

Sold out? The right-to-buy, gentrification and working-class displacements in London

The Sociological Review

1–16

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0038026120906790

journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Adam Elliott Cooper**

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, UK

Phil Hubbard

Department of Geography, King's College London, UK

Loretta Lees

School of Geography, Geology and the Environment, University of Leicester, UK

Abstract

Since the 1990s, the renewal of council housing estates in London has involved widespread 'decanting' of resident populations to allow for demolition and redevelopment, primarily by private developers who sell the majority of new housing at market rate. This process of decanting has displaced long-term council tenants and shorter-term 'temporary' tenants, with many not able to return to the estate. In contrast, those leaseholders who bought under the 'right-to-buy' legislation introduced in the 1980s have a 'right to remain' by virtue of the property rights they have. Nonetheless, given the threat that their property will ultimately be subject to compulsory purchase because the redevelopment of the estate is in the 'public interest', these leaseholders experience similar displacement pressures to other residents. Describing these pressures, this article argues that the right-to-buy legislation offered these residents the illusion of entering a property-owning middle-class, but that they were never able to escape the labelling of council estates as stigmatised spaces which have ultimately been seized by the state and capital in a moment of 'accumulation by dispossession'.

Keywords

class, displacement, ethnicity, housing, urban gentrification

Corresponding author:

Phil Hubbard, Department of Geography, King's College London, Bush House NE 6.08, 30 Aldwych, London, WC2B 4BG, UK.

Email: philip.hubbard@kcl.ac.uk

Introduction

Built to provide affordable housing for the city's working-class, council estates in London have long appeared the 'final gentrification frontier', a bulwark against the middle-class colonisation of the capital. Yet the last truly affordable housing on these estates is being demolished and they are succumbing to an influx of more affluent dwellers (Hodkinson, 2011). This has been enabled by the local state, which has effectively handed estates over to private developers who are replacing social housing with a denser mix of 'affordable' housing cross-subsidised by the market rate homes which make up the majority of properties (Beswick & Penny, 2018). For this to happen, local councils and developers have orchestrated a process euphemistically-termed 'decanting': existing tenants bid for properties elsewhere in the borough, or are moved against their will; private renters in leasehold properties are evicted, and leaseholders bought out via compulsory purchase, often at unfavourable rates. The displacements this process sets in motion involve psychological, as well physical, dislocations (Watt, 2018).

Councils are generally unwilling to reveal the number of tenants rehoused or leaseholders displaced. However, our estimates suggest approximately 56,000 homes on council estates have been demolished through processes of urban renewal since 1997: we cannot know how many people this represents, but it is upwards of 100,000, and possibly nearer 200,000. This population includes tenants on long-term assured tenancies (renting at council rates much lower than those in the private sector), those housed in estates on a temporary basis (i.e. those effectively homeless awaiting more suitable accommodation) as well as those who own the long-term lease for their property. This latter group includes former long-term council tenants who, following the passing of right-to-buy legislation in 1980, were able to purchase their property at up to 50% discount. This sale was conditional in that if the property was sold in a given period, some or all of the discount would be returned: the purchase was normally on a 99- or 125-year lease, with leaseholders remaining liable for ground rent and service charges to cover building and grounds maintenance (Blandy & Hunter, 2012).

This article focuses on the recent experiences of leaseholders on three London council estates, and suggests the ongoing wave of urban renewals exposes a contradiction between neoliberal discourses extolling the benefits of home ownership and the lived experiences of those who exercised the option to buy their homes. The idea of right-to-buy 'sold' council tenants (leasehold) home ownership as something that would provide greater security, private property rights, and a fuller stake in a home-owning democracy (Forrest & Hirayama, 2015). At the same time, it offered a means to accumulate wealth in line with a privatised notion of asset-based welfare. But as we show in this article, leaseholders on London council estates undergoing renewal are being subject to forms of displacement that suggest this promise of security and wealth accumulation was ill-founded. Drawing on narrative interviews with leaseholders on three supposedly 'unpopular' London estates undergoing renewal, we hence highlight multiple contradictions between right-to-buy rhetoric and right-to-buy realities.

Though critiques of right-to-buy policies are not new – with commentators noting that many right-to-buy properties ultimately fell into the hands of those who rented them out to others (via buy-to-let) (Kleinhans & van Ham, 2013) – there has been little

said about the effective ‘betrayal’ of working-class residents who bought their properties on London council estates. While their displacement is ostensibly something that will benefit members of the wider community given the perceived need for more housing in the capital, we follow Beswick and Penny (2018) in suggesting that current residents are seeing their homes (and their stake in the future) destroyed to enable the financialisation of housing and processes of ‘accumulation via dispossession’ (Harvey, 2005). These processes inevitably support global institutional investors, private equity and hedge funds rather than those who bought their own homes under right-to-buy (Aalbers, 2017; Christophers, 2018).

