

The invention of the ‘sink estate’: Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis

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Abstract

This article explores the history and traces the realisation of a category that was invented by journalists, amplified by free market think tanks and converted into policy *doxa* (common sense) by politicians in the United Kingdom: the ‘sink estate’. This derogatory designator, signifying social housing estates that supposedly create poverty, family breakdown, worklessness, welfare dependency, antisocial behaviour and personal irresponsibility, has become the symbolic frame justifying current policies towards social housing that have resulted in considerable social suffering and intensified dislocation. The article deploys a conceptual articulation of agnotology (the intentional production of ignorance) with Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power to understand the institutional arrangements and cognitive systems structuring deeply unequal social relations. Specifically, the highly influential publications on housing by a free market think tank, Policy Exchange, are dissected in order to demonstrate how the activation of territorial stigma has become an instrument of urban politics. The ‘sink estate’, it is argued, is the semantic battering ram in the ideological assault on social housing, deflecting attention away from social housing not only as urgent necessity during a serious crisis of affordability, but as incubator of community, solidarity, shelter and home.

Keywords

agnotology, Bourdieu, housing, ‘sink estate’, symbolic power, territorial stigma, think tanks

Housing – having a roof over one’s head – is absolutely central to human dignity, community, family, class solidarity and life chances (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). But intersecting with draconian welfare reforms, housing policies in the UK (particularly but not exclusively in England) are wreaking havoc upon people living at the bottom of the

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class structure. A few snapshots of the situation across the UK suffice to assess the financial ruin and displacement of the poor created by four decades of housing policies tightly tethered to profit generation for owners of land and property, and correspondingly unmoored from providing shelter for people most in need. As Lansley and Mack (2015) detail in *Breadline Britain*, of the 4 million people in the private rented sector who live in poverty, a full 2 million of those are employed full-time. One-third of all private rented sector tenants in the UK are living in structurally inadequate housing, with poor insulation issues having major energy and health implications. More than 2 million households (and counting) are on the waiting list for social housing. A staggering 1.8 million households are spending over half their incomes on housing costs: the very poorest people have approximately £60 per week left for everything after housing costs are met. Local authorities have spent £3.5 billion on temporary housing in the last five years (Buchanan & Woodcock, 2016). Homelessness has become a fixture of cities and is still on the rise (there has been a substantial increase in rough sleeping since 2010) – even though there are over 750,000 empty homes across the UK. Security of tenure is a huge issue, amplified by the massive rise in ‘assured shorthold tenancies’ because of the explosion in ‘buy-to-let’ mortgages, a get-rich-quick scheme for landlords that until 2015 offered generous tax breaks, and still allows landlords to evict tenants without any reason. If food prices had risen the same rate as house prices since 1971, a fresh chicken would cost over £50 (Carylon, 2013). Under the banner of ‘regeneration’, social housing in English cities, particularly London, is being demolished at an unprecedented rate without replacement (Watt & Minton, 2016). Perhaps most arresting of all is that one-third of Conservative MPs have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, for they are private sector landlords.

Profit has been the guiding principle behind government housing policies for four decades. Spectacular fortunes have been made, but the cocktail of deregulation, privatisation and attacks on the welfare state has also made a spectacular mess.¹ This story is well known, having been very well documented and analysed by others (e.g. Dorling, 2014; Hodkinson, 2012; Meek, 2014). There is already an ‘intimate history’, rooted in personal experience, of the rise and fall of large social housing estates in the UK that tackles frontally the systematic disinvestment and profound stigma that quickly shattered the optimism over their initial construction (Hanley, 2007). Less well studied is the ongoing *ideological* assault on decommodified housing provision, particularly the institutions carrying out the ideological groundwork needed to make attractive the destructive policies deepening profound housing inequality. David M. Smith (1994) once noted that:

Arguing for justice as equalization will inevitably face opposition from the vested interests who gain from inequality, and who have been able to marshal so much reverence for market outcomes and their association with social justice. Neoclassical economics has performed a powerful ideological role, in the hands of those whose primary purpose seems to have been to deflect criticism of distributional inequalities. (p. 123)

This article tackles one of those institutions holding the fort of vested housing interests: a free market think tank called Policy Exchange. Such think tanks have been

massively influential in the formation of recent housing and welfare policies in the UK that have led to displacement and social suffering on a disturbing scale (Slater, 2016a). Given their influence, it is rather remarkable that these think tanks have not been subject to much analytic scrutiny, particularly on the housing and urban fronts. I argue that what is emerging is a *vested interest urbanism*, and free market think tanks – those who write for them, finance them and decide that their voice needs to be heard – are right at the heart of ensuring that there are certain stories that people hear and ultimately believe in respect of housing issues. These stories are truncations and distortions of social realities, and particular representations homologous to material interests. Crucially, the activation and amplification of the taint attached to certain places, which Wacquant (2007) calls ‘territorial stigma’, is a key tactic of think tanks deployed to control the housing narrative such that territorial stigma becomes an instrument of urban politics. In what follows, I provide an analytic dissection of the stigmatising tactics of Policy Exchange, fusing Robert Proctor’s concept of agnotology with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power to explain how the ‘sink estate’ has become a semantic battering ram in the ideological assault on social housing.

