The Tenants' Movement: the domestication and resurgence of a social movement in English housing policy

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Abstract

The launch of a National Tenants Voice for the English social housing sector rekindles a contentious debate among housing scholars over the role played by class and material interest in the mobilisation of collective action.

The clear suggestion in the declaration of a National Tenants Voice is that tenants in the fragmented and residualised social housing sector share certain common interests that can be mobilised around, represented and promoted and that there exists a tenants' movement that is effective to some degree in negotiating at national policy level.

The contention that common interests rooted in class or sectoral divisions engender political conflict was the dominant theme in the application of Marxist and Weberian theory to the struggles of social housing tenants in the 1970s and early 1980s. This thesis was debunked in the 1990s when the restructuring of the social housing sector made the assumption of shared interests and common cause between tenants impossible to maintain.

The return of the concept of shared interests applied to a tenants' movement makes it necessary to re-examine the treatment of tenant collective action in academic studies. This paper explores the concept of material interest as applied to housing struggles and provides a new analysis of the mobilisation of tenant collective action. It concludes in setting out an interpretive framework based on social movement theory to guide further study into the mobilisation, aims and effectiveness of the tenants' movement and its role in English housing policy.

Introduction

The launch of a National Tenants Voice for the English social housing sector effects a return to housing studies of the disputed political concepts of class struggle and material interests and rekindles long-slumbering debates around consumerism, identity, class consciousness, and the radicalism or degree of incorporation of a tenants' movement.

The *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill*, put before Parliament in December 2008, will establish a consumer watchdog organisation for the social housing tenants of England. The Bill legitimises the representation of the consumer interest in housing policy-making and appears to signal one more step in the remorseless marketisation of public services. The model of a National Tenants Voice set out in the Bill, however, suggests that the consumer interest in housing policy owes more to collective and even class interests, than to the classic liberal representations of the individualist consumer. The Bill proposes what appears to be a hybrid of consumer watchdog and political organisation and its aims and objectives are resonant of a tradition of collective action and community struggles associated with the contentious history of the tenants' movement (Grayson 1997).

In 1993, Liz Cairncross David Clapham and Robina Goodlad concluded decisively that two decades of academic dispute between those scholars who portrayed tenants' collective action as an expression of class struggle, and those who positioned it as the outcome of stratification within the housing market, had been a sterile and misleading debate that had little relevance to the contemporary field of housing policy. Presenting a bleak account of a marginalised and fragmented council housing sector, Liz Cairncross and colleagues trounced the notion that tenants comprised an element within the class struggle, dismissed the suggestion that tenants could be identified as a distinct sector within the structuring of collective urban consumption and debunked the contention that tenants shared any material interests or common issues. In this big knockover of housing theories, Manuel Castells'

thesis of collective consumption (1977, 1978), John Rex and Robert Moore's hypothesis of housing classes (1967), the consumption cleavages of Patrick Dunleavy (1980) and Peter Saunders (1981), and Stuart Lowe's work on the social base of tenant struggles (1986) were all scuttled, findings from a series of local studies of tenants' action were brushed aside and practitioner debates from the community and social work profession over the course of the 1970s and 1980s were squashed, while in further scenes of destruction the very existence of a tenants' movement was put in doubt.

These discredited theories now appear to have returned with vigour in the proposals for the new National Tenants Voice. The role of the new organisation is defined in the *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill* as 'representing or facilitating the representation of the views and interests of social housing tenants in England'. It is to be governed by a council drawn in part from the national and regional tenants organisations (HL Bill 2008/09: 25) and is charged with increasing 'the opportunities for social tenants to have a strong collective influence over the policies that affect them' (NTV Project Group 2008b: 14). The clear suggestion in the declaration of a National Tenants Voice is that tenants in the fragmented and residualised social housing sector do share certain common interests that can be mobilised around, represented and promoted and that there is indeed a tenants' movement that is effective to some degree in negotiating at a national policy level.

It is clearly time to re-assess the competing concepts, theories, local studies and empirical research that have marked the itinerary of the tenants' movement through the work of the housing academy and to attempt an analysis of the movement as it emerges in its latest definition. This paper engages with the premise behind the National Tenants Voice that social housing tenants have defined interests that can be represented and that can lend themselves to the mobilisation of collective action. It critically examines the origins of the concept of interest in housing, firstly as it emerges in the restructuring of social housing through the quasi-market forces of choice and voice, and then in the association of tenants' interest with theories of class

struggle, sectoral divides and a history of collective action. It shows how a narrative of struggle posited unproblematic causations between economic interest, consciousness and mobilisation and constructed a largely imaginary tenants' movement, a conceptualisation that proved unable to survive the subsequent fragmentation of the council housing sector. The paper argues in favour of an understanding of interests as the product of negotiation, discussion and the construction of shared frames of meaning and concludes that the interests expressed in the new National Tenants Voice can best be understood through the social movement theory of collective identity as the outcome of processes of identity construction by the tenants' movement and their impact upon the dominant identificatory practices of a restructured welfare state.

