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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: THE PRECARISATION OF RENTAL HOUSING IN THE NETHERLANDS

7.1 Recapitulation: Facets of the precarisation of rental housing in the Netherlands

In order to answer the research question posed at the beginning of the thesis – to what extent is Dutch rental housing becoming more precarious, and how does this precarisation manifest itself? – I first briefly recap the findings of the earlier chapters.

In *Chapter 1* I introduced the theme of insecure housing and precarisation. I argued that the uncertainty of not knowing whether you need to leave your home weakens ontological security, and as such has a negative influence on wellbeing. The anecdotal evidence that indicates an increase of insecure housing in the Netherlands provided the rationale for this research, making it urgent and relevant. The trend of precarisation fits in with wider developments in Dutch housing policy since the mid-1980s. Prominent elements are the switch to the successful promotion of home-ownership and the lifting of rent controls for a growing proportion of the stock. Within the shrinking regulated sector, the government constantly allowed rent prices to be increased at well above inflation levels. As a result, renting within the regulated as well as the newly created unregulated sector became more expensive, and this translated into a significant increase of the average proportion of the household income renters spend on housing expenditures. This is relevant, since the security provided by housing not only depends on the certainty that the lease does or does not provide. Unaffordability and a serious lack of maintenance can also force tenants out of their homes, and the aggregate effects contribute to the precarisation of renting.

In *Chapter 2* I studied non-enforcement of rules and regulations as a technique of governance. Because rental housing in the Netherlands formed the case study through which I analysed this phenomenon, the chapter provides a useful background on Dutch housing regulations. In the Netherlands there are swathes of rules and regulations to protect renters. On paper, these guarantee security of tenancy, regulate rent increases and ensure that houses are well maintained. However, in many cases, these rules and regulations are not enforced, so the reality on the ground differs sharply from the reality that is often presumed/asserted to exist in policy documents. For instance, many tenants wrongly assume that rent regulations only apply to homes owned by housing corporations and not to homes with private landlords. The

protections do not function well in practice due to a number of factors: a lack of knowledge among renters and landlords about their existence or about how they work; the complexities and inherent risk associated with accessing the enforcement mechanisms, requiring open conflict with the landlord; and the limited efficacy of the enforcement regulations themselves. I concluded that this duality, protections that are simultaneously there and not there, functions as a technique of governance. Against a backdrop of an ongoing discursive tilt against the desirability of a large, stable and affordable rental sector, and the reframing of public goods as aspirational goods, tenants are asserted to already enjoy formidable levels of protection. Their failure to secure this protection is thus, by extension, their own responsibility, their own fault. This weakens the position of tenants, adding to the precarisation of rental housing in the Netherlands.

In *Chapter 3* I zoomed in on the element of security of tenure. I observed that there has been strikingly little attention for the phenomenon of the Dutch rental sector becoming more precarious in terms of the introduction of non-permanent leases. Compared to the ongoing and prominent discussions about employment security, ample anecdotal evidence of a shift towards temporary or otherwise uncertain rental situations has not been translated into political discussion about or scientific analysis of the topic. The shift, so far, has been silent. No data are collected, hence estimations of the amount of precarious rental arrangements are absent. I give some reasons for this lack of attention, noting that given the potential for such housing arrangements to undermine ontological security, and its wider significance for welfare-state restructuring, it is imperative to research this topic. To this end I proposed a concrete research agenda to chart the size and character of the sector and its evolution; this thesis constitutes the first step in executing this research agenda.

In *Chapter 4* I looked more in depth at reasons for the shift towards precarious renting arrangements being silent, and how the role of temporary contracts in the Dutch rental sector changed through the years. Before 1997 such contracts were essentially non-existent. However, a sequence of developments – urban renewal, state-led gentrification, the introduction of special contracts for students and other target groups, the financial crisis – led to the steady expansion of the situations in

which temporary rent is permitted. I argue that combined with the phenomenon of non-enforcement of regulations (see *Chapter 2*), the assumption that temporary rent only creates win-win situations and the tendency to underappreciate the aggregate effect of all these individual policy reforms, the sector eventually reached a critical tipping point. Rather than being an ad-hoc, technical solution to various other problems in the housing market, temporary contracts have since 2015 been proposed as a general-purpose instrument for significantly altering the distribution of rental housing. At the time the chapter was originally published (2016), the Dutch government approved a no-strings-attached two-year temporary rental contract for private landlords, and five-year contracts for several specific groups for housing corporations. This was a major break with the traditional role of temporary contracts as an – in theory – heavily circumscribed exception to the permanent rental norm. It is noteworthy that this development was not fully anticipated when the research agenda, *Chapter 3*, was written; in that sense the shift towards temporary contracts, and as such the precarisation of the Dutch rental housing sector is proceeding faster than expected. The topic of this thesis proved to be a moving target.

