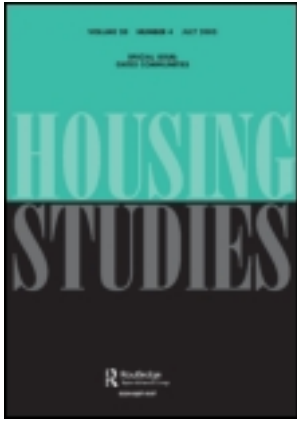


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Housing: Did it Have to be Like This? A Socialist Critique of New Labour's Performance

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BOOK REVIEWS

Housing: Did it Have to be Like This? A Socialist Critique of New Labour's Performance

Socialist Renewal No. 53, Eighth series, No. 3

Cathy Davis & Alan Wigfield

Nottingham, Spokesman Books, 2010, 36 pp., £5.00 (pamphlet)

ISBN 9780851247823

This pamphlet originated as a paper given at the conference, 'Housing Privatisation', 30 Years on: time for a critical appraisal', hosted at the University of Leeds, 26–27 July 2010. This stimulating and informative publication has a somewhat problematic title, made explicit by the fact that although the 'socialist critique' aspect of the paper is very compelling indeed, it fails to adequately address the question it poses.

The paper provides a robust analysis with a critical eye cast over a very detailed statistical account of housing provision under successive governments, from the end of the Great War, to the present. Taking the familiar path through Wheatley's legacy and the accomplishments of Bevan, the authors succeed in showing the massive gulf between what was achieved by old Labour, and the free-market recklessness that masqueraded as 'housing policy' under New Labour. In their treatment of Blair, the authors echo other Left academics such as Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) who have argued that Blairism represented the Trojan horse of Americanisation, which threatened all of Europe by generalising extreme levels of economic inequality and social insecurity. In the same vein, the authors effectively show how Blair's market-obsessed government actively promoted unprecedented levels of privatisation in housing provision. The authors set out their arguments by criticising the decision to continue with the Right to Buy as well as lambasting the relentless push towards ownership and the gross over-inflation of house prices.

The pamphlet then narrows its focus from politicians and governments to the policy agenda relating directly to the issue of housing management. Looking at falling standards, fragmentation through the transfer of stock, erosion of democratic accountability, greater concentrations of deprivation, and the augmentation of stigmatisation and escalation of the anti-social behaviour agenda, the reader is presented with a difficult argument to refute, embodied by the notion that 'New Labour had gone much further than perhaps Thatcher or Major would have dared' (p. 28). The inclusion of a brief postscript on Cameron's coalition plans for the future of social housing provides added gloom. As 'a socialist critique of New Labour's performance' the piece cannot be faulted. This is a first-class account, written in great detail, providing much of the evidence for the case against 'market driven' social policy.

The question the pamphlet poses ‘did it have to be like this?’ does not quite receive the same level of rigorous interrogation as afforded to its critique of New Labour’s performance in housing. Although it makes a wide range of very important observations, the paper fails to step back and observe the situation from a wider theoretical position. As a consequence of the paper’s reluctance to break from ‘the logic of the trial’, the focus is sharply on who-to-blame rather than the wider context of a global economy which is alluded to, but not in relation to the global economic situation. Any comparison between Labours, old and new, must take account of the epochal changes in economic policy between the two periods starting from the post-war years to the Neoliberal age of market driven politics. The abolition of capital controls leaving money to freely cross national borders was the Thatcher/Regan revolution, which today means that national governments can influence their domestic economies only by adopting policies which have the incentivisation of investment at their core and by adopting measures that are seen as market friendly by increasingly globalised capital players (Leys, 2008). Indeed, in 2001 Peter Mandelson said ‘we’re all Thatcherites now,’ a direct reference to the politics which New Labour had to embrace if it wished to take, and ultimately remain in power.

The question, ‘did it have to be like this?’ seems somewhat naïve when the Fordist-Keynesian compact is juxtaposed with the ‘total-capitalism’ of Blair’s era. So, the answer to the above question; whether one likes it or not, is undoubtedly, yes, it did have to be like this. We arrive at this conclusion, not by putting Tony Blair on trial for his failings (as a socialist?), but by stepping back and looking at the growing supremacy of capital within a global market as well as the corresponding changes to both the economic structures and employment practices which have shaped current levels of urban marginality and the unequal provision of housing.

It is something of a contentious point but the globalised nature of market-driven politics may have offered Tony Blair few options beyond tinkering around the edges of social policy and welfare reform, favouring banking and business profits over housing needs, among others. Any socialist critique needs to embrace the overarching theoretical praxis and in order to achieve this must break from the ‘logic of the trial’. Both the ‘game’ and the ‘stakes’ need to be raised in order to provide a fresh approach to age old polemics. A profound understanding of the full implications, in particular the threat to welfare, of this global economic age of total-capitalism is a good starting point. Not being afraid of re-engaging with Marxist perspectives is another.

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