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**Getting ‘Out There’ and Impacting:  
The Problem of Housing and Urban  
Research and its Anarchist Alternative**

**Paper prepared for  
*Housing, Theory and Society***

by

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## **Abstract**

Housing and Urban Researchers (HURs) are under intensifying pressures to impact on society. Although this orientation towards research impact sits well with 'policy oriented' HURs it has sat less well with some 'critical' HURs. It would nevertheless be wrong to paint critical HURs as unconcerned with research impact. Debates about research impact led to the emergence of 'critical' Housing and Urban Research (HUR) in the first place. Critical HURs simply seek to ensure that their research impacts in different ways. In fact, this is the problem. Policy and critically oriented HURs both presume social science to be an appropriate vehicle for impacting social change. Yet such presumptions have been questioned by Allen (2009) who is philosophically hostile to the idea of social scientific HUR, which he seeks to dethrone. However, he stops short of outlining an alternative to it. My paper addresses this lacuna by suggesting an anarchist approach to impacting social change that is equally suspicious of social science but, unlike Allen (2009), conciliatory towards it.

**Keywords:** Anarchism, impact, theory, research, social science, knowledge.

## **Introduction**

Institutional pressures on Housing and Urban Researchers (HURs) to make their work more relevant to housing, urban and regional policy makers have been growing for a long time and are intensifying (see Allen and Marne, 2010, on the UK; Kemeny, 1997, on Sweden; Atkinson and Jacobs, 2008, on Australia; and Perry and Harloe 2007 on the European situation more generally). The neo-managerialisation of national research funding systems has been identified as the main institutional mechanism for securing this relevance of Housing and Urban Research (HUR) (Allen and Imrie 2010). Thus Van Vliet's (2003) survey of HURs publishing in *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* unearthed an international picture of HUR that is now overwhelmingly funded by government departments and agencies, with national policy makers as the main audience.

However, the influence of funding regimes is only one part of the HUR picture.

Research audits in countries such as the UK ('Research Excellence Framework') and Australia ('Research Quality Framework') have recently moved beyond the idea that

HUR should merely be 'relevant' to the needs of policy makers. Audits are now emphasising the additional idea that the 'impacts' of HUR upon policy making (or the achievement of policy goals) should be measured, and that these impact measures will influence decisions about the future government funding of HUR. Although this shift has been significant for HURs in these two countries, it is also significant for HURs in other countries where 'relevance' pressures are have been moving in similar directions.

Suffice it to say that pressures for policy 'relevance' and 'impact' have not simply been imposed *upon* HURs. HURs have been engaged in their own internal debates about policy relevance and impact for a long time. The background to these debates has been the longstanding tradition of 'policy oriented' HUR which sought to 'inform' and impact policy making since its conception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kemeny's 1992; Cowan and Marsh 2001). It was against this background that the 'New Urban Sociology' emerged in Europe and the USA in the 1970s among a group of mainly young and left-wing HURs that were interested in developing more 'critical' understandings of relevance (Milicevic 2001). They argued that HURs had a political responsibility to be 'critical' of housing policy rather than to simply 'inform' its development.

The debate between 'policy relevant' and 'critical' HURs intensified in the aftermath of the publication of *Housing and Social Theory* (Kemeny 1992) and also with the emergence of a 'relevance debate' amongst urban and regional geographers (see especially Martin 2001; Dorling and Shaw 2002; Hamnett 2003). Advocates of 'policy relevance' in these debates argue that critical HUR has become too

theoretically and linguistically obscure to be able to inform and impact policy making (Hamnett 2003; Van Vliet 2003). ‘Critical’ HURs retort that their relevance and impact lies in a research approach that deconstructs taken for granted policy discourses to show their arbitrariness and thus the potential for alternatives (Kemeny 2002) whilst, on the other, producing narrative accounts of ordinary experience that are vital to achieving a better understanding of housing and urban issues (Imrie 2004).

This brings me to my key point. Despite their differences, both sides seem to agree that their purpose is to produce a HUR that is ‘relevant’ and ‘impacting’ in one way or another, e.g. on policy makers, housing campaigners and so on (Van Vliet 2003).

Herein resides the problem. The debate about ‘relevance’ and ‘impact’ is concerned with what goes on ‘inside’ the social scientific field of HUR and how this impacts on the world ‘outside’. As such, an ‘inside–outside’ distinction is posited which ‘in principle’ accepts the epistemic superiority of social scientific knowledge produced by HURs ‘in here’ by merely asking how it should achieve impact in the social world ‘out there’. Indeed far from questioning the privileged epistemic status of social science knowledge vis-à-vis other forms of knowing ‘out there’, some HURs have responded to fundamental critiques of HUR by dogmatically asserting its epistemic superiority vis-à-vis other forms of knowing ‘out there’ (see the exchange between Sprigings, 2010, and Allen, 2010, relating to the ‘fallacy paper’ published by Allen 2009).

So where do we go from here? Well, Allen (2009) has used phenomenological reasoning to assert the legitimacy of everyday understandings of housing and urban issues *vis-a-vis* social scientific knowledge; he argues that they are different and

competing modes of knowing that have an equal right to assert themselves. The problem with Allen's (2009) argument is that it is underpinned by a conflict ontology that pits HUR against everyday knowledge, whilst championing the latter over the former in a debate that he thinks both have a right to participate in. As such it creates an impasse between HURs and those involved in housing and urban issues on an everyday basis. I suggest that this is an undesirable place to leave the argument - not least because, as Allen (2009) suggests, social scientific HUR will always have the greater capacity to assert itself *vis-a-vis* everyday knowledge in conflict situations.

