Investigating the New Landscapes of Welfare: Housing Policy, Politics and the Emerging Research Agenda

Abstract

As debates about housing form an increasingly important arena of political controversy, much has been written about the new fissures that have appeared as governments not only struggle to reduce public expenditure deficits but also attempt to address problems such as affordability and homelessness. It is widely anticipated that new conflicts will be played out in the private rental market as access to homeownership becomes unrealistic and the supply of social housing diminishes. However, what other tensions might surface; that hitherto have not been subject to the critical gaze of housing research? In this paper we provide some thoughts on the nascent policy issues as well as the ideological schisms that are likely to develop in coming years, offering suggestions as to how the focus of housing policy research might be reoriented towards a "politics" framework to capture and better understand the conflicts that are likely to arise.

Introduction

Stuart Hall (2011:1) in an article written in 2011 suggested, "we are living through an extraordinary political situation". At the time of writing, Hall had in mind the formation of a Conservative led coalition government, the global financial crisis, disillusionment towards representative democracy and deepening social inequality. Three years on Hall's description remains one we can concur with. The last few years have also been turbulent, so much so that the confluence of events and government interventions has made "politics" difficult to read. Only now are the salient issues becoming clearer: for example, the volatile political environment, an underperforming economy, radical austerity programmes, changing attitudes towards welfare and demographic change. In the first place, a volatile political environment is reflected in what Wacquant (2013) has termed a "rampant social insecurity" (p.8) comprising objective insecurity for the bottom "precarity", subjective insecurity in the middle and self-seclusion for the upper classes. This insecurity is intensified by polarisation between these groups and research carried out by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) in late 2011 has provided details of the extent of this social polarisation, noting that the gap between rich and poor has increased at a faster rate in the UK than in any other comparable nation state since the mid 1970s. Much of this widening gap can be attributed to rise of a super elite working in the financial service sector and by 2008, the annual average income for the top 10% stood at around £55,000, approximately 12 times greater than the bottom income decile, with an average of just £4,700 (OECD 2011).

Second, the fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) continues to reverberate as the UK government struggles to reduce debt and attempts to stimulate a stagnant economy. The NIESR (National Institute for Economic and Social Research) (2013) has predicted that UK growth will be slow at around 0.9 per cent for 2013 as a whole, with a slight improvement in 2014 but only to 1.5% growth with unemployment likely to remain at around 8 per cent. One has to go as far back as 1930s for a comparable period of low economic growth and this economic malaise has led to a flurry of activities from a government keen to present itself in a positive light, whilst committed to an austerity programme designed to reduce the public sector deficit through radical welfare reforms. These reforms have primarily been directed at the housing sector in an attempt to reshape the welfare state to discourage dependency and promote employment (see for example the announcements set out in the March 2013 Budget speech delivered by the Chancellor of the Exchequer) (Treasury: 2013).

Changing attitudes towards welfare present a third important component of the new political agenda. As the government has justified its strategy to restructure the welfare state it has been convinced that hardening public attitudes towards benefit claimants, including large-scale resentment at perceived fraud, vindicate its strategy. The Labour party has struggled to maintain a separate narrative in the face on sustained, political, media and institutional hostility towards welfare benefits (and social housing in particular) amidst evidence that shows that the Government does have support for their policies (see for example Clery, Lee, and Kunz, 2013). The 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey (NatCen 2012) noted that 28% of those 3000 householders surveyed wanted to see an increase in expenditure on welfare (a reduction from 35% in 2008). This despite research forecasting the numbers of children in relative poverty to increase from 2.6 million in 2009/10 to 3.3 million by 2020/21 (before housing costs) and poverty amongst working age adults to increase from 5.7 million to 7.5 million over the same period (Brewer, Browne and Joyce, 2011). The tendency to censure poorer households and to focus on their behaviour rather than their material circumstances is reflected in political and media representations (Taylor Gooby, 2013:40) and forms a problematic backdrop for those concerned to alleviate social disadvantage and to reduce inequality.

