

The Political Ideology of Housing and the Welfare State in Scandinavia 1980-2008: Change, Continuity and Paradoxes.

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Abstract

How did the political ideology of housing change over the last thirty years in Denmark, Sweden and Norway? In the years from 1980 to 2008 was housing policy portrayed as a part of the universal welfare state in dominant political discourses, or was it described in the language of selective social policy and the market? How did the concepts of the housing market and homeownership change in the main political discourses in Norway, Sweden and Denmark from 1980 to 2008? These are the main questions posed in this paper on the political ideology of housing in Scandinavia in the years of deregulation, privatisation and restructuring. My point of departure is the ideology which arguably dominated the political discourse on housing in Scandinavia the first four decades after the Second World War. I argue that this social democratic ideology, with its distinct conception of welfare policy, the market and homeownership, still was a powerful discursive force from 1980 to 2008. However, in this period a large gap opened up between the Social Democratic Parties universal discourse and the selective and market oriented housing policies of Scandinavian governments.

Keywords: Deregulation, Discourse, Housing Policy, Political Ideology, Scandinavia, Welfare State.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is, firstly, to contribute to a better understanding of ideological change in one area of welfare policy in Scandinavia after 1945. Norway, Sweden and Denmark are often labelled with the term “Scandinavian welfare states”, which implies that the three countries welfare policies have been characterised by generous universal benefits and high levels of “de-commodification” (Esping-Andersen 1990). A goal of this paper is to analyse changes in housing ideology with reference to these widely held views about the welfare states in Scandinavia. Because of their importance as the main parties of government after the Second World War, the principal focus of this paper will be on the housing ideologies of the main social democratic and liberal-conservative parties in the three countries. Secondly, the paper is intended to engage with scholars like Peter King, Bo Bengtsson and Peter Malpass, in a discussion on European housing ideologies in the post-war era (Bengtsson 2001 a; King 2006; Malpass 2008).

In what follows, the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the paper will be outlined. Then I will turn my attention to the social democratic ideology, which arguably dominated the political discourse on housing in Scandinavia the first four decades after the Second World War. In the last sections of the paper this social democratic ideology will be compared to the discursive changes from 1980 to 2008. These discursive developments will be analysed using the works of other scholars and a wide selection of primary source material, including parliamentary debates, key policy documents, newspaper articles and election manifestos. Firstly, however, a short overview of the transformation of housing policy in Norway, Sweden and Denmark over the last thirty years is in order.

The transformation of housing policy in Scandinavia 1980-2008

Recently an influential study of housing policies in the Nordic countries, namely Bengtsson et al., emphasised the institutional differences between Norway, Sweden and Denmark. In the study titled *Varför så olika?* (“Why so different?”), the Norwegian bias towards individual and cooperative homeownership after 1945 is frequently contrasted with the prominence of public-rented housing in Denmark and Sweden (Bengtsson (ed.) 2006). This institutional legacy has had an impact on the tenure structure of contemporary Scandinavia. At the present time approximately 40 percent of the housing stock in Denmark and Sweden is a part of the rental sector. Public housing makes up a little more than 50 percent of all rental housing in

both countries. In Norway, on the other hand, the housing market is characterised by a small rental sector which currently accounts for roughly 23 percent of the housing stock. Furthermore, social housing is a marginal tenure in Norway, only 4 percent of the market for rental housing can be described as public. The remaining 77 percent of the Norwegian housing stock consists of various forms of owner-occupied housing. The corresponding figures for Denmark and Sweden are around 51 and 54 percent respectively (Ruonavaara 2008).

These institutional differences aside, the Scandinavian housing policies had many similarities from 1945 to 1980. In this period governments in all three countries provided subsidies for mass-construction and administered various instruments that constrained market forces. Over the course of the next thirty years, however, housing policies were profoundly transformed across Scandinavia. “Brick and mortar subsidies” for the construction of social housing were greatly reduced, and the market was allowed to expand its influence over rents and other prices in the housing sector. Broadly speaking, one could argue that a universal policy aimed at all sections of society has been replaced with a housing policy that is targeted at underprivileged groups. The relative importance of means-tested housing allowances has increased in all three countries in line with this development (NOU 2002:2). Another common trend is the state assisted privatisation and expansion of owner-occupied housing of different forms.

This process of privatisation and deregulation has, however, varied in form and depth from country to country, and has been paralleled by similar developments in other European countries (van Der Heijden 2002). Norwegian housing policy underwent a revolutionary development from 1978 to 2005. In 2009 virtually all price and rent controls in the housing market and state subsidies for mass-construction are history, and housing policy is primarily geared towards the perceived needs of the poorest and most marginalized groups in society (Skeie 2004). In Sweden housing was targeted for cutbacks when the country went through an economic crisis in the 90s. Interest subsidies for the building of municipal housing were drastically reduced, and different forms of targeted, means-tested subsidies became more important instruments of housing policy. At the same time the rent levels in the public rented sector, although by no means completely determined by the market, were allowed to conform closer to market levels by the end of the decade. Furthermore, it became easier to convert rented flats into owner-occupied cooperatives (Turner & Whitehead 2002). The process of retrenchment and privatisation has been accelerated by the present liberal-conservative government in Sweden. What little remained of general subsidies have been abolished by the

Reinfeldt government, and the expansion of owner-occupied flats and owner-occupied cooperatives are presented as the key to solving the main problems of housing policy, including segregation and housing shortages in some metropolitan areas (Magnusson Turner 2008). Developments in Denmark have been less dramatic than the Norwegian and Swedish experiences (Green-Pedersen 1999; Kristensen 2002). Although subsidies have been reduced, the state still contributes financially to the construction of public rented housing. In addition, despite strong advice to the contrary from many economists, rent controls are still in place in many segments of the housing market, like public, cooperative and privately rented housing (Erhvervs- og byggestyrelsen 2006; Hede 2006; Skak 2006). The liberal-conservative government's "right to buy-scheme" from the beginning of the present decade, which mimicked the British Thatcher government's (1979-90) sale of social housing to tenants, also met political and legal obstacles that seriously diminished its impact (Jensen 2006). However, the relative stability of Danish housing policy from 1980 to 2008, must not lead one to forget that the Danish housing sector was liberalised through various cross-party compromises during the 50s and 60s (Daugaard 1984).

Conceptual and theoretical foundations

The term "housing ideology" is meant to refer to a more or less coherent system of ideas about housing policy. This system of ideas has a conception of justice, a distinct perspective on the role of housing in society and functions as a prescription for policy action (Bergström & Boréus 2000). My hypothesis is that it is possible to speak of social democratic and liberal-conservative housing ideologies in Scandinavia from 1945 to 2008.