The purpose of this paper is to breach this impasse by creating a more productive engagement between HUR and people living housing and urban realities 'out there' – which implies a phenomenological acceptance of experiential understandings of housing and urban realities as legitimate forms of knowing (see Allen 2009). An anarchist approach is suggested because it is capable of removing 'in principle' distinctions between 'in here' and 'out there', and thereby building cooperation where Allen (2009) has identified conflict in the relationship between HUR and its 'outsiders'. Specifically, an anarchist approach requires HURs to move on from their current preoccupation with thinking about how HUR produced 'in here' can impact 'out there'. Instead, it encourages HURs to re-place themselves into the social world from whence they came and to co-constitute the terms of their own lives (and not just the terms of their social science) in-common-with-others, i.e. within non-hierarchical 'lived spaces' that dissolve any institutional boundaries that exist between HURs and people living housing realities. I draw on insights and examples from the anarchist literature to show what this means in practice as well as theory. Although

anarchism's impacts might flow less directly from the academic text to the knowledge user, this should be considered to be a good thing.

## **The Problem of 'Impact' in the Social Sciences**

### **A Brief and Abridged History of HUR and its Impact**

Despite growing institutional pressures on academic social scientists to become more 'relevant' and 'impact' on the 'real world' of social problems and policy making (Gibbons *et al* 1994; Greenwood 2007), HUR can point to its long standing tradition of systematic and practical social enquiry that stretches back to the pioneering urban poverty studies of the mid- 19<sup>th</sup> century that were so influential in bringing about social and policy change in countries such as France, England and the USA (Troen 1988; Cowan and Marsh 2001). That HUR undertaken within the universities has always been socially and policy relevant and impacting has therefore not generally been in dispute. What has been in dispute is the *nature* of its 'relevance' and 'impact' in the 'real world' (see Kemeny 1992). Debates about these matters have, in fact, been waging within the field of social science since the emergence of systematic social enquiry in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when concerns about social science as 'statecraft' emerged (Staheli and Mitchell 2005) only to intensify from the 1960s onwards when Marxist and Feminist social scientists emerged to challenge the then hegemonic status of positivist social science for providing a 'scientific mask' to legitimise power and exploitation (Harvey 1984).

These critiques reached into HUR which, in 1972, witnessed the establishment of Research Committee 21 to promote the idea of a 'New Urban Sociology'(NUS) within the International Sociological Association, following the debate initiated by

Castells' (1977) critique of 'traditional' HUR. Castells and his followers in the Europe and the USA argued that the dominant understanding of HUR – as a social science that produced 'objective' knowledge to inform policy making – obscured the fact that HURs were, in reality, 'handmaidens' of the state; tasked to produce a social scientific knowledge that legitimised urban capitalism (Harloe 1977; Milicevic 2001). Castells and his followers argued that research and policy making were not technical activities objectively oriented to the resolution of housing and urban problems but, rather, forums for the expression of class power (Harloe 1977 1981; Lambert *et al* 1978; Darke and Darke 1979). In other words, they argued that the relevance of HUR lay in its utility to the capitalist state and to the reproduction of class power. They argued that sociology, as a critical discipline, should reconsider its relevance by 'reconnecting with the problems of society'; being 'critical' of the 'dominant powers' and studying the class distribution of power (Harloe 1977 1981; Lambert *et al* 1978).

If this critique was intended to halt 'policy oriented' approaches to HUR in their tracks it did not work because several housing and urban policy oriented research centres were established at universities in Glasgow, Cardiff, Bristol, York, Delft and Uppsala<sup>1</sup> in the 1980s and 1990s. In the light of this situation Kemeny (1992) published a book length critique of housing studies which re-ignited the debate about the policy orientation of HUR and its general direction. Despite his differences with the NUS (see Kemeny 1982), Kemeny's (1992) critique emerged out of the same concerns raised by the NUS in the 1970s and ended up on similar epistemic grounds; the preoccupation of HURs with the concerns of national policy makers had led to an 'epistemic drift' towards empiricism and away from 'critical' social scientific concerns such as 'the state', 'power' and 'ideology'. Kemeny (1992) regarded this as

problematic because it meant that definitions of housing issues produced by national policy makers tended to be taken for granted and accepted rather than questioned by HURs.

Kemeny (1992) argued that a return to social scientific theories of the state, power and ideology would facilitate the critical deconstruction of national and cross-national housing policy rhetorics, thereby opening up academic thinking to a wider range of housing policy possibilities. The relevance of a theorised HUR based in the social science disciplines, then, was its ability to change ways of thinking about ‘real world’ housing policy issues ranging from the supposed inevitability of social housing residualisation across societies (Kemeny 1995) to official definitions of overcrowding within countries (Kemeny 1984 1992). Indeed Kemeny was so successful in promoting this need for a theorized and critical HUR within the international field of HUR that he was able to re-launch the journal *Scandinavian Housing and Planning Research as Housing, Theory and Society*; an international journal that “furthers the agenda of housing research as an integrated multidisciplinary field of research and practice that is theoretically informed and embedded in wider societal issues”.

### **Contemporary Debates about Impact in HUR**

If the emergence of the NUS and *Housing, Theory and Society* were exemplars of a critical theoretical ‘turn’ amongst some HURs in the 1970s and 1990s<sup>ii</sup>, this has since been counter-balanced by growing levels of institutional support for policy oriented HUR; National governments now ‘contract out’ much of their research to HURs in the universities (see Clapham 1997 and Allen 2005 on the UK; Atkinson and Jacobs 2008 on Australia; Kemeny 1997 on Sweden; and Pinson 2010 on France and the

international situation more generally) such that Van Vliet's (2003) international survey of academic HUR found it to be overwhelmingly funded by government departments and agencies with national policy makers as its main audience. Van Vliet (2003) also found that the majority of HURs had no difficulty in identifying the policy implications of their research.

