



## **Editorial: Interrogating structures, struggles and subjectivities of rent**

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Housing (in)security plays a key role in the economic, social and political experience of residents across different urban settings. Today, millions of people are pushed to dwell under insecure conditions due to a number of factors. These include the financialization of land and housing, the growth of informal housing markets in rapidly urbanizing cities, increased displacement and migration and the precarization of livelihoods. These factors, and more, directly impact housing systems and people's lives, with comparable housing struggles playing out differently in different national and local contexts. Some of these factors can be formally categorized under 'rent struggles', but many others cannot; in this light, being a tenant can be defined not just as a legal status, but as a condition shared by all who do not have control over their own homes.

In this second issue of the Radical Housing Journal, we have opened a translocal conversation to interrogate the notion of 'rent' in various contexts. The different contributions collectively serve to unpack both traditional and contemporary structures enabling multiple forms of rentiership, as well as strategies of resistance towards securing dignified housing. We have strived to encourage an intersectional approach to experiences, subjectivities and processes of politicization, exploring the ways in which different groups and geographies are facing housing vulnerability through rent relations, particularly experienced by growing urban communities, transitional dwellers and groups left behind by contemporary housing markets.

In political economy terms, the expansion and development of real estate and housing financialization has opened new avenues for rent extraction: many of the contributions discuss new forms of rent relations and private actors, alongside resistance and mobilizations. We also felt it was important, however, to question the short-term view of rent as a ‘new struggle’ and of tenants as the ‘new’ political subjectivity, to move towards a more longitudinal and comparative overview of subject positions in relation to rent, and longer term processes of accumulation and dispossession.

Furthermore, as observed by many contributors, ‘rent’ is not solely the name of an economic transaction, but a social relation. As such, it cannot be abstracted from emplaced social, cultural, political and material conditions. Interrogating ‘rent’ thus means engaging with a multiplicity of geographically-specific definitions. In our editorial practice, we tried to expand our imaginaries of rent and its struggles beyond Western and Euro-centric approaches. To this end we actively sought and encouraged contributions in different formats from activists and scholar-activists engaged in producing knowledge about conditions in less exposed countries and geographies, often in languages other than English. Supporting the development of a substantial number of contributions from non-English speaking regions of the world has been challenging, especially for contributors less familiar with academic writing. We feel, however, that the effort has been worthwhile, enriching the debate and furthering our attempts to decolonize knowledge around housing relations and struggles.

The articles in this issue each stand independently to provide theorization, contextualization and/or learnings based on geographically specific experiences. However, when considered collectively they offer insights beyond the capacity of a single article. We suggest that a cross-sectional reading of the content provokes conversation around four key themes interrogating the translocal and theoretical notion of ‘rent’. These are: the changing relations, actors, and structures of rent extraction; the subjects and identities of rental relations; tactics and strategies of rental struggles; and visions of alternative structures ‘beyond’ rent. The interaction of the different kinds of content welcomed by RHJ provides alternative lenses which enhance each of these conversations. *Long Reads* propose theoretical framings, approaches or conceptualizations of ‘rent’, often tested through empirical cases. *Retrospectives* focus on specific ‘rent’ movements and actions to sharing experiences and lessons, while *Conversations* bring together multiple voices to reflect on, compare and contrast multiple movements and actions. Finally, the briefer *Updates* included provide reviews of recent events and provocations.

### **Changing relations, actors and structures of rent extraction**

New forms of rent extractivism and rentier actors have emerged with the expansion of housing financialization and strategies for urban development. The establishment and rapid expansion of lucrative operations of transnational Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) is a shared concern across several countries. In Ontario, Canada, Emily Power and Bjarke Skærlund Risager’s *Retrospective* relays experiences of a recent struggle between the Hamilton

Tenants Solidarity Network (HTSN) and a financialized REIT landlord. Written from the perspective of residents and advocates on the ground, they share detailed and perceptive insights into collective organizing, as well as reflecting on failures and successes, which can support future actions and actors across jurisdictions.

In Ireland, REITs have also become a significant actor in the rapidly growing, unaffordable private rental sector. In his *Long Read* contribution, Mick Byrne offers a grounded and positioned analysis of the antagonistic relationship between wealth accumulation and social reproduction, and deploys this unique perspective to frame tenant organizing activities in the Irish rental sector. He proposes a political economy approach to understanding antagonisms in the landlord tenant relationship, which he terms the ‘residential rent relation’. Following its introduction and application here to a particular locale and action, Byrne’s conceptualization can provide insights for other markets and relations moving forward.

The introduction of low-income private rental housing through Private Public Partnerships (PPPs), in theory belonging to socially-oriented housing policies, has become a new frontier of dispossession, displacement and contestation in Brazil. Felipe Villela de Miranda, Raquel Rolnik, Renato Abramowicz Santos and Regina Dulce Lins uncover a critical example in their *Long Read* article ‘Permanent transitoriness and housing policies: inside São Paulo’s low-income private rental market’. Building upon Rolnik’s (2019) recent work on the notion of *permanent transitoriness*, this article presents new data and personal stories that shed light on the lives and struggles of residents of central São Paulo, and discusses how official programmes labelled as ‘social’ and ‘affordable housing’ are reproducing processes of displacement for tenants and squatters of buildings targeted for demolition.

