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From housing crisis to housing justice: Towards a radical right to a home

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Abstract

Amidst a protracted housing crisis that has affected major cities in Europe and beyond, vibrant social movements for housing justice are trying to challenge the notion that housing is a commodity, with transformative demands framing housing as a fundamental human right. This paper explores the ways housing movements in Dublin use direct and confrontational approaches as political action. Previous literature has examined the emergence of new housing movements as a direct consequence of the economic and social challenges that arose as a result of the economic downturn and neoliberal austerity policies. However, there is, as yet, little that addresses the ways autonomous housing groups engage in non-violent direct action and the challenges they face in trying not just to promote a radical change of policy but also in carrying out practical prefigurative action. As such, the findings in this study provide insights into how emerging direct-action-oriented housing groups fight for housing justice.

Keywords

housing, politics, social justice

摘要

在一场影响欧洲及世界其他地方大城市的长期住房危机中，活跃的住房正义社会运动正试图挑战“住房是一种商品”的概念，变革要求将住房视为一项基本人权。本文探讨了都柏林的住房运动如何使用直接和对抗性的方法作为政治行动。以前的文献研究了新住房运动的出现，认为这是经济衰退和新自由主义紧缩政策带来的经济和社会挑战的直接后果。然而，到目前为止，关于自治住房团体参与非暴力直接行动的方式以及它们面临的挑战（它们不仅努力促进政策的彻底改变，而且开展实际的预先行动）方面，几乎没有什么论述。因此，本研究的结论为新兴的、以直接行动为导向的住房组织如何争取住房正义提供了见解。

关键词

住房、政治、社会正义

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Introduction

The serious housing crisis in many cities highlights the scale of inequality and injustice in the housing system. The extent of the housing crisis is global and virtually every major city is having to confront its own housing struggles (Potts, 2020; Rolnik, 2019). Recent developments in housing provision have been shaped by the global financial markets and they involve the commodification of welfare provision and the financialisation of housing. This is because the decisions made by governments create opportunities for speculative investors which, in turn, accentuate inequalities and greatly contribute to prolonging the current affordability crisis (Jacobs, 2019). But especially in places where the after effects of the 2008 economic crash were more severe, such as Ireland, Spain and the USA, social movements, largely focused on housing, have stepped up to resist financialisation pressures on urban housing markets (Fields, 2017). In these locations, the ongoing housing crisis has led to an increase in people mobilising and organising for housing justice.

As a central aspect of financialisation, housing has been dominated by financial actors, markets and practices (Aalbers, 2016). In advanced economies, post-Fordist housing policy has informed government decisions to retreat from supply-side programmes and has encouraged debt-based home ownership, deregulation and privatisation strategies (Aalbers, 2015). The 2008 systemic housing-financial crisis had a severe impact on the urban space. It was linked to the rise of a finance-led accumulation in which housing is no longer connected to the need for a home; instead, it is perceived as an opportunity for profit extraction (Fields and Uffer, 2016). One of the worst aspects of the housing problem in the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis in Ireland is that housing has become one of the biggest social and economic issues facing the country. Levels of home ownership have dropped because of difficulties in accessing credit, the number of evictions in the private sector has increased, homelessness rates have risen dramatically and rent costs have skyrocketed (see Hearne and Murphy, 2017). Housing affordability is a widely discussed issue and it is identified as the main reason ordinary young people are excluded from the opportunity to buy a home and are forced to rent privately (social housing is an option for only a limited number of low-income families) (Byrne and McArdle, 2020). These unprecedented conditions have led to the emergence of a diverse range of social protests, since housing problems have developed in spaces of political antagonism. The housing movements analysed in this study focus on post-crisis housing financialisation and its dynamics, such as homelessness, evictions in the private sector, unaffordable rents and property vacancy. They demand affordable rents and the provision of social housing. From tenant organising to building occupations and eviction bans, housing activists are pushing back against the dynamics of financialisation and making themselves heard when it comes to urban policy-makers and large corporate landlords (Byrne, 2019; Hearne et al., 2018; Lima, 2019; O'Callaghan et al., 2018).

Considering the need to examine on-the-ground urban struggles for housing justice and contemporary strategies employed by housing activists to achieve this right (Fields, 2017; Hohmann, 2019; Listerborn et al., 2020), this study examines direct action housing activism in Dublin in light of their repertoires of contentious political action, focusing on the justifications and objectives as well as the constraints to achieving their political goals. In particular, the study offers some important insights into the surge of building occupations between 2015 and

2018, organised by the Take Back The City (TBTC) network and the Irish Housing Network (IHN). Therefore, the findings in this article contribute to research in the field of urban social movements by demonstrating how autonomous grassroots organisations use direct action and confrontational non-violent strategies to protest against housing oppression and fight for housing justice in the context of post-austerity in Ireland.

