An Ontology of Social and Economic Reproduction: Modern Slavery, Housing and Critical Realism

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Abstract

This paper argues that commodification of housing plays a key role in the reproduction of social and economic relations and contributes to debates by, firstly, recognising modern slavery as a fundamental intersection of economic and social vulnerability intimately connected to experiences of housing. Secondly, that rather than understanding modern slavery in terms of exclusion, it should be understood as a form of adverse incorporation in the labour market and housing. Awareness, therefore, of critical realism as an analytical framework usefully takes debates beyond exploring relations between housing supply and housing experience to also include political economy and ideology. From this broader ontology of housing, it is possible to emphasise housing within reproduction of social and economic relations and consider ways in which this relates to modern slavery.

Key words: Modern slavery, housing, commodification, critical realism

Introduction

This paper argues that amidst a growing 'formal' private rented sector (PRS) characterised by increasing commodification of housing, there has been a growth and diversification of a precarious, low-cost, and 'shadow' PRS (Spencer *et al*., 2020; Rugg and Rhodes, 2018). Aspects of this diversity have been covered in various forms under the umbrella of housing crisis debates that include the growth of HMOs (Wilson and Barton, 2021), sofa-surfing (Sanders *et al.*, 2019), beds in sheds (Lombard, 2019; Rowe and Wagstaff, 2017), sex for rent (Jolley, 2020), and increased numbers of people in temporary accommodation (Wilson and Barton, 2022a). These areas can be understood as the 'grey areas' of housing disadvantage and homelessness, emphasising a non-binary way to understand 'housing precarity' and '*core homelessness*' (Fitzpatrick *et al*., 2021), with such precarity disproportionately affecting people in poverty and with a range of often overlapping, more-than-economic vulnerabilities and disadvantages (England *et al.*, 2022).

In particular, this paper focuses on the links between housing precarity and modern slavery (MS) which has come to be understood in UK policy as "an umbrella term that encompasses the offences of human trafficking and slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour" (Cooper *et al*., 2017: ii). Hence, whilst there is a popular perception of MS in relation to fruit picking, car washes, and nail bars, MS also includes county lines activities, sexual exploitation, cuckooing, and other areas of hyper-exploitation. This draws on Anti-Slavery International's now commonplace definition of MS: "when an individual is exploited by others, for personal or commercial gain. Whether tricked, coerced, or forced, they lose their freedom." This paper, however, argues that, as with understandings of housing disadvantage, it is important to move beyond narrow, statutory definitions. We argue, therefore, that MS applies to those 'hyper-exploited' to the point that they experience 'hyper-precarity' across their entire lifeworld (Lewis *et al*., 2015; Lewis and Waite, 2015), and that housing plays a vital role in denying the 'ontological security' required to combat this experience (Clare *et al*., 2023).

In terms of a housing policy landscape, alongside the impacts of welfare reform (O'Leary and Simcock, 2022), growing levels of poverty, an under-supply of affordable housing, and neoliberal government interventions (Robertson, 2017; Edwards, 2016), policy has focused mainly on boosting home ownership and supply. It is therefore possible to recognise a '*hegemony of home ownership*' (Robbins, 2020), with hegemony representing moral and political leadership attained through consent (Bocock, 1986). However, despite aspirational goals of a home owning democracy, the paradox is a landscape of increasing numbers of people in the PRS – both formal and 'shadow' – and growing housing precarity that has the potential to exacerbate vulnerabilities and even contributing to MS.

Problematically, within debates examining the 'housing crisis' and the growth of precarious housing, the experiences and vulnerabilities of MS victims have been largely overlooked (Clare *et al*., 2023; Hodkinson *et al*., 2021), which reflects a pattern in broader social policy research (for an overview see Murphy and Lazzarino, 2024; Phillips, 2020). For these people, there are specific patterns of vulnerability underpinned by an intersection of hyper-exploitation and legal vulnerability, with this paper arguing that housing plays a role in facilitating the social and economic reproduction of their vulnerabilities. At the root of this position is the way in which informal housing or grey areas of homelessness within a diverse and expanding PRS has created greater opportunities to facilitate social and economic reproduction, especially through this shadow PRS (Spencer *et al.*, 2020; Rugg and Rhodes, 2018).

