

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Books
Is Housing a Human Right?
By David Madden & Peter Marcuse
Review by Michael B. Tietz

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BOOKS

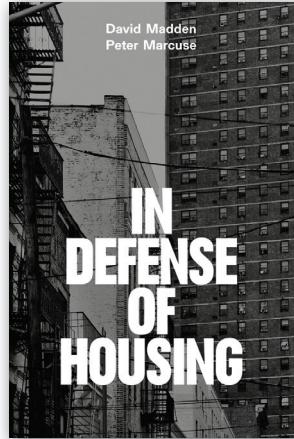
Is Housing a Human Right?

REVIEW BY MICHAEL B. TEITZ

Does Marxist analysis have anything useful to tell us about housing issues in wealthy countries in the 21st century? London School of Economics sociologist David Madden and Columbia emeritus professor of urban planning Peter Marcuse think that it does. They present their case forcefully in their short book *In Defense of Housing*, arguing that housing should be treated as a fundamental human right, removed from the market and distributed according to need rather than wealth or income. But their analysis isn't bound by the traditional Marxian focus on capitalism's evolution and categories such as class and labor. Instead, the authors follow the thinking of Henri Lefebvre, who argued for a "right to the city" and saw urban dwellers and their social movements as a driving force for change.

The book begins with a denunciation of the increasing commodification of housing, meaning that "a structure's function as real estate takes precedence over its usefulness as a place to live." In the authors' view, growing income and wealth inequality, the increasing dominance of financial markets, deregulation, and globalization have combined to produce a situation where no one but the ultrarich are secure against an exploitative housing market, and many people face eviction, foreclosure, and homelessness. The authors see homeownership, the standard response to these concerns, as an illusory solution that only enriches banks and real estate interests, and discourages collective action by focusing on individual private property.

The book also chronicles resistance to these trends in cases such as the rent strikes in Glasgow in 1915, when large numbers of the city's residents refused to pay rent until the state committed to making housing more widely and cheaply available.



IN DEFENSE OF HOUSING

David Madden and Peter Marcuse
230 pages, Verso, 2016

However, the authors argue that most cases of resistance lead to limited gains in the long run. This may be in part because they are frequently short-lived, since the organizations that push for change tend to be fairly narrowly focused.

What of government policies to provide housing directly or regulate its provision in the market? The authors see such policies as generally benefiting real estate developers and the wealthy, pointing to the examples of slum clearance and urban renewal programs. And they present the efforts of many genuine supporters of better housing for the poor who seek to reform the system, such as Depression-era public housing advocate and government adviser Catherine Bauer, as ineffectual in preventing capture by special interests.

Given the limits of these efforts, the authors see enforcing the idea of housing as a basic human right as essential to progress. As they point out, the avowal of such a right is neither new nor rare. Organizations including the United Nations have long listed it among fundamental human rights. The goal of "a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family" is embedded in the US Housing Act of 1949. The authors believe that more communities must

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now mobilize to hold governments, developers, and others to that goal.

What might we make of this heartfelt and often eloquent analysis of the failures of capitalism in the provision of housing, especially for the poor? First, much here may ring true to more people than moderate liberals or conservatives might expect. Although written in the Marxist tradition that calls for a break from the established order, the book's arguments would resonate with many housing advocates in American cities who are struggling to work within existing political constraints.

Yet the story that the book tells is simplistic. Adequate housing for the vast majority of the population does exist in some capitalist countries, notably in Europe. While experiencing its post-World War II-era capitalist boom, the United States saw a huge increase in housing quality, although the process was seriously marred by racism. China, albeit at great human cost, has housed hundreds of millions of people over the past 30 years since its formerly communist state moved toward capitalism. How can this be if the system is so fundamentally flawed? Conversely, countries that have turned to socialism, such as Cuba, have not been as successful in providing *high-quality* housing, even if they may now have fewer homeless people.

As almost always, the real story is complex. So is the task of changing it, which is unlikely to be achieved by proclaiming the right to housing alone, or by the sort of local community mobilization that the authors also advocate. Rather, improvement will take a level of social and political commitment that rarely has been seen in history.

Such a commitment must involve many different elements, including social mobilization, public financing, and technological innovation. For nations of great wealth, surely that is not too much to ask. We know that adequate housing for the vast majority is possible. The trick is how to get there. ■