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COMMENT

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I am grateful for being given this opportunity to comment on the Focus articles by David Clapham ([This issue](#)) and Hannu Ruonavaara ([This issue](#)). Since the two papers are very different, I will comment on them separately.

David Clapham’s Paper

Kemeny (1992) complained that housing studies at the time was narrowly constituted, largely focused on empirical research, and failed to make use of social theory from outside its field. The distinction he was making was between research that merely describes or re-describes housing phenomena and research that offers new explanations and new understandings of those phenomena. Clapham, however, argues that this distinction is “flawed”. By adopting a very wide definition of theory as “collections of concepts about the real world that facilitate explaining, predicting, or intervening”, he includes in it all forms of re-description that can be regarded as “theoretically engaged”. He then distinguishes “between research that makes theory by breaking new ground in theoretical and conceptual development and research that only seeks to apply theory without developing it”. This distinction, however, is effectively the same as Kemeny’s, so long as the “theory” that is applied here is what is assumed by empirical researchers. So this is a sleight of hand whereby theory is redefined to make it seem like something new is being said. For Clapham, the descriptive housing researchers that Kemeny was criticizing are theoretically engaged (if only implicitly), but they are not doing theoretical work as understood by Kemeny (or Ruonavaara). Thus, the distinction between theory and re-description seems to disappear in Clapham’s account. Obviously, if we define theory to be whatever we want it to mean, it is easy to argue that all research has a theoretical foundation.

Clapham does not explicitly say what he means by housing theory or theory of housing. Adapting his wide definition, however, we could say it is “collections of

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concepts about the world of housing that facilitate explaining, predicting, or intervening”. Clapham has his own housing theory in this sense: he sees housing as “a complex and unique commodity” and “a basic foundation for life”, which both seem rather obvious, and he points out the limitations of neo-classical economic theory for explaining these characteristics of housing, which are also well known. He suggests that there are different theories of housing in different disciplines but, with the possible exception of neo-classical economics, it is not clear what these different theories are. He sees a single unified theory of housing as “extremely desirable” but does not explain what form this might take or why it would be desirable at all. It might be more illuminating to question what might be meant by the world of housing. Is it, for example, the world of practice – the world of housing professionals and practitioners? Is it the world of housing markets (conceptualized as a field by Bourdieu 2005)? Or is it perhaps not a world in itself but an integral part of a wider world of financialized capitalism?

Much of Clapham’s paper is about housing policy, but I think his discussion would be regarded by Kemeny as somewhat atheoretical. Basically, it describes the types of mechanisms or interventions used by government: regulation, direct provision, subsidy, information/guidance, accountability mechanisms, issue defining and non-intervention; and approaches to the policy process: analytical/rational/positivist, political/pluralist and structural. All of these are well known, and Clapham’s attempt to apply the three approaches to housing policy does not seem to add anything to our understanding. In any case, much of what passes for housing policy in England today is driven by ideology and prejudice and does not clearly follow any of these approaches (Somerville 2016a).

Overall, therefore, little of what Clapham says is new, and where he does have something new to say, namely about the meaning of theory, his argument tends to obscure important distinctions.

Hannu Ruonavaara’s Paper

This paper addresses the question of what *kind* of theory housing theory can be. Initially, it defines a theory as a “hypothetical construction based on a mixture of the researcher’s imagination, concepts and ideas drawn from previous research and empirical knowledge” (179). This seems to me a more sensible definition than Clapham’s, and not unlike Popper’s (1963) concept of a conjecture. Later, however, the paper defines “social theory” as “a discourse that consists of a set of linked (a) concepts and (b) propositions to be used for hypothetical (i) re-description, (ii) explanation and (iii) interpretation of all or some subset of social entities, relations and processes” (181). This is quite a demanding definition. While accepting, *contra* Clapham, that theory must involve more than re-description, it might be questioned whether a social theory must also provide both explanation (e.g. causal or functional or fit to a model) and interpretation (new meanings and understandings).