Agnotology and symbolic power: A conceptual articulation

It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have. (James Baldwin, 1972)

In his swashbuckling critique of the economics profession in the build up to and aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Mirowski (2013) argues that one of the major ambitions of politicians, economists, journalists and pundits enamoured with (or seduced by) neo-liberalism is to plant doubt and ignorance among the populace:

This is not done out of sheer cussedness; it is a political tactic, a means to a larger end. ... Think of the documented existence of climate-change denial, and then simply shift it over into economics. (p. 83)

Mirowski makes a compelling argument to shift questions away from ‘what people know’ about the society in which they live towards questions about what people do *not* know, and why not. These questions are just as important, usually far more scandalous, and remarkably under-theorised. They require a rejection of appeals to ‘epistemology’ and, instead, an analytic focus on intentional ignorance production or *agnotology*. This term was coined by historian of science Robert Proctor, to designate ‘the study of ignorance making, the lost and forgotten’ where the ‘focus is on knowledge that could have been but wasn’t, or should be but isn’t’ (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008, p. vii). It was while investigating the tobacco industry’s efforts to manufacture doubt about the health hazards of smoking that Proctor began to see the scientific and political urgency in researching how ignorance is made, maintained and manipulated by powerful institutions to suit their own ends, where the guiding research question becomes, ‘Why don’t we know what we don’t know?’ As he discovered, the industry went to great lengths to give the impression that the cancer risks of cigarette smoking were still an open question even when the

scientific evidence was overwhelming. Numerous tactics were deployed by the tobacco industry to divert attention from the causal link between smoking and cancer, such as the production of duplicitous press releases, the publication of ‘nobody knows the answers’ white papers, and the generous funding of decoy or red-herring research that ‘would seem to be addressing tobacco and health, while really doing nothing of the sort’ (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008, p. 14). The tobacco industry actually produced research about everything except tobacco hazards to exploit public uncertainty (researchers commissioned by the tobacco industry knew from the beginning what they were supposed to find and not find), and the very fact of research being funded allowed the industry to say it was studying the problem. In sum, there are powerful institutions that want people not to know and not to think about certain conditions and their causes, and agnotology is an approach that traces how and why this happens.

Many scholars (and think tank writers) might claim that there is no such thing as the intentional production of ignorance; all that exists are people with different worldviews, interests, and opinions, and people simply argue and defend their beliefs with passion. Yet as I will demonstrate with reference to Policy Exchange, this claim would be very wide of the mark. Even when there is a vast body of evidence that is wildly at odds with what is being stated, and when the social realities of poverty and inequality expose the failures of deregulation at the top and punitive intervention at the bottom of the class structure, the ‘free marketeers’ become noisier and even more zealous in their relentless mission to inject doubt into the conversation and ultimately make their audiences believe that government interference in the workings of the ‘free’ market is damaging society. Therefore, tracking the ignorance production methods of ‘the outer think-tank shells of the neoliberal Russian doll’, to use Mirowski’s (2013, p. 229) memorable phrasing, is a project of considerable analytic importance.

Agnotology, whilst very useful in dissecting the methods and tactics of messengers of disinformation, is less useful in explaining precisely how certain terms and categories are converted into common sense (often across the political spectrum) and become so powerful that alternative or competing terms, and the arguments they anchor, are kept off the political grid and the policy agenda. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power is invaluable in such an analytic task. As explained by Bourdieu (1991) himself, symbolic power is:

[T]he power to constitute the given through utterances, to make people see and believe, to confirm or to transform the vision of the world and, thereby, action upon the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power that enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (physical or economic) by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization. ... What makes for the power of words and watchwords, the power to maintain or to subvert order, is belief in the legitimacy of the words and of those who utter them. (p. 170)

Wacquant (2017) helpfully distils these words to define symbolic power as:

...the capacity for *consequential categorization*, the ability to make the world, to preserve or change it, by fashioning and diffusing symbolic frames, collective instruments of cognitive construction of reality. (p. 57, emphasis added and reproduced with permission in the title of this essay)

Bourdieu produced an enormous body of work on symbolic power; indeed, Wacquant notes that it is ‘a concept that Bourdieu elaborates over the full spectrum of his scientific life’ (p. 57) and which runs from his early work on honour in Algeria to his late lecture courses at the Collège de France on the state, art and science. It is especially useful in analysing the classifying and naming powers of the state (Bourdieu, 2014; see e.g. Auyero, 2012). Even when non-state institutions such as tabloid newspapers and think tanks might be responsible for inventing and circulating particular terms and categories, symbolic power is helpful in tracing how such categories become elevated into authoritative and consequential discourses emanating from state officials and institutions:

In the social world, words make things, because they make the meaning and consensus on the existence and meaning of things, the common sense, the doxa accepted by all as self-evident. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21)

In what follows I pay specific attention to a term that was invented by journalists, subsequently amplified and canonised by think tanks and then converted into doxa by politicians: the sink estate. This term has become the symbolic anchor for policies towards social housing that have resulted in considerable social suffering and intensified urban dislocation. The conceptual articulation of agnotology with symbolic power, I argue, allows us to understand the institutional arrangements and symbolic systems that fuse and feed off each other to structure the deeply unequal social relations behind such a serious housing crisis.

The sink estate: The genealogy and anatomy of a semantic battering ram

Tracing the genealogy and usage of the ‘sink estate’ category is instructive for any analysis of the plight of social housing estates in the UK. The etymology of *sink* dates back many centuries, and refers to a cesspit for wastewater or sewage – a receptacle that collects and stores effluent. It would therefore be somewhat simplistic to see ‘sink’ as a direct reference to something being poured down a kitchen sink, or just to the idea that people are sinking rather swimming in society. Wedding ‘sink’ to a tract of council housing – an act of symbolic violence that turns a receptacle that collects and stores effluent into a *place* that collects and stores the refuse of society – is a journalistic invention, and continues to be (though not exclusively) a journalistic trait. The first use of ‘sink’ by a UK newspaper to describe a geographical area was on 4 October 1972 in *The Daily Mail*, a right wing tabloid newspaper: ‘The downward spiral of decline in these “sink” areas could be broken if the school led the way.’ However, it was journalist Jane Morton who coined ‘sink estate’ in November (1976, in a short piece for *New Society* magazine, a short-lived left wing publication (absorbed by *New Statesman* magazine in 1988):

Somewhere, in every town that has council houses at all, there’s a sink estate – the roughest and shabbiest on the books, disproportionately tenanted by families with problems, and despised both by those who live there and the town at large. ... As long as families on the margins of society are shunted into second best accommodation, there will be sinks. (p. 356)

