



# At home there are unknown possibilities. A comparative research on oikophobia

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## Abstract

This essay presents an overview of the main results of the burglaries research, a little-discussed and studied topic. Collection, organization, and analysis of empirical data have been carried out by two working groups at the university of L'Aquila and at the IULM University of Milan. Research has gone on for twenty years and has accumulated an impressive amount of data, from a comparative perspective and with extensive references to the classics of sociology, criminology, philosophy, political science, and literature. Starting from the Italian situation, comparisons are presented regarding the situation existing in other European countries, because the differences between various areas are very significant.

This essay explores also the themes of the relationship between the house and democracy, treated in a sociological tradition that includes authors such as Max Weber and Anthony Giddens. The idea of an unmotivated aversion to one's home environment has had some success in Roger Scruton's use of it.

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## 1. Indoor species in an unknown environment

On houses, on homecoming and homeownership, there is an almost infinite literature, which begins with Homer and Cicero, then continuing at the dawn of modern Rule of Law, with Coke and Blackstone (who formulate the doctrine "A man's home is his castle"), lastly culminating with the extreme versions of Martin Heidegger and Ezra Pound, in one of the most cursed, but also among the most quoted *Cantos*.

"... a house of good stone  
each block cut smooth and well fitting  
that design might cover their face..." (XLV, 1-3).

It's easy to stay at home, it is much more difficult to know which and where the true our home actually is. Traitors and burglars are the first to have doubts about the precise boundaries between

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mine and yours, just as homeless and globalists have doubts about the anthropological need for home.

Philosophers, jurists, poets have written a great deal on the subject. But the house is nevertheless a partially unknown place, as in David Foster Wallace's famous apologue, about the two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?". And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?".

First of all, according to the statistics, Westerners are now an *indoor generation*, which spends about 90% of its time indoors, between houses and offices, schools and shops, restaurants and gyms, cinemas and libraries. Humans have become indoor species in such a nurtured way that they have claimed to be the only rulers of the natural space, neglecting that even in domestic territories there is another impressive life of microorganisms with which coexistence is forced (Anthes 2020). Small droplets, aerosols, fungi, viruses and contaminated surfaces can stay at home and hide everywhere, ready to be associated with the diversity of microbial life inside the human body. Every house is for his habitants a partially unknown and uncharted place, where sudden, unrequested and sometimes completely unwanted surprises are possible.

## 2. Rationality and irrationality at home

Modern sociology is very diverse. Sociology of the house exists in many versions, in connections through the *sociology of everyday life* to the *sociology of housing* that is focused on the way that rights to housing are created, distributed, and enforced. Debates about *housing need* often occur in political discussions about housing types and shortages.

Philosophers, jurists, poets have written a great deal on houses, with sociological reflections full of ambivalence and disturbing questions.

Christopher Lasch wrote that the loss of faith and future has led to narcissism and the prominence of survival strategies. In our modernity, uncertainty leads to a life "in a state of siege" and a defensive core "armed against adversity". The house is the last shelter of desperate people; it is the last trench where disheartened people have barricaded themselves in an extreme defense from the outside world. The family is a haven in a heartless world, the last refuge, says Christopher Lasch.

The most important pages of sociological thought on the house are found in Max Weber and must be located within the whole of his powerful work. Investigation of rationality permeates all of Weber's work. It is a central concept in the essay *Über einige Kategorien der verstehenden Sociologie*, then in the *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* and in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. He clearly distinguishes *Zweckrationalität* (rationality with respect to purpose) and *Wertrationalität* (rationality with respect to value). In many pages Weber described carefully what he saw as West's journey towards rationalization, with the development of capitalism, as one of the main factors setting the European West apart from the rest of the world.

Of the whole Weberian work, the most revealing part is that on music, where he explains why the rationalization of music is a solitary Western feature. A lifelong personal passion, music became the subject of his more ambitious study in the final years of his life. As in his entire study of the Western rationalization, Weber sought to trace the origins and progress of this absolutely original and European specificity, in counterpoint with all the other geographical and historical contexts. Pursuing gorgeous cross-cultural research, he made a cosmopolitan account of Western music and its peculiar, unique, singular development (*Sonderentwicklung*). A rational composition of music (i.e. written, measurable and calculable in a mathematical and standardized way, according to very complex procedures that are understandable and recognizable by specialists) has only existed in the West, says Weber.

