

## Home Sweet Home: A Critical Comment on Saunders and Williams

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**Abstract** While accepting the need for research which focuses on the social meaning of the home, this article takes issue with some of Saunders' and Williams' formulations for a research programme -- in particular, the emphasis given to physical and design features of the home at the expense of an understanding of more fundamental gender and generational relations within the home. It attempts to uncover the assumptions lying behind those formulations, to clarify some of the conceptual confusions, and to point out some of the serious theoretical difficulties which such formulations have to resolve. It argues that theoretical advance in this area does not have to depend upon the adoption of a Weberian perspective, but must be situated within a broader theory of the production and maintenance of ideology, and this theory must be explicitly linked with theories of power and kinship. In particular, it is emphasised that power relations within the home, associated mainly with gender and age differences, need to be investigated in greater depth if the social significance of the home is to be properly understood.

### Introduction

In a recent article in *Housing Studies* (April, 1988) Saunders and Williams attempted to outline a new research agenda on the home'. Through focusing on the home' they aimed to throw new light on the nature of household structures and relationships, gender relations, property rights, privacy, privatism, and privatisation. They also aimed to contribute to the development of a 'sociology of consumption', linking housing with community, neighbourhood and social status. They argued for the importance of the home as a locale', and suggested that conceiving of the home in this way can help to explain the structuring of activities and relationships within the home. In order to demonstrate the cultural significance of the home in our society, they described various physical processes and symbolic meanings associated with features of dwelling design, estate layout, relationships among neighbours, and divisions of labour within households; and they attempted to relate the material trappings of domestic status and territory to wider realities of class, ethnic and tenurial divisions. They noted further that the meaning of the home is different in Britain from that in other countries, and argued that this was because in Britain the home is the institutional basis and expression of the "private sphere" (p88). They attempted to support this argument through analyses of concepts of privacy, privatism and privatisation, drawing upon evidence concerning the increasing importance of home-based production and consumption activities, and reflecting upon the implications of these changes for social stratification - in particular, the growing divide between those who do and those who do not own their own home.

### Weberian perspectives

The theoretical position adopted in the article by Saunders and Williams in *Housing Studies* is essentially Weberian, but this is nowhere explicitly stated. The definition of social class, the assumption that society consists of basic units', the belief in the autonomy of 'culture', and the invocation of *Versteheri*, are all expressions of a Weberian perspective. For an analysis which the authors describe as tentative', I would not have expected such a marked theoretical bias, or at least I would have expected some recognition that this was indeed to be the reference point for their analysis. As it is, their Weberian approach could be criticised on a number of grounds, for example:

Whatever society may be (and there is no attempt to conceptualise it in this article), it does not consist of basic units' - or at least if it does, then this point needs to be proved and not assumed a priori. Pahl (1984) does not prove that the household is the basic economic unit' through which to analyse both production and consumption because he does not properly analyse the economic processes which impinge upon the household from outside. Many people would argue that if anything can be said to be a basic economic unit' then it would be the firm rather than the household. The same people would probably question whether there really has been too much emphasis on production' issues in the past at the expense of 'consumption', and others would argue that many of the current defects in urban sociology stem rather from a failure to grasp that production' and 'consumption', are inextricably intertwined (do we really have to keep going back to Marx's 1857 Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy to remind ourselves of this?). The point here, however, is simply that the case for thinking of 'society' in terms of basic units' has not been made, whether these units be conceived in terms of individuals, households, firms, families, or whatever. In spite of what the authors say (p82), their assumption is atomist, because they conceive of households as the atoms of society, and they argue that although these atoms have their own internal structure they are 'indivisible' (p83). The effect of their argument is therefore to replace an old atomism of individuals with a new atomism of households - the old ideology of individualism becomes transformed into a new ideology of householdism. The authors argue that the ineffectiveness of corporatist initiatives and state planning in Britain are to be explained not (apparently) by reference to economic and political factors, but in terms of Britain's peculiar 'cultural heritage' (p88). They then go on to state that it is this 'cultural heritage' which makes the idea of the home so important in Britain, and by so doing they have absolved themselves from the need to explain this idea in anything other than 'cultural' (ie ideological) terms. In other words, rather like Weber they have set up their position in such a way that they can always justify remaining at the level of ideology, without having to concern themselves with deeper levels of explanation. The authors' concept of explanation appears itself to be unsatisfactory. Concepts of locale and socio-spatial systems are used in contexts which suggest that the authors believe that such concepts actually explain something, when it could be argued that all they really do is to reproduce common sense knowledge in abstract theoretical language, Alice Coleman is criticised for producing 'causal adequacy without Verstehen' (p83) and it is implied that Verstehen' would count as adequate explanation in the sense of 'an understanding of how social action is routinely constituted within a context of spatiality' (p83). It could be argued in contrast that Alice Coleman provides neither causal adequacy nor Verstehen' (eg see Hillier, 1986, 1988), and that Verstehen' itself, or rather the social meanings which are its object, can never be taken at face value but must always be explained in terms of the wider social structure.

