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Rational fictions and imaginary systems: Cynical ideology and the problem figuration and practice of public housing

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how Van Wel's theory of problem figuration, Carlen's concept of imaginary systems and Zizek's notion of cynical ideology may advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of the contemporary construction of housing policy narratives and embedded localised housing practice. Applying this theoretical framework to a case study of responses to homelessness in Scotland and further illustrative examples from the United Kingdom and United States, the paper examines how housing practice is constituted through different imaginaries of housing systems. These are based on fictional as well as rational elements, located within a form of cynical ideology whereby actors act 'as if' the realities of the present housing crisis are distanced from the imagined intended functioning of housing systems. This masks alternative social realities and denies an explicitly articulated politics of housing which would reveal new processes of capitalism, generational and class realignments and a reframing of the role of government itself.

Key words: cynical ideology; housing policy; housing practice; imaginary housing systems; problem figuration; public housing.

Introduction

In his second inaugural address, United States President Franklin Roosevelt described one third of the nation being 'ill housed' (quoted in Heathcott, 2012a: 361). He continued:

> But it is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope- because the nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out.

This paper examines how, within a politics of urban housing (Murie and Rowlands, 2008), such a picture of housing crisis is painted and how a contemporary political and governmental gaze formulates and understands housing injustices. The politics of housing is inherently a struggle for the legitimate right to 'name the world' (Bourdieu, 1991) and to define, rationalise or justify 'the way things are' (Hamblin, 1994; Bourdieu, 1984; Allen, 2008). This includes constructing a formulation of housing problems, their explanations and solutions and defining the limits of housing governance (Hamblin 1994; Van Wel, 1992; Jacobs et al., 2003; Crook, 2008).

There is a substantive existing housing studies literature on the discursive construction of housing problems, often utilising the concepts and methods of critical discourse analysis and social constructionism. There is also an established body of work on localised housing practice. This paper aims to build on this knowledge drawing on the work of Van Wel (1992), Carlen (2008) and Zizek (1989). It argues that their theories can illuminate our understanding of the relationship between rational and fictional elements, the changing role of ideology in shaping practice and how imaginary housing systems permeate localised problem construction and practice. This framework additionally provides a critical lens on a contemporary politics that is radically redefining particular populations' access to affordable housing. The final aim of the paper is to examine how the contemporary dominant political construction of the housing crisis challenges the notion, advanced on both sides of the Atlantic from the 19th Century, that public problems necessitated expansive public solutions. .

Decades of social reform advocacy and activism around urban and housing crisis resulted in legislation establishing that housing problems of access, affordability and standards constitute a legitimate arena for governmental action (Heathcott, 2012b).

Catherine Bauer's influential advocacy, in *Modern Housing* (1934), of governmental intervention where the market failed) was published during the Great Depression. This global crisis of capitalism resulted in new ideas being advanced about the relationship between state and citizen, the economy and the role of government (Heathcott, 2012a). The eventual response to housing conditions in British cities in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and the reaction to the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States was to establish ambitious public housing programmes, with construction and management costs and rent levels for tenants being subsidised, and often managed, by the state or quasi-public organisations (Bauer, 1934; Heathcott, 2012a). The contemporary global financial crisis has similarly resulted in discourses that seek to reframe the understanding of public housing. But, the political responses in both nations to the present crisis appears primarily to be a very different project of limiting public and governmental responsibilities and narrowing the scope of solutions.

The paper begins by reviewing existing work in housing studies on policy construction and local housing practice. It develops a theoretical framework seeking to build on this work, which is then applied to a small qualitative study of homelessness practice in Scotland. This reveals how the rational and fictional imaginaries of one policy field of a housing system are enacted through particular frames of understanding and the requirement to act 'as if' the realities of the present housing crisis are distanced from the imagined intended functioning of that system. The paper concludes by illustrating how similar processes are manifested in national-level housing discourse and policy, acting to mask alternative social realities and to deny an explicitly articulated politics of housing and arising housing inequalities.