Chapter 5 focussed on the specific case of Amsterdam. By analysing data from the 2015 WIA survey (in Dutch: Wonen in Amsterdam, English translation: Housing in Amsterdam), which is unique in the Netherlands due to its inclusion of questions about precarious housing, my co-author Clara Mulder and I provide an initial baseline on the share of temporary renters living in Amsterdam. Via multinomial logistic regression we were able to identify significant factors which increase the likelihood of having a temporary lease. Amongst other observations, we show that the majority of young adults between 18-23 years live in temporary rent. Also students, those with a Western migration background, those who moved because their previous rental contract was terminated or because the previous dwelling was too expensive, and those who moved from abroad were particularly likely to have a temporary lease. Perhaps these findings do not sound surprising, but they are the first attempt to place what before were only anecdotal observations on a formal footing. Given the potential for the temporary rent law of 2016 to greatly impact on the future structure of the Dutch housing market, the baseline provided by this argument could and, I argue, should form

the first of a periodic analysis of how the proportion of temporary rental housing in relation to permanent rental contracts and owner-occupation is changing. I return to this topic below in the scientific and policy recommendations. This chapter also differs from the others in that it takes a fine-grained look at the housing options available (in Amsterdam) to different sections of the population, taking issues such as age and income into account. This analysis leads to the conclusion that, contrary to the usual assumption in housing studies, newcomers entering the Amsterdam housing market cannot, realistically, choose between renting a house permanently or temporarily. The choice for temporary rent is a consequence of the lack of alternatives.

Finally, in *Chapter 6* I examined displacement, i.e. involuntary residential relocation: when people are forced to move. Compared with permanent renting contracts, which used to be the standard tenure in the Netherlands until the end of the twentieth century, the distinguishing feature of temporary renting contracts is that they end at a time beyond the tenants' control. As I show in the chapter, permanent renting contracts, however, can also become precarious. I followed several groups of established renters in Amsterdam attempting to resist their state-led gentrification driven displacement. This (looming) displacement, which corrodes their ontological security, is presented as inevitable by the housing corporation landlords. A participatory process is used to legitimate the process, both internally and externally, and serves to transmit the logic that tenants can only influence how, not whether, they are displaced.

7.2 The significant precarisation of Dutch rental housing manifests itself through three processes

Having summarized the contributions of the previous chapters, it is time to address the central research question of the thesis: *To what extent is Dutch rental housing becoming more precarious, and how does this precarisation manifest itself?* It will not surprise the reader that I think that Dutch renting is becoming precarious to a significant extent. The successive introductions of new temporary contract forms advances very quickly (*Chapters 3 & 4*), as do the continuous steep rent increases and the increases of starting rents (*Chapter 1*). Rules on security of tenure, rent ceilings and maintenance are in theory still strong, but in practice

knowledge of these regulations is almost non-existent, and enforcement is so weak that the rules have become largely meaningless (*Chapter 2*). An explicitly ideological discourse has been evident since 2013, in which temporary tenancies are now championed as a catalyst for structural housing market reform (*Chapter 4*). Empirical evidence shows that the majority of young adults in Amsterdam has a temporary renting contract, rather than a permanent one or being an owner occupier (*Chapter 5*).

I argue that this process of increasing precarity of the Dutch rental sector manifests itself simultaneously through three processes. The most concrete, easily identifiable process is *the increasing widening of the situations in which temporary rental contracts are legally permitted*. *Chapter 4* charts how in the last two decades the repeated use of temporary contracts as a technical instrument to solve unrelated problems in the housing market created increasingly many exceptions to the permanent rental norm. This created a momentum that yielded the introduction in 2016 of the unconditional two-year temporary contract. This constituted the first unconditional departure from the permanent rental norm in modern Dutch political history, and as stated above, it is a departure that I myself had not anticipated when I started this research. Of course, one might ask: why should the introduction of new contract forms, which are additional to permanent renting, increase precarity? Tenants can still choose for a normal renting contract, and surely landlords prefer a stable long-term relationship with their renters? What is the relevance when the new law does not affect existing renters, whose rights are well-protected? The answers to these questions can be found in different chapters. In the Netherlands, especially in the big cities, scarcity of housing is a fact of life. As explained in *Chapter 5*, due to economic and regulatory constraints, electing for temporary or otherwise precarious housing is usually more a necessity than a choice. Scarcity also creates a power imbalance between tenant and landlord, an imbalance that was itself the justification for the introduction of permanent rental contracts as a pre-emptive right (*Chapter 2*). The Dutch government has stated that the new temporary contracts will not displace permanent rental contracts. However, this statement seems to be a statement of belief more than anything else, since all regulatory trends and market dynamics point in exactly the opposite direction. As noted in *Chapters 3 and 4*, temporary

contracts were also introduced quietly in the UK in the 1980s, but quickly became the norm, almost completely displacing permanent rental contracts. If the economic incentive is large enough (e.g. a new renter can be asked to pay substantially more rent), rent-seeking landlords will rationally accept a rapid turnover of renters as an acceptable cost.

