



Justice et injustices spatiales, Nanterre 2008

The New Enclosures: Public Housing, Privatisation and Resistance in Contemporary Britain

Les nouvelles ligne de partage: Logement social, Privatisation et Résistance dans l'Angleterre contemporaine

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From the late 1400s onwards, Britain's dramatic transformation from a Feudal society to a capitalist one was inseparable from the land enclosures that gradually dispossessed the vast majority of the population from the means of re-production. Since 1980, and more intensely since New Labour, an historic new wave of 'enclosures' has gripped Britain under the rapid shift from post-war social democracy to free market society. Nowhere has this process been more acute than in housing: over the past three decades more than three million publicly-owned homes have been transferred to private individual or corporate ownership. Existing public housing provision is now being marketised through 'Arms Length' management companies and the use of private sector finance. Large-scale demolitions are also clearing vast areas for new private housing under the government's so-called 'sustainable communities agenda' while proposed regulatory changes could eventually see social housing providers becoming Real Estate Investment Trusts that would float on the stock market. Despite the obvious role of finance capital in these processes, surprisingly little academic research of either theoretical or empirical nature exists into the 'financial geographies' of Britain's housing privatisation story.

This paper explores two hypotheses: first, that housing policy is being primarily driven by the particular investment needs of overaccumulating finance capital; and second, this process is in turn driving a 'new enclosures' movement in Britain beyond the simple 'public to private' transfer of assets that incorporates the 'privatisation of welfare' through associated benefit and labour market reforms, and the 'privatisation of place' through 'displacement by gentrification' of the poor from their own communities. The paper will assess these hypotheses in relation to recent research conducted in the Northern England city of Leeds where the New Urban Enclosures are particularly acute as governments and multinationals force submissive local authorities to sell off – even give away – more and more of their housing stock, playing fields, and other land assets as part of massive urban regeneration schemes aimed at gentrifying communities and dispersing the poor further and further out of the city. The paper will explore the various mechanisms of Enclosure through case studies of a local public-private partnership housing renewal scheme in an inner-city estate and a major joint-venture regeneration project in the deprived suburbs of East and South East Leeds. However, as the chapter will argue, ordinary people are fighting back whether through traditional tenants groups or more self-organised campaign networks. The paper ends with a critical analysis of how far these movements can truly resist the New Enclosures and what strategies and tactics might be adopted in the future.