

## The Politics of Housing: Power, Consumers and Urban Culture

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For various reasons housing is important to everyone and thus it has rarely been far from the centre of political debate in Britain. As the main urban land use, housing is a valuable and scarce resource, and if politics are about command over resources then housing is inescapably a political issue. From the point of view of individual households, a decent affordable home, conveniently located, is a basic requirement, and for a whole slew of businesses, from developers and landlords to estate agents and do-it-yourself stores, housing is a source of income generation and wealth accumulation. The politics of housing have been dominated by one powerful underlying assumption: that the market should provide for most people most of the time. However, between 1919 and 1979 local authorities in the UK built nearly 6.5 million council houses and flats, and by the end of this growth phase they owned almost a third of all dwellings in the country. After 1980 council housing went into numerical decline as a result of the introduction of a statutory right for tenants to buy their homes at substantial discounts. By this time council housing was already experiencing a different sort of decline, in terms of its status, reflecting the changing socio-economic position of its tenants. The transformation of council housing, from virtually nothing in 1919 to a situation where it housed nearly one family in three (and often a much higher proportion in urban areas), and its subsequent decline from being a tenure of choice appealing to the better off working class to a safety net for the least well off, as a result of deliberate changes in central government policy, has rightly attracted substantial scholarly attention.

Given the volume of research carried out over many years, it is surprising that (as far as I know) this is the first book entitled *The Politics of Housing*, and Peter Shapely is to be congratulated for spotting that it was still available. In fact the focus of the book is much narrower than its title suggests; the central empirical core of the book draws on detailed historical research on Manchester between 1890 and 1990. And within

Manchester the study concentrates not on the local politics of housing as a whole, but on slums, slum clearance, council housing and overspill estates. Three key themes run through the book. The first is that too many accounts of the history of housing ignore the importance of the local level, drawing unjustifiable claims that gloss over variation from place to place in the interpretation of central government policy. The argument here (which few would want to disagree with) is that it is necessary to embrace both the national and the local. In fact the literature contains a good number of accounts of the formation and implementations of housing policies at the local level in a number of British towns and cities, but this book is a welcome addition, containing a wealth of original detail about housing conditions and policy responses in Manchester.

Second, emphasis is placed on the notion of 'civic culture', as both a way of referring to differences between localities and a way of generalising about:

'a central element in the operation of government and governance at the local level. Civic culture transcends traditional politics. It provides a network of unspoken values, norms and patterns of behaviour. Local politicians have a shared sense of identity, of belonging to the same community with its distinctive history and traditions' (p. 11).

In relation to the Manchester study the concept is used as a short-hand for continuities such as the preference for cottage estates rather than flats, and the city fathers' determination to pursue grand ambitions. In a sentence that refers directly to the homes for heroes period immediately after 1918, but which could stand as a summary of the Manchester research as a whole, Shapely says that, 'As so often during the twentieth century, the council had the big vision and had increased expectations, only to see it all ending in frustration and disappointment' (p. 98).

The third theme is that 'the tenant' was largely ignored until the 1960s, both in Manchester and elsewhere, and that it was only when the council's efforts 'proved to be a disaster' that 'the angry, active citizen consumer emerged' (p. 213). This is perhaps a more contestable claim, depending on your view of the politics of housing, of which more later.

The structure of the book is logical and straightforward: after an introduction that provides a literature review and critique of the historiography of housing, there are two chapters on the national context and local interpretations of central government policy. The focus of part two, headed 'the rise of municipal housing' then shifts to Manchester, and covers the period up to about 1960. Part three, 'the decline of municipal housing', takes the story on into the early 1990s, although it is not made clear why the book stops at that point. The strength of the book lies in the detailed empirical research, which has generated a richness of local detail that is missing from many existing accounts. However, the interpretation of the data is questionable. The local story in Manchester, as recounted by Shapely, is essentially one of the city hall elite, gripped by civic culture, seeking to pursue its own ambitious and generally well-meant vision without reference to 'the tenant', until serial incompetence aroused tenants to anger. This is a black and white world in which the council are the bad guys and the tenants are the good guys. The tone is relentlessly anti-municipal, which renders the author unable to acknowledge the fact that local authorities in the 20th century were responding to problems created in the private housing market, and were working within a policy framework set by central government. The council seems to get the blame whatever it does, whether it is not building new homes fast enough or building them too fast, or too far away. The private builders and landlords who created the problem are somehow absolved of responsibility in this account. The impact of government policy is not brought out as fully as it might be because the national level is discussed quite separately, rather than being woven into the local narrative as a key variable.

I have two main criticisms of the book. The least of these is that although it is extensively referenced, and has introduced me to some sources that I want to follow up, there are, nevertheless, some surprising omissions. This is partly a reflection of a general problem, namely, the extent to which different academic disciplines remain unaware of each other's publications and debates. Curiously, however, Peter Shapely has

sought out a number of relevant unpublished PhD theses, but has failed to mention readily accessible published work on the same topics. Key works on the history of housing and housing policy by, for example, Michael Harloe (1) and Stephen Merrett (2) are not cited. Well-known and often cited books on slum clearance and redevelopment in the 1960s by, for example, Norman Dennis (3) and John Gower Davies (4) are not mentioned. One of the main bones of contention in the politics of housing over the last 30 years has been the sale of council houses, a subject which is discussed in the book without reference to either Alan Murie or Ray Forrest (5), whose extensive research in this area is widely known and respected. Important local historical studies, such as the collection edited by Melling (6), are also absent as far as I can see, despite his inclusion of a chapter on Manchester based research. English, Madigan and Norman (7) also included Manchester as a case study in their 1970s research in slum clearance, but I saw no reference to it. Also in the 1970s some really good local historical research on the politics of housing was carried out by a number of teams linked to the official Community Development Projects. (8) Some of this work is referenced in passing, but it deserves closer attention.

