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Political Economy Comes Home

On the Moral Economies of Housing

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Published in:
Critique of Anthropology

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1177/0308275X18758871](https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X18758871)

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Alexander, C., Bruun, M. H., & Koch, I. (2018). Political Economy Comes Home: On the Moral Economies of Housing. *Critique of Anthropology*, 38(2), 121-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X18758871>

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Political economy comes home: On the moral economies of housing

Critique of Anthropology

0(0) 1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/0308275X18758871

journals.sagepub.com/home/coa



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Abstract

Struggles over housing are one of the most pressing social, economic and political issues of our time. Yet questions over access to, plus the redistribution and maintenance of secure housing have only recently begun to be considered anthropologically. Drawing on E.P. Thompson's concept of moral economy, this special issue addresses these questions and considers how contemporary moral economies of housing play out. Citizens try to make their demands for adequate and safe housing heard, but such aspirations are often undermined by, political rhetoric, state officials, loan terms and the law. People claim allegiances to particular moral communities, thus (re)constituting themselves as deserving of secure tenure and proper homes, often in the face of stigma, laws or policies that construct them as the very reverse. By placing fine-grained ethnographic analysis in conversation with the political economy of housing, we redefine housing as an essentially contested domain where competing understandings of citizenship are constructed, fought over and acted out.

Keywords

Moral economy, housing, security, state, third sector, financialisation, austerity

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Introduction

Struggles over housing have become one of the most pressing social, economic and political issues of our time. Yet questions over access to and the redistribution and maintenance of housing have not always been at the centre of anthropological attention. This special issue aims to address the gap from a particular angle. Moving from Danish housing cooperatives (Maja Hojer Bruun) and post-socialist apartment blocks in Belgrade (Charlotte Johnson) and China (Charlotte Bruckermann) to informal settlements in Kazakhstan (Catherine Alexander) and Brazil (Alex Flynn) and Britain's marginalised council estates (Insa Koch), we consider how citizens try to make their demands for adequate and safe housing heard, and how their aspirations to build and maintain their homes are often out of sync with, or undermined by, political rhetoric, state officials, loan terms and the law. The articles reveal the complex and often overlooked ways in which people claim allegiances to particular moral communities and how they (re)constitute themselves as deserving of secure tenure and of what they consider to be proper homes, often in the face of stigma, harsh laws or policies that construct them as the very reverse. By placing fine-grained ethnographic analysis in conversation with a broader awareness of the political economy of housing, the articles in this collection redefine housing as an essentially contested domain where competing understandings of citizenship are constructed, fought over and acted out.

We draw on the concept of moral economy to analyse the conjunction of political, economic, social, affective and moral dimensions of housing struggles that are increasingly unfolding across much of the world today. 'Moral economy' first appeared in the 18th-century (Götz, 2015), was elaborated by Thompson (1971, 1991) and Scott (1976), with close ties to Polanyi's work on embedded economies (2001 [1944]) but has been so widely applied of late that, as Edelman warns, the 'proliferation of the term into an overly capacious, catchall category runs the danger of rendering it simultaneously clever and meaningless' (2012: 63), a point restated by Fassin (2009).¹ Thompson himself warned that the simple equation of values with moral economy could be a slippery slope if separated from class analysis (1991), a point we take up in the final section. He was referring to very specific practices: 18th-century protests against increased grain prices in times of scarcity by the English mob which appealed to paternalistic authority for intervention. The moment was crucial. One moral economy, capitalism, was displacing a paternalist model where authorities, the master class, had traditional obligations to the people. Alongside increasing constriction of commoners' rights, the calcification of private property was outlawing customary allowances that had often allowed bare life (Linebaugh, 1992).

