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Housing and the Realignment of Urban Socio-Spatial Contracts

Abstract

This paper argues that narratives of the Big Society and localism in England enacted through housing and planning policies; and housing welfare and benefit reforms across the entire United Kingdom, partly articulate, but primarily mask, a particular governmental response to the present structural crisis in housing and its sociological impacts. This response may be located within a wider political project aimed at realigning understandings of cities and the right for working class and younger populations to occupy urban space and access welfare as enacted through affordable and decent homes. The paper utilises social contract theory to suggest that the promotion of localism in housing systems needs to be understood within wider struggles of naming the world and reframing the respective rights and responsibilities of the state and particular population groups. The paper concludes that Big Society rationales represent an implicit acknowledgement of a regressive reduction in the ambition of government to address the housing crisis as it affects low and middle-income populations and its related social consequences.

Key words: Big Society; government; housing; localism; social contract; Right to the City

Introduction

In 2010 a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition formed the new government of the United Kingdom (UK). The new Prime Minister, David Cameron articulated an idea of 'the Big Society' as a response to a diagnosis of a 'broken Britain' and as a mechanism for ameliorating the effects of the austerity measures to be imposed on government spending and local services (Cameron, 2010; Flint and Powell, 2012). The Big Society was premised on a reduction in the power and role of central government and the primacy of localism- with devolution of powers to local communities and enhanced flexibility for local authorities- and a plea for more voluntary endeavour by individuals and charitable and private sector organisations. Big Society discourse and resulting legislative and policy mechanisms including the Localism Act were not enacted in the devolved administrations of Scotland and Northern Ireland, although housing welfare benefit reforms are applied in these nations.

Discourses of the Big Society and localism and their specific attribution to housing policies need to be situated within a wider struggle to name the world (Bourdieu, 1984). There has been an increasing international coalescence and alignment in housing, planning and urban policy in Western neo-liberal societies in the last twenty years, characterised by a uniformity of diagnosis of problems and a commonality of rationalities and techniques to address them: low demand, neighbourhood effects, poor stock condition and declining personal morality and responsibility; to be addressed through quasi or full privatisation, mixed communities and physical and demographic and reconfigurations of urban environments (see Flint, 2012). These projects involve naming the world through reimaging cities and re-presenting public and affordable housing in the urban imagination (Goetz, 2012; Mann, 2012). They require and construct a fundamental redefinition of the city and a different vision of what the city should be (Goetz, 2013: 99).

This paper argues that the conceptualisation of the Big Society in England masks a more significant project of redefining the socio-spatial contracts- imagined and legal- at national and local scales that have underpinned the temporal and spatial rights to housing. This is being enacted through dismantling previous actually existing rights to access affordable housing and occupy urban space, in which the presence and purpose of social housing, and the forms of governmental interventions and responsibilities that enabled it, are defined as obsolete (Goetz, 2013; Jacobs and Manzi, 2013). Therefore, the rationales of the Big Society and localism need to be understood as coinciding with, and being intrinsically linked to, radical housing welfare and benefit reforms. The UK coalition government's explicit attempt to form 'a new contract with the British people on work and welfare' (HM Government, 2012: 36) is only one element of a far broader realignment of key pillars of expectation, reciprocity, authority and responsibility that both social contract theory and the post-war welfare state were built upon. Housing is a major site of contractual governance, extending beyond the rented tenancy agreement to housing-related welfare provision and mortgages, and therefore a key arena in which the rhetorical and legal realignment of the social contract is occurring.

The paper beings by examining the concept of the social contract as developed in 17th and 18th Century political thought, identifying the importance of a national associational imaginary, centralising authority and the covenant of sovereign power to deliver protection and predictability, including permanency and control of the future. It then explores how these key pillars of social contract theory have been eroded at different geographical scales. The paper continues by describing the governmental response to these developments involves reframing the narrative of contractual relations, including a radical diminishing of the expectations that certain populations groups should have for their housing provision. Finally, the paper suggests that the largely aspatial concept of the Big Society masks how socio-spatial contracts are being realigned in the contemporary era in ways that threaten to return housing conditions for many to the circumstances that were the catalyst for the birth of public

housing policy in the first place. The paper focuses primarily on England, with references to the rest of the UK and the United States, but the splintering authority of nation states to globalised market forces and the relationship between 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Wacquant, 2008) and the ending of 'the actual existing right to the city' (Hodkinson, 2013) previously enacted through 20th Century welfare states is applicable to many advanced liberal democracies.

