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Demunicipalisation, unaccountability by design and housing safety from below

Safe as Houses (2019) is first and foremost a book on the Grenfells-about-to-happen throughout the UK in as diverse sectors as housing, transport, health and education. The focus is mainly on housing, but the private greed and political negligence of the subtitle extend beyond the privatisation of municipal housing – its renovation, maintenance and management - to outline the mechanics and logics of a wider erosion and transformation of the role of the state to plan and safeguard the common good. Council housing, ever the wobblier pillar of a diminishing welfare state (Malpass, 2003), becomes the starting point for a detailed examination of the actors, processes and consequences of wider dynamics of privatisation, demunicipalisation and building deregulation. As one engages with Hodkinson's long-term endeavour of documenting and analysing Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) regeneration programmes across the country, the term 'privatisation' appears increasingly inadequate. With its apparent simplicity, it obfuscates sets of historical and contemporary relations that deeply trouble the distinction between private and public provision. As acknowledged in the book, municipal housing in the UK was never a fully decommodified provision in its circuits of production and maintenance. And its demunicipalisation – sometimes seen as 'privatisation through the back door' – should not be seen as a mono-directional process, from public to private, or even as an 'alternative privatisation', but rather as a dynamic, parasitic relationship between, on the one hand, 'public' elements of housing and the wider built environment, and, on the other, private actors and their outsourced subsidiaries. In PFIs, this relationship is as extractive as it is dependent on the municipal public and it users: enclosing but keeping some elements 'public' in order to sustain the privatisation of profit-making.

My use of 'enclosure' is intentional. Elsewhere, Hodkinson has referred to the demolition and privatisation of municipal housing in the UK as one of the largest contemporary enclosure of a commons (2012). While it is highly debatable whether council housing has ever met the criteria of a 'housing common', this is nonetheless an interesting theoretical and political proposition to expand the debate beyond public/private dichotomies, and to help sketching out the multiple immaterial enclosures at play. Demunicipalisation goes further than the privatisation of bricks, mortar and tragically combustible cladding. The geographies of PFI agreements reveal not only the complex legal arrangements into which local governments enter, in some cases for decades, but also, importantly, the terrifying horizon of the near-total outsourcing of all technical aspects of housing and construction management, from legal to financial, governance, regulation and its enforcement. The first enclosure thus concerns the depletion and commodification of housing knowledge and expertise, through a fundamental transfer of knowledge, data and know-how, which provides the private sector with, in Hodkinson's words, an 'enormous knowledge advantage'. This issue requires greater attention than perhaps has been given to this date. The longue durée of most of these processes generate near monopoly conditions for a handful of large companies and their ancillary services. Such a technological and governance corporate lock-in (Kitchin, 2014) delineates a geography of diminishing know-how and the discontinuation of existing practices and functions. The situation paves the way for the foreclosure of a non-corporate housing future, even if were there political will to imagine and implement one. Such an erosion is made increasingly tangible by the regular move of workers from decommissioned local authority and central government departments to building contractors and larger regeneration and real estate corporations: what housing activists refer to as the 'revolving doors' phenomenon (35percent campaign, 2013). In a wider sense of the technology of the 'public', this reflection should prompt a rethinking of demunicipalisation in housing and other provisions for the common good as proceeding in lockstep with corporate dependency on private firms and a much broader loss of 'technological sovereignty' (Morozov and Bria, 2019). Critical geographies of demunicipalisation should thus give centre place to this more intangible dimension of housing as a common: the knowledge and know-how of the essential, but often invisible, infrastructure of

construction, management and maintenance. Building on this, the second enclosure concerns the erosion of safety in housing (and the built environment more broadly) as a matter of common concern. This enclosure extends way beyond council housing, as it is becoming everyday clearer with the Grenfells-about-to-happen, many of which of recent construction, across all tenures.[i] Casting a spotlight on the unmaking of protocols of building regulation and enforcement over the past decade shows a profound privatisation and outsourcing of mechanisms of oversight, and the unlinking of chains of accountability. As the unfolding of the Inquiry make visible, the thick infrastructures of outsourcing are opaque and unaccountable by design. On Grenfell and elsewhere, public and community members who raised questions about quality and safety are often caught into binding contractual obligations and non-disclosure agreements characteristic of urban development's 'era of regulatory capitalism' (Braithwaite, in Raco, 2014), at a time of unprecedented planning deregulation. In this sense, the 'accountability vacuum' is created not so much by the enclosure of accountability, but by corporate-institutional mechanisms that siphon out the air in a de/regulatory stranglehold.

