

A Britain that everyone is proud to call home? the bedroom tax, political rhetoric and home unmaking in UK housing policy

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Abstract

This paper explores the prominence of rhetorics of home in UK politics. Through the analysis of key prime ministerial speeches, I trace the lineage of home in political rhetoric, paying particular attention to the ways in which the imaginary of the homespace has been moralised through tenure type. The paper examines the ways in which both of the country's major political parties have utilised rhetoric that places homeliness and homemaking at the centre of citizenship construction and nation-building, whilst simultaneously introducing housing policies that contribute to class-based acts of home unmaking. The final section of the paper examines the case study of the bedroom tax as an example of the power and influence of rhetorics of home. I draw on interviews with social tenants affected by the policy to highlight some of the consequences of the moralisation of the home, and the everyday impacts of home unmaking policies. Conceptually, the paper makes a dual contribution to social and cultural geographies. Firstly, I highlight the need for a stronger dialogue between critical geographies of home and geographies of housing literature. Secondly, the paper utilises home unmaking as an integral, and yet relatively underexplored, means of extending critical geographies of home literature.

Keywords

home unmaking, homemaking, citizenship, bedroom tax, rhetoric

“Here, today, I want to set out how in this generation we can build a country whose future we can all be proud of...how we can secure a better future for all. How we can build a Britain that everyone is proud to call home” (David Cameron, 2014)

...’Just because I don’t own it, it doesn’t mean it’s not mine!’ (Annie, social housing tenant affected by the bedroom tax, 2015)

Introduction

In 2012, the UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-2015) introduced a suite of sweeping revisions to welfare provision via the Welfare Reform Act. The ‘removal of the spare room subsidy’, known colloquially as the ‘bedroom tax’ⁱ, formed the housing element of this reform agenda, and was introduced in April 2013. The policy affects social tenants in receipt of housing benefit, reducing the amount of rent tenants can claim if they are deemed to have one or more ‘spare bedroom’. The Department for Work and Pensions framed the decision to implement the bedroom tax as one based around fairness and tenure equality, stating that the bedroom tax has been introduced in order to bring social rents ‘in line with the private rented sector’ (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014a). In the three and a half years since its implementation, the impact of the bedroom tax has permeated the lives of penalised social tenants across England and Walesⁱⁱ, for many leading to the threat of forced eviction and the loss of home (Nowicki, in press 2017). Alongside such stringent housing policies, former prime minister David Cameron (2010-2016) simultaneously promoted a rhetoric that espoused the home as the centrepiece of the strong nation-state (Cameron, 2014).

With a focus on the bedroom tax, this paper explores the prominence of this, often contradictory, relationship between UK housing policy and rhetorics of home. I explore the ways in which both the country’s major political parties (Conservative and Labour) have, particularly in the wake of the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, in varying contexts utilised rhetoric that places homeliness and homemaking at the centre of citizenship construction and nation-building, whilst simultaneously introducing housing policies that contribute to class-based acts of home *un*making (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Conceptually, the paper makes a dual contribution to social and cultural geographies.

Firstly, I highlight the need for a stronger dialogue between critical geographies of home and geographies of housing literature in order to better understand both political decision-making, and the complex and multifaceted impacts such policies have on citizens and their everyday homemaking practices. Secondly, the paper utilises home unmaking as an integral, and yet relatively underexplored, means of extending critical geographies of home literature. Together, these two conceptual focal points highlight the importance of understanding housing policymaking as inherently directed by social and cultural constructs and ideals, and vice versa. Housing policy both reflects cultural ideologies around idealised citizenship behaviour, and is in turn influenced by these ideologies. At the core of this paper is a call to pay more attention to this relationship and its consequences for the everyday homelives of those most vulnerable in society.

The paper also employs dual methods. The first section utilises a critical discourse analysis approach in order to explore prime ministerial speeches ranging from Margaret Thatcher to David Cameron in relation to their usage of homemaking and home unmaking rhetorics. The key speeches that are discussed in this paper were chosen as they highlight the ways in which rhetorics of home are utilised in acutely political ways. Examining the ways in which these rhetorics have evolved is important in furthering understanding of the ways in which conceptualisations of home impacts housing policy decisions. This is particularly striking in the context of politically entrenched neoliberalism and the financialisation of the home that has been prevalent in shifting rhetoric around housing from a site of social security to one of equity provision (Aalbers, 2016). Through the examination of language use in political speeches, critical discourse analysis therefore enables better understanding of the ways in which the home is used as a means by which to moralise citizens in relation to tenure type.

Alongside analysis of political rhetorics of home, the final part of the paper, the focus of which is the bedroom tax, draws on semi-structured interviews I conducted between 2013-15ⁱⁱⁱ with social tenants in London who have been affected by the policy. These conversations in particular explore the ways in which the bedroom tax has penalised everyday processes of homemaking, and constructed social tenants as undeserving of rights to home. Drawing on conversations with people directly affected by the bedroom tax illustrates the consequences of rhetorics of home and consequent home unmaking policies on the everyday lives of citizens.

Combining these two methodological approaches therefore provides important insights both into the ways in which political conceptualisations of the home have acute impacts on housing policy (Ronald, 2008), and the ways in which these constructions are felt 'on the ground' through everyday lived experience. The bedroom tax is particularly important to examine in this way. One of the most controversial contemporary UK housing policies, the scale of its impact for those affected, and its wider implications for future housing policy decisions cannot be fully understood without an assessment of its socio-political lineage. In short, in order to better combat a policy that disproportionately penalises already vulnerable people, stronger understanding is needed of the ways in which the moralisation of the home has brought it into being in the first place.

Bringing the home into housing policy

Central to this paper is a call for greater dialogue between critical geographies of housing and critical geographies of home scholarship. This is particularly pertinent in a political context whereby socially conservative depictions of the homely and familial are framed as central to citizenship construction, whilst policies such as the bedroom tax simultaneously penalise some of the UK's most vulnerable citizens, inhibiting their homemaking capacities on the basis of tenure.

