Workshop 8 - Housing and Social Theory

Quo vadis, comparative housing research?

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Quo vadis, comparative housing research?

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Abstract (revised)

Looking back upon some 25 years of comparative housing (policy) research, several typologies of levels of generalisation, of types of explanation, of methodologies used, and of stages of research come to one’s mind. Jim Kemeny and Stuart Lowe's distinction between juxtapositional, convergence and divergence approaches remains one of the most popular of these typologies.

The reality of comparative housing research often looks different. Most comparative studies will not fall neatly within either of these approaches. There will be elements of convergence, and there will be divergent developments, and new data or funding may lead us into the temptation of empiricist juxtaposition. My personal research biography is given as an example. To distinguish between different approaches, even within one’s own work, is helpful, nevertheless, and most comparative research can be accommodated within the three schools of comparative housing research.

For each of the three approaches, examples are given for comparative work completed in the decade since Kemeny and Lowe have presented their framework in 1996, at Helsingør. All three approaches are still alive and continue to attract researchers and funding. In many cases, there is overlap between developments of convergence and of divergence, and the interesting outcome is the balance between the two.

But some recent comparative work is quite different from all of these schools: these are micro-scale comparative studies, focussing on individual agents, their attitudes and beliefs, on micro-politics in different cities, using different, often qualitative methods. They do not fit well into the three macro-approaches that have dominated comparative housing research so far, with the nation-state as the exclusive unit of analysis. A selection of these micro-level comparative studies will be presented as another, emerging school of comparative research that merits closer attention. This will be the fourth section of my paper.

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0. Introduction

My academic journey into housing research started from an interest in the management and organization of new housing construction. As an urban geographer, my case study was on a large continental city, my native Vienna, in its last decade of mass social housing, the 1970s and early 1980s. In these years, over 90% was multi-dwelling, high density housing, 87% was built with public subsidies, two thirds of it for renting, one third of it for condominium ownership. A local corporatist machine, with non profit developers and housing politics at its core, was running urban development.

From the outset, my research on Vienna was intended to be comparative, comparative with the findings of British urban sociology of the time, such as HARLOE et al.’s study of housing organizations in London (1974). Reading through these texts on urban housing in Britain, many parallels could be drawn with local welfare regimes on the continent, even council housing was no surprise to me. Other features of British housing were strikingly different, such as the ways of housing finance.

I was well on my way through my Vienna case study, always commenting upon convergence and divergence with urban housing in Britain, when I stumbled across a comparative analysis of urban housing in Britain and Sweden, explicitly set within the larger framework of two national housing policies (DICKENS et al. 1985). Comparisons at the national level were new to me, but made sense in a country like Sweden with a more centralized housing policy. Again, post-war Swedish housing appeared very Austrian to me, with the important difference that Austrian housing policy was being decentralized, down to the regional level of the Länder, each developing a politics of housing of its own.

At the national level, comparative housing policy was dominated by convergence approaches in these years. They came under different names, be it recommodification (HARLOE 1981), decollectivization (HARLOE-PARIS 1984) or privatization (ADAMS 1987), the message remained the same. Housing subsidies were being reduced, direct and building subsidies in particular, public loans disappeared, and rented housing was superseded by owner-occupation. Confronted with these findings, basically from Anglo-Saxon countries, I came up with a more nuanced evaluation of Austrian housing, acknowledging partial convergence and partial divergence (MATZNETTER 1990). The instruments of housing finance were moving towards the market, but housing developers and their products were not following suit.

Soon after completing my Vienna case study, the forces of convergence appeared to become even stronger, with the completion of the Single Market and the prospect of European Monetary Union. To reflect the
changes, the ENHR Working Group on “Comparative Housing Policy” was renamed “European Integration and National Housing Policies” in 1991, we held a conference in 1995, and published a book in 1998 (KLEINMAN et al.). From my point of view, this kind of supra-national housing research merits treatment as an approach of its own, but others may want to look at it as a variant of the convergence approach.

My third encounter with comparative housing policy was in the late 1990s, when ESPING-ANDERSEN’s “Worlds of Welfare” were finally debated in German political science (cf. LESSENICH-OSTNER eds. 1998). In a number of contributions, Austria was classified as the prototype of a conservative and corporatist welfare state. It was hard to believe that housing provision and housing policy had evolved within such an environment without being affected, without displaying some traits of the larger welfare regime. Within Austrian housing, I found major reverberations of the conservative welfare regime (MATZNETTER 2002). These findings put me more explicitly on the path of divergence.

