

Mansion on the Hill?

Richard Harris

Volume 16, 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt16re02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Harris, R. (1985). Compte rendu de [Mansion on the Hill?] *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 16, 239–244.

Mansion on the Hill?

Richard Harris

There's a place out on the edge of town, sir
Risin' above the factories and the fields
Now ever since I was a child I can remember
that Mansion on the Hill

Bruce Springsteen

David Englander, *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain 1838 - 1918* (Oxford: Clarendon 1983).

David Halle, *America's Working Man. Work, Home, and Politics among Blue-Collar Property Owners* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Michael Ball, *Housing Policy and Economic Power. The Political Economy of Owner-Occupation* (New York: Methuen 1983).

Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream. The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: Norton 1984).

OWNING A HOME IS THE North American worker's dream. Generations of immigrants have aspired to property ownership in the New World. The home has become a powerful symbol of American life: of the rewards of thrift, of the possibilities for social mobility and individual achievement, and of the abiding virtues of family life. Such, at any rate, is the prevailing view, articulated by social observers and real estate promoters alike.¹ Homeownership is so plausible a symbol of achievement because so many have been able to attain it, and not merely the social and economic élite. In Canadian cities in 1982, for example, almost exactly two-thirds of all blue-collar workers owned —

¹ See, for example, S. Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress* (Cambridge 1964); J.P. Dean, *Home Ownership. Is It Sound?* (New York 1945); C. Perin, *Everything in Its Place* (Princeton 1977).

or were buying — their own homes.² It is perhaps not surprising, then, that so many have taken homeownership as living proof that American capitalism works. Certainly homeownership has posed a dilemma for socialists. On the one hand, socialists have welcomed homeownership on the grounds that it has emancipated the working class from the potentially exploitative tyrannies of private landlordism. On the other, however, they have often viewed it with unease, as a sop to working-class discontent. Sombart, for example, was one of the first to make the point that widespread homeownership might be a reason why socialism found so little support in the New World, a notion that one west coast construction company expressed in the slogan "Kill Bolshevism by Erecting Homes."³

But it is a mistake to view the American working class as wholly exceptional. Homeownership is just as much an aspiration — and today almost as likely an achievement — in Australia, and even Britain, as it is in Canada or the United States. Moreover, in each country, recent threats to the realization of the dream have caused widespread concern. House price inflation seems to have put homeownership beyond the reach of many working people, especially in the larger cities. To buy a home these days both spouses have to work, thereby increasing

the pressure on family life. As aspirations have been frustrated, and mortgage rates have fluctuated, hopeful tenants and young owners with large debts have become angry and vocal. Something, people in all of these countries seem to agree, must be done.

Four recent books advance considerably our understanding of the historical roots, and future prospects, of working-class homeownership in both the old world and the new. In *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain 1838-1918*, the historian David Englander is concerned with the political relationships between landlords, tenants, and the state at a time when fewer than 10 per cent of British working-class families owned a home. Reviewing the large body of recent work on housing in nineteenth-century Britain, he notes that the attitudes and actions of working-class tenants have been neglected, and the inference commonly made that in those years this group was silent and passive. (ix-xviii) In such a context, the Glasgow Rent Strike of 1915, which forced the government to implement rent controls, has been made to seem a glorious aberration. Using a wealth of material drawn from local papers, royal commissions, and the records of tenants' and property owners' associations, Englander shows that it was not. Throughout the nineteenth century, landlords had wide powers of eviction and distraint. Intimidation, through the use of eviction notices ("blue frighteners") and bailiffs ("candy men"), was common, particularly in the poorer districts. Tenants resisted in many ways. Rent strikes were the last resort, and alternatives included the non-payment of rent, squatting, "flitting" (or "moonlighting"), "junking" and burning of property, hurling brickbats at the bailiffs, and sacking the landlords' homes. Echoing E.P. Thompson, Englander (185) argues that there persisted a "moral economy" according to which the actions of landlords could be judged, and the collective resistance of tenants justified. Resist-

² The author's estimate derived from the 1982 Household Income Facilities and Equipment micro-data file distributed by Statistics Canada. See also R. Harris, "Homeownership and Class in Modern Canada," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (forthcoming).

