

Securing social conquests in and beyond the State: the case of Denmark's "common housing"

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Abstract:

Denmark has practically no public housing that is owned and provided directly by the State, yet 20% of the housing stock is run by independent and democratically managed non-profit housing associations supported and regulated by the State: the “common housing” sector. This sector is the outcome of a pragmatic compromise between the social democratic movement and the bourgeois parties in the 1920s and 30s. The social democrats at the time were too weak politically to implement their programme of “municipal socialism”, which included direct housing provision by the (local) State. This weakness, however, has in fact proven to be a strength in the face of recent State-led privatisation and mercantilisation schemes. The Danish experience guides a discussion on how State involvement both underpins and undermines the societal pooling of resources for the provision of public housing, as well as other welfare services. Instituting the common beyond the direct reach of the State appears to be a lesson to be learnt from the rise and demise of socialdemocratic welfare statism.

Introduction

Housing has typically been considered the “wobbly pillar” under the Welfare State (Torgersen, 1987). That is, before the other pillars - education, health, pensions and insurance schemes - also started to “wobble”. The crisis of the European Welfare State regimes in the 1970’s and the advance of neoliberalism sparked renewed debate around the nature of the State and its role as guarantor of the series of social conquests attained by the working classes in previous decades. As Welfare State retrenchment and restructuring continues, so does the relevance of this debate.

The welfare State in Western Europe is the historical product of a wide range of factors and has been shaped by different social and political forces. A comprehensive account is beyond the scope of this article; it is sufficient to recall its dual roots and its foundation upon a “social” or “class compromise”. It emerged from, on the one hand, the bourgeoisie’s concern to secure the conditions for capital accumulation as well as social and political stability. On the other hand, as a result of the redistributive pressure of the labour movement, in the form of a “social”, “indirect” or “deferred” wage. The “social wage” not only entailed a redistribution of social wealth favourable to labour, but also a step towards disconnecting the material reproduction of the working classes from their income level and employment situation. It required public institutions geared towards the production of use values and the satisfaction of needs. These characteristics resonate in the broadly socialist and social-democratic tradition of the labour movement.

Transformations in the world economy and the international division of labour have, however, produced a devalorisation of labour power and exercised a downward pressure on the “social wage”. The decommodified spheres that constituted the “social wage” moreover, became a prime avenue for capital’s strategy of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003). Via electoral changes and political party realignments, many of these transformations have been directly State-led.

As was the case for similar groups at the time, the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) started to revisit the theoretical as well as practical implications of the “problem of the Capitalist State” (Clarke, 1991). One of the key concerns was observing how “a period of working class strength and militancy is followed by a period of concession and incorporation. It was a risky and costly strategy for capital and it made a new assault necessary. But it also laid the ground for that assault – because when it came, working class organization were no longer rooted in real strength.” (*Ibid* 1991, p. 59). The assessment was that it was partly through the process in which social demands had been institutionalized into the structures of State, that the conditions for the posterior backlash they were witnessing had been created. The centralised clout of the State had proved decisive in institutionalising and implementing what could, at least in part, be considered a series of working class conquests. This same centralisation in the institutions of the State, however, also facilitated the implementation of widespread public service cutbacks, privatisation and mercantilisation schemes once changes in government occurred. Many CSE participants were from the United Kingdom, where undoubtedly this process was most advanced. Social spending cuts and privatisation programmes were being pioneered, and in the sphere of housing policy, Thatcher’s “right-to-buy” scheme set a precedent for similar efforts across Europe.

A few hundred kilometers east in Denmark however, this pattern has not been followed in quite the same manner. Despite restructuring and retrenchment processes, the Danish Welfare State has managed to retain the core of its main “pillars” to a comparatively large degree (Albæk et al., 2008). The following article however, will focus on one of its weakest

links: housing. Public housing in Denmark has not taken the form of a stock of State-owned social rental housing. Only 2% of the housing stock is owned by the (local) State, the municipal authorities. Yet 20% is owned and run by independent non-profit housing associations supported and regulated by the State: the “common housing” (*almene boliger*, previously *almennyttige boliger*) sector. It encompasses 550 non-profit housing associations comprising 7,000 housing estates (BL, 2015).

This sector has maintained and even increased its share of the total housing stock in the past few decades. It has not been immune to many of the problems that have afflicted public housing across Europe, such as social segregation processes, State funding cutbacks and liberalisation trends (Abrahamson, 2005; Engberg, 1999; Jensen, 2013a; Kristensen, 2007; Vestergaard & Scanlon, 2014). Yet, unlike many of its European counterparts, it has not undergone any significant privatisation or mercantilisation processes that compromise the preconditions upon which its public nature is founded. Building on Harloe’s (1995, p. 13) preliminary definition, (1) provision that is not determined by considerations of profit, (2) access that is not circumscribed by ability to pay and (3) governance marked by political decision-making processes rather than by market mechanisms.

In line with the work of Bengtsson & Jensen (2013) and Larsen & Lund Hansen (in press), this article will argue that that one of the key explanatory factors behind the “common housing” sector’s resilience as public housing is precisely its non-State characteristics. It will do so by further analyzing the sector’s resistance to two key measures undertaken by the liberal-conservative government in office during the 2001-2011 period. In addition, it will draw upon the experiences of Swedish and Dutch public housing as pertinent counterpoints to illustrate the contours of this resistance in the State/market binary. Denmark’s common housing invites the re-examining of the theoretical and strategic debates that underpinned the formation of the welfare State and, in particular, the State’s role in the provision of public housing. It provides a useful case study for empirically approaching the notion of the *common*, in the sense Dardot & Laval (2015) have conceived of it, as the “non-State public” which cannot be privately appropriated nor is at the State’s disposal.

