

# AFFECTIVE POLITICS, ACTIVISM AND THE COMMONS: FROM WECH TO GRENFELL

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the activism of the Walterton and Elgin Action Group (WEAG) who successfully campaigned against attempts by the UK Conservative government in the 1980's to sell off their council homes to private tenders. Focusing on their inventive and creative actions, and the composition of the group not usually associated with militancy, the article takes the formation of WEAG as an example of affective politics and the cultivation of a housing commons-through-difference. What was foregrounded and became important were the relations of mutual dependence and care that existed and could be mobilised to stir collective action across categories of race, class, gender, disability and age. These relations existed at the nexus of personal histories including those of migration, poverty, displacement, social exclusion, homelessness, neglect and discrimination. These histories were mobilised within an area that had a strong history of community development and activism, and amongst a diverse group of tenants who had shared, yet different histories of displacement, suffering, and struggle having been forced to live in substandard conditions with little hope for the future. The Homes for Votes scandal and the WEAG campaign hover at the edges of the Grenfell tower tragedy in the present, making links across shared geographies and histories, particularly of displacement and suffering as well as community activism and politics, reminding us of what was and is possible beyond the devastation and neglect symbolised by the charred remains of the tower.

**Keywords:** affective politics, housing activism, commons, archives, gentrification, community video movement

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## INTRODUCTION: POLITICS OF THE COMMONS

One of the prolonged and enduring questions of participatory democracy grappling writers and activists within the context of neoliberalism is how to prevent, thwart, transform, diagnose and shape the conditions that will help counter its pernicious effects across a range of contexts. These include within provision and responses to healthcare, housing, welfare, mental health, the prison system, migration and the social distribution of inequalities and opportunities together with the uneven distribution of poverty and risk across racialised and classed lines. In Jeremy Gilbert's theoretical meditations on some of these issues, and their relationship to a broader 'politics of the commons',

he suggests that one of the important questions for left politics is how to bring “the collective” into being at all.<sup>1</sup> This is a crucial observation given that ideas of the collective often map on to, or intersect with, more reactionary ideas of the masses ‘haunted by the image of the mob’ (*Common Ground*, p99).<sup>2</sup>

The ‘commons’ as a concept exists alongside a range of related concepts, including community, the multitude, the masses, sociality, being-with or being-in-common, as a means of identifying processes that bind and bring people together, ideally, as Lauren Berlant argues, within conditions of ‘non-sovereign relationality’.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in conditions that do not presume or attempt to produce homogeneity or a ‘rage for likeness’ (p394). The utility of the concept of the commons in contrast to ideas of community, for example, ‘is that it does not depend on any presumption that the participants in a commons will be bound together by a shared identity or a homogenous culture’ (*Common Ground*, p165).

The broader question of the commons and the political utility and importance of different conceptions of the commons, including the under-commons, relational commons, queer commons, brown commons and anti-capitalist commons, for example, is recognised by many authors who might not usually be included in debates on participatory democracy and left politics. In their edited collection on the concept of the ‘queer commons’, for example, Millner-Larsen and Butt,<sup>4</sup> writing in the context of the rise of right-wing reactionary politics, including Trumpism, populism and Brexit, argue that perhaps it might be better to talk about a ‘commons-under-threat’, recognising the extinction of alternatives to neoliberalism to any (left) commons that once might have existed. Describing ‘the commons’ as in danger of ‘looking like the proverbial dodo’, they suggest it is facing extinction as an organising principle given the reach, traction and stabilisation of neoliberal privatisation and marketisation (*Queer Commons*, p399).

Taking readers back to the 1980s and 1990s as formative moments, they explore examples of queer commons, or queer commoning, in specific LGBTQ action and activist groups, including groups such as FIERCE! founded in 2000, responding to gentrification in New York and its uneven effects on queer people of colour, for example. Two examples of activist groups within the UK and London who have worked to develop queer commons include the trans and queer groups Sisters Uncut and the DIY Space of London. Both support queer publics, particularly in the context of housing, domestic violence, and crime, gaining broader visibility and rights, and attending to the importance of decolonisation. They argue that what cuts across and makes the importance of a queer commons more pressing are how issues of austerity and gentrification are unevenly affecting particular communities in danger of erasure and further displacement. Or perhaps the question, as Gilbert suggests, is rather how to bring communities into existence in ways that are sustainable and effective in bringing about alternatives to neoliberalism in relation to broader questions of how to live, love, and even make better left

1. Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*, London, Pluto Press, 2014, p24. (Hereafter *Common Ground*).

2. For example, Lisa Blackman and Valerie Walkerdine, *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave, 2001.

3. Lauren Berlant, ‘The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times’, *Environment and Planning D: Environment and Space*, 34, 3, 2016, p394. (Hereafter *The Commons*).

4. Nina Millner-Larsen and Gavin Butt, ‘Introduction: The Queer Commons’, *GLQ*, Vol. 24, 4, 2018, pp 399-419. (Hereafter *Queer Commons*).

or radical politics together.

Gilbert was writing prior to particular events which have made these issues ever more urgent for left politics, including the Covid-19 global pandemic, Brexit, Trumpism and the rise of new forms of authoritarianism in many countries across the world, where we are witnessing the removal of gendered and LGBTQ rights, and the amplification of racisms and xenophobia. The question of the shaping of left collectivities and what we can learn from theories that offer critiques of rationalism based on the fundamental relationality of subjectivities is central to Gilbert's reflections. Engaging with theories of mass psychology, the field of affect studies, psychosocial studies, and broader political philosophy and theory that foreground desire, structures of feeling, vitalism, fantasy and theories of contagion, suggestion and imitation, he explores the utility of a range of theories, which might be said to take an *affective* approach to politics and activism with the aim of moving beyond the dogma of the rational subject.<sup>5</sup>

5. For example, Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, London and New York, Routledge, 2020.

## AFFECTIVE POLITICS AND THE HOUSING QUESTION

My interest is also in affective politics and processes of change and transformation that cannot be sufficiently captured by rational, deliberative and cognitivist models of communicative action. Although these critiques have been made by many political philosophers and theorists, I choose to foreground the writings of an artist and theorist, Ana Pais, who works through performance practice and its insights. In her book *Performance and the Public Sphere*,<sup>6</sup> she explores the mobilising power of performance across art, theatre and dance, particularly in the context of the revolutionary art practices that were part of the 1974 carnation revolution in Portugal. She argues that performance art has the power to make politics, and that this happens via the 'provocative, disturbing, excessive and controversial experiences that it generates' (p18). The book includes discussions of Portuguese futurism within the context of international avant-gardes, as well as an important contribution by the British performance scholar Jen Harvie, *Housing Crisis, Art and Performance*, on the current housing crisis in the UK, and two feminist performance responses by GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN and Sh!t Theatre.

