Struggling for decent housing : displacements, blurred situations and activist exhaustion

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HAL Id: hal-02819354
https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02819354

Submitted on 6 Jun 2020

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When analysing mobilisations of poor people, the precariousness of the mobilisations themselves is a much-underlined question. These mobilisations are unlikely to emerge and the ability of groups to sustain them over time is low – movements often dwindle away quite quickly. By showing the high level of social heterogeneity among group members – between poor or deprived populations and seasoned activists with resources for collective action, such as '*professional activists*' or '*entrepreneurs of mobilisations*' – and the wide range of reasons for action within those collectives – drawing effective benefit from the action or serve a common cause – the analysis tools developed by political sciences or the sociology of collective action lead us to explain the precariousness of mobilisations in relation to the precariousness of the participants themselves. Thus, it would be tempting to describe poor, deprived or drop-out people as lacking resources and political consciousness, unwilling to be mobilised for a long time unless they have direct interest in the matter (see Olson's 'selective incentives' where only those who effectively participate in the action may hope for benefits; Péchu, 1996) or have a civic education ('awareness' or 'consciousness raising'). Responsibility imputation is then quite consequential. It probably contributes to both 'legitimate and deny a type of social framework for dominated populations' (Mathieu, 2002).

However, the heterogeneity of the group is an issue that concerns not only the researchers, but also the actors as it is a practical problem they have to face. Tackling those questions about mobilisations using from the outset tools which seem to strengthen the differences in resources, availability and so on is likely to leave out the efforts made and the actions taken by the actors to lessen the heterogeneity of the groups and does not

allow to figure the new tensions actors have to face. In this paper, this idea will be defended through the case study of the French Association *Droit au logement* (DAL). First, we will briefly present the struggles related to housing and poorly-housed people which preceded the creation of DAL and sum up the difficulties those struggles met with. Then, we will examine the displacements DAL activists have tried to make. Lastly, we will try to understand the practical displacement-induced problems DAL activists have encountered.

By replacing poorly-housed people in the core of the process of mobilisation with a view to make them participate in it, and by enhancing the attention given to what is personal (individual relationship with housing; otherness) within activist activity, the group builds up composed relations between a plurality of engagement regimes (Thévenot, 2006). We will then describe the kind of tensions that emerge along with the difficulty in making those composed relations *hold* over time. Our idea will be based on the study of the requisition actions carried out by DAL where the aim is to occupy an empty apartment building in which poorly-housed families make their home until they get definitive rehousing. During the period of occupation, the aims are multiple and heterogeneous within the same place: public information, comfortable housing and so on. The period of occupation is full of hitches, wavering, conflict and tensions. When the occupation lasts the participants say that it is dragging on or stalling and, according to them, it appears to be a key moment of the *activist exhaustion* in the figurative sense of *exhaustion of the movement* and in the literal sense of *exhaustion of the activists*. The way tensions get root and grow heavier and heavier on the participants as the occupation action drags on is perfectly rendered by the following comment by an activist who warned adherents to the DAL committee they have just set up and are anxious to carry out their first requisition action: 'The management of a building over time is a big problem. Each of us who has experienced it perfectly knows that it's not a pushover and that it represents the bulk of the work. A DAL committee […] with no experience in how to hold a

building or manage a building over several weeks, months or even years will go through hell'.

A. Return to French urban struggles

In order to understand the displacements made by DAL at the turning of the 1990s, we have first to come back to the movements from which many of its activists have come from, including the urban struggles which appeared in France in the context of the movement of May 68. Those mobilisations tried to give shape to an original form of criticism, but were faced with difficulties in that very process. The current groups supporting new forms of engagement have emerged based on the experience of those difficulties.

A.1. Mobilisations about housing

Housing is one of the main issues about which the poorest people have mobilised (Péchu, 2006). In France, the first important claims appeared in the 19th century, as a reaction to an increase in rents which were paid weekly or daily in some working areas. During the Commune of Paris, Louise Michel called for a moratorium on rents. At the end of the 19th century anarchistic activists structured and organised the first 'moonlight flits' in working areas, which consisted both in making families move suddenly at night before the owners came for the rents, and in rehousing them elsewhere. A tenants' movement was then organised around Georges Cochon, who developed an active and inventive form of activism, based on demonstrations, occupations of Bourgeois mansions, and sudden encampments (in the *Jardin des tuileries* or on the site of the 1900 International Exhibition). After World War II, struggles over housing changed: in the context of housing shortage, tenant associations claimed the requisition of vacant housing, the end of expulsions and the development of social housing. Such was the struggle of the *Confédération Nationale du Logement* (CNL) and the *Mouvement Populaire*

