Chapter 4.

Lone Voices in the Desert: The politicisation of housing discourse in public space

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Abstract:

This chapter documents posters found on the streets of Naarm/Melbourne, Australia between 2017 and 2024, and analyses the issues depicted within them. The chapter explores how housing is politicised in the public space of an iconic high street in the increasingly gentrified inner-northern suburbs of Naarm/Melbourne. Here, rogue posters are pasted on vacant shopfronts and narrow wall spaces between shop windows. Most of the posters date from 2020-21, probably due to COVID-19 lockdowns when not only more posters were produced but also when their authors and the authors of this visual essay spent more time walking their local streets. The chapter quantifies the types of issues raised in the posters and demonstrates that although *Homefullness* is the third most popular issue, only one of the selected posters states that housing is a human right.

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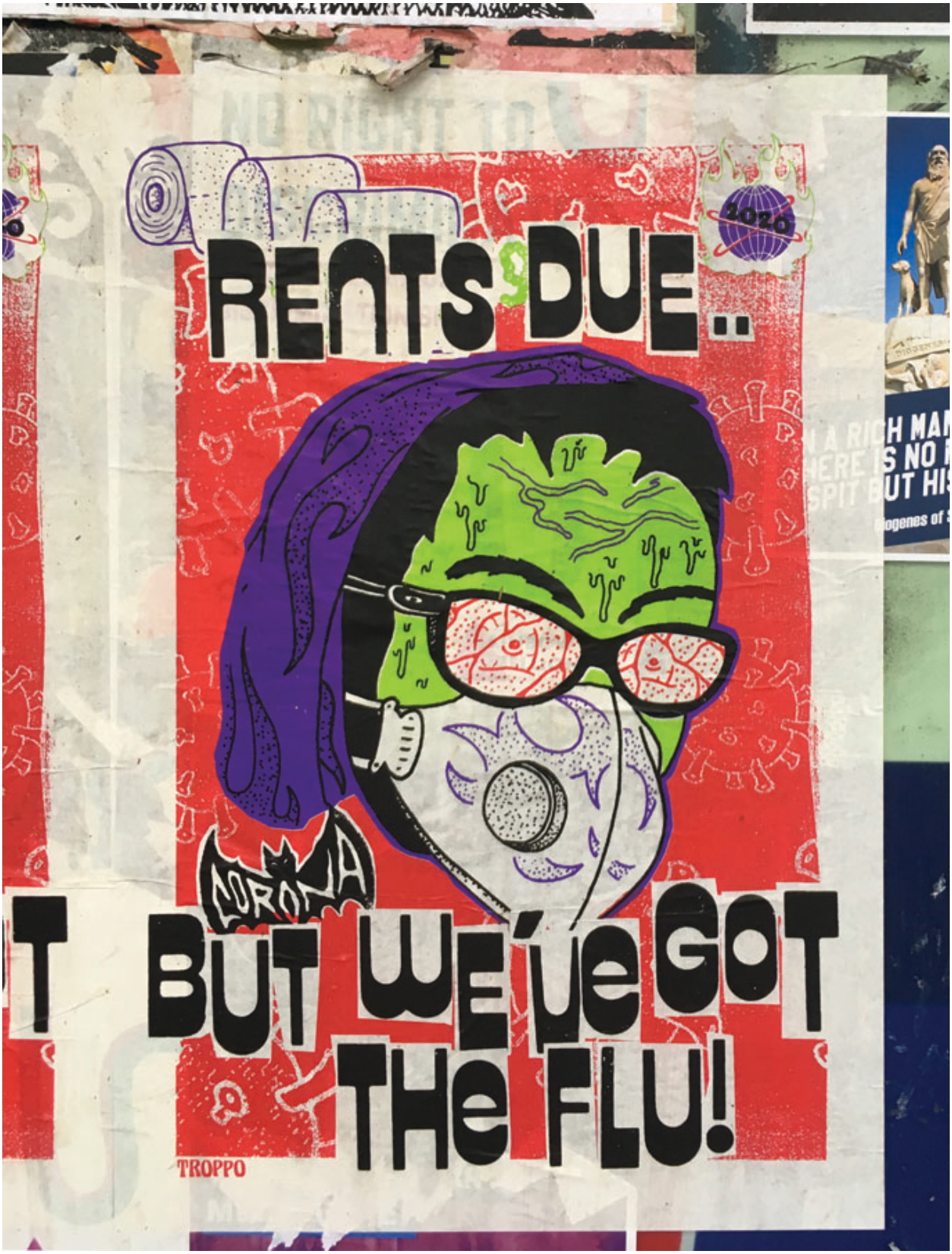
<Figure 4.1. here>

Figure 4.1. Rent is theft – seize the city, 6 July 2020. Photograph by the author, 2020.