6. Ana Pais, *Performance in the Public Sphere*, E-book, Centro de Estudos Teatro/FLUL and Performativa, 2018, <https://performativa.pt/> (Hereafter *Performance in the Public Sphere*).

My interest, like Harvie, is in relating some of these questions and issues to the current housing crisis, specifically focusing on London, although the issues are spread across other cities and countries undergoing transformation linked to aggressive and rapid gentrification, and the subjection of housing to market principles. These transformations have their own local specific histories, and historically have much longer histories of emergence and formation. These principles are, however, reaching their zenith in the current political climate with still little offered in terms of alternative visions for the present and possible futures, now made even more urgent

by the effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic. I will focus these issues in relation to a case study of a successful example of housing activism linked to the formation of Walterton and Elgin Community Housing (WECH) that has been put forward as a model for an anti-capitalist commons and as a partial resolution to the housing crisis in the present. Taking the reader back to the 1980s and early 1990s in London specifically, I will explore this community-housing model as both of its time, while speaking insistently to present struggles and challenges.

WECH exists as the material embodiment of a set of struggles for social justice within the context of Thatcherism that has become a reference point for many interested in what Hodkinson has called, following Engels' polemic in 1872, 'the return of the housing question'.<sup>7</sup> As well as an important set of theoretical reflections on the usefulness of the commons, drawn from autonomist and feminist Marxism within this context, he also cites the formation of WECH as an important example of how commons or 'housing-as-commons' (p29) might be created. The history of this group is linked by geographical and symbolic proximity to the struggles of the Grenfell Action Group, a stone's throw away, and their attempts to achieve social justice and accountability for the horrific fire that destroyed the Grenfell Tower in West London and decimated the community on 14 June 2017. WECH exists as one example of what is possible although foreclosed and thwarted by current governmental responses. Unlike the survivors, and those whose lives were tragically taken in the Grenfell fire, WECH stands as a beacon of hope reminding us of what *was* and *is* possible beyond the devastation and neglect symbolised by the charred remains of the tower. Both exist materially, symbolically, politically and affectively shaping a particular area of West London, speaking to each other across shared geographies and histories.

In the next section I will focus specifically on the Walterton and Elgin Action Group (WEAG), the tenant activist group who were behind the formation of WECH, one of whom was my grandmother, Irene Blackman. Aged seventy-five at the start of the campaign, she played an important part in the struggles and was chair of WECH from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. The article will add to the already existing debates that have identified WECH as an important example of a sustainable and successful alternative to the housing question.<sup>8</sup> I will focus more specifically on the composition of the activist group that brought together poor white working-class, Irish and West-Indian migrants, the latter who are now known importantly as part of the Windrush generation. They came together to form a housing commons in inventive ways, becoming entangled with and enabled by the mobilisation of personal histories, feelings and sentiment, politics, art, bodies, law, and imaginative civic actions that forged relations of mutual dependence and interdependence between activists, key artists, journalists, documentary film-makers, architects, politicians, some public officials and others. I will

7. Stuart Hodkinson, 'The Return of the Housing Question: the commons and their im/possibilities', *Ephemera: theory and politics in organization*. 12, 4, 2016, pp423-444. (Hereafter *Return of the Housing Question*).

8. Bradley Quintin, *The Tenants Movement: Residents involvement, community action and the contentious politics of housing*, London and New York, Routledge. 2014.

9. <https://www.philipwolmuth.com/>

10. For example, Rebecca Bramall, 'Introduction: The Future of Austerity', *New Formations*, 87, 2016, pp1-10; Rebecca Coleman, 'Austerity Futures: Debt, Temporality and (Hopeful) Pessimism as an Austerity Mood', *New Formations*, 87, 2016, pp83-101; Rebecca Coleman and Richard Tutton, 'Introduction of Special issue of The Sociological Review on "Futures in Question: Theories, Methods, Practices"', *The Sociological Review*, 65, 3, 2017, pp440-447.

11. Peter Watt and Anna Minton, 'London's Housing Crisis and its Activisms', *City*, 20:2, 2016, pp204-221. (Hereafter *London's Housing Crisis*).

12. Kirsteen Paton, *Gentrification: A working class perspective*, 2014, Farnham, Ashgate; Loretta Lees, Tom Slater and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification*, New York, Routledge, 2013; Lisa McKenzie, 'The rich, the rich, we've got to get rid of the rich', *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 29, 2017; Lisa McKenzie, 'Stuck in their ways: how we blame the poor for their failure to embrace globalization', *Democratic Audit UK*, 2017, <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2017/06/15/stuck-in-their-ways-how-we-blame-the-poor-for-their-failure-to-embrace->

bring this history into the present through combining elements of my own intergenerational history related to the campaign with an analysis of some of the official archives and documentation of the struggle.

The analysis will move across official archives which have documented the scandal that the action group were responding to, including legal reports, newspaper articles, public-interest inquiries and television documentaries, while at the same time foregrounding those archives that document the actions of the tenant activists and allies whose efforts mainly exist in a half-forgotten and submerged form. My aim is to highlight what often becomes displaced within official archives, and through regimes of visibility that displace and occlude these relations of care and interdependence. I put what is missing from the official archives back into circulation through a form of storytelling that works hauntologically, moving across traces of archives that are almost or half-forgotten, 'under the radar' personal and family memories (particularly those which are half-formed), and images from the photojournalist Philip Wolmuth's moving photo documentation of the struggle.<sup>9</sup>

Within the context of London's current housing crisis and the Grenfell fire tragedy, the traces of these histories, stories, contexts and models for living have become available for inspection, pointing towards disqualified, displaced or foreclosed histories. The archival research is therefore also linked to recent work on sociologies of the future,<sup>10</sup> which focuses on the importance of imagining alternative futures at a time when often it feels like there is little or no hope. As well as imagining alternative futures, I will argue that re-moving archives of past events within the present will also help us to see why so much remains the same. Why often within the context of particular controversies we are stuck with 'business as usual', or what some commentators within the context of London's housing crisis have called 'housing business as usual'.<sup>11</sup>

The analysis will also add to important scholarship exploring contemporary forms of housing activism within the context of gentrification and displacement.<sup>12</sup> WECH is an important part of histories of class and housing activism in the UK that has been noted in studies of architecture,<sup>13</sup> and housing and law.<sup>14</sup> The history is a salutary tale of what is possible when people who are dependent on state provision for welfare and housing come together to effect change and fight what Mary McIntosh<sup>15</sup> has called the indignity of welfare dependence when cast through notions of moral failure and inadequacy.

The story of WECH that I will partially tell in this article also contributes to important work on gentrification and displacement that particularly focuses on what are sometimes cast as the more psychosocial or affective dimensions of community formation and activism.<sup>16</sup> It speaks to the urgency and importance of retaining, cultivating and supporting communities, and imagining alternative housing models and models of sociality that exceed or challenge neoliberal notions of autonomous selfhood. Without

rendering visible what has become submerged and half-forgotten, we will not adequately understand the dynamics and practices that led to change and the inauguration of WECH as an example of a housing-in-commons, or what I will go on to call an example of a ‘commons-through-difference’.