Migration and demographic changes have had an additional effect on the political environment with concerns about the impact of large-scale immigration appearing to shape the political agenda. By 2012 as many as 51% of those surveyed wanted to see immigration numbers "reduced a lot" compared to 1995 when the percentage of those wanting a significant reduction was only 39%. The proposed introduction of an Immigration Bill in the 2013 Queens Speech and the Labour Party's apologies for not previously acknowledging the level of public concern about the implications of the accession of new member states to the European Union indicate a wider anxiety about the resonance of this issue as well as reflecting the gains made by a re-emergent UK Independence Party (UKIP) in council elections in England in May 2013.

In our view, many of the welfare reforms enacted over the last few years need to be understood as components of a broad political engagement strategy being pursued by the Coalition Government. It might seem an obvious point but contemporary UK policy interventions fulfil an important role at a discursive level (see Fairclough, 2000 for a discussion in respect of the Blair-led Labour Government). These interventions "perform" to convey to the wider public that the government is implementing measures to address the housing shortage and the high cost of owning and renting. Whilst some of the interventions proposed by the Government will have little practical effect this matters less than conveying an impression of activity. In a frenzied media environment, announcements and speeches on housing matter and we can see evidence of this engagement in the construction of certain narratives that are produced to justify interventions in housing as discussed below.

New and enduring conflicts

Whilst policy performs at this discursive level, there are of course a number of tangible and pressing underlying tensions that have surfaced in recent years. First, we anticipate an accentuation of conflict over the role of the local state. The government's localism agenda stymies opportunities for local authorities to increase their influence whilst at the same time presenting much greater scope for community involvement in local decision-making (Parvin, 2009) and this anti-state version of localism offers considerable capacity for conflict and tension. Moreover, the swathe of expenditure cuts has already impacted on housing budgets and capital repair programmes and is certain to have more severe consequences for the ability of agencies to deliver housing services to lower-income groups. Indeed some argue that the localism agenda is simply a rationale to cover for the draconian expenditure cuts now impacting on local government and welfare (Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley, 2012).

At the same time, we can observe the operation of private sector organisations seeking to fill the vacuum in public policy and analyse proposals to expand their role in areas of welfare. We are thinking here of large accounting firms who have embedded themselves in the operation of government successfully of late (Raco, 2012a) through schemes such as the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and the establishment of Special Purpose Vehicles which have provided a significant extension of for-profit organisations. The increasingly common use of the private sector in rented housing raises concerns about increased squalor in this market (Bowie, 2013), particularly in London, where overcrowding is especially pronounced and over a third of homes are classified as "non-decent" (CLG, 2006). The proposal for a limit or "cap" on housing benefit has already had an impact on many households in London and local authorities are exploring mechanisms of encouraging some of their housing waiting list applicants to relocate either to the private sector or to areas outside the London area (Harloe, 2010; Ambrose and Jenkins, 2011). These developments have significant implications for the governance of welfare policy and for the research agenda as we discuss below.

The shortage of housing and the pressure to build more homes is an issue of enduring importance, but is likely to become more pressing given projections that the population of the south east region of the UK will continue to increase. Yet at a time of rapid population growth

and changing household formation, housing starts are now at an historic low - comparable to the 1920s (CLG, *Housing Statistics*). As the pressure to increase housing supply continues, we can anticipate renewed conflict over planning and development issues in rural and suburban areas, especially as the Government has announced measures to override local authority planning controls in an attempt to remove bureaucratic constraints and thereby facilitate more efficient housing development procedures (through the National Planning Policy Framework) (CLG, 2012).

Other issues are well known and widely discussed. The problem of housing affordability and the decline in first time homeowners in the housing market is a clear indication that many young people have insufficient incomes to compete with rental investors in the market who will have no option but to remain living at home or renting in a substandard private market. The social housing sector is in decline and in England is now numerically smaller than the private rental sector- the last time this was the case was in the early 1960s (CLG, *Housing Statistics*). Research (for example Heywood, 2011) suggests that many aspiring homeowners will need intergenerational wealth transfers to compete in the market. The announcements in the 2013 budget of measures to assist homebuyers (through the "Help to Buy" scheme) are likely to have little impact on supply but will increase the demand and price of properties. It is likely that as more middle class households struggle to gain a foothold in the housing market, politicians will look for ways to attract positive headlines in the media.

