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Resisting Gentrification: Everyday Politics & Collective Action
From Oakland to Madrid

Caitlyn Clark
Yale University

Stephanie Redden
Yale University

Sakena Abedin
Yale University

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Resisting Gentrification: Everyday Politics & Collective Action From Oakland to Madrid

Cover Page Footnote
This paper was originally submitted as an assignment for PLSC 165: Gender, Race, and the Everyday Politics of the Global Political Economy, taught by Dr. Stephanie Redden.
ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes case studies in resistance to housing insecurity and neoliberalism to demonstrate the successful combinations of everyday resistance with collective action. Presenting the case studies as illustrations of two modes of analysis (Feminist Everyday International Political Economy and Marxism) previously thought of as somewhat contradictory, this paper argues that these models can strengthen one another. Using the examples of the Moms 4 Housing movement to resist gentrification and affordability crisis in Oakland, CA, and the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) that followed the Spanish housing and eviction crises, this paper addresses the possibility to combine the structural with the everyday. Attention is called to everyday, visual representations of gentrification through popular culture and “gentrification architecture.” Ultimately, this paper presents exciting possibilities for combining everyday politics with structural approaches to build effective collective action from the bottom-up.

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2020, hundreds of protestors gathered around a small house on Magnolia Street in West Oakland, California. The Alameda County Sheriff’s Office deployed militarized tanks and riot gear to surround the crowd. Deputies broke down the door of the home with battering rams and AR-15s. Several minutes later, they emerged with two women, Tolani King and Misty Cross, in handcuffs. King and Cross were arrested for illegally squatting in a vacant home owned by Wedgewood Properties, a large real estate company in California (Burns 2020). However, they were not acting alone; King and Cross are members of a social movement called Moms 4 Housing, a collective of houseless Black mothers from Oakland fighting back against the rapid gentrification and housing crisis in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Moms 4 Housing movement is situated within a global pattern of resistance to neoliberal austerity. From Moms 4 Housing to the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) in Spain, housing has emerged as a particular site of struggle against the subjugation of the poor under late capitalism. This form of resistance combines the everyday needs of houseless and housing insecure people with the power of collective action. Situated within contemporary debate between everyday international political economy (EIPE) and structural approaches (i.e. Marxism), this paper argues that the intersectional feminist EIPE approach does not negate collective organizing against larger structures of oppression; rather, feminist EIPE can situate everyday individual actions within organized resistance. Feminist EIPE and Marxism strengthen one another as modes of analysis, and can better dissect such case studies of successful contestations of neoliberalism.

This paper begins with a literature review of the debate surrounding Marxist analysis and everyday politics. Housing crises and gentrification are explained using Marxist theories on the commodification of land and accumulation by dispossession. The everyday impacts of gentrification and austerity are explored through the overlapping lenses of feminist EIPE and Marxism, with particular focus on...

1 What I refer to as ‘structural’ is also known as ‘regulatory international political economy,’ which Hobson & Seabrooke (2010) argue includes both neoliberal analyses asking “Who governs?” and Marxists or world systems theorists asking “Who rules/benefits?” Hobson & Seabrooke (2010) assert that while both of these modes of analyses reach different conclusions, their approaches both lack the ability to address the everyday lives of the people impacted by such regimes, nor the bottom-up agency that these ordinary people may possess (pp. 291-193).
2 Throughout this paper, I refer to this mode of analysis as “feminist EIPE,” although its commitments to intersectionality should not be understated.
architecture and popular culture. Finally, global examples of individual and organized resistance to gentrification and its implications for the debate between feminist EIPE and more structural approaches are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent developments in political science have opened up new avenues for conceptualizing politics through the everyday. Everyday international political economy (EIPE) argues that it is not enough to focus on top-down, regulatory regimes when the impact of said regimes and resistance against them can be found in everyday life. EIPE has often placed itself in opposition to the structural approaches that EIPE pioneers Hobson & Seabrooke refer to as regulatory international political economy, which includes both neoliberal statecraft models and Marxism (2010). The purpose of EIPE, Hobson & Seabrooke argue, is:

neither to marginalise the importance of the dominant elites nor to reify the agency of the ‘weak’, but rather to analyse the ways in which the weak affect and respond to the dominant and how in the process this interactive relationship generates change in the global economy. (2007, p. 2)