Establishing the consumer interest in social housing

The idea that the social housing tenants in England share common interests is integral to the re-commodification of a regulated housing market, and essential to an overall restructuring of the welfare state begun in the mid 1970s, in which the service user has been reborn as a consumer, and the concept of consumer interests has been applied as a counterweight to the power of the professional and bureaucratic elites in charge of service delivery (Clarke & Newman 1997, Stoker 2004). In this programme of restructuring, the classical liberal view of the consumer as a rational, self-interested individual endowed with free choice has been transposed to the organisation and delivery of public services, where the passive recipient of welfare has been re-imagined as a demanding and sceptical citizen-consumer with an interest in the choice, quality, and price of public goods and the accountability of those who supply them (Trentmann 2005, Clarke 2007).

The notion of a consumer interest to be asserted as a counterweight to the dominance of the producer emerged in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Individual self-interest was seen by Enlightenment thought as the propellant of human behaviour, and the market place as the site for harmonising

association. The figure of the rational, discerning consumer appeared first in the primitive guise of *homo economicus*, a being fathered by John Stuart Mill and David Ricardo, and driven by an appreciation of its economic self-interest, evolved into the leading actor of rational choice and public choice theories (Swedberg 2005). In the Conservative Governments of the 1980s and 1990s, and the New Labour regime that followed, the consumer interest was pursued by ushering the market forces of supply and demand into public services through a programme of privatisation, and, where no market was possible, by introducing a range of 'choice and voice' mechanisms in quasi-markets and opportunities for participation, complaint and redress (HC 49-I 2005). The Citizen's Charter, launched in 1991, spawned a new industry dedicated to arming the public service consumer with league-tables and performance information so that this new welfare subject could combat the inefficiencies of bureaucracy and producer-interests by switching suppliers or registering dissatisfaction in satisfaction surveys (Clarke & Newman 1997).

Social housing has provided Conservative and Labour governments with an almost uncontested territory to try out their restructuring strategies but opportunities to transform social housing tenants into sovereign consumers have been limited. Defining the interests of tenants around the seven themes of representation, access, choice, safety, information, fairness and redress, Ed Mayo, Chief Executive of the National Consumer Council, and James Tickell, former Deputy Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation characterised the tenant as a captive consumer, and in their audit of social housing revealed a service dominated by the interests of producers (Mayo & Tickell 2006). They called on government to fund a national organisation to represent the interests of tenants as effectively as the professional bodies and landlord associations defended the interests of service providers. This was a call the National Consumer Council repeated in December 2006 when Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, announced a review of Government housing regulation to be led by Professor Martin Cave, and one upheld by the Cave Review in its recommendation for the establishment of a new consumer watchdog organisation to voice the interests of social housing tenants. The model for a National Tenants Voice

set out in Cave's report *Every Tenant Matters* (2007) was of a consumer watchdog on the lines of the train passengers' lobby, Passenger Focus, or the OfCom consumer panel, that could influence the national policy agenda for social housing and collate and research information on landlords' performance at regional and local authority level. The creation of consumer watchdogs has been a standard feature of the privatisation of regulated public services in Britain, and follows the template of customer advocacy and research originally established in USA by Consumers Research (Rao 1998)*,* and in this country by the Consumers Association in 1956 and the National Consumer Council in 1975 (Hilton 2003).

In calling for a National Tenants Voice to represent tenants as consumers, Mayo & Tickell (2006:10) acknowledged the existence of a self-organised tenants' movement but appeared to be making the distinction drawn by Marian Barnes (1999), between consumer interest groups, or lobby groups that seek to influence policy from a standpoint of self-interest and presuppose an equality of interests in a pluralist society and the autonomous user groups whose collective action stems from a position of powerlessness and exclusion and who seek to bring about a change in power relations. Tenants have engaged in collection action over the quality and cost of rented housing since the late 1880s, and residents associations became a feature of the new council estates built from the 1920s onwards. A succession of national tenants organisations has been constituted since the 1930s, and nationally organised campaign groups have mobilised around issues such as damp and system-built homes while country-wide mobilisations against the Housing Finance Act in 1972, and the Tenants Choice and Housing Action Trust legislation in 1988 spurred the creation of a federated network of local and borough-wide tenants groups in the council housing sector (Englander 1983, Cole & Furbey 1994, Grayson 1997). The growing support for participation policies evidenced by both Conservative and Labour governments from the late 1970s put pressure on councils and housing associations to support the growth of these tenants' organisations at both neighbourhood and regional levels (Cairncross et al 1992). Local authorities were encouraged to develop tenants and residents associations in order to win estate regeneration funding

from government investment programmes like the Priority Estates Programme, Estate Action, City Challenge and Single Regeneration Budget while legislation around compulsory competitive tendering for housing management in 1993, the launch of the Best Value regime and the issuing of government guidance on Tenant Participation Compacts in 1998, and the regulatory pressure of the Housing Corporation, Audit Commission and lately the Tenant Services Authority have all spurred social housing landlords to resource tenants organisations, with many tenants associations and federations receiving on-going financial support as well as initial help to set themselves up, while funding for tenant management organisations has been available from government since 1986 (Furbey & Wishart 1996, Hickman 2006). Although in the last few years, some landlords have withdrawn support for tenant self-organisation, preferring to adopt market research techniques to fulfil their commitment to participation, there now exists a social housing tenants movement in England that, at best estimate, makes up a network of more than 10,000 neighbourhood tenants associations, with borough-wide or landlord-wide federations, as well as six regional federations and a national organisation, called the Tenants and Residents Organisation of England or TAROE (Bines et al 1993, Cole at al 2000, Aldbourne Associates 2001, Housing Corporation 2007).

