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HOUSING AND HOME

Objects and technologies of neoliberal governmentalities

Rae Dufty-Jones

For some time housing has been an object of government and governance. It is not surprising therefore that housing is an important focus for analyses of neoliberalization, particularly the socio-spatial implications of neoliberal policies, programmes and processes. Indeed, neoliberalism has become an important explanatory tool when examining the changes to how housing is produced and consumed and the policy settings guiding this economic activity in the twenty-first century. From analyses of privatization processes of social housing, to tracing the precursors and fall-out of the global financial crisis (GFC), the connections between neoliberalization and housing have been made by commentators and academics alike. This chapter seeks to untangle some of the many links made by researchers regarding neoliberalization and housing. It does this in two ways. First, it examines how housing has come to be seen as ‘neoliberalized’ – specifically, the way housing has become an object of government: a problem requiring neoliberalized solutions. The second way in which this chapter examines the neoliberalization of housing is as a technology of neoliberal forms of government – in particular, the way in which housing is not only an object of neoliberal governance, but also an important tool employed in the pursuit of wider neoliberal governmentalities. The chapter concludes with some reflections on how housing studies has evaluated the consequences of the neoliberalization of housing and how this field of research could engage with the wider theoretical debates around the concept of neoliberalism in future.

The neoliberalization of housing

The effects of the GFC have brought to the fore the way that the links between the micro-scale of the home and the wider economy have changed. Part of the story of this change is the connections between neoliberalization and housing. Since 2008 individuals, communities, businesses and governments have faced a range of housing issues from the large-scale abandonment of homes due to foreclosure processes to worsening problems of homelessness and housing affordability. However, problematizations of housing emerged well before 2008 and what this chapter is interested in is the way that housing problems – how they are understood, explained and what solutions are presented – are (among other things) rationalized through a prism of neoliberalism – that is, the way housing has become an object of and technology in neoliberal governance.
First, clarification is needed as to how the analysis of neoliberalism and housing that I seek to present will proceed in this chapter. Like other studies of neoliberalism, housing research draws on a range of acknowledged and unacknowledged theoretical perspectives. Some studies blend different theoretical approaches, while others adhere strictly to one approach. This chapter will approach neoliberalism and how it relates to housing from a governmentality perspective. This involves understanding processes of neoliberalization as a series of complex economic rationalities and technologies, whereby ‘Knowledges about economic processes are colonised and folded back onto themselves to become artefacts and technologies of government applicable to a variety of domains, resulting in various types of activity becoming “economised”’ (Prince and Dufty 2009: 1751). Importantly, in this definition the state is viewed as continuing to have an integral, albeit qualitatively different, role in processes of governance (Dodson 2006; Kitchin et al. 2012).

Housing is an important field when considering neoliberalism. Despite the differences in how neoliberalism is defined and approached by housing scholars, a common theme among many researchers is the pervasive impact that processes of neoliberalization have had on how housing is produced, consumed and governed (Flint 2004b; Hackworth 2005; Hackworth and Moriah 2006; Beer et al. 2007; Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Hirayama 2010; Beer 2012; Hodkinson et al. 2013; Kennett et al. 2013; McKee and Muir 2013). For instance, Hodkinson et al. (2013: 4) argue that the ‘privatization of public housing in the United Kingdom is arguably one of the most iconic and significant applications of neoliberal policy worldwide’. Similarly Forrest and Hirayama (2009: 998) point to housing as being ‘at the forefront of… neoliberal policy prescriptions in many countries’. Table 39.1 summarizes the various ways in which the neoliberalization of housing has been understood to have occurred. However, the way that this smorgasbord of neoliberalization processes has played out on the ground means that such processes are both path-dependent and spatially contingent (Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Beer 2012). The studies drawn on in this chapter come from an array of national contexts including Australia (Darcy and Rogers 2014; Rogers and Darcy 2014), Canada (Hackworth and Moriah 2006; Hackworth 2008), Chile (Posner 2012), China (Lee and Zhu 2006), Japan (Hirayama 2010), Sweden (Turner and Whitehead 2002; Hedin et al. 2012), the USA (Hackworth 2005) and the UK (Hodkinson 2011; Glynn 2012). However, despite this geographical breadth, only a few have undertaken cross-country comparisons (Dodson 2006; Forrest and Hirayama 2009).