#### Home sweet home

Although Saunders' and Williams' Weberianism is questionable, their attempt to broaden the scope of urban sociology from its present almost exclusive concentration on the public realm and to develop a better understanding of private matters is to be welcomed. It represents a laudable move away from urban sociology's traditional sexism (in which for example, domestic problems' were not recognised as urban problems at all), and (possibly) an incorporation at long last of the recognition that the personal is also political. It is unfortunate, therefore, that there are serious difficulties with some of their formulations on the home', tentative though these may be. For example:

What is home?

The home is described as the active and reproduced fusion' of household and house (p88). The concepts of household (as social unit) and house (as physical unit) are therefore crucial to the description (or is it definition?) of the home. From the standpoint of this description or definition, the meaning of home is allowed to vary only as between household members, different types of household, and different geographical areas (p85). The problems with this formulation are: Firstly, it presupposes that which needs to be proved, ie that the home is actually constituted by means of such a fusion'. As an empirical concept, however, it is far from obvious that the home is always or necessarily constituted in this way - eg what about homes for the elderly and disabled, the Home Counties, the Home Guard, the Home Office, etc? 'Home' used in these senses does not seem to involve reference to either 'household' or 'house'. There is also Austerberry and Watson's 114 Downloaded by [University of Lincoln] at 03:54 18 June 2015 Home Sweet Home (1983) research on homelessness, which established an enormous variety of meanings of home', only some of which included ideas of household' and house'. Empirically, therefore, it seems only partially correct at best to describe the home<sup>1</sup> as a fusion of household' and house'. Secondly, if it is intended as a theoretical concept, then it must be pointed out that it explains nothing and provides no guidance for empirical research. Households and houses are understood only in an empirical sense, so the idea of fusing the two adds nothing to our understanding unless, of course, we have some theory of how the fusion takes place, and Saunders and Williams have no such theory. The home is said, for example, to reflect' the wider culture, while also playing a part in 'constituting<sup>1</sup> that culture (p88). Fine, but this tells us nothing about the basis of such reciprocal determinations, ie what exactly are the relationships involved? Thirdly, in spite of their recognition of the varying meanings of home', the authors do not seem fully to appreciate the ideological character of the concept. After all, if the home is where the heart is, how is it possible for it to be a socio-spatial system, let alone a fusion of household and house? In ideology, as Althusser said, we see things sub specie eternitatis, not in the mundane world of space and time. The visible forms of households and housing, and all the material baggage that goes with them, are relevant not in themselves, but solely because of the 'eternal truths' which they may symbolise. In the end, therefore, it is not really very important whether the home is a socio-spatial system or not, or what kind of system, if any, it is. What is important is to analyse what the home means to different people and to attempt to explain the range of different meanings that we find.

