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London's Housing Crisis and its Activisms

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Introduction

'London, buffeted by economic catastrophe, vastly reconfigured by a sporting jamboree of militarised corporate banality, jostling with social unrest, still reeling from riots. Apocalypse is less a cliché than a truism. This place is pre-something'. China Mieville, *London's Overthrow* (2012, 14).

This Special Feature on 'London's Housing Crisis and its Activisms' is based on commissioned papers from both academics and housing activists, and it also includes a visual essay, bringing together text, images and artworks. One can argue that it is activists, rather than academics or housing organisations, who have brought this crisis to public prominence. The latter two groups have been lamenting the distinctive and extreme nature of London's housing problems for many years with little obvious impact. In 2004, Shelter launched a national investigation into the housing crisis in which it highlighted the plight of one million children living in various forms of bad housing. The relevant Shelter report, authored by one of us, was explicit on where the problem and solution lay: 'the acute shortage of […] social rented housing is at the root of the housing crisis […] almost everyone now agrees that we need to build more social housing' (Minton 2005, 6). Going farther back, Brownill and Sharp (1992, 23) provided a forensic dissection of London's late 80s/early 90s' housing crisis (street homelessness, lack of social rental provision, private rental expense and insecurity) and concluded: 'this situation can only get worse until radical reforms are implemented'.

As this Special Feature details, the situation did get worse, much worse. This was not, however, because radical reforms were not implemented. They were, but not in the way that Brownill and Sharp advocated. London's housing has been subject to prolonged neoliberal reforms under the twin lodestars of 'privatisation' by Conservative and Coalition governments and 'modernisation' by New Labour (Hodkinson et al., 2013; Hodkinson and Robbins 2013). Such policy reforms are of course nation-wide, although they have had particularly pernicious effects in London, not least because of its premier role within financialised global capitalism, as the papers in the Special Feature by Edwards, Glucksberg, and Beswick and colleagues testify. A recent Google search of 'London housing crisis' produced over 75,000 webpages, while a slew of academic publications and policy reports outline various aspects of the crisis and suggest a range of solutions (see *inter alia* Bowie, 2010; Ambrose and Jenkins 2011; Dorling 2014; Lyons 2014; Edwards 2015; Shelter 2015). But London by no means monopolises the UK housing crisis, even if it takes particular intensities in the capital (Dorling 2014; Edwards 2015).

Several papers in the Special Feature query what the nature of London's housing crisis actually is and '*who* it is a crisis for'? What kind of answers can we identify? Those who *do not* experience housing-as-crisis are those replete with economic capital, especially the super-rich and overseas investors, but also including buy-to-let landlords (Leyshon and French 2009) and London's home-owning, mortgage-free upper-middle class (Savage 2015) both of whom possess substantial residential property assets. The notion of a housing crisis will also be unfamiliar to most of those whose businesses are involved in the building, sale or rent of residential property, including those engaged in 'regeneration' schemes –

developers, builders, estate agents, lawyers, surveyors, consultants, etc. And neither will those who are engaged in the financialisation of housing – the 'too big to fail' banks for example – be feeling much of a housing crisis.

So who *does* experience London's housing crisis? More or less all other Londoners, albeit with varying degrees of severity ranging from the mild (over-indebted 'mortgage slaves'), through the moderate (young professionals and students experiencing multiple private sector rent hikes and evictions), to the severe (those living in damp, overcrowded flats or in temporary accommodation), and ending at life-threatening (the street homeless). The severity of housing crisis impacts are determined by where one stands in relation to hierarchical configurations of class, 'race' and to an extent gender, with generation also playing some role. Those media commentators who emphasise the latter tend to focus on the notion of a 'housing ladder' – and who can step onto it and who cannot – a predominantly middle-class concern (Allen 2008) especially in London. On the other hand, London's struggling multi-ethnic, working classes have been lingering in the Godot-esque queue for social housing for many years with limited mainstream media attention; the numbers on London's local authority waiting lists went up by over 80% from 1997-2006 to 331,000 or 10% of all households (Watt 2009a, 223). It is also the *children* of the city's multi-ethnic working classes who are the most likely to wind up homeless and in temporary accommodation (Kennelly and Watt 2012).

The role played by the mainstream media is crucial in relation to how the crisis is framed or even whether it's framed at all. It is pertinent to contrast the current media treatment of council estate residents and their homeless relatives (McKenzie 2015) with how

homelessness was mediatised in the 1960s (Gilligan 2012) when public awareness of homelessness shot to prominence with the airing of the seminal BBC film *Cathy Come Home* (Dir. Ken Loach, 1966) and subsequent efforts exerted by Shelter (born out of the concern over the film) and a raft of campaigns and organisations to highlight London's housing problems (Crowson 2012). Cathy's contemporary equivalents are more likely to appear as welfare wasters in today's so-called 'reality TV' rather than as part of credible docu-dramas of the *Cathy Come Home* type (Gilligan 2012).

Housing 'crisis' or 'business-as-usual'?

Some prominent voices in the mainstream media question whether there is even a housing crisis at all. For example, Simon Jenkins (2015), the columnist, asks 'what housing crisis?' From an activist perspective, Simon Elmer and Geraldine Dening in this Special Feature also query the notion of a housing crisis by pointing out how one of its key elements – the wholesale demolition of council-built estates – is being *actively produced* out of the synergy between neoliberal politics and international finance capital. Not so much housing 'crisis' as housing 'business as usual'. This confluence – between housing-business-as-usual and housing-crisis – exemplifies the way that neoliberalisation and financialisation processes have become normalised ('the only way is up the housing ladder') whilst at the same time they accelerate and reconfigure patterns of socio-spatial insecurity and inequality. Such insecurity and inequality is intensified under what Jamie Peck (2012) has identified as 'austerity urbanism' in US cities. Austerity urbanism is now coming to UK cities, and especially to its working-class areas, with a vengeance (McKenzie 2015).

