

THE TRAGEDY OF THE URBAN COMMONS: HOUSING POLICY VALUES AND EQUIVOCATION

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Abstract: Housing policy research has a precarious link to overarching theory. Any resemblance to replicable phenomena, though interesting and noteworthy, is coincidental and, at best, existential in the context of time, place and human interventions. Complexity in its most visceral form beguiles the rank and file of positivist scholars into believing that the application of algebraic expressions and algorithms, alone, can explicate the human dynamic, a dynamic that is galvanized by political, social and personal self-interest. Positivism invites a construct of equivocation with an internal bias that seeks to influence values that are ineffective in informing housing policy. In using the “tragedy of the urban commons” as a contextual metaphor to describe the disconnect between positivist policy research and housing policy outcomes, I challenge quantitative researchers and qualitative thinkers, alike, to engage in a pragmatic dialogue around housing policy values, practices and demonstrable outcomes.

Keywords: Housing Policy, Positivism, Deconcentration, Migration and Regeneration

Introduction

In the nineteenth-century, Auguste Comte advanced the theory of “positivism” to explicate the intended outcome of humanity’s progressive quest for knowledge, that is, the transformation of myth into science (Wicks, 2003). Comte’s epistemological progression originates with religious expressions which are overcome by philosophical concepts, which, in turn, are overcome by the final “positive” stage, science; the most precise, logical and observable method for attaining positive truths (Wicks, 2003). Since the time of Comte, the pervasive movement of positivism gained momentum in the social sciences and is ubiquitous as a major component of the policy research field and the intransigent positivist scholars that subscribe to the literal precepts of positivism.

Such intransigent positivist scholars are locked into a dependency on scientific validations and verifiable proofs. There is a view in the literature that the scholarly output of positivist researchers obscures and feigns the reasoning behind their findings in order to avoid the “messiness” of real life research (Robson, 2000). The unfettered enthusiasm of positivist policy scholars to pursue complexity, for the sake of complexity, believing that complexity infuses rigor into research and somehow validates the results of their quest for generalizable theory, is a spurious exercise, without regard to potential risks.

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This messiness of real life research and the corresponding risks portend the degradation of research values associated with positivism. Barzun criticized the tendency of scientific research to overemphasize the refinement and application of analytical tools while losing sight of the subject and outcomes under investigation (Barzun, 1974).

Analysis slices things finer and finer, taking heroic risks with the operator's fingers, but there comes a time when only the analyst is left and the scalpel might as well be thrown away. (Barzun, 1974)

Taking a more radical viewpoint, Marcuse, concerned with the extinction of free thought, argued that “operational and behavioral concepts” nested in an imposed commonality of academic theory, reason and behaviorism would allow society to transform “scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination” (Marcuse, 1991). If put to the task, current views of the policy sciences would dispel Marcuse's argument pointing out that policy research and theory would be incapable of such domination because both lack unity and common agendas (Meier, 2009; Weimer, 2008). This is not to say, however, that Marcuse was entirely misdirected in his thinking. Despite his unease with a science-enriched regime's domination over free thought, Marcuse was wary of the negative influence academic theory, reason and behaviorism – arguably, as a collective thought synonymous with positivism – could have on public policy.

To compound matters, positivist scholars believe human behavior can be explained statistically (Rubin & Rubin, 2003). The vagaries of human behavior are not subject to deterministic causality – yet the most intransigent positivist scholars would argue otherwise.

Positivists presuppose that knowledge is politically and socially neutral and is achieved by following a rigid plan for gathering information. They argue that a commitment to quantitative precision and an accumulation of facts is the way on which to build a close approximation to a reality that exists independently of human perception. (Rubin & Rubin, 2005)

Complexity in its most visceral form beguiles the rank and file of positivist scholars into believing that the application of algebraic expressions and algorithms, alone, can explicate the human dynamic, a dynamic that is galvanized by political, social and personal self-interest.