There has been renewed interest in emerging housing movements, and vibrant Irish community-based housing action groups are worthy of scrutiny because of their potential for community organising and resistance to housing injustices. On the 'progressive' side, these movements include national organisations and campaigners for housing rights, including trade unions, political parties, NGOs and other groups which, in this paper, I identify as part of the 'institutional left'. On its more radical side, it includes direct-action and consciousness-raising groups, as well as grassroots community groups and left-wing and anarchist groups operating outside the boundaries of institutions, which I identify in this paper as non-institutional or autonomous groups. The term 'autonomous movements' refers to those organised in a horizontal network fashion and underscored by the principles of self-organisation, direct/participatory democracy, autonomy, diversity and direct action (Fominaya, 2015); given that, I focus on the tactics of grassroots housing activism or, more specifically, building-occupation and anti-eviction actions. In turn, the term 'direct action', in its broadest sense, refers to confrontational tactics and forms of disruptive resistance, offering pragmatic responses to social problems in which actions align with the end's objectives (preconfiguration); while the subcategory 'non-violent direct action' encompasses peaceful but disruptive forms of resistance designed to create contention and challenge norms.

Literature review

Given the global affordable housing crisis, the analytical and political focus has shifted towards the urgent question of housing justice (Slater, 2020). Housing as a question of social justice has an extensive and globe-spanning history, widely known by its capacity to merge with more general claims for social justice (Lees et al., 2015; Listerborn et al., 2020). As a field of enquiry, the scholarship on housing justice takes full account of the structural processes of housing precarity as well as the continuous and complex contestations through which rights to housing are conceptualised, claimed and consolidated (Roy, 2017). Work in this field has been well-documented in the literature, examining the conditions that have led to the recent new political phase of housing activism and how activists resist, create new alliances and present alternatives to neoliberal housing politics. This growing interest in everyday struggles for housing justice reflects a shift from the housing crisis to housing justice, by means of scholarship that focuses on research and analysis of the work of those movements in relation to the wider context of neoliberal reforms and political changes currently impacting the housing system (Fields, 2017; Martinez, 2019; Roy, 2017).

Recent trends in the areas of housing mobilisation have led to a proliferation of studies that focus on the contemporary struggles for the right to a home, in which increasing rents, dispossession, insecurity of tenure and lack of affordable housing have become a crucial battleground. This work has highlighted the resistance to housing precarity in multiple locations (Fields, 2017; Lancione, 2019), analysed the shifts in politico-economic policies that create housing inequality (Alexander et al., 2018; Madden and Marcuse, 2016), examined the mass movements demanding a state response to evictions and foreclosures in the context

of housing crises (Martinez, 2018; Muñoz, 2017), documented the newly created spaces of resistance, social organisation and networks of solidarity (García-Lamarca, 2017) and focused on the emergence of housing precarity and renters as a political subject (Byrne, 2019; Listerborn et al., 2020; Wilde, 2019). The recent political phase of housing activism brings into question how housing action-protest can reclaim housing, invigorate resistance to the privatisation of housing, restructure relations and, ultimately, implement organisational styles that are inclusive and that challenge neoliberal housing development models.

The engagement of housing movements with direct-action tactics gives visibility to the contradiction of buildings being kept vacant while homelessness and evictions seem to be on the rise (Roy, 2017). While sometimes seen in a pejorative or negative light (Dupuis-Déri, 2010; Franks, 2003; Gamson, 2007), direct-action tactics have emerged progressively as part of an articulated struggle that has brought widespread social legitimacy to this practice and the groups that carry it out, such as the building occupations implemented by the PAH in Spain (García-Lamarca, 2017). Direct action has more than just tactical relevance to movements in which occupying vacant buildings and preventing evictions are strategies used to attract public attention and pressure governments. It is also related to their prefigurative politics that seek to address injustices by directly intervening in housing precarity with the creation of autonomous spaces in tandem with direct actions and disruption.

The capacity of social movements to configure alternative models of living in the city is an important subject for academic research (Lancione, 2019). That work has tended to look more at the willingness of the movements to engage in direct action as an important differentiator compared with more conventional types of political organisation (Burstein, 1998, 1999). While recent studies report extensive research on the subject, I aim to situate my analysis between the prefigurative politics (and related forms of direct action) and the organising for housing justice, an area that has received less scholarly attention. In considering that direct action presents a practical prefigurative action and a way of challenging the ongoing housing precarity, I put forward the core argument that the emerging housing activism reflects the increasing demands for housing justice. Direct action has been the preferred strategy for increasing the organisational capacity of groups affected by housing precarity and I argue that, by constructing a counternarrative on the housing crisis, direct action is a pragmatic response to the violation of the right to housing and shelter, a prefigurative tactic that shines a light on the links between the housing crisis, discrimination and injustice.