London's housing problems are deeply rooted in the city's unique position within the UK and global economies, combined with its status as a massively *unequal city* (Hamnett 2003; Davidson and Wyly 2012; Hamnett and Butler 2013; Dorling, 2014; Savage et al. 2015). This inequality and its resultant social tensions were prominent when Victorian London was the centre of the British Empire and they are prominent again today with the city one of the epicentres of financialised capitalism. In 19th century London, workers and their families squeezed themselves into slum rental housing, preferably with as many wages coming into the household as possible. They paid a heavy price in doing so, in terms of exorbitant rents, damp, insanitary conditions and premature death (Porter 1994). In 21st century Victorian London redux, this is also the tactic of last resort that many households employ today as seen in multi-occupancy, 'Third World' conditions with people crammed into as many as ten rented bed spaces in one room, and 'beds-in-sheds' (Minton 2012; Dorling, 2014). Despite the flowering of late-Victorian philanthropy in the shape of Peabody housing and its ilk, major progress in solving London's 19th century housing question did not really occur until the early 20th century, largely through the building of 'council housing' by the local state (Porter 1994), aided and abetted by progressive voluntary associations such as the St. Pancras House Improvement Society (Campkin 2013).

Speculative investment and social insecurity

So what is it that is unique about the present? While the contradictions underpinning urban housing provision under capitalist relations of production have been well-known since

Engels published *The Housing Question* in 1872 (Engels 1988), they have magnified under neoliberal financialised capitalism. London's contemporary housing crisis centres upon the transformation of the city's real estate market into a hub for footloose global capital in search of risk-free investments and high returns in uncertain times (Heywood 2012; Dorling 2014). The city's increasingly precarious service-sector workforce, on the other hand, is faced by a long-term shortage of genuinely affordable housing, notably social rental housing (Ambrose and Jenkins 2011; London Tenants Federation 2012; Bernstock 2014). 21st century London is thus experiencing a particularly vicious intertwining between housing as speculative rent-seeking investment vehicle and housing as an agent of social *in*security.

In his paper, Michael Edwards examines the overarching role played by financialisation in British economic and social life, with a focus on housing and property, where heavy flows of credit inflate prices. At the same time, local government has been pressurised to look at housing assets and the allocation of tenancies primarily as a way of securing finance. While this financialisation has presided over huge profitability, it has also coincided with a long period of falling wages which, as Edwards notes, is a very significant but under-reported aspect of the housing crisis.

London of course is the epicentre of speculative investment in UK housing with residential property being snapped up by overseas' investors and UK buy-to-let landlords (Dorling 2014). Luna Glucksberg's paper explores the former looking at the impact of the 'super prime' market, and the role of super-rich 'alpha elites' in London, a relatively closed group in terms of academic research. Her paper emphasises that UK governments' treatment of these 'Ultra High Net Worth Individuals' contrasts sharply with other parts of the world

which also attract wealthy overseas' investors, like Hong Kong and Switzerland, but which have tighter legislation to guard against the excesses of such investment. The impact of the alpha elites is not just limited to the super prime market, since one of Glucksberg's key findings is that the super-rich are now 'displacing' London's old elites[i], who in turn are purchasing properties further out for their children, causing displacement and gentrification ripples in outlying areas.

If overseas' residential investment in the UK housing market is heavily monopolised by London, buy-to-let [BTL] investment is nation-wide. Nevertheless London *dominates* the BTL market, accounting for 24% of the England total compared to 13% of the owner-occupied mortgage market (CML 2015), while BTL accounts for nearly half of all new-build properties in London (Molior 2014). The BTL market collapsed most in the crash, but has recovered more strongly since (CML 2015). If rentier investment in London residential property has been buoyant since the 2008 crash, the same cannot be said about owner-occupation. This has contracted, partly as a result of a shortage of mortgage credit for first-time buyers but also because of the post-crash spike in London property prices (see Edwards). Shelter (2015) recently found that just 43 advertised properties were suitable for median-wage families in London. By 2011, the number of owner-occupied London households was less than 50%, down to percentage levels last seen in 1981, as in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Housing tenure in London for households, 1961-2011

Tenure	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Rented from Local Authority %	18.2	24.9	30.7	23.3	17.1	13.5
Rented from Local Authority N	484,992	659,020	769,996	644,510	516,242	439,727
Rented from Housing Association %	-	-	4.1	5.6	9.1	10.6
Rented from Housing Association N	-	-	102,430	154,657	274,129	346,266
Social Rented %	18.2	24.9	34.8	28.9	26.2	24.1
Social Rented N	484,992	659,020	872,426	799,167	790,371	785,993
Rented Privately %	42.4	34.1	15.1	12.2	14.3	25.1
Rented Privately N	1,128,090	904,219	378,860	337,911	432,482	819,085
Owner occupied %	36.3	40.4	48.6	57.2	56.5	49.5
Owner occupied N	964,934	1,069,465	1,217,559	1,579,177	1,704,719	1,618,315
Other %	3.0	0.6	1.5	1.6	2.9	1.3
Other N	80,150	17,120	36,429	44,874	88,425	42,780
Total N	2,658,166	2,649,825	2,505,274	2,761,129	3,015,997	3,266,173

Source: Census

Note: Social Rented is Local Authority (aka council or public) and Housing Association combined

If homeownership is increasingly becoming an investment vehicle rather than what – post-crash – looks like 'old-style' owner-occupation (Sprigings 2013), this is having profound knock-on effects in the private rental sector (PRS). The PRS in London is notoriously expensive and insecure (Dorling 2014), and unlike other global cities, such as Berlin or New York City (Bernt 2012; Scanlon 2015), is largely deregulated. This deregulation occurred as a result of Conservative government legislation, notably the Housing Act 1988, which created Assured Shorthold Tenancies, and the Housing Act 1996 which standardised such tenancies (Lowe 2004). BTL was itself facilitated by the introduction of Assured Shorthold Tenancies, although it did not actually take off until the introduction of BTL mortgage products in 1996