The Social Contract

One of the features of neo-liberal governmental discourse, particularly in the UK under the New Labour and Coalition administrations, is an explicit emphasis on realigning the contract between government and governed populations and reframing the relationship between state and citizen. There has been a specific focus on the mid-20th Century welfare state settlement and an articulation that the founding principles of the contractual underpinnings of the welfare state, including individuals' obligations to act, seek self-sufficiency, and contribute, have been subverted (see Flint, 2009). In this context, it is useful to return to the theories of the social contract which developed from Hobbes in the 17th Century through the work of Locke, Hume and Rousseau in the 18th Century (although, as Barker, 1960: vii explains, the general idea of the social contract 'has haunted the generations' and may be traced back to the times of Plato). In particular, its emphasis upon the contract *implied* in government (Barker, 1960: vii, emphasis added) and the underpinning mechanisms of covenant that enable the exercise of authority offer a new lens for understanding the discourses and associated policy techniques of the Big Society and localism.

Theorists of the social contract never suggested that society had ever been constituted on an actual (legislative or legalistic) social contract, rather it was conceptualised as 'an associative figuration' which exists and evolves of itself (Rousseau, 1762; Barker, 1960). However, this implied contract of government, even if it never really existed, shaped human

behaviour: that is figurations of social relationships between groups of the population were constituted and understood through a conceptualisation of an implied, largely unwritten, contract of regulations, rights and responsibilities (Barker, 1960: vii). Crucially, the development of the philosophy of the social contract in the 18th Century coincided with the transition in political thought from natural law to the idealisation of the nation state (Barker 1960: xxxii) and the social contract functioned through a nationalism of government. For Hobbes (1651), the first key lesson of sovereignty was that the people were to be taught that they ought not to be in love with any form of government they see in their neighbour nations, more than with their own (Hobbes, 1651; Wickham and Evers, 2012). Therefore, the imaginary of the social contract in framing social relations between groups, and the relationships between populations and their rulers, was linked to another imaginary- that of the nation and the histories, values and ways of being viewed as inherent to this particular form of association (Anderson, 1983). It was the nation state's increasing monopolisation of violence, taxation and other elements of social control that framed the civilising process in modernity (Elias, 2000). As argued below, it is the splintering and reversing of these state monopolising forces, with the complicity of government itself, which frames the specific developments in the contemporary housing crisis and the articulation of new forms of social contract enacted through housing, including the concept of the Big Society, localism and the simultaneous reconfigurations of the welfare state.

Theorists of the social contract acknowledged that, even if some form of initial contract originated in consent, it did, and does, not continue to exist through consent (Hume, 1740). Rather, centralising authority and the exercise of power were fundamental and it was a fear of an all-powerful civitas, which Hobbes (1651) termed 'Leviathan', that regulated self-interest and self-preservation. Humans' capacity for sociality, therefore, relates to the specific configuration of governmental authority (or the particular rule of Leviathan, which in modernity was manifested in the nation state) and the frameworks of power and legislation through which Leviathan exercised authority. However, even for Hobbes, Leviathan became

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and remained sovereign through forms of (imagined) covenants with its subjects (Davy, 2012). Hobbes' famous 'perpetual war of all against all' is postulated as occurring in the absence of a commonwealth (Hobbes, 1651: 296). But, this commonwealth and the social contract underpinning it is not premised upon forms of social solidarity, but rather, individuals unite in commonwealths and place themselves under government in order to preserve their own private property (Locke, 1698) and government actually works through erecting guards and fences to protect this property (Davy, 2012). The struggles of the proponents of public housing in the United Kingdom, United States and other nations in the 19th and 20th Centuries to challenge elements of this orthodoxy of private property is testament to the power of the idea of protecting private property rights as the central element of political economy, most visibly manifested in the valorisation of home ownership.