A sector forged in the sidelines of welfare State construction

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, that socialist and social democratic projects were going to take the form of welfare statism was of course not a given. Rather, there reigned an adverse and contradictory position towards the State, as well as towards strategies of social amelioration more generally. The pressing living conditions of the working classes however needed to be addressed with urgency. At the same time, there was concern about the ways in which raising living standards within the confines of capitalism could tamper with the longer term prospects of instituting socialism. The Danish labour movement and social democratic party engaged in these theoretical and strategic questions and were marked by the developments of their influential German and Austrian counterparts.

On the one hand, there was weariness about the hostile “bourgeois State” undertaking welfare policies that could materially as well as ideologically influence the working classes. It was under the German Chancellor Bismarck that much social legislation, to which the roots of current welfare states can be traced, was passed. Moreover, the design of social services structured along occupation or other social demarcations that were being pursued by liberal and conservative parties was problematic. Class fragmentation, corporatist identities and divided loyalties could be produced, generating cleavages across class lines (Esping-Andersen, 1985, p. 149).

The earlier writings of Karl Kautsky (1892) reflected an apprehension towards the State. In his comments on the Erfurt Program he emphasised that “the modern state is preeminently an instrument intended to guard the interests of the ruling class [...] This feature is in no wise changed by its assumption of features of general utility which affect the interests not of the ruling class alone, but of the whole body politic.” Nationalisations were not carried out for “the purpose of restricting capitalist exploitation, but for the purpose of protecting the capitalist system and establishing it upon a firmer basis”. Never “further than the interests of the ruling classes demanded, nor will it ever go further than that.” He concluded that, “The state will not cease to be a capitalist institution until the proletariat, the working-class, has become the ruling class; not until then will it become possible to turn it into a co-operative commonwealth. (*ibid*)” Early socialist thought in Denmark and Scandinavia was heavily influenced by “Kautskyian” Marxism (Esping-Andersen, 1985).

On the other hand, working class self-help institutions in the form of cooperatives, mutual-benefit societies, unemployment funds, popular education and leisure programmes, etc. had been springing up in response to everyday needs and aspirations. These were autonomous from the State, yet faced another line of theoretical scepticism and criticism. Marx and Engels had on several occasions employed the term “bourgeois socialism” to describe these types of initiatives. In relation to the “housing question”, Engels saw building societies as leading the workers towards small property ownership aspirations and the false belief that they could overcome their proletarian condition within the capitalist social order (Engels, 1974). Self-help housing initiatives were moreover only accessible for the better-paid workers (*ibid*). In Denmark, moreover, the cooperative movement had originated amongst farmers in the countryside with an overtly non-socialist character (Grelle, 2013). In the cities, the amalgam of building societies, housing associations and cooperatives was heterogeneous and produced disparate results. Some of the early housing associations were bourgeois philanthropic self-help initiatives based on charitable and paternalistic values. Worker housing cooperatives and building societies on the other hand were affordable only for the “labour aristocracy”. Furthermore, many engaged in speculative real-estate practices as the advancing process of urbanisation allowed them to capitalize on the increase in ground rents (Jensen, 2013a, p. 78).

In this context, at the turn of the century, the role that cooperativism was to have within the Danish labour movement and social democratic party was under discussion, as it was in wider international socialist circles. The 1889 Danish Social Democratic Party congress resolution declared that, “the extinction of poverty can only occur through the socialisation of the means of production, and that the only means to this end is industrial and political working class organisation, it decides to recommend that cooperatives are only established with utmost caution [...] where the conditions are not right, it is extremely dangerous to tread this road.” (Quoted in Grelle, 2012, p. 62). With time however, this position shifted. Leading local figures, such as Frederik Borgbjerg (1909), argued that cooperativism did not divert attention from the political struggle but was a practice that built new social structures from the base of society and could contribute to its transformation. In Denmark, it eventually came to be accepted as the “third wing” of the movement, alongside the party and the unions (Bryld, 2003).

In the International Socialist Congress in 1910, held in Copenhagen, a “Resolution on cooperation” was passed. It finally stated that, “cooperation alone is incapable of realizing the aim of socialism, which is the acquisition of political power for the purpose of collective ownership of the means of production”, yet declared that, “the working class has the strongest interest in utilizing the weapon of co-operation in the class struggle”(ISC, 1910, p. 16). Writing on the discussions that had been taking place during the Congress, Lenin (1974) disdainfully reflected, “And what is “socialisation”? It can be taken to mean conversion into the property of the whole community, but it can also be taken to mean any palliatives, any reforms within the

framework of capitalism, from peasant co-operatives to municipal baths and public lavatories". In the absence of an insurrectionary context, strategies of socialisation and social amelioration were plagued with contradictions and incongruities.

These theoretical and strategic impasse's did not prevent what later became one of social democracy's (and especially in Danish case) defining features, its pragmatic and non-ideologically orientated praxis. The party's political theory derived from Marxism but adapted to non-revolutionary conditions (Callesen, 1990, p. 159). In this vain, the Danish Social Democrats had been pushing for State subsidies to cooperative building societies in order to make them affordable to a wider spectrum of workers. The first programmes began in 1887 and were pioneering at the European level (Bro, 2009, p. 10).