The importance of the home

The home is said to be the crucial medium through which the society is structured (p84), but this statement is not justified, and is not even explained except in a reference to the home being the base point around which local and national politics is organised' (p84). In fact, it seems more reasonable to hypothesise that the home is only one of a number of locales, the others being school, workplace, shop, place of leisure or recreation and office. It may well be that in some sense which remains to be clarified the home is more important than these other locales, but this needs to be proved, not assumed. In the mean time, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that In fact capital-labour relations are crucial for structuring 'society<sup>1</sup>, and domestic relations are secondary - but of course it may just depend upon what is meant by 'society<sup>1'. Saunders and Williams are surely right in saying that the home is more than being the place of women's unpaid work, of the reproduction of labour power, and of the socialisation of the young (p84) because it also structures gender and</sup>

age relations to a significant extent, and is closely linked with perceptions of neighbourhood and territory (and also nationhood, although the authors do not state this explicitly). What they fail to notice, however, is that the relations which play the key role in ensuring the home's social importance are not those of household and house but those of kinship and family. It is the family, not the household, which ensures reproduction of labour power and the socialisation of the young and which helps to explain the existence of women's unpaid work; and it is kinship relations, not household relations, which help to explain the creation of communities and nations. Saunders and Williams are seriously mistaken to say that the kinship system has arguably declined in significance as a structuring principle of social life' (p82), because the evidence shows rather that the family has if anything become more important in relation to housing, education, consumption patterns, and so-called 'community care'; and although there has undoubtedly been an increase in the numbers of non-family<sup>1</sup> households, the vast majority of the population (over 80 per cent) continue to live as members of traditional' families (eg see Rimmer and Popay, 1982, p53; or General Household Surveys, 1984, 1985, 1986) and opinion polls show that even higher proportions (up to 90 per cent - eg MORI, 1982) prefer it that way. Focusing on the family rather than the household also helps to explain why the home should come to be so important, because the family, like the home, has strongly emotive connotations, which are lacking in the case of household'. The home is therefore socially important not only because it happens to be the locale through which key kinship ties are continually reinforced (eg see Franklin, 1986), but also because it is seen to be crucial by the people involved (eg 'charity begins at home' or my family always comes first with me'; or, to quote a famous politician There is no such thing as society: there are only people and their families' - and of course these families' are all assumed to live in homes', ie homeless families are ignored).

#### Relationships within the home

Partly because of their concentration on household' and house' instead of family<sup>1</sup> and partly because of their failure to grasp the nature and causation of home' as an ideological construct, Saunders' and Williams' account of relationships within the home tends to be rather superficial. For example, it could be argued that they attach too much weight to the spatial and physical differentiation of gender-related activities (ie predominantly men working outside the home and women inside the home; high-energy but low-information women's work, and low-energy but high-information men's work, within the home, etc). Apart from the fact that these propositions could be questioned, anyway (eg what about 'Do It Yourself within the home, which is carried out predominantly by men?'), this approach surely misses the main point, which is that the gender division of labour within the home is based on functional stereotypes rather than physical regularities (although the latter are to some extent determined by the former). Whether a particular task is performed by men rather than by women will depend not so much upon whether it is external rather than internal to the home, high-information rather than low-information, etc, but upon how that task features within the overall construction of the gender division of labour - eg if it confers higher status it is more likely to be male, or if it is seen to be (even if it is not really) 'difficult' or technical'. Physical differentiation may seem to be important here - eg work on structure, exterior and fixtures of the home is overwhelmingly carried out by men - but in reality this differentiation is significant only to the extent that it reflects the traditional division of labour in our society between men as home-builders and possessors, and women as home-managers and unpaid domestic servants. Some of the ritual details of domestic activity to which Saunders and Williams refer (eg the woman cooking the

