EN

VOL. 7. ISS.13

INTRODUCTION: «UNEQUAL SOCIAL RELATIONS AND THE FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO HOUSING AND TO THE CITY»

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In his 1887 preface to *The Housing Question,* Engels (1976 [1887]) notes that the housing shortage is one of the consequences of capitalist transformation. Existing housing is demolished to build factories, which in turn attract large numbers of rural workers seeking employment. Engels cites various examples, in England, Germany and Spain, that show how the housing crisis, closely bound up with capitalism, is characterised by "the peculiar intensification of the bad housing conditions", "a colossal increase in rents", "aggravation of overcrowding in the individual houses, and, for some, the impossibility of finding a place to live at all" (p. 26). The only suggestion from the bourgeoisie in response to this crisis was access to home ownership, which is incompatible with the freedom of movement of workers required for capitalism to function. However, as far as capitalism was concerned, the housing question was only a problem deriving from itself, not a problem per se. As if analysis of rental relations teaches us little more than an analysis of class relations, the housing question is resolved by analysing rental relations and capitalism. However, as Engels stated in his response to Proudhon, the housing question is not limited to the working class, but also affects the petty bourgeoisie. Housing is, in effect, inseparable from the processes of capitalism, but these processes adopt particular forms, the experience of which reveals unequal social relations that actually further our understanding of capitalism, and that show how the links between inequality and housing can illuminate contemporary social structures (Goyer, 2017). As Keenan (2004) argues, "Social structures are not remote entities that exert power onto human persons; rather, they continue to limit or support human actions because of the continued human interactional patterns that construct the structures" (p. 541).

Although on the face of it housing is a simple concept—a building the provides shelter to one or more individuals (Havel, 1985)—it is a complex, multidimensional asset that comprises a plurality of means and ends (Pezeu-Massabuau, 1983). It is the base on which members of a community are anchored to a territory and their community, but it is also what enables them to protect themselves from the community and the environment. Yet various processes undermine this relationship, particularly for tenants. Phenomena that threaten the right to housing include the increasingly urgent problems of housing sanitation that contribute to the social exclusion of tenants faced with these challenges, and the rise in forced displacement (through eviction or foreclosure) of tenants to allow developers to transform the built environment in pursuit of greater profits. In both cases, tenants face processes in which their dwellings and neighbourhood spaces are plundered, and that pose serious challenges for territorial planning and development. The intertwined inequalities therefore encompass multiple dimensions, whether political, spatial, economic or even environmental, that can interact with each other. The study of inequalities in the question of housing is thus a pertinent sociological point of access to understand what characterises contemporary social, and especially urban, experiences. It allows us to question how unequal social relations are put into practice, and how social justice can be guaranteed from such analysis.

Housing and non-egalitarian social relations

To understand inequalities in housing, it is important to bear in mind social and political relations in the analysis of inequalities, and not their conditions. As Therborn (2013) reminds us:

“Inequality is a violation of human dignity; it is a denial of the possibility for everybody’s human capabilities to develop. […] Inequality, then, is not just about the size of wallets. It is a socio-cultural order, which (for most of us) reduces our capabilities to function as human beings, our health, our self-respect, our sense of self, as well as our resources to act and participate in this world” (p. 1).

Indeed, inequalities result from the appropriation of resources, of existence, and even of experience. Thus, three unequal social relations allow us to identify the social question of housing: 1) the monopolistic appropriation of territories and resources (exclusion and segregation); 2) the appropriation by others of the capacity to produce and reproduce (exploitation); 3) the appropriation by others of the capacity to think and decide (domination and symbolic violence) (Goyer and Borri-Anadon, 2019; Goyer 2017).