Together with suffrage extensions, the prospects for producing social change through the State seemed to improve and ideological and strategic positions also start to shift accordingly. Kautsky (1982, p. 132) argued that "universal voting rights are the most important medium through which to make the Parliament an instrument for the majority of the population and convert it into a true expression of its aspirations". In Denmark, after the democratization of municipal voting rights, the abolition of the different classes of electors and the introduction of municipal woman suffrage in 1908, the electoral chances of the social democrats where improved. Their institutional progression started off with the "Conquest of the Municipalities"(Callesen, 1990, p. 157). They stood on a platform of "municipal socialism", which included the demand for municipally-owned public housing (Bro, 2009, p. 11).

Voting rights and electoral politics provided the link between the State and the working-classes. The democratization of the State was seen to amount to the socialisation of the State (Powell, 2013). The expansion of State ownership and control over to new spheres was thus the medium through which to socialise them. Analyzing the contents of social legislation and parliamentary debates in Denmark in the 1890-1933 period, Levine (1978, p. 55) observes how all sides started to use the terms "society" (*samfund*), "the public" (*det offentlige*), and the State and municipalities or national and local government (*stater og kommunerne*), "either as synonyms or as very nearly synonyms". This lead to the observation that "since government was society, the distinction between them was not only unimportant, it did not exist" (*Ibid*, p. 57). The extension of State ownership and control was initially seen in more "Kautskyian" terms as a means in the progression towards socialism. It later became an end in itself, following Eduard Bernstein's "the movement is everything".

In the tumultuous post-WW1 years, neighbouring Austrian and German socialist circles actually engaged in in depth discussions about the nature of widespread socialisation, what concrete institutional forms it could take and how it could be effectively carried out. The concept was never clearly defined and it ranged from nationalisations (State ownership), state regulation, worker councils and cooperative enterprises, in diverse combinations and to different degrees. In Denmark, the Social Democratic party set up its own "Socialisation Commission" in 1919. Its final report however, did not propose the State's takeover of the means of production but rather the assumption of a regulatory and supervisory role in addition to worker participation in businesses through industrial councils (Olesen, 1993).

At the municipal level, the Danish Social Democrats had a great deal of difficulty pushing through their municipal housing plans. Liberals and conservatives were weary of too much intervention in the housing market and of the perceived socialisation zeal that lay behind. In municipalities where the Social Democrats had a stronger institutional presence, such as in Copenhagen, municipally owned housing projects were carried out (Bro, 2009, p. 13). Yet the wider political balance of forces required a compromise, which took the form of further subsidies to housing cooperatives and associations. The close links between the cooperative,

labour and social democratic movements made this arrangement more palatable for the social democrats. At the same time, the bourgeois parties were keen on this housing sector remaining in the private sphere, albeit it being a form of “collective private property” (Jensen, 2013a, p. 52)

In exchange for State subsidies, housing associations and cooperatives also started to get regulated in order to guarantee their “public utility”, particularly to prevent profiteering from speculative individual housing sales. Public funding was to remain in the association. Regulations in 1933 and 1938 set out the basic characteristics of what today is known as common housing. Tenants were ascribed a stakeholder-user role and thus excluded from the possibility of privatizing any value increase in their dwellings, whilst the association was defined as the collective owner (Jensen, 2013b, p. 6).

After WW2, Denmark faced a housing shortage and housing market failure. The situation required a large-scale intervention to boost residential construction. Common housing associations were well positioned to take on a decisive role in this task. The sector had grown in size and had acquired technical and administrative expertise throughout the previous decades. The Social Democrats had fully incorporated a wider definition of what was to be considered “public”, which included non-profit non-governmental organizations subject to State control (Socialdemokratiets, 1945). The parliamentary balance of forces required multi-party agreements and further state subsidization of housing associations provided a way forward. Whereas the Social Democrats knew that the bourgeoisie parties saw State involvement as a provisional measure that should be phased out as soon as possible, the latter suspected that State subsidies were being used to displace private housing construction (Jensen, 2013a, p. 85). It is under these special conditions of post-war exceptionality that the “common housing” model becomes fully institutionalized and implemented.

During the same years, the socialisation debate resurfaced in the Danish social democratic circles and its institutional form was finally watered down to a mixture of welfare statism and Keynesian aggregate demand management policies (Olesen, 1993). This was grounded on the distinction between the socialization of “flow” and that of “stock” (Esping-Andersen, 1985, p. 23). Rather than owning and managing property directly (“stock”), the State could exercise an influence over investment and consumption functions through taxation and government spending (“flow”). Whilst the sphere of production was to remain mostly private, however, key elements of the sphere of social reproduction did come under State ownership. In particular, what Castells (1986) coined as the domain of “collective consumption”. Educational institutions and health facilities, for example, had both their “stock” and “flow” socialized, or, more accurately, “statisised”. Schools and hospitals were both State-owned and financed through statisised income flows via taxation. As outlined above, public housing, another key institution in the sphere of social reproduction, followed a different pattern. Whereas “flow” had been partly statisised via State subsidies, “stock” had remained the “collective private property” of housing associations.

In the process of State involvement in the housing cooperative sector, much of the autonomy of the cooperatives was lost. Yet, as Richman (1995) argues, cooperativism’s organizational forms and values set the standard for the common housing sector as a whole. Today, the sector is governed through a multi-level “tenant democracy” system and elements of co-governance with the local and central State. Dwellings are allocated via open waiting lists to which all sectors of the population are eligible. The municipal authorities are in control of a separate waiting list for which 25% of the dwellings are reserved. They also control the approval of new build projects. States subsidies are provided both by the municipalities and the central State.