Alongside the recent mainstreaming of the everyday in political science, feminist scholars argue that EIPE must also recognize the longstanding feminist tradition of focusing on the banal (Elias & Roberts 2016). The second wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” predates the everyday politics shift of the 2000s by several decades (Hanisch 1969). Cynthia Enloe’s feminist, multidimensional retheorization of power in the 1990s brought gender and race from the margins of political economics to the core (Enloe 1990). Enloe, a key player in the eventual development of feminist EIPE, argued that structural approaches to political economy either neglect everyday life entirely, or study everyday life but do not view it as powerful enough to impact politics on a grand scale (Enloe 2004, p. 24).

Feminist EIPE, however, argues that everyday actions are more than capable of shaping politics from the bottom-up. Feminist EIPE further highlights the ‘feminization of resistance’ — “the increase in more individualized forms of resistance within certain workplaces ... where women make up the majority of workers” (Redden 2016, p. 847, Ustubici 2009). Scholars in this field pay particular attention to centralizing the individual voice and agency of those on the margins, arguing that social reproductive labor is inseparable from capitalist modes of production. Thus, analysis of capitalist regimes must acknowledge the gendered and racialized social reproduction behind them. They can do so by following the lead of feminist scholars who have long focused on the mundanities of everyday life, “asserting the need to uncover the micro level processes through which these transformations take shape” (Elias & Rai 2018, p. 202).

Moreover, the EIPE approach and Marxism hold apparent contradictions, not only in their theories but also in the different avenues for resistance that they offer. The EIPE model focuses on individualized, everyday actions; feminist EIPE goes further, suggesting that small acts of daily rebellion should be acknowledged as legitimate forms of resistance within the gendered and racialized opportunity structure for resistance. This prompts problems for Marxists, including Marxist-feminists, whose systemic analysis of oppression under capitalism demands a systemic approach to resistance, mainly through labor unionism, strikes, and large-scale revolutionary aims. The feminist EIPE critique of Marxism, however, overlooks that Marxists themselves have highlighted the need for bottom-up organizing models that reassert the agency of the oppressed in their own collective liberation (McAlevy 2016, Friere 1970). This paper interrogates whether or not these contradictions are irreconcilable. Utilizing the case studies of collective resistance to housing crises, this paper argues that feminist EIPE and Marxism can strengthen rather than invalidate one another.

HOUSING IN CRISIS: EVICTIONS AND GENTRIFICATION

To understand resistance through both everyday and collective action, we must first understand the current state of housing and gentrification that makes such resistance necessary. Many argue that various housing crises through history have been the result of poor public policy or exceptional greed; however, the root causes of housing crises, such as the 2008 housing bubble and the contemporary affordability crises, can be instead explained by the inherent contradictions of capitalist commodification of housing. Socialist economist Karl Polanyi (1944) argued in The Great Transformation that capitalism creates “fictitious commodities” out of land. Fictitious commodification, Polanyi (1944) argued, creates conflict between society and markets; the resistance of the houseless and housing insecure to urban austerity and affordability crises demonstrates the inevitable class struggle when com-
modification threatens the wellbeing of society (Polanyi 1944).

Building on Polanyi, Marxist geographer David Harvey claimed that a central tenet of the contemporary housing crisis is the shift of housing from use-value to exchange value. Applying his theory of accumulation by dispossession¹ to the financialization of the housing market, Harvey (2019) asserted that “large segments of the economy are being run on the accumulation of capital, which is not involved in producing anything. It’s all about the trading of asset values” (6:41). In other words, financialization of the housing market is integral to the production of a housing crisis. When large real estate companies purchase properties only to incur value, not to be used for housing, a housing crisis follows. At the most profitable point in Bay Area housing market history, there remained nearly 2,000 more vacant homes than unhoused people in the city of Oakland (Kawamoto 2020, Carlisle 2020). For investors and real estate companies, the Bay Area housing market is thriving; for working people in search of housing, the market is unlivable.