(Leyshon and French 2009). BTL mortgages represent less risk for lenders compared to owner-occupier mortgages – it is precisely *because* private tenants have so few tenancy safeguards that BTL is such an attractive proposition for mortgage lenders who are more likely to be able to recoup their money from BTL landlords than owner-occupiers since the former have so few restrictions on the rent hikes they can implement or their capacity to evict lower-rent paying tenants.[ii]

Table 1 above shows there has been a dramatic growth in both absolute and relative terms of the PRS in the 2001-11 inter-Censal period – that period which has also seen the overseas' and BTL investment explosion in London. By 2011, for the first time since 1971, more London households were living in the PRS (25%) compared to social renting (24%); Shelter has estimated that the PRS will grow to 41% by 2025 (cited in London Assembly Housing and Regeneration Committee 2013, 13). This rapidly expanding PRS could well see greater involvement by 'Global Corporate Landlords' (GCLs) as suggested by Beswick and colleagues in their Special Feature paper. This paper shows how GCLs are playing a growing role in 'distressed' housing markets in the US, Spain, Ireland and Greece, and have already featured in London, for example in relation to the New Era estate in Hoxton, which we return to below.

One important ongoing aspect of this marketisation shift is the role played by ex-council properties which were sold under Right-to-Buy [RTB] policy in the 1980 Housing Act. The RTB is often regarded as Thatcherism's seminal social policy since it supposedly expanded the 'property owning democracy' in the UK (Jones and Murie 2006). At the same time, the RTB is also the epitome of 'roll back neoliberalism' since the Thatcherite state did not simply

'leave well alone', as in classical 19th century laissez-faire capitalism, but *engineered* private property and market creation by simultaneously increasing council rents and offering large discounts for sitting-tenant purchasers (Harvey 2005; Jones and Murie 2006; Hodkinson et al. 2013).

New Labour broadly continued the previous Conservative emphasis on home ownership as representing an almost quasi-natural tenure of 'choice' and 'aspiration' and as such it continued to support the principle of RTB, even if it reduced the maximum discounts available for tenants (Jones and Murie 2006). From 1998-99 to 2009-10, nearly 85,000 council homes were sold in London (DCLG 2015a). The RTB was certainly a major factor behind the shrinking of local authority stock in London from 1981 onwards, as seen in Table 1. This shrinkage was mirrored by an initial rise in owner occupation. However, the RTB in London swiftly morphed from a property owning democracy into what we are calling here a *private landlord owning plutocracy* as increasing numbers of ex-RTB properties were bought up by absentee landlords (including BTL). A GMB report (2013) on the south London borough of Wandsworth found that nearly 40% (6,180) out of 15,874 RTB leasehold dwellings in council blocks were owned by private landlords with one landlord owning 93 properties. London-wide research by Copley (2014) for the Greater London Assembly has revealed that at least 36% of ex-council homes in London are now let by private landlords. As Copley argues, this transfer also inflates the size of the Housing Benefit bill given the large disparity between private and social rents in London.

As London's PRS has grown and its investment potential has increased, so it has become even more insecure since exploitative landlord and lettings agent practices are 'getting

worse in London' (Copley 2014, 5). Copley cites data from Shelter that the number of complaints made by PRS tenants has increased by 47% in the last five years, whilst Citizens Advice in London dealt with 18,539 PRS enquiries in the year to April 2012 regarding issues such as disrepair, possession actions, harassment, problems with letting agents and deposits.

Social renting and the rise and fall of public housing

For the last three and a half decades, social rental housing in the UK has been in long-term decline, propelled by waves of 'roll back' Thatcherite and 'roll out' New Labour neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002; Hodkinson et al. 2013), and the 'return of class war Conservatism' (Hodkinson and Robbins 2013) under recent Coalition and Conservative governments. As we write, this neoliberalisation process is reaching some kind of peak/nadir as a result of the Housing and Planning Bill 2015-16 which is working its way through Parliament and is predicted will effectively mean 'the end of council housing' as we know it (Harris 2015).

London had a massive and growing public housing sector up until the 1980s, courtesy of the London County Council [LCC] (1889-1965) and later the Greater London Council (1965-86), coupled with the borough councils (Porter 1994; Watt 2009a). During the 1946-61 period, nine-tenths of all London's post-war housing was provided by local authorities (146,545) and over half of this by the Labour-controlled LCC alone (LCC 1965, 99). From the 1960s-80s, the borough councils embarked on further massive housebuilding programmes coupled in

some boroughs, such as Camden and Islington, with the municipalisation of PRS dwellings (Watt 2009a). As a result of these building and municipalisation programmes, the numbers living in local authority flats and houses increased by nearly 60% from 1961-81 to 31% of all London households (Table 1). In Inner London this figure was 43% and was at unprecedented levels in long-term Labour boroughs such as Tower Hamlets (82%) and Southwark (65%). Despite the massive reduction in the size of London's council housing stock since 1981, nearly 440,000 London households (13.5%) remained council tenants in 2011, while many others reside on council-built estates as either homeowners or private tenants.

The huge scale of council (public) housing in London compared to many Western cities challenges the notion that it shares an *equivalent* 'excluded/residual' character to that of the US public housing 'projects', as for example seen in Power's (2000, 17) comments on council housing suffering from 'ghettoisation'. It is certainly the case that London's council estates do house some of the most deprived sections of the city's population. However a spatial concentration of poverty and deprivation does *not equate* to ghettoisation, as Wacquant (2008) has argued. Unlike the US projects, which largely cater for a poor, deeply marginalised African-American population (ibid.), London's council estates have for several decades housed a multi-ethnic population many of whom do paid work, even if that work is increasingly insecure and often low-paid in nature (Smith 2005; Gunter and Watt 2009).

