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Framing the housing crisis: how think-tanks frame politics and science to advance policy agendas

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Framing the housing crisis: How think-tanks frame politics and science to advance policy agendas

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A B S T R A C T

In England, think-tanks have played a crucial role in framing the causes of unaffordable housing. Yet the logics of think-tanks, the reasons why they intervene publicly in the way that they do, remain unclear. Drawing on the social field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, this paper seeks to understand the framing strategies of think-tanks. Based on quantitative and qualitative textual analysis of five years' worth of public interventions from three think-tanks, this paper demonstrates how the framing strategy adopted by a think-tank – that is the causal narrative and policy agenda it promotes, and the means it uses to promote it- can be partly explained by the amount and types of capital it possesses as an organisation, and its respective ties to the fields of science, politics and the media. In doing so, the paper illuminates some of the key structural logics which explain why some framings of the affordable housing crisis dominate others in the public and political domains.

1. Introduction

Across the world, there is widely perceived to be a 'crisis' in the affordability of housing. At least in England, this crisis worsened after the Global Financial Crisis as stagnant incomes, asset price inflation and austerity all made housing less affordable for young and low-income households. Although housing affordability is a problem across England (e.g. Meen, 2018), it is most acute in London and the South East due to the particularly high rents and house prices, and the UK housing crisis discourse is also overwhelmingly concerned with this region (Heslop and Ormerod, 2020).

The term "crisis" implores immediate action by the state (Hay, 1996), but act how? Despite the extensive literature on the topic, policymakers, politicians and the public remain divided over the causes of unaffordable housing and what can be done to address it. For some, the problem lies on the demand-side: with excessive immigration,[1] a shortage of mortgage credit for first-time buyers (e.g. Help to Buy scheme), or wealth and income inequalities. Others emphasise the supply-side: be it a lack of market supply due to planning constraints and/or the monopolistic behaviour of volume housebuilders; or a lack of new social housing due to government cuts.

From a political-economy perspective, it is unsurprising that such ideational contestation exists given the conflicting economic interests at stake (Kohl, 2020). Yet while such structural factors certainly constrain the narratives that are likely to take hold in public and political discourse, there still remains considerable variation over space and time that cannot be explained by structural factors alone. Moreover, structural factors play out in different ways in different social and geographic contexts.

To get a better grip on why certain framings of the housing affordability crisis dominate over others, it therefore helps to consider the *agents* of ideational change (Carstensen, 2011). In this paper, I focus in particular on the role of think-tanks. Since the 1980's, think-tanks in England have established themselves as arguably the main producers of policy-relevant knowledge. Relative to their size, it is difficult to identify any other non-governmental institution which has had quite so much impact on English housing and planning policy. For example, in the last seven years, three out of four of the special advisors for housing and planning policy (probably the most powerful non-elected official in the land) came from one of the think-tanks studied[2]; in the most recent Planning White Paper (MHCLG, 2020), there were seven think-tank citations out of a total of sixteen (and, in contrast, only one paper written by academics); alone, a recent report by Centre for Cities (Breach, 2020) was covered by eight major media publications ranging across the political spectrum. These are not big organisations: Centre for Cities has only one analyst devoted to housing & planning and a total annual revenue of £1.4 million (2018), pittance compared to the $90 M reported by the US-based Urban Institute (2018).

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[1] See https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/13/housing-minister-dominic-raab-defends-claim-of-immigration-pushing-up-house-prices. Note too that, when surveyed in 2014, the public also identify immigration as the chief driver of Britain's housing crisis – see https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/30/housing-crisis-poll-city-country-split-blame (Both accessed 4 May 2022)

[2] Toby Lloyd, 2018–9 (Shelter), Jack Airey 2020- (Policy Exchange), Alex Morton, 2014–6 (Policy Exchange)

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For some time the (disproportionate) impact of think-tanks on English housing and planning policy went largely unexamined by geographers and urban scholars (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016). This has changed more recently, with several papers exploring how think-tanks seek to influence housing policy (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016; Slater, 2018; Heslop and Ormerod, 2020). However, whilst these papers cast much needed light on the ideas and discourse advanced by think-tanks, they do not really interrogate the reasons why think-tanks act in the way that they do.

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this paper seeks to address this gap. I conceptualise think-tanks as institutions which traverse, but are also dependent on the fields of politics, science, media, and to a lesser extent, business. These fields in turn are dependent on the broader structures of the political–economy. From this perspective, it becomes clear that think-tanks face multiple competing logics which vary according to the field in which they are most anchored. This allows us to provide an explanation for a think-tank's public interventions (Eyal and Buchholz, 2010) and to propose a reasoning, based on power relations, as to why certain norms and ideas spread, but not others. In short, the research questions guiding this paper are twofold:

1. How did framings of the affordable housing crisis vary between think-tanks, and within think-tanks over time?
2. To what extent can this variation be explained by their positioning in relation to the various fields of politics, science, media and business, and to changes that took place in these fields over time?

The paper starts, below, by conceptualising the logics and resources of think-tanks using the field-theory of Bourdieu. After a brief summary of the methodology, I then turn to the main section, where I discuss each think-tank in turn: identifying their field-positioning; summarising the public interventions they make; and seeking to understand the relationship between the two. The final section concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualising think-tanks using Bourdieu's Field Theory

Bourdieu used the term field to describe a relatively autonomous social space, or domain of activity, with its own set of practical logics (Bourdieu, 1996).[3] Just as the 'real is relational' (Bourdieu, 1998), so the meaning of a particular utterance, or the power of a particular form of capital, always depends on the field in which it is situated. Each field is also a site of constant contestation between the dominant who have high levels of capital (the value of which will be defined by the practical logics of that field) and the dominated who lack such capital and therefore, either seek to acquire that capital, or to change the rules of the game so that their own capital takes on a higher value (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992: 108–109).

Thomas Medvetz proposes at least four ways in which we might usefully use Bourdieu's field theory to conceptualise the activities and power of think-tanks (see Medvetz in Hilgers and Mangez, 2014): as constituting a field unto themselves; as actors in a larger field (e.g. politics); as actors in the interstitial spaces between fields; or as actors spanning different fields. In this paper, I adopt the forth approach, conceptualising think-tanks as organisations that seek to influence policy through spanning the fields of politics, science, media, and to a lesser extent, business. In doing so, I depart from other scholars who define think-tanks by their objective characteristics (e.g. Abelson, 2009), or their self-definition (e.g. Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016).

Seen from this perspective, the competitive advantage of think-tanks in influencing policy lies in their ability to traverse these fields, or their 'plasticity' (Hernando, 2019; Medvetz, 2007). They may fall short of the rigour and originality demanded in academia but through their media visibility they yield significantly more impact on public discourse. They may lack the grounded, context-specific knowledge ('techne') of experienced practitioners but their familiarity with the scientific literature ('episteme') grants them greater intellectual legitimacy.

Because of their hybrid nature, the practical logics of think-tanks will, to a large extent, vary according to which field(s) they are most dependent upon for economic, symbolic or social capital. If a think-tank is heavily reliant on the scientific field for funding then their logics will be more closely aligned with those of academia, oriented around the pursuit of knowledge defined by the standards of the university (see Hernando, 2019 in relation to National Institute of Economic and Social Research, NIESR). On the other hand, a think-tank like Policy Exchange which gets its social and symbolic capital from having strong networks with the incumbent government (see Hernando, 2019), will have to be more sensitive to the logics of the political field, oriented around the making and influencing of normative closed decisions about how to act (Eyal, 2019).