Reflections on the current housing policy research agenda

The field outlined above defines the parameters and issues which government ministers feel compelled to respond to with new policies. In the next section we draw on some of the research from the last few years that has made an important contribution for understanding contemporary housing issues. We have identified four overlapping areas of analysis: class; governance; state crafting; and sites of resistance and identity. Each are considered in turn.

Class analysis

A re-emerging strand of housing research has been the utilisation of class as a lens to interpret contemporary developments. Some of the texts - for example Hodkinson, Watt and Mooney (2013) argue that the severity of the financial crisis has exposed the underlying objective of government policy to engage in a radical overhaul of the welfare state. For example, Hodkinson and Robbins (2012) consider the 2011 Localism Act as a "Trojan horse" intended to "accelerate privatization and corporate takeover in the interests of a revived class war agenda" (p.65). Linked to this class based analysis debates surrounding gentrification and displacement have become increasingly contested in housing research. Hence, the Housing Market Renewal programme has generated acrimony between those who argue that it has had some positive benefits (for example, Cole, 2012) and others who contend that its impact has been wholly negative and is the result of "academic hubris, middle class domination and institutional profiteering" (Allen, 2007:200). The Labour government's mixed communities initiative has also fuelled considerable (albeit less heated) debate about its potential for neighbourhood benefits (for example Tunstall and Lupton, 2010) or its propensity for social engineering or "state-sponsored gentrification" (Bridge, Butler and Lees, 2012).

Whilst we are supportive of a class lens to interpret contemporary housing politics, it is important to avoid subsuming what are quite complex and nuanced processes into a singular explanatory narrative. One of the risks of framing a primarily class based narrative is its portrayal of the modern state as operating in accordance with one specific trajectory, that is to further the interests of capital. Whilst class based interests are clearly aligned to contemporary policy-making it needs to be acknowledged that there are significant sites of resistance and oppositional groupings within the state that act in quite different ways. In respect of housing policy, for example certain Labour and Nationalist aligned local housing authorities have

sought to protect resources for public housing tenants (for example by retaining "social" rather than "affordable" rents or to offer permanent rather than fixed-term tenancies). In short, the point we are making here is the modern state comprises contradictory forces, some of which are in direct opposition to each other and active in pursuing an alternative role for the state.

This noted, class remains an important optic for the contemporary era and the scholarship in this vein has provided a trenchant critique of government policy making. As McKee and Muir (2013:7) write: "it is reasonable to assume that, if current trends continue access to housing and other services will become more restricted, difficult and expensive for low-income households; as a result class will become an inescapable feature of housing studies as social divisions exist". These processes are only likely to intensify spatial segregation and inequality (see for example Dorling, 2012) and the potential for social conflict is likely to be increasingly pronounced.

Governance

Academics who wish to retain a class based approach but in conjunction with other lines of investigation have drawn from governance theory. This approach has its origins in public policy studies and its strengths rest on the development of an analysis based on the limitations of "traditional" state-centric social theory. In contrast governance theory identifies that the limitations of a centralised and controlling state sector and considers the extent to which new housing policy environment comprises a much broader range of (public, private and voluntary sector) agencies, based on inter-dependence rather than hierarchical control.

Thus, the concept of "community networked governance" (van Bortel, Mullins, and Rhodes, 2009) depicts the way that resident groups have assumed an increasingly influential role in decision-making processes and ways in which both local and national governments have been subject to significant constraints in their autonomy and power. Similarly, the Foucauldian concept of "governmentality" has been used by researchers (such as Flint, 2003 or McKee, 2011) to consider the ways in which disciplinary power has become "decentred" and how "responsibilisation" is exercised through self-regulation, internalised discourses and knowledge (Foucault, 1991). These ideas have been used to interpret contemporary practices, and to critique strategies to tackle anti-social behaviour and resident empowerment. Thus both Flint (2004) and McKee and Cooper (2008) highlight the conflicts that arise when top down policies are imposed on local agencies and the ways in which actors seek to resist processes of "contractual governance" (Flint, 2006:31). Their work has informed recent critiques of government policy that we discuss further on in this paper.

