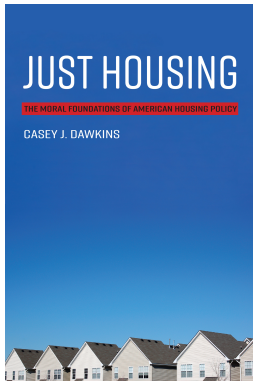


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# Book Reviews

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Casey J. Dawkins 2021: *Just Housing: The Moral Foundations of American Housing Policy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press



In this ambitious book, Casey Dawkins examines housing provision in the United States through a discussion of its moral basis, intellectual history, existing programs for affordability and policy recommendations. He begins by presenting two theoretical bases for housing ownership: (1) the natural right of individuals to own property, traceable back to Locke and his intellectual descendants; and (2) civic republicanism, attributed to Roman political thought and later to writers like Montesquieu and Harrington. He equates Lockean liberalism with individualism, a labor theory of value, and the absence of external restraint. He defines republican freedom as non-domination, although his explanation of what he means by this within the context of housing is rather murky.

While each set of theories defends private property, they differ in that natural right refers to a pre-existing right to property achieved through individuals' labor in taking possession of the land, whereas civic republicanism justifies property rights as an instrument for achieving political stability created by government. For both, rough equality in ownership is to be valued as protecting freedom. Dawkins depends on these two traditions to argue that housing insecurity is a moral failure but also that 'housing justice does not require abandoning private property' (p. 8).

After defining private property as security of tenure and arguing that each citizen is entitled to it, Dawkins goes on to discuss various proposals aimed at achieving this end. (He considers renters with secure tenure as well as inhabitants lacking legal status to be property-owning citizens.) He notes that the Homestead Act was an early attempt to provide individual households with property rights, but that it did not take city dwellers into account. And although Henry George's proposal for a single tax to capture increases in land value did address the situation of urbanites, he claims it was too abstract a concept to achieve majority support.

Dawkins regards the ideal of the single-family detached house, which later became embedded in zoning regulations throughout the country, as the legacy of nineteenth-century progressivism. In doing so, he pays little attention to the role of real estate developers in constructing this conception of property security, instead attributing it to housing reformers. He cites Richard Foglesong's contrary view, saying that it overplays the role of capitalists in shaping housing policy. He also mentions the failure of the labor movement to involve itself in housing issues as one factor in the failure to provide housing security for the working class.

Looking at the effect of neighborhood on housing value, Dawkins examines the dispute between those calling for racially and ethnically integrated

neighborhoods and those wishing to protect existing communities. He favors Iris Marion Young's view that ethnic communities should not be broken up but that they should have porous boundaries. He worries that the split among housing advocacy movements in the neoliberal era around issues of segregation and gentrification largely ignores broader housing inequalities arising from lack of income.

Dawkins contends that civic equality calls for measures that reduce extreme housing inequality even if no one is homeless. He defends a right to housing and sees it as justification for 'a private property regime that delivers tenure security to all' (p. 246). He considers this achievable through a federal 'negative housing tax', which would be earmarked for a monthly housing allowance and community development block grants (CDBG). The former would go to individuals, allowing them access to secure housing, while the latter would aim at equalizing conditions among neighborhoods. He does not specify how this tax would be administered—presumably it would work like an earned income tax credit or a family allowance. Since he proposes that it be provided as cash, it does not seem to differ from a negative income tax which is not tied to housing need; limiting it to housing expenditure would not differentiate it from the present system of housing vouchers and CDBG except in its greater generosity. Nor does he tell us how to control for an inflationary effect on the price of housing under this system.

This volume has many objectives: to locate a basis for housing equity within abstract philosophical texts; to offer a history of housing ideas and policies; and to develop a proposal for achieving just housing. However, despite its sophistication, it has several flaws that limit its usefulness to policymakers and scholars. The writing is frequently opaque, with few examples of actual places and policy impacts provided. Also, it does not sufficiently clarify the link between the two traditions of rights and republicanism; while Dawkins attempts to blend the two, he does not tell us how he weights each one.

Most importantly from the perspective of political economy, he does not analyze how housing policy should deal with land markets and large-scale developers, nor how it can overcome the neighborhood effects of land prices. The possibility of public ownership of land is not considered. Since the discussion is wholly limited to the United States, the author does not consider the policies adopted in other places like Vienna, Amsterdam and Singapore, which practice public land banking, forestall property speculation, and mix private and public ownership by separating land from structures. While Dawkins might contend that the American context is unique and solutions adopted elsewhere are not politically viable in the United States, his own proposal is no more likely to prevail there either.

Despite its deficiencies, *Just Housing* represents a brave attempt to establish the right to secure housing within a strong ethical framework. Its call for the continuation of private ownership, defined as a bundle of rights connected to the secure possession of shelter, does not require that markets set prices. Although more elaboration of the relationship between ownership and markets would have improved the book, it still makes a strong case for its argument regarding housing security. Further, it goes beyond most discussions of housing policy in specifying the broad purposes of policy and rooting them in the theoretical literature.

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