Although HURs such as Bramley *et al* (2004) and Cowan and Marsh (2001: 15) are enthusiastic that 'much housing research is [now] research *for* policy' others have been less sanguine about this policy orientation on the grounds that it has enslaved HURs to the entrepreneurial state (Slater 2006; Wacquant 2008; Allen and Imrie 2010) resulting in a loss of critical edge (Milicevic 2001; Slater 2006; Allen 2010b)<sup>iii</sup>. Nevertheless, it would be easy to overstate the case. Although much HUR undertaken in the research centres established in the 1980s and 1990s is undoubtedly 'policy oriented' (as Van Vliet's, 2003, survey indicates) a different picture apparently emerges when we examine HUR undertaken within the traditional disciplinary spaces that Kemeny (1992) has spent the last couple of decades urging HURs to return to. Dorling and Shaw (2002), for instance, bemoan the fact that too much contemporary HUR undertaken in traditional disciplinary spaces, such as geography and sociology university departments, is theoretically obscure and lacks policy relevance. Hamnett (2003) has placed a large part of the blame for this on the theoretical indulgence that traditional disciplinary spaces encourage and reward because, for him, they have become

... theoretical playground[s] where [academics] stimulate or entertain themselves and a handful of readers but have in the process become increasingly detached from contemporary social issues and concerns .... The renewed interest in theory and theorising has arguably generated an interest in 'theory for theory's sake' and 'critique for critique's sake'. (Hamnett 2003: 1)

### **Universalising Impact – in the context of the ‘theory problem’**

It is against this background that research audit frameworks in countries such as the UK and Australia have recently introduced the idea that academic research should be evaluated according to its ‘impact’ as well as its quality and relevance. In the UK, for instance, HURs are now obliged to make a clear and unambiguous connection between their ‘high quality’ peer-reviewed publications and the impacts they generate ‘out there’. This should be demonstrated through the composition of impact ‘case studies’ which describe how a ‘high quality’ HUR publication (e.g. a book or peer-reviewed journal article) has generated effects that have resulted in some form of policy or practice change ‘out there’ (HEFCE 2010; 2011)<sup>iv</sup>.

The significant thing about such research audit schemas is not simply that ‘impact’ thinking will restrict the intellectual space available to HURs for ‘theoretical indulgence’. It is that HURs are now expected to ensure that their publication of ‘high quality’ HUR becomes a ‘moment of rupture’ that acts as a catalyst in producing change ‘out there’ – especially policy and practice change<sup>v</sup>. Suffice it to say that some HURs in the UK and elsewhere have spent the best part of the 2000s considering and debating how to overcome problems of theoretical abstraction and achieve impact, anyway (e.g. Van Vliet 2003). First, some have been arguing that HURs need to make a ‘policy turn’ (Imrie 2004) by putting distance between themselves and social theory (Dear 2005) in order to produce ‘well written’ reports containing an ‘evidence base’ that provides ‘clear answers’ to policy problems (Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Van Vliet 2003; Nevin and Leather 2006). In other words, a return to empiricism and positivism has been advocated despite the critiques that have been levelled at them (see Kemeny 1992 1995). Others have been arguing that

a dichotomy need not exist between theoretical and policy relevant HUR since “it is also the case that policy-driven research can be the springboard to addressing broader theoretical questions” (Cowan and Marsh 2001: 15) which Martin (2001: 196-7) thinks should result in the theorisation of ‘real structures’ leading to ‘empirically grounded conceptualisations’ that can be ‘carefully and clearly articulated’ in dialogue with policy makers (see also Atkinson and Jacobs, 2008, and Priemus, 2012: 408, who similarly support ‘more interaction between research and policy on the one hand, and theory and practice on the other’). These researchers are not against theory *per se*, then, because it can be a “crucial tool to assist in understanding the world in which we live” (Hamnett 2003: 2). Instead, they are against irrelevant theories and the indulgent use of theories where “‘doing theory’ has arguably become an object of attention in its own right .... [where] more attention [is] paid to the representation and deconstruction of phenomena than in phenomena themselves” (Hamnett 2003: 2).

Nevertheless, this has not settled the argument. Bridge (2010) and Imrie (2004) disagree with the contention that a post-structural emphasis on ‘representation and deconstruction of phenomena’ is an irrelevant indulgence. First, Bridge (2010) - in an echo of Kemeny (1992) – has suggested that the relevance of post-structuralism lies in its ability to provide a ‘check and balance’ on policy makers use of HUR to create particular constructions of housing problems, as well as its ability to illuminate policy possibilities beyond currently taken-for-granted policy frameworks. It follows that a critically relevant HUR should theorise at one step removed from policy rather than from within its confines (c.f. Cowan and Marsh 2001). Second, Imrie (2004) not only argues against the idea that building theory out of policy oriented work provides the most direct route to relevance but also against Hamnett’s (2003) “belittling of

particular epistemological positions” (Imrie, 2004:698) which misrepresent particular forms of HUR, such as post-structural analysis and ethnographic case studies, as obscure and irrelevant. Far from being irrelevant, Imrie argues that such scholarship seeks to produce understandings of the everyday lives of ordinary people that policy makers would otherwise be excluded from

Much of post-structuralist urban geography is about the excavation of the everyday and the ordinary, or the geographies that constitute the lives of those that live in cities. Such geographies are not inimical to practice or policy; if anything, they provide the very grounded knowledge that policy makers [should] seek to feed off” (Imrie 2004: 703)

Thus in contrast to policy oriented HURs who argue that housing and urban policy makers require comprehensive insights that can inform policy making (Martin 2001) - as if the geographical scale of empirical enquiry and ability to generalise were the only indicator of utility - Ward (2005: 316) adds that smaller scale ethnographic case studies are just as relevant because critical HURs can “through engagement with a variety of users ... be better placed to answer the questions policy makers have not yet, but will one day, ask” (Ward 2005: 316). For Imrie and Ward, then, critical HUR should not simply involve exercises in the theoretical deconstruction of housing and urban policy (c.f. Kemeny 1992; Bridge 2010) but, also, reconstructions of its precepts by drawing on the concepts that people ‘out there’ have of housing and the urban. Of course, such a task orientation presents ‘critical’ and impacting HUR with a new set of problems which revolves around the question of which of the ‘variety of users’ HURs should be engaging with in order to fulfil this task of reconstruction. A consultation with debates about researching urban housing struggles (inequalities, marginalisation, gentrification *etc.*) is instructive in this regard so will provide us with an example that we can refer to next, and throughout the remainder of the paper.

