services? A more analytical approach to these intriguing findings might have detracted from
the effort to present a ‘nonbiased’ survey on urban governance, but the book overall would
have been more powerful and engaging.

The absence of prescriptive recommendations in such a normative exercise, however, is
welcome. The study explores views and attitudes on local governance and after nine chapters
of this you realise that the question of the best model of local governance is more appropriate
than the actual determination of one. The current state of confusion after two decades of
experimentation in the area is clearly highlighted in this timely, accessible, but not very analytical
publication.

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Housing: who decides? by P. King, M. Oxley; Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hants (distributed in the
USA by St Martin's Press, New York), 2000, 193 pages, £42.50 (US$65.00) ISBN 0 33376007 7

Across North America, Europe, and elsewhere, rental housing policy has been in retrenchment
for a couple of decades now. Starting in the 1950s in North America (earlier elsewhere), govern-
ments enacted housing programs to subsidize massive construction of assisted rental housing.
Social reformers of the day (King calls them “collectivists”) saw the need for public housing in the
wretched housing conditions of the working poor, the dispossessed tossed adrift by wrenching
economic and industrial change, and the underclass. To collectivists, public housing enabled
improved living conditions, was a buffer against the vagaries of the labour market, and provided
a social laboratory wherein households could learn of the merits and importance of a clean, safe,
and healthy living environment. To collectivists, many of the households to be assisted were
incapable of fending for themselves.

In the words of the authors, “collective decision-making” was seen to be a necessity. However,
since the 1980s, while governments continue to subsidize costs of operation within
the remaining stock, they have sold off part of the stock to the private sector and have sharply
reduced programs that subsidize new construction. Whatever the reasons for this change—and
I argue that these reasons are complex—governments typically assert that they want less costly
and more effective ways of assisting needy households. To this end, housing policy has increas-
ingly come to be based on the notion that households are purposeful agents capable of making
choices in their own best interests, and not simply dependents reliant upon the good will
and/or obligations of the state. That emerging housing policy is now focused on individual
decisionmaking must tear at the heart of collectivists today. What the authors do here can thus
been seen as an attempt to understand the emerging basis for housing policy.

If individual decisionmaking is to be the focus of housing policy, what are its possibilities
and its limitations? This handsome little book takes the form of a debate between two scholars
over the nature and goals of this emerging approach to rental housing policy. One of them,
Peter King, senior lecturer in housing studies at De Montfort University, describes himself as
a political philosopher and a libertarian. The other, Michael Oxley, professor of housing at
Nottingham Trent University, describes himself as an economist, and espouses views better
described as (new) liberalist. This is an engaged dialogue written (page 4) “in a balanced
manner”: a phrase that the authors never define.

The book does not set out to resolve the debate over the nature of emerging housing policy.
What it does do is to look for the areas of consensus and disagreement between the two
authors, and in so doing to make us understand better the nature, extent, and significance of
their disagreement. The authors make their central argument early (pages 3–4) in the book.
“There is a key dichotomy apparent here: namely that between social (or collective) and
individual decision-making ... . If individuals are to make decisions on their welfare they must
be competent and be capable of making rational decisions about their interests and how to
achieve them ... . The issue of competence, its extent and its limits will thus be at the centre of
this debate.”

The remainder of the book delineates the authors’ different views of the conditions under
which competence can be established or denied. The book begins and ends with a chapter
written by both authors. In the rest of the book, each chapter is single authored. In chapter 2, King gives a libertarian perspective. Like much of the writing that I would characterize as “new right”, the argument is simple, clear, and compelling. At the same time, with the hindsight of some notable fiascos in privatization (for example, energy deregulation in California), King’s argument may seem like a siren song. In chapter 3, Oxley gives a liberal democratic perspective. To people like me, trained in the 1960s and 1970s, Oxley’s arguments are a familiar defence of the role of the state in enhancing efficiency and promoting redistribution. For me, Oxley’s chapter was like reciting catechism: in this case, the tenets of liberalist thought. Chapters 2 and 3 each sound like opening statements in a debate. To me they each seem to ramble at times, but overall are lively and interesting. The next two chapters (4 and 5) are rebuttals, the first by King, the second by Oxley. Across these four chapters, one has a sense of thrust and counterthrust, as though the book was the written record of a long evening’s debate. As a result, the closing chapter seems strange; you feel like you have witnessed an interesting debate only to have a well-intentioned friend (in this case, both King and Oxley) reexplain the debate to you.

King and Oxley each have their intellectual strengths. I was particularly impressed with the clarity and coherence of King’s argument. Nonetheless, for a philosopher, King commits a curious leap of faith when, early on, he makes the assumption that individuals are rational. Is this reasonable? Further, given the variety of ways in which rationality might be defined, how are we to choose how behaviour ought therefore to be assessed? Let me put this argument another way. Must public policy be driven by the necessity that people act rationally? If I choose to act irrationally (by my own account), should there be public policy to correct for my behaviour? I am not sure that the answer to this question is affirmative, but I suspect that King’s subsequent analysis presumes so. This leads to a broader comment about the two authors. To me, their arguments seem more principled than practical. At times, their debate about public policy sounds to me to be between two boy scouts: earnest, but not as worldly as I would prefer. Central to my concern here is the following question. Why and how do governments govern? Put differently, what motivates the proponents of a new public (housing) policy and how does the process of approval and implementation help shape that policy? Such discussion is largely absent from this book.

As a behaviouralist, I would like to have seen more discussion here of neo-Nietzschean thought as exemplified by Bent Flyvbjerg (1998), and others might question the lack of reference to the work of Michel Foucault, or to the growing literature on neighbourhood social capital For me, the authors’ debate sounds thin with only its two decidedly traditional voices. Finally, perhaps because of the very clarity of its argument, this book left me feeling that I was an outsider. I am not a professor of housing studies. My interests lie in how individuals develop and use strategies to cope with the difficulties and constraints of everyday life. These coping strategies include both choices thought to be personal (such as nuptiality, fertility, schooling and workforce participation, and budget reallocation over the consumer’s lifetime) and choices about involvement in community or society (such as coercive and cooperative political activity). I am interested in housing because it exemplifies important principles in the study of these two kinds of coping behaviour. However, the authors appear to focus on the former and neglect the latter. I am also a quantitative analyst. I make extensive use of data on consumer behaviour in the belief that many of the important questions at hand are quantitative. In contrast, the authors present their arguments in this book without using even one table of data. While King is perhaps closer to my heart in the sense that his argument focuses on human agency, I wish that there had been more in this book to expand my sense of the range of strategies.

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