This portrayal of landlords might jar with how we traditionally perceive the Dutch rental market. However, the *process of non-enforcement* (Chapter 2) emphasizes that the daily reality of renting in the Netherlands is not the same as the reality that policy makers and politicians presume/assert to exist. This is a theme that permeates every chapter of this thesis. Discussions of how good or bad a particular policy (reform) is, are typically couched in the assumption that existing policy is implemented – when, in multiple ways, it is not. I regard this as the second process through which Dutch renting is becoming more precarious. It is less tangible than the regulatory relaxations mentioned above, which make temporary rent possible in an ever-wider number of situations. However, it is arguably more far-reaching. Despite the complexities and ineffectiveness of the various rules and regulations that, on paper, protect renters, the idea continues to exist that Dutch renters are amply protected – privileged, even (Chapters 2 and 6). This creates a sharp duality between what actually happens on the ground and what is simultaneously asserted to be happening on the ground. I think that, in various ways, this duality is itself a threat to ontological security. It is one thing to tell a renter that she has no or limited rights, or that the rights that she has are difficult and risky to obtain; this is, I feel, a more honest depiction of how the situation really is (Chapter 2). But if a renter is consistently told that all is well and that there are no problems, and that it is easy to address problems with their housing, then the failure of the renter to secure those rights can logically only be attributed to the failure of the renter herself (Chapter 2), or her failure to be reasonable and realistic (Chapter 6). Such constructions have a very strong disciplining effect. The actual failure of the various protections (even when renters try to access them) is a clear and concrete erosion of tenant security, but the implicit transmission of blame is a more subtle instrument through which ontological security is further undermined. As stated in the earlier chapters, and at the risk of repeating myself: I do not think that phenomena such as the process of non-enforcement are planned; it is not that somebody sets out to

make this happen. It has arisen as the result of many accumulating and intertwined developments in the Dutch housing market over the period of several decades. However, it does function, which is why it persists; somebody benefits.

This brings me to the third precarisation process. If the first concerns the way precarisation is being articulated through law books and policy, and the second concerns the peculiar effects of saying that renters are strongly protected when in fact they are not, the third process concerns *the more overt discursive shift against renting in recent decades*. This cannot be ignored. Since the late 1990s home-ownership has been promoted at the direct expense of rental housing – in many Dutch cities the supply of houses for purchase could only be expanded by converting rental housing. As part of this shift, rental housing is increasingly framed as something that a typical Dutch citizen might briefly encounter, but only on the way to acquiring one's own house. In a nutshell, only the poorest or otherwise severely disadvantaged should live there for any protracted length of time, or need regulatory protection (Chapter 2). At the same time, the idea of the permanent rental contract is at odds with the meritocratic ideal of constantly having to prove one's right to stay put. As I put it in Chapter 1, the introduction: the message that is being conveyed is 'you should not be renting at all'.

In summary, precarisation manifests itself through three processes, namely the continuous widening of the legal grounds on which temporary leases are allowed, the process of non-enforcement of regulations and the increasing discursive framing of renting as a social service for disadvantaged people. It is likely that these processes are actually mutually dependent and interconnected, interacting and reinforcing each other. For instance, it is possible that the ongoing non-enforcement of regulation in the practical reality will reinforce the discursive framing, setting in motion a new round of legal widening, which will in turn impact upon the reality on the ground. Whether and how these processes interact could be the topic of future research, a point we will return to later.

7.3 Back to the future: Recent diverging processes of rental precarisation in Anglo-Saxon countries

A recurring theme in this thesis has been the comparison of the precarisation of the Dutch rental housing market with the earlier but similar devel-

opment in the United Kingdom (Chapters 1, 4 & 5). As noted earlier, from the end of the 1970s the British government implemented a series of policies that had by the end of the 1990s resulted in a completely precarious private rental sector, and a diminished, residualised social housing sector (Kemp & Keoghan, 2001; Kemp, 2009; Morgan, 1996). This shows that over the relative short period of twenty years, a secure rental sector can be transformed into a very insecure one. The standard lease in the UK now lasts half a year (Moore 2017), and in England can be legally terminated by the landlord for any reason at any moment after the six months have passed. Rent control in terms of starting rents and rent increases only applies to social housing, and renting has become very expensive (Elliot 2019). Lack of maintenance has become a serious issue, and tenants do not dare to ask landlords for repairs for fear that the landlord will respond by terminating the lease (Rogers *et al.* 2018). Recently, in several Anglo-Saxon countries, two divergent processes of rental precarisation have come to the fore, that might be relevant for the Netherlands. On the one hand, governments have come with tentative proposals to make private rental housing *less* precarious. On the other hand, by making leases conditional on the behaviour of the tenant, governments are making social housing *more* precarious. In this section, we chart these latest developments.