It is pleasing to note that Ruonavaara agrees with my earlier argument (Somerville 2005) that a general theory of housing is impossible (Clapham seems to agree as well, though he qualifies it to the present time), whether this be a theory that “encompasses all housing-related topics” (180) (version 1) or a theory about “the invariable relationship between features of housing systems ... and features of society” (183) (version 2). It is true that Ruonavaara’s arguments are rather different from my own. For example, he asserts that housing is a “non-topic” because “there are many

theoretical objects linked with housing, and theorizing them is more or less connected with theoretical debates elsewhere” (187). I find myself in agreement with this argument, however, and, contrary to what Ruonavaara alleges, I have never said that theorizing about housing was not possible at all – witness my own work with Bo Bengtsson on middle-range theory (Bengtsson and Somerville 2002) or my mention of relationships between housing and non-housing features in particular countries that can be theorized (Somerville 2005) or my more recent theoretical work on homelessness (Somerville 2013).

Beyond this, however, I would want now to argue that, although general housing theories are not possible, more general social theories are – and indeed already exist. For example, Marxist, Weberian and Bourdieusian theories, to which Ruonavaara refers, actually theorize different objects: Marx theorized capitalist social formations in terms of capital-labour relations, Weber theorized bourgeois society in terms of markets, social status and political action, and Bourdieu theorized modern society in terms of sets of positions and dispositions ordered by different types and volumes of capital. Social stratification, therefore, means different things in the different theories. A general social theory constructs its own object and housing is just one part of the general picture.

Apart from theory *of* housing, Ruonavaara identifies theory *about* housing and theory *from* housing. I’m not sure, however, how theory about housing differs from theory of housing. Any theory that attempts to explain housing phenomena sounds like a theory of housing. The crucial difference seems to be that theory about housing rejects the housing universalism of theory of housing version 1 and, in the person of Kemeny (1981), posits a neo-Weberian typology of social structures as either privatized (corresponding to home ownership) or collectivized (corresponding to cost-renting). This dichotomy seems simplistic – for example, it does not include private renting. This is perhaps why, as Ruonavaara notes, it has been widely ignored by commentators. As for theory of housing version 2, Ruonavaara recognizes that this is the same as Kemeny’s general theory about housing, which, as Ruonavaara acknowledges, I criticized in my earlier work (Somerville 2005) – a criticism that he seems to accept. So, I’m not clear what, if anything, is left to be said about theory about housing other than that it is specific (rather than general) theorizing about housing phenomena, such as my own work mentioned above.

Theory from housing is rather different. Ruonavaara cites King (2009) to show that the social embeddedness of housing is not an insurmountable barrier to its theorization. On one level, this seems a truism, since anything in the world can be theorized in some way. On another level, however, it suggests that it may be possible to theorize housing as part of a wider system of social relations; that is, as part of a theory of the “social” – a position that Ruonavaara (and King) seem to reject. For King, however, theorizing (from housing) is not about this but about the experiences and activities of people using housing, and Ruonavaara does not tell us what this theorizing amounts to. Ruonavaara also cites Clapham (2009), who adopts a more cautious and pragmatic approach to theorizing from people’s experience of housing – an approach that seems close to my own sceptical but open-minded approach to theorizing housing. But I see no reason to call this “theory from housing”.

Overall, therefore, there are many interesting points and arguments in Ruonavaara’s paper, but I am not entirely convinced of the utility of his typology of housing theories as theories of, about or from housing. I think there is an important distinction to be made between, on the one hand, grand theories of housing, which

posit highly generalized relationships between aspects of housing and aspects of wider society, and, on the other hand, more specific or middle-range theories of housing, which attempt to throw light on historically and geographically specific housing processes and systems. It is also possible to make a general distinction between theories that attempt to explain correlations between variables and those that attempt to make sense of people's experiences. And beyond these there exist social theories that try to explain the ways in which housing is embedded in capitalist society and so-called welfare states. "Housing theory" is, therefore, highly diverse, and I remain sceptical about the more generalized, "grand" approaches within housing studies. However, if I understand Kemeny correctly, I agree with his aim to formulate more general social theory, which can then help to explain housing processes. My point is just that general social theory already exists, which could more fruitfully be applied to housing, or within which housing could usefully be situated. I have tried to do this, in a very limited way, in my own work (Somerville 2016b; ch. 8; see also Aalbers and Christophers 2014, who situate housing within political economy).

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