Some contributors to the recent debate about gentrification research in Europe and North America have argued that the problem with policy orientation is that it focuses on ‘the lives of those’ whom policy makers are interested in, i.e. middle class social groups that policy makers seek to entice back into cities rather than working class people already living there (Slater 2006; see also Watt 2008). This has not only produced an abundance of theory and knowledge that celebrates middle class lifestyles for their apparent urban regenerative effects (Slater 2006; Allen 2008); it has resulted in a dearth of knowledge of how low-income households are faring in the brave new world of regenerated cities (Slater 2006; see also Allen 2008; Watt 2008) leading to an invisibilization of the urban poor in European and American housing and urban scholarship (Waquant 2008; see also Allen 2008; Charlesworth 2000). This has led some critical HURs to argue that there is not a simple generic need to ‘get out’ and understand ‘the lives of those that live in cities’, which is what the idea of ‘impacting’ promotes. They argue that there is a need to ‘get out’ and understand the lives of *particular* constituencies of people living in European and American cities, notably, those people that are invisible to policy makers’ (see Slater 2006; Waquant 2008; Watt 2008).

### **Getting ‘out there’ and impacting invisible lives**

It was right for the sociologist to be critical and to explore wherever possible whose interests are served by the planning process. However, the sociologist also has an innovative role in postulating new social forms. By helping to raise the consciousness of those suffering inequalities in the socio-ecological system the sociologist himself becomes part of the distributive process (RC21 Statement, cited in Harloe 1977)

The emergence of the NUS in Europe and the USA in the 1970s was based on the claim that critical HURs needed to ‘get out’ and ‘get involved’ with ‘those suffering inequalities’ in cities. Given its Marxist origins, the task in this regard was to develop

a macro theoretical analysis which could be used for the purposes of ‘consciousness raising’ amongst those suffering inequalities ‘out there’ (Harloe 1977 1981; Harloe *et al* 1998). Now, if the demise of the NUS (see Milecevic 2001) and subsequent descent into theoretical indulgence in the 1990s and 2000s (Hamnett 2003) produced a disconnection between HURs and ‘out there’ (see Castree 2000) then critical HURs such as Slater and Wacquant have brought us full circle; once again, the critical task is to ‘get out’ and ‘get involved’ with those suffering inequalities in the housing and urban system. However, there is a key difference between then and now: In the 1970s and 1980s, the Marxist NUS issued HURs with a *political challenge* to produce macro theoretical analysis and engage in ‘consciousness raising’ among European and American urban populations. However, the challenge presented to critical HURs in the contemporary context is more concerned with *verstehen*; to re-engage with everyday contexts as ‘out there activists’ in order to generate better ethnographic understandings of the lives of invisible urban populations (Castree 2000; Watt 2008) upon which new theoretical critiques of housing and the urban can be built (Slater 2006; Wacquant 2008). This raises the question of whether being ‘out there’ will enable HURs to better understand the lives of invisible urban populations.

An initial glance at some classic urban ethnography certainly supports the suggestion that getting ‘out there’ can bring HURs ‘closer’ to the experiences of marginalised populations and, as such, lead to a better informed HUR. We need only consult Herbert Gans’ (1962) ethnographic study of a working-class district due for demolition and redevelopment in Boston, USA, for an example. On encountering the district, Gans’ acknowledges that he saw it from the point of view of a well-to-do and well-meaning social scientific ‘outsider’ that saw ‘problems’ and understood the

policy imperative for redevelopment. However, after a few weeks living ‘out there’, Gans notes that he began to understand the district “as a resident [whose] eye focused only on those parts of the area that were actually being used by people. Vacant buildings and boarded-up stores were no longer so visible” (Gans, 1962: 12). So, he began to question policy imperatives for demolition and redevelopment.

This Gans example seems to indicate that ‘out there’ approaches to HUR with marginalised and otherwise invisible people can result in research that is relevant to those people because, first, it can speak more accurately about urban lives (Imrie 2004); second, it can provide a better basis for theorising (Imrie 2004); and third, such theorising can therefore critically talk back to policy makers (see Bridge 2010). For HURs that define relevance in terms of its critical engagement with ‘out there’ such that it can locate and theoretically explicate invisible suffering, it seems that the relevance problem is solved. However, I beg to differ. This is because such a critical view of relevance gives too much attention to HURs ‘out there’ *in the field* to the neglect of thinking about their return to the *institutional context* ‘in here’. This is an important omission because a focus on HURs ‘out there’ in the field marginalises more fundamental questions about the production of HUR ‘in here’. When we do consider this aspect, HUR begins to look more questionable from an impact point of view.

### **Moving from ‘out there’ to ‘in here’**

A social science focus on what HURs should be doing ‘out there’ does not solve the problem of relevance and impact because it focuses on HURs *in the fieldwork context* rather than HURs *in their academic context*. Thus although HURs have been

impelled to position themselves ‘out there’ where they can ‘excavate the ordinary’ and engage with invisibilized urban populations, almost nothing is said about what happens when they return to their academic context or about the political conditions in which academic texts are composed (Graeber 2009). Some HURs are confusing on this point. On the one hand, critical HURs such as Slater (2006; see also Watt 2008) suggest that HUR in European and American universities is populated by a ‘middle class intelligentsia’ with ‘a class habitus’ that Castree (2000: 962) suggests “poses challenges for the researcher or activist seeking to make common cause with people out there”, e.g. the ability to produce empathetic interpretations of lives ‘out there’.

However, they are less clear about how these interpretative challenges might be overcome. Being more critical? More reflexivity? Getting ‘out there’ and ‘getting involved’ might provide us with a route to greater reflexivity. But would that be *enough* reflexivity – whatever ‘enough’ is? Allen (2008) is sceptical: How can the middle class intelligentsia step outside a habitus that is at the core of its being? And how can it achieve ‘enough’ reflexivity if its class habitus is so separate, in social and epistemic terms, from the people and contexts under study?