Weakness becomes strength in the face of a State-led backlash

It was with the arrival of a liberal-conservative government in Denmark in the year 2001 that a serious attempt at partially dismantling and thoroughly transforming the role of the common housing sector, as institutionalized in the post-war years, was carried out. It formed part of the new housing policy programme titled “More Housing – Growth and Renewal in the Housing Market” which called for “a gradually more market oriented policy, which increasingly will support economic growth and where the role of the state is reduced and centred on those really in need on the housing market ”(Regeringen, 2002a, p. 27). The objective was to reduce the stablished income flow to the sector. Simultaneously, to shift it away from its universalistic ethos and gear it towards a more residual role as social housing for those unable to meet their needs elsewhere. This required dismembering part of the collective stock that existed beyond its newly ascribed purpose and reintroducing it into the circuits of the private housing market.

Two key measures were introduced in this regard. One was a “right-to-buy” scheme for sitting tenants. The other, an intervention in the use of the sector’s National Building Fund (*Landsbyggefonden* - LBF) so as to increase the sector’s degree of self-financing. The government’s strategy included further measures, such as a price cap that made new construction in metropolitan areas with high land prices almost impossible (Nielsen, 2010, pp. 152–193). Also, the introduction of top-down clauses in the management of the sector that allowed to encroach on the jurisdiction of the “tenant democracy” system (Larsen & Lund Hansen, in press). Other regulatory changes that favoured the marketization and revalorization of membership shares in the private housing cooperatives (*Privat Andelsbolig-forening*), can also be included as part of the State-led efforts in commodifying the housing stock under “collective private property” (Bruun, 2011; Larsen & Lund Hansen, in press). The following section nevertheless will focus on the first two key measures, as these touched upon the defining features of the common housing sector.

The *Thacherite*-inspired “right-to-buy” scheme was both a material as well as an ideological offensive. On the one hand, it was linked to a narrative that promoted home-ownership as a lifestyle and private property rights as an essential aspect of personal freedom (Jensen, 2013a, p. 61). On the other, it hoped to break up what was considered a social democratic power base. *Boligselskabernes Landsforenings* (BL), the common housing sector’s umbrella interest organization, was aware that losing their better-off tenants through sell-offs could have long-term effects on the way the sector was socially perceived and politically recognized. Losing its demographic transversality pushed the sector away from the mainstream and into the margins of housing and managing “the poor”. Moreover, the risk of losing its best positioned (both economically and location-wise) dwellings could impact upon the economic sustainability of the sector as a whole as it could reduce the redistributive financial flows within the sector. This would have an impact on its financial autonomy vis-à-vis the State. It would also ill-equip it to provide a sufficiently diverse and attractive stock for housing different demographic profiles. The political and media campaign launched by BL against the measure highlighted the latter effect and the foreseeable increase in residential segregation that it could produce. However, the crucial line of defense was of a legal nature. Selling-off dwelling against the will of the housing associations amounted to an expropriation of privately owned properties, protected by section 73 of the Constitution (BL, 2003).

The legal uncertainties that surrounded the initiative contributed towards the government reformulating its proposal. BL also lobbied the government’s ally, the Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), in order to minimize the scope of the measure. The scheme was finally launched in the year 2004. In an attempt to circumvent the expropriation problem, the

decision for opting to buy was not made available to individual tenants but to the tenant assemblies at the local housing estate level (Økonomi- og Erhvervsministeriet, 2003, p. 60). A majority of tenants at the base level of the “tenant democracy” system could vote in favour of sales on their housing estates, regardless of the position of their “parent” housing association. The measure was not permanent moreover, but became a “pilot programme” lasting until the year 2009.

When in 2005 the first housing estate, unsurprisingly in an attractive area, opted for its “right-to-buy”, the housing association to which it belonged legally challenged the decision. Its position, as well as BL’s, was that such a decision belonged at the higher housing association level (BL, 2003). At stake was the content and form of the “collective property” status of the housing stock. At a practical level, distancing the decision-making process from its direct potential beneficiaries, so as to include a wider range of stakeholders, would favour decisions geared by the long-term needs of the sector rather than by locally circumscribed short-term gains. The entangled and overlapping bundle of rights developed throughout decades of multi-level “tenant democracy” and elements of co-governance with the municipal and central authorities meant that it was not clear who actually owned the dwellings. The court case worked its way up to the Supreme Court. The final decision came in the year 2007 in favour of the government’s interpretation of the “right-to-buy” by the closest margin of 5 votes in favour and 4 against. The scheme did not contravene section 73 of the Danish constitution about expropriation (Højesteret, 2007).

Despite the final legal outcome, the closeness of the judicial decision and BL’s lobbying and campaigning did have a decisive impact. The legal objections led to a protracted period of uncertainty about the future of the measure. When the final court decision came, the housing market boom had already peaked and entering the property market was no longer as easy or attractive. BL’s campaigning as well as the influence that long-timer tenant democrats, heavily invested in the traditional values of the sector and with little interest in jumping on the property ladder in their later lives, had in the tenant assemblies, also contributed to a lack of demand to buy. As the director of BL at the time points out,

“In the supreme court it was extremely close, 5 votes against 4, which means that the Supreme Court in reality was much in favour of us. The conservative-liberal government knew that it was not a good case. It was a warning to the government. Also, they could see that no one wanted to buy their flats. We have succeeded with the propaganda in housing areas (...) Then they made the new decision in 2011, they changed the law in a way we could accept (...) it was a compromise between government and the housing movement.” (Interview, 28/05/2015)

The final version of the liberal-conservative government’s “right-to-buy” scheme in 2011 introduced further restrictions. Crucially, the housing association’s veto can only be overruled if there is a 2/3 majority in the tenant assembly at the housing estate level, the local municipality specifically backs the sales and the association cannot prove that the sales will result in significant negative net proceeds (Socialministeriet, 2011). By the end of 2014, only 19 housing estates, comprising 1,241 dwellings, had opted for allowing sales. In total, only 62 sales have effectively taken place (LBF, 2014, p. 57). Out of a sector with around 600,000 dwellings, one can safely conclude that the attempt to privatise common housing has been a failure. As Larsen and Lund Hansen (in press) point out however, the final legal outcome still places the sector in a precarious position as it leaves a door open for piecemeal privatisations in the future.