There is an extensive debate about the nature and extent of violence in direct action (Carter, 2010; Wehr et al., 1994). Direct action, together with a focus on practical politics, is a central feature of autonomous politics (Fominaya, 2014). In general, direct action is associated with contentious challenges through disruptive public action against governments, elites, authorities and other groups (Melucci, 1996). It has also been associated with anarchism, since it places political power in the hands of people directly affected by an issue who come together on an equal footing to deal with the issue (Franks, 2003; Joyce, 2017). It has also become increasingly associated with a greater willingness by citizens to claim their rights and a lessening of respect for the decisions of authorities (Carter, 2005).

Direct action does not necessarily involve breaking the law. More assertive and usually

implemented as a form of collective action, direct action encompasses a wide range of actions and approaches ranging from explicitly non-violent actions to more confrontational forms of protest and politically motivated property damage (Fominaya, 2014). Some types of direct action are legal, such as organised rallies, strikes and boycotts, but some are considered illegal, such as trespassing and blockages. These challenge specific laws and can lead to imprisonment (Carter, 2005). The literature has shown that direct action is ethically justified, based on two points: (1) there are urgent issues serious enough to warrant direct action, and (2) these issues are so highly entrenched and bureaucratised, and the inequality of power is so great, that dialogic exchange is not possible (Franks, 2003; Fung, 2005; Smith, 2018).

Here, the notion of 'prefigurative politics' combines with that of 'right to the city' – a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation, including the access to affordable housing. This combination encompasses scenarios where activists express the political 'ends' of their actions through their 'means', or where they create autonomous, horizontal spaces separated from the institutional left in order to overcome isolation and reshape the city in a different image from that put forward by the financialisation of housing and the increasingly entrepreneurially minded local state apparatus (Fominaya, 2014, 2015; Harvey, 2008: 33).

Experiences of direct action in Ireland

The dynamic of social protest in Ireland was dominated for years by a perceived lack of protest during the period of economic austerity that featured the 'Adjustment Programme' set out by the government and the Troika (2010–2014). In comparison with other European countries that endured severe austerity budgets and public services (e.g. Portugal and Spain), Ireland did not display the same level of energetic anti-austerity protests and followed a different path. For instance, Portuguese trade unions assumed the leading role in labour-based protests together with several anti-austerity groups while, in Ireland, trade unions were demobilised and fractured in their response to austerity budgets. Whereas, in Spain, property vacancy and foreclosure acquired a high degree of politicisation in the early stages of the crisis, the Irish mortgage crisis only reached its acme in 2013. New Irish housing movements only began to emerge when the initial period of the crisis gave way to a new housing crisis in 2014 and, when it emerged, it was mostly focused on homelessness and evictions (Hearne et al., 2018).

While direct action is not a frequently used organisational tactic or part of the repertoire of left-wing organisations that have organised protests in recent years, Ireland has historically possessed a substantial degree of grassroots working-class self-organisation in the form of community-based activism (Cox, 2017). As noted by Mallon (2017), where direct action was used by movements, it was on rare occasions and it was a relatively divisive topic for activists.

Irish housing activism has been reinvigorated in recent years but it has a history that stretches further back in time. It is possible, however, to locate direct action in the Irish protest landscape, including in the housing area. The country has a history of direct action in housing that goes back to the 1960s and 1970s, which included rent strikes, squatters' movements, anti-eviction actions and the defence of public housing/anti-gentrification campaigns (Smyth, 2019). As housing conditions deteriorated in the 1960s as a result of overcrowding, insufficient supply, poor living conditions, inadequate maintenance and ageing stock (Punch, 2009), housing protests started to take place across

Ireland. Housing action committees were established to push for better housing conditions in Dublin, particularly the Dublin Housing Action Committee (DHAC), which is normally identified as one of the first organised movements for housing rights in Dublin, followed by the National Association of Tenants' Organisations (NATO). As explained by Punch (2009) and Cox (2017), the 'de-tenanting' of flat complexes and rehousing programmes were often implemented in the face of vigorous local opposition to resettlement plans that moved local communities to the suburbs, and this developed bases for neighbourhood traditions of solidarity, consensus formation and direct action. DHAC adopted direct action to organise squatting at empty homes in Georgian inner-city Dublin by families who were facing homelessness, both as a political act and as a pragmatic attempt to address elements of the housing crisis (Smyth, 2019).