Crucially, for Hobbes, the functioning of government enabled through imagined social covenants was dependent upon an acceptance and faith in the power of the sovereign authority to *protect*, and provide *predictability* for, its subjects. But, as explored in the following sections, the centralised or centralising authority which philosophers of the social contract built their theories upon; and the envisaged and perceived power of authority to provide predictability for populations, have diminished rapidly in the contemporary era. The Big Society, and specifically its operationalisation in housing and welfare policy, represents a new articulation- partly tacit acknowledgement and partly a deliberate project of government- that these key pillars of the social contract: a centralising authority and an ability to provide predictability, no longer apply.

Governing the Uneasy Society

In this context of an inability of governance to provide predictability, the Big Society and localism may be seen as representing one element of what Gilbert (2009) terms a 'governmentality of unease', in an age of insecurity, anxiety and angst (Giddens, 1990; Judt,

2010; Mackay, 1993; Scott, 2000), epitomised in the Conservative Party's narrative of Broken Britain (Cameron, 2010; Conservative Party, 2010). While such social morbidity (Overy, 2010), and its sociological manifestations may be identified in many historical periods (see Flint and Powell, 2012), as Judt (2010) argues, what is particularly pronounced in the contemporary period is a sense that those in power have lost control of the future. Given that the concepts of modern government and techniques of governance, and specifically the discipline of planning, are premised on the belief that the future can be known and shaped, this represents a fundamental shift. Standing (2011) has identified a new precariat whose pillars of security and predictability, including housing, have been eroded in a reversal of trends during the 20th Century where housing, including home ownership, was viewed as a strategy for the working class to insulate themselves from the vagaries of capitalism. As Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2013: 16) describe, the increasing use of short fixed-term tenancies in social housing in the UK and other western neo-liberal nations is 'a rhetorical and practical assault on the (often meagre) ontological security of society's poorest and most disadvantaged groups'; resulting in a return to forms of urban precariousness that preceded public housing (Hodkinson, 2013).

What is different about the present housing crisis is that forms of advanced urban marginality (Wacquant, 2008) increasingly engulf new social groupings beyond the working class, encompassing younger generations, many middle class households (Hodkinson, 2013) and what von Hoffman (2005) termed 'the forgotten third' including white collar workers and public service professionals. The crisis in working class housing is made visible in the crude machinations of current benefit reforms and the flashpoint protests of groups such as the English Defence League (a social movement which opposes Islamic fundamentalism in the UK, but with complex links to far right and football hooligan groups and protests against changing conditions in British cities). But this time the crisis extends much further and the Big Society and localism, and the realignment of imaginings of socio-spatial contracts constructed within these concepts, may be viewed as one form of pre-emptive response to

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the consequences of a new generation having fewer housing opportunities than their parents: a situation unprecedented in the welfare state era and engendered by previous market-orientated reforms (Colic-Peikser and Johnson, 2012; McKee, 2012; Pennington et al., 2012).

Therefore the authority derived from a covenant enacted through the perceived ability of government to protect and provide predictability for governed populations, including housing provision, has been drastically eroded. Similar erosion may also be identified in another key pillar of social contract theory: the centralisation and monopolisation of authority by a Leviathan, which in modernity came to be understood as the nation state. The UK coalition government is explicit in its argument 'that the days of big government are over' (Communities and Local Government, 2011: 2; see Jacobs and Manzi, 2013). The government also states categorically that 'the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today…and to pass power back to where it belongs' (Communities and Local Government, 2011: 2). But the actual dynamics of this dispersal of power require further contextual understanding and the concepts of the Big Society and localism, comprising a realignment of power within the nation state, cannot be divorced from a dissipation of central state governmental power at the global level and both represent the creation of new spaces for market forces and profit accumulation. The increasing inability of nation states to control taxation revenues in a world of offshore 'Treasure Islands' (Shaxson, 2011) and the privatisation of local public services fundamentally reshape any notions of local empowerment. The Coalition government claims that 'for too long central government has hoarded and concentrated power' (Communities and Local Government, 2011: 2). But the reality is that much of this nation state power has dissipated beyond national borders. Put starkly, large scale and direct governmental intervention such as public housing was a product of a political economy that no longer exists (Goetz, 2013: 6).

