

Getting Rid of Home

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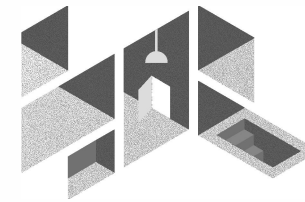
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Getting Rid of Home



I cannot think of homelessness in 2030; of strategies and interventions; of more policymaking and expertise, without addressing the pressing issue of what and where *home* is. The issue is as follows: if, under current conceptions and conditions of home, we have space for something like *home-lessness*, then we will never be able to get rid of that thing without tackling the original problem – which is home itself.

Michele Lancione

Home is an exclusionary act. It is made of walls and doors, which create control and allow the policing of a border. It is made of social relationships based on emotional bonding, which are carved out through exclusion (there is no bonding if there is no exclusion of others). It is constructed, in its material form, thanks to accumulations of capital that, in some form or other, are related to – and contribute to reproduce – systems of oppression. As many have shown, it also has internal exclusions, being filled with unbalanced, gendered power relationships and paternalistic modes of breeding. In its most common physical representation – housing – home can quite easily be turned into an exploitative machine, used as a means of capital accumulation that has effects not only on tenants, but also on land values, urban development, and financial markets. It seems as if home is that construct that cuts across multiple dimensions of human life, as a machine that is capable of abstracting from those domains an autonomous function that is then able to reproduce itself in the longer term (it is what Deleuze and Guattari called an ‘abstract machine’). That machine is about extracting one form of existence from the magma of all possibilities, of all possible forms of existence. What I argue is that the possibility of that extraction, the bare primordial functioning of that machine, is carved around the possibility of its negation: home is home because it contains the possibility of not-being-at-home within itself. Home is a full bodied and multi-dimensional exclusionary act.

So, answering the question of what homelessness might be in 2030, in 1861, means investigating the unformed matter that diagrams or sketches out the functioning of the universally accepted, mainstream, homing machine. How can one think of ending homelessness without ending this kind of home?

Further, what home does is more than enabling its negation from within, the creation of

home-lessness as a space of existence upon which the whole exclusionary act can be sustained. Home and that negated space of -lessness are productive, because they are not only the site for the (re)production of material and cultural conditions, but also the nexus where subjects are (re)produced. In other words, home-lessness is matter of becoming. It is a non-linear process of subject-formation: one is not born homeless, one does not choose to be homeless, one does not end up being homeless. Everyone, within current systemics of home, endures a process of subject-formation that can be defined of ‘home-less’. The particularity of the socio-technical machines involved mean that even those with a house are not at ‘home’; not fully in-place; not really belonging in the fullest possible way.

The ‘theory’ of homelessness is, for the most part, concerned with making sure that this categorisation is used as a bordering tool to create a minority who are then defined as l’autre, the deviant other. This kind of mainstream normative theory knows nothing of the enduring process of subject-formation that makes home-lessness not an exception, but a true common: our shared experience of not being fully in-place. When mainstream theory speaks of ‘the transition’ from being a ‘normal’ dweller to being an ‘abnormal’ homeless person, it explains it as a matter of stages, of pre-explanatory traumas; it justifies it in terms of linear paths where, at a certain point, something ‘went wrong’ causing ‘homelessness’ to emerge. Cause and effect. But in reality, home-lessness is not a matter of cause and effect. Far from that! Home-lessness is about a process of subject-formation that cuts across sociological categorisations, social groups, classes. Rough sleeping is a traumatic intensification of that process: a dense cusp that is not set apart, but well within a whole pluriverse of intensities of ‘lessness’ that endure above, beyond, before, and after it.

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The subject is suddenly kicked out of his or her house. Because s/he wasn’t paying. Because s/he couldn’t cope. Because s/he is ill, sick, addicted. The subject is kicked out of her/his house and seems to fall in-between. This is a space made of all sorts of relations and objects that the subject was not aware of before, when s/he was living in the fiction of ‘home’: soup kitchens, shelters, begging and the charity of strangers, sidewalk walks, tents, wet sleeping bags in abandoned buildings, nights, shadows and new fear of violence too. These things are not foreign, totally hidden away, but instead lie in-between a normalised form of everyday life under contemporary capitalism and its expelled version. But once we zoom out and plug into the micropolitics of our shared existences, is there a real distinction between the subject who falls and the one who does not? Is there a real distinction from the subject within and the one without home? I am not denying that there is a traumatic experiential difference, which is a matter of intensities, but there is not more than this. Both subjects never really left home.

