Claire Lévy-Vroelant[1], and Christoph Reinprecht[2]

Is social housing still social?
Reflections about the transformation in the notion of 'social' in European social housing policies

Paper presented in W06 – Social Housing in Europe: Institutional and Organizational Transformations – ENHR, Prague, 28 June – 1 July 2009

Abstract

In the context of the neo-liberal turn which stamps nearly all European welfare states in the late 20th century, and of the current crises impacting the building sector, individualisation and fragmentation have became the main characteristics of the social housing system, although it is organized and supported by powerful stakeholders.

Whereas individualisation refers both to socio-demographic changes and to the neo-liberal ideology, it is also strongly linked to an increasing fragmentation of the social park.

This fragmentation reflects the structural changes in economy and labor market with its weakening effects for living standards, job-stability, and the equality of opportunities. These growing inequalities leave strong marks in the social housing system, and weaken the political basis of social housing as a "global project". This is visible also on the changes occurring in the conception and production of the new supply.

Starting from a reflection on what social housing have been in the past, and on the main changes' drivers, the paper aims to identify as clearly as possible the *transformation in the notion of "social"* which is active in the current redefinition of social housing. Through this paper, which expresses synthetically their views, the authors would like to open a discussion on the main issues "social housing", or better social housing policies, will have to face for the next two decades.

In order to give to synthesize the framing of the changes in the notion of social in relation with general trends in societies, we propose at the end of the paper a figure to be discussed.

Key words: *Social housing, Very Social Housing, Welfare Regime, Social Change*

---

[1] Claire Lévy-Vroelant, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Paris 8 Saint-Denis/Centre de Recherche sur l'Habitat (CNRS), France (clevyvroelant@gmail.com)
[2] Christoph Reinprecht, Professor, University Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, Austria (christoph.reinprecht@univie.ac.at)

Claire Lévy-Vroelant, and Christoph Reinprecht

Is social housing still social?
Sociological views on the transformation in the notion of 'social' in European social housing policies

1. Introduction

In nearly all European Countries social housing is running through vital transformations. Various indicators suggest a changing pattern of social housing policies: There is, for example, the two decade lasting neo-liberal hegemony in social policy. As a consequence, direct state involvement has been discredited, and in many countries a privatization of the social housing stock and a growing significance of the third sector (associations, non- or limited profit companies) can be observed as well as new (or renewed) forms of public-private partnerships. At the same time, to take another example, many countries experience a decline of new constructions in the social sector, whereas new accommodations are more and more targeted for the population of the very poor. This residualisation of social housing is weakening the political basis of social housing as a "global project", and this effect may be much stronger in countries representing the generalist model (such as France, the Netherlands or Austria). In most countries, to take a third example, we can observe a shift from brick and mortar subsidies to personal income-related allowances; thus the financial basis of social construction is losing ground[3].

In literature, these transformations are mostly interpreted as an effect of neo-liberal deregulation, and of a retreat of the welfare state across Europe; one even can read that social housing generally has come to an end[4]. Our paper tries to open a different perspective. Despite the ongoing transformation of social housing's organizational and financial realities and the re-arrangement of its main actors and their interplay, social housing remains a key issue in social policies, and it may even gain in importance in future. What has fundamentally changed in social housing is the notion of the social. We argue that social housing is still social, since it is aimed to be part of the social question's solution. But it is social in a very different meaning comparing to what social housing has represented in its beginning, in the context of the emerging social question in the 19th century. It seems therefore useful to look back into social housing history with the aim to identifying as clearly as possible the transformation in the notion of social which is active in the current redefinition of social housing. This allows a new insight into the forms and functions (social) housing will have to face in the future.