Housing crises are not symptoms of diseased or broken housing markets. Rather, the fundamental tenets of a commodified housing market are the very qualities that cause housing crises in the first place. Describing the United Kingdom’s privatization of public housing in the 1970s, David Harvey recounts that:

[Housing] speculation took over, particularly in prime central locations, eventually ... forcing low-income populations out to the periphery [sic], and turning erstwhile working-class housing estates into centres of intense gentrification. The loss of affordable housing produced homelessness and social anomie in many urban neighbourhoods.

(Harvey 2018, p. 158)

Additionally, gentrification and houselessness are deeply racialized and gendered issues, as austerity impacts are disproportionately felt by women of color (Kandaswamy 2018). Approximately 60% of unhoused families in the United States are single-mother households (Bhattacharya 2020). In California, where the total population is 6.5% Black, Black people make up 40% of the houseless (Bhattacharya 2020). The Black population in Oakland, which once stood at nearly 50% in 1980, dwindled to only 28% in 2010 and is expected to reach as low as 16% in the next several years, as more Black residents leave the Bay Area in search of affordable locations (Levin 2018).

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¹ “Accumulation by dispossession” refers to David Harvey’s theory that neoliberal capitalism centralizes wealth and power in the hands of a select few by forcibly dispossessing the working class through mass privatization of land and public goods (Harvey 2007). It is an expansion of Karl Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation.

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⁴ “Commodity fetishism” refers to the process through which capitalism masks the labor and use values of commodities, making the exchange value of commodities appear to be magically severed from the labor-time required to produce them (Marx 1867).
gentrification and austerity—what Hall (2019) refers to as “mundane mobilities,” wherein “austere conditions [sic] limit where and with whom people can live near, move to or even move away from” (p.782).

The Last Black Man in San Francisco (2019) visually highlights the antithesis to gentrification architecture—the historic Victorian homes of San Francisco (Talbot). The film describes a young Black man’s hyperfixation on the design and upkeep of his childhood home, a mechanism through which the audience understands both the cultural, political, and personal significance of the house. When the main character reclaim the home by squatting in it during its vacancy, viewers not only believe he is justified but read his reclamation of the house as an act of justice.

Feminist EIPE makes room for the intimate forms of resistance displayed in The Last Black Man in San Francisco, from the main character Jimmie’s squatting in his childhood home to the gendered and racialized vulnerability shared between Jimmie and his best friend (Talbot 2019). Through the lens of feminist EIPE, the effects of housing crises on interpersonal relationships can be just as important to understanding the political economy of gentrification as understanding housing commodification and profiteering. Viewing Marxism and feminist EIPE not as contradictory modes of analysis but as overlapping ones can help identify how local productions of knowledge via pop culture reflect both the structural and the everyday.

MODES OF RESISTANCE: RECONCILING THE EVERYDAY WITH COLLECTIVE ACTION

Squatting has become an essential form of resistance against housing crises in reality. By focusing specifically on the intersectional dimensions of urban squatting, we can address the “invisibility of women in the urban space … enabling us to focus on their agency and thereby helping to disclose prevailing power relations in society” (Wittger 2017, p.18). However, the feminist EIPE approach alone is insufficient to explain successfully organized resistance against housing austerity. This section utilizes two prominent cases that combine the everyday resistance of squatting with collective action: Moms 4 Housing in Oakland and the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH), a social movement in Spain that utilizes organized civil disobedience in the form of squatting to fight for fair housing and against the profiteering of the housing market (Berglund n.d.).

When Moms 4 Housing first gained national media attention, Wedgewood Properties refused to negotiate with the mothers so long as they continued to illegally “squat” in the long-vacant residence. Support for the mothers grew through viral, informal videos expressing the disparity between the cost of rent in Oakland—a “housing wage” estimated at $33 per hour—and the current minimum wage of $15. “Before we found each other, we felt alone in this struggle,” reads the Moms 4 Housing website. “But there are thousands of others like us here in Oakland and all across the Bay Area. We are coming together with the ultimate goal of reclaiming housing for the community from speculators and profiteers” (para. 2, n.d.). The message embodies the need to move beyond action in isolation and towards collective action.