As Raco (2012) so powerfully argues and illustrates, we are in an age of government by contract, but it is not the social contract of 18th Century political thought, or the imagined social covenant of the post-war welfare state, but rather a form of commercial and legal

contract which, through its bewildering complexity, masks an ever-growing socio-spatial distance between local service users, ownership and investment and service delivery decision making. Beyond the wicked irony of Private Finance Initiatives often acting to ossify service flexibility and consumer empowerment in ways remarkably reminiscent of Stalinist planning techniques, we have to understand that the socio-spatial configurations of governance and populations that have underpinned our understanding of urban and housing problems, and the drivers to address them, are radically altered.

For example, the Victorian housing philanthropists and the pioneers of planning, urban and public housing policies, crucially, shared a fate in space and place with the populations that they sought to govern. The risks of the poor and insanitary housing were the risks of the urban elite, given that spatial proximity provided no insulation from contagious diseases or social unrest. As Hunt (2004) portrays, the attempts of the elites to imagine and shape cities were inherently local as well as urban: the museums, parks, prisons, clinics, schools and, eventually, housing for the working classes were built on an understanding of a localised social contract, in which the elites resided in, and were linked to, their city as much as any other citizen. While this was always embedded in a wider sense of nationalism, it is the changing socio-spatial relations between elite power and locality that drives the contemporary crisis. The notion that public housing is redundant is a dimension of a much wider project of demunicipalisation (Jacobs and Manzi, 2013) and dismantling the associative figurations and covenants that municipalisation was built upon. The housing situation in London powerfully illustrates this: it is estimated that 60 per cent of new-build property in central London was bought by overseas investors (Hodkinson, 2013). Where contemporary projects of civic boosterism for cities occur, such as the Olympic Games in Atlanta and London, they are now often captured by urban regimes to further diminish public (municipal) housing (Goetz, 2013; Watt, 2013a; see Paton et al., 2012, on Glasgow and the 2014 Commonwealth Games).

Of course, the reduction in actual nation state power and responsibility does not mean a reduction in governmental and elite discourses continuing to frame understandings at the national level or make reference to the nation. But there has been an important shift in the nature of this discourse. The obsolescence of a former political economy and new articulations of the 'national' in governmental discourses illustrate Walter's (2004) argument that we are in a period of 'domopolitics' in which the nation is governed as a home, rather than the traditional political economy which governed the state as a household. This new politics, Walters argues, emphasises belonging, identify, affiliation and emotion rather than rationality and calculation. As will be illustrated below, this development is very evident in the attempts to realign the socio-spatial contract of affordable housing provision, in which concepts such as 'fairness' and 'expectation' take primacy over 'need' and 'rights'.

Belonging and legitimacy in the framework of the nation state have always been problematic for public housing and its tenants. Housing has been the 'wobbly pillar' of welfare states (Torgersen; 1987; Malpass, 2003) and public housing in the United States was often portrayed as 'un-American', epitomised by Congress requiring, in 1952, public housing tenants to sign loyalty oaths certifying that they were not members of subversive organisations (Argersinger, 2010; Bradford Hunt, 2003). But this linkage of a national commonwealth and contract was also very evident in the positive achievements of public housing policy in the United States, which may be juxtaposed with contemporary discourses in the UK to illuminate the radical project of realignment that is now occurring. The response to the 'long hot summers' and 'urban convulsions' in the United States in the 1960s (McLaughlin, 2011: 541-542) was Lyndon Johnson's administration launching a war on poverty (rather than seeking to reframe its essential essence). Crucially, housing was identified as both an issue of social justice rather than one of environmental health and 'a national disgrace' rather than an implacable system beyond governmental reach (McLaughlin, 2011). There was, therefore, an acknowledgement that, in the words of Senator Robert Wagenaar, introducing legislation for a permanent federal housing

programme in the United States in an earlier era, "a government housing subsidy…[is necessary to correct]…the distribution of our national income that has not been entirely just' (quoted in Argersinger, 2010:. 799). In contrast, as will be explored in the next section, the UK Coalition government's attempts to reframe national covenants, amidst the background of major urban disturbances in England in the summer of 2011, acts to deny the nature of the housing crisis and specifically to ignore economic inequality as a causal factor.

