E. The Municipalisation of Housing

(Thematic Correspondence to Chapter Six)

The social and economic revolution that Catalonia experienced in the first months of civil war was multifaceted, and it played itself out in many different sectors. After the Collectivisation and Workers’ Control Decree, one of the most important decrees called for the ‘municipalisation’ of housing, which attempted to resolve a problem that had affected the Catalan popular classes for decades. After an intense debate lasting until 11 June 1937, the new decree was announced, going into effect immediately and collectivising urban space for the first time in history. Here we publish that historic decree as it appeared a few days later in Barcelona’s La Vanguardia newspaper.

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(La Vanguardia, 19 June 1937)

At the beginning of the fascist uprising, the government of the Generalitat did not hesitate to reduce rents for urban properties, understanding the people’s desire to free themselves from one of their most burdensome sources of exploitation.

Yet, while echoing the will of the people, the government was not unaware of the move’s inevitable consequences. The interests of capital, already fearful in these circumstances, did not dare commit to new investments or put more money into projects that were already begun. And if there was no chance of lucrative gain – the only incentive that might induce the capitalist class to take risks – then it was logical that the construction industry would become more paralysed each day.
With the aim of making sure that workers’ needs were not denied, and to avoid the losses that abandoning all construction would have meant for the country, it was necessary to take steps to ensure that all building owners would continue investing resources to finish work on constructions already begun. But many of those who had begun works found themselves lacking in the liquid assets that they had counted on being able to gather, and so it was necessary for the Generalitat to play a role in organising loans and pledges to avoid the potentially disastrous consequences.

At the same time, many of the works started have been completed, and in spite of the number of workers employed in defence work and those who have gone to the front, the number of construction workers forced into unemployment goes up every day.

As a result of all of this, the Generalitat finds itself in a position of having to use important resources in order to complete projects not yet finished and provide jobs for unemployed workers. Meanwhile, the increasing pressures of the war suggest that all resources should be used exclusively in the fight against fascism.

It is indispensable and urgent that we find a rapid solution to these exceptional circumstances. If we consider that the benefits to be gained from urban properties do not depend exclusively on capital investment, and we instead see property as intimately connected to the municipality, a factor that is not the fruit of the proprietors’ efforts, we will conclude that it is the municipality that will benefit most.

From these considerations we have drawn the conclusion that we must municipalise urban property. However, so as to not suffer the defects of bureaucratisation, we have decided it would be best to municipalise through a body that will have sufficient flexibility and agility to withstand the fluctuations that the urban housing stock faces on account of the rise, stagnation, and drop in the city’s population. Hence, the body will have to be directed from a practical (técnico) point of view, without the city government losing its influence and control. With these aims in mind, the Housing Board (Consejo Directivo de la Caja Inmobiliaria), which will be the body in charge of this task, shall have representatives from the two trade union organisations, the National Confederation of Workers (CNT) and the General Union of Workers (UGT), as well as from the city government itself.

Therefore, in view of the report from the Catalan Economic Advisory Council (Consell d’Economia de Catalunya), a proposal from the Economic, Finance, and Justice Ministers, and in agreement with the cabinet of the Generalitat, we decree: