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The Politics of “Parental Co-Habitation”: Austerity, Household, and the Social Evils of Dependency

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ABSTRACT The household as a social formation is being assigned a renewed function in the provision of social welfare via neoliberal austerity politics. Government inaction regarding housing provision is forcing millions of young adults into “parental co-habitation”. In contrast to the dominant ideological view of the family as a school of liberty through the provision of welfare, this article argues that the dependence of millions of young adults on the parental household is degenerative both for the individual “recipient” and for the future democratic character of the polity. Mobilizing a Neo-Roman analysis of Liberty, I argue that housing policy is promoting the long-term creation of “slaves” as part of a wider strategy of oligarchic domination. The article seeks to articulate an explicitly political theoretical critique of “parental co-habitation” and advocates for directed government action in the area of housing provision to secure the autonomy and independence of a generation otherwise reduced to “slavishness”.

KEY WORDS: Housing, Family, Welfare, Liberty, Neoliberalization, Neo-Roman

It is certainly an open question whether the development of this biopolitical fabric will allow us to build sites of liberation or rather submit us to new forms of subjugation and exploitation. We have to decide here, as the ancients used to say, whether to be free men and women or slaves, and precisely this choice is at the basis of the establishment of democracy today (Hardt and Negri 2005, 285).

Introduction

Over the last several years, we have come to a crossroads in the United Kingdom thrown up by the politics of Austerity and a re-invigorated prosecution of Neoliberalization in the interests of the property-power nexus. Affected profoundly by massive reconfigurations in the global regime of capital accumulation, life in the core states...
is being transformed through new modulations of capitalist Governentality and Disciplinarity in the 21st century “Societies of Control” (Deleuze 1992; Lazzarato 2015). The general election victory for the British Conservatives (2015) promises five more years of so-called National Austerity, the Government’s new Housing and Planning Act (2016) threatens the remaining social housing stock in London and beyond, and the possibility of withdrawal from EU membership promises to bind ever tighter the property-power nexus of City-State Britain.

In the historical articulation of modern capitalism that is Neoliberalism, Austerity has emerged as a response to the crisis in the dominant model of capital accumulation (Overbeek and van Apeldoorn 2012, 3). Specifically it is a politically transformative regime of meta-disciplinary strategies and tactics (Welsh 2016), ensuring, at least in the short to mid-term, the continuity of capital accumulation across the terrain of the capitalist world-system, but in a manner that does not challenge the oligarchic political power structures and the social hegemony of the capitalist class established through the neoliberal period (Harvey 2005). We are dealing here with another instance of the dispossession of individuals through a socio-political technology that effects the productive relations of possession (Poulantzas 2014, 18).

Amidst these historic social forces, the question of Housing as a component of social welfare in our nominally democratic society once more materializes around us, as it does for every generation concerned with its future well-being. As house prices have spiralled away from average income levels, driven up by the buying-to-let of speculator-landlords and the consequent circularity of soaring exchange-values (Sprigings 2008, 77, 86), more and more individuals are deprived of access to the use-value of housing. This is having profound psychosocial effects in the constitution of the family household.

In the current politics of Austerity, the nuclear household has once again been appropriated, discursively and institutionally, to take on a contingent and transformative role in the (re)arrangements of post-welfare capitalism. Specifically, the family household is being mobilized out of a technical social fragment and forged into a strategic technological vertex that offers a range of tactical political possibilities for the deployment of class-power in accord with the imperatives of the emergent post-crisis regime of capital accumulation that is Austerity. Once again, we are dealing with the perennial “capitalist attempt to impose scarcity and dependence as structural conditions of life” (Federici 2004, 115), where such an endeavour, far from being a natural necessity, is rather highly contingent and thus political. A contingent politics of “locally” enforced scarcity (“locality” being taken in the most versatile and figurative sense), in this case regarding the provision of housing, arises strategically as both a periodically acute and structurally chronic “necessity” within the capitalist mode of production so as to establish conditions propitious for the reinitiating of reproductive cycles of capital accumulation, the concomitant extraction of capital surpluses and financialized transfers to dominant social fractions in the form of monopoly-rent (Harvey 1972, 9). The shortage of affordable housing for certain sections of society therefore functions according to an identifiable political Reason, the Reason of capitalist discipline.

However, the aim of Austerity as one strategic set of policies amongst many possible alternatives, is to achieve a transitional “spatio-temporal fix” for the dominant accumulation model of capital undergoing crisis (Harvey 2006, 2010), but where “the spatial organisation of society [is] being restructured to meet the urgent demands of capitalism in crisis – to open up new possibilities for super-profits, to
find new ways to maintain social control” (Soja 2010, 34). Expansion of access to housing options would still contribute to “spatio-temporal fixes” in capitalist society, but would be detrimental to the political dominance of oligarchic fractions that have spent the last 30 years of neoliberal government restoring themselves to that position (Harvey 2006, ix–xxvii). Much better that 3.3 million young people in the British polity, for instance, be reduced to a slavish condition through deprived access to affordable housing, than to pursue reform that would challenge the political economic basis of their class-power.

Our basic problem is how to harness the strategic power of government to put roofs over our heads in a manner properly consistent with democratic principles, regardless of the attempts by dominant social fractions to retard via austerity politics any such development. It is therefore imperative to consider the potential social and political consequences of a failure to do so, and to articulate intellectually the necessary political theoretical arguments for why this is so important and necessary for the future of the democratic polity, in order for others subsequently to contrive purposively motivated and more detailed and concrete formulations in housing policy. This article thus attempts to provide a more intellectual advocacy for decisive government action to make housing more affordable for the citizenry at large, and to make clear the reasons why this is especially desirable beyond the obvious.