In the case of the first relation, exclusion/segregation is based on the monopolistic appropriation of territories and resources through social relations that prevent some people from having control over their space/time (McAll, 2008). The fact that too many households have no choice over the environment in which they live, and the stigmatisation of people living in what are perceived as “difficult” neighbourhoods are manifestations of such a relation. This spatial exclusion prevents many households from acting to the full in the places where they live, both in their home and in their neighbourhood: these relations go backwards or stagnate, which can have repercussions on the relation over time (especially in terms of transport) (Marcuse, 1985). Thus, households, depending on their income, do not have the right to access the city’s spaces, and likewise, services, employment and quality housing (Winchester and White, 1988). This is how rich and poor homes can become concentrated in separate areas (Musterd and Ostendorf, 1998). In some poor neighbourhoods, this population concentration has stigmatising effects that lower the social value of their residents (Wilson, 2012). This stigmatisation not only affects self-esteem, but also limits contact between people and social mixing, thus cementing the social exclusion of these localities.

Secondly, the appropriation by others of the capacity to produce and reproduce, which we call exploitation, reveals relations that prevent one person (or one household) from controlling their economic and social activities, and enjoying the income that they help to create. This is the process by which income inequalities are transformed into inequalities of rights and power (Wright, 2005). For example, the gentrification and revitalisation of certain neighbourhoods contribute, among other things, to rising rents that reduce households’ disposable income to the advantage of the owners or real estate developers that invest in those neighbourhoods. In addition, in the rental housing market, landlords do not appropriate tenants’ productive forces, but rather their possibility of reinvesting this expenditure as in the case of homeowners. This form of exploitation is the difference between the rental price and the cost, for the owner, of owning the dwelling. To gain a financial advantage, the owner must control the costs, and this sometimes means putting quality to one side. This “unequal distribution of groups in space” (Grafmeyer, 1996 : 210, our translation), which also contradicts the egalitarian principles that democratic societies purport to uphold, is the result of unequal social relations that arise not only in terms of income (or in economic relations). The question of ethnic and racial discrimination is also present in this type of relation, particularly through exclusion: “a community (defined according to gender, ethnicity or social class, for example), that keeps for itself access to work or the use of certain resources in a territory to the exclusion of others” (McAll, 2008 : 4, our translation). In this respect, immigrants and/or visible minorities that are excluded from certain resources—especially employment opportunities but also some housing—are confined to certain neighbourhoods in the large cities of Europe and North America (Desmond, 2015). This situation increases the stigmatisation of both the neighbourhoods and the people living there, which creates considerable problems of exclusion and urban development.

The third relation, symbolic violence, is defined as the appropriation by others of the capacity to think and decide, meaning that the decision-making capacity of households is compromised. Inequalities, therefore, are not only economic or spatial, but are also transferred to relations of domination. To analyse these relations, the theoretical tool of symbolic violence gives recourse to elements of domination that are invisible to the actors (Bourdieu, 1994), that in fact represent the hidden (or in Bourdieu’s terminology, incorporated) side of exploitation and exclusion/segregation. Both relations feed on symbolic violence so they become taken for granted. This symbolic violence is expressed particularly through discourses that reduce the scope and experience of housing problems by imposing true discourses on the solutions to be found. In the specific case of housing, Dietrich-Ragon (2011), in Le logement intolérable, points out that housing reflects a society's winners and losers, and "in these conditions, not having quality housing reflects an inferior, devalued and humiliating social status" (p. 2, our translation). In this regard, returning to the expression coined by Gaulejac and Taboada-Léonetti (1994), Dietrich-Ragon reminds us that housing is part of the "struggle for places" with consequences in terms of stigmatisation. Types of housing (owned or rented), its size and quality, and its geographic location are social judged. Housing can be an indicator of "social disqualification" (Paugam, 1994).

We therefore consider that focusing on only one relation, or on economic dimensions of housing such as exploitation, does not explain how these inequalities are put into practice. Exploitation is an interaction, but it does not determine all other interactions, as Marxists claim. This conceptualisation of inequalities, therefore, can take into account other systems of domination, systems that class analyses have found difficult to clarify. In effect, exploitation takes place through practices and interactions that limit the possibilities of some and give credibility to others. It is not obvious: exploitation feeds off other unequal social relations, which in turn are embedded in numerous interactions and practices. Capitalism and inequalities are not imposed; they are implemented in the same way that power is not owned, but exercised (Foucault, 1976), particularly through the experience of housing.