The term "housing discourse" is meant to refer to the way ideologies of housing are expressed in policy documents and political debates. "Discourse" is a term commonly associated with the so called "cultural turn" of the social sciences in the 90s. However, in this paper I do not draw on schools of discourse analysis that sees no reality "outside texts" and explain social change exclusively as a product of discursive struggles over hegemony. Rather, I think it is fruitful to discuss ideological developments with reference to societal changes that were not primarily discursive in character (Kjeldstadli 2002; Phillips & Jørgensen 2002). For instance, increased wealth and homeownership rates as well as the end of the most extreme housing shortages, probably contributed to changes in the ideology of housing in 70s and 80s, but these developments were not primarily of a discursive form. On the other hand, political discourses might influence the preferences of citizens (Mathisen 1997), for instance make

them strive towards homeowner status, something which in turn can contribute to political change. This paper is, however, not the place to further explore the interesting relationship between housing ideology, housing discourse and political change.

The Social Democratic Ideology of Housing

Arguably, what I call the social democratic ideology of housing dominated the political discourse on housing in Scandinavia from 1945 to 1980. This ideology had the three following characteristics: Firstly, housing policy was portrayed as universal, geared towards all sections of society. An affordable dwelling of an acceptable standard was seen as a condition for full membership in society. Thus, housing was portrayed as a social right in T.H. Marshall's terms, and as a part of the universal welfare state. The discourse within the field concerned itself with the just and efficient distribution of housing for all. In many other Western European countries a selective ideology of housing, focusing on the guaranteed minimum rights of the poorest sections of society, dominated political debates (Bengtsson 2001 a; Marshall 2006). The universality of Scandinavian housing discourse can be exemplified by pointing to the Swedish and Danish public rented sectors and the Norwegian State's Housing Bank. Rhetorically, at least, Swedish and Danish social democrats after 1945 made clear that the public rented sector was constructed for everyone, not just low-income groups (Elander 1991; Vestergaard 2004). In the same way, the Norwegian Labour Party guaranteed that construction subsidies were available for everyone who accepted the Housing Bank's demands and criteria.

Secondly, the social democratic ideology of housing was ambivalent and contradictory when addressing the role of the market in the housing sector. Most social democrats implicitly or explicitly accepted the argument that the market should play a part in the allocation and distribution of resources in the sector. Following the lead of Bengtsson (1995), who discusses the ideas behind Swedish housing policy since 1945 at length in his doctoral thesis, one can even say that social democrats for the most part viewed housing policy, not as a replacement but a corrective to the market. Important reforms carried out by social democratic governments in the housing sector, like the Swedish user-value system of rent control and the Norwegian finance reform of 1972, were not examples of "Politics against markets" (Esping-Andersen 1985). In line with the Scandinavian tradition of "pragmatic and democratic socialism" (Bergh 1990), these reforms were rather intended to ensure more just and efficient market outcomes. The acceptance of the market as the main instrument of resource allocation

illustrates that housing was different from all other major areas of the Scandinavian welfare states after 1945. Thus, it has famously been described as the welfare state's "wobbly pillar" (Torgersen 1987) or "market commodity" (Bengtsson 1995).

When that is said, there was also an inherent antagonism towards market forces in the social democratic housing ideology. The election manifestos of the leading Social Democratic parties in Scandinavia make clear that one of its main aims was to limit speculation and the influence of private capital in the housing sector (Frimand 1999; Norwegian Labour 1960; SAP 1956). Housing is not a market commodity, but a social right and a welfare good", has been a popular rallying cry of social democrats across Scandinavia since 1945. Thus, market forces and private landlords were often condemned as obstacles for the construction of a fair and effective housing policy by leading social democrats. These condemnations were a reaction to the vulnerability of workers in the slums of the laissez-faire housing markets of the 19th and early 20th century. Bo Bengtsson underestimates the importance of this aspect of post-war housing ideology in my opinion. For instance, public-rented sectors in Sweden and Denmark were constructed as "de-commodified" alternatives to private renting (Strömberg 1989). In Norway cooperative housing had a similar status within social democratic circles. The long term goal of the Norwegian Labour Party was to convert all privately rented housing into cooperatives (Gulbrandsen 1980). In addition, social democrats across Scandinavia vehemently attacked anyone seen to profit unjustly by charging excessive prices for land and property at the expense of the general public (Alsvik 1995; Frimand 1999; Zetterberg 1978). In the early 70s leading figures in the Norwegian Labour Party like Odvar Nordli, Prime Minister from 1976 to 1981, in a heated moment even talked of eradicating the influence of market forces from the housing sector (Arbeiderbladet 22.06.1973). Furthermore, large sections of the Norwegian Labour Party wanted to introduce price controls on most of the market for cooperative and owner-occupied housing in the 70s and 80s. Several proposals calling for tighter regulations were put forward from within the Party following the lead of a government report. In 1974 the Labour Party's minister of housing even toyed with the idea to regulate prices on all transactions in the housing market. However, these radical proposals were in the end opposed by the Party leadership and the majority of the cabinet (Sørvoll 2008 a). In my view, this is an example of a split within social democracy in Scandinavia. One faction has advocated a more or less aggressive strategy of "Politics against markets" (Esping-Andersen 1985), a second group has tried to work with and correct the housing market. Of these two groups the latter has usually gone victorious out of policy squabbles.

Thirdly, the social democratic ideology of housing accepted individual homeownership in some forms. In Norway individual and cooperative homeownership were the preferred tenure forms of the Labour Party. Swedish and Danish social democrats were strong advocates of public housing, but still accepted and promoted individual homeownership. However, homeownership was restricted in different ways across Scandinavia in the post-war era. According to the social democratic housing ideology the status of homeowner gave families the right to a decent and affordable dwelling, but not necessarily the right to, for instance, sell their home at a price determined by the market. Thus, the selling and buying of cooperatively-owned flats were subject to price regulations in all three countries in the first decades after the Second World War. In addition, although social democrats did not oppose homeownership as such, they opposed homeownership expansion if this was perceived to conflict with the overriding goals of housing policy (Sørvoll 2008 b).

The presentation of the social democratic housing ideology above is, of course, greatly simplified. It overlooks differences between countries, methodological challenges, developments over time, as well as the many ideological inconsistencies and divergent opinions of political parties and organisations. Clearly, what I call the social democratic ideology of housing was weaker in Denmark than in Sweden and Norway in the years from 1945 to 1980. Here Social Democratic governments more or less reluctantly chose to accept important aspects of the bourgeois opposition's housing policy in the 60s: owner-occupied flats, housing market liberalisation, promotion of single-family housing, and the notion that housing subsidies should be geared towards low-income groups. However, housing policy has been a contested area within Danish social democracy. Many in the Party and the Tenant Association opposed their government's strategy of compromise towards the bourgeois parties. In the 70s the Danish Party leadership also distanced themselves somewhat from the liberal housing policy reforms of the 60s (Daugaard 1984; Rasmussen & Rüdiger 1990).