des Familles (MPF) from which the *Confédération Syndicale du Cadre de Vie* (CSCV) and the *Confédération Syndicale des Familles* (CSF) have come from. Those claims relative to requisition and new modern housing construction – especially aimed at the poorest people – reached their peak in the 1950s with Abbé Pierre's Call and the establishment of the *Confédération Générale du Logement* (CGL) in 1954.

Those movements' claims about social housing, requisitions, rent increase freezing, and so on continued in the 1960s and 1970s. However, new mobilisations emerged that intended to break with the reformism and the target-focused aspect of those claims and actions, so as to take up a revolutionary tradition, stressing a form of radical criticism of the Bourgeois way of life and institutions. Those extreme-left movements – from communist to anarchistic – aimed at making a system disappear through struggle. Two important forms of critique met, supported by different normative references. Here, we take up the distinction between 'artistic critique' and 'social critique' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 83-84). Artistic critique 'focuses on the loss of meaning [...] that stems from standardisation and generalised merchandisation,' whereas social critique denunciates 'the growing destitution of popular classes in a society that has never been so rich' and unveils exploitative relationship. In the mobilisations we are interested in, artistic critique focuses on the growing anonymisation of urban spaces: dormitory towns and tower blocks which are 'inoffensive, insignificant, neutralising spaces' (Sennet, 1992: 16). Social critique is structured round the life conditions of working people, for example migrant workers, as during the struggle involving the rent strike in SONACOTRA centres. Social criticism also tackles urban policies and real estate transactions that make popular classes leave some areas, either willingly or reluctantly (on the 'deportation' theme, see Coing, 1966).

A.2. The dual problem of urban struggles

The urban struggles that appeared in the 1960s linked, to a greater or lesser degree, those two tendencies. Artistic critique and social critique

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got closer to each other in the particular context of May 1968 crisis – a protest both from students and workers (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 244). Boltanski and Chiapello notice a similar amalgam among the intellectuals in post-war France who wanted to appear as the spearheads of all the struggles and reconcile 'worker power' with the ways of the 'artistic avant-garde' (ibid.: 85). Those urban movements were most often led by middle-class members, who right from the start advocated 'revolutionary struggle' and 'ideological denunciation,' as Manuel Castells explains through the example of a mobilisation 'led by students in architecture, foreign to the neighbourhood, who tried to entice inhabitants into leaving away from their homes' (Castells, 1973: 34).

But those mobilisations faced serious difficulties to last.

First, at the normative level, artistic critique and social critique are very likely to come into conflict with each other, their bases being so opposed. In the case of urban struggles, a dose of artistic critique was used, especially in the 1970s, through policies deriving from Malraux Law (4 August 1962). With the idea of renovating the historic town centers and protecting a remarkable environment considered as 'heritage,' that law broke with previous purely functional representations of urban spaces. Until the 1980s, the mobilisations that emerged from renovated areas concentrated again on social criticism through the case of the forced leaving of popular classes (often migrant people) from central areas (Barrère et al., 1981). Dispossessed from artistic critique, those movements however lost some of their strength, for they did not entirely enjoy the same resources as the main institutional actors involved in social critique (who concentrated, in relation to the worker movement, on the fields of enterprise and work, not housing).

Second, these movements were mainly led an 'avant-garde', able to make social and artistic critiques hold together by. The movements' leadership by *entrepreneurs of movements* then raises a further difficulty due to the constitutive heterogeneity of those movements, devided between 'politicised activists' and 'poor people'. Contrary to poorly-housed people or migrant workers, the activists who take the leadership of those