Studies of contemporary housing processes can benefit from an understanding of neoliberalism informed by the writings of Rose (1999) - the acquiescence of the subject and their agency. Hence, government is not simply imposed on individuals, but is part of an active process of consent. The "conduct of conduct" that has been a strong feature of centre-right and centre-left governments across Europe has placed considerable importance of the idea of "governing at a distance" (Rose, 1999), illustrating how capitalism manages the state rather than the state managing capitalism.

At the same time a key feature of the contemporary housing landscape is the accentuation of policies to encourage local government agencies to disengage from service delivery and the implementation of new mechanisms to enable private sector agencies to provide and manage social housing. These processes are enabling fundamental shifts in the governance of housing, yet they have been subjected to very limited original research. It is evident from even the most cursory reading of government policy documents that the long-term aim of the Coalition government is to reframe public housing as a transitional mode of housing until tenants can exit to the private rental or owner occupied sector. The view of public housing as a residual

tenure is being reconfigured. Policies; for example to impose sanctions directed against social alongside further discounts to encourage council tenants to purchase their homes are indicative of an on-going disengagement project by the government from "welfare" housing to "ambulance service sector" housing (see Bradley, 2012 and Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013).

What form should more critically based analysis take? It is instructive to consider the research undertaken by Raco (2013a). Our interest in his work stems from his analysis of the operation of private sector agencies in the delivery of welfare and urban regeneration, such as the building of hospitals and the construction projects associated with the hosting of the Olympic games in London. Raco notes that business elites are not demanding deregulation but are instead putting pressure on the state to engage in spending programmes in which their business can secure access. As he points out, it is the large accounting firms that have been particularly active in this space seeking to embed themselves inside government agencies to conduct internal reviews, restructuring and management. As he argues, the state in this new role operates more as a contract manager to regulate services. Writers such as Levi-Faur (2011) have deployed the term "regulatory capitalism" to note the government departments regulate in ways that ease the entrance of commercial agencies into the management of welfare. Welfare services offer a reliable and a long-term source of revenue, as evidenced by the lucrative revenue streams offered to private sector agencies that participated in the previous government's Private Finance Initiative. Raco's key point is that there has been too little awareness of, let alone resistance to what he terms "hyper-pluralisation" (Raco, 2012:369).

State crafting

In contrast to network governance theories that highlight the relative impotence of the central state, others (such as Davies, 2011) see the ideology of networks as a "central facet in the neoliberal hegemonic project" (p.7). Thus research considering the impact of the New Deal for Communities initiative under the Blair and Brown Labour governments (an initiative that claimed to put "communities in the driving seat") has indicated an ineluctable tendency towards centralised control (see for example Beatty et. al., 2009: 247).

Clearly, the sweeping policy changes directed and reconfiguring the role of the state have made it necessary for researchers to interrogate the logic of welfare provision. Whilst some have argued that the state's role in housing has historically been to reinforce rather than undermine market processes (Malpass, 2005: 71), under neoliberalism the role of the state is transformed in different ways. The writings of Loic Wacquant are useful here (2008 and 2009). Recently he argued that:

> neo-liberalism is not the coming of King Market, as the ideology of neoliberalism would have us believe, but the building of a particular kind of state. Following Max Weber, neoliberalism is best defined not by its end but by its means. For it is not primarily an economic venture, as classical liberalism was: it is a political project of *market-conforming state-crafting* (Wacquant 2013: 1, emphasis in original).

Wacquant suggests that researchers on welfare policy must break with what he terms "the ambulance" and "service counter" conceptions of the state. These construe government as a reactive agency that seeks to tackle problems such as poverty through welfare provision. Instead, Wacquant argues that the state is "stratifying and classifying agency", and comprises "the paramount institution that sets the basic coordinates of social space and produces inequality and marginality upstream, before it manages them downstream" (p.8).