Crisis as Norm: Government and the New Social Contract

One consequence of the splintering of centralising authority and the increasing ceding of control of the future by the state to global markets forces is that the role of government becomes more about the management of perceptions than the management of the urban macro economy (Lovering, 2007). This is enacted through narrative techniques in which major realignments in existing socio-spatial contracts, including those embedded in housing systems, are located within discourses of governmental transformation. For example, the Liberal Party in Canada described its 1995 budget which transferred responsibility for social housing to the Provincial governments as "the very redefinition of government itself' (Martin, 1995: 6). Similarly, the UK Coalition government describes a 'new contract with the British people on work and welfare" (HM Government, 2012: 36), with housing welfare reforms being 'about localism' (Communities and Local Government, 2010). They also involve attempts to change definitions, for example, the increasing use of the term 'private registered providers of social housing' (Home Office, 2012) and to introduce new moral regimes and language for framing policies, including the primacy of 'fairness' over 'need' in rationing housing. Fundamentally the reconfiguring of the housing crisis is about realigning causation, prioritisation and responsibility:

"The housing benefit system has almost created an expectation that you could almost live anywhere, and that's what has to stop."

Grant Shapps, Former Housing Minister, 2010 (quoted in Ramesh et al., 2010).

"Those within [the welfare system] grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own…"

Prime Minister David Cameron, June 2012

This extends the problematized population to children in households receiving welfare support and generates a new distinction between welfare recipients and non-recipients on the basis that it is now only the former who have an expectation of a home of their own. It attempts to fundamentally reframe the expectations of populations (and by extension, their expectations of government to deliver) so that the idea of a home of one's own becomes somewhat fanciful, while minimising this as if this shift has already occurred and is now *doxa*: taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1984; Allen, 2008). It also subtly lowers expectations further by focusing on a home (any home) of one's own, rather than aspiration to home ownership.

The Prime Minister continued:

"Why does the single mother get the council housing straightaway when the hard-working couple have been waiting years?"

Beyond the misunderstanding (deliberate or otherwise) of social housing allocation policies and the denial of the possibility that single mothers in social housing can be hard working, the crucial obfuscation here is the focus on distinctions between these two forms of household, rather than the central question of why households are waiting years to access suitable accommodation. A third passage of the speech epitomises the acceptance of crisis as norm and the reconfiguration of responsibility and imagined social covenants:

"There are currently 210,000 people aged 16-24 who are social housing tenants…and this is happening when there is a growing phenomenon of young people living with their parents into their 30s because they can't afford their own place- almost 3 million between the ages of 20 and 34. So for literally millions, the passage to independence is several years living in

their childhood bedroom as they save up to move out. While, for many others, it's a trip to the council where they can get housing benefit at 18 or 19- even if they are not actively seeking work…there are many who will have a parental home and somewhere to stay- they just want more independence."

The very existence of young people in social housing becomes problematized, as does the desire for independent living. The complete transformation, within a generation, of the expected pathways and timescales to having a home of one's own is termed 'a phenomenon' as if it were completely divorced from governmental and societal processes and priorities, denying any possibility of an alternative (see Jacobs and Manzi, 2013).

This reframing of the narrative of housing expectations has to be situated in a much more ambitious project of the current UK coalition government: that of realigning the essence of the poverty that necessitates a public housing system in the first place:

"For too long we have measured our success in tackling poverty in terms of the simplistic concept of income transfer."

(Iain Duncan Smith, foreword to HM Government, 2012).

"This government believes that the focus on income over the last decades has ignored the root causes of poverty"

(HM Government, 2012: 4)

That is to say, in the tradition of classical Conservative political thought, 'the causes of apprehension and complaint among populations lie not within constitutions or governments but in their own conduct' (Burke, 1790: 375). Prime Minister David Cameron (2010) updated this paradigm in his 'Big Society' speech, arguing that 'huge cultural changes are required within communities lacking the abilities to cope with modern life.' The 'associative figuration' (Barker, 1960) of the social contract is thereby linked directly to the 'problem figuration' (Van Wel, 1992) of the contemporary crisis. It is the location of the contemporary crisis (including

its housing dimensions) in the actions of individuals and localised dynamics that is the defining feature of the Big Society and localism agendas. These, in turn, are driven by the need to mask the reframing of the social contract as being inherently linked to the ceding of state authority to market forces and the resulting inability to provide predictability and protection in housing and urban systems for large sections of the population.