As illustrated in the quotation below, taken from research on older tenants in New Zealand by Bates *et al.* (2019:5), in Anglo-Saxon countries renting nowadays is often seen as synonymous with precarity: “The disadvantages of renting are that I hate moving all the time; just when you think you’re sorted and settled, you have to move again. You can’t put your roots down.” Similarly, Hulse and Milligan (2014) state: “In Australia, we often see security as a ‘natural’ part of home ownership and renting as an inherently insecure form of housing”. Perhaps this explains why most research on security of renting comes from Anglo-Saxon countries.

In those countries, since the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the ensuing global economic recession, home-ownership is becoming less accessible for many people, while the already small social housing sectors usually continue to shrink (for the USA, see Schwartz 2018, for the UK, see Stephens 2018, for Canada, Australia and New Zealand, see Martin *et al.* 2018). As a result, the number of households renting in the private sector is increasing, and the amount of time they spent there is lengthening as well (Pawson *et al.* 2017, Hulse *et al.* 2019). This has recently

led to governments considering making renting in the private sector somewhat more secure. In Australia, the three states with the largest populations (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland) plan to change rental legislation to offer more security for tenants (Martin 2018). In the United Kingdom, Scotland and Wales limited the use of tenancies that can be terminated by the landlord at will (Moore 2017), and in England the online consultation on removing the notorious section 21 of the Housing Act, ended mid-October 2019. The government proposes to abolish this law, which allows landlords to terminate tenancies at will (British Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2019). Given the extreme precarity of renting in these countries, these attempts at making rental contracts more secure are promising, but will only lead to modest improvements for tenants. For instance, while proposing to abolish what are commonly named ‘no-fault evictions’, the British government allows termination of tenancies on many grounds, such as the landlord wanting to move in, the mortgage provider taking possession, retrofitting or demolition of the home or minor misbehaviour of the tenant.¹

At the same time, as the pressure on the remaining social housing stock increases, it is important to note that Anglo-Saxon governments are making access to social housing (Morris 2018), as well as the right to remain there, more conditional (Fitzpatrick & Pawson 2014). Time-limited leases for social housing were introduced in England in 2012, with the tenants’ ‘income, employment status, under-occupancy and behaviour’ as possible factors for housing providers for deciding whether to renew the lease after expiry, and if so, for how long (Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018). The so-called fixed-term tenancies create a system where tenants that do not conform to the norms are punished with a shorter renewal period of their tenancy, or even termination, while ‘good’ behaviour is rewarded with longer lease periods. The English government might make the use of such leases obligatory for local authorities that provide social housing (*ibidem*).

This relates to a change in ideas on the function of social housing. Fitzpatrick and Watts (2017) sum up the two different visions well. On the one hand, one can view social housing as a temporary safety net to catch the most needy people as well as those that have temporarily slipped in life, for instance through job loss, akin to a social service. The safety net should be bouncy, to allow people to

bounce back quickly to housing supplied by the free market. On the other hand, social housing can be viewed as an important, permanent housing tenure in its own right for poor people. In Fitzpatrick and Watt's words (p. 1026):

In the first [vision], social housing is a short-term welfare intervention, subject to periodic means test to ensure that it is rigorously targeted at those in greatest need, and operates as a transitional 'springboard' to other tenures. In the second [vision], it is a key mechanism for securing stable homes and communities for low-income groups, and a legitimate long-term 'tenure of destination'. On one side, overriding priority is given to what is viewed as the efficient allocation of scarce resources, and on the other to the security of poor households.

Since the end of the 1970s, this first vision of social housing as a sober safety net has become dominant. Indeed, previous, similar articulations of this vision resulted in the current residualisation of the sector. The new element is the ongoing conditionality of the lease, that stimulates precarisation.

In summary, Anglo-Saxon countries have had precarious rental housing sectors now for so long, that they equate renting with precarity. Given the increasing long-term reliance of households on the private rental sector, recent legislation tentatively tries to smooth the roughest edges by allowing a measure of security. In contrast, social housing is becoming more precarious, by making leases conditional on the behaviour of the tenant. Interestingly, this growing emphasis on conditional leases can also be observed as an emerging trend in the Netherlands. We return to this point in more detail below, in section 7.5, the final part of the conclusion.