One original contribution of this paper is the application of the concept of 'adverse incorporation' to the PRS in order to add nuance and criticality to discussion of the links between MS and housing. Much mainstream, 'residual' (Phillips, 2013) analysis of modern slavery has been criticised for two main issues (see Gore and LeBaron, 2019; Kenway, 2021). First, it can be portrayed as being caused by processes of economic and social exclusion, i.e., people supposedly suffer from MS as they are typically employed (or housed) informally, and, putatively, were these arrangements to be formalised, and people inserted into formal economic (and housing) markets, experiences of hyper-precarity would be lessened. Second, and relatedly, MS is frequently presented in binary terms, with victims either experiencing it or not – this is a consequence of the mainstream definitions presented above. The limitations of such understandings are manifold (for an overview see LeBaron, 2015). It can create a narrow focus on extreme cases, missing many extremely exploitative situations, and it fails to grasp the reality for many globally who are victims of MS not due to their *exclusion from*, but instead their *'adverse incorporation'* into, capitalist processes (Phillips, 2013) - although there are, of course, instances caused by exclusion. MS and forced labour are thus not aberrations but structural consequences of an increasingly globalised and neoliberalised economy that has removed several social protections (see Barrientos *et al*., 2013; LeBaron and Ayers, 2013; Strauss, 2013). Understood in this 'relational' way (Phillips, 2013), it is more useful to conceptualise MS on a continuum, where people exist between poles of 'ontological security' and 'hyper-precarity', rather than seeking to point to dichotomised absolutes (LeBaron, 2015; Lerche, 2011).

However, while this relational approach has been applied productively to understand forms of economic exploitation, as yet this is not the case with housing. The argument we make here, therefore, is that not only do we see MS emerging among those excluded from the housing market but also among those who are adversely incorporated. As research has

shown, even those with seemingly secure, social housing tenancies can experience ontological insecurity (Cameron, 2024) and be vulnerable to MS (Clare *et al*., 2023). Linked to this, the heterogeneity of the PRS, itself a structural consequence of the increased commodification of housing (explored below), creates a variegated picture of exploitation and hyper-precarity which can only be captured through a more nuanced continuum, as the formal and 'shadow' PRS themselves exist relationally. The paper therefore calls for careful attention to be paid to the heterogenous nature of the PRS as without this there is a danger of misunderstanding the drivers of MS. What is more, we argue that the complex interplay between structure and agency that drives 'adverse incorporation' is best understood by a critical realist analysis. Critical realism (CR) has been used to frame discussions of MS (Ash, 2022; Hobbs, 2024) and housing/homelessness (Hastings, 2021; Taylor, 2020), but as yet the framework has not been used to analyse the two together. Connected to the growth of debates regarding the PRS and commodification, housing represents a situation whereby it is understood as an economic commodity that, given its increasing allocation through market forces, decreasingly prioritises the personal needs or welfare of tenants (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). For those with specific vulnerabilities (England *et al.,* 2022), this can be problematic, but for those experiencing hyper-precarity and MS this is even more challenging.

Housing diversity and precarity

Much has been written about the nature of the housing market in the UK, recognising its increasingly problematic nature as a source of disbenefit to many households and growing housing precarity (for an overview see Iafrati, 2021). Evidence of this is seen in the growth in specific areas of housing in the context of an under-supply of social housing (Wilson and Barton, 2022a; 2022b), welfare reforms, and the complex relationship between housing and poverty (Bailey, 2020, Preece *et al*., 2020; Stephens and Leishman, 2017). Characterising such literature, it is possible to recognise two key themes. First, there is the body of research that examines affordability that recognises people are increasingly struggling to buy houses, which is pushing greater numbers of people into the private rented sector, which has been able to grow to accommodate such increased demand in a way that councils and housing associations have not in the face of financial challenges (see Clare *et al*., 2022). At the same time, a series of welfare reforms, which include limits on Local Housing Allowance coupled with a growth in poverty and in precarious work, has meant that the cost of housing has become increasingly challenging, fuelling economic opportunism in the PRS that caters for those with the fewest choices, most vulnerabilities, and least market power. Secondly and connected to the growing numbers of people struggling with the affordability of housing, there

is recognition of diversity within the PRS as seen through the growth of precarious housing, the 'grey areas' of homelessness and 'housing informality' (Schiller and Raco, 2021).