The Big Society, Localism and the Right to the City

The Coalition's Localism Act attempts to provide new powers to local communities to shape neighbourhood planning, influence decisions on housing developments and provide communities with a right to build, incentivising new development in localities through the community infrastructure levy requiring developers to make further investments in local services or transport systems. This emphasis on 'localness', including enhancing 'local connection' in the prioritisation of housing allocations (Gallent and Robinson, 2012) provides a further example of how the new form of domopolitics (Walter, 2004) emphasising 'belonging' continues to replace alternative definitions of need. The Localism Act also reforms social housing through enhancing flexibility in new tenancies (which may now be a minimum of two years, see also Scottish Government, 2012) and enhancing the autonomy of local authorities to determine their own social housing allocation priorities. Local authorities have also been given enhanced powers to discharge their homelessness obligations through the private rented sector (Communities and Local Government, 2011; HM Government, 2011).

The Localism project of government cannot be separated from other major reforms of the housing system, including the marketization of social rents through changes to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates (based on the 30th percentile, rather than median of market rates), capping LHA rates by property size, scrapping the five bedroom rate and raising the age at which the requirement for a room in shared accommodation applies from 25 years to

35 years. The spare room subsidy (bedroom tax) attempts to produce equivalence in the social and private rented sectors, financially penalising social housing tenants deemed to have an excess of space in their existing properties. The Prime Minister has repeatedly proposed ending Housing Benefit for those aged under-25 who are not in employment, education or training (BBC News, 2012). These policy reforms represent a parallel governmental project of localism that reframe the social contract between groups in society and act to remake the social composition of localities, in addition to further eliminating distinctions in rights between social and private renting (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2013).

These policies, and parallel processes in the private housing system such as financial barriers to rent and mortgage deposits, produce a temporal and spatial compression of the expectations of, and right to, housing. The manifestations of power enacted in property relations through the reconfiguration of the populations of the urban environment (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2013; Zukin, 1991) are played out through what Watt (2013a) describes as the daily struggle over space in the contemporary city. In a damning corollary to the discourse of the Big Society and localism, for many low income households, the local arena is a site of a desperate effort to defend their 'right to stay put' and their 'right to place' (Watt, 2013a). The permanency of housing affordability is removed (Goetz, 2013) reducing the elective fixity (Paton, 2013) of working class populations; that is their capacity to retain control or choice over their locality of residence. In a mirror image, for other groups of the population, most notably younger generations, there are new forms of forced fixity, in which the necessity of extended residence in the parental home is generated through public policies of Housing Benefit, tenure and allocation reform; private forces rationing access to mortgages and private renting; and the mix of public and private drivers enacted through processes of gentrification (although there remains considerable social class diversity amongst younger age cohorts in terms of access to housing assets). The attempt of the Big Society and localism agendas to realign the 'locus of control' (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2013) to local

communities actually coincides with a loss of this control over fixity in locale for large groups of the population.

Hodkinson (2013) argues that contemporary housing processes have abolished what previously constituted an actual existing right to the city, enacted through affordable housing, welfare provision and market regulation. Working class populations were able to reside in urban centres with a sense of permanency and expectation that occupancy of these urban spaces would also be possible for their children. The displacement and dispersal arising from gentrification and government programmes such as Housing Market Renewal (HMR- a £2.2 billion initiative in the north of England using renovation, demolition and new build to reconfigure housing stock, tenure and population profiles in areas of low demand) have been followed by a new wave arising from Housing Benefit reforms, in which low income households are forced from central areas in cities such as London and Leeds, out to urban peripheries and, in some cases, to other regions of the country in what the Conservative Mayor of London equated to 'Kosovo style social cleansing' (Ramesh et al., 2010; Hodkinson, 2013; Watt, 2013b). These waves of displacement have complex evolving geographical patterns as local authorities respond differentially to Housing Benefit reforms and their homelessness obligations.