The legal status of the housing stock has in effect been a determining factor in the evolution of public housing. Public housing owned by the (local) State has fared very differently. The housing stock owned by the municipality of Copenhagen, for example, underwent a far-

reaching privatisation process in the second half of the 1990's. The city's precarious fiscal situation at the time and pressure's from the central government resulted in sales to private landlords and conversions into private housing cooperatives. Municipally-owned housing lost over 80% of its dwellings. It went from representing 11% of the city's housing stock in 1995 down to around 2,5% in the following years (Statbank DK, 2006). The higher percentage of municipal housing in Copenhagen relative to the rest of the country can be explained in part by the historically stronger institutional influence of the Social Democrats in the city, as mentioned in the previous section. The preferred institutional expression of their original "municipal socialism" project however has resulted in being less resilient than their "plan B" common housing model.

The developments in neighbouring Sweden are also illustrative of this paradox. Under social democratic dominance, a system of public housing under municipal ownership was developed. Electoral swings in favour of liberal-conservative parties since the early 80's however allowed for the introduction and posterior extension of "right-to-buy" schemes with far reaching effects (Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2015). 180,607 public dwellings were sold off in the period 1991-2011 (*ibid*). As Bengtsson & Jensen (2013) point out, direct (local) State ownership has become the Achilles heel of the sector under changing political conditions.

Whilst the collective nature of Denmark's common housing stock was in dispute, the government also sought to reduce the statisised flows to the sector. Their key strategy consisted in committing the sector's own funds to covering costs that had until then been assumed by the State. The housing associations have, since 1967, pooled resources through the National Building Fund (*Landsbyggefonden*, LBF). This institution is administered by a board that consists of 7 representatives of the housing associations and 2 representatives of the municipal authorities, yet it is strictly regulated by law and its budget must be approved by the Ministry of Housing. The use of the funds is decided through multi-party housing agreements that are approved in the national parliament. The fund's income comes from mandatory contributions of the housing associations. One principal income stream comes from tenant's rents on housing estates that have already paid of their mortgages. The fund was originally conceived to foster a certain degree of "self-financing" in the sector. Until 2001, it had been used to finance renovation, maintenance and other activities in the existing housing stock (Socialministeriet, 2006). The State, for its part, had subsidised the costs of new-build projects. The liberal-conservative government at this point sought to "activate" the fund to also participate in the financing of new construction, as well as other "social" investments, such as in senior housing (Regeringen, 2002b).

In this case, the institutional form of the sector was not a direct obstacle for the government. As can be observed in Table 1, the initial capital provided by the municipal authorities was promptly halved, increasing the percentage of the finance tied to loans with private credit institutions. The costs of subsidising these mortgage payments were then shared with LBF. The institutional design of the fund however, established and administered "at arm's length" from the State, did facilitate the housing movement to represent the fund as the tenant's savings and the government's intervention as theft. As Nielsen (2010, pp. 233–242) elaborates, BL and the government clashed over two contradictory notions of the nature and role of LBF. BL's position was that the construction of new housing was society's task, to be paid via taxation. It argued that the tenants of the sector, who on average are below the mean national income, should not be expected take on the burden of expanding the sector and carrying out the "social" role of housing youth, seniors, etc. Moreover, BL insisted, the sector had maintenance and renovation needs that required financing. The government's version in contrast, contended that the fund had already been receiving state financing throughout the years. Both brick-and-mortar subsidies as well as individual rent allowances that benefited many tenants

had ultimately contributed to the sector's savings. Those savings, at least in part, belonged to the State. What was being contested in this dispute was the socialised nature of the flows that fed into the sector, and, again, the question of ownership.

Table 1: Financial conditions of common housing new-build costs (%)

Year	Initial tenant contribution	(local) State capital grant	Private mortgage / <i>Realkredit</i>	Subsidisation of mortgage interest payments	
				(central) State	LBF
1999	2	14	84	100	-
2001	2	7	91	100	-
2002	2	7	91	29	71
2003	2	7	91	45	55
2004	2	7	91	47	53
2005	2	7	91	44	56
2006	2	7	91	48	52
2007	2	14	84	75	25
2008	2	14	84	75	25
2009	2	14	84	75	25
2010	2	14	84	75	25

Source: based on (Gibb, MacLennan, & Stephens, 2013, p. 37) & (Nielsen, 2010, p. 208)

BL launched a media campaign that played on themes of “theft” and an unjust “special tax” on the sector (Nielsen, 2010, pp. 233–23). The Tenant’s Union (*Lejernes Landsorganisation*, LLO) accused a “Robin Hood in reverse” (LLO, 2006). LBF also carried out a study about the pressing maintenance and renovation needs of the housing estates (LBF, 2006). As much of the housing stock was old and increasingly becoming mortgage free, a growing income stream into the fund was scheduled. This was a factor that the government wanted to take advantage of to relieve its own fiscal burden. The fund however was quickly run down and rather than managing surpluses it was managing debts (Gibb et al., 2013, p. 36). As the political pressure heightened and the new scheme was reaching its limits, the 2006 housing agreement upped the State’s financial commitments. Since then, LBF’s co-financing of new construction has been established at 25%. Whereas BL was not in accordance with the final outcome, the new financial arrangement de-escalated the confrontation and was the starting point of a cooperative period of relations between the sector and the government (Jensen, 2013b, p. 10).