2. from warfare to welfare, from welfare to workfare

From an historical-sociological point of view, social housing in Europe has developed as a project to overcome the impoverishment of the working classes in the 19th century industrial societies. Although first social houses initiatives go back to earlier periods, carried out by philanthropic initiatives, and later also by settlement movements, social

---

[3] e.g. Malpass, Peter (2008), Histories of social housing: a comparative approach. In: Kathleen Scanlon/ Christine Whitehead (Hg.), Social Housing in Europe. A Review of Politics and Outcomes. London: London School of Economics and Political Sciences, 15-30

[4] The discussion of the changing meaning of the social goes back to the 1990s, e.g. Priemus, Hugo (1997), Growth and stagnation in social housing: What is 'social' in the social rented sector? In Housing Studies, 12 (4), 549-560

housing emerged in the context of capitalist industrialisation process and rapid urban growth. The conflictual and antagonistic relationship between capital and labour, and its regulation, which were at the core of the social question, thus became the core of the housing question itself. This relationship has been a key to defining common wealth and welfare for more than a hundred years with changing figures of the power relation between labour and capital and its different kinds of institutionalisation (trade unions, governments, social landlords, companies interplay).

Beside traditional forms of accommodation, social housing has developed in the transition from "warfare" (exploitation of working class) to "welfare" (pacification of class struggle via institutionalization) as a utopia and a collective project for the modern industrial society. This project was implemented in the power triangle of state, market and societal actors, and it has been based on a relative, but sufficient consensus on defining the common good. The general interest on better housing conditions for working class people is directly linked to the dominance of the wage earner model (salariat) which became the key mode of economic and social integration in European industrial societies since the 19th century. Social housing responds directly to the "civilization of labour" which characterizes the "Metamorphoses of the Social Question", as Robert Castel describes the passage from feudal labour-relations to contractual based employment and collective risk protection.[5] Consequently, social housing policy traditionally has been seen as serving the need of industrial society for a solid labour force in stable private reproductive conditions. Since the beginning, the reference point of social housing policy was not the very poor but the worker: the blue-collar or key worker, later the salaried employee, often by systematic privilege of nationals. The immigrants had different residential epic through the different national contexts, but where hardly accepted as a first stage in the social sector. Those who were marginalised in the labour market were therefore also marginalised in the housing market. The very poor were accommodated outside the social housing sector, mostly by private initiatives or charities.

The narrative of social housing goes through five milestones[6]: (1) First housing acts at the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century (Belgium 1889; Great Britain 1890; France Loi Siegfried 1894, Loi Ribot 1908, and Loi Bonnevay 1912; Netherlands 1901; Austria 1910). (2) The municipalities commitment to social housing in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g. Red Vienna 1922-1934; Habitation à Bon Marché in France; Amsterdam School in the Netherlands, etc.), mostly linked with programmes concerning mass mobilisation and mass education ("Woonscholen"). (3) The episode of nationalistic and ethnocentric/ racist oriented welfare regime (e.g. NS-settlement ideology), and wartime economy. (4) The mainstreaming of social housing after World War II, the so called "golden age", which aimed the social mobility toward middle class positions, with mass production, national welfare state embedding, a key role of national governments in (mainly brick and mortar) subsidizing and the formation of a techno-structure (banks, construction companies, architects, urban planners, engineers). (5) An ongoing diversification and fragmentation of the social park since the 1970s, accompanied with privatisation policies, new models of governance (private public partnership), and a growing importance of associations and non-profit or limited profit companies.

---

[5] Castel, Robert (1995), Les métamorphoses de la question sociale. Paris : Fayard
[6] see e.g. Guerrand, Roger-Henri (1992), Une Europe en construction *Deux siècles* habitat social en Europe Paris La Découverte

With the current so called "financial crisis", that is bringing at the same time a restructuration of the whole housing sector, and a weakening of the households' positions, it is not excluded that a quite new episode is beginning, where social housing has to face new expectations - for instance to insuring "right to housing" and at the same time "social mix" and "social cohesion"[7], and recuperates legitimacy to do so.

