

Martin Lux: Habilitation Thesis Review

By Suzanne Fitzpatrick, October 2019

My assessment is that this work represents a cohesive body of substantial and original scholarship that can clearly and unambiguously be attributed to the efforts and contribution of Martin Lux.

The Introduction does an excellent job of setting out the stall for this endeavour by providing a crystal-clear research aim - *to analyse the long-term impact of early-transitional policy changes on the recent housing system in the Czech Republic and, especially, on the recent status of private and social renting in this country*. It also provides an extensive set of very interesting and specific research questions. While there are rather a lot of these research questions, they do nestle within the overall aim set out above, and I think it is fair to say that they are all answered in the course of the thesis. This Introductory chapter is also provides a very nice contextual and comparative narrative in its own right, offering an excellent overview of the 'transformational' experiences of the 'transition' economies moving from centrally-planned to market-based systems.

The substantive papers that constitute this body of scholarship offer a compelling and authoritative account of the evolution of housing policy in the Czech Republic in the post-Socialist era. In so doing, and as intended, they also offer a vital window on housing system dynamics more broadly. The work presented here is striking in its comprehensiveness – providing an in-depth account of the development of home ownership, private rental housing and social housing systems in the Czech Republic in the post-Socialist era, as well as analysis of wider aspects of social life, including labour market participation and homelessness.

The papers included are consistently very well written, structured and evidenced. They are generally published in highly rated journals (e.g. *Urban Studies*, *Housing Studies*) or appear as chapters in books by well-regarded publishers (e.g. Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge). There is some repetition of key contextual material across several of the papers, but as is explained in the Introduction, this arises inevitably from the fact that these are standalone pieces that each require this material to make sense in their own right.



While the main focus of the work is, rightly, on the Czech Republic, one of the most interesting aspects of the thesis is the extent to which it provides an international and comparative perspective, especially with regard to other post-Socialist countries. The contrasts and continuities between these countries' housing policies in the period since 1989, particularly with regard to key interventions like restitution, is utterly fascinating.

Moreover, the range of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies deployed in the thesis is truly impressive. Alongside conventional secondary data analysis, statistical survey work, depth interviews and focus groups, are also more unusual (within social science) experimental, counterfactual and qualitative comparative methods. This range of evidential approaches is one of the stand out characteristics of the thesis, substantially enhancing its sense of comprehensiveness and authority.

While there are many important arguments and concepts that thread throughout the thesis, I would just highlight a few as particularly insightful and relevant to audiences well beyond the Czech Republic, or even the post Socialist states as a whole. This includes revelations such as the strength of preference for home ownership amongst the Czech population, and the implications of the dominance of this tenure for both labour market mobility and social exclusion. The concept of 'personal use' as a form of quasi-home ownership was an entirely new one to me, and fascinating in its implications for interpretations of tenure more generally. Lux's identification, explication and critique of the 'privatisation trap' is, for me, one of the most important contributions of the thesis. The idea of a 'paradox of decentralisation' is also a very pertinent one for a whole range of work that I personally am undertaking, and I found the explanation of its underlying genesis and impact on p.77 of the thesis highly persuasive (though I am not sure that it is reality a 'paradox' as we would understand that word in English). Linked with this, one the most welcome aspects of the thesis from my perspective was the recurring equity-focussed emphasis on the implications of policy decisions for the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in Czech society. A key finding in this respect is that even generous housing allowances are insufficient to ensure access to housing for groups who are stigmatised and rejected by risk-averse landlords. The policy marginalisation of social/public housing in the Czech Republic in the post-Socialist period has clearly had particularly serious consequences for these groups.

As a homelessness researcher, I was naturally especially interested in Section IV of the thesis that focussed on this topic. I found the piece first published in *European Journal of Homelessness* really excellent – one of the most in-depth, balanced, detailed, well-evidenced and persuasive accounts of a national strategic context for homelessness policies that I have read to date. I also found the journal article in the *Journal of European Social Policy* very interesting, and I think it makes a useful contribution both intellectually and in policy terms. However, I would take issue with some aspects of the argument as set out here, including the emphasis on the 'diversity' of causes of homelessness in the UK literature, as referenced to authors such as Neale and Pleace, given the compelling weight of more recent research evidence (both qualitative and quantitative) demonstrating the recurring features and common factors, most notably poverty, in homelessness pathways in the UK. While Lux's paper's focus on homelessness pathways and 'nodes' in the Czech Republic was very illuminating, I did struggle to understand this analysis as 'causality-free' or 'non-

causal', unless 'causation' in this instance is being defined in a very narrow, positivistic fashion? Or else something important and conceptual has been lost in translation in this piece? I would also caution against too ready an acceptance of the perspective of homeless people and frontline workers as the last word in understanding fully the drivers of phenomena like homelessness. Almost inevitably, these highly personalised accounts tend to draw attention to the most immediate and individual factors, such as addiction, rather than broader social structures which the 'agents in focus' may not be fully aware of, but have 'real' effects nonetheless.

Finally, if one was to be critical of the Conclusion, one might say that it reads as more of a summary in certain respects – going through the various sections in turn – but this would be overly harsh as it also cogently pulls together the threads of the argument to make perfectly clear the overall cohesiveness of the thesis and its substantial intellectual contribution. Lux certainly achieves his aim in this thesis of making a powerful argument that the unintended and long-term consequences of crucial housing policy decisions taken very early in the transformation period have had long-lasting consequences to this very day in the Czech Republic.

Sincerely



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