Spanning these fields gives think-tanks a comparative advantage in the production and operationalisation of policy relevant knowledge. However, it also places think-tanks in an awkward position when the practical logics of the different fields diverge or conflict. Arguably, the most fundamental tension that think-tanks face in attempting to span these fields is that between maintaining their intellectual autonomy on the one hand, and effectively advancing a policy agenda on the other: what I term, for shorthand, as the 'autonomy vs heteronomy' bind. To find a wide hearing, think-tanks need to be seen as credible 'experts' by their relevant publics (e.g. Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016). This typically relies on being perceived as having some degree of cognitive autonomy, where statements are motivated by 'truth-seeking' (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016; Denham and Garnett 2006). At the same time, however, as heteronomous organisations, think-tanks must also generate policy-knowledge under profound constraints, the nature and strength of which will depend upon how reliant they are, materially or symbolically, on their different 'anchoring' fields (Medvetz, 2007). This dependence is most blatantly expressed in economic terms, when an organisation commissions a think-tank to conduct a piece of research with a specific objective in mind. Even with secure core funding though, for a think-tank to exert influence in the political field they will have to orientate their policy recommendations around the priorities of the governing party. And even if they are concerned with just attracting media and public attention and building a brand (see Hernando 2019 on Adam Smith Institute) then this necessitates a certain amount of repetition and message discipline (Baert, 2012).

2.2. Public interventions: framing the science (and politics)

How then do think-tanks manage this 'autonomy vs heteronomy' bind? Or to put it in Gregor McLennan's terms, how do "think tanks achieve a certain public identity or 'brand' without being perceived as being enslaved by an ideology"? (cited in Hernando, 2019: 54).

To address this question, we first need to reflect briefly on how the modern state legitimises its actions, as these same sources of legitimacy are also invoked by think-tanks. In democracies today, there are essentially two authorities which the state invokes to justify the exercise of power: 'science' and the 'will of the people' (Caramani, 2017). Technocracy stresses the former, requiring voters to entrust authority to experts who identify the general interest from rational speculation, while populism stresses the latter, requiring voters to delegate authority to leaders who equate the general interest with a putative will of the people. While both claims of authority are often seen as opposing, they are actually complimentary in their depoliticising tendencies, as both overlook the existence of conflicting (legitimate) interests and the inevitability of political disagreement (Bickerton & Accetti, 2018). Both therefore represent a crucial source of legitimacy for think-tanks who

[3] See Hilgers & Mangez, 2014 for a book length review of Bourdieu's field theory

seek to push policy in a particular direction without appearing 'political'.

In terms of representing the 'will of the people', a common strategy of think-tanks is to conduct electoral analysis and commission opinion polls so that a particular policy agenda takes on the appearance of being politically expedient and legitimate (e.g. Igo, 2007; Bickerton & Accetti, 2018). It is in the field of 'science' though from which think-tanks derive most of their legitimacy. At least since the rise of New Labour and 'what works' pragmatism, British think-tanks have been keen to portray themselves as following the 'evidence', 'data' or the 'science' (Denham and Garnett 2006). Neoclassical economics has been particularly dominant across the fields of science and politics (Hirschman and Berman, 2014), and in the UK, its influence has been bolstered by the stranglehold of the Treasury (e.g. Craig, 2020), identified by one recent special advisor as the main barrier to council housebuilding.[4]

More specifically, what think-tanks do is to *frame* the science. The defining feature of any successful political narrative lies in providing a simple and flexible story that succinctly links together a series of 'symptoms' with a cause while attributing blame (Hay, 2001: 204; Stanley, 2014). This is what framing seeks to achieve. Defined by Entman and Rojecki (1993: 52) as "the process of selecting and emphasising aspects of complex issues according to an overriding evaluative or analytical criterion", framing involves two acts: first it presents a highly selective, but not factually inaccurate, picture of the scientific evidence; second, it entwines the evidence with a particular policy recommendation so that the positive and normative become indistinguishable.

By entwining the evidence with their preferred policy-agenda – e.g. "house price inflation is *caused* by planning constraints" – framing strategies allow think-tanks to advance preferred policy agendas under the auspices of pure scientific enquiry (Daviter, 2011). Moreover, it allows them to do so in a tightly condensed format that is better equipped to survive in the fields of politics and media where the competition for capturing attention is intense (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Baert 2012: 316–317). The corollary of these framing strategies though – and of the structural logics to which they conform – is that causal narratives become increasingly *politically contingent*. The decision of which cause to emphasise is made not only on the basis of that cause's explanatory power but also on the perceived short-term feasibility of the policy solutions that flow from it.

Framing strategies also lead the debate to become increasingly reductive. Rather than engaging with opposing causal explanations and policy proposals in good faith, there is a tendency instead to just crowd them out of the fields of media and politics, through relentlessly repeating the same frame, thus capturing the scarce attention of the public and policymakers (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Baert 2012: 316–317). The end result is that the debate becomes "bedevilled by rival simplifications" as Edwards (2015) recently described the English housing crisis discourse.

This 'crowding out' strategy also has methodological implications for this paper, as if we want to get a sense of a think-tank's impact on public discourse, then we need to examine their public interventions in quantitative, as well as qualitative, terms. For example, a think-tank that exclusively and publicly deploys the same framing of the housing crisis (e.g. "unaffordable housing is caused by planning constraints") 100 times in a year is likely to be following a different strategy – and with different effects - to a think-tank that exclusively and publicly deploys that same framing only twice in a year, or a think-tank that publicly deploys that framing among others.

To summarise, in trying to span the fields of science, politics and the media, think-tanks must manage a number of tensions; most notably the 'autonomy vs heteronomy bind' to which framing strategies are a logical response. As we will see, however, think-tanks are invested in, and dependent upon, these anchoring fields to varying degrees. My central proposition is that this variation, along with the types of capital held by the think-tank, can go a long way to explaining both the causal frame they advance and the type of public interventions they adopt (discursive vs non-discursive; framing public opinion vs framing science). Below, I take each of the three think-tanks in turn, attempting to connect i) their position in relation to the three fields and ii) the type of framing and public interventions they adopt.

3. Data and methodology

The bulk of the analysis in this paper is based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of almost 300 blogposts and executive summaries published by three-tanks over a five-year period from July 2015 to July 2020. The three think-tanks – Shelter, Centre for Cities and Policy Exchange – were chosen on two bases. First, they all have significant political influence: all three have been cited in central government papers, and have received considerable media attention for their public interventions (Eyal and Buchholz, 2010) in relation to housing and planning policy. Second, I tried to select think-tanks that vary in their level and composition of capital and their anchoring in the fields of science and politics.

The analysis started by looking at the level and structure of capital held by each of the three think-tanks, with a view to understanding their respective anchoring and dominance in the fields of science, media and politics. I focussed less on the business field as, according to publicly available data, none of the three think-tanks seemed particularly invested in this field. Drawing mostly on secondary data, I started by examining the think-tanks' size and funding structure (gleaned from think-tank websites and annual reports). I then explored the career trajectories and the educational histories of those think-tank staff who had authored relevant publications (taken from think-tank websites and Linkedin Premium) to get a sense of their individual backgrounds (or 'habitus' in Bourdieusian terms) and levels of capital (e.g. qualifications). Career and educational information was successfuly collected on 29 think-tankers involved in housing research: 11 from Centre for Cities; 3 from Policy Exchange and 15 from Shelter. This part of the analysis was completed in Summer 2020.