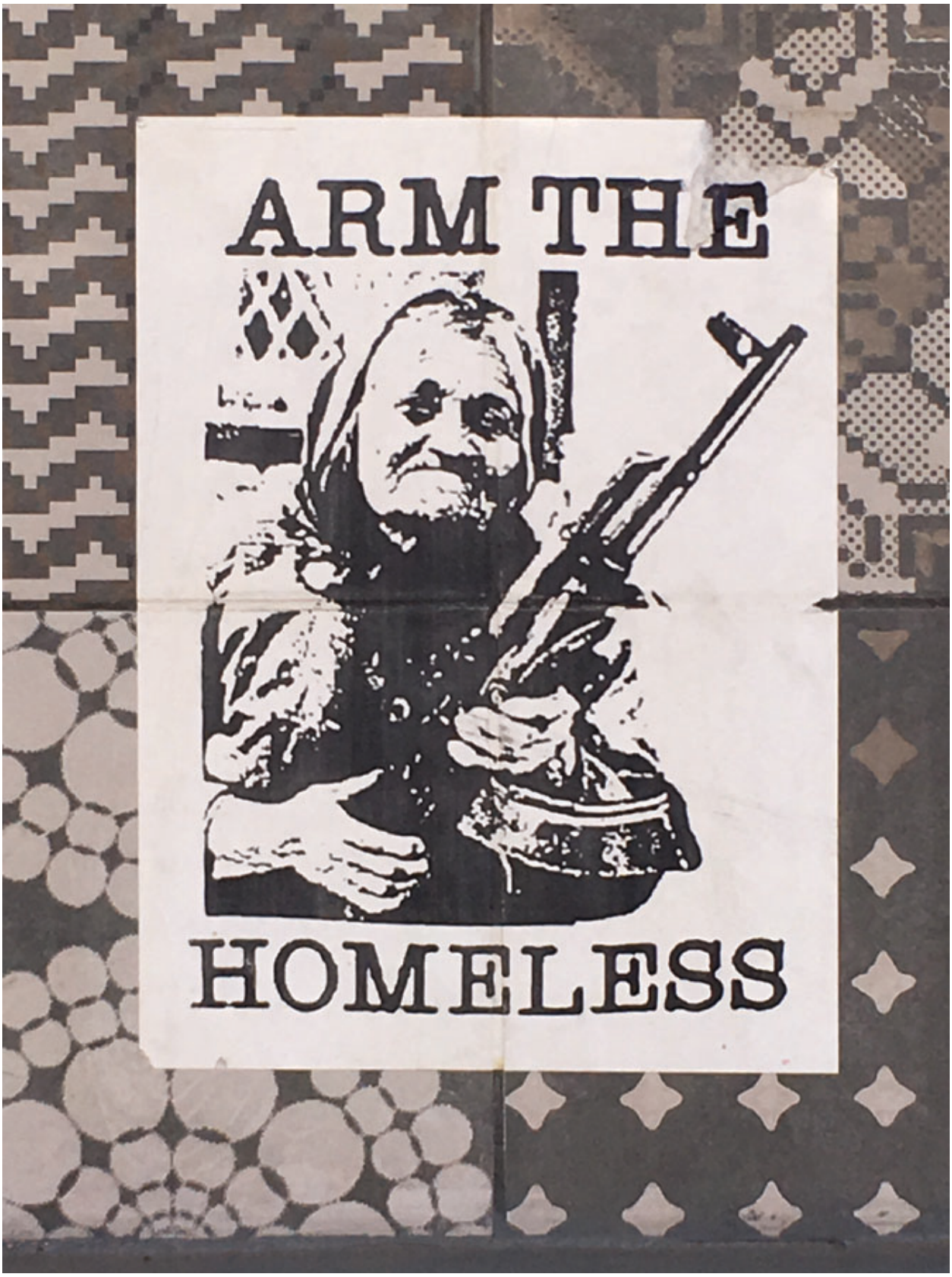
<Figure 4.2. here>

Figure 4.2. Housing is a human right, 7 July 2019. Photograph by the author, 2019.