Thatcherism, the right-to-buy and neoliberalism

Stuart Hall’s work on the cultural politics of the ‘new right’ provides perhaps the most useful theorisation of the legacies of right-to-buy given it encompasses the implementation of what Hall termed ‘Thatcherism’, as well as what would come to be known as neoliberalism. Hall (2011) notes that in the run-up to the 1979 general election, Thatcher’s Conservative Party proposed a radically new vision of Britain. While much of her party had long been unhappy with the postwar managerial consensus (centred on welfare support from cradle to grave, strong trade unions, collective bargaining and state-led employment), the criticism of this managerial consensus changed under Thatcher. Taking advantage of a poorly-handled political crisis by the Labour Party (the ‘winter of discontent’), Thatcher drew on classical liberal ideas of individual liberty, tax cuts and the free market, combining them with traditional conservative values of nationalism, self-reliance, patriarchal respectability and ‘law and order’ (Hall et al., 1978). What Hall later described as ‘the long march of the neoliberal revolution’ had begun, defined by a logic which argued:

[The] welfare state . . . is the arch enemy of freedom. The state must never govern society, dictate to free individuals how to dispose of their private property, regulate a free-market economy or interfere with the God-given right to make profits and amass personal wealth. (Hall, 2011, p. 11)

The myriad of neoliberal policies implemented by Thatcher’s government have been debated *ad infinitum* (e.g. Burnham, 1999; Hefferman, 2000), with much attention paid to their inherent contradictions: namely, the apparent rejection of state power in favour of individual liberty at the same time as immigration controls and ‘law and order’ policing were expanded (Hall et al., 1978).

Yet Hall argued that political changes under Thatcher were far more than a simple change in the direction of policy, suggesting they were designed to ‘disorganise an existing political formation’ and confirm ‘a new historical project’. For Hall, Thatcherism represented a fundamental attempt to change the way social and class relations were conceived:

[Thatcherism] means to promulgate not just a new set of policies but a new ethic, to construct a new form of ‘common-sense’. It has a model for every feature and aspect of social relationship: it has a ‘philosophy’ as well as a programme. (Hall, 1980, p. 26)

This new common-sense became, in the language of Gramsci, a hegemonic project in which Thatcherism ‘effectively presented itself as the “popular force” in the “struggle” of “the people” against “the state”’ (Hall, 1980, p. 26). In order for the British people to be liberated from the state, this new common-sense affirmed they would require greater access to the market through the dismantling of a welfare system which, the emergent hegemonic project argued, rewarded idleness.

This was also a society, it was suggested, where people should be given the opportunity to invest in, and own, property:

We propose . . . that council and new town tenants shall have the right-to-buy their own homes . . . to give people what they want, and . . . to reverse the trend of ever-increasing dominance of the State over the life of the individual. There is in this country a deeply-ingrained desire for home ownership. The Government believes that this spirit should be fostered. It reflects the wishes of the people, ensures the wide spread of wealth through society, encourages a personal desire to improve and modernise one’s own home, enables parents to accrue wealth for their children and stimulates the attitudes of independence and self-reliance that are the bedrock of a free society. (Michael Heseltine, Second Reading Housing Bill, *Hansard* 15 January 1980, p. 976)

Here, Heseltine’s words echoed Thatcher’s rhetoric of Britain as a nation of shopkeepers, imploring British citizens to become entrepreneurial property-owners accumulating economic security through the market. While privatising national industries and inviting the public to purchase shares in newly-floated limited companies was controversial given it involved the fragmentation of the public sector, right-to-buy was more palatable as it continued a longer-term trend towards the privatisation of land (Massey & Catalano, 1978). Here, the ideological investments of capitalist society aligned with the promotion of a particular model of land ownership: right-to-buy represented a privatisation of housing that allowed the state to take a back seat, though also bought assets and land that was previously off limits into the ‘calculus of profit-making’ (Koch, 2018, p. 45).

The reforms which incorporated working-class citizens into the so-called ‘free-market’ through home ownership hence served a dual purpose. The first was ideological: rolling back the welfare state – in this case the subsidy of council housing – signalled an acceptance of the primacy of private capital in housing markets, shoring up a classical liberal conception of property (Blomley, 2004) and what would later be termed ‘neoliberal urbanism’ (Harvey, 2005). The second was more pragmatic: right-to-buy was hugely popular amongst working-class voters. While sales of council homes fluctuated during Thatcher’s time in office, tens of thousands took advantage of the scheme every year (Jones & Murie, 2008). This was aided by the way in which the scheme was presented: the ‘right-to-buy’ was thought to imply ownership, and hence a sense of long-term security over the life-course. Yet those ‘buying’ their home on London’s council estates were in fact taking on 99- or 125-year leases, and were liable for maintenance and repairs costs for which tenants were not, as well as service or ground rent charges (which often amounted to thousands of pounds annually).

Analysing Thatcherism when the right-to-buy policy was first introduced, Hall (1980, p. 27) argued such policies could well succeed in shifting the balance of class forces to the right, ‘without Thatcherism itself surviving for years . . . in the parliamentary sense’. This

prediction was correct, with marketisation of housing as clear an indication as any of Britain's retreat from a postwar consensus which posited 'cradle to grave' housing as a right. Indeed, in addition to extending the right-to-buy to housing association tenants, one of New Labour's flagship initiatives – the New Deal for Communities – promoted privatisation through the language of urban renewal. Rather than focusing on individual home purchases by council estate residents, New Labour encouraged the wholesale stock transfer of council estates to private development companies with the belief that these could best provide the mix of social and market housing that would provide balanced communities (Allen et al., 2005). This institutional promotion of housing as a market good, rather than welfare provision, accelerated the decline of council-owned residential properties and, in turn, encouraged the gentrification of London's council estates, especially on those estates identified as persistent 'sinks' of social malaise where the 'rent gap' between actual and potential ground rent appeared widest (Campkin, 2017; Slater, 2018).