Later in the 1980s and 1990s, Concerned Parents against Drugs (CPAD) was created in response to the first wave of heroin abuse in Dublin's inner city. Much of the action at this time involved street-based resistance and oppositional stances towards top-down processes of urban change (Punch, 2009). As described in detail by Lyder (2005), these groups were organised around direct actions in order to evict dealers and to patrol the communities to curb drug dealing. Other examples of direct action from that period include the defence of public housing and anti-gentrification campaigns in Inchicore against the regeneration of St Michael's Estate. Since the 1990s, the working-class community there has been torn apart and has protested against a redevelopment project that prioritises private finance providers (Smyth, 2019). As noted by Cox (2017), the strongest pockets of activism were located in the most deprived working-class areas, which saw the benefits of community organisation in a process of collective self-education and mobilisation around concrete issues.

However, in the 1980s, and more strongly in the 1990s, a broad shift in governance started in Ireland which saw the demobilisation and professionalisation of local community development projects in the form of 'social partnerships'. The energy, capacity and empowerment of local communities and organisations were funnelled into the 'community and voluntary sector', as the government offered limited funding for direct service provision and the possibility of policy influence. The establishment of social partnership saw a de-politicisation and co-option of community activism, which gradually moved away from practices of community empowerment to introduce managerial practices, thus failing to understand and recognise the nature of community development (O'Byrne, 2012).

The introduction of water charges in 2013 functioned as the key catalyst in spurring the Irish anti-austerity movement. The anti-water charges movement started in local communities, with a campaign to boycott water bills and direct action against the installation of water meters. From this movement emerged the Right2Water umbrella group, based on the counter position to the revision of water as a commodity (Dukelow, 2016). Right2Water succeeded in having water charges lowered and then scrapped in 2016. It was also successful in terms of electoral politics and in reinvigorating a stronger and more radical political left in Ireland that may have more far-reaching and longer-term implications (Moore-Cherry et al., 2017). For many of the activists involved, the relative success of the water protests and the more recent success of the pro-abortion rights campaign (Together4Yes campaign) have developed into activism on the Irish housing crisis.

Methods

To examine the direct action tactics of autonomous housing groups in Dublin in the current housing crisis, this study uses thematic analysis on 31 semi-structured, qualitative interviews and documentary data relating to housing campaigns. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It provides rich details and allows for the interpretation of various aspects of a research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). A purposive sample approach was implemented to reach research participants most likely to be information rich. These were selected taking into consideration their participation in housing protests, their experience in direct action activities and their membership (formal or informal) in community-based housing groups. Interviewees are members of local neighbourhood groups, eviction watch groups and migrant groups. These are participants in the IHN and the TBTC collective – sometimes with overlapping membership. These two groups are mainly composed of small left-leaning groups, varied in their level of radicalism.

IHN is a collective of housing and homeless groups fighting the ongoing housing and homeless crisis. It is a horizontal, autonomous, loosely connected group of housing activists, community groups and NGOs that share a focus on community organising and it coordinates actions with groups across Ireland. It was responsible for the Home Sweet Home campaign that occupied Apollo House in 2016 and the Bolt Hostel in 2015. Similarly, TBTC worked as a non-violent direct action group that arose in response to Ireland's housing crisis and was created to engage particularly in direct action through the occupation of empty buildings, the staging of protest marches and the prevention of evictions.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and subsequently transcribed and safely stored. The interviews focused on the topics of mobilising for housing rights, the impact of mobilisation, and challenges and opportunities for direct action. In the data analysis phase, transcriptions were coded in NVivo software following two coding stages, namely, first and second cycle (see Saldaña, 2009). During the coding, I identified the main themes from the interviews. The analysis produced the four themes that are analysed in the next section. The study received ethical clearance from my university's ethics research committee.

Presentation of results and discussion: Autonomous practices in housing movements

The collected data show the history of how grassroots housing movements have strong connections to 'Right to the City' perspectives and housing justice movements, and better access to information and skills. The autonomous, grassroots housing activist networks and groups share a radical democracy framework along with diverse, horizontal and flexible organisations, with an action repertoire based on direct action. Four broad themes emerged from the interviews and documentary analysis: the justification for direct action, the differences among groups, state repression and diversity. These themes are presented and discussed below.