RENTS DUE..
2020
CORONA
T BUT WE'VE GOT
THE FLU!
TROPPO

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Figure 4.3. Rents due got the flu, 10 April 2020. Photograph by the author, 2020.



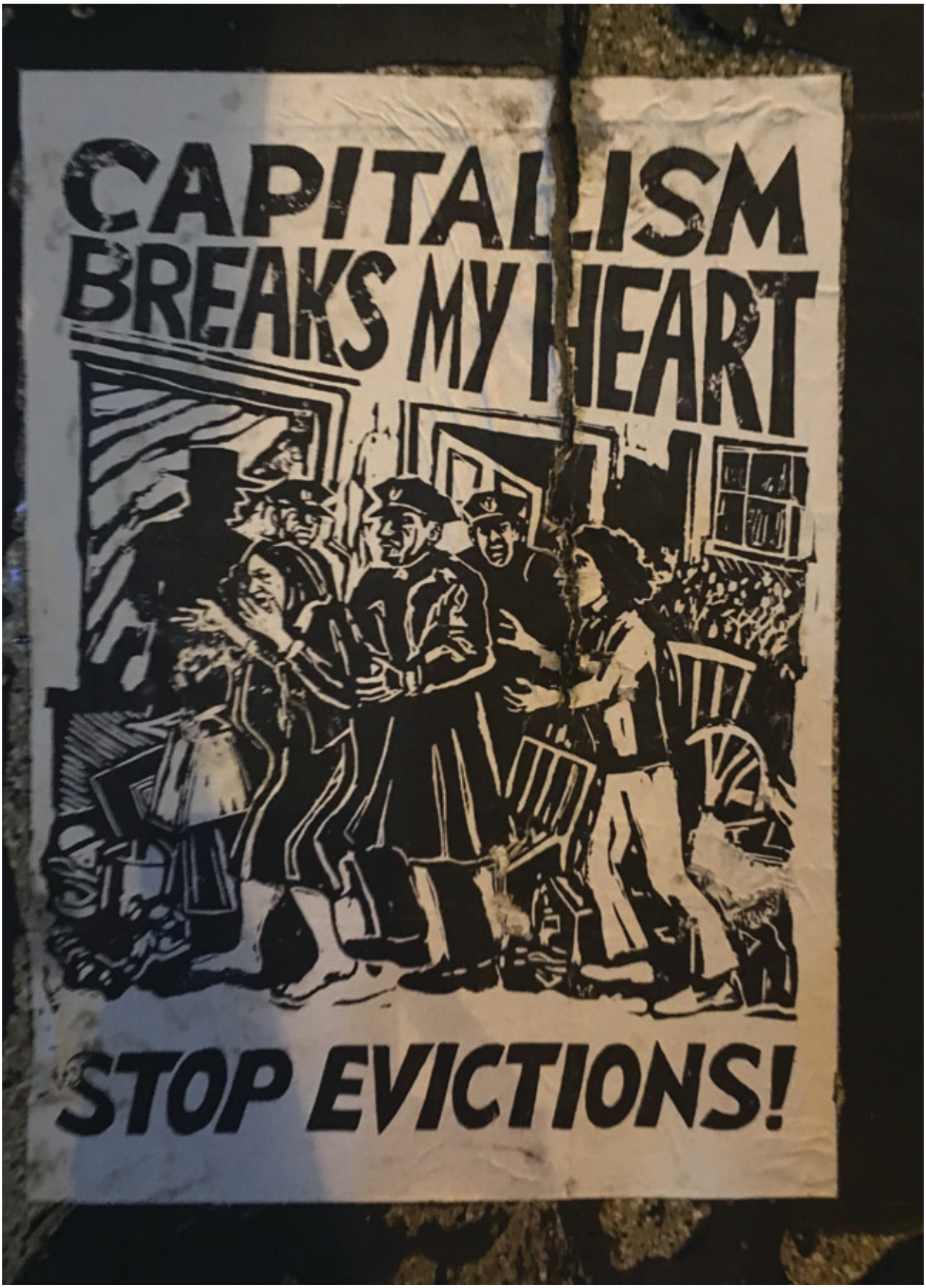
<Figure 4.4. here>

Figure 4.4. Arm the homeless, 10 June 2019. Photograph by the author, 2019.



