

Draft for Housing Studies Handbook not yet for quote but for discussion

Abstract

A review of structurally inspired approaches in housing studies – concepts, contributions and future perspectives

Julie Lawson, OTB, TU Delft, the Netherlands

Housing studies is a broad field, which has ploughed the disciplines of political economy, radical geography and sociology since the 1970s, making use of structural theories, concepts and methods. These studies have embroidered notions of human agency engaged in different aspects of housing provision, consumption and exchange, with the concepts of class and power embedded in historically contingent social and economic structures. Researchers have argued that housing is not only subject to commodification, but vulnerable to shifting circuits of capital, changing modes of social regulation and crises prone regimes of capital accumulation. These structurally inspired studies aim to explain why different modes of provision have been generated and highlight processes which exacerbate social inequality and promote uneven development. Some researchers, informed by causal explanations even propose an agenda for change.

This paper reviews their contribution since the 1970s, when widely read authors such as Castells and Harvey, directed our attention towards the relative power of human agency in structures influencing the production, consumption and exchange of housing, providing a critique of more benign policy orientated research. It reviews the influence of developments in locality studies, state theory, comparative historical analysis and urban sociology and the use of frameworks such as structures of housing provision (Ball) and regulation theory. Critical Realist ontology, implicit in structural accounts now explicitly inspires research on homelessness and the causality of property relations, circuits of savings and investment and different modes of consumption and their crises prone, cumulative role in shaping mode of housing provision. Castells and Harvey continue to inspire housing researchers, informing analysis of the US mortgage market crises, highlighting switching circuits of capital, redlining and racial inequality.

This paper evaluates the contribution of this rich body of research and its important role in the development of explanatory theories and policy critique.

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Introduction - What is structure and how does it inform housing analysis?

The notion that individuals co-exist, not as isolated atoms, but as people bound by social relationships has influenced social thought and stimulated academic debate for centuries. These relationships can be considered as influential in defining and mediating social structures, such as the family, organisations, labour relations and also forms of housing provision. It has been claimed that the term ‘structure’ is as old as social analysis itself, which is used to designate the social – non-individual – characteristics of human life (Glucksman, 1974). Whilst structures have an enduring quality, they are also malleable being carried and mediated by actors with agency (Lawson, 2001).

These claims, however, are contestable. Over time, competing and conflicting theories have emerged, each making assertions about the nature and existence of social structures. These include theories debating the relative power structure over individual agency, the level of consciousness held by agents and the endurance of structures over time and space. Indeed, social structures are often coupled with very different theories of society (Glucksman, 1974), from Weberian organisations to Marxist classes linked to the means of production to a more middle range theory of Structuration (Giddens, 1984) and so on. Thus structure should be seen as a contested and multifaceted concept which has generated a rich body of debate. This discussion has particularly influenced urban and housing analysis, pushing researchers into the realm of political economy, radical geography and sociology, especially since the 1970s.

Structural concepts drawn from political economy have embroidered notions of human agency engaged in different aspects of housing provision, consumption and exchange, with the concepts of class and power embedded in historically contingent social and economic structures. Researchers have argued that housing is not only subject to commodification, but vulnerable to shifting circuits of capital, changing modes of social regulation and crises prone regimes of capital accumulation. These structurally inspired studies aim to explain why different modes of provision have been generated and highlight processes which exacerbate social inequality and promote uneven development. Some critical social scientists, informed by causal explanations, even propose an agenda for change.

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The paper also reviews some of the criticisms of political economy and the structural movement, as well as political and professional forces which have generated an era the post-structuralism in housing research.

Structural concepts in housing research

Drawing from across the social sciences, housing can be considered an object that embodies many cross cutting and complex social, economic and cultural relationships. These relationships underpin and are influenced by the process of producing, allocating and exchanging dwellings as well as the consumption of housing services. In all, housing can be viewed a unique and concrete expression of broader social arrangements such as property relations, institutions for saving and borrowing capital and of work and welfare in and beyond the home (Lawson, 2003:1). A number of social theories have influenced conceptions of social structures in housing studies and these are briefly reviewed below with reference to key texts in the field.

There was a period during the 1970s and early 1980s when housing researchers hotly debated the nature and existence of structures underlying different forms of housing provision and indeed searched for underlying causal mechanisms of difference and change using terms such as class, monopoly rent and capital switching. This section briefly reviews the contribution of these housing studies, when widely read authors such as Castells and Harvey, directed our attention towards the relative power of human agency in structures influencing the production, consumption and exchange of housing, providing a critique of more benign policy orientated research.