> The state practices laissez-faire at the top, at the level of circulation of capital and production of inequality, but it turns interventionist and intrusive when it comes to managing the consequences of inequality at the bottom, for the life spaces and life

chances of the precarious fractions of the post-industrial working class (Wacquant 2013:9).

Thus the role of the state is not the classical liberal, detached and neutral "night-watchman", but in practice is highly interventionist. Wacquant's conceptualisation of the state has particular relevance for understanding the housing policy reforms now being enacted in the UK, which involve a combination of localism, disciplinary power and stigmatisation. In inviting us to disregard the notion of Government as a benevolent agency Wacquant writes that the state is thus active both in producing inequality (upstream) and managing its consequences (downstream). Housing researchers have been slow to provide an adequate conceptualisation of the contemporary state under neoliberalism that can make sense of the contradictions in the role and functions of governmental intervention.

Sites of resistance and identity

The conditions of neoliberalism require a form of research that considers the way oppositional forces seek to resist externally imposed government diktat, partly influenced by the class based analysis now being advanced within UK housing scholarship. A number of research studies (see McCormack, 2009, Hodkinson, 2011 and, Robinson 2012) have considered opposition to the stock transfer processes and privatisation initiatives and tenant activists have initiated campaigns to oppose the "bedroom tax" or "spare room subsidy" which penalises social housing tenants deemed to be under-occupying their accommodation. Studies that seek to consider the capacity of local actors to mount campaigns against specifics of housing policy are thus likely to prove fertile ground for housing research. These communities of resistance range from homeowners in areas such as Romney Marshes who opposed plans to build new housing to public housing tenants campaigning against the bedroom tax. Ruming (2013) provides a useful case study of NIMBYism in Australia that sets out what can be learnt from these developments. It is possible to view these conflicts as examples of counter resistance to the practices of neo-liberalisation and the genesis of alternative strategies for housing policy. Ethnographic and participative studies can provide important sources for housing researchers to provide detailed information about first-hand experiences about the impact of policies designed to further marginalise and stigmatise low-income groups.

Whilst the study of opposition and resistance form important developments in housing research, an additional fascinating aspect of the neo-liberal environment is the way that individuals are reconfiguring their notion of selfhood. We can note a shift from place based attachments to more "elective base belongings" (see Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst, 2005). In short, individuals project a notion of identity that is less bounded to family and place towards a more personalised consumption based narrative. Researchers (for example, Smith, Munro and Christie, 2006 or Cook, Smith and Searle, 2013) have examined how middle class households are drawing upon their equity to boost their consumption capacity and are using equity to purchase assets that effectively reshape and forge new understandings of the self. It is likely that the divide between, on the one hand well-off homeowners and, on the other hand disadvantaged public and private renters will intensify over the coming years. The purchasing capacity of homeowners, and how they use their housing wealth is likely to become a burgeoning area of research.

Gaps in knowledge

In spite of the corpus of research set out above, we argue that there are a number of gaps in existing knowledge. Here we set out some tentative suggestions for areas that might be investigated further. First, we contend there is a need to continue analysis that seeks to account for the scale and operation of government. We can detect changes in the way that commercial interests are seeking to capture new markets. As Raco (2013) has shown, private

sector agencies have assumed an increased role and have occupied spheres of governance in ways that are as yet little understood. The vast complexity of commercial arrangements has enabled large and often multi-national companies to become embedded in public service provision, yet with minimal transparency. These organisations have up until now avoided scrutiny on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. The extension of regulatory capitalism involving increased public expenditure but entrusted to large private sector firms such as accounting agencies and project management companies has consequently been a largely unexamined area of research. The dominance of these private sector interests and multi-national companies, initially through the Private Finance Initiative and subsequently through a complex range of partnership arrangements has been ubiquitous, yet subject to minimal critical scrutiny. The lack of data is partly due to practical constraints at the difficulty in uncovering a complex and largely hidden world of commercial relationships, but the importance of this issue for local democracy, accountability and transparency demands more intensive analysis. Here the work of Mike Raco (2012a and b) has been helpful and there is considerable scope for further study.