What I have to contribute here applies to a very great extent across the capitalist core states generally. As we shall see, the political nature of the social problem that I will analyse in what follows is not confined to the social policy of any single nation or state. We are faced with a much more general ideological battle across the contemporary capitalist world-system that must be fought transnationally with quick feet over a much broader terrain. However, I shall be principally concerned here with the British case, representing as it does the most acute instance of the phenomena under consideration, and it is primarily with the reconfiguration of the British State into a city-state predicated on London as a Global City that I am implicitly concerned. It is a marked feature of the British particularity that the outward “ripple effect” from the housing market of the metropole adversely effects the rest of the state-territory (Cameron, Muellbauer, and Murphy 2006, 23; Sprigings 2013, 18). I shall be exploring elsewhere the socio-historical forces that are constitutive of the especially acute disciplinary transformation of the British State over recent decades, and it is within that agenda that I want to think analytically on one instantiation of those disciplinary social forces. That instantiation is the intensifying problem of affordable housing, and I shall make my more general argument regarding the provision of affordable housing via a treatment of the more particular emergent phenomenon of “parental co-habitation”.

The Social Problem: Hikikomori, Austerity and the Family Household

Firstly, we must set out the psychosocial problem that our critical theory seeks to address. From the outset of The Lost Decade (1991–), a remarkable social phenomenon began to emerge in Japan: Hikikomori. Literally meaning “withdrawal, pulling inward, being confined” (Saito 2013), this descriptive term became applied to young adult individuals who were forced by socio-economic circumstance to return to, or remain in, their family homes where previous generations had been able to acquire the social and material means to live and be housed independently (Furlong 2008; Kremer and Hammond 2013). Prolonged economic depression,
mounting education costs, high real estate prices, wage repression and other “issues related to late capitalism” (Kaneko 2006, 234), combined with exacerbating Japanese cultural specificities, and drove ballooning numbers of young Japanese back into living under the financial and material care of their parents. Due to a particularity of the Japanese family dynamic, this movement commonly resulted in a further “withdrawal” into subspaces within the home (usually bedrooms), where these young people would practically become hermetic recluses (Teo 2012). The effects were devastating, and led to the emergence of the Hikikomori concept as a recognized social problem. One Japanese youth summarized the psychological effects:

“I had all kinds of negative emotions inside me”, he says. “The desire to go outside, anger towards society and my parents, sadness about having this condition, fear about what would happen in the future, and jealousy towards the people who were leading normal lives” (Kremer and Hammond 2013).

Since that time, the phenomenon has not receded. In fact, the only change is that the average age of the Hikikomori seems to have risen over the intervening Two Lost Decades. Before it was 21, now it is 32 (Kremer and Hammond 2013). Since the onset of depression conditions in Europe, an approximation of Hikikomori is being realized in numerous other capitalist core states as the political project of Austerity has been implemented in Europe and the United States. Hikikomori might not be a perfectly accurate analytical label for what is happening elsewhere than Japan, but it is useful as a means of getting a handle on a disconcertingly similar set of developments subject to a historical time delay. So, far from a direct transposition of Hikikomori into a Western context, one ought to think here of the phenomenon in Europe and the US as bearing a striking similarity in its broad strokes and resulting from a similar set of social and historical forces in the neoliberal capitalist world-system. Most importantly, the Hikikomori phenomenon ought to alert us to the probable, though as yet unrealized, psychosocial immiseration building up as a consequence of the political, contingent and strategic regime of Austerity, on the basis of which strategic social policy questions such as housing are being taken in states like the UK.

In January 2014, the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) released data revealing that 26% of British youth aged 20–34 were living at home with their parents as of 2013. This constitutes some 3.3 million individuals across the UK. However, this trend is not a British eccentricity, but is part of a more widespread tendency across the capitalist core states. Spanish youth unemployment in 2014 was at 55%, with just under 50% of 18–29 year-olds now living with their parents (Buck 2014). In Italy the situation is even worse, sparking references to a “Mammone” phenomenon as 66% of Italians aged 18–34 now live directly under their parents’ auspices (Day 2015). Even in the United States, where the regional picture is somewhat varied and where unemployment levels are lower, it is claimed that as many as 36% of 18–31 year olds live with their parents as of 2012 (Fry 2013). This “Parental Co-Habitation” figure is drawn from US Census Bureau data. In the American case, rising education costs is an added causal factor (Shah 2015), but in the more densely populated North East and Californian coasts the cost of housing is still decisive (Davies et al. 2014). These figures admittedly do not communicate anything on the socio-cultural differences in family structure or behavioural proclivity between these various societies or regions, which could of course explain much regarding the
respective levels of parental co-habitation in each case. However, aside from a desire not to fall into easy stereo-typing (Italian “mummy’s-boys” etc.), we shall see from the anecdotes of Maria and Gaia below that the desire for autonomous living independent of parental supervision is a fairly widespread aspiration amongst European and American youth. Even admitting some socio-cultural variation in behaviour or preference patterns, the abstract argument below still stands for a great many individuals throughout the capitalist core.

