

Building the “Neue Menschen” Reformers, the State and Working-Class Housing

Sean Purdy

John Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy* (Kingston-Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1993).

Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna: Experiment in Working-Class Culture, 1919-1934* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991).

David Widgery, *Some Lives! A GP’s East End* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson 1991).

The foreman employed by a big contractor rushed into the office of the boss, wild-eyed and palpitating. “Boss,” said he, in a greatly agitated voice, “one of them new houses of ours fell down in the night!” “What was the matter? How did it happen?” “It was the fault of the workmen, boss,” answered the foreman, “They made the mistake of taking down the scaffolding before they put on the wall paper.”¹

This joke made the rounds among Toronto’s construction workers during the First World War. It was a time of severe housing crisis marked by widespread concern over shoddy dwelling construction, poor sanitary conditions and critical housing shortages for the city’s burgeoning population. Seventy-six years later similar apprehension abounds among the mainstream press, municipal politicians and social welfare organizations in the advanced capitalist countries, as protracted economic dislocation and a ruthless hollowing out of public services is once again placing the health and efficiency of the workforce in question. While we do not yet hear foreboding cries of an impending ‘plague of beggars,’ as late Victorian critics warned, the systematic gutting of public housing, a sunken housing market and the mounting difficulties of families who are trying to keep up with the mortgage has rekindled concern in the “Housing Question” so beloved of early twentieth-century social reformers.

It is supremely ironic that at the very moment when the ability of capitalism to deliver the goods has been sharply called into question, books still appear premised on the bold certainties of the post-1945 period. In the housing sphere, rising levels of home ownership and an interventionist welfare state, as part of a general so-called embourgeoisification, prompted many on the left and right in the 1960s and 70s to argue that capitalism had discovered a permanent way to buy itself out of social conflict. Belief in the inevitable prosperity and dominance of capitalism gained a new lease on life in the ‘booming’ 1980s, spawning a veritable industry of post-modernist, post-Fordist, post-XYZ theories. Curiously, they seem to have lost much of their attraction in the last few years.² The recent publications of books dealing with key

1 Phillips Thompson, “Modern Housebuilding,” *Canadian Forward* 10 May 1917.

2 For commentaries see Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York 1990) and *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (London 1991).

aspects of the working-class housing experience from historical and contemporary perspectives afford us an opportunity to evaluate the state of the literature in the recession-ridden 1990s when a depressed housing market, endemic homelessness and spiralling mortgage foreclosures prevail.

John Bacher’s monograph on the evolution of Canadian housing policy is written from the perspective of a social housing activist *cum* academic concerned with the limited successes and failures of government policy to house adequately those Canadians unable to afford decent shelter. In a conventional policy history, he rigorously details the nefarious manoeuvrings of key state officials, at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, to block the development of a vibrant social housing sector. Resorting to various bureaucratic ruses and outright chicanery, W.C. Clark, deputy minister of Finance in the 1930s and 40s, his successors at Canadian Mortgage and Housing Finance (CMHC), and various obstructionist conservatives at the provincial and municipal levels, ensured that their friends in big finance and real estate garnered the lion’s share of concern in housing policy.

Governments at all levels in the postwar era persistently promoted private home ownership rather than creating viable public rental housing. As a result, Canada now has a minuscule proportion of its population housed in government-assisted shelter. Between 1949 when the federal government first fully accepted the principle of social housing and 1964 when amendments to the National Housing Act allowed for a direct relationship between the three levels of government, leading to the rapid expansion of public housing production in Ontario, only 873 units of social housing were produced in the entire country. (3) As Bacher concludes, it is ironic that the final acceptance of the *principle* of public housing also marked the federal government’s *practical* withdrawal from the public rental field. The few success stories, especially seniors’ housing and the few large public housing ventures, were encumbered by excessive red tape and often undermined by restrictive rental policies. (187)

