



## State - Market - Family Triangle Revisited: Visualizing and Expanding a Housing Studies Theoretical Tool

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**Abstract:** *This paper revisits and revises the over-used State - Market - Household triangle as a theoretical analytical tool, proposing its repositioning at the centre of Housing and Welfare Studies, and reopening the debate. The goal is to eventually elaborate a dynamic visualization of the State - Market - Family triangle's spatial and temporal transformations and transitions in housing provision, considering the relations of the actors involved. Towards this goal two conceptual adaptations are proposed. Firstly, it is suggested to add the parameter of time when assessing the triangle's transformations from one era to another, or when comparing systems with similarities but on different evolutionary phases. Secondly, it is necessary to introduce - by default - an understanding of the triangle as a dynamic configuration, due to inter- and intra-polar shifts. It is argued that, apart from remaining a useful theoretical research tool, such visualization offers the opportunity to communicate various studies' findings to a wider, often non-specialist audience.*

**Keywords:** housing; state-market-family triangle.



## Introduction

The State-Market-Family triangle has been over-used during the years in an effort to conceptualize complex and often seemingly abstract notions. This tri-pole with each of its vertices, occupied by the State, Market and Family/Household (social institutions) and characterized by their respective action and influence spheres, has been incorporated in the majority of Welfare and Housing Studies, despite its often simplistic utilization, at least as an elementary point of reference. It is uncontested that the conditions, which initially accompanied and supported the formation of the triangle, have very much changed towards - an often hard to manage - complexity. Despite this, the hesitancy to defend a definitive change or even rejection of the triangle (e.g. form, elements) is due to its simple form allowing for a case-by-case adaptation and theoretical manoeuvring.

For example, housing policies have been described as the amalgam of public and private actors' action (Stephens, 2011) collectively positioned within the State-Market-Household triangle (Allen, 2006; Norris & Domański, 2009). Housing systems are generally analyzed as the outcome of different factors' intersection and varying configurations within the triangle, affected by national and supra-national forces.

Some analyses target specific aspects of housing, trying to position them in a more proper place, sometimes proposing the modification of the triangle. Fahey & Norris (2011) argued for the use of a State-Market bi-pole in order to assess issues relevant to its Capital (Asset) aspect, while keeping the tri-pole for its Accommodation (Service) function. As another example and discussing different issues, Allen *et al.* (2004) replaced the State with the wider Public Action pole, especially for Comparative Housing Studies. Expanding on the numerous example cases proposing changes in the triangle would only escape the scope of this paper.

This framework's simplistic form and potential for manipulation have exposed it to significant criticism as basically every modification suggested has been accompanied by a respective criticism. The main argument is that the triangle's simplistic base allows for generalization from specifically-cut empirically-based cases to ideal-typical typologies and universal theories. In other words the customization potential (advantage) is at the same time regarded as one of the main disadvantages, as the necessary acknowledgement of limitations leads eventually to an over-relativistic use, which may eventually support its abolishment as a theoretical tool. Moreover, such approaches often miss inter and intra-system institutional configuration 'flavours'.

In this paper it is argued that while some indications of the new-age triangle are present and have been hesitantly analyzed in some papers, there is a need to further expand and elaborate on the tri-pole itself. Furthermore, adaptation and modernization should not be restricted just to spatial shifts - i.e. from one country or system to another but also in time - i.e. from one era to the next. Lastly, the lacklustre use of the State-Market-Household triangle has also to do with an obsession of fitting systems and policies within it, while considering its shape fixed and static in time and space.



Indeed, there is no real need to be prejudiced against use of the triangle as it is actually a helpful theoretical and communicative tool, but it is imperative to change the way researchers conceive and eventually implement it in their studies. The shape is static in neither space nor time, while the inter-pole distances (inter-connections) adjust according to varying socio-political and financial contexts. A visual representation of the triangle is being described and proposed herein as an effective and practical revision of the tool.