movements seem to have 'ideological' motives, as they have no housing or social problems and are students, employees and managers (Cherki, 1976: 203). The researchers who have studied those movements analyse three different forms of squatters in relation to those mobilisations (Castells et al., 1974). The first group is identified as that of 'structurally poorly-housed people' or 'needy squatters,' mainly 'migrants' or 'sub-proletarians,' characterised by their lack of 'political consciousness,' according to sociologists. They are the ones who can 'make the movement step back' for their 'only goal' is to 'get housing […] under any circumstances' (ibid.: 656). They are thus likely to accept compromises without any consideration for the cause. The second group includes the 'occupiers' or 'squatters out of choice' and differs from the first one in relation to their 'consciousness' and social or ethnic origin, the authors state. They are mainly 'young French couples'. Last, the researchers describe a third group – the 'activists' – who take decisions pertaining to the organisation of the collective mobilisation and the political goal of the action. The failure of those movements is then explained by their high social heterogeneity. The authors report 'contradictions between squatters arising from problems caused by the coexistence of different social classes, different generations and different nationalities'. From that perspective, which can be qualified as representative inasmuch as activists with resources represent poor people, the conditions for a movement to succeed are clearness of the stakes regulating the conflicts between identified interests, movement homogeneity and strong organisational capacity (Castells, 1972). Those conditions seem difficult to be held together, given the heterogeneity of the collectives described by sociologists. Then the 'most destitute' seem to be condemned – in order to constitute a group and exist as a group, that is as a force able to speak, be listened to, and make itself heard – to abandon, and doing so be dispossessed of, their political word (Bourdieu, 1987: 186).

The movements that have taken from the mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s have thus stemmed from two difficulties. The first one is a critical difficulty: artistic critique has been taken over and social critique is

weakened. The second difficulty is linked to the cul-de-sac in which the 'representative' perspective stalls, namely dispossession.

At the end of the 1980s, DAL was about to be created following many experiences (the *occupants-renovateurs* – 'the renovating occupiers,' the *Comité des mal-logés* – 'the poorly-housed people committee,' and so on)[1], for the actors to face those two difficulties.

B. The displacements made by DAL

DAL has intended to make a set of displacements relative to the urban movements that dominated in the 1960s and 1970s. Through a displacement of criticism DAL insists on individual relationship with housing. Drawing the attention to what is personal (inhabited places, comfort, neighbourhood...) entails the reassessment of the emotional dimension of the action. However, rather than indulging in complete emotional reaction, which would lead to 'charity' or the abandonment of collective action, DAL has intended to turn poorly-housed people into actors of the movement. Thus they are not simply beneficiaries of it. The enhancement of the individual relationship with housing implies the enhancement of the individual inhabitant when going from a representative logic to a participative logic in which poorly-housed people are personally in the centre of the decision-making process and activist action.

B.1. Focus on personal goods

Thus, DAL has made what can be called a displacement of critique, following Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello when they consider that critique is movable and can be extended to 'new objects of concern relative to the fair or unfair character of daily situations' and to 'moments that had not been yet formalised in terms of action involving people whose suffering or unfair conditions imposed on them had not been revealed' (Boltanski and

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[1] See Cécile Péchu's work in order to understand the variety of activist trajectories and logics of action.

Chiapello, 1999: 603). That way DAL intends to give back its strength to social critique – a form of critique that unveils social inequalities as regards housing – by incorporating new critical resources, not only 'artistic' ones, but also resources focussed on the individual relationship with housing itself, that is personal goods. The citizen is not abstract, he is rather set in a body and a place from which he speaks (Abel, 1995). That may explain the strength of the housing issues at stake in the mobilisations of poor people. Living in a comfortable place is a prerequisite to getting out of passivity or becoming a political actor and subject (Breviglieri, 2002). DAL members recognise that precondition for entering and sustaining public engagement.

Thus, DAL supports the notion of 'decent housing' – a notion that raises general issues of people dignity (Priso, 1996) and calls for justice. However, such dignity is to be recognised at its lowest level too – from the acknowledgement of particular features developed through the attachment to an inhabited space which encompasses the flat, neighbourhood and the area immediately recognised by the inhabitant through habits and memories related to particular objects, uses and adaptations (Thévenot, 1994; Breviglieri, 1999). Critique is then focussed on the way the familiar links between the inhabitant and their immediate environment – what Sansot calls 'the way of reaching an agreement' (Sansot, 2000: 129) – are impaired.

Law has tried to specify housing decency[2] by defining a set of conventional criteria intended to assess equipment and place functionality (conformity with standards; attention drawn to what may induce a recognised risk to health or safety). 'Decent' housing thus recognised may be subjected to normal use. Law poorly specifies the difference between 'indecency' and 'insalubrity,' and states that the difference lies more in the action tools developed by law itself than in the realities those two notions refer to (Faure et al., 2006). Qualifying housing as 'indecent' falls into the scope of proprietor/tenant relationship and private law, whereas the notion of 'insalubrious housing' induces a public issue, namely public

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[2] As in the French decree on decent housing adopted under the Loi Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbain (law on solidarity and urban renewal).

