



# Social housing in France: A permanent and multifaceted challenge for public policies



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of the overwhelmingly generous social housing in France that covers a wide spectrum of recipients. Being influenced by electoral power of rotating ruling parties and social ideals, policy formulations are often reflected by idealistic politics which tends to over-stretch the nation's budget and restrict its scope in reaching its target groups. From the 1990s, fund availability has been further hit by economic globalization causing falling business profitability and high unemployment rates affecting notably ethnic minorities. Upcoming social crisis has been met with public response via a series of technical-led remedial acts to promote social integration in housing and by identifying social ills and polarization in sensitive and problematic urban quarters. New technical and financial measures in coping with the complexity and magnitude of social housing are expected to remain highly challenging in the French parliamentary politics.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the nature of social housing and its implementation problems in France as a welfare state. France is selected as a case study as it is representative of the complexity in deploying social housing as welfare provision to the less privileged, yet its implementation is constantly restricted by self-inflicting policy contradictions and national economic performance affecting fund availability. The study of social housing in European welfare states by Scanlon and her counterparts demonstrates remarkably well that they all aim to improve housing conditions for their citizens but are forced to reduce public expenditure by the financial crisis (Scanlon et al., 2014). For France, social housing is situated at the centre-stage of this dilemma which is contextually complicated. Situated in the late industrial capitalism, the French social housing is by no means linear in its development path, and is characterized by both convergence as well as divergence events occurring even within a single municipality over time (Kemeny, 1992; Brouant, 2002), due to different options undertaken by rotating ruling political parties. By Kemeny's (1992) interpretation, convergence implies

that a capitalist state would show signs of developing housing along similar trajectories or objectives with continuity whilst divergence is more often a response to particular needs by the ruling political parties such as physical housing conditions, consumption needs of households and rationale of gathering electoral support.

Though it has never been moved wholesale into the public sector, social housing has been used as a political instrument in the French democratic system where electoral support from disadvantaged groups counts substantially towards return or change for control of political power (Castle, 2004; Chaline, 2011; Driant, 2009a). As such, social housing has played two key roles in the French party politics. The first is to make social housing a highly subsidized item which has appeared *a priori* to be a solution to house the urban poor and those socially disadvantaged as a measure of good governance. Secondly, to guide the course of actions of the social housing policy, a series of laws have been adopted as a legislative tool towards its implementation. Yet, for over half of a century since World War II, there has been a persistent housing crisis characterized by difficulties of access. This posits a permanent and multifaceted challenge in public policies, despite progress in constitutional or conventional rights institutionalized by the French law as well as the European Social Charter which promote housing access in favor of those without adequate resources (Ball, 2011; Council of Europe, 1996; Julienne, 2009).

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Indeed, there is a dilemma and even confusion in the French housing market as France has a “universal” housing policy to house everyone, including the poor (Lévy-Vroelant and Reinprecht, 2014). Housing debates and democratic rights have witnessed the adoption of “the right to property” to protect landlords, and “right to housing” to protect tenants of low-income including the disadvantaged minorities, linked to the “principle of human dignity” (Ball, 2011). France’s rights to housing of all citizens on the basis of needs and financial means are believed to be a key source of persistent crisis. Such an encompassing policy covering social housing development, housing subsidies, schemes for rental investment and tenancy guarantee schemes can be seen as a strong social redistribution mechanism of generous allocation of financial resources which are by necessity short in supply, particularly during periods of recurring recessions. For example, in 2008, housing subsidies amounted to merely 37.1 billion euros or 1.9% of the national GDP, hardly enough to go around to meet the objective of promoting housing access, social integration and household improvement facilities such as the heating system. Under the 2007 law of DALO<sup>1</sup> (*droit au logement opposable*—statutory right to housing), some 648,570 households were estimated to be entitled to some kinds of housing aids (Rolland, 2011).

Essentially, this paper aims to address and respond to two key questions: (a) why has a welfare state like France to face persistent housing shortage and poor living conditions of their lower income groups? and (b) what legislative measures have the French authorities taken to manage the housing crisis and inequitable spatial distribution of their social housing? The theoretical framework of the paper is tied in with arguments explaining how rotating ruling governments adjusted and updated tenaciously strategic policies to justify their political responsibility in equity governance via social housing, especially after the socialist government first came to power in 1981 during the era of the Fifth Republic. Before addressing the two research questions, a brief background of the French social housing is first examined.