Lessness for both starts before getting kicked out. It is beyond, above, before, and after the event of displacement, because it has to do with the substratum of our social lives. It has to do with the answer to the broader question of how we go about life; about how we decide to deal with the power and energy of life in its multiple forms. The power to love, to make connections, to create and

destroy, to make ends meet, and more. The way these things are managed and the way they are reproduced is always matter of collective choices, conscious and unconscious in their makings. The mode of reproduction that we have chosen is just one of the ways to go about these things. Under this (capitalist) frame there is an individualistic mould that dominates and regiments all others. From the figure of the successful entrepreneur of the 19th century to contemporary consumer-based arguments about choice and free will, capitalism has (re)produced individualisation as our mainstream mode of assemblage and circulation, meticulously constructing the desire for victory, success, and affirmation into the backbone of each subject. Lessness is one of the substrates that emerges from this, and upon it home is assembled. This is a key assemblage of contemporary life, which is made out of private property; individualised responsibilities and private accountability for ‘failures’; identity construction by exclusion; patriarchy; racialised bordering; and so on.

Home does not sit outside of these relations but is their most evident product, which in turns produces us as home-less: it (re)produces us as subjects in a way that ensures that, being at-home, being-‘OK’ also creates the possibility of our expulsion from that home. This being-OK cuts across the unconscious levels of the skin, the body, the face: it becomes a way of being alive, an entanglement with the codes/axioms brought forward by the capitalistic machine, becoming therefore machinic itself, channelling and reproducing that particular form of exclusion as a normal way of life. The subject at home is far from being free –far from being able to choose and to actuate, far from being allowed the free circulation of will and joy. On the contrary: by accepting the individualisation and commodification of everything (which is the abstract mantra of the capitalistic machine) the subject becomes commodified as

well. S/he becomes defined, privatised, wrapped up in opposition to that which is portrayed as less defined, less private: the deviant, the poor, the black body, the 'homeless'. But again, this is a fictional opposition. When the event of expulsion happens, home-lessness is not generated. It simply re-asserted, intensifying the exclusionary status upon which the norm, is built. That is the shared substratum of -lessness, where life is codified on the basis of home's possible absence. This is the substratum upon which we have assembled that thing we call home.

Like theories, policies know nothing of the way in which home-lessness is at the core of the homing game. They are built around a false compartmentalisation. They aim to tackle the 'homeless' subject as if that subject exists in a domain distinct from that of normality, from that of mainstream, shared functions of home. This is perfectly coherent under current conditions because it maintains a false distinction that is required for policies – and experts – to maintain their role (as Foucault so clearly argued). Expertise and interventions are designed to isolate and manage, and through that act of isolation and management – through detachment – they are able to reproduce themselves and their function. Policies can, of course, vary greatly in their immediate effects, which can range from outright annihilation to compassion and care. But ultimately, they all fail in recognising the impossibility of tackling 'homelessness' and the 'homeless' subject as a defined, distinct element in

a wider social plane. That's because – once again – there is no distinction to start with. Homeless people do not exist. Once we realise that everyone is part of and a producer of a shared way of life, we can recognise that homelessness lies right at the core of the current home we choose to embrace and inhabit.

PAAVO should be celebrated for its capacity to reduce the intensities of lessness. Few programmes have achieved so much in terms of restoring forms of ontological security to so many people. Those interested in the short-term alleviation of the symptoms of home-lessness should take inspiration. But PAAVO, and other initiatives (such as Housing First in many other contexts worldwide), will not end home-lessness. Not now, nor by 2030. To tackle home-lessness requires a radical critique of the function of lessness, and then the imaginative labour of reinventing home. We need a new home, based around solidarity, affective care, horizontally-shared responsibilities, redistributed means – and more. Only then will we reach a point where home does not include, within its own definition, the possibility of its annihilation. We must move beyond mere shelter, deep into the socio-economic and cultural making of being in the world together, as a true collective being. As anarchist and feminist literature shows, these alternatives makings are possible. An entirely new home needs to be assembled, starting from the radical undoing of the current one.

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MICHELE LANCIONE is an urban ethnographer and activist interested in issues of marginality and diversity, homelessness and radical politics. His non-academic works include a full-length documentary around forced evictions in Bucharest, Romania (www.ainceputploaia.com). He is also one of the founders of the forthcoming publication, the *Radical Housing Journal*. He is Senior Research Fellow at the Urban Institute, University of Sheffield, UK.