The Big Society and localism require, if they are to have any sense of coherence, a sense of belonging and commitment to place, but these concepts exist simultaneously with processes of displacement. In the UK (and the United States), public housing policy acts to reconfigure the spatial, architectural and demographic reality of cities (Goetz, 2012). In doing so it realigns a socio-spatial contract underpinning the 'right to the city': that is the ability of populations to legitimately participate in (access) and appropriate (occupy) urban space (Attoh, 2011; Duke, 2009; Connelly, 2011: Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 1973, 2008). Public housing is increasingly only seen as being 'of' the city when it is conceptualised as a link in a chain of economically valuable neighbourhoods (Goetz, 2013). Housing Benefit reforms act to literally reduce occupancy of space within domestic properties while denying the

appropriation of particular urban spaces to poorer and younger groups at neighbourhood and city scales.

Retrogression

The fury with which the UK government responded to the observations of Raquel Rolnik, the United Nations rapporteur on adequate housing during her recent visit to the UK was revealing (Gentleman, 2013). Despite the specific focus on her criticisms of the spare room supplement (bedroom tax), it was her challenging of three key elements of the contemporary governmentality of housing that was most significant. Firstly, she explicitly identified the UK as having a housing crisis, something, which, as discussed above, governmental rhetoric has sought to portray as a new doxa- a normal state of the world. Secondly, she identified that the location of some social housing, including in neighbourhoods subject to gentrification, was inextricably linked to the success of that housing and the project of social justice and urban sustainability underpinning it; in other words, the localism of social housing matters, not merely its aggregate provision. Finally, and most damningly, she described the deterioration of the right to housing, as a form of human rights: 'Retrogression is what you talk about in human rights when you go backwards and that is what we are seeing now' (quoted in Gentleman, 2013). She directly linked this to the changing status of social housing.

The idea of retrogression is a very powerful characterisation of current housing and welfare policy. Minton (2012) has sought to make historical connections through describing programmes such as HMR as the 21st Century equivalent of previous slum clearance initiatives. But this is to miss a key point, which is, despite all the controversy about HMR and Hope VI in the United States (see Flint, 2012; Goetz, 2013), these programmes represented a reinvigorated belief in the power of state planning, enacted through housing policy, to reshape cities (Judt, 2010). This was a belief with a lineage back to the birth of environmental improvement projects of the 19th Century Victorian city (Smith, 1981). As

articulated by one of the residents in Minton's study (2012: 92) 'With the destruction of the sixties, at least they had the excuse they were building the new Jerusalem'.

Current governmental discourse and policies, and the outcomes of these policies, are of a different order. They are conceptualised and enacted at the individual household level. They reduce the centralising authority of public housing through an enhancement of the private rented sector, including the dispersal of policy mechanisms and aims to private landlords, epitomised in the enhanced role for private landlords in local authorities discharging their homelessness obligations and landlords' role in governing Housing Benefit changes. This is the major housing tenure change occurring in the era of Big Society localism. As Watt (2013b) describes, what has occurred in many urban areas is not the achievement of the home-owning society, but rather a replacement of public housing with the provision of housing for low income households by private landlords. The private rented sector is estimated to be housing 37 per cent of all households in London by 2015 (Watt, 2013b) and an actual decrease in home ownership in the East London boroughs since 2001 has coincided with a 75 per cent rise in the private rented sector (Watt, 2013b, see also Minton, 2012).

The centralising authority and capacity so essential to notions of social contract dissolves from public housing to a constellation of private rented provision. As a result, the sense of predictability, permanency and belonging- central to social contracts, the Big Society and localism- is replaced with a new 'context of transience', more usually applied to an understanding of the precarious access to urban space amongst poor populations in the 'illegal cities' of the Global South (Datta, 2012). But this transience was also a defining feature of 19th Century British urbanisation prior to public housing, as were the problems of landlord exploitation, overcrowding and working class displacement.