The bedroom tax has been implemented in a socio-political context that has long framed understandings of the normative, idealised citizen in relation to tenure type. Most prominently since the 1980s and the mass advent of the Right to Buy policy, homeownership has been politically promoted and publicly understood as the ultimate attainment goal for hard-working citizens (Flint, 2003; Ronald, 2008; Hodgkinson & Robbins, 2013). This moralisation of tenure type has vast implications for citizenship construction, with those remaining in social tenancies in particular derided for their lack of engagement with the acquisition of private property. These cultural and political landscapes that undermine low and no-income citizens do so through a specifically neoliberal framework that condemns those that do not conform to approved aspirations of individualism and the acquisition of capital (Peck, 2010). As numerous scholars have argued, housing in the UK has become a site understood through terms of profitmaking and financial self-support in old age, the home reconfigured as a means of capital accumulation over and above a site of shelter and identity construction (see Aalbers, 2008; 2016; Smith & Searle, 2008; Smith, 2011; Forrest & Hirayama, 2014). The

financialisation of housing, and in particular the conceptualisation of households as asset-holders, has in large part contributed to the refiguring of state responsibility in the UK. In particular, the advent of 'asset-based welfare' has entrenched understandings of financial and social security as being attained by the individual through property acquisition, rather than being a fundamental of state provision (Montgomerie & Büdenbender, 2015). Citizens have therefore been moralised through housing policy, whereby to own, or aspire to own, property acts as a marker of social responsibility (Flint, 2003; 2004).

Conversely to the responsible homeowner, those whose relationship with housing tenure is not constructed through capital and profit gains are figured as underperforming citizens, branded as social scourges unwilling to take responsibility for their own lives (Tyler, 2013; Lees, 2014). Reform measures are subsequently framed as a means of restructuring the behaviours of low-income citizens and encouraging their participation in a 'property-owning democracy' rather than relying on welfare services (Thatcher, 1975). As Loïc Wacquant notes in his seminal work *Punishing the Poor*, welfare reform serves to:

...treat – and in turn constitute – the dependent poor as a troublesome population to be subdued and “corrected” through stern behavioural controls and paternalistic sanctions (2009, p.79).

Such penalisation of the poor occurs on multiple levels, with welfare reform policies compounding with media language use to establish a rhetoric that frames the poor as 'scroungers' in the public psyche. Taylor-Gooby (2013) argues that numerous factors converge to increase such stigmatisation of the poor. Firstly, a lack of widespread knowledge about increasing rates of inequality. Secondly, a mode of neoliberal governmentality that promotes individualism, with the bases of social identity structured around individual choice, consumption and asset accumulation. Thirdly, consistent political and media rhetoric that explicitly denounces those reliant on benefits cements understandings that those not engaged with individualism are a social burden. Such factors culminate in somewhat paradoxical public attitudes whereby stigmatisation of the poor has become more widespread, even as the number of people living with low incomes and social and economic inequality continues to grow.

The bedroom tax is a clear example of such sanctioning and stigmatisation of the poor, whereby the right to access particular kinds of homes are stripped away from social tenants as a means of discouraging the expectation of space, comfort and security in the context of social housing. This is justified as a decision based on fairness, the promotion of private tenure, and a discourse that frames social tenants as 'taking up space' at the expense of the taxpayer (Nowicki, in press 2017). This has profound impacts on the homemaking capacities of social tenants. The bedroom tax discourages and punishes particular kinds of homes based on tenure type, reaching into the innermost and intimate areas of social tenants' lives and dismantling their right to homes they may have lived in for decades.

Clearly, the class-based moralisation of tenure type is intrinsically linked to critical geographies of home, whereby policies such as the Right to Buy and the bedroom tax reduce the ability of social tenants to retain their homes through the de-legitimisation of social tenancy. And yet there has been surprisingly limited work within human geography, and the social sciences more broadly, that examines these strong linkages. This lack of dialogue is slowly beginning to shift, as some scholars have recently begun to point more urgently to the interconnectedness of housing and home. Atkinson and Jacobs (2016) have for example argued for a stronger and more meaningful consideration of the ways in which housing policy impacts everyday experiences of home. And a recent event at the Geffrye Museum in London called for greater attention to be paid to the ways in which the current UK housing crisis diminishes rights to home for low-income and working-class citizens in cities such as London, where soaring property values have for example led to the mass decanting of social tenants (Baxter et al, 2016). And yet, the home remains conspicuously absent from analysis of housing policy more broadly.

The following section outlines the lineage of critical geographies of home literature, further highlighting its potential contributions to housing geographies, and the ways in which social and cultural geographers can benefit from better connecting housing and the home. I pay particular attention to the importance of furthering understandings of home *unmaking* in relation to the class-based moralisation, and subsequent penalisation, of the poor, and in particular social housing tenants, in the UK.

Furthering home *unmaking* as a conceptual tool

This paper is conceptually grounded in now well-established geographies of home literatures. Feminist geographers, particularly since the 1990s, have asked us to 'move past the front stoop' (Domosh, 1998, p.276), to explore the prolific social, cultural and political influences that both impact on, and emanate from, the homespace. In their seminal work, Blunt and Dowling emphasised the importance of understanding the home beyond solely material, 'bricks and mortar' depictions, to also consider home as an imaginary, noting that 'home...is a *place*, a site in which we live. But, more than this, home is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings' (2006, p.2). Moving beyond essentialist conceptualisations of the home as an apolitical, private space, geographers have in recent years argued that the home is an intrinsically political site, not only passively affected and shaped by governance practices and socio-political trends, but that one that itself actively impacts wider politics (Brickell, 2012a); the homespace acting as a site through which gender, class and racial identities and performativities are constructed, enacted, reinforced and resisted (Domosh, 1998; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012b). Feminist scholarship has for example highlighted the complex, and often tumultuous, ways in which traditional representations of the home can prove problematic for women and sexual minorities, entrapping people in sites of violence and discriminating against non-conformist family structures (Johnston & Valentine, 1995).