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order, and is therefore subject to public law. The qualification 'indecent' is hardly objectifiable and is quite open to free subjectivity. In effect, the focus on housing decency encompasses realities which are not easy to quantify or objectify without reducing their range[3].

Those realities correspond not only to the normal use of the place – its functional and secure characteristics – but also to the familiar dimensions of the inhabited place and to the possibility to develop intimate uses or attachments within the comfort of an inhabited place. The assessment may concern effective degradations as well as the constraints they impose on the occupiers as regards gestures and habits and the need for them to adapt objects to the place, including providing buckets or placing mattresses and cushions so as keep off the mould in case of water leaks. The assessment may also concern the relationship between neighbours and the way they are affected or prevented from being fully open through familiar friendship or affection, especially when the occupier is suspicious about possibly squatted neighbouring flats and watchfully expects outside noises – a source of anxiety. In such a case, the individual relationship with housing is spoilt and is no longer set in the comfort of personal conveniences, but in the context of lesser-evil situations to be managed. The inhabitant is never relaxed and works out ever-temporary solutions and ever-shaky compromises. The ensuing exasperation is such that the inhabitant will always try to spend as little time at home as possible. Sentences like 'I only go home late in the evening' are common thing (ibid.: 16). The notion of 'decency' is set in a wide range of experienced realities and most intimate goods, and covers the 'grey area' which the public has difficulty in figuring out and recognising – hence the difficulty for law to recognise 'decency' as definitely as 'salubrity' – and on which the proprietors, who are often nicknamed *marchands de sommeil* – 'sleep sellers' – by the associations, play (ibid.: 22).

By emphasizing the importance of 'decent housing' the activists not only support the right to housing against property right or examine

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[3] Marc Breviglieri shows how social workers use the legal concept of 'decent housing' to assess the seriousness of given situations, and also how the reduction – from the inhabited sphere to normal housing – implied by that category confronts social workers' home visits to people in difficulty (Breviglieri, 2006).

conventional criteria pertaining to the functional character or salubrity of housing, but also draw attention to a set of elements pertaining to the personal, intimate, and familiar – without loosing the public dimension. Here we contend that DAL highlights those elements that were not totally emphasized by previous 'urban movements' (whose leaders were often more concerned about abolishing property and claiming the 'right to squqtting'). The 'decent housing' category that DAL uses seems to be one of the interfaces between the familiar and the public.

That way, DAL engages in activist actions notably against expulsions that tear inhabitants away from their familiar places and scatter neighbouring families through the process of rehousing – these expulsions being adressed as an act of violence against the solidarity expressed in the familiar place.

When a building is 'requisitioned' by DAL the poorly-housed people occupy it not only as activists, but also as inhabitants forging new ties.

As DAL President Jean-Baptiste Eyraud puts it: 'Families are happy even if the place is dirty, for it belongs to them. (…) The most difficult moment is when we decide to step back. The future inhabitants go home but don't feel like leaving the place'.

Attention to personal goods goes along with attention to the other, which means that poorly-housed people should not be derided as mere 'files' and that 'human beings should not be treated as numbers or files' (Margalit, 1999: 207) – a form of humiliation the experience of the poor has been haunted with, as Simmel has shown.

B.2. Emotional engagement in activist action

Within DAL, activist activity is often underpinned by a strong emotional engagement. DAL appeared partly through the acknowledgement of poorly-housed people vulnerability. Jean-Baptiste Eyraud remembers an experience he went through in 1983 when he belonged to the '*occupants-rénovateurs*' movement and describes the event as decisive in his DAL-prior involvement:

'It was at the end of December 1983, we were occupying an empty building at the limit of the 19th and 20th [districts of Paris]. There were about a hundred people, a number of whom had decided to resist militarily and began to prepare Molotov cocktails. […] It was on Christmas Eve, 24 December. Finally, the [police forces] broke in, hit… the most fragile, vulnerable people, the girls, the youngest. […] What some of us have learned from that event is that we can't oppose physically an expulsion without seriously putting families at risk. That's what we've learned from that event'.

