

Commentary

These comments relate to the articles in this Cityscape symposium by Fraser, Chaskin, and Bazuin and by Kleinhans and van Ham.

Housing Policy Possibilities in the Prison of Property Relations: A Commentary

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At the current conjuncture of neoliberal capitalism in the United States and in the United Kingdom, housing policy continues to undergo transformations that increasingly make poor households vulnerable while emphasizing (and enhancing) the value (and values) of the private property market. As the conveners of this symposium explore, a variety of housing policies have been rolled out in the past several decades to deconcentrate urban poor populations from public housing (in the United States) or social housing (in the United Kingdom) projects. Such policies include dispersing them into mixed-income Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) developments or distributing housing vouchers for market-rate rental units (in the United States), or providing opportunities for residents of social housing to purchase their units with the Right to Buy (RTB) program (in the United Kingdom). These transformations have raised important questions about the ability of a marketized social safety net to deliver housing as a social good and the effects of these policies on poor urban households, on neighborhoods, and on cities more broadly. As the articles in this section of the symposium reveal, the assumption that mixed-income housing is a desirable policy with beneficial outcomes requires interrogation. Before turning to the careful arguments that James C. Fraser, Robert J. Chaskin, and Joshua Theodore Bazuin and that Reinout Kleinhans and Maarten van Ham offer, I first situate my discussion of housing policy in terms of the “prison” of property relations.

In his article on space, politics, and the political, in which he explores conceptualizations of space and politics based on the writings of Jacques Ranciere, Dikec (2005) retold a compelling story to make a clear point about the possibilities for emancipatory politics and real social change. The story, in my view, is instructive in thinking about how policies such as those involving housing often ignore the more fundamental societal dynamics that undergird the very need for state intervention in housing in the first place. The story he recounts, based on Eric Rochant’s 1997 French film *Vive la République!*, is set in a French city in which a homeless man gives a lesson on politics to a political activist. The homeless man asks the activist to imagine a prison in which the prisoners have done nothing wrong but were simply born into the prison. It is, as Dikec (2005: 173, emphasis original)

highlighted, the “*natural* order of things” that some people are born in the prison and some people are born outside of it. At some point in the prison experience, a shortage of food occurs. The prisoners organize to elect democratically a representative from the prison population to address the food shortage. The first elected representative, who is from the Left, sees the food issue as a great injustice, but very little changes in the prison, and the prisoners still do not have enough food to eat. So they elect a representative from the Right, who also has limited power to address the food situation.

The prisoners, in fact, do not care much about the Left or Right as long as they have enough to eat. And the problem of food in the prison becomes the major issue in the agenda; people talk about nothing but the food problem in the prison. And this, the homeless person argues, is the fraud. Even if one day the problem of food in the prison is resolved, either by the Left or the Right, the situation will remain unchanged: they will have enough to eat, but they will still be in the prison. Politics, he concludes, is not about the food in the prison, but about the very prison. (Dikec, 2005: 173)

The prison that needs to be addressed by politics—and, ultimately, policy—is, in my view, the capitalist property relations and the ownership model of private property.

As Blomley (2004: xvii) suggested, property “is understood in largely political and legal terms, characterized by a particular and potent mix of rights, jural relations, ideologies and exclusions. To invoke property is to summon up both formally prescribed rights as well as nonjusticiable, yet still powerful, understandings of ownership and entitlement. It is to recognize that property is deeply social and political. . . .” In the “ownership model” of property relations, property is imagined as private, “with the solitary owner exercising exclusionary rights over a bounded space. While property may be public (that is, held by the state), it is rarely imagined as collective” (Blomley, 2004: xiv). The ownership society is clearly productive of and produced by capitalist social relations, in which private property is a key component of the circulation of capital (Harvey, 1989; Smith, 2010). Emphasis on private ownership in housing policy, as the articles in this symposium section explore, does not fundamentally address the ownership model; or, to invoke the prison-food story, mixed-income housing that relies on property ownership in a neoliberal capitalist political economy remains in the domain of a food question. Recognizing the prison structure is, I would argue, an important way forward. In the absence of revolution or proper politics (Ranciere, 2001), however, the very issue of providing housing to those who are marginalized by capitalist property relations is not a task to be ignored. In this vein, then, I think it is important to look to the articles in this section to explore how the ownership model of (private) property relations has become increasingly dominant on both sides of the Atlantic.