Palomera and Vetta's (2016) recent systematic treatment of the concept's development reminds us of both its analytical power and its frequent partial use. Our own deployment of the term can be distinguished from two salient uses identified in Palomera and Vetta's analytical historiography. First, they note that 'moral economies' has been used to analyse *alternative* economic systems that emerge

outside, or in opposition to, mainstream capitalist market economies (e.g. de Sardan, 1999), but that these studies often fail to relate these economies to global capitalist processes. Second, studies in the field of moral anthropology have often taken ‘economy’ not as the object of analysis, but simply as a metaphor for ‘the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space’ (Fassin, 2009: 37). In this special issue, we follow Palomera and Vetta (2016) in aiming to revive those dimensions of the moral economy concept that link popular understandings of social justice, moral obligations, rights and entitlements to persistent structural inequalities. Such inequalities, as they argue, are ‘always metabolized through particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices’ – and it is these fields that can be referred to as moral economies (Palomera and Vetta, 2016: 414). A corollary of these dynamic combinations is that there is not a unitary moral economy but plural and overlapping moral economies.

Despite their emphasis on plural moral economies, Palomera and Vetta pay less attention to the role performed by the state and actors (whether they be mortgage lenders, housing cooperatives or social movements) who take on state-like functions. In this volume, we aim to recapture the importance of the state and state-like actors through the case of housing. Housing has often been seen as an expression of a social contract between citizens and the state, one which entitles citizens to material resources – namely housing – in return for certain obligations rendered to the state. The parameters of this social contract have changed significantly from the post-war decades to the present. While in the post-war decades, housing was often presented as a right gained through criteria of citizenship and labour, the advent of neoliberalism, financialisation and austerity have redrawn the lines between those who are included and those who are not. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the case of ‘public housing’ which, more than ever, has come under attack. We deliberately use the word ‘public housing’ in a broad way to capture, under a single umbrella, institutions and practices that are often kept separate, including self-constructed housing in Brazil, housing cooperatives in Denmark and outsourced social housing in the UK.² What unites these institutions and practices we call public housing is how they bring into focus questions about the social justice of access, redistribution and maintenance of housing in often vastly different contexts.

Bear and Mathur (2015: 18) have recently called for more subtle attention to be paid to the spaces where public goods are negotiated in what remains of the social contract. In this volume, we respond by challenging the reductive dyadic notion of the social contract that still characterises narratives of public housing. Instead, we argue that the social contract idea eclipses the moral and affective aspects of housing by foregrounding proprietorial and legalistic elements. Without taking on board *all* these elements, it is not possible to fully appreciate the contemporary global housing situation and what it means to be in need of a secure and proper home. Several themes emerge from our analysis of moral economies of housing.

First, multiple moral communities exist, sometimes rivalrous, internally riven, or with differing expectations of reciprocal obligations. We also uncover overlapping relations, both vertical and horizontal, as these different groups make claims and invoke obligations at multiple levels. Second, several actors appear, or are invoked, as authorities to be performed to for satisfaction of rights, from local and central state institutions and individuals at various levels to banks and social movements. We thus reject the idea of a singular and hierarchical relationship between one authority – often ‘the state’ – and a singular recipient, be that individual citizens, households or communities. A third element of moral economies of housing is the lack of clarity in how to translate demands for sufficient, more secure and more adequate housing into a sustainable platform for policy change and political action. Taken together, our three themes also help to explain the widespread feelings of abandonment and frustrations that citizens articulate today.

By unpacking the different analytical uses of moral economies of housing, we make two important interventions. First, we explore today’s struggles over housing as an artefact of interlocking and plural economic, political, moral and affective domains, each with a historical dimension. Second, through this focus on housing, we add to recent debates on moral economy, which have already performed important work in recuperating its analytical subtlety and potential from its rather promiscuous deployment (Fassin, 2009; Palomera and Vetta, 2016). Extending Palomera and Vetta’s insights, we emphasise the need to ‘bring the state back in’ (cf. Evans et al., 1985) recognising the multiplicity of the state’s representations and practices (cf. Thelen et al., 2016) including in its appearance in many of our ethnographies as aphasic and inscrutable. In the remainder of this introduction, we will first unpack the social contract in more depth, before introducing the home as a paradigmatic case where political economy meets everyday moralities and affect. We conclude by discussing our concept of moral economies of housing with reference to the ethnographic material explored in this volume.