**Housing as an object of neoliberal governance**

The emergence of neoliberalized approaches to housing has its antecedents in the late-1960s and 1970s. In these early years, the fiscal and representational crises that afflicted many nation-states were important contributors to the specific problematization of supply-side housing policies (e.g. the large-scale development of public housing, state regulation and subsidization of mortgages etc.) that had characterized the liberal post-World War II period (Dodson 2006; McKee and Muir 2013). Through such crises, various versions of the argument that the state was ill equipped to solve problems of economic, social and cultural equality were rolled out in relation to these forms of housing policy (Hackworth 2005; Dodson 2006). For instance, in 1973 US President, Richard Nixon, announced the national public housing system to be ‘too expensive and declared a moratorium on all new public housing’ (Hackworth 2005: 33). Liberal interventions into housing were seen to produce and/or exacerbate economic, social and cultural problems rather than contribute to their solution.

A range of neoliberalized approaches was presented as solutions to these problematizations of housing. Such measures included the removal or subsumption of housing departments and
ministers, to approaches that sought to bring the market into the field of social housing such as the sale of public housing (e.g. the Right to Buy (RTB) system in the UK) and the shift to demand-side policy approaches that provided subsidies to those privately renting (e.g. the Commonwealth Rent Assistance in Australia or the Section 8 voucher system in the USA), in effect replacing ‘subsidies for concrete’ with ‘subsidies for people’ (Hirayama 2010: 124). Markets were also prioritized through a range of deregulatory measures such as the removal of rent controls and other protections for renters that enabled easier evictions. Such measures were argued as necessary to encourage greater investment in private rental housing.

The principle of the ‘market is best’ was also extended to encompass how the remaining social housing stock was managed with the devolution and demunicipalization of this role to a range of private contractors such as community housing providers. Similarly, what new funding and/or assistance that was now provided was also oriented towards the private sector. The shift to private contractors in the delivery and management of social housing enabled private finance to take a stronger role in this area and access what little government funding made its way into social housing (Hodkinson 2011). A variety of ‘incentives’ were also introduced by different governments to bring the private sector into the social housing space. An example of this was the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) programme that was introduced in the USA in 1986. The programme involved ‘the allocation of tax credits to qualifying low-income housing builders… builders of [these] units [then sold] the credits to corporations or individuals with high tax liability to create a revenue stream of their own’ (Hackworth 2005: 34). What this example also shows is that while markets were considered ‘best practice’, their very existence depended on the state.