If Bacher’s culprits are the uncaring officials of the government bureaucracy and finance capital, then his heroes are the “Red Tory” and social democratic academics and politicians, inspired with an “ethic of community,” (ix) who managed to wrench some concessions out of the hostile market-oriented bureaucrats. Eschewing the liberal emphasis on Canada as a straightforward success story and the Marxist stress on structural constraints and class conflict, he stresses the “creative class coalitions” of enlightened academics and popular constituency which have sowed the seeds of “social solidarity” (ix) crucial to the success of reforms. In this way, “dedicated social reformers” coaxed “the Canadian political system to respond to their proposals.” (31)

While the ‘ideology’ of reformers and bureaucrats is central to Bacher’s appraisal, it veers far from the traditional Marxist usage of the term as a set of ideas that people have about the world which distort or ignore the actual relations of exploitation and oppression in capitalism. In *Keeping to the Marketplace*, ideology essentially denotes the social attitudes and political will of key individuals in the history of housing policy. (23) Several times in the text, Bacher relies on the stylistic device of personification to analyze the trajectories of policy formulation. For instance, W.C. Clark, a determined opponent of Wartime Housing Limited (WHL), the government’s attempt at direct public housing construction to solve the housing crisis brought on

by the Second World War command economy, is contrasted to J.M. Pigott, a Red Tory, building contractor and head of WHL, dedicated to consolidating and expanding social housing schemes.⁽¹²⁰⁾ Yet little attention is given to the larger social and economic context in Bacher's analysis. Individuals as expressions of larger social forces tend to get lost in personalities. In this respect, Bacher is unable or unwilling to deal with why his cherished social democrats and Red Tories have accepted the logic of cutback in the 1980s and 90s, resulting in wholesale attacks on social services and welfare.³

By slighting the social and political contours of the welfare state, *Keeping to the Marketplace* obscures important influences on policy formulation. Feminist and socialist housing historians have begun to poke behind conventional accounts of the welfare state, uncovering a distinct gender bias in social reform and the active struggles of those who were on the receiving end of government policies. Yet Bacher totally ignores or misinterprets the gender dimensions of housing policy and the political struggles around housing which emanated from below. For example, his rather lengthy exposé of the Home Improvement Plan correctly shows that it was an exercise in smoke and mirrors to prevent real action on the housing front, but Ruth Pierson's and Margaret Hobbs' adroit and comprehensive analysis of the gender and class dimensions of the policy is neglected.⁴ By the same token, Bacher's curt dismissal of the limited but modestly successful direct action strategies led by Communists around evictions in the immediate postwar period recalls the crude red-baiting of Cold War historians.⁵ (x, 33) While denigrating reform initiatives from below and praising the Red Tory and reformist "conscience of big business," Bacher's own evidence of the success of militant actions from below seriously undermines his uncritical evaluation of the futile back-room lobbying by middle-class reformers and other enlightened custodians of the system. (158-159, 174, 192) Moreover, it hampers his understanding of the reasons why the public housing sector that was created was severely limited in terms of access, affordability, and quality and why sincere middle-class reformers often found themselves in dodgy coalitions with certain business interests, for instance, supporting the reactionary policy of urban renewal which proceeded with little concern for the working class and poor.⁶ (213-214, 224)

3 For a cross-national study of housing policy which calls into question the relevance of focusing solely on the political culture and ideology of government officials, stressing instead the economic context and differing ruling-class strategies see, Michael Ball *et al.*, *Housing and Social Change in Europe and the United States* (London 1988).

4 See Margaret Hobbs and Ruth Roach Pierson, "'A kitchen that wastes no steps': Gender, Class and the Home Improvement Plan, 1936-1940," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 41 (May 1988), 9-38.

5 For militant protests against evictions in Montreal and Ottawa see Marc Choko, *Crises du logement à Montréal (1860-1939)* (Montréal 1980), 145-181. For Vancouver note Jill Wade, "'A Palace for the Public': Housing Reform and the 1946 Occupation of the Old Hotel Vancouver," *B.C. Studies* No. 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), 288-310.

6 One of Bacher's heroes, Albert Rose, an instrumental figure in the establishment of Canada's first substantial public housing scheme, Regent Park in Toronto, was also partly responsible for the unscrupulous relocation of black residents of Africville near Halifax. See D.H. Clairmont and D.W. Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (Toronto 1974).