Justification for direct action

One of the main recurring themes from the analysis of the direct action activities was the justification for the use of direct action. A common view amongst interviewees was that direct action is key to the dynamic of recent protests and two discrete reasons emerged in the justification for its use. First, the politicisation of newly mobilised groups, especially groups connected to the Right2Water campaign, and an increased political awareness

about the current housing crisis, which affected the activists themselves and/or their communities. Second, direct action, which is seen as successful when it creates disruption and tension that forces the government to confront certain issues. The first reason, the politicisation of new groups, has been observed in previous research (i.e. Hearne et al., 2018; Mallon, 2017) but, in the interviews, it was suggested that people newly mobilised by their experience in the Right2Water protest, in combination with the seriousness of the housing crisis, served as motivators for the use of non-violent direct action. These newly mobilised people were referred to by interviewees as new to political engagement and also 'people who had nothing – or nearly nothing – to lose' (Participant 7), which would justify taking some of the risks direct action entails (e.g. state repression). As put by this IHN activist:

> They all come from different political backgrounds. You have people who have never got involved, people under threat of being evicted, students that cannot pay for a house, people couch surfing, it is a mix and match from everywhere, but especially young folks. (Participant 16)

The grassroots housing groups have attracted a substantial number of young people who are virtually excluded from the housing market (generation rent) and many of whom lacked previous activism experience. However, other groups previously active in the water movement engaged in grassroots housing activism. Participation in these protests led to a growing political consciousness in communities where activism had been dormant during the social partnership period. As explained by this activist, some of the structures around organising against water charges actually just developed into the structures for housing:

> A practical example of this would be meeting places, Facebook pages, like, a 'community says no to water charges'; 50% or 60% of those people, just filled right into housing, because they see it as a struggle against the government, the establishment. (Participant 5)

The motivation to engage in direct action was also warranted by the previous successes of the water movements and also by perceived efficacy of direct action compared with other forms of protest, such as holding placards in mass street protests. There was a sense amongst interviewees that some level of confrontation was needed and the best way to motivate people to engage was to focus on the housing precarity in the capitalist system. The use of research data from policy reports and the production of their own data on evictions, vacant properties and weak regulation (e.g. a report by IHN on the impact of short-term lettings on local communities) help to substantiate actions such as building occupations. This helps to shine a spotlight on injustices, making it much harder for authorities to ignore. As illustrated by this activist from a migrant group:

> What we wanted to show is the fact that they had so many empty buildings and so many empty houses while there are a lot of people living on the street. So, it was bringing this to the media and with that also gaining support for the actions so that we could continue. (Participant 2)

Direct action tactics implemented by participants were justified as a way to powerfully illuminate housing injustices. Their 'bold political action attracts more support than just going to protest on the streets' (Participant 4) in the view of direct action practitioners, and their ideological politics confronts those in power by challenging a system perceived to be unjust. The awareness and criticism of a product of contemporary

capitalism itself – housing injustice – mobilises activists to subvert the system in order to survive (Carter, 2010; Fominaya, 2014).

Direct action also has a spatial dimension. Activists selected particular sites and spaces for direct action to (a) contest private property norms, (b) highlight the failures of current housing policies, and (c) demonstrate that vacant buildings can be put to use and so shape and value the urban space. For example, the occupation of Apollo House in 2016 targeted a building owned by NAMA (National Asset Management Agency), an agency that managed property development loans from Irish banks. This occupation called attention not just to the bad condition of homeless shelters but also to the number of properties vacant in Dublin for the sake of real estate speculation. The choice of Apollo House symbolically claimed back the use of vacant buildings (i.e. it criticised the government's poor response to the housing and homeless crisis). It also emphasised that keeping buildings vacant is a political decision. Commenting on how particular buildings were chosen, one of the participants from IHN said that:

> There is increasing dissatisfaction with the housing crisis across communities in Ireland and when we take over buildings, people can understand why vacant housing would be occupied to show how unacceptable homelessness is, how emergency accommodation is and all the vacant housing that is available that could be used. (Participant 23)

The occupation of vacant sites in one of the most attractive locations for foreign direct investment in Dublin city centre highlights the contradictions and failures of the property market and the stress paradox of vacancy versus housing unaffordability (Lima, 2019; O'Callaghan et al., 2018). However, while building occupations enjoy a level of legitimacy as a valid insurgent practice by the radical left, this tactic is sometimes viewed in a negative light.

Institutional left and autonomous groups

In the Irish political landscape, as elsewhere, there are points of tension between two different approaches to politics and collective action, concerning horizontal autonomous and more vertical institutional-left actors. The choices of tactics and structures among these two groups are the source of most of the splits among the contemporary left. While both groups share some similar goals, they have not always worked easily together and, in some cases, the differences between them have prevented unified collective action (Fominaya, 2015). In the particular case of Ireland, traditional leftist parties and trade unions were too demobilised by years of social partnership and for a long time unable to organise and mobilise resistance. Into this vacuum, small grassroots communities and left activist protests emerged to support the resisting of austerity, starting with the 'Occupy' protests in 2011 and later with the anti-water charges protests (Hearne, 2015). When the Labour Party (centre-left) joined a coalition with Fine Gael (centre-right) after the 2011 general election, this was a breaking point for the left, which was already experiencing clashes, especially in the trade union sector.[1] As noted by Mallon (2017) and Hearne (2015), the institutional left was abandoned by new community groups, who took the opportunity to expand the Irish social movement repertoire through tactical innovation.

