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Broken Cities: Inside the Global Housing Crisis, by Deborah Potts. London, Zed Books, 2020, xi+391 pp., figures, tables, foreword, appendices, notes, index, (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-78699-054-9.

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The thesis of *Broken Cities* is that such phenomena as evictions in Sydney, homeless encampments in San Diego, growing queues for public housing in South Africa, and declining birthrates in Spain are symptoms of a single, global housing crisis that afflicts large cities everywhere. This crisis is endemic to capitalism, because labor markets invariably draw people to cities in larger numbers than urban housing markets can provide them with decent shelter. The result is a “housing dilemma” (p. 2): Market-supplied housing may be affordable to the poor, or it may be effectively regulated in accordance with minimal standards of “space, privacy, services and health,” but it cannot be both (p. 10).

Broken Cities may be read as an illustrated catalogue of policy responses to this dilemma. Assuming that it is a true dilemma, there are only a few logical possibilities for how a society might respond: in very broad strokes, one must either give up on applying basic standards of decency to housing, give up on affordability for the poor, or give up on the market and accept the need for non-market housing provision on a very large scale. The book walks through each of these possibilities, and illustrates them with examples from around the world.

The first possible response is to give up on the enforcement of basic standards. That sounds terrible, but Potts observes that legal standards of decent housing are “a double-edged sword for the poor” (p. 42): when such standards are routinely enforced, they increase the price of housing, and when they are not, they may expose poor people to coercion, as when a regime selectively uses building code violations as an excuse to bulldoze a neighborhood that voted for the opposition (see, e.g., pp. 60-62). She also notes the variety of unregulated, “informal” housing arrangements that have provided poor people with affordable housing, from “squatter

settlements occupying land illegally” (p. 93), to peri-urban indigenous settlements operating under customary land-tenure arrangements, to semi-legal trailer parks, caravans, and encampments in the cities and suburbs of the Global North. Some of this informal housing may meet basic standards of decency, but much of it does not, and, most importantly, the enforcement of minimum standards cannot be counted on in the informal sector.

Another possible response, increasingly pursued since the “neoliberal turn” that began in the 1980s (p. 6), is to accommodate poor people in the formal housing sector by giving up on affordability. In practice, this means that some poor people may find formal accommodation by skimping on other necessary expenditures, crowding more people into fewer rooms (p. 202), or delaying marriage and childbearing (p. 227). Still another policy response is to give up on housing poor people altogether and to ration their access to the formal, urban housing sector by means of internal migration controls. Potts provocatively likens China’s *hukou* registration system to the pass laws of apartheid-era South Africa and to the practice of some local governments in the U.S. and the U.K. of subsidizing the relocation of unsheltered residents to other jurisdictions. All of these policies expel or exclude poor people who cannot be accommodated in the formal housing sector (pp. 218-223). All of these options would seem to violate basic human rights.

A final possible responses, and the one that *Broken Cities* endorses, is to expand social housing. Potts construes social housing very broadly to include not only public rental housing, but also public subsidies for private rental housing, and even public subsidies for homeownership in forms that range from the public provision of plots for homesteading in planned settlements (as in some neighborhoods in Zimbabwe, p. 151), to public grants for the purchase of apartments on state-owned land (as in Singapore, p. 141). What makes all of this *social* housing is not the ownership structure but the fact that they are examples of regulated, formal-sector housing that is subsidized by the state and provided at below-market rates. Public rental housing is not necessarily affordable to the poor, and even when it is affordable, it may be used as an instrument of political repression, for example, through racial segregation, as in apartheid-era South Africa (p. 114). The transfer of public housing to private ownership also may cut both ways: it may exacerbate the housing dilemma, as the privatisation of council housing after 1980 did in the U.K., or it may provide some temporary relief, as in the “massive and rapid transfers with very

high subsidy rates” (p. 152) that occurred in many countries in southern Africa and eastern Europe after 1989. In the long run, Potts argues that “addressing the housing dilemma via direct and indirect interventions in the rental sector,” including both subsidies and regulation, is necessary for any sustainable solution to the housing dilemma (p. 137), but she notes that these interventions may take many forms.

One of the particular strengths of this book is its breadth of comparative reference. Potts insists that analyses of housing in the Global South and the Global North can be conducted within a common conceptual framework, and she makes the point persuasively by delivering dozens of case studies from Zimbabwe to China to the U.S. The result is a series of thought-provoking analogies among housing policies that are usually studied in isolation by specialists in different regions of the world. Any housing expert will come away from this book with new insights and new ideas.

Broken Cities also has its weaknesses, among them a certain vagueness about key terms. Is it true that housing markets can never provide poor people in any society with enough decent, legal, affordable places to live? The answer surely depends on how many people we count as “poor,” how much housing is “enough,” and which housing we are willing to characterize as “decent” and “affordable.” The book does not commit to any particular definitions of these key terms. The result is ambiguity. Some passages, for example, appear to assert a particular, substantive conception of “decent” housing, comprising not only rights to certain quanta of safety, health, and personal dignity, but also the right to form autonomous families (see, e.g., p. 214). Other passages appear to retreat to the much weaker assertion that *some* standard of decent housing is minimally necessary, but that the specific content of this standard should be left to local norms (p. 70). The difference between the strongest and weakest versions of this claim could matter a great deal for how we interpret the book’s argument. At one extreme, we might read *Broken Cities* as implying the bold thesis that large-scale social housing will be necessary to ensure the reproduction of the human species in our urban future. At the other extreme, we might interpret it as implying merely the claim that some people have less income than middle-income people, and therefore cannot afford housing that is up to the standards that middle-income people would set for themselves.

These critical remarks notwithstanding, I found *Broken Cities* to be a stimulating read. It is a book that I will re-read for the case studies, and that I would consider assigning to students as a comparatively jargon-free introduction to an important radical perspective on housing. I would recommend *Broken Cities* to anyone studying housing or urban settlement processes anywhere in the world.