7.4 What can be done? Contributions and limitations of the current study translated into recommendations for further research and policy

This thesis *contributes* to the development of academic knowledge in several ways. To start with, the understudied but relevant topic of especially the *process* of precarisation of rental housing has been put on the

agenda. Rather than investigating rental security as a static phenomenon, the focus has been on the gradual shift to more precarity in housing over time. Such an analysis of the process of the growing insecurity of renting (in this case in the Netherlands) was previously lacking in the international field of housing studies. The theoretical exploration of why people would accept a temporary lease rather than a permanent one, is also the first of its kind in the Netherlands, and given that we could not locate any similar studies, perhaps also internationally. The statistical analysis of who rents with a temporary lease in Amsterdam is similarly novel. An important finding is that age is correlated with the chance of having a temporary contract and that the majority of those in the age category 18-23 years have a temporary contract. The mechanisms of both non-enforcement as a technique of governance and citizen participation as a means to legitimize state interventions were developed and add to the theoretical understanding of complex sociological phenomena. Hitherto, non-enforcement was mainly understood as bureaucratic or organisational failure, rather than a mechanism for governing, whereas studies of citizen participation usually take the idea of allowing people more influence on their direct environment as their starting point, rather than state-legitimation. By linking the topic of rental housing to conceptions of governance and governmentality, this study also furthers the international field of political sociology. The proposal of the research agenda is both a theoretical and methodological contribution, as is the identification of the lack of knowledge concerning precarious living arrangements in the Netherlands.

This brings us to the *limitations* of the study, which somewhat mirror its contributions. Given the unavailability of data, it was not possible to indicate the precise magnitude of the phenomenon of precarisation in the Netherlands. As was described at length in the previous chapters, this is a result of the lack of attention for many important aspects of Dutch renting. Most importantly, the number of temporary rental contracts is not registered nationally nor at the local level. How many students have a renting contract? How many people are living as property guardians? How many youth contracts are there? How many landlords have switched to the new generic temporary contracts since their introduction in 2016? The answer to all these questions and more, is: we do not know. Policy is based on assumptions, such as that only

students are living precariously, but these notions are not corroborated by any evidence. Lack of maintenance and rent increases are not well documented either.²

Concerning *recommendations for future research*, it is striking that the academic literature on labour precarity is much further developed than the academic literature on housing precarity. In particular, the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of labour precarity, and the development of instruments to chart and compare its progress within and across countries are further advanced in comparison with housing precarity. One notable point is that the literature on labour precarisation explicitly acknowledges the shift of risks from the employer to the employee as a core, characterising feature of precarisation (Kalleberg 2009, Thompson 2010). More recently the role of the shifting of risks from the government to the worker as an additional element of precarisation has become also a topic of focus (Kalleberg 2018). I see here parallels with the process of non-enforcement of regulations described in Chapter 2, where I argue that non-enforcement constitutes a transfer of risks from the government to the renter. At any rate, future research could more explicitly work with the literature on labour precarisation. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the finding that the precarisation of Dutch rental housing manifests itself through three processes could be followed by research that looks into the interaction between these processes, and the possibility of mutual reinforcement. This analysis could also be expanded to other countries. In how far is the current process of precarisation unique for the Netherlands, or can we also find similar developments in other countries?

A natural starting point for *further quantitative research* is to collect survey data, over a period of multiple years, enabling us for instance to place our baseline analysis of the WIA 2015 data in a broader context. Survey data from WIA 2017 are now available, and data from WIA 2019 are expected to be available soon. It would already be interesting to compare these three datasets to understand whether the precarious renting sector in Amsterdam is measurably growing, and whether multinomial regression analysis yields similar results, or that the categories of people who display a higher chance of accepting a temporary lease are changing. In 2016 the new temporary contract forms were introduced, so there is a possibility that this policy

shift is already reflected in the WIA 2017 and WIA 2019 data. Of course, WIA concerns only Amsterdam; while perhaps representative of other Dutch cities with a large amount of rental housing and significant pressure on the market from scarcity, such as the other Randstad cities, similar survey data should be collected for the rest of the Netherlands too, preferably as part of the national periodic WoON survey. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this state-commissioned National Survey on Housing in the Netherlands (WoON) is repeated every 3 years. For the 2017 wave of data collection, over 70,000 respondents were interviewed, and the outcomes of the survey provide substantial input to Dutch housing policy. However, the questionnaire still does not include *any* question about the length or termination of rental contracts, while questions on maintenance and rent increases are very limited.³ I presented my research at the PBL, the Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency that co-designs the survey, in June 2017 and pressed upon them to include questions on temporary rent in the next wave of WoON, which will take place in 2020.

