The Tiny House Movement

The Tiny House Movement: Challenging our Consumer Culture
Harris, Tracey
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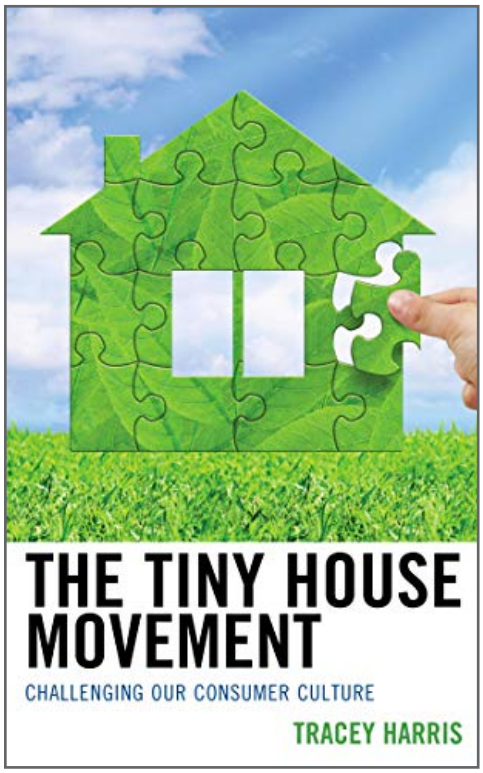
The Green movement has always tried to link theory, or ideology, with practice. Its aim is to convince us that things can change if we all play our part and that another world is possible if everybody does their bit. By focusing on individual efforts, the movement seeks to counter the overwhelming enormity of mobilizing to transform social and economic structures. In her discussion of the tiny house movement, Tracey Harris concludes that it shares the same goal. Few studies have examined the movement and Harris's contribution, in which she presents its identity and context, provides an insightful understanding of its basis of action.



Although the title suggests that the reader might expect an analysis of the movement itself, it is actually more of an activist's view of the movement's potential and the impacts it can have on environmental policies and action in future years. To develop this argument, the book's first chapter questions the need for bigger houses and uncovers the economic, environmental and political consequences of this trend. It gives the reader an understanding of the broader political context of the tiny house movement through a history of its development in the last 30 years, but also describes how the movement can foster a new political alternative, in particular in

our relationship with the environment and use of space. Indeed, while tracing the origins of the movement, the book offers a critical appraisal of the transformation of homes, particularly through an enormous increase in space given over to housing. Individuals and families occupy far more housing space than thirty years ago, especially in North America. This increase is coupled with a expansion in the accumulation of material goods, which ironically creates a need for more space. Space and consumption are now considered, as Robert K. Merton would say, as cultural goals, and as such are closely associated with personal success. This trend has led to ever higher financial debt for households, and a growing environmental debt for societies.

After setting out the context the second chapter appraises the movement itself, which the author attempts to define. It is essentially based on the more or less coordinated actions of individuals who choose to experiment with and defend the concept of tiny house living. Thus, the movement constitutes a network of participants who seek to promote the idea that we should be "thinking little" by experiencing it themselves. However, reducing individual housing space implies sharing commodities and, consequently, living in communities of tiny houses and using these commodities cooperatively. This constitutes the first of the social transformations the movement aims to bring about. The second is related to the first: smaller dwellings in cooperative communities could offer an alternative to social housing. Indeed, according to the author, by reducing costs and expenses, the tiny house experiment challenges housing security and poverty. Nevertheless, the book and this chapter in particular, although based on empirical data, lacks a theoretical discussion of social movements. The questions I found myself asking afterwards were: what does this mean to contemporary study of social movements? and what characteristics of this movement can point us to theories relevant to understand collective action and society? In this sense, my critical appraisal of the book should be read as a proposal or even more, a discussion around what theories could be useful to study such a movement. The tiny house movement is, to paraphrase the title of the book by the late Alberto Melucci, challenging "the codes of collective action", by using our own housing decisions to act collectively

against climate change. For Melucci (1996), what drives movement is the capacity to develop the self-reflexivity, on individual practice and social context, that has become the most important resource for activists. It thus seems that the way the movement is presented in the book relates to this theoretical stance.

The following two chapters outline what the author considers to be the two main contributions of the movement to sociological analysis, and chapter five identifies its blind spots that have drawn some criticism. First, although it was well presented in the first chapter, readers are reminded through the words of participants that the movement defends the idea of "less is more" and that tiny house living allows them to live a fuller life, thereby "challenging our consumer culture". The following chapter focuses on how the movement builds itself not only around mobilization and demands, but also on the lifestyle adopted by its participants. As well as promoting tiny house living, these people also experience it and the movement can thus be characterized as a "lifestyle movement". The last chapter rightly questions what the glorification of living with fewer material resources might mean for people on lower incomes and also the accessibility (or affordability) of this experience. Indeed, the movement could contribute to the stigmatization of low-income households who are forced to live on very little but do not have sufficient financial resources to choose this "lifestyle". Here, the author cautions that if the movement wants its ideas to have an impact on society as a whole, it must develop a reflection on how these ideas can be shared by those who would benefit most from the transformations it proposes: people living in poverty or on low incomes.

We could add another, more theoretical, critique to those outlined in the book. Although the author mentions that the tiny house movement constitutes a "lifestyle movement" that challenges predominant cultural norms and promotes an alternative way of life, it is not linked to a broader discussion about how social movement scholars can benefit from the experience of this movement. Moreover, to say that these movements are all about lifestyle contradicts some of the author's appraisal of housing as a complex and multifaceted subject with its micro-, meso- and macro-sociological dimensions. Once again,

if one of the contributions of the movement is to link collective action to consumption of a commodity such as housing, which is so important to how cities are built and experienced, then perceiving it as an urban social movement using Manuel Castells' view in *The City in the Grassroots* (1983) might enrich the analysis. Certainly, as demonstrated in the book, housing is not just a personal expense; it has consequences for how social life is organized, and in this case links the protest about collective consumption (however small-scale and personal it might be for some) with struggles around community culture and political self-determination.

Thus, here lies the most powerful contribution of the book: to remind us of the importance of housing in our personal lives, but also in the structure of capitalism and the financialization of the economy. Housing is what French anthropologist Marcel Mauss would call a "total social fact" because it is at the center of our personal, political, social, financial and spatial life. Therefore, the usefulness of housing to social sciences as a hub of many social dimensions should be remembered and illustrated to understand how it is a basis for oppression and liberation (Marcuse, 1987). Furthermore, as the author notes, housing represents a social science subject allowing for the sociological imagination proposed by C. Wright Mills. Indeed, Harris rightly takes "something as personal as where we live and [gets] us to think about the historical, economic, political, social and cultural dimensions that come to shape our individual decisions and desires" (p. 66).

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