A key factor in all this is that housing has become increasingly commodified (Jacobs and Manzi, 2019; Bailey, 2020) and access increasingly shaped by market forces (for an excellent overview see Madden and Marcuse, 2016). In this context, commodification is a process through which goods such as housing are allocated by market pricing, rendering non-financial themes such as welfare, equity or need less important against the power of economic logic (Fenton *et al.*, 2013). Significantly, the commodification of housing comes at a time of increasing precarity of work, growing levels of in-work poverty, and the impacts of welfare reforms. This has contributed to making housing less affordable and more exclusionary at a time of under-supply of affordable housing. In such situations of housing commodification, those with the least market power and the greatest precarity will typically fare worst in the competitive nature of market forces, usefully characterised by England *et al*., (2022) and Fitzpatrick *et al.,* (2013) portrayal of '*multiple exclusion homelessness*', and the fact that even those with accommodation may not have the ontological security associated with a home (Cameron, 2024).

Despite the hegemony of home ownership, however, this growing commodification has meant that during the last decade we have seen the increasing political salience of the PRS with a growth in both its absolute size and the proportion of households renting (Marsh and Gibb, 2019). Not only has this led to an increase in overcrowding in rented accommodation (Wilson and Barton, 2021), but for those struggling to access the formal PRS the shadow rented sector has also expanded (Spencer *et al.,* 2020), emphasising the relational, overlapping nature of these formal and informal markets. Drawing on critical urban geography (Varley, 2013), we argue that the formal and informal PRS should therefore not be viewed in discrete, binary terms and that it is crucial to recognise that precarity and adverse incorporation exists across both.

Relatedly there has been an almost doubling of households in supposedly 'temporary' accommodation (Wilson and Barton, 2022b), reinforcing a sense of ontological insecurity that increases susceptibility to exploitation and potentially MS (Clare *et al*., 2023). This is especially a concern as many people find themselves staying in temporary accommodation for months if not years (Wilson and Barton, 2022a). This heterogeneous growth shows the importance of awareness of the diversity of precarious housing in response to growing needs for '*housing of last resort*' (Irving, 2015) by people experiencing poverty and social vulnerabilities, including potential victims of MS. This growth caters for a diverse body of renters connected only by their poverty and vulnerability contributing to potential '*homelessness pathway[s]*' and has

been important in 'conceptualising interactions between 'homelessness' and other forms of '*deep social exclusion' […] and can be defined as the combination of an experience of homelessness (rough sleeping, squatting or living in insecure accommodation) with one or more indicator of deep social exclusion (problematic substance use, chronic mental or physical ill-health or an institutional background)*' (Pattison and McCarthy, 2022: 405).

For undocumented migrants, the specifics of their vulnerability include the presence of illegality that prevents them from exercising the 'right to rent' (McKee *et al*., 2021). These migrants are therefore at an increased risk of MS because they are forced into the shadow housing market '*given their genuine fears of persecution [and] deportation*' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2021: 83), meaning that vulnerable tenants are targeted by criminal landlords and letting agents flouting housing and tenancy laws to maximise profits (Spencer *et al.,* 2020). Inherent in the shadow PRS are threats, debt bondage, hyper-precarity and -exploitation, and labour and sex trafficking (Rhodes and Rugg, 2018) meaning undocumented migrants are especially vulnerable here. It is also important to note that deportation can be an outcome for those receiving 'successful' outcomes from the National Referral Mechanism (the UK framework used to ascertain is someone is deemed to be a victim of MS), something which further prevents victims of MS coming forward and can force them further into the hands of their exploiters.

However, while criminal landlords and letting agents within the shadow PRS are exploiting undocumented, criminalised, and marginalised groups (Hodkinson *et al*., 2021), it is important not to lose sight of the structural drivers of MS and that, beyond exclusion from the housing system, exploitation is overwhelmingly driven by adverse incorporation. It is arguable therefore that in the shadow PRS, where there exists less external regulation and policing, there is even more pronounced commodification of housing which can lead to the economic and social reproduction of MS. Inherent in this process of commodification comes inequalities based on class, gender and ethnicity (Spencer *et al*., 2020; Dukelow and Kennett, 2018) as a reflection of contextual market inequalities, emphasising how commodification can also include more-than-economic issues. Connecting this to the shadow PRS and the experiences of people within MS, the commodification of housing is especially germane and pronounced in the absence of welfare support and legal rights that, at least arguably, may mitigate some of the worst excesses for most of the population.

