Critical realism and housing studies: An explanation for diverging housing solutions.

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Chapter 2 Ontology Matters

2.1 Introduction

Many times over the past three years I have been struck by lack of attention given to ontological issues by 'young researchers' of the European Network for Housing Research. New PhD students, fresh from their masters' graduation, were giving little or no critical thought to the nature of their research object in various presentations and debates. Amongst more experienced researchers, ontology and epistemology were long forgotten terms, buried deep in their mental archives and considered of no practical consequence to their research. Implicitly and without critical reflection, important choices were literally being made 'in the dark' concerning the composition, structure and dynamics of housing problems.

Nevertheless, these important philosophical issues have not left the stage of housing research and remain a focus for debate. Indeed, they have surfaced in the form of a simmering methodological debate, which has divided comparative housing and urban researchers (Pickvance, 2001; Kemeny, 2001; Lawson, 2001; Ball and Harloe, 1992; Bourne, 1986; Ball, 1986, 1988; Harloe, 1991; Harloe and Martens, 1983; Kemeny, 1987, 1992, Kemeny and Lowe, 1998; Lundqvist, 1989, 1991; Oxley, 1991; Pickvance 1986; Sommerville, 1994; Sommerville and Bengsston, 2002; Van Vliet, 1990). The dispute surrounds the ontological perspective of research: the nature of housing systems, the differences between them and why they change over time.

For two tense days in Autumn 2001, members of the UK Housing Studies Association assembled in Cardiff to discuss new ideas, concepts and theories. The organiser planned to create a climate of creativity, resurrect the spirit of C. Wright Mills (1959) and ignite the scientific imagination. There was electricity in the grand auditorium during the closing session of the Housing Studies Association conference. Far from collaboration, many sat stunned, arms crossed in the auditorium, some licking their intellectual wounds, others victoriously arrogant. Why was there partition rather than collaboration?

The answer partly lies in the basis for division amongst housing researchers: their ontological and epistemological approach. The tension and division experienced on that day in Cardiff was merely a superficial expression of unresolved scientific debate. On the one side were interpretivists, post-modernists, social constructionists and relativists. This group, once shrouded in intimidating jargon and mystique, was suddenly accused of a lack of scientific development, policy critique and self-indulgence. Yet it wasn't the law-seeking positivists, modernists, and empiricists who were calling foul. A new group had entered centre stage from the wings, demanding more scientific rigour, but of a different kind. This new group of scholars from political science, sociology, urban and housing studies included Professors Hopper, Sommerville, Bengsston, and researcher Chris Allen, who launched their criticisms from a new vantage point, that of critical realism.

This Chapter asserts the value of making a justified and explicit ontological choice at an early stage of any research endeavour. It takes a closer look at the forgotten fundamentals of housing studies: the competing ontological and epistemological bases and puts forward a preliminary case for research informed by a critical realist approach. This case is further elaborated in Chapters 3 and 4.
2.2 Ontology as the Basis of Perception

In an exceptional review, Sommerville (1994) compares ontological approaches, which underlie explanations of housing policy and challenges policy researchers to justify their own ontological perspective and apply coherent research strategies. This Chapter continues in this vein.

Debates and indeed misunderstandings in housing research often arise because housing systems can be perceived and therefore analysed from a range of positions. Indeed, different assumptions concerning the conceptualisation, legitimate data sources and methods, as well as theories and approaches to comparability of housing systems have led researchers along distinct epistemological paths, leading to very different descriptions, evaluations or explanations.

From the earliest stages of the research, an explicit or implicit choice is made from divergent ontological pathways. This Chapter attempts to clarify ontological alternatives and promote a particular approach.

The following sections are dedicated to a critical review of two divergent alternatives and outline a preferred middle path. The potential and pitfalls of positivist and interpretivist approaches are discussed and the basic tenants of critical realism are outlined.

2.2.1 Ontological Differences

Classical Positivism adopts a Naturalist perspective. This doctrine asserts that the same logic and methods used in the natural sciences can be applied to social science. Subsequently, social science should adopt deductive logic when analysing empirically observable objects. Positivists strive to find patterns of observable behaviour towards the development of predictive theories. Such researchers promote the testing of hypotheses to develop laws that can predict patterns between concrete events (Neutze, 1981). Such theories contribute towards universal laws with general application, which can be empirically verified.

