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New Sociology of Housing

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In 2013, Mary Pattillo proposed a new agenda for the sociology of housing, focused on the way that rights to housing are created, distributed, and enforced (Pattillo 2013). The books here take up her call. They focus, respectively, on private rental housing, subsidized affordable housing in mixed-income developments, and debt-financed home ownership. What they have in common is a focus on housing not only as a built environment, a location in space, or a habitation where we learn and enact cultural practices, but also as a set of positions in social relations. These are books about the social relations by which we house each other.

This new sociology of housing holds out the promise that it may help to solve some intellectual problems that have plagued the urban sociology of neighborhoods. For the last two decades, sociologists have pursued the measurement of neighborhood effects on individual life chances, and one of the findings of this research program is that the effects of neighborhood context on individuals are often weaker, more short lived, or more highly variable than we first expected. One reason may be that our relationships to the places we live are mediated by, and dependent on, housing relations that are themselves variable, and that often exert a substantial effect on our circumstances. We may be more deeply embedded in housing relations than we are in

Integrating the Inner City: The Promise and Perils of Mixed-Income Public Housing Transformation, by **Robert J. Chaskin** and **Mark L. Joseph**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 344 pp. \$40.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780226164397.

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City, by **Matthew Desmond**. New York: Crown Publishers, 2016. 432 pp. \$28.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780553447439.

No Place Like Home: Wealth, Community and the Politics of Homeownership, by **Brian J. McCabe**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 240 pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780190270469.

particular neighborhoods. These books show that the mortgage lender or the landlord matters more than the neighbor in the lives of many Americans.

Profiting from Eviction in the Low-Income Rental Market

Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* argues that housing insecurity reproduces urban poverty. Eviction is more than just a symptom of poverty. It is a cause: "Losing a home sends

families to shelters, abandoned houses, and the street. It invites depression and illness, compels families to move into degrading housing in dangerous neighborhoods, uproots communities, and harms children" (p. 5). It also has massive financial transaction costs. Evicted renters run up court fees and debts for moving and storage. They sacrifice working hours to moving and lose welfare checks that are sent to the wrong address. Being evicted makes you poorer. It also makes it more likely that you will be evicted again.

Evicted rests on more than a year of full-time ethnographic fieldwork in Milwaukee, followed by a face-to-face survey of Milwaukee renters, an analysis of eviction court records, and an interview study of defendants in eviction court. The studies, published elsewhere, are not all reproduced here, but some of the core quantitative findings are summarized and skillfully interwoven with ethnographic narratives that illustrate how housing insecurity produces misery for people in different circumstances. The research subjects whose housing histories are told in this book are white and black, gay and straight, young and old. The juxtaposition of white and black renters in a segregated city reveals just how rigidly the color line segments the Milwaukee rental market: alternating chapters braid together the narratives of white and black renters whose lives run in parallel but who never cross paths.

The narrative that frames the book is the story of Arleen Belle, and a short summary will convey the quality of the evidence. In January 2008, Arleen's landlord evicted her for damaging the apartment. (Her elder son threw a snowball at a passing car; the driver kicked in the door of her house in retaliation, and the landlord blamed Arleen.) From there, she moved to a homeless shelter, then a house that was boarded up and declared "unfit for human habitation" (p. 2), then an apartment complex that "was a haven for drug dealers" (p. 3), then a downstairs apartment in a duplex (p. 3). Soon she fell behind on the rent, and her landlord filed eviction papers. She was not actually expelled, however, until her roommate reported their upstairs

neighbor to the police for domestic violence, whereupon the police notified the landlord that the whole apartment house could be seized as a nuisance property. The landlord then evicted Arleen, who had neither committed the violence nor called it in to the police, in order to satisfy the police that she had done *something* to abate a nuisance at that address (p. 208). Arleen and her two sons went back to the shelter, then to another apartment, from which they were evicted after three weeks (this time, because the landlord was unhappy that the police came to the property after her eldest son acted out at school) (p. 287). They went to stay with a friend, who was herself evicted soon after; so they went to stay with Arleen's sister, then to an apartment where she was robbed at gunpoint, which led a case worker to decree that it was an unsafe place for her children. Back to the shelter it was. By my count, Arleen and her sons moved more than ten times in two years, usually under immediate threat of expulsion. Their misfortunes were compounded with every involuntary move.