A key consequence was that the increasingly limited supply of public/social housing meant that what housing stock remained had to be targeted on those most in need. The increased targeting of social housing, combined with the original design of many public housing projects – where economies of scale were achieved through large-scale land release and development of large public housing estates – meant that there was an increase in the ‘concentration of disadvantage’ in social housing spaces (Flint, 2002; Darcy 2010). It is important to note that the problematization of public housing as producing a ‘concentration of disadvantage’ was not just an effect of the processes of neoliberalization outlined above. However, the impacts of earlier neoliberal responses did exacerbate such problems, which were only made more pressing as cities became globalized and/or began to gentrify. As a result, what was previously undesirable urban space became of much higher value to the state, private developers and individuals (Glynn 2012; Hedin et al. 2012; Darcy and Rogers 2014; Rogers and Darcy 2014). Combined with the declining quality of social housing stock due to declining funding for maintenance (Hackworth 2005; Glynn 2012), one of the ways the problem of the ‘concentration of disadvantage’ has been resolved is through the neoliberalized response of housing regeneration. Housing regeneration approaches usually involve some level of large-scale demolition of whole social housing estates. Examples include the US HOPE VI programme, which has a mandate to demolish some of the nation’s most ‘severely distressed’ social housing estates (Hackworth 2005). Housing regeneration also serves other neoliberalizing objectives such as facilitating the further privatization of social housing (Hodkinson 2011) and the further erosion of the quantity of social housing stock available (Hackworth 2005; Glynn 2012). Moreover, housing regeneration also results in the displacement, and with that the destruction, of social housing communities, resulting in the further marginalization of those that such programmes were argued to help and the further splintering of urban spaces (Arthurson 2004; Hackworth 2005; Hedin et al. 2012; Posner 2012).
Table 39.1  Neoliberalization of housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem/problematization</th>
<th>Result/response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fiscal crises:</td>
<td>Reduced government funding to maintain existing public housing stock</td>
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<td>- Declining ability of governments to pay for large-scale supply-side responses to housing need</td>
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<td>- Declining capacity of governments to fund state pension systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Representational crises:</td>
<td>Significant reduction in building of new public housing</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Citizenship and housing rights increasingly afforded to those who were not male, white, married and employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Governments do not always know what is best/act in the best interests of citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supply-side housing assistance policies are argued to have a distortive effect on the wider housing ‘market’ as well as restricting the capacities of recipients of those in housing need</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Supply-side housing policy as ‘inefficient’</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Where government still plays a role in providing a housing ‘safety net’ such provision should be as ‘market-like’ as possible</td>
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<td>- Public provision of housing results in a lack of ‘choice’ for recipients of housing assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social housing ‘locking away’ valuable urban land suitable for urban regeneration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Declining quality of social housing/poor maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concentration and residualization of public housing argued to result in:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Problematic ‘neighbourhood effects’</td>
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<tr>
<td>- ‘Anti-social behaviour’ (ASB) of social housing tenants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentrification exacerbates perceptions of and complaints about ‘social problems’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devolution/demunicipalization of responsibility and stock transferred to not-for-profit sector/community housing/registered social landlords</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Another discursive shift from ‘public’ to ‘social’ housing</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Enables role of private finance in the management and delivery of social housing</td>
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<td>- Contracting out of maintenance services to private sector</td>
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<td>Demand-side housing assistance policies (e.g. Section 8 vouchers and other forms of private rental assistance/subsidy) argued to be a more effective mode of delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Legislative changes and tax incentives to make it more appealing for private investors to invest in low-income housing</td>
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<td>- Removal of rent control</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Removal of security of tenure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social housing ‘locking away’ valuable urban land suitable for urban regeneration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Declining quality of social housing/poor maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sell public/social housing stock and argue that profits will be used to replace this stock elsewhere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Displacement/movement of existing social housing tenants out to more peripheral areas of city</td>
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<td>Facilitates gentrification-led housing regeneration</td>
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<td>Deconcentration</td>
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<td>- Social mix</td>
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<td>- Tenure diversification</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Makes way for (further) gentrification-led housing regeneration</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Responsibilization’ of social housing population</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenant participation programmes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stricter screening of ‘problem’ tenants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve ease of eviction</td>
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It is also important to recognize that housing as an object of neoliberal governmentalities is not limited to the sphere of social housing. Real estate, especially housing, has traditionally been considered a problematic form of capital investment for a number of reasons, including: the capital invested in housing is immobilized for long periods of time; housing as a source of capital is not easily divisible; housing is an illiquid asset; there are high transaction costs associated with housing as a capital good; and the assessment of risk with housing investments had traditionally been highly conservative due to the way it was regulated by the state (Follain and Zorn, 1990; Pryke and Whitehead, 1994; Weber, 2002; Kamel 2012; Wissoker et al, 2014; ). Thus another problematization of housing that emerged during this period was how it could be ‘made more flexible and responsive to the investment criteria of capital’ (Weber 2002: 519). According to Weber (ibid.: 529):

Since the 1970s… in order to attract capital looking for large, liquid trading markets, the commodity of real estate [including housing] has become progressively dematerialized and deterritorialized. [Housing] has… in the process become more detached from place and more subject to the disciplining power and accelerated schedules of global capital markets.

Wissoker et al. (2014: 2788) summarized the change that occurred during this period as the ‘way property markets were … woven into the broader financial architecture of “neoliberalization”’.
Like social housing, the problem of the cost of accessing capital to purchase housing and the illiquidity of housing as an asset was seen to be solved through a range of neoliberalized policy solutions which facilitated the introduction of new financial tools. Deregulation of financial markets, among other things, allowed retail lenders (the traditional source of residential mortgage lending) to source capital from the wholesale market. The expansion of the capital market in this way was argued to reduce the costs of accessing capital to purchase housing as it enabled those lending to home purchasers the capacity to offer loans at lower interest rates. Competition in the mortgage market was also heightened through allowing new players into the residential mortgage lending market. As Pryke and Whitehead (1995: 77) pointed out, since the 1970s the mortgage market had ‘changed from an “under-supply” of funds … to one of intense competition to provide mortgage finance’.