There has been a massive contraction in public housing since 1981 combined with an overall reduction in social housing provision. As seen above, the RTB ate into the size of the council stock, while building of new homes by local authorities declined markedly during the 1980s

as a result of central government withdrawal of funding. If local authority housing has contracted, housing association properties have expanded, partly as a result of the 'stock transfer' of homes from the former to the latter, dependent upon a majority of council tenants voting for transfer in a ballot. Stock transfer was introduced under the Conservative's Housing Act 1988 which facilitated demunicipalisation by reducing the housing powers and responsibilities of elected public local authorities (Pawson and Mullins 2010).

Following its return to government as the rebranded 'New Labour' in 1997, Labour's approach towards council housing followed the Conservative's enthusiasm for privatisation and demunicipalisation, albeit under the guise of 'modernisation' (Pawson and Mullins 2010). Council housing was considered irredeemably 'Old Labour' and hence unworthy of fiscal or political support, unlike the NHS or public education (Ginsberg 2005). Not only did New Labour retain the RTB, as discussed above, but its modernisation agenda aimed to 'support the transfer of up to 200,000 homes each year from local authorities to registered social landlords [housing associations], where proposals are supported by tenants' (DETR 2000, 11). Whilst housing campaigns, notably Defend Council Housing, alongside trades unions and elements within the Labour Party, regarded stock transfer as privatising public housing (Ginsburg 2005; HOCCHG 2009), New Labour insisted it was merely modernisation. Stock transfer became the main New Labour vehicle ('option') for implementing its Decent Homes programme, which set out statutory policies and investment paths to ensure that by 2010 all social tenants (local authority and housing association) in England should live in a 'decent home' that met minimum standards. The other two 'options' councils had for meeting Decent Homes' targets were the Private Finance Initiative and Arm's Length

Management Organisation. Decent Homes was in reality classic 'roll out' neoliberalism in that it ensured marketisation either directly or indirectly (Ginsberg 2005; Hodkinson et al. 2013) by ruling out direct public investment by councils in their stock, i.e. the 'fourth option' (HOCCHG 2009).

Stock transfer was rolled out – and resisted – in large Labour cities such as Glasgow, Birmingham and London (Daly et al. 2005; Watt 2009a). Cash-strapped London Labour councils with large un-decent housing stocks, such as Tower Hamlets and Lambeth, found themselves trapped between a Labour Government antithetical to council housing provision and a disinvested housing stock in need of repairs (Watt 2009b). Many councils opted for stock transfers in order to lever in the necessary funding from central government, so that over 55,000 homes were transferred in 15 boroughs from 1998-2007 (Watt 2009a, 219-220). London's council tenants were, however, far more attuned to the importance of maintaining and enhancing council housing, as seen in the large minority (one third) of 'no votes' against transfers in the capital. Even though funds were invested in the *existing* council stock via stock transfer (Pawson and Mullins 2010), the extensive, lengthy and heavily contested transfer programme merely shuffled renters from one tenancy ('secure') onto another ('assured' – less secure and more expensive) without substantially *adding* to the total supply of social rental homes.

Despite housing associations' political valorisation under both Conservative and Labour governments as constituting the main providers of social rental housing, they have *never* come close to making up for the shortfall in municipal provision in London or indeed the rest of the UK (Watt 2009a; Bowie 2010; Lyons 2014). As Table 1 shows, the combined local

authority and housing association tenures accommodated over 872,000 households in 1981, nearly 35% of London's total; by 2011 this had shrunk by 85,000 to stand at 24% of the total. At the same time, the complex post-transfer governance and financial arrangements on transferred estates have directly and indirectly contributed to gentrification and displacement processes (Watt 2009b).

During the New Labour period, 1997/98-2009/10, a derisory 340 new council homes were built in London (DCLG 2015b). Unsurprisingly the numbers on local authority waiting lists in London went up from just over 181,000 in 1997 to nearly 345,000 in 2010, before peaking at over 380,000 in 2012 (DCLG 2015c). Since then the numbers have gone down to nearly 256,000 in 2014. However this decline does not reflect some underlying improvement in Londoners' housing circumstances, but instead has resulted from the changes to waiting lists introduced in the Localism Act 2011 which changed the rules on who has access to social housing whereby local authorities were expected to prioritise certain groups, notably those in paid employment (Hodkinson and Robbins 2013; Somerville 2016). According to Inside Housing (2014), nearly 51,000 applicants in just seven London boroughs were struck off waiting lists or told they were ineligible.

The overall size and trajectory of the social rental sector is crucial for understanding gentrification in a city like London. Unlike other global cities which are subject to intense gentrification pressures, such as New York City and Berlin, London has a highly deregulated PRS. The existence and functioning of rent controls means that gentrification can be stalled and muted (Newman and Wyly 2006); their weakening can accelerate gentrification as in the case of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin (Bernt 2012). But in a city with very limited PRS

controls, such as London, the only de facto *buffer* against gentrification is social rental (especially council) housing, as Watt (2009b, 2013) has argued. Thus the post-1981 reversal of London's rental structure from social renting back towards the PRS (Table 1) is a major trend which facilitates and encourages gentrification. So does the process referred to by politicians, developers and PR companies as 'regeneration', which we now discuss.

