

On Explanations of Housing Policy

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This paper is concerned with making sense of current ways of explaining housing policy. Four different types of explanation are identified and analysed in detail: explanations in terms of systems of actors, hypothetico-deductive explanations, realist explanations, and culturalist explanations. The characteristic ontology and epistemology of each type of explanation is made explicit. The four types of explanation are then evaluated, partly in their own terms, and partly in relation to each other. It is argued that explanations in terms of systems of actors are inherently superficial, so it is essential to go beyond and below them in order to achieve an acceptable level of explanatory adequacy. Hypothetico-deductive explanations are rescued from realist and culturalist criticisms which tend to dismiss them altogether, but they are recognised as having serious limitations in terms of conceptual vagueness/ambiguity and contextual fragmentation. Realist explanations are considered in greater depth through an examination of regulation theory. This examination amounts to a critique of the theory as regards its application to housing policy. Finally, culturalist explanations are assessed by using Kemeny's theory as an illustration, with both ontological and epistemological problems being identified. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the logical relations and differences between explanations of the four different types.

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THE NATURE AND CLASSIFICATION OF HOUSING POLICY

Policy used to be defined in terms of the political intentions of decision making elites (Jenkins, 1978). Such an approach makes elitist theories of political power true by definition. More recently, therefore, writers have pointed to the existence of continuity between policy and action or implementation (Barrett and Fudge, 1981; Means, 1993). The question of whether a policy process is dominated by elites is then to be resolved by empirical investigation.

Policy, then, can be defined in terms of the positions and actions of decision makers and of those who are responsible for carrying out their decisions. Public policy can now be defined as the policy of public bodies such as governments, statutory authorities, and corporations, and housing policy can be defined as public policy in relation to housing. This paper is concerned with housing policy as an element or dimension of public policy, and more specifically with the housing policy of state institutions.

State policy (the policy of state institutions) does not fall neatly into a number of different categories, because there are inevitable and substantial overlaps between social policy, economic policy, urban policy, regional policy, fiscal policy, monetary policy, employment policy, and so on. In singling out state housing policy, therefore, we must be careful not to miss its intimate links with these other aspects of state policy. In addition, it has been argued by Houlihan (1988, p. 31) that there is no unified policy area for housing itself, but only a number of overlapping policy areas. We must also be careful, therefore, not to assume that there is any internal coherence to state housing policy as such.

This paper is concerned with the explanation of state housing policy. In general terms, this means the identification of a conceptual framework within which the state's positions and actions can be shown to have a certain logic or to fit into a certain type of pattern. The idea is that making this logic or patterning explicit could help to make better sense of the policy process, and therefore enable more effective contributions to policy reform. It is possible that a generally agreed typology of state housing policies would be helpful in terms of clarifying what it is that needs to be explained. In practice, however, there is no such general agreement: typologies can be devised, for example, on the basis of structures of housing provision (Ambrose, 1991, 1992; Ball and Harloe, 1992), administrative/professional convenience, or housing tenure (see examples at the end of this paper). Since theoretical support for

these typologies is weak or lacking, the result is as much distortion as clarification of housing policy processes. Fortunately, however; it is not necessary to develop typologies as a precondition for explaining housing policy.

The aims of this paper are relatively modest. I am concerned not so much with explaining housing policy in itself as with identifying and evaluating a number of types of explanation that are found in housing policy studies. The intention is that such evaluation should help to guide future attempts to explain housing policy. The argument is conducted at a relatively abstract level, because the aim is to focus on the most general presuppositions of each theoretical approach. The next section identifies four general types of explanation, and the section after that concentrates on their evaluation.

TYPES OF EXPLANATION OF HOUSING POLICY

It may be as difficult to construct a generally agreed typology of explanations of housing policy as of housing policies. Nevertheless, certain broad perspectives do emerge in the literature, and it is these which are the subject of this paper. The selection of these perspectives is not entirely arbitrary, because it is guided by a conception of the primary purposes of explanation in social science generally (and possibly in natural science as well). These purposes are, broadly speaking, ontological, epistemological, and methodological: ontological, because explanations make assumptions about the nature of what is to be explained; epistemological, because explanations need to be clear about the nature of the knowledge which they are seeking; and methodological, because explanations need to be explicit about the ways in which such "knowledge is to be acquired. On the basis of this classification of purposes, this [paper claims that it is possible to throw some light on different theoretical perspectives, and hence improve the quality of explanation in this field. This paper identifies four types of explanation of housing policy. The selection is arbitrary in at least two respects: firstly, it is possible that there exist other types of

explanation which cannot be subsumed under any of those selected; and secondly, it is possible that selected types could be divided into a number of sub-types, which could equally well be justified as separate types. The selection is non-arbitrary, however, insofar as the distinctive character of each type of explanation is determined by ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations. The four types in question are: (1) explanations in terms of "systems of actors" (Dunleavy, 1981); (2) hypothetico-deductive models of explanation (Hempel, 1962); (3) realist explanations (Bhaskar, 1978); and (4) culturalist explanations (Kemeny, 1992). Each of these types is considered in detail below.

(1) Explanations in terms of systems of actors " "

The first type of explanation is selected as the most common type of explanation, of housing policy. The expression "system of actors" is taken from Dunleavy (1981), and this type of explanation is found in the work of Donnison and Ungerson (1982), Balchin (1989), Malpass and Murie (1990) and many others. This should '\:

\ not be taken to mean, however, that any of these writers necessarily identify themselves with it. One general characteristic of this approach is that explanations of housing policy are sought in terms of the relations between agents, whether human or institutional. I call such relations social relations. This type of explanation therefore assumes that the reality of housing policy is articulated through social relations. In technical terms, the ontology of this perspective consists of social relations.

A second general characteristic of this approach is that it seeks to identify systems by means of empirical investigation and inductive generalisation. While not being avowedly empiricist because it does not claim that all knowledge is derived from experience, it is nevertheless redolent of an empiricist position. The social relations involved may not be always observable (for example, relations of power

and influence), but it is assumed that the patterns into which such relations fit must be observable in order to be real. This approach is therefore based on an inductive logic, and its epistemology can be labelled inductivist. In addition, and as one would expect, its methodology is predominantly descriptive and comparative.