Even though on this occasion, the non-State elements of the institutional design did not constitute a strong barrier for the government, they did provide a basis from which to frame a strategy of resistance. However, even in the hypothetical scenario in which the institutional framework had effectively prevented the government from intervening in the use of the fund, it would not have prevented it from enforcing the “self-financing” of the sector via other means. Simply cutting the flow of State subsidies would do. The alternative to State income flows are private income flows. These can only be sourced from the tenants themselves, whose personal incomes are bound by the wider unequal distribution of income in society, from charitable donations or from the surpluses reaped from for-profit activities. The case of housing associations in the Netherlands is an example of a similar sector with a very high degree of “self-financing”. It is illustrative of the problematic that autonomy from the State is no guarantee against the commodifying pressures of the market economy. The Dutch model is very present in the imaginaries surrounding housing reform in Denmark.

As in Denmark, Dutch housing associations run their own privately owned housing stock. The legal and constitutional status of the associations has also provided a substantial obstacle to any forced transfer of property (Harloe, 1995, p. 505). Since the late 1980's, the Dutch government's strategy has been geared towards financially disengaging from the sector. In the early 1990s the government phased out object subsidies for new construction and through a "Grossing and Balancing Operation" all the subsidies the State would be liable to pay to the housing organisations in the future were set off against the outstanding loans these owed to the State. After the deal was struck, housing associations were to act with financial independence. The increase in rents that had been produced in the preceding years strengthened their financial position to do so and their management was also professionalized for the task (Boelhouwer & Priemus, 2014, p. 224). Many have changed their legal status from associations to foundations, which has reduced the influence of members and tenants and increased the power of directors (Stephens & Elsinga, 2014, p. 122).

Dutch housing associations have since pursued for-profit endeavors in order to sustain their losses in their non-profit rental activity via a "revolving fund" mechanism. These ventures have ranged from the building and selling of owner-occupied housing to speculative investments in financial derivatives. Plunging into the vicissitudes of the market has pushed Vestia, the country's largest housing association, to seek to sell-off one-third of its housing stock and increase its rents in order to recover from over €2 billion financial losses in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. By February 2015, 13,000 out of its 90,000 dwellings had been sold, almost a half of which to a foreign real estate investor and the other to another housing association (Aalbers, et al., 2015, p. 18). Management also hopes to sell to sitting tenants at discounted prices (Fearn & Allen, 2012). Albeit from a different route, the final outcome overlaps with that of the "right-to-buy" and other sales schemes.

As Aalbers et al. (2015, p. 21) suggest, the financialisation of Dutch housing associations was a continuation of competition with different means. The competitive dynamics of the market playing field brought about mergers and the compulsion to outgrow other players so as to secure and expand one's market position. The increasing use of non-conventional financial tools provided means to cover risks of real estate ventures as well as to generate an additional income stream based on speculation with derivatives. This was a strategy that Vestia used to the extreme to outcompete other housing associations. It is an extreme, yet not unique, case that is illustrative of the dynamics that are unleashed when a decentralised sector of independent housing associations shifts towards the terrain of the market.

Denmark's common housing is strictly non-profit, yet dwindling subsidised flows have progressively placed the dynamics of economic efficiency, cost-cutting and technical fixes into the centre of the management of the housing stock. As the current director of the Tenant's Union (LLO) explains, "the sector has developed from being cooperative and NGO-like to being part of "the system"". The staff of the non-profit housing management companies, who work for the housing associations as technical support, "have become professionals [...] who have an agenda, which is administrating and running the properties as cheaply and professionally as possible, and that's not always corresponding with tenant's wish to decide [...] so we help them keep their democratic rights (interview, 12/05/2015)." Financial constraints can thus sometimes be expressed in conflicts between different levels of the sector's own structure. It can also strain the mechanisms of financial solidarity between different housing associations. In the early 2000's, the former director of DAB, a large housing management company that managed a stock of housing associations that were in comparatively better financial conditions than those of the sector as a whole, put forward the proposal of disengaging from the sector's common fund (LBF). Although the proposal made no headway, it highlights the darker turn that the "self-help" values, which lay in the origins of the sector, can take.

These examples are illustrative of the fine line between autonomy and competitiveness, decentralisation and marketisation, in the interstices of the State and the market. Liberal and conservative parties were not completely misguided in their insistence on keeping housing associations as private institutions. They hoped that the links that connected them to statisised income flows could be severed when the conditions were right. In this case, the institutional framework of the sector could ease the transition to market conditions.

The common beyond the democratisation of the State

That aspirations regarding common ownership and socialisation finally found a concrete institutional expression in the structures of the State can be traced back to its democratization via suffrage extensions. Universal voting rights and parliamentarianism appeared to provide the avenue through which society could collectively govern those spheres under State ownership and control. Yet these developments took place within the continuity of capitalist social relations, relations grounded on the separation of producers from their material means of subsistence. That is, on a class society, where different social groups have fundamentally antagonistic material interests.

