An Introduction to the Special Issue – The Big Society, Localism and Housing policy
A Special Issue for Housing Theory and Society

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Abstract
"The Big Society, Localism and Housing Policy" was the theme of a seminar series funded by the *Economic and Social Research Council* (2012-14) in the UK. A collaborative venture between the Universities of St Andrews, Sheffield, Reading and Queen's University Belfast – it brought together academics, policy-makers and practitioners from across the UK to critique contemporary political debates in the context of devolved policy-making in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The papers in this special issue emerged from that seminar series. Whilst the policy discussions that follow are very much UK focused, the wider narratives around localism, empowerment, citizenship and welfare reform have a much broader international relevance as this editorial introduction explains.

Keywords: austerity, Broken Britain, community, devolution, voluntary sector, welfare

What is the Big Society?

> "The size, scope and role of government in Britain has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing, the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality and increasing general well-being. Indeed there is a worrying paradox that because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity but selfishness and individualism […] we need a thoughtful imagination of the role, as well as the size, of the state […] our alternative to big government is the big society" (David Cameron, 2009)

The Big Society is an idea popularized by the UK Prime Minister David Cameron (2009) in his often-quoted *Hugo Young* lecture. It was significant in establishing an alternative, more positive characterisation of the Conservative party prior to the 2010 general election. Occupying a place in the political central ground, the Big Society critiques big government and calls for more power to be devolved downwards to the local level. This is reflected in the policy emphasis on local decision-making, citizen empowerment and community action that has underpinned the coalition government. Uniting both Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians is a commitment to disperse power away from central government towards local institutions and active citizens (Kisby 2010; Norman 2010).

Yet the Big Society is more than a localist agenda, for it also a critique of big government and represents an attempt to destabilise the role of the state, in the guise of an attack on bureaucracy. It identifies the welfare state in particular as a driver for social and moral decline in society through the creation of a dependency culture. This argument is crystalized most clearly in the emotive language of 'Broken Britain', as promoted by Conservative Ministers such as Iain Duncan Smith (Centre for Social Justice 2006; for a critical commentary see Slater 2014; Hancock and Mooney 2013). These twin dimensions of the Big Society: the pursuit of localism and a problematization of state welfare are illuminated only too clearly within the field of housing.

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Of course, whilst these arguments are made within the UK context the core debates have wider international relevance in an era of fiscal constraint, as the remainder of this paper will argue. Austerity and welfare reform are being experienced by many countries and many housing systems around the world, albeit it in different ways (see for example, Wodak and Angouri 2014; Peters 2012; Matsaganis 2012). Whilst these geographical differences need attended too, what we are witnessing on a global scale is the political reconfiguration of housing systems (especially public housing systems) in terms of financing, combined with the re-balancing of control and responsibility between states, the private and voluntary sectors, and citizens. The Big Society agenda provides an interesting illustrative example to explore these governance shifts within the context of the UK.

Localism and Housing Policy in the UK
Localism has been central to housing policy agendas since the formation of the UK coalition government in 2010. There have however been important policy variances across the four jurisdictions of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales reflecting the nature of devolved policy-making (Muir 2013; Maclennan and O'Sullivan 2012; Alcock 2012; Paris and Muir 2002). The scale to which powers have been devolved has also varied regionally and nationally, reflecting the extent to which localism is itself a contested concept (Evans *et al* 2013). Nonetheless it is possible to tease out three common developments across the UK:

- Promotion and growth of the co-operative, mutual and self-build housing sector, and in community asset ownership more generally (see for example, Moore and McKee 2013; Moore and Mullins 2013). This reflects a small but subtle shift in the nature of the not-for-profit housing sector in the UK, which has also been mirrored internationally in Europe and the USA (see for example, Moore and McKee 2012; Lang and Robl 2011);
- Growing recognition of the role of housing associations as place-makers and local leaders of community development and regeneration (see for example, McKee In Press, 2012; Respublica 2012). Whilst housing associations have long been recognised as providing more than just 'bricks and mortar', austerity measures have resulted in them having to take on a greater role in this respects to plug the gap as local and central government have pulled back. This mirrors a broader emphasis on the voluntary and community sector delivering formerly core public services as we shift away from a welfare state to a welfare society (Blond 2010; Centre for Social Justice 2006). This has also been witnessed in an international context, as nation-states have struggled to cope with the fall-out from the global credit crunch (McKee, In Press; Featherstone *et al* 2012)
- A shift towards neighbourhood planning in both land-use and the provision of public services, which has significant implications for decisions regarding new housing supply and ability to access services (see for example, Pugalis and Townsend 2013; Gallent and Robinson 2012; Peel and Lloyd 2010). These changes in planning policy represent an interesting example of the re-balancing of autonomy and control between different scales of government from the national through to the regional and local, which has been a defining feature of the Big Society.