One aim of this article is therefore to help researchers, activists, academics and allies within the media to proliferate visibilities to counter the usual stories and cultural imaginaries related to social housing; including what are framed as problems with welfare dependency and immigration, and the media obsession with ‘poverty porn’ or the ‘myth of meritocracy’.<sup>17</sup> This leads to a normalisation of precarity that Harris and Nowicki define as the making and entrenchment of a ‘new normal’.<sup>18</sup> They go on to highlight that we need competing imaginaries to help counter this normalisation. This countering of what has become common sense, replacing it with what I term a new *commons* sense, is crucial for imagining futures different to now.

## WECH

As we have seen, WECH is considered by many to be an important example of anti-capitalist housing activism, which created an alternative to the privatisation of housing and rapid gentrification in metropolitan cities such as London. The campaign was led by tenant activists who came together to form the Walthamton and Elgin Action Group (WEAG). They challenged and exposed what became known as the ‘homes for votes’ scandal. The scandal concerned the actions of the Conservative Westminster council, London during the late 1980s and early 1990s, who were selling off council housing in order to influence voting and, specifically, to increase Conservative voters following their narrow majority in the 1986 council elections. This was a cynical practice that became known as gerrymandering. The successful activist campaign exposed these practices and resulted in the establishment of a community-owned and resident-led form of housing in West London: Walthamton and Elgin Community Housing (WECH). Westminster council transferred council housing stock to WECH, the land and properties became owned by WECH, and the council were also forced to transfer a dowry of £22 million. This was used by WECH to help support the refurbishment and renovation of the dilapidated properties.

The Walthamton and Elgin Action Group used a change to housing policy and law introduced by Thatcher’s government, and imaginatively and inventively worked it ‘against the grain’. So-called ‘tenants’ choice’ was designed to privatise council housing, introducing market principles into the system to facilitate ‘new landlords’, increasing choice and thus enabling private housing developers to manage and own council properties. This practice was orchestrated off the back of Thatcher’s ‘right-to-buy’ scheme. WEAG creatively saw the opportunity to set themselves up as community landlords to take advantage of this new law.<sup>19</sup> As Hodkinson argues:

globalisation/; Lisa McKenzie, *Getting by: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2015.

13. Christopher Holmes, *A New Vision for Housing*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006.

14. Brian Lund, *Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: Power, Planning and Protest*, Oxford, Polity Press, 2016; Jonathan Rosenberg, ‘Social housing, community empowerment and well-being: part two – measuring the benefits of empowerment through community ownership’, *Housing, Care and Support*, 15, 1, 2012, pp24-33; Jonathan Rosenberg, ‘Social housing, community empowerment and well-being: part one – empowerment practice in social housing’, *Housing, Care and Support*, 14, 4, 2011, pp113-122.

15. Mary McIntosh, ‘Dependency Culture: Welfare, women and work’, *Radical Philosophy*, 091, 1988.

16. For example, Gavin Brown and Jenny Pickerill (eds), ‘Editorial: Activism and Emotional Sustainability’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2, 1, 2009, pp1-3; Dave Studdert and Valerie Walkerdine, ‘Being in Community: re-visioning Sociology’, *The Sociological Review*, 64, 4, 2016, pp613-621; Valerie Walkerdine, ‘Affective History,

Working-class communities, and self-determination', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 64, 2016, pp 699-714; Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community after De-industrialisation: A Psychosocial Approach to Affect*, London and New York, Palgrave, 2012.

17. For example, Tracey Jensen, 'Welfare commonsense, poverty porn and doxosophy', *Sociological Research Online*, 19, 3, 2014 p3, DOI: 10.5153/sro.3441; Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler, 'Benefits Broods: the cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense', *Critical Social Policy*, 35.4, 2015, pp470-491; Jo Little, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and (Myths) of Mobility*, London and New York, Routledge 2017.

18. Emma Harris and Mel Nowicki (eds), 'Cultural Geographies of Precarity', *Cultural Geographies*, 25, 3, 2018, pp387-391.

19. Andrew Hosken, *Nothing Like a Dame: The Scandals of Shirley Porter*, London, Granta Books, 2007; Brian Lund, *Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: Power, Planning and Protest*, Oxford, Polity Press, 2016.

20. <https://www.channel4.com/news/could-kensington-tenants-run-their-own-homes>

In 1988, WEAG decided to use the government's privatisation legislation against itself in order to transfer ownership of the estates to the community, and pre-empt the sell-off to private developers, and in April 1992 the residents of Waltherton and Elgin Estates took over ownership and control of 921 homes under a resident-controlled housing association. (*Return of the Housing Question*, p32).

The homes-for-votes scandal and the WEAG campaign hover at the edges of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in the present, making links across shared geographies and histories, particularly of displacement and suffering, as well as community activism and politics. In a recent *Channel Four* news item within the context of the Grenfell tragedy there is a brief interview with Jonathan Rosenberg, the current chair and one of the founding members of WECH. The title of the piece is 'Could Kensington tenants run their own homes?'.<sup>20</sup> The news item explores the campaigns against North Kensington council and the tenant management organisation (TMO) by the Grenfell survivors, and their concerns about how social housing is run in the borough. The residents in the piece say the tragedy provides an opportunity for them to take the management of their homes into their own hands. The question posed by councillors and tenant activists from the Grenfell Action Group is what kind of housing arrangement should replace the TMO? The activists demand a resident-led, resident-centred model and invoke WECH 'just a stone's throw away' as a good example of what is possible and 'can be done'. The brief interview, accompanied by images from the WECH campaign, reveal that a two-bedroom property with WECH is rented for £80 a week; as the journalist exclaims, 'yes, you have heard right, £80 per week'. As Rosenberg responds: 'There is absolutely no reason why it can't be done'.

## SHERRYMANDERING

It is an unbearably hot evening and I am waiting for my aunt in London, W12, at the Playground Theatre to see the play *Sherrymander* by Gregory Evans. The play was originally documented for radio by Evans based on a book written by Andrew Hosken in 2007 called *Nothing Like a Dame: The Scandals of Shirley Porter*. I am there with my aunt as the homes-for-votes scandal has taken on a particular place within our family history. I have just walked from Latimer Road station, the nearest underground, past the charred ruins of Grenfell Tower and the signs and symptoms of unbearable loss and devastation, as well as hope and love, which populate windows, railings, phone boxes, balconies and pavements. The Playground Theatre is showing the play *Sherrymander* in the proximity of Grenfell Tower and the communities who lived, love and organise in relation to the disaster. It is described as follows: 'London is in the midst of a housing crisis. Properties stand empty while homelessness soars. Close-knit communities are destroyed for profit. Local councils are

accused of “social cleansing”, as families are evicted and forced to move away or into unsafe accommodation while affordable homes are sold as investment properties’.<sup>21</sup>

A review of the play in *The Guardian* comes under the headline ‘A timely retelling of a Chilling Tory Scandal’, a case which the journalist Michael Billington also describes as ‘half-forgotten’.<sup>22</sup> This could, of course, be Grenfell Tower and the present, but it refers to a story and scandal that haunts this disaster. The metonymic link between the half-forgotten story of a previous social housing scandal and a contemporary housing disaster that hangs as a spectre over the present is explicitly made in the framing and the play itself. The half-forgotten scandal was itself formed through semi-secret Conservative council policies that were to be later exposed for the political fraud they were.