Social cleansing: regeneration, state-led gentrification and austerity urbanism

London's ongoing gentrification is a complex multifaceted set of processes involving uneven combinations of structural socioeconomic and cultural trends (Hamnett 2003; Gonzalez and Dawson 2015), as in the recent Hipster phenomenon (Wessendorf 2014). Our argument here is two-fold. Firstly, London's housing tenure trajectories discussed above – notably the shift from social to private renting – are highly significant for understanding how and why gentrification is occurring at the metropolitan level. Secondly, urban policy, including stock transfer and the wholesale demolition and redevelopment of council estates, has and is contributing towards processes of 'state-led gentrification' in specific neighbourhoods (Watt 2009b, 2013).

Indeed, a key manifestation of the housing crisis is that ordinary Londoners' 'right to the city' – their capacity to remain in the city and especially in gentrifying areas with rapidly rising rents, house prices and land values – is being eroded. As Simon Elmer and Geraldine Dening argue in their 'London clearances' paper, the demolition of London's council-built estates is being trumpeted by senior Conservative and Labour politicians, and some Labour

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as well as Conservative Councils, as being an important weapon in *combatting* the housing crisis via its capacity to provide new homes through densification (Adonis and Davies 2015).

If elements of the political elite, coupled with regeneration and real estate professionals, regard the bulldozing of social housing estates as wholly beneficial, this same phenomenon has caused both outrage and opposition among estate residents and housing campaigners who have dubbed it 'social cleansing', much to the annoyance of the landlords concerned (McCabe and Duxbury 2015). Is the regeneration of social housing estates 'social cleansing' as activists proclaim? Whilst the *motives* of individual local councillors and housing professionals engaged in regeneration may not be accurately encompassed by such a wilful Machiavellian notion as 'social cleansing', the over-arching policy frameworks and initiatives in relation to social housing provision and regeneration under both Conservative and New labour governments have *de facto* contributed towards processes of state-led gentrification (Watt 2009b, 2013) and accumulation by dispossession (Hodkinson and Essen 2015). These processes incorporate expulsionary displacement effects, as the Special Feature paper by Jerry Flynn, a member of the 35percent campaign, demonstrates. 'Resisting state-led gentrification' or 'halting accumulation by dispossession' are not, however, stirring rallying cries. It's therefore unsurprising that activists have focused on 'resisting social cleansing' (McCabe and Duxbury 2015), as the paper by Watt on Focus E15 in the Special Feature illustrates.

Social cleansing as allied to regeneration is symbolised by the demolition of the Heygate estate in Southwark, one of the two large modernist estates at the heart of the Elephant and Castle regeneration, the other being the Aylesbury (Campkin 2013). Jerry Flynn

demonstrates how the 'regeneration' – demolition – of the Heygate was heavily steered by the Australian company Lend Lease, 'an international leader in property and infrastructure' (Lend Lease website). The Heygate demolition has resulted in minimal social rental provision coupled with plentiful new luxury apartments, while the majority of the previous estate population are unaccounted for or have been displaced from the immediate area. As Flynn's Figure 2 demonstrates, leaseholders (who bought under the RTB or the market) in particular were scattered over a wide area due to their financial recompense being insufficient to enable them to buy in the same London area. This demonstrates the conditionality underpinning the RTB's entrée into the property owning democracy; only until a higher land value usage appears (Watt 2013). The outcome of the Heygate demolition will not simply transform the Elephant and Castle into another over-priced, bland uber-gentrified enclave, but also contribute towards the privatisation and corporatisation of the city (Minton, 2012), a point we return to in the conclusion.

If the Heygate redevelopment symbolises all that's gone wrong with regeneration at London's council-built estates, it is far from unique. A London Assembly Housing Committee (2015) report was critical of many aspects of regeneration, especially regarding how the 50 estates that have undergone regeneration from 2004-14 witnessed a *net loss* of around 8,300 social rental homes, while the total number of homes almost doubled to nearly 68,000 largely due to a massive increase in market provision. In 2014 a London cartographer identified 75 social housing estates going through some form of regeneration (Duvillier, 2014). More recent analysis by Watt (2015) estimates that since 2000 over 100 council-built estates have been (or are going through or are likely to go through) either full or partial

demolition as a result of renewal policies. And as Elmer and Dening highlight, such numbers could well be dwarfed if the political elite get their way (*The Sunday Times* 2016).

As 'austerity urbanism' comes to town throughout the UK (McKenzie 2015), London's social cleansing is also linked to welfare cutbacks and restructuring. London councils have been busy removing the 'undeserving poor' from their areas as a result of cuts to local housing allowance in the PRS (Powell 2015), the housing benefit cap, introduction of the bedroom tax and changes to housing allocations (Hodkinson and Robbins 2013). London councils are exporting their homeless families into temporary accommodation in cheaper areas either within or outside London. In July-September 2015, one third (17,120) of London's 50,490 households living in temporary accommodation were located in another local authority (DCLG 2015d).

Democratic failure: information underload, mainstream media, lobbyists and PR

Flynn's paper on the Viability Assessment at the Heygate estate provides a remarkable insight into the process of deciding how much affordable housing – *how little* would be more accurate – a developer should provide. Based on years of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, campaigners have revealed a process which almost amounts to false accounting, while not falling outside the scope of the law. The highlighting of what Flynn describes as 'becoming a disreputable part of the planning process' has had an impact and is now recognised as a contentious issue with several London councils taking it more seriously, which shows that forensic investigation by committed campaigners can yield results.

This issue of process not actually falling outside the law, but not acting within the spirit of it either, can also feature in the way local authorities spearheading estate regeneration schemes consult with residents and manage their media operations. It is the same with other contentious development proposals, from fracking to plans for HS2, the High Speed Rail Link. This democratic deficit has long been apparent, for example in stock transfer ballots (HOCCHG 2009), forced evictions resulting from New Labour's Housing Market Renewal programme (Minton 2012), and the Scottish Government's handling of planning permission for Donald Trump's golf course in Aberdeenshire (Minton 2013). The difference is that today this failure of democratic representation for local communities is becoming standard practice in many parts of the UK.

