

Un-homing with words: economic discourse and displacement as alienation

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation into the psychological aspects of displacement, where displacement is understood as a form of un-homing that severs the connection between people and place. Extending the human-geographical discussion begun by Mark Davidson and Rowland Atkinson on the possibility of being displaced while staying put, I argue that words and narratives – here exemplified by the Swedish (neo-classical) economic discourse on market rents – can displace people, and that this particular kind of un-homing is best understood as alienation. A theoretical underpinning is psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe's work on identity and language and on the effects of neoliberal political economy on our psychological well-being. I analyze texts by and interviews with economists arguing for the abolishment of the 'rent regulation system' and find that their use of the terms 'insiders' and 'outsiders' frames (current) tenants as *undeserving* and *in the way*. Economists *encourage* displacement (of people who lack the means to pay market rents), they gentrify with their words. By being told they are a 'welfare loss', tenants with affordable housing in attractive parts of the city are pushed to become critical on-lookers onto themselves, thereby dis-placed from the spontaneous act of dwelling and alienated from their original insideness. A larger conclusion is that the famous economist Milton Friedman was right: neo-classical economic theory, and *homo neoliberalismus*, in particular, does not respect geography. This disrespect, I explain, should be interpreted as a *philosophical negligence* towards human situatedness in place, and as an *ethical carelessness* towards people's need for home.

Keywords

alienation, displacement, economic theory, identity, language, un-homing, market rents

Introduction

This text is an investigation into the phenomenon of displacement. Being one of the most frequently-invoked concepts in human geography, used to describe forms of enforced mobility in a variety of contexts and at various spatial scales,¹ a definition is necessary. Following Marcuse,² and, later,

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Davidson,³ and Atkinson,⁴ I understand displacement – a central feature of gentrification – as not (only) a question of physical relocation, but (also) very much a psychological phenomenon: a(n immaterial) rupture between self and home. Displacement affects ‘many more than those actually displaced at any given moment’.⁵ Important to note here is that *an individual can be displaced without having moved a meter*.⁶ This statement is paradoxical; our often taken-for-granted logical thinking regards it as false, while it is in fact true. This paradox builds on important human(istic) geographical knowledge of what it means to *dwell*, as well as on an understanding of space that proceeds from the subject.⁷ Displacement conceptualized in this sense cannot be measured, but must be understood. Therefore, like Elliott-Cooper et al., who also draw on these three mentioned sources (Marcuse, Davidson, and Atkinson) amongst others, I identify displacement as a form of *un-homing* ‘that violently severs the connection between people and place, undermining the *right to dwell*’.⁸ To further specify what kind of displacement I aim to discuss in the paper, the term *alienation* will be used and explained.

Can words – narratives and arguments uttered by other people, especially if they are in a position of power – displace people? Using an example from Sweden and its debate on market rents, concentrating on the rhetoric used by economists as well as on the potential effects that this rhetoric can have on the mind/body of the tenant, I attempt to explain why the answer to this question is yes. I hereby aim to extend the discussion begun by Davidson⁹ and Atkinson¹⁰ by focusing more explicitly on the psychological dimensions of being displaced while staying put.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I want to deepen urban and cultural geographers’ sense of what displacement is by making psychological displacement central to the overall processes of displacement. By this I do not mean to say that physical displacement is not important, but its negative effects on people’s health has already been captured in research.¹¹ Seeing displacement not (foremost) as a physical-geographical phenomenon that involves a form of ‘travel’ from one location to another, but rather as a dilemma involving more or less intangible processes and networks, highlights certain connections between my research and for example Crang’s¹² work on consumption, in which he uses the figure of displacement ‘to signal a shift from what we might call “vertical” analyses of consumption (as involving relations of surfaces and depths) to a more “horizontal” framing’, that is, ‘horizontal sociospatial relations of consumption (of distance, diversion, routes, inhabitations)’ (pp. 63–4).

Secondly, my intervention contributes to a cross-disciplinary field of research that has grown steadily in recent years – namely, the critique of economic theory.¹³ ‘Economic theory may be speculative, but its impact is powerful and real’, as Offer and Söderberg¹⁴ write. Aldred¹⁵ even calls economic experts ‘dangerous’, since their use of theory gives rise to consequences from which we all suffer. Critiquing economic discourse, widespread in today’s society, is important for cultural geography since discourses are representations of our society and environment, and representations influence how people experience reality and themselves. The language of (more or less self-appointed) experts on urban issues shapes how we understand the city and our place in it. This paper can thus be associated with contributions in cultural political economy – a field that corrects the failure of classical political economy ‘to anticipate new issues of cultural and political significance, such as the politics of identity’, and which corrects ‘economic reductionism’s dismissive treatment of culture and the lifeworld’, to use Sayer’s¹⁶ definition.