An important methodological difficulty which will confront any historian who attempts to study ideologies must also be noted, if not necessarily resolved. Firstly, like Bo Bengtsson has pointed out elsewhere, it is difficult to "distinguish in a certain housing policy the ideological element from the rhetoric and economics of *realpolitik*" (Bengtsson 2006 b:108). It is often hard, if not impossible, to determine what is strategy and what is heartfelt ideology in a political Party's preferred policy. In addition, discursive content that appear as ideological may in fact be rhetoric that is designed to cloak self-interest. My answer to these dilemmas is simple, but I hope fruitful. Instead of viewing ideology and electoral strategy as

fundamental opposites, I view them as complementary entities. For instance, although Social Democratic Parties in Scandinavia after 1945 saw public or cooperative housing as instruments to realise the ideological goal of “Good dwellings for all” (Elander 1991), they may also have viewed the expansion of collective forms of living as beneficial to their electoral strategy. In the same way, while Conservative Party leaders, like Thatcher in Britain, Willoch in Norway and Bildt in Sweden, certainly had ideological aims for their privatisation of social housing, they may also have thought that privatisation would produce home owning conservative voters in the long run.

Another nuance that needs highlighting is the fact that the social democratic housing ideology on the whole was strongest in the movements and organisations of the housing sector. In Sweden these movements and organisations were primarily the Tenants Association and SABO, the national federation of the municipal housing companies. The corresponding organisations in Denmark were BL and the Danish Tenant Association. In Norway the cooperative housing movement, organised through the national federation NBBL, was deeply infused with social democratic housing ideology. The rank and file membership of Social Democratic Parties in Scandinavia, including many parliament backbenchers and party chiefs at the municipal level, were also often forceful advocates of the social democratic housing ideology. Socialist governments, however, have had many incentives to water down their implementation of social democratic principles. The demands of fiscal policy, perceived voter reaction and electoral competition with bourgeois parties led governments to restraint and compromise, at times when organisations and many party members called for more radical measures. For example, restraint and moderation were shown when the Danish social democratic government reached a broad compromise agreement with the bourgeois parties in 1966, and when the Labour government in Norway shelved a radical proposal for housing market regulation in the 70s (Christensen, Kolstrup & Hansen (eds.) 2007; Sørvoll 2008 a). Thus, I would argue that the social democratic housing ideology in Scandinavia after the Second World War had shaky foundations. In general it was vulnerable to attacks from bourgeois parties and organisations which accused it of being a threat to the “little mans dream of homeownership” (Hansen & Henriksen 1984; Zetterberg 1978). In response to these accusations senior figures in the Scandinavian labour movement, like the long serving Swedish Minister of Finance Gunnar Sträng (1955-76) and Norwegian Prime Minister Trygve Bratteli (1971-72, 1973-76), went out of their way to reassure homeowners that their property was safe under social democratic governments (Aftenposten 17.11.1976; Svenska Dagbladet 12.04.1999). Bourgeois agitation and fear of negative voter reactions also led social

democratic governments in all three countries to tax homeowners more leniently, than their original redistributive goals implied (Daugaard 1984; Sørvoll 2008 a; Torgersen 1996). Thus, bourgeois parties and what I call the liberal-conservative housing ideology exerted considerable influence on housing policy in Scandinavia after 1945.

The Liberal-Conservative Ideology of Housing

The liberal-conservative ideology of housing has roots in the classic liberalism of the 18th and 19th centuries and dominated the field of housing in Scandinavia up until the 1930s. It may be described, somewhat simplified, by pointing at the three following characteristics. Firstly, it portrayed individual homeownership as a linchpin of a free, virtuous and prosperous society. Conservative politicians in Norway and Sweden after 1945 promoted the vision of an “Ownership Democracy”, where the homeowner had an important role to play as a custodian of a free society (Ljunggren 1992; Sejersted 2005). Whereas conservatives throughout Europe in the 1920s and 30s viewed the expansion of homeownership as a bulwark against bolshevism, they saw it as an antidote to the regulated society of social democracy after the Second World War. For conservatives and liberals in Scandinavia after 1945 homeownership was a precious individual right to be safeguarded from an obtrusive state (Benkow 1981; The Norwegian Conservative Party 1957, 1973). Housing scholars like Kemeny (2005) and Ronald (2008), who write of an Anglo-Saxon discourse of homeownership, seem to neglect this strong ideological undercurrent in Scandinavian politics. Peter King (2006), who has written an entertaining analysis of the ideas behind the British Conservative Party’s housing policy, might also have benefited from taking the Scandinavian liberal-conservative homeownership ideology into account.

Secondly, the liberal-conservative ideology of housing saw free markets, combined with government support for the poorest sections of society, as the ideal for all segments in the housing sector. The liberal-conservative ideology of housing was therefore of a selective nature. I would therefore dispute the claim, put forward by Bengtsson (1999) in his analysis of Sweden, that there existed a relative consensus around the universal nature of housing policy in the post-war era. Although liberals and conservatives in some cases accepted reforms that increased the role of the state on the housing market in the age of “social democratic hegemony” (1945-1975) (Sasson 1996), the post-war consensus of many other areas of the welfare state never really characterised housing in Scandinavia. The ideological strife surrounding housing can be seen as product of the fields close connection to

key conflicts in capitalist societies with large social democratic parties, namely the role of private property and the size and shape of the market economy

The practical consequences of the liberal-conservative housing ideology manifested themselves in the policies of the main bourgeois parties in Scandinavia. They advocated for the expansion of single-family housing, owner-occupied flats and owner-occupied cooperatives. They were also generally in favour of modest tax burdens on homeowners. Furthermore, they supported the reduction of brick and mortar subsidies for general housing consumption and the eventual abolishment of all rent controls (Frimand 1999; The Norwegian Conservative Party 1957; The Swedish Conservative Party 1956, 1968; Zetterberg 1978). Consequently, I would argue that the deregulation, privatisation and cutbacks in the Scandinavian housing sectors since the 1980s were in line with the liberal-conservative housing ideology. The next sections of this paper will make clear, that I also believe liberal-conservative housing ideology to be one of the driving forces behind many reforms in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian housing policy from 1980 to 2008. This implies that instead of viewing the cutbacks, privatisations and deregulations in the housing sectors across Scandinavia as a product of a neo-liberal revolution without deep historical roots, they should partly be seen as a consequence of the increased strength of liberal-conservative parties and values. Although societal forces and the forming of cross-party elite consensus were important factors behind the changes in housing policy from 1980 to 2008, bourgeois governments, like the administrations of Willoch in Norway (1981-86), Bildt (1991-94) and Reinfeldt (2006-) in Sweden and Fogh Rasmussen (2001-) in Denmark, were instrumental in the implementation of liberal reforms. Policy documents from these administrations sometimes read like manuals for liberal-conservative housing ideology. The Norwegian Willoch administration, for instance, plainly stated that the goal of the government was to expand homeownership, create housing markets that functioned in accordance with the laws of supply and demand and limit financial support for housing consumption to groups with special needs (St. meld. 61. 1981-82; Willoch 1982).