The authors of both articles make it clear that the private ownership of housing has become an aspirational model for housing policy, as seen in the ways in which the state has relinquished control of state-owned property to market relations, such as project-based housing to HOPE VI in the United States and RTB in the United Kingdom. In fact, with a simple table, Kleinmans and van Ham note the significant shift in tenure distribution in housing in England and Wales between 1981 and 2011, whereby 69 percent of the population were private property owners or renters in 1981 versus 82 percent in 2011. This shift has been the product of constantly embattled public housing, as noted in Fraser, Chaskin, and Bazuin, and very powerful discourses around the efficiencies of the private property market, which ultimately serve private interests.

The authors of these articles make clear that the results of this shift to the privatized delivery of housing have been mixed at best. Kleinhans and van Ham rightfully analyze findings associated with the effects of RTB on neighborhoods, a much-needed scale of analysis. As Kleinhans and van Ham explore, RTB is intended to stimulate homeownership. As they demonstrate through careful combing of a large body of literature, the effects of the policy in recent decades have been to advantage better off, economically active tenants who generally live in more attractive properties in more desirable areas. The result is, as they argue, to further marginalize already marginalized regions of cities or to contribute to *residualization*, or the growing concentration of poor or economically inactive households in certain areas. They note that RTB has created a wider gulf in terms of “desirable” neighborhoods and those that were made increasingly undesirable.

Kleinhans and van Ham include an important dimension in their analysis of RTB: that of the time horizon of impactful change. That is, in their attempt to evaluate neighborhood stability (a desired goal in the RTB housing policy), they separate out the short-term wave (directly after a wave of RTB sales to sitting tenants) and stability in the longer term. In the short term, neighborhoods experience some stability, but as the RTB owners decide to trade up through the sale of their properties (thus engaging in the private property market) or to lease their properties, neighborhood stability becomes compromised. The ownership model of property relations, then, does little to achieve the goals of housing policy as set out by U.K. and U.S. governments.

So what are the possibilities? What are the landscapes, discourses, and actions indicating that there are ways to exist beyond capitalist property relations and their logics? In addressing these questions, Gibson-Graham (2006: xxi) argued for a retheorization of capitalism and encouraged a rethinking of the “tendency to constitute ‘the’ economy as a singular capitalist system or space rather than as a zone of cohabitation and contestation among multiple economic forms.” Gibson-Graham suggested that alternative imaginaries, languages, subjects, and collective action are possible to remake the dominance of the hegemonic forms of capitalist economies and the spaces they produce (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 1996). Although the authors of the articles in this *Cityscape* symposium are not tasked specifically with this challenge, they point to openings and possibilities for progressive policies around housing society’s poor households.

As Fraser, Chaskin, and Bazuin make clear, housing policy alone cannot address the myriad problems associated with poverty in the United States. Their very important piece first and foremost refocuses the discussion on housing policy to ameliorating the experience of poverty (instead of discussing housing policy as an economic development tool). They rightly point out that many of those engaged in mixed-income policies and programs lack a coherent theory of change and a focus on structural factors “from the shifting nature of economic opportunity (and constraint) under global capitalism to the enduring effects of racism and racial inequality and the uneven distribution of quality public goods like education—[that] fundamentally shape individuals’ experiences of poverty and their access to avenues out of it.” Their suggestion is to focus on the holistic community through a system of supports for low-income residents and collectivizing strategies rather than to have an isolated focus on the private ownership of building structures.

Fraser, Chaskin, and Bazuin insist that housing policy discussions should include mention of social services and supports, employment, and neighborhood life—and even a reimagining of the ownership model. They suggest policy that would enable HOPE VI-subsidized renters to purchase

their properties—but not through the standard private property market. Instead, a la Gibson-Graham (2006, 1996), Fraser, Chaskin, and Bazuin advocate shared-equity housing and the use of community land trusts to remove the profit motive from the ownership model. This idea is creative and collective, and it challenges the exchange-value dimension of capitalist property relations. Furthermore, by suggesting childcare cooperatives, community gardens, inclusive neighborhood associations, and other subsidized services and collectivized efforts, they encourage a reimagining of the (neoliberal) ownership model, which they (and scores of others) have indicated contributes to the continued marginalization of the poor population.

In sum, now is an exciting time to engage in questions of neoliberal housing policy that document the deleterious effects of existing policies and the problematic conditions for individuals, neighborhoods, and cities that they produce. Ultimately, though, creatively addressing and replacing the private ownership model of property relations is, I suggest, the way out of the prison.

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