
Intraviews

Joscha Metzger 2021: *Genossenschaften und die Wohnungsfrage: Konflikte im Feld der sozialen Wohnungswirtschaft* [Cooperatives and the Housing Question: Conflicts in the Field of Social Housing]. Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot

Housing cooperatives have been part of the German rental market for over 150 years, ever since the height of the industrialization process, forming a third pillar between private, for-profit housing and the state-owned sector. While some housing cooperatives are already a century old, having responsibility for several thousand flats, others comprise just a single apartment building and may be the result of a relatively recent squat legalization. All of them, however, share a common legal form and principle, in that tenants are shareholders of the cooperative from which they rent their flat or house. With one vote per member, they democratically control the cooperative either directly or through elected representatives, and as shareholders they are entitled to the profits arising from their own rents. Rent regulations legislated at the federal level and tenant protection laws apply; these are complemented by guarantees built into the individual cooperative's statutes, such as a life-long-right to remain.

Against this backdrop, Joscha Metzger's book *Genossenschaften und die Wohnungsfrage (Cooperatives and the Housing Question)* opens with a group of tenants protesting against the demolition of their homes by their own cooperative in the city of Hamburg. As the title makes clear, the book deals with both the inner contradictions of Germany's large, not-for-profit housing cooperatives and their evolving position in the field of housing. Yet, as the subtitle also signals (*Konflikte im Feld der sozialen Wohnungswirtschaft / Conflicts in the Field of Social Housing*), cooperatives are not the only providers of not-for-profit or social housing: together with state-owned companies, social housing and religious or charitable foundations, they form a distinct field within the German rental market—a market that Jim Kemeny describes as 'integrated', because there are no strict divisions between for-profit and not-for-profit actors when it comes to regulations or subsidies.

Cooperatives make up about 5% of the federal housing stock in Germany and 10–15 % in large cities like Berlin and Hamburg. They are generally perceived as providers of secure, high-quality, affordable housing. Because they are non-profit yet still private entities, cooperatives enjoy support from various political camps. And yet, as Metzger finds, member-led protests like the one in Hamburg challenge this reputation. They reveal, in the author's view, the fundamental contradiction internalized within cooperatives between housing as a home and housing as a means for profit. In the case of the large cooperatives that Metzger focuses on, which have hundreds or even thousands of members, this contradiction is mediated through the

cooperative's professional management and democratic institutions, including the elected member-representatives.

To understand how the contradiction is handled, Metzger uses a range of qualitative methods from document analysis to interviews and participant observation. He presents and contextualizes different subjectivities and strategies. A core example is the understanding of participation as presented by managers: while member delegates are expected to invest themselves in organizing neighbourhood activities, their involvement ('interference') with business strategies is discouraged. Getting involved in questions about rent levels is perceived as a particularistic pursuit against the common good and its self-proclaimed professional keepers—the management. Delegates are therefore encouraged to raise concerns in meetings prior to the larger assemblies, or else are treated with a carrot and stick approach to win their loyalty.

However, Metzger's interest does not stop at the local level, and macro developments are more than just a background to his research. He analyses the history of not-for-profit housing and housing policies in Germany in great depth and with a focus on his case-city of Hamburg. He simultaneously addresses both large formations and the concrete agents of change, always linking the political and economic circumstances to the changing role and self-description of cooperatives. The author uses regulation theory to describe the changing regimes and modes of regulation—constellations in which capital accumulation takes place and is legally institutionalized on a large scale. With regard to housing policy, he relates the post-Fordist mode to a shift from highly subsidized large-scale housing provision to strategies for creating a 'social mix' within 'functioning neighbourhoods' that largely rely on private capital.

The changes in housing policy, as Metzger explains, also shape the scope of action for cooperatives, which have themselves transformed over time. With their roots in a multitude of associations—from the paternalistic projects of wealthy philanthropists to petit-bourgeois partnerships of convenience and workers' self-help groups—cooperatives became much larger and increasingly professional during the Fordist mid-twentieth century in West Germany. This provoked the formation of new, smaller cooperatives oriented towards what Metzger describes as the decommodification of dwelling (*Wohnen*). Added to the already existing decommodification of housing (*Wohnraum*), which is about the non-profit provision of (somewhat) affordable homes, this introduces aspects of self-organization and the incorporation of personal needs.