It is in England however where localism has most fundamentally transformed housing policy, as reflected in the introduction of the 2011 Localism Act. Moreover, it is also in England where the linking of localism with a critique of the welfare state has been most notable (see for example, Jacobs and Manzi 2013). A critical aspect of the Localism Act has been the reform of social housing tenancies – security of tenure has now been replaced by more time-

limited 'flexible tenancies'. Instead of having a guaranteed permanent home for life, these new tenancy agreements are typically only for between two to five years. New tenants to the sector may also have to pay higher rents - of up to 80 per cent of local market rents. These measures seek to introduce social and income mix into the sector, and reduce the cost of social housing to the tax-payer. More fundamentally however, such policies challenge the whole ethos of social housing, and question the act of being a social housing tenant – even though research indicates it remains a desired tenure for many (see for example, McKee 2011; Ecotec 2009):

> "The period in which a tenant finds themselves in social housing must be used to build aspiration, not stifle it. This can mean that, wherever appropriate, social housing is a step on the property ladder, used for shorter periods of time, to help people in a crisis or to overcome homelessness […] we must end the stifling requirement that social housing tenancy be secure for life, and rather alter it, so that it can adapt to the needs and aspiration of the tenant" (Centre for Social Justice 2008: 19).

Local flexibility in terms of allocating social housing in England (e.g. local homes for local people, market rents), has therefore been delivered at the expense of access to permanent, affordable housing for those in need – an important juncture in the evolution of social housing provision. Social housing is now akin to an 'ambulance service', which provides assistance during an emergency or time of crisis, as opposed to being a fundamental right of citizenship and key component of the welfare state.

Broken Britain and Punishing the Poor
Advanced by the Centre for Social Justice, the idea of Broken Britain argues the social problems facing Britain today are caused by a broken welfare system that has 'privileged' welfare claimants over hard-working families. It reflects a particular understanding of the causes and solutions to poverty: one that focuses on individual failings, not structural problems (see for example Murray 1990, writing in the context of the US). Crime, anti-social behaviour, addictions, family-breakdown and inter-generational unemployment and poverty are all blamed on decades of state welfare. Geography is fundamental to this argument with regards to the way in which the interconnections between poverty and place are understood and articulated:

> "The broken society narrative is […] enmeshed with claims that there has been a spread of 'welfare ghettoes', localities characterised by worklessness, welfare dependency and often criminality and disorder. Proponents counterpose 'problem' places and populations against supposedly 'normal' places and people" (Hancock and Mooney 2013: 48).

The presumed causality about the co-location of council-built housing and the problems created by concentrated poverty is underpinned however by an overly simplistic reading of the complex and multi-faceted debates surrounding so-called 'neighbourhood effects' (see for example, Manley et al 2013). Moreover, such analyses ignore the structural causes of poverty and the uneven geographical distribution of income and inequality in the UK, in favour of tough policy interventions focused on reforming the welfare state to make things "fairer, simpler and based on conditionality" (Centre for Social Justice 2007: 89). Such interventions signal a further move towards more American-style workfare models of welfare: a process begun under Blair's New Labour administration, but which have become

further entrenched under the Coalition government. Welfare recipients are now subject to more conditionality and compulsion than ever before: the introduction of Universal Credit has created a single monthly benefit payment, which is capped at a maximum level regardless of economic or family situation, or indeed geography. Claimants are also now subject to 'mandatory work activity' – compelled to undertake voluntary work placements in order to retain their entitlement to benefits. Whilst conditionality predated the Big Society (see for example Flint's 2006 edited volume on anti-social behaviour), these measures serve to further undermine the legitimacy of social housing as a tenure.