So, cultural differences, statistics and damn lies aside, it is clear that across the advanced capitalist core states there has been a definite trend toward ever-greater numbers of young adults being forced to live under the personal and financial supervision and suffocating physical proximity of their parents in the family home. This trend has doubtless been intensified by the austerity regimes systematically implemented since 2010, but is also part of a much longer historical narrative in post-welfare neoliberal political economy across Europe and North America entailed by rising student debt burdens (Weissmann 2015), low wage growth (Shah 2015) and insurmountable accommodation costs (Davies et al. 2014; Vespa and Burd, 2014). When it comes to this latter question of the housing market, in the British case “the problems faced by young first time buyers in this market are very clear as prices accelerate away from their low inflation incomes” (Sprigings 2008, 83). From the late-1960s to the end of the century, the ratio of average house price to average income remained around 3.1 throughout the period (Sprigings 2013, 17–18). However, just in the first decade of this century, the ratio of lower quartile house price to lower quartile income levels in England and Wales has risen steadily from 4 (2000), through 5.2 (2003), to 7.1 (2006), reaching as high as 12.1 in some areas of London and persisting since then around a national average of 6 (Chu 2016). Clearly, access to the use-value of housing has been increasingly restricted for many citizens, particularly younger ones, over the last couple of decades.

The common implicit assumption is that these individuals are irresponsible, indolent and inconstant; a predictable behavioural characteristic of the Sunny Delight generation, and that an investigation into more systematic causes is therefore not necessary. However, without even going into more thoughtful arguments to the contrary, this is not born out by the recently released statistics that show how in Britain roughly the same proportion of those living with parents are in full-time employment as those who live independently.\(^3\) Evidently, it is the prohibitive costs of living, in terms of basic utilities, enforced debt burdens and accommodation costs, that are pushing even the fully employed back in with baby-boomer parents (Cumming 2013), whose generation fortuitously cashed in on the post-war rising-tide and then evaded the wage repression of the 1980s-2000s by resort to personal asset price inflation, that is, steadily rising household equity (Panitch and Gindin 2011, 12). In generational terms, we are emphatically not all in the same boat (Reich 1991, 4–5).

The nuclear family household is a fundamental unit in the social matrix of disciplinary control and production that is advanced capitalism. I work from the critical-theoretical assumption that there is no ontological necessity entailed in the family household as a social formation, and that attempting to ground such a claim in the universal, the eternal, or the natural – a typical manoeuvre in patriarchal and conservative discourses (Barrett and McIntosh 2014, 26–29, 33–40) – is profoundly dubious. The family household is rather a historically contingent formation that has coalesced throughout capitalist core states in socially particular and culturally local configurations that are under constant reformation and re-articulation.\(^4\) However,
variation of form is marginal, and the nuclear family household remains a highly stable modulation across the capitalist core.

As has been the case throughout the history of modern capitalism from its early-modern emergence, the household is once again being given what Silvia Federici identified as a “new importance as the key institution providing for the transmission of property and the reproduction of the workforce” alongside its disciplinary role of “supervision of sexuality, procreation and family life” (Federici 2004, 88).

In concrete terms this means that UK government policy is purposively devolving responsibility for the welfare of citizens onto the family household as “the last frontier of welfare” (Quoting La Stampa, Day 2015), via the Austerity politics of a neoliberal capitalism in a “catastrophic equilibrium” of politico-social forces. In The Pinch (2011), David Willetts, as former Conservative Secretary of State variously for Families, Universities, Children, Schools, inter alia, described the post-war nuclear household as “a kind of mini-welfare state”, by which the structured patriarchy implicit in post-war society became inscribed into a political apparatus. This is an apparatus through which “the man’s earnings are transferred to four dependents” as a necessary tactical device that ensures his continued dominance (Willetts 2011, Chap. Two). In various conservative circles this move is actually deemed beneficial to the political and individual well-being of a democratic and prosperous society. This broad policy move is implicitly assumed to spread, promote, secure and deepen the liberty of our citizenry in the long-term through enhancing the individual and moral responsibility of young adults. As we can read in Britain’s Daily Telegraph, housing policies set in broader social policy orientations that do not operate within this assumption thus “risk undermining the traditional family” (which is actually a highly modern innovation of post-war capitalism), thus betraying a “mindset” that is “anti-aspirational” (Telegraph View 2012). It is clear in such conservative discourses that the family household is posited as the fundamental social guarantor of liberty, security, initiative and civic virtue.

If social welfare provision must be grudgingly made in some manner, such dependence of individuals on the family is deemed to be a positive condition ensuring stronger organic bonds, care, empathy and promoting a superior form of welfare, in contrast to the impersonal and enervating relations promoted by state social security. In addition, such a situation is more propitious to the restoration of a morally accountable society. The family household becomes thus a highly gendered “womb”, a safe place, a haven, as well as an environment of encouragement and support that engenders greater individual responsibility for personal welfare, social engagement and individual liberty.

Such ideological familism, as Barrett and McIntosh put it (2014, 26), is currently resurgent. One can easily find in papers like the Daily Telegraph, statements such as: “the Conservatives should stand for individual responsibility and one of the most responsible things a family can do is care for their children”, and that in this regard “they should also stand for individual liberty, particularly against the state” (Perrins 2013). In this now dominant ideological position, liberty and responsibility (civic virtue) are placed in direct opposition to action taken on the part of the State, a position to which we shall return below. Personal liberty here is complacently conjoined with devolution of welfare provision onto the family and the promotion of the family as the single greatest institutional headwater of a free society, even and especially in conditions of austerity politics. Of course, the notion that the nuclear family as
understood in this limited and historically contingent form is, to a great extent, a construction and product of the State, is never even considered let alone mentioned. Concentrating on the British case as the most acute actualization of a broader international theme, the position of conservative and traditionalist opinion groups has now become the hegemonic ideological position in that state beyond a narrow circle of political ideologists and politicians, as is evinced by even the slightest glance at popular discourses. This ideologically familist theme is clearly endorsed into strategic social policy by the recently departed Prime Minister, for whom “it’s family that brings up children, teaches values, passes on knowledge, instills in us all the responsibility to be good citizens” so that “long before you get to the welfare state, it is family that is there to care for you when you are sick or when you fall on tough times” (Cameron 2014).