From a universal to selective: Leaving the welfare state?

In this section, where the changes in housing ideology from 1980 to 2008 is analysed, I try to answer three broad questions.

Firstly, has housing policy increasingly been portrayed as a part of social policy, a policy directed at the poorest and most marginalized sections of society? Too what extent,

were the universal social democratic housing ideology replaced by a selective discourse in the years from 1980 to 2008? Given the development of housing policy in this period one might conclude that a selective discourse has become the norm in political debates on housing. Furthermore, a selective turn seems consistent with the re-emergence of the poverty question in political debates across Europe. After being largely absent from political debates in the post-war years, “poverty” returned to the policy documents of governments of all political persuasions in the late 90s (Fløtten 2003). Furthermore, as stated previously, liberal-conservative Party’s have always maintained that housing subsidies should primarily benefit the poorest sections of society. Housing allowances have therefore been the preferred policy instrument of the many bourgeois government’s in Scandinavia from 1980 to 2008, and consequently the discourse of selective benefits have grown in strength. On the other hand, my analysis of key policy documents and debates on housing in the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian parliaments show that universal principles are still advocated by social democratic parties (Hellman 2008; Johannesen 2008 a; Socialministeriet 2006). Although the turn towards a liberal-conservative emphasis on selective policy instruments has been strong, one should therefore not talk of a complete abolishment of universality in leading housing discourses. Consequently, it can still be debated whether housing policy, at least in ideological terms, is a part of the universal Scandinavian welfare state.

In response to the selective discourse of the bourgeois Bondevik government’s white-paper *On Housing Policy* (St. meld. nr. 23. 2003-04), the Norwegian Labour Party, for example, emphasised that housing along with employment, education and healthcare was a cornerstone in welfare policy. Admittedly, the social democrats did not explicitly oppose the government’s emphasis on targeted means-tested policy instruments and groups with special needs, but still the Labour Party’s rhetoric had a much broader scope than the liberal-conservative government’s discourse. In parliament the social democrats argued that the selective and market oriented strategy of *On Housing Policy* was not a step in the direction of a more just housing sector, and would not help the plight of people who struggled to raise the necessary capital for a decent home. Housing was a part of the welfare state, not a part of a social policy directed at poor and marginalised groups, according to Labour Party discourse (Innst. S. nr. 279. 2003-04). In a document from 2005 that spelled out the goals of the new coalition government, consisting of Labour, the Socialist Left Party and the Agrarian Party, the commitment to universal principles in housing policy was reiterated. One of the first sentences in the documents section on housing makes it clear, that “Housing policy is a part of the government’s broad welfare policy” (Soria Moria-erklæringen 2005:37). Despite this

declaration the discourse and policies of the coalition government have largely been of a selective nature. A broadening of the criteria for receiving housing allowance has for instance been the government's most substantial reform in the field of housing (St. prp. Nr. 11 2008-09). The government has also increasingly highlighted the links between housing policy and combating poverty (Kommunal Rapport 31/2008; Norwegian government 2008). The fight against poverty and homelessness is in the centre of the coalition administration's housing discourse, broader goals of welfare policy and redistribution are not absent, but they have decidedly been given a marginal role to play (Housing Policy 2008). In practice, therefore, the government's discourse has been hard to distinguish from the rhetoric of the previous Bondevik administrations (1997-2000, 2001-2005).

Thus, even though elements of universalism are visible in social democratic policy documents and election manifestos, the discourse of the Labour Party has taken a selective turn. This ideological shift is the result of a thirty-year old process. Already in the 70s the Labour Party leadership, at least privately, stated that housing subsidies, on the grounds of both principle and budget restraints, should be limited to people with low- to average incomes. Predictably, these sentiments were neither shared by the left flank of the Party or the cooperative movement. In their view steps towards a more selective strategy was a bourgeois aberration, which would put housing policy firmly outside the realm of the welfare state (St. forh. 1979-80: The Norwegian Labour Party 1979). Despite this opposition, the Party leadership pushed through a reform that led to the abolishment of nearly all the State's Housing Bank's general subsidies in the mid-90s (Bachke 2003). As one would expect, however, from 1996 to 2008 some party activists have called for the return of the Housing Bank as a subsidised motor behind general housing construction. Even though a restructuring of the Bank along these lines seems highly unlikely at the present time, the demands of party members have made some impact on official social democratic policy documents (The Norwegian Labour Party 1990-2005; The Norwegian Labour Party 2008). On the whole, however, the discourse of social democratic universalism in Scandinavia has been at its weakest in Norway in the years from 1980 to 2008.

In Sweden it was the liberal-conservative Bildt government which implemented a large-scale cutback of production subsidies in the early 90s. The Social Democratic Party vocally opposed cutbacks before the election in 1991 (Motion 1991/92:BO232). Nevertheless, as Per Borg (2004) notes in his doctoral thesis, the reform of the Swedish subsidy system is probably best understood as a result of a cross-party elite consensus. Tellingly, even though they argued for general subsidies in the years of opposition, the social democrats did little to

reverse the reforms when they returned to power in 1994 (Svenska Dagbladet 13.03.1995). However, this was not the result of an ideological shift, but rather a product of the immense challenges of Swedish fiscal policy after the economic downturn of the early 90s. Among many, if not most, rank and file party activists, parliamentarians, local party chiefs, the movements and organisations of the housing sector, and even some cabinet ministers, the abolishment of general subsidies were deeply unpopular in accordance with the universal character of the social democratic housing ideology. A consequence of this was the opening of a rift within the Party concerning the role of housing in the welfare state, between fiscal policy hardliners and true believers in the old universal housing policy during the course of the 90s.