DAL's focus on the vulnerability and suffering of the other and on the life-conditions of poorly-housed people, and its concern for a form of collective action that must be directly effective (act so as to obtain effective rehousing) put DAL in the wake of Christian-inspired housing movements – Abbe Pierre was one of the major supports of the association – and make it dominated by the theme of 'exclusion,' a theme highlighted by movements like ATD-Quart Monde in the context of the 1980s and 1990s (Didier, 1996) even if, as we'll see, DAL activists attempted to keep away from that tendency. Emotional engagement is often linked to the presence of fragile people such as old people or children (Peneff, 1992: 167). These closer links are forged during risky 'actions' such as demonstrations or requisitions. In those difficult stages of the activist activity, the actors try to *take care* of one another and they attempt more particularly to *take care* of the most vulnerable. The outset of a requisition action is always tense because of the often-violent intervention of the CRS (police forces) to expel as quickly as possible those who make their way into the building, and because of the dangers sometimes created by the place itself, including staircases without any banisters and open access to the roofs. At any moment, children run the risk of being separated from their parents, notably in the metro, when on their way to the building to be occupied – in fact, activists take a sinuous way on the different metro lines of which nobody knows the destination, so that the agents of the *Renseignements Généraux* ('general information agency') who follow them can't warn the police about the direction the activists have taken, and the

police taskforce is thus prevented from being in front of the building concerned before DAL members – or over the course of the requisition itself – an attack by the CRS may separate families when certain family members have succeeded in going into the building but can't get out of it, while others remain outside and can't go in. During those unclear episodes, the actors rely on close relations, have their children looked after by trustworthy people, and check close relations' presence. Over the course of an action, the links between activists are personalized. One day one association's member responsible for maintaining good order declared: 'It's very important for the families to know someone taking part in such type of action. They must be able to notice someone they trust'.

Such closeness often develops during the first visit to a poorly-housed person's place. There, a reciprocal step is taken by both the activist – from collective action setting to private place – and the poorly-housed person – from private place to public sphere. When a DAL district committee is manned, a poorly-housed person or family about to be expelled from their places may go to the office for the first time and knock at the door. Often, they are at a loss, exhausted, and restless. As poorly-housed people often ask activists to 'come and see' their home so as to show the seriousness of their situation and the distress they are in, an activist on duty may see poorly-housed people home. During the first interview, the activist generalizes the issue – for example by explaining to the poorly-housed people that their situation is not an only case, giving them data, telling them about what has already been seen elsewhere, or presenting the issue in terms of politics and economics and calling for collective struggle – and feels *solicitude* in front of an ever-particular, experienced situation, *emotion* in front of a 'Parisian slum' or an insalubrious interior in which a whole family live, and *disgust* at the behaviour of a '*marchand de sommeil*'. A reciprocal movement is made by suffering people who denounce an injustice and ask for the support of a collective action. During those episodes in which poorly-housed people greet activists at home, the activists enter the place, observe it, remain in it for some time, and even joke with the children. Thus, closer links

pertaining to the familiar – 'a glimmer of relation' (Farge et Laé, 2000: 132) – begin to develop between the activists and the poorly-housed people, even though the public sphere never entirely disappears. That way, emotional engagement may back up activist engagement and help the actors carry out their activist activity.

Usually, over the course of a requisition action, DAL members enter an empty building in which poorly-housed families are then settled. The object is to draw public attention to those families and negociate with the owner of the building or the relevant authorities, so that the families in question may be rehoused stably and definitively in a decent place. Not all the poorly-housed families registered on the association list can be involved in a single requisition action, which means that not all are likely to be rehoused on that very occasion. The 'choice' of the families to be rehoused is discussed in a plenary session held prior to each requisition action and usually answers a neutral principle of justice. For instance, the date at which families give back the files they have filled in to obtain public housing from the relevant authorities is a major criterion for DAL members to make their choice. The less recent claims which have not yet succeeded, sometimes after a ten-year interval, are considered as more urgent than the others. The situations of poorly-housed people are thus assessed, compared, and ranked according to an urgency scale legitimately established. On one occasion, however, during a meeting preparing for a requisition action, an activist – the association lawyer – suggested that another participant be added to the families initially selected for the action. She proposed to loosen the impartiality principle on the grounds that she considered the individual situation of a poorly-housed man as even more urgent than the others. She said: 'That bloke who's moved me so deeply, his electricity's been cut off, his ceiling's fallen down. He must be included in the action!' In that case, the activist spoke up the emotion she had felt when she met with a particular situation of hardship. According to her, though that public housing claim had been made after others, it must be acknowledged before others, in accordance with its urgent character. When the '*interpellation*' effectively occurs, an