There are several variants of the systems of actors approach, depending upon the nature of the actors and systems under consideration. With respect to specifically political actors, for example, the two main variants are pluralism and elite theory. Writers on housing policy have commonly been critical of the former and sympathetic to the latter. Dunleavy, for example, has argued that pluralism cannot explain the scale and development of the high-rise boom (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 183), and has pointed to the existence of a "public housing apparatus" which is an elite grouping that was substantially cohesive and controlled many aspects of policy development (p. 183). Similarly, Houlihan (1988) has identified a public sector housing policy "community" in Britain which appears to be a set of overlapping political and professional cliques or elites. Housing policy is then to be explained in terms of the patterns of behaviour of such elite groups.

Other housing policy texts do not always refer explicitly to elites, but their existence and importance is clearly implied. For example, Donnison and Ungerson see housing policy as a response to housing problems (Donnison and Ungerson, 1982, p. III), but the housing problems of those excluded from the core of the political system tend not to elicit a policy response (pp. 192-3). Similarly, Bowley (1945) sees state action in terms of a number of reformers responding to a perceived housing "need" through a series of "experiments", as if policy were a purely technical matter of professional or scientific expertise. Balchin (1989) sees the prime actor's as being political parties organised within a national political system, so that housing policy becomes determined by the manifestos and programmes of ruling political parties. Again, Malpass and Murie (1990), while acknowledging class struggle as the

"general backcloth" to the (housing) policy process, suggest that there may exist elites of politicians and administrators at both national and local levels who effectively control the whole operation. Finally, albeit rather differently, Ball and Harloe (1992) have characterised structures of housing provision as "combinations of social agents involved in housing provision that relate to each other in empirically observable ways" (p. 3)—a characterisation which is compatible with both elite theory and pluralism.

(2) Hypothetico-deductive explanations

Explanations of this type are less commonly found in the housing policy literature. Nevertheless, they are important because the type represents a model of scientific explanation which researchers are urged to emulate. The approach derives from the classic Popper-Hempel account of explanation, according to which phenomena are said to be explained if statements describing them are logically deduced from theoretical postulates or hypotheses (Hempel, 1962). For Popper and Hempel, explanation is the logical inverse of prediction. In most versions of this approach, the hypotheses or postulates are interlinked so as to form a system. A key characteristic of hypothetico-deductivism is therefore its assumption that explanation can be validated only if it can be interpreted in terms of processes of logical deduction. Consequently, the epistemology of this approach can be described as a form of deductivism, in contrast to the inductivism of the systems of actors approach. The hypotheses themselves can come from anywhere, so the ontological status of explanations of this type is uncertain. What is clear, however, is that this approach seeks to identify relations other than social relations, namely logical relations between structures and actions. Such relations can be characterised in general terms as analytically necessary relations between social relations. Methodologically, the approach involves the formulation of hypotheses and the analysis and testing of their consequences.

In the study of housing policy, two variants of the hypothetico-deductive approach

can be distinguished. In the first, or probabilistic, variant, which Dickens et al. (1985) define as the "systems approach" (p. 158), housing policy is characterised as a set of "outputs" which follow with greater or less probability from a set of inputs into the policy process. In the second, or deterministic, variant, an attempt is made to discover or invent the system of relationships among the inputs which is causally responsible for the observed outputs. This second variant is illustrated in the work of Dunleavy (1981), which attempted to establish the structural determination of the policy of high-rise housing provision in Britain. Dunleavy's approach explicitly goes beyond systems of actors to consider underlying relationships between different systems of social relations. This approach has similarities with a realist approach (see next paragraph), but for Dunleavy the link between structure and action is one of logical necessity rather than objectively real relations.

(3) Realist explanations

This type of explanation stems from the work of Bhaskar (1978, 1979, 1989, 1991)—see also Sayer (1992). In application to housing policy, it is exemplified in the work of Dickens et al. (1985). Ontologically, realism assumes that the world is inherently structured, differentiated and changing. In the words of a leading exponent of the realist position, "realism . . . asserts that there are in fact structures and powers which generate phenomena independent of our experience of and access to such objects" (Dickens, 1992, p. 177). For realists, therefore, the real meaning of the world is hidden, and needs to be revealed by scientific investigation. The assumption is that there exist not only relations between phenomena such as social relations are, but also necessary relations between different sets of phenomenal relations. These necessary relations, however, are not the analytically necessary relations of the hypothetico-deductivists, but rather they are synthetically necessary relations: in other words, the necessity in question is not merely a product of definitions and logical deductions, but is an attribute of (material or social) reality.

Realist epistemology follows directly from its ontology. Realism seeks, above all, knowledge of synthetically necessary relations, knowledge which will explain phenomenal relations by reference to their underlying causes. Methodologically, however, realism is compatible with a number of different approaches, of which perhaps two are worth mentioning here. One is that of Kantian transcendentalism (Kant, 1929), of which perhaps the best-known modern exponent is Harré (1972). According to this method, models of causal mechanisms are developed by processes of logical and practical reasoning, and their implications are then tested through examination of the phenomena to be explained. This method is much the same as that of hypothetico-deductivism. The second method derives from Hegel and Marx, and works according to a dialectical process of analysis and synthesis known as the method of articulation (Jessop, 1990). Explanatory structures are first identified in a simple and abstract form, and then a hierarchy of increasingly complex and concrete manifestations is derived by the dialectical process. For example, the Marxist category of labour appears first in the concept of abstract labour, and the capitalist form of wage-labour is derived at a later stage. The concept of abstract labour is seen as necessary in order to explain the phenomenal form, and this necessity is synthetic because dialectical logic cannot be reduced to formal or analytical logic.

Examples of both of the above methodologies can be found in the literature on housing policy. The work of Dickens et al. (1985) illustrates the Kantian approach, with Class relations being selected as causal mechanisms, and with the causal model being developed through empirical and comparative research. The second, or dialectical, approach is dominated by regulation theory. Space does not permit a detailed treatment of regulation theory in this paper, so the reader is referred to Aglietta (1979), Lipietz (1985, 1986), de Vroey (1984), Boyer (1986), Jessop (1988, 1990), Kotz (1990) and Dunford (1990). The main point is that regulation theory sees state policy as structured on the basis of regimes of accumulation which are

associated with particular modes of social and economic regulation. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the so-called Fordist regime of accumulation, involving a systematic linkage between mass production and mass consumption, became increasingly dominant in the world, and the growth of mass state provision (such as mass housing) was necessary to secure this linkage.