## 2. Brief background of social housing in France

In the nineteenth-century France, religious and rising business groups<sup>2</sup> had acted as a philanthropic incubator towards improving physical living conditions of the urban poor. France’s young democratic system then hardly faced any political pressure from the poor as an electoral instrument (Dumont, 1991; Flamand, 1989; Carbonnier, 2008; Chaline, 2011). Having an origin from predominantly “utopian” socialist ideals, and as a response to the early industrial exploitation, “utopian” socialists such as Charles Fourier’s (1772–1837) social habitat for workers “living a healthy and harmonious life” and P.J. Proudhon’s (1809–1865) activism in labor movements had promoted by consciousness working class welfare (IIOR, 2012).

Awareness of working class welfare was especially amplified by the death of 18,000 Parisians from the cholera epidemic in 1832. Such tragic deaths had profound repercussions on social housing as

<sup>1</sup> The DALO, adopted on 5 March 2007, offers rights to housing for all citizens. Among the 648,570 households affected, six main categories were identified: those without proper shelter; those under expulsion threat without rehousing option; those putting up in temporary shelter; those being accommodated in filthy or insalubrious shelter; handicapped individuals who may live with minors in overcrowded or indecent premises; and those who have been waiting unusually long period of time for new housing (Rolland, 2011; p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Most of the early initiatives in social housing provision came from philanthropic or enlightened entrepreneurs and social reformers such as the Association of Entrepreneurs in Mulhouse, manufacturers like Menier in Noisiel (near Paris) or Godin (*famillière de Guise*). Mulhouse group in 1850 launched the first low-cost social rental housing (*Habitation à bon marché*—HBM).

it attracted social reformists, health and charitable organizations who blamed overcrowding and poor housing in Paris as the key causal factor. Deplorable housing conditions were seen as having harmful effects on workers’ economic reproduction ability and on this basis, some manufacturers built decent worker quarters near their factories to provide a more economically productive environment and as a social control mechanism against potential unrest. Another cholera epidemic outbreak in 1849 acted further as a catalyst to expedite this process to improve to an extent workers’ habitat (Carbonnier, 2008). Domestic industrial and colonial expansion saw Napoleon III (1850–1870) and subsequently the French parliament using various measures to accommodate rural migrants and workers’ living conditions (Stébé, 2009:32). But it was the 1894 Siegfried Law that initiated the first political-driven national low-cost housing policy, which was followed by the 1928 Loucheur Law adopted between the inter-war years. During the immediate post-World War II period, mass production of social housing was politically inspired by Abbé Pierre, a parliament representative, social activist and founder of the Emmaüs movement against social exclusion as a response to the prevailing housing crisis and tragedy.

As a matter of fact, party politics and the voting democracy from the twentieth century had turned out to be increasingly complex, in particular in the post-1945 France as “left-wing” socialist and “right-wing” Gaullist parties realized the importance of using social housing to satisfy rising numbers of low-income working classes following rapid urbanization and industrialization (Stébé, 2009; Sévin and Wong, 2011; Fourastié, 1998). Following the end of World War II featured by post-war economic recovery and restructuring, France saw influx of large numbers of immigrant workers in the lower paid sectors, adding to its working class. On the one hand, as cities expanded towards the suburbs and beyond, social housing was also incorporated within the new towns, and commercially less demanding sites in the suburban zones. A new form of urban habitat had emerged here to accommodate the industrial and low-skilled service workers as a political force in the context of an urbanizing society (Chaline, 2011; Chodorge et al., 2009; Flamand, 1989; Segaud et al., 1998). The “*grands ensembles*” which will be analyzed below is a new urban form.

On the other hand, for ruling political parties, social housing targeted at disadvantaged social groups was a socio-political arena. Here, they had to deal with the issues of social discrimination and exclusionary effects resulting from the supply–demand defects of the real estate market forces discriminating against lower income groups. Policies thus had to be adopted in a sustained manner with law regulations and financial subsidies to direct housing production, aiming at reducing disparity as a political mandate (Chaline, 2011; Lowe, 2004; Malpass, 2008). The following two sections examine the role of politics in the French social housing which provides a basic explanatory framework elaborating why housing shortage and poor housing conditions persist to haunt ruling parties, and the successive law regulations used to deal with social equity issue in relation with social housing.

## 3. The role of politics in the French social housing policy: persistence in shortages and poor quality European social housing in perspective

In European democracies, social rental housing has been generally used as an income redistributive mechanism and historically as a means to mobilizing the working classes. Their housing policies have been influenced by their respective housing history, socio-economic and demographic factors. The reunification of West Germany and East Germany in the early 1990s, for example, meant more social housing would be required in the economically more developed west to accommodate potential migrants from

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