It is not uncommon for critiques of economic theory to overlap a critique of neoliberalism and vice versa, since the ideology and practice of neoliberalism is about the application of economic thinking onto areas outside of economics. This overlapping happens in this paper too. Like Bourdieu¹⁷ (p. 101) and Offer and Söderberg, I see (non-critical neo-classical) economists as actors who contribute to and reproduce the faith in the ideology of neoliberalism. They do this by

‘normalizing and naturalizing an economic frame of mind’.¹⁸ To ‘think like an economist’ means to ‘generally approach social problems in economic terms’.¹⁹ Neoliberalism can be seen as the new myth of our time, to use Bourdieu’s expression,²⁰ being not only a doctrine about purely economic matters, but a way of thinking about political problems as well. This view of neoliberalism and economic theory also echoes the work of Foucault,²¹ Brown,²² and Davies.²³

I begin by explaining what methods and empirical material I have used, while also giving a short overview of the Swedish debate on market rents. Thereafter, in order to provide more context, I give a brief presentation of the current Swedish housing sector. After that, I present the most important theoretical points about identity and language – a ground to stand on when analyzing the material. Thenceforth, the analysis of the empirical material is presented, where I pay special attention to the insider-outsider theory in economics since this is what the economists draw upon when arguing for market rents. In the final section before the conclusion, I analyze the identity-conferring messages about tenants that the economists convey, explaining why the term alienation is suitable to describe the particular effects economists’ rhetoric risks causing.

Method and material: studying the Swedish economic discourse on market rents

‘[E]conomists are not of a single mind’, Offer and Söderberg rightly state (p. 120). Although there is more diversity among Swedish economists than what their engagement in the public debate demonstrates, Swedish academic economics is to a great extent dominated by neoclassical theory.²⁴ Neoclassical economists are often associated with a market liberal worldview, that is, the belief that the pursuit of individual self-interest maximizes collective welfare.²⁵ This doctrine ‘is actually the point of departure for a good deal of policy-related economic analysis since the 1970s’.²⁶ In line with this doctrine, the leading group of Swedish economists wants to solve societal problems such as unemployment through microeconomic measures (like deregulation and a weakening of social insurance and of unions).²⁷ The attitude is the same when it comes to the housing sector. For more than half a century, Swedish economic experts have argued for the abolishment of what they refer to as ‘the rent regulation system’.²⁸ Since the 1970s Sweden has had a system of negotiated rents (*Bruksvärdessystemet*, translates into something like ‘the use value system’),²⁹ but most economists continue to talk of ‘regulated’ rents, even though central regulation, which was installed in 1942, ended in 1968. Economists have ‘an intuition’ that regulated rents are damaging.³⁰

According to a study financed by the Swedish Tenants’ Association about the likely effects of a system of market rents in Stockholm, the drastic rent increase that would follow would lead to the displacement of people from the inner city.³¹ Rents would increase by, on average, 63% in the inner city of Stockholm, and 40% in Stockholm county.³² The day after the report was released it was heavily criticized by three real-estate economists in one of the biggest newspapers in Sweden, in a debate article entitled ‘Skeva slutsatser från ett särintresse’ (‘Doubtful conclusions from a partial interest group’).³³ The report has ‘no support in economic theory’, they wrote (although it was indeed conducted by economists³⁴). Curiously, however, the critics did agree with the report’s main message that with market rents people would have to move. From the debate article: ‘The conclusion is correct that when the implied subsidy ends when rent regulation is abolished, some of the tenants with a low willingness to pay will leave their apartments. They will be replaced with new tenants with a higher willingness to pay’.³⁵ This is for the good of society, they insist – an argument also made in the book *Så skapas attraktiva städer* (translated as *How to create attractive cities*) from 2014, written by the same economists.

My analysis of the Swedish economic discourse on market rents centers on the debate article and the book mentioned ('Doubtful conclusions from a partial interest group' respectively *How to create attractive cities*), the latter written with the explicit aim to influence politicians and policy makers. Since the book includes references to half a century's worth of economic literature on market rents – national as well as international – it is representative of neo-classical economic discourse on market rents. The definitions and arguments 'must not be interpreted as subjective or arbitrary', but rather as grounded in economic theory, the authors explain (pp. 10–11). I have also conducted qualitative interviews with two of the book's authors, both active as (microeconomic and welfare economic) researchers at the Department of Real Estate and Construction Management at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm – Sweden's leading academic environment for real estate development.³⁶ The department has a long history of participating in the public debate; 'it's deeply rooted here'.³⁷ I asked them to elaborate on their critique against the report by the Tenants' Association. Fundamentally, my motivation was to learn about why they see displacement as a solution, not a problem. The interviews were carried out in Stockholm in 2015 and 2016 and were unstructured conversations, which were recorded and transcribed. In this article I have chosen not to use their names, since what is important is that they are, and see themselves as, economic experts.