The broader context for the half-forgotten story concerns the ‘Westminster cash-for-homes’ scandal in the 1980s as outlined in the introduction. This scandal referred to attempts by Westminster council to sell off council homes to private developers (attempting to sell-off up to 10,000 council homes). One estate that was being secretly tendered to private developers as part of this practice was the Walerton and Elgin Estate, W9, which my grandmother lived on. Jonathan Rosenberg,<sup>23</sup> who had lived on the estate since 1979, got wind of this and as he recalls:

One day, in September 1985, I got a call from a councillor who said, ‘I’ve just got the housing committee papers and in five days’ time there’s a report on Walerton and Elgin, item 20, to knock down and sell off the estates’. So I went out and ran round the estates like a lunatic for five days. I organised a petition and three coaches and we went down to the committee meeting. Westminster council had never seen anything like it before, they were shocked. It descended into chaos, the police were called and the campaign started from there.<sup>24</sup>

My grandmother was a Labour-voting tenant who lived on the estate in a council flat with her daughter and husband, who was also a Labour councillor for Paddington North. I lived with my grandmother briefly in 1987 when I moved to London. I would be greeted at her flat in Fernhead Road with a sheet hanging out the first-floor window proclaiming, ‘We Shall Not be Moved’.

Although the play was written by Gregory Evans originally as a Radio Four play, first broadcast on 27 November 2009, it has taken on an afterlife in the context of the Grenfell disaster. It was performed as a commentary and response to Grenfell, bringing the past into the present, making important metonymic links between both scandals. In the queue for the toilets during the intermission, I meet a woman who is clearly shocked and wants to talk. I ask her if she has a personal connection to the story, which concerns the actions of Dame Shirley Porter, the then Conservative leader of Westminster council. The practice of selling off council homes to private developers was found to be unlawful by the

21. <https://theplaygroundtheatre.london/events/shirleymander/>

22. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/may/27/shirleymander-review-gregory-evans>

23. Central to this story are the actions and foresight of Jonathan Rosenberg who is the board chair of WECH and founding member, <http://www.farnerer.org/2017/02/walerton-and-elgin-community-homes-jonathan-rosenberg/>

24. Although the actions and foresight of Jonathan Rosenberg are hugely important to the foundation of WECH, I am also concerned to retain the voices of the members of the Walerton and Elgin Action Group who made these actions possible and are in danger of being written out of the story as it becomes documented in different ways. Many of these include elderly residents who are no longer alive. Some of the residents’ stories were documented in a publication by WECH, *Ten Years of Resident Control 1992-2002*, which has photographs and stories of some of the residents, including my grandmother. <http://wech.co.uk/images/pdf/Ten-Years-of-Resident-Control.pdf>



Image 1.  
Fernhead  
Road, W9.  
(Photograph:  
Philip Wolmuth)



25. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2002/apr/10/guardiansociety-supplement3> (Hereafter *The Guardian* 10.4.02).

Image 2.  
Chantry Point.  
(Photograph:  
Philip Wolmuth)



courts in 1997, where she was ordered to pay back £27 million, including a sum of uncollected rent. This is a sum that as yet still remains uncollected.<sup>25</sup> The ‘secret policy’ that Dame Shirley Porter and others of her collaborators were enacting was ironically and fugitively known as ‘building stable communities’. The woman I speak to ‘was there’, she told me. She ‘knew’ what was going on and did nothing. When I ask her what she is referring to she tells me she was a social worker for Westminster council and her ‘clients’ were ‘in the towers’. They (the council) knew that there was dangerous asbestos and they were left there. They were lied to, neglected and nothing was done.

The towers that she was referring to were called Hermes Point and Chantry Point off Chippenham Road near Elgin Avenue, part of the Walterton Estate. The Walterton Estate is made up of a series of roads in London, W9, including Walterton Road, Fernhead Road and houses on the west end of Elgin Avenue and Chippenham Road north of Harrow Road. The estate has an interesting history made up of houses built in the 1860s to 1885. The estate was purchased by the London County Council (LCC) in 1953. It was run-down, lots of the houses became derelict and many were squatted during the 1970s. Squatters included Joe Strummer of *The Clash*, who at the time was in a band called *The 101ers*, named after the squat he lived in at 101 Walterton Road.

Those that were inhabited by council tenants suffered from a lack of basic amenities, including bathrooms and heating in a dilapidated condition. The social history of the area is linked to the Windrush generation and a large Irish diaspora of immigrants. They shared conditions, including being greeted by signs in windows proclaiming, ‘No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs’. What remains of this diverse history in terms of the branding of the area is a tale of ‘punk and protest’, with a feature in *The London Magazine* detailing the histories of punk squatting and the formation of WECH as part of the cache which has attracted celebrities to the area, such as Noel Gallagher and Ed Sheeran.<sup>26</sup>

The towers were built in 1968 by the Greater London Council (GLC) and were considered groundbreaking at the time, but had been poorly maintained and left to rot. The towers were riddled with dangerous asbestos that was not contained and was circulating through the heating system. It was not airtight, although Westminster council denied this. A BBC *Newsroom South East* programme filmed the asbestos and the safe demolition of the towers in 1995, and made a half-hour documentary focusing on the scandal and Westminster council. The scandal was also the subject of a 1994 *Independent* newspaper report with the headline, ‘Inquiry into Homes “riddled” with asbestos: Homeless moved into dangerous tower blocks.’<sup>27</sup> The archives assembled in the report exist on the Radio Four *Today* programme website and make damning reading.<sup>28</sup> Prior to this, there were two *Panorama* exposés in 1989 and 1994 exploring the homes-for-votes scandal.<sup>29</sup> The Labour party also accused the BBC of attempting to suppress the stories.<sup>30</sup>

The towers, fraud and the asbestos were exposed, but only after a long campaign involving, among others, politicians, journalists, senior councillors such as John Barratt (who had previously exposed paedophile scandals in Hackney and Lambeth councils), district auditor John Magill, and a Master’s student, Graham Farrant, who had written a thesis on the potential asbestos in the towers;<sup>31</sup> Farrant also worked for Westminster housing department. This was at a time when homeless people were being moved into the tower blocks. All of these actors, agencies and the various reports that were made existed as a distributed form of perception that eventually allowed a public to ‘see’ what various politicians, councillors and others tried to keep hidden. The traces of the underhand deals and fraud became assembled as part of an archive that allowed this story to be told by journalists and others to expose what was happening. These are the forms of visibility that are part of the official archives which illustrate the collective effort, imagination, determination and labour that was needed to bring this into public consciousness.