The roots of structural concepts in housing studies: class, production, capital accumulation, power and conflict

This section draws on the key text by Basset and Short (1980) *Housing and Residential Structure: Alternative Approaches*, which argues that housing is a complex object for study, which has been described as:

- a heterogeneous, durable and essential consumer good;
- an indirect indicator of social status and income differences;
- a map of social relations within the city;
- an important facet of residential structure;
- a source of profit to different institutions and agents involved in the production, consumption and exchange of housing (Basset and Short, 1980:1-2).

Different approaches, embodying often competing ontological views and social theories, have inspired various perspectives and traditions in housing research. Towards the end of the 1970s Basset and Short (1980:2) identified four streams of approaches as outlined below.

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Wider social theory</i>	<i>Areas of inquiry</i>	<i>Exemplar writers</i>
1 Ecological	human ecology	spatial patterns of residential structure	Burgess (1925)
2 Neo-classical	Neo-classical economics	Utility maximisation, consumer choice	Alonso (1964)
3 Institutional	Weberian sociology	Gatekeepers, housing constraints	Pahl (1975)
Managerialism		power groups, conflict	Form (1954)
Locational conflict		Housing as a commodity,	Harvey (1973, part II)
4 Marxist	Historical materialism	reproduction of labour force	Castells (1977a)

Social conflicts which emerged in the late 1960s and erupted in France during 1968, permeated academia challenging the dominance of social theories such as pluralism, consumer sovereignty, equilibrium and modernism, raising sharp questions about the role of state and capital in generating social inequality and polarising living conditions, countering the conservative cold war political consensus which pervaded academia as well as policy realms in capitalist countries. Neo-classical economic theories were also challenged by their atomism, mechanistic and ahistorical analysis reliant on observable officially recorded facts oblivious, uncritical towards underlying social relations shaping ideology and power. Weberian sociologists were also criticised for their theory of a neutral bureaucracy (ibid, 1980:183) and their use of ordering concepts to be overlain and juxtaposed with actual reality (Berry, 1983:12).

Emerging from these criticisms, urban social theory and housing studies took a radical turn in the late 1960s developed a more critical perception of the relationships between state, labour and capital and a concern for the generative (sometimes hidden) causes of social inequality. According to Basset and Short (1980) this turn also coincided with academic aspirations to chart alternative theoretical territory, leading some researchers and social activists to rediscover Marxism (Pickvance, Walker, Harloe, Castells) promoting a historical macro sociological perspective of social-structural determinants of social inequality and conflict (Berry, 1983:8). This shift was greatly influenced by the work of David Harvey and Manuel Castells during the 1970s, which became a launch pad for a new paradigm in housing studies. Despite many criticisms of functional structuralism and a cultural - post structural turn in social science, the themes of Castells and Harvey continue to influence researchers more than four decades later, as reviewed in later sections.

The Urban Question by Manuel Castells (1977a) introduced Marxist concepts to urban analysis and emphasised the importance of an historically contingent definition of class emergent from social structures underlying each urban system. Thus cities and their social structures including their housing systems must be historically understood within the “rhythms of capital accumulation” of uneven global expansion of capitalism which has generated different and uneven forms of development (Berry, 1983:16). This theme remains central to Boyer’s variety of capitalism thesis which is employed by economic geographers to this day (Hieden and Terhorst, 2007). When Castells uses the term structures, he refers to the interrelation of economic, political/judicial and ideological level, with relative autonomy from each other rather than economic functionalism. Productive enterprises are sustained by collective forms of consumption, including housing, which enables the reproduction of labour power but is also subject to processes of exchange between producers and consumers. However, from time to time, housing conditions deteriorate – either in terms of availability, affordability or quality, undermining the reproduction of labour power and leading to a crisis of collective consumption. Thus for Castells during the 1970s, conflict, contradiction and social movements were a focus for housing research.

