

The politics of queer precarity: queer resistance to rentier-capitalism

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Housing precarity governs how we live, how we can socialise, how we can have sex, and ultimately determines who has a secure roof over their heads. It is a queer issue precisely because it often dictates whether we can live openly as queer and love without reprisals. It is at the heart of a 'u accom' culture, whereby access to space for sex is often closed down or narrowed by housing environments in which queer people do not feel able to have the sex they want. What can queer people do about the housing crisis? Taking cue from Christopher Chitty's *Sexual Hegemony*, I suggest that an avenue forward within sexual politics can be resistance to rentier-capitalism, as "part of a wider social movement responding to the worsening conditions of life, further cuts to public expenditure, and hostility towards the ruling elite" (Chitty 2020, 191). I concentrate on the housing crisis in Ireland and Britain, both because of my own political organising experience within these settings. Disparity in access to housing, rent struggles, and household instability form part of a broad set of demands which include claims on healthcare and welfare – what is here termed a politics of queer precarity (Hollibaugh and Weiss 2015, 19) – which is aware of and rejects the implications for queerness that the financialization of housing has helped reconstitute.

Centring the housing crisis at the apex of a rejuvenated sexual politics raises possibilities of counterhegemonic organising which contests how capital governs our own sociality. Across Ireland and Britain, tenant and community unions such as CATU, Acorn, Living Rent, London Renters Union, Greater Manchester Tenants Union, among others, challenge landlordism. Tenant unions resist the financialization of housing and understand the need to build community power. They seek to end the private expropriation of housing as an asset – as a means of capital accumulation – in much the same way as the renters in Berlin who recently won a city-wide referendum on expropriating the city's largest landlords (Vasudevan, 2021).

This essay offers one insight into how the current conjuncture of rentier-capitalism has come to structure queer life, in particular its sexual sociality, in a housing system that gentrifies and privatises urban space and forces queer people into hostile and unstable housing. Neoliberal financialization created fluidity and instability in the housing system and reconstituted aspects of queerness. Alongside neoliberal financialization have emerged mobile and fluid sexual and gender identities, some of which have then been widely embraced by many fractions of the bourgeoisie for whom diversity is both profitable and

hegemonic— perhaps the most garish contemporary face of this has been property consultancy firms declaring their support for Pride Month (Allsop, 2020). The current housing crisis grew from the transformation of older property relations that already harmed queers, and yet the diversity-attuned face of *en masse* housing financialization has engendered newer form of queer proletarianization. This will feed into an exploration of how CATU, my tenant union, have organised around such politics. Broadly, this essay accounts for the restructuring of aspects of queer life through the financialization of housing and is, consequently, suggestive as to how new forms of queer resistance may offer emancipatory horizons.

Rentier-capitalism and queer sociality

How then has the avalanching financialization of property since the 1970s – a component part of rentier-capitalism – restructured queer life as housing crises increasingly dominate sexual relations? One way they have done this, is through changing forms of gay sociality by altering the availability of queer access to safe and comfortable housing, that is, precisely the proliferation of ‘u accom’ culture. The decline of the Fordist-style nuclear family, detailed as by ME O’Brien within a ‘broader crisis of capitalist profitability’ (O’Brien, 406), combined with increasing crises and securitisation of public space through rentier-capitalism destroyed institutions already ostracising and harming queer people whilst simultaneously instituting new forms of precarity and proletarianization. Public and private spaces for queer people to meet and have sex are often increasingly rare, leading to a spreading of ‘u accom?’ forms of gay sociality. Chitty documented the birth of a fluid and mobile proletarian sexuality (Chitty 2020, 135) which was intertwined with the history of property and family relations. Urban policing of sexuality, and ensuing moral panics about the phallus in public, was brought on with the emergence into the public sphere of bourgeois women; Chitty cites the growth in public urinals as evidence for the growth in influence of bourgeois sexual mores

which cast displays of sexuality, or the body, as ‘public indecency’ – in Manchester these urinals were quickly moved out of middle-class areas after they became centres of sodomy (Chitty 2020, 126). What brought stability and pushed sex and sexuality out of the public sphere, through a partial and constructed adoption of bourgeois familial and sexual mores, Chitty posits, were the introductions of sanitation and housing reforms, and the winning of wage increases (Chitty 2020, 135). These were the foundations upon which bourgeois sexual morality, articulated through the mass of newly emerged nuclear families, had been built and intertwined within a Fordist-capitalism by the mid-twentieth century.

Partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales (1967), Scotland (1980), and the North of Ireland (1982) was so restricted that for many years it was technically illegal to have gay sex in a tenant’s own council flat. My own experiences of growing up in a small town in the North of England, as a pre-university teenager negotiating access to space for sex, chime with this. Very few people whether my age or older could ‘accom’, some had cars and used them for cruising, but doing this outside of the quiet country lanes with no CCTV and very little police presence would likely have been impossible, even late at night. Comfortable access to space for sex eluded me – it was secret, it was dark, it was often quick, and it was situational. For many queer people, this precarity in access to comfortable space in which they can express sexual desire continues out of their teenage years, through to university halls, moving back in with their parents post-university, and living in shared housing. Marx describes rent as the “shameless exploitation of poverty” (Marx 1991, 908), and with 34.4% of renters living in deprivation in Ireland, and adults in low-income poverty in the private rental sector in Britain rising to 42% (Kenny 2020; Bailey 2020), it is not hard to see why many queer people are forced into housing situations in which they can feel uncomfortable or suppressed.

Property relations are fundamental in the structuring of queer life under capitalism, and have structured that life in different ways as new articulations of capital accumulation come to the

fore. It was in these terms that Chitty understood the history of sexuality to be a history of property (Chitty 2020, 39), with Chitty's thesis on homosexuality within a regime of world systems drawing heavily from Arrighi's writings of systemic cycles of accumulation (Arrighi & Moore 2001, 56). One of these cycles of accumulation, exploding since the 1980s, has also been referenced as a form of accumulation by dispossession by David Harvey (Harvey 2005, 145), whereby class fractions of landlords and investment portfolios have participated in highly unpredictable waves of financialization within the housing sector. These housing speculators act as a mobile yet entrenched class fraction in mature neoliberal capitalism, which creates 'new, and often more violent, instabilities' (Soederberg 2018, 121). The privatisation of social housing by the Thatcher government was fundamental to gentrification processes in cities like London and formed part of the accumulation by dispossession process (Harvey 2005, 158); tenants were slowly expelled from particular areas, before the land and housing could be released "into the privatised mainstream of capital accumulation" (Harvey 2005, 149). That by 2016 40.2% of houses privatised under Thatcher's Right-to-Buy scheme had fallen into the hands of buy-to-let landlords, renting the homes at twice the rate of local councils, is indicative of a process of accumulation by dispossession (Foster 2016; Collinson 2017). So consolidated have fractions of the finance-property class become that in the two years up to 2021 a quarter of all donations to the governing UK Conservative party came from property interests (*Financial Times* 2021). The speculation of housing and public land through processes of capital accumulation constantly narrows the spaces in which queer people sexually socialise.

Writing a biographic history of gay bars, Jeremy Atherton Lin, noted the importance of the toilet to gay sociality, as places of "consummation" (Atherton Lin, 7) which function as both openings to new opportunities and operate as a means of barricading out the rest of society from the deviancy within (Atherton Lin, 204). In the public domain, the sight of freely accessible toilets in Ireland and Britain has become increasingly rare. Jack

Sheehan bemoans the closing in the late-twentieth century of most of Dublin's good public toilets (sanitation improvement schemes from the Victorian era), under the guise of public decency, leaving the city with a lack of public facilities – "There is nowhere to take a shit in Dublin" (Sheehan 2021). Owen Hatherley has written of a similar problem in London, where "Public toilets are a joke; in London they barely exist. It amuses me to imagine that there are people who actually take street signs pointing to a 'Toilet' seriously...Most often there is no longer a toilet there, or it has been permanently closed" (Hatherley 2019). He admonishes that half of all council-run toilets in Britain have now closed – principally victims of cuts to local authority budgets who sell the land to raise funds instead of paying to maintain provision. New toilets are often designed to deter rough sleepers, automated, fit with timers, likely charge for entry, or, as in Galway, Ireland, have gained commodity value of their own – with basic care for the facilities being sold as luxury for €3.50 (Mannion 2021). The result of this has been to push established, if diminishing, patterns of gay sociality – cruising for sex in toilets – into more heavily policed toilets within privately owned shops. In Dublin's M&S, which became a hotspot for gay sex, five men were arrested in 2021 for public sex acts, after the store's toilets had been put under police surveillance targeting gay men cruising (Wakefield 2021) – a move concerningly reminiscent of mid-twentieth undercover policing tactics used to jail gay men for both acts of sodomy or attempting to 'solicit' sex in public. Southwark Council in London have secured court injunctions against gay cruising in Burgess Park, threatening huge fines and lengthy custodial sentences to disrupt gay sex outside of private bedrooms (Reid-Smith 2020). The privatisation of public space combined with carceral approaches to controlling a principal form of gay sociality – cruising – is, though, a symptom of a housing crisis which is forcing queer people to look for, and engage in sex, outside of paradigms acceptable to post-Fordist bourgeois sexual mores which, whilst changing, are still consumed with the notion of sexuality as innately private. More importantly, the securitisation of cruising spaces such as parks

and toilets, on the pretext of stopping gay sex, has serious implications for those who have a right to these areas of the city without having to first become consumers– paying for the right to use the toilet with dignity.