The second gap in knowledge we have termed "the commodification of care" and other related welfare relations. Sandel (2012) has discussed how private sector agencies are deploying the language of welfare in their bids to manage welfare services such as aged care homes and mental health facilities. We can view this expansion of the market in the wider context of capitalist development; the concept of the "relational state" is apposite for interpreting the emphasis now placed on human interactions in contrast to previously dominant ideas of new public management and government statecraft (see Cooke and Muir, 2012; Mulgan, 2012; 2013). A component of this commodification is the use of new technologies and data capture; although this has been barely addressed by housing researchers thus far. Whilst the growth of "digital governance" has been a central theme in contemporary public policy (for example Dunleavy et.al 2006), there has been little or no discussion of its significance for housing services.

A third area of research is to consider the implications of a reconfiguration of the welfare state. This area has been more extensively considered, but the implications of changing public attitudes, of widespread retrenchment and a much more hostile philosophy towards the public sector need further scrutiny. What do these issues mean for the future of social housing? How should researchers respond to the purposeful framing of dependency and abuse by recipients of welfare assistance? How can the stigmatisation of social housing be addressed and challenged?

A fourth area of study relates to changes in spatial geographies. There has been extensive theoretical debate in this area (drawing on the work of writers such as Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, 2005; Massey, 2005; and Amin and Thrift, 2002). However, there is scope for a much wider understanding of issues such as the changing nature of suburbia (Huq, 2012; Mace, 2013) and the gentrification of the inner city (Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2007; Bridge, Butler and Lees, 2012). Present trends indicate the likelihood of increasing spatial polarisation as evidenced by the emergence of gated communities, master planned estates and increased levels of surveillance, reflecting anxieties surrounding safety and security in urban environments. These and other dimensions of urban life provide researchers with opportunities to investigate how the workings of capitalist development are played out spatially. Hence, we should not shift our gaze away from public housing for socially disadvantaged groups, but we should also consider other social groupings. There is considerable scope here for further work on gentrification (Butler, 2007), "super-gentrification" (Butler and Lees, 2007), "elite enclaves" and the super-rich (Burrows, Savage and Atkinson forthcoming). As housing involves an integration of "material, interpersonal and individual elements" (Ronald, 2011: 419) there is a need for theories to: combine the micro and the macro levels; take account of both structure and agency and explain the significance of multi-level actors and institutions.

Conclusion: New landscapes of housing and sites of conflict?

The impact of the financial crisis has been widely commented on, yet the full implication of these new landscapes is as yet barely understood. It is nevertheless clear that the government austerity programme should be seen as primarily an ideological construct, one that uses deficit models to explain housing failure. A more subtle analysis would develop ideas about the sociology of housing, drawing on a wider literature from writers such as Weber and Marx. Housing issues are symptomatic of fissures and class conflicts being played out and more work will be needed on the nature of these conflicts and their wider significance. Housing must therefore be situated in the context of wider politics and cannot be understood in a narrow way.

A second insight is that the concept of neo-liberalism should not be understood in simplistic terms, but is an unfolding and diverse set of processes (see Brenner and Theodore 2002). We can thus draw a distinction between what can be seen as "manufactured and real crises". In particular we need to be aware of the way in which business elites and their allies in Government have manufactured a particular conceptualisation of the housing crisis and overlooked the "real", lived experience of social groupings.

Thirdly, a growing wealth disparity, illustrated by recent data from Office for National Statistics (ONS) which indicates a widening gap between rich and poor households, implies that new social tensions are bound to develop and these are certain to be exacerbated by recent housing and welfare reforms, which seem designed to widen social inequality and the increasing potential for social unrest.

Finally, there is scope for further theoretical innovation in housing research, which has tended to be somewhat insular and sceptical of cross-disciplinarity (Clapham, 2013; Dwyer and Somerville, 2011). There are opportunities that can be gained from drawing upon disciplines such as political science, sociology and social geography amongst others, for understanding broader narratives about identity and housing which might help to explain the allure of homeownership and the role of media in constructing policy and shaping narratives of policy decline.

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