For the main part of the analysis, I then used manual and automatic web-scraping techniques to capture the three think-tanks' public interventions. The sampling strategy differed slightly between think-tanks (see Table 1), but across all three I focussed in particular on shorter outputs - mostly blogposts, and some report executive summaries- which talked directly about the causes of housing unaffordability in England. Because of their brevity, these are much more likely to be read and shared among journalists and politicians than, for example, 60-page research reports,[5] so they provide a more accurate representation of the frames that think-tanks seek to advance in the fields of media and politics, and the strategies they use for doing so. In terms of timescales, I looked at the 5 years running from July 2015, just after the Cameron-administration had achieved the first overall Conservative majority since 1997, only to lose the EU/Brexit referendum (2016) and be replaced by Theresa May (2016), then Boris Johnson (2019-).

I then read through each of the scraped outputs, both to ensure they were complete, and to conduct analysis on them across two bases. First, the discursive frame they advanced, both in terms of the causal narrative they focussed on, and the policies they recommended. This part of the analysis was conducted iteratively and interpretatively. I started out by listing a number of causal stories and policy recommendations which I thought were likely to appear. I then went through each of the outputs to

[4] See https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/my-time-at-number-10-an-interview-with-former-government-housing-advisor-toby-lloyd-63073 (Accessed 4 May 2022)

[5] This was confirmed by one think-tank researcher who told me that only a small proportion of people who viewed the report webpage (where the executive summary was displayed) actually clicked through to view the full report.

Table 1
Sampling Strategy.

Think-tank	Sampling strategy
Shelter	Shelter were by far the most prolific think-tank, publishing over 700 blogposts, and 200 briefings, reports and consultation responses. To manage these numbers, I applied two filters: first, I only looked at blogposts, as these typically cover any reports/ analyses, so provide a relatively comprehensive overview of Shelter's public intervention strategy; second, I only included authors[1] who were senior management (and presumably deemed more influential), or wrote on the drivers of housing unaffordability (as opposed to exploring its symptoms e.g. homelessness).
Policy Exchange Centre for Cities	These two think-tanks published far fewer outputs on housing and planning matters, but mostly focussed on the drivers of housing unaffordability. For both think-tanks, outputs were first filtered using the "housing and planning" topic filter on their respective websites[2]. I then excluded outputs which I judged to be of marginal relevance to housing unaffordability (but included outputs written by external authors). As well as the blogposts, I also copied and pasted the "executive summary"[3] from each of the relevant research reports.

[1] Selected Shelter authors were: Robin White, John Bibby, Eleni Stratton, Alex McCallum, Sara Mahmoud, Chris Wood, Campbell Robb, Hilary Burkitt, Greg Beales, Tom Weekes, Toby Lloyd, Rose Grayston, Adam van Lohuizen.

[2] https://www.centreforcities.org/housing (blogs and reports) and https://policyexchange.org.uk/publications/housing-planning-publications/ (reports) and https://policyexchange.org.uk/blogs/housing-planning-blogs/ (blogs) (Accessed 4 May 2022).

[3] If there was no "executive summary" then I looked for the nearest thing to an overview/summary written by the author(s).

add any missing frames to the list and delete any redundant ones. With this revised list of frames in hand, I then went through the outputs a second time and categorised them according to the first and second most prominent causal narrative/policy recommendation. I also noted any non-discursive devices that were used to bolster the frame, such as a graph, opinion poll, or economic model. Table 2 below lists those causal frames and policy recommendations that appeared most frequently (i.e. were used as the primary frame/recommendation in at least 10% of a think-tank's outputs).

To compliment this more interpretivist methodology, I also conducted more inductive quantitative text analysis – namely, correspondence analysis. Pioneered by Bourdieu (2018), correspondence analysis is an inductive method used to reveal the structure of a complex data matrix and to represent it on a visual map, thereby facilitating the interpretation of results (Greenacre, 2017). The method is used widely in sociology, albeit less so in discourse analysis and quantitative text analysis (though see Clarke et al., 2021 for recent example).

Table 2
List of most frequently deployed causal interpretations (bold) and policy proposals (unbold).

Frame/policy proposal	Details
Supply	**There is an overall shortage of housing supply**
Planning-	**The planning system is too restrictive/too much 'NIMBYism'**
Supply (SH)	**There is a shortage of social housing (SH)**
Quality	**The quality of new development is poor**
Land	**The land market is dysfunctional (e.g. land-banking/slow build-out by housebuilders)**
PRS/OO	**The private rented sector (PRS) is too large, expensive or precarious / owner-occupation (OO) is too low**
Zoning	Introduce a zoning system (rather than discretion-based planning system)
Betterment	Capture more betterment value, strengthen state compulsory purchase powers or close 'viability loophole'
Supply+	Build more homes overall
Supply (SH) +	Build more social housing (SH)
PRS S21 -	Introduce greater security of tenure for private renters (i.e. reform S21)
Build beautiful	Build better designed/'more beautiful' homes

For Graph 1, I started by uploading the entire corpus (291 output texts) onto KH coder software[6] and extracting the top two-hundred most common phrases (i.e. two or more consecutive words). I then conducted "simple" correspondence analysis on the corpus to reveal the relative relationships of different phrases with different think-tanks. I repeated the same process for Graphs 2 and 3, but this time I extracted the top two-hundred most common phrases for a *single* think-tank (Centre for Cities then Shelter) and used correspondence analysis to reveal the relative relationships of different phrases with different *years* (the results for Policy Exchange were excluded as the corpus was too small).