A variety of perspectives were expressed by interviewees to explain why they abandoned mainstream parties and today continue to resist working with the institutional left. These views surfaced mainly in relation to a feeling of 'betrayal' and the limited repertoire of the institutional left. As this

TBCT activist illustrates, autonomous groups are vexed at the Labour Party administering austerity and trade unions that are still tied to it:

> People being wary over large organisations, political parties, considering the context of the Labour Party in Ireland going into government with Fine Gael. There is a large amount of people, it is not just a far-left thing, people have a really negative feeling of being betrayed politically by what they saw as the left party at the time. (Participant 1)

The majority of the activists interviewed acknowledged their rejection of Labour. The presence of the party in housing protests and mainstream housing coalitions, such as the Raise the Roof campaign, upset and affronted far-left activists. This is explained by the party's perceived role in policies precipitating the housing crisis while in government with Fine Gael between 2011 and 2016. Others also criticised Sinn Féin's (centre-left) endorsement of the sale of public lands to private developers. Activists agreed that developing responses to housing problems requires bold solutions that begin with housing models that exist outside the for-profit market. Their engagement in prefigurative politics, involving a radical change of policy and an increased need to put vacant buildings to use, steered autonomous groups to organise outside the institutional left.

A common view amongst interviewees was that the typical repertoire of the institutional left is too limited. They often contrasted their own activities with the more structured and formally organised action of institutional left groups, such as trade unions, leftist political parties and housing charities, which often agree (with serious internal disputes sometimes) on exact routes for marches carefully coordinated with law enforcement. When the participants were asked about their preferred or most common form of direct action, the majority answered building occupation, surprise protest and obstruction. The former refers to taking over buildings to house and provide services to homeless people (as in the case of the Bolt Hostel or Apollo House occupations) but also includes sit-ins in government buildings, or in front receptions of the offices of private developers. The latter refers to stopping eviction orders being executed and closing roads in order to obstruct traffic, for example. Surprise protest concerns protests that are not communicated to the police in advance and are intended to create some sort of disruption by blocking traffic, as observed by this activist from TBTC:

> We make protests to mobilise and disturb too. Protests like this, without notifying the police. In protests, we change the route to try to create some kind of disturbance. (Participant 2)

As noted by Della Porta and Fillieule (2004), social movements rely on unconventional forms of political participation to disturb the daily routine, as they go beyond an 'acceptable level of disruption' to include illegal acts of civil disobedience as legitimate forms of political action. Only a small number of respondents indicated that the typical repertoire of content from the institutional left is useful but only if combined with more radical forms of action.

State repression

The housing question must be understood in relation to juridico-political structures, from the legal order of property to state violence and surveillance (Roy, 2017). The level of state repression triggered by direct action and civil disobedience is an indication of the collective power of this tactic. For grassroots housing groups, the creation of an autonomous space for resistance and solidarity illuminates the processes and practices of creating autonomy, as they often experiment

with non-capitalist ways of organising social and economic life (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). While forms of non-violent protest are guaranteed and protected by law, other types of contention, including the ones that involve civil disobedience, are constrained by legal norms and repressed by state forces. Building occupations, in particular, challenge the very core of private property rights. In appreciating that direct action is essentially confrontational, interviewees shared that the risks involved in direct action are worth taking in order to challenge existing structures of power. As described by this activist, civil disobedience might be essential in helping vulnerable people to face injustices:

> Laws are designed to restrain you. If houses are empty and there are people living on the streets, what is wrong with that picture? I might break the law if I want to help. (Participant 4)

This quote highlighted the courage needed to use tactics that can be innovative and bold but also risk being misinterpreted or considered overtly radical, triggering repression from the state. Research has shown that high-risk activities require strong ties among participants who are strongly committed to the group's goals (see Diani, 2015). Actors in social movements form alliances and connections with each other across issues, groups and geographical spaces in order to share resources and experiences that tie activists together in networks of support and solidarity.