A Spinwatch report included the following comments by a planning academic who attended a closed presentation given by lobbying company Westbourne:

> This is a debate which is tricky and nuanced. But this wasn't open at all, it was very coldly targeted and very strategic in the way that images were put forward. That's the way PR works but it was so calculating. I came away thinking this has implications for the way democratic debate develops in this country, particularly the element about 'scaring the living daylights out of people'. (Minton 2013, 4)

During the presentation, the academic heard a no-holds-barred account of the tactics used by the lobby company to counter local opposition to contentious development. These tactics included the admission that 'we shit them up' in order 'to scare the living daylights

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out of people' (Observer 2013). Westbourne, like most lobbyists, work with a range of clients. This presentation was about HS2, the campaign for high speed rail, but the tactics are instructive for shedding light on how campaigns which seek to crush local opinion operate in places around the UK.

During the closed seminar, Westbourne's lobbyist explained that the technique they used was to create compelling stories designed to change the parameters of the debate. In this particular instance, the framework they set was about pitting wealthy people in the Chilterns – 'posh NIMBYS' worried about their hunting rights, against working-class people in the north. According to Minton (2013, 4), the strategy was 'posh people standing in the way of working class people getting jobs'. Posters for the campaign asked people to choose between 'their lawns or our jobs'. This manipulation of 'class conflict' has echoes in the way that some local authorities are framing differences of opinion between so-called 'middle-class leaseholders' and 'working-class tenants' on estates like Cressingham Gardens, which we discuss below.

These are not isolated incidents. In a House of Commons debate on lobbying, Labour MP Thomas Docherty, a former lobbyist, shared with Parliament some of the techniques of his former colleagues, recounting stories of lobbyists being planted in public meetings to heckle those who oppose his clients' schemes. His stories chime with a wealth of anecdotal evidence of dirty tricks which include fake letter writing campaigns and even actors attending planning meetings. Docherty described the behaviour as 'utterly unacceptable', although 'not a crime' (Minton 2013, 6).

This behaviour goes hand in hand with a media in which standards of journalistic scrutiny have collapsed as resources and jobs have leached out the newspaper industry and ownership of local newspapers is concentrated in the hands of very few, often US, owners, with a handful of corporations owning the majority of local papers. As journalists' jobs were cut, the role PR and lobbying plays in every journalist's life, whether in the local or national media, grew exponentially, partly because of the huge resources ploughed into PR by corporations and partly because the cuts meant journalists no longer had the time to research stories properly. According to the Public Relations Consultants Association, Britain now has about 60,000 press officers, compared to 10,000 journalists working on local and regional papers (Davies 2008) and the results are abundantly clear to see in terms of the media's stance on contentious development decisions. As for London's own newspaper, the *Evening Standard*, its 'Homes and Property' section is little more than 'advertorial' for pages and pages of property listings and has long been a cheerleader for the turbo-charged development of the city.

In examining failures in democratic representation, it is also relevant to look at the professional background of elected members themselves. According to Minton (2013), in 2013 just under 20% of Southwark's 63 councillors worked as lobbyists, while the former leader of the council, Jeremy Fraser, went on to found lobbying firm Four Communications, where he was joined by former councillor and cabinet member for regeneration Steve Lancashire. Equally concerning is the 'revolving door' between council employees and elected members and developers. For example, Tom Branton was Southwark Council's project manager for the Elephant & Castle Regeneration Project until 2011, when he left the Council to work for Lend Lease, the lead developer on the project (Minton 2013).

The stigmatisation of council housing, largely by external actors (including the mainstream media) rather than by residents themselves (Hastings 2004), has played a key role in policy justifications for demolition including at the so-called 'sink' Heygate and Aylesbury estates in Southwark (Campkin 2013). The same stigmatising trope was recently used by Prime Minister David Cameron to justify demolishing 100 of the UK's 'worst sink estates' (*The Sunday Times* 2016). Despite the attachment of many residents to the Heygate, the PR narrative promoted by Southwark Council and Lend Lease saw the BBC (2011) greet news of its demolition with the headline, '"Muggers paradise" the Heygate Estate is demolished'.

It has been much more difficult, however, to promote this line on the Cressingham Gardens estate, which looks onto Brockwell Park in south London's Lambeth. Lambeth is another Labour council vehemently pursuing estate regeneration, with plans to 'redevelop' six estates which are likely to entail either full or partial demolition (Lambeth Council 2016). As the Special Feature paper by Pam Douglas and Joanne Parkes from the campaign group 'Save Cressingham Gardens' outlines, Lambeth Council put forward five options for consultation with residents on the future of the estate ranging from refurbishment, to partial demolition and full demolition and rebuilding. A three month consultation began in November 2014, groups were set up to consider the various options and a consultancy *Social Life*, which specialises in community participation in design, was appointed as part of Lambeth's commitment to being a 'Co-operative Council'. But before the groups had completed their reports, residents were informed that the refurbishment options would not be consulted on further, despite receiving enormous support from residents, the vast majority of whom opposed demolition. Social Life (2013) conducted a survey of residents

(nearly three quarters of respondents were tenants) which found that 81% wanted to remain on the estate with repairs done and that only 10% wished to leave.

Residents, architects and consultants appointed by the Council were left aghast at Lambeth's treatment both of residents and its 'co-operative' concept. Nicola Bacon from *Social Life* put it succinctly: 'We were supposed to be doing a co-production exercise which failed because the Council wouldn't do their side' (Minton 2016a). When the project started, she believes Social Life were appointed in good faith but 'then that didn't work because the council couldn't get the figures, the residents didn't trust the council and it appeared that all the residents' suspicions came true' (ibid.). The result of these competing pressures was a failure of democratic accountability and a breakdown in relations between residents and Lambeth Council, with members dismissing residents as 'activist NIMBYs'. The NIMBY line appears to feed into a class discourse promoted by the Council, which emulates Westbourne's PR campaign for high-speed rail, once again claiming that it is 'middle-class people' – in this case the leaseholders who own their own homes – who are standing in the way of redevelopment which they claim will benefit working-class tenants on the estate.