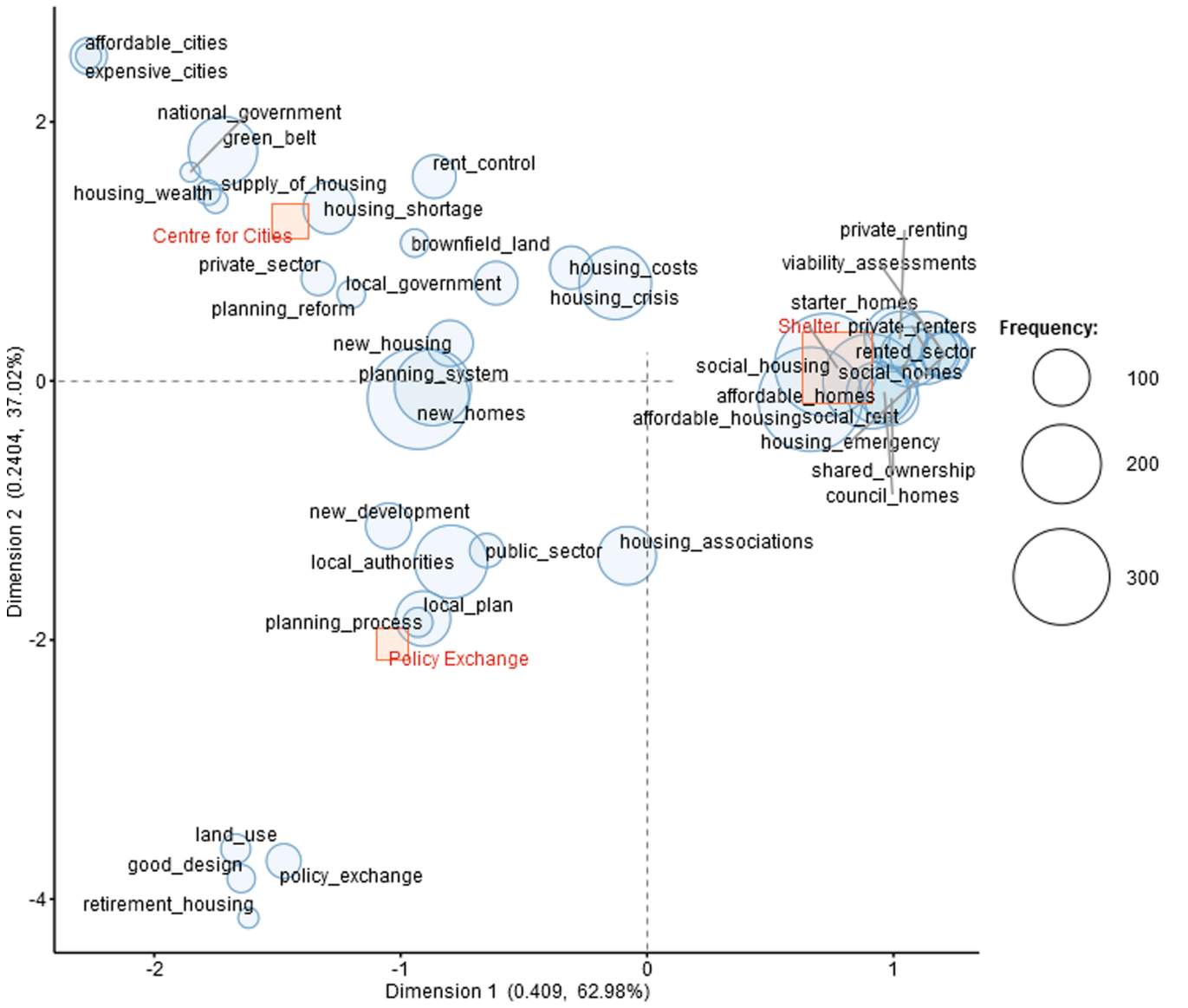
One relatively easy way of interpreting the results from Graph 1 is to imagine straight lines running from the centre of the graph (i.e. the origin) to each of the circles (phrases) and squares (think-tanks). Those phrases which have short lines (i.e. low chi-squared values) are not very distinctive. In Graph 1, for example, phrases such as "housing costs" were used relatively frequently by all three think-tanks and are therefore near the centre. Because these phrases crowd around the centre, I don't show them in the graphs. Instead, Graphs 1–3 only show the forty most 'distinctive' phrases: those forty phrases that are furthest away from the origin (i.e. highest chi-squared values).

But if we want to estimate how distinctive these phrases are to the different think-tanks, we need to look not only at the distance of the imaginary lines, but also at their angles. Continuing with Graph 1, if the angle of the line running from a phrase (circle) to the centre, is close to that running from a think-tank (square) to the centre, then that phrase is very distinctive to that think-tank. In sum then, those phrases most distinct to a think-tank are i) most distant from the centre *and* ii) at a similar angle from the centre to the respective think-tank. Applying this rule to Graph 1, the two most distinctive phrases to Centre for Cities are "affordable cities" and "expensive cities", which appeared in 13 outputs, all by Centre for Cities. The least distinct phrase (i.e. closest to the origin) is "housing crisis" which was commonly used by all three think-tanks. Applying the same rule to Graph 2 (Centre for Cities), the most distinctive phrases for 2016 were "new mayor" and "new work": both were used in two blogposts in 2016, but none of the other years.

Two other more detailed aspects of the correspondence analysis are worth pointing out. First, I used the standardised method of scaling, meaning that plotting was performed without fixing the aspect ratio to 1:1 (or to put it another way, the results are displayed to the limit of the plot area). This allowed me to fit the whole graph in the page, but it means that the scaling is different for the horizontal and vertical axis. The reader should therefore look at the axis labels before surmising that one phrase is more or less distinct than another. Second, the % under the horizontal and vertical axis denotes the proportion of variance of the 40 phrases that is explained by the two axis (horizontal and vertical) in the graph. Whereas Graph 1 explains 100% of the variance, Graphs 2 and 3 only explain 57% and 66% of variance respectively. Consequently, the relationships implied by Graphs 2 and 3 should be considered *probable* rather than conclusive.

To conclude this section, it is worth recognising the methodology reviewed above suffers from a number of limitations; the absence of any interviews with think-tankers themselves being the major one. This methodological choice was made partly due to resource constraints, and partly due to concerns over anonymity, but it has probably has led me to misdiagnose the drivers of particular framing strategies and to overstate the role of structural factors relative to agency. Moreover, by making think-tanks the object of analysis, rather than the actors operating within them, I have probably exaggerated the internal coherence of these organisations. Having recognised these limitations, I now analyse each of the three think-tanks in turn.

[6] https://khcoder.net/en/ (Accessed 4 May 2022)



Graph 1. Correspondence analysis of outputs by think-tank. Note 1: All phrases must have appeared at least 10 times (in entire corpus) to be included in analysis (total phrase included = 133).

4. Results

4.1. Centre for Cities

Initially founded in 2005, under the umbrella of the left-leaning Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), Centre for Cities has since branched off on its own. Describing itself as an "Independent, non-partisan think-tank dedicated to understanding and improving the economies of the UK's largest cities and towns", the think-tank had 17 core staff listed on its website, although from 2015 to 2020 only one staff member was typically devoted to housing and planning.

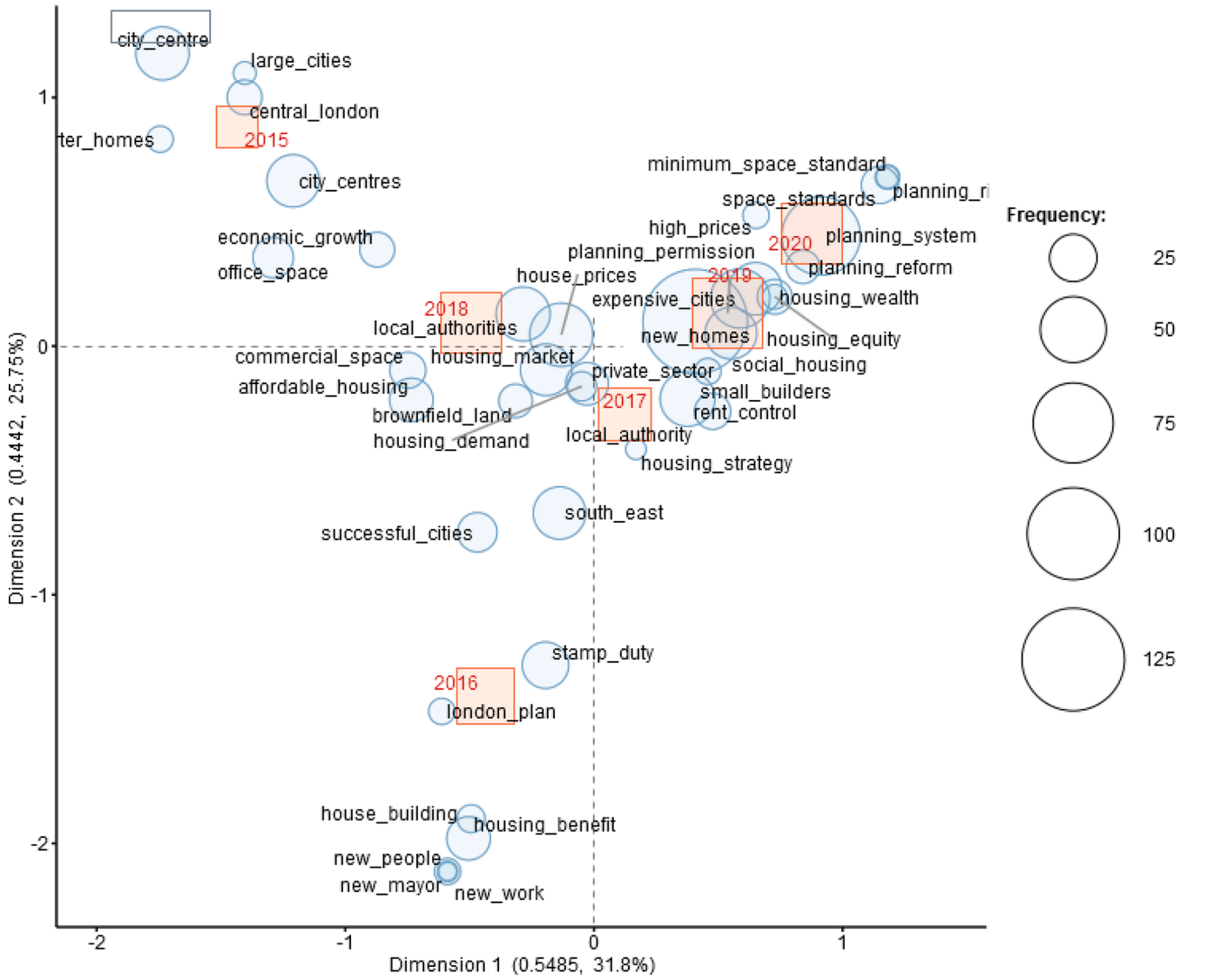
By the end of 2018, the Centre's revenues were £1.4 million: 53% was core funding from the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, and the remainder came from sponsorship of research projects and events, as well partnering with the central-government/Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) funded 'What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth Network (WWC) which generated 20% of the Centre's funding.[7] The funding situation was broadly similar at the end of 2015.[8] Of the Centre's five research projects, two reported direct project-funding, from the Private Debt Project (Breach, 2019), and the real estate consultancy, GL Hearn (Breach and Magrini, 2020).