These policy shifts are underpinned by a pernicious discourse that demonises the poor: blaming them for their own situation. As Kisby asserts such an argument relies on a "deeply negative, pessimistic view of human nature" (2010: 485). Whilst there are obvious parallels to be drawn with previous debates about social exclusion under New Labour (Matthews 2010; Levitas 2005), and the nature and extent of the British underclass (Mann 1994), there is also a new, distinctive and tightly bounded geography at play (Hancock and Mooney 2013; Jones 2012). It is low-income families within *council-built housing estates* that are being problematized here, as reflected in UK television documentaries such as 'The Scheme', 'Benefits Britain' and 'Poverty Street'. This reworking of longstanding narratives about the deserving and undeserving poor is not only place-based, but has also resulted in the expansion of the categories of people deemed problematic, such as the long-term sick and disabled and also young people, who are now to be moved off welfare and back to work (Centre for Social Justice 2006, 2007; see also Slater 2012; Hancock and Mooney 2013). These transformations in the entitlements and rights of citizenship are visible beyond the boundaries of the UK. Moreover, they deflect attention from the dire economic situation facing many nation states, and instead focus the lens of media attention and public opinion on the presumed behaviour of the most vulnerable members of society. The demonising language and focus on the cultural norms of the poor - who are constructed as work-shy welfare scroungers, enjoying a life on benefits at the taxpayer's cost – reflects the centrally of class to these arguments. As Hancock and Mooney argue, "although class itself is rarely named and made explicit" it nonetheless "features centrally and symbolically" in these political and policy debates (2013: 48). Moreover as Wacquant (2008) eloquently argues, these narratives have a strong spatial dimension, captured in his notion of 'territorial stigmatisation' (see also, Slater *et al* 2014).

The Special Issue Papers
Taking these ideas forward in terms of the discussion and debate that unfolded during our ESRC seminar series, Manzi opens the special issue by illustrating how the Big Society represents a response to a conjunction of crises: in morality, the state, ideology and economics. Highlighting both the continuities and differences between consecutive New Labour and Conservative governments in the UK, he argues the Big Society represents a fascinating example of the 'mobilization of bias' in the political and policy arena. His historical approach is significant, for the core ideas at the heart of the Big Society have a long provenance in housing and social policy, both within and beyond the UK. Moreover his emphasis on the interpretative turn draws attention to how relationships of power are located within wider frames of meaning.

Building on debates about welfare governance and regulation, Jacobs underlines how the Big Society offers a discursive setting for politicians to address 'social anxieties' in an age of insecurity. Drawing on a psychosocial framework which has an analytical focus on the 'subjective', he highlights the turbulence within contemporary UK politics. Not only has it

drawn on a 'mythologisation' of the past, but it also evokes the 'fantasy' of a broken present: the aim here is to offset public hostility and opposition during a period of economic austerity.

Flint, with reference to social contract theory, explores how the Big Society and Localism represent a particular governmental response to the present structural crisis in housing. This represents a political project, which undermines the 'right to the city' and entitlement to welfare, and results in 'urban marginality' engulfing even wider sections of society including young people and some of the middle classes. Drawing on the work of Wacquant (2008) and Bourdieu (1984) he argues that this 'actually existing neoliberalism' has resulted in waves of displacement, and may potentially undermine peoples' attachment to place and sense of belonging.

The final paper in the Special Issue by Matthews, Bramley and Hastings highlights how the neighbourhood planning proposals contained in the Localism Act are based on a flawed understanding of human behaviour. Conceiving NIMBYs as rational economic actors ignores the complex web of interests individuals must negotiate before deciding whether to support local plans for new housing development or not. This suggests incentivising behaviour may have limited impact, and downplays the importance of the wider social-cultural context in which decisions are made.

To conclude, whilst the notion of the Big Society may now represent an embarrassing and outdated idea for the coalition government, it remains a useful starting point for disentangling contemporary policy and politics. It is critical however to differentiate between its symbolic impact and its practical policy effects. Without doubt what we are witnessing on a global stage is a reworking of the state-citizen contract in a political project geared towards mobilising citizens to take greater responsibility for their own life outcomes (see for example, McKee In Press; Wodak and Angouri 2014). Yet as has been called into question here, there is an inherent tension between the local scale at which community and neighbourhood based interventions work, and the scale of solutions needed to remedy structural inequalities within society. Although this special issue has drawn on contemporary housing and social policy debates from the UK the theoretical resonance of the papers, which engage with ideas and concepts transcending a number of different disciplines, speak to an international audience. Whilst the day-to-day reality of what Wacquant (2012) terms 'actually existing neoliberalism' varies from place to place, the regulation of citizens through welfare and penal policies remains a universal trait of the current economic and political system. Geographical, historical and sociological inquiry therefore remain critical if we are to better understand the lived reality, as well as the discursive narratives, associated with localist policy agendas within and beyond the UK.

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