David Harvey’s landmark text *Social Justice in the City* (1973) critically examines the extraction of rent by land owners from productive processes, distinguishing monopoly from absolute rent and creation of value through manipulating supply to promote scarcity to increase rents and thus profit margins. Class monopoly rent refers to owners of housing resources able to release units when profitable rents can be extracted. For Harvey, housing markets comprise a complex of submarkets with different modes of extraction differentiated levels of monopoly rent, thus filtering access and dividing the city into spatially segregated residential environments. These filtering processes are derived from a number of generative relations such as labour market specialisation, consumption lifestyles, authority relations at the work place, housing ideologies and intergenerational barriers compounding residential divisions and fragmenting class awareness and solidarity (Basset and Short, 1980:196). Finance capital, as distinct from primary industrial capital, increasingly plays a role across the various phases of housing provision from production to consumption, in which cycles of building activity lead to patterns of over accumulation and crises - a theme that has made a strong comeback in housing studies (Aalbers, 2007) concerning the financialisation of home which is later reviewed in this paper.

Interweaving streams of structurally inspired research – from urban history and state theory to path dependence and emergent relations to explain difference.

A key difference between structural and actor centered explanations, is the claim by the former that objects and events are embedded in key social relations. Such theories focus upon the definition of specific social relations in housing provision and the role of the state. These include the relations of savings and investment, the exploitation of land, materials and labour relations in the formal work place and their (gendered) reproduction in the home, as well as circuits of capital accumulation throughout the production, consumption and exchange process. Nevertheless, agents produce and reproduce relations, and thus their behaviour remains integral to causal explanation (Lawson, 2003:55)

‘Relationists’ argue that particular, context defined sets of social relations, cumulatively form different types of causal chains, which can explain divergence in forms of housing provision. These causal chains or mechanisms, in combination with contingent relations and other necessary relations, help to explain the nature and development of housing related events and experiences (Jessop, 1990, Sayer, 1984, 2000; Dickens et al 1985). According to Ball et al (1988):

The determination of changes in housing provision is a complex historical process whose explanation can only be investigated through detailed empirical analysis (Ball, Harloe and Martens, 1988:32).

Whilst there is no single theory of social structure that pervades contemporary housing studies, now quite fragmented and fractured, a number of tributary streams emergent from the urban political economy of Harvey and Castells continue to flow through housing research. Concepts such as inequality, uneven development, the role of and relations between state/capital, structure and agency, the variety of capitalism thesis, monopoly rent and exploitation, processes of glocalisation, commodification, modes of capital accumulation and capital switching, continue to inspire researchers. Other themes, such as Castells urban social movements, have receded from contemporary focus. Ongoing concepts originating from political economy are the focus of this section.

Re examining housing and urban history

During the 1980s, historical urban and housing studies, informed by theoretical Marxism and political economy, emphasized the importance of property relations, the timing and unique forms of capital accumulation and the differing role of complex state arrangements which funded urban infrastructure mediating the pace and form of urban expansion and housing consumption. This approach spurred a wave of historical analysis using concepts such as reproduction, modes of capital accumulation and land rent theory.

This movement was particularly influential within Australian housing research but also the UK, France and to a much lesser degree Germanic countries where Weberian sociology and Elias (the civilising process) had taken a stronger hold (Jurriens, 1981, Mullins, 1981, King, 1986, Williams, 1984, Sandercock and Berry, 1983, Terhorst and van de Ven, 1997, Badcock, 1984, Hayward, 1992, Daly, 1988). Berry later provided a typology of the state's role in housing and urban development as either market supporting, market supplementing or market replacing (Berry, 1988, Dalton, 1999). Whilst many rich cases were produced, there remained an interest in more overarching theories of provision.

Frameworks to examine difference

During the 1980s, Ball undertook a detailed examination of the home ownership in Britain (1983). Later he devised the structure of housing provision thesis, for prompting sensitivity to reveal the unique relations of production over time and space (Ball, 1998, 1992, 1983, Ball, Harloe and Martens, 1988). In capitalist societies, some aspects of housing production, exchange and consumption may

become highly commodified, whilst others remain decommodified. Exploitation of surplus value may occur within land transactions; whilst securing development rights; employing labour and materials; in the exchange of dwellings; and ongoing housing maintenance. Further, consumption of certain forms of housing may demand participation in the paid labour market and (re) enforce certain modes of domestic labour exploitation (i.e. unpaid, gendered, unevenly shared) (Lawson, 2003:48). Ball assumed, in the first instance, that that these relations were “an historically given process of providing and reproducing the physical entity, housing” and recommended that researchers focus on the social agents essential to the process of housing provision and the relations which exist between them in time and space (Ball, 1986:158). Intensive case study research is employed to identify the social agents involved in production, allocation, consumption and reproduction relations of housing (Ball, 1986, p. 160) and their inter-linkages (Ball, Harloe and Marteens 1988:29) who later argued that:

“Actual structures of housing provision, however, are empirical constructs and cannot be theoretically deduced, although obviously theory has to be applied in their analysis.” (Ball, Harloe and Marteens, 1988:29)

Another descriptive framework includes the chain of provision framework developed and applied by Ambrose (1991, 1994) which emphasises the wide variety of state, private and voluntary configuration of agents engaged in the interconnected stages of housing promotion, investment, construction, allocation and maintenance (Ambrose, 1991:41), which has also inspired a number of evaluations. Ambrose (1994) later proposed a model of state - market - civil society relations, illustrated below, that underpin any chain of housing provision. In his book *Urban Process and Power* he analyses the shift in power balance between the state and market and the influence of these shifts upon the built environment (1994:12-13). A polarised characterisation of the state and market are proposed: on the one hand the state is perceived as democratic, responsive to need and allocating on this basis; and on the other is the market, undemocratic, responsive to effective demand and allocating on the basis of capacity to pay. This abstraction 'floats' beneath the chain of provision (Lawson, 2003:243). Doling has also proposed the commodification decommodification continuum in housing process. Both offer a useful framework, rather than a theory, which must be grounded in concrete case study research.

Theories of change across housing systems

Theories of change in housing systems have been put forward debating convergence and divergence; explaining differences and similarities; linking powerful phases of economic development to the role of the state in housing and the changing role of housing consumption in daily life and its relationship with the development of different welfare states. As mentioned earlier, the danger has been that large scale, albeit historically informed comparisons can down play the locally embedded nature of causality affecting national housing systems.

More overarching theories of change in housing systems have been put forward by Harloe, linking powerful phases of economic development to the role of the state in housing and the changing role of housing consumption in the development of different welfare states. Harloe's theory of converging phases of housing provision perceives systems of housing provision as oscillating between mass and residual forms of housing provision linked to normal and abnormal phases in capitalist development (Harloe, 1995). These phases are briefly summarised as follows:

Pre 1914 –social housing began in most European countries to assist the least well off

After 1918 mass model dominates during post war recovery

From 1920s to 1939 residual model was reasserted

From 1945-mid 1970s –the golden age of social housing

Since the mid 1970s –when the mass model was challenged and retreated as residualism advances (Harloe in Malpass 2008:4)

Countering Harloe's theory of converging phases of housing provision linked to economic development is Kemeny's less deterministic divergence thesis, focusing upon the financial position of social landlords and the state's role in shaping competition between private and non-profit landlords. For Kemeny (1995) divergent systems emerge partly as governments role in and response to different types of rental markets (dual, integrated, unitary), where different rental models (cost rent, market rent etc) and competitive market conditions are of strategic explanatory significance. Several researchers have attempted to ground these interesting concepts via empirical case studies (Kemeny et al., 2005 on the Netherlands, Switzerland and Sweden and Elsinga et al., 2008 on the Netherlands).

There have of course been numerous efforts to identify key phases in the development of housing systems across Europe (Matznetter, 2006), some linking these to factors beyond Harloe's phases in capitalist development or Kemeny's financial maturation phase of landlords, often focusing on the role of the state at various spatial scales. This work includes Boelhouwer and van der Heijden's (1993) attempt to discern phases in policy development between 1945 and 1990 across seven Western European countries, defined by policy emphasis and degree of state involvement. Yet whilst a typology can assist a parallel description of nominated policy phases it cannot explain their differences.

However, the danger has been that large scale, albeit historically informed comparisons can down play the locally embedded nature of causality affecting national housing systems and over look important differences in the development of housing 'solutions' from Austria to Australia, Kenya to Korea.

Housing and the nature and role of the state

Beyond history and change in housing systems, one of the central projects of urban political economy has been the development of a theory of the capitalist / state relations as they apply to regions, cities and systems of housing provision and these efforts go back to the 1970s when locality studies (Massey, 1978, Urry, 1986) and Structuration thesis (Giddens, 1984), Regulation theory (Boyer, 1986, Jessop, 1990, Goodwin, 2001) and most recently Structural- Relational theory (Jessop, 2007) have all emerged as theoretical frameworks to inform an explanation of housing provision and its differences (Lawson, 2006 on difference and change, Aalbers, 2006 on the unique geography of mortgage markets, Becker and Novy (1999) on the interaction between nation and city states in Austria, Berry, 1998 on Australian urban history and Marcuse, 1986 challenging simplistic views of the benevolent or meddling state).