The archive of materials referred to above became the subject of two *Panorama* documentaries in 1989 and 1994, exposing the lies, dishonesty, underhand dealings and corporate irresponsibility that the towers symbolised and materialised. As the archival report cached on the Radio Four website (*ibid.*) makes clear, the decision to place homeless families in the blocks when Westminster council knew about the asbestos was: ‘taken, not for genuine

26. <http://www.thelondonmagazine.co.uk/people-places/area-guides/ionic-streets-elgin-avenue.html>

27. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/inquiry-into-homes-riddled-with-asbestos-homeless-moved-into-dangerous-tower-blocks-1382747.html>

28. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/politics/hoskendocuments.shtml> (Hereafter *Today*).

29. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/programme\\_updates/1711245.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/programme_updates/1711245.stm)

30. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/bbc-accused-of-suppressing-programme-simon-midgley-on-anger-over-a-panorama-report-on-the-1372315.html>

31. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/politics/images/dissertation1.gif>

32. <http://www.britishasbestosnewsletter.org/ban26.htm>

33. [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFijnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Barry\\_Legg.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFijnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Barry_Legg.html)

34. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/may/06/conservatives.housing>

35. [image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2004/02/04/Westminster.doc](http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2004/02/04/Westminster.doc)

housing reasons, but rather for the “improper purpose” of *fighting a group of local campaigners in the Paddington area of London*’ (my emphasis). Nothing else is said about the local campaigners, but the report makes clear that homeless people had been used as pawns in a political game. Barratt said that senior officers of the council had been trapped into ‘defending the indefensible’. His report said that people’s health had been placed at risk (*ibid*). The scandal was also documented in the *British Asbestos newsletter* issue 26, Winter 1996/97.<sup>32</sup> In another newspaper report published in *The Guardian* in 2006, the explicit focus is on the then chief executive of the Conservative party, Barry Legg, who the article alleged had played a key role in the scandal.<sup>33</sup> He worked with Dame Shirley Porter to engineer votes through gerrymandering and also ‘bore direct responsibility (for) putting more than 200 tenants in two high rise blocks, Hermes and Chantry Point, which were known to be full of asbestos, for seven years’.<sup>34</sup>

As a result of the campaign and exposé, John Magill, a public auditor, was commissioned to write a public-interest report in 2004, which has been cached in an archive by *The Guardian*.<sup>35</sup> It too makes for horrifying yet familiar reading.

WECH inherited the empty blocks in 1993 and safely demolished them in 1995.

## JIGGERY-POKERY

I will now turn to the local group of campaigners who only get a brief and passing mention across the various archival reports that have formed the basis of the previous analysis. They exist in a submerged and half-forgotten form although they return in sympathetic reports by journalists, particularly in an important *Guardian* article celebrating WECH’s ten-year anniversary in 2002 (*The Guardian* 10.4.02). The action group appear largely as an absent-presence within the play *Sherrylander*, referred to briefly and appearing at the end of



Image 3. WEAG campaigners. (Photograph: Philip Wolmuth)

the play in a series of photographs taken during the WEAG campaign, many of them should be the people whom my aunt and I immediately recognised.

To redress the balance and centre the action group, the following analysis draws from a WEAG documentary, *Against the Odds* (1988),<sup>36</sup> which charts the struggles of members of the Waltherton and Elgin Action Group against the sell-off of their council homes in the 1980s by the Conservative Westminster council.<sup>37</sup> It was filmed by an unknown person(s) and directed by an unknown and uncredited person. These omissions perhaps reveal that this was a collective, community-building effort and exercise that carries what is displaced by the official documentation and archives of the scandal and events. This section is called 'jiggery-pokery' as it refers to a song that forms the backdrop to the documentary.<sup>38</sup> The definition of jiggery-pokery refers to behaviour that involves tricking people and engaging in acts of dishonesty.

The documentary's second scene opens with what the running title refers to as a 'man with a problem'. The man, who we discover is a private developer, is on the phone speaking to an unknown person about the seventy people who have arrived at his office from WEAG without invitation and are refusing to leave. Somebody from the action group films the phone conversation, while the man who is the subject of the filming gives an anxious running commentary on this practice to his interlocutor. The next scenes identify some of the key protagonists associated with Westminster council, including councillors and housing developers, who as the documentary suggests are carving up Westminster council homes for sale to private developers. Rather than repairing and maintaining properties, the council were running them down to dereliction, demoralising tenants, and then selling the properties and land to private developers. As a shot of a graphic poster stuck to the door of a seemingly derelict council home with a big red cross and a black background proclaims, 'Westminster is Selling off this Home: Where are your Children Going to Live?'

36. Our Homes are Not for Sale <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4cc2b797eb766>

37. Initially to Regalian Properties PLC, who later pulled out due to pressure and direct action from WEAG.

38. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrQHhBX0Toc>



*Image 4.  
Boarded-up  
houses on  
Waltherton  
Avenue, W9.  
(Photograph:  
Philip Wolmuth)*

In the footage, a black tenant on the Mozart Estate (London, W10), also subject to gerrymandering practices, challenges an argument made by John Wheeler, a Conservative Westminster councillor. Wheeler suggests that this is a policy that will benefit so-called ‘ordinary people’:

What ordinary people of Westminster? Take St Mary’s hospital, they knocked that down. Now they are talking about building £300,000 luxury flats. Who in Paddington has got that kind of money? They probably wouldn’t be living in Paddington if they had that kind of money ... the places that they are building are not for people living in Westminster, or for people living in Paddington, it’s for anybody who’s got the money, that’s it.

Sarah Schulman, in her memoir *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a lost Imagination*,<sup>39</sup> uses the concept of gentrification not just in relation to the brutalising and indiscriminate transformation of neighbourhoods and communities as a result of gentrification, but also in the context of those histories which are heard in the present; who gets to tell their stories and who becomes disqualified and disavowed, existing perhaps in shared traumas that become foreclosed historically and socially. As she has argued, gentrification is a brutal process that replaces difference with sameness; she suggests that it replaces diversity (of communities, for example) with homogenisation. It is a ‘concrete replacement process’ (p14) that erases complexity, difference and dynamic dialogic action, replacing it with sameness. It is a process which results in less diversity and an amnesiac memory of the past and the present; what she astutely terms a gentrification of the mind.

So, who were the WEAG campaigners? There is little to nothing about them in the official reports other than being referred to as a group of local campaigners, or if we are to believe the story that the Westminster Conservative council of the time peddled, that they were a violent group

39. Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2012. (Hereafter, *Gentrification of the Mind*).