The conflict between the fiscal hardliners and the true believers came to the surface shortly before the Social Democratic Party's convention in 1997. In August Interior Minister Jörgen Andersson, who was responsible for housing within the cabinet, signalled that more emphasis would be put on targeted subsidies in the future (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 07.08.1997). Several prominent parliamentarians and party activists replied by attacking the social democratic cabinet's housing policy for almost being undistinguishable from the previous right-wing government's selective policy. The main demand of the insurgency of activists and parliamentarians was a reversal of the Bildt administration's large-scale subsidy cutbacks (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 07.09.1997). Although, this demand was never met by the government, the views of the insurgents were strongly reflected in the official declarations of the 1997 Party conference. Housing policy was one of the pillars of the social democratic welfare state and should consist of a mix between selective and general subsidies, according to the convention (Svenska Dagbladet 12.09.1997; Svenska Dagbladet 13.09.1997). In the aftermath of the convention, however, leading housing policy experts and representatives of the youth movement attacked the government for not giving housing the recognition it deserved as a cornerstone in the universal welfare state along with education, full employment and healthcare (Svenska Dagbladet 23.12.1997). This illustrates the discrepancy between the enduring force of the social democratic housing ideology in Swedish politics, and successive social democratic governments selective and market oriented housing finance strategy. The social democratic government's policies have, due to electoral strategy or fiscal policy, not always acted through on the universal discourse of most official policy documents. On the other hand, the publications of government committees have sometimes been characterised by selective discourse that not even mainstream bourgeois politicians have been prepared to fully endorse. For instance, a white-paper published by a cross-party committee in 1996, which

proposed further cutbacks in general production subsidies and a wide range of selective measures, was watered down and supplemented by universal discourse by politicians across the political spectrum (SOU 1996:156; Bengtsson & Kemeny 1997; Bengtsson 1999). It was first after the liberal-conservative Reinfeldt government came to power in 2006 that what little remained of the general subsidies were finally abolished.

When addressing the public rented sector, the discourse of the Swedish Social Democrats has continued to be decidedly universal over the last thirty years. The Party has thus defended the principle that the sector is open for all and should cater to the housing needs of a substantial proportion of Swedish households, not just underprivileged groups. Social democrats often describe the public rented sector as an essential part of the Swedish universal model of welfare. “Social housing” is a word preserved for public rented sectors in other parts of Europe and is still a pejorative term in the discourse of the Social Democratic Party (Motion 1991/92:Bo220; Motion 1996/97:Bo234; Motion 2008/09:C245). This is one of the best illustrations of the continuing presence of the social democratic housing ideology in Swedish politics. In contrast with the social democrats, however, the Conservative Party’s discourse has, as one would expect, taken a far more selective approach to the public rented sector and the municipal housing companies. Shortly before the election in 2006 the present Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, for example, signalled that the municipal housing companies no longer were needed as providers of housing for broad segments of society. Reinfeldt followed the lead of many conservative politicians, especially in Stockholm, who have questioned the principle and utility of large stocks of municipally owned rented housing (Hellman 2008). Whereas the social democratic discourse praises the large public sector as a prerequisite for just rents on the housing market as a whole through the user-value system, liberal-conservative discourse has tended to speak of lifting rent controls and creating a residual rented sector for poor and marginalised groups (Motion 2004/05:B0301; Motion 2005/06:Bo276). Even so, it seems unlikely that the present Reinfeldt government will try to follow the lead of the more aggressive interpretations of a recent government report, which called for the implementation of a market based rent system and the transformation of the public rented sector into “social housing” found elsewhere in Europe (SOU 2008:38; Aftonbladet 18.04.2008; Dagens Nyheter 18.04.2008). The unpopularity of the reports conclusions among many voters, dissent from coalition partners and hesitation among many conservatives will probably restrain Reinfeldt’s liberal instincts. The European court in Brussels may, however, in the end decide that the Swedish model of public housing is in conflict with EU’s principle of free and fair competition (Magnussen & Turner 2008).

Compared with the case of Sweden, the degree of consensus in the political discourse surrounding public rental housing has been large in Denmark from 1980 to 2008. The present liberal-conservative government, for instance, still maintains that public rented sector should make up a substantial proportion of the housing stock and contribute to a varied and affordable supply of housing on the market (NBO 2008). However, the social democrats have been the more adherent defenders of the universal characteristics of municipal housing. This was illustrated in the debate surrounding the right-to-buy programme (2001-2002), a subject we will explore in a section of this paper on changes in conceptions of homeownership in Sweden and Denmark. In addition, whereas the Social Democratic Party's discourse portrays housing as a part of welfare policy, the main liberal-conservative parties have had a tendency to separate welfare and housing explicitly in their rhetoric. In the discourse of the largest Danish bourgeois Party, the Liberal Party, housing allowances are part of a social policy directed at the poor and elderly, while housing construction is depicted as a subcategory of economic policy.

The market: From ambivalence to celebration?

Secondly, how did the depiction of the market changed in the main housing discourses from 1980 to 2008? Did the ambivalence of the social democratic housing ideology give way to a more positive understanding of the market and its place in the housing sector? The answers to these questions are ambiguous. On the one hand, the liberal-conservative belief in the market was firmly spelled out in important policy documents in all three countries. On the other hand, leading liberal-conservative and social democratic politicians were often careful not to use the "the market" and "liberalisation" in public debates on housing policy. It seems that the anti-market rhetoric, so central to the identity of the Scandinavian left, was hard to shake off for the large social democratic parties and struck a chord with many voters. The latter phenomenon encouraged the right to tone down their desire for market reforms.

As previously touched upon, the Willoch governments of the early 80s unleashed a ferocious rhetorical attack on the many regulations and subsidies in the Norwegian housing sector. In the government's most important policy document on housing Agnar Sandmo, a distinguished professor in economics, argued rather one-sidedly for the deregulation of Norwegian housing policy. In Sandmo's words "the market ensures that all desires of consumers are met" (St. meld. nr. 61 1981-82:8). In retrospect, it seems clear that Sandmo in reality argued that housing policy as such was superfluous to requirements in a functioning

market economy. Taxation policies and money transfers to underprivileged households were superior methods to subsidies and rent controls if politicians were honestly concerned with the distribution of housing in society, according to Sandmo (St. meld. nr. 61 1981-82). Erna Solberg, a conservative minister of housing, followed the lead of Willoch and Sandmo in *On Housing Policy*, her eulogy to the market from 2004.

The Labour Party at first reacted with hostility towards the pro-market discourse of the Willoch government. In the words of leading social democrats, deregulation of housing markets would only benefit well-to-do homeowners and lead to increased speculation in the economy as a whole. The governments celebration of the market and “freedom of choice” was empty rhetoric aimed at concealing the economic interests of the very rich, according to Labour (St. forh. 1981-82). Thus, as a reaction to the liberalisation of the liberal-conservative government, the inherent antagonism to the market in the social democratic ideology was prominent in the 80s. Still, in the late 80s the Labour government of Gro Harlem Brundtland in reality accepted the idea that the free market was the most fair and efficient mechanism of allocation in the housing sector. In a policy document that outlined the strategy of Norwegian housing policy in the 90s the government stressed the need to adjust housing policies to a liberalised property and capital market (St. meld. nr. 34 1988-89). The market friendly approach of Brundtland’s government was reiterated in the last major publication of the Labour Party’s housing committee (The Norwegian Labour Party 2002). In general, however, Labour’s discourse maintained a hostile edge towards the market in the housing sector from 1980 to 2008. The slogan “housing is not an ordinary commodity, but a welfare good”, have continued to be one of the standard expressions of Scandinavian social democrats (Innst. S. nr. 279 2003-04; The Norwegian Labour Party 2008; Sørvoll 2008 a).