Bacher’s analysis, focused as it is on social democratic and Red Tory knights in armour fending off the rapacious real estate and financial barons, has a closer affinity to the tarnished Whigs he believes obstructed social housing. By concentrating solely on the trials and tribulations of ideologues, policy makers and administrators in the inner corridors of government, his approach is reminiscent of the Great Man (and occasional Great Woman) approach of pre-1970s historiography. His technical scholarship with respect to the primary sources of housing policy is admirable, but his lack of engagement with a rich international literature and growing Canadian work on housing seriously limits his analysis.⁷ The attribution of political culture (Red Toryism and social democracy) as determining factors in explaining the relative success of Ontario’s and Toronto’s social housing sector and the failure of other jurisdictions does not address the structural context of housing policy and the glaring contradictions of reform from above.

Helmut Gruber’s brilliant interpretive essay on the most far-reaching experiment of ‘reform from above,’ that of Viennese municipal socialism in the 1920s and 1930s, provides a healthy antidote to Bacher’s diagnosis of the elitist movement for housing improvement in Canada.⁸ Vienna was governed by the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SDAP) from the end of the First World War until 1934. The leaders of the SDAP aimed to build “neue Menschen” (new man) through a “revolution of souls” by forging a new working-class culture able to transcend capitalism peacefully within the confines of the liberal democratic state. In practice, this meant “educating workers, improving their environment, shaping their behaviour, and turning them into conscious and self-confident actors.” (6) In reality, however, the party’s cultural and political strategies were thoroughly imbued with paternalism and elitism, pushing an essentially bourgeois morality in the guise of working-class culture.

Nowhere was this more true than in the party’s housing programme, the core of their reform endeavour. The SDAP utilized their auspicious tax raising powers to embark on a massive public housing project. Over 63,000 new dwellings were built by the municipality, mostly in affordable apartment blocks containing communal laundries, kindergartens and canteens. Every tenth dwelling in the city was built by the municipal government. (46) In addition, welfare measures such as free school lunches, medical and dental examinations, state-sponsored vacations, and summer camps succeeded in dramatically lowering death and infant mortality rates. Success in housing and public health reform was intended to lay the basis for their more radical cultural initiatives.

But, as Gruber details, despite the impressive scope of the public housing campaign, it was beset by massive contradictions flowing from the top-down approach. In a vein characteristic of the SDAP’s wholesale denigration of existing working-class

7 Bacher fails to engage rigorously with relevant secondary sources. While the book claims to cover developments until 1992, a number of major works available before this year are not cited, most importantly, John Weaver and Michael Doucet, *Housing the North American City* (Montréal-Kingston 1991).

8 The great ‘socialist’ experiment in Vienna was widely known and praised by reformers in Canada. Bacher cites Vienna’s efforts four times.

traditions, the backers of the housing programme exaggerated the deficiencies of existing working-class housing, recalling the urban renewal strategies of North American reformers. The housing problems of Vienna's workers centred on overcrowding and the absence of modern utilities yet preference for the "monumental" led party leaders to build unwieldy projects that failed to address the real needs of the workers. In the context of severe economic difficulties, the number of homeless housed in shelters tripled to 77,419 per month from 1924 to 1934; only 18 percent of worker households had gas, electricity, and running water, while a similar number had none of these utilities.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Neither of these glaring deficiencies were confronted by the SDAP.

Moreover, the ideas and practices of architects, planners, social reformers and state agencies were based on liberal reform tenets and a resolutely anti-modernist conception of external and internal built environment which aimed to foster sturdy family life and requisite standards of working-class behaviour. ⁽⁶⁰⁾ Oligarchical control of the party in the political and cultural realms by a coterie of theoreticians and experts was extended to the creation of the housing projects or "people's palaces" as some party officials proclaimed. The planning, design, construction and management functions of the projects were undertaken with absolutely no surveys or discussions to inquire into the needs and wants of the workers. For example, while most of the apartment blocks lacked private bathrooms, central heating and hot water, putting additional strain on domestic labourers, expensive parquet flooring was installed in the flats. ⁽⁶⁰⁾ As Gruber puts it: "The tenants of the new municipal housing were confronted with structures, spaces, rooms, facilities, and rules of operation devised for them, all in place and impervious to influences or demands from below." ⁽⁶³⁾