From social contract to reconfigured relations between state, market and third sector

After the Second World War, similar political economies emerged across much of the world which, broadly speaking, can be understood as state-controlled modernisation with a settlement struck between capital, labour and the state. These systematic forms of state intervention have variously been called ‘welfare states’ (see Esping-Andersen, 1990 for a classic typology, revised by Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011), ‘dirigism’, ‘state capitalism’, ‘state corporatism’ or ‘socialism’. They assumed a particular understanding between citizens and the state, one that has often been couched in terms of the model of a social contract. In return for labour, tax and sometimes war service, citizens gained access to the state’s protective arms that cared for them ‘from cradle to grave’. The notion of a singular ‘welfare state’ always glossed over a myriad of different actors, historical legacies

and relations between citizens, authority figures and various institutions that were far from homogeneous or subsumed under a single agency. That said, the provision of decent social housing by states, or state-supported agencies and institutions, was a central feature of the post-war era. Despite Cold War ideological differences, state control or support of the means of production and the provision of welfare and housing in return for labour (and sometimes tax and other citizenship criteria) was relatively widespread (Hart, 1992) during the period the French call '*les trente glorieuses*' 1946–1975 (Fourastié, 1979).

Politics merged with concrete, the proletarian building material par excellence, to manifest this new social settlement, enabling rapid construction of apartment blocks from prefabricated panels (Calder, 2016). But the intention behind the grey blocks was not simply to provide shelter. Across much of the world, housing complexes incorporated basic social infrastructure and communal spaces that together formed models of the good life and the good family in the context of a wider community overseen by a beneficent state. Nuclear family units with indoor sanitation, heating, hot and cold water were set within larger spaces that included shops, basic health and childcare, green areas and playgrounds. Early Soviet experimental collective living sought to shape everyday life (*byt*) through eradicating the domestic burdens of women through communal eating, childcare, and laundry facilities (Buchli, 1999). In Japan, traditional housing was replaced by concrete, multifamily constructions for nuclear families with internal rooms separated according to function (Hirayama, 2014: 119; see Alexander, 2002 for a similar phenomenon in Turkey). The capacity of material design to shape lives has also been linked to nationalist projects. In Israel's early days, for example, public housing was a tool to mould new immigrants into loyal citizens of an imagined nation-state (Kallus and Law Yone, 2002), while in the UK, the ideal council home was built for the 'respectable' male-headed working class family (Koch, 2015).

Such experiments in living were not new. Post-war states built on a legacy of philanthropic organisations, trade unions, factory compounds and churches in creating housing that offered a particular vision of the good life. Often characterised as socialist housing, it is salutary to remember that many 19th- and 20th-century worker or one-company towns were also variously inspired by philanthropy, welfare capitalism or the wish to shape compliant workers by 'governing through the family' (Donzelot, 1997; see Crawford, 1995, for US examples; Gibson, 1991, for Australia; Ferguson, 1999, on the Zambian Copperbelt; Klak, 1993 for Brazilian, Ecuadorean and Jamaican planned housing). Henry Ford may not have built much housing but his notorious Sociological Department focused on disciplining his newly immigrated workers via home visits and courses on "thrift and economy", "domestic relations" and "community relations" (Lawrence, 2008: 177). What was new about post-war housing construction was its scale and that it was largely masterminded by states Miller through local municipalities and workplaces. Rows of low, 'slab' housing and high-rise blocks after the 1950s typify stretches of urban landscapes from Shanghai to Parisian banlieux (Urban, 2012). These landscapes still underscore the common recognition that

citizens have a right to a home, however, hobbled this right might have been even in the post-war decades.

By the late 1970s, the glory days of mass housing were largely over. New configurations of state, market and third sectors began to appear across much of the world, often glossed as processes of structural adjustment, privatization, neoliberalisation and, most recently, as necessary austerity measures via a valorisation of private and non-governmental sectors and, particularly, private home ownership. In the UK, the right to a home was notoriously recast as the Right to Buy Act of 1980, enabling tenants to buy their homes below market value. From then on, across much of the world, although different states followed different trajectories, investment in social housing was cut. States shed housing stock, construction and management services either through mass privatisations, as in the former Soviet Union, or by transferring existing social housing to private landlords or housing associations, as in the UK and elsewhere in Europe (Hodkinson et al., 2013; Nonini, 2017; Scanlon et al., 2014). Meanwhile, in the US, home ownership became increasingly linked to class and race and was cast as the means for allowing non-Whites and the working class to achieve the American Dream (Desmond, 2016; Perin, 1977), as through the 1980s and 1990s new lending ‘opportunities’ (later identified as subprime loans) helped low income families to achieve home ownership (e.g. Metzo, 2008). But many continued to live in precarious housing conditions, including in mobile home parks (Sullivan, 2018). Far from addressing racial and class inequities, sub-prime lending reinforced the gap between rich and poor (Sykes, 2008).