dinner for guests, while the man serves the drinks) cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of some kind of 'cybernetic hierarchy' - this would indeed be a case of 'correlation without understanding'. Rather, an adequate explanation must be based not on stereotypical generalisations, but on a detailed analysis of the relevant social relationships within the home. As Christine Delphy (1984) has said, the sexual division of labour is not a division of tasks but of jobs' (p206). In short, a real understanding of relationships within the home must at best demonstrate how the physical characteristics of the housing and the detail of task performance within the housing are relevant, ie how they manage to symbolise the labour relations involved. These relationships then need to be explained, in terms of new theories of gender, family and social structure. My own very provisional view is that there are at least two important modes of symbolisation, one in relation to the achievement of social status (as mentioned above), and a second in relation to ideas of art, beauty, skill and individuality of expression (eg the copious literature on principles of architectural design). These two modes of symbolisation do of course overlap but they are nevertheless quite distinct - eg cooking at home is generally a low-status activity, and is much more likely to be carried out by women because of the gender division of labour. In terms of social status, therefore, 'cooking' symbolises low status in the home, and this remains the case irrespective of what is actually cooked. In terms of aesthetics, however, cooking is an art form, and as paid rather than unpaid work, it is capable of conferring relatively high status, though on the whole it does not. What needs to be explained is why the undoubted art and skill of cooking is systematically ignored or downgraded, not only within the home but in society generally. Saunders' and Williams' account of relationships within the home is simplistic not only with regard to gender relations but with respect to age relations as well. For example they assume that individuals can have 'autonomy' only within their own home, so children have to leave their parents' home before they can enjoy 'autonomy'. This analysis seems to rule out the possibility that parents might share their autonomy in the home with their children, and yet we know that parents commonly do allow their children to have their own personal space within the home from quite an early age, and it is possible for this space to grow as the child gets older. If the child remains at home after it has grown up, it can and sometimes does happen that the balance of power within the home changes so that the home eventually becomes that of the child rather than the parents. In short, Saunders and Williams, by concentrating on the unit of the household rather than the family, have failed to appreciate the importance of the dynamics of relationships between generations. What is most significantly missing from Saunders' and Williams' account of relationships within the home, however, is any understanding of possible tensions between individuals' perceptions of what relationships within the home should be like and what they are really like. Since they conceive of the home as a basic unit, the authors have no means of dealing theoretically with contradictions within that unit. This perhaps explains their peremptory dismissal of crucial issues such as domestic violence and child abuse as being due to the fossilisation of the general 'crisis' of British society (p90). In their concern with the dominant ideology of the home as a sanctuary and safe haven, they fail adequately to appreciate that the reality of the home may be something quite different. For example, there has long been a contradiction between the belief in sex equality, subscribed to by a large majority of married couples, and the reality of sex inequality, produced mainly by a patriarchal economic and political system. Ideologies of the home, involving the pursuit of happiness through domestic consumption, help to support the patriarchal and capitalist status quo by means of the new opiates of consumer goods and leisure activities. Similarly, the ideology of the traditional' heterosexual two-

parent family, in combination with women's forced economic dependence upon their husbands, ensures that on the whole women remain subject to men at home as well as at work. No discussion of relationships within the home can be complete without an analysis of how such relations of domination and subordination come about, plus an account of the dynamics of the attempts by men and women at home to resolve the tensions between their ideals and the reality of life in Thatcher's Britain. The explanation of the evils of violence against wives and abuse of children within the home should therefore be sought initially in terms of the realities of male power within the home (as has already been done for women by Pahl (1985)), and then, when that has been understood, it will be appropriate to try and identify the basis of that male power in society outside the home.

