

House and Home

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THE WORD ANARCHY MEANS “WITHOUT AUTHORITY”, and anarchism as a social theory implies an attempt to provide for social and personal needs from the bottom up, rather than from some government or other authority down, or for some-one else’s profit. It implies an extension of the idea of voluntary associations and autonomous groups to cover the whole field of human activity.

The anarchist thus has peculiar difficulties in formulating an approach to questions like housing, in which the initiative is so much in the hands of people with political, financial and economic power, and so little in those of people with none of these things, but simply the need for a roof over their heads. An older generation of anarchists, adopting a militant and revolutionary approach, would point out that the housing problem is a permanent feature of modern society which only a revolution would eradicate. They were right, no doubt; we still have a housing problem, and they didn’t get their revolution. But since we are today advocating anarchism as an approach and not simply as a hypothetical destination, we have to look around for those fields in which means which are in harmony with anarchist ends can be applied today. And the difficulty experienced in locating examples is a measure of the way in which so vital and basic a human need as housing has slipped out of the range of things which ordinary people can provide for themselves. Even such credit organisations as building societies which were originally instituted in the early 19th century as organs of working class mutual aid, have become vast money-lending organisations which most working-class people are not credit-worthy enough to employ. Ray Gosling pointed out recently in *New Society* that even since the years just before the war the range of people able to make use of building societies has “gone up a class.”

A year ago, in *ANARCHY* 23, we attempted to survey the possibilities of popular intervention in the field of housing, by discussing the potentialities of housing societies, including self-build societies, and by giving an account of the most significant example of direct action for housing, the “squatters’ movement” immediately after the last war.

In this issue another aspect of popular direct action for houses is described, thanks to the material, gathered in South America by John Turner, which formed a recent special issue of the journal *Architectural Design*, from which we reproduce William Mangin’s case history, which, apart from its intrinsic human interest, illustrates a similar pattern of evolution to that of previous examples. John Turner argues that the squatters’ settlements or *barriadas* of Peru, “far from

being a problem are in fact the only feasible solution to the rapid urbanisation problem”, and Architectural Design notes that:

Although the 350,000 people who inhabit the *barriadas* of Lima are living outside the law, in that they have no legal right to the land they have settled on, their determination to remain has won them the tolerance of the public authorities, who now, through the Junta Nacional de la Vivienda, allocate aid, at first experimental, but later more systematic, to the more permanent of the communities.

This is the same sequence of Initiative, Consolidation, Success and Official Action, which we noticed in all previous examples of direct action applied to the housing problem in a non-revolutionary situation. (The reader of William Mangin’s article will notice that the *barriada* builders of Lima do not by any means consider themselves to be revolutionaries.)

Little has happened in the Housing Society movement since the article “What Hope for Housing Societies” in ANARCHY 23, to make them a feasible proposition for people of average earnings. The government promises further loans, but not at the kind of interest rates which would bring down the cost. (In this connection see the discussion in this issue, from two points of view both claiming to be anarchist, of local authority housing.)

A quite different approach to the housing question is raised by Teddy Gold in this issue. Even if we could all get houses, is the standardised solution of the one-family house or flat, the kind of housing we really want? He is campaigning to start a housing society to build Multiple-Family units, for the reasons which his article set out. This moves from the question of housing to that of the family: is the statistically standard family the kind we really want to belong to? How many happy families do you know?

But the housing news of the year has undoubtedly been the revelations of racketeering landlordism known as *Rachmanism* which became “news” simply because the late Mr *Rachman* shared a mistress with people concerned in the *Profumo* scandal. Tenants have been discovering that unity is strength. The *Spectator’s* account of the formation of the St Stephen’s Tenants Association concluded thus:

Of course, it was difficult to persuade tenants, even if their rents were grossly unfair, to take the risk of going to the Tribunal and incurring the wrath of their landlords. However, fourteen were piloted through the terrors of reprisal to success. The reductions ranged from one-third to two-thirds.

It wasn’t an entirely bloodless victory: the tenants were threatened by agents of the landlords before they went to the Tribunal (one tenant was visited by two men and an Alsatian), and they were threatened again after the reductions had been made (one was attacked by four men with empty bottles and came away with a broken wrist and abrasions).

But beyond the individual gains against bad landlords and the occasional dents inflicted on official complacency (“We all know what dreadful things are happening. It is up to the people to go to the police. We as the borough council can do nothing at all”), the mere coming into existence of a group of people, white and coloured indiscriminately, for the express purpose of improving their living conditions, forced landlords to tread more warily, authorities to uncover blind eyes, and the tenants themselves to realise that they were not quite as helpless as they had once supposed.

Later came the eviction of Mrs Cobb, during which the police distinguished themselves, and the formation of further tenants’ associations in other boroughs. Colin MacInnes commented

that “Direct action of the kind adopted by the tenants’ associations may not be unconnected with the recent marked upsurge of anarchism among the young in their tactics, that is, if not always in their conscious philosophy.”

Perhaps this is optimistic, but something has to happen to break the housing stalemate, something beyond reliance on the promises of the politicians in readiness for the general election this year.

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