Socialism, Creativity, and the Housing Crisis

by Ben Irvine (December 2018)

Reflections on the Thames, Westminster, John Atkinson Grimshaw, 1879

A few months ago I purchased a house—with a great sense of relief. Britain is in the grip of an unrelenting housing crisis, and I've spent the last decade caught up in it. Before I become complacent, I want to reflect on what it has been like being a young person in a developed country where one of life's necessities has become a scarce resource.

Young people are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the crisis. Many have been priced out of owning or even renting their own home. Recent statistics show that the proportion of young adults living with their parents in the UK is larger than ever; one in four adults aged 18 to 34 still lives under

the same roof as mum and dad. That's a rise from 2.7 million to 3.4 million in two decades. A study by the homelessness charity *Shelter* has suggested that, based on current trends, the proportion of young adults living with their parents will exceed 50% within a generation. And, of course, homelessness is a growing problem in the UK. There are currently more than 300,000 homeless people in Britain. One in five young people report having stayed temporarily with friends or relatives—'sofa surfing.' as it's called—because of a lack of permanent accommodation. Nearly one in ten young people report having sofa surfed for more than a month.

If any other vital resource—food or water—were in such short supply, a national emergency would have been declared by now. The statistics on housing are frightening. Since the 2008 financial crash, house prices have resumed their precipitous rise while outpacing earnings; at the time of writing, the average UK home costs in excess of £230,000. The cost of renting has soared, too—to the highest level in Europe, with the average rent now at £750 per household per month, almost twice the European average of £400. The average Briton spends over 40% of his regular income on housing, a figure which is the third highest in Europe. One in seven private tenants pays over half his regular income on rent. The average first-time buyer pays a colossal £52,900 in rent before owning a home. Young people today are paying three times more for housing than their grandparents did. Escalating housing costs have been a major driver of inequality in the UK.

The housing crisis has scarred the social and physical landscape of Britain. Recent reports have revealed over four and a half million people receiving housing benefits (including around a million people in work) at an annual cost of £24 billion to the exchequer, while over a million families

are currently on housing waiting lists in England alone. One report found that 24% of private renters in England had moved home in the past 12 months, and 29% had moved *three or more times in the past five years*. Our local areas have seen upheaval too: we have lost pubs, petrol stations, libraries, community centres, playing fields, and high street shops, with land usage skewed by house price rises. Moreover, the UK's newly built homes are among the smallest in Europe. Space-saving apartment blocks have sprung up like mushrooms in towns and cities, even though flats are not the homes most people ideally want to live in. One survey found that 50% of respondents wanted to live in a detached house, 22% in a bungalow, 2% in a low-rise flat, and 1% in a high-rise block. Developers know that affordability overrides all other considerations. For the same reason, aesthetic beauty has also become a pointless expense on the part of developers; such is the desperation of homebuyers, whatever is built will sell, no matter how ugly it is. In so many ways, the housing crisis has impoverished Britain.

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Admittedly, in some ways I'm not a standard example of a young person. Though I attended a state school in a working-class area of North East London, I ended up completing a PhD in Philosophy at Cambridge University, and now I'm an internationally published writer. (And—ahem—I'm not very young anymore). If I had wanted to sail clear of the housing crisis by cashing in on my education and climbing through the ranks of a professional career, I suppose I could have done. Instead, I chose to prioritise my writing career. For almost

ten years, I have supported myself through various low-paid evening jobs, and I continue to do so. In that sense, you could argue I've been something of a housing crisis tourist: I have made life hard for myself voluntarily. But actually I think stories like mine are an overlooked aspect of the crisis. Almost all aspiring artists—writers, painters, illustrators, musicians, magicians, actors, dancers, comedians, or whatever—will have to 'slum it' at some point in their careers, especially early on. The same goes for aspiring entrepreneurs, or any other creative type of person. For creative people, keeping costs down is part of the process of success. Unfortunately, with housing costs skyrocketing, keeping costs down isn't as easy as it used to be. The housing crisis has made it harder for young people to pursue creative careers.

Another reason the housing crisis has been particularly hard on artists and entrepreneurs is that creative people are notorious for needing their 'space.' In the physical sense, space has become increasingly hard to come by. Recent statistics reveal a 'surge' in overcrowded homes; in England and Wales more than three million people now live in a house with at least five other individuals. Granted, some people enjoy communal living. But creative people often prefer to live alone, because physical space is a precondition of the 'mental space' they need; pursuing a creative project requires a lot of deep thinking, imagining, planning and organising. Alas, mental space is obliterated by distraction and disturbance, and, in a shared house, distractions and disturbances abound. Whether it's housemates talking on their mobile phones, housemates Skyping, housemates watching TV, housemates playing music or video games, housemates having loud sex, housemates getting up early in the morning, housemates coming home drunk late at night, or housemates just *being there . . .* shared living drags creative people down and

makes it difficult to focus. When George Orwell wrote his masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he took himself off to a cottage on the remote Scottish island of Jura. He wanted, he said, to become '*ungetatable*'. Any creative person will know exactly what Orwell meant.