Transforming supposedly politically and socially neutral hypotheses into scientific pronouncements that purport to elucidate the rationale for influencing public policy decisions is wrought with risks, especially in the area of housing policy where the stakes are high for the most vulnerable citizens of a regime.

The most vulnerable citizens of the regime are those citizens who live in or on the edge of poverty. To describe this condition and the consequences of positivist research and the ambiguous impact it may have on housing policy, Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin, 1972) will be used as a metaphor for the "tragedy of the urban commons." In the same manner that Hardin's Commons is depleted of its resources under a regime of egoism, positivist research and the resulting public policy deplete the housing options available to those who must survive in the "urban commons." The Tragedy of the Urban Commons will be discussed later. The next section will present examples of positivist housing policy research in the context of understanding the research methodology, findings and common themes.

Examples of Positivist Housing Policy Research

Positivist housing policy research seeks to establish a connection to overarching theory, yet the link to that connection is precarious and illusive. Any resemblance that positivist scholarship may have to replicable phenomena, though interesting and noteworthy, is coincidental and, at best, existential in the context of time, place and human interventions. The following examples of positivist housing policy research published in recognized scholarly journals will demonstrate that complexity does not necessarily yield substantive and meaningful fruit.

Murray used a sequential logit model to examine the probability of low-income renter households locating quality, affordable housing (Murray, 1997). The source of Murray's research data was the American Housing Survey's 1989 National Core File published by the United States Bureau of the Census in 1991. The methodological approach employed the application of a series of binary models and assigning them to a place within a "housing choice hierarchy" developed for the study to analyze the probability of finding affordable housing, $P(A)$; the probability of finding quality, affordable housing, $P(Q/A)$; and the probability that crowding influenced the affordability decision, $P(C/Q, A)$, all of which were run through as series of logistic regression models across numerous variables for household characteristics, housing type and geographical location (Murray, 1997). Murray explained the algorithm for the models and provided an empirical analysis of nine probability tables making reference to three additional

tables in the appendix. The research results indicated that the probability of locating “affordable, adequate-quality, and non-crowded housing” increased substantially for households receiving federally funded housing assistance, leading Murray to conclude that researchers would be in a better position to inform housing policy designed to deal with the “real constraints on housing choice,” if researchers had “specific local data” enabling them to create better models for identifying those households with the greatest housing needs (Murray, 1997).

Murray’s positivist housing policy research published in 1997 was based on aggregated national data that was collected in 1989 and published in 1991. This is problematic for a number of reasons, the most evident of which is the fact that the data is outdated. Robert Higgs, an economist, asserted that “[b]ecause many official economic statistics are ill defined conceptually, they fail to capture what they purport to measure (Higgs, 2004).” This assertion by Higgs regarding economic statistics could certainly apply to Bureau of the Census data, a major source of official socio-economic statistics. The quality and source integrity of the data used by Murray, therefore, could be challenged. The research finding that the probability of locating quality, affordable housing would increase substantially for those low-income households receiving housing assistance approximates a tautological expression. It would be true by virtue of the economic value of housing assistance that low-income households receiving housing assistance would find housing easier than low-income households without the same economic advantage. These observations notwithstanding, Murray’s commitment to positivism is heavily focused on the methodology as a means to create a deterministic model with the end, to create better models.

George Galster’s article published in 2002, which proposed a model for the analysis of the economic efficiency of deconcentrating poverty populations, is a seminal work in positivist housing policy research. Relying solely on the “meta-analysis” of published empirical research from a number of social science fields and statistical applications, Galster developed a conceptual econometric model to identify the “social benefits and costs associated with alternative spatial distributions of the poor” by utilizing a methodological approach based on a “comparative static analysis” framework (Galster, 2002). Galster relied solely on a disciplined mathematical analysis comprised of algebraic functions, algorithms and multiple independent variables, operationalized and represented in symbols and mathematical equations. The functions for total social benefits (TSB) and total social costs (TSC) are:

$$TSB = \sum_n \sum_i I_{in} \quad \text{and:} \quad TSC = \sum_n \sum_i (B_{in}) \quad (\text{Galster, 2002})$$