Scale, state structures, regulation and accumulation regimes

Beyond explanations for difference between so called 'national' housing systems, researchers have also paid attention to dynamic state structures at the urban scale in the development of long term housing solutions using a variety ideas emanating from locality studies movement from Lancaster in the 1970 and 80s (Urry, 1986, Massey, 1978) as well as the glocalisation movement (Swyngedouw, 2004) and variety of capitalism thesis. Indeed, whilst national level analysis predominates comparative housing research there are critics of this approach, especially amongst political and economic geographers, who argue for recognition of the regional and local origins of national housing policies (Lawson, forthcoming, Matznetter, 2007, 2008).

Regulation theory seeks to account for differences in social phenomena via concrete contexts of specific social practices. Rather than universalizing propositions, such as the convergence of housing provision, it seeks to provide explanations for differences. Analysis compares the regulatory systems and their outcomes according to critical interactions between Modes of Social Regulation (MSR) and Regimes of Capital Accumulation (RCA). It implies that explanations for change in forms of social

housing provision must *not* be seen in functional economic terms but as an interaction of between modes of social regulation (MSR) and regimes of capital accumulation (RCA). Lawson and Nieboer (2009) take a more considered look at the concept of regulation and investment strategies of social housing organisations, drawing on the literature from institutional economics, sociology and geography. This includes the work of Chouinard, 1990; Cooke, 1989; Dunford, 1990; Florida and Feldman, 1988; Gertler, 1988; Harvey and Scott, 1988; Sayer, 1989; Schoenberger, 1989). According to Cloke and Goodwin :

“A key notion...is the idea that the expanded social reproduction of capitalism is never guaranteed, but has to be continuously secured through a range of social norms, mechanisms and institutions. Together these help to stabilize relations between production and consumption within a particular regime of accumulation.” Cloke and Goodwin, 1992:322)

Most recently, Jessop (2007) has promoted a strategic-relational approach for understanding and explaining different state forms, which acknowledges its gendered selectivity, the hollowing out of the nation state, its temporal sovereignty and the relevance of multi-scalar meta-governance in Europe for the more general future of the state. It is too early to say what influence this theory is likely to hold for housing research, but it certainly places city based research on the housing agenda, a theme which has been recently re-embraced by the ENHR social housing working group (Whitehead and Scanlon, 2008).

Globalisation and glocalisation

The pervasive globalisation thesis, based on the increasing mobility of (manufacturing) capital and financial markets across international boundaries and the undermining of national rules of regulation and their capacity to steer investment, has also influenced comparative housing research (Sassen, 2001, Smart, 2003). A weak globalisation variant, giving more autonomy to national governments, has informed comparative research on the different experience of home ownership across Europe, using statistical data and qualitative case studies (HOSE project, Doling and Ford, 2003). It has also inspired other European research on the security and insecurity of home ownership (OSIS, Boelhouwer et al, 2005)¹ and the uneven role of ownership in increasingly asset based systems of social welfare (Hegadüs, 2009, DEMHOW)².

Capital switching and mortgage markets

Focusing on financial markets, a primary object of globalisation, Sassen (2009) recently explains how housing has become a new channel for extracting household incomes, via mortgage instruments which are packaged and sold internationally as RMBS, with profit extracted from the sale of financial products, rather than fulfilment of mortgage obligations. Wainwright (2009) and Aalbers (2008) return to the work of Harvey (1982) concerning capital switching, not only to explain this process of financialisation but also the very foundations of the global financial crises. Recent developments in comparative political science and economic geography concerning the ‘variety of capitalism thesis’ (Boyer, 2004, Hall and Soskice, 2001, Brenner, 2004, Goodwin, 2001) have also been used to argue why some mortgage markets have been more resilient to the problem of default and repossession, than others (Aalbers, 2009).

Theoretically informed and empirically grounded research has been undertaken a multi-disciplinary team of researchers using a range of methods to explain the targeting and exploitation of racial and ethnic minorities by predatory lenders in the US (Wyly et al, 2006). Their outstanding work draws inspiration on the early work of Harvey (1974) concerning the creation of class monopoly rents via localised structures in which national banking systems and how local tensions between slum landlords

¹ <http://www.osis.bham.ac.uk/>

² <http://www.demhow.bham.ac.uk/>

and the poor are exploited, as well as more recent work concerning accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003). They argue amongst other concerns, that “Today’s ‘owners’ are simply renting capital (Kreikeberg, 1999). Capital is the landlord” (Wyly et al, 2006:109). Saskia Sasson expresses a similar view in an analysis of RMBS in the US (Sassen, 2009).