However, as Baxter and Brickell (2014) have argued, much of the critical geographies of home literature to date has focused on methods and practices of homemaking, and negated the role of 'home *unmaking*' in the perpetration of social, economic and political injustices (Baxter & Brickell, 2014; Fernandez, 2014; Brickell, 2013). Home unmaking extends the concept of homemaking, exploring the fluidity and unpredictability of the homespace across the lifecourse, and the ways in which the home may be dismantled and/or reconstructed in a wide variety of circumstances, for example due to eviction; marital breakdown; indebtedness; death, and so on (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Home unmaking also reveals the ways in which the loss of home can in some circumstances have a positive transformative effect, providing opportunity to construct new forms of home out of the ashes of the old. Marital breakdown in Cambodia resulting in the end of violence perpetuated against women (Brickell, 2013), or the criminalisation of squatting in the UK resulting in squatter crews redrawing the boundaries of home by

repurposing abandoned commercial properties (Nowicki, 2014), are just two examples of the complex and fluid nature of the home that home unmaking alludes to.

It is this notion of home unmaking, alongside more traditional constructions of homemaking practices, that I utilise within this paper in order to explore the ways in which political rhetorics of home simultaneously construct (homemaking) and dismantle (home unmaking) senses of home through the moralisation of the homespace, particularly in relation to tenure type. I argue that this moralisation of the home subsequently reinforces class-based inequalities in the UK, and it is this relationship between the moralisation of tenure, home unmaking and the resulting class injustices that is at the heart of this paper.

I focus in particular on the ways in which those responsible for policies that dismantle the homespace for particular groups of citizenry themselves utilise strategies of both homemaking and home unmaking simultaneously to promote ideological citizenship-constructing agendas. Specifically, I explore the language of home in political rhetoric using several key case studies, from prime ministers Thatcher to Cameron, in order to highlight the consistent use of the home as a key site in constructing conceptions of the ideal, and concurrently the undesirable, British citizen. Rhetorics of home are consistently deployed both in terms of unifying homely imagery that denotes one-nationism and concern for the poor; and simultaneously divisive housing policies and rhetoric that condemn those who do not (or cannot) aspire to homeownership. This is emblematic of the ways in which housing and home, and in particular home unmaking, are intrinsic to one another.

The remainder of the paper asks what the consequences are when homemaking and home unmaking are utilised alongside housing policy, in often highly contradictory ways, to further a moralising project framed around promoting understandings of low-income citizens, and in particular social tenants, as socially and economically unproductive. I both explore the lineage of home in neoliberal political rhetoric, and focus on the bedroom tax as a contemporary exemplification of the power of these rhetorics.

Lineages of home in neoliberal political rhetoric

Home and the familial have long been powerful tools in British political rhetoric. The interwar period in particular saw a major shift in rhetorical agendas, with Liberal and Conservative governments alike focusing on a more domesticated political approach (Gilbert & Preston, 2003). In the wake of the horrors of the First World War, political rhetoric shied away from traditional glorified, masculinised depictions of the nation as a powerful site of international significance. Although still highly gendered, conceptions of the nation-state focused instead on a more feminised political approach, concentrating on house-building, domestic consumerism and positioning women, the home and family at the epicentre of strong nation-building in the aftermath of war (Light, 1991). The post-World War II large-scale social housebuilding projects that formed part of a newly emergent welfare state in the UK established council housing as a predominant tenure, thus beginning a longstanding and complex relationship between governance, welfare agendas and social tenancy.

Whilst rhetorics of home in British political discourse has a rich and multifaceted history, the focus of this paper lies in the 'neoliberal turn' of the 1980s onwards due to its particular significance for the bedroom tax, and contemporary understandings of welfare provision and conceptualisations of home more broadly. During her premiership, Margaret Thatcher significantly restructured housing policy, connecting housing tenure to citizenship construction and both individual and state morality. This refiguration of housing and home I argue in large part established understandings of social tenants as abject citizens (Tyler, 2013) and enabled the policies of future governments, such as the bedroom tax, to come into being (Nowicki, in press 2017).

The Thatcher administration(s), through both rhetoric and policy, fused neoliberal and socially conservative ideals of citizenship and homemaking, heralding both the rise of contemporary free market individualist-focused nation-building, and at the same time retaining home and the nuclear family as central socio-political values. Depictions of traditional homemaking in particular remained integral to the Conservative moral project. Indeed, in the early years of her leadership, Thatcher was often portrayed in relation to her role as a wife and mother, photographed standing over the kitchen sink doing the dishes in a motherly floral apron. Such imagery explicitly espoused home-as-nation rhetoric, Thatcher's well-maintained home 'a metaphor for the nation' (Gilbert & Preston, 2003, p.272). Throughout her premiership, Thatcher continually intertwined

governance with the familial and homely through a specifically neoliberal lens, an uneasy yet successful social construction that paired the encouragement of individual property speculation with traditional homely nuclear family values. Thatcher argued that it was only through individuals' responsibility to build strong familial foundations and a home capable of 'balancing the books' that a secure and successful nation could be maintained, and that an over-reliance on the state leads to a lack of citizen commitment to homemaking on both the scale of the household, and of the nation. As she stated in her now well-known interview with *Woman's Own* in 1987; 'most of the [social] problems will be solved within the family structure' (Thatcher, 1987). Homemaking, then, was utilised by Thatcher to conduct a moralising and intimate governance agenda, whereby the British people could be instructed on how to perform appropriately as neoliberal citizens through the homespace. Such constructions were specifically class-oriented, encouraging the working-classes to participate in neoliberal frameworks of homemaking that promoted individual responsibility towards the home on the national, as well personal, scale. In particular, Thatcher encouraged homeownership (as opposed in particular to social tenancy) as the key to a successful home life, and thus a successful nation.