This paper and a number of others in this Special Feature describe the context within which the housing crisis operates, which in many areas amounts to a failing local democratic system. Now, as we prepare this Special Feature, there are mounting concerns that the Housing and Planning Bill 2015-16 is going to take democracy out of planning decisions affecting housing altogether. Commentators fear that the most radical measure is the introduction of automatic 'planning permission in principle' on sites allocated for development (*The Guardian* 2016). These sites will be listed on local authority registers of

brownfield sites, including housing estates, allowing councils to bypass the consultation process with residents living there (Minton 2016b). Planning academics describe the legislation as 'an attempt to destroy any form of democratic control of planning and land use' which is doomed to fail in its aim of building more homes as it is reliant on an 'entirely dysfunctional private house building industry' (ibid.).

Alongside this, Lord Adonis, the former Labour minister who has been instrumental in promoting estate demolition (Adonis and Davies 2015), has now been appointed by the Conservatives to head up Chancellor George Osborne's National Infrastructure Commission. This is the body which will ultimately be in charge of decisions over fracking, neatly linking housing and fracking which are both issues with the potential to witness two of the biggest abuses of democracy in the UK today. They are also two significant sources of strength for activists, and if the links could be made between what is happening in Lancashire and North Yorkshire with London's housing estates, then the potential for an effective political response would be greater. We now focus on the existing responses.

London's housing activisms

It has long been recognised that tenants and squatters have played key roles in urban social movements (Castells 1983). Moreover, such housing-based movements have been strengthening in societies with limited historical traditions of such forms of activism, for example in Poland (Polanska and Piotrowski 2015). One relevant question therefore is 'how far the new housing activism in London constitutes an urban social movement?' (or

movements?). The Special Feature contribution by Jacob Wills from the Radical Housing Network provides some useful pointers as to how this question might begin to be answered. He notes how private renters are becoming organised, and he also addresses the dilemmas confronting London's housing activists, including around the relationship between campaigns and political parties. The burgeoning *interconnections* between activists, which Wills highlights, also appear in a recent *Inside Housing* feature.

'The inexorable rise of housing activism in London has seen previously disparate interest groups co-ordinate and share resources. Social housing tenants facing the loss of their homes through regeneration projects have come together with private renters protesting sky-high rents; revolutionary communists joined forces with architects and planners; celebrities have joined with unions; and ordinary commuters have picked up banners to march alongside anarchists. Their common cause? The fight against the commodification of housing and the break-up of communities in London'. (McCabe and Duxbury 2015, 1).

This fight was highlighted by the well-attended London-wide housing demonstration which was held in January 2015. In addition to demonstrations, the current crop of housing activists employ a mix of practices, as this Special Feature illustrates including 'resistance by design' (ASH), the forensic dissection of planning documents and data (35percent), lobbying the council and pursuing a judicial review (Save Cressingham Gardens), plus facilitating cross-campaign and cross-tenure information, contacts, energies and actions (Radical Housing Network).

The social cleansing of estates – the London clearances (Elmer and Dening) – is one of the major issues which has galvanised the recent spate of London housing campaigns. As Duvillier (2014) shows, a plethora of campaigns have sprung up on such estates. Some of the best known include 'Save Cressingham Gardens' in Lambeth, 'Our West Hendon' in Barnet and 'Carpenters Against Regeneration Plans' (CARP) in Newham (Watt 2013). The bulldozing of estates has also prompted considerable political opposition, both from the Green Party and the left within the Labour Party, as well as from trade unions such as UNITE (2015).

The new housing campaigns employ a range of tactics, but direct action – be it squatting, blocking lorries at regeneration sites, or preventing evictions – can often feature. 'Eviction Resistance', for example, was set up in 2012 in response to growing numbers of people being evicted, made homeless and/or sent out of London – they describe themselves as:

> '… a small group of evicted people, activists and squatters working to support people in London to take direct action to stay in their homes. By sharing knowledge learned through our experiences, helping connect people with others in their community, holding workshops and creating publicity around evictions, we have successfully supported many to stay in their homes. For social tenants this can mean gaining crucial leverage to force councils to either let them stay or provide suitable alternative housing'.[iii]

Gaining media publicity has been important in several campaigns although, as mentioned above, the mainstream media has not given the issue the attention it warrants. Instead

activists are finding that social media is a highly effective tool; it played a key role in the success of the New Era estate campaign against Westbrook Partners, an 'archetypal' Global Corporate Landlord as discussed by Beswick and colleagues in the Special Feature. Social media has also featured strongly in the Focus E15 campaign (see Watt), as well as the 2015 occupations of the Sweets Way and Aylesbury estates. Furthermore when social media is twinned with celebrity, campaigns can achieve very prominent media coverage, as witnessed by the involvement of the comedian Russell Brand. With 11.4 million followers on Twitter, Brand has a vastly greater reach than most of the media and was able to boost the New Era, Sweets Way and Focus E15 campaigns. Building on a long tradition of 'socially engaged' art practice, artists are another group heavily involved in housing activism, not least because they are another low-earning group increasingly priced out of every part of the capital. The visual essay and text by Anna Minton, Michela Pace and Henrietta Williams included in the Special feature highlights a number of responses by artists and photographers.