As well as personal risks – such as arrest, prosecution, injury or worse – there are drawbacks to civil disobedience. The media can vilify activists or praise their actions, and activists have no control over how media outlets report on their actions. Repression from the state is one of the most relevant costs of taking part in collective action because of fear of the consequences, which can hinder collective action. This theme arose, for example, in discussions on the consequences, of direct action and how the commitment to the goals outweighs the risk of individual harm. Fear of retaliation and prosecution are very much on activists' minds. In speaking with activists who took part in three high-profile building occupations – Bolt Hostel (2015), Apollo House (2016) and Summerhill (2018), organised by IHN and TBTC – all of the interviewees made reference to the violence, threat of violence or persecution they were exposed to. The level of legalistic and physical sanctions unleashed by the state forced movement actors to review their strategic choices and consider their chances of success. The impact of a judicial order and the decision to leave one of the occupations mentioned above is described by one of TBTC members:

> I do not know what might have happened, but they were implying that those people that were named in the injunction would be held personally liable to what they considered to be property damage to the hostel. Financially they would be pursued, so that was that type of risk that we would have to decide if we would continue the occupation or not, so we opted for leaving the building. (Participant 8)

Whereas participants understand that high-risk activism (e.g. trespassing) entails some dangers, they continue to resist and defend the need for direct action, pointing out that most feel 'emboldened'. Other participants were also subjected to repression, in particular, activists occupying the house in North Frederick Street (Inner City Dublin) in 2018. Six activists were removed from the building by private security in balaclavas under the watchful eye of the Gardaí (Irish police force), who were also masked. There was a negative reaction from the public regarding the heavy-handed tactics adopted

by the Gardaí and private security. Whilst a minority of the activists mentioned that they expected to be removed, all agreed that the way the occupation ended was a high-risk situation. One IHN participant explained that:

> We were not afraid but concerned about it. I think when they allow for the repossession of houses and police brutality, they see how people come out against violence. Because something Irish people do not tolerate is police brutality. It strikes a chord with the public. (Participant 31)

While the policing of social protest has been somewhat tolerant of conventional forms of political protest, Della Porta and Fillieule (2004) have specified the types of repression mentioned above as 'ritualistic stand-offs', based on a more aggressive police presence but often at a distance. Irish policing is permeated by a history of political violence in the conflict in Northern Ireland, and despite the relatively high levels of trust in the force, the Gardaí have shown potential for aggressive repression (Conway, 2019). The accounts presented here suggest that activists can effectively navigate multidimensional repressive contexts but that state repression potentially impacts the strategies they employ (Chenoweth et al., 2017).

Diversity

The direct action of autonomous housing groups is consistent with an argument offered by Fominaya (2014), who argued that autonomous activists consider collective identity as being grounded in a recognition of difference and diversity. Therefore, as a political subject, housing activism has multiple overlapping identities. The struggles concerning affordable and fair access to housing are often intertwined with systems of oppression and racism in today's multiple domains of urban inequality. Housing is also implicated in systemic racism and, in many contexts, housing exclusion has been intertwined with racism (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Research participants reported viewing multiple power structures – racism, poverty, discrimination – as being linked to the resistance against oppressive forces and that this resistance was the path towards social justice.

During a crisis such as this, the shortage of housing and increasing homelessness are often blamed on immigrants. As one of the respondents from TBTC noted:

> [The shortage] of housing is used by different racist groups and individuals that goes as 'we need to look after our own first and we don't have enough houses' or 'migrants are creating housing problems in Ireland'. So that's why it's our conscious decision to be part of the housing group and make sure that our voice is heard. (Participant 20)

The recognition by autonomous groups that more vulnerable people suffer different kinds of oppression, such as racism and discrimination, has encouraged the creation of new groups and a multiplicity of interventions designed not just to address housing rights but also to incorporate working rights and anti-discrimination legislation. Direct action, for many activists, is useful in highlighting unequal and discriminatory practices, making them more evident. An example is the Summerhill occupation staged by TBTC, which was prompted by the mass eviction of about 120, mostly immigrant, tenants and which had an inclusive anti-racist narrative (Sassi, 2020). According to Franks (2003), these areas of contestation and zones of autonomous behaviour create nodes where prefigurative, supportive relations can be formed with other groups. These new groups understand the housing question as being inseparable from the issues of racism and migration.

Anti-racism and also feminist activists have highlighted the ways in which the housing crisis reinforces and, in turn, is reinforced by patriarchy and white supremacy (Madden, 2019). Grassroots networks use non-violent direct action and assemblies for fostering participation, while embracing diversity as a core value. The housing networks that took part in this research involved a wide range of groups including those from an anti-racism, feminist and LGBT background. In fact, the heterogeneous social composition of autonomous housing groups demonstrates that new models of social relations and reproduction can be experimented with through combining a set of non-negotiable principles (such as being against racism, sexism and homophobia). The participation of ethnic minorities has been positive, as these groups and their networks embrace cultural diversity as a result of an intersectional agenda that sometimes clashes with progressive movements who have a difficult time engaging the marginalised or excluded, such as migrants. Eschle (2018) also made this observation, noting that the most progressive social movements are also subject to the processes of patriarchal and Western-centric globalisation. While migrants, especially migrant women, spoke of being heard and accepted within their autonomous networks, some of them spoke of difficult relations with mainstream housing movements connected to the institutional left. Participants from a migrant background also described either being used as 'tokens' or excluded and ignored outright, especially in relation to speaking in housing protests and events. These examples are in stark contrast with autonomous movements that attempt to use feminist and ethnic/racial political grammars although they often recognise the challenges involved in focusing on several issues at the same time. The political practices of autonomous groups often depict, in my interpretation, a critical mass of direct action based on the strength of multiple identities and prefigurative actions employed to protest against housing inequality.