Emergent contingent relations and causal mechanisms

Lawson (2003, 2006) explored the issues of how key social relationships underpinning forms of housing provision were contingently defined and packaged together over time. Cumulative phases of coherence, crises or adaptation were defined by the contingent definition of property, finance and consumption underpinning open and vulnerable forms of housing provision (Lawson, 2006:88). Coherence is defined as “historically contingent ensembles of complementary economic and extra-economic mechanisms and practices which enable relatively stable accumulation to occur over relatively long periods (Jessop, 1997: 503 in Goodwin, 2001). It is contended that *coherence* in housing provision occurs when the contingent definition of property rights, circuit of savings and investment and the mode of housing consumption are able to sustain a particular form of housing provision, such as cost rent LPH, home ownership or private rental.

Yet structural coherence can be undone amidst open and dynamic housing markets, in which monopolies, misinformation, opportunism, material constraints, ideological shifts and changes in policy constantly threaten. These changes may generate a *crisis* in provision, in which actors, with varying degrees of agency, may struggle to establish new norms, practices and institutions, leading to the development of new, revised or reformed solutions to moderate (or exacerbate) a crisis of housing provision (Lawson, 2006:83-86). *Adaptation* may occur via the adoption of new land use regulations, establishment of a financing guarantees and the revision of demand assistance programs, drawing on the institutional foundations and reflections of the past.

Path dependence and institutional layering

The concepts of path dependence and institutional layering (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003) compliment and enrich the divergence approach to comparative historical analysis, by strengthening the critique of convergence theses, such as globalisation and demanding more careful consideration of local regimes and causal processes (Terhorst, 2008, Heijden and Terhorst, 2007). This has led to the development of theories explaining the very different housing regimes present in five Nordic countries (Bengtsson et al, 2006) and establishment of an ENHR working group on historical explanation in housing Annaïsson (2008), Bengtsson (2008), De Decker (2008), Gomez-Nielsen (2008), Lawson (2008) and Ruonavara (2008) provide illustrations of this approach. Hopefully, a special edition of *Housing Theory and Society* (end 2009) will consider its use in comparative research.

Focusing on labour, gender and welfare relations

Some housing researchers have turned away from traditional political economy which its emphasis on accumulation regimes, towards different arrangements of labour and welfare provisions and conditions for answers, largely inspired by Esping-Andersons work on welfare regimes (1990) and Kemeny’s concept of residence (1992), drawing on Rose. The concepts of welfare regimes strongly influences comparative housing research via the selection of case studies and has also generated a number of country cases studies (Kleinman, 1996, Hoekstra, 2005, 2003 on the Netherlands, Matznetter, 2002 on Austria) and less examined regions of Europe (Allen et al, 2003) and the investigation of familial based welfare models. In addition to more nuanced categorisation of cases, theoretical progress has attempted by combining welfare regime theory with other types of development regimes (Matznetter, 2002, Lee, 2002). Most recently Schröder (2008) attempts to integrate welfare regime typologies with variety of capitalism thesis (mentioned below) but ignores housing in the process! (Lawson et al, 2009).

There are recent comparative studies which attempt to comprehensively apply ideas encompassing market structures and contingent dynamics, historical processes of industrialisation (Fordist, post Fordist, regimes of accumulation), evolving state roles (market promoting, regulating or replacing) and welfare regimes (bismarkian, Beveridge, conservative, neo-liberal, social democratic) (Dalton, 2009, Schröder, 2008, Hoekstra, 2005, Smart, 2003).

Beyond state focused research, there have been valiant attempts to investigate other structures influence housing provision: namely gender and labour relations and challenge conceptions of the nature of capitalist relations mediating these realms of social life. This work has examined not only the nature of work (causal, paid, permanent, gendered, professional, skilled, etc) but also its location and influence on home life and the nature of housing services consumed. This includes research by Hamnett & Allen, 1991; Randolph, 1991; Hayden, 1981 Allport, 1983, Fincher & Nieuwenhuysen, 1998. Further housing consumption is greatly influenced by access to credit and the separation of home from the workplace – often unequally affecting men and women. Watson (1991:136-154) stresses the importance of the changing nature of home and work especially efforts undertaken in the domestic sphere. She argues for a feminist approach to labour and work relations that is recognises the complex interplay of culture, gender and class (Lawson, 2003:273). This point is returned to in the conclusion of this paper.