Without describing all aspects of Galster's methodology, the symbols in the functions presented here are operationalized as neighborhood (n); household (i); household income (I_{in}); behavior (B); and behavioral impact on household income (B_{in}) (Galster, 2002). In his conclusion, while identifying an optimal range for neighborhood poverty levels, Galster asserted that in order to assess the social efficiency of moving low-income households to lower poverty neighborhoods ("alternative spatial distribution"), "...one must identify the mathematical way in which the percentage of poor residents in a neighborhood affects all residents' incomes and problem behaviors (Galster, 2002)." Although Galster would posit that his model has relevance to housing policy research, Galster would not be convinced of the social efficiency of deconcentrating poverty without additional empirical evidence and further testing of the model with aggregated household and neighborhood data (Galster, 2002).

Galster's positivism is grounded in econometric modeling that is entirely disconnected from any understanding of social dynamics. No real world data is introduced into the various equations and functions – Galster was only interested in creating a model around a theory derived from extant social science and statistical research. A major criticism lodged against positivists is that they posit theories based on "...mathematical manipulation of variables they have predefined, often taking these definitions from an existing academic theory (Rubin & Rubin, 2005)." While Galster may be advancing econometric modeling, he could lay no claim on having any better understanding of the human nuances and range of choices that inform the migration of households within a metropolitan area.

The positivism of Bajari and Kahn and the positivist research of Murray and Galster are complementary in that the work of Bajari and Kahn published in 2005 is a permutation of the methodological approaches of Murray and Galster. Bajari and Kahn used a parametric model of housing choice and analyzed data drawn from the 1990 United States Census of Population and Housing Integrated Public Use Microdata Series with a 1% unweighted sample for three metropolitan areas in order to estimate housing demand based on an application to explain racial segregation in cities (Bajari & Kahn, 2005). They utilized a three-stage methodological approach where the first stage is the determination of a "nonparametric hedonic house price function" as an estimated factor; the second stage is the determination of "household-specific preference parameters for continuous product characteristics using a first order condition for utility maximization" as an inferred factor; and the third stage is the determination of "individual-specific taste coefficients as a function of household demographics and household-specific preference shocks" as artifacts recovered from the

microdata (Bajari & Kahn, 2005). Bajari and Kahn created a complex scheme of equations, regression algorithms, euphemistic language and various modeling techniques which, as a collective methodology, Bajari and Kahn admitted that their methods are “somewhat unique (Bajari & Kahn, 2005).” While highlighting the value of their empirical research approach, Bajari and Kahn concluded that the urbanization of black households is based on the lower cost of housing, closer proximity to employment, and the “disutility” of commuting, while the suburbanization of white households is based on the greater demand for large scale single-family housing and the greater demand for “high human capital communities” (Bajari & Kahn, 2005).”

The research of Bajari and Kahn is traditional positivism. Like Murray and Galster, Bajari and Kahn use highly complex empirical methods, modeling and, similar to Murray, outdated aggregate official statistics to describe human preferences without having any human intervention with the subjects of the research. It appears that a trend or possibly an entire field of positivist inquiry, similar to the research of Bajari and Kahn, known as “ecological inference” is afoot, which fosters a positivist research regime that manipulates aggregate data foregoing the need to engage people directly to investigate policy issues inside of the construct of human understanding and perception.