Recent changes in rented housing policies, and the forms of resistance emerging from them, is also the theme of the article about tenant organizing in Sweden, an *Update* written as a conversation between Jennie Gustafsson, Allt åt alla Malmö, Elof Hellström, Åse Richard and Scott Springfieldt. Considered for a long time to be a haven for tenants’ rights, activists in the cities of Stockholm, Malmö and Uppsala reflect on recent campaigns against dynamics of privatization through tenure conversion, gentrification caused by new landlords and market actors in private rental housing, and local struggles over green space and displacement in the rental housing stock.

Finally, in light of the recent republication of the 1985 classic edited book titled *Land Rent, Housing and Urban Planning: A European Perspective*, we commissioned a review in the form of an *Update* from Callum Ward. The book emerged over thirty years ago to challenge the dominant structural approaches to rent, proposing instead a focus on the social relations of landownership and the centrality of class struggle in the rent relation. Despite the absence of an intersectional approach to rent, the book’s theoretical explorations point to what urban housing justice movements across the world know today: social struggle is fundamental to challenge the existence and distribution of rent and landlord-property-tenant relations.

## **Subjects and identities of rent relations**

The subject of rent struggles comes under scrutiny in multiple ways through the issue. While sometimes the political subject is the ‘renter’, other groups opt for organizing from, with and for ‘tenants’. Indeed, collectives like the Los Angeles Tenants’ Union defines a tenant as ‘anyone who doesn’t control their own housing’ (Rosenthal, 2019). In editing this issue, we invited contributors to explore the identities and subjectivities generated by dwelling under rent conditions, encouraging contributors to be attentive to the embodied dimensions of tenants’ struggles, whose position and possibilities of mobilization need to be explored and questioned beyond somewhat ‘unmarked’ subjects. We think such explorations are crucial to challenge the way in which many contemporary discourses around rent and the ‘housing crisis’ –especially in Western Europe– reduce complex questions of identity and subjectivity to a ‘generational issue’ that fails to include class relations and other intersecting vulnerabilities linked to gender, race, age and ablebodyness, just to mention a few (McKee, 2019).

Addressing these issues from the understanding that politics are performed and enacted by bodies in space, Caroline Genz’s *Update* ‘Housing the elderly: between crisis and resistance’ builds on an ethnography of tenants’ protests in Berlin, Germany, to query the body as a site of rent politics. In her thoughtful piece, she examines the intersection of gender and ageing in recent tenant-led struggles in Berlin, asking broader questions about the conditions of political engagement of elderly bodies in public spaces. In the contest for visibility of particular housing struggles, elderly women tenants fight back from a position of invisibility and immobility, developing new tactics and strategic alliances. Rent relations become political issues through and alongside wider social mobilizations, with housing vulnerability revealing the intersection of multiple forms of oppression.

Relying on their own experiences and reflections, authors Gal Levy and Riki Kohan-Benlulu discuss the political nature of housing struggles at the intersection of gender and poverty in the *Retrospective* ‘Being *civil* is not enough: on practices of citizenship of women living in poverty in Israel’. Drawing on the experience of five women, the article tells us the story of how their housing struggles have allowed them to ‘become political’. While introducing historical components about social mobilization and housing provision in Israel, Levy and Kohan-Benlulu present a rich discussion that allows the voices of these women and their diverse identities to emerge. It is also a clear example of the power of collaborations between academics and activists to record and communicate collective reflections on housing struggles.

As a growing body of literature has shown, rental markets are also a key part of the housing relationships established in informal settlements. In the *Long Read* piece ‘Negotiation, mediation and subjectivities: how migrant renters experience informal rentals in Gurgaon’s urban villages’, Mukta Naik brings a crucial issue in relation to rent struggles, interrogating the experience of low-income migrant renters in the informal rental markets in the Indian city, which are controlled and managed by village landlords. In this piece, Naik explores how housing choices are mediated by migration strategies, and she interrogates how everyday acts of resistance enable rural migrants to create a relationship with the city.

## **Tactics and strategies of rent struggles**

Situated reflections on tactics and strategies of rental struggles occupy an important place in most contributions. Among them, a running thread is the tension between particularist and locally grounded struggles, and the ever present desire and need to build collective power to ‘scale up’. This is manifested in reflections about aspirations and difficulties of going beyond the geographically and socially bounded spaces of activism, with implications in terms of sustainability and exclusivity, as well as in the territorial delimitation of such struggles and the mobilization of place-specific collective actors. The short *Update* by Jacob Stringer of the London Renters Union titled ‘When European tenants’ unions meet’ offers insights about this concern through a dispatch from a recent transnational assembly of tenants’ unions and organizations across Europe, under the banner of the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City. Beyond more traditional questions of common conditions and shared targets, the modes of political organizing surfaced from a deeper concern for inclusivity and politicization beyond the repertoires and rhythms of activism.