Problem Figuration, Imaginary Systems and Cynical Ideology

There is a strong recent tradition within housing studies of critically analysing housing problem constructions and policy frameworks. This includes the advocacy of discourse analysis methodologies (Hastings, 2000), and the application of these methods to illuminate how discourses- influenced by political ideologies and power- are related to public housing policy (Darcy, 1999; Jacobs et al., 2003) and the use of subjective metaphors and myths within such discourses (Marston, 2000). Jacobs and Manzi (2013) have also identified the power of claimed 'rationality' in policy framing, for example through the advocacy of 'evidence-based' approaches. These ideas are returned to later in the paper.

There is also a substantial existing literature on local housing practice, often situated within a social constructionist model (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Jacobs and Manzi, 2000; Jacobs et al., 2004). This work has given primacy to a subjectivist interpretation of housing practice as seen through the eyes of practitioners themselves, with reactions to situations of housing practice including strategic positivism or fatalism (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004). Understanding this construction of practice requires moving beyond Lipsky's (1980) concept of discretion in professional practice to understanding broader 'structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1991) produced by politics and institutions that constrain practitioners' actions.

For example, Saugeres (2000) argues that dominant ideologies and narratives become materially grounded in everyday practice, articulating a particular social reality through practice that legitimates and reproduces the dominant and prevailing social, political and spatial order. In such an understanding housing practitioners internalise, reproduce and impose dominant institutional values, including through normative class-based judgements and moralities about their tenants and housing applicants and a discursive construction of worthiness (Saugeres, 2000; McCarthy, 2011; Schneider,

2009; see Flint, 2012 for a critique of this argument). McCormack's (2009: 396) work on housing stock transfers in Scotland, applying Friere's notion of a suppression of the oppressed through a state of submerged consciousness, describes a key tactic as being:

> ...the banking of myths; that is issuing as unproblematic and uncontested 'facts' the world view of the dominant oppressors. This world-view centres on the principle of the world as an ahistorical, fixed entity, impervious to the will of mankind and governed by the omnipotent, reified forces of 'destiny' , 'fate' and 'market'.

While the concept of submerged consciousness allows for some agency, actors (including tenants and some front line housing practitioners) become resigned to a 'reality' presented to them by the oppressors, which constitutes Bourdieu's notion of doxa- that is 'taken for granted', 'common sense' and 'the way things are' (Bourdieu, 1984; Allen, 2008). But such an interpretation may neglect the possibilities within practice for advocacy of alternative critical narratives and active resistance to, or subversion of, official national governmental or local organisational policies. Practices situated within a dominant framing structure, such as neoliberalism or managerialism, therefore remain incomplete, nuanced, context-dependent and contingent (Fields, 2015; Barnes and Prior, 2009; McKee, 2014; Wacquant, 2008). Structuring structures (Bourdieu, 1991) still enable the active agency of individuals in the reproduction and negotiation of institutional and social realities within localised projects of realigning practice (Saugeres, 2000; McKee, 2014; Flint, 2004).

What is required is a further understanding of housing practice in its complexity and multi-faceted, but often hidden, dimensions. We need to investigate the framing mechanisms used by housing practitioners to order their experience to make sense of their world (Goffman, 1974) and to examine how they justify their role in housing practice, which agents have an inherent requirement to do, particularly under periods of critical scrutiny (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991, 1999). Casey's (2008) study of the individual occupational trajectories of housing officers as a response to the 'spoiled identity' of what she termed an 'invisible' or marginalised profession illustrated the importance of

recognising the plurality of actors in a field. So any theory of housing practice should be understood through the actual situations practitioners find themselves in and should recognise how individuals will react differently in apparently similar work contexts (Lahire, 2011).

However, within such diversity the necessity of communication between actors requires a translation of personal frames of reference into forms of 'collective conventions' within the field of practice, or housing system, in order for actors to be understood (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991).

There is always a dialectical relationship between the structures of governance and the subjectivities of practitioners in the field, formed through political relations and the categories of perception that sustain them (Bourdieu, 1991). So power and force operate through relations and agents choose for themselves their meaningful courses of action and these choices determine the social factors that move them as well as these social factors influencing their behaviours. For example, McKee (2014) describes how the specific practices of front line housing professionals need to be located within struggles of subjectivity and the context and framing of the 'inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished' (Li, 2007: 1).