Within the typology of comparative housing research put forward by Jim KEMENY and Stuart LOWE (1998), my own journey had touched upon all levels of analysis: convergence, divergence, and – I forgot to say – juxta- positional. Yes, I have also contributed to the lowest, disreputed level of comparative analysis, finding the appropriate national data and hypothesizing about any correlations between them (MATZNETTER 1993).

What I am missing in this three-fold typology is any distinction between the spatial/territorial/administrative scales of comparative housing research. It goes without saying that we are talking about nation-states, not the European supra-nation, nor any sub-national/regional units of analysis. Maybe it is the disciplinary bias of geographers to look for variation at very different levels, and to compare variation between levels.

Over the last few years, I have begun to re-engage with the regional/urban level where I had started comparative housing research many years ago. Why is there so little comparative housing and housing policy research at the local to regional levels? Long ago, DICKENS et al. (1985) and BARLOW et al. (1992) have set the scene, but very few others have followed over the years.

As a level for comparative analysis, the regional level should have gained, not lost interest over time. With European integration, national levels of income have converged, but regional levels have drifted apart, particularly in the new member states. Housing markets do operate at the regional level, housing policies are forged or at least executed at the regional level, why should not regional comparisons bring forward new and relevant insights?
There are other aspects that make the comparison of housing (market and policy) regions a promising avenue of research. The size of regions brings the analysis nearer to the actors of the housing, de-anonymizes the players, and allows for investigations into the life-world of individuals, of both the powerful and the powerless. At the regional level, the emergence and the withdrawal of housing policies and investment can be better approached and easier understood.

My arguments will follow the sequence of my personal journey into comparative housing research. Along that path, I have used and contributed to a number of paradigmatic approaches within the field. In the literature, there are several typologies of such clusters of theories, methods, disciplines and timing in comparative housing, but I will use one of the most popular here, the three “levels of generalization” proposed by Jim KEMENY and Stuart LOWE at the 1996 ENHR conference. Hence, the following sections will take us from juxtapositional analysis to universalist convergence perspectives to divergence perspectives, commenting upon more recent contributions to these approaches. In a fourth section, an innovative group of comparative studies, partly completed, partly ongoing, partly theoretical, will be presented, that cannot be easily accommodated within the three-fold typology. In the final section, conclusions will we drawn for the future development of European comparative housing (policy) research.

1. Juxtapositional analysis: housing indicators

For many reviewers, the history of comparative housing policy research started with the pioneering work of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, published as “Annual Bulletin of Housing and Building Statistics for Europe” from 1957. It started with 14 basic data on the number of households, the housing stock, on housing construction, construction labour and housing costs – and even for these the data boxes remained empty for a number of the 22 countries involved. This was almost all material that was available to the early comparativist. The data were exploited by both adherents of the convergence as well as the divergence approaches.

Over the years, the coverage of the UN-ECE Housing Statistics was improved and expanded, and from 2002 data can be retrieved on the Internet (and printed publication was ended). Driven by European integration, many more international agencies have entered the field and there is a substantial database for the comparison of housing related indicators on the national level by now. At the ENHR Cambridge 2004 conference, Martti LUJANEN has presented a useful overview of organizations involved and countries covered in the business of international housing statistics.
There is definitely "much less need for description in Western Europe now", as Michael OXLEY stated at a comparative methodology workshop (published 2001: 91). The times have gone, when it was hard to find any national housing experts at all, who would then be commissioned to write a chapter on their respective country’s situation, interesting per se, but in a widely diverging format (e.g. KROES et al. 1988).

Concerning the “New Europe” of the transition economies, the collection and documentation of housing data remains a valuable and rewarding enterprise. Building upon the framework of his earlier study (published 2000) of all 15 EU member states of the old, Christian DONNER has completed yet another book (2006) on the 5 new member states in Central Eastern Europe. It follows an elaborate structure of topics across all these countries, which is meticulously filled with the most recent and reliable information available.

This has to be considered the most advanced product of European housing indicator research, but is doubtful whether this kind of research can be advanced any further. Once there is such a comprehensive study of group of national housing systems, all further questions to be asked lead us outside the housing sector per se, to the many relations that connect it with other parts of the economy, that relate housing policy to other sectoral policies, to the many ties that exist between the life-worlds of individuals and households and the housing system.