In a nutshell, the family household is claimed to be a school of independence. The rest of this article is devoted to arguing the unsettling contrary: household welfare creates slaves.

We must consider thoughtfully the likely psycho-political effects of neglecting the problem of affordable housing for young adults on our ‘citizens’ democratic character in the long-term. With a chronic problem of affordable housing evident across Europe and the United States, which stands woefully unaddressed by governments for strategic political reasons, and with an especially acute disciplinary agenda actualizing through the London-centred “housing crisis” in the British city-state, it is imperative that a concerted attempt be made to articulate focused political theoretical argument elaborating upon why radical strategic reform of our housing problem is a major priority beyond its material immediacy. It is essential to clarify intelligently what it is that is potentially so egregious about the current direction of social policy on housing provision in more impressive historical, political, and even philosophical terms. In particular, if we wish to influence the public policy discourse outside of academia, we must attack the hegemonic concepts of Austerity and Neoliberalism, and undermine them with political critical analysis. Such is what Michael Orton has recently called for in his discussion of Hikikomori and its western differentia specifica of parental co-habitation (Orton 2015). I argue that by mobilizing an immanent critique of Liberty as the core concept of Neoliberalism, we can drive a stake through the ideological heart of Austerity apologetics and its policy centrepiece: welfare devolution onto the family household. Such a theoretical framework will be essential for those who wish to formulate housing policy reform and then effectively advocate for it politically in the jungle of conservative skeptics and neoliberal naysayers.

**Neo-Roman Liberty: Liber Homo vs. Servus**

In the Anglophonic world, it is the Classical Liberal tradition of political thought that has come to dominate our conception of Freedom or Liberty (Skinner 2006). Despite a complex genealogical and intertextual descent (Herkunft), it seems to derive principally from Thomas Hobbes, and as such bears the imprint of his severely materialist corpuscular political ontology: there is nothing in existence other than bodies in differential perpetual motion and therefore “freedom” can only refer to the freedom of a body. This might be a body of water, an atom, or a body politic, as well as that of a person. The hegemonic conception of liberty today is preicated
on this assumption, which Hobbes developed in his notorious defence of absolutist monarchy (*Leviathan*), and endures in exemplary fashion in numerous more recent academic treatments of the concept (Steiner 1974–1975; Carter 2004; Kramer 2008). The Hobbesian Liberal conception of liberty is thus simply the absence of constraint on a body. Freedom cannot concern the freedom of a will (*arbitrium*), as the will is not a body, and therefore to coerce the will is not to deprive a person of their liberty, that is, their freedom to choose or “de-liberate”. Ever the devotee of Euclidian mathematics, Hobbes drew the ruthlessly logical conclusion that even if a highwayman were to demand of you your money or your life, you are free to choose to give your life. In this example, there is no deprivation of liberty; it is a free action. This is the genealogical root of the Liberal theory of liberty, that to be free is to act freely in the manner outlined above. Its central concern is with the action of bodies, and it originated out of early-modern discourses of the “new science”. It is this very limiting idea of freedom, as the absence or removal of any bodily obstacle to act, that we must challenge as profoundly unsatisfactory in our ruminations on housing policies. This conceptual definition has nothing to say regarding the condition or status of dependence, which is our chief concern here regarding the domiciled condition of many young people today, and the generalized effect of this dependence on an individual’s capacity to act.

From the early-modern period to the present, another tradition of political thought has contended the Liberal. It is of ancient provenance, and originates particularly in the legal thought of Ancient Rome, and as such has been labelled the Neo-Roman or Neo-Republican tradition (Pettit 1997; Skinner 1998; Lovett and Pettit 2009). The Neo-Roman concept of liberty has most conspicuously been mobilized in the history of the Anglophonic world by the seventeenth Century polemical advocates of the parliamentarian cause in the Civil War (1640s), and by the signatories to the United States’ Declaration of Independence (1776), and by the framers of the US Constitution (1787–1788). This oppositional distinction has critical potential today, due to the currently hegemonic position of the Liberal understanding of liberty in our society (Skinner 2006). I want to follow Quentin Skinner’s formulation of this historically discursive differentiation between Liberalism and Republicanism in Anglophonic political philosophy and relate it to the housing problem referenced above. In contrast to the Liberal understanding, liberty in the Neo-Roman discourse rests on the notion of independence, and therefore must be conceived as the name given to the “status of a person” (*de statu hominem*), rather than to the hindrance of a bodily action.

At the heart of the Neo-Roman understanding of liberty is the figure of the *liber homo* (free-person). The *liber homo* stands in clear distinction to the *servus* (slave) in Roman law. There is no intermediate position in this analysis. Firstly, by *slave* is meant something quite subtle and particular, yet quite straightforward. We must dispose ourselves of the image of the slave as chattel, subjected to whips and chains, as the personal human property of another. Neither the Southern American plantation slave, nor the ancient galley rower in Ben-Hur, has a monopoly over the definition of a slave. Slavery is defined in the *Digest of Roman Law*, as “an institution of the *ius gentium* [law of persons] by which someone is, contrary to nature, subject to the dominion of someone else” (cited in Skinner 2002, 289). This means that to be a *servus*, in contrast to a *liber homo*, is to be under the dominion of another person. But what is it to be subject to the dominion of another? This is simply to be under the arbitrary power of another person (*in potestate*), that is, under the will
(artbitrium) of someone else – a Master (dominus). Note the ancient etymological connection that binds servitude and unfreedom to the household institution (dominus, domestic, domicile, domination, etc.). Liberty (libertas) therefore must be understood as a condition or status, not as merely the bodily freedom or hindrance of an action. This is a status of dependence on another person, who by virtue of that relation of dependence alone has arbitrary power over you.

