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## Anti-gentrification nelle città (Sud) Europee

Anti-gentrification in (Southern) European cities

Edited by Sandra Annunziata Commentary by Loretta Lees

- Tonia Katerini |
- Libera Repubblica di San Lorenzo |
- Left Hand Rotation | Agustin Cocola-Gant & Daniel Pardo, ABTS |
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- Andra Annunziata |
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- Mara Ferreri |
- Thomas Maloutas |Pietro Saitta |
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# Anti-gentrification nelle città (Sud) Europee

Anti-gentrification in (Southern) European cities



## Tra attivismo, analisi delle politiche e ricerca Between activism, policy analysis and research



@ Andrej Holm |

# Berlin: anti-gentrification between protest and program

Berlino: anti-gentrification tra protesta e programma

Negli ultimi dieci anni Berlino è diventata la capitale della crisi abitativa tedesca. Cambiamenti demografici, strategie di investimento alterate e la battuta di arresto dello Stato nei confronti di politiche per l'abitare sociale non hanno avuto solo l'effetto di aumentare drasticamente il costo degli affitti ma hanno anche portato ad una crisi abitativa strutturale. La gentrification non è più solo un fenomeno che riguarda singoli quartieri ma è diventata una normalità per porzioni vaste dell'area urbana di Berlino dove movimenti sociali urbani e iniziative locali hanno combattuto il processo di gentrification per anni. Le loro proposte sono state integrate nelle strategie e politiche delle più recenti coalizione di governo cittadino (SPD, DIE LINKE, GREENS) formatesi in seguito al cambiamento di governo nel 2016. Il paper commenta questa fase di innovazione nelle politiche di housing a Berlino analizzandone le potenzialità e i limiti per una possibile politica della casa anti-displacement.

## The Berlin housing crisis

Until a few years ago Berlin was considered to be among the most affordable European metropoles for housing. This was possible thanks to a high percentage rates of public and social housing stock, extensive construction activity, and substantial public funding programmes. All of these factor limited the profit expectations of private investors and guaranteed affordable rents in almost all parts of the city. The dynamics of gentrification were spatially confined to a few selected neighbourhoods of the East Berlin urban core.

However, in the last years Berlin has been transformed into a city with a structural housing crisis. Reasons for these changes lie in the population growth of the past decade, very limited new housing construction, and above all a neoliberal decimation of social housing. The privatisation of more than 200,000 public housing units into the hands of mainly financial funds (Uffer 2011), the termination of funding programmes for new social housing units, and the liberalisation of building and tenancy laws have transformed Berlin's housing market into an arena of profit expectations (Holm 2011). The growing gap between existing rent-controlled tenancy agreements and the realisable rent levels from new tenants, in particular, has resulted in enormous displacement pressures as owners are now able to generate significantly higher rental income from new tenants without any additional investments. Turning rental property into owner-occupied property, utilising refurbishment notifications and other reasons to ask for the enforcement of a faster eviction are all signifiers of an intensification of displacement pressures, which is caused by the rent gap. Incentives for modernisation and the danger of displacement are, by far, no longer restricted to clearly localised neighbourhoods. Gentrification has become the new urban norm for vast parts of the urban core and, over the past few years, has begun to affect quarters outside the usual geographical marker of the inner urban core, the S-Bahn Ring (Holm 2013).

Gentrification and displacement are thus part of this structural housing crisis. In total, more than 100,000 housing units are needed in order to supply every household in needs with proper accommodation. The supply deficit is even higher if we consider the amount of affordable housing¹, in this fraction 150,000 additional units would be necessary to accommodate low-income earners (Holm 2016). Due to the rapid closure of funding programmes for social housing, apartments with rent control and secure tenancies are particularly in short supply, consequently an increasing number of people are seeking accommodation but are almost entirely excluded from the market. The city-wide rent increase mean that every move of home (even into significantly smaller apartments) comes with higher financial pressure². Many households are too poor to be displaced and try to compensate for these higher rents with over-occupation, subletting, and the reduction of other vital costs. Displacement from a neighbourhood in Berlin is accompanied by a displacement of one's living standards.