Although ‘sink estate’ was first uttered in Parliament in 1983, the phrase did not appear in British political debate until the late 1980s, when politicians began using it to make direct links between housing tenure and deprivation; for example this statement by Labour MP Paul Boateng:

They [the Conservative government] have set their hands to a course that is determined to create in our inner cities the development of welfare housing along American lines – sink estates to which people are condemned, with no prospect of getting out.²

The term cropped up occasionally after that in parliamentary debates, but ‘sink estate’ has circulated freely and widely since Tony Blair visited the Aylesbury Estate in south London in May 1997 to make his very first speech as Prime Minister: an event that Campkin (2013, pp. 95–104) rightfully analyses as the symbolic watershed moment in the emerging phenomenon of the ‘sink estate spectacle’. Blair spoke of an ‘underclass ... cut off from society’s mainstream’ and made a direct association between ‘sink estates’ and apparently self-inflicted poverty stemming from ‘fatalism’ and ‘the dead weight of low expectations’ (quoted in Crossley, 2017, p. 49).³ Figure 1 shows the appearances of ‘sink estate’ in major UK newspapers over a 30-year period.⁴ Campkin’s assertion of the watershed moment is correct, as usage took off in 1997, and since then tabloids and broadsheets have used ‘sink estate’ freely. It is noteworthy that whilst a majority of major UK newspapers are right wing in political orientation, centre and left wing newspapers have used ‘sink estate’ just as frequently.

One thing becomes very clear from even a cursory analysis of the reporting during this timeframe – ‘sink estate’ is used to describe an area of council housing where the behaviour of tenants is, first, under intense moral condemnation, and second, both cause and symptom of poor housing conditions and neighbourhood malaise. The *Oxford English Dictionary* in fact lists one meaning of ‘sink’ as: ‘A receptacle or gathering-place of vice, corruption, etc.’. In this respect there is a very important intellectual precursor to ‘sink estate’ that may explain why the phrase has gained such currency. The American ethologist John B. Calhoun, based on his experiments with rodents in the 1950s, developed the concept of the *behavioural sink* to warn against the dangers of overpopulation in urban environments. After putting rats in an enclosure and supplying them with an ideal ‘rodent universe’ (food, bedding and shelter), the animals bred rapidly, and Calhoun documented how they behaved as their enclosure became more crowded. He produced a typology of pathological crowding behaviours, and described the tendency to congregate in dense huddled knots of squalor and violence as the ‘behavioural sink’.

As Ramsden and Adams (2009) explain in a paper tellingly entitled ‘Escaping the Laboratory’, Calhoun’s concept was astonishingly influential, from its initial publication in the popular magazine *Scientific American* – where it remains one of the most cited papers ever in the field of psychology – to its influence on a generation of scholars in human ecology, social epidemiology and environmental psychology concerned with the problem of urban density; to its influence on urban planners and designers seeking physical solutions to social problems; to its popular uptake in science fiction, urban fiction (particularly the writings of Tom Wolfe), film and comic books. As Ramsden and Adams explain,

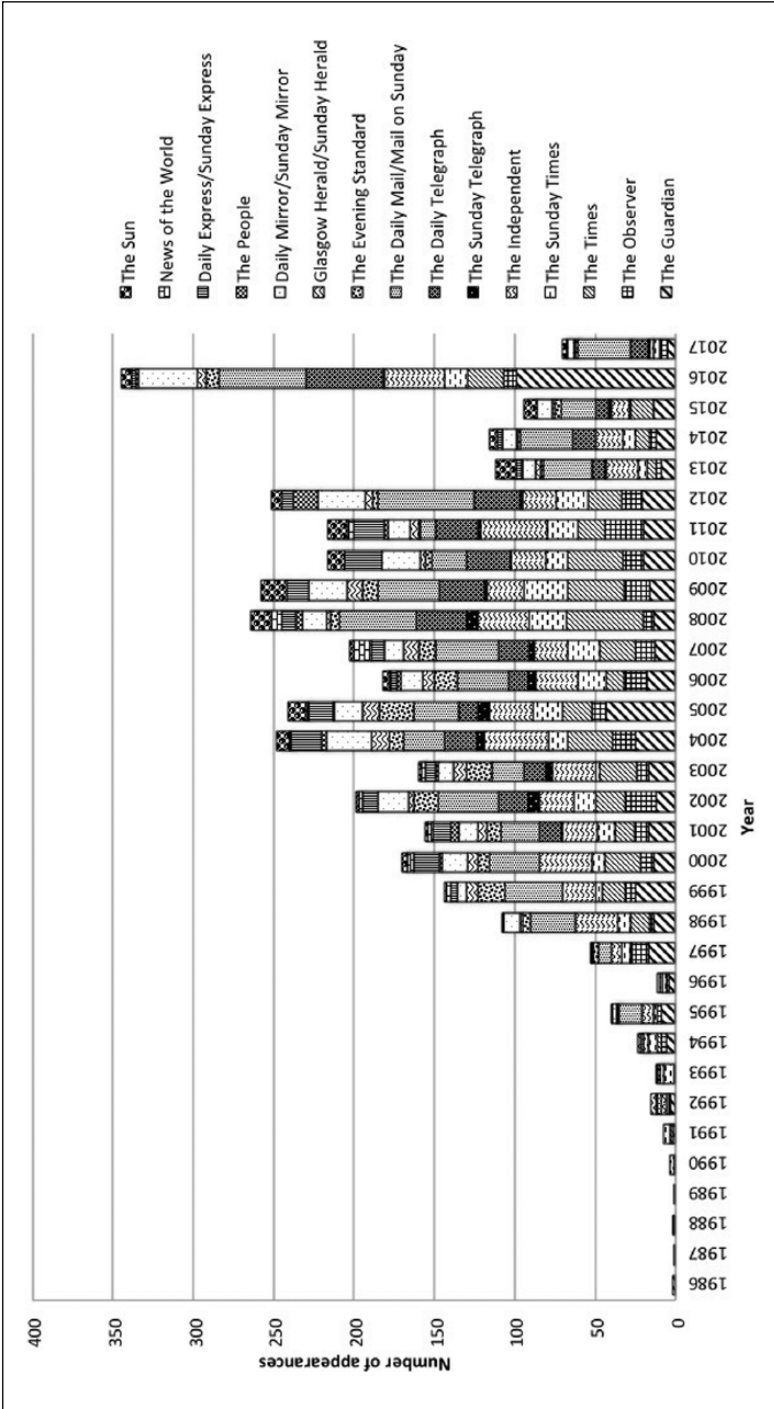


Figure 1. Appearance of the phrase 'sink estate' in major UK newspapers, 1986–2017.
Source: LexisLibrary.