In a series of tenant conferences held in the wake of the Cave review, the idea of a National Tenants Voice won wide-scale support from tenants' organisations but the model to emerge from these workshops was rather different from that of the consumer watchdog imagined by Cave and the National Consumer Council. Tenants pictured a Voice that could be a national trade union for tenants, democratically constituted with regional branches and elected officials, holding statutory powers that might extend into the private rented sector, and with the authority to intervene against landlords and resolve complaints (Bandy et al 2007). Responding to proposals for the National Tenants Voice set out in a Tenant Empowerment consultation paper (CLG 2007a), tenants organisations called for the new body to have a formal role in government decision-making on housing policy as a representative and democratic organisation led by tenants. Largely ignoring these responses, the

approach taken by Communities and Local Government was to pursue the consumer watchdog model for the Tenants Voice in announcing they wished to host the new body with the National Consumer Council, while still involving tenants in the development process (CLG 2007b). A National Tenants Voice Project Group was established by Communities and Local Government in February 2008 with representatives from national and regional tenants' organisations, and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) sitting alongside the National Consumer Council and the housing trade bodies, with tenants taking the majority of places. At the first working party meeting, the tenant lobby successfully staved off plans to give the National Consumer Council control over the new organisation, leaving the question of the location of the National Tenants Voice in abeyance while the tenant empowerment consultancy TPAS and the national tenants organisation Tenants and Residents Organisations of England (TAROE) lobbied Ministers to exclude the National Consumer Council from further consideration (Morgan 2008). By the time the Project Group issued a consultation paper on its proposals in July 2008, not only had the National Consumer Council been removed from the negotiations, but a shade of antagonism had crept into the imagery of a National Tenants Voice conceived by the group. In the project group's proposals (NTV Project Group 2008a: 2) the National Tenants Voice was to be 'rooted in the tenants' movement, with close working links with representative tenants' organisations' and, while still imagined as a consumer watchdog with an advocacy and research remit, the new body would help build and strengthen tenants organisations and be guided by a belief 'that tenants are citizens of equal worth' (2008a: 3). The National Tenants Voice was now to be an independent organisation rather than operating as part of an existing agency, and would have a governance structure that was accountable to tenants, led by tenants, with guaranteed places on its National Council for the national and regional tenants' organisations.

The final report of the National Tenants Voice Project Group *Citizens of Equal Worth* (2008b: 14) made clear the subtle changes to the way a consumer watchdog role was to be envisaged. The core purpose of the new organisation was 'to increase the opportunities for social tenants to have a

strong collective influence over the policies that affect them' and it was clear the National Tenants Voice was to be seen as part of a collective movement, strengthening the network of self-organised local and regional tenants organisations and resourcing representative organisations. The model of a National Tenants Voice that found its way into legislation appears then to have been substantially amended by the influence of tenants' organisations who had strengthened their collective base through participation in a consumerist discourse. The outline of a tenants' movement had been embodied in legislation, and a new articulation of democratic values had been conjured from the welfare consumer interest.

Collective action and the consumer interest

The ability of tenants on the National Tenants Voice Project Group to apply a consumerist discourse to promote ideas of political representation and collective action reflects the ambiguity surrounding the concept of the consumer interest in housing policy. This section explores the evolution of the concept of a tenants' interest and seeks to identify its origins in a narrative of contentious housing and neighbourhood struggles in the urban studies literature of the 1970s and 1980s.

The tenant interest to be represented by the National Tenants Voice may be envisaged as the aggregate sum of the economic self-interest of four million social housing consumers, but it can also be interpreted as a collective interest that espouses views on citizenship and political policy, and draws on a tradition of thought in which consumers take on the contentious dynamic of collective action. In the urban studies literature of the 1970s and 1980s both Marxist and Weberian class theories were applied to theorise the accumulating pressure on the welfare state from the rise of neo-liberal models of public service provision and from the collective action of social movements organising at the level of communities, and agitating around issues of housing, health, education and child care. Marxist class theory equates the

interests of the working class in their systemic exploitation by the ruling class with a process of political and social struggle founded on the development of a class-consciousness of their objective situation. In contrast Weberian theory draws attention to forms of stratification other than class and to the interests of individuals based on a shared market position. The Marxist model of ceaseless class struggle rooted in the material relations of two opposing forces, and the Weberian model of conflicting interests based on consumption position, status, association and employment were both harnessed to theorise an upsurge of collective action over housing issues. From this literature emerged a tenants' movement associated with housing struggles over rents and the management of council housing, over urban renewal, property speculation and the crisis of homelessness, portrayed as the expression of a set of interests located in class position or consumption sector that were the pre-requisite for movement mobilisation and the determinant of its impact and meaning. This tenants' movement was predicated on the assumption that community action on housing provided a unifying narrative that allowed a number of disparate and localised organisations to be characterised by their contentious protests rather than by their less-combative negotiations, collaborations and social activities. This action-oriented definition of a tenants' movement meant that theories of material interest drawn from Weber were as likely as those drawn from Marx to be addressed to the phenomenon of political conflict and to promote an unproblematic causative connection between interests and collective mobilisation. The tenants' movement was conceived then as the outcome of objectively situated lines of conflict, and while there was disagreement on whether those conflicts pertained to class or sectoral position, there was no doubt that the result was a readily-mobilised and antagonistic movement.