But the regimes of justification informing practice remain mediated by state institutions and the demands, often conflicting and incommensurable, made on practitioners by these institutions. An apparent societal and organisational 'quest for truth hides a moving game of impulses and interests', through a discursive transaction between actors (Martel, 2010: 427), although these interests and objective truths- for example the limits and contradictions within a policy and practice field, are often not acknowledged by participants who hold to a sincere fiction of disinterested exchange (Brubaker, 1985: 755). This arises because power imbued through relations masks a substantial part of itself and, indeed its success is often proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms and power cannot be exercised without disguising itself, dissimulating itself and obfuscating its true nature (Foucault, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984).

This power enacted through relations in the field of housing practice is evident in the policy discourses within which localised practice is situated. The importance of policy narratives in constructing problems, identifying causality and assigning responsibility for their resolution have long been recognised (Stone, 1989). Jacobs *et al*. (2003) analyse how housing problems and policy responses are specifically constructed, requiring a convincing narrative, a coalition of support and subsequent implementation of institutional measures aligned with such constructions (see also Flint, 2004). The link between policy narratives, state institutions and contested subjectivities is encapsulated in Van Wel's (1992) concept of *problem figuration* which emphasises the socially constructed nature of policy rhetoric and interventions in defining problems, their perceived causes and the mechanisms to be deployed; and argues that successive waves of problem figurations within a policy field may be identified. Problem figurations explain the relationship between rational and fictional elements within the subjectivities identified in critical discourse analysis and social constructionism. A problem figuration maybe understood as a form of *rational fiction*. A figuration may be 'rational' in the sense that it specifies systematically a problem and its causes and then develops coherently related policy goals accompanied by mechanisms and instruments of intervention and practice that are logical (and often claimed to be 'evidence-based') within the parameters of the constructed problem. But such figurations are based upon particular assumptions and prioritisations comprising historically embedded, shared fictional images and interpretations of the nature of the problem and the subjects of intervention that reflect the 'structure of bias' in a particular period.

For example, specific particular images of public housing sites and subjects are used to filter a range of narratives and simplistically re-present the imaginary of public housing, including the framing of obsolescence applied symbolically to iconic (in)famous public housing projects in the United States, such as Pruitt-Igoe, Gabrini Green or Lafitte (Graham, 2012: Heathcott, 2012b; Mann, 2012; Weber, 2002; Marston, 2000), the teenage single mother subverting public housing allocation systems in

the United Kingdom (Cameron, 2012) or the Housing Benefit claimants allegedly occupying large properties in prime real estate locations in central London (see Rayner, 2010).

An understanding of the interplay between rational and fictional elements within problem figurations transcends the false antinomy between the subjective and objective. The enactment of this interplay through localised practice is further developed in Carlen's (2008) concept of *imaginary systems*. For Carlen, professional actors operating in a field of practice- in our case, public housing- often simultaneously perform three levels of conflicting action: they claim that the stated goals of a strategy, policy or project are impossible to achieve given severe resource constraints; they complain about the enormous efforts that are required to prove the effectiveness of the policy or project; and they have to respond and address oppositional projects with a material reality that is counter to the stated objectives of the 'official' project. Such justifications and tensions of practice have previously been identified in housing management practice (Casey, 2008; McKee, 2014; Crawford, 2012).

These contradictions have an ideological foundation which is borne of the dialectical relationship which exists within the space between oppositional and contradictory demands. The internal conditions of the field place the public housing professional under enormous pressure, which arises from having to deal with the highly contested purpose of public organisations (Hogget, 2010). In practice this situates the housing professional between two dichotomous forces. On the one side there is the internal ethos of the organisation which gives rise to a sense of duty to one's tenants. This exists without necessarily acknowledging the limited resources which make the realisation of certain internal goals or objectives difficult, if not impossible. On the other side there is the recognition that a large number of policy interventions are imposed externally and which, Hogget (2010: 183) argues, are largely 'symbolic.' This enables the government or public authorities to sustain the appearance of doing something, and thereby create and manage perceptions (Lovering, 2007); supported by techniques of managerialism and audit to evidence effective intervention and

governance (Carlen, 2008; Jacobs and Manzi 2000; Jacobs et al., 2004; Marston 2004). Housing professionals are required to implement these interventions despite their frequent reservations about doing so.