There is one further caveat to be added to that oldest research tradition within comparative housing: almost all housing indicators are collected and documented at the national level only. Given the large variance of size amongst European countries national housing means do mean something different in small countries with a single regional housing market than in large countries with a substantial number of regional housing markets that may develop in opposite directions.

The only exception I am aware of is the World Bank- HABITAT’s Housing Indicators Program, to which I contributed as a local expert on Vienna. In total, there were 53 cities in 53 countries for each of which around 100 indicators have been collected and analyzed. The project started in 1990, included a number a seminars world-wide (one with ENHR participation), was completed with a series of documents with restricted circulation, and is best accessible in a book published by one of the project leaders, Shlomo ANGEL in 2000. Unfortunately his partner, Steve MAYO, had passed away the year before.

2. Convergence and European integration perspectives

David DONNISON was amongst the first social scientists to analyse the new housing data assembled by UN-ECE. In his “Government of Housing”
of 1967, he came to the conclusion that economic growth will lead to better housing, independent of political system, and that housing policy can only speed up or slow down developments. With data for the after war period, he showed that housing conditions had improved on both sides of the Iron Curtain, in both market economies and command economies.

Amongst the capitalist countries of the time, he distinguished three types of housing policies: a housing policy of first intentions, a social housing policy, and a type of comprehensive policy. The first group, where housing policy was in its infancy, was made up of Southern European countries, from Greece to Spain, with their poor economic standing of the 1960s. Not economic performance, but their after-war history distinguishes the more selective housing policies of the second from the more comprehensive policies of the third group. DONNISON found Switzerland, the UK, Ireland and Belgium to be in the second, and Sweden, France, Holland, West Germany, Austria, Denmark and Finland to be in the comprehensive policies group. In the latter group of countries, some kind of perceived housing crisis had led to comprehensive interventions in the past. Due to these reservations, DONNISON should not be seen as a hard-core proponent of policy convergence, not least because he has further modified his position in the revised edition of 1982 (together with Claire UNGER-SON).

From the early 1980s till the mid 1990s, sociologist Michael HARLOE, together with economist Michael BALL, has been working on an even longer comparative history of housing policy, starting with the housing reforms of the late 19th century. In his latest book out of a series of publications, on social rented housing in five European countries, the Netherlands, Denmark, Britain, France and Germany (1995), HARLOE elaborates several stages of social housing, which may be shorter and longer in different countries, but which are experienced in sequence.

After a period of timid housing reforms, in the final years of liberal capitalism, the revolutionary or reformist spirit after both World Wars made possible the project of social housing for all, of social housing as a mass model. The experiment was short-lived in the 1920s, but remained the dominant model from 1945 well into the 1970s. In both cases, the mass model of social housing had to withdraw, giving way to a residual model where social housing is provided for an increasingly circumscribed group of households who are unable to afford market rents and prices. The basic message is that of cyclical convergence, not only of social housing, but of housing in general, across regulationist social formations. The general trend of the post-Fordist era has been appropriately summarized by HARLOE himself as "the recommodification of housing" (1981).

In a similar vein, Peter BOELHOUWER and Harry VAN DER HEIJDEN (1992) explored stages of housing policy in seven European countries: from a focus on quantitative output after WWII towards greater emphasis
on quality, followed by state withdrawal and better targeting, to the reappearance of housing shortages in a number of countries. This sequence is followed through in Germany, France, England, and Denmark, but not simultaneously, whilst Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands had not experienced the last stage yet at the time of the project.

Fuelled by the completion of the Single Market and the progress made towards Economic and Monetary Union, research on the impact of European integration has been booming in the 1990s. Amongst these studies, more arguments for convergence in housing have been put forward. Economist Laurent GUEKIÈRE (1991, 1992) was the first to screen EU legislation systematically for direct and indirect effects upon national housing policies. Due to monetarist economic policies, housing policy budgets have been cut down severely in many countries, subsidies have become increasingly targeted, and housing finance is being unified ("banalisation"). Thus he summarizes his findings as the "convergence model" of housing politics.

For the mid-1990s, the debate on the effects of European integration upon housing is summarized in the conference proceedings of an ENHR seminar (KLEINMAN et al., eds. 1998). Many of its contributors adhere to the view that it is mainly the Union’s general economic policy that impinges upon national housing and housing policies, in mainly indirect ways, and to a limited extent. Another recurrent finding was that it was difficult to distinguish the effects of market globalization from the effects of European deregulation and competition. The overall picture is one of convergence, but not of housing policies, rather of outcomes of an increasingly market-led provision of housing. Housing policy in the sense of comprehensive post-war housing policy has collapsed, Mark KLEINMAN contends, but divergent institutional arrangements continue to restrain current developments in housing (1998: 250f.).