Researchers in a diverse variety of fields often need to know about individual-level behavior and are not able to collect it directly. In these situations, where survey research or other means of individual-level data collection are infeasible, ecological inference is the best and often the only hope of making progress. Ecological inference is the process of extracting clues about individual behavior from information reported at the group or aggregate level. (King, Rosen & Tanner, 2004)

Bajari and Kahn statistically estimated the choices black and white households make in deciding whether to live in an urban environment or suburban environment and unequivocally declared their conclusions without interacting with members of either racial grouping. The criticism of this type of positivist research is that positivists like Bajari and Kahn assume that they can measure truth with “statistical precision” and condense complexities into quantifiable numbers, while ignoring complex behaviors, subtlety and special cases in order to seek generalizable theory (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The time-degraded data used by Bajari and Kahn to determine the racial preferences for place was fashioned after pre-1989 economic conditions and societal compositions that in all likelihood would not be representative of the nature of things when the article

was published in 2005. In the final analysis, the research of Bajari and Kahn offered statistical hypotheses testing to arrive at generalizations but had nothing to offer in the way of results that could guide housing policy.

Central to Vicino's positivist research agenda presented in an article published in 2008 was a comparative examination of the spatial transformation of suburban areas in the Baltimore metropolitan area between 1970 and 2000. Vicino analyzed 152 census tracts in 21 suburban areas defined as first-tier census designated places and 49 socio-economic variables using a principal component analysis and cluster analysis of United States Bureau of the Census information for the years 1970 and 2000 to approximate the boundaries of the first-tier suburban areas and collect the demographic data aggregated at the census tract level for the suburban areas, in order to develop a five-category neighborhood typology for the year 1970 and a six-category neighborhood typology for the year 2000 (Vicino, 2008). Vicino found that there was "significant spatial transformation" of the first-tier suburban areas in the Baltimore metropolitan area between 1970 and 2000, and concluded that the study of spatial transformation and the trends that differentiate neighborhoods have policy implications that will inform policy makers, planners and community stakeholders and will assist them in the decision making process relative to resource allocation, community planning and neighborhood regeneration (Vicino, 2008).

Vicino's positivism is subtle yet not lacking in complexity. The number of variables Vicino employs, 49 variables to describe 21 suburban areas, is evocative of one of Meier's criticisms of policy theory in which Meier asserted that policy theory needs to "generate some coherence among the cacophony of empirical findings" and ranted that policy implementation literature, for example, struck him as "65 variables explaining 25 cases (Meier, 2009)." Vicino did provide a spatial analytical dimension, which was not part of the methodology of the other positivist housing policy research articles under review in this paper, though not unheard of in other positivist spatial studies investigating poverty concentration in urban environments (Spencer, 2004; Strait, 2006). However, Vicino's observation that the spatial transformation of suburban and urban areas can be expected over a 30-year period is not a particularly outrageous finding – such change can be expected. The policy implications are interesting because there was a skewed assumption on Vicino's part that planners are not studying trends and local policy makers and stakeholders do not know their communities and the issues that are in play in real time.

This brief review of a small sample of positivist housing policy research has recurring themes that permeate positivist research agendas. As exhibited in this section, positivist housing policy scholars have examined housing choice, poverty deconcentration, metropolitan migration and spatial transformation but, in doing so, have created a layer of empirical complexities involving models, frameworks, multiple variables, spatial analytics, symbols and mathematical expressions. The clarity derived from most positivist housing research may illuminate issues in case study or large scale statistical study formats but such positivist housing policy research still falls short of the mark with respect to real world policy recommendations and overarching theories.

The Tragedy of the Urban Commons

Concentrated poverty in urban areas is a global crisis. According to the 2007 world population report issued by the United Nations, the global trends in population growth indicate that rural populations are declining while urban populations in cities and towns are increasing, a phenomenon that is especially acute in developing nations where the rural-to-urban population shift will double far outpacing the urban population growth in industrialized nations (Martine, 2007). Of considerable importance to public policy, urban population growth projected for the twenty-first century indicates that the population will be largely comprised of people living in poverty (Martine, 2007). Poverty is a major issue for the world community as globalization expands opportunities and promotes migration (Sachs, 2005) and for the United States as a social problem that has been vexing public policy and engaging various social movements to resolve it (Iceland, 2006).