Calhoun's description of the behavioral sink not only captured the sense of the city as a destructive force, but further, seemed to explain why it was that such an horrific environment seemingly acted almost as an attractor, drawing and holding together large numbers of people. The process was one of 'pathological togetherness', individuals conditioned to seek out the presence of others, even to the detriment of self and society. ... Calhoun ... had tapped into an extensive etymological precedent linking sinks with both cities and entropy. (2009, p. 773)

They are quick to point out that the diagnosis of problems was only one part of Calhoun's scientific life – he was convinced that within his experiments were possible solutions for the behaviours he had observed:

[H]e thought his experiments underlined the need for a revolution in the way we organise our societies and our cities. ... However, in the furore surrounding the grim spectacle of the 'behavioral sink', Calhoun found that this ameliorative message was drowned out – everyone wanted to hear the diagnoses, no one wanted to hear the cure. (p. 780)

The fact that Calhoun's behavioural sink concept was 'extraordinarily appealing to popular audience' (p. 780) is not affirmation that the 'sink estate' label derives directly from it. However, when a concept circulates so widely and resonates so strongly with multiple audiences, it makes it easier for those using the related phrases that follow to gain symbolic footholds.

More elaborate media analysis of the data than can be provided here would dissect the reporting to determine the specific social and geographical contexts in which 'sink estate' was used, and continue to explain the fall in usage from 2013 to 2015. The significant spike in 2016, however, is directly because of a speech made by Prime Minister David Cameron in January of that year announcing his '100 sink estates' strategy, to be discussed shortly. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the political embrace and policy deployment of the derogatory designator 'sink estate' is a clear tactic in the ongoing condemnation of the very existence of social housing, and in blaming poverty on the behaviour/choices of tenants. However, it would be inaccurate to say that this is fuelled by newspapers, but rather by free market think tanks. It is one of these institutions in particular to which I now turn.

Policy Exchange and the marketplace of ignorance production

Policy Exchange was established in 2002, and is probably best known as former Prime Minister David Cameron's favourite think tank. It describes itself proudly as

... the UK's leading think tank. As an educational charity our mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas which deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy. The authority and credibility of our research is our greatest asset. Our research is independent and evidence-based and we share our ideas with policy makers from all sides of the political spectrum. Our research is strictly empirical and we do not take commissions. This allows us to be completely independent and make workable policy recommendations.⁵

The claims of independence are bold, given that it this ‘educational charity’ was founded by three Conservative MPs who had backed Michael Portillo’s unsuccessful campaign in the 2001 Conservative Party leadership contest. Portillo was troubled by the ‘nasty party’ reputation of the Tories, and advocated a modernising shift towards more liberal social attitudes, whilst maintaining a commitment to Thatcherite economics. The day after Portillo withdrew from the leadership race, Archie Norman, former Conservative MP for Tunbridge Wells and the former CEO of Asda supermarkets (who masterminded its sale to WalMart in 1999 for £6.72 billion), said that he was planning to finance a new think tank: ‘This is the future of the Conservative party and we would like to find a way of channeling that and harnessing it’ (quoted in Sylvester, 2001). Nick Boles, currently Conservative MP for Grantham, who previously had a modest business career supplying painting and decorating tools to the DIY industry, was also involved from the start, describing Policy Exchange as his ‘biggest achievement in politics so far’.⁶ The third founder was Francis Maude (since 2015 Lord Maude of Horsham), a fixture on Conservative benches for over a quarter of a century. Maude felt that a new think tank should be free of the ‘baggage’ that he felt was affecting the Institute of Economic Affairs, Adam Smith Institute and Centre for Policy Studies, the trinity of ‘policy institutes’ behind the Thatcher revolution of the 1980s. He now claims that his creation ‘bestrides the policy landscape like a colossus’ (Maude, 2012).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the inaugural chairman of Policy Exchange was staunch Thatcherite Michael Gove, currently Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Affairs, and one of the two central political architects of the exit of the UK from the European Union (the other being Boris Johnson). Policy Exchange’s claim it does ‘not take commissions’ is a denegation, and an interesting choice of wording. It was registered with the Charity Commission in 2003. Registering as a charity can provide numerous advantages for a think tank, as charities do not have to pay corporation tax or capital gains tax, and donations to charities are tax free. Most significantly, think tanks can also use their charitable status to refuse requests for transparency in terms of who donates to them. *Who Funds You?* is a campaign to make the so-called think tanks more transparent, and Figure 2 shows the results of its enquiries (the methodology involved trawling through information provided on organisations’ own websites, or via annual accounts where they were provided).