The *Long Read* ‘Resisting the rentier city: grassroots housing activism and renter subjectivity in post-crisis London’ by Matt Wilde, offers an ethnographic and self-reflective insight into the workings of a small but powerful activist collective of tenants organizing private renters in the borough of Hackney, London, UK. The piece examines and reflects upon knowledge-practices, modes and repertoires of organizing and campaigning, through an attention to relationships, care and the complex temporalities of collective action and mutual support. Interviews evidence the significance of personal biographies and affective dynamics to sustain and nurture processes of politicization, while also telling tales of burnout and the ever-present worry about building and sustaining ‘capacity’ and scaling up. This concern eventually led to the establishment of the first union for private sector tenants in the city.

In her *Retrospective* of housing justice organizing in New York, Oksana Mironova’s ‘Defensive and expansionist struggles for housing justice: 120 years of community rights in New York City’ weaves together historical materials and interviews with organizers to conjure an overview of over a century of mobilization. Around and through the concept of ‘community rights’, she explores how housing struggles against privatization and dispossession challenged and provided an alternative to the ideology of property rights, and how community rights manifested in campaigns that explicitly supported the struggle of Black and Latinx residents. Drawing on contemporary reflections, she concludes by critically assessing the limits of this hyperlocal framing in the context of multinational corporate landlord and real estate operators, which may require a scaling up struggles.

## **Visions of alternatives ‘beyond’ rent**

Running throughout the issue and many of the contributions is the political question of the vision beyond a critique and mobilization around rent. For some, the issue is framed around whether to struggle for rent justice or against rent itself. The latter is the polemical

point made by Julian Francis Park's provocation in his *Update* piece 'Abolish Rent!', which aims to challenge the naturalization of rent relations in contemporary housing movements across the US.

Rethinking a political vision by reading histories of past rent struggles 'against the grain' is the subject of two important recent books. As editors, we contacted the authors and instigated the *Conversation* piece 'Tenant and resident militancy for housing justice: an exchange between Amanda Huron and Neil Gray', where the two authors discuss and explore their divergent and –at times– convergent positions on the question of tenants organizing and housing justice. Both Gray's work as a researcher and editor of *Rent and its discontents. A century of Housing Struggle* (2018), and Huron's research in the monograph *Carving Out the Commons. Tenant organizing and housing cooperatives in Washington D.C.* (2018), show the need for longitudinal approaches to question of tenants' politicization and to the different visions that aimed to move beyond market rent relations, such as through public housing and limited equity co-operatives.

Following our approach to rent struggles not just as a legal status, but as a condition faced by all those who do not have control over their own homes, the issue includes two other contributions on the relationship between cooperative housing and tenants' struggles. One is a *Conversation* led by Brenda Pérez-Castro under the title 'On "being collective": A patchwork conversation with Somsook Boonyabancha on poverty, collective land tenure and Thailand's Baan Mankong programme'. The other is a *Retrospective* by Natalia Beatriz Quiñónez titled 'The fight of housing cooperatives against gentrification in the Historic Centre of San Salvador'. Somsook Boonyabancha is probably one of the most authoritative voices to interrogate the ways in which community-led processes can offer alternative land and housing arrangements. Discussing the paradigmatic case of Baan Mankong ('*secure housing*') in Thailand, this conversation explores collective ownership and alternative modes of land tenure to position the role of 'collectivity' in dealing with housing insecurities; a key feature that emerges in different forms throughout this issue. Quiñónez's *Retrospective* focuses on the *mesones* left crumbling and abandoned in the centre of El Salvador's capital city following a decade plus long civil war and a severe earthquake in 1986. Built to house upper-class families in the 19th and 20th centuries, *mesones* have been subdivided into rooms for rent to low-income households. As the municipality promotes the commodification and touristification of the Historic Centre, *mesones* living in becoming increasingly precarious. The article explores how, using grassroots organizing, residents are collectivizing their homes through cooperative property ownership. Here, the fighting against informal rentiership is shown to benefit not just individual households, but the social capital and community cohesion of the neighbourhood.

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With the second issue of the RHJ we continue to create a space for diverse content and voices on urgent, contemporary housing issues and politics, giving a platform for engaged scholar-activist research able to inform both housing debate and practice. In this thematic issue, we have interrogated 'rent' through the four key themes and the grounded experiences

outlined above, with the aim of offering a fertile terrain for further debates on housing insecurities and the multifaceted nature of current ‘rent’ organizing.

Questions of housing and rent justice require urgent attention to the changing structures of contemporary, trans-national rent extraction, as well as to intersectional identities, tactics and alternatives ‘beyond’ rent struggles. Going forward, more conversations across diverse geographies, experiences, types of praxis and approaches are essential. We invite readers and fellow scholar-activists to explore and engage with the contributions in this issue in the hope that it can forward collective reflections, struggles and practices.

## **References**

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