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Building territories to protect life and not profit: The RHJ in conversation with Raquel Rolnik

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Abstract

In this conversation Raquel Rolnik discusses her latest book, introducing our commitment to a form of intellectual praxis that cannot be detached from direct engagement with housing struggles. She reflects on the makings of her latest book - *Urban Warfare* - and she also offers insights on the challenges (and opportunities) brought forward by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Michele: It is a pleasure for the *Radical Housing Journal* to host this interview with you, Raquel. We are all very inspired by your scholarship and activism. Thank you for accepting our invitation!

Raquel: Thank you! I think the *Radical Housing Journal* is a great and timely initiative, so I'm very proud to be part of it in a modest way.

Michele: Let's start with the here and the now. How are you in this difficult time? We know you are in Brazil, and we were wondering if you could share with us some initial thoughts on the times we are living in.

Raquel: In a way, I am going through the pandemic in a very privileged position: I am a fulltime professor, tenure track, which means that my salary is coming every month despite the pandemic. I have an adequate house to be confined in, and my family is in the same situation. It is a privileged situation. Although it's tough and difficult for everybody physically and psychologically, I think the outbreak of the pandemic could be used as an opportunity—more for some than for others—to change things.

First of all, we must reflect on the differential impacts that the pandemic has on people in different housing and urban conditions—which are in fact the same thing, because housing is not four walls and a roof. It’s something much more than that. Location matters, and neighborhood matters, as well as the condition of the housing structure itself. During this time, we are seeing the differential impacts of these situations, including in the very basic conditions of being isolated. To be isolated, for a lot of people, is impossible. *Just impossible*. To begin with, in order to stay home, you must have a home. That brings into the public arena questions that remain largely invisible during ordinary times, and opens up a discussion on the right to adequate housing.

Second, the pandemic is accelerating our ‘smart cities’ nightmare, or the ways big data and its ownership are becoming more and more a device of control. Due to the conditions of our isolation, some of us are entering much deeper into the digital economy and digital life, to the extent of the utopian idea that nobody will meet anybody anymore.

Myself, as a researcher and an activist for the right to housing and the city, as well as our laboratory team, we are super engaged in monitoring the impacts, raising awareness, and mobilizing and campaigning to try to overcome some of the effects of this pandemic. But none of the devastating effects of the pandemic were created by the virus. The impacts have to do with the preexisting general model of organizing cities, life, economies, societies, and politics, all of which we absolutely need to reflect upon now. All the harsh conditions that some people and groups, especially, are living have to do with the way we organize our relations with territories and among ourselves.

This is a precious time to reflect on what comes next. Are we going to go back to business as usual, or can we use this moment to tackle the ecological question, the housing question, and the political crisis we are living through? This crisis is an opportunity to take decisions and then to think—to say, ‘Okay, so what comes next?’ This does not have a clear and definitive reply; it is an open question.

What comes next depends a lot on what kind of conditions we can create at this particular moment to make clear that our current model is just unsustainable and will kill all of us. What is a social, economic, or political organization, or a way to build cities that protects life and not profit?

Michele: You’re really nailing the point. The crisis offers an opportunity—perhaps in a weird way, but it does. What to do with it, and how, is the big question.

Raquel: We need to keep a broad perspective. I am trying to do that by not only following the situation in Brazil, but trying to connect with different experiences. That’s what I did in my work during my mandate at the United Nations: try to see these processes as global, but also rooted in their singularities.

Michele: Our next question connects well with what you just said. We would like to hear about your experience for six years as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, and about the book you wrote afterward, *Urban Warfare* (Verso). Your book speaks not only to academics, policymakers, and practitioners, but is engaging

enough to speak to the many—precisely, we think, because of the kind of direct engagement with movements that you had, across geographies, when you were UN Rapporteur for Adequate Housing. Why did you decide to write it in the way you did? What did you aim to achieve?

Raquel: I think there are two issues to take into account here. First of all, there is a tradition in urban studies in Brazil, a tradition of engagement. Not only me, but many, many scholars of my generation and the previous generation—those who were deeply involved in the struggles against dictatorship in Brazil in the 70s and beyond—embrace this tradition. Historically, my generation came hand-to-hand with scholarship on certain urban issues— scholarship that was not an end to itself, but a platform to build a specific agenda, which was an agenda to address those issues with urban and housing policy, and then an experiment of implementing and enforcing this programme that also involved academics.

Personally, I have been always a professor and researcher. But for many years, I was also engaged in public policy—as head of the planning department of Sao Paulo, then in Brazil’s national government, and then at the global level as Rapporteur. I’ve always moved back and forth between the public policy realm and activism, all the while retaining connections with housing movements. I can’t—I simply cannot—understand how it’s possible to write on urban and housing without this kind of engagement.