'*accordement*' between the poorly-housed person and the activist is being developed (Corcuff, 1996). Including that suffering man into the collective action has strengthened and sustained that '*local accordement*' and has drafted a form of politics of compassion. That feeling of compassion is in such situation different from pity, a feeling which establishes fundamentally unbalanced relationship between people. DAL members observe that the presence of pity is more pregnant in charity movements, from which they wilfully tend to depart, insisting on the need to turn poorly-housed people into actors as such. The association doesn't want the poor to be maintained in a passive position, or in the posture of the sufferer which is based on highly unbalanced relationship. On the contrary, DAL would like to enhance the otherness of the characters[4]. Jean-Baptiste Eyraud puts the blame on the associations that fight exclusion (often Christian-inspired) for 'clinging to the idea that the poor must be educated,' denying them the capacity to take responsibility for themselves, and for taking it for granted that they are characterised by a lack of resources.

B.3. Poorly-housed people as actors

As the individual relationship with housing is highlighted, new legitimacy is given to the inhabitant (Lafaye and Flanquart, 2001), which entails a displacement from a representative logic to a participative logic. We have already mentioned that the urban movements of the 1960s and 1970s were structured around an enlightened avant-garde endowed with activist resources and competence in organised collective action, which enabled those movements to firmly assert their critical discourse, while leading to a form of political dispossession that confined 'the poor' to a passive role. On the contrary, here, the object is to avoid a situation in which a group of '*professional activists*' act as the spokespersons for the

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[4] That ambition has its roots in the tradition of civic engagement in France. 'Within the framework of unions' action, those who suffer take their destiny into their own hands. [...] That is the very rea son why the unions' movement has diferentiated itself from philantropic movement, the latter being based on the external assistance of benefactors to poor people of whom they don't share the conditions or sufferings [...]' (Boltanski, 1993: 276-277).

poorly-housed people. This is not to state that there isn't such actors in the movement of course, but that the problem is dispossession is identified by the actors *as a problem*. DAL primarily presents itself as an 'association of poorly-housed people,' the members of which are 'adherents,' with no distinction between 'volunteers' and 'beneficiaries'[5]. The association charter highlights the active role of the most concerned actors, namely the poorly housed, in the decision-making process and conduct of actions. Though the charter does not deny the importance of establishing relationship with other activist actors – unions, political parties, associations, etc – those actors are no more than a 'support' and the committee must strive to retain its independence, for example by having many different supports so as not to give too much power to a particular group of sympathising activists at the expense of the poorly-housed people. The seizure of power by such sympathizing activists at the expense of poorly-housed people is perceived as a constant threat. Those committees 'cannot do simply with supporting a debate or raising public awareness and authorities' consciousness,' rather, they 'are determined to overcome expulsion procedures, reach rehousing, or obtain improvements in housing conditions, for these elements generate hope and mobilisation among the drop-outs'. A DAL committee must 'set up general assemblies of adherents as often as possible to strengthen solidarity, organise collective actions and break everyone's isolation. A committee must also help poorly-housed and homeless people monitor their own struggle and regain their dignity, through collective actions focusing on realistic claims'. The charter is not only symbolical, for it also operates as a binding instrument that must be implemented. In this respect, local committees may be brought back to these principles, and, sometimes, the disqualification of a committee may be discussed by the federation.

The committees must then multiply occasions for deliberation. For example, when DAL is preparing for activist action, a Malian activist may translate what is said from French to Bambara ou Fulani language for

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[5] On protest against delegation of power in contemporary activist movements, see Ion et al., 2005 among others.

Malian participants[6]. The object is not only to inform the poorly housed or explain to the 'novices' what they will have to do in any given situation – the route to be taken on foot or by metro, the arrival at the chosen building, the possible attack by the CRS and the ensuing forced expulsion – but also to prevent those who do not command French language properly from retreating or acting as mere passive followers – which would consist in relying exclusively on 'professional activists' – and to enable them to make themselves heard in the decision-making process. In such a case, the general assembly gradually deviates from usual activist routines and operates within its own temporal dimension. The translator reports the comments, opinions, objections, and viewpoints of the poorly housed. One day, at the end of a meeting, a young activist who was surprised, said to us: 'At some stage, I don't know when exactly, the discussion turned into African palaver. I was a little disoriented myself. And finally, we took the right decision'.