“I read [Slater’s argument] as a plea for more social criticism [from HURs]. Should we really seek to engage the academic nobility in order to secure more ‘social criticism’ when, as a class that is socially and epistemologically separate from the working class experience of gentrification, it appears to be increasingly incapable of doing this.” (Allen 2008: 184)

This is not necessarily an insurmountable problem for advocates of ‘strong objectivity’ who argue that social scientists that – broadly speaking - share a form of ‘being’ with those they study can set themselves the objective of producing *an understanding of subjugated understandings* because they are better positioned to understand those they study (see Harding 1991; Oliver 1990) and that, therefore, it is

possible to produce *an understanding of other understandings* under *specific conditions*, that is, where there is some consistency between the standpoint of the researcher and the researched. In this view, then, relevance and effective impacting is a consequence of the authorship of HUR; it all depends who is doing the research because, ultimately, that will fundamentally determine whether its impacts are appropriate to the constituencies that are the subjects of the research (see Heyman 2007). In practical terms this would necessitate more working class HURs to counter its middle class bias (Allen 2008). But, again, is this really the solution to the class habitus problem? Can HURs that share a form of being with those they study really produce an understanding of others when, as social scientists, they remain institutionally, if not socially, separate from those they study? I would suggest not. Although they might be able to claim they are not *something else to those they study*, they cannot escape from the fact that they remain *somewhere else from those they study*, i.e. in the scientific field. Allen (2009) suggests that this matters.

Following Schutz (1953), Allen (2009) suggests that it is important to understand the significance of the fact that HURs within universities operate ‘in a social scientific situation’ which requires them to ‘supercede[their] biographical situation as a human being within the world’(Schutz 1953: 29-30) and to instead work ‘in accordance with the scientific method’ and with reference to ‘a field of pre-organised knowledge’. Thus the rules of the HUR field – in common with all social scientific fields - require HURs to “construct thought objects ... which supercede the thought objects of common sense thinking” (Schutz 1953: 28), thereby making housing and urban issues available to us in critical and theoretical terms that enable us to see beyond naive understandings and surface realities

“There is a difference in kind between the type of naïve understanding of other people we exercise in everyday life and the type of understanding we use in the social sciences. *It is our task* to find what distinguishes two sets of categories from each other: (1) those categories in terms of which the man in the natural standpoint understands the social world and which, in fact, are given to the social sciences as material with which to begin, and (2) those categories which the social sciences themselves use to classify this already preformed material”. (Schutz 1972: 140)

Several important consequences follow from this. First, Schutz (1953: 30) suggests that it is the “scientific problem once established which determines alone what is and what is not relevant” to social scientists ‘in here’ rather than the concerns of ‘the man in the natural standpoint’ ‘out there’. Thus as a scientific field that has its’ own scientific problems, the rules of the HUR field require HURs to address themselves to these problems (Van Vliet 2003; Allen 2009). Slater (2006) provides us with a stark insight into the consequences of such scientific epistemocentrism in gentrification research, i.e. when HURs are compelled to work with the ‘scientific’ problems of gentrification rather than those of everyday life. He accuses both policy oriented and critical HURs of being overly obsessed with resolving the social scientific agency – structure problematic of ‘whether gentrification is brought about by the imperatives of capitalism or the actions of individuals’ (Slater 2006; Lees *et al* 2007). Meanwhile, as the social scientific debate about gentrification as agency or structure rages on, its displacement consequences on ‘real people’ go undocumented and even unnoticed by HURs (Slater 2006; also Crookes 2011). HUR thus becomes disconnected from the way urban processes such as gentrification produce everyday problematics for people whose experiences – as undocumented – become invisible in urban scholarship (Wacquant 2008; Allen 2008; Charlesworth 2000; see also Graeber 2009 and DeLeon and Love 2009 in a wider context).

If we return to Gans (1962) work in Boston we find that he is also illuminating in this respect. Although Gans produced an ‘out there’ ethnography that provided a ‘thick description’ of the ‘urban villagers’, he acknowledges that there were ‘some shortcomings of the findings’ which were limited by his social scientific ‘research purposes .... a desire to learn first-hand what differentiates working and lower class people from middle class ones’ (Gans 1962: 336). Hence although Gans’ involvement and identification with the urban villagers had the advantage of enabling him to “look at the world through their eyes” he was also aware that his ‘scientific situation’ had left him “blind to some of their behaviour patterns and thus distort[ed] the study” (Gans 1962: 343). The point is made, then, that being in a scientific situation is inherently problematical because it leads to a set of questions that can leave us ‘blind’ to the housing and urban problematics of the invisible people we are studying. Yet HUR seeks to be relevant to these very people!

The second problem with the ‘scientific situation’ concerns how the constitution and regulation of the field of social science shapes the type of understanding that can be legitimately produced and disseminated within the field. Specifically, ‘it is the task’ of HURs seeking to publish their research in learned journals to use social science concepts to classify the material (experiences *etc.*) given to them by invisible people in the fieldwork context. Yet, as Charlesworth (2000: 75) sees it, the problem with this social scientific requirement to ‘appropriate experience through academic discourse’ is that it leaves HURs in epistemic isolation from the ‘primordial experiences’ of ‘those suffering inequalities’. This produces an epistemic crisis on two levels.

First, as we have seen, it can empty the social world of real experience by failing to document it (see Slater 2006) thereby rendering it invisible (Wacquant 2008).

Second, since social scientific concepts and discourse constitute the ‘epistemic reverse’ of the primordial meanings that invisible people give to their housing and urban experiences, they ‘sugar coat’ those experiences thereby obscuring them (Slater 2006). Keith (1992) is particularly scathing of social scientific discourse in this regard because, according to him, primordial experience can only be properly captured in primordial forms of expression – such as ‘angry writing’ – which express the pain and suffering ‘out there’ and which academic discourse is simply unable to convey. Yet, the opportunities to engage in such unconventional forms of writing are often restricted by senior HURs that police the production of text allowed in journals and who ensure that new entrants to the field do not deviate from the ‘acceptable style of academic texts’ (Keith 1992) as the following postgraduate HUR suggests

I did my presentation last week to a small number of staff and fellow PhD students .... Anything said with passion and you’re accused of all sorts of things: perhaps I should take [Professor X] advice to one of my peers and start writing ‘more like an academic’! (personal communication)

Keith (1992) suggests that this social scientific regulation of HUR leads to scholarship that is ‘epistemologically strategic but fraudulent’ because it requires critical and ‘out there’ HURs such as “even Andy Merrifield” (Heyman 2007: 109) to conform to the demands of the social scientific field rather than their own urban constituencies (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999; Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Heyman 2007 2009). Bourdieu similarly agrees that such a system constitutes “scientific censorship [which] is very often only concealed political censorship” (Bourdieu 2008: 87) because its’

denigration of vernacular voices ‘out there’ as ‘not academic enough’ subjugates them. Yet these are exactly the voices that an impacting HUR needs to hear.