Poverty and the need for quality, affordable housing are inseparable. In the United States, the federal government's role in ameliorating poverty conditions and substandard housing escalated during the first half of the twentieth century. The nation's first comprehensive housing policy promulgated into law was the Housing Act of 1937 which created a two-tiered system of resource allocation – the top tier had capital resources and a viable infrastructure in place to support homeownership for the middle class, and the bottom tier had controlled funding allocations for low rent housing for the poor (Martens, 2009). The two-tiered system grew out of concerns arising among private sector interest groups who feared that housing for the poor would compete with private interests (Martens, 2009).

Still, the efforts of advocacy groups who were part of the slum clearance movement were realized and many believed that public housing would be short-

term housing as residents transitioned into the workforce. Nonetheless, along with the two-tier system, federal government housing policy, which directed the placement of public housing in inner-city locations, contributed to poverty concentration in the urban core (Wilson, 2008-09).

Notwithstanding the foregoing discussion of poverty and housing policy, some view public housing as good, renewable housing that has a place and purpose in society (Pyatok, 2001; Vakili-Zad, 2004). Arguably, however, that point cannot be supported with the pervasive reality that public housing is politicized poverty under highly concentrated conditions. The Tragedy of the Urban Commons is a metaphor for a contextual understanding of poverty and public housing, but should not be taken to be interpreted exclusively for the problems endemic to public housing projects.

Imagine a safe community whose original intent was to provide a decent and safe place for people to live and call home, at least on a short-term basis; that is, until they could pull themselves up by the bootstraps and move out and on to new opportunities. This decent and safe home fostered values among the people of the community; values such as hard work, perseverance, and the desire that their children would have bright futures. Imagine again, as the years passed and the original people moved out and were replaced by others, and then those by still others, until what was once a safe and decent community – one that you could call home, at least for a short while – became overcrowded with not just people, but with settlers who did not want the same things that the original people wanted. The new settlers did not want to leave. The new settlers did not want to improve their circumstances. Was this really the case or was it simply that they did not have the ability or the kinds of opportunities that would enable them to do so? After more time passed, the buildings in the community deteriorated, crime became a way of life, and poverty seemed to be a trap from which the new settlers could not escape. The new reality for the current settlers, those without opportunities or other viable options, would be that the settlers, now permanent residents, would have to remain in the obsolete warehouses of concentrated poverty, places that are neither decent nor safe.

Lance Freeman, a positivist housing policy scholar, asserted in his article published in 1998 that his research “does not support the notion that receipt of public assistance, whether welfare or public housing, becomes a trap from which it is increasingly difficult to exit as time wears on (Freeman, 1998).” Freeman

used “culture of poverty” and “rational choice” theories to build multivariate regression models around Panel Study of Income Dynamics data and 1990 Census Bureau data, both sources being official statistical data aggregated and maintained by federal government agencies (Freeman, 1998). However, there is an obvious disconnect between Freeman’s positivist research and housing policy outcomes.

As this paper has demonstrated in its directed review of some of the positivist housing policy research literature, the credibility of positivist research is foiled by time-degraded and source integrity data; the manipulation of predefined variables based on extant academic theory that may not have an immediate application to the subject research; the assumption that truth can be measured with statistical precision by condensing complexities into quantifiable numbers that ignore complex behaviors, subtlety and special cases; removing human perception of the realities in play; and taking a rigid methodological stance that presupposes that knowledge is politically and socially neutral. The core of Freeman’s conclusion that public housing is not a trap was based on the length of time a resident remained in public housing. Although he used multivariate models, Freeman did not control for the human subtleties and nuances that may have impacted individual decisions to leave. In the end, Freeman’s work is subject to the methodological missteps that foil positivist research.

Positivist housing policy researchers should look at concentrated poverty in the context of the Tragedy of the Urban Commons. The metaphor is not limited to public housing – it is applicable to communities, neighborhoods, towns, villages and any other collective incorporation of people with high levels of concentrated poverty due to a number of socio-economic and political reasons, and the increasing impact of globalization on poverty within and across borders as people remain in place or migrate to other places for new opportunities.