Judged by international standards, Gruber forthrightly argues that the SDAP's programme of housing improvement left much to be desired. Architecturally, it was exceeded by similar experiments in Hamburg and Frankfurt which were subject to a far less favourable political environment. Socially, it reinforced the drudgery of women's work and did little to counter the oppressive social norms of the traditional domestic environment. Economically, even though the municipality owned most of the city's land, the party failed to give consideration to producer cooperatives and socialization of the building industry, squandering the enormous creative potential for economic experimentation. And politically, "like virtually all interwar socialist parties, where the oligarchy 'knew best' and always 'acted in the common interest' of the party rank and file, the SDAP operated as a paternalist machine." ⁽⁵³⁾ The Viennese socialist experiment, much-lauded at the time by SDAP leaders and subsequently by housing historians, was "originally conceived as a major weapon in the armoury of the class struggle, [but] more and more became a substitute for politics." ⁽¹⁸³⁾ The ultimate tragedy is that the SDAP's political paralysis paved the way for the right-wing coup d'état in 1934 and eventually the Nazis.

The late David Widgery's superb personal account of housing conditions in London's East End deals with a strikingly dissimilar political context than that of Viennese municipal socialism. *Some Lives!* sketches the social deterioration of the East End under the "sado-monetarism" ⁽²²⁹⁾ of the British Tories. Yet Widgery's extraordinarily rich insights, compassionate but not moralistic, into the history,

politics and health of those relegated to the sidelines of the British ‘property-owning democracy’ meshes well with Gruber’s searching indictment of reform from above. Both authors highlight the structural limits and ambiguities of urban reform in twentieth-century capitalism.

Life-long revolutionary socialist, cultural critic, dedicated physician and regular contributor to the *British Medical Journal*,⁹ Widgery weaves together snippets of the history and politics of the East End with intensely personal and meticulously poignant descriptions of the ailments of his patients. Drawing on sound medical research, he astutely links many of the sufferings of the area’s inhabitants — alcoholism, drug addiction, respiratory diseases and other afflictions — to the misery brought on by the social and physical dislocations of the Thatcher years. Urban renewal schemes, deindustrialization and the invasion of the area by the Canadian-financed Canary Wharf project, whose architectural blandness and brutal profit considerations stand in stark contrast to the vibrancy of cosmopolitan working-class neighbourhoods, have devastated the East End.

Widgery shows how the brutality of the Thatcher and Major governments with regard to urban social services is the culmination of a process begun in the postwar years. The long and honourable tradition of good-quality public housing, established in militant struggles by local workers and their Labour representatives against the central government in the 1920s, was systematically run down and replaced by monstrous tower blocks amidst the devastation wrought by the Blitz:

The degree of bomb damage related directly to the location of factories and docks. The density of postwar council housing it made possible related, in turn, directly to the degree of bomb damage. And so it came about that in postwar London it was the rich who got the terraces and the poor who got the tower blocks. What the Luftwaffe didn’t get, the developers did. (35)

The legacy of unthinking postwar housing policies has had intensely harmful consequences for the health and social life of the East End’s inhabitants. As Widgery puts it: “Poor housing means chronic overcrowding and a loss of privacy, a compulsory communalism which manufactures neurosis rather than roofs falling in.” (108) In contrast to the visions of the elites who established the tower block design for social housing needs, he cites a pointed summary of the effects of poorly maintained and run down highrise flats from one of his patients forced to use the stairs in a block whose elevator is broken down: “And what do you do,” a patient asked me, “when halfway up with the shopping and a child and buggy, you realise you have forgotten the milk?” (38)

And poor quality council housing is only the half of it. The homeless population of the area, whose numbers doubled in the 1980s, if not living rough in “sheds and skips and gutters,” are forced into makeshift and overcrowded ‘homes’ in privately-owned hotels with no cooking facilities. (118) Hotel owners have thus reaped an economic windfall to the tune of several hundred million pounds sterling while