The fragmentation of social housing reflects the process of individualisation (referring to socio-demographic changes, increasing mobility and also neo-liberal ideology), and it responds to the structural changes in economy and labor market with its weakening effects for living standards, job-stability, and the equality of opportunities; all these inequalities leave strong marks in the social housing system. A striking point of the fragmentation process is the emergence of the *very social* as a growing sector in social housing, which especially also affects countries representing the generalist social housing model (like France, the Netherlands, or Austria). Very social housing is focusing on 'the poor' or 'the vulnerable' as target groups for social housing provision; at the same time the concept links housing with social work. In some cases, its leads to the complete blurring of the frontier between housing (common law) and sheltering (assistance). It targets the vulnerable groups, the so-called dispensable, by claiming self activation, and by following the leitmotif of insertion: 'from welfare to workfare'.

3. The changing notion of the social

If the passage from warfare to welfare was marked by the emergence of collective responses to the social question, the passage from welfare to workfare is marked by an epistemological rupture in the notion of social. This rupture is reflecting the changing mode of societal integration, linked to the increasing instability and precariousness of the labour force, the questioning and transformation of traditional family and life-cycle patterns, and the reconfiguration of the welfare state. In this context, the long-term dominant understanding of social housing as a common good is replaced by an individualistic approach of self responsabilisation, individual safeguarding, individualized risk pooling. As carried out, also the composition of the target groups is affected by this change. A particular effect lies in the introduction of a prioritizing system (for access to housing), which leads to more competition and feeling of unfairness at all levels of the social body. The hegemony of the old pattern – which appeared in different variations such as social utopia, pacification of social class conflicts, mass emancipation of working class, social upward mobility – finds an end in the context of the so called 'post-welfare governance' phase, in which housing policy becomes fragmented between privatisation and social services policy, and in which the poor are become called the "dispensables"[8] and put at stake of a huge competition, at least in most of the biggest urban areas in Europe.

At the beginning of social housing history, the social question seemed to be solvable through the contractualisation and securisation of employment, the creation of collective risk protection strategies, and by incorporating the collective organisation of working class interests in the institution of social partnership. The struggle for better working

[7] Houard Noémie, Le logement social entre droit au logement et mixité, L'Harmattan, 2009.
8 Lévy-Vroelant, Claire/ Reinprecht, Christoph (2008), Housing the poor in Paris and Vienna: the changing understanding of social. In: Kathleen Scanlon/ Christine Whitehead (Hg.), Social Housing in Europe. A Review of Politics and Outcomes. London: London School of Economics and Political Sciences, 209-224

conditions, stable contracts, and higher salaries, was linked with the struggle for risk protection and better living standards. The primarily functions of housing concerned the regeneration of labour force, family integration, and socialization (also in political terms). In this way social housing also contributed to the social upward mobility of the popular classes.

The structure of labour has changed profoundly since the 1970s. Due to the deregulation of the employment regimes stable and durable incorporation into the labour force has become more and more unrealistic. This may be the case in particular for those who are new entering the labour market, such as young people, women, and immigrants. For these social categories, participation in the labour market does not ensure economic integration, they remain dependent on precarious, part-time, temporary or short-run forms of employment, or forms of self-employment. The erosion of employment affects also populations with structural difficulties in entering the labour market, and the very poor who are no longer marginalised but are simply excluded.

The consequences of the erosion of the traditional employment regime for social housing are crucial. Since the precarization of employment hampers social integration and social security through labour market participation, individuals rely more and more on labour market de-connected forms of protection. The securisation of employment is replaced by a securisation of the individuals themselves, e.g. through a basic income or other forms of employment independent support such as social housing.[9] The increasing relevance of housing is going hand in hand with the loss of relevance of the concrete place where integration happened in the employment-centred society: the working place. The erosion of employment mediated social integration implies a shift from (mostly institutionally formalized and standardised) working place to the individualized living place. This is why housing becomes so central for social integration: The securisation of the individuals is mediated through housing. Social insurances and allowances can be perceived only through the residential belonging. The increasing inequalities in the housing market demonstrate the problematic and precarious character of this mode of social integration through housing.