Thatcher's most notable and era-defining home-centric policy was the Right to Buy. Introduced in 1980, the Right to Buy^{iv} was a seminal point in the promotion of individualist, anti-welfare rhetoric that has shaped British class politics ever since. The Right to Buy encouraged tenants in social housing to purchase their homes for a fraction of their market value: inevitably, those with enough capital were able to transition into homeownership, with the poorest tending to remain in social housing. This forever changed the social and cultural landscape of home in Britain, and proves a seminal example in understanding the integral role of both homemaking and home unmaking within governance agendas. The Right to Buy made a particular form of homemaking available to those that could afford it, and simultaneously began to dismantle the homemaking capacities of those who could not, thus establishing a consensus of home unmaking across class lines. The Right to Buy therefore not only decimated the country's social housing stock, it also furthered the politicisation of tenure type (Blandy & Hunter, 2013). Where once the inhabitants of housing stock of all tenures had consisted of reasonably mixed social and economic backgrounds, they were now far more

homogenous in nature, as many wealthier social tenants 'upscaled' to become homeowners (and later landlords) (Timmins, 2001). As the number of homeowners in Britain swelled as a consequence of the Right to Buy, homeownership became more explicitly lauded as the desired tenure type. As Thatcher stated in an interview with *Women's Own*:

One of the reasons why...we want the spread of personal property ever wider, not only because we want the material benefits to spread further wider, but because we believe when you have that personal property you get a much greater feeling of responsibility because you have to exercise responsibility towards it...And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. (Thatcher, 1987).

Thatcher's now-infamous 'there's no such thing as society' quote reflects her positioning of the home and individual family units, as opposed to welfare provision, as being at the centre of strong citizenship and nation-building. Here, homeownership is explicitly moralised, both financially in terms of the home as a site through which both personal and national wealth is constructed, and socially as a means of responsible citizenship. Right to Buy and Thatcher's focus on the home as a central site of governance and citizenship construction established a powerful legacy that intertwined conceptions of the home with equity and the provisions of the free market. At the same time, Thatcher's rhetoric continued to connect with socially conservative constructions of ethical citizenship and the promotion of traditional forms of homemaking as lying at the epicentre of a strong nation. All governments, Conservative and Labour alike, since Thatcher's have since disseminated a rhetoric that frames homeownership as the aspirational form of tenure, promoting it as beneficial for both the individual and the state (see Flint, 2003; Lowe et al, 2012; Blandy & Hunter, 2013; Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013). For the individual, the primary function of the home has been reframed as a financialised space; a source of equity and financial security, particularly in retirement (Smith, 2011). For the state, the privately owned home has become a symbol of economic buoyancy and an important site of moral justification for the rolling back of welfare services. This has occurred hand-in-hand with the increased demonisation of those who cannot or will not

aspire to homeownership, in particular social tenants and those that are welfare-dependent more broadly.

As the Thatcher administrations lauded aspirational homeowner and home-as-equity discourses, they simultaneously derided social tenants as unengaged with individualism and wealth creation, the bastions of neoliberal ideology. Right to Buy encouraged binary distinctions between homeowners (or those aspiring to be homeowners) and social tenants, with the latter regarded the antithesis of successful homemaking, and thus successful nation-building (Nowicki, in press 2017). This established a sense of moral justification for the continued class-oriented home unmaking policies and agendas directed at those who remained in social housing, and in particular those who were also welfare dependent in other ways, for example the unemployed. Homemaking rhetoric (specifically in relation to the promotion of homeownership) coupled with the Right to Buy and its potential for producing home unmaking during the Thatcher administrations was therefore central in establishing a moralised rhetoric in relation to both housing tenure and homemaking practices.

Although spearheaded by the Conservative prime minister Thatcher, this emergent understanding of the interconnectedness of morality, housing tenure and homemaking has by no means been limited to Conservative housing policies and rhetoric. Tony Blair's New Labour (1997- 2007) in particular continued to understand housing as a moral concern, whereby social tenancy was further developed as symbolic of what a home *should not* be.

In June 1997, the newly elected prime minister Tony Blair gave his inaugural speech at the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark, south London. With the estate as his backdrop, Blair framed his newly formed government as one dedicated to eradicating moral blight and worklessness in the country, stating:

I have chosen this housing estate to deliver my first speech as prime minister for a very simple reason. For eighteen years, the poorest people in our country have been forgotten by government. They have been left out of growing prosperity, ...There is a case not just in moral terms but in enlightened self-interest to act, to tackle what we all know exists – an underclass of people cut off from society's mainstream, without any sense of shared purpose. Now, at the close of the

twentieth century, the decline of old industries and the shift to an economy based on knowledge and skills [have] given rise to a new class: a workless class...a large minority is playing no role in the formal economy, dependent on benefits. (Blair, 1997)

Blair's speech, coupled with the backdrop of the Aylesbury Estate, makes explicit the correlation between social housing, in particular the council estate, and the manifestation of a British 'underclass': a workshy, politically and socially abject group unequipped to contribute to the neoliberal social order (Welshman, 2006). The 1980s onwards saw a rise in academic and popular imaginaries of the council estate-dwelling underclass as a growing threat to a new socio-political order that had abandoned the needs of the industry-centred working-classes for a knowledge and service based socio-economic model (see Mann, 1991; Welshman, 2006). Derived from Marx's derisive discussions of the 'lumpenproletariat' (Marx, 1852), the concept of the underclass collectivises 'an entire plethora of disenfranchised people into one stigmatizing category, denoting dangerousness and expendability' (Tyler, 2013, p.185).

As understandings of the underclass as an (anti)social category perpetrated through political and public rhetoric throughout this era, social housing was cultivated as the visual centrepiece for this growing moral panic (Tyler, 2013). Blair's reference to social tenants as 'cut off from society's mainstream' encouraged a common understanding that social tenancy represented the epicentre of society's ills: a breeding ground for the abject and the dangerous. These associations have further justified policies that contribute to home unmaking agendas that focus on the derailment of rights to home for social tenants and those that are welfare dependent. Rhetoric and imagery that connects social housing with understandings of a social underclass further justified the unravelling of social tenants' rights to home by framing such decisions as morally necessary and fair. For example, the advent during the 1990s of stock transfer from local authorities to housing associations, and the private financing of social housing services through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) further dismantled social tenants' long-term rights to their homes. Assumptions around the private sector as producing higher quality and more cost-effective housing has further justified the erosion of social housing and increased reliance on the private sector to produce housing (Hodkinson, 2011; Campkin, 2013). This in turn has contributed to a rise in urban regeneration projects that in large

part demolish social housing estates and decant their residents to make way for profit-bearing property owners and private tenants (Campkin, 2013; Lees, 2014).