One question which the recent *Inside Housing* special feature asks of London's contemporary upsurge of housing activism is whether it is 'a fleeting period of high-profile wins by a loud group of protestors, or is it the start of something much bigger?' (McCabe and Duxbury 2015, 20). Indeed McCabe and Duxbury's feature suggests that social housing landlords are genuinely concerned about this round of activism. Their response however, at least according to McCabe and Duxbury (2015), tends towards suggesting that the activists against estate regeneration/demolition are 'outside agitators' and as such are unrepresentative of estate residents. Similar accusations were levelled by Newham Council

at one of the most prominent London housing campaigns – Focus E15 – as Watt's paper in the Special Feature discusses.

This commonplace defensive trope about *any* political resistance ('they're all outside agitators') cannot account for the fact that many of the recent crop of housing activists in London are *not* the 'usual suspects', i.e. established leftists. Watt's ongoing research[iv] on regeneration and resistance at London's council estates notes how 'older' tenant-based campaigns, notably Defend Council Housing, have played a role in current anti-demolition campaigns in certain parts of London whilst, at the same time, many of the most ardent current campaigners are *estate residents* themselves who have had *no* previous interest in housing or urban policy. Not interested, that is, until they begin to experience the confusing presentations of ever-shifting plans; the loss of existing support networks and community facilities; years of noise, dust and disruption; and new unaffordable homes not for the 'likes of them'. Indeed residents living in London's so-called 'failed' but now 'renewing' estates enter an existential black-hole – what Andrew Wallace (2015) calls a 'limbo-land' – of endless insecurity, anxiety and frustration (Watt 2015). Many residents not only have to deal with this level of disruption to their everyday lives, but at the same time devote countless hours to attending meetings, door knocking and leafletting on their estates. That sometimes residents take heart, as well as assistance, from nomadic posses of squatters – as happened at the Aylesbury estate occupation in 2015 – is hardly surprising and also reflects the potential for co-operation between traditionally differentiated housing movements (Polanska and Piotrowski 2015).

Such co-operation in the face of accelerating housing commodification and breaking up of communities reflects on how many Londoners are rejecting the neoliberal subject position which is being imposed on them alongside its stark 'alternatives' – house *yourself* in the market ('get on the housing ladder') – or leave the city (social cleansing – 'if you cannot afford to live in London, then you cannot afford to live in London'; see Watt). Increasing numbers of Londoners are demanding some kind of *collective* response to their own manifest housing problems and the city's housing crisis.

It's instructive that 'social cleansing' rather than 'gentrification' is the discursive target of most activist ire in London. Indeed one can even query whether what is currently occurring in London is adequately captured by that very English, genteel-sounding phrase 'gentrification', coined by the sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) in the very different London of the early 1960s. Being either *for* or *against* gentrification almost inevitably tends to focus attention on 'identitarian' (Madhu 2012) sociological and political questions – prominently 'who are the gentrifiers?' and even the narcissistic 'am *I* a gentrifier?' (Schlichtman and Patch 2014). Such questions have emerged in relation to recent anti-gentrification protests in South and East London (Heartfield 2015; *Kuwait Times* 2015). However, as Watt suggests in his Special Feature paper on the Focus E15 campaign, an over-emphasis on identity can dilute the potential for new radical collectives to emerge amidst the encounters between the multiple singularities which swirl around the metropolis (Hardt and Negri 2009).

Conclusion

What fundamentally distinguished 20th century London from its Victorian forbear was an over-arching sense of *public state responsibility* as opposed to laissez-faire attitudes, policies and practices (Porter 1994). This was achieved, albeit imperfectly, by the efforts of London's metropolitan and borough councils to house their populations. Over 35 years of neoliberal 'reforms' have shredded the *capacity*, but perhaps more importantly the *willingness* of London's current local government bodies to properly accommodate Londoners (Bowie 2010). There is certainly no shortage of policy solutions on offer which could potentially be implemented, as Dorling (2014) and Edwards (2015) outline. Yet politicians have ignored the warning signs for far too long. Or rather, in too many cases they have been complicit in gearing housing production and distribution in London towards maximising real-estate exchange values at the expense of fulfilling use values and meeting housing needs.

Watt has recently suggested that London is experiencing "gentrification on steroids – the growing corporatization of retail space and housing" (cited in *Kuwait Times* 2015). It is this impersonal *corporatisation* which represents by far the greatest threat to London's remaining public/social housing, public space, independent retailers and traditional markets (Minton 2012; Gonzalez and Dawson 2015). This threat could well accelerate via the increased penetration of Global Corporate Landlords into the city, as Beswick and colleagues suggest in the final paper.

What is to be done? As Elmer and Dening say, the housing paradigm and the terms of reference need resetting. One way of doing this is to look outwards to the example of

housing activists in countries like Spain which found themselves on the frontline of the 2008 housing crisis and drew on the success of the Indignados to galvanise a political movement around housing. In 2015 Barcelona elected radical housing activist Ada Colau, while Podemos, the radical coalition of which she is a part, is poised to play a central role in Spain's national government. Should GCL's, such as Blackstone and Goldman Sachs which are active in Spain, enter the London market, as Beswick and colleagues suggest, then maybe London's activists would do well to look to the example of their Spanish counterparts. As China Mieville says, London is 'pre-something'. Whatever this 'something' might be, it's likely that housing will be part of it.

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Notes

[i]. Glucksberg raises the pertinent question whether this movement of wealthy households is really an equivalent 'displacement' to the forced movements of the poor and working classes out of gentrifying areas, especially given the massive power and resource imbalances between these groups. It certainly smacks of the co-optation of a 'victim status' on the part of otherwise extremely privileged and wealthy groups.

[ii]. Thanks to Pete Somerville for this point.

[iii]. Thanks to Lita Wallis and Eviction Resistance for supplying this quote;

evictionresistance.org.uk

[iv]. Paul Watt, *The Life and Death of London's Council Estates* – forthcoming monograph to be published by Policy Press (2017).