As Clarke (1991, p. 177) points out in the discussions in the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE), “the framework of parliamentary representation is one in which social power is expressed as an abstract collectivity of individual interests, not the concrete expression of collective power”. It cannot become in this sense the “true expression” of the majority, as Kautsky had hoped. Firstly, because collective antagonisms are distorted and expressed skewedly as differences in individual interests. Secondly, because these antagonisms are fundamentally contradictory and unresolvable. There is no unified “democratic will” that can be reached at. Instead, the State expresses permanently contradictory and conflictive positions that vary according the correlation of forces. Finally, in this scenario, there are structural class inequalities in terms of power resources for engaging in the parliamentary contest.

According to Lenin (2002), the late Kautsky had “turned Marx into a common liberal”. Lenin argued that “it is obvious that we cannot speak of “pure democracy” as long as different classes exist; we can only speak of class democracy” (*ibid*). He accused “a lack of understanding both of the class struggle and of the nature of the state” that consequently ended up “embellishing and glossing over the class content of bourgeois democracy” (*ibid*). Embracing the legitimacy of liberal parliamentary democracy does indeed run the risk of legitimizing regressive assaults on hard won collective rights and resources. As Clarke (1991, p. 178) observed, “the inadequacy of the parliamentary form to the aspirations of the working class has meant that the state has to concede a growing political role to the collective organisations of the working class, as expressed in the political role played by the trade union movement and by a wide range of other working class organisations. In this context, both ‘corporatist’ and ‘pluralist’ developments represent responses to the inadequacy of the parliamentary form”.

The class nature of the State moreover, runs deeper than the inadequacies and inequalities of parliamentary politics. As Holloway and Piccioto (1977) argued, the State is both historically and logically a form of the capital relation. Its role in the foundational and continual enclosing of the commons is a precondition for capital accumulation. The separation of the producers from their means of production, upon which the market for labour and commodities is founded, is a separation enforced and overseen by the centralized power of the State. As Holloway (2010, p. 58) elaborates, “capital is above all a process of separation, of the object of creation from the creating subject (...) The state is part of this process of separation. It is the separation of the public from the private, of the common affairs of the community from the community itself”. The State, in the last instance, guarantees the social conditions for the

accumulation of capital. It is an institutional arrangement for the governing of capital, not of the commons.

Using state ownership as a proxy for common ownership is thus a risky strategy. Firstly, because it is conditioned upon developments in the unequal and distorted arena of electoral politics; secondly, because it is ultimately tied to the necessities of capitalist accumulation. The latter can be expressed, for example, in fiscal pressures on the State. Also, through the State's role in restructuring the urban and built environment, the "secondary circuit of capital" (Harvey, 1982), so as to facilitate the wider process of capital accumulation. As such, its appropriateness as an institution for the ownership and tutelage of resources that are put in common for the provision of education, healthcare, housing, etc. is problematic. However, within capitalist social relations, the State is the only institution that can effectively implement a redistributive socialisation of resources. In the context of the separation of producers from their means of subsistence, it is only via the "social wage" that a common pooling of resources can be brought about at a societal level. Yet, if the State is sought out as protection from the market, what can serve as protection from the State?

At this point it is useful to refer back to the distinction between "flow" and "stock". Table 2 illustrates this distinction in terms of the generic project of social-democratic welfare statism as well as the concrete housing models that have been mentioned. The socialisation of income flows can come about through a progressive taxation system. However, these income flows do not necessarily need to feed into a stock under State ownership. Whereas the continued flow of socialised resources (State subsidies) continues to be dependent on the parliamentary process. Past income flows can be shielded from posterior processes of enclosure and privatisation by maintaining the accumulated stock away from the State. In the Danish case, it is ironically the private legal status of the common housing stock that has allowed it to maintain its public character.

Table 2: Statisation, stock and flow

	Sphere	Stock	Flow
Social-democratic welfare statism	Production	Private	Private and State (taxation)
	Social –reproduction ("collective consumption")	State	State
	<i>Swedish Municipal Housing</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>State (subsidies) and private (rents)</i>
	<i>Danish Common Housing</i>	<i>"Collective private"</i>	<i>State (subsidies) and private (rents)</i>
	<i>Dutch Housing Associations</i>	<i>"Collective private"</i>	<i>Private</i>
	<i>Danish Private Housing Cooperatives</i>	<i>"Collective private"</i>	<i>Private</i>

The "collective private property" of the housing associations has its roots in the history of workers housing cooperativism. Yet, without State subsidies, housing cooperatives were only an option for the "labour aristocracy" of the time. A common or collective stock, without a socialized, or more accurately, statisised flow, easily has the potential to develop into a "gated community" accessible only for those who can afford it. It is in this sense that one can also interpret Harvey's (2012, p. 73) assertion that, "in order to protect the *common* it is often vital to protect the flow of public goods that underpin the qualities of the *common*". The end of statisised flows to Dutch housing associations has led them towards for-profit activities which

put the public character of the housing stock at risk. Constraints in State financing of Danish housing associations has led to the progressive prioritisation of criteria of economic efficiency over the democratic criteria of tenant decision-making structures. The highly legally protected status of private property can shield from direct State-led interventions on the housing stock. Yet the State's ultimate control over the socialised nature of the income flows can in the longer run also impact upon the nature of the stock.

A definitive balance between State and private forms is impossible to strike. Yet in the context in which the majority of the population have been separated from their direct means of subsistence and the common has no legally protected juridical figure, it is the only option available. Urban environments are already parceled between State and private (both individual or collective) ownership. Behind the formal legal status of the housing stock however, it is the social relation established between the dwellers, including potential and future dwellers, and their habitat that is the fundamental issue.