With economic restructuring, and the dismantling of the social housing sector that this entailed, new moralising discourses of deservingness and respectability have come to the fore (Koster et al., 2017; Muehlebach, 2016, Smart, 2013; cf. Fraser and Gordon, 1994). The post-war social contract that saw worker-citizens as entitled to state benefits and resources based on their contributions has been drawn in more exclusionary lines as growing numbers of citizens are unable to meet the criteria set out by the state, state-like institutions and, more and more importantly, banks and mortgage lenders. This has not been an even process. At the same time, as increasing numbers of citizens are left at the mercy of inadequate and insufficient housing, gentrification has also expanded. It is worth reminding ourselves that gentrification can be manifested quite differently, sometimes creating new alliances between gentrifiers (artists, writers, young people) and the remaining working-class population (Susser, 2012) in a shared effort to improve neighbourhoods and inhabit them as homes (Brown-Saracino, 2009; Bruun, this volume). But in other cases, while gentrification has been rhetorically softened to ‘regeneration’ or ‘renewal’, echoing these more benign desires of newcomers, it has also become more violent in its enactment. Processes of displacement are often conducted via a language of chilling abstraction with wholesale demolition increasingly common, often on the bitterly contested grounds of obsolescence (Weber, 2002) and failure to meet standards of adequacy, decency, or even beauty (Elinoff, 2016). Families (‘decants’ in the language of British council housing) are moved

out of their flats ('voids') often to peripheral locations; housing is destroyed, and, in its place, twice as many apartments built, half for private sale, half for 'affordable housing'. Crump (2002), amongst many others, describes the massive destruction of American public housing, including entire African-American neighbourhoods as a 'deconcentration of the poor'.

'Adequate housing' can thus be a double-edged sword, as demands for adequate housing may be met with destruction on the grounds that existing dwellings are unfit-for-purpose, after decades of neglect and poor maintenance, thus effectively depoliticising gentrification by shifting the focus onto the building material itself. Already in 1964, Ruth Glass had identified the phenomenon 'where many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes' (Glass, 1964: xviii). Four decades later, Harvey (2006, 2008) and Smith (1996, 2002) suggested the state was an agent of the market (cf. Greenhouse, 2010) and that globalization had turned gentrification from a local phenomenon to one connecting international capital flows to local power across the world's cities (cf. Lees et al., 2016). Most recently, the housing crisis of 2008 and austerity politics have brought about a new era of precarity, even for those who had previously counted themselves as part of the gentrifiers or middle classes. Struggling mortgage owners have experienced the fear and stigma associated with the prospect of losing their home (Han, 2012; Stout, 2016). In Spain, Sabaté (2016) records how mortgage debtors fail to call into question the paradigm upon which debt discourse is based, evidencing Graeber's point that personal debt itself has become a way of defining personhood in contemporary times (2010). One of the ironies of the housing crisis of 2008 and after was that tenants, investors *and* new homeowners alike have become subject to Compulsory Purchase Orders, indebtedness, foreclosures and evictions, reminding us of the Occupy slogan that 'we are the 99%'.