## Thesis

In the last decade, researchers (Kemeny, 2006; Stephens, 2011) have attempted to introduce the element of *time* into Housing Studies – like for example, in path-dependency theories (Bengtsson, 2009), general policy-making analyses (Molina & Rhodes, 2002) and institutional configurations reform paths and approaches (Gertler, 2010). For example, Stephens (2011) supported the transfer of policy and performance through time and space, while analysing a ‘system embedded approach’. However, such an addition has yet to be directly and essentially applied to the State-Market-Household triangle.

Firstly, we argue that housing’s position shift within the State-Market-Family triangle is not *bi-* but *tri-dimensional*. If we consider the triangle being flat and placed in terms of  $x$  (intra-group changes) and  $y$  (intra-Country changes) axis system, housing (policy and outcomes) may be observed moving somewhere along this plane. However, the third dimension of *time* ( $z$  axis) offers the triangle depth and modifies its shape. Housing changes – depicted as movements – are varied not only in space (between different country groups or different countries of the same system/group) but also in time. If there is no change in the three poles or their interconnection, then we are talking about a simple projection-transition in time, but this is rarely the case. A simple projection would imply that either no change has taken place within each of the three poles or that it has happened in a radical manner so as to disrupt any link to the past (fig. 1). However, path-dependency theories directly nullify the latter.

Simplified case assumes no change in the poles’ interconnection and interaction - represented by the distances between them - and is depicted as a prismatic shape (fig. 2). The existence of intra-pole changes would be depicted by respective changes in their influence sphere, which would also exist in a three-dimensional field. The second case assumes two of the poles following a somehow similar or variably paced evolutionary path-dependent shift in time, while the third pole remains anchored. Here we get two different pyramid-like shapes (fig. 3 & 4). The third case retains the two poles anchored in time while the third is on a changing course (fig. 5).

Secondly, even in studies adopting a bi-dimensional perspective (‘snapshot’ approach), the forms of the triangle can be depicted accordingly, demonstrating different pole weights in different country groups or systems. A familialist system for example, with limited market provision and a retrenched state will be more like a pointed acute triangle, depicting the pulling weight of the family pole (fig 6a). Various configurations can be formed as shown. The internal arrows represent the dominant trend, indicating the main load going to the specific pole(s).



Thus, two-dimensional changes in the shape of the triangle are due to the inter-pole relation shifts in space. Changes in the poles – and their inter-positioning – in time creates transformations, and various three-dimensional shapes. Furthermore, three-dimensional movement shows signs of change in the institutional structures, the harmony and intensity of which are determined by the shape of the prism or pyramid, and its volume respectively.

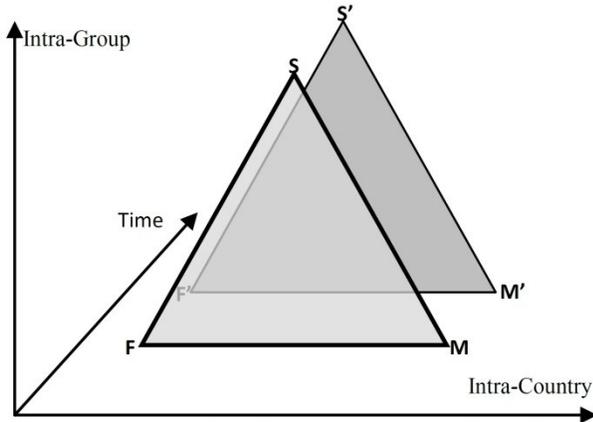


Figure 1 – Simple projection in time, without path-dependency

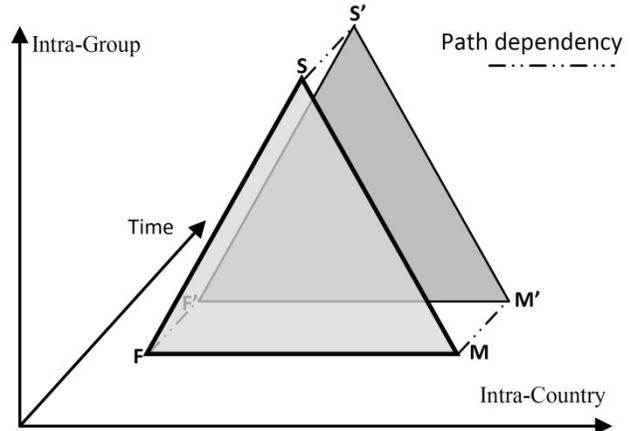


Figure 2 – Projection in time with path-dependency in each Pole but without inter-pole change (Vertices' distances)