Gentrification-induced displacement on London's council estates

In Britain, gentrification has classically been noted in mixed-tenure inner city districts where inward-investment and incumbent improvement combine to raise property prices and 'price out' the working-class. Yet since the 1980s, one of the drivers of gentrification has been the right-to-buy, with some council residents who purchased their property subsequently selling it and moving on (Boleat, 1983). Many of these are private sales to more wealthy incomers who live in their properties, but over a third of right-to-buy council properties are thought to be owned by private landlords who rent to (non-council) residents at rates typically far higher than council rates in neighbouring homes (Murie, 2016). Ironically, many private renters on council estates in such homes are effectively now subsidised by the council through housing benefit payments (Cole et al., 2016).

This means fewer affordable properties now exist in the communities where right-to-buy was most vigorously pursued (Jones & Murie, 2008; Kleinhans & van Ham, 2013). However, the (subsidised) transfer of property from the council to the private sector shows much geographical variation. In some 'popular' estates where rental markets proved buoyant, the transition from right-to-buy to buy-to-let was pronounced (Cole et al., 2016), with rates of owner-occupation also particularly high in some cases (Koch, 2018). For example, some London estates – notably The Barbican, Golden Lane Estate and Highgate New Terrace estate – now contain ex-council properties that change hands for upwards of £800,000 pounds. Yet on what have been described as less desirable or 'unpopular' estates (Power & Tunstall, 1995), the numbers exercising the right-to-buy were generally lower. In part, this was because the local authority took some years to resolve legal issues concerning ground rent and maintenance charges as they related to tower blocks, with banks and mortgage lenders also unwilling to lend residents money to buy properties on these 'sink estates'. On such estates, those council estate residents who ultimately bought their leases did so in order precisely to 'stay put' in their local area, rather than seeking to capitalise on their investment in the short-run: it allowed them to plan with a view to the longer-term, with notions of inheritance – or simply the ability of

children to remain in the local area – especially important (James et al., 1991). In the three London council estates in our study, most of those who originally bought under right-to-buy remained *in situ*, having had no real incentive to move given a comparable property in a neighbouring part of London would be unaffordable in comparison.

It is those who bought under right-to-buy because they wanted a sense of security and community that appear most threatened by the wholesale renewal of estates, which critics have identified as a form of ‘state-led gentrification’ (Hodkinson, 2011). With negative representations of council estates in London continuing to circulate, Slater (2018) suggests that the rhetoric of ‘sink estate’ has been an ideological ‘battering ram’ enabling the effective destruction of social housing in the capital. Analyses which identified estate residents as participants in the 2011 ‘English riots’ (Till, 2013), as well as concerns about knife-crime in the capital, have consolidated this territorial stigma. Simultaneously, the crisis of housing in London is being used to suggest these estates – once depicted as high-rise and high-density – are not densely-occupied enough, with a government-sponsored report by Savills promoting the adoption of a ‘complete streets’ model of redevelopment rather than a ‘block-based’ one (Campkin, 2017). The move to a ‘complete streets’ model would, it is argued, create several hundred thousand new homes. The argument posited is that high-rise development surrounded by communal space (e.g. gardens, playgrounds and drying areas) not only breeds neglect of public space – an argument echoing the defensible space thesis of the 1970s – but is highly uneconomic (Campkin, 2017). The implication is that the redevelopment of London’s council estates is morally, socially and economically necessary, with estates being identified as *de facto* brownfield sites, and hence suitable for new housing even though they are already home to long-established communities, many of these multi-ethnic and multi-cultural in character.

Around 140 council estates of over 100 units in London have been earmarked for renewal, are undergoing renewal or have undergone renewal since 1997. These renewals all involve the demolition of homes which require residents to be ‘decanted’ on a short- or long-term basis, with leaseholders subject to Compulsory Purchase Orders which, according to Christophers (2010), have become the key weapon in the privatisation of land in the UK. In almost every case, the number of council homes decreases following renewal, replaced with ‘affordable’ housing units for rent, shared ownership or sold on the private market. While planning applications, press reports and residents campaigns produce different estimates of the number of ‘affordable units’ post-renewal, the overall conclusion is that this is not just resulting in a sharp decline in council housing, but a relative decline in properly-affordable housing in London. Estate regeneration hence involves multiple displacement processes, from the initial decanting of populations to allow for redevelopment to a wider exclusionary pressure that prevents working-class populations from ever returning to the estate or its vicinity.

In the remainder of this article we draw on semi-structured interviews with leaseholders experiencing displacement pressures on three council estates. These were chosen according to a number of criteria including size, stage of redevelopment and location. Significantly, all are in Labour-controlled boroughs, underlining the hegemonic nature of Thatcherite reforms which were further entrenched by New Labour policies promoting ‘mixed communities’. The estates are located in inner North (Love Lane, Haringey), East (Carpenters Estate, Newham) and South (Aylesbury Estate, Southwark) London: all are

'brutalist' 1960s estates characterised by a mix of tower blocks and lower-rise homes and maisonettes, and arguably all fall into the category of 'unpopular' estates (Power & Tunstall, 1995), with the case for their regeneration combining discourses of environmental, social and economic malaise. The smallest of these (Love Lane) amounts to some 300 households, the largest (the Aylesbury Estate) over 2700 households.