## New wave of tenants' protests in Berlin

A wave of housing political protest emerged in response to these developments and displacement pressures. Since 2010, citizens started to actively mobilize for the access to housing and against displacement. In addition to the ongoing struggles of several former squats, we can distinguish several types of mobilisation: *interventionist street protests, neighbourhood initiatives, organised housing cooperatives,* and *subject-specific campaigns*.

Interventionist street protests originated in the protests against the controversial investment project MediaSpree, which intended to transform the banks of the River Spree into a landscape of concrete office buildings (Dohnke 2013). In this case a series of smaller, campaign-like protests have formed against luxury new-builds (Crossland 2009) and the temporary siting of international cultural projects in Berlin Kreuzberg (Kompatsiari 2017, p. 57; Vartanian 2012). The activities of these interventionist street protest

- **1\_** Affordability is defined in Berlin as the costs of an apartment not exceeding 30% of a household's net income.
- 2\_ As a response to the housing market development, the number of house moves within Berlin decreased significantly between 2007 (350,000 internal moves) and 2015 (275,000 moves) despite rising population numbers (Amt für Statistik 2016).

consisted in demonstrations, poster campaigns, the disruption of official events, as well as targeting buildings with paint bombs and stones. Far more specific and continuous are the activities of the group Stop Evictions Berlin which has organised protests against forced evictions since 2012. The group draws on a combination of self-organisation, public relations works, and civil disobedience to stop forced evictions<sup>3</sup>. The initiative's ability to mobilise is considerable, e.g. in February 2013 more than 1,000 people took part in a blockade of a forced eviction in Kreuzberg. Despite the fact that the eviction was eventually successful due to police deployment that lasted several hours, the Stop Eviction Berlin's position for future conflicts was strengthened by this event. Many landlords shying away from such sustained attention, and cancelled evictions before that the Stop Eviction Campaign would announce protest. The interventionist street protests primarily focus on a specific reason for mobilising and do not pursue any agenda of policy reform besides abstract demands ('No wholesale of the city', 'Rent is not for profit'). However, the activities against forced evictions, with their demand to the housing associations and the Social Welfare Office of suspending evictions, are an exceptions.

Neighbourhood initiatives and local associations have formed in approximately fifteen neighbourhoods of the urban core to critically observe the changes in their residential areas and to support neighbours in their arguments with landlords. Many of the neighbourhood initiatives document cases of displacement and changes to their neighbourhood on their websites4. The initiatives investigate not only the displacement of tenants but also the construction of new housing projects, increasing touristification, as well as the conversion of rental property into holiday lets<sup>5</sup>. A fairly new area of concern for these neighbourhood organizations is the defence of long-established local shops against displacement. Shops catering for day-to-day needs, in particular, often have to make way for catering businesses, small boutique shops, and flagship stores. In Kreuzberg, neighbourhood initiatives were successful in preventing the displacement of a grocer, a bakery, a bookstore and a florist. These local associations organized meetings with several hundred participants, petitions and demonstrations that successfully putted pressure on the owners and the local district to provide long-term security for the businesses. In addition to providing information in and for the neighbourhood, to being present in conflicts and making an often personal address to the owners, many initiatives also aim to confront local district policy. Arising from actual conflicts in the neighbourhood, these neighbourhood initiatives have created a series of demands to reform policy. Many initiatives, such as support the extension of protected neighbourhoods and demand a ban on holiday lets, as well as demanding the increased application of the municipal right to first refusal Vorkaufsrecht 6.