Many think tanks across the political spectrum are registered charities, so have the legal right not to disclose who funds them, but the more right wing and libertarian a think tank, the less likely it is to show funding transparency. In 2007, Policy Exchange was investigated by the Charity Commission after a complaint was made that it was effectively a research branch of the Conservative Party. The investigation, remarkably, found ‘no evidence of party political bias’.⁷

Policy Exchange is a very busy institution. It produces an astonishing number of reports – literally hundreds of them since it was founded in 2002 – and it sponsors many events and public statements on various policy priorities like crime and justice, immigration, education, foreign affairs, and housing, planning and urban regeneration. Its influence in all these spheres has been immense in the UK over the past decade – major political speeches and catchy slogans often originate from Policy Exchange reports – but it is housing policy in particular where it is possible to see a direct imprint of think tank

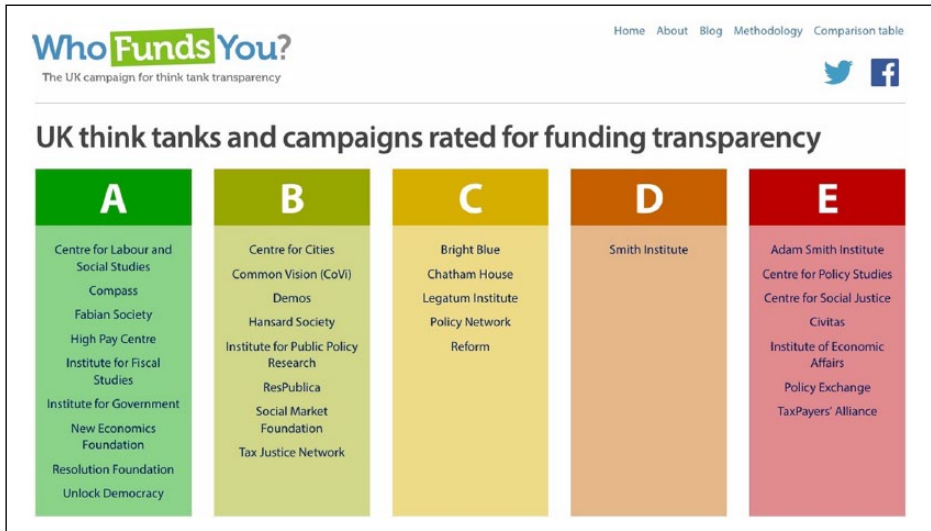


Figure 2. The funding transparency of leading UK think tanks. Those listed under 'A' name all funders who gave £5000 or more in the last reported year, and declare the exact amount given by each funder. Those listed under 'E' provide no or negligible relevant information. 'B', 'C' and 'D' lie somewhere in between in a hierarchy of transparency.

Retrieved from <http://whofundyou.org/>

writing on what has been happening to people living at the bottom of the class structure in UK cities. A report entitled *Making Housing Affordable*, written by neoclassical economist Alex Morton and published in 2010, is arguably the most influential document of all. Many of the proposals in this document quickly became housing policy under the Coalition government (2010–2015) and subsequent Conservative governments, as did other work Morton authored, notably a report entitled *Ending Expensive Social Tenancies*. It was telling that, in December 2013, Alex Morton left Policy Exchange to become David Cameron's special advisor on housing policy, where he remained until Cameron resigned in June 2016.⁸

The *Making Housing Affordable* report argues that social housing of any form is a terrible disaster because it makes tenants unhappy, poor, unemployed and welfare dependent. Not only is this baseline environmental determinism, it is a reversal of causation: a very substantial literature on social housing in the UK demonstrates that the reason people gain access to social housing is *precisely because* they are poor and in need, and that it was *not social housing that created poverty and need* in the first place (e.g. Forrest & Murie, 1988; Hanley, 2007; Malpass, 2005). Nonetheless, here are just some of the things that Alex Morton says about social housing in order to denigrate it:

The real reason social housing fails is because of the incentives it creates. (p. 12)

[S]ocial housing will continually act to stop inactive tenants returning to work – essential to generate savings and reduce the welfare budget. (p. 12)

The current 'need' for social housing is not really a need for more social housing at all, but a need for new private housing. (p. 42)

Social housing has a substantial negative impact on employment per se over and above the characteristics of its tenants. (p. 51)

Social housing has always damaged equality of opportunity. ... The effects of social housing are generally getting worse over time. (p. 52)

In the real world, it [prioritising those in housing need] has acted as an extremely sharp poverty trap. Welfare dependency is rewarded while independence from the state is penalized. (p. 59)

If an area is becoming gentrified the worse thing to do in terms of creating future poverty is to increase the social housing element in the area. (p. 61)

The bulk of these assertions come from cherry-picking various sound bites from a deeply problematic report on social housing written in 2007 by John Hills of the LSE (Hills, 2007) – one that embraces the highly dubious 'neighbourhood effects' thesis whilst simultaneously ignoring the question of systematic disinvestment in social housing and in people's lives – and also from numerous opinion polls commissioned by Policy Exchange, which are treated as 'robust evidence' and the definitive verdict on the topic under scrutiny. Had Morton consulted the literature on housing estates across Europe, he would have discovered that nowhere is low-income housing provided adequately by the market and also that the countries with the largest social housing sectors (Sweden, France, Holland, etc.) are those with the least problematic social outcomes (e.g. Musterd & Van Kempen, 2007; Power, 1997; Van Kempen, Dekker, Hall, & Tosics, 2005).

Having effectively argued that social housing is the scourge of British society, Alex Morton then goes on to propose what he feels are solutions to the housing crisis. Predictably, they involve helping social tenants into home ownership via the acquisition of considerable debt, and demolishing the 'worst' social housing estates and selling the land to private sector housing developers. He also posits repeatedly the hegemonic view that the housing crisis is created by too much demand and not enough supply, ignoring the inconvenient fact of over 750,000 empty homes across the UK. As Dorling (2014, 2016) has pointed out, if house prices were simply about supply and demand, then that massive surplus of homes would result in falling prices – but the opposite has happened, in that an oversupply of housing for purchase has led to unaffordability. Morton also ignores the land-banking epidemic facilitated by a system that actively rewards speculate-to-accumulate investment, and dismisses the importance of abundant mortgage credit and consistently low interest rates as factors behind the crisis (Fernandez & Aalbers, 2016). He asserts that the crisis is caused by a bloated local authority planning system aggravating NIMBYist tendencies and blocking the release of land for housing development, so he proposes that concerned local residents are given 'financial incentives' by developers to give their blessing to proposed new housing developments nearby.