³ W. Sombart, *Why is There no Socialism in the United States?* (New York 1976), cited by Halle, 3. The slogan appeared in an article published in the trade magazine *Industrial Canada* in 1921 and is reproduced in Shirley Sprague, "A Confluence of Interests: Housing Reform in Toronto 1900-1920," in A.F.J. Artibise and G. Stelter, eds., *The Usable Urban Past* (Toronto 1979), 130-54.

ance was organized most effectively by a labour aristocracy, "eminently respectable militants," (186) and was often facilitated by their geographical concentration. The Rent Act of 1915, then, is seen as the outcome of a continuing struggle.

This struggle helped to bring about the subsequent decline of the private landlord and, as it continued after the war, a new impetus for public housing and homeownership. It is a limitation of the book that it does not examine the other reasons for these shifts in tenure composition and national policy. The author suggests, for example, that landlords were being squeezed financially by the local tax system, making them especially vulnerable to tenant activism; he also proposes that middle-class support was a vital element in the political decision to fund public housing after 1918. Unfortunately, neither of these ideas is systematically developed or examined. Even in terms of working-class tenant politics, the picture is incomplete. One-third of the book is devoted to the "rent war" between 1914 and 1918, and little space is given to the period between the years 1838 and 1867. Moreover, the geographical coverage is spotty, raising questions about the general validity of the case. But this is inevitable in a work that breaks new ground, and again a comparison with Thompson's work seems apposite: an important new argument has been made, and if gaps are apparent, new directions for research have been opened up.

In light of the horrors of unregulated private landlordism, it is not surprising that working people have struggled to own their own homes. MacKenzie has argued that workers in the United States aspire to homeownership as a way of freeing themselves from the restrictions and insecurities of tenancy; in this they supposedly differ from the middle classes, who are more likely to see the home as an investment.⁴ This issue, along with many

others, is taken up by the sociologist David Halle in *America's Working Man*. This is an ambitious book. Halle observes that most of those who have studied the working class have dealt either with work, or with aspects of life outside work. In contrast, his aim is "to present a total picture of workers' lives." (xi)

Guiding his account is the question of whether blue-collar workers have a way of life distinct from that of the middle class. The problem is addressed through a case study of the 121 male blue-collar chemical workers at an oil refinery in northern New Jersey. Based on seven years of field research, Halle's account is both detailed and convincing. He deals successively with life outside work (the residential setting, leisure, and the family), the nature of work and the opportunities for occupational mobility, with politics, religion, ethnicity, and what he terms "national rituals," notable holidays. He argues that the workers' lives are separated into three spheres, and that they accordingly display three types of "class consciousness." In their roles at work, they perceive themselves as "workers;" in life outside work, they see themselves for the most part as "middle class," on the basis of their incomes, their neighbourhoods, and their ability to own homes; lastly, as citizens they are "Americans." Except for the more skilled mechanics, these workers see work as repetitive. Life at work and at home is kept strictly apart, and indeed the latter is explicitly seen as a sphere of autonomy, (295) where workers can exert some control over their own lives. In this regard homeownership — "after their job... the dominant economic fact in the lives of most workers" (12) — takes on particular significance and is an almost universal goal. As a result, 77 per cent of the workers are homeowners and a further 12 per cent live with close family members in owner-occupied dwellings. Halle

The Position of Skilled Craftsman in the American Class Structure (Cambridge 1973), 74-7.

⁴ Gavin MacKenzie, *The Aristocracy of Labor:*

finds evidence that workers see their home as an investment. (43) In this regard, as in many others, he suggests that the contrast between blue-collar workers and the middle class has been overstated. Only at work are the experiences of these groups clearly distinctive.

