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Book Review

Family and Housing: Recent Trends in France and Southern Europe

Catherine Bonvalet, Valerie Laflamme and Denise Arbonville, 2009, The Bardwell Press, ISBN-10: 978-1-905622-19-1

The publication of this book, which focuses on housing and households in France and Southern Europe, is a welcome addition to the literature. The text provides an in-depth analysis on a topic that is not always accessible to the whole research community due to the lack of academic English-language work in this field.

The book is based upon a workshop created in 1998 by the French institution GIS "Socio-Economie de l'Habitat". The aim of this book is to point out the main developments in housing markets in Southern Europe and France (supply, demand and urban development) that reflect recent demographic transformations. Five countries, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy and Romania are used as case studies to be tested against the French experience, in order to evaluate the existence (or not) of the so-called 'Southern model'. There are two main research axes in this book: on the one hand are changes in population and the demographic shifts of the last fifty years and, on the other, its impact on and interaction with household structures, housing and urbanisation. A transversal issue which is considered, to a greater extent in some chapters than in others, is the impact of housing policies in this interaction. There are a number of ambitious research questions the editors set out to be answered in the course of the book. Did urbanisation go along with the spread of the nuclear family in Southern Europe? Did the spread of this family model go along with the spread of a typical housing pattern as it did in France? Can the same be said for housing patterns in Southern European countries? What is the impact of new forms of family behaviour on housing demand and, conversely, how does the housing supply influence family behaviour?

Certainly, there are certain common demographic trends noticeable in many countries. The declining fertility rate, the rise of new household structures, the increase of immigration flows and the ageing population, are, among others, well-known population transformations across Europe. However, two aspects are pointed out as peculiar to and common among Southern countries: first, these phenomena happened later and, second, at a higher speed. Nowadays, many research projects and academic articles stress something that it is also relevant in this book: there is no longer a common trajectory of social development. Each country (even each city and neighbourhood) demonstrates distinctive features and context-related attributes, which emerge as decisive in facilitating housing access and shaping household demand.

As stated in the preface of the book, differences between countries (Northern and Southern, Eastern and Western) cannot only be understood by or limited to cultural aspects. Such an approach constrains insight into housing policies that potentially solve the huge housing problems currently faced by households. In that sense, the in-depth analysis of each selected case study provides an excellent insight into diverse situations and solutions. While they ostensibly appear comparable they belong to the same 'Southern' group. 'A rupture of dominant models' (p. 4) is thus presented in the book as a starting point of the research. Therefore, there are neither standard models to apply nor recipes for policy success. As shown in this book, a comprehensive consideration of the details of each circumstance is clearly the right approach. The prevalence of the marriage institution in Greece, the difficulties of young people 'leaving the nest' in Spain, the mass housing provided by the government in Portugal and its transformation into immigrant ghettos, the proliferation of the middle class with particular

housing demands in Italy, the impact of the Romanian revolution in residential patterns and changing residential lifestyles in France denote some of the particular idiosyncrasies of each country.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of general demographic trends in the six case studies, mainly on the basis of a comparable European database. Reference to the relationship with household structures and housing demand is also provided. In the same vein, Chapter 2 presents some highlights in the discussion on the existence (or not) of a residential model in Europe. By doing so, clear aspects emerge as starting points for future research as well as evidence of the limits of this model. Despite the effort in summarising the current salience of these trends, many questions remain unanswered.

From Chapter 3 to Chapter 8, several authors offer their particular view on each national case and their demographic evolutions. As the editors of the book recognise in the introduction, the preliminary research framework, given the difficulties of applying the same structure to each case study, had to be open. The availability of data was not the same in each country. Therefore, we end up relying on the discretion of each chapter author in dealing with research questions according to the limits of their local data.

In my opinion, despite the heterogeneous contexts (and authors' disciplines), this book puts a varied range of perspectives together which, despite the difficulties of comparison, certainly enriches housing research. It provides an invaluable opportunity for researchers to acquire better knowledge of the six countries analysed and offers a rare opportunity to access data not normally available in the English language. However, I would have liked to see more policy implications considered across the book. Unfortunately, some chapters do not pay enough attention to the impact of (particularly past) housing policies in the current interaction between households and housing. Conclusions are largely grounded upon the early chapters, and especially on demographic perspectives. Still, certain policy assumptions concerning Southern countries deserve better explanations. For instance, I am not sure that there was 'little public effort', at least in Spain, to solve the dramatic housing shortage after the (Civil) War. On the contrary, the majority of social housing in Spain was built during this period and involved the private sector. Certainly, far greater reflection is required in terms of policy.

To summarise, the book demonstrates a well-documented approach to understanding housing and family in Southern European countries, Romania and France.

Nonetheless, the demographic perspective dominates the research approach and explanations of interactions between households, housing and space. Certainly, one of the final statements on the limitations of current research on housing and residential trajectories implies the need to open up this research field and extend it beyond Southern European countries to include the whole developed world.

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