Importantly, in my analysis I also include texts about the so called insider-outsider theory in economics, originally developed to analyze unemployment and the workings of the labor market. The reason is that two terms – 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – recur in the economists' arguments and they originate in this theory. The terms have also spread in the public debate,³⁸ even though the theory itself is not discussed, nor is the translation from one context (the labor market) to another (the housing market) motivated. Because of the central-yet-hidden place that the insider-outsider theory takes in the economists' discourse on market rents in Sweden, I include texts where the original theory is presented, as well as an email conversation with Swedish neo-classical economist Assar Lindbeck, one of the founders of the theory and a long time debater for market rents.

This correspondence with Lindbeck is relevant to my analysis because Lindbeck, who was a member of the Social Democratic Party until 1982, is one of the central public figures in the history of Sweden's market liberal turn.³⁹ He has testified to being influenced by famous neo-liberal economists such as Hayek⁴⁰ and Becker,⁴¹ and his (and his successors') arguments for market rents are almost identical to the ones put forward by Friedman and Stigler in *Roofs or Ceilings? The Current Housing Problem* from 1946.⁴² Moreover, in the Swedish popular scientific journal on economics, *Ekonomisk Debatt*, founded in 1973 by Lindbeck among others, the references during the years 1973 to 1995 are mostly Swedish and American.⁴³ These connections illustrate what Offer and Söderberg argue; that Swedish (Social Democratic) politics has partly been 'undercut by intellectual forces from the outside, mainly from North America'.⁴⁴ In other words, what I have wanted to stress in this paragraph is that an analysis of Swedish economists is necessarily an analysis of American economists too.

In the section "Insiders" versus "Outsiders" – Economists' Argumentation for Market rents' I analyze all of the material indicated above and look for hidden, in the sense more or less indirect, arguments that are being made about tenants, challenging the supposed ethical neutrality of the economists' statements.⁴⁵ I thereafter analyze the material against a background of literature on (psychological) alienation and humanistic-geographical insights on place and home.

Context: an increasingly marketized Swedish housing sector

Since the 1960s, Sweden has been associated with equality, social security, high housing standards, and a universal housing model. Between 1965 and 1974 more than a million homes were built as

part of the Million Program, of which the most common form of tenure was rental housing. Today, the number of affordable apartments have decreased due to privatization of a large part of municipal housing companies as well as waves of tenure-conversion into condominiums, not least in the inner city of Stockholm.⁴⁶ Segregation has sharpened and tenants are experiencing a higher level of insecurity due to large renovation projects and rent increases in the housing stock from the 1960s and 70s – a problem known as *renoviction*.⁴⁷ A law reform of 2011 made public housing companies obliged to – besides taking social responsibility for housing provision – act in a ‘business-like’ manner. As a consequence, the Million Program rental stock has been turned into an object for profit-seeking.⁴⁸ This is not only leading to increased displacement but also to a change in the nature of gentrification in a Nordic context from ‘gentle’ to ‘brutal’.⁴⁹ The development fits into a wider process of the neoliberalization of Swedish politics, portrayed not least by Allan Pred in *Even in Sweden*.⁵⁰

Christophers⁵¹ has described the Swedish housing sector as ‘a monstrous hybrid’ of combined regulation and deregulation that constitutes the current lack of affordable housing. Swedish housing politics, as well as the general state of Swedish political economy, is a hybrid of neoliberalism and old Social democratic welfare politics: Sweden is neoliberalized, although the welfare state is not entirely gone.⁵² As previous research has noted, Sweden traditionally has an exceptionally high level of social trust (in institutions and in one another) compared to other countries, a phenomenon that has been connected to the general welfare politics in Sweden.⁵³ A recent study of how tenants experience *renoviction* threats⁵⁴ shows that the idea that you deserve good housing even though you are not rich but because you are a citizen of the welfare state of Sweden, is alive – but threatened.

The positive attitude towards market rents in Sweden is traditionally almost exclusively held by economic experts, though this has begun to change; in recent years, newspapers have started to write more frequently and more positively about market rents.⁵⁵ Hence, the number of market rent enthusiasts are growing; while not necessarily economists, they use the same arguments as economists, reproducing their discourse – a development that has made tenants turn to the Tenant’s Association’s *Facebook* page to express their worry.⁵⁶

Theory: the relation between language and identity

[T]he eye does not see itself,

But by reflection of a mirror.