Pivotal, the liberty of a person is established by the extent to which they live in a condition where they are free to exercise their will without being subject to the will of another. If, by your status or condition, you are not free to exercise your will by virtue of that status or condition, whether de jure or de facto, you are not a free-person and are thus a slave. In such a condition, de facto you therefore do not live suae potestatis, that is “possessed of a power to act according to your own will rather than being obliged to live in dependence on the will of someone else” (cited in Skinner 2008a, 86). Likewise, de jure you are not sui iuris, that is, possessed of the capacity to act “as your own man”, and hence “in your own right”. In John Locke’s Two Treatises (1690), written as an intertextual speech act against the absolutists Hobbes and Filmer, to live “under an Absolute, Arbitrary, Despotical power” is to live in servitude. More specifically, a slave is understood to be a person forced to live in subjugation to a Master with “an Arbitrary power over his Life” (Locke 1988, II.24, p. 285). Therefore, freedom is “a Liberty to follow my own Will in all things, where the Rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man” (Locke II.23, p. 284). It was in these terms that Parliament had opposed the attempt of Charles I to extend discretionary and prerogative powers over them, and thus without a shred of exaggeration claimed their new condition to be that of “the most abject of all bondslaves” (Parker 1999, 109; Skinner 2008c, 293). Likewise, the key motivation for the Declaration of Independence (not a declaration of “liberty” or “freedom”, NB) was justified conceptually as a revolt on the part of colonial oligarchs against the exercise of arbitrary power by an executive government, which had reduced them to the condition of servitude and the status of slaves. It was not a revolt against any hindrance on their bodies to act, nor a bid to experience the “freedom” of the absence of constraint, but a revolt to secure for themselves (though not for their own chattels, of course) the condition of in-dependence.

In contrast to the historical deployments of the Neo-Roman theorizing of liberty, we are not concerned in this article with the structure or dynamic of the polity as a constituted whole. What is of supreme importance are the attitudes and behaviours that the social condition of dependence engenders in those individuals subjected to it, although we are concerned with the effects on the polity that flow from this multiplicity of individuals’ statuses of servitude. What is of relevance in this conceptual position does not relate to the question of Sovereignty. Though the historical discourses under discussion here have been preoccupied with questions of political sovereignty, the Neo-Roman conception of liberty can be easily extended to all manner of social relations and statuses. This is evident from Locke’s expansive discussion of the core relation in constitutional government, which he contrasts to government predicated on biblical authority or, as in Hobbes’ Leviathan, predicated on the war-of-all-against-all, both traditionally deployed to legitimate parental authority in the household. He critically juxtaposes the constitutional relation Magistrate-Subject, with the tyrannous relation of Master-Servant, Father-Children, Husband-Wife, Lord-Slave (Locke, 1988, II.2, 268). The former relation of political
power is legitimized by the imprimatur of constitutionality, where the status of the subject as *liber homo* is secured, whether legally, institutionally, practically, or customarily; the latter are not. From this we can see that the condition of living under arbitrary power is not merely a relation between the individual and the Sovereign, but is de facto reproduced in all manner of social situations.

As one illustration, throughout the 19th Century the legal status of women as household dependents on their fathers and then husbands made slaves of them. They did not live *sui iuris*. From the early-modern emergence of capitalistic social relations, women had been rendered “legal imbeciles” from their prior status as *femmes soles*, the innovated assumption being that “their lives were now in the hands of men who (like feudal lords) could exercise over them a power of life and death” (Federici 2004, 100); almost the definition of an arbitrary power. The subordinating and infantilising psychosocial effects of which were made clear in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and it wasn’t until Acts of Parliament in the period 1870–1880 that women in Britain could legally own property or make their own wills. This is more than a play on words; it perfectly illuminates women’s condition of unfreedom living “under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord”, that is, under legal *Coverture*; under the arbitrary power of the Master. It is interesting to note that today *Hikikomori* or “parental co-habitation” is predominantly a male phenomenon. However, far from suggesting a greater independence or personal responsibility on the part of young women, the reason is more likely that, subject to the same socio-economic forces, many women have resorted to the historically time-honoured option of obtaining welfare provision by entering into dependent relationships with male partners under whose de facto dominion they then live as a seemingly preferable and more socially acceptable alternative to returning to the parental home. We wonder why instances of domestic abuse against women are on the rise. For young men, such a “preferable” option comes with a greater social stigma attached and thus steers them towards the much more discouragingly dysfunctional condition of parental co-habitation.

Clearly the devolution of welfare onto the parental household can mean nothing other than the placing of individuals under the condition of financial, and thus social and material, dependence on parent(s) in the parental household (*in potestate parentis*), by purposive and systematic omission of action on the part of government. In such a situation, parents by definition are either (1) placed in the privileged position of the landlord (*dominus*), with coercive power over the will of their dependent who lives under a species of *Coverture*, that is, not regulated by the protection of legal contract afforded a “tenant” (*sui iuris*); and/or (2) the sole or main supplier of victuals, and thus with de facto monopoly control over the direct reproduction of the living body of the dependent (*suae potestatis*). Effectively, both formally and informally, the relation of dependence is universally established by definition of the circumstance itself of welfare provision devolved onto the family household. Such an effect can hardly be denied, and is even recognized today by the harshest critics of the dependent generation. According to Renato Brunetta, unsympathetic former Innovation Minister in the Italian Government, “there’s a price they pay. It allows their parents to keep control of them, emotionally, socially and financially” (Day 2015). Above this definitional minimum, dependence in such circumstances is usually of the most physically proximate and suffocatingly intimate kind, and almost of a totalitarian character.
One might expect the objection at this point to be that the emotional and psychological ties of family must surely be a guarantor and protection against domination. What of the love and care that parents give their children in the household? It is precisely the Neo-Roman argument that liberty cannot rest on just such whimsical and unstable a basis, for surely to live at the will of another’s love is to live under conditions highly conducive to tyranny. The beneficence or physical absence of a Master is irrelevant to the status of servitude in this analysis of liberty. The ironic figure of the “free-slave” is common in the literature of ancient comedy, who goes here and there doing as they please as a result of the Master’s incompetence, absence, or good will (Skinner 2008b). The status of living in potestate domini nevertheless remains, and the entailed relations of dependence endure. The ancient Master could put to death at any moment; the parent can burst into one’s bedroom or even evict at any moment.