#### The wider significance of home

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Saunders and Williams do not correctly grasp the significance of the dichotomy between "public" and "private". Their conception of privacy, for example, fails to take account of the fact that the domain of the "private" is not constituted only by the home, but also by a whole range of contractual relationships, among which economic relationships are probably the most important. There is a real sense in which business affairs are "private" (eg industrial espionage as a crime), in that outsiders can be effectively excluded. Even within public bodies, including the state itself, invocations of confidentiality and the need for secrecy can maintain vital areas of decision-making free from the public gaze. In each case, whether it be done at home, at work, or in politics, the alleged need for privacy comes into conflict with the alleged need of the public to know what goes on behind closed doors'. Privacy is therefore not just a matter of an individual's or household's freedom from public surveillance or interference, but of the power to exclude members of the public from any body whatever. Saunders and Williams are also wrong with regard to the constitution of the "public", insofar as they appear to assume that public surveillance means surveillance by the state. This is essentially the same mistake as that made by Alice Coleman, because the latter equates public control of space with state control of that space. She then attributes the evils of public sector housing to the existence of state control and argues that the remedies for such evils are to be found by maximising the privatisation of such space at the level of the household (giving each household its own private entrance, sharing access to one's home with as few other people as possible, giving ground-floor flats their own fenced-off gardens, etc). Such views fail to appreciate that many of the problems which beset council housing management can only be alleviated through increasing public surveillance (though not necessarily surveillance by the state) - eg in order to reduce crime, litter, graffiti, urine, faeces, etc. Because they misconceive the nature of privacy, Saunders and Williams also misunderstand the nature of privatisation. Just as privacy is not necessarily home-based (eg it can be individual-based, firm-based or group-based), so also with privatisation. Privatisation sees the private sphere as intrinsically more worthwhile than the public sphere, even to the extent of denying the existence of the public sphere (or 'society') altogether. (Familial ideologies, for example, are privatised because they value the "private" concerns of the family above all "public" concerns, including those of the state.) This does not necessarily mean, however, a withdrawal from collective life' unless the privatisation is exclusively home-based. What it does involve is rather the privatisation of that collective life as far as possible, ie the political and ideological transformation of collective activity by means of extending the privacy of property as well as home. Saunders' and Williams' characterisation of privatisation is indeed simplistic - ie 'privatisation refers simply to change of ownership relations' (p90), from a collectivity (normally the state) to the individual' (p90). Privatisation needs instead to be understood as a complex set of

political strategies, held together loosely by anti-collectivist ideology, and deriving largely from the interests of private capital in restructuring the 117 Downloaded by [University of Lincoln] at 03:54 18 June 2015 Housing Studies Vol 4 No 2 British economy in the 1980s. The Right to Buy for public sector tenants, for example, is just one of these political strategies. It is true, as Saunders and Williams say, that on the whole owner occupation does confer greater private control over one's home, but even with regard to the home (and less so in the case of work organisations) there is no simple relationship between privatisation and increased power for individual households - there are many so-called 'marginal' home owners, for example, who are 'trapped' in poor quality housing (eg see Kam, Kemeny, and Williams, 1986), and the alterations which council tenant purchasers so frequently make to their homes may only be symbolic gestures in some cases rather than evidence of any real increase in control. With the best will in the world, it is difficult to see how a research agenda focused on the home can lead to a better understanding of privatisation strategies.

### Conclusion

In this comment, I have attempted to indicate some of the defects in Saunders' and Williams' project for a new sociology of the home. I have argued that their formulations contain a hidden Weberianism and essentialism, that they fail to appreciate the concept of home as an ideological construct, that their neglect of kinship structures and ideologies leads to simplistic and distorted representations of relationships within households, and that their formulation of the distinction between 'private' and 'public' is incomplete and one-sided. Saunders and Williams are right to draw attention to the (increasing) importance of the private realm of the home, but their research agenda does not appear to allow for an investigation of the ways in which this importance is socially constructed. They are right to point out that we need to gather a lot more empirical evidence about the role of home in people's lives, but their formulations do not enable us to distinguish between evidence which is important and advances our understanding, and that which is trivial or merely reinforces our preconceived ideas. They pay homage to Giddens' structuration theory, but their own agenda is eclectic and not structurationist. Above all, in conceiving of the home as real object (a socio-spatial system) whose nature and functioning is to be explained by means of a new sociological theory of the home, they fail to appreciate that the home must also be understood as an ideal place, whose character is to be explained by reference to its social context - ie the institutions and ideologies which are dominant in British society today.

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