The identification of tenants' organisations with class interests and class struggle was rooted historically in a narrative of tenant agitation over rents and labour movement campaigns for the development of publicly subsidised housing prior to and during the First World War. The Social Democratic Federation, the Workmen's National Housing Council, British Socialist Party, Independent Labour Party, Trades Councils and the Labour Party were all

instrumental in the organisation of tenants' associations from the 1880s into the early years of the 20th Century, in the orchestration of a series of rent strikes against landlord associations and in the development of a political campaign for public housing (Ginsburg 1979, Englander 1983, Grayson 1997). This tide of militant tenant action, culminating in the Glasgow rent strike of 1915 and the imposition of rent controls on the private rented sector has been persuasively portrayed as 'class struggle over reproduction and social welfare issues' (Damer 2000: 94).

There have been some attempts to deny the class nature of these early rent strikes (for instance Castells 1983, Melling 1983) but it is the depiction of tenant collective action in the 1960s and 1970s as class struggle that is more problematic, based as it is on tenant campaigns against the Housing Finance Act in 1972 and agitation against rent increases in the previous decade (see Burn 1972, Moorhouse et al 1972, Sklair 1975, Lowe 1986). While these tenant protests coincided with an upsurge in labour and trade union militancy triggered by reductions in public spending and the imposition of wage controls (Hague 1990), they were also part of a wave of community mobilisations around the organisation of public services that directed attention to the welfare state as an area where 'the social relations not only of class, but of gender and 'race' – not to mention age, disability and sexuality – are most apparent' (Williams 1994: 64). These movements shared a common emphasis on participatory involvement and the demand for more control over the everyday environment and were locally based and organised around personal experience (Segal 1979, Lees & Mayo 1984). For Hilary Wainwright (1979: 4) tenants were part of a heterogeneous wish-list of grass-roots upheaval: 'The women's movement, solidarity movements with international struggles, many shop stewards' combines or local action committees, the anti-fascist movement, theatre groups, alternative newspapers, militant tenants, squatters and community groups'. The insertion of tenants into this frail alliance was the result of the practical intervention in housing struggles by community workers, socialist campaigners and socialist feminists like Wainwright whose transference of anti-capitalist goals onto community protests helped to construct the image of a radical tenants' movement and

provided the unifying narrative for a grass-roots network of local campaigns. This was a process associated initially with the Community Development Projects, a Home Office funded programme launched in 1968, that deployed a network of community workers to tackle the social problems of neighbourhoods who quickly became guided by a class analysis that attributed these problems to structural processes of inequality and oppression rooted in capitalist society as a whole (Loney 1983). Housing provided the focus for much of the community action that developed from these projects, beginning in the inner city neighbourhoods under threat of demolition and urban renewal and moving, after 1975 onto the council estates where tenants were organising against rising rents, insensitive housing management and structurally defective homes that were expensive to heat and dripping with damp (Fleetwood & Lambert 1982). A series of militant campaigns followed, erupting in marches, pickets and occupations typified by the tactics applied by the South Wales Association of Tenants who, assisted by three community workers from a housing resource centre, chained themselves to Town Hall railings, occupied a Council Chamber, disrupting the Council meeting, demonstrated on the steps of the Welsh Office and carried a Wendy House in procession through the streets in their campaign to get adequate heating for their council homes (Lees & Mayo 1984). In council housing protests radical community workers thought they had found the class base for a new kind of political movement that would straddle socialist theory and the practice of community action. As Mike Fleetwood and John Lambert (1982) reflected: 'It became feasible to conceive of a broad tenants' movement using a socialist strategy, linked to a form of local organising concerned with short-term objectives to remedy local grievances'.

While in practical terms, this attempted mobilisation often disappointed the hopes of the community project teams (Lambert 1981), the framework for their radical practice was provided by Marxist theories of the State, and by the classification of tenant struggles by Simon Clarke and Norman Ginsburg (1975: 4) as 'objectively, a struggle between capital and labour over the provision of housing'. Ginsburg contended that the development of public housing served the interests of capitalism as much as it provided

improvements in living standards for the working class and he characterised council housing's bureaucratic management processes as essential functions of capitalist welfare, serving to ration benefits and services, contain opposition and divisively obscure structural contradictions by locating social problems in individual failings (Ginsburg 1979). This thesis had been developed earlier by Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard (1978) who characterised social housing, along with other welfare services, as mechanisms for maintaining a capitalist regime in the face of class struggle, and who positioned tenants' campaigns and neighbourhood struggles as a vehicle for uncovering the economic and social inequalities obscured by the welfare state. This attribution to the tenants' movement of transformatory potential was inspired by the model of urban social movements in the work of Manuel Castells (1976, 1978) and his analysis of the organisation of the collective means of consumption. Influenced in his earlier work by the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, Castells interpreted the development of social housing, along with health care, education and public transport, as a response by the State to the need to provide the capitalist economy with an adequate labour force. This, he argued, led to the development of a new forum of class struggle in the cities where demands for improvements in public services threatened the authority of the State and the capitalist mode of production it served. Just as industrial production had enabled the collective organisation of a labour movement, so the mass provision of public services within the infrastructure of cities created the possibility of organised opposition to the State from a new front. Castells (1978: 41) identified the tenants movement with this new arena of class struggle, and community action as the domestic front of class conflict, claiming: 'These demands are expressed on the one hand through the union movement organised at the place of production, and on the other hand, by new means of mass organisation which have gradually constituted a complete network of movements in the sphere of collective consumption, from associations of tenants, to committees of transport users'.