Drawing a direct comparison with Carlen's (2008) analogy of imaginary penality, that is, penal systems which, although aware of the distance between the reality (of not being able to meet their objectives) and the ideological mask (having to make it look as if they are), the notion of 'Imaginary housing systems' helps to illuminate these processes. 'Imaginary housing systems' arise from the lack of alternatives on offer to the housing professional, who, caught between the personal ethos which gives their role meaning and the external political pressures with conflicting aims and objectives, must become both imaginative and at the same time 'cynical', in order to survive or prosper within the field (Carlen, 2008: 20):

> For while 'everyone knows' that the chief inspector was only 'doing his job', 'everyone else knows' that in-prison programmes and decent regimes are almost certainly not in themselves going to reduce offending…So why lose credibility (or your promotion, or even your job if you are a prison officer or a prison governor) by continuing to say what everyone else always and already knows?

Thus imaginary housing systems become a form of collective convention (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991) for the framing and embodiment of housing practice. Carlen's notion of the economic and political impetus for imaginary practice emerges in the day-to-day pressures of working within structures and techniques of governance which are logical in their rationality of securing a perception of the attainability of the institutional goals of policy but sustain the fiction of an imaginary system that masks the impossibility of such goal attainment. Carlen argues that in the past, methods such as critical discourse analysis could expose the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of policy interventions. But by contrast, the contemporary world of welfare service provision, including public housing, has become a closed arena where 'rhetoric has become the reality' (Carlen

2008: 5), thus creating an 'imaginary' which leads to professionals having to 'act as if' the imaginary is both attainable and measurable while at the same time having to save face by insisting that the job simply cannot be done with such limited resources. Carlen (2008: 9) links the practice of professionals to both the blaming aspects of problem figurations and the imaginary order and rational fictions within such figurations:

> Professionals in blame driven cultures … tend to acquiesce in the pursuit of institutional goals set by the various political and management agendas, at the same time as knowing that they are acquiescing in (and thereby promoting) an imaginary order, the perpetuation of which renders these goals more and more desirable as they become less and less likely of achievement.

The forms of cynicism in practice that Carlen identifies and their situation within wider ideological structures is illuminated by Zizek's (1989) explanation for why professionals tend to act 'as if'. He draws attention to the philosophical development in Marx's notion from saying 'they do not know it but they are doing it', to Sloterdijk's (1988) amended version which reads,' they know perfectly well, yet they are still doing it'. Zizek, mapping the layers of ideological production, starts from the premise that ideology constitutes the ideas, beliefs and concepts which seek to convince us of the truth, while actually serving some hidden power interest. Ideology is, therefore, always a distortion, seeking to mask the hidden forms of interest which creates the gap separating its official 'mainstream' or 'common sense' meaning from its real intention (Zizek, 1994).

This is where Zizek takes us beyond the previous conceptualisation of ideology as something the subject is unaware of (they do not know), back to the realm of consciousness, in his borrowed notion of 'cynicism as a form of ideology' (they know perfectly well, yet they are still doing it). For Zizek, it is not, as the Frankfurt School thinkers claimed, about seeing through the illusory fog or unveiling the hidden truth, it is about asking questions about the role of this ideological mystification in reproducing reality itself: 'This mask is simply not hiding the real state of things, the ideological

distortion is written into its very essence' (Zizek 1989: 25). The cynical subject is well aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality but still insists on the mask: 'they know what they are doing, and still they are doing it' (Crawford, 2012). Thus, the transition from the un-reflexive agent to the conscious and sometimes cynical actor in which both individuals' and organisations' abilities to act as if the imaginary is real drives practice, embodied and materialised in social activity through a framing that embeds such practice in an imaginary housing system that sustains its fictional as well as rational elements (Zizek, 1989).

We have sought to show how the value of existing work in housing studies on discourse, policy construction and localised practice may be enhanced by a stronger understanding of the relationship between rational and fictional elements. The concept of imaginary housing systems identifies how collective conventions within the field generate justificatory regimes and how their dialectic relationship with institutional structures requires a new conceptualisation of how ideology functions. We now apply these ideas to an illustrative case study of house practice.