Recently, there have been a number of attempts to apply regulation theory to housing processes and policies (Florida and Feldman, 1988; Chouinard, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Kennett 1992, 1993; see also Stoker, 1989). Generally, state formation is seen as part of a process of class formation (Chouinard, 1989, p. 390), and specific state policies are explained as outcomes of class conflicts structured by particular modes of social regulation (Chouinard, 1990a, p. 1294): modes of regulation provide means of institutionalising class struggle (Jessop, 1988, p. 150).

Similar themes can be found in the work of realist writers who are not explicitly regulationists: for example, Dickens et al. (1985) explained the level of council housing provision in each locality as being produced by a local authority's own particular way of regulating its local class relations, and they attempted to explain differences between British and Swedish housing provision in terms of differences in state regulation of national housing structures. Although there are differences among regulation theorists (Jessop, 1990), as among realists generally, regulationist accounts all point to a broad shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, that is from a regime based on mass production-consumption to one based on "flexibility in relation to labour processes, labour markets, products and patterns of consumption" (Kennett, 1992, p. 5). This shift is then used to explain a variety of phenomena, from the history of suburbanisation in the USA (Florida and Feldman, 1988) to the failure of the cooperative movement in Canada (Chouinard, 1989, 1990b) to the rise of gentrification and homelessness in a variety of countries (Kennett, 1992, 1993) or the change in British local government from a corporate management to a consumer oriented

approach (Stoker, 1989). By extension, the rise and fall of mass high-rise housing provision, so well described by Dunleavy (1981), could be explained as a classic Fordist project, a typical standardised product of that particular regime of accumulation, provided by a bureaucratic state to meet the housing needs of the "typical" working class family; in the post-Fordist era (so a regulationist would argue), such provision is neither necessary nor appropriate.

(4) Culturalist explanations

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Culturalism is the opposite of realism. The world is viewed not as having an inherent structure, but as a system of meanings which is culturally and historically variable. Policies are therefore generated on the basis of culturally-determined perceptions and ideologies, which are themselves responsible for defining the distinction between reality and ideality. Exponents of a culturalist approach include Kemeny (1992), "social construction of reality" theorists (Berger and Luckmann, 1984), and, by implication, symbolic interactionists or constructivists (Becker and McCall, 1990). Culturalist ontology, therefore, while not denying that there exists a reality "out there", presupposes that it is one which is entirely socially created. The elements of this reality are meanings, which are created, maintained and transformed through discourse and action. For culturalists, therefore, not only social relations but the relations between social relations are fundamentally contingent, not necessary. The knowability of different realms of meaning is then a function of the modes of discourse and action which have been culturally (and contingently) produced and developed over relatively long periods of time. Culturalist epistemology is thus virtually inseparable from culturalist ontology.

Culturalist methodology is essentially hermeneutic, seeking an interpretive understanding of the social construction of social relations through human discourse and action. In practice, this means that there are probably as many culturalist methods

as there are interpreters. In the field of housing, however, a common approach has been to identify how certain social problems and myths become politically salient. For example, a theme which occurs periodically, though not centrally, in most housing policy texts, such as Balchin (1989), Malpass and Murie (1990) and Donnison and Ungerson (1982), is the representation of housing policies as responses to dominant perceptions of "the housing problem". The assumption, usually implicit, is that the housing problem, however constructed, is part of a real world in which we all live, and not (as in the realist position) an epiphenomenon or idealisation which may or may not conceptualise an underlying structure of "real" social relations. A strict or "pure" culturalist approach would take the view that since the very distinction between idea and reality is culturally produced, and can only be culturally produced, housing policy can be explained only by reference to a wider context and patterning of social relations, without making any claims about the fundamental reality or unreality of the "housing problem" posed at any given historical conjuncture. Kemeny, for example, says: "/ see ideology as being not secondary or derivative of social formations but central to the way in which social institutions are constituted, sustained, and changed" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 85), and again, even more strongly: "society is the product of definitions of reality held by people, and... such definitions are sustained and changed through interpersonal interaction to become the basis for social action which in turn generates the social organisation that frames and limits future definition changes" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 100).

The earliest applications of a culturalist approach in housing studies were actually in the 1970s, by those writing from a labelling theory perspective (Gill, 1977; Shenton, 1976; Damer, 1974). In these studies, housing policy and practice were seen largely as a response to dominant perceptions of different housing areas and types of resident. The authors were concerned to argue that the nature and power of such perceptions were produced by a complex process of social interaction,

and also that alternative perceptions were possible on the basis of more detailed investigation of the areas and residents involved. Primarily, the authors aimed to lay bare the processes of myth construction, and explode the myths as necessary.

More recently, housing research from a culturalist perspective has emphasised the emotional energy associated with powerful myths influencing housing policy, such as the American myth of the yeoman farmer (de Neufville and Barton, 1987) or the English myth of the green belt (Rydin and Myerson, 1989). As with the earlier, symbolic interactionist work, however, this research focuses on individual myths or problem areas, and does not attempt to tackle wider issues of housing policy causation.

Kemeny (1992) represents an attempt to delineate a more explicit and general theoretical culturalism in housing studies, and this will be assessed in detail in the next section. His concept of hegemony, based on Gramsci's work, is particularly important. Hegemony is defined as "the ability of the members of a social group to impose their definitions of reality upon the other members of a society, such that their definition constitutes the taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie everyday action, and, most importantly, informs the manner in which social life is organised" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 102). Neither the constituting of underlying assumptions nor the informing of social organisation can be fully understood in terms of personal relations between agents, so the identification of a hegemony involves the discovery of a distinct, culturally-determined layer of reality.