Methodological challenges remain. As discussed in Chapter 2, even if questions concerning temporary rent, lack of maintenance and other salient issues were included in regular surveys and attempts were made to reach those concerned, people living in precarious housing can be difficult to get to respond to surveys, and this requires further attention, i.e. *better research designs*. For instance, those renting precariously have a larger chance to not actually live where they are officially registered, for instance because their landlord does not allow this (Chapter 3). Rather than relying solely on the population register as a sampling frame, i.e. as the database to draw the survey sample from, as occurs in the Netherlands but also in other European countries (for instance for a number of countries involved in the EU-Silc research; Eurostat 2013), perhaps address registers, which contain also buildings not intended to live in, could be used as well.

Another example concerns survey questions. When analysing responses to the WIA 2015 questionnaire I noticed an unexpected link with the ‘discursive obfuscation’ of renting that I flag up in Chapter 2 in the thesis. Specifically, a number of respondents were visibly uncertain about the type of rental contract they had: tenants renting

in clearly precarious situations at the same time claiming to have ‘normal’ renting contracts, and tenants that were legally almost certainly entitled to a permanent contract indicating that they had temporary contracts.⁴ To improve research designs it would be useful, and improve the quality of data, to conduct qualitative research to understand how citizens interpret and respond to such survey questions, and to accordingly rephrase questions and routing of questionnaires so that they lead to clearer outcomes. A final point originating from WIA is to look carefully at our finding, emerging from the regression analysis, that previously having had a temporary contract increases the chance of currently having a temporary contract. Could it be that more temporary rent fuels more temporary rent – and, if so, what are the possible explanations for, and long-term consequences of, this self-reinforcing mechanism?

The recommendations for quantitative research above also apply to the broader *international context*. Research into security of rental housing in Europe is scarce and often country specific. Comparing precarity, let alone comparing the process of increasing precarity over time, between countries is greatly hindered by the absence of reliable statistics. The recent attempt to develop a measure for precarity across Europe by Clair *et al.* (2019) is commendable, but limited in its applications. For instance, no difference is made between tenants with a short-term lease or a permanent rental contract.

There is also an important role to play for *qualitative research*. The Anglo-Saxon literature does engage with the experiences of tenants from different categories of the population. Across qualitative research under for instance older renters in Australia (Darab *et al.* 2018, Morris 2018), New Zealand (Bates *et al.* 2019) or young adults in the UK private rental sector (McKee *et al.* 2018, Soaita & McKee 2019), the common theme seems to be that the experience of precarious housing is sub-optimal for all dwelling in it. At the same time, findings show that the capability to deal with this precarity varies between people, based on social-economic position and personality traits. More Dutch and European qualitative research can greatly improve our in-depth understanding of how people come to live in precarious housing. Semi-structured interviews could uncover in how far tenants accept this tenure owing to a lack of choice, and how they experience their

housing situation. Research designs could focus on those categories that were identified in Chapter 5 as having a higher chance of having a temporary renting contract, such as students, internal and international in-movers, and those who had to leave their previous home because of termination of the contract. Furthermore, the impact of the condition of the home, in terms of the state of maintenance and the affordability of the home, on the experience of precarious housing could be explored and would enrich our knowledge of the challenges of living in homes in need of repairs, or of having your rents raised sharply, or how these problems sometimes combine. Finally, most of the extensive suggestions for possible fruitful avenues for future quantitative and qualitative research, made in Chapter 3 (and summarised there in table 3.3) are still valid.

This thesis also hopes to *advise Dutch politicians and policy makers*. A first policy recommendation concerns the considerable speed at which reforms of the rental sector are accumulating (Chapter 4). This rapid succession of reforms cannot be the result of evidence-based policy making, since there is simply not enough time between reforms to objectively assess and evaluate the impact of the previous reform. Moreover, the reforms inevitably overlap, reinforce and interfere with each other, making it very difficult to understand their cumulative and aggregate impact. To get a better grip on what exactly is happening in the rental market, it is therefore strongly recommended that the Dutch government, for several years, refrains from undertaking any further significant widening reforms. This will give much-needed time to rigorously evaluate the developments of the past few years.

Secondly, and relatedly, I advise policy-makers to base their policies on evidence rather than conjecture. As discussed in Chapter 2, much policy around rental policy seems to be an articulation of how things should be - or a repetition of how things are claimed to be - rather than an understanding of how things are on the ground. This makes it very difficult to understand, scientifically, where evidence-based policy stops and aspirational, normative policy begins. In any case, I propose that the government undertakes extensive quantitative and qualitative research in order to more comprehensively document the experiences of renters in the Dutch market, also for instance regarding lack of maintenance, so that policy can be based on this.

Finally, and most importantly, after having studied the precarisation of the Dutch rental sector for a considerable amount of time, I cannot refrain from giving as the *main policy advice to rescind all laws allowing temporary rent in the Netherlands*. It bears stressing that until recently (or perhaps still) the strength of the Dutch rental sector was that it was not residualised and that it offered ontological security almost comparable to that of owner-occupied housing for a large section of the population. This strength is now rapidly being dismantled, while it cannot easily be repaired. Once it is gone, it will be too late.

