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meant by a 'right to housing'. Rather I will argue that the meaning must be defined socially and understood against the background of a specific national context of housing provision. The reason why the right to housing is seldom clearly defined is not that the concept is empty, I will argue, but the opposite, that it embraces the whole set of principles that constitute a national housing policy. The right to housing is a political 'marker of concern' pointing out housing as an area for welfare state policy. The specific meaning of that marker can be understood only in terms of how the relation between state, citizens, and housing provision is in fact perceived in a particular national housing discourse, something that can seldom be summarised in a brief and clear-cut definition.

If this is so, we would look in vain for universal definitions and can only interpret the phrase by reconstructing the more concrete guiding principles behind a specific national housing policy. To understand what is meant by a 'right to housing' we must scrutinise the national housing discourse and, more particularly, the dominant policy theory behind decision making in housing. (A 'policy theory' can be defined as 'the total of causal and other assumptions underlying a policy'; cf. Hoogerwerf (1990, 285-86). A dominant policy theory must then be defined in social terms, i.e. as a commonly held set of descriptive and normative ideas about a policy field. This definition is related to Walzer's discussion of 'spheres of justice' and Elster's concept of 'local justice', both socially defined within a certain political community at a certain period of time, cf. Walzer (1983, 3-10); Elster (1992, 2-5).)

The aim of this article is to discuss the idea of a right to housing against the background of dominant national policy theories of housing provision. In particular I will focus on the distinction between a right to housing in national housing policies of a 'universal' type and a right to housing in policies of a 'selective' type. This is done in the first part of the article. In the second part I will give some attention to the question of what should be understood more precisely by the distinction between 'universal' and 'selective' in housing.

The discussion is based primarily on the Swedish housing discourse, with its 'universal' ambitions, but the aim is to give some input to a more general discussion on housing rights and housing policies.

Housing: Both Market Commodity and Public Good

Having a right is often seen as being entitled to something without having to pay for it - except perhaps a symbolic or small nominal sum. In a democracy this is true of the rights to a political vote and to legal justice, and in many countries also of the rights to basic education and medical care.

FROM: Bengtsson (2001) Housing as a Social Right,
Scandinavian Political Studies 24, pp. 255-275

With such a definition, however, a right to housing would not exist in any country, since everywhere households are in principle expected to pay for a dwelling. Consequently it makes no sense to interpret a right to housing as an entitlement for free. To understand what could be meant instead we must first reconstruct the specific welfare logic of housing policy.

Housing is not for free but distributed in the market. Though the relation between state and market is at the core of both the political and the scientific debate about housing, housing researchers seldom confront explicitly what is common about housing in all modern welfare societies, i.e. the fact that it is *at the same time* defined as an individual market commodity and as a public good demanding state involvement. Since housing is always provided through markets, analogies with other welfare sectors, where state allocation is the main mechanism of distribution, are often misleading.

Housing policies in most Western countries are best perceived as *the state providing correctives to the housing market*. This means that market contracts serve as the main mechanism for distributing housing, and state intervention takes the form of correctives defining the economic and institutional setting of those market contracts (Oxley & Smith (1996, 2-3) make a similar observation). In principle, housing is distributed by means of *voluntary contracts* between buyer and seller, between landlord and tenant, and so forth. Housing is perceived as an *individual good*, which, as far as possible, should be distributed in accordance with individual consumer preferences.

Ulf Torgersen has pointed out the specificity of housing by describing it as 'the wobbly pillar under the welfare state'. According to him, other welfare sectors (e.g. pensions, schooling, and health) have a number of common characteristics. Fairly clear standards have been extracted from the vague concept of 'need', standards that define when the institutions in charge are responsible to take action, and lack of conformity to those standards is subject to legal action from the prospective recipient. Those responsible for implementing the policies are typically trained bodies of professionals, within a fairly unified institutional complex with well-defined borders, a certain *esprit de corps*, and a national director. Even though some of those elements may sometimes be discerned in housing provision as well, what is striking is rather the contrast in those respects between housing and other welfare sectors (Torgersen 1987, 116-18).

The normative basis of this mode of provision is that housing is seen not only as an important element of citizens' welfare, but also – and perhaps above all – as a market good over which consumer preferences should rule. Hence, and in contrast to other welfare commodities, the politically defined needs of housing cannot be fulfilled by direct state allocation but only by state correctives to the market.