In short, the political economy of post-war 20th-century housing is a tumultuous history of large-scale, non-market or heavily regulated provision followed by a reconfiguration of power and responsibility between government agents, the market and third sector movements. Inconsistencies between neoliberal aims and practices abound, and once public (and now increasingly privatized) housing has become one such ideological battleground. To give just one example, the nominal aim of reducing public sector costs often appears instead as increased, but displaced costs. In Britain, for example, rent subsidies were introduced allowing low-income tenants to rent in the private sector, thereby effectively offering a state subsidy to private landlords (Meek, 2014). Across the Eastern bloc, privatisation was initially presented as a mechanism for sharing wealth, but it rapidly became clear that poorly-maintained housing stock was a liability not an asset (cf. Alexander, 2009). In the next section, we explore how macro processes (privatisation, gentrification and home-related indebtedness) are experienced and acted on by citizens through the home as a nexus of affective and politico-economic domains. A sense of plural, moral economies, we argue, illuminates what are often hidden and overlooked understandings of rights and obligations in

negotiating housing struggles and hence offers an important corrective to the dominant trope of social contract thinking.

Political economy of the home

In modernist, bourgeois thinking, the ‘home’ constitutes a private space, the realm of family life and social relations that can be distinguished from the public sphere as ‘the realm of politics and market activity’ (Davidoff and Hall, 2002 [1982]: xv). Such neat divisions of public and private are of course ideological simplifications. Mass public housing of the kind described above provides daily physical reminders that public and private spaces are conjoined in numerous ways; such housing is always also intended to create particular kinds of citizens, communities and nations. Recent interventions have emphasized how sociality and mutuality, commonly either portrayed as lost features of past communities or confined to the domestic sphere, continue to influence, and be influenced in turn by other domains, such as law, politics and the economy (e.g. Gudeman, 2008). Cannell and McKinnon (2013) urge us to ‘mobilise the particular resources of anthropological thinking against the ‘domaining’ practices that have been so key to the narratives of modernity’ (p. 12) and demonstrate the continued relevance of kinship to political, economic and political life. Similarly, in the context of India, Bear (2015) has recently traced how the economisation of debt invokes intimate socialities that are frequently overlooked, calling for closer attention to the social calculus of daily relations between precarious workers and their families as an alternative to capitalist time. To give just one more example, Gudeman and Hann (2015) show not only the continuation of pre-socialist self-sufficiency in the Eurasian context, but also how the *oikos* – rather than simply opposing market values – is meshed with state and market.

Building on these critiques of the separation of spheres, we start from the premise that the home is a meeting point for a number of different actors – the state, market and third sector – as well as imagined and real communities of families, households and the nation. The home then ‘both represents the possibility of reproduction and shapes the contours of its families’ (Leinaweaver and Marre, 2017: 565). Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) paved the way for such an analysis two decades ago. Drawing on Levi-Strauss’ concept of ‘house societies’ (1983), they argued that questions about the house and the household should be linked to larger units of political and economic organization. Levi-Strauss himself stressed that house-based societies endure through time not just through reproducing human resources but also through holding on to property, names, titles and rights that are embedded in a broader political economy extending beyond the household. Using Marx’ notion of fetishism, Carsten and Hugh-Jones describe the house-as-institution as ‘an illusionary objectification of the unstable relation of alliance to which it lends solidity’ (1995: 8). Thus, houses constitute alliances, which may appear unified as ‘moral persons’ through kinship ideology but which, upon closer inspection, reveal different economic and political motives

for action. As a social and affective unit, the home becomes at once a conduit through which broader political and economic relations are enforced and acted out, a place of domestic retreat and a means through which people engage with kin, community and other local actors.

An emphasis on the political economy of the home is also evident in anthropological analyses of the home as a socio-temporal space, a 'pattern of regular doings' (Douglas, 1991: 287) that ties together social relationships, identities and materialities. '[H]ome starts by bringing some space under control' (Douglas, 1991: 289), and the particular order, its authority or 'proto-hierarchy', is what characterizes a home as such. Thus, questions of what constitutes a home are inevitably bound with complex issues of social order and power. As Saunders and Williams suggest,

the home is a major political background—for feminists, who see it in the crucible of gender domination; for liberals, who identify it with personal autonomy and a challenge to state power; and for socialists, who approach it as a challenge to collective life and the ideal of a planned and egalitarian social order. (1988: 91)

Although housing has been a mechanism to frame new, 'modern' ways of living within the nuclear family and wider community, modernist housing has also been shown to recapitulate normative gendered roles (Attwood, 2010; Madigan et al., 1990). Miller (2001) shows how material design can be co-constitutive of social identities, and Löfgren (2003 [1984]) presents a masterly analysis of how the home became an arena for cultural warfare when the foundations for the Swedish welfare state were laid through concepts of 'modern living'.

