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The Private Rental Sector in Australia: Living with Uncertainty, by Alan Morris, Kath Hulse and Hal Pawson, Springer, 2021, xvii, 169 pp, ISBN 978-981-33-6671-8 ISBN 978-981-33-6672-5 (eBook), Doi 10.1007/978-981-33-6672-5

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The aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the tumultuous socioeconomic and health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the problems blighting the private renting sectors (PRS) in countries with a market-based policy approach. While recent research has helped understand the relational practices and institutional settings in some countries, and enabled a broad comparative understanding, this literature still remains patchy and thin in terms of outcomes and policy detail. It is here where I see the major contribution of Morris, Hulse and Pawson's book, which provided them the space to synthesize their vast expertise of Australian rental housing and offer a thorough analysis. I would welcome a collection of such one-country books of similarly outstanding historical, institutional and relational detail so that researchers gain in-depth understanding of the international setting, and how a status-quo can be challenged (rather than the 'if' suspicion of path-dependence studies).

The book is arranged in eight chapters. The first delves into the historical development of the PRS since 1919: its deep unpopularity until 1945; its oblivion during the 1945-1980's steer towards mass homeownership; and its post-1980 growth due to "*tax and policy settings that stimulated investment in rental housing*" (p.1). The story may not be different from those of other Anglo-Saxon countries, but the reader will discover fascinating national specifics. The authors validate here the theme of 'diversity' as a characteristic of the current socioeconomic and demographic profiles of private renters *and* landlords (27% and 13.8% of all households in 2018, respectively), and various PRS submarkets. This theme reverberates throughout the remaining chapters.

The second chapter focuses on regulations "*which sets the norms and expected behaviours involved in Australia's landlord-tenant relations*" (p.25), with attention to rent regulation, tenure security and landlord obligations for maintenance and repairs. A national overview and an international comparison cast the Australian PRS as a lightly-regulated market, a judgment that would surprise no housing scholar. While a hurried reader may skip this chapter, the text on landlords' obligations for repairing and the regulation of boarding houses is worth reading.

Focusing on the supply-side of the PRS, Chapter 3 brings truly novel and comprehensive insights. I flag it as a must-read, including as a stand-alone piece. The chapter develops the idea of landlord diversity beyond and within the simplifying typologies of institutional versus individual landlords, and with attention to various PRS submarkets (e.g. 'mainstream', built-to-rent, purpose-built student accommodation, boarding houses, Air B&B). The chapter discusses the context of rental property investment in terms of market conditions, tax settings and discourses that privilege landlords over tenants, financially and symbolically. The authors bring bespoke information about landlords' property portfolios and investment behaviour, which is even more commendable given the difficulties of assembling such data. A look at the changing geography of the PRS makes the case for the suburbanisation of poverty in Australian cities.

The following four chapters address renters' situations, with a focus on long-term renters, older tenants and those who cannot afford to buy but can afford to rent in a desired (usually high-rent) area. These groups were selected as a way to depict the diversity of the sector, with the first two exemplifying some of the most and the last some of the least exposed tenants to the insecurities of the PRS.

Chapter 4 looks at private tenants' housing pathways, particularly the reasons for which tenants entered and remained in the PRS, such as being priced out of homeownership, suffering disruption events, being unable to access social housing or buy in desired area, and even a few choosing to rent. These reasons reflect the circumstances of the three groups in focus, hence they do not aim to be comprehensive; obviously migrants and students are in the PRS for very different reasons. The chapter reinforces the idea of diversity by arguing that "*every trajectory into the PRS is unique, as are the possibilities for moving out and rebounding back again*" (p.83), which may be less appealing to someone holding a more structural perspective on housing. Chapter 5 looks at the challenging process of finding a tenancy and the tenants' varied ability to construct a sense of home. The former was found to depend mostly on households' economic resources but also on discriminatory practices in the PRS. The latter depended on home's materialities, the ability to personalise and the tenant/landlord social relationship, which, when positive, gives a sense of security and control. From this point of view, I note that the Australian perspective seems more positive than its UK counterpart (Soaita and McKee 2019). Chapter 6 on the (un)affordability of rent makes sober reading, bringing a more structural analysis of rental stress across income quintiles and low/high-rent areas as well as focusing on particularly disadvantaged tenant groups. Chapter 7 applies Hulse's framework of insecure occupancy to the lived experience of insecurity of long-term tenants and of those relying on government age pension.

The concluding Chapter 8 summarises the main arguments, arguing that a "*fundamental shift in the way housing is viewed is required if Australia's housing system is to become more equitable and affordable*" (p.148). Unfortunately, this is a door barely cracked open by the authors although they do argue in passing that "*affordable and secure housing must be reconceptualised as a human right*" (p.148). It is indeed timely that housing scholars engage fully with the idea of the right to housing to call for fundamental change. The idea of 'diversity', which is so notably substantiated in this book, should be now critically questioned in terms of whose rights to housing we should be concerned with. Housing scholars who are familiar with the important work of the authors will recognize they draw heavily on some older projects, here creatively interwoven to produce a remarkable work of breadth and depth which would be of interest to anyone interested in PRS, whether student or senior researcher, with an Australian or international interest.

References

Soaita AM & McKee K (2019) Assembling a 'kind of' home in the UK private renting sector. *Geoforum*, 103(July), 148-157.