On the basis of the above outline of four types of explanation, it is possible to identify a certain system of relations between them. The focus of this system lies in the sphere of ontology, although, by implication, epistemology is also highly relevant. For all explanations of housing policy, reality consists of social relations, and possibly also relations between social relations. For all explanations, social

relations are all contingent. Relations between social relations, however, are either necessary or contingent, and necessary relations are either analytically necessary or synthetically necessary. An explanation which posits only social relations is an explanation in terms of systems of actors. An explanation which sees reality as composed of social relations and contingent relations between social relations is a culturalist or constructivist explanation. An explanation in terms of analytically necessary relations between social relations is hypothetico-deductivist. And finally, an explanation in terms of synthetically necessary relations is a realist one. Since all relations must be either necessary or contingent, and if necessary, they must be either analytic or synthetic, I claim that the typology of explanations outlined above is exhaustive.

Similarly with epistemology. Knowledge can be founded on induction or deduction, synthetic logic (transcendental, dialectical or abductive) or imaginative construction. There are no other possible options, although of course new sub-divisions of these categories may be possible. Inductive logic and epistemology are associated with explanations in terms of systems of actors, deductive logic and epistemology with hypothetico-deductive explanations, synthetic logic and transcendental or dialectical epistemology with realist explanation, and imaginative construction with culturalist explanation. These conclusions are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Typology of explanations

Type of explanation

"Systems of actors"

Hypothetico-deductive

Realist

Culturalist

Ontology

Social relations

Analytically necessary relations

between social relations

Synthetically necessary relations

between social relations

Contingent relations between

social relations

Logic/epistemology

Inductive

Deductive

Synthetic

(transcendental or dialectical)

Constructive

EVALUATING EXPLANATIONS OF HOUSING POLICY

This section is concerned with the evaluation of the four types of explanation identified in the previous section. Starting with systems of actors explanations, problems inherent to the approach are outlined, whose resolution is attempted by the other three types of explanation. Misunderstandings of the hypothetico-deductive approach are then dealt with, and the work of Dunleavy in particular is briefly reassessed in the light of its own theoretical assumptions. This is followed by a more detailed critique of regulation theory and its application to housing, which is intended to expose serious weaknesses in recent expositions from a realist perspective. Finally, as an example of perhaps the most developed application of a culturalist approach to housing to date, the work of Kemeny is discussed, as a means towards identifying the general problems associated with such an approach.

(1) Explanations in terms of systems of actors

The first problem with systems of actors explanations is that although most housing policy writers have leaned towards elite theory rather than pluralism, they have

differed as to the nature and degree of importance of different elite groups. It seems unlikely that this could be due to differences in the types of housing policy being considered because of the considerable overlap among housing policies of different types. It is more probable that it results from assumptions made about elite determination which are insufficiently supported by evidence. Balchin (1989), for example, does not seriously test his assumption that housing policy is (entirely?) determined by the governing party. In contrast, Dunleavy (1981) has argued, with considerable evidential support, that "ministerial or parliamentary involvement was negligible" (p. 186) in the public housing apparatus which was responsible for the high-rise housing boom. Instead, Dunleavy stresses the role of the construction industry and professional groups in determining policy on high-rise housing provision. Far from seeing these groups as alternative elites, however, Dunleavy questions the whole systems of actors approach on which elite theory depends. For Dunleavy, the public housing apparatus is more than a system of actors, whether those actors be politicians (giving rise to voluntarist explanations), administrators (giving rise to managerialist explanations) or construction capitalists (giving rise to instrumentalist economic explanations). It also, and more importantly, involves impersonal structural relations (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 187). In Dunleavy's own words: "our research has shown empirically how diffuse social class pressures and specific influence-exerting activity by private firms could come to set an influential ideological context for the development of state policy, without in any way positing the conscious pursuit of either of these interests by decision-makers" (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 190). Dunleavy leaves open the question of whether these structural forces are real in the realist's sense, or socially constructed in the culturalist's sense.

If Dunleavy's arguments are correct, explanations in terms of systems of actors must inevitably be partial and relatively superficial. In particular, the approach does

not deal with the argument that in order to explain why actors behave as they do it is necessary to go beyond the form and content of the activity itself to consider the structural context of that activity. This is why Ball and Harloe (1992), for example, are correct to say that the concept of structure of housing provision "does not of itself 'explain' any housing issue" (p. 4). A structure of housing provision is essentially a system of actors, and needs to be systematically related to a wider context in order to produce deeper and more comprehensive explanations. In contrast to the systems of actors approach, the other three approaches all attempt to do this, though in characteristically different ways.

(2) Hypothetico-deductive explanations

This approach sees policy outputs (such as the level of state housing provision) as logical consequences of specific combinations of structural variables (such as party control, condition of housing stock, administrative structure of government, and system of housing subsidy). These variables include groups of "actors" (such as political elites), but they can also be ordered sets of social relations (such as Dunleavy's "national local government system"). The method adopted by this approach is then to identify which patterning of input variables is most closely correlated with the policy outputs which are to be explained. Dunleavy in particular identifies a complex configuration of inputs into the housing policy process which includes a socio-economic background, a structure of nationally determined perceptions of situations and appropriate public housing responses to those situations, a system of central-local government relations, and a pattern of movements of capital (Dunleavy, 1981, pp. 347-8). The structure of nationally determined perceptions is particularly significant because, for Dunleavy, "actors formulating policy did so within a context effectively pre-structured by the ideological positions adopted by the design professions, central government, the construction industry, and the national local government system" (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 348). The policy of high-rise housing

provision therefore derived immediately from a political culture created by a number of different elites operating within a variety of overlapping social structures.

For Dunleavy, the input configuration as a whole represents the structural determinant of the policy output, and it is therefore implicit in his approach that the output is a logical consequence of the input.

The hypothetico-deductive approach has been widely misunderstood. Realists, for example, have criticised the "systems approach" version of it on the grounds that: "The actual social processes involved in housing provision are ignored in favour of correlating necessarily isolated variables" (Dickens et al., 1985, p. 158). This criticism is valid in relation to those who have interpreted the approach as a comparative statistical exercise (for example, Pinch, 1978). The variables identified within this approach, however, do not have to be isolated from one another: as Dunleavy has shown, they may well be structurally and logically interrelated. Indeed, for Dunleavy, it is this interrelatedness which actually explains the policy output. Dickens et al. (1985), however, miss this crucial point: in spite of Dunleavy's emphasis on the key influence of the political culture, they accuse him of minimising the role of national and local politics (Dickens et al, 1985, p. 160), and despite his avowed belief in structural determination they attribute to him a crudely instrumentalist position, describing him as "having plumped for an explanation of national policy in terms of large-scale industrial influence" (Dickens et al., 1985, p. 160).