Another important driving feature of a ‘u accom’ culture is the increasing numbers of younger adults living with their parents, carers, and others for longer periods. An increasing number of 20 to 34 year olds in the UK now live with their parents. This figure was 26% in 2018, has gone up 6% in twenty years, and is likely even higher through being exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mayor of London 2019). For those not living with parents or relatives, a typical private rental household in London now spends 37% of their monthly income on rent – a figure which rises to 40% on average when members of the household are accounted for individually (Ministry of Housing 2019). And whilst younger people are more likely to rent than older people (25 to 34 year olds make up 35% of the private rental market), the average age of those living under private landlords is increasing (Christiansen and Lewis 2019). The effect of this is both fewer queer people living alone, more living with parents, and others who may have previously been able to afford living on their own having to house-share, often not with friends, as the burden of rent gets too high. An important caveat here, with awareness that ‘young renters’ and ‘queer people’ are not synonymous, is that the housing crisis impacts everyone, queer or not, young and old. Housing crises do impact us all, but through my experience in tenant union organising, I have some anecdotal experience that activism against housing precarity has high engagement from younger queer people at disproportionate rates– CATU’s first caucus, touched on below, is an LGBTQ+ one.

Rentier-capitalism has reconstituted the housing market as a site for the constant reproduction of this precarity – housing has become more fluid, mobile, and insecure. In this process a financialised housing model has replaced the Fordist-based, family-centred, heteronormative, nuclear family-oriented suburban domesticity. Such a domesticity damaged queer people and

resulted in direct challenges from gay, lesbian, and queer squats and communes (Cook, 2014; Egan, 2014). The neoliberal financialization of housing which has replaced a heteronormative suburbia, however, instituted its own forms of queer proletarianization, and one expression of this is that queer people within the housing crisis can have more limited sexual relations. The securitization and gentrification of cruising spaces, and an inability to live alone, or with comfort, in housing which can safely allow people to accommodate sex means shifting property relations have restructured queer sexual sociality. With many people on apps like Grindr unable to ‘accom’ for sex, and (often privatised) public space increasingly policed, having sex becomes more difficult for the new queer proletarians of rentier-capitalism. This has happened alongside a proliferation of privatisations of public facilities which marginalises and ostracises those already most vulnerable and in need of such spaces to be able to exist in public with dignity. Of course, there are other ways in which rentier-capitalism has restructured queer life – through gentrification (Haritaworn, 2017), queer work (O’Brien, 2019) and the explosion of homelessness across Ireland and Britain (Bhandal and Horwood 2021). I have concentrated on the question of sociality here, teasing out why it too has important ramifications for human dignity past the desire of organising a hook-up.

How we organise

This shifting queer sociality shows precisely how the change in property relations under a rentier-capitalist financialization of housing has restructured queerness itself. It is because the housing crisis does not only negatively impact queer people, but that rentier-capitalism and the financialization of housing has reordered queer life around further exploitation and surveillance, that queer resistance is imperative.

It is important, however, that this resistance does not dwell nostalgically on the brave and fun forms of collective gay living arrangements that arose in the 1970s and 1980s in co-ops, communes

and squats. There have been drastic and unignorable structural changes in housing provision and the wider political economy since the late-1970s which have fundamentally changed the landscape for precarious queers. There are no longer dozens of empty council houses, which squatters can access and maintain. Council housing provision has collapsed over the last forty-years as the private rental market has extrapolated its growth. In this same period, there have also been changes in dominant narratives of queer politics. Christopher Chitty spoke to this very issue, writing that the breakdown of bourgeois sexual hegemony – accelerating after the Second World War – necessarily closes the radical and transformative potentials that homosexuality had in the 1960s and 1970s. Chitty goes on to write that “these radical potentials have been worn out by a neoliberal multicultural politics of recognition, preserving the hegemony of this formation” (Chitty 2020, 180), with legal equalities and crises of social norms diminishing the emancipatory potential of homosexuality as a form of sexual politics, or indeed as “the basis for any future politicisation of sex” (Chitty 2020, 191). Rather than looking to homosexuality itself, or forms of political organising simply no longer practicable, we should build a politicisation of sex which seeks to negate austerity and financialization, instead centring human dignity.