There is one inescapable feature of the dependent Master-Slave relation, and of life under the arbitrary will of the Master, and it is foregrounded by John Milton in his great defence of republican liberties, The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649). This is the assumption that freedom is to be opposed not to actual constraint but to possible or potential constraint (Skinner 2002, 299). It is not the actual constraint of an action, but the potential constraint of action brought about by the condition of dependence, that coerces the will and thus renders a person unfree. It is living in this condition of unfreedom born of dependence, and the perpetual uncertainty over the arbitrary will of another overriding one’s own at any instant, that drives dependent individuals inexorably into the fear, anxiety and “slavishness” that is inevitable under such conditions.

Anxieties amongst theorists of liberty over the social consequences of living in servitude, in the manner described above, have resurfaced repeatedly over the millennia in political discourses on liberty (Skinner 2002, 292). This is evident from ancients such as Sallust, Tacitus and Livy, through James Harrington and Henry Parker, Milton, Locke, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, through 20th Century analysts of antebellum chattel slavery in the US like Stanley Elkins, to the Neorepublicanism today of Skinner, Pettit, et al. The assertion made again and again by exponents of this analysis is that those who live in the condition of a slave (dependence) will behave slavishly, the very condition of dependence itself, living under a relation of arbitrary power and under the will of another, is enough to force the slave in that condition into obsequiousness, flattery and, most importantly, self-censorship vis-à-vis the Master on whose will they are dependent. It is the material and social conditions of living, that is, housing arrangements, which profoundly influence the character of the individuals subject to those relations. The result of the “slavish patience” (Sallust, Bellum Iugurthinum. 31.1) necessary for living in potestate domini on the character of those subjected thus is to become “so anxious and dispirited that all civic virtue has been lost” (Skinner 2002, 290). Recall the Hikikomori quote at the outset.

Experiences of young people in the condition of the servus attest to my analysis. These are cited from The Guardian newspaper (Davies et al. 2014), in anecdotal form, and are quite illustrative of widespread sentiments engendered by the experience of parental co-habitation. For instance, Maria (28, Dublin) says that “I do miss having people over for dinner and too many bottles of wine. That’s hard to do when your Mum might pop in to put on the kettle at any given moment!” Dependent adult offspring will not set boundaries to their parents’ arbitrary and whimsical behaviour;
to do so would seem ungrateful or cheeky. Whose house is it, after all? She continues, “I’m lucky my parents are so supportive”. Lucky. Capricious, whimsical, arbitrary, there are no boundaries or secure guarantees set in this condition. The good will of the parents can evaporate in an instant, leaving the dependent without any recourse whatsoever. Fortuna is arbitrary. For what is implicit in her wording is that if she were not lucky, she would be powerless to resist the arbitrary will of her parents when displeased by her behaviour. For Gaia (26, Piacenza),

the problem is you don’t feel empowered. And I think for us, for young people, it’s really important to have the power to control your life and say: “I can do this. I can have a job but I can manage my private life as well”

Independence is a prerequisite for personal self-government and souci-de-soi.

Most important of all, under conditions of dependence comes the tendency to self-censor – “if we fear that some harm might befall us if we were to voice our less conventional thoughts, that in itself will be sufficient to inhibit us from voicing them” (Skinner 2002: 303). This is not self-censorship as a performative act of civility, but a routinized deformation of the Self in what James Scott called the public transcript in the power relation between the dominant and the subjugated that becomes more stereotypical and ritualized “the more arbitrarily it is exercised” (Scott 1992). Young people learn to bite their tongues in all manner of things around their parents. Such a condition is surely no school of liberty and independence, but a school that teaches silence, obedience, acceptance, resignation and humiliation, well into adulthood. This condition is enervating of the courage necessary for “civic greatness”, and we should be seriously concerned about generalized arrangements that induce and inculcate such behavioural characteristics in millions of our young citizens.

So, I have established (1) that for a young person to be forced back into the family home is for them to be placed under a condition of dependence, that is, under the arbitrary power of another; and (2) how one is no longer a free-person (liber homo) in this condition of dependence, but a slave (servus); and (3) what the political and social long-term consequences of this condition will entail for the free and democratic character of our society (civitas), if generalized as it is from a multiplicity of individual experiences. It now remains for me to demonstrate how it is that the wills of young individuals are in fact being coerced presently into such a condition by the current configuration of social and material forces when they return home to live with the parents. I will then conclude by outlining the proper role of government on the basis of this analysis, and the kind of policy (re)directions that it demands.