In the densest observations on the subject, in a study that dizzily spans centuries and continents, Max Weber explains that the bourgeois *home* is a very recent experience, diffused in Europe in an unequal way, characterized by various climatic as well as economic specific profiles (Weber 1921). Weber's observations on the bourgeois and Western *home* are developed within an encyclopedic treatment of the rational and sociological presuppositions of the piano, which has been evaluated (Braun, 1992) and admired by specialists (Blaukopf 2001), with rare criticism (Wierzbicki 2010).

The historically unique experience of the piano is seen by Weber within the totally unique experience of some European houses and these are finally seen within the astonishing renaissance of cities in a part of Europe. There have always been huts and caves, houses and residential agglomerations, but in very different ways and constructions. Just as, in its peculiar genetic moment, in the waning of the Middle Ages, the European city was very different from all the other cities that have existed in every other time and under every other latitude, so that idea of a bourgeois *home* is very different from all the other houses that have existed in every other time and under every other latitude.

At a precise historical moment, only in a very limited part of Europe the walls of medieval fortifications were demolished: then the doors of the revived ancient cities were opened and, at the same exact time, the doors of the houses were closed, in the light of a principle of private freedom which, as Benjamin Constant first explained, did not exist in the ancient world. Weber underlines the uniqueness of that historical Western experience.

Human life can progressively incorporate elements of rationality that are universal, in the same way as the piano incorporates universal treasures of rationality and makes them usable, enjoyable, operative even at home. The private and domestic appropriation of universal treasures is possible in forms that have since been parodied and travestied by consumerism. At its best, the Western house embodies the culture of Western rationality, with its tensions and contradictions.

### **3. Some people want break into houses and others want to break out of houses.**

Exaltation of home and family is frequent and well known. Less well known is that houses contain ambiguity, ambivalence, fear and violence. These dramatic profiles parallel the upbeat and positive description.

Western houses in the nineteenth century sometimes had shaky foundations. Modernization had its discontent. There is an enormous literary production in Europe, which does not see family and home as protective, but destructive places.

In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe published *The Philosophy of Furniture* and in 1839 he published *The Fall of the House of Usher*, milestone of literature committed to describing the horrors that can take place inside the narrow domestic walls. Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary are not exceptions, but they are in fine gathering with the following intense criticisms of critical psychiatry and vehement feminist denunciations. The domestic walls would delimit a space of daily violence, spiritual and material. Home was not always a sweet home.

In *Arsenic and old lace*, Frank Capra had left a famous description of the skeletons hidden in the cellars of the apparently more welcoming home, but in Hitchcock the description of the house as a place where the strangest, most perverse, dangerous things can happen reaches the top: for him, the house is the space where all the imagery of the gothic tale is transferred, in its most disturbing aspects, obviously starting with the murder between husband and wife. He overturns the tale of love that lasts for a lifetime into its tragic and exact opposite.

A merciless analysis already existed in some of the best-known pages of Anglo-Saxon culture, in the *Spoon River Anthology*, which dates from 1915, and in Peyton Place, which is from 1956. The problem has been after described in famous legal drama comedy, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, released in 1979, *The War of the Roses*, released in 1989. The stereotype of the perfect middle-class home, with a perfect family, is put under the microscope (and slaughter) in television series,

such as *Big Little Lies*, released in 2017, or *The Undoing*, released in 2020. They are worms on the corpse of the old West.

This old West has been marvelous and should now be buried with all the honors that are due to something that is no longer there. We are in a millennium that is not full of opportunities only for Westerners - while the best Western legacy is squandered by unworthy and unprepared heirs.

The meaning of the Western home must be interpreted by looking at two sides of the coin. Western love of home is both an acknowledgment of pride and vulnerability.

In *The Life of Reason: Reason in Art* (1905), George Santayana said: "Plasticity loves new molds because it can fill them, but for a man of sluggish mind and bad manners there is decidedly no place like home". In *Matchmaker* (which originated the famous Broadway musical and a famous movie, *Hello, Dolly!* in 1964?), Thornton Wilder said: "Everybody's talking about people breaking into houses but there are more people in the world who want to break out of houses".