In total, over 60 interviews with residents from a range of tenures were carried out on these three estates, but this article will focus on the 23 interviews carried out with leaseholders. All of our interviewees had bought their home directly from the council, under right-to-buy. This sets them apart from second, or third occupancy leaseholders, who are generally higher-income, paying non-subsidised market rates for former council properties. All interviewees' names are anonymised, including any information which may reveal their address, place of work or any other identifying details. While these 23 residents are arguably representative of leaseholders living in flats on the multi-cultural and 'unpopular' council estates currently undergoing renewal in inner London, their experiences may be very different to those who bought their lease on more popular estates in London, or, indeed, outside London, where some council tenants were able to buy their home on a freehold basis (Murie, 2016).

This noted, we suggest that the consistency in our respondents' responses to estate renewal provides valuable insights into leaseholder perspectives and experiences in those multi-cultural inner-London boroughs on the gentrification frontier. Significantly, almost all of these leaseholders were from minoritised ethnic groups, with many claiming that most of their white neighbours had long moved on from the estate. Noting there *could* be a number of reasons for this, such as the safety of anti-racist, multi-cultural communities, the presence of ethno-cultural institutions (places of workshop, community centres, etc.) and associated attachments to place (Keith, 1993), here, we reflect especially on the way that renewal programmes impact on ethnic minority residents, noting this is a group whose identity has continued to be informed by stigmatised images of the estates on which they live/d, far from the ideal of security, community and inheritance that right-to-buy promised (James et al., 1991).

Experiencing unhoming

In describing the experiences of leaseholders, we draw on perspectives which understand the loss of home as a psycho-social process of unhoming that impacts on well-being, mental health and social ties. Such ideas were highlighted in Young and Willmott's (1957) classic study of the ambivalent impacts of postwar urban renewal, with destruction of family and kinship networks perceived as the price paid for improvements in housing quality. Fried (1968), who was part of Young and Willmott's Institute for Community Studies (ICS), went a step further and used a psychological category – grief – to describe the impacts of unhoming. One of his quotes – 'It's just like a plant; when you tear up its roots, it dies' (Fried, 1968, p. 374) – was used as a metaphor some 40 years later by Fullilove (2004) to describe the 'root shock' experienced by black communities displaced in the name of modernisation. Interviewing displaced African-American residents, Fullilove alluded to a shared sense of loss associated with unhoming:

There was a remarkable emptiness in that pain. In that searing moment I realized the loss he was describing was, in a crucial way, the collective loss. It was the loss of a massive web of connections – a way of being – that had been destroyed by urban renewal; it was as thousands of people, who seemed to be with me in sunlight, were at some deeper level of their being wandering lost in a dense fog, unable to find one another for the rest of their lives. (Fullilove, 2004, p. 4)

More recently, Pain (2019) has used the term ‘chronic trauma’ to describe similar experiences in the destruction of a former coalmining village in Durham. Pain (2019) also notes the possibilities of ‘retrauma’, and the fact that memories of unhoming can become hard-wired into the collective psyche of a community.

These conceptualisations of the impacts of unhoming are important in so much that the leaseholders who bought under right-to-buy receive compulsory purchase payments for their properties, but these payments are insufficient to allow them to buy properties on the redeveloped estate or even nearby. For example, one leaseholder was offered £117,000 by Southwark Council for her two-bed flat on the Aylesbury Estate even though independent evaluations came in at £300,000, and a two-bed flat in the newly-developed Harvard Gardens was offered to her at £695,000. She said she had no option other than to move out of the capital. Given she had worked hard to pay for the property, she felt her investment for her retirement had gone, and that her savings would be depleted. Stating that she regretted buying under right-to-buy, she broke down in tears as she talked of this at the 2015 Aylesbury Public Inquiry (Hubbard & Lees, 2018).

So while secure council tenants are rehoused under ‘like-for-like’ terms, and generally in the same borough, or in a nearby one, leaseholders who purchased under the right-to-buy are not. Across all three council estates (Aylesbury, Carpenters, Love Lane), leaseholders appear to have been treated roughly the same: when renewal was announced, leaseholders were assured that they would be rehoused in an equivalent property, but as the plans progressed and renewal began, that assurance disappeared, replaced with the offer of financial compensation or a property offered under very different terms (e.g. shared ownership). Leaseholders stated that initial promises of a right to return were reneged on:

[W]hat they did say was that initially, which felt encouraging, was that we could move off the property but then there would be an option to come back here years after, once they had built and finished and refurbished the flats. But now it does not seem like that option is available. (Aylesbury Interview 1)

Asked if they would swap their own home for another on the renewed estate, interviewees largely replied in the affirmative:

If it is a leasehold swap, yes. If the option that they had for us was a leasehold swap, that was one of the options, then yes, I would say yes . . . if they can swap this property for the new one they are going to [*build*], then why not? (Love Lane Interview 12)

Rather than being against estate renewal, leaseholders were against being permanently displaced from their estate: for many, the issue was not about ‘cashing in’, but to have a place they could call their own:

So they kept on offering [financial compensation for] the flat, we said we are not interested in money, we want a place to live, you know. We are not after the money. (Carpenters Interview 13)

This implies that those who bought under right-to-buy exhibit a phenomenological understanding of their home and neighbourhood as a ‘comfortable lived space’ rather than a financial investment. So even if leaseholders receive the market value for their loss of property, this suggests it would be impossible to compensate them for their loss of sense of home and community. Clearly, many leaseholders across the UK used the right-to-buy legislation to buy their property before selling and moving on, but the residents interviewed in this study did not – demonstrating a more rooted attachment to place.