Developing a Critical Realism Approach

One of the challenges of understanding MS and the role of housing is to theoretically incorporate the structure of housing as an element of economic and social reproduction

alongside the agential experiences of hyper-exploitation. Without such a position, there would remain '*a limited theory of causality because [exploring] only epistemological questions about the observable actions of an object […] fails to ask enough questions about an object's internal ontological properties*' (Roberts, 2014: 4). Critical realism (CR), whilst most associated with Bhaskar (2008; 2013; Collier, 1994) and further developments by Archer (Archer *et al*., 1998) represents a broad amalgam of theorists recognising a realist approach that understands economic, social and political factors independently of our knowledge (Ash, 2022). In this respect, this paper seeks to challenge some of the theoretical assumptions regarding markets where people are 'free to choose or free to lose' (Sayer, 1997: 479) by positioning markets in terms of hyper-exploitation and adverse incorporation. What makes CR particularly useful is the theorisation of knowledge being, therefore, shaped by our positionality and experience to this reality. In doing so, it prevents both ontological determinism and epistemic fallacy. In synthesising the ontological and epistemological positions also lies a critical perspective that recognises the role of power, exploitation, and an emancipatory theory. For this reason, CR forms a useful tool to explain the relationship between areas such as MS, housing, exploitation, and inequality. This paper does not set out to explore the full complexities of CR, which would be voluminous. Instead, the purpose of recognising CR is its usefulness as a framework by which to understand the synthesis of structure, agency and power. CR forms, therefore, a useful if underutilised tool in understanding MS and housing.

In this respect, the synthesis of ontological and epistemological dimensions positions CR as 'an emancipatory project; as such, it should be able to offer a coherent stance on an issue such as [modern] slavery' (Ash, 2022: 3). For this reason, Bhaskar (1994) played a pivotal role in developing CR as a means of developing a critical theorisation of 'emancipation' through recognising the synthesis of evidence and morals. Consequently, at the core of 'critical realism is a continuing, spiral movement from knowledge of manifest (empirical) phenomena to knowledge of the underlying structures and causal mechanisms that generate them. This spiral movement is not purely theoretical—it also involves careful consideration of empirical studies of actual tendencies' (Jessop, 2001: 99).

Developing this position, CR provides an ideal framework to explore the complexities of housing in a way that includes the experiences of MS and an ontology of adverse incorporation. However, it would be fair to say that CR has been a relatively underused framework within theorising the connections between housing and MS, and therefore represents an opportunity to develop awareness of connected yet distinct aspects of housing reality. That said, there remain some useful applications of CR to housing, with Taylor recognising how homelessness, and presumably hyper-precarity as a result of MS, can 'happen to a person as the result of a combination of structural, contextual, or individual factors

and emerge from the interaction of necessary and contingent relations' (2020: 8) and recognising housing in the 'reproduction of labour power'.

So, what does CR contribute that is useful in the analysis of housing, vulnerability and MS? Without awareness of ontology, it is not possible to understand why there has been a growth in the PRS and the drivers of this growth, as well as the ways in which MS can be seen as adverse incorporation. Consequently, CR emphasises an 'ontological assertion that there are core capacities essential to human functioning, whilst also acknowledging the shape these take or how they are played out is context specific, changes over time, or may not ever be a capacity that is exercised' (Mcnaughton Nicholls, 2010: 28). Arguably, without this ontological companion to the epistemology of the PRS, it is difficult to fully explore policy solutions or comprehend the reasons for where we have arrived. But more so, it can be understood as an economic structure that has facilitated the growth of MS through a confidence in market forces and laissez-faire economics of which MS is, arguably, the ultimate expression. Hence the argument of MS being an example of adverse incorporation rather than economic exclusion. As such, a CR approach recognises the way in which housing provision has led to the economic and social reproduction of poverty and vulnerability. In the context of MS, it can be argued that housing plays a significant role in reproducing economic relations and the power imbalances that facilitate the perpetuation of MS through the intimate relations recognised above of traffickers, employers and landlords as well the way by which MS can be seen as a process.

