
Housing and Homelessness in Ireland

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Housing Shock, by Rory Hearne (2020). Policy Press: Bristol, pp.302. £23.99.

Gaffs, by Rory Hearne (2020). HarperCollinsIreland: Dublin, pp.352. €18.95.

Housing systems in many countries have become increasingly dysfunctional, with accommodation often precarious or unattainable for newly-forming and middle-to-low income households. In these two books, Rory Hearne sets out to describe and explain the emergence of the current domophobic housing system in the Republic of Ireland, and to point the way towards a domophilic transition (in the terminology of Finnerty and O’Connell, 2021).

Housing Shock and *Gaffs* provide vivid descriptions of the contours of Ireland’s current housing crisis: homelessness, unaffordability and unavailability of homes, and poor quality of housing. The explanations of housing dysfunctionality centre on the role of neoliberalism (both marketisation and financialisation). Also common to both volumes is a passionate and engagingly expressed case for the centrality of housing for personal and societal well-being, and for the urgent need for change to the prevailing arrangements for providing this social good.

The principal difference between the books is that *Housing Shock* is more conventionally scholarly (albeit with chapters on the role of the academic in social change and on housing activism), while in *Gaffs* the addressees are young people directly experiencing the housing crisis. *Gaffs* is effectively a popular restatement of *Housing Shock*’s arguments, as is apparent from its snappy, colloquial title, absence of the ‘scholarly’ apparatus of footnotes, bibliography, and index, and from Hearne directly addressing the reader as ‘you’.

Hearne identifies three factors in the Irish housing crisis: the decline in social and affordable housing new build; the aftermath of the residential property crash from 2010 in the form of mortgage arrears and collapse of employment in the construction sector; and the courting of corporate residential investment by successive governments after the crash. This courtship of institutional investors is explained in the context of governments deliberately wishing to inflate house prices and rents, as part of a strategy for banking stability and economic recovery.

Hearne's proposed solution to the current dysfunctional housing system is a 'Green New Deal for Housing', whose central pillar is the construction of 300,00 cost-rental housing units (public rental housing supplied by public or private not-for-profit landlords), along the lines of 'the Vienna model', and funded by loans from sources such as Ireland's Housing Finance Agency and the European Investment Bank. The closing chapters of both books provide a rousing call to arms for a radical tenure restructuring involving the ambitious development of this cost-rental model. He aims to change the discourse on housing – "to put the heart back into home" (*Gaffs*, p.3) so that its use-value rather than its exchange value becomes paramount.

A potential downside of any politically-committed text is that some nuance may be sacrificed. For example, despite the acknowledgement that housing is a very complex issue (*Housing Shock*, p.11) and that there are differing explanations for the crisis, the only alternative explanation mentioned is 'the free market view', a perspective not systematically engaged with throughout either book.

A point deserving further consideration is the importance of institutional investors, "faceless piles of global cash" in Hearne's striking phrase (*Gaffs*, p.10). One aspect of this is whether their business model is inherently about "sweating their asset – you, Generation Rent" (*Gaffs*, p.9) and of 'maximising return' (*Housing Shock*, chapter 7). The second aspect is the extent of the impact of these corporate investors, relative to smaller private landlords. While corporate landlords are having a major impact in relation to the supply/purchase of new apartments in the main urban centres, small to medium size landlords still dominate the Irish private rented sector. The danger here is of throwing out the small landlord baby with the corporate landlord bathwater, especially given the current exit of many of the former. The important role of the private rented sector in providing exits from homelessness in the last decade likewise deserves greater examination (O'Sullivan, 2020). Furthermore, the significant progress, despite important loopholes, toward much greater security of tenure in the private rented sector, with most recently the introduction of tenancies of indefinite duration, is insufficiently reflected in the discussion.

In relation to homelessness, the extent to which values of care and social justice do in fact animate some politicians and public servants, as well as NGOs in providing services such as Family Hubs, is worth further exploration (Finnerty et al., 2021).

Housing Shock and *Gaffs* are impressive works of synthesis by a public intellectual which deserve to find a wide audience, particularly amongst the latter's Generation Rent addressees. The late EO Wright remarked, apropos Antonio Gramsci's dictum that progressive forces need pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will, that they also need at least a little optimism of the intellect to sustain the optimism of the will. These books supply grounds for both kinds of optimism.



› References

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O'Sullivan, E. (2020) *Reimagining Homelessness* (Bristol: Policy Press).