I would say that most of my knowledge come from practice and praxis. But I would also say that I am very proud that most people in the housing and right to the city movements in Brazil and Latin America call me Professor Raquel. I’m very proud of it. Why? Because everybody who is engaged in activism can bring something to the table, and that is what I can bring to the table. As a professor in a free public university in Brazil, it’s my obligation to do serious research and thinking. I mean, Brazilians are actually paying me to reflect, to think, to understand, and to help put together a puzzle in a way that is more understandable, that is critical, and that can provide some grounding for action. So, going from the mandate to the book was the same thing I have done all my life, in different positions, with different mandates, and at different scales.

But there is also a second important point. Traditionally, scholars in Brazil and throughout Latin America, as well as in Africa, Southeast Asia, and beyond, are on the periphery of knowledge production. Within the international division of labor in academia, our task has been always to do case studies in order to apply the big theory that is produced by Anglo-Saxon and European think tanks, universities, and research centres. And if I always questioned this, something that happened during my mandate pushed me to take it up even more strongly, and that was my mission in the UK.

When I arrived there and I was doing exactly the same thing that I have done in other places, in other countries—engaging with communities and struggles—all of a sudden the reaction of the government was, “How come a Brazilian woman is coming here? How does she dare say that housing policies in Britain are wrong, that they are violations of human rights?” At that point I realized, “Oh, there is something here. Maybe from the

periphery of scholarship, I am coming with a general view that can matter to UK, to the U.S., and to Europe, as well.”

The amount of information that I was able to access in six years was incredible. An enormous amount of information—information that came from across the spectrum: from national policies, from local policies, from communities, from academics that were reflecting in each country. It was an incredible amount of knowledge that I thought it would be very important to share, to register, to make available beyond the constrained language and rituals of the institutional human rights system. That’s why I decided to write the book.

The UN reports are absolutely squared into a type of narrative that cannot show the whole picture or tell the whole story. In the book, I was finally free to show and to register exactly what I thought, something that was not entirely possible during the mandate because of diplomatic constraints. It was important for me to bring in the lived experience of the poor people I encountered throughout my journey. You can have a general theory, but at the end of the day, there is a real person there, suffering and voiceless. That’s why I decided to write in a way that was accessible to more people, and also why I tried to bring some non-academic voices to the academic world.

Michele: I really appreciated the way you open most chapters in the book with a felt and lived account of housing precarity, and then with that grounding cast light on broader political and theoretical points. This brings me to our next question. Radical housing movements worldwide are using housing as a gateway to challenge broader forms of inequalities. The struggle is about housing, but it’s not only about housing; it’s always about something else. You’ve already pointed this out beautifully in this interview by asking about a way of organizing that protects life and not profit. Can you expand on this point—on how to fight for housing *and* for a radical re-envisioning of society?

Raquel: I think that behind this question, there is another very important theoretical question. That is a question that was already been dealt with David Harvey, for instance, among others.

People live in precarious conditions because they don’t have money. They don’t have money because of class issues, because they are exploited, because of inequality in the distribution of salaries and wages and in economics. But it’s very important to reverse this story. This is what I think we should always highlight in our struggles around cities and housing: Housing differences and different urban conditions *produce* inequalities. They’re not just reflections of inequalities that are produced elsewhere; the territorial production of inequality has always been crucial, very crucial, to building other forms of inequalities.

There has always been a difference between those who have and those who have not, but this is even truer now when the built environment has very clearly become a vehicle for financial capital. Who controls the built environment, and what that means for the built environment, is absolutely central in the struggle against capitalism in its current neoliberal financial phase.

When we struggle to stay put, we are not just struggling for the right to housing as part of our struggle for human rights, as in the liberal thinking. No. We are also struggling to keep parts of the planet out of the playground of global financial capital. We are seizing part of the planet to provide ground for us to live on. We are fighting to retain at least part of it for life—for the production and reproduction of life. That’s how I see the connections. I think it is very important to demonstrate how much one can, through housing, be more exploited, more marginalized, more stigmatized, and more oppressed, and also how one can, through struggles around housing, do the reverse.

Michele: Yes, precisely. When we started the *Radical Housing Journal*, we really wanted to give voice to that intersection: housing as a gateway to broader visions and struggles. But a follow-up to this is the way in which certain kinds of housing struggles are not really recognized as political or do not reach the level of ‘the political,’ either because of how that has been traditionally conceived, or because of their visibility. For instance, this is the case for housing struggles in the extended peripheries of the so-called urban south, which are often registered within the depoliticized rubric of ‘resilience’ and appropriated by a framework of humanitarianism locked on individualized claims. It’s also the case for struggles in violent households, which, even when heard, are still mostly registered as individual issues within certain kinds of homes, rather than the structural conditions of a particular idea of ‘home.’ In a sense, perhaps the problem is not just how to use housing for broader struggles, but also how to re-approach the terrain of what counts as politics and how.

