

Jane Ball (2012)

Housing Disadvantaged People? Insiders and Outsiders in French Social Housing

London: Routledge, 314 pp. £34.99.

This book explores the role of French social housing in relation to housing exclusion, homelessness and the provision of adequate housing to vulnerable groups. The author argues that there is evidence that the allocation policies of French social landlords favour specific groups – essentially those who are already strongly represented among social tenants in France – while excluding other, often more vulnerable, groups.

The book is also specifically concerned with critically assessing the operation of French housing laws that were designed to foster housing equality. A key argument of the book is that the law is, in effect, being used to block access to social housing for some vulnerable groups. The emphasis on equality in French law is, in the author's view, being used as a mechanism by which not to offer specific 'privileges' to one particular group (in this instance vulnerable people in housing need) over other citizens. She also asserts that the law governing social housing allocation is sufficiently ambiguous to allow considerable room for manoeuvre for social landlords, and that it contains sufficient 'procedural complexities' to effectively mask the details of allocation decisions within a tangle of bureaucracy, making the allocation process less than transparent. Laws that are designed to enhance housing rights are, it is asserted, actually functioning as a mechanism to facilitate exclusion from social housing for some groups in French society.

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework for the book, which draws upon insider-outsider theory. The chapter describes how the 'insiders' of social housing, including landlords, local politicians and existing tenants, have an agenda that involves focusing on groups with lower support needs, who are not perceived as presenting housing management risks to French social landlords. The author argues that tenant organisations have, in the tradition of French collective bargaining, further reinforced a situation in which preference in social housing allocation is given to specific groups – in this instance people who share the characteristics of existing tenants.

The second chapter begins a section of the book that establishes the context for the detailed arguments that are presented further on, summarising research on the roles of social housing across the EU before considering the extent to which French social housing reflects common ideas about what social housing is and what functions it should have. The author notes a wider policy context, also reported in other studies (Pleace *et al.*, 2012), in which it is debatable whether much EU social housing was developed with a primary focus on meeting housing need among homeless people or vulnerable groups, as greater priority was given to other functions such as meeting general housing need or urban regeneration (indeed some EU social housing has no specific role in relation to homelessness). The author also notes how relatively affluent groups can obtain French social housing. While some problems with the evidence base are noted, the INSEE data she refers to from 2002 suggest that only around 37% of social tenants are 'poor' by the French definition, while social housing contains around 32% of the poor households in France.

The third chapter explores the development of housing law and housing rights in France, charting the evolution of law back to the 1789 revolution and through the nineteenth century, and describing the rise of French social landlords. Chapter four looks at the right to housing in France in the wider legal context, drawing some contrasts between the French experience and UK housing law. This detailed review concludes that due to ambiguity, a high degree of local discretion, and the local representation of insiders, the law has become a mechanism by which some socio-economically marginalised and vulnerable groups have had their access to social housing blocked. At this point, the book enters into a discussion of the complex local government structures in France, and the interaction of local government with varied forms of social landlord within the housing allocation processes. The fifth chapter looks at organisational change and social housing allocation, charting the decentralisation that began in the 1980s and providing a highly detailed discussion of the evolution of housing allocation governance in France. This chapter describes how social housing allocation started to take place in what the author calls a 'complex negotiated context', in which various local actors sought to balance their own interests, different policies and a response to local housing needs.

Chapter six considers the financing of French social housing and reports on the ways in which the mechanisms for funding new housing development, in conjunction with a situation in which some social landlords have no income other than rent, have created pressures to offer social housing to tenants who can pay the rent. The impact of the wider context, in which welfare benefits were sometimes insufficient to allow poorer people to meet the cost of social housing rents, is also noted; in some

locations, restricted budgets and reliance on financial models for social housing development in which rental income had to be guaranteed, have effectively stopped French social landlords from helping the most disadvantaged households.

The seventh chapter looks at the process of social housing allocation in detail. Beginning with an overview of the high demand for social housing in France, the chapter moves on to discuss the limitations of legal duties towards vulnerable households in housing need and the ambiguities of the law, as well as the impact of the concern to promote economically 'mixed' communities in social housing. The term 'social mix' is used in France (as elsewhere in the northern part of the EU and North America, see Busch-Geertsema, 2007) as a euphemism for the avoidance of spatial concentrations of poverty. The author's interviews with social landlords reveal an attitude of wishing to avoid, as one interviewee put it, a pressure to 'house all the misery in the world and nothing but the misery of the world'. This is an attitude reflected among social landlords elsewhere in the northern part of the EU who are also concerned with, and influenced by policies designed to promote social mix (Pleace *et al.*, 2011).

Variation in social housing allocation is noted by the author across the three regions where she undertook fieldwork (Hauts-de-Seine, Lyon, Nord), Lyon focusing more on social disadvantage and Nord on poorer workers, while Hauts-de-Seine showed inconsistencies linked to more localised decision-making. A general preference for local people and poorer, but employed, households was noted across all three regions. Again, French law is presented as a mechanism that has facilitated local variation and control over social housing allocation, rather than as a means by which equity or enhanced access to social housing for vulnerable groups has been promoted.