In some of interviews, residents stated that a new place would never feel truly like home, as no matter how many new friends they made or how much better their new house might be, the memories of their original home and neighbourhood would always remind them of their loss:

I mean, I was brought up here, in this area, I have always lived [here]. It’s the only place . . . it is more sociable you know, like it has got every multicultural people living here. A few of everyone and I like it here. And I don’t want to move out, my children don’t want to move out too. And you know it is very hard to find a place. Getting used to the place, do you understand? (Carpenters Interview 12)

It is worth restating that all those we interviewed purchased their property at heavily-subsidised rates from the council, rather than via the market. All were long-term residents, and were therefore attached to the social and cultural environment of multi-cultural working-class London.

‘Displacement anxiety’ (Watt, 2018) was widely apparent in our interviews, given no interviewees had been offered the means to access similar housing under the terms of their existing lease: they were generally offered compensation, something which all of the leaseholders we spoke to felt was wholly inadequate because it was not enough to purchase a comparable property in the immediate area:

Because, the offer they have given us, when we have looked in [this] area, we would not be able to afford a three-bed. Whether it was a three-bed maisonette or a house, we would not be able to afford it. (Love Lane Interview 8)

Some leaseholders were looking at locations as far away as Northamptonshire for a comparable property. Residents explained:

What the council said when I complained, is . . . ‘For the amount you would get for your house you can get a nice bungalow in Southend.’ I said ‘Who told you I want to live in Southend?’ If I want to – if I love Southend – I would have gone there to buy my property. I would not be here. It is because I like it here, that is why I have bought a place here. So if you want to offer me something, go and get a place around this area for me, I will move in, we will do a direct swap. Oh, it is too expensive, oh really? Oh, really? I didn’t know that! (Carpenters Interview 9)

One of the reasons given for the discrepancy between the valuation of leaseholders' homes and comparable properties in the area was the 'managed decline' of the estate pre-renewal, caused by a lack of council maintenance over many years, coupled with the territorial stigma these estates were subject to. This meant that the value of the leaseholder's homes was regarded as insufficient to justify compensation at a level that would enable purchase of a similar new home in the area.

Councils did, however, offer leaseholders a property on the new estate if they agreed to rescind their lease and start a new mortgage under shared ownership. While leaseholders who exercised the right-to-buy were provided with a state subsidy in order to take out their lease, the financial support provided by the council for shared ownership properties is a mandatory investment contribution. While the contractual terms of shared ownership properties differ across different estates and councils, they are broadly consistent in as much as the resident purchases a portion of a property, and the council owns the rest. The sharing of the property means residents are often unable to rent out the property, sell it on the market or pass it on through inheritance. None of the leaseholders welcomed the prospect of entering a shared ownership agreement:

Yes, well I can't afford [this area] because I wouldn't want to go and buy a 5% or 10% share of a £700,000 property which I would never finish paying for . . . that your children cannot inherit, and you cannot rent it out. (Aylesbury Interview 1)

For leaseholders, shared ownership properties hence do not come with the same (perceived) benefits as their right-to-buy properties, leading many leaseholders to refuse such offers from the council. While the right-to-buy was a financial investment, the leaseholders interviewed suggested it was also a social investment in their home, community and neighbourhood. Rather than simply maximising sale-value, our interviewees wished to keep their property so that they and their children could remain in the community they had invested in over many years.

The realisation that they would lose their home, and their investment, led many leaseholders to resolutely refuse to move until they received enough compensation to purchase a similar property in the area:

. . . I am staying in my house, and I do not want to move. Who wants to move me? So, if you want to move me, you cannot say that 'I am moving you to this place' which is not comfortable for me. I like it here! I don't want anybody to take this from me, I don't want problems with anybody! (Aylesbury Interview 4)

But there was also awareness that some leaseholders had accepted compensation payments early on (often because they believed the offer would decrease if they did not accept it quickly), and had left the estate at the same time as the council tenants who were being moved into accommodation elsewhere. In some instances, this created a perception of abandonment as the neighbourhood began to fragment and services began to fail. In such cases, the life of leaseholders was effectively suspended: there was no longer any incentive to improve their home, nor was it clear how they should plan for the future. They became trapped in the present, and displaced before the event. The potential

psychological and physical consequences of living in this state of abeyance are multiple, with the tortuous and exhausting processes of establishing how displacement would impact on their home and community leading to feelings of shame, stress and anxiety:

I mean, some people, some neighbours that I know they've gone already. Some of them, they don't want to leave yet, like myself, my mum, we don't want to go from here. None of them they want to go from here. It is really affecting us. (Love Lane Interview 12)

This ultimately wore some individuals down, leading to an inertia that made effective resistance to displacement impossible (Lancione, 2017). However, some were more dogged in their resistance, and developed discourses of resistance which emphasised they were facing forms of systematic violence.