Evicted draws our attention to the social relations that pattern housing insecurity. Arleen's story illustrates vividly how relationships with children, for example, can put their caregivers at risk for eviction. Caring too much about your neighbors can also get you evicted. Relying on kin and friends can even cause eviction to propagate through social networks: some of Desmond's research subjects were evicted for violating their lease terms by opening their homes to other evicted people. Desmond also follows the lives of landlords, property managers, and movers who make money by turning people out of their homes. Eviction, he argues, is "a process that bound poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle" (p. 317)—it is, in other words, a class relation.

Refusing integration in mixed-income housing

There are many things that might have helped Arleen Belle find a more stable income and permanent housing. Money and legal assistance are good places to start.

But she might have benefited from the guidance of someone who knew how to navigate rental and housing markets. She could have used a bigger circle of acquaintances to help her out with leads on housing. She also might have wished for more close relationships to neighbors whom she could have trusted to keep an eye on her kids. Many sociologists have argued that people like Arleen who live in high-poverty neighborhoods lack resources like these *because* they live in high-poverty neighborhoods. Housing policy makers, influenced by these sociologists, have pushed for policies to deconcentrate poverty, in hopes that housing poor people in mixed-income communities will help them acquire role models, weak ties, and the collective ability to enforce social norms.

Robert J. Chaskin and Mark L. Joseph dash some cold water on these hopes. Their book, *Integrating the Inner City: The Promise and Perils of Mixed-Income Public Housing Transformation*, reports a multi-year, multi-sited, and multi-method evaluation study of the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation. This plan, announced in 2000, has involved, among many other things, the demolition of 60 percent of the city's public housing stock and the relocation of many tenants to new mixed-income, public-private housing developments in less-poor neighborhoods. The plan was designed to encourage social integration of public housing residents by bringing them into proximity to middle-income renters and homeowners by developing housing in accord with new urbanist design principles and by devoting resources to social services and community event programming that would encourage social interaction. Chaskin and Joseph conducted focus groups, interviews with residents and development professionals, and field observation at three redeveloped sites. The result is the most thorough study of the largest single public housing transformation in the United States.

There is some positive news here. Relocated public housing tenants report greater feelings of safety and greater satisfaction with the aesthetic values of their new housing (p. 157). On average, they also report higher incomes after relocation, though

most are still below the poverty threshold (p. 223). The research design does not allow us to say whether these improvements were *effects* of relocation—but they are improvements in the lives of some very poor renters, and maybe we should take good news where we can get it.

The planners' hopes for social integration, however, mostly went unfulfilled, because the homeowners and upper-income renters just didn't want to interact with their new neighbors. According to Chaskin and Joseph, "interactions between low- and higher-income residents are described as almost invariably minimal and distant by the vast majority of people, across sites and regardless of income, race, or housing tenure" (p. 134). Informal interactions in parks and on sidewalks often merely reinforced stereotypes. Formally organized interactions—resident meetings, neighborhood association picnics, on-site farmers' markets, and the like—were often designed in ways that permitted, encouraged, or even required self-sorting by income and housing tenure (pp. 147–9).

Residents' interactions with the surrounding neighborhoods were equally fraught. The new mixed-income developments, although they were designed to look attractive, nevertheless looked sufficiently distinct from their surrounding neighborhoods that they were easy to avoid, and neighbors avoided them. Relocated public housing tenants who showed up for community police advisory meetings in the surrounding neighborhood sometimes discovered that nearby homeowners defined *them* as the problem in the neighborhood (p. 214).

Many of the homeowners and upper-income renters whom Chaskin and Joseph interviewed, including black interviewees, repeated invidious class and race stereotypes of their low-income black neighbors. Complaints about "ghetto" behavior were particularly common (p. 153). Middle-income neighbors often assumed that their noisiest and most troublesome neighbors were relocated public housing residents. They also sometimes exploited that presumption—for example, by behaving inconsiderately toward their homeownership neighbors, secure in the belief that their

other, rent-subsidized neighbors would take the blame. "There are days when I'm hanging out with my girlfriends, and I'm coming home at 2:00 in the morning from some joint and my music is blaring and we're screaming and acting crazy," one homeowner said: "People never think those are the homeowners or that's the attorney coming home and making all that ruckus" (p. 154), even when it was.

Homeowners who rejected their rent-subsidized neighbors were not just acting on stereotypes. They were also responding to market constraints. They borrowed to finance their homes. They thought of their homes as private investments. They believed that potential buyers would value their homes less if the proximity to subsidized neighbors were too salient (pp. 165–167). So they attended community meetings and argued for enforcement of what development professionals called "market norms" (p. 169), a particular vision of social order that is presumed to increase property values.

The social relations of housing, here, limit the willingness of neighbors to be neighborly—indeed, to interact with each other at all.