## **An Anarchist Approach to Impact in Housing and Urban Research**

### **Anarchism and ‘in here’, ‘out there’ boundaries**

Such is the importance of academic text in research audit logic that its production is considered to be a ‘moment of rupture’ that should generate impacts ‘out there’.

Although Allen (2009) has challenged the epistemic authority of HUR in this regard his suggestion that HURs are “well within their rights to continue to do what they do and make their own arguments about housing” (p76) reifies rather than challenges what we have seen to be a problematic epistemic distinction between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’. Moreover, it is a dangerous place to leave the debate because, in situations of epistemic conflict there is only likely to be one winner and that is ‘high quality’ HUR (Allen 2009). It is fortunate, then, that anarchism (a movement characterised by its hostility to scientific authority but which emphasises cooperation in egalitarian and non-hierarchical spaces) provides us with an alternative approach to ‘research’ that dissolves this problematic distinction.

So where Allen (2009) reifies the separation between HUR ‘in here’ and experiential forms of knowing ‘out there’, anarchists reject any reductionisms (e.g. into ‘expert’, ‘bystander’) that enforce this separation (Chatterton 2006; Chatterton *et al*, 2008; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). As a philosophical current that shares Allen’s (2009) phenomenological suspicion of social scientific intellectualism (see Graeber 2009; DeLeon and Love 2009; Kahn 2009) anarchist approaches instead emphasise a dialogue in which humility is the prerequisite that requires interlocutors to be open

about the limitations of their episteme (Rouhani 2012). Yet an anarchist approach does not simply require a dialogical “commitment to mutual learning and listening and rejecting essentialist assumptions about the ‘other’” (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010: 483). More fundamentally, it seeks *mutually transformative* dialogue (Chatterton 2006). This means that ‘impact’ cannot simply flow in one direction – from the pages of academic text and into the lives of people ‘out there’. It must also flow in the other direction; HURs’ engagements with others’ lives should not merely transform academic texts but also *academics themselves, i.e. as people*. In principle, then, this duality of transformation would seem to make an anarchist understanding of ‘impact’ unique. Suffice it to say that some HURs would claim that such a duality of transformation already happens in some parts of HUR. For instance Slater (2012: 118-119) discusses how many HURs would

“... aspire to a situation in which what we say and do touches someone else, somewhere else, just as we are touched by what others say and do elsewhere. It is through this reciprocity that *scholarship* and teaching unfold in politically progressive ways, with the *transformation of self*, others and the world. No audit frame can possibly capture this” (my emphasis)

In reality, however, the research literature is dominated by individualised accounts of reflexivity which are essentially limited to *intellectual transformations* (AGC 2010) that, ultimately, serve to legitimise the ‘correctness’ of social scientific authorship. So nothing has fundamentally changed. Although Slater (2012) is promoting a more expansive understanding than this when he refers to ‘transformation of self’, he maintains that the reciprocal relationship is between ‘scholarship’ and ‘others’ that are ‘out there’. For philosophical anarchists that reject such rigid essentialisms, this remains insufficient. An anarchist approach demands more than reflexivity about the HURs own intellectual standpoint and more than a transformation of the ‘scholar self’. As we have already seen, this is because philosophical anarchists consider

‘researcher’ and ‘public’ to be essentialisms that obscure common agendas by maintaining the ontological separation between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ (Chatterton *et al*, 2008). In rejecting these false and divisive essentialisms, the anarchist task is to establish and expand spaces in which the uncommon is transformed into the common (Chatterton 2006) such that *all* become more aware of their ‘common grounds’ (Chatterton *et al*, 2008). That is to say, the task of the anarchist is to step outside of the ‘scholar self’ and into genuine personhood and reciprocal *human relationships* that dissolve the boundary between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ (Heyman 2007).

The implications of this dissolution of ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ are especially profound for an impacting HUR – and become lucidly apparent if we return to consider the logic of research audit systems which emphasise impact. In general, social scientific research audit systems are disciplinary mechanisms that have been introduced to ‘produce’ new and self—regulating researcher subjectivities (Allen 2005). As such they are concerned with governing the behaviour of the ‘scholar self’ at work ‘in here’ rather than the ‘the autobiographical self’ that goes home at night; they seek to discipline HURs into orienting their work so that it has a transformative impact ‘out there’. They ask nothing of their personal lives ‘out there’.

Now HURs might consider this limited reach of research and impact audits (into the professional lives of HURs but nothing more) as appropriate ‘in principle’ because, of course, the business of HUR has no formal right to regulate their autobiographical lives which are essentially ‘beyond HUR’ – even if there are sometimes overlaps in practice<sup>vi</sup>. Yet such an ‘in principle’ separatist view is only appropriate to a mode of thinking that considers HUR to be ontologically separate to ‘out there’. Anarchists

beg to differ. Where research audits encourage an ontological separation between HURs ‘in here’ and the social world that they are trying to impact ‘out there’, an anarchist approach dissolves this separation and replaces HURs back into the social worlds from which they came and, ultimately, can never escape no matter how much, as social scientists, they might like to think they can (see Allen 2009: 71-2). That is to say, it replaces them back onto ‘common ground’ in reciprocal *human* relationships (Chaterton 2006; Heyman 2007).