Homelessness Practices in Scotland

In this section qualitative data is presented from a study commissioned by a homelessness charity in Scotland. Scotland is a part of the United Kingdom (UK), but housing policy, including homelessness policy, is devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, although some elements of the housing system, for example housing-related benefits payments, remain under the jurisdiction of the UK Government. Scotland has a higher proportion of social housing (delivered by local authorities, housing associations and cooperatives) than the rest of the UK and Scotland's approach to tackling homelessness is very different to other parts of the UK (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2014). Section II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 placed statutory obligations on local authorities to

accommodate homeless individuals and families. The Scottish Government made a commitment that by 2012 all those assessed as unintentionally homeless would be entitled to settled accommodation as a legal right. This was achieved through secondary legislation that removed the distinction between previously priority cases (such as households with dependent children) and those who had previously only been entitled to temporary accommodation (for example single individuals). Local authorities also have, since 1 June 2013, a statutory duty to assess the support needs of individuals whom they have a duty to secure settled accommodation for.

The research was conducted over a six-week period in the Autumn of 2012 and comprised 25 semi-structured interviews with senior managers of local authorities and housing organisations, senior representatives of housing and homelessness charities, and representatives of national housing professionals and landlords organisations, including the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Associations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews do not constitute a representative sample, although there was considerable commonality in the main themes identified by the participants.

The first striking finding was a commonly expressed acknowledgement that the statutory duties to homeless applicants were not being universally met:

> [A local authority] is notoriously bad at meeting their statutory obligations. All the local law centres are stretched and it takes about one week just to be seen by an advisor. Therefore [the local authority] is getting away with not meeting their statutory obligations (Officer of Voluntary Organisation).

The second common theme was the constrained resources in which the system operated:

> [There is] a shortage of accommodation; there are simply not enough units of accommodation to meet demand (Officer of Voluntary Organisation)

> [Homelessness charities] have to realise that there is only so much we can do with the resources we have (Local Authority Head of Housing)

But the fundamental failure to deliver statutory obligations and the structural impossibilities of doing so arising from a lack of resources, in other words the undermining of the entire system envisaged by the Scottish Government, become distorted by housing practice being constituted in an imaginary of a functioning system and housing professionals acting 'as if' these structural constraints were not reality:

> Problems in [a local authority] are endemic. People are still being turned away on a daily basis. There is not enough accommodation and [the local authority] pretend to listen to our concerns but at the end of the day they do nothing. The issue is being largely ignored (Officer of Voluntary Organisation).

> If anything, there is a sense that it's getting worse: you're going to Council meetings and you're hearing managers openly discussing the fact that they are failing to meet their statutory obligations, quite openly, without any reservations (Officer of Voluntary Organisation).

Housing practice continues as if the effective functioning of the system is possible, despite what are interpreted as periodic procedural failures and the disjunction between the imaginary system (meeting of statutory obligations, provision of accommodation and support to all entitled to it) and the reality being explicitly acknowledged:

> [Charities] have to understand that the resources just aren't there for authorities to resolve everyone's accommodation issues: that's a fact we all have to accept (Local Authority Head of Housing).

This 'fact' has to be accepted by actors as a function of local homelessness policy systems, rather than representing a form of crisis and, as will be illustrated later, this reframing of crisis as

implacable fact rather than the outcome of political contestations and choices) is similarly evident in national policy discourse (McCormack, 2009). So the actors in an imaginary system act as if the inherent constraints to deliver what the system is premised upon were not present. Housing practitioners openly acknowledged that non-delivery of some statutory duties was enshrined and embedded in daily practice:

> Working for a local authority means that you can become very laid back about not being able to meet your duties…the fact that on a daily basis I don't meet my statutory duties is something I'm quite used to (Local Authority Head of Housing)

This participant acknowledged that homeless charities and advocacy groups were required to challenge the failings of the system and that these groups should not become used to, or accepting of, these failings; and other participants identified the different roles of organisations within the system. However, the challenges made by homelessness charities, and thereby the rupturing of an imaginary system through the exposure of its reality, was often criticised by housing professionals:

> [Charities] have to realise that there is only so much we can do with the resources we have. Making our lives more difficult by publically naming and shaming helps no one in the long run (Local Authority Head of Housing)