Class, race and the fragmentation of the 'homeowner society'

The perceived injustice of the circumstances faced by the leaseholders appeared to lead to the development of a critical class consciousness, and the sense that their homes were being sacrificed in the name of capital accumulation:

[T]he rich will always remain rich and have no respect for the poor. Do you understand me? And nobody, people do not consider people. Just in their own selfish way. I have to say that. Because, I mean, it is my personal business, how much stuff I suffered to buy my home, you know, I spend a lot of my money to make myself comfortable in my house, because I stay on the road a lot, I struggle . . . (Love Lane Interview 9)

This was also evident in discourses that suggested that the negotiation of payments for homes occurred within uneven relations of power:

They are taking advantage of us, you know, because they can see that we are poor people . . . If you want money, do it in the right way. Don't try to steal it from us . . . Yeah. So now what they have to sort out is, how to, give us more percentage, so that we can be sort of, we can sustain ourselves, to get, to buy a new property here, or to buy new property elsewhere. (Love Lane Interview 12)

Here, the refusal of leaseholders to move was bolstered by the perception that local councils and well-resourced development companies were pressurising residents:

[Y]ou feel like you're going up against a regime, and you are doing this all part of your spare time and, when limited progress is being made, it stems the flow of the fight in people. And there are a few people here, and they are fighting to the bitter end here. (Aylesbury Interview 9)

This serves to underscore a key argument: namely, that although the right-to-buy offered the promise of spreading wealth and breaking down barriers between classes, many of those who bought their own home were never able to escape the labelling of their council

estate as a stigmatised space, and remained vulnerable to the power of capital and the local state to override their property rights in moments of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2005).

Given that almost all the interviewees were of African, Caribbean, Latin American or South Asian heritage, it is perhaps not surprising that this class consciousness was also racialised, and often articulated through the politics of migration and the nation:

They know that only black people bought the houses. That is all I can say. Yeah, it is true, the majority of us are black. We haven’t got any white person in there. When we go to meetings we don’t see anybody, if they are there they are not coming, because they are not accepting it . . . Because we stay here for this place to become . . . new for them. We take the rubbish from here, we take everything we can take from here and now they know that this land is worth gold. So they want to move us and take their gold. We are not ready. (Aylesbury Interview 5)

Here, interviewees claimed racialised stereotypes were being invoked by those proposing the demolition of their homes:

I thought because, first of all, we are Africans, we don’t know much about the system. And, they think that most of the people living in this estate, or this borough, are minorities. They are not working. They are, excuse me, they are stupid. Yeah, they know that. And you are just an individual, you are not a force, there is nothing that you can do. So they just think that these people are stupid Africans. (Aylesbury Interview 17)

Leaseholders repeatedly affirmed that the justification for displacing them was the way in which they, and the estates in which they live, were racialised. This racialisation includes particular associations with crime and deviance, consolidated in long-standing images of ‘sink’ estates (Lees, 2014). For example, the idea that the ‘mugger’ was a young black male was effectively created by a British police and media campaign during the 1970s that identified ‘areas of above-average crime rates, even though at the time black immigrants were under-represented in the crime rates of these “criminal areas”’ (Hall et al., 1978, p. 45). Council estates in many parts of inner London have seen this racialisation continually reproduced, with images of poverty and ‘roughness’ seen to reflect the racial make-up of an area (something which appeared to gain momentum on the three estates with the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees on short-term tenancies). The racialisation of ‘riots’ and ‘gang-related’ violence (Williams, 2014) was also identified by interviewees as stigmatising the estates and the areas in which they were situated.

Some scholars argue that gentrification has reaffirmed the need for multi-ethnic communities to defend their communities (Perera, 2019), countering the tendency of ‘new urban pioneers’ to erase black geography and history. Experiences of marginalisation and disenfranchisement experienced by many of the leaseholders were then translated into organised resistance, spanning high-level legal campaigns funded through crowd-sourcing (Hubbard & Lees, 2018) through to more grassroots struggles (see Watt, 2016 on Focus E15). However, in the estates we studied, these struggles have been prolonged, with the gradual decanting of residents making it hard to maintain effective opposition:

It is a legal war of attrition, and it can be drawn out over many years as is shown in the case the leaseholders brought against Southwark council . . . and these people who are, for the most part, just trying to survive, cannot compete. So yes, there is a tactical way to kill the fight in people. (Aylesbury Interview 3)

This ‘slow violence’ was seen as a barrier to be overcome, with the recognition that it was important to build coalitions involving different protest groups and campaigns from other parts of London:

And then there were split opinions so one of the residents formed another, you know, committee, to get all of the residents involved in it, and then that started, you know, getting the message . . . And this Focus E15 group, which has been supporting us . . . they came here and occupied for the week, to emphasise the . . . you know. (Carpenters Interview 13)

Unsurprisingly, many of these campaigns seek to defend the property rights – or perceived property rights – held by leaseholders. But arguably, it is through the unpacking of the contradictions between the promises made to, and the perceived rights of, residents who exercised their right-to-buy, and their actual experiences in the face of London boroughs and private developers, that the opportunity for a far more radical critique is opened up.