The role of critical realism as under labourer in the fragmented field of housing studies

In recent years, comparative and evaluative research has grown, partly driven by international networks of housing research as well as the policy demands of governments. Such researchers have had to confront a plurality of influential factors or causes which have generated differences in housing systems are not easy to isolate, observe or measure.

Critical Realism is helpful in this regard, as it provides an ontological theory for abstracting causal mechanisms that can emerge from the realm of dominant ideas, material resources and social relations, which are contended to underlie forms of housing provision.

Thus cultural belief systems and ideologies, such as those embedded in housing aspirations, state promoted individualistic ideals of the ‘property owning democracy’, asset based welfare, or the solidarity of social housing or the self sufficient co-operative, are acknowledged to have causal influence upon institution building and policy making.

Further, influences can be generated from actual material conditions, such as the stability of investment in the built environment or the technical capacity of the building industry and availability and market suitable sites for development, are materially important when explaining difference and change in forms of provision.

Furthermore, causes can also be embedded in long established and institutionalised power relationships or ‘ways of doing’, which mediate the agency of urban planners and land owners, borrowers and lenders of housing finance and tenants and landlords. Attention to these different realms of reality (experience, actual events and social relations) and their contingent definition (Bergene, 2007) can provide a rich source of causal explanation.

Finally, towards more nuanced and accurate explanations for difference, comparative historical research should be alert to the scalar nature of shifting state structures operating within dynamic and often vulnerable housing markets and critically aware of the weak social construction of cultural norms and aspirations influencing housing consumption (Lawson, forthcoming).

Towards this end the Ball’s original conception of structures of provision (Ball, 1998) can be underpinned via explicit application of Critical Realist ontology when conceiving housing embracing the existence of ideological categories and real relationships in mediation everyday practices (Lawson, 2002, Bhaskar, 1975:69-75), requiring the comparison contingently defined emergent relations over

time and the postulation and revision of cumulative causal mechanisms. Such a strategy is more complex than the correlation of observable events (T Lawson, 1997), brief descriptions of policy trends or historical narratives and, given cumulative path dependent nature of housing provision requires intensive case study approach.

Yet CR is not a sociological, urban or housing theory it is a philosophical theory of ontology which can inspire research strategies which aim to explain phenomena. It cannot not replace, sound conceptualisation of housing phenomena. This involves two stage process of retrodution (Danermark et al, 2002, Sayer, 2000) involving interpretation and recontextualisation of the housing phenomena under consideration, using a plausible, justifiable set of explanatory ideas and concepts. In CR terms this new interpretation is known as a postulate, or hypothetical conceptual model, which aims to explain what is actually going on. This model is tested and revised in the second retroductive stage, using methods such as contrastive and counterfactual questioning, in order to provide a more competitive explanation (Harre, 1974, Blaikie, 1993, Lawson, 2006:262-263).

To date, CR theory of ontology has promoted new analysis of the causes of mortgage default in Australia (Lawson and Parkinson, 2009, Parkinson, forthcoming), attempted to explain differences in housing 'solutions' in Australia, the Netherlands, Korea, Austria and Switzerland, (Lawson, 2009, 2008, 2006) and the causes of homelessness in the UK (Fitzpatrick, 2005). It has also inspired analysis of urban differences including very thorough explanations for differences in the housing and urban development of Amsterdam and Brussels (Terhorst and van de Ven, 1997). In terms of methodology, it has also generated lively debate within housing studies, particularly from social constructionists, political economists and sociologists (Fopp, 2008, Lawson, 2006, 2002, 2001, Somerville 1994, Somerville and Bengtsson, 2002, Fitzpatrick, 2002, Manzi, 2002), which is discussed in part below.

Finding the 'radical edge' and placing 'critical' on centre stage

There are certainly criticisms of structural approaches within political economy. This section outlines these dilemmas and the need for more focused efforts in conceptualizing housing phenomena which necessarily demands an adequate empirical understanding of housing practice, interdependent processes subject to change and their sustaining ideologies. It also outlines an agenda for more critical research in the field of housing studies.