The hypothetico-deductive approach has also been misunderstood by those writing from a culturalist or constructivist perspective. Kemeny, for example, argues that Dunleavy's position is "essentially non-statist" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 45) in relation to housing policy, because of the prominence which Dunleavy gives to the influence of factors outside of the state (namely the construction industry and design professions) in determining high-rise housing provision. In fact, however, a hypothetico-deductive approach cannot be essentially either non-statist or statist, and Dunleavy's own account clearly involves reference to both intra-state and

extra-state forces. Admittedly, Dunleavy's concept of structural determination is insufficiently clear, and therefore liable to misinterpretation, but his work could reasonably be represented as an attempt to demonstrate a process of "social construction of hegemony" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 117) in the provision of mass housing, and therefore possibly compatible with Kemeny's own approach.

The real problems with the hypothetico-deductive approach do not lie with its alleged non-statism or its alleged failure to grasp the "reality" of housing processes.

In fact, the ontological and epistemological openness of this approach can be represented as a positive advantage in comparison with realism (see the argument later in this section). At the same time, however, this openness can be interpreted as vagueness or ambiguity with respect to fundamental explanatory concepts.

Dunleavy's concepts of "economic and ideological systems" (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 183) and "non-local structural forces" (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 346), for example, are insufficiently precise for their intended theoretical task. It is not clear how actions actually spring from such structural determinants, and even the distinction between explanans and explanandum itself becomes blurred. The policy of high-rise housing provision, for example, is seen both as an effect of a specific configuration of structural forces and as an element of such a configuration. (The two positions are not necessarily incompatible, but they need to be consciously reconciled, for example by appropriate definitions of causality and structural relatedness—see, for example, the discussion of culturalist arguments below). Above all, it can be argued that it is the policies which are isolated in the hypothetico-deductive approach.

Dunleavy's adherence to what he terms an "issue-based" approach (Dunleavy, 1981), for instance, means that to some extent he separates the issue of high-rise housing provision from its social context. Arbitrary cut-off points are selected in the policy-practice continuum, leading inevitably to a partial and distorted picture of the set of overlapping networks of housing policy relations. Considered as a structural

element of this set, the policy of high-rise housing provision needs to be assessed in terms of its wider policy connections and more lasting historical significance.

(3) Realist explanations

Realism has a number of advantages in comparison with the two other approaches so far identified. For realists, a systems of actors approach can never be adequate for explanatory purposes because it does not take account of the real social relations which enable the actors' performance. The drama that we see played out on the policy stage cannot be understood without placing it in the wider context of social and political theatre. As for the hypothetico-deductive approach, realists point out that similar outputs can be produced by quite different inputs, so in order to explain any given output it is not sufficient to show that it is logically implied by a particular input (or by a particular configuration of structural forces or whatever): it is also necessary to identify the "real" relations between inputs and outputs. Dickens et al. (1985), for example, claim that although Sheffield and Smallburgh both had a high level of council housing provision, this similarity of output was produced by quite different configurations of class relations. A hypothetico-deductive approach might well have stopped at a more superficial level of analysis, interpreting the lack of variation in local policy simply as evidence of the relatively much greater importance of national policy.

As explained in the last section, regulation theory is an example of a particularly well-developed realist theory. It establishes the clear superiority of realism over explanations in terms of either systems of actors or deductions from externally selected or constructed hypotheses. It starts with realities which are highly abstract and relatively simple such as the commodity form, the wage relation and the state, and by the method of articulation (Jessop, 1982), attempts to explain realities which are more concrete and relatively more complex such as regimes of accumulation, national modes of growth and conjunctural crises (in order of increasing concrétisation

and complexification—Jessop, 1990). There are, however, serious problems with regulation theory, which reflect more general underlying problems with the realist approach.

Ontologically, regulation theory holds that there are "real causal mechanisms" (Jessop, 1990, p. 188) which produce the tendencies and counter-tendencies of capital accumulation, but the nature of these mechanisms is never specified in precise and unambiguous terms. Regulation theory therefore leaves itself vulnerable to the charge of structural-functionalism (Clarke, 1988). In addition, critics have expressed scepticism concerning the reality of regulationist regimes of accumulation (Tomaney, 1990). In response to such critics, the Fordist and post-Fordist regimes have tended to assume the status of ideal types rather than real structures of social relations (Jessop, 1988). If these regimes are no more than ideal types, however, the sense in which they can be said to produce real state policies becomes unclear. As Jessop himself admits: "unless one examines the mediation of regulation in and through specific social practices and forces, regulation will either go unexplained or will be explained in terms of 'speculative' structuralist categories" (Jessop, 1990, p. 204). In reply to Clarke's accusations, the causal primacy of the class struggle is typically acknowledged (Jessop, 1990, p. 191), but the nature of class struggle itself is left unanalysed.

Similarly, and this applies to regulationist epistemology as well as ontology, the notion of level of abstraction, and the dynamics of transition from one level to another, are insufficiently clear. Whereas the contradictory logic of capital accumulation, for example, appears to exist at the highest level of abstraction, the class struggle which is articulated with that logic seems to operate at all levels—and yet at the same time the concept of class struggle is generally assumed to be of a relatively concrete character. The regulationist ontology of class relations is therefore particularly confused.

The confused character of regulationist ontology does not, however, invalidate the

realist approach as such. It could just be that the particular causal mechanisms assumed by regulationists have not been shown to be correct (Jessop, 1990, p. 207, footnote 12). On reflection, though, there would appear to be something inherently problematic about the concept of real causal powers existing at a level which is different from the one in which they are actually realised. The argument seems to take us back to a pre-Humean state where the notion of causality remains resolutely unpacked. The alienation of structure from agency (or struggle) is, according to Marx (1970, pp. 71-81—the fetishism of commodities), created by capitalist social relations, but the realist approach seems only to reproduce this alienation in thought and then seek ways by which it might be abolished (again, only in thought).