Conclusion

Given the local state’s power of compulsory purchase, any homeowner can lose their property if it is deemed in the public interest (Christophers, 2010). But those who bought on council estates on a leaseholder basis appear more vulnerable than most, particularly if that estate is in an area of inner London that is both stigmatised and perceived as under-utilised (Cole & Robinson, 2000). Ironically, many of these gave up their assured tenancies as council tenants when they bought their lease, and have seen their non-leaseholding neighbours rehoused in similar properties on, or near, the estate in question. In this sense, leaseholders are finding their expectations of home security, wealth growth and inheritance undermined in a fashion that provokes anger, resentment and resignation. Leaseholders may receive compensation that reflects the value of their property on a council estate – one that might be stigmatised as crime-ridden, poverty-stricken or outdated – but do not receive adequate funds to allow them to buy a home on the new estate, typically a mixed community where notions of affordability do not encompass those who bought their homes at highly-discounted rates years before (Beswick & Penny, 2018). Even where leaseholders were offered accommodation they could afford on the redeveloped estate, this was generally shared ownership, a mode of tenure that does not give the same potential to invest in, or make money from, property as was the case under right-to-buy. In all our case studies, there was no like-for-like agreement between developers and leaseholders that allowed the displaced to return to a similar-sized property on a similar lease – however, this situation may now be changing, with the Department for Communities and Local Government (2016, p. 5) arguing demolition schemes need to ‘go further and offer leaseholders a package that enables them to stay on the estate or close by’.

Those residents who purchased their property under right-to-buy on the three ‘unpopular’ estates we studied expressed a mixture of seemingly contradictory arguments in the face of the gentrification-induced displacement they faced. On the one hand, they affirmed neoliberal policy logics, demanding the sanctity of property ownership and inheritance rights. On the other, they were highly critical of the state-led gentrification of council estates, and ‘personalised’ this through criticism of local politicians and council officials (Koch, 2018). Criticising the seeming-impunity of Labour-controlled councils, leaseholders argued that they and their neighbours are facing discrimination that is inherently class-based, but experienced through their ethnic identity as a form of racism. As Hall et al. (1978, p. 307) argued, race is ‘the modality in which class is “lived”, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and “fought through”’. Thus, their perceived rights as leaseholders were overridden, leading to displacement pressures experienced as inherently racial in character. Black residents felt betrayed, and sidelined to make way for white gentrifiers. The investments they had made in their homes were perceived to be lost, and their community socially-cleansed. Though not the focus of this article, this involved considerable ‘displacement anxiety’ (Watt, 2018) before the event, and the exacerbation of pre-existing health difficulties that spoke to the ‘root-shock’ of unhoming (Fullilove, 2004).

Almost all of those leaseholders interviewed on our case study estates conceded that, although they had gained some property rights by becoming leaseholders, those rights were then trumped by the rights of private companies and councils, leaving them disillusioned with the promises made by successive governments pushing right-to-buy. In the context of the rampant financialisation of housing in London (Aalbers, 2017; Christophers, 2018), the fact that leaseholders are being dispossessed by the neoliberal state and development companies is unsurprising. But what remains largely unexplored is the importance of racism in this process: the persistent and pernicious representation of London estates as crime-ridden and inhospitable spaces has become a key plank of the argument for their renewal, with the racialisation of the displacement process defining much of the experience for the leaseholders we interviewed. The fact that many reported positive experiences of home and social life on their estates has rarely been noted in any of the policy documents advocating renewal (Thoburn, 2018): instead the case for renewal is presented on *behalf* of the estate’s residents. As in many areas of policy, white gentrifier imaginations reign, and multi-ethnic working-class perspectives are ignored: the erasure of council estates is represented as a necessary form of social and spatial renewal, and the displacement of those home-owning leaseholders who invested in their communities over so many years is barely acknowledged.

So although right-to-buy legislation offered the promise of entry into a less precarious mode of private property ownership, those who took up this option have ironically not enjoyed the same rights to dwell as those who continued to live in state-owned properties. Home ownership has, for some, proved more precarious and less secure than right-to-buy’s proponents suggested, with the state’s ability to use compulsory purchase to undermine seemingly inalienable property rights suggesting that property needs to always be understood as socially produced rather than an *a priori* question of ownership (Blomley, 2004). This serves to emphasise the point that on many ‘unpopular’ council estates in London, as elsewhere in the UK, the privatisation of council housing was

partial at best, with the state's interest in this land never truly receding. While Thatcherism offered some council tenants a route into a home-owning democracy, and entry to a putative middle-class, many who exercised the right-to-buy remained subject to the bureaucratic and invidious control of a state that continued to identify them and the estates on which they dwelt as 'problems' that needed to be solved. In this light, the managed decline of 'multi-cultural' inner city estates and the case for their renewal has been constructed by the state in a way that fails to recognise the investments made in place by non-white residents, and implicitly makes a case for white gentrification as the only solution to the environmental deterioration of these estates.

Funding

This research was supported by the ESRC grant ES/N015053/1 'Gentrification, displacement and the impacts of council estate renewal in twenty first century London'.