More and more, tenure type has been deployed to stratify, exclude and dismiss particular citizens from the distinctly neoliberal homely imaginings instilled in political rhetoric, with the council-flat dwelling, white British workless underclass developed as a firmly established trope in British popular culture (Haylett, 2001). Recent UK documentaries such as *Benefits Street*, *Skint* (Channel 4, 2014 and 2013-15 respectively) and *On Benefits & Proud* (Channel 5, 2013) are high-profile examples of a popularised and ongoing exclusionary process that frames particular, classed British citizens as Other (Crossley & Slater, 2014). Such documentaries characterise those who are welfare dependent as ‘the bad seeds of the family’; lazy scroungers that threaten to disrupt the security of the homespace from within via a lack of social and economic productivity, and who drain the resources of those that do contribute to the nation. Such discourse has therefore cemented a socio-political landscape that frames home unmaking agendas as acceptable for those deemed undeserving of their homes, and enabled the introduction of policies such as the bedroom tax that specifically dismantle the homemaking capacities of social tenants (Nowicki, in press 2017).

Home unmaking in the Cameron era

Former Prime Minister David Cameron continued to retain both homemaking and moralised forms of home unmaking as central to his administrations’ political rhetoric, whilst at the same time implementing stringent housing reforms that in particular penalise the welfare-dependent. Citizens were encouraged to form homes and households that are in keeping with normative neoliberal ideologies. Married couples have been rewarded with tax breaks, and same-sex marriage was legalised in 2014 by Cameron’s government with much political and social aplomb. In the same period, a programme focusing on ‘troubled families’ associated with welfare dependency, addiction and crime moralised such figures as responsible for a ‘Broken Britain’; a reduction in family values framed as a growing national crisis that must be curbed by government intervention (Cameron, 2011; Wilkinson, 2013). As Wilkinson notes, ‘despite the supposed increasing acceptance of sexual diversity [for example through the legalisation of same-sex marriage], an exclusionary rhetoric of ‘family values’ continues to circulate’ (2013, p.206). This inclusion of LGBTQ relationships into normative familial

values such as marriage, versus the implementation of highly exclusionary and divisive policies such as the bedroom tax and programmes that point to ‘troubled families’ as at the centre of the nation’s ills, are decisions in large part centred around understandings of what a home *should* be (Brown, 2015). Much like his predecessors, and in particular Thatcher, policies and legislative changes relating to housing and the familial were firmly structured around socially conservative understandings of the responsible, self-sustaining nuclear family: married, professional and home-owning (Wilkinson, 2013; Brown, 2015). Such idealised depictions of the home have in tandem continued to encourage populist understandings of the homelives of social tenants as sites of degeneracy and limited social participation.

Despite the divisiveness present in his administrations’ housing policies, Cameron’s rhetoric in relation to the home conversely promoted unity, with the nation depicted as a homespace for all. In his 2014 speech to the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham, Cameron explicitly placed homemaking at the centre of his aspirations for the country’s future within the framework of compassionate, one-nation conservatism, asserting his desire to ‘build a Britain that everyone is proud to call home’ (Cameron, 2014). Cameron in particular focused on the plight of the poorest in society, declaring;

We are one people in one union and everyone here can be proud of that... And here, today, I want to set out how in this generation we can build a country whose future we can all be proud of...how we can secure a better future for all. *How we can build a Britain that everyone is proud to call home.* Families come first. They are the way you make a nation strong from the inside out. I care deeply about those who struggle to get by...we are on your side, helping you be all you can. (Cameron, 2014, emphasis my own)

Here, Cameron emphasises a desire for a singular, unified homespace, secured through strong familial structures and overseen by a paternalist and compassionate Conservative government. In the speech, Cameron places particular emphasis on unity, belonging (‘we are one people’) and social security (‘we can secure a better future for all’), evoking well-established (if grossly over-simplified) affectations of home as ‘ours’, a sacrosanct site of safety and security to be prioritised and protected. Cameron also focuses on the familial

as an integral means of state construction; the foundation of 'a nation strong from the inside out'. Cameron's political rhetoric is clearly founded in homemaking discourse, constructing a sense of unified nation-building and explicitly framing the home and family as the key to a prosperous and secure state. This is exemplified by Cameron's incorporation of homely imagery during his 2015 general election campaign, whereby he conducted an intimate interview with the BBC from the kitchen of his Cotswolds home (BBC, 2015). The interview depicts Cameron as an 'average family man' character, cheering his son on at a football match on the village common, and preparing a meal in his rustic country kitchen (very much mirroring the homely representations of his predecessor Thatcher discussed earlier). Here, Cameron explicitly brings the intimacies of home life to the fore of political rhetoric, his interview implicitly assuring his potential electorate that his continued leadership would be one centred on traditional values of homemaking.

Alongside his cosy espousals of homeliness, Cameron's rhetoric has also continued along a by now well-established trajectory that attributes social tenancy and worklessness to moral decay. His compassionate, homely one-nation speeches concurrently, and contradictorily, include decidedly othering language that seeks to reinforce the moralisation of home unmaking along classed lines. Interlaced throughout many of Cameron's calls of compassion, social unity, and constructions of the nation-as-home are numerous references that allude specifically to supporting those who 'want to get on and *work hard* in life' (Cameron, 2015b, emphasis my own); those 'who do the right thing, *put the effort in, who work* and build communities' (Cameron, 2014, emphasis my own); and promises 'to back *working* people', implicitly condemning citizens who are unemployed, regardless of their circumstances (Cameron, 2015a, emphasis my own). Therefore, within the homely imagery of compassionate governance that seeks to maintain and protect a national homespace for all, the workless other is simultaneously framed as unwilling to participate, a deviant figure that chooses not to contribute to national homemaking agendas, and thus framed as undeserving of rights to home. Such othering again re-establishes conceptions of those who are welfare-reliant as socially immoral. This in turn reinforces justification for the implementation of home unmaking policies such as the bedroom tax that fixate on the penalisation of those living in social housing.