Most striking of all about this report is setting the content against its title: *Making Housing Affordable*. In addition to calling for the destruction of social housing and the

removal of government support for housing associations, the report proposes numerous strategies to *make housing more expensive*:

What is needed are better quality developments that both increase housing supply and raise house prices and the quality of life for existing residents in the areas that they are built. (p. 15)

The government should scrap all density and affordable housing targets and aspirations. (p. 23)

It is a fallacy to assume that making new homes ‘low-cost’ will help increase affordability – it makes no difference to house prices whether you build cheap or expensive new homes. (p. 68)

Social rents should rise to meet market rents. (p. 81)

It is difficult to imagine a more clear-cut case of agnotology than a report entitled *Making Housing Affordable* recommending that affordable housing targets and aspirations should be scrapped, and social housing demolished. The report won *Prospect Magazine*’s prestigious Think Tank Publication of the Year award in 2010, and, crucially, performed the ideological groundwork for the activation of the ‘sink estate’ designator in the reports that followed, to which I now turn.

In 2013 Policy Exchange published a report jointly authored by Alex Morton and Nicholas Boys Smith, a director at Lloyds Banking Group with an interest in architecture. Boys Smith had just founded what he calls a ‘social enterprise and independent research institute’, *Create Streets*, which has a mission to ‘encourage and facilitate the replacement of London’s multi-storey housing and the development of brownfield sites with real houses in real streets.’ (Boys Smith & Morton, 2013, p. 5). The inaugural *Create Streets* report castigated all high-rise social housing estates in London, in a spectacular torrent of unsubstantiated assertions:

Multi-storey housing is more risky and makes people sadder, badder and lonelier. (p. 29)

The best predictor of juvenile delinquency was not population density but living in blocks of flats as opposed to houses. (p. 30)

Multi-storey buildings create a myriad of opportunities for crime due to their hard to police semi-private corridors, walkways and multiple escape routes. (p. 32)

[T]he evidence also suggests that tower blocks might even encourage suicide. Without wishing to be glib, tower blocks don’t just make you more depressed. They make it easier to kill yourself – you can jump. (p. 30)

Under a chapter entitled ‘Multi-storey Housing Creates a Spiral of Decline’, ‘sink estate’ was used to describe the Aylesbury Estate in London – once again used to illustrate that social housing fails, regardless of the struggles to protect that estate from demolition (see Lees, 2014). The authors even claimed that multi-storey housing is bad for you regardless of income or social status, avoiding the question of how to account for the explosive growth and growing appeal of luxury condominium towers in many

large cities globally. The question of how to account for any social problems in *low-rise* housing was studiously, perhaps judiciously ignored. Morton and Boys Smith concluded by saying that high-rise housing makes people ‘sadder’ and low-rise housing makes people ‘happier’. This fitted neatly with the Conservative government’s embrace of ‘happiness’ as their chosen catch-all indicator of well-being in austere times (Davies, 2016), and ensured that the *Create Streets* report was firmly on the political radar (as we shall see below).

The *Create Streets* report was followed two years later by another Policy Exchange report entitled *The Estate We’re In: Lessons From the Front Line*, written by crime journalist Gavin Knight, author of a ‘non-fiction’ book entitled *Hood Rat*, ‘an unflinching account of life and death in the sink estates of Britain’ (Anthony, 2011), for which he spent time ‘with dozens of violent criminals involved in gun and gang crime ... [and] accompanied detectives on a manhunt, firearms and drugs raids and was embedded with a CID unit over a lengthy drug surveillance operation’ (Knight, 2014, p. 4). The report, which was launched with considerable fanfare,⁹ opens as follows:

The state of many of Britain’s social housing estates is nothing short of a national embarrassment. Too often, crime, unemployment, gangs and violence are rife. The human cost is heart-breaking; the cost to the public purse immense. (p. 7)

A range of assertions are deployed to condemn both the design of the estates and the behaviour of people living on them, furnished with interview quotations such as, ‘Sure, we have role models. Nelson Mandela. Barack Obama. They just don’t live around here’ (p. 13). The report concocted a relationship between social housing estates and rioting:

Let us state the obvious: the [2011 England] riots did not start in a street of Georgian houses with spacious sash windows and manicured lawns. The riots started on a social housing estate – Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, to be exact. ... The linking walkways between blocks were a gift to fleeing criminals. (pp. 13–14)

The 2011 riots did not start on the Broadwater Farm Estate. They began following a peaceful evening protest outside a police station on Tottenham High Road in London at the police killing of Mark Duggan. Not long after the protest concluded, a 16-year-old girl approached police officers to voice her anger, and was beaten back with batons (Eddo-Lodge, 2011). Two police cars, a bus and several shops were then attacked, looted and set ablaze in Tottenham, and the rioting then spread to several other districts in the capital and beyond (see Slater, 2016b). Social housing estates did not cause rioting, nor did rioting occur on them: in fact, as well as the looting and torching of stores and businesses, a large number of public buildings – such as police stations, sport centres, municipal institutions and in a few cases schools – were targeted for attack (Sutterluty, 2014). As Hancock and Mooney (2013) have argued:

[P]articular representations of urban places as problematic on a number of different levels are mobilized. While the 2011 disorders were largely confined to inner urban areas with a significant degree of tenure mix, social housing estates (or areas where these dominate) and the populations

therein are frequently highlighted and represented as being not only vulnerable, but as particular locales where social pathologies and problems flourish. (p. 48)

Based on the unsubstantiated catalogue of nefarious properties of social housing, *The Estate We're In* report makes several predictable recommendations, best captured in this passage:

Although Estate Recovery Plans will offer the opportunity to turn around social housing estates, we recognise that in some cases this may not be enough. In the long-term, where it is clear that an estate is beyond recovery, the government must commit to demolishing and replacing these estates. The replacement of high rise social housing must be the priority, given the strong evidence that tower blocks and multi-storey living leads to higher crime rates, weaker communities, and poorer health and education outcomes for residents. (p. 50)