For the precarious employed who have uncertain perspectives regarding future income, for the working poor who earn less money than the poverty level, for those who are systematically excluded from labour market, housing become an unattainable good, also due to a decline of favourable offers on the private rental sector and increasing inequalities in housing market in general. A growing number of the population becomes excluded from private rental market and for more and more people social housing is linked with insertion and with social care. This is actually why certain conservative political leaders argue that social housing has a repulsive effect on the desire to be active on the labour market, interchanging the cause with the effect helping people to recognise that "work pays" is likely to be a far greater challenge than these policies recognise[10]. This regards in particular those groups who no longer have a place in the labour market, and no hope of regaining one, or have a part time and discouraging employ. We no longer ask, 'How shall we house the poor?' but 'How shall we house the disaffiliated?' (Castel,

[9] Castel, Robert (2009), La montée des incertitudes. Paris : Seuil
[10] See introduction and chapter 7 in The future of social housing, Edited by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Mark Stephens, Shelter, London, 2008

2006). This is the reason why 'very social' can be seen as a new paradigm and which substitutes more and more the traditional meaning of the social.

In an era characterised by insecurity of both housing and employment positions and increasing mobility and migration, both embedded in general socio-economic changes, housing has become a key issue for both collective existence and individuals' social status. But neither the inequalities in the labour market nor the increasing socio-spatial inequality can be solved just by providing housing. Although individuals need housing to achieve social integration, that alone is not sufficient. For this reason the link between social housing and insertion programs seems so attractive. But far from facilitating integration, insertion often brings people in a spiral of dependency[11]: Forced to demonstrate the own capacity to work they are confronted with closed doors to stable and durable employment. At the end of the process, common law is weakened[12].

4. Future perspectives

Our argument that social housing remains a key issue in social policies and that it may even gain in importance, is nourished by the heterogeneous (patchwork) character of the system in European countries. That a solution had to be found for the terrible housing situation of working-class people was the fundamental idea which animated the development of social housing. Country specific traditions contributed to a differentiated and heterogeneous landscape of social housing today. Path dependency will also influence the future of social housing, without stopping unexpected and sometimes rapid change which is produced by the combination of inherited experiences and mutations in specific demographic, political, social and economic circumstances, including the current economical crisis[13].

Based on our reflections, we would like to put in discussion some social housing policy outcomes concerning the changing notion of social:

From Social to Very social
Especially in countries representing the generalist model (France, Austria, Netherlands) the division between traditional welfare based options on the one hand and new paradigm of social intervention with new actors using new moral and political principles on the other hand will gain importance. As described above, social housing will remain an important field of social policies, but it will by more and more linked with 'insertion' (entry or re-entry to the labour market). This development will go ahead with a replacement of public authorities by the third sector, associations and organisations, which are already active in the field of insertion.

From Private to the (Very) Social
Countries with a less important tradition of social housing, and an important private sector (this is the case in southern Europe but also in countries like Norway) are confronted with

[11] See for example Sahlin, Ingrid (2005), The staircase of transition. In: Innovation. 18 (2), 115-136
[12] Ballain René, Maurel Elisabeth, Le logement très social : extension ou fragilisation du droit au logement ? Aube, 2002.
[13] see Lévy-Vroelant, Claire, Reinprecht, Christoph, Wassenberg, Frank (2008), Learning from history: Changes and Path dependency in the social housing sector in Austria, France and the Netherlands (1889-2008). In: Kathleen Scanlon/ Christine Whitehead (Hg.), Social Housing in Europe. A Review of Politics and Outcomes. London: London School of Economics and Political Sciences, 31-46

increasing social housing demands of "vulnerable" groups to which social policy may answer with specific social housing programs: poor, young, aging people, etc. Even if it is the aim of neo-liberal policies in other countries (in France, the government has declared to be willing to promote the rate of owner occupancy from about 55% up to 70%), the domination of home ownership appears not to be a "global" solution.