If this all sounds like middle-class moaning, let me explain that there is another aspect to my experience of being a writer during the housing crisis. Being chronically poor has given me an insight into many topics that I studiously avoided during my education. While I was studying philosophy, I never dreamed of what life is like for people outside of the so-called 'elites.' But now I know what it's like to survive on a low wage, and to live in cheap lodgings (as, indeed, Orwell himself knew). As a result, my sympathies have changed beyond recognition—mostly, but not always, in favour of the proverbial 'man in the street.' I've become wary of intellectuals. The trouble with intellectuals is that, in their arrogance, one of the countless things they are ignorant of is how much damage their ideas can do. Bad ideas lead to bad social norms and bad governance. The housing crisis, I now believe, derives predominantly from bad ideas—ideas that urgently need to be challenged with a heavy dose of reality. Sometimes it takes a tourist like me to state the obvious.

Or, indeed, a refugee—of sorts. The house I bought is located in a former mining village in the North East of England, an economically deprived region that has remained on the periphery of the housing bubble that has engulfed the rest of the UK. My house cost me a twentieth of what a similar dwelling would have cost in London, where I grew up (and where the average house price recently exceeded £500,000). I'm very fond of the North East—I did my undergraduate and Master's degrees at Durham University—so my move back here hasn't been

too much of a wrench. But the fact is, I'm a housing crisis refugee. I've left my family down south, because living anywhere near London isn't economically viable for me. In this, I'm far from alone. Most of my school friends have moved away from London, because even people with decent jobs are struggling in the capital. Native Londoners are abandoning their city in droves. I haven't really escaped the housing crisis. I'm running away from it every day.

Meanwhile, many of the lucky Britons who aren't desperately trying to escape the housing crisis are actively avoiding it in another sense: they are avoiding thinking about it. Above all, they are avoiding thinking about the root cause of the crisis. In general, rising prices are caused by a lack of supply and an excess of demand. Rising house prices are no different. Not enough homes are being built, and there are too many people who need homes. Since the early 1970s, the rate of housebuilding in Britain has declined steadily (albeit with a small uptick in the last few years), while immigration has risen, especially in recent decades. In 1998, the annual net migration figure soared above 100,000 then stayed above 150,000 for two decades, exceeding 200,000 for eight years in a row, and peaking at a colossal 336,000 in 2015. Each year, the equivalent of a new *city* would have needed to have been built in order to accommodate all these newcomers.

The combination of low supply and high demand in the UK's housing market derives from a single root cause: the ideology of socialism. In 1947, the post-war Labour government implemented the Town and Country Planning Act which decreed that landowners who wanted to build on their own land needed permission from central government. The idea was that the government would oversee a more 'rational' housing sector. A slew of national building regulations soon followed, as did

green belt regulations that throttled the supply of housing in precisely the areas where it was needed most: on the outskirts of Britain's growing cities. No subsequent UK government, of the left or the so-called 'right', has repealed the fundamentally socialist Town and Country Planning Act, which has caused desperate shortages, as socialism always does.

In turn, socialists ushered in the modern era of mass immigration. When New Labour came to power in 1997, they loosened the rules on immigration. Andrew Neather, a former speechwriter for the party, has recalled that Tony Blair's government wanted to attract more immigrants to the UK so as 'to rub the right's nose in diversity and render their arguments out of date.' The second part of Neather's explanation hints at another probable motive for New Labour's legislative support for mass immigration: they wanted to enlarge the electoral constituency for the left, immigrants generally being poorer than non-immigrants. Moreover, New Labour were probably confident that their supporters would help bring about this enlargement, by relentlessly telling immigrants that the only people who care about them are socialists, everyone else in British society supposedly being xenophobic and bigoted. Tellingly, Barbara Roche, who was Minister for Asylum and Immigration during Blair's first term, declared that the immigration constraints of the day were 'racist'.

All in all, socialism's impact on Britain's housing sector perfectly exemplifies the *modus operandi* of socialists. Socialists are poverty farmers; they create conditions in which poverty flourishes even as they claim to be alleviating poverty; they both cultivate and manage poverty. Britain urgently needs to change course. We need to challenge the policies of (restrictive) planning and (unrestricted)

immigration that have caused the housing crisis. Alas, there is widespread reluctance to do so. Partly this is because many homeowners and investors are happy to see their homes increase in value amid a government-mediated housing bubble. And partly it's because many would-be critics of socialism have been intimidated into self-censorship and therefore acquiescence. The more the failings of socialism have become evident, the more irascible socialists have become. Increasingly, they are reacting to the truth with verbal aggression against dissenters. Carried along by this tide of irrationality and conformity, Jeremy Corbyn, the most far left leader in Labour's history, is a whisker away from power.

Escaping from a cult requires creativity, because creative people can see past the cognitive dead ends of conformity. In turn, creative people can help their fellows escape from conformity, by showing them that another way, a better way, a more authentic way, is possible. The truth is, there is a natural alliance between capitalism and creativity. Not only is capitalism fuelled by the creativity of entrepreneurs and producers, but capitalism generates the surpluses that enable artists to thrive and create, free of ideological constraints. Alas, the impact of the housing crisis on creativity is weakening the alliance between creativity and capitalism, in more ways than one. Lacking the space to create, many young artists and entrepreneurs are being thwarted in their attempt to provide a counter-narrative to socialism. At the same time, many young artists and entrepreneurs are succumbing to the temptations of the left, the temptations of government-sponsored mediocrity; if you can't beat them, join them; if you can't find the creative space to start a business or to produce authentic art, join the ranks of the anti-capitalist bureaucrats, whether as one of their colleagues or as one their grant-funded cheerleaders, producing politically-correct 'art' the likes of which the Soviets would have endorsed.

Socialism, via its contribution to the housing crisis, is crushing creativity, the very same creativity that we will need if we are to escape from socialism. I fear we are in a spiral.

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