In Denmark and Sweden the main liberal-conservative parties often called for the lifting of rent controls and other forms of market oriented reforms from 1980 to 2008. On the whole, the Social democratic parties met these proposals with anti-market rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, what is perhaps more surprising is that liberal-conservative parties have often softened their market oriented housing discourse. Reinfeldt and Fogh Rasmussen advocated strongly for the implementation of a market based system of rent setting in earlier stages of their careers (Fogh Rasmussen 1982). Later in their political life, when they were candidates for the highest offices and eventually became Prime Ministers, they took a more pragmatic approach to the subject of housing market reform. Thus, euphemisms like “demand determined” and “balanced” rents became frequently used terms in the discourse of the major liberal-conservative parties in Denmark and Sweden. This change in discourse was not least a

concession to renters, who make up a substantial part of the electorate in Denmark and Sweden (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 22.10.2007; Sydsvenskan 29.10.2007). In my view, the rhetorical shift of Reinfeldt and Fogh-Rasmussen can also be seen as an example of the way Swedish and Danish conservatives have attempted to replace the social democrats as the principal custodians of the welfare state in the public imagination (Lindblom 2008; Petersen 2008).

Conceptions of homeownership: From social democratic to liberal-conservative?

Thirdly, how did the conception of homeownership change in the years from 1980 to 2008? Did the liberal-conservative vision of a stable society of free and prosperous homeowners gain in popularity over the course of these years? Furthermore, were the rights of the homeowner as an individual in the marketplace, increasingly emphasised at the expense of the social democratic conception of homeownership? Important policy changes in the years from 1980 onwards seem to answer these questions affirmatively. The liberalisation of Norwegian cooperative housing in the 80s and the more recent right-to-buy programmes in Sweden and Denmark were partly driven by liberal-conservative ideology that celebrated the independence, virtue, freedom and individual rights of homeowners (Jensen 2006; Kristensen 2007; Sørvoll 2008 a). The same can be said of legislation that lifted the bans on owner-occupied flats in Norway (1983) and Sweden (2008) (Motion 2007/8:C388; Ot. Prp. Nr. 48 1981-82).

Willochs Conservative government (1981-83) laid the groundwork for the virtual abolishment of price regulations on cooperative flats in Norway during the course of the 80s. The liberalisation of cooperative housing and the lifting of the ban on owner-occupied flats were part of a conscious strategy to expand homeownership. In the Conservative Party's discourse homeownership was connected with terms that praised the perceived merits of private property for individuals and society: Terms such as "decency", "independence", "responsibility", "safety", "freedom of choice", "flexibility" and "local democracy" were the most frequently used, in the documents that spelled out the Willoch administration's policies for homeownership expansion (St. meld. nr. 61 1981-82; Ot. Prp. Nr. 44 1981-82). Some leading conservatives hailed the new housing policy reforms as a victory for a liberation movement which had fought the social democrat's excessive regulations and anti-ownership sentiments (St. forh. 1982-83; Benkow 1982).

Initially the Labour Party opposed the Conservative government's policies. The social democratic parliamentarians attempted to fight the government's rhetoric by claiming that the Labour Party had done more to swell the ranks of homeowners than any other political force since 1945, by being a loyal friend to the cooperative housing movement and a staunch defender of the production subsidies channelled through the Norwegian State's Housing Bank (St. forh. 1982-83). However, in the 70s and 80s the dominant understanding of homeownership in the Labour Party was still consistent with what I have called the social democratic housing ideology, and therefore strikingly different to the liberal-conservative discourse of the Willoch government. Because of the price regulations the Conservative Party regarded the people that lived in cooperative housing as poor cousins to the majority of homeowners, who could sell their house at the highest price obtainable in the market. The Labour Party, on the other hand, had a tendency to describe cooperative housing as a fully fledged category of homeownership (Innst. S. nr. 21 1973-74). In the social democratic discourse cooperative housing was connected with the ideals of safety, teamwork, participation, fraternity, and non-profit. According to the social democratic discourse there was a special fraternal bond between all members of the cooperative housing movement, including members that already lived within the cooperative sector and those who were looking to become cooperative homeowners. In line with this Labour argued that cooperative homeowners should not be allowed to make excessive profits at the expense of members that waited for access to a cooperative home (St. forh. 1979-80; Sørvoll 2008 b). Thorbjørn Berntsen, something of an icon of the Labour left, summed up the dominant Party line in 1980 when he stated that the freedom of homeowner's must be tempered to accommodate the needs and desires of first-time buyers and to protect public investment (Arbeiderbladet 10.03.1980). Thus, although there was much discussion within the Party on the merits of the regulations within the housing sector, the official Labour stance in the early 80s was that price controls on cooperatives in urban areas were necessary to protect the interests of groups with limited purchasing power (Sørvoll 2008 a).

Later in the 80s, however, leading figures in the Labour Party seemed to replace the social democratic understanding of homeownership with a more bourgeois conception during the so called "Freedom Debate". When the debate was launched in the autumn of 1985 Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Party leader, and Thorbjørn Jagland, the Party secretary, spoke in glowing tones of the need to expand the "freedom of cooperative homeowners in the housing market" (Sørvoll 2008 a:149). Although Brundtland and Jagland's rhetoric was vague and short on specifics, the signals they sent were a brake with the past and can plausibly be seen

as an ideological precursor to the Labour Party's accept of a wholesale liberalisation of the market for cooperative flats in the late 80s and early 90s. When that is said, even though many authors have viewed the "Freedom Debate" as a part of a wider rightward shift of European social democracy (Giddens 1998; Sassoon 1996), the social democratic conception of homeownership still dominated the Labour Party throughout the 80s. For instance, Einar Førde, deputy leader of the Party, called the liberalisation of cooperative housing one of the biggest follies of the Conservative government in a famous speech to the Party convention in 1987 (Førde 1979). Furthermore, in the years of opposition from 1981 to 86 the Party's housing committee attempted to find new ways to regulate the prices on owner-occupied housing. In addition, when a Labour government returned to power in 1986, it resisted strong demands to increase prices on regulated cooperative flats in Oslo for quite a long time, before it finally adjusted prices before the municipal elections in 1987 (Sørvoll 2008 a). Finally, the discourse of the Freedom debate, although probably genuine enough, certainly also had a strong tactical dimension (Brundtland 1997; Lafferty 1987; Tjernshaugen 2006). Labour had lost important middle-class votes to the Conservative Party in the 1970s and 80s, partly due to the Party's support of regulations and restrictions on the housing market (Gulbrandsen & Torgersen 1976; Bay 1985). The discursive turn of the Freedom debate can therefore arguably be seen more as a strategic concession to cooperative homeowners, than a reflection of the heartfelt abandonment of the social democratic housing ideology.