The 'strong evidence' cited is a single source: the *Create Streets* report. In addition, it is not just Policy Exchange elevating 'sink estate' to semantic battering ram: the former director of the 'Centre for Social Justice', the think tank behind the current assault on the welfare state (Slater, 2014), wrote this while in post:

2013 is the year to tackle the tyranny of sink estates, no-go neighbourhoods and child poverty. ... Look a little closer at such neighbourhoods, and we see something deeper than physical dilapidation. Behind the front doors are far too many broken and chaotic families. ... Many adults could work but don't because when they do the maths, there's nothing to be gained by coming off benefits. There's usually a local school where a culture of low expectations and high truancy rates is a catalyst for underachievement and future welfare dependency. Alcohol abuse and drug addiction tend to flow through these estates like a river ... (Guy, 2013, p. 10)

Tempting though it is to dismiss all the Policy Exchange documents as rhetorical ranting among like-minded free market fanatics, they are worthy of analytic scrutiny as they have had (and continue to have) major policy impacts. In April 2014 the Department for Communities and Local Government embraced many of Policy Exchange's recommendations in the three reports discussed, and created a £140m Housing Estate Regeneration Fund. It then commissioned Savills, a global real estate corporation headquartered in London with expertise in high-end, elite markets, to investigate the potential of all *Create Streets*' proposals. In January 2016 the Savills report was published (Savills, 2016) and was used as evidence to support a government strategy pledging to demolish the 'worst 100 sink estates' in England. Although the Savills report did not make a specific call for high-rise social housing demolition, it said, 'We have assumed cleared sites.' It points to current housing policy priorities that Savills was even commissioned as expert consultant on the matter of urban poverty on social housing estates, given that it stands to make vast profits from what replaces those estates.

When announcing these plans for estate demolition, David Cameron said:

Step outside in the worst sink estates, and you're confronted by brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers. Decades of neglect have led to gangs, ghettos and anti-social behaviour. One of the most concerning aspects of these estates is just

how cut-off, self-governing and divorced from the mainstream these communities can become. And that allows social problems to fester and grow unseen.¹⁰

‘Dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals’ is too similar to Policy Exchange’s ‘The linking walkways between blocks were a gift to fleeing criminals’ to be a rhetorical accident. In addition to the phrasing, the strategy of demolishing social housing estates is guided by the simplistic, fictitious reasoning emanating from Policy Exchange, crystallised by the sink estate label: that people who live on those estates are trapped in the culture of poverty that such estates create, and are an expensive, troublesome burden on ‘taxpayers’ who do not live on such estates; therefore, the only feasible solution is to bulldoze the estates and rehouse people elsewhere. But if we were to take that same logic and apply it to, say, healthcare, it is completely stranded. The argument would go: people in hospital tend to be less healthy than people who are not in hospital, so to improve health, we should demolish hospitals in fairness to the taxpayer. Since 2010 it has become *de rigueur* for UK think tanks and elected officials to frame destructive social policies as being undertaken in ‘fairness to the taxpayer’ (ignoring the fact that poor people are taxpayers too). But if one taxpayer considers something to be fair to them, and another taxpayer does not, then what possible arbitration procedure could there be between them? The ‘fairness’ approach gets us nowhere other than: if nobody paid any taxes, there would be no disagreement.

Tracking the activation of territorial stigma

Activating and amplifying the ‘sink estate’ – repeatedly condemning social housing estates as precipitates that collect and incubate all the social ills of the world – makes it considerably easier to justify bulldozing those estates to the ground and displacing their residents. We can also see symbolic power in the 2016 Housing and Planning Act in England and Wales, which allows social housing estates to be reclassified as ‘brownfield sites’ – a category normally reserved for *contaminated* ex-industrial land. The symbolic erasure of homes and entire communities thus paves the way for their literal erasure. One of the key teachings of Bourdieu’s work is that symbolic systems – of which cities are major centres of production and diffusion – do not just mirror social relations, but help constitute them.

The history and use of the ‘sink estate’ phrase offers support for Tyler’s (2013) argument that territorial stigmatisation, amplified and activated, has become a device to procure consent for punitive policies directed at those living at the bottom of the class structure; policies that cause enormous disruption. Numerous recent studies have revealed an intense and direct relationship between the defamation of place and the process of gentrification (August, 2014; Gray & Mooney, 2011; Kallin & Slater, 2014; Lees, 2014; Liu & Blomley, 2013; Slater, 2004; Slater & Anderson, 2012; Thörn & Holgersson, 2016). The taint of place can become a target and rationale for ‘fixing’ an area via its reincorporation into the real estate circuit of the city (Wacquant, 2008), which can have major consequences for those least able to compete for housing. Symbolic defamation provides the groundwork and ideological justification for a thorough class transformation of urban space, usually involving housing demolition, dispersal of residents, land

clearance, and then the construction of housing and services aimed at a more affluent class of resident.

A substantial body of scholarship on public housing demolitions in several societies illustrates how the frequent depiction of public housing complexes as obsolete, poverty-creating failures justified the expulsion of people from their homes and the subsequent gentrification of valuable central city land tracts (e.g. Arthurson, 2004; Crump, 2002; Darcy, 2010; Goetz, 2013; Imbroscio, 2008; Kipfer and Petrunia, 2009; Minton, 2017; Steinberg, 2010). Wacquant (2007) summarises as follows:

Once a place is publicly labelled as a ‘lawless zone’ or ‘outlaw estate’, outside the common norm, it is easy for the authorities to justify special measures, deviating from both law and custom, which can have the effect – if not the intention – of destabilizing and further marginalizing their occupants, subjecting them to the dictates of the deregulated labour market, and rendering them invisible or driving them out of a coveted space. (p. 69)

The fact that Savills was asked by the Conservative government to explore the potential of ideas to demolish tower blocks in the wake of Policy Exchange using the semantic battering ram of the sink estate illustrates how social realities are transformed through the strategic deployment of words and phrases by institutions and individuals in positions of power. Indeed, Boys Smith and Morton (2013) made their case for demolition under subheadings such as ‘Building attractive streets provides the best returns for the long term landowner’ and ‘Plugging into the rest of the city improves economic returns’.