As a confluence of affective, moral, political and economic relations, the home constitutes an arena from which people engage with various agencies and authority figures (e.g. from the state, the market, the third sector, mortgage lenders and banks), and 'in this process' advance their own understandings of citizenship. From London's anti-eviction movements, which model themselves on an ethics of 'militant care' (Wilde, 2016), to the 'drumming on pots with spoons' reported among the housing protesters of 24 Rigaer Strasse in Berlin (Die Zeit, 2016), to the home-centred performances in Brazil's MST movement discussed in this volume (Flynn; see also Fabricant, 2012 for Bolivia), people articulate demands to have social and political rights enforced. Some movements also use a language of rights consciousness and appeal to textual sources, such as a constitution, international law or statutes, to invoke a sense of common suffering and injustice (Earle, 2012). Meanwhile, urban dwellers in Sao Paulo engage in practices of auto-constructed housing and consumption in the neighbourhoods that they have built as a way of engaging the Brazilian polity more broadly (Holston, 2008). Holston calls these practices 'insurgent citizenship' because they challenge the differential and class-structured models of citizenship that prevail in Brazilian society. 'Insurgent' citizenship has been reported across the globe, including in Cape Town (Miraftab,

2009); Mumbai and Shanghai (Weinstein and Ren, 2009) and North America (Sandercock, 1998).

Practices of home making draw attention to what constitutes a proper home ethnographically and who is seen to bear responsibility for creating and maintaining it. One theme that runs through all the articles is the importance of security in making a proper home. Security, in its different forms, thus illuminates the various political and economic relations from which the home emerges, as discussed above; it is essentially relational, something that home occupiers cannot achieve on their own but only through collectives or the intervention and care of authority figures and institutions. Thus, financial security, or its lack, shadows co-operative housing speculation in Bruun's account in this issue. The insecurity of poor building construction threatens citizens with homelessness in China (Bruckermann, this volume) and Kazakhstan (Alexander, this volume), and shapes whether or not Belgrade apartment owners can achieve a warm and heated home (Johnson, this volume), and London tenants can be sheltered from the violence of neighbours' intrusive noise (Koch, this volume). Environmentally hazardous regions, such as China and Kazakhstan, intensify the need for safe locations and rigorously monitored and regulated construction. Finally, security of tenure, which does not automatically translate into ownership, frames most of these ethnographies, most explicitly in Flynn's account of Brazil's landless movement, although legal property rights, in the absence of these other forms of security, can be undermined to the point of worthlessness as Alexander's article shows. The need for security is core to moral economies of housing. In the next section, we introduce the idea of plural moral economies of housing as a framework for analysing the different moral commitments, obligations and political actions that meet in and around the home.

Moral economies of housing

We suggest that the strength of the moral economy concept can be recuperated and extended through ethnographic attentiveness to specific kinds of struggles and their relations to broader politics of redistribution. Housing provides an excellent point in case. Like grain in Thompson's (1971) case, shelter is a basic need. What is more, just as in Thompson's study, there was a fair price for grain, and a market that was regulated by mutually acceptable rules, so citizens' have expectations of what constitutes secure tenure and a proper home. Post-war housing provision was far from ideal in many places but has become sharply worse since the end of the post-war settlement and more recently, across much of world with the housing crisis in 2008. The concept of moral economies has all too often been used to assume that a break with, or breakdown of, a previous moral economy has occurred. By contrast, we use the concept of moral economies as a heuristic device to access our informants' demands for housing and how they make sense of their rights to a home in the face of political-economic processes and larger political-economic institutions. The ethnographic cases in this issue show the co-

existence of many moral economies that involve a range of different actors, and the difficulties that emerge in terms of translating citizens' moral demands for housing into sustainable action for political change.