Against the backdrop of the 'accountability vacuum', the book can be read as an implicit testament to all those minor practices of everyday accountability, which are familiar to all those researchers working with communities on council estate but which are perhaps overlooked by debates in housing policy, welfare retrenchment and privatisation. Monitoring, documenting issues in the built environment, learning about shifts in planning and policies, engaging with the bureaucratic mechanisms of escalating complaints, supporting applications for repairs, relocation or compensation, speaking out against neglect, indifference, and even threat: these and more are common activities on demunicipalising estates, neighbourhoods and cities. In contrast, examples of shared knowledge and 'accountability from below' run across the case studies of *Safe as Houses*, highlighting the vast amount of political labour and care that goes into maintaining (council) housing as safe as possible within the cost-cutting, unaccountable and necropolitical logics that undergird poor maintenance, botched refurbishment and partial or full privatisation. It is undeniably important to understand the making of council estate tenants as disposable subjects within much wider politics of stigma (Shildrick, 2018) and chronic disaster (Fernandez-Arrigoitia, 2019), and how such disposability intersects with the urbanisation of racial capitalism (Danewid, 2019). It is also equally important, I believe, to value and make visible the ongoing, everyday accountability work of residents and committed community groups to expose and counter the deep disavowal of democratic processes (MacLeod, 2018). Perhaps one of the most remarkable consequences of the Grenfell fire was its power to shake up the debate by making visible unparalleled solidarity and the articulate, angry voices of urban communities fighting back the 'social death' to which they are condemned. The initial responses to the fire reclaimed brief media visibility for a politics of life that escaped and challenged the compounded negligence and greed of 'privatised regeneration'. In its long aftermath, much work of piecing together the truth, bringing accountability, coping with collective grieving and homelessness, is still done through self-organisation and volunteering at the margins of 'public' institutional channels and responses. Here and elsewhere, it is this work, attention, and painstaking advocacy, day after day, that ensure that other Grenfells-about-to-happen are exposed and risks minimised.[ii] These are life-sustaining politics of knowledge production and care that emerge alongside, and often in antagonism with, both private greed and political negligence.

In a moment when political attention is captured by the institutional processes of accountability of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, there is a need to acknowledge the myriad ways in which neighbours, community groups, sympathetic professionals and researchers, in Kensington and elsewhere, *make* housing *safe* in their practices of solidarity and mutual support. It is from this reflection that I wonder why the book's most normative propositions remain within the familiar framework of a call for mechanisms of independent overview of regulations and for more municipal housing, albeit reclaimed from logics of privatisation, greed and democratic disavowal. Can housing politics after Grenfell be contained within the boundaries of a debate that reproduces private/public dichotomies and that displaces the housing question, once again, to the territory of state politics? What about the reclaimed collective knowledges and labours of accountability that

make such housing liveable against all odds? What would it mean to re-centre a critical geography of housing demunicipalisation on life-sustaining counter-practices from below? If corporate lock-in is fundamentally parasitic on both public-municipal and communities of residents-users, there is a need to start from the former to acknowledge already existing practices of commoning as a foundation to resisting enclosures but also, importantly, to formulate radically different future practices for the common good. Without wanting to diminish the importance of the labour of accountability and policy critique, these questions point to an urgent need to reposition such a geographical research within a much wider strategy and set of everyday practices to reclaim housing and other 'public' provision – in their complex interconnection of regulation, governance, financing, professional and bottom up knowledges and know-how, but also solidarity and care – as a common.

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[i] See 'Thousands trapped in limbo by post-Grenfell fire safety standards', https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/feb/02/thousands-in-limbo-over-grenfell-cladding-fire-safety-guidelines
[ii] An example in point is the Ledbury Action Group and their housing safety campaigning set up in June 2017, see https://www.ledburyestate.com/ (accessed 10/3/2020).