More than 100 organized housing groups have been set up city-wide to enforce their right to housing. Besides legal attempts to avert rent rises, refurbishment and the conversion of rental into owner-occupied property, many housing cooperatives went public and addressed specific political demands to the district administrations and the Local Government. While protests of housing groups has mainly remained fragmented, the tenant struggles were able to establish a series of demands for political reform in the ensuing public debate. In 2011/12, for instance several groups produced a joint catalogue of demands ('The dossier on rent policy') addressed to the state government

- 3\_ Around 6,000 forced evictions are pursued each year in Berlin. In particular, in city centre districts with their high rents for new tenants, landlords increasingly justify the termination of a tenancy agreement not only with rent arrears but with lesser causes such as 'contravention of house rules', 'obstruction of building work', or a 'breakdown in trust'. The courts and administration report that landlords far less often agree to out of court settlements and mutually agreed resolution. The higher the expectation of profit due to a change of tenant, the more uncompromising the owner's inclination to evict (Berner et al. 2015). 4 Different grassroots
- mapping projects on displacement and gentrification: http://www.wem-gehoe-rt-kreuzberg.de/index.php/karte-verdraengungsprozesse, https://moabit.crowd-map.com/, http://www.bi-zim-kiez.de/blog/2015/06/24
- se, https://mounterwormap.com/, http://www.bizim-kiez.de/blog/2015/06/24/ karte-der-verdraengung-in-s036-map-of-displacement/
- **5**\_ A survey of internet platforms such as Airbnb shows that around 25,000 apartments in central Berlin are used as holiday lets and are thus missing from an urgently needed supply of housing (http://www.airbnbvsberlin.de/).
- **6**\_ Vorkaufsrecht is a special right to intervene into property transactions and to take properties into public hands.

(http://mietendossier.blogsport.de/). Their demands included: a cap on refurbishment, a stronger protection against conversion into ownership, the restriction of demolitions, and a re-communalisation of already privatised housing stock. Social housing tenants have, since 2012, organised a series of events and a conference to develop proposals for social housing reform (Hamann et al. 2016). The quality of the proposals and their underlying ideas was so advanced that the city administration appointed several spokesperson of the housing groups to take part to an expert commission for social housing reform. While mobilising for a city-wide referendum on rents, a cooperation of numerous initiatives developed a legislative proposal ('Housing supply bill') in order to fundamentally reform public and social housing (Braun 2015).

A number of more strongly institutionalised initiatives have become established in recent years as a further element of the new tenants' protests in Berlin. With subject-specific expertise and political dialogue, these institutionalised initiatives take the form of subject-specific campaigns and seek to influence different instruments of urban and housing policy. One of them is the 'Initiative: Thinking the City Anew' which was formed by a circle of young architects, town planners, and cultural workers in 2011 as a broad alliance for re-orientating real estate policy in cooperation with different organisations. The initiative's central demand is to utilise the development and allocation of public real estate in Berlin as an instrument for the promotion of social and cultural diversity. Following a decade of austerity and public real estate being routinely sold to the highest bidder, the initiative calls for a moratorium on sales, more transparency in real estate policy, and to restrict any future real estate allocations to land subject to hereditary leaseholds. The initiative convene a round table on real estate policy which has for many years provided a regular and consistent forum for discussion between these type of initiatives, the Berlin Senate, political parties, and organisations. In contrast to the otherwise usual means of participation, the initiative puts forward a committed goal (to develop guidelines for Berlin's real estate policv) and sets the agenda. The concept of 'Transparent real estate' was adopted by the Senate in 2014 and is directly based in the discussions of the round table (Initiative Stadt Neudenken 2014). The initiative City from Below also aims to influence urban policy in Berlin. Originating in the demand to obtain public real estate from the Federal State (the Dragonerareal in Kreuzberg) for municipal use, the initiative so far has developed a series of proposals on how municipal planning can be done with meaningful neighbourhood participation. It aims to develop a model of how the 'best ideas of self-organised projects can be brought together with the best characteristics of municipal housing supply' (https://stadtvonunten.de/). The initiative promotes a different construction policy in Berlin by way of public events, participation in various subject-specific political committees, and direct discussions with those politically responsible.