As Dardot and Laval (2015) argue, the common should not be understood as a type of property, but as a social relation. A social relation that in fact is the polar opposite of that of property. It is a relation of non-appropriation, characterized by that which cannot be monopolized, alienated or capitalised by anybody, be it a person or institution. In this sense, the alternative is not between common property and private property, but between what is unappropriable and property, be it private or State (*ibid*, p.262). Access to something unappropriable is based on use, conservation and collective management (*ibid*, p. 533). However, these relations are circumscribed to a certain social group of reference. As the authors argue, the common should not be assimilated automatically to the universal, as in to the whole of human kind. The universality of the common is of a practical nature: it corresponds to those that participate in its governing and coproduce the rules of its use (*ibid*, p. 542).

Can these relations exist within the State/market binary? The experience of Denmark's common housing suggests that certain institutional arrangements, formally enveloped in private and State forms, can certainly be conducive to them. If the housing stock is privately owned however, it must be so only in a formal legal sense and not practiced as such. It is on the one hand State regulation which can set conditions of "public utility", such as the way in which speculative sales in housing cooperatives in the early 20th century were halted. On the other hand, it is the own institutional and organisational configuration of the housing sector which is also key. The "common housing" tenancy contracts and a multi-level and federated "tenant democracy" system is an obstacle for the individual capitalization of the potential equity of the dwellings. It allows moreover for a collective management of the housing stock that takes into account the needs of the sector as a whole and its wider societal impact. The complete decentralization and atomization of decisions-making processes in the Danish private cooperative housing sector, for example, has proven prone to exclusively favour the interests of its current members (Larsen, 2012). The struggle around whether decisions regarding the "right-to-buy" in the "common housing" sector should be taken at the housing estate level or at the housing association level, responds to a similar diagnosis. In the ambiguities around ownership of the sector there resonates a relation of non-appropriation as outlined by Dardot and Laval.

The case of Denmark's common housing suggests going beyond the paradigm of the democratisation of the State as the route through which to create and protect the common. It highlights the role of institutions that do not seek to represent society as a whole, but the interests of those whose existence is vested in the common. These exclude the social class that has not been dispossessed from its means of subsistence.

Back in pre-welfare State times, Gramsci widened the political terrain beyond the State-centred approaches that dominated amongst his Marxist colleagues. He saw the State as an important locus of power, yet only “an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks” (1971, p. 128). These were the sturdy structures of civil society, which had their own dynamics and inertias. Whilst he was mostly analysing the ways in which the dominant classes entrenched their vested interests, it is also relevant to the ways in which social conquests can be entrenched. In instituting and protecting the “social wage”, the State might not necessarily be the most robust fortress. Trade union leader Knud Christesen in his speech in BL’s 1987 congress illustrates this condition: “The bourgeois can get a lot of seats [in parliament], but when we gather our forces and coordinate them right, you cannot get past us!” (Boligen 1987, p.7-13, quoted in Jensen, 2013, p. 101).

Conclusions

The case study of the evolution of Denmark’s common housing invites an initial exploration of the ways in which gaining a “social wage” through the welfare state “laid the ground” for its posterior cutback. In this case, it was the private legal status of its housing stock which served as an obstacle for a State-led privatisation process. It was also the semi-autonomous nature of the sector’s institutional framework which provided an independent basis from which to confront the government’s plans. Had the housing stock been owned and governed directly by the State, no such obstacles would have existed. The initial weariness of liberal and conservative forces towards the extension of State ownership has ironically constituted an obstacle for their contemporary efforts in intervening in society through the State.

Swedish housing theorist, Jim Kemeny , argues that more developed and resilient welfare States are buttressed by “social structures that exhibit relatively high degrees of collectivization in their social organisation” (1992, p. 111). Echoing the concerns expressed in the CSE, he (1992, p. 114) reflects on how,

The very act of creating a welfare state had the effect of impoverishing deep social structural collectivism by removing key collectivist dimensions – such as social security and the provision of social housing – from the hands of ordinary people and centralizing these tasks into state agencies. The result was that a privatist sphere was created into which ordinary people retreated, relieved of the task of creating collective grass-roots means of providing these services amongst themselves.

His argument points to the ways in which the welfare State corrodes its own material and ideological basis by contributing to dismantling the collective and popular institutions and organisations that buttress it.

Despite the fact that Danish worker housing cooperatives lost much of their autonomy and affiliation to the labour movement in their assimilation into the common housing model, that the sector remains independent and tenant-run evidences that its structures were not fully dismantled in the process. The sector’s independent sources of power and legitimacy have contributed to shielding it from the fluctuations in electoral politics. Not handing over the sector completely to the State, despite it being subjected to parliamentary democratic processes, has proven in the best interests of popular classes which inhabit it.

It is important however to recall that the common housing model resulted from a compromise between social-democratic, liberal and conservative forces. That the common housing stock remained in the private sphere occurred in the context in which the wider means of production also remained private. In the continuity of capitalist social relations, the classical Marxist “bourgeois State” and “bourgeois socialist” critiques still haunt all attempts at instituting the common. If attempted through the “social wage”, it will be mediated through the State and exposed to State-led cutbacks or decommissioning. If forged collectively from

below, it will be limited and traversed by income inequalities and will navigate amongst the marketization and commodification tendencies of the market. Forging a housing commons within the interstices of the State and the market will be permanently under the strain of different processes of enclosure. The rise and demise of social-democratic welfare statism, however, can provide us with valuable strategic lessons for new ways of adapting Marxist thought to non-revolutionary conditions today.

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