Exploitation, exclusion/segregation and symbolic violence through housing: intersected perspectives

For this reason, the struggle for the right to housing and, in consequence, the struggle against housing inequalities, not only aims to reduce income inequalities as a strategy, but also to show that housing can itself be a question of inequality. There are numerous possible strategies to implement housing, which means researchers must be aware of the unequal social relations that prevent its application, but also of the social and urban policies that attempt to guarantee it. The articles published in this issue approach these unequal social relations in their understanding of the housing question.

In their analysis of the social policies that promote access to home ownership in different welfare state regimes in Europe and America, Raïq, Chatti and Ali describe how rental relations contribute to social stratification and to the reproduction of inequalities. These authors refer to exploitation, to the relation of appropriation of the capacity to produce and reproduce. However, to properly evaluate the impact of access to home ownership, consideration must be given to the way in which these societies redistribute wealth, and the level of state intervention to decommodify citizens' needs. Hence, in their study the authors point out that housing solutions are complex and that recommodification through ownership does not mean that social and economic inequalities will decline as though by magic, especially when housing and real estate ownership prices are rising or when the welfare state favours an ownership strategy.

Bendaoud's paper, which also examines housing decommodification issues, compares social housing policies in the Canadian provinces and their effects on housing conditions among vulnerable population groups. Traditionally, policies tackle the question of housing accessibility by attempting to reduce exploitation through public housing, known as low rent housing (HLM), which provides vulnerable households with affordably priced housing managed by the state (at federal, provincial or municipal levels). Although this solution was highly successful in the 1950s and 1960s, the author argues that lack of funding and the construction of fewer housing units led these spaces to become stigmatised. For this reason, since the 1970s collective solutions have grown in popularity, such as community housing and cooperatives, which offer much easier-to-use living spaces that are better incorporated into neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the author points out that these options are highly selective in choosing their tenants and they may exclude vulnerable families from housing. By doing so, he shows that an exclusive focus on exploitation relations does not guarantee that other relations, such as stigmatisation and spatial segregation, will not develop in the long term.

The question of the city's relation with its territory through housing in a context of gentrification is the main focus of the article by Redaelli. The author writes about the emancipating potential of urban rehabilitation projects that enhance and promote aspects of their heritage. Redaelli documents cooperation among residents, in the frame of a project in the historic centre of Córdoba in Spain, as an anti-gentrification strategy in the context of the real estate boom. The project enables residents to challenge the appropriation of urban space, thus showing how they are able to put into practice the right to housing and to the city by fighting against unequal social relations. By showing their solidarity, residents and neighbours can act to defend their own living spaces against private interests, and in doing so, they also challenge the symbolic violence imposed by a single vision of the city.

These relations of exclusion at the territorial level are also the subject of Huerta Núñez and Bélanger's article about Mexico City and the impact of neoliberalism on the right to housing and to the city. The authors shed light on the questions of power in urban development that have prioritised the construction of luxury dwellings to the detriment of social or affordable housing. Here, power relations establish a symbolic violence by creating a hierarchy of legitimacy in the city, and at the same time segregating the urban space. This alliance between public powers and private interests imposes a conception that the city is much more accessible to wealthy households, while excluding poorer households from certain neighbourhoods and in some cases, displacing them altogether. In this respect, their analysis reveals the interconnections between different unequal social relations and their spatial, economic, social and political dimensions.

It therefore seems to us that this question can contribute to reflections on housing and its links with inequalities, which allows housing to be re-politicised as a crucial urban question. In addition, the analyses in these papers describe how housing can form the basis for the struggle against inequalities, at the same time allowing the contemporary social question to be redefined, and possibly guiding social policies in a neoliberal context.

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