Examples of societal 'laws' include notions of the 'natural state' of objects such as human nature, markets and the role of government. There are many different types of such theories related to housing studies, including generalisations about the nature of housing tenure, predictions of housing need, laws of 'good practice' and the convergence of national welfare states or their parallel evolution along predetermined phases.

For housing researchers, such as Oxley (1991, 1996), whilst housing systems are perceived as a complex of social relations, they are expressed in terms of directly observable and measurable variables. For this reason, Oxley considers that the relations of housing provision can be statistically analysed, and this analysis can contribute towards general explanations of differences between national housing systems. He goes on to promote (1991:66-77) a specific scientific approach, involving the testing of hypotheses that are policy-specific and value free. In particular, he contends that such an approach should not employ theoretically deterministic categories and concepts, but rather, use familiar policy descriptors. In this way, the researchers assumptions are tested against statistical relationships derived from uniform categories of quantifiable, cross-national data. Oxley (1991, 1996:22) contends that
abstraction from empirical evidence, in the form of statistical relationships, can provide explanations for differences and similarities in national housing systems.

Oxley's ontological persuasion is easily abstracted from these explicit comments. He maintains a flat or experiential view of housing reality, which only exists in terms of actual, measurable events. His emphasis upon hypothesis testing, observable, measured events and the search for statistical regularity, places his approach squarely rests in the positivist camp.

Beyond this view of observable reality, other housing researchers stress the existence of structures of housing provision (Ball, 1986, 1988, Ball and Harloe, 1992); critique the presence of a dominant constructivist ideology (Kemeny, 1983, 1992, Winter, 1994); or search for underlying causal mechanisms of difference and change in housing systems (Dickens, Duncan, Goodwin and Grey, 1985, Basset and Short, 1980).

Positivism, which seeks universal laws deduced from observable, measurable and quantifiable events, can be juxtaposed against the anti-naturalist, subject-orientated perspective of interpretivism. This approach to social science has evolved to provide an alternative definition of not only scientific practice but also social reality. This perspective maintains that reality is defined by meanings given by its inhabitants, rather than the objective, independent researcher.

Far from the deductive, predictable and observable world defined by positivism, interpretivists draw upon the hidden meanings underlying social action, which are defined by the social actors themselves. Social reality is therefore multiple and subjective, rather than singularly defined by the expert observer. The behaviour of social actors is influenced by the unobservable meanings they ascribe to their reality.

Interpretivists try to understand social reality through the everyday explanations, common sense and attributions employed by social actors. Unlike the natural realm, it is possible for the social scientist to engage with their subject through spoken language and/or interpret their historical accounts of social life. For the interpretivist social scientist, these communications may reveal explanations for social phenomena. They analyse language and attribution and employ data of a qualitative and unobservable quality.

The difference between these and other approaches stems from their 'world view' or ontology. This has a profound influence upon the theory of what is real, the logic of the research process, the selected research strategy, and ultimately the results obtained.

2.2.2 The Problems with Positivist and the Potential of Constructivist Approaches

One can perceive positivism and interpretivism as lying at opposite ends of the ontological spectrum. Like any polarised positions they are liable to critique from the middle field.

The arguments against the use of positivist-naturalist doctrine in social science are strong and numerous. Karl Popper made many of these arguments in the 1960s and 1970s. They have been rehearsed many times since the dominance of modernist social science between the 1930s and 1960s. Popper's arguments are outlined once again below, this time drawing upon Blaikie's contemporary interpretation (1993:17-21).
Firstly, many critics have argued that the subject matter of the social sciences essentially different from the natural sciences. Social life is more complex and involves the behaviour of intelligent human beings. Capable human beings learn their behaviour from their own experience and the culture of their social group.

Secondly, a social group is not confined of independent parts, which can be isolated and examined in a vacuum. Society is composed of complex, interacting relationships: far from being isolated entities, human beings adopt socially and materially constructed patterns of behaviour and are influenced by social groups. This behaviour develops unevenly over time and space, and in response to changing historical and cultural circumstances. Therefore the laws (event regularities) of Positivism cannot universally apply: patterns of behaviour can be changed by human action, which is both socially constructed, materially constrained and changes over time and space.

Thirdly, and related to the above, the Naturalist application of experimental method to human behaviour is artificial (often excluding explanatory causal conditions) and overly simple: it denies the complex and transformative nature of social life. Regularities or patterns in social behaviour are fundamentally different from universal laws. Humans can think and learn and therefore don't necessarily behave the same way in response to controlled situations. Controlled experimentation, to prove or disprove universal laws, is therefore inappropriate for the study of social phenomena.