<Figure 4.5. here>

Figure 4.5. Rent strike tenants rent landlords distance, 11 August 2021. Photograph by the author, 2021.


CAPITALISM
BREAKS MY HEART
STOP EVICTIONS!

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Figure 4.6. Capitalism breaks my heart stop evictions, 13 July 2020. Photograph by the author, 2020.

Western society's inexorable shift towards neo-liberalism means housing is now more a commodity than a human right (United Nations Human Rights, 2009). In Australia, where this case study plays out, we are told by the media that we are in the midst of a housing crisis yet the political dimensions of housing are only addressed within the limited discourse of a two-party system that pits the governing party against the opposition in a zero-sum game of political ping pong (Clare, 2022; Sukarno & Bragg, 2024).

This is how the issue is made known to the public in the official arena of political discourse: mainstream (now, including social-) media and party-political press releases, narrowly focused on a purported numerical crisis in the supply chain rather than the broader desire for everyday *Homefullness*, diverse experiences of its absence and the structures that create them. But this is not the only place where political discourse occurs. There is the unofficial arena of political discourse, the public space of our high streets. Since the spray can has passed from the hands of political dissenters to those of taggers and street artists, 'throw-up' or 'rogue' street art has proliferated to fill the gap in what is a key medium of political expression for citizens to speak out against the establishment (Marcello, 2023).

This essay looks at how housing is politicised in public space in 323 instances of rogue posters between 2017 and 2024, the majority pasted on vacant shopfronts and narrow wall spaces between shop windows on Sydney Road, the iconic high street of the increasingly gentrified inner-northern suburbs of Naarm/Melbourne, Australia's largest city, famously the southern hemisphere's longest continuous shopping strip and oftentimes site for protest marches and one of Melbourne's oldest and most successful street festivals. Most date from 2020-21, probably due to COVID-19 lockdowns when not only more posters were produced but also when their authors and those of this essay spent more time walking their local streets. The dominant discourse in these posters (63%) is rooted in anarchist notions that rail against the establishment, be it the patriarchy, government or police and their complicity in supporting global capitalism as represented by the wealthy in general and, more specifically bankers, developers, real estate agents and landlords. These issues dovetail with other themes such as the environment (9%), the COVID pandemic (8%), gender (7%) and Indigenous rights (3%). The percentage of posters addressing housing was the same as COVID at 8% and these two issues became inextricably linked during Melbourne's many lockdowns, among the most extensive globally. Rent became an important topic of discussion because the pandemic forced many out of work meaning they could not afford to pay it. Rogue poster artists took on

the predominant discourse of the time, with slogans such as “Tenants keep your rent. Landlords keep your distance” and “Rent’s due… but we’ve got the flu” decorated with rolls of toilet paper referencing the shortages that often resulted in fist fights in supermarkets (Zagon, 2020).

Rent was the most frequent topic tied to the anti-capitalist concept that rent is theft, captured by the striking Constructivist-inspired ‘Rent is theft. Seize the City. Squat the world.’ Evictions come in a close second with the most common slogan ‘Capitalism breaks my heart. Stop evictions.’ This poster aligns with the dominance of anti-capitalist (10%) and anti-police themes (15%) in the posters overall and its rough-hewn lino cut look shows desolate tenants being removed from their home by police. Before the digital age, political posters were commonly made via screen-printing and lino-cut techniques as these were inexpensive and easily accessible media for collectives who often came from art school backgrounds (Marcello, 2023).

Homelessness (or lack of *Homefullness*) is the third most popular theme. In line with the anarchist class war theme that predominates the full sample of posters, the posters advocate arming people experiencing homelessness with hand grenades and AK 47s, the official weapon of the former Soviet army and the Viet Cong. *Homefullness*, according to the poster, is easily achieved by evicting the rich. One popular poster that correlates wealth with home ownership quotes the Greek stoic philosopher Diogenes, who shamelessly defied convention by renouncing all material goods and sleeping in public buildings.

But the most fundamental idea that housing is a human right, was found in only one instance. This lonely voice in the desert will still be heard.

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