The eighth chapter relates how, in the author's view, insider-outsider theory explains the inclination of French social landlord to retain existing tenants and to seek new tenants from those with similar socioeconomic characteristics. Local political considerations, including mayors wishing to present social housing as local housing for local people, a concern with social mix, and a concern with avoiding housing management problems and ensuring rent is paid all play a part in influencing allocations, in the author's view. Collectively, these pressures have created a situation where local, stable families and people not perceived as toxic to 'social mix' have been prioritised.

The ninth chapter looks at who the 'outsiders' in French social housing allocation are, highlighting – alongside the concerns with 'social mix' – a concern with preventing high child density to avoid social problems, a reluctance to house young people who were seen as a bad risk, and barriers to social housing for some cultural and ethnic minorities, including requirements for local residence certificates and

long residence permits that, according to the author, are actually unlawful. More generally, a resistance to housing highly socially and economically marginalised groups and people with high support needs is again described by the author. Again, there is some evidence that the attitudes held by French social landlords towards specific groups in terms of their being 'difficult to house' are also prevalent across the northern part of the EU, and that they are nearly identical to those found among British social landlords (Pleace *et al.*, 2012; Bretherton and Pleace, 2011).

The author also notes that some social landlords identified problems with accessing the required health and social care support packages, including problems with joint working and service coordination, which made them reluctant to house people with high support needs. Other research on access to social housing in EU member states has had similar findings (Pleace *et al.*, 2012).

Chapter 10 looks at the role of French social landlords in helping households in situations of housing exclusion, and potential and actual homelessness. Reviewing the earlier discussion, it is asserted in this chapter that localism, contradictory requirements (including the policy pressure to promote social mix), a wish to avoid management problems, a need to ensure rent is paid, and local political influence all affect the allocation process. The author then moves on to discuss the case for making changes.

This is an exhaustive study that represents a huge amount of sustained work by the author. The book is a valuable one because it highlights the complexity of policy implementation around access to social housing for vulnerable groups, including people in situations of housing exclusion and homelessness. It also shows that social housing is not distributed or accessed in a neutral way, that barriers exist for some groups, and that allocation processes are not consistent. The various actors involved in decision-making are sometimes self-interested, sometimes constrained and sometimes caught up in a policy mess that creates inconsistency and inequality of access across the social housing system as a whole.

Some of the core arguments presented in the book are also evidenced in wider reports of problems with the allocation of French social housing, and this reinforces the strength of some of the author's findings and conclusions. For example, the author refers to the 2007 complaint by FEANTSA against France for breaching the European right to housing, and to the 'hurried' implementation of the 2007 DALO statute introducing the right to housing in response to a perceived policy problem (see also Loison-Leruste and Quilgars, 2009).

The book is reasonably clearly structured, but there is an element of repetition, with the same themes and arguments reappearing across several chapters. The level of detail into which the author enters when describing the evolution and operation of

allocation processes is also almost overwhelming at times, but it is difficult to see quite how one can avoid such complexity when writing about such a complex and varied system. The French tendency for the frequent use of long acronyms in public policy means that reference to the four-page glossary at the front of the book is very necessary, and the book might perhaps have benefitted from more diagrams explaining the administrative structures, like those in the first chapter, but again, the author is describing a complex situation and this has to be allowed for.

There is sometimes a sense that the author is someone so immersed and so knowledgeable about her subject that it is challenging for her to convey all that she knows, even within a book of some length. This occasionally means that the text makes leaps that a reader new to French social housing cannot easily follow, and it is likely that someone with prior knowledge of French social housing allocation would derive more insights from this extensive and detailed volume than this reviewer was able to.

As someone familiar with UK social housing allocation processes and with the barriers to social housing in the UK, the reviewer found a huge degree of resonance between what the author reports as occurring within France and the barriers to access into social housing that exist in the UK. UK law governing homelessness and reasonable preference in social housing allocation is, for all its relative simplicity compared to France, still sometimes hazy, ambiguous and possibly open to abuse by social landlords (Anderson and Morgan, 1997; Bretherton and Pleace, 2011b; Bretherton *et al.*, 2012), while other factors influencing access to social housing are often (literally) the same as those reported by the author in France. This raises some questions as to whether or not something unique is happening in France, something that is specifically about French housing law, or whether – albeit with different laws and administrative processes influencing outcomes – a series of *shared* barriers to social housing exist for homeless people across much of the EU (Pleace *et al.*, 2012).

Overall, this is a carefully put together book that provides a wealth of detail on a subject that is of specific interest within France, but which also discusses concerns that are of direct relevance to several EU member states. The book is recommended for anyone with an interest in social housing allocation and the barriers to social housing that exist for some groups who are in situations of housing exclusion and homelessness. In addition, the book increases the knowledge base on why social housing cannot simply be assumed to be ‘tackling homelessness’, why reform to allocations may be necessary and, at a more basic level, why societies with social housing continue to experience significant homelessness.

› References

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