Fourthly, no researcher is completely objective, detached or disinterested in the subject or outcome of his or her own research. Implicit values and prejudice influence what is studied and how it is perceived. Deductive prediction promotes this subjectivity, as it involves the anticipation of defined results. This can influence the design of the experiment and even the behaviour of the subject. Further, the Positivist-Naturalist form of experimental, deductive science is not universally applied to the natural sciences. It is therefore wrong to assert that social science is only a science, when it adopts the narrow logic and method of Positivism. The notion of scientific objectivity and controlled experimentation is therefore questionable in science generally.

Reacting against modernist and positivist science, contemporary social science tends to acknowledge the influence of understanding, meaning and power upon social phenomena. It does so through the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, as appropriate to the subject matter.

Critical realists are primarily opposed to the ontological assumptions of Positivism and it's epistemological implications. Whilst Positivists view the world as being comprised of discrete and observable events (Blaikie, 1993:94), critical realists argue for more structured ontology comprising the overlapping domains of experience, events, and necessary and contingent relations. Causal mechanisms may or may not be observable; they have emergent powers and generate tendencies for certain events to occur. Positivists seek to find empirical regularities through observation and experiment, towards the discovery of scientific laws. For the realist, causal mechanisms can emerge from any one or a combination of these domains. That is reasons can be causes, material conditions and or embedded social relationships. This conception differs markedly from the X leads to Y version of constant conjunctures of events (Lawson, 1997:17-23, Bhaskar, 1978 in Blaikie, 1993:61, Danermark et al, 2002).
The ontological position and epistemological process of critical realist research rests selectively between naturalist positivism and post-modern social constructivism. It does not seek to strive for experimental conditions of closure, which ignore the open, contingent laden context of reality, to produce regular outcomes and make law like generalisations. It also rejects strongly socially constructed world of multiple realities, which is sceptical of any kind of knowledge claims or scientific progress (Sayer, 2000:3).

As with positivism, there are numerous and important criticisms of the interpretivist approach, which are summarised below. These criticisms concern the level of consciousness held by actors; the implicitness of the researchers own critique; the disregard for institutional structures and material resources; the limits placed on causality; unintended consequences of action; and existence of structures of conflict and social change (Blaikie, 1993: 110-112, Sayer, 2000).

Interpretivists stress the importance of lay accounts and rationale for their actions, and are bound to them. Yet such actors may not always be able to rationalise their actions. Indeed, many actions are routine and taken for granted. An interpretive approach is of little use when actors cannot reason why they act in particular ways (Giddens, 1984:282 in Blaikie, 1993:111) or when their motivations are hidden or 'false'.

Unlike positivists who stress observed events, interpretivists stress the causal importance of meaning. Strong social constructivists extend this position, ignoring the importance of changing material conditions influencing not only meaning itself, but also people's very actions (Sayer, 2000:6). What both positions ignore is the existence of social structure with causal emergent powers operating under influential contingent conditions. Such structures cannot be 'discovered' by impressions of observable events or multiple experiences of events.

Further, strong social constructivists cannot acknowledge or make use of the wealth of theoretical research concerning the existence of influential social relations, social structures, interests and power (Rex, 1974:50 in Blaikie,1993:111). These social structures may be hidden from the consciousness of the social actor, and therefore s/he is unable to articulate them as a source of motivation. It is one step to apply for social security in order to pay the rent, and quite another to articulate the related, broader processes of wage levels and housing costs within the capitalist economy.

Finally, strong social constructivism is not concerned with conflict and possible sources of social change, and is therefore inherently conservative (Fay, 1975:83-84 in Blaikie:1993:112). Suspicious of knowledge claims and the struggle for truth, such researchers are satisfied with documenting multiple realities and assume they are equally true (Sayer, 2000:69).

Despite the above criticisms, positivist notions of science still dominate certain areas of social science (especially econometrics, demography, psychology and subsections of geography) and strong social constructionism has taken a stable foothold in ethnography, sociology and cultural studies.
2.3 Introducing Critical Realism as an Alternative to Positivism and Interpretivism

A clear and justifiable ontology and coherent epistemology is required in order to avoid stumbling blindly through past events in housing histories, categorized data and multiple meanings. This section outlines the potential of critical realism towards explanations of social phenomena.