7.5 Conclusion: An increasingly insecure tenure - The continuing precarisation of the Dutch rental housing market

In the introduction I have discussed the transformative policies which over the last decades have reduced the size of the Dutch rental sector in favour of home-ownership and, within that shrinking rental sector, sought to allocate an increasing share of it to target groups and to gradually weaken the protections afforded to tenants. This erosion of the regulated housing stock is unlikely to abate. For example, the decision by the Dutch government to maintain the so-called liberalisation threshold for rental housing at 710 euro per month between 2015 and 2019, while at the same time allowing the euro-value of points (which are used to determine rent levels) to increase annually beyond inflation (Dutch government 2019), has meant that ever more dwellings from one year to the next fell, by virtue of this bureaucratic construction, into the deregulated sector. The general two-year contracts available to private landlords, and the specific five-year contracts that several housing corporations are now looking to specialise in, are likely to further move the sector away from the traditional permanent rental norm.

Despite the many changes to renting policy in recent years, not many politicians actively advocate liberalising all the rental stock, including existing permanent rental contracts. Partially this has been the result of a political logic which has sought to spare existing tenants from the full force of deregulatory reforms. However, is this consensus now breaking down? Has another tipping point been reached? A change seems to be coming. In June 2018, 23 Dutch housing corporations presented a manifesto to the Dutch Minister of Housing (*Manifest 2018*, see *Pleidooi 2018* for a counter argument). They argue that they

Table 7.1

Proposed changes to income entry conditions for renting housing with regulated rent from housing corporations, June 2019⁵

NOW		PROPOSED	
Type of household	Gross annual income in euro	Type of household	Gross annual income in euro
80% of stock needs to go to households with incomes	< 38,035	100% of all stock needs to go to households with income under the new limits:	
10% of stock can go to households with income	< 42,436	1-person household	< 35,000
10% of stock can go to households with any income	no limit	2- or more person household	< 42,000

can house people in a more fitting and more cost-effective manner if the system of regulation of starting rents and annual rent increases is replaced by a system whereby household composition and income are assessed annually to determine people's rent. People currently living in homes that are deemed too large or too cheap for them, should be forced to move through steep annual rent increases, even those with low incomes. The Minister responded in June 2019 with a proposal to change the law that will be discussed in Parliament in December of this year (Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2019). The core of this proposal are more measures of liberalisation and residualisation. The income threshold for housing corporation-owned homes will be lowered for single person households, excluding more people that live alone with a modest income from regulated rental housing, while the threshold for couples and families will be increased (table 7.1). The net result will be a decline of 8% of the category of households eligible for

Table 7.2

**Proposed changes to maximum allowed annual rent increase,
June 2019**

Type of household	NOW		PROPOSED	
	Gross annual income in euro	Annual rent increase	Gross annual income in euro	Annual rent increase
Lower incomes				
1-person household	< 42,436	Inflation + 2.5%	< 45,000	Annual rent increases of 25 euro until a rent of 300 euro per month has been reached, ¹ then inflation rate + 2.5%
2 or more person household	< 42,436	Inflation + 2.5%	< 52,000	
Middle incomes				
1-person household	> 42,436	Inflation + 4.0%	45,000- 55,000	Annual rent increases of 50 euro until a rent of 720 euro per month has been reached, ¹ then inflation rate + 2.5%
2 or more person household	> 42,436	Inflation + 4.0%	52,000 -74,000	
Higher incomes				
1-person household	> 42,436	Inflation + 4.0%	> 55,000	Annual rent increase of 100 euro until a market conform rent has been reached, ² then inflation rate + 2.5%
2 or more person household	> 42,436	Inflation + 4.0%	> 74,000	

1 Or when the maximum rent according to the system for valuing homes has been reached, whichever comes first.

2 In this case, this could be above 720 euro.

homes with regulated rents owned by housing corporations (Aedes & Woonbond 2019), which more than fits the rationale the government put forward in the proposal that “the target group should not become too large” (Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2019:8). Steep rent increases for middle and higher income households will be allowed, to stimulate them to move out of the regulated sector (table 7.2).⁶ This is not too far from the trend towards the reframing of traditional rent protection as a necessary evil that should only be required by the most vulnerable in society, who furthermore (by virtue of their social failure) need to be periodically means-tested to ensure that

they still belong to the target group. Perhaps this scenario sounds far-fetched, but as discussed in section 7.3, it is precisely what is happening to the demoralised social renting sector in England. The danger of such developments is that they seriously undermine ontological security. People need stability and predictability in their living situations in order to thrive. Temporary contracts, precarious housing, means-tested housing, continuous achievement: these all erode that basis.