In the characterisation of housing struggles as a working class movement to control the organisation and delivery of public services, tenants were attributed a set of material interests they could mobilise around: the interests

of the working class opposed to those of the capitalist class (Bolger et al 1981). This radical tenants' movement was a construction that took place in the literature of 1970s community action, founded on a tendency to privilege direct action and contentious protest over the everyday concerns of tenants' associations with local issues such as repairs, environmental matters, clearance and re-housing, and the complexities of their collaboration with local authorities in participation schemes (Cockburn 1977, Smith 1978). Community workers were urged to be selective about the tenants associations they supported, and to prioritise only those who were prepared to raise socialist demands about their housing conditions (Corkey & Craig 1978), while many community workers persisted in the belief that neighbourhood struggles were secondary to the 'real class struggle' of trade unions and industrial conflict, and constantly urged tenants to construct alliances with the labour movement (Blagg & Dericourt 1982: 18). But the campaigns that radical community workers hoped would 'generalise the frustrations and the class position of local tenants and residents in order to build a wider political campaign' (Corkey & Craig 1978: 58) turned out to be localised and defensive actions with limited objectives, that took place, with some few exceptions, in isolation from the working-class movement (Cowley et al 1977). Social housing tenants, in particular, had been relegated to a backwater of social policy that trade unions in Britain had largely ignored. Peter Dickens and colleagues (1985) contended that housing issues had been the subject of a compromise between capital and labour which had resulted in a housing system that prioritised owner-occupation, and Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard (1978: 150) admitted: 'Community groups have arisen precisely because of the failure of working class parties to establish themselves in this area'.

As Stephen Edgell and Vic Duke (1991) noted, the developing processes of welfare state restructuring made class appear an increasingly blunt instrument for understanding the dynamic of social change. The class analysis of 1970s tenants' and community struggles became subject to criticism from its own proponents (Clarke & Ginsburg 1975), and was replaced in urban studies literature by a new theoretical strand that linked collective action to divisions in

consumption and replaced the concept of class-consciousness with a sectoral interest that generated political action. In developing the theory of sectoral consumption cleavages, Patrick Dunleavy and Peter Saunders reflected the role that housing policy assumed as the test-bed for welfare restructuring strategies: the imposition of market rents or means tested benefits on tenants from the early 1960s, the erosion of support for the mass development of public rented housing that had been apparent since the late 1950s and in the mid 1970s translated into cuts in council house spending, and the increasing cultural and political shift in favour of home ownership (Ginsburg 1979, Malpass 2008). The theory that consumption cleavages, or sectoral divides, could be identified in the consumption of housing was applied to interpret the fracture opening up in the working class between those with the potential to realise increased value from their ownership of housing and those who remained without property in the social rented sector. Rival motivations around consumption appeared to override class boundaries to establish a new set of interests exemplified in the growth of home ownership among the working class, and the emergence of social stratification based on consumption rather than production.

Sectoral theory constructed a thesis of consumer interests taken from a Weberian framework first applied to the housing market by John Rex and Robert Moore (1967) in their theory of housing classes and the argument that access to housing creates a hierarchical social structure in urban areas. Rex and Moore reasoned that competition for scarce desirable homes had a stratifying effect and that distribution of housing resources through the market and by local authority allocation established a series of housing classes engaged in struggle over their position on the housing ladder. In particular, Rex and Moore identified the subordinate position of ethnic minority and immigrant communities in the housing market as social divisions that cross-cut labour market distinctions. In his criticism of this thesis, Peter Saunders (1981: 276) was concerned to stress the 'real and vital' nature of housing divisions and the material interests that were specific properties of particular consumption sectors. In the place of Rex and Moore's seven housing consumption sectors, Saunders proposed instead a structure based on the

economic interests deriving from a division between home ownership and renting. Where Patrick Dunleavy (1980) argued that a shared position in housing consumption produced a common ideological alignment, and manifested itself in shared political loyalties or beliefs, Saunders (1981) asserted that consumption cleavages generated material interests that did not simply shape the beliefs and voting patterns of those affected, but motivated their behaviour. While maintaining that housing was consumed individually, in keeping with a Weberian notion of class and interest groups, Saunders applied his structural model to interpret the phenomena of collective action around housing issues and claimed that community housing struggles mobilised around 'specific sectoral interests defined in relation to the process of consumption' (1981: 274). In making this assertion, he assigned to the material interests of council tenants the power to act as a rallying point for political struggle. By applying Weberian theory to a narrative of collective action, Saunders shifted the meaning of the consumer interest from the economic property of a sectoral position to the political foundation of contentious collective action. His differences with Marxist theory centred on the characteristics of these struggles and Saunders argued that collective action in the sphere of consumption was, by definition, always localised and reactive and would not have the transformatory qualities attributed by Marxists to class struggle.