Re-Configurations of the Social
One striking experience of social housing is its remarkable vitality: The actors are continuously reconfiguring, establishing new alliances and 'techno-structures' to adapt the fundamental ideas to new needs and circumstances and the structural characteristics given by path dependency. In many countries where privatisation has been effected, the new actors (such as Housing associations in United Kingdom or private Associations in Germany) are reinventing the (very) social.

From Anti-Social to Very Social?
In Central Eastern Europe the notion of social is connoted with the experience of state socialism and the transition process to neo-liberal capitalism. Identified with the role of the state in the totalitarian-paternalistic and finally unfair system, 'social' here is already stigmatised as 'anti-social'. In many countries the privatisation process (sold-out to tenants) has provoked increasing demands of affordable housing, established the label of "very social".

Social Housing as a Global Issue
Has social housing, whatever its form, become a globalised issue? The history of social housing is deeply embedded in the history of European industrial modernity. But the issue of social housing is now also crucial in non-European countries (e.g. China, the Maghreb, Latin America, South Africa), and should be studied there. These countries have experienced powerful economic development, and mass migration from poorer peripheral regions to cities has led to explosive urban growth. The story has not reached its end, and examining the issues from a global perspective can only benefit European studies of social housing and welfare, even if – or because - these developments are far from the "European model".

Figure 1. The changes in the social housing sector in Europe from the nineteenth century to nowadays: a tentative of interpretation

	Type of society	Structure and form of the city	Style of social housing and target groups	Actors	Notion of the "social"
Pre-welfare state (philanthropic type)	Rapid industrialization "Wild capitalism" urban growth	Housing shortage epidemics separation of social classes	Workers' barracks factory-dependent housing estates For: workmen	Private entrepreneurs, philanthropists, foundations cooperatives and settlement movements governments (first legislations)	Benefaction, dependency, social utopia
Local welfare state (municipal socialism)	Growth of population industrial mass production Formation of social classes and class struggle	Density and class-based integration Dramatic cities (class conflict)	Pioneer constructions with new architectural language collective arrangements For: one earner working class families	Municipalities and political actors (parties, trade unions, etc.)	Mass emancipation of working class

	Type of society	Structure and form of the city	Style of social housing and target groups	Actors	Notion of the "social"
Racist welfare state (totalitarian type)	Wartime economy; Nationalistic-fascist mass movement blood-and-earth ideology Exclusion and expulsion	Total control of public space and private life	Mix of functionalism and romanticism For: member of national and racial "we group"	Ideological movements fascist state	Cohesion of national and racial community
National welfare state, (corporatist type)	Fordist mass production Economic prosperity Social partnership	Extension of urban sprawl, peri-urbanization functionalism Recon-struction and renovation	Big estates prefabricated housing For: jobholders and their families; nationals	Active role of national welfare state central government non-profit sector	Social mobility toward middle class positions Paternalist clientelism

	Type of society	Structure and form of the city	Style of social housing and target groups	Actors	Notion of the "social"
National welfare state (post-corporatist type)	Demographic changes due to immigration and ageing tertiarization and post-fordist production weakening of collective actors	Socio-spatial segregation gentrification social polarization	Diversification, fragmentation: Target group projects for middle classes Old inner-city and suburban estates for the precarious	Retreat of state and public authorities; emergence of private actors (constructors, investors)	Individuali-zation Assistance (poverty/ exclusion)
Post-welfare state	Economic globalization Flexible capitalism and increasing mobility Ageing and immigration	Accentuation of socio-spatial differentiation Fractal and fluid cities enlarged urban agglomeration	Gated and hybrid new form of temporary housing For: the poor and the mobile	Municipalities Local ethnic and/ or hybrid communities	Activation of the individual