Form some researchers, being *critical* of research undertaken has become almost as important as undertaking *critical research*. Indeed, there have been a number of criticisms of political economy which led to the formation a variety of post-structural approaches incorporating deconstructionism, aesthetics, and versions of social constructionism. Their criticisms target overly structural accounts which diminish the power of agency (Sommerville, 2000), fail to recognize the oppression of women in patriarchal capitalist cities (Watson, 1988, Fincher 1990) and the narrow capitalist framework which blinds researchers to alternative representations of society, space, and the home (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 3 in Davidson and Fincher, 1998:192).

There have also been alternative arguments stemming from the nature of societal risk, claiming that greater uncertainty; flexibility and change in social and economic relationships (in the workplace, home and social networks) are shifting risks along new societal lines. As societies modernise, old processes are subject to increasing scrutiny and modification. Traditions fall rapidly by the wayside, old structures and collective institutions recede (Beck et al, 1994). These researchers shifted their conceptual focus from political economy of class to gender, environment, technology, aesthetics and identity formation.

Others shifted their analytic focus to 'deconstruct' urban narratives (Soja, 1989) often employing a far more literary style such as Davis' dramatic account of Los Angeles (1990), disenfranchising some geographers and social theorists used to more strategic-relational prose and argument (Sayer, 2000, Davidson and Fincher, 1998:172). Whilst they can be grouped together as the post structuralists, their

ontological approaches, claims and prescriptions for the future are very different (contrast Sommerville, 2000 with Davis, 1990 and Gibson-Graham, 1996).

Thus the critical thinkers of the 1980s and 1990s, unlike those in the 1970s, formed closer alliances with cultural studies rather than political economy, taking their feminist and green interests to post structural pastures applying more linguistic and cultural concepts and methods.

However, in the US as the work of Wyly et al (2006) on predatory lending and racial discrimination demonstrates, along with many others mentioned in this paper, an awareness of social structure can still produce work respectful of agency and identity and produce work of great relevance to contemporary dilemmas in housing provision. Further, this kind of contemporary political economy has much to share with the elements of the social constructionist movement (Jacobs et al, 2004), regarding power and the creation of identity.

The debate generated by Sommerville and Bengtsson's article in *Housing Theory and Society* (2002) (and the response by Fitzpatrick (2002) and (Lawson, 2002)) as well as the recent contribution by Fopp (2008), attest to the lively interchange in which there is common ground to be found between Critical Realists conception of structure, causality and open systems (Sayer, 2000:12) and social constructionists interest in experience and meaning. I have argued that there is certainly room for both (Lawson, 2002) within realist ontology.

Reflecting on the competing debates above, I have tried to bring together coherent elements into to a research ontology which moves beyond the limits of SHP and addresses the criticisms of overly structural accounts applied in my own comparative work (Lawson, 2003, 2009). This approach incorporates weak social constructionism, recognizing the influence (but not determinism) of meaning and dominant ideologies that influence the perception of different housing actors in their material and socially constructed contexts. It recognises the uneven position of different actors in housing provision and their coalitions that may form to promote more commodified or de commodified forms of provision. It recognizes the different and related elements of housing provision, each subject to its own institutional network, competing ideologies, economic relations and power coalitions. Further it demands a strategy analytical approach to reveal the key generative social relations of housing provision such as property, finance and labour as they emerge over time and space.

So where does this leave those wishing to pursue critical housing studies, using concepts of structure and agency to challenge the way we house each other? Whilst many complain about the consequences of neo-liberal housing policies what is their alternative and on what normative basis? Whilst traditional political economists with few exceptions (Ball, 1983) hesitate to propose solutions to housing problems for a range of reasons, those in the green and feminist movements have been shouting loud and clear for an alternative vision (Sayer, 2000:158). Why the reluctance from housing researchers? Having sought explanations for housing problems, such as homelessness and housing related poverty, research should be able to suggest appropriate and feasible alternatives, which may require different structures and mechanisms to achieve more desirable outcomes.

Sayer (2000) and Jessop (2007) argue that researchers should continue to strive for objectivity in their work, but also engage more closely with moral and political philosophy which can underpin arguments concerning basic needs for shelter, sociable and safe living environments, equality, democracy, fairness and tolerance. To progress beyond the confines of benign policy studies and commissioned research (Donnison and Stephens, 2003:257), critical housing studies informed by an awareness of social structures, should interact with these disciplines to strengthen their normative standpoint when dealing with more neo-liberal perspectives emanating from other domains.

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