Voting to Keep Poor Renters Out

Viewed from a very great distance, the kinds of things that homeowners did in the course of Chaskin and Joseph's study, such as showing up for meetings and speaking up for normative standards of community behavior, might be mistaken for indicators of the health of democracy. It is a cliché of urban policy that home ownership brings civic benefits. Brian J. McCabe, in *No Place Like Home: Wealth, Community and the Politics of Homeownership*, describes the idea that homeownership makes people into "better neighbors, citizens, and Americans" as the "ideology of homeownership" that lies at the base of federal housing policy (p. 15). His book shows that this ideology has a long history but that there is little reason to think it is true.

No Place Like Home traces the "origins of the ideology of homeownership as a tool for building communities and strengthening citizenship" (p. 23) to two campaigns of the early twentieth century. The first was the

Own Your Own Home advertising campaign begun by the National Association of Real Estate Boards during the First World War to encourage more people to buy homes (p. 29). The second was the Better Homes in America campaign, which aimed through prize competitions and demonstration projects to establish normative standards for adequate housing (p. 32). Both campaigns portrayed the single-family home as a way to lure the working class away from communism and instill civic virtue. This is interesting history, although the book does not actually present any evidence that these campaigns changed anyone's mind about anything. The association of land ownership and civic virtue has very old roots, and it might have found its way into discussions of American housing policy even if these campaigns had never happened.

The book is on much stronger ground when it comes to debunking the ideology. McCabe mines the Current Population Survey and the Social Capital Community Survey to show that homeowners are more likely than renters to vote, sign petitions, attend community meetings, volunteer for local organizations, and participate in various kinds of voluntary associations (e.g., pp. 81, 85, 87). But is it really because they are homeowners that they participate? His analysis shows that the answer is probably no. Few of these associations are robust to statistical adjustment for social and demographic covariates. Much of what we have mistaken for the effect of home ownership appears to be the effect of residential stability. Long-term residents, regardless of whether they rent or own, are more likely than short-term residents to participate in almost every way.

When homeowners do participate, they are not necessarily out for civic betterment. McCabe's quantitative evidence shows that homeowners are *less* likely than otherwise similar renters to participate, for example, in sports clubs, parents' associations, fraternal organizations, religious organizations, petition drives, and protests (pp. 82, 88). They participate more only in neighborhood associations, where, McCabe argues, they may expect some direct benefit to their own property values (p. 87). There is

circumstantial evidence here of a *counter-civic* causal effect: maybe homeownership transforms otherwise civic-minded people by narrowing their circle of concern. McCabe also presents a handful of qualitative case studies to argue for an even stronger thesis: ownership does not only detract from homeowners' civic engagement, but also encourages them to deny *others* the opportunity for civic engagement. For example, homeowners in Winnetka, Illinois, organized for a decade to block the construction of affordable rental housing in their suburban community and thereby to keep renters out of the local polity altogether (pp. 117–118). The qualitative cases are presented without any apparent sampling rationale, and they do not demonstrate that homeowners succeed in diminishing the civic participation of renters. They are sufficient, however, to make plausible the claim that, at least sometimes, at least some homeowners, *because* they are homeowners, may behave in ways that are not only un-civic, but anti-civic.

In short: subsidizing home ownership is a bad way to improve the quality of American democracy. *No Place Like Home* devotes a chapter to arguing against federal subsidies for homeownership, and in particular the implicit subsidies for homeownership in the Internal Revenue Code. Other ways of providing residential stability might yield a greater civic payoff.

The Problem of Concentrated Affluence

Some time after her first eviction of 2008 and 2009, but before her last, Arleen Belle

told Matthew Desmond, "I don't want to live in the inner city ever again" (Desmond p. 162). She had lived in neighborhoods where the poverty rate was high, the schools were bad, and violence was comparatively commonplace. She lived in those neighborhoods in part because each experience of displacement stripped her of resources that she might have used to acquire a right to housing elsewhere. The people whose actions most directly caused her displacement included landlords, case workers, police officers, and housing inspectors. Most of them were following rules that they did not write. The people who wrote those rules probably lived far away from the neighborhoods where Arleen felt so trapped.

Urban sociologists have often moved to poor urban neighborhoods to study social dysfunction. The problems that beset poor people who live in poor urban neighborhoods, however, may originate far outside of those neighborhoods. It is the merit of these new works in the sociology of housing to draw our attention to the relational character of urban deprivation. We have, as a profession, spilled a lot of ink on the pathologies of concentrated poverty. We have only begun to investigate which of the problems that beset the urban poor are actually pathologies of concentrated affluence. These works begin to point the way.

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