A commonly expressed view of local authority housing managers and representatives of national housing membership organisations was the need for charities to 'stand back and look at the bigger picture' and that charities should 'see the bigger picture and need to be able to see what's important and what is not.' This was framed as the need to recognise other forms of support being provided to homeless applicants or the problematic nature of some individual cases; so that actions could be justified as rational or appropriate (the prioritisation of resources, the rationing of support) but not acknowledge or undermine the fictional context and imaginary system in which they were situated (Van Wel, 1992; Carlen, 2008). Housing practitioners criticised charities for their overall lack of

understanding of homelessness policies and procedures as essentially operating within an effective system. Therefore, the framing of the bigger picture being constructed here is the limitations, efforts and successes with an imagined functioning system, rather than a broader lens that would reveal that the pillars upon which the system is imagined to be built are fundamentally flawed.

This case study briefly illustrates how a problem figuration is operationalised through a claim for rationality in the actions of housing practice which masks the fictional nature of the imaginary system within which practice is situated. Actors in the system acknowledge resource constraints and tensions (Casey, 2008; McKee, 2014) but are required, through a collective convention, to act 'as if' the foundational basis of the system- the statutory duty to accommodate and support all eligible homeless applicants- is achievable. This does not mean that practitioners' primary orientations or motivations are insincere or cynical, nor does it deny the many successes of accommodation and support achieved in constrained circumstances or the relatively progressive policy framework in Scotland. Rather it demonstrates the power of ideology, fictions and the imaginary to become embodied and materialised in housing practice.

There are other illustrative examples of such imaginary housing systems, including the contract sales market in post-war Chicago which resulted in the subdivision of apartments, destructive speculation and exploitative rent levels (Satter, 2009; Helgeson, 2011). Satter (2009) argues that all those involved in this market knew that lack of access for African Americans to formal credit markets was the principle cause of the crisis, but such causation was not officially recognised and the practices continued as if such causality never existed.

The paper now turns to suggesting that such imaginary housing systems constructed in localised practice are intertwined with a cynical ideology and rational fictions articulated in national housing policy discourse.

Problem Figuration, Cynical Ideology and the Politics of Public Housing

Almost half a century ago Carmichael and Hamilton (1967; see also Hegelson, 2011) identified that United States society, and much of its elite political discourse, pretended that it did not know about slum tenements, exploitative merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents, acted 'as if' this reality did not exist, or argued that society and government were incapable of addressing these problems. Commentators have similarly critiqued the contemporary 'manufactured ignorance' of the British state to urban crisis and poverty and the alleged wilful Federal indifference to the permanent displacement of the urban poor from cities in the United States such as New Orleans (Slater, 2012; Graham, 2012). The mechanisms through which such ignorance is 'manufactured' are again those of imaginary housing systems in which rational policy responses are based on fictitious images and representations, as illustrated in this speech by the British Prime Minister, David Cameron (2012):

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

As with other problem figurations, this discourse aims to order and make sense of a complex and dynamic social reality of housing (Scott, 1998; Carlen, 2008) to enable a justificatory regime for

governmental response. The rationality of the problem figuration is articulated through a policy response to housing shortage that seeks remove disparities between public and private housing provision. It also aims to realign an interpretation of 'fairness' in the housing system, as all problem figurations are infused with providentialism: that is appeals to the notions of how the world is supposed to be and how it should be ordered accordingly, including normative concepts such as fairness and decency (Van Wel, 1992; Hamblin, 1994).

But the fiction upon which this rationality is ascribed lies in the image of the single mother immediately accessing public housing. This is either ignorance, or knowing distortion, of the actual policies and practices of public housing allocation, juxtaposed with the equally powerful and omnipresent rhetorical device of 'hard working' households. The cynical ideology- the acting 'as if'- occurs in the focus on differentiation between categories of housing need that obfuscates the broader housing affordability and supply crisis. It is a very different way 'of seeing and understanding housing injustice' to that articulated by President Roosevelt in the introduction to this article, involving precisely an avoidance of 'the bigger picture' that housing practitioners in our case study referred to.