Austerity, Oligarchy and the Spatio-Temporality of Capitalism

In the previous section, I have demonstrated how the status of the servus is not the result of a “free choice”, as understood in the Liberal conception and as seems to be assumed amongst many in our society. At the very least, I have shown how such a Liberal conceptualization is entirely unsatisfactory for comprehending or explaining the phenomenon of “parental co-habitation” that is popping up across the capitalist core states. It is now necessary to establish how it is that the person of the servus in this particular social condition is actually forced into their situation of dependence, and that such a status is not the result of widespread and coincidental personal inertia.
on their parts. By augmenting the Neo-Roman theory of liberty with a Marxian account of the social order, within which this theory of liberty has explanatory valence, we can better apprehend the conditions within which arguably a generation of “slaves” is being created. Situating the Neo-Roman analysis within a particular historical articulation of the capitalist social order is essential if we want to champion effectively the liber homo in capitalist modernity through policy reform.

An objection one might expect to the analysis so far is that surely no one in our society is under the arbitrary power of another, because all are under the protection of the law that guarantees their basic legal rights. However, this is an unacceptably narrow way to understand relations of dependence, arbitrary power and coercion of the will. What is essential to remember here is that, in this Neo-Roman analysis, it is possible to live in a condition of dependence under the arbitrary will of another, whilst still being in possession of all your basic civil rights (Skinner 2006). As Marx famously summarized, “between equal rights, force decides” (1990, 344). Social relations of coercion operate and exist beyond the naïve boundaries of legal definition.

Those who believe that a young adult in the situation of parental co-habitation can leave the household “at will”, and must therefore personally accept the consequences of “choosing” not to do so, falls into the dubious position of accepting Hobbes’ choice (as offered in the highwayman example) as an unproblematically free choice. Under the conditions of capitalistic social relations, the household is perpetually being reforged to serve precisely the disciplinary function that coerces and restrains the members of the household, coercing (or rather “co-linearizing”) their wills and thus precluding free exit. In this condition, the household becomes a strategic device in the social apparatus of epithumogenesis, wherein an engineered asymmetric relation of dependence renders a person “ipso facto dominated” by virtue of that “dependence of an interest on another person”, which is enforced by spatio-temporal circumstance and functions as a “relation of command” distributing individuals “bi-jectively” to their places in the new division of labour (Lordon 2014, 106). This epithumogenetic apparatus of “co-linearization” with the master-desire has the effect and intention of “fixing the enlistees’ desire” to certain objects out of the heterogeneity of desire-objects encountered by an individual in the multiplicity of lived experience. In particular, this is just one more historical instance in the capitalist society of the “the reconstruction of the [nuclear] family as the locus for the production of labor-power” (Federici 2004, 95), in collusive service to “the buyer of labour-power” (Lordon 2014, 106), but that precludes democratic political participation and access to society’s accumulated capital surplus. Such individuals are effectively dispossessed in absolute terms, whilst many of them nevertheless continue to produce surplus value, which is then realized elsewhere and by others.

In addition, it must be born in mind that the generation of “slaves” to which I refer will not be an entire generation, but a contribution toward a class formation immanent to that generation. The dismantling of state welfare is tasked with this very end, to remove any choice and force younger generations into the orbit of the family and household economy in order to be disciplined, controlled, tranched and carefully placed in the new regime of production and consumption. By removing state welfare, employment possibilities, free education, affordable housing, etc., purposively through a concerted political class project called Austerity, any such exit options are severely restricted for millions of young people who are forced by social
and material conditions into a status of dependence on others, regardless of any minimal legal protection under the criminal code of the common law.

It is not simply that the parent within the household constitutes “the Master” who exercises arbitrary power over the youth, a configuration whereby each house is turned into an isolated petty fief. The parent as master must rather be grasped as a point of contact, within the institution of the household, to a vast technology of coercive organization that is the Society of Control (Deleuze 1992) driven by capitalist imperatives. The parent is just one of the most intimate and proximate instantiations of the “meta-disciplinary” apparatus of the capitalist megamachine (Welsh 2016), occupying the place of foreman or subaltern in the household as social vertex, somewhat akin to the NCO, gaoler, teacher, caseworker, in other institutional settings.

**Government Action and Housing Policy Imperative**

In Classical Liberal ideology, intervening and socially ameliorative strategic action on the part of the State is anathema. If freedom is the absence of constraint on a body, then the intervention of the State, whether through legal or political means, annihilates by definition the liberty of the subjects on whom such an intervention is applied. By devolving welfare onto the family, via both the founding act of government action and then subsequent ideological inaction, the British Government in particular endorses this position. However, in the Neo-Roman conception of liberty, government action bears no necessary stigma of unfreedom, and in fact is often necessary for the establishment of a society (civitas) of free-persons. This is easily compatible with the Ordo-Liberal problematic of “police power”, whereby the State intervenes in the regulation of a given population in order to further the strength and future prosperity of that population (Foucault 2007, 2010). This is its political reason, and is actualized through the State’s “art of government”.

Locke himself elaborates the necessity for Liberty to be secured by the actions of the State in precisely this way. He elaborates that the “Freedom of Men under Government, is, to have a standing Rule to live by, common to every one of that Society and made by the Legislative Power erected in it” (Locke, 1988, II.23, 284). That “rule” is not so much the rule of law, as some might presume, but the secured common condition of each individual as a liber homo, and is to be made by the legislative power erected in it. This is a clear mandate for the State to act positively so as to establish the status of free-persons as a minimum equality of autonomy according to natural law. Similarly, several decades later in discussions over the formal establishment of civil liberty and independence in the Thirteen Colonies, Alex Hamilton reminded his peers that “it will be equally forgotten that the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty” (Hamilton 1961, 35). At the heart of these positions, the assumption is that government action can secure the conditions for liberty in the generality. Government non-agenda abandons the individual to the (literally) uncivilized caprice of the war-of-all-against-all, where, far from realizing an immanently anarchic state of nature, such an anarchy is imposed in contravention of the freedom of persons according to natural law. The result is vampirism, brigandage and the subjugation under Masters of various colours, which are given free reign to dominate those forced into conditions of dependence by social forces and the political ambitions of others in violation of the equality of natural law.