3. Divergence perspectives: Welfare regimes and housing regimes

Institutions and ideologies enter centre-stage in studies of European welfare regimes that try to shed light onto the bewildering array of arrangements between the state, the market, and the family that have developed over the last 100 years. Comparative public policy had worked on this topic for quite a while without paying attention to housing policy, the “wobbly pillar of the welfare state”, as the widely quoted comment by Ulf TORGENSEN (1987) goes. Comparative housing policy, on the other hand, developed in isolation from mainstream comparative welfare research, a “Cinderella amongst the comparative social sciences”, as we have once called it (MATZNETTER-STEPHENS 1998:6).

It was in the early 1990s when the two strands of comparative research were brought together by a few pioneers. In 1992 Jim KEMENY published
his book on “Housing and Social Theory”, where he developed a strong case to apply a divergence thesis in comparative housing – apart from more and better social theory in general. In 1994 James BARLOW and Simon DUNCAN expanded their earlier report on four European growth regions (1992) with an outlook on the type of welfare state these regions are embedded in: a liberal welfare state, Britain, is the setting for the London housing case study; France is the representative of a corporatist welfare state, with Paris and Toulouse as case studies; the social-democratic welfare state is present with Sweden and Stockholm as the case study; attention is paid to a fourth type of rudimentary welfare state in Southern Europe. In both of these publications, and in many other comparative housing studies since, reference is made to Gøsta ESPING-ANDERSEN's seminal book on "The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism" of 1990.

At first the linkages between welfare regimes and housing typologies were tentative and speculative, but over the years contributors to the debate have become more confident about the relationship between welfare and housing. When Jim KEMENY wrote his following book, on comparative rental systems, he suggested that "each system tends to be associated with a particular kind of welfare state" (1995: 5), but he added the warning that "such work is, ..., still in its infancy and extremely crude" (p.172). The coincidence of corporatist political systems (both conservative and social-democratic welfare regimes) having unitary rental housing systems, and of liberal welfare regimes showing dualist rental systems, is striking indeed, and should be the starting point for investigations into the missing links between these outcomes. In similar ways, this is true for the correlations found between types of housing development and welfare regimes (BARLOW-DUNCAN 1994: 36).

In the late 1990s, both the critique and the understanding of ESPING-ANDERSEN's work have deepened. The variables on which his typology was based have been debated, his data have been re-analyzed, and put into a longer-term perspective. Depending on the data included, the time period analysed, and the cluster algorithm used, three or more worlds of welfare will be detected, and their groupings will change over time. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of institutional inertia involved, allowing for path changes only at critical junctures in history. According to BORCHERT (1998: 169), the broad variety of welfare regimes that was typical for the 1960s and 1970s has been substantially reduced, channelled into a smaller typology, converging, if you like. Only a few countries have remained loyal to their course throughout the 20th century, most from the conservative group, but also from the Labour-Liberal group.

Within comparative housing policy research, such a longer-term perspective is not unknown, and offers a fruitful avenue out of the impasse of having to decide between a divergence or a convergence approach. In Jim KEMENY's view (with Stuart LOWE 1998: 167) Michael HARLOE's com-
parative histories of private rented (1985) and social rented housing (1995) span the divide, but with a primary interest in convergence, and a secondary element of divergence.

For a single country, Austria, I have tried to compile evidence on the reperccussions of its welfare regime within housing. Classified as an ideal type (or paradigm case) of a conservative and corporatist welfare state by some, characteristic features of such a system are shown to present within Austrian housing as well: a tendency towards fragmentation and devolution of policy, corporatist forms of interest intermediation, a familialist bias in housing provision, an inherent resistance to change (MATZNETTER 2002: 275). Future research should be directed at the policy networks within which these policies have been decided.

Since the beginnings of comparative housing research, the widely divergent levels of home-ownership (and renting) have attracted politicians and researchers alike. At times, the obsession with tenure-related questions and analysis had to be tamed by critical contributions, trying to put tenure in its place (BARLOW-DUNCAN 1988). Concerning welfare regimes, one of the early observations was that generous public welfare for the old (such as in Sweden) tended to go with low levels of ownership, whilst the reverse was true in countries with poor public pensions and services for the retired (KEMENY 1981). A few years ago, Frank CASTLES, one of the leading comparative policy researchers, has taken up the question again, re-analysed the data, and published the results as "the really big trade-off" between home-ownership and welfare (1998). With reference to concepts of risk management in individualized societies, BEHRING and HELBRECHT (2002: 183ff), in another comparative study on home-ownership study, are coming to very similar conclusions: where public pensions are poor, home-ownership is used as buffer of wealth that can be tapped and released after retirement.