By placing MS and housing within a CR framework, it is possible to recognise that MS is not a niche issue, or a marginal set of events that have little connection with other people's lives. Instead, MS may be an extreme aspect of hyper-exploitation and hyper-precarity that is to a large extent maintained by housing and the PRS. But it is similar in many ways to the way that the expanding and diverse PRS is fuelling poverty and vulnerability for many other households and individuals. Consequently, it is possible to identify strands of influence between the different layers, with the ontology of political economy being a basis on which austerity (Stephens and Stephenson, 2016), precarious and low paid employment (Lombard, 2023; Ferreri *et al.*, 2017), late neoliberalism (McCall *et al.*, 2022), welfare reforms (Powell, 2015), housing unaffordability and other factors have contributed to the growth of the PRS, which includes a diversity of precarious housing.

The benefit of adopting a CR approach is therefore that it takes us beyond studying the relationship between housing and personal experiences. Instead, it provides a broader framework that allows for recognition of a real political context that shapes the evidential policy and experience. In doing so, there is an assumption of power imbalances that are particularly

germane to the study of housing and MS. With this in mind, it is possible to recognise a series of unequal market positions and power in relation to the PRS. This is not entirely surprising and all people entering the PRS do so from positions of power determined by capital and personal vulnerabilities. However, recognising the positionality of those experiencing MS, it is possible to include another dimension to market power, which is the concept of legal vulnerability regarding residence and engagement in the labour market.

To this end, it is possible to identify how the shadow and informal sectors of the PRS play a critical role in the ontology of social and economic reproduction. To this end, CR, whilst rejecting 'economic determinism' recognises 'the inter-relatedness of the different spheres of the social totality means that the reproduction and operation of economic structures and generative mechanisms, however important, cannot be viewed independently from other social processes' (Joseph, 1998: 94). The connection between housing and the reproduction of social and economic relations is one that is well documented and has played a part in social policy for many years through, for example, the development of council housing, housing market renewal, and key worker schemes. In contrast, the development of the shadow and informal sectors of the PRS as a facilitator of reproducing specific economic and social relations is the result of a lack of policy, limited capacity to intervene and a lack of strategy that has led to worse outcomes. Using a CR approach, it can be seen that experiences of housing are diverse and are shaped by a range of factors such as personal vulnerability, economic position, and social networks. This paper also argues that it can be shaped by legal status. As such, those experiencing MS are particularly susceptible to hyper-exploitation in the housing market that results in their experience of a shadow PRS characterised by hyper-precarity. From a social policy perspective, the understanding of this relationship is significant in order to recognise relations within an area of housing that is largely overlooked in contemporary housing research. However, the advantage of CR is that it recognises a real level that can be described as being the invisible causal structures underpinning the relations recognised in the actual (hyper-precarity) and empirical (hyper-exploitation) levels. In this respect, the causal structures are the economic opportunism that fuels MS, but also, the shadow PRS that plays a central role in the social and economic reproduction of MS.

Housing and MS

So far, this paper has recognised a process of housing commodification alongside the growth of a diverse PRS, especially in relation to the more precarious aspects of 'informal', shadow housing. The paper has also examined the idea that those with the least market power – understood in terms of the intersection of economic power and the experience of vulnerability

– are most likely to find themselves in precarious housing, and with this their risk of exploitation and potentially MS is increased. In this respect, this paper identifies those experiencing MS as being in a socio-legal position that allows them to be hyper-exploited in both housing and labour markets.

A notable aspect of debates regarding MS, however, is the limited research into the ways by which hyper-precarious housing contributes to the social and economic reproduction of hyper-precarity and exploitation. This is perhaps surprising considering that it is estimated there are over 120,000 people in the UK experiencing MS (Global Slavery Index, 2021), all of whom need somewhere to live. However, it is important to note that these figures are contested on methodological grounds by the ONS (2020; see also Kenway, 2021). By the end of 2021, official data show that 12,727 people experiencing MS were identified (Home Office, 2022), which is just below 10 per cent of the figure cited above. This lack of reliable data relating to MS, the shadow PRS, and hidden homelessness in itself represents an issue, compounded further by their overlapping nature.