Besides the relatively high level of core funding the centre has access to - which provides it considerable autonomy in deciding what research topics to concentrate on (Hernando, 2019) – the key feature of the Centre lies in its strong relationship with the academic field of neo-classical economics. Of the eleven staff most involved in housing/planning policy, six had an economic degree as their highest qualification (one with a PhD). In terms of career trajectories, there were also quite strong links with economic/business consultancies (3 staff members came from this sector - 'in'; while 1 left for it- 'out'), politically centrist think-tanks (4 in, 1 out), and public sector agencies (1 in, 2 out).

More specifically, the Centre is anchored in the field of New Urban Economics (NUE). Centred around high-ranking journals such as 'Urban Economics', the rise of NUE in the 1980's went hand-in-hand with the

[7] Centre for Cities Annual Report 2018. See https://www.centreforcities.org/about/annual-reports/ (Accessed 4 May 2022)

[8] Centre for Cities Annual Report 2015. See https://www.centreforcities.org/about/annual-reports/ (Accessed 4 May 2022)



Graph 2. Correspondence analysis of Centre for Cities' outputs by year. Note 1: All phrases must have appeared at least 3 times (in entire corpus) to be included in analysis (total phrase included = 119).

broader "Americanisation" of the economics discipline (Fourcade, 2009). Unlike institutional and classical economics which emphasised the *inherent* imperfections and context-dependence of housing and land markets, NUE smoothed over these idiosyncrasies, assuming that housing and land markets could - and should – operate like any other market, if only planning constraints didn't get in the way (McMaster and Watkins, 2006; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017).

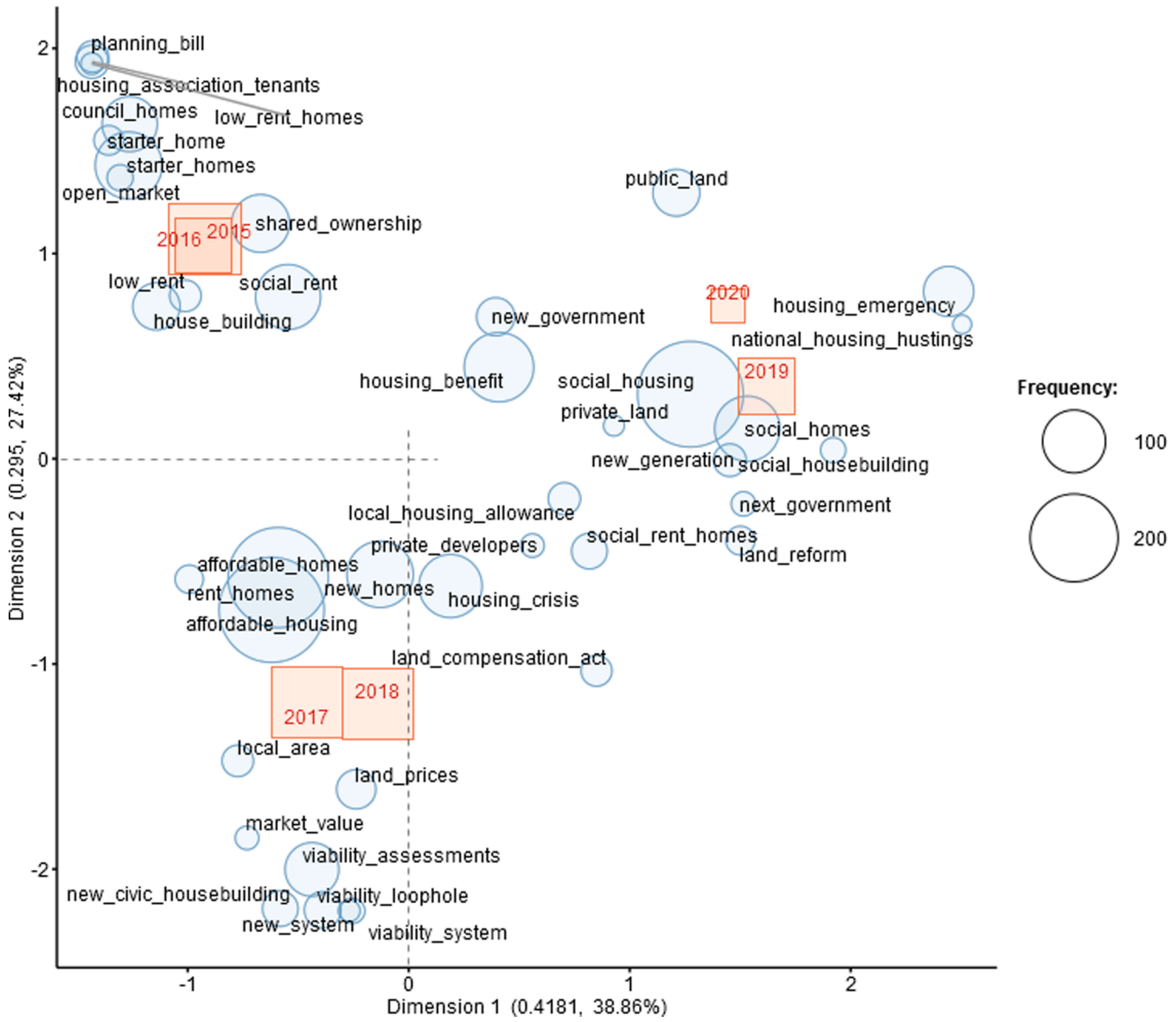
Central to the "Americanisation" of economics was the London School of Economics (LSE) (Fourcade, 2009), which also hosts many of the most prominent NUE's today, and it is no coincidence that the LSE and C4C enjoy a close, almost symbiotic, relationship. The Centre was partly set up by Max Nathan (who later became an Urban Associate at LSE) and, as noted above, a considerable amount of its funding comes from collaborating with the LSE on the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, which is headed by LSE New Urban Economist, Henry Overman.[9] In 2019, the Centre also published a paper co-authored by Paul Cheshire, another LSE New Urban Economist, that argued for building on the greenbelt.