This process of homely and familial rhetoric that emphasises unification whilst simultaneously excluding particular citizens and dismantling their homemaking capacities again highlights the complex, and at times contradictory, relationship between rhetorics of home and the realities of housing policy. Cameron's avowal that he aimed to create 'a Britain *everyone* is proud to call home', alongside his consistent references to one-nationism and the unity of British citizens, stands in stark contrast to the realities of many of the policies implemented under his premiership. On the one hand, Cameron earnestly promised to support the most vulnerable and ensure a morally just society that protects all those who want to 'get on in life'. On the other, his governments introduced a suite of policy reforms that have fundamentally destabilised the homemaking capacities of hundreds of thousands of Britain's most economically and socially vulnerable citizens, most notably through the controversial Welfare Reform Act (2012). The remainder of this paper focuses on one of the most publicly criticised policies to emerge from the Act, the bedroom tax. In particular, I emphasise the ways in which the rhetorical lineage discussed is manifested in current policy, and highlight the tensions between homemaking/unmaking in political rhetoric and the realities of housing policy in the everyday.

The bedroom tax: home unmaking through housing policy

In the midst of Cameron's avowal that the Conservatives are the party of compassion, ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable and building 'a Britain that everyone is proud to call home', the Welfare Reform Act 2012 brought about a suite of significant changes to the welfare system that arguably undermine such depictions. Socially and politically framed as a necessary austerity measure in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, the Act included; a benefit cap that limits the amount of total benefits a claimant can receive; alterations to council tax benefits meaning that all households, no matter what their income, must contribute towards council tax; and stringent 'work capability assessments' for those in receipt of disability allowance. The reform that is the focus of the final part of this paper, the 'removal of the spare room subsidy', or 'bedroom tax', sees a reduction in housing benefit availability for social tenants deemed to have one or more spare bedroom.

The bedroom tax has affected more than half a million households since its implementation in April 2013 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). The policy

applies to social tenants in England and Wales in receipt of housing benefit, reducing the amount a tenant is able to access if they are deemed to have one or more 'spare' bedroom (a 14 per cent reduction for one spare bedroom, or 25 per cent for two or more). Its official title, the 'removal of the spare room subsidy', is built around a moral rhetoric, framing the policy as the reclamation of a generous subsidy misused by social tenants. Its implementation was justified through the assertion that it was a decision based on pragmatism and fairness, bringing housing benefit allowances in line with those in the private rented sector and incentivising those under-occupying to downsize in order to reduce the issue of overcrowding in social housing (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012; Carr & Cowan, 2015).

This rhetoric of fairness further cemented constructions of social tenants as living in unjustly privileged settings: enjoying their 'spare' rooms through the help of housing benefits at the expense of taxpaying homeowners and private tenants aspiring to homeownership. Just as Cameron emphasised the socially conservative home and the nuclear family as at the centre of strong nationhood and responsible citizenship, the bedroom tax has worked in tandem to penalise those who are seen to be living socially irresponsible lives. At a time when legislation such as same-sex marriage has celebrated the increased inclusion of citizens into normative ways of homemaking, the bedroom tax has worked to further delegitimise the homelives of those living in social tenancies as being representative of what a home *should not* be (Wilkinson, 2013; Brown, 2015).

As a consequence, the home lives of social tenants affected by the policy have been penalised, with the policy in particular failing to account for individual and personalised needs within the homespace. This is particularly true of tenants living with physical disabilities, whose 'spare' rooms may be used to store medical equipment or enable them to sleep in a separate room from their partner due to their condition. This is a large concern in regards to the bedroom tax, with two-thirds of those affected living with a disability (Moffat et al, 2015).

During the course of my research for a project examining the impact of various Coalition government housing policies, I met with several people living with a disability who had been affected by the bedroom tax, and had seen a vast decrease in their sense of security within the home as a consequence. Jane^v has been living with severe arthritis for decades, and is a full-time carer for her daughter, who has spina bifida. The small box

room that has made them subject to the bedroom tax is used to store Jane's crutches and her daughter's medication. Luca, the head of a north London tenants and residents' association (TRA), told me of a couple who used to live on his estate who slept in separate rooms due to one of them having a condition whereby he would wake up continuously during the night, therefore disturbing his wife's sleep. In 2013, the couple became subject to the bedroom tax due to their second bedroom, integral for the health of both husband and wife, being deemed spare. Their local authority did not grant them Discretionary Housing Payment^{vi}, and they were therefore forced to downsize as they could no longer afford their home. They are now sleeping in the same bedroom in a one-bedroom flat, with the wife's lack of sleep vastly affecting both her work and her relationship with her husband.

Vas, another participant affected by the bedroom tax, suffers from long-term physical conditions that have left her unable to walk without the aid of crutches. She has been losing housing benefit through the bedroom tax because one of her adult children has left home, leaving a bedroom empty. For Vas, the prospect of moving as a consequence of the bedroom tax brought with it the threat of having to leave behind valuable social networks, such as friends and family living close by, and her children being forced either to move schools or travel potentially large distances every day. Both Jane and Vas told me that they had experienced rent arrears for the first time in their lives since the advent of the bedroom tax, and although both were extremely reluctant to leave their homes, were understandably concerned as to what would happen as their indebtedness continued to increase. Both participants saw the bedroom tax as delegitimising their rights to the homes they had lived in for decades, with the policy dismissing the same aspects of home that Cameron espoused in political rhetoric such as its role in empowerment, autonomy and individualisation. As Vas commented:

I made quite a lot of changes to this place over the years to improve it. I paid for that all myself and I get nothing back. And now I'm being charged, not being able to pay my rent for the first time ever! (face-to-face interview, 20/02/2015)

Conversely to the presiding rhetoric of injustice that frames social tenants as draining the resources of the hard-working taxpayer, Vas highlights the policy's dismissal of her own input into the house, with her partner doing much of the necessary repair work that her local authority regularly failed to address adequately. Through the bedroom tax, Vas has

seen the home she has constructed for herself over the past twenty years be slowly taken from her, with her increasing rent arrears making the threat of forced eviction an ever-more likely outcome. Ultimately, Vas' claims to her home have been delegitimised through an ongoing political rhetoric that heavily implies that social tenants do not, and should not, have the same rights to home as those who own private property.