The Moms 4 Housing movement centers around Black women, who are often pushed to the margins even in movements contingent on their labor. In the case of Moms 4 Housing, Black mothers and their children are the faces of the movement, employing personal storytelling and vulnerability to appeal to their audience’s emotions. Feminist EIPE’s politicization of the body, specifically for women of color, reconstructs the mothers’ squatting to fulfill their unmet need for physical shelter as a form of resistance in and of itself. “Politicising the body by making it a site for resistance,” Ustubici (2009) argues, “challenges ideological and historical processes that exclude bodily experiences and activities from political discourse” (p. 29). Yet Marxist analysis of collective action is also critical in understanding the results of the Moms 4 Housing movement: Wedgewood Properties ultimately agreed to sell the house to a non-profit organization for affordable housing. Feminist EIPE and Marxist analysis in conjunction can aptly understand how Moms 4 Housing successfully combined individualized squatting with community power to achieve a significant win in the fight against capital and housing insecurity.

Another example of squatting and collective resistance is Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH), a coalition that resists the financialization of the housing market that left hundreds of thousands houseless and debt-ridden. During the Spanish speculative housing bubble prior to the 2008 recession, nearly 80% of the population were homeowners, but many of them were low-income workers with subprime mortgages (Berglund n.d.). Half a million people who were evicted from their homes still carried debt into their evictions (Berglund n.d.). Blackstone and
other private-equity giants took advantage of the housing crisis to buy up properties at low costs, turning many of them into rentals (Berglund 2018). This pattern was seen across the world following the 2008 recession; in fact, the mass purchasing of foreclosed homes from companies like Blackstone led in part to the housing crisis seen today in Oakland, CA.

While the PAH remains local and situated in the everyday, its success comes in large part from its rejection of neoliberal individualism in favor of collective action (Di Felicianonio 2017). The abandonment of squatting as a form of satisfying individual needs allows PAH to turn instead toward the needs of the community. “The action of the PAH is aimed at giving a concrete solution to the housing problems of the people involved, not at creating an oppositional dialectics with capitalistic institutions. It could be better said that these political horizons coexist” (Di Felicianonio 2017, p. 52). PAH exists as part of the “politics of possibilities,” a theory shared by feminist EIE modes of resistance that critically engage with resistance as it becomes available to the oppressed (Di Felicianonio 2017, Enloe 2011, Elias 2019).

CONCLUSION

There are several important limitations to the organizing models of Moms 4 Housing and PAH. Though PAH is often lauded as a success, it was not without its flaws, including the government passage of anti-civil disobedience legislation and minimal to no comprehensive housing legislation (Martinez 2017). The initial process of organizing for collective action around housing is similarly challenging, as many feel ashamed of their positions and afraid of contentious collective action (Santos 2018). On the other hand, overcoming organizing challenges sets an important precedent for conceptualizing resistance in the future. Santos identifies that the key was solidarity (2018). By presenting a new mode of analysis centering solidarity, not only can we better understand social movements, but we can better shape them as well (Santos 2018).

The displacement of working-class people from their homes is both a product of capitalism and a key component in capitalist reproduction. Disrupting this displacement from the bottom-up is a significant form of anti-capitalist resistance that successfully secures material gains for those impacted by gentrification and the financialization of the housing market. The case studies of Moms 4 Housing and PAH demonstrate how the intersectional feminist EIE approach makes room for a multidimensional understanding of resistance (Enloe 2011, Elias 2017).

These examples of resistance serve as a model for reconciling individual action in the everyday with the need for collective action to address the structural problems that plague everyday politics in the first place. They support the argument that feminist EIE and structural Marxist approaches can uplift, not contradict one another. When everyday resistance as it stands—gendered, racialized, and often unrecognized as a legitimate form of resistance—is combined with collective action, agency is returned to the hands of the oppressed in contesting power from the bottom-up.

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