9 For a moving obituary detailing Widgery’s life and work see Paul Foot, “Obituary,” *New Left Review* No. 196 (November-December 1992), 120-124.

available council housing units quickly dwindle. What makes Widgery's book so poignant is his refreshingly candid statement that,

this ludicrous and cruel situation is not the consequence of some natural calamity or war but the deliberate result of central government policy, which between 1981 and 1989 cut the number of houses let to new tenants by London councils by 41 per cent and the number of new council houses built by 91 per cent. During the same period, again as a deliberate policy, over 17 per cent of London council houses were sold off, further cutting the housing stock by 150,000 homes. (119)

Vainly attempting to assist his patients by recommending them for council housing, Widgery quips that "If the road to heaven is paved with housing letters, sainthood is guaranteed." (100)

Widgery's searingly memorable portrait of social decay in one corner of the advanced capitalist world and Gruber's critique of 'socialism from above' in Vienna forcefully lay bare the contradictions of housing reform initiatives predicated on the "Leave It To Us" approaches of sympathetic reformers. Both studies point to important consequences for the study of housing reform. The most striking is the centrality of pinpointing the location of reformers in the wider social and economic context. Too much stress on the biographical details of state personnel and reformers, as in Bacher's analysis, obscures such actors' location in the class structure. Reform ideology fumbled sluggishly toward an amelioration of the contradictions of capitalism, but conspicuously avoided confronting the underlying class divisions in society. Based on essentially middle-class beliefs in the necessity of state intervention and the capacity of the trained expert to alleviate social conflict, the movement for housing betterment centred on a doctrine of 'community' that ostensibly stood above labour and capital, aiming to harmonize social relations for the greater good of the entire society. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci insightfully noted, "The intellectuals" were "breaking loose from the dominant class in order to unite themselves to it more intimately."¹⁰

Gruber and Widgery also nudge us toward a renewed appreciation of the centrality of the wider political economy in setting the boundaries of the reform process. While it is fashionable in much current historical writing on the welfare state to reorient analytical lenses to the autonomous role of the state and its functionaries,¹¹ it is crucial that we not lose sight of the specific economic and political contexts that shape government policy. If the ideology of state actors and reform advocates was important in determining the ultimate forms of state intervention, policy outcomes nevertheless hinged on the state of the economy and the balance of class forces. Housing reform in the postwar period in the advanced capitalist countries rested on economic

10 Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Sexual Question," in David Forgacs, ed., *The Gramsci Reader* (London 1988), 281, 296. See also David Harvey, "Labor, Capital, and Class Struggle Around the Built Environment in Advanced Capitalist Societies," in Kevin Cox, ed., *Urbanization and Conflict in Market Societies* (Chicago 1978), 23.

11 Note P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, T. Skocpol eds. *Bringing the State Back In* (New York 1985). For critiques, see the essays in Rhonda Levine, ed., *Bringing Class Back In. Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (Boulder 1991).

expansion and high rates of profit that shaped the social compromise of the welfare state. This compromise is now a shattered vestige of the past. Wrenching economic decline and accompanying political uncertainty have prompted mainstream politicians and reformers previously committed to the welfare state to quickly change their spots, leading to the ruthless axing of social services. It is in the light of the shifting economic exigencies and political trajectories of capitalism that future scholars must trace the history of social housing.

Work has commenced on the *Encyclopedia of the European Left*, edited by Dr. William A. Pelz and published by Garland Publishing, Inc. of New York City. Scheduled to appear in 1997, this title will contain entries on individuals, institutions and key events in the history of the European left.

This project will be assisted by a distinguished international advisory board including: Aldo Agosti (Italy), Tony Benn, M.P. (England), Pierre Broue (France), Gerd Callesen (Denmark), Gregor Gysi (Germany), Hans Janitschek (Austria), Ken Livingston, M.P. (England), Ernest Mandel (Belgium), Jan Myrdal (Sweden), Jürgen Rojahn (The Netherlands), Sheila Rowbotham (England), Helena Sheehan (Ireland), Hermann Weber (Germany).

Inquiries should be addressed to: Dr. William A. Pelz, DePaul University, SAC 5F, 2323 N. Seminary Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60614-3298, U.S.A.