References

- Aalbers, M. B. (2017). The variegated financialization of housing. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41(4), 542–554.
- Allen, C., Camina, M., Casey, R., Coward, S., & Wood, M. (2005). *Mixed tenure, twenty years on*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Beswick, J., & Penny, J. (2018). Demolishing the present to sell off the future? The emergence of 'financialized municipal entrepreneurialism' in London. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 42(4), 612–632.
- Blandy, S., & Hunter, C. (2012). The right-to-buy: Examination of an exercise in allocating, shifting and re-branding risks. *Critical Social Policy*, 33(1), 17–36.
- Blomley, N. (2004). *Unsettling the city: Urban land and the politics of property*. Routledge.
- Boleat, M. (1983). The prospect for council house sales. *Housing Review*, 32, 147–148.
- Burnham, P. (1999). The politics of economic management in the 1990s. *New Political Economy*, 4(1), 37–54.
- Campkin, B. (2017). Out-of-synch estates. In P. Guillery & D. Kroll (Eds.), *Mobilising housing histories: Learning from London's past* (pp. 163–176). Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).
- Christophers, B. (2010). Geographical knowledges and neoliberal tensions: Compulsory land purchase in the context of contemporary urban redevelopment. *Environment and Planning A*, 42(4), 856–873.
- Christophers, B. (2018). *The new enclosure: The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain*. Verso.
- Cole, I., Powell, R., & Sanderson, E. (2016). Putting the squeeze on 'Generation Rent': Housing benefit claimants in the private rented sector. *Sociological Research Online*, 21(2), 1–14.
- Cole, I., & Robinson, D. (2000). Owners yet tenants: The position of leaseholders in flats in England and Wales. *Housing Studies*, 15(4), 595–612.
- Department for Communities and Local Government. (2016). *Estate regeneration national strategy resident engagement and protection*. HMSO.
- Forrest, R., & Hirayama, Y. (2015). The financialisation of the social project: Embedded liberalism, neoliberalism and home ownership. *Urban Studies*, 52(2), 233–244.
- Fried, M. (1968). Grieving for a lost home: The psychological costs of relocation. In J. Wilson (Ed.), *Urban renewal: the record and the controversy* (pp. 359–379). MIT Press.

- Fullilove, M. (2004). *Root-shock: How tearing up city neighborhoods hurts America, and what we can do about it*. Ballantine Books.
- Hall, S. (1980, February). Thatcherism: A new stage? *Marxism Today*, pp. 26–28.
- Hall, S. (2011). The neo-liberal revolution. *Cultural Studies*, 25(6), 705–728.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hefferman, R. (2000). *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political change in Britain*. Palgrave.
- Hodkinson, S. (2011). The private finance initiative in English council housing regeneration. *Housing Studies*, 26(6), 911–932.
- Hubbard, P., & Lees, L. (2018). The right to community: Legal geographies of resistance on London's final gentrification frontier. *City*, 22(1), 8–25.
- James, S., Jordan, B., & Kay, H. (1991). Poor people, council housing and the right-to-buy. *Journal of Social Policy*, 20(1), 27–40.
- Jones, C., & Murie, A. (2008). *The right-to-buy: Analysis and evaluation of a housing policy*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Keith, M. (1993). *Race, riots and policing: Lore and disorder in a multi-racist society*. UCL Press.
- Kleinhans, R., & van Ham, M. (2013). Lessons learned from the largest tenure-mix operation in the world: Right-to-buy in the UK. *Cityscape*, 15(2), 101–117.
- Koch, I. L. (2018). *Personalizing the state: An anthropology of law, politics, and welfare in austerity Britain*. Oxford University Press.
- Lancione, M. (2017). Revitalising the uncanny. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(6), 1012–1032.
- Lees, L. (2014). The urban injustices of New Labour's 'new urban renewal': The case of the Aylesbury Estate in London. *Antipode*, 46(4), 921–947.
- Massey, D., & Catalano, A. (1978). *Capital and land: Landownership by capital in Great Britain*. Edward Arnold.
- Murie, A. (2016). *The right-to-buy? Selling off public and social housing*. Policy Press.
- Pain, R. (2019). Chronic urban trauma: The slow violence of housing dispossession. *Urban Studies*, 56(2), 385–400.
- Perera, J. (2019). *The London clearances: Race, housing and policing* (Background paper No. 12). Institute of Race Relations.
- Power, A., & Tunstall, R. (1995). *Swimming against the tide: Polarisation or progress on 20 unpopular council estates, 1980–1995*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Slater, T. (2018). The invention of the 'sink estate': Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis. *The Sociological Review*, 66(4), 877–897.
- Thoburn, N. (2018). Concrete and council housing. *City*, 22(5–6), 612–632.
- Till, J. (2013). The broken middle: The space of the London riots. *Cities*, 34, 71–74.
- Watt, P. (2016). A nomadic war machine in the metropolis. *City*, 20(20), 297–320.
- Watt, P. (2018). 'This pain of moving, moving, moving': Evictions, displacement and logics of expulsion in London. *L'Année Sociologique*, 68(1), 67–100.
- Williams, P. (2014). Criminalising the other: Challenging the race–gang nexus. *Race & Class*, 56(3), 8–35.
- Young, M., & Willmott, P. (1957). *Family and kinship in East London*. Penguin.