Thus, first, our ethnographies suggest multiple and mutable conceptions of moral communities, which are neither unitary nor static, can be riven by internal struggles, enhance, enable or militate against individuals' life projects (Das and Walton, 2015). They may be created through the co-production of secure, adequate housing or provoked by the perceived dereliction of external obligations. Kazakhstan's informal settlements (Alexander) are typically inhabited by Kazakhs, yet rivalrous claims to land rights between sub-groups can appear. What is more, despite potential common cause with those who have suffered from currency devaluation, foreclosures and evictions, there have been no unified protests. Danish co-operatives (Bruun) mediate both vertical relationships on behalf of citizens where they act as guardians of a shared public good, and lateral relationships between residents who comprise a community of shared living and ownership, variously harmonious or agonistic (see also Bruun, 2015). These co-operatives illustrate an initially unexpected theme across many of our ethnographies: the simultaneity of multiple relations encapsulated in collective groups that may be at once authority figures, mediators and households. Finally, in Belgrade's newly privatized apartment blocks (Johnson), owner-occupiers find that individual life projects can only be realized through collective action as maintaining the value their privately owned apartments necessitates working together with people.

Second, we examine and, in some cases, challenge the idea of the primacy and singularity of the state as authority. 'The state', in all its manifold forms, is not necessarily the actual or perceived authority figure by whom citizens feel betrayed or to whom they direct supplicatory performance. Indeed, our ethnographies show that it is often unclear who or what the master class or authorities are. In Koch's, Bruckermann's and Alexander's articles, 'the state' dissolves and fractures into municipal and central government bureaucratic and political figures, rent collection officers, housing officials, bailiffs, and the police, even if they are ideologically presented as part of the same mass of 'them' (Koch, this volume). Flynn and Bruun meanwhile show that state-like or public functions can be taken on by other social actors. Rather than evoke state officials as a nominal audience, MST members direct their performances towards fellow members and leaders of the MST, who mediate with state officials on their behalf. In yet other cases, citizens' relations with banks and creditors have come to stand for tokens of citizenship (Perin, 1977). Credit may also be obtained via extended networks of kinship, credit groups and other legal and illegal moneylenders (James, 2014), thereby both diverting responsibility from the state and also building new solidarities (Rodima-Taylor and Bähre, 2014). Current forms of financialized lending can also transform relations of reciprocity and protector–protégé relationship into forms of conflict and symbolic violence (Palomera, 2014) and may lead to the debasement of moral communities that previously secured collective and individual credit (Bruun, this volume).

A third theme that runs through the contributions in this volume pertains to the difficulties of translating moral demands into avenues for sustainable change (Narotzky, 2013): how to invoke a relationship of care, obligation, legal responsibility or imagined reciprocity that will hold those in charge of power responsible. In some cases, this relates directly to the ambiguous and shifting nature of authority. For example, Alexander demonstrates that in Kazakhstan, the sheer quantity and bemusing complexity of bureaucracy has created a parallel system where houses are built illegally. Bribes or preferably ‘acquaintances’ in the local municipality are used to speed through post hoc legalisation. Similarly, in China, Bruckermann analyses the difficulties citizens experience in holding local government officials accountable to their demands for safe and adequate homes. Koch argues that the weakness or absence of collective protest points to a larger shift from a politics of ‘welfare’ to that of ‘lawfare’ in the British context, and perhaps even beyond. This is not to conjure an idealised image of the ‘golden’ decades of post-war social democracy, but to trace how broader shifts in policy making and thinking have reconfigured state–citizen relations in more subtle ways. ‘Lawfare’ refers to the ways in which social actors invoke modes of punitive control and a logic of individual blame to manage problems that lie outside the law. This can be contrasted to a ‘politics of welfare’, which she takes to refer to redistributive struggles and a logic of collective solutions in dealing with structural problems.