Image 5. WEAG campaigners. (Photograph: Philip Wolmuth)

who were militant-run, infiltrated by the far left of the Labour party. In this context, the Waltham and Elgin Action Group, and their actions and collective resistance, remind us of what gentrification of both an area and of the mind attempts to erase in terms of memory, consciousness and how, who and what gets remembered. In terms of the action group, analysing the ‘under the radar’ history of their struggle allows us to see how a diverse community was forged through cultivating interdependent bonds of support, solidarity and care to live together in relations of mutual dependence; what I call a *commons* sense. This was not about a homogenous community coming together, but rather the composition and creation of new bonds of solidarity, a form of what Hodgkinson has called both creation and resistance, in order to shape what Berlant terms a ‘commonality through difference’ (*The Commons*, p394). As we will go on to see, the members of the group were mainly elderly pensioners and a range of tenants reflective of the history of the area brought together through migrancy, poverty and welfare dependence.

What is also significant about WEAG is that its story was documented as it happened through photography, video technology, political art and posters, journalism, music and song, as well as through direct action, protest and other inventive civic actions, including acquiring knowledge of legal loopholes such as ‘tenants’ choice’. Rather than violence, the group engaged in creative and critical strategies that were inventive and effective in exposing the lies and fraud that the homes-for-votes scandal carried. As well as the protestors, there were important creative and political alliances drawn between the photographer and photojournalist Peter Wolmuth, the artist, photographer and printmaker John Philips, and an as-yet unknown and uncredited person or people who filmed the protests. There was an iconic poster, designed by John Philips of The London Print Studio that is now part of the V and A collection in London. I also have one of the few existing copies that was in an art gallery in New York. I am unable to reproduce the image due to copyright reasons but there is an interesting Guardian article interviewing John Philips about the Print Studio and the campaign with its focus on creative community collaboration. The article also has an image of the poster, entitled ‘We are a little worried about our landlord’ (see also, image 8).<sup>40</sup> As Philips recounts:

The Printstudio happened to be located on this estate, which comprised approximately 1,000 housing units. A tenants’ delegation arrived at our door. Could we make a poster suggesting that this was a bad idea? We did! During the next four years, the Printstudio *produced thousands of postcards and billboard-sized posters* supporting the tenants’ cause. Successive development companies shied away from a scheme which was so vehemently opposed by the residents.<sup>41</sup>

There are parallels to be drawn with the role that video technology, art installations, direct action and practices (such as the quilt project) played in

40. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/sep/23/organise-to-resist-the-radical-posters-of-the-paddington-printshop>

41. John Philips, ‘Transforming Print: Key issues affecting the development of the London print studio’. A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Brighton for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, March, 2005, p133. <http://johnphillips.media/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/TransPrintText.pdf>

activist movements, such as ActUp (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) in the USA and Europe during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, ActUp mediated protests that took the private anguish of dying individuals (from HIV and Aids) on to the streets, to the broadcast media and into people's homes; to the Bush administration, and the insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Different forms of media, including DIY video technology of the time, were used to mediate collective action against governments and pharmaceutical companies. The alternative media of the time and its circulation within particular networks act as an interesting precursor to YouTube and social media (and the uploading of documentaries, video-diaries etc.). These media carried feeling, passion, imagination, longing, anguish and hope, as well as being embedded and circulating within social and media networks. Although it is not clear whether WEAG were aware of ActUp and its strategies of collective resistance, there are interesting parallels to be drawn. There are certainly histories of community activism at that time that also used video technologies as part of protest and civic actions. This has become known as the community video movement, which was popular in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>42</sup>

42. see The London Community Video Archive, created by video activists Professor Tony Downum and Andy Porter: <http://www.the-lcva.co.uk/items?splash=true>

Due to the foresight of WEAG and their understanding of how important it was to intervene within the story that the council were attempting to tell about their actions, and to document their actions and protest for broadcast media, they used the media technology of the time to stage events for a wider public. This includes thousands of posters and cards produced by the London Print Studio, as well as the photographs of the photojournalist Philip



*Image 6. WEAG campaigners. (Photograph: Philip Wolmuth)*



Image 7. WEAG campaigners. .  
(Photograph: Philip Wolmuth)

Wolmuth [some of which are reproduced within this article). These creative and collaborative alliances helped to actively intervene and mediate both its sense and the senselessness of the Westminster council's actions.

The WECH archive and my attempts to re-move its prescience for the future helps to codify and reflect on the emergence of housing practices that have literally gone on to transform cities such as London, opening housing up to finance capitalism and foreign investors,<sup>43</sup> while increasing homelessness and radically decreasing opportunities for affordable social housing. What we have in many cases are the removal and eradication of diverse communities and the histories of migration, poverty and displacement that helped to shape them. What is often left behind as traces of the past are facades (literally simulations, sham illusions or poses); just a frontage of a building with a gesture to the heritage of the communities and histories who once shaped areas, often with the actual communities now removed and missing.<sup>44</sup> The façade, or what has become known as *facadism*,<sup>45</sup> has become part of a complex set of administrative practices that replace accountability and responsibility of those in power to affected communities and instead move issues into the realm of PR, branding, simulation and displacement.

However, and perhaps unsurprisingly, these administrative practices of jiggery-pokery, PR and branding can be found in the earlier histories of dishonesty, workarounds and underhand manipulation and dismissal that the WEAG exposed. The group were subject to some of the tactics of politicians and the affective economy of lies, deceit and deception that circumscribed their practices. To return to the documentary *Against the Odds*, which opened this section, the discourse of gentrification mobilised by the affected council tenants as an explanation of what was happening to them is reframed by the Westminster councillors as a problem of brainwashing by the far left

43. see <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Global-Brief-2-International-Capital-Flows-into-London-Property.pdf>

44. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/20/grenfell-tower-facade-dangerous-government-facade>

45. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facadism>



who have supposedly infiltrated the Labour party. The reversal of who is the perpetrator and victim, and the use of blame-shifting and deflection, are common communication strategies used in all kinds of abuse tactics now commonly known as gaslighting. An example of the egregious use of this tactic is recounted in the following exchange between an affected council tenant, who says that, 'she would like to stay around here but if it comes to buying all the time I couldn't buy and my mum couldn't buy ... so we don't know where we would be'. The interviewer relays her concerns to Westminster council, where they are dismissed as an example of somebody who has been brainwashed by the far left.

Interviewer: 'Do you think that Westminster council has any responsibility to council tenants?'

Affected council tenant: 'No, no responsibility otherwise they wouldn't put the designated sales on the flats. If they had a responsibility they wouldn't do that'.

Interviewer: 'Where do you think their responsibilities are then?'

Affected council tenant: 'Well it will be to business people that will be able to use these as town flats when they are in London during the week for work where they have got their place in the country for the weekend'.

Interviewer: 'Does it make you fear for the future?'