Housing Policy Research Perspectives

Housing policy research informs a process in which researchers identify concepts with a real world context which, in turn, inform policies designed to achieve certain anticipated outcomes, and if outcomes are deemed to be achievable, the policies are then operationalized into standards that form the basis of an organization’s implementation regime.

This paper has presented a critique of positivist research, but the intent was not to be critical of housing policy research, whether the research is quantitative or qualitative. There is value in research yet the research must be done with a

purpose that leads to an outcome and not for the selfish motivation of conducting research where the research alone is the desired outcome.

There is a body of work in poverty deconcentration, migration, neighborhood regeneration and new communities that has been conducted purposefully by researchers and practitioners from both sides of the academic research aisle, whether from a quantitative or qualitative perspective (for example, Boston, 2005; Goetz, 2000; Imbroscio, 2008; Imbroscio, 2004; Jargowsky and Yang, 2006; Jargowsky, 2003; Joseph, 2008; Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber, 2007; Wassenberg, van Meer, van Kemper, 2007). Notwithstanding the differences in housing policy research perspectives and an individual scholar's orientation to any one method, there is something to be said about a unified approach to housing policy research that would enhance both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Weimer speaks to reconciliation in the policy sciences in order to avoid "grand theories that are not helpful and helpful theories that are not grand (Weimer, 2008). Similar perspectives are advanced by Horn in his article on human research and complexity theory where the preferred state is a blending of rigorous and interpretative investigations of phenomena (Horn, 2008); and Dixon and Dogan who proposed positioning the conduct of policy analysis using philosophical points of reference to guide both conceptual and analytical tools to allow policy analysts to be critically reflective before they seek to describe, explain, understand, judge and address policy problems and issues (Dixon & Dogan, 2004)." Finally, in perceiving the complexities of decision making rooted in the need for integrated data, a common lexicon and horizontal interdisciplinary thinking versus vertical "stovepipe" thinking, DeLaurentis and Callaway, two aerospace engineers, endorsed a "system-of-systems" approach to improve public policy decisions (DeLaurentis & Callaway, 2004). The aim of the system-of-systems approach is not to search for a "method to predict the future" but, instead, provide the navigational tools to map the "real world" effectively in order to inform policy makers (DeLaurentis & Callaway, 2004).

A Kuhnsian paradigm shift among practitioners of the policy sciences, especially in the area of housing policy research (Kuhn, 1970), may be the key to developing a generalizable approach to theory and research in the context of real world problems with the expectation that this effort would result in real world anticipated outcomes. Neither quantitative nor qualitative methods as mutually exclusive approaches can measure, interpret and inform housing policy and shape policy outcomes. Empirical methods may define and quantify observations but such methods, alone, cannot make deterministic policy recommendations without meaningful explanations and contextual elaboration. Interpretative methods may have epistemological and ontological value but such

methods, alone, cannot form the basis of policy recommendations without quantifiable results and what-if scenarios to anticipate the consequences of policy decisions. The nexus of quantitative and qualitative methods would be the value-added approach for housing policy researchers, whether as a member of the discipline at large or the lone researcher who has expanded the number of analytical and interpretative tools and acquired the capacity to use any one of those tools whenever they are removed from the toolbox. Housing policy research must be grounded in an unbiased paradigm and in tune with the realities that confront the Commons operationalized in the construct of a real world approach to housing policy that would inform policy initiatives that serve the public purpose, invest in human capital and seek sustainable communities.

The end game, the antithesis of the Tragedy of the Urban Commons, is a pragmatic dialogue among housing policy researchers and policy practitioners that would balance the need to reposition dysfunctional communities, stabilize low income households, provide meaningful housing choices and generate economic opportunities with the goal of preserving and sustaining the identity of existing communities and neighborhoods, and bestowing upon researchers and practitioners, alike, sound housing policy research values, practices and demonstrable outcomes.

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