The introduction of non-retail lenders to the mortgage market also had a qualitative shift in the way housing markets operated (ibid.). In particular, new lenders introduced the financial tool of mortgage-backed securitization (MBS). Such tools were not solely the brainchildren of those operating in financial markets, but were also intimately tied to the state. For example, in the USA the development of secondary mortgage markets was supported through state institutions such as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. As Weber (2002: 529) explained:

institutions buy mortgages, package them, and guarantee their payments with government backing on mortgage-backed securities held by other institutions such as pension funds. Securitization connects real-estate credit markets to the nation’s general capital markets and creates more liquidity in the system… The secondary mortgage market also enables investors in one part of the country to invest in mortgages originated in another region, effectively ending the geographic segmentation of credit… These innovations, mediated by the development of new electronic trading technologies, have increased the pace of financial transactions so that capital does not get grounded for too long.

Thus, the deregulation of the financial market and the introduction of new financial tools such as MBS seemed to solve many of the problems associated with housing as a capital good. However, as Pryke and Whitehead (1994: 78–9) presciently pointed out, while securitization ‘opened up the potential for introducing lower cost funds for housing’, it did so ‘at the price of higher transaction costs and higher risks which themselves require more complex management’. While new financial tools, like MBS, offered neoliberalized solutions to the problems of capital illiquidity associated with housing as a commodity, they also changed the way that risk was identified, calculated and priced in relation to residential mortgage lending.

**Housing as a technology of neoliberal governmentalities**

While housing is a problematic object of government requiring neoliberalized solutions, because of its ubiquitous nature it is also regularly enrolled as a technology of neoliberal governmentalities. That is, housing is used as a tool to produce neoliberal subjectivities that are seen to address wider problematizations around the relationship of the state and citizens (Flint 2002, 2003; Dodson 2006; Dufty 2007; McKee 2009; McKee 2011b). The neoliberalized ‘good’ citizen is active, autonomous, empowered and responsible (Flint 2003). The ideal aspired to is that the ‘good’ citizen no longer passively looks to the state to address their needs. Rather, the role of the state is to provide citizens with the capacity to become reflexive, rational consumers with a concomitant sense of duty to community (Flint 2004b; Dodson 2006; McKee 2011b). Housing
performs an integral role in the development of such neoliberal subjectivities. This has been most clearly demonstrated in the realm of social housing but can also be seen to play out in the field of homeownership more widely.

Supply-side policies to housing assistance were not only problematized as inefficient they were also constructed as limiting the choice/freedoms of public/social housing tenants. Changes to how housing assistance was provided were, thus, not just about reducing the fiscal burden on nation-states. They were also designed to introduce ‘choice’ – and the effort, education and exercise that involved – to the way recipients of housing welfare consumed housing. For example, the RTB policies in the UK provided social housing tenants with the choice of remaining a tenant or becoming a homeowner (McKee 2011a), while in Australia the rapid expansion of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) subsidy in the 1980s and 1990s allowed housing assistance to expand recipients’ housing choices to private forms of renting (Dufty 2007). This choice was in terms of not just what type of housing was consumed, but also where that housing was consumed. As Dufty (ibid.) showed, while the CRA was recognized to be a less fiscally responsible means of distributing housing assistance, it was pursued as a policy because it allowed housing welfare recipients to make both housing and locational choices in response to other governmental issues such as unemployment. Housing assistance policy in many nation-states was thus redesigned to ‘empower’ recipients to direct their own acts of housing consumption (McKee 2011a).

At the same time, as social housing has increasingly become the tenure of last resort in many countries, those citizens who continue to consume public forms of housing have increasingly been constructed as ‘flawed consumers’ and thus as ‘failed citizens’ (Flint 2003; Darcy and Rogers 2014; Rogers and Darcy 2014). As Darcy and Rogers (2014; see also Hackworth 2005 and Posner 2012) outline, those who have access to public/social housing find themselves governmentally trapped. Their legitimacy as social housing tenants increasingly relies on their inability to participate in the wider economy. Yet their disadvantage and outsider status is constructed as both (1) the result of individual deficiency rather than the product of government policy – that is, a product of making the wrong choices, and (2) used to justify the withdrawal of other citizenship rights – such as their the ability to enact civic rights to self-organize and resist urban regeneration projects that threaten their homes. The ‘flawed consumer’ and ‘failed citizen’ trope can also be seen to be deployed in order to justify the redistribution of resources away from homelessness programmes and the physical relocation of the ‘chronically’ homeless from urban spaces (May et al. 2005; Del Casino and Jocoy 2008).