This brings me to the essence, and what is axiomatic to, the anarchist approach to impacting housing which emphasises ‘living-in-common’ and a pre-figurative approach to social change (Hodkinson 2012). So where the social scientific impact schema emphasises how what we say as HURs should matter ‘out there’ (c.f. Van Vliet 2003), a pre-figurative anarchist approach suggests that ‘what we say’ means nothing unless we are “being, thinking and doing” something to embody the social change we wish to see (Graeber 2009; Jeppesen *et al* 2014). As such, it demands nothing less than the embrace of a ‘way of life’ dedicated to changing the terms of our lives in-common-with-others (Rouhani 2012). Importantly, this does not mean that HUR is debunked, i.e. kicked away as a meaningless irrelevance. It is simply practised in new spaces and in different ways.

### **Anarchist Research Practices and their Spaces of Impact**

Although the anarchist research *approach* emphasises the pre-figurative dissolution of ‘in here’, ‘out there’ boundaries and the re-placing of HURs on common ground, this is achieved in two different ways in anarchist research *practice*. First, some anarchist leaning HURs continue to use social science instruments but insist on taking them

beyond HUR and sharing them with others in non-hierarchical and egalitarian spaces in order to demystify them and thus undermine academic power (Fuller and Kitchin 2004). In this model of practice the whole group shapes the research process; from ideas and hypothesis to data generation and analysis, as well as in the writing of reports and use of findings (Fuller and Kitchin 2004; see also Heyman 2007 2009). The result is a form of co-produced knowledge where the expertise of *all* participants is acknowledged as equal but from different frames of reference (Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Chatterton *et al* 2008). The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute provides us with the most commonly cited example of this approach in a HUR related field because it involves a new role for the anti-expert academic that is tasked to place their social scientific instruments in the hands of others (Fuller and Kitchen 2004; Heyman 2007 2009; Bunge 2011). Thus the process of knowledge production itself becomes a vehicle of pre-figuration; a way in which social relations can begin to be reshaped along egalitarian lines.

But this is not sufficient in itself. Chatterton *et al* (2008: 218) prefer the term ‘solidarity action research’ over ‘knowledge co-production’ because they think that the larger aim should be to develop forms of HUR “practice aimed at social transformation rather than [merely] the use of a set of tools aimed at the production of knowledge”. They refer in particular to some forms of Participatory Action Research (PAR) where the emphasis is on A as much as R such that the research process is used by HURs as “a vehicle for liberation, radical social transformation and the promotion of solidarity with resisting or struggling ‘others’” (Chatterton *et al* 2008: 218; also AGC 2010)<sup>vii</sup>. That is to say, the social scientific research process becomes the means through which HURs replace themselves in-common-with-others in the context of the

struggles of everyday life. They become part of struggles rather than merely scientific observers.

A second ‘humanist’ strand of anarchist pre-figurative research practice follows Gadamer in recognising that there is an understanding to be gained beyond the social sciences (see Allen 2009: 73-4). Rouhani (2012) falls into this category when he suggests that anarchists are tasked to expand their understanding of what counts as worthy of knowing. In doing so he returns us to the ‘mutually transformative dialogue’ which is axiomatic to anarchist praxis and that requires humility and reciprocity among participants. In place of the *intellectualism* of academic text which is the ‘moment of rupture’ that creates impact, Chatterton *et al* (2008) suggest that understanding and transformation also emanate from our *emotional* responses to ‘struggling others’ in-the-world which promote solidarity, mutuality, compassion and care (see also Heyman 2007; Jeppessen *et al* 2014). So where ‘critical’ HURs might regard theory as their primary means of deconstructing and reconstructing housing and urban policy, anarchists would argue that changing our lifestyles - by living in solidarity with others who would otherwise be the ‘subjects’ of our research - can help us to reach new ‘lived’ understandings that are beyond the reach of theory and that might nurture a revolutionary spirit (CrimethInc 2001).

There are a number of key things to note about this ‘humanist’ approach. First, it eschews the idealisation of social scientific HUR as the agent of impact upon whom others ‘out there’ are dependent. In place of research audit logics that are encouraging HURs to inflate their social scientific ambitions to impact on ever greater scales (‘national’, ‘international’, ‘world leading’), the anarchist HUR gets locally

involved in the everyday sustenance work of engaging with others and ‘building a commons’ (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). In contrast to the impact schema that identifies social scientific text as the ‘moment of rupture’ that acts as a catalyst for change on these ever greater scales, then, a pre-figurative anarchism promotes the idea that everyday acts count and that we are, in fact, making history all of the time; impact and change are not located at some point in the future – after HURs have laboured and enlightened ‘out there’ with their insights – but are located in the everyday (Chatterton 2006). This becomes abundantly apparent if we consult the book lists of any anarchist publisher where one finds an abundance of texts that describe how fundamental and desired housing and urban changes have been achieved around the world through the everyday actions of ordinary people living-in-common and acting in solidarity through a shared ethic of care and compassion – without the help of any HURs at all (e.g. Ward 1976; Branford and Rocha 2002; Rameau 2008; Zibechi 2012; Hebden 2014; Hunt 2014; Tracey 2014).

This brings me to the second key point which concerns the role of text in ‘humanist’ anarchist research practice. If HUR texts are crafted to be social scientifically ‘correct’ and to ‘win’ arguments and debates in the social science literature, then most anarchists housing and urban texts are anything but (Graeber 2009). Anarchists do not necessarily see texts as part of larger intellectual debates or contests which one is tasked to win (Graeber 2009); neither, therefore, do they see these texts as ‘moments of rupture’ from which impacts flow. For these anarchists, change is a less clear cut and more messy process. So in place of the intellectual clarity of a ‘theoretical framework’ that emerges from the complex process of undertaking research, anarchist pre-figuration is often an ongoing journey of progress and failure that, as integral to

the building of solidarity, is regarded as more important than the final destination (Chatterton 2006). Although the anarchist text plays an important role in this journey, it does not do so from the position of theoretical superiority that will provide intellectual clarity. It merely adds another leg to the journey; another story to be read and considered.