In analysing the agents of ideational change, Carstensen (2011) draws a distinction between Paradigm man and Bricoleur man. Whereas the former deduces political solutions from the paradigm they follow, the latter pragmatically combines bits and pieces from several paradigms in recognition of the complex array of challenges in getting one's ideas and recommendations to the top of the policy agenda. Throughout the last five years, the Centre has represented the almost embodiment of paradigm man, drawing consistently on NUE to derive and legitimise their framing. This is reflected in their consistent criticism of the planning system as well as their emphasis on economic efficiency over equality; for example, the Centre consistently prioritised market supply over social housing supply, and was notably in support of the government's Permitted Development Right reforms[10] which increased market supply but were exempt from requirements to provide social housing. We can also see this reflected in Graph 1, where "planning_reform", "green_belt", "housing_shortage" and "supply_of_housing" distinguish Centre for Cities from the other two think-tanks.

This anchoring in the field of NUE is also reflected in the Centre's non-discursive interventions - such as calculations showing the large

[9] See https://www.whatworksgrowth.org

[10] https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/sleepy-suburbs/what-needs-to-change/



Graph 3. Correspondence analysis of Shelter's outputs by year. Note 1: All phrases must have appeared at least 5 times (in entire corpus) to be included in analysis (total phrase included = 133).

amounts of housing that could be built around train stations in the green-belt, or maps showing higher house price inflation in regions with low housebuilding. Whilst these interventions do not carry a message in themselves, they align with and reinforce the central economic framing that housing unaffordability is an efficiency problem (statistics are calculated at the aggregate level e.g. average house prices) driven by a spatial mismatch in supply and demand (e.g. frequent use of maps) which can only be solved by increasing market supply in high-demand areas– either via greenbelt reform or a zoning system. This anchoring in the field of science is also reflected in their limited framing of the politics and technocratic language: C4C only published one opinion poll, and emphasised the need to make "tough decisions" rather than politically expedient ones.

The challenge paradigm man faces, however, is how to adapt his messaging and 'build a brand' so that it fits the logics of the politics and media fields – politically realistic, easily understood, repetitive - without departing from the paradigm which gives him his legitimacy. Over the first three years studied, the Centre appears to have had only marginal presence in the political/media field, analysing various policies through the lens of NUE, but with little frame discipline beyond advocating for greenbelt reform ("green belt" was C4C's second most common phrase) which, in any case, is widely considered politically untouchable.

Since 2019, however, the Centre appears to have moved itself closer to the fields of media and politics. First, rather than advocating for green-belt reform, a line of argument which had proved predictably fruitless, it instead switched its attention to the way the planning system is run more generally, calling for the replacement of the current discretionary system with a zoning system. Second, the Centre has become much more *disciplined* in its framing, focussing its messaging and research almost entirely on the impact of planning regulation and the institutional flaws of the discretionary-based planning system. We can see this in Graph 2 above with key phrases like "planning reform" "planning system", and "planning permission" all clustering closely around the years 2019 and 2020 (in the top right corner). In contrast, the phrases clustering around years 2015–2018 are more disparate e.g. "local leaders" "stamp duty", "housing associations", "public sector".

This repositioning towards the fields of media and politics appears to have come, at least in part, from the top-down. The "Programme for 2019" section of the 2018 Annual Report stated that "There has been a great deal of building in successful city centres in recent years, and much

conversation about the need to build on the greenbelt, but are other planning regulations limiting housebuilding?",[11] and the next year's annual report specifically highlighted the media impact of the Centres work on "Housing", something it had neglected to do the previous 5 years.[12] And it appears to have been successful: as well as receiving considerable media coverage, the Centre's (2020) report "Planning for the future: How flexible zoning will end the housing crisis" was cited, and its proposals broadly reflected, in the Government's 2020 "Planning for the Future" White Paper.

Studying the NIESR in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), another think-tank with strong links to the neoclassical field, Hernando (2019) found that as it became an increasingly vocal and sustained critic of austerity, the think-tank also became politicised. Despite its sustained attack on the discretionary planning system, however, the Centre seems to have avoided such a charge (at least in public), and still receives substantial ESRC funding through WWC. How then has C4C managed to increase its presence in the fields of politics and media, but without compromising its scientific legitimacy?

The answer appears to lie in the dominance of its framing in both the scientific *and* political fields. In the aftermath of the GFC, NIESR faced a mismatch between these two fields: neoclassical economists generally opposed austerity whereas the incumbent coalition party supported it. For C4C, there was no such mismatch, as the Conservative party has consistently advocated for the deregulation of the planning system (even if their policies have been relatively tame). A comparison of C4C and NIESR therefore indicates that it is much easier for think-tanks to span the fields of politics, media and science if it is able to conform with the dominant framing in each of these fields.

4.2. Policy Exchange

Policy Exchange (PX) was formed in 2001 to modernise centre-right thinking. In recognition of the 'post-ideological' approach successfully propounded by New Labour, which had somewhat marginalised the more explicitly ideological right wing think-tanks of the 1980's (Adam Smith Institute, The Centre for Policy Studies, Institute of Economic Affairs), PX sought to put forward 'evidence-based' policy solutions with an emphasis on free markets and voluntarism. Since David Cameron's Conservative party was elected on a similar platform in 2010, PX has probably been the most politically influential think-tank in England (Hernando, 2019; Pautz, 2013).

Over 2015–20, PX received approximately £3M per annum in revenues, the vast majority of which came from "donations and legacies".[13] PX does not publish its funding sources but one former employee estimated "roughly a third from individual donors, a third from trust and foundations, and a third from corporate sponsorship" (Hernando, 2019). Four out of fourteen of PX's research reports noted or implied direct sponsorship - from a group of housing associations (Walker, 2016); John Armitage Charitable Trust (Airey et al., 2018); Morgan Sindall Group plc (Airey and Blakeway, 2019); and jointly from Landowner Legacy Ltd and The Prince's Foundation (Airey, 2019). In 2020, PX had 50 staff listed on its website (excluding 'Visiting fellows'), although only one staff member was generally responsible for housing, planning and urban regeneration policy, and most publications were either co-authored with others from outside PX, or took the labour-light form of essay-collections.

Compared to Centre for Cities, Policy Exchange appears to have stronger links with the business field (e.g. comparatively large number of sponsored reports) but what defines it is its close relationship with the Conservative administration (see Hernando, 2019; Pautz, 2013). Four out of ten of PX's publications had a foreword from either the Secretary of State for Housing and Planning or the Communities Secretary. In contrast, with the notable exception of New Urban Economist Ed Glaeser, PX has not published any blogposts or reports authored by academic neoclassical economists since 2004, nor has it ever reported any scientific funding.

On the one hand, this proximity to political power is attractive to those businesses and NGOs looking to influence policy, such as the five large housing associations who 'sponsored' a PX report arguing that large housing associations should be allowed greater freedom and flexibility in borrowing and setting rents (Walker, 2016). On the other hand, being anchored in the political field also necessitates a certain degree of political caution and pragmatism: an emphasis on practical policy problems, a preparedness to change tack with the political centre of gravity, and an avoidance of policy positions that are out of step with the incumbent Conservative government (Hernando, 2019). We can see this reflected in PX's relatively low media profile - it wrote fewer blogposts than the other two think-tanks - as well its 'bricoleur' (Carstensen, 2011) approach to ideational positioning, which is exemplified by the 'Building Beautiful' agenda.