Epistemologically, the failures of regulation theory reflect and reinforce the flaws in its ontology. The theory claims that the "laws of motion" of capital in general can be known through the analysis of specific conjunctures (Jessop, 1990, p. 163). The regulationist concepts of regime of accumulation, mode of regulation, etc., operate at this relatively more concrete and complex level (Jessop, 1988, p. 162). The regulationist accounts, however, whatever their merits in other respects, entirely fail to establish any laws of motion of capital in general operating at the level of actuality, but only patterns in the development of particular social forms.

Methodologically, regulationists (and realists generally) argue that a realist approach is necessary for theory construction (Bhaskar, 1978; Jessop, 1990, p. 207).

There are many examples from the history of science, however, which appear to contradict this, the best of which is probably the construction of quantum theory (Jammer, 1966; Forman, 1979; Hendry, 1980). Nevertheless, realism does have a strong following among scientists, and this is largely for methodological reasons. As one leading scientist has put it: "almost every working scientist is a realist—at least during working hours" (Barrow, 1988, p. 16), and Barrow also suggests that this tendency to realism may be naturally selected.

The above problems with regulation theory are evident in its applications to housing processes. Although these applications clearly involve "the mediation of regulation in and through specific social practices and forces" (Jessop, 1990, p. 204), they do not explain the nature of the regulation itself. Chouinard, for example, does not succeed in explaining why the cooperative housing movement in Canada was unable to oppose the reproduction of dominant, market-based performance criteria within the state, except by reference to the dominance of the ideology of "abstract consumerism" (Chouinard, 1990, p. 1442). The source of this dominance in Canadian class relations (or in the specific character of the prevailing Canadian hegemony) is not adequately identified, with the result that the mode of regulation which reproduces the marginal position of cooperatives in the delivery of assisted housing is not clearly specified or explained. In contrast, Florida and Feldman (1988)'s account of suburbanisation in the USA is more convincing, because it does delineate the nature of the "class accord" (p. 192) which is said to have been responsible for rapid postwar suburban growth. Unfortunately, however, this class accord is represented as a structural feature of US society rather than an inherently unstable, uneasy truce between conflicting social forces. Consequently, Florida and Feldman's explanation of postwar US housing looks structural functionalist, with suburbanisation being seen as functionally necessary to complete the structuralist cycle of production-exchange-consumption: "The postwar housing system was an integral component of US Fordism's 'mode of regulation' since it provided an important mechanism through which production and consumption were integrated and the productivity-wage-consumption circuit completed" (Florida and Feldman, 1988, p. 198).

Like Florida and Feldman and Chouinard, Kennett (1992, 1993) sees marginalisation in the housing market as produced by modes of regulation. In this case, however, the emphasis is on the "Keynesian Welfare State System" (Jessop, 1989,

p. 267) as the means by which Fordist regimes of accumulation were extended throughout society. The decline of Fordist accumulation regimes is then associated with the decline of Keynesian modes of regulation, resulting in "greater marginalisation and insecurity" (Kennett, 1992, p. 15), of which increasing numbers of homeless people is one expression. According to Kennett, the demise of the "Keynesian city" has only "accompanied" (Kennett, 1992, p. 13) the restructuring of capital, so she is not necessarily arguing that there is a causal relationship between the two. Nevertheless, that is the impression conveyed, and if the alleged relationship is not of a causal character, it is not clear what its nature might be (some form of complementarity, perhaps?). In particular, Kennett fails to consider the extent to which Fordism might itself have produced marginalisation in the housing market in the first place. It seems strange, for example, that Florida and Feldman should attribute inner-city marginalisation to the effects of Fordism (because of suburbanisation), and similarly Chouinard with respect to the marginalisation of the cooperative housing movement, while Kennett in contrast should attempt to explain housing marginality by reference to the transition to postFordism. As with Florida and Feldman, there would appear to be an underlying structural-functionalism: the retrenchment of the Keynesian welfare state is seen to be functionally necessary in order to restore the conditions for capital accumulation (Kennett, 1992, p. 10). In addition, the responsibility for carrying out the retrenchment is attributed to "the emergence of right-wing governments" (Kennett, 1992, p. 10), and this signifies an explanation in terms of systems of actors. When specific social practices and forces are examined more closely, therefore, the nature of the regulation which is said to be mediated by them seems to dissolve in a stew of functionalism, voluntarism and empiricism.

The application of regulation theory to housing, then, has lacked concepts which are meaningful and effective at this level. Within the realist approach, however, the

only non-regulationist housing account has been that of Dickens et al. (1985).

Although this account has been criticised, somewhat unfairly, for its alleged emphasis on the primacy of production relations (Ball and Harloe, 1992), it remains probably the most outstanding application of a realist approach in housing.

Broadly speaking, it attempts to explain patterns of national and local state housing performance in terms of differences in national and local class relations. Unlike in Florida and Feldman's account, these relations are seen as fragmented and dynamically changing causal mechanisms (uneven development) rather than as all-pervasive structural entities. Nevertheless, Dickens et al. fail to explain exactly how such relations exert their causal effects: the relations between spatially and temporally defined class relations and national and local state apparatuses remain unclear. As a result (and ironically in view of their realism), Dickens et al. have been accused by Kemeny of instrumentalism, that is of having "a view of the state as being largely, if not entirely, the passive tool of wider societal interests" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 47). The notion of class forces operating within state apparatuses is generally absent from Dickens et al.'s account (contrast, for example, Cousins, 1987'—although her account has little to say about housing). Instead, the reality of class relations is interpreted in terms of geographical and historical contingency.

(4) Culturalist explanations

In considering culturalist or constructivist perspectives, I concentrate on the work of Kemeny (1992). Constructivism has several advantages over the other three approaches. From a constructivist point of view, a system of actors approach has merit insofar as it identifies patterns of interaction among social groups which are responsible for the production of the policy process. Such an approach, however, seems to be incapable of conceptualizing hegemony, as we saw in the last section. There appears to be a sense in which the processes of constituting underlying assumptions and informing social organisation operate at a different level from that

of a system of actors: a level of discourse and emotionally-charged meanings.

