monopoly has played out in Glasgow via Harvey, see: http://www.variant.org.uk/37_38texts/13RentTyranny.html
- 23 <http://gamesmonitor2014.wordpress.com/2012/01/17/dodgy-land-deals-in-dalmarnock/>
- 24 Hudson, Michael, 'From Marx to Goldman Sachs: The Fictions of Fictitious Capital': <http://michael-hudson.com/2010/07/from-marx-to-goldman-sachs-the-fictions-of-fictitious-capital1/>
- 25 Swyngedouw et al give an excellent account of these structural processes, albeit with little attention to resistance, in Swyngedouw *et al*, 'Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe: Large-Scale Urban Development Projects and the New Urban Policy', in, *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, Blackwell Publishing, 2002, p.201-209
- 26 See Gonzalez, Maya, 'Notes on the New Housing Question: Home Ownership, Credit and Reproduction in the US Post-war Economy', *Endnotes*, # 2, April, 2010: Misery and the Value Form: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/3>
- 27 Adorno, Theodore, 'Paysage' in *Minima Moralia*, p.48
- 28 Harvey, David, *The Enigma of Capital*, Profile Books, p.169
- 29 See Stuart Hodkinson's excellent critique of neoliberal urbanism in Leeds: 'From Popular Capitalism to Third-Way Modernisation: the Case of Leeds', in Glynn, Sarah, ed, *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower-income Housing in a Neoliberal World*, Pluto Press, 2009
- 30 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2012/jan/03/ireland-squatters-occupy-homes-nama?INTCMP=SRCH>
- 31 Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Chapter 24, 'The Transformation of Surplus Value into Capital', Penguin, p.742
- 32 For examples of radical progressive public housing, see, Hatherley, Owen, *Militant Modernism*, Zero Books, 2009
- 33 Hudson, Michael, 'The New Road to Serfdom: An Illustrated Guide to the Coming Real Estate Collapse': http://www.outstutute.org/blog/download/MichaelHudson/Hudson_RoadToSerfdom.pdf
- 34 *Ibid.*, Chapter 13, 'Co-operation', p.443
- 35 Lefebvre, Henri, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Volume 1, Verso, p.237
- 36 This problematic is raised in co-housing and mutual home-ownership schemes. For a current model, see: <http://www.lilac.coop/>
- 37 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>
- 38 Two social centres in Glasgow, for instance, have been closed down in recent years, in part because the rent was simply too much to cover.
- 39 <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/467647/index.html>
- 40 Guy Debord describes the Bolshevik Party as "a substitute ruling class for the market economy". Further, "when the bureaucracy attempts to demonstrate its superiority on capitalism's own ground, it is exposed as capitalism's *poor cousin*". *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.73, p.79
- 41 Negri, Antonio, *Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State: 1929 as a Fundamental Moment for a Periodisation of the Modern State*: http://libcom.org/files/negri_keynes.pdf
- 42 For Marx, the commodity was "a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties". At once a material object (such as a table), and also a commodity, it "evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will", Marx, Karl, *Capital* Volume 1, Penguin Books, p.165
- 43 Lefebvre, Henri, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Volume 1, Verso, p.237
- 44 Lefebvre, Henri, *The Survival of Capitalism*, Motive series, Allison & Busby, 1976, p.21
- 45 See, for instance, 'The Geography of it All' chapter in, *The Enigma of Capital*, Profile Books, 2010, pp.140-183
- 46 Turner, Graham, *The Credit Crunch: Housing Bubbles, Globalisation and the Worldwide Economic Crisis*, Pluto Press, 2008.
- 47 Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Chapter 24, 'The General Law of Accumulation', Penguin, pp.777-778
- 48 Hudson, Michael, 'From Marx to Goldman Sachs: The Fictions of Fictitious Capital': <http://michael-hudson.com/2010/07/from-marx-to-goldman-sachs-the-fictions-of-fictitious-capital1/>
- 49 Lefebvre, Henri, *The Urban Revolution*, Minnesota Press, p.154