In addition to being ‘taught’ how to consume in the appropriate ways, housing assistance recipients are also trained in how to be ‘empowered’ (McKee and Cooper 2008; McKee 2009; McKee 2011b; Darcy and Rogers 2014). An example of this is the various tenant participation programmes that are variously enrolled by the state, social housing managers and urban development companies. At their best, tenant participation programmes will involve ‘tenants taking part in decision-making processes and influencing decisions’ (McKee and Cooper 2008: 133). At their worst, these programmes ‘obviate the self-organising efforts of tenants’ and ‘attenuate’ their rights (Darcy and Rogers 2014: 236). Tenant participation programmes are an example of how social housing tenants are not just provided with new opportunities to ‘choose’ and ‘participate’, but – combined with such ‘freedoms’ – are governmental processes of responsibilization (Flint 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Hackworth 2005; Posner 2012). Hackworth (2005: 35–6) argued that the US ‘Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act’ did exactly this when it introduced ‘community service requirements and stricter screening’ with tenants increasingly required to ‘behave in “acceptable” ways to continue to receive their housing benefits’.
Key to the rolling out of the above neoliberal governmental technologies is the changed role of housing providers and managers. As Flint (2002: 622) explained, increasingly, the role of social housing agencies... involves techniques of identifying and classifying populations to be governed.... Social housing managers may also be seen to be involved in constructing populations through attempts to establish 'balanced' communities in social housing estates.

Combined with the above governmental roles, social housing agencies also assume much of the risk of not only the behaviour of an increasingly marginalized social housing tenant population, but also the financial risks and uncertainties associated with providing and managing social housing stock (Pryke and Whitehead 1995; Flint 2003; Hodkinson 2011). As a number of studies have shown, the multiple roles of social housing providers – of 'responsibilizing' social housing tenants, managing the wider financial risks of social housing stock, and the social purpose of this type of housing assistance – regularly come into conflict, remain unresolved and have the potential to make social housing agencies less effective in their execution of all of the above roles (Pryke and Whitehead 1995; Flint 2003, 2004b; Hackworth and Moriah 2006). This can result in such organizations being both the enactors and the targets of governmental reform (Dufty 2011).

While much housing scholarship has focused on the way in which social housing is used as a technology of neoliberal government, there is also a growing awareness of how homeownership has also increasingly been used in the same way. Housing researchers have argued that the various housing challenges to both capital and the state have coalesced, making homeownership pivotal to the general health of both domestic and international markets (Coakley 1994; Smith and Searle 2008; Kennedy et al. 2013). As a consequence, housing has become a fundamental tool in the operation of neoliberal forms of macroeconomic policy. This has occurred in three main ways. First, as various nation-states’ capacities to directly fund pensions from fiscal policy have declined, homeownership has become an increasingly important mechanism of redistributing the responsibility of funding the costs of retirement onto individual households. McKee and Muir (2013: 3; see also Smith and Searle 2008; Forrest and Hirayama 2009) describe this as the emergence of the ‘asset-based welfare state’. Second, as wage inflation has declined in recent decades homeownership has also become an important tool in producing macroeconomic stimulus. Through financial tools that allow housing and mortgage equity withdrawal, households are encouraged to draw down on the equity in their properties to maintain and expand consumption (Smith and Searle 2008; Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Kennett et al. 2013). Last, as the state steps away from addressing social and economic needs, family and community are expected to become responsible for addressing the shortfall. This can be seen in the emergence of Japan’s ‘parasite singles’, the UK’s ‘kipper’s, and Australia’s ‘boomerang’ generations as intergenerational family dependency becomes an important feature of homeownership (Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Liu et al. 2015). As Forrest and Hirayama argue (2009: 1009) ‘neoliberalism in the housing sector has been associated as much with refamilization as marketization’.