In recent years, Joris HOEKSTRA has been working on projects, where housing data are systematically tested against welfare regime and housing regime typologies. At first, housing tenure and housing quality have been analyzed across 12 EU countries, clearly pointing towards the specificity of the fourth, the Mediterranean welfare regime (2005a, b). More recently, he has empirically tested KEMENY’s distinction between dualist and unitary rental markets, the first being typical for liberal welfare regimes, the other originating in the concept of the social market that remained popular in corporatist welfare regimes of the continent, both in their conservative and their social-democratic variant. All hypotheses derived from KEMENY’s concept can be proved, apart from the fact that unitary rental markets have seen an increase in residualisation recently, connected with an ongoing growth of owner-occupation, at the expense of both the social and the private rental sectors.
In the long run, not only the variance of welfare regimes seems to be reduced by convergence, but also the divisions between housing regimes which are becoming less clear-cut over time.

4. Micro-scale comparative studies

Up until here, the typology of approaches to comparative housing has been following earlier and well-established categorizations. It was shown that progress has been made over the last decade or so within each of KEMENY-LOWE's schools of comparative housing research. As a metatheoretic and didactic device, the three-fold classification is very useful. New data have been added to the collections of the empiricist (or: juxtapositional) camp. New topics, such as the effects of European integration, or "the really big trade-off" can be integrated, within convergence approaches the first, within divergence approaches the second. But the boundaries between these approaches should not be excessively policed. Innovative research often combines new data collections, converging and diverging characteristics and developments. In short: the three approaches to comparative housing research should not be reified.

If such a view of overlapping approaches is accepted, there is at least common ground between them that is shared by all these approaches. It is the macro-level of nation-states and their societies that seems to be the dominant, often exclusive focus for comparison. Comparative housing policy research at the sub-national, regional or local levels has remained a minority programme, despite of its early and promising beginnings (e.g. DICKENS et al. 1985, BARLOW-DUNCAN 1992). It shares this level of analysis with comparative social policy, and other comparative research.

It is possibly another example for the Anglo-Saxon dominance in housing research that a strong, centralized, uniform organization of the welfare state is deemed to be the norm across all European countries. In continental welfare states, not even the main, uncontested pillars of welfare, such as health or schooling, are uniformly organized on the national level. This is even truer for housing, the "wobbly pillar of the welfare state", which has been taken over not by the market, but by many regional housing markets and their players. What remains of housing policy – after it has collapsed at the national level – has been devolved down to the provinces and (urban) regions (GUÉKIÈRE 1992).

The argument that more regional comparative housing research is needed may be readily accepted by many, and its difficulties and costs will be quoted as an excuse for not having done so in the past. But there are more implications of moving comparative housing research to the regional and local levels. As people and buildings in Google Earth, individuals and organizations appear when housing is researched at these territorial
levels, with all their values and beliefs, engaged in discourses and collaborations.

These are the lacunae of comparative housing research that have to be filled, and that some have started to fill. Interest comes from different corners, and in different guises. Political scientists want to know more about the micro-politics of housing, where most of the game is in local arenas. At the HSA 2004 conference, DALY et al. have presented a comparative study of two city councils trying to privatise their housing stock, Birmingham and Glasgow.\(^1\) More of such studies are needed, comparing regional housing politics both within nations and across.

In the omnibus volume on "social constructionism in housing research" (2004), HAWORTH, MANZI and KEMENY have written an admittedly speculative article on the consequences of such an approach for comparative housing research. As in single case studies, the focus will be on public discourses on housing matters, on the construction of housing problems, on power struggles over ideas – but in a number of places compared. The translation of housing discourse, the transferability of policies, and policy transfer itself are proposed as avenues for comparative constructionist research. Any empirical research of that sort will have to grapple with the fact that housing issues are debated at the regional level today, where specific problems are perceived and constructed, which will rarely become salient issues at the national level.