What is critical realism? CR is an ontology that challenges the researcher’s view that only that which is observable is what exists. It promotes active acknowledgement of the structured, open and dynamic nature of the object or phenomenon for explanation – important causal dimensions that may or may not be directly observed or recorded. For critical realists, the social world and its spatial organisation are perceived as something that is experienced differently by different actors. Reality comprises events (and non-events) or ‘actuality’ that may or may not be experienced or recorded, and further, is influenced by emergent possibly unobservable relations with a tendency to produce certain outcomes under certain contingent conditions. Given this complex, structured reality, explanation requires more than actors accounts or record-keepers notes. It must engage the critical imagination to abstract geo-historical internal relations that form causal mechanisms operating in the context of contingently related conditions.

Critical realism promotes the consideration of underlying social relations and causal mechanisms generating social practices, ideological constructs and perceived phenomena. From such a perspective, housing is perceived as a complex of dynamic, underlying and interrelated social relations. These relations are the essence of provision, the necessities that operate in the context of influential contingent conditions. In later Chapters, these essences are postulated and refined via concrete, empirical research.

The implications of CR can be profound, especially where dominant practice persuades naïve researchers that all that exists can be recorded and that regularities found amongst aggregated data sets provide certain proof of causality and thus explanatory truth. CR offers no such claims, but challenges researchers to understand the complex, dynamic and structured nature of their object of study, in order to postulate, refine and offer practically adequate explanations for continuing critique and development.

Rather than impose theoretical concepts, the conceptual process closely interacts with the object of study, to postulate appropriate ideas and concepts with the potential to abstract complex, interacting dimensions from accidental circumstances, towards a more adequate theory of explanation (Sayer, 2000). The abduction process can draw upon existing theories to sharpen the focus of abstraction and avoid drowning in empirical detail. Abstraction can be aided by selective adaptation of a number of meta-theories and concepts, which may include the structure of housing provision thesis, the commodification continuum, the welfare continuum and labour-housing costs thesis. Dutch social science has generated its own body of explanatory concepts including the corporate passive welfare state thesis, pillarization and the division of welfare responsibilities, the role of housing providers in social control and suppressing labour costs⁵. Ultimately, middle range theoretical explanations must plausibly

⁵ All discussed in Chapter 4 concerning theories of housing provision.
theorise the object of study, thus not merely ‘fit’ the data but competitively provide the most adequate explanation.

Critical realist ontology forces researchers to reject an observable and recordable view of social events and address the interconnections between forces generating housing forms in their contingent context. For example, CR explicitly informs Anglo developments in Regulation theory (Jessop, 1990). This theory is based on an understanding of the interdependence of political/economic processes, which differ over time and space. Under different regimes of accumulation distinctive political, economic and cultural practices combine to ensure growth, forming a mode regulation. Realism provides the ontological justification for the open, conflicting nature of regulatory mechanisms – in which structural relations are always dependent upon contingency, leading to different forms capitalism over time and space. Well beyond Regulation theory, CR has illuminated explanations for the variable success of government programs, helped to explain uneven health impacts, and distinguish between real causes and associations’ in gendered organisational hierarchies.

Indeed, there is a wide and growing body of work and debate concerning contemporary critical realism. For this purposes of this research, the following view of ontology is based upon the early work of the philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1975,1979) and social theorist and geographer Andrew Sayer (1992, 2000).

Contrary to positivist ontological conception, reality is not merely observable, but comprises several interconnected domains: the empirical, actual and the real. Empirical experience is the observable domain, whilst the actual domain of reality comprises possibly unobservable events. These events are generated by real underlying mechanisms or structures, which tend to have influence in favourable circumstances (Bhaskar, 1975).

The following figure illustrates Bhaskar’s (1975) conception of everyday experience, social practices, ideological discourse, and underlying real relations:

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B Phenomenal forms

Real relations A

C Ideological categories

D Practices
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Figure 2.1: Bhaskar's concept of ideology, phenomenon, relations and practices

Bhaskar explains his schema as follows: real relations (A), generate phenomenological forms (B), which are reflected in ideological discourse (C) that sustain every day practices (D). The vertical line represents the everyday consciousness, which may be visible or conceivable to individuals (Bhaskar, 1975:89).
The positivist remains fixed upon everyday, observable practices, which are ordered by the objective researcher for convenient statistical analysis (Oxley, 1991, 1996). Interpretivists are more likely to be focused upon meanings expressed through discourse, and therefore place ideology in a more decisive role (Kemeny, 1992:86).