Taken together, these three themes – the co-existence of multiple moral economies, the splintering of authority into myriad, often unclear figures and the difficulties of translating moral demands into political change – explain the sense of abandonment that has been articulated by many citizens. This is, of course, not to say that there are no actors or individuals who mediate, as it were, the gap that is so frequently felt between individuals’ and groups’ demands and those who are perceived to be in power to help them deliver those. As alternative tracks through impossible bureaucracies and state-controlled media channels, citizens build on reciprocal favours and personal links, recapitulating informal exchanges between officials and citizens in the former Soviet Union (Ledeneva, 1998) and ‘*minjian*’ (people-to-people relationships) in China as Bruckermann outlines. Personal connections, imagined or real, are one of the ways in which people try to engage with authorities and political and economic elites (Tuckett, 2018). Some may seek out brokers (James, 2014), while others draw officials into their own daily networks and the logics that govern them. Koch (2016) coins the term ‘bread and butter politics’ to capture the key role played by local politicians who mediate between the world of hostile outsiders and people’s mundane experiences. These practices can be understood as attempts to project a more relational understanding of the state (Alexander, 2002; Thelen et al., 2016) and state-like actors.

And yet, the work carried out by broker and interstitial figures does not transcend the feelings of abandonment that people report. If anything, such mediators are likely to reinforce popular frustrations as they fail to meet unrealistically high expectations in practice (James, 2006). The limits of such brokerage activities cannot be separated from the broader political and economic context in which

they occur. While hopes and aspirations for alternative futures continue to exist (Bear and Knight, 2017), decades of neo-liberal policies have also left their toll. Occupy and the 99% movements that unfolded after the financial crisis failed to bring about improvements in access to secure housing. The latter also points to another reason why widespread frustration with housing often fails to translate into a basis for action: there has been a de-legitimisation of redistributive struggles in the broader political and legal sphere. The conditions for left action have been systematically dismantled over the last few decades in many places across the world, particularly in liberal democracies that once claimed to be the seat of social rights, as labour movements and trade unions have been weakened through decades of neo-liberal ruling (Brown, 2015; Nugent, 2012), political decision-making colonized by corporate lobbying and technocratic expertise (Crouch, 2011) and punitive approaches replaced the old welfarist consensus (Wacquant, 2009). Public activism has often focused on issues of identity politics, including the politics of race (evident in the recent police killings in the US), the politics of gender and LGBT rights (Zizek, 1997) and of indigeneity and multiculturalism (Hale, 2002).

Ethnographic insights have begun to engage the life trajectories of those who are not generally heard in their struggles for decent housing and those who do not mobilize along class struggles or leftist causes. For instance in Desmond's depiction of America's renting poor, informal networks of support and care, amidst rampant rent, sub-quality housing conditions and bullying landlords, fail to offer any protection, let alone the basis for class consciousness, as people move across vast distances and lose their social ties and sense of grounding in a community (2016). The increase in populist sentiments and reactionary rights that have fostered the return of right-wing movements across Europe and beyond (Edwards et al., 2017; Kalb, 2009, 2011) can also be understood through the notion of moral economy (Hann, 2010). Narotzky (2016) highlights the link between these movements and people's frustrations when she argues that, in the absence of any institutional and political mechanisms to channel people's sense of betrayal, the turn to a divisive politics of victimhood takes on a new force. Far from generating the conditions for collective action, the divisive language of victimhood ultimately isolates and depoliticises those most in need of secure housing. There is a pressing need to record and analyse ethnographically how those who feel betrayed and abandoned make sense of their situations on their own terms, what kinds of obligations and understandings of customary justice their moral claims invoke and what structural inequalities they link up with. This special issue is a first step in this direction.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the LSE, Danish Research Council and St John's College, Cambridge, for supporting the writing workshops that led to this special issue as well as our reviewers' very helpful comments. This research was part funded by Grant ES/M003825/1 from the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom for

the project 'An ethnography of advice: Between market, society and the declining welfare state'.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding


The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was part funded by Grant ES/M003825/1 from the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom for the project 'An ethnography of advice: Between market, society and the declining welfare state'.

Notes

1. Fassin lists the many contexts and objects to which 'moral economy' has been applied from astronomical instruments in revolutionary France to embryonic stem cells in Europe.
2. We are aware of the specific connotations that the phrase 'public housing' has in certain contexts, such as the US, but the same applies to the sister term 'social housing' in other countries. Our use of the term 'public housing' is broader than the case of state-sponsored and rent-controlled housing that it designates in the US context.

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