Evaluations of the neoliberalization of housing

The outcomes of neoliberalization processes of housing are complex and evaluations of these changes have primarily questioned their sustainability along economic, environmental, social and political lines. The GFC exemplifies the question of the economic sustainability of neoliberalized approaches to housing. One highly visible result of the failure of the neoliberalization
of housing markets is the emergence of ‘ghost estates’. Kitchin et al. (2012: 1311) defined ‘ghost estates’ as developments of ‘ten or more houses in which 50% of the properties are either vacant or under construction’. At the end of 2009 they found 620 such estates in Ireland. However, the question of economic sustainability does not just apply to the spectacular failure of the global financial markets in 2008, but also to the growing fiscal burden of demand-driven and monetarist policies. These policies have narrowed the capacity of the state to respond to changes in economic conditions by relinquishing tax revenue through exemptions, and, as economic conditions worsen, exacerbating the fiscal burden through the increasing demand for housing assistance subsidies. For instance, Kitchin et al. (ibid.) argued that a contributing factor to the property crisis in Ireland was governments becoming increasingly reliant on the narrow, but lucrative, tax base associated with property development and sales. Similarly, Beer et al. (2007) maintained that the removal of supply-side housing policy options forced governments in Australia to increasingly rely on the blunt, and less effective, tool of planning regulation to address issues of housing affordability.

Related to the economic, the environmental sustainability of neoliberalized approaches to housing has also been raised in a number of studies (Weber 2002; Beer et al. 2007; Smith and Searle 2008; Glynn 2012). For instance, both Weber (2002) and Glynn (2012) question the logic behind advocating demolition over rehabilitation. Glynn (2012) points out that refurbishment of existing social housing rather than the wholesale destruction of these assets is both economically and environmentally more efficient. Similarly, Smith and Searle (2008: 23) point to how the capacity of homeowners to make mortgage equity withdrawals has the potential to cause a ‘risky drain on the quality and condition’ of housing stock as households defer the costs of building maintenance to finance welfare needs or more general consumption.

Intertwined with the economic and environmental is the question of the social and political sustainability of neoliberalized approaches to housing problems. An important fissure is the problem of inequality (Lee and Zhu 2006; Smith and Searle 2008; Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Dorling 2014). Specifically, neoliberalized approaches to housing seem to be exacerbating inequalities, not ameliorating them. For instance, examining the role of housing subsidies in Chile, Posner (2012: 68) maintains that this ‘mode of social welfare distribution does not offer a long-term solution to the plight of the poor’. Instead, he points to the way that such policies can undermine political stability by undermining the ‘cohesion of disadvantaged communities, thus making it difficult for them to work together to improve their welfare and to hold public officials accountable’ (ibid.). Inequality as an intrinsic feature of the operation of neoliberalized housing policies and markets is also pointed out by Forrest and Hirayama (2009: 1011), who emphasize the intergenerational nature of this problem:

Housing conditions of young people in the future will be partly determined by whether or not their parents own a house… Despite the current period of severe asset deflation, there will be an increasing number of families with considerable housing wealth. Low-income renters, whose parents are also renters, will continue to be excluded from housing property-based societies.

As governmentality scholars will argue, the goal of neoliberal approaches to government is to ensure the security of government. For some scholars, the security of neoliberal forms of government in the field of housing appears to be assured, with many noting that failures in the neoliberal approaches to housing post-2008 are being addressed by new rounds of further neoliberalization (Kitchin et al. 2012; Kennett et al. 2013). Yet, politically, the sustainability of many of the above approaches remains questionable. A number of housing scholars have pointed to...
the problematic repressive or disciplinary elements of neoliberalized approaches to housing that involve the erosion of citizen rights rather than an augmentation of their freedoms (Flint 2003; McKee 2011b; Kennett et al. 2013; Rogers and Darcy 2014). Others also point to the ways in which subjects of these governmental shifts are not passive victims in such processes but actively ‘challenge, contest, reinterpret and subvert’ neoliberal subjectivities (McKee 2011a: 3410; Dufty 2007, 2011). These evaluations go to a core conclusion of many studies of the neoliberalization of housing: that such programmes are fragile, unstable, contingent and experimental (May et al. 2005; Hackworth and Moriah 2006; Kamel 2012).

Future directions: reimagining neoliberal approaches to housing and home?

A number of criticisms have been levelled at the way neoliberalism has been utilized as an epistemological device in recent years (Larner 2003, 2011; Barnett 2005; Castree 2006; Lewis 2009; Collier 2012). As Lewis (2009: 114) outlines,

The accusation has been that as a critical frame ‘neoliberalism’ has been deployed as an anchor for a deep political disaffection and specific critical narratives expressed via overly simplistic critiques of power, weak analysis or its operations, casual empirics and naive and ineffectual politics.