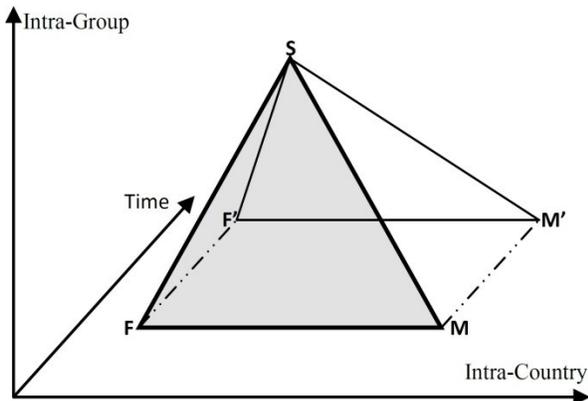


Figure 3 – Same paced path-dependent movement (change) of the two Poles in time, with the third one anchored

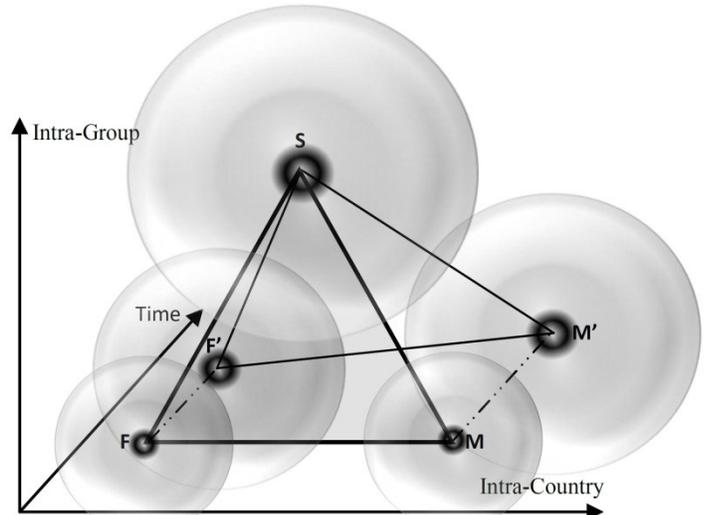


Figure 4 – Varied paced path-dependent movement (change) of the two Poles in time, with the third one anchored

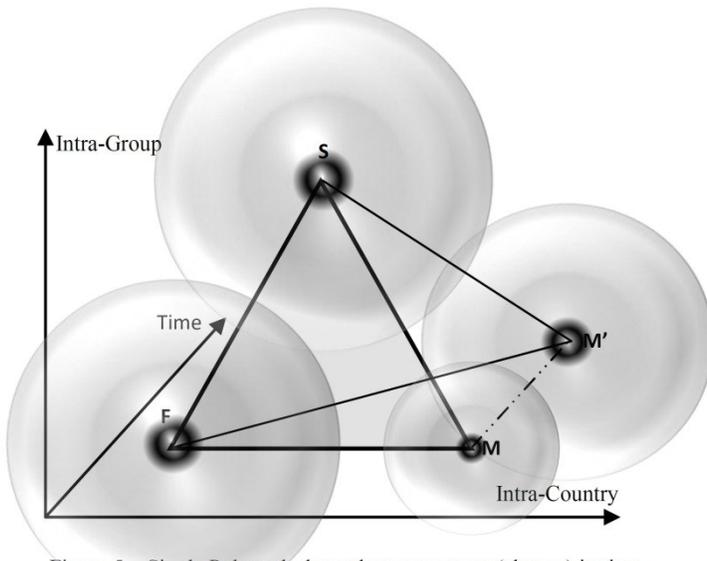


Figure 5 – Single Pole path-dependent movement (change) in time, with the other two Poles anchored