This can be seen if we consult some anarchist texts themselves, which are not generally written by intellectuals and do not contain ‘theoretical frameworks’ or empirical analysis that ‘wins’ arguments and impacts accordingly. Anarchist housing and urban texts are often authored by a wide range of academic and non-academic actors involved in the pre—figuration of housing and urban change and contain stories about the changes achieved (see Rameau 2008; Zibechi 2012; Hebden 2014; Hunt 2014; Tracey 2014). Far from enlightening and impacting others ‘out there’ with their intellectual clarity, these stories more humbly serve as inspirational journeys that are honest about their failures but also pregnant with

‘... ideas about the *possibilities* for more horizontal abilities of people to manage their own affairs through mutual aid and solidarity. It presents a commitment to workable alternatives .... [The point is to] introduce [people] to ideas not in a doctrinaire or theoretical way but as living ideas that would catch their imagination and act as possible openings for how we might live more sustainable, just and equal lives” (Chatterton 2008: 423; *my italics*)

This orientation does not make HURs redundant. Rather, anarchist HURs are required to reject the rules of the social scientific field that require them to win debates and ‘measure’ their impacts. They are tasked instead to facilitate discussions amongst those with whom they are pre-figuratively living-on-common-ground by asking ‘do these alternatives attract you, incite you, make what you’ve got appear absurd?’ (Chatterton *et al* 2008; Hodkinson 2012) As such, and in contrast with social scientific HUR which seeks to impact ‘out there’, anarchist HURs *become*

*change* in the form of newly developing and liberating living arrangements that they are involved in building in-common-with-others. Anarchist HURs become the means and the ends rather than simply the means to the end; they become the story rather than merely the story teller.

## **Conclusion**

The problem with the type of research audits now being used in the UK and Australia is that they are concerned with *what social scientists do* ‘in here’ and how it impacts ‘out there’. Allen (2009) has recently provided a trenchant phenomenological critique of Housing Studies which is critical of the idea that it should prevail in such an impacting way. However, although he takes sides with the possessors of ordinary and experiential knowledge of housing *vis-a-vis* HURs he nevertheless accepts that the latter “are well within their rights to continue to do what they do and to make their own arguments about housing” (Allen 2009: 74). The problem with this is that it maintains what I have suggested is a problematic separation between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ in which the former is always likely to win in situations of epistemic conflict. I suggested that an alternative approach needs to be posited to overcome this conflict situation and that anarchist insights are helpful in this respect.

In outlining an anarchist approach to HUR I have shown how the boundary between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’, which Allen (2009) argues is problematic on philosophical grounds, can be productively dissolved. Although this dethrones HUR as the agent of impact it does not make it redundant; Anarchist HURs are required to perform their task with humility and ‘in discussion’ with others rather than as experts over others. It does, however, ask fundamental and challenging questions of HURs

because the pre-figurative approach of anarchism raises questions about how HURs live their lives – and with whom – rather than just how they perform HUR. In fact, it only makes sense to leave questions about how we live our own lives aside if we subscribe to an ‘in here’, ‘out there’ distinction – which anarchists reject.

This rejection changes a lot of the things that we currently take for granted as HURs: Instead of seeking to ‘write papers’ that ‘win’ arguments and thus cause ‘moments of rupture’ in the social science literature, HURs could become more comfortable with the idea of undertaking the messy journey of change – and then perhaps writing about it with non-academic others that were also on the journey. And instead of ‘speaking’ to ‘audiences’ and ‘disseminating knowledge’, HURs could be engaging more in open discussions with non-academic others with whom they are ‘living-in-common’. And so on.

Although the anarchist *research approach* is distinctive, this does not mean that there is a simple contrast to be made between anarchist HURs and HURs more generally or, therefore, to denigrate the later from the position of the former. As I have indicated, similarities between the two can be discerned in *research practice*. For instance, many HURs in mainstream social science make strident efforts to overcome the boundary between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ by operating in ambiguous and complex spaces, albeit *as scholars* (see Slater 2012). In other words, they are involved in softening (albeit not overcoming) the boundary between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’. By the same token not all anarchist influenced HURs are overcoming the boundaries between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ by living in common; some anarchist influenced HURs remain wedded to their role as social scientists – albeit they share their

expertise with others (see Heyman 2007). They are similarly softening rather than overcoming the boundaries.

So the important point is this: Following in the footsteps of Colin Ward's 'pragmatic anarchism' (White 2007) I would suggest that the important thing is not that the philosophical approach of anarchism 'wins' an argument within HUR but that it has its voice heard in the literature such that it influences HUR practice. This is especially important because, following the recent death of Ward, few anarchist voices are now heard within the social scientific field of HUR yet anarchists have valuable insights to offer HURs that might serve as inspirations. Although some HURs might chose to embrace a *per se* anarchist approach to praxis, other HURs might wish to learn from anarchism and incorporate its principles into their HUR in a more pragmatic and gradualist fashion. This would not be a cop-out. Anarchism, after all, emphasises the journey of change as the point of it all rather than the hoped for utopia at the end of it.

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<sup>i</sup> The Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala was established in 1994 through a process of research re-organisation rather than as an entirely ‘new’ research organisation (see Kemeny 1997).

<sup>ii</sup> A theory group was established in the European Network of Housing Research in the late 1990s.

<sup>iii</sup> Slater (2006) refers to some HURs that have gone down this route as ‘Formerly Radical Upwardly Mobile Professors’.

<sup>iv</sup> Some learned societies are assisting in this respect by publishing booklets advising HURs on *how* to translate academic research into impact (Slater 2012).

<sup>v</sup> The membership of the panel judging ‘impact’ in the field of ‘Social Policy and Social Work’ was composed of Professorial level social scientists that are well known to be ‘policy oriented’, government research managers, central and local government policy makers, and a number of influential national charitable organisations such as Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Age UK (see HEFCE 2010: Appendix B).

<sup>vi</sup> Although some HURs work in their ‘own time’ this is a matter of personal choice. HURs would generally maintain that ‘in principle’ a separation of work ‘in here’ and autobiographical life ‘out there’ should be maintained.

<sup>vii</sup> Chatterton et al argue that the emphasis in PAR is disappointingly too often on R rather than A, and that an anarchist approach should foreground A.