Sectoral theory, then, failed to make a definite break with the Marxist concept of class interest but reinterpreted it to acknowledge the intra-class divisions caused by the breakdown of the welfare state consensus. The connection made by Dunleavy between structural position and ideology referenced the work of Louis Althusser, while in his concern with the analysis of collective action in the sphere of consumption, it could be argued that Saunders was following, however reluctantly, the trajectory of thought taken by Manuel Castells. In its controversial depiction of tenants as agents of class struggle, Castells' early work imagined a working class united across the fields of production and distribution and energised by the forces of collective consumption. As he developed his theory to engage with the growing privatisation of consumption that obscured class boundaries, Castells (1978)

was to characterise tenants' struggles, alongside other community protests, as the evolution of an urban social movement that crossed class lines and represented the growing centrality of consumption interests to social stratification. In the revision of his earlier thesis, Castells (1983) continued to attribute mobilising effects to consumption cleavages and to assert the local neighbourhood as a field of struggle. Attempting to apply Castells' frameworks to the social housing sector in England, Stuart Lowe (1986) argued for the existence of a working-class social base in council housing that engendered material interests based on class and consumption positions. Lowe theorised that as council tenants were brought together by the restrictive housing management practices of local authorities, and concentrated in defined and distinctive housing estates, they were bound by their shared experience of stigma and conjoined in an overwhelmingly working class culture. This social base established a set of common cultural and economic interests that enabled council housing tenants to mobilise in collective action, a thesis Lowe applied to his study of protests against the rent rises of the 1972 Housing Finance Act. Even as Lowe was writing, however, the uniformity of council estates were dissolving, and the Right to Buy, brought in by the 1980 Housing Act, had already begun to fracture the bonds of tenure, culture and place. The sale of council houses was to radically reduce the size and status of the social housing sector and speed the residualising effect of a housing policy bias that, since the 1930s, had favoured home ownership at the expense of public renting (Ginsburg 1979, Malpass 2005). Rent increases encouraged better-off tenants to exit the sector while the substitution of means-tested rent rebates and then housing benefit payments for the supply side subsidies that had once supported the mass building of council housing confirmed the sector's role as a welfare safety net for the poorest and most vulnerable, housed in the worst quality homes (Jones & Murie 2006). In a re-assessment of Lowe's profile of the social base of council housing for the much-changed housing market of the 1990s, Liz Cairncross, David Clapham and Robina Goodlad (1993) evidenced the numerous distinctions in material interests between tenants of different council estates and different property types, and as recipients of different management processes. This research put an end to any proposition that social housing tenants shared a set of common material

interests that could trigger collective action. By 2005 half of all council housing had been transferred to registered social landlords or sold while half of the remaining stock had been removed to the quasi market of arms-length management while the sector had become even more diversified with the development of new shared-ownership and rent to mortgage housing (ODPM 2004a, Ginsburg 2005). The concept of collective interests seemed to be a feature of a mono-tenure past, while the contemporary housing landscape reflected a more individualistic outlook, perhaps the one envisaged by Mancur Olson in the *Logic of Collective Action* (1971): a landscape of free riders without shared interests who are almost impossible to mobilise into a dissenting movement.

Tenant collection action was one strand in a proliferation of social movements characterised by campaigns of service users against the bureaucracy of the welfare state that arose in the 1960s and 1970s and was awarded an illusory, and often unwelcome, unity through the category class struggle, and that by the 1990s had become an increasingly scattered collection of organisations, protests, and lifestyle groupings whose diversity challenged any notion of structural interests (Williams 1994, Carr 2007). Women had played a leading role in the tenants' movement (see Castells 1983, Lees & Mayo 1984, Damer 1992), but as the women's movement gathered momentum, housing struggles did not become a feminist issue; instead, women active in the community were presented with a new vista of their separate interests (Smith 1993). New opportunities opened for disabled activists, gay and lesbian campaigners, while fresh political agendas emerged in the peace and environmentalist movements. The particularist goals of these divergent campaigns underlined the failure of a universal discourse of interests to suitably characterise community and welfare service user movements in England and allowed them to be identified with what Jürgen Habermas (1981) and others called the 'new social movements'; an emerging force that appeared to fragment the traditional distinctions of social class and material interest (Hewitt 1996).

Tenants and social movements: from interests to collective identity

The social struggles that arose with such vivacity in the late 1960s were interpreted as 'new' because they seemed to mark a departure from the class-based approach of the labour movement and could not be interpreted through the Marxist prism of material interest. In attempting to classify the new social movements, Alain Touraine (1985) identified their defining characteristic as their concern with cultural issues, their engagement with transforming values and social norms. Movements in the United States and Europe appeared to be championing or rebelling against definitions of identity, striving for civil rights and justice or to be engaged in defining alternative lifestyles or culture, an approach typified by the women's, gay and lesbian, ecological and peace movements.

Social movements have been defined by Sidney Tarrow (1998: 4) as 'collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.' The key to this definition is the 'collective challenge', the framing of grievances, common interests and issues into a package of resonant claims that helps recruit supporters, define the movement's aims and construct the unifying narrative that participants recognise and support. These frames act on a cultural level, defining 'them and us', marking the boundaries of a constituency by identifying the opposition, and provide the shared signs and stories that bring movement participants together. As social movements develop and grow, and their activists elaborate their beliefs, as they socialise and attempt to mobilise a constituency, Tarrow argued that a collective identity is constructed through the symbols, metaphors, traditions and emotional claims that are generated in the process.