(William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)⁵⁷

A key theoretical point of departure for my analysis of the economists’ rhetoric is the idea that language affects our understanding of the world, and that language is a medium of power.⁵⁸ Our identity, how we see ourselves, is shaped by the environment, of which language is a crucial part. As psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe⁵⁹ (p. 12) notes, ‘[i]t’s no coincidence that the philosopher Hegel traced the origin of self-consciousness back to the gaze of the other’. [I]dentity is always a construct that derives from an interaction between the identity holder and the wider environment’, we ‘mirror ourselves in the dominant narrative, with its embedded norms and values’.⁶⁰ This insight on human identity, which Verhaeghe shares with Cooley,⁶¹ Mead,⁶² and Honneth,⁶³ can be seen for example in the work of Shakespeare, when Cassius in *Julius Caesar* manipulates Brutus’ understanding of the world and of himself. ‘The more Brutus is called virtuous the more virtuous he believes himself to be’.⁶⁴ In other words, Brutus introjects Cassius’ and others’ view of him and makes it a part of his own internal structure.

In short, our self-awareness is affected by stories, and while stories may begin with individuals or groups of individuals, 'they are contagious, spreading like viruses from person to person, until they start to take on a life that transcends any single storyteller-and-listener pair', writes anthropologist John Allen⁶⁵ (p. 152). Economists' stories, which are at the forefront of this paper, are believed to have an even more profound effect on people, since economists are authorities. And economists *are* story-tellers.⁶⁶

Since our identity, succinctly put, is of external rather than internal origin, shaped by parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and/or society as a whole, 'we are perfectly capable of having a dialogue with "ourselves"' and sometimes ask '*Is that really "me"?*'.⁶⁷ In other words, we can experience self-alienation when we feel that our picture of ourselves does not match our actions or feelings; '[T]he "I" that is judging "me" is based on a different identification from the "me" that is being judged', Verhaeghe explains.⁶⁸ If we are continuously disrespected by others, it is hard to maintain self-respect; hence, Verhaeghe's suggestion that we understand 'self-respect' as 'other-respect'.⁶⁹

Identity is tied to ideology, to society as a whole, and 'is all about ethics'.⁷⁰ Verhaeghe argues that neoliberalism, one of the dominant political-economic narratives of contemporary Western society, has led to a psychic crisis and altered the way we think about ourselves and others.⁷¹ If we fail to become economically successful, we stop feeling 'worthy', because our own state of being differ so much from the ideal state, which is 'the most productive man or woman'.⁷² In sum, the neoliberal organization of our society is 'determining how we relate to our bodies, our partners, our colleagues, and our children – in short, to our identities'.⁷³ And, I want to add, to our homes. Even if our feelings of home can be complex, and even if the view of home as a place of security can hide inequalities, as feminist geographers have underscored,⁷⁴ home serves – or *should* serve – 'our most basic physiological and psychological needs'.⁷⁵ Thus, '[l]oss of self can go along with loss of home'.⁷⁶

Empirical investigation: 'insiders' versus 'outsiders' – economists' argumentation for market rents

It is the Tenants' Association's job to represent the tenants, but what we see is that. . . and this is cynical, but. . . the wrong people are occupying the wrong apartments. . . . Those who are willing to pay, it would be good if they came to Stockholm and worked, it would be better if they were the ones [as opposed to e.g. elderly women] who lived in these apartments, quite frankly. (Interview with economist, 2015)

The 'rent regulation system' causes giant 'welfare losses', which appear when 'potential tenants with stronger demand, *outsiders*, are excluded from the apartments . . .'.⁷⁷ Hence, displacement of individuals with less money from the attractive parts of the city would equal 'a welfare gain'.⁷⁸ This summarizes the economists' arguments for market rents. One of the most notable things about their rhetoric is that they frame displacement as a positive thing.⁷⁹

The economists whose work I have analyzed here use the term 'outsiders' in relation to 'insiders', which denotes 'tenants with first-hand contracts in cheap and well-located apartments'.⁸⁰ As previously stated, the terms 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are taken from the insider-outsider theory developed by Lindbeck and Snower in the 1980s to analyze unemployment. As Lindbeck⁸¹ explains, the question that motivated the theory was: Why do unemployed people (outsiders) not get a job even if they are willing to work for less than those who already have a job (insiders)? When I asked Lindbeck how and when and why the theory was translated into the context of the housing market, he only confirmed that 'it is suitable for the housing market'.⁸² Applied to the housing market, I infer that the question logically must read: Why do people without a rental contract (outsiders) fail to get a hold of an apartment even though they are able to pay more than the

current tenants (insiders)? At the face of it, this seems like a reasonable translation of the theory. However, it *seems* suitable only as long as one does not define who the outsiders in the respective contexts are. Who the insiders are seems less complicated; they are individuals with employment respectively a secure and affordable rental contract.

