

Tomáš Samec: Discursive Construction and Materiality of Debt in Context of Housing

Dissertation review

As a reviewer of an earlier draft of Tomáš Samec's dissertation, I have already had the opportunity to read the manuscript thoroughly and to comment on it. I will, therefore, mostly focus on the changes made in the draft from its earlier version. Even so, I will probably re-iterate some of my previous points, where these still stand.

Overall, the thesis has improved and its central argument – that “*the power of the financial realm is not a top-down hierarchy imposed by elites on unwilling subjects, but rather it is the households' attachment to the logic of finance and financial debt via self-discipline, self-responsibilisation, and self-management of affects which enables them to see mortgages as a promise that will deliver the family hope, status, wealth, and welfare*” (p. 112) – is now presented in a more convincing way. Also, the English of the thesis has improved substantially, as a result of language editing.

The analytical framework of layered performativity presents a strong backbone for the work but it also contains a challenge: I have witnessed two public presentations of Tomáš Samec's thesis, and in both cases, the layer of devices was a subject of discussion and controversy. While I am glad to see that the author has included additional comments on the topic, I would invite him to develop the concept further, as it seems to me the most theoretically promising part of the manuscript. The controversies, I believe, follow from the conflation of what devices are (material objects, people – such as financial advisors; p.100) and what they do (make the unfamiliar familiar, legitimise knowledge etc.). I believe there is a lot of potential in untangling this dichotomy.

I am glad to see the author has added references to UK-based research (even though it anticipates some of his own conclusion) and to concepts such as debt amnesia which correspond well to his own findings. Other additions may not be so necessary: Tables 3 and 4 show us the frequencies of speakers and topics in the media coverage sample. Since the sample is non-representative and doesn't allow for statistical inference, they carry no value and may be conveniently left out (the author seems to be aware of this, as he refers to the tables as “illustrative”. I would probably call them misleading). Instead, I would like to re-iterate my suggestion about a different use of quantitative frequency analysis: a simple curve showing the yearly use of terms such as “mortgage” and “fixation” in popular media, such as tabloid press, could provide an interesting underlying visualisation for the argument.

I appreciate the extended comments on the role of financial advisors whose translation work and whose mediation between the expert and the lay discourses may be one of the key institutional factors behind the Czech households' emotional relationships to their financial products. I also understand why the chapter “(B)reaching the Limits of Performativity: Misfires and Contingencies” was added to cover for the differences and the alternatives. Tomáš's argument is strong and eloquent and the chapter makes sure readers do understand its limits, too.

As a food for discussion, and re-iterating another point of my previous review, I would still like to see how the process of self-responsibilisation relates to Ulrich Beck's concept of individualisation. I believe that the latter can provide a more general anchoring for how individuals are made responsible for their actions in the condition of late modernity.

Second, the question of what it means to be a good citizen peeks through the chapter on household manuals, and through the other two as well, yet it is never directly addressed. Before 1989, Tomáš Samec argues, the meanings of economic behaviour had a transcendental

dimension: good housekeeping was a sign of being a good citizen, as it was seen as a contribution to the central ideological project. The question is, what transcendence is there in the period after 1989? Are we expected to be good housekeepers only for our own selfish interest or is there perhaps a representation of what "being a good citizen" means, reproduced by good housekeeping, frugality and annual skiing trips to the Alps (p.59)?

Third, I think Tomáš's invitation to "repoliticise the housing discourse" is worth discussing. Many of his interviewees would probably reply: why politicize something which is working? Barring possible recent changes, the media discourse on mortgages, as analysed here, appears to be unanimously positive. My question to Tomáš is, do you think a crisis on the market is necessary to repoliticise the discourse? Or can this be achieved through cultural work and through performances like those which, the thesis argues, have caused the hegemony in the first place? Without an actual crisis in the housing market?

As a conclusion, I would once again like to emphasise that Tomáš Samec's thesis is a strong piece of academic writing and it manages to present its argument convincingly and lucidly. I am sure the author now has enough material to seek publication of his results in high profile journals and even to offer his manuscript to an international book publisher, provided he can make a case for the specifics which the Czech case brings in comparison to research already done in the UK and elsewhere. For the dissertation itself, I am convinced that it fulfils and meets all the requirements of the genre and I gladly recommend it to be accepted by the commission.

Wien, 11.9.2018

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