The ahistorical character of this contemporary problem figuration, which Van Wel (1992) identifies as ubiquitous to such figurations in any period, is illustrated by the Prime Minister's reference to 'a growing phenomenon.' This masks the rapid emergence of what Cohen (2014) terms a new form of 'gerontocracy' in which younger generations now have fewer housing opportunities than their parents and flows of inherited money have returned to their 19th Century levels (Colic-Peikser and Johnson, 2012; McKee, 2012; Pennington et al., 2012; Picketty, 2014). The Prime Minister's reference to 'a growing phenomenon' is also an articulation of the world as an entity impervious to action (McCormack, 2009) suggesting an implacable housing system beyond governmental intervention. It seeks to paint out, or reframe, the understanding of the essence of injustice in the

constructed *picture* of an imagined housing system, rather than, as Roosevelt intended, seeking to fundamentally address the underpinning reality of that injustice.

The Prime Minister's speech (Cameron, 2012) continued: "Those within [the welfare system] grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own…" This problematizes and makes fanciful the notion of independent living (in any tenure). But it also illustrates how imagined housing systems construct a fantasy that regulates social reality (Zizek, 1989). For, as Bourdieu (2005) explains, much of the politics of housing has always been, for the middle as well as working classes, an articulation of the aspiration of home ownership that denied the realities of its actual possibility and sustainability. The rationality of aspirations of individual households to owner occupation within 20th Century housing systems in the UK and US was further premised on a form of fictitious capital (Harvey, 1975), with housing as a mechanism of financial asset accumulation based on exchange, rather than use, value. As early as the 1930s, reformers such as Arthur C Holden critiqued 'the imaginary costs' and 'stubborn illusions' (Schwartz, 2002: 292) which resisted attempts at public intervention in affordable rental provision.

Jacobs and Manzi (2013) have identified how, previously, governmental discourse has used appeals to technical rationality to deflect scrutiny from the underlying ideologies that constitute housing practice. This, they argue, generates a particular politics of truth about housing, framed within the lack of an alternative. Such problem figurations of the contemporary housing crisis, and the urban renewal programmes arising from them, involve naming the world through reimaging cities and re-presenting public and affordable housing in the urban imagination (Goetz, 2012, 2013 Mann, 2012). They require and construct a fundamental redefinition of the city and a different vision of what the city should be in which the presence and purpose of public housing, and the forms of governmental interventions and responsibilities that enabled it, are defined as obsolete (Weber, 2002; Goetz, 2013; Jacobs and Manzi, 2013). Public housing policy subsequently reconfigures the actual spatial, architectural and demographic reality of cities so that the urban environment and the reduction of

public housing within it becomes simultaneously the product of preceding rationalisations of the way things are and a physical justification and endorsement of this new reality (Goetz, 2012; Heathcott, 2012c; Hamblin, 1994) or in Zizek's terms the constructed fantasy becomes the social reality.

Jacobs and Manzi (2013) argue that contemporary governmental discourses about housing conceal major realignments in property and power relations between social classes and generations and such governmentalities act to mask and conceal the actual politics of housing and its continuing basis in values, class and interest groups. For Helgeson (2011: 992) the post-2008 terminology of subprime loans, credit default swaps and collateralised debt within political discourse symbolises how speculative markets have undermined the struggles of large sections of the population to create and protect their wealth, which is transferred, through the new financialisation of housing, to a narrow financial class (see also Fields, 2015).   Flows of capital into urban real estate are directly linked to realigned spatial relations, whether this be the shifts in credit systems that facilitated Hausmann's displacement of working class populations in 19th Century Paris (Platt, 2010; Harvey, 1975), the 'predatory equity investment' in New York's affordable rental sector in the 2000s real estate boom (Fields, 2015), or contemporary central London where 60 per cent of new-build property is bought by overseas investors (Hodkinson, 2013).

In the post-war period there was a systematic dislocation of capital from central cities and the resulting crisis in employment, tax bases and housing (Heathcott, 2012b). But the new politics of housing involves central cities and their neighbourhoods, not as arenas of disinvestment, but as sites of investment and accumulation of weakly regulated capital and therefore, integral to the functioning and reproduction of global capitalism (Fields, 2015). Thus, rather than mortgage capital anchoring wealth in place, new financial mechanisms transcend spatial fixivity and enable the extraction of value and capital accumulation from place-bound property and the built environment (Fields, 2015). In such a process, often influenced by a paradigm of the obsolescence of public