Still, in the long term the social democratic conception of homeownership disappeared as a major motivating force behind the housing policies of the Norwegian Labour Party. It seems fair to say, however, that the social democrats have not embraced the liberal-conservative conception of homeownership. They have rather tacitly accepted that all homeowners may sell their home at prices dictated by the market. The old goal of preventing profit motivated speculation with the people's homes was largely absent from Labour Party discourse in the 90s and 00s (Sørvoll 2008 b). However, by examining proposals to Labour Party conventions from 1989 to 2007, one can see that the social democratic conception of homeownership survived among sections of the rank and file membership. In particular, the public or cooperative building of non-commercial tenant-occupied housing has been a popular demand at the grass root level. These demands have also manifested themselves in Party programmes and government declarations (Soria Moria-erklæringen 2005; The Norwegian Labour Party 2007). Still, on the whole the social democratic discourse of homeownership has been a weak factor in Norwegian politics over the course of the last twenty years. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the rights of homeowners have been holy for both left and right

alike. The sanctity of homeownership has amongst other things led the Labour Party to accept the right's demand of property tax reductions (Sekse 2007; Torgersen 1996). In short, in questions of homeowner regulation and property taxation Labour have let electoral strategy trump any goals of redistributive welfare policy.

The Bildt government in Sweden (1991-94) made it legal for municipal housing companies to sell all or part of their housing stock to tenants as owner-occupied cooperatives. This decision was partly a part of the government's commitment to expand homeownership (Prop. 1991/92:160). Later social democratic governments attempted to curtail the conversion of public-rented housing into cooperative housing through different laws. However, the bourgeois coalition headed by the Conservative Party's Fredrik Reinfeldt removed the rather strict restrictions on conversions in 2007, and have advocated strongly for the tenants "right to homeownership" (Turner & Andersson 2008; Aftonbladet 16.12.2006). The Reinfeldt administration also managed to realise the old liberal-conservative dream of legalising owner-occupied flats (Prop. 2008/09:91). The introduction of owner-occupied flats had been on the agenda of Swedish liberals and conservatives since the 19th century, and both the bourgeois Fällidin (1976-78, 1979-82) and Bildt governments made plans to remove the legal obstacles in the way of this tenure (Göteborg-Posten 02.12.1994; SOU 1982:40; SOU 2002:21). According to politicians on the right the introduction of this tenure was necessary to increase the freedom of choice and individual rights on the housing market. In the right's discourse owner-occupied flats were also connected with the classic liberal notion that private property was a precondition for a functioning market economy and a democracy of responsible and independent citizens (Motion 1990/91:BO402; Motion 1994/95:K213; Fastighetstidningen 29.08.2008). But because of opposition from the social democrats, it was only when the majority government of Fredrik Reinfeldt came to power that the ban on owner-occupied flats could be lifted (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 18.03.2004). Furthermore, the bourgeois coalition pushed through a reform that led to the abolishment of the state's property tax on homeowners. This was a fulfilment of an election promise and a longstanding commitment to reform the property tax to the benefit of homeowners (The Swedish Conservative Party 2002). However, since the coalition's tax reform was partly financed by increasing capital gains taxes on profits from house sales as well as a hike in municipal property taxes, the Swedish tax regime on homeowners is still far stricter than its Norwegian and Danish counterparts (Prop. 2007/08:27). The relative restraint regarding the property taxation reform of the bourgeois coalition showed that the implementation of liberal-conservative homeownership ideology has sometimes been sacrificed for the sake of fiscal policy.

The Swedish Social Democratic Party has more or less vocally opposed the liberal-conservative reforms mentioned above. This does not mean that politicians on the mainstream left stopped talking about “freedom of choice”, invoking the principle of neutrality between the tenures from 1974, which means “equalising the costs of housing of different types (...) in order to provide a basis for the freedom to choose the form of housing best suited to family type and living pattern” (Lundqvist 1988:2). However, consistent with what I have called the social democratic conception of homeownership, the Social Democratic Party rejected policies of homeownership expansion that came into perceived conflict with the fundamental aims of housing policy. The large scale conversions of public-rented housing in Stockholm that were promoted by liberal-conservative majorities in the City Council in the 90s were, for instance, bitterly opposed by the SAP. According to the Social Democratic Party the sale of municipal housing stocks constituted a threat to the universal model of public housing in Sweden. In the opinion of most social democrats, a brake down of the user-value system, market determined rents, increased segregation and speculation would be the consequences if the conversions in Stockholm and other urban areas were allowed to continue (Göteborg-Posten 08.05.1999; Svenska Dagbladet 05.06.1996). Social Democratic governments therefore acted in accordance with the majority view in the Party, when they enacted legislation that was intended to stop, or at least greatly reduce, the conversion of public housing in 1999 and 2002 (Prop. 1998/99:101; Prop. 2001/02:58; SOU 2001:27).

The Social Democratic Party’s opposition to the introduction of owner-occupied flats is another example that illustrates the social democratic conception of homeownership’s continuing presence in Swedish politics in the 90s and up until the present time. Leading spokespersons for the SAP criticised the introduction of owner-occupied flats in 2009 for contributing to a more insecure housing market. The Reinfeldt administration had let ideological considerations override the vital concern of constructing a legal framework for the new tenure that protected the rights of tenants, according to leading spokespersons for the social democratic opposition (Motion 2008/09:-S68094). Furthermore, in 2001 the Party wholeheartedly supported the permanent introduction of a new tenure, tenant-occupied cooperative housing (*Kooperativ hyresrätt*), which was launched as a non-commercial alternative to cooperatives (Prop. 2001/02:62; Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 28.01.1999). The interest in expanding the de-commodified section of the Swedish housing market was also evident in the 80s, when the Social Democratic government discussed the re-introduction of price regulations on cooperative apartments that were lifted in the late 60s (Lundqvist 1988). When that is said, Social Democratic governments in the 90s and 00s continued to be

vulnerable to liberal-conservative demands of reduction in homeownership taxation. The Pärsson government (1996-2006), for instance, lowered property taxes several times as a response to the vehement protests of homeowner organisations and bourgeois parties (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 25.05.1998).

In general, I would argue that the social democratic conception of homeownership was far more prominent in Sweden than in Norway from 1980 to 2008. Seabrooke and Mortensen seem to place the contemporary Danish political discourse on homeownership close to the Norwegian end of the ideological spectrum in a recent article. “In the Danish context, there has been a change from viewing housing as a social right within a pro-tenant discourse to a gradual transformation of seeing housing as a means to wealth”, according to Seabrooke and Mortensen (2008:312). In contrast with their analysis, I would claim that the intensity of the Danish social democratic discourse of homeownership seems to fall somewhere between its two Scandinavian neighbours. In my view, Seabrooke and Mortensen overlook the continuing presence of a discourse that calls for opposition to conversions of public housing and restrictions on the freedoms of cooperative homeowners.

