

Build Forward Public: The Case For A Post Pandemic Housing Imaginary

Professor Mary Murphy

Department of Sociology, Maynooth University

Expectations of paradigmatic change often overestimate the degree to which crises will result in change. The reality seems more consistent with Klein's (2008 'Shock Doctrine' which associates crisis with a reinforcement of neoliberalism. Our experiences of the 2008 crisis and subsequent austerity means we should not be rose-tinted about the likelihood of the pandemic re-baselining the future (RIA, 2021). Indeed, it is sobering the degree to which the richest men are getting richer globally, the powerful are demanding business as usual and a 'back to normal' narrative is interrupting ambitions for transformative change. We know crisis can be often a necessary but is rarely a sufficient condition for policy change. Blyth (2001) stresses the key role played by ideas and how it is only when the cognitive lock of consensus is broken that transformative change is likely. The fault-lines and failures of the present model have clearly been exposed during the pandemic, but we have not had an ideational shift or championing of ideas that are crucial to critical change.¹

A huge fault line exposed during the pandemic is Ireland's globalised political economy model in which the country opened up to the market large parts of society, including housing, health, and pensions. For example, 80% of nursing home accommodation and 70% of childcare places are provided through the market (Murphy, 2020). Conversely, Irish pandemic responses are severely limited by poor capacity in public services in housing, health, nursing homes, creches, education and special needs. The pandemic offers an opportunity to revalue the concept of 'public'. Feminists and others have led the generation of a public policy that puts the state at the heart of decommodified political economy and service provision (RIA, 2021).

A public future

The pandemic makes us hyper aware of interdependency, vulnerability and our collective need for care. Lynch (2021) argues for a new narrative of interdependency care and affective justice and for a *homines curans* to replace the

homo economicus. This idea is echoed in Power and Mee (2020) sectoral call for a housing as an infrastructure of care and in Murphy's (2012) argument for a 'careful' labour market policy. A careful and public future has to be at the heart of our imaginary (RIA, 2021) as we seek to move on, learn from and build a stronger society and economy in which we are capable of meeting the perpetual challenges and transitions that lie ahead. *A careful future*

Mobilising towards such an alternative means generating housing policies that puts the state and society at the heart of the political economy of housing. This is consistent with Susan Smith and Manuel Aalber's² call for a post-capitalist de-financialised future, and Power and Mee's (2020) call 'housing as an infrastructure of care'. None of this can be delivered by a market society. The hashtag 'stay at home' has demonstrated to us how central home and housing is to our well-being – home is somewhere we 'belong unconditionally', we are 'reciprocally accepted' and are 'ontologically secure'. The reality of domestic violence during the pandemic contrasts sharply with that concept of home and safety, and of course many have no safe abode, and live the reality of highly degraded socio-economic outcomes caused by new forms of rentier capital (rising rents, repossessions, mortgage arrears, public private partnerships).

While in Ireland domestic landlords, 95% of whom own only one or two properties, still dominate the private rental sector, the tone is set by larger oligarchic institutional investors who chase short-term profit through higher rents. Social degradation reinforces and deepens existing inequalities, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality and age intersect with class to determine the lived experience. We see in the pandemic how Travellers, asylum seekers, migrants, homeless families often headed by lone parents are likely to be living in overcrowded and/or congregate living. Those experiences regulate how life impacts on autonomy, capability and ontological security. The multidimensional circles of deprivation are reinforced by discrimination, shame and stigma. Meanwhile policy continues to enable the rich to get richer.

While many people hope that the pandemic will trigger change, it has may have impacted negatively on the momentum for change that was evident in the 2020 General Election and its focus on public health and social housing. Impacts of COVID-19 on housing and homelessness illustrate cracks, fault lines and underlying social conditions in Ireland which can be used to evidence the need for change. A huge fault line in Ireland's globalised political economy model is the degree to which Ireland has followed a financialised route for housing delivery. The Irish state triggered key formative policy changes that lead to diverting investment

from ‘bricks’ to ‘benefits’ (Minton 2017), as policies and related outcomes are never natural or inevitable but always ‘man-made’, the men are still clearly fixated with market based provision of housing. Wijburg (2020) sparks our imagination with the exciting prospect of a de-financialization of housing.

However, the pandemic also enabled policy makers to demonstrate good policy (Focus Ireland, 2020), and we have seen the government take swift and decisive action including prompt introduction of legislation to ban evictions and rent increases and acquisition of additional accommodation for homeless households. There has been more intensive co-operation between official bodies and voluntary agencies in dealing with homelessness and a proactive approach to protecting homeless people including innovations in use or rental subsidies to fund short-term lettings for women fleeing domestic violence.

Yet, the temporary nature of such innovative pandemic policy responses is troubling. The quick move to ban rent eviction contrasts with the pre-pandemic resistance to legally ban evictions of tenants in all buy-to-let properties being sold or repossessed, the 2017 Focus Amendment. Such legislation now seems legally possible within the 1937 constitutional protection of private property. If the constitution presents less of an obstacle to progressive legislation than is often claimed why not press ahead with greater tenant security and rent control, is necessary there are safeguard mechanisms to test the constitutionality of such legislation. There is also the question of how to maintain positive changes. Focus Ireland (2020) also demonstrates how homelessness was positively impacted by the greater availability of touristic and other short-term lettings in the private sector but lament the reality that moves to permanently hold previously short-term rental properties in the long-term market are conspicuously absent in Ireland compared to Lisbon, Rome and Barcelona.

Whether the pandemic leads to greater value in ‘public’ is not yet clear. Right now, an anxiety inducing narrative reinforces low trust in public institutions and public policy, but confidence breeds confidence, and we know Ireland can do ‘public’ well.

The alternative is unambivalent, we need public-led solutions to housing inequality. Our highly globalized small open political economy is highly dependent on Foreign Direct Investment and our highly centralised political institutions remain vulnerable to regulatory capture. In turn, the Irish local government, the weakest in the EU, lacks policy and operational capacity. Ireland’s historically mixed welfare state is increasingly market-oriented, with many services, including housing, marketized, privatised, commodified and financialised – reshaping civil

societies into a market society with consequences for their capacity to advocate, protest and imagine alternatives.

None of this is natural, inevitable or legitimate. Policy needs radical rethinking and alternative approaches over tweaking incrementalism. States create markets (Kirby, 2020) and there are multiple ways to rethink the relationship between state institutions, society and markets, including the focus on a care economy, human rights approaches. These see the state and market as duty bearers, strengthening the local state and social institutions as alternatives to markets, developing Universal Basic Services (Coote and Percy, 2020), and enabling public dominated provision by an innovative and active state (Higgins, 2019). State provision of social and affordable housing over the short to medium term is central to a sustainable and green economy. The notion of a stronger better post-pandemic world is a powerful call to action. The pandemic is an opportunity to create new political narratives, not ‘build back better’ but ‘build forward public’, and in caring way. The EU Green New Deal reinforces the focus on the need for a public-oriented post-pandemic adjustment towards sustainability. More needs to be done to reframe the debate about what we value, about how to strengthen public and social institutions, and to fight for a better regulated market that serves society and delivers the right to an accessible, affordable accommodation for all.

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² In discussion at 26 Feb 2021 in the RIA’s event ‘Post-pandemic housing transformation and the value of home’.