Walter Benjamin described a specific terror that would be hidden and looming in middle-class apartments. In a stratification of exotic and exaggerated comfort, between sumptuous Persian carpets and silver Ottoman boxes, he says (Benjamin 1966), the orgies of banknotes are enlivened by the unexpected irruption of the crime. To Benjamin, bourgeois residences always seem to be on the verge of atrocious crime: not only that committed between husband and wife, but that conceived between family members, servants, friends.

The unknown killer of Benjamin's novels is the extremist (anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist and anti-Western) version of that ubiquitous and impalpable, pervasive and spasmodic mood that had been described through Freudian *Unheimlich*. In a very famous volume, in 1919, Freud thinks a lot about this word: *Das Unheimlich*, which, he says, does not have an exact correspondent in other languages, such as in Italian or Portuguese, because it indicates something frightening and yet known to us from a long time and is familiar. The German word *Unheimlich* is the antithesis of the adjective *heimlich*, which refers to something domestic and familiar, but capable of suddenly transforming itself into forms that can become threatening and lethal. The English word "eeriness" quite describes the sense of disorientation, even at home, which derives from the constant possibility of some unknown and devastating danger.

#### **4. A comparative research on burglaries and distrust.**

In connection with social and cultural phenomena (above all the spread of psychotropic substances), from the end of the 1960s, property crimes began to rise throughout Western Europe, marking a reversal of the previous trend. The reduction that had become a characteristic of the civilized world after the Second World War, was reversed.

Thanks to various interventions, in Germany, France, and Great Britain, property crime levels, more or less, returned to the levels they were before. Not in Italy. Therefore, the perception of insecurity in Italy remains high. Insecurity has led to the growth of distrust. But this mistrust is not an Italian specialty (Connaughton 2020). Many events have shown that in various countries (suspicion about the vaccine, baseless theories about the dangers of 5G networks, political conspiracy theories), distrust in governments is much higher than in Italy. The yellow vest movement in France (Guilluy 2020), Brexit in the UK, Trump's elections in the US are a demonstration of the high levels of distrust. Trade wars and class wars threaten international peace (Klein and Pettis 2020), but all is not lost (Reich 2020).

My contribution presents an overview of the principal results of my research on burglaries (Scramaglia, Sidoti and Gammone (2021), a little-discussed and studied topic.

The research was conducted by two working groups in the university of L'Aquila and in the IULM university of Milan. In our research, burglary is more than housebreaking, the act of illegally entering another's premises without authorization to commit a theft.

Our research on burglaries has gradually become a research on the relationship of the citizens with the State, understood as the large "home" of the Europeans and generally perceived as a house that would need a better defense from thieves as well as a profound renovation.

Research has gone on for twenty years (with interruptions), and has accumulated an impressive amount of data, in a comparative perspective and with extensive references to the classics of sociology, criminology, philosophy, political science, and literature.

Burglary on the private building may constitute a serious offense, perceived as home invasion, especially regarding the attempt to take property by force or fear from persons on their premises. Nighttime burglaries are more severe than simple housebreaking. People ask to punish nighttime burglary more severely than housebreaking. In Italy, the phenomenon appears very relevant (since it affects millions of people), politically significant (since it concerns the trust in the institutions of these millions of citizens), risky (since it highlights the institutional responsibilities, denounced by citizens as unbearable).

Starting from the Italian situation, comparisons were made with the situation existing in other European countries, because the differences between the different areas are very significant (Gammone 2018).

On burglaries, various national and regional, economic and cultural specificities have become evident. We started from research on thefts in Italy and came to comparative research on various forms of European crime. For instance, for a long time it has been believed that the Sicilian mafia was an original and unique criminal organization. Instead, over time it has been seen that there are many forms of organized crime in many countries all around the world, even in Italy, where new mafias have been found, geographically characterized as coming from many other countries, such as Nigeria or Columbia.

Research first taught us to view common opinion and official statistics with caution. The validity of this cautious approach is evident in the homicide rate. In Italy, homicides are now 0.77 per 100 thousand inhabitants, while France has a rate of 1.53. Italy has fewer homicides than France and Germany, which has a rate of 0.84. In Finland, which, according to international rankings, would be the country where people are the happiest in the world, the rate of 1.61 is more than the double that of the Italian rate.