In the original theory, typical outsider groups are ‘young workers, women and some minorities’.⁸³ ‘They are typically unemployed or working at temporary, low grade, or dead-end jobs . . . They often live in the underclass neighborhoods of large cities, with meager social services, poor schooling, and scant policy protection’.⁸⁴ That the outsiders are a group of less advantaged individuals is also stated, or assumed, when the theory is applied to the housing market. Initially and superficially, at least. In *How to create attractive cities*, the economists argue that ‘[n]umerous young people, students and young families are in need of an apartment’, and it is partly due to the so called rent regulation system that they lack housing.⁸⁵ But later they explain what will happen if the rents were set free: ‘Tenants with a high willingness to pay for an apartment in attractive areas will replace those who have a low willingness to pay’.⁸⁶ And ‘. . . potential tenants with a higher willingness to pay, *outsiders*, are excluded from the apartments while those who have got them, *insiders*, at regulated rents consume more housing than they would do at market rents’.⁸⁷

Here we notice an interesting, and complete, shift in meaning when the theory is taken out of its original context. In short, ‘outsiders’ now denotes the rich, not the poor. But since this shift is not acknowledged, the economists *seem* to care about the ‘original’ outsiders, while what they really argue is for the less advantaged to clear their way in favor of the better off. Another notable change in meaning appears when we look at what the original theory says about the insiders’ treatment of the outsiders. ‘Historical experience documents the hostile manner in which insiders often treat outsiders who try to underbid insider wages; terms like “scabs” reflect the attitudes of insiders to such outsiders’.⁸⁸ In other words, the insiders *harass* the outsiders. When applied to the housing market, this message is kept intact; in-between the lines, it is the insiders’ fault that the outsiders lack housing.

It is clear that the insider-outsider theory frames insiders as actors with power over the outsiders’ lives, and Lindbeck & Snower’s primary policy recommendation is to commit to “power-reducing policies” that mitigate insiders’ market power’.⁸⁹ The insiders’ power can be reduced by reducing security of employment, and by reducing the power of labor unions. Another way to level the playing field, as they express it, is to strengthen the outsiders’ position with for example more education. But the recommendation to mitigate the insiders’ power is stated first – both in the overview from 2002, as well as in the paper from 2001. The insiders, the employed workers, are ‘exploiting the monopoly power that they obtain in wage setting as a result of the costs of hiring and firing’.⁹⁰ A word to contemplate here is ‘exploiting’. Tenants – who want to stay put – are seen as ‘exploiting’ their power, at the expense of individuals who have nowhere to live. In the light of the application of the insider-outsider theory to the housing market, tenants’ protection against being exploited and evicted – their rental contract and the support they get from the Tenants’ Association – in itself becomes an exercise of power. They hold ‘privileged positions’,⁹¹ and this, we understand, must change. An affordable rent and a secure dwelling condition is what make the tenants’ situation ‘privileged’. In the economists’ view, it is the tenants (not politicians or developers) that hinder people from acquiring a place to live. Lindbeck and Snower⁹² use the word ‘power’ no less than 35 times, almost exclusively to describe the ‘insiders’ market power’, and/or the power of unions.

Analysis: a potential effect of the economists’ rhetoric: alienation

Distinctions concerning ‘inside-outside’, ‘subjective-objective’ . . . are only phenomenological, but these pseudo-polarities . . . are central to the alienated person’s explanation of himself as an object in the social universe. (Frank Johnson, ‘Psychological alienation’.)⁹³

Economists' underlying message to tenants in affordable apartments in attractive areas boils down to the following: *We know how little you pay in rent for your centrally-located apartment and we know that there are individuals who could pay more than you. In our opinion, which is not an opinion but a scientific fact, they deserve it more. You are 'a welfare loss'. Moreover, the reason to why you want to stay put is because you want the subsidy that rent regulation entails; you care about your apartment because it is worth a lot in monetary terms. Lastly, your secure living condition happens at the expense of those who do not have a place to live; hence, you only care about yourself.*

I will now explain why I see alienation as a potential consequence of this message. First, what does alienation mean? The flexibility and vagueness of this term is extraordinary; it has become 'a generic expression for diverse anxieties, violences, imperfections, discontinuities, and separations in Western life'.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, it says something important about the defective aspects of human existence. To begin with, alienation means 'detachment'.⁹⁵ Hence we are dealing with a division, a gap – which is perceived by the individual who suffers from it. Having the ontological status of a gap, a breach, means that alienation is something quite elusive. Still, it remains an important object of study; if we are to believe Harvey,⁹⁶ alienation is the most important problem of cities today.