These socio-political constructions that celebrate normative forms of home such as the home-owning nuclear family are deeply entrenched within political rhetoric. As a consequence, such rhetoric has severe impacts on those deemed external to this understanding of the 'correct' form of home. Such rhetorics simultaneously, implicitly and explicitly, delegitimise and deride the homemaking decisions of social tenants deemed to be living inappropriately. This was felt acutely by Annie, living in a now-desirable north London borough:

There's an attitude of 'these people shouldn't be here because it's [her flat] worth too much'...But it's not just bricks and mortar, it's my home! *Just because I don't own it, it doesn't mean it's not mine...*this [coalition] government is fundamentally about disempowerment. (face-to-face interview, 10/01/2015)

For Annie, the bedroom tax had led to a sense that she felt she had to defend her rights to home and her position as a social tenant, a right she had previously assumed as fundamental and unchallenged. In a socio-political landscape whereby the financialisation of the home has positioned homeownership as the only true means of laying long-term claims to home, Annie felt exasperated that the home that she has lived in for decades is not understood as being hers. Her exclamation that 'just because I don't own it, it doesn't mean it's not mine...' is emblematic of an embedded conceptualisation of social tenants as inhabiting property that they should have no expectation of permanently making home. This is in spite of tenancies that, until Cameron's administration and the advent of 'flexible tenancies'^{vii} were understood to be for life. The bedroom tax has therefore exacerbated a decades-long shift in the conceptualisation of social tenants as being undeserving of the same rights to home as homeowners due to their incomppliance with neoliberal understandings of appropriate citizenship.

Annie also commented to me that for the first time since she had become a social tenant in the 1980s, she felt a sense of shame, wanting to hide her tenure status from

neighbours due to a fear that they would perceive her as a 'workshy scrounger'. Clearly, prevailing rhetorics around social tenancy as equalling social deviancy have been so well entrenched by the bedroom tax and other welfare reform policies that have preceded it that social tenants themselves have in some cases begun to internalise this discourse. This is what Caldeira (2001) has termed 'the dilemma of classification', whereby those that are socially demonised replicate the same language and rhetoric when referring to themselves and others who are similarly stigmatised. Here, the impact of home rhetorics are clearly manifest in Annie's experience of the bedroom tax, with housing discourse and policy implementation centred on the promotion of private tenure and the derision of social tenancy leading to the dismemberment of rights to home, not only materially in terms of the threat of forced eviction, but socio-politically as social tenants themselves understand their social position as one that is unproductive and at odds with normative values of homemaking. This once again brings to the fore the intrinsic connection between housing policy and rhetorics of homemaking and unmaking. The bedroom tax has simultaneously curtailed social tenants' rights to their homes, and framed this as a morally just action. Perhaps more pertinently still, ongoing rhetorics of idealised and moralised homemaking that are centred on tenure have encouraged social tenants *themselves* to understand their own social position and rights to home as inferior to that of their home-owning counterparts.

The strength of such an embedded moralisation of the home through tenure type is all the more astonishing when we consider the high-profile, and at times cross-party, condemnation of the bedroom tax as an infringement of human rights. In 2013, an inspection by the United Nations special rapporteur for housing Raquel Rolnik culminated in a report that called for the immediate repeal of the policy. The report warned of the perils of the bedroom tax. She stated that it was a potentially retrogressive policy, leaving those affected in the precarious position of either struggling to stay in their homes by reducing other living costs such as food and clothing, or having no choice but to leave the homes where they had 'raised their children and lived their lives' (Rolnik, 2013, p.13). She noted the 'tremendous despair' felt by many social tenants affected by the bedroom tax, and recommended that the policy be re-examined in light of emerging data that suggested little budgetary benefit, low moving rates of affected tenants, and growing rent arrears.

Legal challenges to the bedroom tax have also been commonplace since its implementation. Cases such as that of the Carmichaels, a story widely reported at the time, brought to public attention components of the bedroom tax that discriminate against the specific needs of many disabled people. Jacqueline Carmichael has spina bifida: her husband, also her 24-hour carer, sleeps in a separate room as a consequence of her condition. Despite their medical need for two bedrooms, the couple nonetheless received a 14 per cent reduction in their housing benefit eligibility. The couple took their case to court, and at a tribunal hearing in April 2014, a judge ruled that the Carmichaels were entitled to two bedrooms, and that the bedroom tax should not have been imposed. In 2014 a group of adults with disabilities affected by the bedroom tax, including the Carmichaels, continued to use the British legal system as a means of resistance to the policy. The group took their case to the Court of Appeal, arguing that the impact of the bedroom tax on disabled people is discriminatory and therefore unlawful (Leigh Day 2014). Although their case was rejected, further legal victories have recently been won against the Department for Work and Pensions. In January 2016, the Court of Appeal ruled in favour of two parties penalised by the bedroom tax on the grounds that in their cases the policy was unlawful. The policy was challenged by the Rutherfords, grandparents of a teenager who needs overnight care, and by a victim of domestic violence whose spare room consists of a panic room to protect her from a violent ex-partner. Legal resistance to the bedroom tax continued in March 2016, when five parties, including the Carmichaels and the Rutherfords, took their case to the Supreme Court, the highest in the UK legal system. In November 2016, the Court ruled in favour of two of the five cases^{viii}, stating that the bedroom tax is discriminatory against those with medical conditions that require a person sleeping in a separate bedroom from a partner or relative. This inevitably raises further questions as to the discriminatory nature of the policy.