Affected council tenant: 'Well it will end up all posh, to-do and everything, and people like us, ordinary people, we won't fit in here anymore. We're be moved on somewhere else'.

Councillor 1: 'That lady who spoke to you has absolutely nothing to fear. If she doesn't wish to buy then we're delighted for her to remain a council house tenant for as long as she wants to. If she wants to buy then she will get all the help and facilities here that we can give to make her a homeowner'.

Councillor 2: 'Well of course she has fears as she has been told lies and misinformation by those who have a vested interest in confusing that lady. I think that is a very wicked thing to have done'.

Councillor 1: 'Let's make it absolutely clear, our opponents are those from the far left of the Labour party. They are militant-run, they are far left infiltrated and they are creating the often violent reaction that appals most reasonable elected councillors in Westminster and other boroughs. Including Mr Kinnock who ought to come down here to see how his cohorts behave in the council chamber and out on the streets'.



*Image 8. WEAG campaign posters stuck to a wall.*

## ON THE ROAD

Being involved is a way of life. (Member of WEAG).

We're all in charge of this situation, all of us. (Member of WEAG speaking to a policeman).

One of those militant members of the cohort behaving badly in the council chambers and out on the streets was my grandmother. Aged seventy-five at the start of the campaign, she took to the streets with a diverse group of residents, including a significant number of other older pensioners.

I remember my grandmother telling me how she had once been escorted by the police from a council chamber for behaving badly and causing a nuisance. She wore this as a badge of honour. The story is also recalled by Irene in *The Guardian* article, published in 2002, 'Home Rule', that marked the tenth anniversary of the formation of WECH:

The action group spent years disrupting council meetings and pouring unannounced into the offices of prospective buyers to argue their case, usually with musicians and video cameras in tow. The memories are relished by 85-year-old Irene Blackman, the longest-serving Wech board member, who has lived in the north Paddington area of the borough since 1936. 'I can't help laughing when I think about it now,' she says. 'We'd pile into these coaches and go to different places and make a right nuisance. I almost got arrested one night at a meeting. A policewoman escorted me to the lift'.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *The Guardian*, 10 April, 2002.

As well as taking part in direct action on the streets, WEAG also went on the road, literally, in a coach to take part in protest, direct action and collective

resistance. These actions were staged following a series of letters that the action group sent to private developers who were tendering to buy the Walerton and Elgin Estate. The letters asked them to consider the consequences of their actions. The letters were ignored and left unanswered by the developers. The action group decided that a more effective strategy might be to visit the offices of all the potential private developers en masse, and that is what they did. The documentary *Against the Odds* documents one instance of a coach journey to a developer, where the scene opens with Jonathan Rosenberg speaking to the group through a microphone at the front of the coach. As is clear from shots of the people on the coach, many of the group are retired pensioners. He starts by saying:

We're going to be doing three targets today. The first one is Lovells who are a developer. And they are based in Chiswick. And that's where we are heading now. Now Lovells are one of the four developers left who are interested in the Walerton and Elgin PMI barter deal, the sell-off deal that is going on. As you know we already knocked out Regalian so that means there are only four left. So that's our first target, Lovells in Chiswick.

The next shot is one of the coach party, headed up by my grandmother and another woman framed in the background by a placard proclaiming, 'We have the right to defend our homes'. Other placards include: 'No Convictions, No Evictions, Housing for All'; 'Westminster Council is Selling off this Home'; 'We are worried about our Landlord'; '400 homes sealed and kept empty'. We then see shots of the party entering the offices of the private developer Lovells, carrying different placards and political posters, while at the same time we hear Jonathan Rosenberg continuing to speak to the group on the coach readying them for action. He says:

On these series of raids this afternoon we would like to have a rapid deployment force. Because if you think about it there's no good just going into the office, right, and having a sort of static demo, we want to do what we managed to do at the last one, which was send detachments of people running through the offices handing out leaflets, so I think that is particularly appropriate for the younger people as there is a lot of charging up and down stairs and running round offices.

The next shot is of Jonathan Rosenberg asking the receptionist at Lovells' offices if they can see one of the managing directors and that they are from the Walerton and Elgin Action Group. In this instance the managing directors do meet with the group and, after a conversation accompanied by loud singing by the protesters in the background, the next shot is of a policeman at the side of the coach asking to speak to one person. This is resisted, particularly by an elderly woman sitting at the front of the coach (with no teeth in) who



*Image 9. WEAG campaigners. (Photograph Philip Wolmuth)*

directs the conversation with the policeman who asks her who is in charge and responsible. She responds that they are all in charge of the situation and that they are just defending their homes. They are told that technically they have been trespassing, which is later reframed by the policeman after some cajoling as civil action. The next shot is of another elderly woman on the coach being asked whether two years ago she might have thought of doing something like this? She replies, ‘no way,’ whilst shaking her head. The elderly woman next to her says: ‘They think we are all stupid with this propaganda. We’re not stupid, we are more or less helpless in a way because we haven’t got much influence or much money’. The woman is Olive David, who as a tenant became involved in the campaign at the age of eighty.<sup>47</sup> What she says in a soft voice as she looks out the window is that what they can do together, however, is agitate.

47. <http://wech.co.uk/images/pdf/against-the-odds.pdf>

My grandmother is asked what she thinks of the developers after meeting them. She says: ‘They are just callous, they’ve got no feelings for people in our situation. All they’re interested in is making money’. Another woman says, ‘they’re dreadful people, they’re out to make big profits, aren’t they, at the price of us poor people. We can’t afford to buy’. Another woman says, it’s all about greed and selfishness, saying the ‘whole country is like that, greed, greed, greed’.

## AFFECTIVE POLITICS

The story I have told of the campaign group and the direct action that they engaged in will, I hope, evoke for the reader some of the sentiment, passion, emotion and politics that were mobilised and brought the group together. Rather than accept their assumed powerlessness and disenfranchisement, the

council tenants joined together with lawyers, academics, architects, artists, journalists and Labour politicians to fight the Conservative Westminster council, and won. As one member of the group clearly states, becoming involved became a way of life, and one that moved people to action across the categories of class, gender, race and age, representing perhaps a 'commons-through-difference'. The action group were diverse, reflecting the diverse communities living in Westbourne Park, and specifically on the Walerton and Elgin Estate. As we have seen, many of the group were older tenants, often living on their own, subsisting on state benefits, living like my grandmother in run-down council properties on the estate. Some of the tenants were living with disabilities and chronic health problems. Some of the members of the action group had been placed in short-life housing in council properties on the estate earmarked for demolition or selling off to private developers. The diversity of the community that came together and took form reflected this poor run-down area; young and old, black and white, mainly working class struggling to survive in council housing (permanent and short-life) seemingly disenfranchised and certainly devalued.