In Denmark the bourgeois government of Fogh Rasmussen launched a right-to-buy programme in 2001. A temporary law that institutionalised the right-to-buy was enacted in 2004 and prolonged in 2008 (L 176 2007-08). In the liberal-conservative discourse of the government the personal freedom of tenants in the public sector would be greatly enhanced by being able to own their homes (Danish government 04.03.2002; Danish government 23.03.2002; Jensen 2006). The mainstream left in Denmark have much like in Sweden, supported the notion of “freedom of choice between the tenures” (L 41 2001-02. beh 1). However, the opposition against the right-to-buy programme from the Social Democratic Party and the organisations and movements of the housing sector was strong. The social democrats and the powerful federation of public housing companies (BL) accused the government’s privatisation policy of increasing the problems in the housing sector, including segregation, inflexibility, high prices and the marginalisation of the remaining tenants in the public sector (Boligselskabernes Landsforening 2003; Boligutvalget 20.05.2008). Thus, the social democratic understanding of homeownership has still been a force to be reckoned with in Danish politics up until the present time. In line with this, the Social Democratic Party has also argued for introducing laws that tighten control on the buying and selling of cooperative housing. In 2001, for instance, the social democrats and the liberal Radical Party proposed a law that was constructed to combat the widespread evasions of the price regulations in the cooperative sector. According to the Social Democratic Party the speculation and black

market practices in the cooperative sector, had to be defeated for the sake of the sectors continued accessibility to low- and middle-income groups (L 34 10.10.2001). Whereas some bourgeois politicians recently have called for the full commoditisation of cooperative housing, social democratic politicians have wanted to preserve the particular features of cooperatives and resisted the temptation to give in to homeowner demands of lifting price controls on this tenure (Dagbladet Børsen 27.07.2008). On the other hand, as Seabrooke and Mortensen (2008) emphasise, the liberal-conservative government have forced the social democrats to accept their arguments for low homeownership taxation. It should also be noted that the discourse of the Danish Social Democratic Party has been full of positive references to homeownership, not least due to the fact that large sections of its core constituents established themselves in single-family housing in the 60s and 70s (Hansen & Henriksen 1984).

Conclusions: Change, continuity and paradoxes

The story of political housing ideology from 1980 to 2008 is one of change, continuity and paradoxes across Scandinavia. Liberal-conservative housing ideology has increased its proportion of housing discourse, and has been an important motivating force behind policy reforms in all three countries. However, the social democratic ideology of housing has by no means disappeared from the political scene, but has remained a discursive force. One can therefore speak of competing conceptions and not of a complete victory for the liberal-conservative housing ideology. This reflects that the historical legacy of universalism and anti-market sentiment still weighs heavy on the backs of social democrats. The ideological baggage of social democracy has made it difficult to leave the past behind, at least rhetorically speaking. Examples like Labour's "Freedom Debate" in Norway are the exceptions that confirm the rule. When that is said, there has been a large gap between the discourse of social democratic parties and their continuation of a selective and market oriented housing policy when in government. This paradox can partly be explained by pointing to the rift between the pious priests of ideology, who often are the manufacturers of discourse, and government officials who have their eyes more firmly on electoral strategy and fiscal policy. In addition, there is clearly a discrepancy between social democratic ideology and key aspects of the social reality of housing sectors in Scandinavia. For example, despite the universal rhetoric of social democrats in Sweden and Denmark, low-income households are disproportionately represented in public rented housing (Magnusson & Turner 2008; Scanlon & Vestergaard 2007). Widespread black market practices and the de-commodified nature of most tenures

(Lundqvist, Elander & Danermark 1990), also coexists rather uneasily alongside the anti-market rhetoric of Scandinavian social democrats. Thus, housing ideology in Scandinavia has lagged behind both changes in policy and “social reality”.

A further common characteristic of the political discussions on housing in Scandinavia from 1980 to 2008, have been the debates about the place of housing within the welfare state. The large social democratic parties have at times stressed that housing is a part of welfare policy. On the other hand, the field of housing has increasingly been characterised with terms normally connected with residual social policy. Scholars influenced by the works of British historian Peter Malpass (2004; 2008) might be tempted to claim that housing policy discourse therefore is in the vanguard of “welfare state modernisation”; implying that the discourse within other fields of welfare policy, sooner rather than later, will follow the path of selective means-testing and targeting. However, this would be an overstatement in my view, at least in the case of Scandinavia. Since 1945 housing has always been a field split between the logics of the market and the welfare state. Thus liberal-conservative politicians have, both before and after 1980, been more reluctant to challenge the universal principles of areas like education and healthcare.

When assessing the differences between the three countries, it seems clear that Norway is the country where the social democratic ideology of housing was least visible in the years from 1980 to 2008. In particular, the strength of the social democratic discourse of universalism and homeownership has been relatively weak. Arguably, this can be explained by pointing to two factors. Firstly, in contrast with the Danish and Swedish case the conflict over social housing is dead. This illustrates the greater resilience to change of the Swedish and Danish public sectors compared with Norwegian cooperative housing (Bengtsson (ed.) 2006). In turn this has had an effect on the discursive climates surrounding housing in the three countries. Whereas social democratic discourse came to the surface in the debates on the future of the public rented sectors in Sweden and Denmark, the liberal-conservative conception of homeownership triumphed through the deregulation of cooperative housing in Norway. The Norwegian Labour Party has conceded defeat, and has not found it in its interest to revive the discussion on social housing, a debate which apparently cost it dearly at the polls in the 70s and 80s. Secondly, compared with its two neighbouring countries, the public debate on issues relating to housing in Norway has been depoliticised over the last twenty years. Studies show that the media largely portrayed housing as a part of the realm of politics up until the late 80s. However, in the 90s and 00s the media coverage of housing related issues moved into the realm of the market and the private sphere (Bjerke & Dyb 2005; Teslo 2008).

This surely reflects the market oriented policies of the governments of the time. Still, it is reasonable to claim that the media coverage in turn strengthened the individualistic and market oriented bent of the political housing discourse in Norway.

The Norwegian case implies that the social democratic housing ideology may lose strength in Denmark and Sweden if substantial parts of the public rented sectors in the two countries, either because of the rulings of the European court or by way of an internal process, are broken up into private pieces of real estate in the future. In my view, this seems probable due to the assumption that housing sectors strongly dominated by homeowners drive discourses and policies to the right in the long run (Tranøy 2008).

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