Conclusion

I have documented the ways in which housing activists use direct action and protest within the framework of housing justice. I explored some of the ways autonomous housing groups based in Dublin engage in direct action activities, with a focus on the forms these take and on the challenges they face in trying to promote a radical change of policy. These new autonomous housing movements are radical in that their demands go well beyond increased housing regulations – they aspire to a future in which the private market is diminished and non-commercial, where local-authority-controlled housing plays a central role in the access to affordable housing. The study has shown that some of their characteristics and tactics are directly connected with their commitment to create autonomous spaces independent of the institutional left and to differentiate themselves from it, first by rejecting vertical, structured networks with a formal leadership that can become co-opted and, second, by perceiving direct action and disruption as essential to their fight against housing injustices.

Activists have contested housing injustices through actions that target the main contradictions of the current housing crisis, showing housing precarity as a political problem and clearly pointing to the financial actors involved in key housing decisions: corporate landlords and property speculators, as well as the lack of tenant protections. This suggests the financialisation of housing has considerable importance when it comes to urban struggles, with housing clearly politicised in new ways. On the one hand, these findings further support the idea of housing as a political subject and a space of resistance (Fields, 2017; Lancione, 2019; Madden and

Marcuse, 2016; Muñoz, 2017). On the other hand, a significant finding from this research involves the novel ways anti-racism activists have highlighted how the housing crisis reinforces oppression against the more vulnerable groups in Ireland, such as migrants. It has also highlighted the challenges and consequences of getting involved in direct action for a young generation of activists and the main conflict on the left in the contemporary Irish political landscape. Additionally, as noted at the outset, direct action is key to the prefigurative politics of housing activists. The resurgence of housing movements, in Ireland and beyond, indicates the ways housing has developed into a topic characterised by antagonism and political struggle. More recently, the struggles of renters paying exorbitant rents in Ireland have given rise to tenant organising taking place across the country, as new forms of resistance continue to emerge around the issue of affordability, evictions, overcrowding and poor-quality accommodation in the private rental sector.

As noted in the literature, the urgency of the housing crisis and the increase in housing inequality act as motivation for direct action (Byrne, 2019; García-Lamarca, 2017; Listerborn et al., 2020; Wilde, 2019). Despite some high profile and relatively successful building occupations, it remains difficult to find a consensus around the occupation of buildings, even if previous occupations gathered positive support from the public and the media. The movement's confrontational approach brings to the fore the relevance of politicising the housing crisis from the perspective of those facing housing precarity and oppression. Even if building occupations culminate in court injunctions, these groups are attempting to prefigure the fulfilment of housing needs as they understand it should be. Their ability to respond to the constraints of state repression and property norms suggests the vibrancy of these movements and how their tactics are compatible with their prefigurative aims.

Despite focusing here on the dynamics of housing justice in Ireland, these findings are pertinent to housing activism in other countries and relevant in other contexts. The increasing capacity of housing movements for self-organisation and collective mobilisation has emerged in various places, from Chile to Vancouver and from Lisbon to Bucharest. Their collaborative efforts contribute to placing housing justice on the political agenda, from both the local and international perspectives. The domination of the housing sector by financial corporations and the transformation of housing into a commodity and, consequently, an instrument for wealth generation, is being felt in various major global cities, as corporate landlords become the face of housing financialisation today (Fields and Uffer, 2016). The study adds to our understanding of the challenges and possibilities relating to direct action in housing protests and should help to increase the relevance of collective action when it comes to housing rights. Further research might carry out a cross-national study involving different cities and a cross-movement analysis, such as with climate justice, which has recently become more visible.

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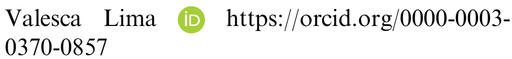
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Note

1. The story of infighting among left-wing parties in Ireland during the economic austerity is fascinating and convoluted, therefore impossible to discuss fully here. See Hearne (2015) and Cox (2017).

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