If alienation means detachment, and if we assume that tenants are alienated by the economists' words, what is it that they have been detached from? An answer may be: the spontaneity that is implied in the activity of dwelling, of feeling at home in a place. Dwelling is an intrinsically spontaneous activity, that is, we do not reflect upon it and think 'I am an occupant of this location', because this would mean engaging in an abstraction, which is the opposite of dwelling. When dwelling, as any other particularity, becomes an abstraction, it is no longer itself.⁹⁷ Dwelling, like 'being', is an intransitive verb, which means I do not dwell *in order to* do something else (make money, for instance). Rather, I dwell *for the sake of* dwelling itself. It is this clarification that Heidegger⁹⁸ makes when tracing the etymological roots of the phrase 'Ich bin' (I am).

Being at the center of the economists' rhetoric on Sweden's need for market rents – a rhetoric, which tenants today are exposed to either through the radio, the newspapers, or public meetings where experts are invited to discuss the topic of housing and rent – the individual tenant may (involuntarily) start to introject their words and view herself as a stumbling block, not only to the market, but to the welfare of society as a whole.⁹⁹ She may start to doubt if she really has the right to live where she lives.¹⁰⁰ And given what dwelling means, doubting one's right to dwell is closely related to doubting one's right to exist. The seemingly simple fact of being called an 'insider' may make you start to view yourself and your home *from the outside*, from the same perspective as the dominant economic discourse today; that your home is a commodity on the market and you are merely a discrete occupant of this particular location, whereby an ontological transformation occurs and your home changes from being a subject – inseparable from you as a person – to being an object. And when your home is reified, you too become reified, and being told the reason you want to stay put is because you want to continue to enjoy a 'rent subsidy',¹⁰¹ you may introject a view of yourself as someone instrumentally occupying your apartment for the sake of money. A facsimile of yourself, a greedy one, has entered the scene, which may cause self-alienation.

A humanistic-geographical answer to the question of what the tenant risks being detached from when faced with the economists' rhetoric is: her *insideness*, to use Relph's¹⁰² expression. Seamon¹⁰³ explains:

For Relph, the key to place identity is *insideness* – the degree to which the experiencer belongs to and associates himself with a place. If a person feels *inside* a place, he is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed.

'Whatever the approach, central to the definition of alienation is the idea that man has lost his identity or "selfhood"'.¹⁰⁴ When calling the tenant an 'insider', economists, inadvertently

and paradoxically, push the individual from her position of being *inside* a place, again in the humanistic-geographical or existential meaning of the term, to being *outside* of it, by forcing her to join the perspective of the critical and objectifying on-looker.¹⁰⁵ An on-looker is an unembodied self, an observer of what the body does, without being in direct contact with anything.¹⁰⁶ To better grasp what consequences that this shift can have, it is productive to turn to literature. In the novel *Despair*, Vladimir Nabokov writes¹⁰⁷:

I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself, to being both painter and model, so no wonder my style is denied the blessed grace of spontaneity. Try as I may I do not succeed in getting back into my original envelope, let alone making myself comfortable in my old self; the disorder there is far too great; things have been moved, the lamp is black and dead, bits of my past litter the floor.

What Nabokov depicts is a self-consciousness so intense it has become destructive – a common feature of psychological alienation.¹⁰⁸ It illustrates the difficulties of getting back into one's original 'envelope' once you have adopted an on-looker's perspective, and how this prohibits you from enjoying the spontaneity that comes with being inside oneself – and in our case: inside one's home.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion: economists gentrify with their words

Homo neoliberalismus 'is no respecter of geography' (Milton Friedman)¹¹⁰

This article has sought to contribute to the discussion of displacement by proposing that the words and formulations used by economic experts can lead to the un-homing of tenants, felt as a form of alienation. The theoretical reasoning that underpins this argument is Verhaeghe's point that our identity is to a large extent formed by the environment, and that the dominant narrative of today's Western society, neoliberalism, is influencing our psychic lives. Important previous research include Davidson¹¹¹ and Atkinson,¹¹² who highlight the possibility/risk of feeling displaced without actually having moved. If it is true what Verhaeghe (and others before him) claim, that '[t]he mirror that our environment holds up to us determines who we become',¹¹³ an insight crucial for cultural geographers who want to understand how discourse and representations shape our sense of place in the city, it is only logical that what economists say about tenants matters for their self-understanding and their feelings of home.

