

CLEARING UP SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Allow us first of all to take the opportunity to thank all commentators for careful reading and interesting and thought-provoking comments, some of them encouraging and others more critical, but all useful in our future work within our perspective of contextualised rational action. The original aim of our paper was to provoke a debate on the use of theory in housing research, and on that point, if nothing else, we have obviously been successful.¹ In this response, we concentrate primarily on some general lines of criticism that come back in several of the comments. Consequently, instead of answering our commentators one at a time, we organise our response in much the same way as the article, i.e. beginning with the general perspective and then going on to the applications in tenant participation, housing management and comparative housing. First of all, something must be said about our general ambitions in the article, since these have been misunderstood by some of our critics. Bridget Franklin is disappointed with our concluding presentation of the strands of our theory, which she finds lame compared with our earlier ‘much stronger, if unsubstantiated’ claims. She also implies that we are out ‘completely to jettison’ the thinking of social constructionism and ‘social’ realism. ‘Certainly that explanatory grand theory remains as elusive and as mired in confusion as ever’, she concludes her comment. Jim Kemeny also reads us as having high – almost Sisyphean – ambitions: ‘to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity, individual and society, actor and structure, micro and macro and a host of other dualities that have plagued the social sciences’. Unlike Franklin, however, he is not disappointed. How could we expect Somerville and Bengtsson to succeed where the giants of social science have failed? Tony Manzi, in contrast, agrees with us when we acknowledge that general theories need to be treated with scepticism and caution – but then rather confusingly accuses us of failing in ‘providing a macro-theory of housing’ and of ‘trying to fit a host of material into one all-embracing model’. The truth is that we have no such ambitions. Our claims are exactly those summarized in our conclusions: To criticize some interpretations of social constructionism and sociological (not ‘social’) realism, and to outline an alternative perspective based on thin rationality that would be applicable to different types of research questions without coming up against the ontological and epistemological problems of strong social constructionism and objectivist realism. We are not trying to jettison social constructionism, indeed – as we explicitly stress in the article – we have no quarrel with its weak version. And we are not presenting any grand general theory, only suggesting an analytical perspective of contextual rational action that may, depending on the context, be fruitfully combined with other lines of more substantive theory. This means middle-range theorising, and we explicitly state in the article that ‘a thinly rationalistic ontology and epistemology is antagonistic to the idea of general social laws of the type “if a then always b”’.

¹ We also wish to thank all colleagues who have commented on an earlier version of the paper, at the HSA Conference in Cardiff in September 2001 and at a seminar at Uppsala University in October 2001, where Clarissa Kugelberg acted as a critical and constructive discussant of the paper.