The Building Beautiful agenda represents the central pillar of PX's collaboration with the Conservative government on housing and planning policy. A joint initiative of Create Streets (CS)[14] and PX, this agenda followed Centre for Cities in defining the housing crisis as a shortage of market supply, and laying the blame at the irresponsive and discretionary planning system (hence the support of Edward Glaeser – see Airey, 2020). The key difference though, is that whereas C4C followed the NUE orthodoxy in attributing NIMBYism to rational economic self-interest, PX framed NIMBYism as a reasonable response to "ugly" homes. Thus the frames advanced by C4C and PX fall either side of the libertarian and traditionalist varieties of conservatism: the former prioritising economic individualism and efficiency; the latter traditionalism, rooted in the belief of an objective moral (or in this case, aesthetic) order (Medvetz, 2007).

Although the 'Building Beautiful' framing has been promoted by CS and PX going back to 2013 (Boys-Smith and Morton, 2013), it has achieved most political traction in the last two years. Until then, like C4C, PX's housing and planning output was relatively subdued and disparate in terms of the frames it advanced. Since 2018, however, six out of ten of PX's reports or essay-collections have advanced the "Building Beautiful" ("BB") frame, and this arguably became the government's favoured framing of the housing crisis, as reflected in the formation of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission under the May administration (which was co-chaired by Boys-Smith), and then by the Johnson administration's proposed planning reforms (MHCLG, 2020).

Under the stewardship of Boys-Smith and Jack Airey, hired from the Localis think-tank (which has strong ties with PX; Hernando, 2019: 12), Policy Exchange framed the science to show that certain designs universally produced better social outcomes, drawing especially on the work of data scientists. As we would expect from their anchoring though, PX relied primarily on framing the politics to show that traditional designs were favoured by the majority of people. Much of the legitimacy for this anti-intellectualist frame rested on polling and focus groups conducted in one report (Airey et al., 2018) which claimed to demonstrate that "not only do people have a soft consensus over what is desirable, but that such a consensus is essential to new homes being built at the rate required". The three essay collections published as part of the Building Beautiful agenda can also be interpreted as a strategy for

[11] https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Centre-for-Cities-Signed-2018-Accounts.pdf (Accessed 4 May 2022)

[12] https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Centre-for-Cities-Signed-2019-Accounts.pdf (Accessed 4 May 2022)

[13] See PX annual accounts at https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/ (Accessed 4 May 2022)

[14] Create Streets is a think-tank that was founded by Nicholas Boys-Smith, an advisor under the Major administration, and campaigns for more popular (and traditional) development aesthetics.

framing consensus, but this time among key stakeholders rather than the public.

To understand why the BB frame become so prominent in the PX's and Conservative's framing of the housing crisis, we need to appreciate the political bind faced by the Conservatives and, by extension, PX. When it comes to housing and planning policy, the two guiding stars of the Conservative Party - localism/communitarianism and 'free markets' - are directly in conflict, with greenbelt policy and housebuilding targets representing the ideological fault-lines (e.g Inch and Shepherd, 2020). By arguing that if only we built houses according to popular, traditionalist tastes – as opposed to the styles dictated by the planning system - then local democratic opposition to development would melt away, the BB frame reconciled these faultlines: displacing blame for the housing supply shortage away from both free markets and local democracy, and onto the over-reaching state.

Regardless of its verity, the BB frame is clearly politically expedient, but why was it adopted in 2018 and not 2013? One likely answer lies in the post-liberal shift that took place in the political field. Under the May and Johnson administrations, the Conservative party tilted away from the libertarian brand of Conservatism that characterised Cameronism, and towards a more traditionalist brand, under which the BB agenda had much greater currency. In sum, the BB frame is yet another example of PX's anchoring in the field of politics, and the logics that it must follow as a result of its dependence on the ruling Conservative Party.

4.3. Shelter

Unlike the other two organisations, Shelter does not self-define as a 'think-tank'. Founded in 1966 with the mission of ending homelessness, at the tax year-end of 2020 the charity had a revenue of 73 million.[15] Approximately £4 million of this was spent on "research and policy" or "campaigning", with the remainder going on advice and legal services, training resources, and fundraising. Funding came mainly from donations, legacies and charity shops (68%), together with grants and contracts (30%). With more than double the total revenues of Centre for Cities, and an exclusive focus on housing, Shelter is certainly the most prolific and active of all the think-tanks researching and campaigning on the 'housing crisis'.

Like Policy Exchange, Shelter seeks to anchor itself more in the field of politics (and media) than science. It receives no funding from scientific bodies and has an explicit focus on campaigning. This is reflected in the composition of the organisation. It has strong connections with market research and public affairs (3 in, 0 out), civil service (5 in, 3 out), charities/think-tanks (3 in, 3 out) and housing associations (3 in). It is also reflected, as we will see, in the bricoleur fashion in which Shelter crafts policy positions.

Dedicated to redistributive politics, and with ties to the Labour Party,[16] it is Shelter which experiences the conflicting pulls of intellectual autonomy and political influence most acutely. Unlike Centre for Cities, it cannot plant itself in the scientifically dominant field of neoclassical economics as this would not align with its redistributive politics, nor would it provide sufficient space for political pragmatism. At the same time, however, Shelter enjoys considerably less power in the (Conservative-dominated) political field – lacking the social and symbolic capital of PX.

That said, Shelter's high level of economic capital means that it does not have to do commissioned research. Consequently, it can be relatively disciplined and strategic when advancing a particular causal narrative in the media field, in which it has also invested significantly (as of 2021, Shelter's communications/media team numbers at least five, compared to two for C4C). Running through almost all of Shelter's blogposts is the premise that the fundamental driver of housing unaffordability is a lack of housing supply, but in particular social housing supply. The key to addressing the housing crisis is, as their extensive 2019 PR campaign's tagline put it, to "build more social housing".

Given their weak position in the field of politics, Shelter invested considerable resources in framing public opinion to show that building more social housing was politically expedient and legitimate. The centre-piece was the Social Housing Commission (2018) which brought stakeholders together from across the political spectrum – including two former Conservative ministers, but no academics – to demonstrate that increasing social housing supply was a policy that commanded consensus across the political spectrum. Complimenting this, Shelter commissioned regular opinion polls and election result analysis hammering home the same point.

In terms of framing the science, Shelter alternated between two approaches. The first involved working within the dominant paradigm of neoclassical economics to argue for more grant-funding for social housebuilding. Here though, they started from a weak position. Whereas C4C could draw upon neoclassical economic theory and evidence from NUE on the 'cost of planning' (e.g. Cheshire, 2018) to paint a utopian vision of what a perfectly elastic housing market would, in theory, look like, there is no neoclassical textbook utopian vision for building social housing.

To justify such mass social housing supply within the neoclassical paradigm, it must first be demonstrated that the market is not, and cannot, be perfect, no matter how much the planning system is pared back. Already, therefore, the burden of proof lies on their side, hence Shelter's repeated analysis showing the gap between planning permissions and completed developments. Then it must be shown that the economic benefits of building more social housing would exceed its costs. Such predictions are inherently speculative, as they are contingent on projecting a whole range of variables (interest rates, rental values etc.) into the future. In making this neoclassical case for social housing, Shelter therefore had to look outside the academic sphere to economic consultancies (e.g. Capital Economics, 2018) and real estate analysts (e.g. Savills, 2020) associated with the 'centre' or right of the political spectrum, whose highly speculative findings were then framed to align with the economic case for social housing.