A range of responses has also been outlined advocating greater theoretical rigour; tighter definitions; and more nuanced and detailed empirical analyses. Importantly, these criticisms were not about capitulating to a ‘big Leviathan’ but a call for researchers to be more attuned to the experimental and flexible elements of neoliberal forms of power relations (Foucault 1991; Lemke 2001). This conclusion picks up on two themes from these debates: (1) bringing neoliberalism back down to size; and (2) the productive opportunities (the ‘uses’) of neoliberalism – and briefly reflects how they relate to and might be applied to future research on housing and neoliberalization.

Bringing neoliberalism back down to size

Collier (2012: 186; see also Lewis 2009; Barnett 2010; Larner 2011) advocates for researchers to approach analyses of ‘neoliberalism as though it were the same size as other things, and trace its associations with them’ rather than allowing the concept to be simply ‘a macro-structure or explanatory background against which other things are understood’. Indeed, Jacobs and Manzi (2014: 218) make a similar call in relation to housing studies, arguing that while ‘studies of contemporary housing processes can benefit from an understanding of neoliberalism… caution is required in using this concept to avoid it simply serving as a convenient label or as an alternative to empirical analysis’. Like Collier (2012) and others, Jacobs and Manzi (2014) point to the need for housing research to reveal other expressions of power that can work alongside, contest, or exist independent of neoliberal forms of government.

With these critiques in mind, there are two ways in which housing research can bring neoliberalism back down to size. The first is to recognize that housing has always been a focus of governmental problematizations. Housing, as an object and technology of government, is not solely a neoliberal phenomenon. Instead, housing researchers should be as mindful of the past ways in which housing has been targeted and enrolled into processes of governmentalization, and seek to trace detailed genealogies of how certain problematizations and their solutions emerge, are contested and change (Dodson 2007; Dufty and Gibson 2010). Genealogical
approaches, however, are still prone to ‘epochal thinking’ and a second way in which housing research can bring neoliberalism back down to size is through what McKee (2014; see also Li 2007; Brady 2014) describes as ‘ethnographies of government’. ‘Ethnographies of government’ seek to go beyond discourse analysis of policy and, instead, illustrate how neoliberal government-mentals are variously engaged with and remade through such relationships. This approach also works as an antidote to the tendency in governmentality approaches to neoliberalism to assume that the ‘description of political rationalities also describes the actual accomplishment of subject effects’ and that such rationalities are only the product of the top-down actions of the state (Barnett 2010: 281).

The productive opportunities (the ‘uses’) of neoliberalism

The second theme picks up on the productive opportunities, or what Ferguson (2010: 170) calls ‘the uses of neoliberalism’. As has been outlined, a core feature of neoliberal forms of government is the way that it is fragile, contingent and experimental. For Ferguson (ibid.; see also Lemke 2001) this feature should be understood not only as vulnerability, but also as an asset to the way this expression of power operates. The question that Ferguson (2010: 174) poses is whether we can find ways of ‘not just opposing “the neoliberal project” but appropriating key elements of neoliberal reasoning for different ends’. Indeed, housing research has made important contributions along the lines that Ferguson advocates. The work of Smith and others (Smith 2005; Smith et al. 2006) is a case in point. Through a variety of studies they use the example of housing to not just argue ‘against markets as they are’ but also to make ‘a bid for what they might become’ (Smith 2005: 1). Arguing that ‘critiques of neoliberalism continue to leave the concept of markets more or less intact’ (Smith et al. 2006: 81), Smith and others (Smith 2005; Smith et al. 2006) point out that the constructed nature of (housing) markets makes them fertile ground for questioning their ‘economic essence’ and reimagining and remaking them through an ‘ethic of care’. The repositioning of our analyses of neoliberalism in this way is radical, but seeking to find the ‘uses’ of neoliberalism offers up important ways of moving our evaluations out of the cul-de-sac conclusions that neoliberalism simply begets more neoliberalism despite its manifest problems and failures. As Larner (2011: 331) points out ‘housing is being understood/problematized in new ways, with the consequence that it is now being politicized and governmentalized in distinctive new ways’. Neoliberalism will continue to play an important part in such processes. It is essential, therefore, that we find new ways of bringing this epistemological tool back down to size, along with ways of reimagining and remaking it to serve alternative (progressive) solutions to contemporary and future housing issues.

Note

1 The effect of the ‘concentration of disadvantage’ was one of the problematizations of housing that emerged alongside the wider fiscal and representational crises of the state during the 1970s. For example, the problematization and, ultimately, the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in the US city of St Louis, Missouri, in the late 1960s and 1970s.

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Housing and home


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