Such an abbreviated summary cannot do justice to the range of issues covered. Those with a particular interest in sport, ethnicity, gender, the family, politics, and religion, as well as housing, will find much to interest, and perhaps provoke. The great strength of the book is that working-class lives are viewed as they are experienced — as wholes. This gives meaning to the discussion of each of the parts. For example, Halle points out that young workers with a family and a mortgage are more likely to try to get work in the "process" (as opposed to the "batch") plant, where the work is harder but overtime more common and the pay better. Later in life, when income is less and health more of a priority, they often ask to be moved to warehouse work. Such insights are won at a cost. Inevitably the author was not able to explore each issue as exhaustively as if he had focused his study more narrowly, and sometimes he seems to be skating on rather thin ice. This is least true of the earlier sections on home and workplace, more true of his discussions of politics and religion. Generally, however, the account is very well balanced, sensible, and clearly written.

The book is weakest when the author attempts to generalize. He recognizes, of course, that the workers in his sample are not typical of the working class as a whole: they are all male, unionized, relatively affluent, and secure. He tells us that they were selected precisely because they lie close to the boundary between the working and middle classes, therefore providing an especially tough test of the notion that the working class lives a distinct way of life. (xiv) Nevertheless, and especially in his conclusions, Halle seems too easily to forget that fact, looking for

broader generalizations than his evidence can sustain. More seriously, he does not tell us what, in his view, "class" is. He treats white-collar workers as if they are middle-class, and then argues that, in terms of working conditions, incomes, family life, leisure, and so forth, the differences between white- and blue-collar workers are minimal. (186-7) (Indeed, partly because they are more likely to be women, the former often receive lower incomes than Halle's workers.) This is a curious procedure. Many, notably Braverman,⁵ have argued that white-collar workers are working-class; by putting them without discussion in the middle class, Halle begs an important question. At the same time he prejudices his case that working-class life is not very distinctive. But as a study of a particular group of affluent, male, blue-collar workers in the late 1970s, *America's Working Man* is a fine book which offers many valuable insights. Not the least of these is full recognition of the fact that, in this group, homeownership is still the American worker's dream, one for which many sacrifices are made.

In recent years the necessary sacrifices have become greater. In *Housing Policy and Economic Power*, the British Marxist economist Michael Ball asks why this has been so. He focuses upon the changing economics of homeownership since 1945, a period in which working-class homeownership in England has risen rapidly to over 50 per cent. Recently, however, this increase has been checked by rapid house price inflation. In opposition to many others, Ball argues that the latter cannot be understood in terms of housing consumption and finance. Instead he suggests that the crisis in housing costs is due to a system of speculative housing production which is characterized by booms and busts, relatively low rates of technological change, and a subcontracting system

⁵ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York 1974).

known as "the lump" which has changed little since it was so graphically described by Robert Tressell at the turn of the century.⁶ In Ball's view, the social relations of production in the industry are crucial: he argues that recent attempts to introduce new construction technologies, for example, by substituting wood frame for brick construction, cannot reduce costs by much. Indeed, through their effects on deskilling, they exacerbate problems of labour supply in a very dispersed industry. The core of the book, and its major contribution, is the development and documentation of these related arguments. Ball also considers the way in which planning and the system of housing finance contribute to the problems of housing production, and also offers some views concerning the political effects of home-ownership. These observations are not fully integrated with the earlier discussion, and the thread of argument is sometimes lost. Nevertheless, the author's conclusion that, unless the social relations of housing production are changed, house prices will continue to rise more rapidly than incomes, putting owner-occupation beyond the reach of an increasing proportion of British household, carries weight and conviction. Appropriately, and very controversially, his solution is the nationalization of land and the residential construction industry.

The diagnosis and prescription of this British Marxist economist differ quite strikingly from those of the American feminist planner and architect Dolores Hayden. In *Redesigning the American Dream*, Hayden recognizes that house prices have increased a great deal in recent years, and that the dream of a single-detached suburban home is no longer attainable for many. But she does not see this as the central feature of the current housing crisis. Her argument is that the more serious problem is that of a mis-

match between the characteristics of the housing stock and the rapidly changing needs of American families. Indeed, in this regard the single-detached suburban home is the source of the problem. Typically it is too large for the smaller households of today; inconveniently located, especially for women who must depend upon public transit; inefficient in its use of energy; too expensive for single parents and low-income groups; and encourages the unacceptable isolation of women in the home where they are required to perform unpaid domestic work. Although she does not pursue the argument to its roots, the clear implication is that the popularity of the single-family home and therefore many of our present housing problems, are due to patriarchy, not capitalism. Our problem is that we have the wrong dream.