Above all research has taught us to see the close connection between the perception of insecurity and mistrust in politics and institutions. The mainstream media and academy abandoned this field of newsworthiness and interest (Martin 2019). Extremist parties benefit from higher levels of crime: they appeal to voters who feel a sense of physical and social insecurity. These results were given by another long research that used a data set covering 18 Western European countries between 1970 and 2005 (Smith 2010).

In Europe, the houses have become the concentration of many fears and tensions, often hidden. According to an impressive survey by the French Ipsos, which was commented without objection by the major observers in the public opinion, including observers from different political views (*Le Figaro*, November 19, 2020; *Le Monde* January 6, 2021), one in ten French persons has been a victim of incest: 6.7 million people (78% of whom are women).

There is certainly a code of silence, but there is also an extreme perception of insecurity and future in European houses. Only a theoretical awareness can explain otherwise incomprehensible phenomena and numbers (Gammone 2016). Outside of European houses there is much worse (Daniel and Kanabus 2021). In all houses in the world there is much to do and improve.

## 5. Oikophobia

In treatises on psychiatric disorders, together with many surprising differences with respect to the common feeling, the term oikophobia indicates an unmotivated fear of the house. A fear that is also extended to common objects, such as appliances or bathtubs. The purely psychiatric profiles must be taken into great consideration, otherwise the problem would be incomprehensible: it is a real disease (like the others that are abundantly described in those manuals and that fill clinics and pharmacies).

The idea of an unmotivated aversion to one's home environment recalls many other extremes connected to identity and cultural origins (for example, domatophobia, ecophobia, xenophobia). The concept has had some success in Roger Scruton's use of it, in order to refer to ideologies that emphatically repudiate their own culture and emphatically praise other cultures (Scruton 2004). Oikophobia is described as central to the Western academic establishment; for example, in France it emerges from the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, continuing a tradition that, from Flaubert to Sartre, had despised the average Frenchman, his values, his sense of saving and respectability, to the cry: "bourgeois, I hate you". Oikophobia, says Scruton, is the phobia of one's own maternal and paternal home: an uncertainty about oneself that spills over to one's roots. It is rejection and contempt for what (according to the common feeling) firstly should be taken care of and preserved.

Contempt of oneself translates into contempt for one's home. This contempt claims to be based on a correct interpretation of Western history and civilization. Objective numbers are also cited for empirical confirmation. Contempt and fear seem justified.

Numbers don't always have to be fabricated in order to give a false representation of reality. Misleading statistics are simply the misuse - purposeful or not - of numerical data. True statistics on violence at home (Messerschmidt 2016) are a clear example of possible misunderstandings regarding Western houses.

Anthony Giddens has claimed: "The home is, in fact, the most dangerous place in modern society. In statistical terms, a person of any age or of either sex is far more likely to be subject of physical violence at home than on the street at night" (Giddens 1989 : p. 200). Mark Twain made similar remarks in his *The Danger of Lying in Bed*. The story is about a person who hunted up statistics and noticed that the great majority of people die in bed. The danger is in trusting to those deadly beds, Mark Twain concluded. Lying at home in bed is the thing you must be afraid of. The bed is, in fact, the most dangerous place in the world (Sidoti 1999: pp. 204-206).

A false prejudice leads to misread the statistics and to reinforce prejudice. Just as many other things can be done in bed, besides dying, so at home there are many other things besides acts of violence.

Antony Giddens' very pessimistic judgment on Western homes has been repeated for many years in the countless re-editions of his famous sociology textbook, which was (and is) among the best-selling in the world. Sir Giddens is deservedly judged a great sociologist and a great public intellectual. The big guys make big mistakes.

Difficulties in the right interpretation of dramatic and profound changes of our age are reflected in difficulties about the right interpretation of the most elementary statistical numbers. This interpretative problem begins at home and, from houses, it extends over the entire surrounding territory, at concentric levels, from the national level until the international level.

Together with the Western numbers on mistrust, the numbers of sociological and political studies (if correctly interpreted) show that in the West there is a lot of will for knowledge and for future yet. The Spenglerian *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, or, more literally, *The Downfall of the Occident* is an old book and a very old idea. The past is gone with the wind. There is another new world to build. After the sunset, after all, even on the sunset boulevard, another day comes up.

If people believe in the solidity of its foundations, the Western home can be renewed and adapted to its new times and its new challenges.

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