Raquel: Yeah! And as I was listening to you, I was also thinking about another trap related to the individual or family dimension of the house: the trap of homeownership. Why is it a trap? This became so clear over the last few years. If you take the idea of human rights and housing to the extreme of the human rights framework, what’s behind it is basically the individual freedom of being at home. It has nothing to do with equality or inequality in the distribution of wealth and opportunities. Indeed, it can be very separate from that, and it’s a trap because it has been used like that politically. How? By promoting homeownership as the one and only solution or policy or model or aspiration for everybody—since, in principle, homeownership is the securest form of maintaining your right to stay put in your place and to have a place to live. More so than homeownership as a housing policy, it is the perverse relationship between homeownership and everything that comes with the idea of private property that is the problem.

Individual, freehold, registered private property is the very base of capitalist economy and capitalist biopolitics. The idea of individual property is the very base. This was the revolution that came with capitalism, making claims against other forms of tenure and destroying them. This has been done for almost 300 years now—the residualization and destruction of any other forms of tenure—and of course, this was revolutionary for the bourgeoisie, to destroy the aristocratic way of accessing and controlling territories, but at the same time was also the destruction of all the collective forms that existed before. This includes all the many different arrangements for tenure, housing, and territory that existed before and still do exist, but are being residualized, criminalized, and stigmatized in order

to promote the promise of an individual life that, like all the other promises that capitalism and neoliberalism have made to us, is a lie.

Because, as we know, it is impossible that everybody will have all the rights and consumer goods and individualized housing and be happy forever. It's a lie. It's a lie and it's impossible, not only because of inequality and the fact that capitalism needs to exploit in order to grow. Not only because of that, but also because of the limits of the environment. It's just impossible to establish the European pattern of living for all the planet. I'm sorry; not enough resources to do that. So this utopia, I think, has come to a deadlock. Having said that, it's still an aspiration. *That is the trap*, because instead of struggling to overcome the whole system, a lot of movements are still struggling for all people to have their individual homes, to increase their consumption levels.

I can use the example of the housing social movement in Sao Paulo. The most radical housing social movement in Sao Paulo, which squats land and buildings, has been doing so essentially in order to get private homeownership for every family in the movement, and the governments always negotiate with that. That is the bargaining chip; everything is traded for housing units. This is the story.

Michele: That example brings me to the question of dealing with different histories, geographies, material conditions, and traditions of collective action. The housing question is one question and many questions at the same time. How were you, personally, able to navigate these complexities in your global praxis? How can one deal with this complexity, without reducing it to the dominant paradigms?

Raquel: The only way I can think of to do this is to think critically about the coloniality of thought, as well as the coloniality of policies and policymaking. In Latin America, we have a long tradition of thought that says, "Here is different; it's not the same thing. Here is the periphery of capitalism." But at the same time, politically, the main idea—and this is true for urban issues and housing—is that we want to be like them. We want to have a welfare system that works, and a housing welfare system that works. This has been an aspiration for our housing struggles, here in the periphery of capitalism. When all these famous welfare states started to collapse completely, I think at that point we saw the opening of a possible dislocation to connect the housing struggles and conditions at the periphery and at the centre of capitalism, and inside capitalism. This is not a theoretical but an empirical question.

When I was a rapporteur, I learned that we never compare one country to the other, or the housing conditions of one country to the other. We always compare the country with itself. Keeping that in mind, we are not comparing different things, but we are comparing each thing within itself in a general global movement that moves everybody toward more exploitation and more inequalities. There are very different versions of this, of course, completely context-dependent, related to existing political economies of land and housing in each country. And at the same time, you can also see a general retrocession, and trace how that is connected to a general trend toward the financialization of everything.

Financialization, too, operated in very different ways in different countries, but everywhere, it had some purchase on the housing question as well.

Michele: What you just evoked comes across clearly in the book, where you always hold together these differences but also these commonalities. You said just now that that is an empirical question, so it is a question of praxis, the way you think about it and the way you do it. Now, many of our readers and also members of the RHJ collective have one foot or both in academia, so if you don't mind I'd like to go back to something you said earlier. How you dealt with that empirical question as an academic? What would you say to those among us who may be doing their PhDs, or starting their first big research projects, on how can they mobilize some of their epistemological privilege in order to do that kind of empirical work? It's a difficult question, but what would you say, pragmatically, to this end?