housing (Weber, 2002; Goetz, 2013), the spatial fixivity of working class populations in central urban areas is diminished; displaced through gentrification, housing policies and welfare reform (Paton; 2013; Watt, 2013). As Hodkinson (2013) argues, the processes and practices of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Wacquant, 2008) result in the ending of 'the actual existing right to the city' for growing sections of the population. If some contemporary cities in the UK and US represent what Minton (2012: 14) terms, 'the architecture of extreme capitalism' and manifestations of power are enacted in property relations and the reconfiguration of the urban environment (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2014; Zukin, 1991), then this urban environment is reproduced, in part, by the justifications, within problem figurations, for the dominant social order (Stevens, 1998). This includes, as articulated by the narrative of the British Prime Minister, a radical diminishing of the expectations that certain population groups should have for their housing provision.

Conclusions

This paper has built on existing theoretical and empirical understandings of the embodiment and enacting of housing practice; and on previous studies of the construction of housing policy and political discourse. . The paper has drawn upon a small scale qualitative study of one housing policy domain in one nation, and the limitations of the paper's empirical basis are acknowledged. There is a need for further robust empirical investigation in different policy fields in various international contexts, and a deepening of our theoretical understanding, including the linkages between national constructions and localised practices; of how the subjects of public housing governance (tenants and housing applicants) are embedded within systems and practices; and the functions of forms of resistance.

However, we would argue that our case study research and further illustrative examples reveal the value and theoretical and empirical potential of applying new concepts to the analysis of housing

policy and practice. . Problem figurations deepen interrogation of the interplay between rational and fictional elements previously identified in work on the discursive construction of public housing problems. Combined with the use of imaginary housing systems as collective conventions framing localised housing practice, these theories also enhance our understanding of how emerging forms of cynical ideology transform localised practice and its relationship with political and policy discourse. They also challenge our interpretations of the subjective and objective framing of housing problems, enabling a new lens for interrogating the contemporary politics of housing and of acknowledging its historical precedents.

The problem figuration of public housing, from the 19th Century onwards, was continually embedded in economically and politically constrained environments, with ceaseless attacks on the welfare state and the enhancement of public powers of policing and eminent domain to regulate private property and an ideological defence of the rights of individuals (Heathcott, 2012a). This resulted in the 'quagmire' of housing struggles in 19th Century Paris (Platt, 2010) and Catherine Bauer's (1957) despair at the 'dreary deadlock' of public housing programmes in the US in the 1950s. Critiques of public housing constructed imaginary housing systems that denied the factors that most determined the nature of the public housing project of the 20th Century: its fate being linked to wider processes of capitalism; the limited economic resources allocated to such housing and the failure to build or sustain adequate coalitions of political support (Goetz, 2013). The attacks on public housing were constructed 'as if', in an imaginary housing system, such constraints were not a reality.

The subsequent policy responses, which were rational as based on an acceptance of this construction, whatever its fictional bias; defined the problems of public housing as ones of architecture, housing management practice, the conduct of its tenants, welfare provision and of government itself. For the rationality of policy discourse and mechanisms is based, not only on the fictitious elements of imagined housing systems, but the very imaginary of what governments may achieve. As Paul Gilroy (quoted in Slater, 2012), eloquently argues, the imaginary of poverty in

contemporary governmentalities, including the links between poverty and housing, actually reveals the poverty of such an imagination.

Challenges to the imaginary of government in the 19th and early 20th Centuries were usually those arising from attempts to expand the boundaries and reach of urban and housing governance (Crook, 2008). The politics of housing in the early 21st Century, at least in the UK and US, is, in a mirror image, characterised by attempts, not least by government itself, to narrow the scope of governance. The acting 'as if' there were no alternative to an (imagined) implacable housing system- whether in national discourse and policy regime formation, or in embedded localised practice- masks the political choices and interests underpinning such a construction, which serves to diminish the potential of government and the public realm. In a cyclical process, the deteriorating public sphere provides the circular confirmation that government cannot produce the public good- in this case affordable and decent housing for all- and therefore this should be ceded to private initiative and enterprise (Heathcott, 2012b: 373; see Smith, 1980 for a Victorian precedent). As Platt (2010: 584) writes of Mexico City's political and rhetorical response to its emerging gargantuan housing crisis in the 1970s and its failure to provide adequate public housing, it seems that 'the official plan was to have no plan at all.'

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