Figures 4 & 5: The expanding spheres represent the poles' area of effect and influence in a spatial manner. The spheres actually intersect, affecting one another. Their size also represents each pole's strength. For example a pole on a changing course will start to lose and decrease its present influence (sphere) as it moves to new institutional configurations, with the newly formed sphere gradually expanding its radius until reaching full capacity. Housing policy and outcomes are positioned within the common place of the spheres. However, during pole transformation or transition and area of influence re-formation housing may be left partially uncovered. The spheres are fit for any of the presented 3-D graphs.

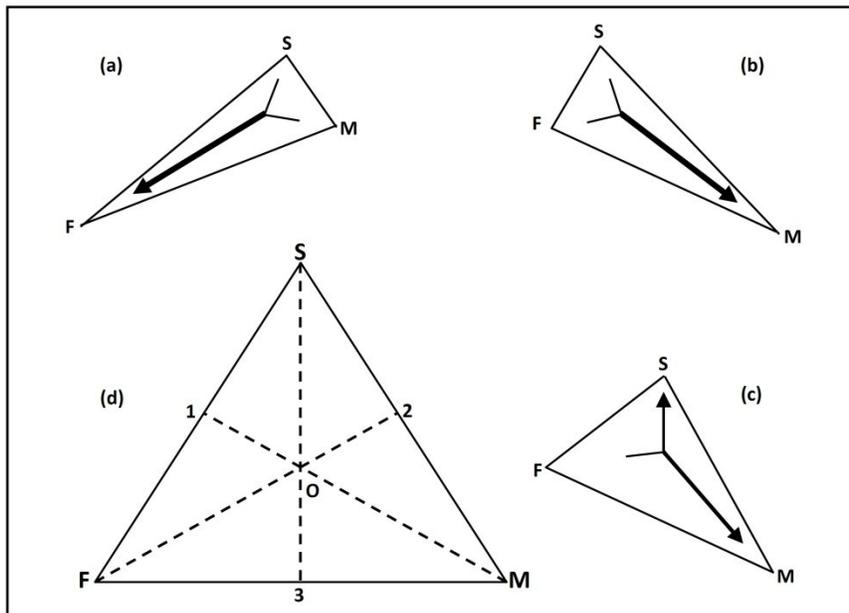


Figure 6 – Bi-dimensional shifts of the triangle and visual depiction of the weights and influences

Configuration (a) could be attributed to extremely familialist systems, while (b) to liberal ones. Configuration (c) would better fit systems like the conservative or corporatist, which aim provide housing through market and state mechanisms.

For example, in familialist systems (depending on State's grade of intervention) housing is expected to move along the F-O-2-M-F plane retrenching to the F-1-O-3-F one on extreme cases of immature Markets and an "absent" State (configuration d).

Such an approach concurs with phasing theories (Lux & Sunega, 2010; on the transformation of post-socialist countries). Transition assumes radical time-specific changes and a transfer of the triangle to another era, albeit in a different shape. Transformation underlines the enhanced complexity of change and the ties to past forms and institutional configurations. This concept is also valid for other – hard to classify and understand – cases such as the Southern Europe, acknowledging, however that transformations may not be so pronounced or widespread as those in post-socialist countries.



## Conclusions and discussion

This short paper has revisited the State – Market – Family/Household triangle proposing certain conceptual adaptations to better fit the Housing Studies modernity. It has been shown that this tool need not be denounced as over-simplified or dependent on extensive and burdensome parameterization to be of some use. Moreover, it can, by default, be particularly useful as a communicative tool for various research findings. For that, a twofold theoretical intervention is needed. *Firstly*, it is necessary to add the *time* parameter, especially in Comparative Housing Studies, over different spaces and periods. *Secondly*, it is necessary to introduce an understanding of the triangle's dynamic shaping, due to inter-polar shifts linked to bi- or tri-dimensional movements. Acknowledging the theoretical nature of this approach, generalizations should be avoided.

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