As previously stated, Sweden is a hybrid of neoliberalized politics and the old Social Democratic welfare state, in which economists have a great influence on policy making.¹¹⁴ One example of this hybridity is the fact that economists still use the word *welfare*, although with an entirely different meaning, as well as by the fact that there still exists affordable housing in attractive urban areas, but the number has decreased drastically, sharpening competition and increasing pressure on the tenants to really 'deserve' them. As shown by Offer and Söderberg, in Sweden as well as globally, economists' statements have been given considerable weight as a result of the Swedish central bank's endowment of a Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 1968 – or 'the Nobel Prize in economics' as it is often wrongly called. An aim of the prize was to provide scientific validation to economic policy and to move Sweden and the rest of the world in a more market-liberal direction. Although economists for half a century have been quite alone in arguing for market rents in Sweden, their efforts now seem to have had an effect; today even Social Democratic politicians accept the idea of market rents (!), although 'only' in newly built apartments.¹¹⁵ That notwithstanding, the ideological hybridity of contemporary Sweden is evident in the fact that the counter-discourse against the neoliberal narrative is very much alive too, not least exemplified by

the Tenants' Association's 2018-until-present campaign against market rents, in which they proclaim that market rents are 'threatening our right to dwell' (The Tenants Association's webpage, 2020-08-24), as well as by the national activist platform 'Bostadsvrålet' (translated as 'The Housing roar'), founded in 2016 and consisting of voluntary organizations and invited researchers articulating the perspectives of dwellers, the homeless, and tenants threatened with displacement/renoviction.

I have stressed the intimate *dialectical* relationship that exists between human beings and our surroundings, in which others' words make up a great part; we are not entities homogeneous within ourselves, separated from wholes, circling around in absolute space.¹¹⁶ Human life is inherently spatial, it can be argued that one of our names is *homo geographicus*. Neo-classical economics lack any real understanding of place,¹¹⁷ and the neoliberal project bears 'no loyalties to place per se; as a mobile rationality it [is] formally indifferent to place, indeed designed for travel'.¹¹⁸ *Homo neoliberalism* is [n]o respecter of geography', claimed Friedman¹¹⁹ – an early advocate of market rents. '[If] I do not like what my community does . . . I can move to another local community, and though few may take this step, the mere possibility acts as a check', he writes.¹²⁰ On a deregulated housing market, the idea of which we have touched upon in this paper via the words of economists, it is *the mere possibility* of being replaced by another tenant with more money which *acts as a check*, to use Friedman's formulations. It is the possibility – or, rather, the risk – of being displaced that tenants are forced to live with in contemporary Sweden, where the threat of market rents is more real than ever.

In light of what has been discussed in this paper, I interpret Friedman's quote as evidence that a rhetoric inspired by neo-classical economics ultimately does not respect human beings' dwelling. *Homo neoliberalism*' disrespect of geography should not be interpreted as a *legal* disrespect towards for example property rights, of which he or she is a famous respecter of,¹²¹ but rather as: one, a *philosophical negligence* towards the phenomenon of place and towards our existential situatedness in place, and, two: an *ethical carelessness* towards people's need for home. Not respecting geography does not mean, as we have seen, not discussing it. On the contrary, economists are very much engaged in discussions on how our cities should be developed, on who deserves to live where. Economists *encourage* displacement (of people who lack the means to pay market rents), they gentrify with their words. When tenants are told that they do not deserve to remain in their homes, they are *dis-placed*; alienated from their original insideness.


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Notes

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5. Marcuse, 'Abandonment, Gentrification, and Displacement', p. 335.
6. See Atkinson, 'Losing One's Place'.
7. See Davidson, 'Displacement, Space and Dwelling'.
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27. Bergström, 'Are Economists Social Scientists?', p. 84.
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31. Ramböll, 'Den svenska hyresmarknaden. Scenariobanalys' [The Swedish Rental Market. A Scenario Analysis]. Report written on behalf of The Swedish Tenants' Association, 2015.
32. Ramböll, *The Swedish Rental Market*.
33. R.Andersson, S.Mandell and M.Wilhelmsson, 'Skeva slutsatser från ett särintresse' [Doubtful Conclusions from a Partial Interest Group], *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 May 2015.
34. This can be seen as a reminder that economics is a *social* endeavor, which 'reflects some points of view, favored by the group that makes the rules for the discipline, and neglects others' (Nelson, 'Gender, Metaphor and the Definition of Economics', p. 107).
35. Andersson et al., 'Doubtful Conclusions from a Partial Interest Group'. Important to note is that the economists' expression 'willingness to pay' does not denote how much a person *wants* to pay for something, but how much money he or she has.
36. I contacted all three authors separately by email but one of them was not available for an interview.
37. Translation of quotes from Swedish to English is made by the author.
38. They appear for ex. in a debate article by two politicians: M.Schröder and D.Mamendi, 'Hyresregleringens vinnare bor på Östermalm' [The Beneficiaries from the Rent Regulation System Live on Östermalm], *Dagens Samhälle*, 20 May 2016. The terms were also used by an architect at a seminar on the housing crisis at ArkDes in Stockholm in 2016, when participants were asked what the biggest problem was. His answer: 'insiders' (people with rental contracts) are in the way for 'outsiders' (people trying to find a place to live).
39. Offer and Söderberg, *The Nobel Factor*, p. 185; L.Pålsson Syll, *The dismal science*, p. 24.
40. Offer and Söderberg, *The Nobel Factor*, p. 187.
41. A.Lindbeck, *Ekonomi är att välja* [Economics Is about Choosing] (Stockholm: Bonniers, 2012), p. 143.