The concept of collective identity emanated from a debate among European social movement scholars in the mid 1980s and was to become one of the main analytical frameworks of social movement study. In the hands of Alberto Melucci (1985, 1989) collective identity became an incisive analytical tool that

focused attention on the relationships developed by individual participants in social movements and reclaimed a role for emotion, conflict and negotiation in movement construction. He defined collective identity as a continuous process of group debate around the material experiences, grievances, and antagonisms of participants that generated goals and strategies and was a fundamental prerequisite for collective action to take place. Collective identity proved an effective and adaptable theory for interpreting the development of the women's movement, and the gay and lesbian movements whose principle objective was to either reclaim a repudiated identity or to assert an identity that had been marginalised or ignored (Bernstein 1997, Taylor & Whittier 1992, 1995). This characterisation of social movements as 'the politics of recognition' (Fraser 1995) has been criticised for supposedly privileging cultural and symbolic concerns over the bread-and-butter of material interests; in pursuing this argument, Iain Fergusson (2000) proposed that the mental health users movement would be better analysed through the framework of class struggle than as a new social movement because of its preoccupation with issues of income, and the connection of mental illness with social status, poor working conditions and unemployment.

Fiona Williams (1992) has sought to reconcile these rival frameworks in her assessment of what she calls 'new social welfare movements' that fuse the politics of recognition and redistribution.   In England new social movements mostly evolved out of community-based struggles (Cowley et al 1977, Lovenduski & Randall 1993), and their approach to the welfare state and to the issues of housing, health and social care gave them common cause on the question of 'who controlled welfare and in whose interests', as Williams (1994: 64) put it. Through community-based groups, and loose networks of local organisations, they celebrated their rejection of hierarchical decision-making, their experimentation with and promotion of participative and direct democracy, and their endorsement of the authenticity of experiential knowledge (Wainwright 2003, Della-Porta & Diani 2006). The diverse demands of the women's movement, gay and lesbian groups, tenants associations and ethnic minority organisations all identified gaps in welfare provision brought about by the imposition of restrictive definitions of universal

need. The development of refuges for women fleeing their violent partners established by Women's Aid, for example, highlighted the failure of housing and social services to identify domestic violence as an issue for intervention (Lovenduski & Randall 1993, Lent 2001). Similarly the growth of the disabled people's movement and the development of organisations of people with learning difficulties and mental health service users challenged definitions of need, rights and autonomy in the organisation of the health service (Oliver 1990, Williams 1992, Barnes 1999).

New social movement theory poses a challenge to the Marxist assertion that collective action is principally propelled by material interests generated by class position by focusing on the development of consciousness and the articulation and affirmation of class identity rather than on the structural location of interests in a social hierarchy (Pakulski 1995). In applying the new social movement concept of collective identity to the theory of class struggle, collective action becomes the parent of material interests rather than the offspring and class formation is interpreted as the outcome of the construction of the shared interests, norms and values developed through mobilisation (Eder 1995). This inversion of the Marxist conundrum of how a 'class in itself' can become a 'class for itself' (Marx [1847] 1975) was expressed by Alain Touraine (1981: 68), one of the founders of social movement theory, who signalled his abandonment of the concept of objective class interests in the declaration: 'There can be no class without class consciousness'. This direction of thought focused attention on the collective behaviour of movements, the construction of relationships and the negotiation of meaning through discussion and though the experience of collective action itself (Pichardo 1997). Drawing on E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, William Sewell (1990) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995) reinterpreted the development of class-consciousness as a process of identity construction, arguing that consciousness emerges when people feel and express the common identity of their interests and define themselves against the interests of others. In this literature, class interest became understood as an identity that was constructed by a social movement rather than as an objective property of structural divisions. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

([1985] 2001) developed this thesis further in their contention that the interests of a social movement are defined by the process of identity construction and have no material pre-existence; in other words, collective identity retroactively creates the interests it claims to represent.

Constructing the identity of a tenants' movement

Where the feminist movement, gay and lesbian groups, ethnic minority campaigns and organisations of disabled people and mental health users have all been defined through the concept of collective identity and fixed with the label of identity politics, the tenants movement, despite sharing many of their characteristics, has remained very firmly an 'old' social movement. It could be argued, however, that collective identity theory provides a legitimate framework through which to study the tenants' movement in the fragmented social housing sector and provides a mechanism for reconfiguring the fallen concepts of shared material interests as the outcome of identity formation. An approach to this new analysis of tenant collective action might be made through the studies of class-consciousness among tenants' groups carried out in community action literature.   While tenants' collective action was once presented 'objectively' as class struggle, it was the lack of class-consciousness arising from their protests that troubled the community workers who sought to guide it. Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard (1978: 148) hoped that the local campaigns of tenants associations could 'provide the experience of taking a little power that will grow into the consciousness that leads to class action', but the conclusion of frustrated community action practitioners was that class-consciousness did not develop from local struggles and that tenants' organisations did not have the potential to become a political movement (Bolger et al 1981, Jacobs 1984). The analysis by Bert Moorhouse and colleagues of the East London rent strikes from 1968 to 1970 provided an influential commentary on this issue. Moorhouse et al (1972: 151) identified the rent strike controversially as 'a clear form of class struggle' but found no explicitly articulated class-consciousness among tenant activists and no expressions of ideology. What the study did find was a perception of 'them

and us' among the rent strikers and their support base, an overwhelming sense that their views were not taken into account and a belief that they had no power or influence in decision-making. The tenants shared a perception that the law was not impartial, and a sense that illegal actions, like withholding rent or squatting, were justifiable and necessary. The research concluded:

'We suggest that while rent strikes and other varieties of ill-reported urban protest do not involve their participants in a clear vision of a new social order, they do reveal something of that muted, defensive "counter-ideology" of the working class, which is the basis of the development of class consciousness in the classical sense' (Moorhouse et al 1972: 153).

