



Introduction to the Special Issue: Varieties of Housing Regime Approaches

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Housing regimes are a key concept in comparative housing sociology. This issue of the online publication CHA contains seven articles which, in line with the publication's aims, all contribute short outlines of original insights on this topic. The broader literature of housing regimes includes a variety of sometimes conflicting approaches, which poses a serious challenge. I would like to highlight five methodological/research problems which differentiate these theories/approaches: the problem of structure and agency; the extension of welfare regime theory to housing; whether housing regimes are to serve as a theory or a framework; the convergence versus divergence approach; the "time and scale" of regime theories. The writings in this special edition take different positions regarding these questions.

The purpose of comparing housing systems is, on the one hand, to categorize housing systems and thus create a kind of typology and, on the other hand, to analyze the development of housing systems over time. This dichotomy is linked to the fundamental dilemma of *structure and agency* in sociological analysis. Hannu Ruonavaara defines housing regimes as a "set of fundamental principles according to which mode of housing provision is operating in some defined area (municipality, region, state) at a particular point in time." This goes beyond an approach which reduces comparative analysis to a typology of housing policies (Donison and Ungerson, 1982, Balchin, 1996). The article of Bo Bengtson and Sebastian Kohl relies on path dependency to focus on changes in the housing system. Almost all of the authors attempt to account for this dichotomy, and combine a typology with the drivers of change. The difference between them is that some focus more on the drivers of change, such as Martin Lux and Petr Sunega, Michael Ball, and József Hegedüs, while others focus more on structure, such as Walter Matznetter and Joris Hoekstra.

Comparative housing research, and housing regime theory in particular, were given momentum by Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regime theory. Housing researchers were of the opinion that the housing sector was at least as important an element of the welfare system as the pension system, education or health care, and sought to add a housing component to welfare regime theory. The research results of the past 20-30 years have generally shown that this is not possible, as the housing system is a special sector (a "wobbly pillar") both within the welfare system and beyond. The close link between the housing system and the welfare system renders it difficult to examine the welfare functions of the housing system independently of the social system (e.g. general income subsidies). The economic and social embeddedness of the housing sector represents a major challenge for housing regime theories. Matznetter proposes that housing research should not only link the housing and welfare systems, but should also include insights from the literature on varieties of capitalism. Identifying the connections between various parts of the system is just the first step, the real challenge is to formulate and test the hypotheses regarding the causal links connecting specific factors. The studies ask whether



connecting various dimensions on the level of the nation state leads to a useful solution, or whether it obscures the differences between various regions and metropolitan areas. Matznetter notes that there can be differences between housing systems within a single country. Hoekstra formulates it clearly, saying that housing regimes can only be interpreted on the level of the region or metropolitan area, where the local housing sector's conditions and policies can diverge from the national "average".

The authors disagree on whether the goal of housing regime research is to develop a specific theory or an interpretative/analytical framework. Kemeny (1995) emphasized the importance of theory which goes beyond a simple typology, and argued that the typology emerged as a result of different rental regimes. The role of theory is less obvious for studies which rely more on path dependency, but both Lux and Sunega and Bengston and Kohl argue for a viable theoretical framework. Lux and Sunega formulate a typology based on the causal path dependency model, while Bengston and Kohl analyze the usefulness of a model which describes gradual institutional change. Both studies go beyond a "history matters" logic and explain processes of change with reference to causal links. They are thus not purely descriptive; they are employing a theory with explanatory power. Hegedüs creates a typology of the various forms of housing provision based on the integration mechanism and the form of tenure, which is more of an interpretative framework than a theory. He provides a theoretical explanation of individual research questions by highlighting the connections between the political system, regulatory interventions and the subsidy system. Ball takes a more radical point of view, and effectively rejects the traditional housing regime approach. According to Ball, creating a typology is pointless and necessarily leads to superficial observations and results that cannot be corroborated. Ball refers to Dewilde (2017), who concluded that a typology of housing systems was not suited to draw any meaningful conclusions that could be supported by data. Meaningful explanations can only be supplied by country-specific institutional analyses which define a form of housing provision.

Housing research has been dominated by developed capitalist countries with a democratic political system, which, due to globalization and other individual factors, grew to encompass some Asian countries in the past 10-20 years. Africa and South America are outside the mainstream. The validity of housing regime theories in non-democratic political systems is questionable. Housing regime theories have historical as well as geographical limits. The housing systems of countries in an earlier phase of urbanization and economic development cannot be interpreted using mainstream housing regime literature. The housing regime models cannot be applied to Socialist countries. For instance, Kemeny's rental regime theory is inapplicable, as the rental sector is embedded in a welfare system which cannot be described by the Esping-Andersen model. For instance, informal private rentals represent an important, but hard-to-measure sector for retrospective studies (Hegedüs és Puzanov, 2017) The housing provision matrix introduced by Hegedüs can be used to account for informal rentals in Socialist countries, the slums of developing countries, or housing solutions in autocratic systems which formally belong to the private sector but are under state control.

Kemeny was a key voice in the literature due to his rental regime theory as well as a methodological study, co-authored with Stuart Lowe, in which he grouped comparative studies in three categories (Kemeny and Lowe, 1998). The first category was that of juxtapositional analyses, which they considered to be purely descriptive analyses entirely lacking in theoretical grounding. Their second category was that of universalist analyses, which assumed that housing systems would converge. The third category was that of studies which aimed to explain the



differences between housing systems, focusing on divergence. In the current study, Lux and Sunega argue that the housing systems of post-Socialist societies followed a similar trajectory, and thus leans towards the concept of convergence. Lux and Sunega support this claim with arguments drawing on path dependency. A recent study by Soaita and Dewilde (2019) has demonstrated that there are important differences between post-Socialist housing systems based on basic housing indicators. However, the two approaches are not necessarily in conflict, due to their different research questions and level of analysis. Elements of convergence and divergence can be present simultaneously in comparative studies.



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