A moralising mechanism for rationing woefully inadequate housing supply was present in the 19th Century and remerges in responses to the acuteness and scale of the present housing

crisis though new forms of individual assessment. Some social landlords are responding to waiting list pressures by linking tenancy renewals and Discretionary Housing Payments to existing tenants' conduct such as consuming 'luxuries' of alcohol, cigarettes, media subscription packages, and their diet and exercise (Brown, 2013; Johnson, 2013). The Big Society and localism agenda lays claim to recapturing a previous era of civic engagement and the dynamism of provincial cities and towns (Hunt, 2004). However, if ghosts run the city (Berman, 1988), the more compelling, and depressing, historical parallel is one encapsulated in the precarious and transient existence of lower income households in the Victoria city: in the midst of a housing crisis, dependent upon laissez faire landlordism and a deliberate distancing (through moralisation of poverty) of state and government from the crisis. We are, unfortunately, in our own times in the midst of 'an urban modernity haunted by that which it sought to overcome' (Crook, 2008: 429).

For the key historical lesson for proponents of the Big Society and localism is that voluntary endeavour, mercantile philanthropy and self-regulation in the Victorian era, whether it be the lodging houses for the destitute (Crook, 2008), the care of the insane (Wise, 2012) or the early provision of housing for the working classes (Birch and Gardner, 1981) exposed the limitations of these forms of governance and their inadequacies to grapple with the scale of the urban crisis. The modern project therefore became one of extending the social contract through municipal and subsequently national state intervention, culminating in the welfare state and the great public housing programmes of the 20th Century. Ultimately, the Big Society, as a form of enacting responsibility and obligation to act, requires the responsibilisation of government rather than the seceding of that responsibility so powerfully evident in contemporary housing systems and processes (Boudreau and Keil, 2001).

Conclusions

Big Society and localism discourses of dispersing power to communities articulate a form of governing without government that conceals major realignments in property and power relations between social classes and generations (Jacobs and Manzi, 2013). The reduction in state intervention to ameliorate processes of economic reproduction directly affects the allocation of housing opportunities between social classes and generations (Pierson, 2006). New housing and planning policies and the simultaneous reform of housing-related welfare are embedded in ideas that the old political economy, municipal forms of government and the public housing provision they engendered are obsolete. The reframing of the social contract between ruling authority and its populations is a response to a structural crisis in housing, a crisis affecting a rapidly expanding proportion of the population. It is a response that seeks to deny or reframe the nature of the crisis, decoupling government and structure as causal effects and constituting a new reality where crisis is norm. The realignment of housing contracts represents a governmental spatial fix for the uncertainties engendered by a generational decline in housing opportunities (Mann, 2012) as power and authority is ceded from national and local state apparatus. The denial of crisis and structural and political explanations reminds us of Foucault's observation (1977) that power requires to mask a substantial part of itself and that its success lies in its ability to hide its own mechanisms.

Understanding these processes through a right to the city paradigm enables the city to be understood as inhabited rather than the city only as property (Marcuse et al. 2009; Pinnegar, 2012). It enables us to view the city through the lens of alternative urban visions, such as that articulated in the 2014 Master plan for Seoul in South Korea, 'Hope Seoul', premised explicitly on allowing each citizen to enjoy welfare benefits and securing a minimum standard of living. The plan may be powerfully juxtaposed with the dominant discourses described in this paper. In direct contrast to the stigmatisation and shaming of welfare and its operationalization in tighter conditionality, the plan aims 'to create a city where each citizen can *unabashedly* enjoy a certain level of welfare…in the future the city will focus on welfare as a basic human right and strive to approach a form of *universal welfare* by establishing the

'Seoul Standard' for the first time in the country" (emphasis added). Rather than the marginalisation of deprived populations and the increasing exclusion and transience of their right to access and occupy urban space, the plan seeks to 'designate the marginalized as *Seoul households* in poverty', emphasising the poor as being legitimately and unquestionably 'of' and belonging (and thereby having a right) to the city. One mechanism for achieving this vision in Seoul will be increasing the ratio of public housing.

This reminds us that in Britain and many other nations, planning and housing policy have, historically, been informed by social equality paradigms linked to wider structural and justice dimensions (Arthurson, 2012). These offered an urban and governmental ambition greater than the emaciated goals of the Big Society and localism. Goetz (2013) argues that much housing and urban policy literally offers low income households a ticket to nowhere and that mobility itself is no answer to chronic joblessness and poverty. He is right, but even that inadequate mobility is increasingly closed down for working class populations and younger generations.

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