The policy has also been criticised within the Conservative party itself as unjustly invasive, with some backbench Conservative MPs warning of its potential to unravel the homely discourses constructed by Cameron. Indeed, the Prime Minister's former speech writer Clare Foges suggested that the Conservatives 'move on from the bedroom tax. It is not working as had been hoped and will remain a fly in the one-nation ointment' (Foges, 2015). In June 2015, the threat of a Conservative rebellion due to the bedroom tax was

also reported to be on the horizon, with Conservative MP Daniel Kawczynski reportedly writing a letter to then-Department for Work and Pensions Secretary Ian Duncan Smith calling for the policy's impact to be reviewed (Fearn, 2015; Hardman, 2015). Kawczynski also informed the tabloid *Sunday People* that he was planning in autumn 2015 to hold talks with colleagues concerned with the unfair impact of the bedroom tax on their constituents^x (Nelson, 2015).

And yet, despite widespread and high-profile condemnation of the bedroom tax, the Department for Work and Pensions have shown no sign that they plan to repeal the policy. Indeed, it has recently been announced that pensioners, until now exempt, will be subject to a 'new bedroom tax', in which elderly people deemed to be under-occupying their homes will potentially lose high levels of housing benefit due to changes in Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates^x (Merrick, 2016). It would appear, then, that the prescience of rhetoric that denounces social tenancy as a form of homemaking to be penalised and discouraged continues to inform and lead housing policy decision-making, despite multiple legal and political resistance efforts.

Conclusion

Through a dualistic methodological approach, this paper has highlighted how imaginaries of home are central in informing housing policy, most notably through the moralisation of tenure. The lineage of political rhetoric that centres around the home and familial was discussed, with a particular focus on the 'neoliberal turn' and the social advent of the home as primarily a space of financial security and equity provision (Montgomerie & Büdenbender, 2015). The implications of a rhetorical shift towards 'asset-based welfare' was considered in relation to the ways in which those who remain in social housing have been figured, by Conservative and Labour governments alike, as socially and morally deviant, and thus undeserving of the same rights to home as property owners. The bedroom tax was shown to exemplify this political imaginary, with homely rhetoric espoused alongside an invasive housing policy that has rendered many social tenants affected struggling to maintain their rights to home. Through research conducted with social tenants affected by the bedroom tax in London, the second part of the paper explored the ways in which the policy has instigated a process of home unmaking through the threat of forced eviction and an increasing sense of shame and self-deprecation among social tenants. Policies and rhetoric that celebrate particular forms of home, such

as the legalisation of same-sex marriage, tax breaks for married couples and the continued advent of the Right to Buy, work to legitimise a specific understanding of what a home should be. Simultaneously, they carve out a public imaginary that derides those who do not aspire to these particular idealisations of home (Wilkinson, 2013; Brown, 2015).

This paper has in part been an exercise in encouraging further dialogue between critical geographies of home and housing scholarship within cultural and social geographies. Through both tracing the lineage of home in political rhetoric in recent decades in the UK, and exploring the bedroom tax as a key case study, I have highlighted the ways in which housing policy is in part defined and shaped by conceptualisations of what a home should, and by equal measure *should not*, be (Brown, 2015). In a socio-political climate whereby the home is utilised as both a means of constructing the ideal neoliberal citizen, and as a method for justifying the implementation of ever-stringent housing policy directed at social tenants and others who do not conform to homemaking ideals, the importance of better connecting critical geographies of home literature and housing studies has never been more pressing. Further exploration of the ways in which the home is deployed as a social and political tool is essential if we are to better understand government decision-making processes and their everyday impacts on citizens' lives (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Home unmaking, in particular, lends itself to understanding the ways in which rhetoric and policy simultaneously construct and dismantle different forms of home in order to fulfil political agendas (Fernandez, 2014).

The bedroom tax represents a striking example of the ways in which moralised representations of the homespace are manifested in housing policy at a time when the home and family have once again been placed at the centre of political rhetoric, notably through David Cameron's revival of one-nationism and his assurances of constructing 'a Britain *everyone* is proud to call home' (Cameron, 2014). Dissatisfaction with this often contradictory relationship between rhetorics and realities of home is reflected in the tireless efforts of campaign groups seeking to highlight the ways in which the bedroom tax impacts the everyday lives of vulnerable people. Public protests and marches, alongside the recent release of important works in film and theatre such as Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* and Alexander Zeldin's *Love*, are perhaps reflective of greater public concern around discriminatory welfare and housing policies. However, despite the

bedroom tax's clear home unmaking implications, and the high-profile methods of resistance that it has triggered, the policy remains in place, with plans to extend similar schemes to pensioners through changes in housing benefit eligibility in the coming years.

The power of the home, then, remains an ever-growing facet of the social, political and cultural imaginary, and continues to have overwhelming consequences for those subjected to housing policies that moralise citizens through the tenure of their homes.

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Notes

ⁱ Labour party Lord Best is widely credited with coining the name 'bedroom tax' shortly after its conception (Brown 2013) and the policy has been referred to as such by both the media, opposition parties, and the general public ever since.

ⁱⁱ The bedroom tax had not been implemented in Northern Ireland at the time of writing. As of 2014 Scotland effectively ended the policy regionally, as Westminster granted Holyrood the power to set its own Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) caps. This means that the Scottish government now covers the cost of all those in Scotland affected by the bedroom tax.

ⁱⁱⁱ These interviews were conducted as part of a larger three-year project exploring the impact of various coalition government housing policies on low-income Londoners.

^{iv} Although the right to buy had existed since the early 1970s, it was not until its inclusion in the 1980 Housing Act that the policy became widespread.

^v Pseudonyms have been used to preserve participants' anonymity

^{vi} Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) is a source of funding allocated by central government to local authorities to assist tenants struggling with rent payments and other housing issues on a temporary and discretionary basis.

^{vii} In 2012, the government introduced 'flexible tenancies', which local authorities can choose to implement. These consist of 2 or 5 year tenancies for social tenants, rather than the previously universal secure 'lifetime' tenancies. Flexible tenancies have been designed to eventually replace all secure tenancies in England (Parkin & Wilson, 2016).

^{viii} The Rutherford and Carmichael families.

^{ix} Although to date it is unclear whether such talks were held, or what their outcome has been.

^x Former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne in March 2016 announced that housing benefit allowances in social housing will become aligned with LHA rates, which determines the amount of housing benefit eligible for tenants in the private rented sector.

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