Whereas this first framing of the science sought to work within the epistemic and political norms prescribed by neoclassical economics, the second sought to overturn them, and with considerable success. From 2017 to 18, Shelter posited the dysfunctional land market as being the other major (social housing) supply constraint, and advocated for land reform as a means of resolving it (e.g. see terms clustered around years 2017 and 2018 in Graph 3). Advanced most notably by Toby Lloyd, this causal framing drew on classical economics to emphasise the unique features of land, smoothed over by NUE, which made greater state intervention and taxation of the land-market a pre-requisite for increasing housing supply, both social and market.

Given the dominant neoclassical norms with which it conflicted, it is perhaps surprising that this frame achieved such traction in the political, and scientific, field. For example, in 2017, Martin Wolf of the Financial Times listed "Rethinking the Economics of Land and Housing" (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017) as one of the best economics books of the year,[17] and from 2018-9, Toby Lloyd was made a special advisor to the May administration. It seems though that by advocating for communities to have greater control over the affordability of new homes, the frame was also able to tap into the same post-liberal, communitarian shift in the political field as the BB frame. Indeed, it is notable that Lloyd went onto

[15] https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnpn0s/2NY9aKUCyQhym18XfsGte2/c374e1b8c25486b7d10be40859cc0a27/2019-20_Shelter_Annual_Report.pdf (Accessed 4 May 2022)

[16] For example, Shelter's Director of Communications, Policy and Campaigns, Greg Beales, was previously Director of Strategy for the Labour Party and Campbell Robb, Shelter CEO from 2009 to 2016 worked for the Labour Party.

[17] https://www.ft.com/content/838ecc26-d62c-11e7-8c9a-d9c0a5c8d5c9 (Accessed 4 May 2022)

chair the "No Place Left Behind Commission", an initiative of Create Streets. The framing was also able to draw on the growing stature of classical economics post-GFC (Solomon, 2010), as well as the historic support of respected political figures, most notably Winston Churchill. As demonstrated in Graph 3, however, the land/betterment value framing was scaled back by Shelter in 2019/20 in favour of an exclusive focus on building more social housing.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper started from the premise that if we are to understand why think-tanks intervene publicly in the way that they do, it helps to conceptualise them in relational rather than absolute terms. Following Medvetz, and drawing on Bourdieu, I conceptualised think-tanks as organisations that span the fields of politics, media, science, and to a lesser extent, business; each field with its own structure and set of practical logics influenced by battles going on both inside and outside. Building on this conceptual framework, I then explored how think-tanks' positioning in these fields, together with changes in the structures and logics of these fields, could explain variation in think-tanks' framings of the housing crisis.

Of the three think-tanks, Centre for Cities was most anchored in the field of science, and in particular, New Urban Economics. This was reflected in its close collaborative relationship with the LSE, its substantial funding from ESRC, the career histories and trajectories of its staff, and above all, its outputs. Throughout the five years, C4C's framings were consistently derived from this paradigm, but it was only from 2018 that their framings became disciplined in line with the logics of the media and politics fields; laser-focussed on the institutional design of the planning system.

Whereas Centre for Cities is anchored in the field of science, Policy Exchange is firmly grounded in the field of politics. PX's prime asset is its close relationship with the ruling Conservative Party, allowing it to influence policy and secure private funding. However, to maintain this asset, PX has to advance frames that are helpful to the Conservative Party. In terms of housing and planning policy, this means advancing frames – like the Building Beautiful agenda - that conform to the free-market logic but without obviously overriding local democracy. It also means showing that such policies are in line with public opinion, hence PX's frequent citing of polling evidence (something which is absent from C4C outputs, for example).

Like PX, Shelter sought to anchor itself in the field of politics. Unlike PX though, Shelter did not enjoy a dominant position in this field, as its core redistributive agenda was out of step with the incumbent government. Consequently, it had to draw on its extensive economic resources, and media connections to publicly frame the politics and science in a way that aligned with its agenda. In terms of framing the politics, this involved opinion polls, analysis of electoral results and the Social Housing Commission– all of which aimed to demonstrate that building social housing was a policy that aligned with the popular will and commanded cross-party support. In terms of framing the science, Shelter alternated between working within the paradigm of neoclassical economics, and challenging it through their land-reform agenda.

In sum, all three think-tanks occupied very different positions in relation to the fields of science, media, and politics (and less significantly, business), and this can help us explain why their framings of the housing crisis diverged. To conclude though, I want to focus on two trends these think-tanks' framings shared in common. First, all three think-tanks agreed that a shortage of supply was the main 'cause' of housing unaffordability. Inversely, there was almost no reference to the role of demand-side factors, such as interest rates, mortgage market liberalisation, the income elasticity of demand or income/wealth inequalities, all of which are recognised by neoclassical economists to have comparably large effects on house prices and affordability (Meen and Whitehead, 2020). This 'supply shortage' framing has not gone without contest. In the last decade, there have been several attempts to challenge the idea that housing unaffordability is due to a shortage of supply, most recently from Mulheirn (2019). Yet, these challenges have had little traction, much to the consternation of some economists.[18]

These demand-side framings are unpopular among New Urban Economists, and challenge the efficacy of free-markets, so it is unsurprising that both Centre for Cities and Policy Exchange have eschewed them. But why did Shelter – or other left-leaning think-tanks - not advance these demand-side framings? The answer becomes clear once we recall Shelter's anchoring in the field of politics. As discussed, one consequence of the framing strategies pursued by think-tanks is that causal narratives become increasingly *politically contingent*, evaluated not only on the basis of their explanatory power but also on the perceived short-term feasibility of the policy solutions that flow from them. Put simply, demand-side explanations were eschewed by Shelter (and other organisations seeking to influence policy) because they were perceived to imply policies, such as wealth redistribution, which are judged politically unfeasible (at least in the short-term). As Toby Lloyd described Mulheirn's demand-side framing "it's just not useful as it doesn't lead to any meaningful solutions".[19] This likely explains why supply-side framings of the housing crisis continue to dominate in the English policy discourse more generally.

The other trend that the three think-tanks have in common is that they have all become more disciplined in their framings since 2017. Whether it was Shelter's campaign for land reform, C4C's campaign for planning reform; or PX's Building Beautiful Agenda – all three of these only became prominent after the 2016 EU referendum. Before then, the framing strategies of all three think-tanks were much more disparate. Again, one explanation for this trend relates to changes in the field of politics on which all three think-tanks are dependent, albeit to varying degrees. When the Cameron administration won an overall majority in 2015, they came back into power with an ambitious programme for housing and planning policy reform (e.g. Planning Bill 2015–16). This pushed the think-tanks (especially Shelter and Centre for Cities) onto the back-foot, forcing them to react to the government's agenda. However, after the EU referendum and the supplanting of David Cameron by Theresa May, there was a vacuum in policymaking, which likely allowed think-tanks to be much more proactive in pushing their own agendas.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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[18] e.g. see Simon-Wren Lewis, "Evidence and the persistence of mistaken ideas: the case of house prices"- Accessed online at https://mainlymacro.blogspot.com/2020/01/evidence-and-persistence-of-mistaken.html (13 May 2022).

[19] https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2018/04/ian-mulheirn-is-right-but-wrong-we-must-build-more-homes/ (Accessed 4 May 2022)

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