Insofar as they can be said to exist at all, systems of actors are seen as "embedded" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 154) in a wider social structure.

Dunleavy's hypothetico-deductive approach is, in comparison, closer to a constructivist position. The salience of nationally determined perceptions in Dunleavy's account, together with his claims concerning the ideological prestructuring of the context of policy formation, are arguably initial attempts at an articulation of how the hegemony responsible for high-rise housing provision in Britain was established and maintained. For constructivists, the main problem with Dunleavy's approach is that an issue-based perspective is simply too narrow to grasp the nature of any particular hegemony, and consequently results in one-sidedness and ahistoricism. A constructivist would argue that such limitations can be overcome by a better understanding of how the structure of social relations in which high-rise housing provision is embedded was produced on the basis of a particular hegemony or hegemonies (relevant ideologies, for example, would have been collectivism and modernism, articulated to a hegemony mobilized to achieve accelerating economic growth).

As for realism, it is rejected by culturalists as essentialist and value-neutral. The world is not seen as having a structure which is independent of human activity; on the contrary, for constructivists the distinction between "real" and "ideal" worlds is itself a human construction. Consequently, the realist distinction between necessary and contingent (social) relations is invalid from a culturalist point of view.

Culturalists would also argue that the divorce of action from structure is inevitable for a realist, because the alleged contingency of action can never be reconciled with the alleged necessity of structure, no matter how much the dialectic is invoked in order to accomplish this impossible task (Jessop, 1990). In contrast, culturalists hold that structure and struggle are linked through what could be called "moving

discourse", that is modes of discourse in which powerful imagery and rhetoric motivate human action. It then almost goes without saying that culturalists reject realist epistemology as well as realist ontology: culturalist epistemology appears to make possible a unity of theory (discourse) and practice (action) which forever eludes the grasp of a realist, who seeks "laws of history" only, apparently, in order to escape them.

Kemeny's culturalist theory, outlined in the previous section, is fairly embryonic, and could be developed much further in explaining the social construction of housing policy. Potentially fruitful applications include processes of bureaucratisation and centralisation (Houlihan, 1988), powerful ideologies such as that of the postwar housing shortage (Malpass and Murie, 1990), or the ideologies associated with the "politics of tenure" (Ball, 1983). Even so, it is possible to identify problems with Kemeny's approach, which in part reflect problems with culturalist perspectives more generally.

The first problem is ontological. It can be accepted that social reality is constructed by human activity, but this activity is physical, as well as intellectual and emotional. Ideologies, as products of intellectual and emotional activity, tend to become detached from material products, but this is arguably only a consequence of the separation of mental from manual labour in class societies. Ideologies, such as Kemeny's privatism/collectivism couple, appear as free-floating abstractions, but in fact they are rooted in social relations (in the case of the privatism/collectivism couple, these are the social relations of competition and cooperation respectively).

There is no political or ideological "superstructure" divorced from an economic "base", nor does it make sense to talk of ideology or the state as having autonomy of some kind in relation to social structure. Both ideology and the state are simply parts of a socially constructed reality, and the problem is to explain the alienation of these parts from the reality, not to theorise the alienation as a given. In short, the

task is to explain how functionally-undifferentiated human activity results in apparently autonomous functionally separated social institutions. The achievement and reproduction of hegemony (which overcomes the alienation of state from social structure) requires pre-eminence in terms of material power (for example, control of the armed forces and the commanding heights of the economy) as well as in modes of discourse.

The second problem, or set of problems, is epistemological. The culturalist approach rightly draws attention to the power of myth, rhetoric and media imagery, and the relationship of all this to dominant ideologies. The approach does not explain, however, how the relative power of different ideologies can be evaluated apart from the vague reference to their emotional energy. As a result, culturalism does not enable us to know what kind of strategies need to be developed in order to establish a dominant ideology in any "key area" (Keiasny, 1992, p. 94). In addition, Kemeny's attempt to show that housing is such a key area for hegemony because of "its embeddedness in broader social issues" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 127) is unconvincing. The problem here lies with the concept of embeddedness, which is insufficiently clear. For Kemeny, the household-dwelling relationship seems to be at the centre of processes of socio-spatial structuring, but it is not clear if such structuring processes do actually have a centre in any meaningful sense. Indeed, Kemeny's recourse to concepts of locality, residence and socio-spatial dimension suggest that he has not effectively distanced himself from a realist position, in which social relations are embedded or centred in spatial reality. For a constructivist, however, space is itself socially constructed, and a due consideration of this point should lead on to a discussion of localist, regionalist, nationalist, and possibly continentalist ideologies. All such ideologies, especially nationalism, are of considerable importance for understanding the social construction of hegemony and political dominance, and Kemeny could have usefully

referred to the work of Anderson (1983), Corrigan and Sayer (1985), Gellner (1983), Hutchinson (1987), and Smith (1991), all of whom, in different ways, have examined culturalist perspectives on the social construction of dominant nationalist ideologies. In comparison with the extraordinary emotive power of nationalism, the ideologies of privatism and collectivism seem of only secondary importance. Indeed, one of the crucial strengths of nationalism is that it appears to combine both privatist and collectivist ideals (through the themes of "Family" and "Nation").

Nationalism, of course, is more than an ideology: it also involves forms of economic and political organisation. The limitations of a culturalist perspective appear in the tendency to focus on ideologies (such as nationalism, racism, religious fundamentalism) and to neglect issues of class and gender in the formation and transmission of such ideologies. For culturalists, therefore, the main problem lies with making sense of class/gender relations (and also domestic relations—Somerville, 1994). For this reason, culturalists such as Kemeny have been labelled by realists as neo-Gramscian pluralists (Burnham, 1991).

Kemeny has applied his theory of hegemony and residence to Swedish housing policy in particular. He argues that the ruling social democratic party in Sweden historically followed what Jessop has called a "one-nation" strategy (Jessop, 1982), incorporating the capitalist class, and expressed through the myth of "the people's home" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 131), and this led to an emphasis on state provision of housing and other welfare goods. In Kemeny's view, "the People's Home is a clear example of a myth in the transposing of the family idyll and the ideal of the home... on to how a moral and proper society should function: as one big happy family, ensconced within the four walls of its home" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 132).