Traces of the stories of members of the action group are briefly told in a publication *Against the Odds, Walerton and Elgin from campaign to control* that was published by WECH in 1998. The text was written by Jonathan Rosenberg, now the board chair of WECH and a key existing founding member. One of the original tenants and members of WEAG included a dancer, known as Diana, who was later awarded an MBE. The recorded stories include Josie Matthews, sixty-two at the time, who was living on the estate having been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis some fifteen years previously. She was brought up in the area and had lived in council housing on the estate for some years. As she recounts:

One day a letter came through saying we would all have to be moved out. My neighbour cried. Then a letter arrived from WEAG saying 'don't move, stay where you are'. That gave us a big lift and confidence that we would be ok. What the council did was low. The people round here did not deserve to be treated that way. But they did not get us down.

Other people, 'living round here', included Thomas Montout, sixty-five at the time, originally from St Lucia. As he says, 'if it wasn't for WECH, I wouldn't be here today'. Thomas had lost his job labouring due to sickness and his age. Many members and tenants were first- or second-generation West Indian and Caribbean migrants. First-generation immigrants had often been housed in the area by the notorious landlord, Peter Rachman. Rachman was known for placing working-class and West Indian tenants (often recent immigrants from the Caribbean) in multi-occupancy run-down properties, subdividing houses into rooms and placing families in one room. Those houses that did survive now exist as multi-million pound properties for bankers, politicians



Image 10.  
WEAG  
campaigners.  
(Photograph  
Philip Wolmuth)

and celebrities, sold off by Westminster council as part of the cash-for-homes scandal. WECH in that sense exists as a material reminder of what became possible at that particular historical moment, in the face of the privatisation of council housing and aggressive gentrification, and unscrupulous fraudulent practices by politicians, developers and Conservative councillors.

In the important literature on anti-capitalist housing struggles where WECH is referenced as an example of a commons, and of the broader anti-privatisation movement in relation to social housing, it is clear that there is very little on the actual composition of the Waltherton and Elgin Action Group. I argue that this omission is important as, although the group were militant, the militancy was shared by a diverse group of people who might not usually be associated with militancy and political protest. This includes elderly residents, some of whom were in their seventies or eighties, like my grandmother, who became a key campaigner and spokesperson. They engaged in tactics and strategies that we might usually associate with more youthful (male, left) anarchist movements. In other words, important questions are raised in relation to ‘who makes the commons happen’ and the need to look towards what is often viewed as the minor or the fugitive.<sup>48</sup> In this case, what took form through the diverse comings-together across age, race, class, gender and disability were new forms of relation and solidarity forged through and across difference. These relations challenged Conservative councillors’ and housing developers’ notions of what it might mean to resist and who might take on the challenge(s). Challenging more conservative notions of common sense helped to shape the conditions for a commons-through-difference to take form genuinely and meaningfully. That this took place through staged forms of protest, usually and often filmed and photographed for wider broadcast, also highlights the performative aspects of the struggle.

48. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Studies*, New York, Minor Compositions, 2013.

There is much more to be said about the personal histories of those who were part of the original campaign, including my grandmother's story that will be told in subsequent writing. What I hope is clear from my analysis in this article, and the re-moving or putting back into circulation of what has become submerged and displaced about the composition of the action group, is that more work needs to be done on the more affective and psychosocial aspects of community or communing, beyond assumptions of homogeneity and shared identity, including who and what carries the possibility of new forms of commoning. I have particularly attempted to foreground processes of change and transformation that entangle historical, symbolic, affective, aesthetic, personal, social, technical, governmental, political and legal practices and histories to understand the success and efficacy of the campaign. This mode of attention is part of what I am calling the need for new *historialities* to counter commonsense assumptions about resistance and change.<sup>49</sup> As I hope to have shown in this article, this might include engaging in forms of storytelling that mine archives beyond specific thresholds of visibility and knowledge, paying attention to what has become submerged, half-forgotten or displaced. This includes attending to those imaginaries and visions for the future that can emerge from relations forged across difference within specific contexts of being and becoming.

49. Lisa Blackman, *Haunted Data: Affect, Transmedia, Weird Science*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2019.

#### CONCLUSION: COMMONS-THROUGH-DIFFERENCE

It is striking how much the residents who became involved in this struggle recount how important the collective resistance was to their sense of well-being, health and of being part of a community. As one resident has argued: 'If more places were like WECH there would be more happiness' (WECH resident, survey 2010). Lynne Segal, in her reflections on moments of collective joy and radical happiness, has considered how important 'collective joy' is to the cultivation and formation of community. As she recounts, what is also important in the formation of community is a sense of shared participation, as well as an active engagement with politics and political issues.<sup>50</sup> Residents who were part of the struggles forcefully communicate just what community might become in this context: 'I'll always remain 100 per cent loyal to the action group. It saved our sanity and gave us hope. We were nothing before. Now we feel like solid citizens and can hold our heads up. I've made some wonderful friends. We are not a community. We are the community because we have that one thing in common – WECH!'

50. Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy*, London, Verso, 2017.

In the context of WECH, I have argued that what was foregrounded and became important were the relations of mutual dependence and care that existed, and could be mobilised to stir collective action across categories of race, class, gender, disability and age. These relations existed at the nexus of personal histories, including those of migration, poverty, displacement, social exclusion, homelessness, neglect and discrimination. These histories were

mobilised within an area that had a strong history of community development and activism, and amongst a diverse group of tenants who had shared, yet different, histories of displacement, suffering and struggle, having been forced to live in substandard conditions with little hope for the future. As we have seen, what community is and can mean often becomes more salient when people's existing housing and already precarious ways of living are threatened.

I will conclude this partial story with an image of my grandmother cutting the ribbon on the first former council house refurbished by WECH as it was transferred to community ownership. The photograph clearly illustrates the diversity of the community that came together and took form. They explored in different ways what might be possible once ties of belonging and collective responsibility are acknowledged and actively lived; what I am calling a 'commons-through-difference'. Her actions, as well as the actions of the other residents who came together 'against the odds', demonstrate the importance of coming together inventively and creatively, collaboratively and communally, to shape practices of self and social determination that provide welcome relief from neoliberal notions of autonomous selfhood and the models of sociality they actively displace and exclude.



*Image 11. Irene Blackman. (Photograph Philip Wolmuth)*



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#### DEDICATION:

This article is dedicated to the members of WEAG, those who have sadly died and those still living, and in memory and by way of a tribute to the photojournalist Philip Wolmuth who sadly lost his life to cancer this year. Philip was an important actor within the campaign and followed their struggles for many years. His photographs are an important part of the storytelling in this article. I am particularly grateful to his family, his partner Jane, and daughters, Anna and Eva for allowing me to reproduce some of the photographs from his archive in the article. The archive of his work documenting a range of campaigns and issues over many decades, including images from the London lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic can be found online <https://www.philipwolmuth.com/> as well as his blog <https://philipwolmuth.blogspot.com/2010/> His obituary detailing his life, politics and passions can be read following this link: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/mar/15/philip-wolmuth-obituary>