Metzger focuses on the large conventional cooperatives which have been affected by policy changes like the repeal of tax exemptions for non-profit housing in 1990 or the reduction of subsidies for social housing that accompanied a narrowing of the target group. In the tight housing markets of larger cities, these cooperatives are expected to provide affordable housing and organize 'socially mixed' and 'functioning' neighbourhoods. This strategy, as Metzger notes, is not aimed at the gentrified inner-city, but at peripheral neighbourhoods with lower income levels. Cooperatives thus seek to attract middle-income households and young families, hoping for higher purchase power while at the same time trying to avoid becoming agents of displacement. This in turn leads to densification projects like the one described on the first pages of the book.

The core conflict in debates about housing has been theorized in political economic terms as the tension between use value and exchange value. A house is both a home and an economic means to create profit. Cooperatives permit decommodification through collective ownership by tenants, but they still need to generate income in order to function within a shifting capitalist housing economy.

The most comprehensive approach Metzger brings to his study is Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory, according to which society comprises a number of distinct yet overlapping social fields. All fields are constituted by the relative positions of the actors involved, while acting within them follows field-specific rules and requires distinct kinds of cultural capital. Fields are never fully stable, because different actors (such as tenants and managers) compete for influence and resources to further their interests. However, the hierarchical positions and unequal access to resources do provide some stability. The theory thus connects the stability and change of large structures and patterns to the relations and doings of concrete actors.

For Metzger, cooperatives are also social fields. In the mandatory assemblies it is theoretically possible for tenant delegates to outvote managers and enforce their interests, but in practice managers have access to the operative processes and thus privileged knowledge: although bound by laws and statutes, they not only hold higher capital but also have the power to subtly manipulate the rules of the field by shaping the settings within which discontent can be voiced and organized.

Like Bourdieu, Metzger understands fields themselves as being hierarchically ordered. Cooperatives are part of the non-profit sector of housing which belongs to the general housing economy. Both are linked to and influenced by the political field, where regulations and subsidies are determined. This embeddedness becomes apparent in one of Metzger's core findings; namely, that the reputation of cooperatives in the field of housing works as symbolic capital for the managers. Even those strategies that do not accord with standard cooperative values can be legitimized by suggesting that cooperatives are generally acting as the good guys.

This is why protests like the one in Hamburg against demolishing affordable homes to achieve densification cause significant concern: they challenge what Metzger (following Bourdieu) calls a *doxa*, an unquestioned and shared truth. *Doxas* can be challenged by heterodox positions, such as the idea that cooperatives should not only be non-profit-oriented but should also provide self-organized living space according to individual needs and capacities. Because they challenge the status quo, heterodox positions tend to be marginalized through orthodox positions—brought forward by those who seek to conserve the status quo. Sticking to Metzger's example, this could be the belief that affordability is secured if rents are below the market level and that the aim of cooperatives is not to ensure self-governance but a quiet life.

In conclusion, Metzger's work on large housing cooperatives in Germany makes at least three important contributions to the debate. First, as the affordable housing crisis becomes increasingly acknowledged in German federal politics, not-for-profit models are reappearing as part of the political debate. While cooperatives are a very familiar part of German life, they are rarely reflected on, and this book provides exactly the broad theoretical, empirical and historical background needed to inform the debate (although the case of eastern Germany is left out of the discussion). Second, the author illustrates how political economy, regulation theory and theory of practice can be combined to understand the changing discourses and practices of non-profit housing provision. He thereby fuses ethnographic insight into concrete

struggles with empirical macro perspectives and theoretical approaches. Third, Metzger's work challenges several orthodox beliefs within current political and academic debates on the provision of sufficient, adequate and affordable housing in tight urban markets, putting the decommodification of housing at the centre of the debate. In sum, the book aims to break the cycle of repeated, 'market conforming' interventions that enable what David Harvey calls a temporary spatial fix for capital rather than securing long-term housing provision.

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