At the ENHR 2005 conference, QUILGARS et al. have presented one of the rare methodological contributions on qualitative comparative housing research. In eight countries of the EU, 30 depth interviews are being conducted on the perception of housing as a repository of wealth. Again, empirical research had to be restricted to one average local housing market in each country. In contrast to the quantitative part of their study, by virtue of its representativeness delivering a "full 'nation' picture", the qualitative part will offer a comparison of regions, often neglected by quantitative analysis (2005: 10).

In her PhD thesis on two urban housing markets, in Leipzig (DE) and Brno (CZ) respectively, Annett STEINFÜHRER (2005) has delivered the most explicit example of comparative case studies across two (post-communist) countries. At multiple levels of analysis, with a variety of methods, in two languages, the author traces the effects of economic and social transformation in two divergent settings. Once again, the fieldwork had to be restricted, to inner-city neighbourhoods, two in each city.

From various angles, these four studies are contributing to an emerging approach within comparative housing research. They cannot be easily ac-\(^1\) I want to thank Henryk Adamczuk for drawing my attention to that article.
\(^2\) based on the European Community Household Panel (ECHP), as HOEKSTRA (2005a, b, c) and CZASNY (2004)
accommodated within the three cross-national schools of comparative housing research introduced by Jim KEMENY and Stuart LOWE (1998). Their common ground is the micro-level, both in a territorial sense, as city or region, as well as in the understanding of social science, as individual, household, or organisation. Their epistemology is often constructivist, their methodology often qualitative, allowing for case studies to be accepted within comparative research. Most probably, there are many more studies available that follow the hidden agenda of devoting "more attention to micro-scale comparative studies" (OXLEY 2001:104). I would be delighted to hear from similar comparative housing research, and the contributors of these studies would benefit a great deal from the transfer of methodology and findings themselves.

5. Conclusions

From time to time, it is helpful for communities of research to lean back from ongoing work, however successful, requested or pressing such work may be, and gain a wider, more general view of the bits and pieces of daily research. This is true for comparative housing research as it is for any kind of academic research. Unfortunately, ours is only a small community of researchers, affiliated to various disciplines across Europe, embedded into their national (or language-area) discourses, coming together at annual occasions, on average. This is why there is little continuity in the theoretical and methodological debate on comparative housing research. Once the group of experts has met for a specialized seminar, and the papers have been published, the feeling amongst the participants and their audience and readers is that everything has been said and that many other projects and tasks are waiting.

From its beginnings in 1988, the European Network for Housing Research has had a Working Group on “Comparative Housing Policy”, renamed the “European Integration and National Housing Policies” WG in 1991 to attract and integrate Europeanist research. A seminar was held in 1995 and its proceedings were published (KLEINMAN-MATZNETTER-STEPHENS 1998). Several ENHR conferences have alluded to these topics in their mottos over the years. At the 1996 Helsingør conference, Jim KEMENY and Stuart LOWE presented their typology of comparative research, to be published as an article in 1998. In 1999, AME, the Amsterdam Study Centre for the Metropolitan Environment, organized a seminar on methodological issues of cross-national comparison. From 2000, the number of papers offered at the specialized workshops on European and comparative topics fell off, and so did their audience. Due to this lack of demand, Mark Stephens and I decided to close down the specialized ENHR Working Group in 2001.

Meanwhile, comparative (and Europeanist) research on housing has continued, in ways I have tried to summarize in this paper. Many findings and
much ongoing research can be accommodated within the three schools of comparative housing research, juxtaositional, convergence and divergence approaches, presented at one of our conferences 10 years ago. All these approaches are united by their focus on nation-states as units of analysis.

In recent years, comparative research at the regional and local levels has gained momentum, focusing on case studies, looking into local discourses, at housing-related attitudes of individuals, making use of qualitative methods. There is a tradition of such kind of comparative housing studies, but they have always been subsumed amongst the dominant approaches at the national level. Of course, this can be done, and divergence and convergence, and empiricist research, will be detected in comparisons at the regional and local level. But my argument is, that these studies have things in common that bring new insight and understanding into comparative housing research, so far dominated by a focus on the macro-level of nation-states and societies. Any fully-fledged social science has to develop concepts at, methods for, and do empirical research at the micro-level, populated with knowledgeable agents. This holds true for comparative housing research as well.

PS: Mark Stephens (University of York) and Michelle Norris (University College Dublin) have proposed to establish a new Comparative Housing Policy Working Group within the ENHR and to hold a first conference in April 2007. This could well be the place where researchers interested in micro-scale comparative studies, currently scattered across specialist communities, will meet.

References


