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Book review

Social Housing, Wellbeing and Welfare

Gregory, J.

Bristol: Policy Press, 2022, 238 pages, £24.95 (Pb)

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Social Housing, Wellbeing, and Welfare takes a dual empirical and theoretical approach to exploring the relationship between social housing and wellbeing in the UK today. The author's key motivation is to challenge the normative assumption that ownership is good for people, which serves to frame social housing as welfare dependent tenure of last resort, and the private rented sector as an in-between space occupied by people who are waiting to buy. James Gregory instead highlights the value of social housing and concludes by proposing a shift in housing policy to pursue a universal, hybrid housing model that prioritises social not commercial value, arguing that such an approach would offer a fairer and ultimately more successful approach to UK housing policy.

The book's introduction (Chapter 1) argues that the concept of wellbeing offers new ways of thinking about and understanding the role we want social housing to play in the UK. Implicit is the notion that a better understanding of how wellbeing is distributed across tenure types – and empirically challenging accepted wisdom about detrimental effects of social housing on wellbeing – could also help dismantle ideological perceptions of social housing as a mark of moral failure that encourages welfare dependency.

The remainder of the book is spread across three sections. Part 1 explores the political and social policy discourses of social housing. It begins in Chapter 2 by focussing on the meaning and measurement of wellbeing, drawing on themes from political philosophy to offer deep reflection on what makes life worthwhile. Here, Gregory emphasises the importance of directly linking conceptualisations of wellbeing to welfare provision, and argues that more philosophical considerations of virtue and human flourishing ought to be prioritised when designing and evaluating social policy. In Chapter 3, Gregory extends these ideas by exploring the discourses of dependency that permeate political debates about social housing and welfare more broadly. By taking a historical perspective, Gregory draws attention to how both the post-war growth in social housing and the subsequent residualisation of the sector contributed to popular understandings of social housing as promoting dependency and nurturing an unwelcome underclass. Chapter 4 then extends these themes, noting that pro-social housing narratives have also been exaggerated or reported selectively. In this chapter, Gregory critiques two counter narratives to the discourse of social housing and welfare dependency: the notion that neighbourhood effects could promote a so-called culture of worklessness, and

democratic participation in social housing management, specifically the case of Large Scale Voluntary Transfers in which over a million UK homes were transferred from local authority to housing association control. In both cases Gregory argues that the evidence was interpreted in light of normative preferences towards housing policy. Although offering persuasive evidence in support of this point, the broader relevance of these discussions feels peripheral to the book's key argument and would benefit from further development.

In a departure from the theoretical approach taken so far, Part 2 shifts quite abruptly to take an empirical perspective to exploring the links between social housing and wellbeing. Chapter 5 draws on multivariate analyses of two small, localised surveys, the first finding both positive and negative experiences among social renters, and the second linking privacy and control in the home to different facets of wellbeing (surprisingly, not exploring these links by housing tenancy). Chapter 6 then uses longitudinal, national-level data to explore these patterns further. Using statistically stringent fixed-effects models, Gregory finds that mortgage owners have lower life satisfaction than social renters, while tenure is not associated with depression or general happiness. These results support his central thesis that social housing is not detrimental to wellbeing, and that concerns over wellbeing would be more fruitfully directed towards mortgage owners. The empirical analyses next interrogate the assertion that social housing creates welfare dependency and economic inactivity. Taking an analytical approach that would benefit from further reflection, Gregory finds no link between social housing and his operationalisation of welfare dependency, a desire to give up work.

Finally, Part 3 considers how to balance different types of wellbeing when considering housing policy. Chapter 7 begins to sketch out a new social housing policy for the UK, drawing on an idealised typology of social housing to explore approaches to reducing the spatial and metaphorical social distance between social housing and other tenure types. Chapter 8 then develops these ideas, proposing a new, universal housing system characterised by means-tested housing allowances in which some participants would make a net contribution and others receive a rebate, with surplus providing capital for cross-tenure developments. Such a system is argued to offer a more fluid approach to social rents that is flexible to both income change and individual needs and preferences.

This book has many valuable features. Its multidisciplinary approach – drawing on disciplines including housing studies, political theory, sociology, human geography, social policy and psychology – offers a fresh and nuanced perspective on enduring and contemporary debates in UK housing policy. At the same time, Gregory's knowledge of changing housing and welfare policy and his in-depth interrogation of the political roots of the shifting sands of policy provide clues to the author's background in political theory. Also noteworthy is the author's willingness to engage in critiques of both right- and left-leaning political commentary, a refreshing approach that demonstrates scholarly credibility.

While the book's wide scope is no doubt admirable, in places it is let down by trying to do too much. For example, considerations of housing quality across different sectors and the potential role of neighbourhood effects do not receive enough discussion to make a meaningful contribution, and instead serve to distract from the book's overall narrative. Likewise, both theoretical debates linking social housing with disengagement from employment, and the accompanying empirical analyses examining this possibility needs to be incorporated more wholeheartedly to more clearly demonstrate their relevance to the book's central argument.

I was also surprised by the comparative lack of attention paid to the book's empirical methods. The two case studies reported in chapter 5 were both small, geographically localised surveys of variable tenure groups that is suggestive of a secondary analysis

project. Yet readers are left in the dark over the scope of these datasets, their original purpose, assessed suitability for exploring the book's central research questions, or the potential generalisability of findings beyond their specific settings. If these datasets were used for reasons of serendipity or convenience, this could go some way to explaining the book's disparate scope and sometimes meandering central narrative. In parallel, certain methodological decisions – for example, operationalising welfare dependency as a desire to give up work – are not explored at all. The comparative lack of critical reflection on the book's empirical components forms an especially noticeable contrast to the richly detailed and nuanced treatment of the theoretical considerations throughout the book.

Notwithstanding these critiques, the book is eloquently expressed and persuasively written, and the author's understanding of the topic area is clear on every page. Accordingly, the book will appeal primarily to scholars and policymakers working within housing research and policy, and social policy more broadly. Its empirical and policy content is explored in a way that would be accessible to diverse scholars from undergraduate students to experienced researchers.

The book engages meaningfully with policy, and commendably, the potential policy implications of the work are interwoven throughout the work. The final chapter then lays out Gregory's vision for a universal housing system that would offer flexibility for people living in all tenures while potentially diluting narratives of underserving recipients and welfare dependency. This vision would be more convincing if developed further, to offer more detail about how this universal system would operate in practice, the challenges likely to arise in designing and implementing such a system, and possible responses to these challenges. Overall, while the book does not fully live up to its hugely ambitious potential, it offers insights into UK housing policy that will benefit scholars in the field.

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