From a wide-ranging and illuminating review of architectural schemes prepared and implemented within the past century, she suggests that there are three types of solution to current problems, each entailing a different set of social relations and each implying a different type of residential environment. The first involves downsizing the dream by constructing bachelor condominiums and mobile homes; encouraging the further penetration of exchange relations into domestic labour, through such schemes as "rent-a-shopper;" and applying computer technology to domestic tasks. This future contains singles and couples living in electronic cottages (urban or rural). She suggests that there are many interests pushing us in such a direction, but that they should be resisted.

Second, domestic tasks might be socialized, so that child care, cooking, and so forth are taken care of collectively, most probably in large high-rise structures. In Hayden's view, although attempted in some communist countries, this is not likely to prove a desirable, or popular, option in America.

In a third option, small groups of people, living in low-rise buildings grouped

⁶ Robert Tressell, *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (New York 1978).

around small courtyards might organize co-operatively to perform certain tasks (gardening, child rearing), while retaining private space for their own use. Based on the ideas of the "material feminists," about whom she has already written so eloquently in *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (1982), this third way is the one that she prefers, and she makes a number of suggestions as to how such a goal might be realized, through the adaptation of existing buildings and the construction of new. Hayden is not unsympathetic to the popular ideal of homeownership, but argues that it must be redefined to meet changes in family structure and gender relations, through the development of co-operatives, privately owned units with communally owned space, and so forth. She concludes with an eloquent plea for a reorganization of public space in the American city which would provide women with at least the level of accessibility and personal security that men have long taken for granted.

Hayden has been in the forefront of feminist writing about housing and cities for several years, and this book develops a number of the points she has made elsewhere.⁷ It is well illustrated, imaginative, and occasionally inspiring. It is full of interesting ideas, together with examples of how they have been put into practice. This is important in a polemical work of this kind, and will add considerably to its influence. But the book is also frustrating. The diagnosis of current problems is cursory; she assumes that the housing industry, as it is presently constituted, can meet the challenge. She does not consider whether and how the housing options and preferences of the working class differ from those of the middle class. The implication is that women in all classes suffer equally from the patriarchy of the single-

family home, and can benefit equally from her preferred alternative. Is this true? More seriously, she is not as clear as she needs to be about the nature of the links between social relations and urban architectural form. The single-family dwelling comes in for a good deal of criticism as the home of patriarchy. It is not clear, however, whether the problem with this housing form is intrinsic to its design (low density, separate units) or to private (as opposed to public or co-operative) ownership, or whether the problem is contingent, having to do with the way that owner-occupied single-family housing has been used in the past. Can new wine be poured into old bottles, or will it be tainted? Hayden seems to be undecided.

It is clear that among the working class the owner-occupied home is alive, but not well. According to Ball, unless something drastic is done about the way housing is built, costs will continue to rise faster than incomes. Given that workers still value homeownership very highly as an outlet for the personal expression that is suppressed at work, the further frustration of homeownership aspirations is likely to lead to political unrest. Hayden's proposal that these aspirations be redirected might make housing more appropriate and affordable in the short run if the alternative can be made sufficiently attractive. The possibilities of this happening would appear to have been enhanced by the emergence of feminism as a major political force. Women (and men) stand to gain from innovative housing design and the associated reorganization of domestic work, and they might become a powerful agent of change. What this, and the continuing contradictions of housing production, might mean for the working person's ideal of the mansion on the hill, only time will tell.

⁷ Apart from *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge 1982), see "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?" in C. Stimpson, *et al.*, eds., *Women and the American City* (Chicago 1981).