The reason why the proper action of government, in the manner I have described, does not contravene one’s status as a liber homo, stems from the constitutionality of
that action. In contrast to living in *potestate parentis*, the action of the State is prescribed by lawful limitation with opportunities and structures for proper recourse. In contrast, decision-making and exercise of power in the household is entirely arbitrary, and although one might argue that such arbitrary power is limited to matters within that household alone, the fact that the individual youth is forced to be there by the politically contingent and circumstantial forces of an omnipresent capitalist society in crisis and politically prosecuted Austerity, means that (as with the victim of the highwayman) there is little or no option to exit from that micro fief of arbitrary power.

In the case of the Nordic countries, states with much lower levels of parental co-habitation (Spiegel 2013), there is much greater State provision of welfare, including various supplementary benefits for students and other social groups within the youth demographic that are explicitly tasked with relieving housing and accommodation difficulties. In the Liberal conception of liberty, these social-democratic structures and policy arrangements are assumed to be components of a politics predicated on a “positive liberty” that invests the State with the role of realising the authentic being of individuals in an otherwise alienating capitalist society (Berlin 1979). To Liberals, this role substitutes for the individual’s own responsibility and initiative, thus enervating in the long-term their dynamism, freedom of action and personal responsibility. It is the “nanny state”, in a nutshell.

However, given the Neo-Roman concept of liberty and the analysis of welfare devolution onto the family given above, such welfare structures supplied by the State actually function to establish and secure the conditions of individuals’ *independence* (from much more proximate landlords, parents, masters), even though some appetitive freedom of action is curtailed (i.e. individuals cannot spend benefits on sports cars or steak dinners, as they might if they retained a greater proportion of their taxable income). Thus, the State does not force you to be free in such cases, as the Liberal critics of positive liberty would definitionally claim, it rather secures young peoples’ statuses as *liberi homines* in the context of capitalist social imperatives, thus providing them with the basis to pursue their goals, desires and obligations freely. In short, the State secures conditions for the exercise of their free wills as individuals, that is, their *ethical autonomy*. We ponder over the greater freedoms, educational attainments and quality of life that are often manifest in those societies. Rather than bastions of any putative socialist nannying, perhaps they are simply societies of greater freedom and personal autonomy in this regard, from which civic greatness flows.

However, such particular policy initiatives will only have any penetrative significance if part of a wider political transformation and a new strategic direction, which in turn will only be possible in the event of a widespread reorientation of the hegemonic ideology and its various political, cultural and ethical, assumptions. I have attempted in this article to supply a political theoretical way of viewing the current housing situation in a way that illuminates its oppressive and destructive actuality. It is for others to develop policy alternatives and solutions in the depths and details of housing policy and governmental action that will release young people from their servitude and return to them their statuses as free-persons.

Politically, in the British case, it seems that there will have to be a reckoning in the city-state. Either the future strategic direction will benefit a younger generation, who require affordable housing and access to education and employment, or it will continue to benefit those older generations and metropolitan elites who have shielded
themselves from the wage-repression and privatisations of the neoliberal period by resort to personal asset price inflation as compensation. Even within the minimal interventionist rationality of neoliberal government, the failure of the State to take action in this chronic housing situation will likely engender a progressive dissipation of the population of the state-territory in generations to come. The option of a studious non-agenda and masterly inactivity regarding affordable housing, is an abnegation of even the neoliberal state’s obligations to its police function and the pastorate of its “governmental rationality” (Foucault 2007, 2010). In political cultural terms, we have to ask ourselves whether a long-term strategic policy direction that produces a generation of “slaves”, or at least of “slavish” character, rather than a generation of well educated, motivated and independent individuals intuitively disposed to speak truth to power, is worth the short-term benefit of pleasing those electoral fractions deemed of greater strategic importance for political parties in office. If we wish to combat the formation of a malignant oligarchy in the heart of our democratic state, spearheaded by strategies such as parental co-habitation, then we must demand government action in the area of housing policy that establishes and maintains social and political conditions that promote and secure individuals’ independence and self-government, regardless of the cynical indifference or capricious impotence engendered by capitalism’s new topologies.

Notes
1. See Welsh (2017)
4. Whilst the family household is also a socio-culturally contingent formation, varying subtly from society to society, the basic “nuclear” dynamic persists as a fairly stable form across the modern societies of Europe and the United States. A generalizing argument is therefore still justifiable, providing that it remains sensitive to the variations in sociocultural particularity that make it a contingent feature of a given society up to a point.
5. My Italics.
6. As an illustration, consider a recent interview with the glossy magazine Woman and Home, where daytime TV host Holly Willoughby waxed prosaic of her idyllic childhood, claiming “my family are my support system” (Young 2015, 1). By referring to the family household principally as “support system”, she faithfully reproduces a now very prevalent ideological semantic in the UK that places the family beyond any narrow set of emotional and psychological relations conventionally constituting a kinship group. Rather, the family is clearly now accepted by many as a structure of welfare provision in its broadest social sense.
8. Though I use the words “status” and “condition” interchangeably, “status” remains more true to the idiom of Roman jurisprudence, where it refers to the de jure situation of a person in a legal framework. However, in this analysis I perhaps prefer “condition” as the de facto positionality of a person in a matrix of social relations and forces.

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