How did we get here? There has been no outright, overt attack on the Dutch rental sector. Election manifestos of right-wing parties occasionally hint at dismantling the regulated rental sector, but in the ‘polder’

or compromise model of Dutch politics such claims are not politically realistic. Even now, in 2019, an attempt to liberalise the sector overnight could expect stiff resistance. But such steps have simply not been necessary, as I have demonstrated in this thesis. Next to the physical restructuring, decades of reforms and non-enforcement are fundamentally altering the way people perceive renting and the protections that, at least on paper, are associated with it; the very culture around renting is changing. As touched upon in Chapter 2, rights for tenants are increasingly an abstract construction for the 'other'. They are complicated and scary to obtain in practice, and under these circumstances it is easier to assume that the rights do not apply to you, than to accept your inability to secure these rights. At the same time, and echoing the findings of Chapter 2, many of us are firm advocates of these rights for the weakest in society: but if we, academics and other middle-class professionals with resources and cultural capital, already do not feel empowered to obtain them, why do we assume so automatically that they are being obtained by others? The sector is rife with such cognitive dissonance concerning rights and responsibilities. Quite possibly this will continue for some years to come, until the rights accrued over generations are truly forgotten, or – maybe – until a sharp change in economic or social conditions suddenly changes the terms of the debate. The sudden economic crisis of 2008 yielded the Generation Rent movement in the UK, with dashed aspirations of home-ownership and the precarious reality of renting transforming from a short stage early in the life course to the most likely tenure for the rest of one's life (McKee *et al.* 2017), suddenly putting the topic back on the political agenda (Elgot 2019).

In the meantime, the sad conclusion of this thesis is that, in terms of the precarisation of Dutch housing, the worst is probably yet to come. As matters stand now, I foresee a further progression of the silent shift, which in the end will make renting in the Netherlands an unattractive alternative, but at the same time the only option for those who cannot escape to the more secure tenure of home-ownership. I hope that, in some way, this thesis will help people to understand the relevance and urgency of ontological security in housing, and the negative impact that insecure tenures have on human lives.

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Notes

- 1 For instance: the tenant has damaged the furniture, the tenant has been convicted for antisocial behaviour or for having been involved in a riot. Furthermore, the government wants to introduce the desire to sell the home as a valid reason for termination. Similarly, the Australian states are looking to replace current leases with longer term leases, rather than making them of unlimited duration and only terminable on restricted grounds (Martin 2018).
- 2 To give an example, due to methodological changes at Statistics Netherlands, the most recent year for which reliable numbers can be found for the absolute number of homes in the four rent classes (presented in table 1.1 in Chapter 1), is 2015.
- 3 WoOn only filters out people who indicate that they are not home-owners but do not pay any rent.
- 4 For instance, a significant number of people answered “a normal renting contract” to the question “what sort of renting contract do you have”, and did not chose the answer category “campus contract”. However, when asked further on in the survey whether they thought they would be obliged to move within the coming two years, they would answer “yes, because when I finish my studies my renting contract will be terminated”.
- 5 Housing corporations are currently obliged to rent out 80% of their dwelling to households with an annual income of less than €38,035. They can rent out 10% of the remaining stock to households with incomes between €38,035 and €42,4368, and another 10% to households with any income above €38,035, including incomes above €42,4368. The government proposes that all housing corporation owned homes with regulated rents should be rented out to those with incomes below the new thresholds of €35,000 and €42,000, newly differentiating between 1- and 2 or more person households.
- 6 In more detail: Landlords should be able to annually raise rents with 50 or 100 euro for households with a middle to high income until a market conform rent level has been reached. In the words of the Minister, such rent increases will be “increasing the incentive to look (after some time) for rental housing outside the regulated segment for such households. [...] To illustrate: in the current system, for a rent of for example € 650 a rent increase of at most € 36.40 (5.6%)

is allowed, raising the rent to € 686.40; with this proposal for a law an increase of € 50 (of 7.7%), raising the rent to € 700 or an increase of € 100 (15.4%), raising the rent to € 750 will be allowed (on the condition that the maximum permitted rental price threshold of the system for valuing housing will not be transgressed).” (Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2019, no page number, translation mine)

To shrink the remaining stock of very affordable housing that is deemed too cheap, the plan is to allow annual rent increases of 25 euro for rents under 300 euro until a rent level of 300 euro has been reached. The fourth measure proposed is to give tenants the right to request lowering of the rent for at most 3 years. The landlord keeps full discretionary power to grant this request or not. If granted, landlords can afterwards set the rent back at the original (higher) level, and implement rent increases retrospectively for the time the rent was lowered. The background of this measure is complicated, but it will assist landlords that want to force out their tenants after some time by raising rents.

