Racial discrimination in social housing access

A comparison of France and Great Britain

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Although racial discrimination can be seen in all aspects of housing, it creates specific challenges in the case of social housing as this is often the only possibility that disadvantaged groups have to access accommodation and because social housing bodies are recognized as having a key role in the implementation of principles of solidarity and social justice. And yet, social housing policy perfectly illustrates the contradictions inherent in the "French universal republican model". Universalist categories such as the "right to housing" and "social integration" are enshrined in the national plan without ever tackling head-on the issue of "immigrants" or "ethnic minorities" (that is, groups that are a minority because of their "origin", real or imagined.) This is seen at a local level in the significance that is placed on ethnic categorizations in the daily management of social housing.

How can we explain the importance placed on ethnicity in the preconceptions of social housing authorities and in their allocation practices? To what extent does it put into question the adherence to a French republican "model" of integration?

A look at the British experience is particularly helpful in shedding light on these questions. Obviously the approach to integration in the two countries is different, on the one hand the republican model, and on the other, multiculturalism. The long-time recognition of institutional discrimination across the channel contrasts sharply with the French vision of discrimination as individual and intentional, and indeed it is often simply denied. The comparison is doubly illuminating as it shows both the mechanisms that create ethnic discrimination and demonstrates the successes and limits of the policies that aim to fight discrimination.

The creation of institutional discrimination and ethnic segregation

In Great Britain, the debate over ethnic inequalities in the access to social housing was established in the 1960s around differing interpretations called the "choice – constraint" debate. This debate offered two explanations for racial inequality. One interpretation emphasized the role of the individual choices of households, supposedly along cultural lines, and the other emphasized the role of racial discrimination.

Initial research in this period showed that apparently neutral eligibility conditions in certain districts, for example, residence in the district for several years, closed off social housing to new migrants creating indirect discrimination. In the 1970s and 1980s, new research highlighted contradictions in the policy and practice of housing allocation by social housing bodies (principally town councils until the 1980s). They were torn between the official objective of satisfying housing need and the unofficial objective of minimizing management costs (reducing vacant lots, preventing conflict between neighbors).This conflict of objectives led to an informal categorization of candidates according to the "respectability" of the household. Ethnicity and class were used, unconsciously or not, to evaluate this respectability. In this way, discriminatory and segregationists practices appear to be products of institutional mechanisms rather than racially prejudiced individuals.

Although the existence of racial discrimination has been recognized by national and local authorities in Great Britain for many years, this is not the case in France where this issue has long been completely denied and is still underestimated today. Witness the chilly reception by many social housing bodies of the report by the group for the study of and the fight against discrimination (GELD) in 2001 that pointed to the widespread nature of discrimination suffered by people perceived as "immigrants" or "of immigrant extraction".

In France, the problem of access to social housing is presented, above all, both at national and local level as a problem of social exclusion. This concurs with the universal republican paradigm according to which "true" inequality is based on socioeconomic factors and not ethnic factors. Also, measures aiming to increase access to social housing (department-level plans for the housing of disadvantaged people, departmental collective accords, etc) are aimed at "people in difficulty" or "the disadvantaged" as defined by their social and economic status, without specifying the victims of racial discrimination. The absence of any statistical method of determining ethnic inequality leads to the denial of discrimination.

And yet, studies of the local management of social housing (and in particular the allocation of social housing) largely agree that evidence exists of mechanisms that create institutional discrimination and ethnic segregation. As in Great Britain, French social housing bodies at a local level are torn between differing objectives which means that they must juggle their social mission to the most disadvantaged with a need for "good management" (limiting vacant lots and management costs). This need for "good management" is such that, in practice, housing allocations are largely orientated to avoid "risk groups". In France, this conflict of objectives is reinforced by the contradiction inherent in the two main official objectives themselves, that is, the "right to housing" and "social integration".

We are touching on the essential difference with the British experience: In France, ethnic residential concentration (ghettoization) is perceived as a problem and social housing bodies are recognized as having a role in social engineering, and more covertly, in ethnic engineering. These bodies make constant reference in their practices to the need to "carefully manage" allocations, meaning that they differentiate between "good" and "bad" candidates and seek to place a "good" candidate in a "good location".

That's where unofficial categorizations of candidates come in that aim to identify "groups at risk", defined according to "class" criteria (the "unemployed", "single parent families", etc) and also ethnic criteria ("North Africans", "Comorians", "Gypsies", etc). Behind these ethnic categorizations is one overriding consideration: the supposed difference between these groups and the cultural norm.

It's this supposed "cultural distance" that legitimizes practices allied to the management of the "equilibrium". These practices can consist of fixing supposed "levels of tolerance" in certain districts in order to preserve their attractiveness or to concentrate ethnic groups in the most rundown areas where we leave them to "rot".

What progress has been made in the fight against ethnic discrimination in social housing access?

In Great Britain, an arsenal of anti-discrimination legislation (race relations acts) was created in the 1960s and 1970s to fight discrimination, whether direct or indirect. The Commission for Racial Equality created in 1976 has played a key role in the promotion, conception and development of

anti-discrimination measures. In addition, the 1980s witnessed a strong development in racial equality policies in local government.

Even taking into account undeniable successes (the recognition of ethnic discrimination, the introduction of ethnic monitoring that allows the measurement of racial inequalities, better representation of ethnic minorities in the relevant bodies), these policies have serious limits. Monitoring has revealed the persistence of racial inequality and the analysis of allocation policy and allocation in practice has pointed to the longevity of institutional discrimination and racial segregation. The impact of stereotypes according to which ethnic minorities prefer living in the inner city maintains and legitimizes allocation practices that lead to the concentration of groups in the most undesirable areas.

In spite of this, the British experience clearly reveals the need for a fight against discrimination in France which was non-existent there until the end of the 1990s. At this time, the question became part of the national agenda, i.e. the report of the high council on integration in 1998 dedicated to the fight against discrimination, the implementation of departmental commissions dealing with access to citizenship in 1999, the GELD report into racial discrimination in housing allocations in 2001, the social modernization law (anti-indirect discrimination, reinforcement of the burden of proof), the creation of the high authority to combat discrimination and support equality (HALDE) in 2005, etc. These initiatives are developing in a favorable European context with the adoption of several directives (most notably the race directive of 2000).

The impact of these developments on the ground must be evaluated. Although this is difficult to measure, it seems to be fragile to say the least, firstly, because the allocation of social housing continues to be the fruit of an institutional system with very opaque practices and strategies, and secondly, because the emergence of anti-discrimination initiatives cannot mask the limits of these measures (the absence of statistical methods with which to measure ethnic inequalities, lack of funding for HALDE, etc).

The inherent contradiction in a social housing policy that draws on two principles as seemingly irreconcilable as a "right to housing" and "social integration" is at the heart of social housing allocation.

Further information

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