These worsening conditions of life are corollaries of rentier capitalism’s pressure to work more and longer for rents which keep rising. We cannot remove ourselves from these cycles of accumulation without removing everyone. Not only do landlords extract huge sums of income from renters, often pushing them into house-shares and poverty, but they also routinely evict for no fault, make tenants homeless, fail to deal with hazardous faults in homes, and let unhealthy infestations (such as mould and mildew) fester and immiserate, making homes uninhabitable – let alone suitable for sex. Into this obligation to oppose rentier-capitalism steps the tenant union.

Tenant union organising has been rapidly growing in Ireland and Britain over the last ten years, responding to a rapidly deteriorating housing crisis. As unions for renters, and more

generally for outside the workplace, they utilise collective community organisation, direct action, and solidarity to “protect and further the right and interests of the members” (CATU What is a union good for? 2021, 2). CATU, the union I organise in, was founded in Ireland in 2019 and despite the pandemic has grown rapidly north and south. CATU (the Community Action Tenants Union) wants “to take the basic ideas of membership, collective direct action, and grassroots democracy from where people work to where they live” (CATU About 2021). CATU membership is open to all who are not landlords or act as state or private security forces. The union orients membership building to build direct action in working class communities, targeting those who can affirm demands which are concrete and achievable (CATU What is a union good for? 2021, 7). With direct action the primary organising tactic of CATU, we aim to build strength of numbers to “directly target those people who can give in to our demands” (CATU What is a union good for? 2021, 7). Expropriating all landlords and dismantling rentier-capitalism is a long struggle, but doorstepping landlords, disrupting council meetings, speaking to tenants about everyday issues, and even rent strikes are levers of working class tenant power we can use to both achieve member demands and build community power.

What can CATU do to build solidarities between precariously housed queer people and wider community union activism then? And what do the strategic implications of this look like? Solidarity here means joining another’s struggle against deteriorating conditions they may face in life and offering that support unconditionally. This is key because it means that commitments to join in struggle with queer people does not premise upon them joining the union and should be a process of continued liaison, not simply an event. Whilst this may have some immediate implications for building the union, gaining the trust and political friendship of queer communities in Ireland, showing how CATU can physically express solidarity by being present in direct action over simply building paper members who are queer ties the tenant movement to other oppressed communities

in much deeper ways. In late 2020 CATU Belfast members joined a picket of queer people from across the city against homophobic, transphobic, presbyterian hate preachers who regularly hold moral majority rallies with no audiences, shouting about sin to the shoppers of Belfast. Members of CATU Belfast, including myself, are planning to join these demonstrators again in the beginning of 2022 when they next take to the streets against hate preachers. When Pride marches are held again in Belfast, local branch members have also raised the possibility of joining the march. A key part of any tenant union is member defence, and CATU members in Dublin have also been active in protesting the eviction of a queer tenant by a gay landlord.

I was also part of a working group within CATU which set up a process for caucuses to form within the union. A caucus, in CATU, is defined “as a group of people...belonging to a systemically oppressed minority” (CATU Caucuses 2021). Our first caucus is for LGBTQ+ people (CATU Working Groups 2021). This working group was established following a vote at the 2021 Annual General Meeting of the union, with 89% voting in favour. Since this, the LGBTQ+ caucus has launched and began garnering interest and involvement from members, before a vote on a committee officer is held. It is my hope that this caucus can function as a means of organising queer people against our own precarity, and also as part of a movement where our struggles fold into wider questions of attacks on our collective welfare through punitive measures and cuts to social infrastructure. For

other renter organisations thinking of following CATU in establishing an LGBTQ+ group or caucus I would, humbly, offer some insights: delegate responsibility to members within the caucus and away from the union’s national executive body; make the roles of officers in the caucus as transparent as possible; focus the caucus’ energy on growing the union both where queer members live locally, and more broadly through both LGBTQ+ spaces and a concentration on campaigns the caucus can wage, both leading them and joining in solidarity.

The fluidity and instability of the housing crisis is part of an adaptive neoliberal agenda of capital and the state which has similarly restructured gay sociality, queer interactions with public space, access to private sex, and more importantly the general right to the city. It is through a CATU wide caucus, local committees and branches that queer people can both organise around elements of housing precarity which ail queer communities (for example, the disproportionate impact of homelessness on LGBT+ people (APPG 2020)) and be part of a wider movement which rejects endless work for endless rent. Collective welfare of queer tenants is our rallying cry. This joining of solidarities between queer people and renters matters structurally too— it provides an avenue of resistance within a movement which seeks to dismantle a system that has restructured important elements of queer life and sociality and inflicts almost constant precarity for so many. The politics of queer precarity must be a politics of our collective welfare and our collective dignity.

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