These attitudes among the East London rent strikers and their supporters, reported by Moorhouse and colleagues, lend themselves to interpretation through collective identity theory as the construction of 'boundary markers' (Taylor & Whittier 1992), as the traditions, narratives and emotional responses that establish a distinct identity necessary for a movement to form; that separate council tenants as 'us' while declaring their antagonism to 'them', the perpetrators of injustice. The definition of collective identity put forward by Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992; 1995) consisted of three parallel construction processes: boundaries, consciousness and negotiation. The construction of boundaries establishes the oppositional identity of the group while the production of stories, interpretations and self-definitions confirms a shared consciousness, and group members internalise these movement values in their everyday behaviour, their speech, clothing and conduct. As Moorhouse et al point out, however, this construction of a shared consciousness is not enough to mobilise a social movement with goals, strategies and plans of action: the key attributes of collective identity defined by Alberto Melucci (1989: 35).

In later work examining the mobilisation of tenants groups against the Housing Action Trusts in 1988 and 1989, Rachel Woodward (1991: 49) noted how the divisions between council tenants were overcome, and a working unity constructed, 'through a continual process of discussion and debate' at

tenants association and campaign meetings. Woodward charts the careful process of negotiation by which this unity was pieced together and the development of narratives and arguments that patched over the ethnic divisions between tenants and coalesced support around an idea of council housing as the outcome of tenant struggle, and therefore something to be defended, and that situated tenants as a powerful force that could defeat the threat to council housing from Conservative proposals to remove estates from public ownership. What Woodward appears to be describing is the construction of a collective identity robust enough to mobilise a range of disparate tenants groups and individuals around the goals of the anti-Housing Action Trust campaign. This identity had to be constructed before a movement could be mobilised and its construction focused on framing a set of interests that could be expected to exert an emotional pull on council tenants and could therefore be applied as the focal point of collective action.

These studies straddling two key periods of mobilisation provide a tantalising glimpse of the possibilities of an application of collective identity theory to the organisation of an English tenants' movement. What collective identity theory offers is an analysis of the mobilisation process that does not depend on the identification of objective interests common to all social housing tenants, whether those are understood as class interests or the interests of consumers, but that focuses attention on the actual processes of identity construction or how movements are built from a series of negotiations, narratives, grievances and perceptions. By paying attention to this complex series of interactions and relationships, it may be possible to understand the process whereby disparate individuals are drawn into collective action and the means by which the barriers to mobilisation are overcome; to listen, for once, to the voice of the tenants' movement in its own words, and assess its achievements on its own terms.

Any such interpretation needs to situate the construction of collective identity in the context of the dominant identificatory processes that regulate the behaviour of subjects and limit the possibilities of their actions. In the restructuring of social housing, as with the wider welfare state, tenants are

subject to a set of identifications shaped by governmental and institutional discourse, that are inscribed in material practice and acted out in everyday life. Where Sarah Carr (2007) has argued that welfare service users construct identities around the role they play in the restructuring of the welfare state to build up collective power as social movements, David Taylor (1998: 342) has drawn attention to the way in which 'identity categories become inscribed in welfare discourse, positioning their subjects with ascribed characteristics'. The identity of the consumer has been applied in social housing, as in other public services, to mould the identity of the welfare service user into a more self-reliant figure (Jayasuriya 2002, Clarke 2005), while the identities of the 'responsible tenant' and the active citizen have prescribed the practices of tenant participation (Flint 2004). While these categories are riddled with ambiguity and contain the possibility that they can be used to express opposition to imposed identifications, any study of the identities constructed in and around the formation of a social movement must situate them as the outcome of a process of regulation and subjectification, and interpret the social movement as a force of 'domestication' as well as resistance (Butler 2000:150.

Conclusion

The proposals for a National Tenants Voice (2008b) are set out in a document entitled *Citizens of Equal Worth*. It is a title that calls to mind Fiona Williams' (1999: 673) characterisation of new social welfare movements as 'struggles to assert their equal moral worth by subaltern, marginalised and excluded groups' and points to the new imaginary of interests this initiative represents. The National Tenants Voice is being established to represent the interests of the social housing tenants of England and this paper has analysed the concept of interest and the way it has been applied to provide the motivation for the collective action of a tenants' movement. The idea that social housing tenants share a set of defined common interests has not survived the fragmentation of the social housing sector unleashed by the restructuring of the welfare state. Yet the notion of interests has made a return as a political

imaginary; a concept so ambiguous that it can enable a consumer watchdog organisation to be presented as a representative movement. The tenants' interest, then, is not the material interest of a consumption sector, and it is not the objective interest of a class position; instead it is an immaterial, mercurial interest that is established in the construction of the identity of the social housing tenant through a contentious blend of mobilisation and regulatory discourses. Long after it was applied to the other social movements, collective identity theory should now provide the analytical tool to understand the complexities of the construction of a tenants' movement in a marketised social housing sector.

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