However, realism contends that causal mechanisms can comprise not only practices and meanings but also social relations; together these overlapping domains of reality can shape social phenomena. Ideology and institutionalised social practices, are important, but alone merely represent the locally mediated expression of underlying networks of social relations. Thus, the aim of the realist researcher is to discover the necessary and contingent causal relations of housing systems in order to explain difference and change in housing phenomena (Keat and Urry, 1982:27-8, Dickens, Duncan, Goodwin and Grey, 1985).

2.3.1 Difference and Change in Housing Systems

Integral to one’s ontological perspective is the treatment of change in social phenomena. Again, there is considerable debate over the nature of change in housing systems. This debate has several facets concerning the origins of change, its application and direction.

Few housing researchers contend that change is a random process. Some propose specific combinations of causal factors centring on class struggle (Dickens, Duncan, Goodwin and Grey, 1985), ideological hegemony (Kemeny, 1992), or politics and institutions (Lunqvist, 1989). Other researchers argue for specific causes or combine a more flexible range of influential factors (Harloe, 1987, Boelhouwer and van der Heijden, 1992).

There are also debates surrounding the universality of causal processes (Pickvance, 1986). Are the same causes responsible for change everywhere, or are causes specific to time and place? The direction of change is also a source of controversy. Change may be viewed as a ‘natural’ evolution towards convergence (Donnison and Ungerson, 1982), a general movement from regimes of Fordism to post-Fordism (Boyer, 1986, Lipietz,1986), or developmental phases along the bumpy road of capitalism (Castells, 1977).

Inspired by realist ontology, housing systems can be considered to be generated by the interaction of necessary and contingent social relations. From this perspective, it is not feasible to conceive that cross-national housing systems are being drawn along the same developmental path, or converging towards a singular state. There is simply no ontological basis for this type of explanation. Housing systems can only be explained by reference to their necessary social relations, which are contingently embedded in time and space.

A more evaluative discussion on causality and change in housing research and a preferred concept is provided in Chapter 4 on housing theory.
2.4 Methodological Strategies for Realist Research

The search for generative mechanisms: the way of acting or operating of a structured phenomena, requires an account of how these mechanisms or tendencies work, derived from intensive, rather than extensive concrete research. Yet, mechanisms tend to generate events that may or may not occur, be observed or recorded by the researcher. Further, such mechanisms may not produce outcomes at all but be impeded by other countervailing tendencies. Thus the realist’s goal, given the complex, open and structured nature of the social realm, is to tease out the tendencies, which are actually operating. Tendencies, of course, differ from universal laws deduced from the constant conjunction of events.

If realist explanation doesn’t involve deduction or induction, what then? Two modes of inference form the backbone of realist inspired methodology: abduction and retroduction. Very briefly, abduction involves the interpretation and recontextualisation of the phenomena to be explained, using a competitively plausible set of explanatory ideas and concepts to produce a new interpretation. It will be argued that specific attention can fruitfully be given to the definition and allocation of property rights, the dynamic system of savings and investment, as well as labour and welfare relations at level of the household, workplace, and community, religious and/or state institutions, which have had a generative influence upon the form of housing provision over space and time. Reaching beyond the field of urban and housing studies, critical use can be made of the conceptual tools of temporally and spatially defined perceptions of social and economic risk and the organisation of trust (Perri 6, 1998, Hutson and Liddiard, 1994, Allen, 2000, Lawson, 2000). This process is outlined and implemented in Chapters 3-7. Retroduction follows abduction, moving from this new description to abstract the tendencies that cannot be directly observed, using thought processes such as contrastive and counterfactual questioning. The results of this approach are to be found at the case study conclusions of Chapters 6 and 7 and in their comparison in Chapter 8.

This Chapter merely promotes the adoption of critical realist ontology to historical explanation in housing studies, which requires a structured ontology and employs a process of abduction and retroduction. It has argued that such an approach can provide a more fruitful pathway to progress in causal explanation – but no royal road to truth (Sayer, 2003). CR acknowledges and promotes an understanding of the influence of temporally and spatially specific ideas and practices around housing provision and, importantly, recognises the existence of emergent real relations that may have generated these ideologies and practices. However, CR is merely a new starting point, an ontological alternative to positivism and strong social constructivism, providing a more fruitful basis for theoretical explanation. It is not a theory of housing divergence. This requires a process of abduction and retroduction, via intensive historical research to understand the connected relations generating dominant ideas and housing events. Much of the latter empirical work has been done; it is now timely for the causal explanation to progress.