My second criticism is more fundamental and follows from the last point. A number of key analytical concepts are freely deployed but without definition or discussion, and without connection to the sorts of analyses that have been developed in the literature. The most obvious and worrying omission concerns the term 'the politics of housing', which is not analysed and discussed in depth, or in relation to the existing literature. The politics of housing are about who gets what, when and how. Peter Shapely's account is dominated by the attempt by the city's elite to remove the slums and to build a better, lower density, more suburban, environment for 'the tenant'. The latter enters the story as an angry consumer after the council has failed to deliver its vision. But the politics of housing are much more complex, and his analysis and explanation is inadequate in a number of ways.

First, the established literature makes reference to the importance of not just looking at the consumption side – Michael Ball long ago pointed out that the supply side represents a powerful set of stakeholders (9) – but land and property owners, landlords and builders make only fleeting entrances in this book. A wider view of the politics of housing would embrace recognition of the dynamics of the market, which can be seen to have undergone a prolonged period of modernisation as private renting (the predominant form of provision in the 19th century) was replaced by owner occupation. The contribution made by local authorities and council housing need to be fitted into this process of change. In other words, housing policy needs to be seen as supporting a market-driven and market-led transformation. In this context council housing needs to be seen to be playing different roles at different times. (10) For most of the time local authorities were building for what was known as 'general needs' – they were simply attacking the serious overall shortages of decent affordable housing. But in the 1930s and again from 1955 to about 1975 they were engaged in slum clearance and the associated rehousing of displaced families. These need to be seen as two quite different activities; in the case of general needs housing the local authorities were encouraged to build at scale only in periods when market conditions were such that the private sector could not meet the needs of ordinary consumers, while slum clearance reflects a more permanent, structural, inability of the market to deal with areas of rundown housing in a socially acceptable way.

Second, the dynamics of the central-local government relationship are inadequately explored and remain largely un-integrated into the account. For instance, there is very little on the ways in which central government was able to influence decisions and actions in Manchester over the years. A fascinating aspect of the politics of housing is how governments were able to shape local responses in the context of an essentially enabling legislative framework. Local authorities enjoyed considerable discretion and autonomy in terms of how they defined and measured the problem within their boundaries, and how many houses they built, how much they charged in rent and how they decided to allocate individual dwellings to people on the waiting lists. But over time central government was able to steer council housing in different directions, according to centrally defined priorities. Just as Shapely is right to argue for a local perspective, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the decline of council housing has been driven by central government policies pursued by both Conservative and Labour administrations.

Third, there is the problem of Shapely's treatment of 'the tenant'. The wider housing studies literature

generally makes a clear analytical distinction between the better off working class and the less well off, arguing that council housing began as housing for the better off, skilled workers, but that it has been turned into a residual safety net service for the least well off. This is central to the politics of public housing (and to the way it has been discussed in the academic literature for 30 years) but it is an aspect that is not considered in the book under review. Another criticism of the way Shapely writes about tenants concerns the suggestion that they were ignored until the 1960s. This just will not do. The historical evidence suggests that the middle class and self-help voluntary organisations that were active from the latter part of the 19th century failed to build anything like enough houses to dent the shortage, but when housing was politicised by working-class demands during the First World War then an effective policy response was rapidly forthcoming. It is simply not credible to write tenants out of the story until they start to become visibly active in the 1960s. The differences between the earlier periods and more recent times are important in at least two ways. The problem for those who insist that tenants were ignored in the past is to explain how and why that was the time when local authorities built such large numbers of houses, many of them of high quality, whereas the period when tenant activism becomes more visible coincides with the decline in new building and the general decline in the standing of council housing as a whole. Part of the answer seems to lie in the historical power of tenants as voters, and importantly as voters with jobs. The housing needs of the employed working class are now overwhelmingly met by the private market, significantly shifting the terms of debate within the politics of housing.

The other dimension concerns the emergence of tenants as consumers, which seems to me to reflect an important change in the welfare state away from collective provision for individual need and towards an individualised consumer orientation. Whereas Peter Shapely welcomes the rise of the demanding tenant, I see it as a sign of a retreat from the ideals of the post-war welfare state. As Bauman (11) has pointed out, consumerism and the welfare state are at cross purposes with one another. The rise of consumerism can therefore be seen as part of the backlash against collective welfare.

By modern standards the book is pretty free of editing lapses and typographical errors, but it does contain a large number of very short sentences, sometimes two complete sentences on one line, and this interferes with the pleasure of reading it. In terms of its content I regret to have to conclude that this book suffers from the same problem that Peter Shapely sees in the civic culture of Manchester: creditable ambition but disappointing outcome.

## Notes

1. M. Harloe, *The People's Home?* (Oxford, 1995). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. Merrett, *State Housing in Britain* (London, 1979). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. N. Dennis, *People and Planning* (London, 1970) and *Public Participation and Planners' Blight* (London, 1972). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. G. Davies, *The Evangelistic Bureaucrat* (London: Tavistock, 1972). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R. Forrest and A. Murie, *Selling the Welfare State* (London, 1988). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Housing, Social Policy and the State*, ed. J. Melling (London, 1980). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. J. English, R. Madigan, and P. Norman, *Slum Clearance* (London, 1976). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Community Development Project, *Whatever Happened to Council Housing?* (London, 1976) and Benwell CDP, *Private Housing and the Working Class*, (Newcastle, 1978). [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. M. Ball, *Housing Policy and Economic Power* (London, 1983). [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. P. Malpass, and A. Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice* (Basingstoke, 1999). [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Z. Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Buckingham, 1998). [Back to \(11\)](#)

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