## The city belongs to you:

## from an election campaign motto to a coalition agreement

The economy of valorisation and the geographical expansion of gentrification have created new forms of housing protest in Berlin. Despite the largely fragmented form of individual struggles, collectivising the housing question has nonetheless contributed towards the politisation of housing and, with a series of reform proposals, has defined the political standards of housing for future governments.

Ahead of the election for the Berlin Parliament in September 2016, the future coalition partners had already developed closer cooperation with a series of tenants' initiatives. While the Greens and DIE LINKE as parties of the opposition coordinated aspects of their parliamentary work with social movements, the SPD was forced to cooperate with a successful petition for the first stage of the Rent Referendum. DIE LINKE introduced in their election campaign posters the slogan 'The city belongs to you' and tried to put that promise into practice after the election. During the coalition negotiations. individual emissaries of the parties were in discussion with tenant activists from housing groups, neighbourhood groups and subject specific campaigns. The latter were able to influence the goals of the coalition to the point of the phrasing specific passages of the government program. The opening towards an urban society, as promised during the election campaign, was initially realised, and the handwriting of the 'street' has become visible in the government programme. Under the heading 'Affordable housing for all', the new coalition's political goals for housing were detailed in more than ten pages of the coalition agreement (SPD; Die Linke; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). The central demands of the urban political movements of recent years in respect to housing encompasses the following objectives and will likely influence the design of housing policy in the future.

Real estate policy. Until now real estate was mainly regarded as an instrument of debt liquidation and arranged accordingly by resorting to a policy of selling to the highest bidder. In future, the sustainable and strategic management of urban land should be pursued as a goal. Public land for housing construction should be solely given to state-owned housing associations, cooperatives and social housing associations. The allocation criteria for sales or lease agreements have to be shaped in such a manner that 30% to 50% of the inhabitable space created falls under rent controls and offers tenancy protection. For the establishment of new building sites, the model of cooperative site development will be applied in order to force private companies to offer at least 30% of the inhabitable space as rent controlled and tenancy protected units.

Social housing. The remaining housing stock of around 100,000 social housing units from earlier funding periods have to be protected from premature termination of their social aims and for the long term. A comprehensive reform also aims to reduce rent levels and to orientate them according to the tenants' income. Picking up the claim to municipalize the social housing stock pilot projects should be promoted with the acquisition of privately-owned social housing through residents' cooperatives.

Public housing. According to the conditions of the coalition agreement, the six state-owned housing associations with their approximately 300,000 units should, from now on, become the central pillar of social housing supply; 60% of the tenancy agreements for this stock should be given to households with low income (below the threshold for housing benefits, according with the certificate of eligibility for housing). Rent rises should be limited to 2% p.a. and the costs of refurbishment are only admissible up to 6% of the annual rent. With these agreements, the future government programme also took on board the demands of tenant initiatives such as *Tenants Forum Pankow* and the Rent Referendum.

Securing housing and protection against displacement. Another key area of

future housing policy lies in the more rigorous application of instruments based in tenancy and urban planning law to protect against displacement and to limit property speculation. The abuse of apartments as holiday lets and vacancies should be more strongly sanctioned than before (for instance by limiting or prohibit uses change). For future demolition permits, there should be regulations in place for appropriate replacement of housing. Furthermore, a charter to protect neighbourhoods, regulations for conversions, and municipal rights to take over private properties have to be extended and designed more effectively. Here, too, the demands of neighbourhood initiatives, support groups for those affected, and tenancy rights organisations have been adopted by the new Government Coalition.

Since the new coalition came into government in 2016, first steps have been taken in the realisation of a new housing policy. However, the realisation of many of these plans is delayed due to the slow moving wheels of the administration, initial tensions between the coalition partners, and the resistance of housing companies to put into practice new obligations. These difficulties demonstrate how important the work and the protests of a whole set of initiatives and grassroots movements are in seeding up processes of change and law reforms. Even under the conditions of a progressive government the following rule applies: only political pressure from below, the calling out of grievances and the highlighting of solutions can secure a solution for social housing supply.

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