Strangely, however, Kemeny does not comment on how such a myth excludes as well as includes, in short its implicit national chauvinism and racism, to which other

writers on the welfare state have drawn attention (Jacobs, 1985; Cohen, 1985). Consequently, the nationalist character of the myth has been understood in only a culturalist sense, and its wider social construction in relation to Swedish economic corporatism and political non-alignment has not been discussed. As with the structures-of-housing-provision approach, one is left with the impression that Swedish housing policy has been redescribed, admittedly in an interesting and thought-provoking fashion, but not really explained. Why should it be, for example, that state action to support collective provision is associated with the encouragement of (non-collective) female wage-labour (Kemeny, 1992, p. 148)? And why should state action to create collectivist residential structure actually prevent the "social construction of deep collectivism" (Kemeny, 1992, p. 149)? Could it perhaps have something to do with the fact that the causation of housing policy is not only ideological or cultural, but also involves a variety of interrelated social structures of which residence is (possibly) only one?

CONCLUSION

Reviewing all four types of explanation together, it seems reasonable to argue that some are better than others, in some sense which remains to be fully explicated. Explanations in terms of systems of actors, for example, are at a more superficial level than explanations of the other three types, because they do not take explicit account of relations between social relations. This does not mean, however, that systems of actors explanations cannot be valid in their own terms, that is if they identify and find evidential support for logics or patterns of social relations.. In addition, precisely because they do operate at a different level, explanations in terms of systems of actors may well be consistent with hypothetico-deductivism, realism or culturalism.

In contrast to systems of actors explanations, the other three types of explanation are not all mutually compatible. Relations (between social relations) cannot be both

necessary and contingent, nor can they be both analytic and synthetic. The explanations therefore cannot all be correct, although they could all be wrong. Hypotheticodeductivism, first of all, seeks to select those relations between social relations which are seen to be analytically necessary, that is those whose interrelatedness can be demonstrated, through logical and linguistic analysis, as logically necessary—for example, the relationship between Dunleavy's "non-local structural forces" (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 346) and the national local government system. Hypotheticodeductive explanations assume that housing policies can be "read off" from a set of rules for the combination of relevant symbolic inputs, and from this it follows that the way to make theoretical progress is to explicate the rules of combination (analytical method). As we have seen, this approach has important merits for policy analysis, but it is inevitably partial and one-sided, and in practice suffers from ambiguity and from arbitrariness in hypothesis selection. It should be noted, however, that hypothetico-deductivists do not claim that all relations between social relations are analytic, so hypothetico-deductivism is not necessarily incompatible with realism or culturalism. Because of its ontological ambiguity, however, the position of hypothetico-deductivism in relation to realism and culturalism is none too clear: the traditional association of hypothetico-deductivism with conventionalism (Nagel, 1961) would suggest a lack of sympathy with realism, but this does not entail an acceptance of a culturalist position. For hypothetico-deductivists, therefore, relations between social relations which are not analytically necessary are highly likely to be contingent, but not necessarily so.

Realism and culturalism are clearly inconsistent with each other. They make contradictory claims about the "deep structure" of social reality. Realism asserts that there exist relations between social relations whose necessity cannot be reduced to logical or analytical necessity, whereas culturalism sees all relations between social relations as contingently constructed (the hypothetico-deductivist's analytic relations

could be contingently constructed, but the realist's synthetic ones cannot). My view is that realism is incorrect. No matter how clear, rigorous or comprehensive realist explanations may be, they all tend to drive a permanent wedge between structure and action, necessity and contingency, and cause and effect. This is a serious, and probably irredeemable, flaw, and I suspect that the synthetic necessities which realists identify (for example relations between social classes) do not in fact exist.

Finally, culturalists argue that relations between social relations are revealed not by means of a spurious transcendental or dialectical "logic" but by a hermeneutic or interpretive approach which proceeds through exploration of a progressively deepening and widening semantic content. According to this approach, even analytical or syntactical relations are explicable in terms of semantics—it is the "logic of meaning" which determines the rules of symbolic combination. Culturalist explanations are therefore powerful with respect to the semantic underpinnings of social relatedness, thus exposing the limitations of the other types of explanation. Nevertheless, they lack criteria for the assessment of semantic or ideological power, and consequently appear to overemphasise the importance of ideology in social construction ideological centring appears to substitute for a coherent unity of theory and practice. This is a fault, however, which can be corrected, for example by means of a due consideration for the material basis of particular hegemonies: this would lead to the development of a social constructivist perspective which avoids the pitfalls of ideologism and culturalism. Ironically, though, a recognition of the deep contingency of relations between social relations leads inexorably to a new appreciation of the value of explanations in terms of systems of actors (in which, presumably, the different systems are related to each other contingently).

APPENDIX: TYPOLOGIES OF HOUSING POLICY

Table 1. The "Structure of Housing Provision" model

Types of Policy (related to phases of the housing provision process)
Policy Examples (in Britain)

- 1) Promotion-related Planning restraint, partnership schemes
- 2) Investment-related Housing investment programmes. Building Society regulation
- 3) Construction-related Building Regulations for housing, JCT contracts
- 4) Distribution or exchange-related Allocations policy, Right-to-Buy
- 5) Consumption-related Mortgage interest tax relief, local housing management

Table 2. The "Administration" Model

Types of Policy (corresponding to Policy Examples (in Britain))

legal-political or

administrative-technical divisions)

- 1) Physical-related Health and safety regulations, repairs systems
- 2) Tenure-related Landlord-tenant law, Housing Corporation powers and duties
- 3) Finance-related Housing Revenue Account regulation, council tax
- 4) Management-related Decentralisation, equal opportunities in housing
- 5) Welfare-related "Special needs" provision, homelessness policy

Table 3. A Hybrid Model—a tenure-focused network of policy relations

Type of network Examples in owner-occupied tenure Examples in rented tenures

- 1) Promotional Developers-builders-estate agents Housing Corporation-housing association-builders
- 2) Financial Building Societies/banks-money Treasury-local authority-Public markets Works Loans Board-money markets
- 3) Legal Property law-solicitors-conveyancers Housing law-local government law-landlord/tenant law
- 4) Managerial Kinship network Councillors-housing managers tenants

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