42. M.Friedman and G.Stigler, *Roofs or Ceilings? The Current Housing Problem*, Popular essays on current problems, 1(2) (New York: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1946).
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44. Offer and Söderberg, *The Nobel Factor*, p. 184.
45. As Aldred (*The Sceptical Economist*, p. 6) points out, 'many economists believe that economics can be ethics-free for the noblest of reasons – they are loathe to foist their own ethical views on other people'. However, 'ethics is unavoidable in economics. . . . The great economists of the past saw economics and ethics as inextricable entwined'.
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77. R.Andersson, S.Mandell and M.Wilhelmsson, *Så skapas attraktiva städer* [How to Create Attractive Cities] (Västerås: Samhällsförlaget, 2014), p. 114, emphasis added.
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79. The Swedish economists are not alone in persevering in this attitude; as previously mentioned, Friedman and Stigler's main complaint about rent regulation in the over 70 years old pamphlet *Roofs or Ceilings* is that rent regulation ('ceilings') causes 'inefficient use of housing', and that market rents would solve this problem through redistribution of people. Displacement, which would follow (for 'some people'), due to the dramatic increase of rent, is listed under 'advantages' (p. 9). 'What is true is that, under free market conditions, the better quarters will go to those who pay more' (p. 10).
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97. See H.Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity. Twelve Preludes September 1959 – May 1961* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 120; B.Ollman, *Alienation. Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 134.
98. M.Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), translated by W.Lowitt, p. 349; see also Davidson, 'Displacement, Space and Dwelling'.
99. I want to emphasize that even though I argue that the tenant risks getting affected by the economists' discourse, I do not see her or him as a person who has no agency or ability to interpret and contest this discourse. Rather, people are negotiating beings; tenants may find ways to – individually and/or collectively – fight against its alienating effects (see Polanska and Richard, 'Displacement in the Making'). From Verhaeghe (*What About Me?*, p. 10) we learn that identity is 'a balance of tensions'; we continuously balance – or negotiate – new and old identity-conferring messages.
100. Support for this claim can be found in Polanska and Richard's, 'Displacement in the Making', in which they report on tenants' reactions to renovation plans and subsequent displacement pressure in Gränby, Uppsala, Sweden, where one of the reactions is that the tenants feel that they do not 'deserve' to be treated the way they are treated by the landlord, because they have worked their whole life and paid taxes and therefore deserve to take part in the welfare society that Sweden at least once was, at the very least to stay put in the apartment for which they have always paid rent.
101. Andersson et al., *How to Create Attractive Cities*, p. 118.
102. E.Relf, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).
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104. E.Josephson, 'Introduction', in E.Josephson (Ed.), *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1962), p. 14.
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- 'the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream' (Vidler in Huq and Harwood, 'Making Homes Unhomely', p. 4).
110. Quoted in J. Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 123.
 111. Davidson, 'Displacement, Space and Dwelling'.
 112. Atkinson, 'Losing One's Place'.
 113. Verhaeghe, *What About Me?*, p. 12.
 114. Offer and Söderberg, *The Nobel Factor*.
 115. J. Löfvenberg and P. Rawet, 'Regeringen ska utreda fri hyressättning i nyproduktion – Hyresgästföreningen rasar' [The Government Will Investigate Market Rents in New Production – The Tenants' Association Bristles], *SVT Nyheter*, 25 April 2020.
 116. See for ex. D. Harvey, 'The Nature of Environment', in D. Harvey (ed.), *The Ways of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 159–213, p. 194.
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 119. Milton Friedman quoted in Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, p. 123.
 120. In Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, p. 123.
 121. The definition and enforcement of property rights is, according to Friedman, 'one of the primary functions of the state' (M. Friedman with the assistance of R. D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 40th Anniversary Edition, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1962], p. 162), see also W. V. McIntosh and L. J. Hatcher (eds) *Property Rights and Neoliberalism: Cultural Demands and Legal Actions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). On the topic of rights, it must be noted that while neoliberals have always wanted to 'claim classical liberalism as their own', the similarities between neoliberalism and classical liberalism are not seldom 'superficial' (D. Steadman Jones, *Masters of the Universe. Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012], pp. 100 & 8). Neoliberalism as '[a] free-market project', which e.g. Friedman was a determined campaigner of, could not be 'simply recovered from the founding texts of philosophical liberalism', but would have to be constructed (Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, p. 3). Furthermore and lastly, the answer to the question of what liberalism is has changed over the course of the past centuries (see D. Bell, 'What Is Liberalism?', *Political Theory*, 42(6), 2014, pp. 682–715).

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