If social housing estates become widely renowned and reviled as epicentres of self-inflicted and self-perpetuating destitution and depravity, opposing their demolition becomes significantly more challenging. The sink estate is thus a pure exemplar of what Wacquant (2012) calls a *catagoreme*, ‘a term of accusation and alarm, pertaining not to social science but public polemic, that serves ... to fuel the spiral of stigmatization enmeshing the impoverished districts of the urban periphery’ (p. 17). Peter Marris (1986, pp. 53–54) offered a particularly succinct summary of the wider problem:

Physical squalor is an affront to the order of society, which readily becomes associated with other signs of disorder in the public image. Crime, drunkenness, prostitution, feckless poverty, mental pathology do indeed cluster where housing is poorest – though not there only. Once this association has been taken for granted, any anomalous pattern of life embodied in shabby surroundings is easily assumed to be pathological, without much regard for the evidence. Bad housing thus becomes a symbol of complex discordances in the structure of society and so to be treated as if it were a cause of them.

Think tanks have reframed a serious crisis of housing affordability as a crisis of housing supply caused by too much state interference in the market, which, inter alia, has trapped people in failed social housing estates that can never be improved. Viewed through an analytic lens of agnotology, we can see a complete inversion going on: the structural and political causes of the housing crisis – that is, deregulation, privatisation, and attacks on welfare state – are put forward as desirable and necessary remedies for the crisis that will squash an intrusive state apparatus. Viewed through the conceptual lens of symbolic power, we can see how the already intense stigma attached to social housing estates is

vamped up by think tank writers and then by political elites. A new circuit of symbolic production has thus emerged, where the framing of the 'sink estate' filters societal attention towards family breakdown, worklessness, welfare dependency, antisocial behaviour, personal irresponsibility, and away from community, solidarity, shelter and home.

In a thorough Bourdieusian analysis of the history and sociology of think tanks, Medvetz (2012) argues that their rise and influence must be set analytically 'against the backdrop of a series of processes that have contributed to the growing subordination of knowledge to political and economic demand' (p. 226). Given the realities of disinvestment in social housing and in the lives of people who are unable to afford anything else, it seems essential for scholarship to continue to analyse and expose the practices of think tanks in corroborating the need and eliciting support for regressive housing policies geared only towards profit. It is not enough to address housing precarity in the United Kingdom without a focus on both symbolic domination and the production of ignorance with respect to the transformations roiling lower-class districts of unequal cities, which, in turn, are always tightly tethered to strategies and skirmishes traversing circles of power.

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Notes

1. These issues were thrown into sharp relief by the Grenfell Tower tragedy in Kensington, London, in June 2017, when fire tore through a high-rise social housing block that had been 'regenerated' with cheap, combustible cladding solely to make it look visually more attractive to wealthy residents of the upscale district. The absolute political contempt for the rights and housing situations of Londoners on very low incomes was exposed, as indeed was the protracted disinvestment in social housing and the disregard for the repeated warnings by tenants of an impending disaster. Following the fire, it became abundantly clear that the scandalous cost of living in London had reached breaking point, as displaced tenants could not be rehoused locally due to exorbitant housing costs, nor even rehoused elsewhere in the city given the steady erosion of social housing in the capital (and this despite the existence of 1652 empty homes in Kensington and Chelsea, held for speculative purposes by absentee renters).
2. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1987/jun/26/foreign-affairs#column_200
3. Lees (2014) has demonstrated that the repeated media categorisation of Aylesbury as a 'sink estate' was a crucial tactic in 'branding both the community and its residents as deviant and untrustworthy and thus justified paternalistic treatment of them' (p. 928) resulting in a massive regeneration project that has displaced many of those residents against their wishes.
4. The first appearance in a UK newspaper article was in *The Guardian* in 1982, when columnist Polly Toynbee said that the Tulse Hill Estate in Brixton, London, 'used to be a rock bottom sink estate' (Toynbee, 1982).

5. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/about-us/>. This description alone is enough material for an exegesis. ‘Research is evidence based’, if you consider what else it could possibly be, is a bit like saying, ‘This water is wet’. ‘Our research is strictly empirical’ is the same. These two completely redundant sentences/tautologies are denegations of the deeply political nature of the knowledge produced, as indeed is ‘all sides of the political spectrum’ and claims of being ‘completely independent’. This description is therefore symptomatic of what think tanks actually are: mongrel institutions that claim to be knowledge producers (cf. Medvetz, 2012).
6. Tellingly, it appears that Boles felt hampered by regulatory nuisances such as paying taxes. He writes on his website, ‘Doing business was hard. My business career did not make me rich. But I learned a huge amount about managing people, dealing with suppliers and keeping control of the company’s finances. I also saw how small interventions by government can handicap British businesses’ ability to compete in a global market.’ <https://www.nickboles.co.uk/about-nick>
7. http://powerbase.info/index.php/Policy_Exchange
8. Morton is now director of Field Consulting, a PR and communications consultancy.
9. For example, Knight wrote a short piece for right wing mouthpiece *Conservative Home* entitled ‘Britain’s sink estates can – and must – be turned around’, saying, ‘Britain’s most deprived housing estates are a time-bomb of social decay. Decades of neglect and ghettoisation have led to acute, entrenched social problems that cost billions to the public purse: gang warfare, knife crime, domestic violence, illiteracy, unemployment and child neglect.’ <http://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2014/08/gavin-knight-britains-sink-estates-can-and-must-be-turned-around.html>
10. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/estate-regeneration-article-by-david-cameron>

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