Nevertheless, despite government rhetoric and legislation curtailing the rights of migrants, Cooper *et al.'s,* (2017) report published by the Home Office recognises a range of connections between migrants experiencing MS and housing. Often, this involves the exploiter/perpetrator providing housing to the victim of MS as part of the labour provided. Such accommodation is often basic, at times without running water and sanitation, and maintained through fear of violence, withholding of documents, and debt bondage. This ties in with Crane *et al.'s,* (2022) models of 'asset leveraging' and 'workers as consumers' models that explicitly connect the hyper-exploitation of MS to the hyper-precarity of housing in the shadow PRS. Consequently, although accommodation is a necessity for workers experiencing MS, it is also as a key element of the MS *process*, with housing integral to maintaining and reproducing the relations of MS (Shankley, 2023). Migrant MS is thus a process whereby the employer, the agent, the trafficker and landlord are all intimately connected and co-ordinated to create a web from which the hyper-exploited struggle to escape (Such *et al*., 2020; Gadd and Broad, 2022). In effect, what emerges is the vision of MS as a process that is managed with business-like efficiency and planning based on extreme commodification of labour and housing that operate symbiotically.

It is, however, important to note that the largest group of MS victims, despite what might be misplaced assumptions based on fear of migration, are those suffering criminal exploitation, which is particularly significant at a time when the UK Home Secretary claims, without evidence, that people are 'using modern slavery laws to game the asylum system' (UK Parliament, 2023). The links between housing and exploitation, therefore, covers a wide group

of people (including British nationals and documented and undocumented migrants), and we have also seen a rise in 'cuckooing' and forced criminality such as young people engaged in 'county lines' activities where a hyper-exploitation explicitly linked to housing is enforced through violence and/or financial control (Cooper *et al.,* 2017). A small, growing body of work has started to theorise the links between MS and forms of homelessness and housing disadvantage more robustly (see Clare *et al*., 2023; Hodkinson *et al.,* 2021), noting the importance of the specifics of housing precarity and the lack of ontological security these afford/preclude. This work, however, requires a more detailed engagement with questions of structure and agency, something that an explicitly critical realist approach offers, and it is to this that we now turn.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper argues that within the growth of a diverse PRS, the development of a shadow sector plays a significant role in the social and economic reproduction of MS. Whilst the diversification of the PRS that has accompanied its growth does not cause MS, it does play a role in perpetuating the social and economic relations of vulnerability and hyper-exploitation. Housing, therefore, plays a key element in social and economic reproduction. The growing capacity of the PRS and especially the precarious elements such as the shadow PRS creates opportunities to facilitate MS. However, to date, the experiences of those within MS have been under-researched in relation to housing and the role housing plays in perpetuating MS. Furthermore, the legal vulnerability and hidden status represents a key intersection of hyper-precarity and hyper-exploitation. Consequently, this paper firmly locates the shadow PRS as an element of precarity and as the shadow PRS plays a key role in social and economic reproduction rather than meeting welfare needs of security and wellbeing, it can be argued that the shadow PRS is an extreme instance of housing commodification.

Within the remit of debates examining the commodification of housing, the growth of the PRS in an age where fewer people can afford to buy their own properties has prompted subsequent growth within diverse and precarious directions. With this in mind, the implicit assumption of housing as an aspect of people's welfare, whereby it improves the quality of their lives, has little relevance to those experiencing MS. Within MS, despite popular parlance and media headlines regarding foreign workers in nail bars, car washing and agriculture, the reality is that criminal exploitation is the fastest growing area of MS and that a large proportion of those of British nationals. For these people, the shadow PRS facilitates their continued exploitation.

At the same time, entrenched austerity has led to a position whereby social housing has become increasingly inaccessible, poverty levels have grown, youth services have seen budgets cut, there are fewer police officers, and local authorities have significantly diminished capacity to inspect the burgeoning PRS. This alerts us to the fact that we should not see the growth of a diverse PRS in abstraction from broader social, economic and political factors. With this in mind, the presence of critical realism allows us to recognise the way in which the *actual* level of reality should alert us to the presence of the less tangible real level that is driving this forward.

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