Raquel: It's super difficult because there is a methodological issue within it. It is very complicated, and it's a big challenge. I had the privilege of having a teaching experience last summer, together with Ananya Roy at the University of California-Los Angeles, and this was our exact question. Our main question was: does doing research on housing and the urban, engaging with struggles in communities, come with any difference in terms of methodology? Is it the same old thing, or is it a different thing? Does it require different methodologies, or not? There's an idea that, if *I am activist*, okay, then I live that, but I am going to use another language and another way of behaving in the academic world. I will put my suit and I will be completely different. This is not true, and that's why we put together a resource book that I like a lot, which is called *Methodologies for Housing Justice*.

Michele: That one is very good!

Raquel: The idea is to bring forth and reflect on existing methodologies that are being experimented with already by different groups in different cities and countries. I am absolutely sure that this will bring us, as scholars, to new ways of doing scholarship and research. We are not putting aside everything that we have learned—of course not—and of course we are not inventing anything new. There is a long tradition in Latin America, in Columbia, of *sentipensamiento*, and all the authors who are trying to break with the very principle of science, the Cartesian idea of the separation between the subject and the object ... I think we are opening a new ground. We are trying to get, to see, to experiment, and it's very interesting. I can tell you from my personal experience how much the work in our collective of researchers is changing over time through this connection. And there are methodological challenges, of course—for instance, how we use technological devices like mapping and cartographies, and how much cartographies can be not only a way to reign, but also a way to empower people.

I think this methodological vein is a big issue and a beautiful issue, and there are a lot of groups and individuals it in a powerful way, and we need to register that. We need to reflect on that, and I see that as a new trend, as a new path, is coming and it's arriving at a moment where most of us receive the exact contrary pressure. We must publish in international journals. We must present in international seminars. It's insane; how can you

at the same time be here and there? It's very difficult, but I think I see more and more people, more and more young scholars, coming and doing these things. This also has to do with the fact that some activists coming from housing movements are becoming academics and scholars as well. They are bringing new, fresh thoughts, and this is very important.

In Brazil, for instance, we are a country where the majority is Black, and yet this is the first generation to have Black people in universities, coming from the peripheries of the periphery. This has been a challenge to the way things were when I was brought in, and this is also important, I think. It's not only a methodological thing, but also sociological thing, in terms of: who is producing knowledge?

Michele: A quick follow-up to what you just said: One of our comrades has asked about the psychological and emotional labor that is associated in doing this kind of intellectual/engaged work. As you said, we are pushed to write, to publish, to get grants, and we need to do that, but at the same time we also need to experiment in the beautiful way you just described. There is a cost associated with doing this kind of labor. Can you share from your own experience how you've dealt with that emotional cost?

Raquel: I'm not a good example to answer that. My friends and my colleagues always tell me that I have so much energy to do things ... For my whole life, I've always done 100 things at the same time. But, having said that, there is one thing that I think is very important. What gives me the energy to be able to write, to be able to publish, to be able to teach, for me, is my role as a public intellectual. That gives me the energy. When I engage with a group who is struggling and thinking, da-da-da-da, that recharges my batteries.

That is why we charge our batteries: in order to be able to survive in the academic world, which I can tell you is very boring. I think that we need places to breathe, to be able to breathe. To be able to see life going on, and to be able to see how much the thinking is related to life ... In a sense, being part of a social movement is a way to get the energy to survive in the academic world.

Michele: I think many people will find a lot of energy in your reply! So, on that note, I think the last question I have for you is: what kind of content would you like to see in our journal? How can we do work that is relevant to different geographies and different people, and also different kinds of housing struggles? We are very motivated, we are putting a lot of energy in this, and any advice from you would be really welcome.

Raquel: Well, I think that the *Radical Housing Journal* is doing a great, great job. I think it would be great if we could see more on, for instance, the methodological question that we were talking about, and the interface among movements, social movements, and the academic world. Another thing that would be interesting would be to see more on social movements that take international or global action, and not only local ones. We need to see more experiences like that and reflect on them, I think. Something that's already part of the *Radical Housing Journal*, which I think is very useful, is the critical reading of public policies. This is very, very important because of the traps that I was talking about.

A last suggestion, and one that I've made to every journal where I've been part of the editorial board, is to increasingly broaden the reach of the journal to non-English-speaking scholars. This means to provide some support, not only for translation, but also for editing, because it's not just a question of language. It's a question of style. It's a question of being able to put together the model of papers that is required in an international journal in order to be accepted in the academic world, and to be valued positively in the academic realm, which is important for people who publish academically. I think that the creation of a fund and a call for papers that could provide editing and translation for papers written in languages other than English, German, or French could be very important.

Michele: Raquel, thank you. It has been a privilege for us to hear your thoughts on these important matters.

Raquel: It was very nice, and it's a pity that we didn't meet in person as planned, but it will happen.

Michele: It will! Thank you very much.

Raquel: Okay, grazie, ciao!