Palaver is actually a procedure as such that leads to a form of public sphere. However, it is contextually situated in a place and in the attitudes of the participants. Palaver looks for 'momentary agreements which acknowledge specificity and otherness' and requires patience and humility. 'Palaver will only be possible if we recognise our fallibility and time limits (…) and a loss of sovereignty is to be accepted as well' (Bidima, 1997: 41)[7]. Palaver establishes links between participants that are different from those forged during a usual activist meeting – in which the notions of public, action, justice, and efficiency are dealt with right from the start – and are rather based on availability and attachment.

The fact that the poorly housed themselves are considered as the principal actors of the movement comes out in the assessments conducted by DAL activists when compared to the situation within other collectives with which they are in contact or even carry out actions on occasions. Opposite 'charity movements,' the adherents of which are simply 'institutional subcontractors' for they help poor people 'individually,' the

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[6] For further information on Africans in DAL, see Péchu, 1999.
[7] The author shows how difficult it is to include palaver in political constructions aiming at generalisation, abstraction, and detachment.

activists present DAL as a struggling association, rejecting the idea of assistance, to the advantage of the claim to a legal right. Faced with more radical movements or collectives that right from the start focus the struggle on general issues lying beyond the scope of the poorly housed, DAL adherents repeat that DAL came out of a split within the *Comité des mal-logés* due to the question on the role of the poorly housed in the decision-making process. During an interview, one of the founders of DAL criticized the fact that some collectives rely upon asymmetry between 'poor people' and 'volunteers' or 'activists,' which reproduces a form of dispossession and humiliation: 'There's something awkward about the idea that "families don't mobilise, they don't understand. We're going to explain things to them, raise their consciousness," I find it awkward'.

C. New tensions at the roots of exhaustion

The displacements made by DAL take the form of constant compositions on the full array of engagement regimes between personal or personalized dimensions (home, solicitude) and the public sphere (critique, action). The need to acknowledge emotional engagement without loosing sight of the action paves the way for situations particularly uneasy to be settled and likely to go awry any moment (Doidy, 2004). After the displacements have been made, the new tensions which the activist collectives face play a role in the process of exhaustion and activist disengagement[8]. We will here focus on requisition, an activist gesture enhanced by DAL, which enables us to grasp the tensions actors have to confront[9].

The occupation process is a shaky deed with blurred limits and has always undergone ceaseless, successive 're-inventions' (Pénissat, 2005). The requisitions conducted by DAL are interesting in that they materialise the displacements made by the actors. DAL requisitions highlight the urgent need for the poorly housed to get a home of their own. During

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[8] On how to tackle the various logics of disengagement, see Fillieule, 2005.
[9] The first draft of this work was made in cooperation with Joan Stavo-Debauge in 1999, with the aim of comparing the requisitions conducted by DAL and the occupations carried out by the movement of the unemployed.

certain occupations in other movements, the place is regarded as a greeting place and is used as a forum (Mathieu, 2001; Siméant, 1998). In the movements studied by these authors, undocumented people or prostitutes occupy neutral places (churches) in order to 'de-locate' the conflict. DAL adherents distinguish 'requisitions' from 'occupations' and 'squats' for, during a requisition, the place is not only used as a means to generalise the issue but also as a setting to settle poorly-housed people in, while awaiting for claims for their definitive rehousing. So the place chosen does more than simply receive temporarily struggling collectives, it is occupied so as to be inhabited, sometimes in the medium or long run (from several weeks to several years). In DAL requisitions, two parallel yet somewhat opposite moves occur: a detachment or generalisation move, such as the critique of real estate speculation in the name of civic common good and in reference to the law on requisition of empty housing, at the same time as an attachment to the place through the process of inhabiting it, for instance when people remain there for a long time, make the place comfortable, forge links with neighbours, form daily habits, etc. In the case of church occupations studied by Lilian Mathieu, the individual relationship with housing is regarded as secondary and verges on temporary *accommodement* or resourcefulness. In our case, on the contrary, within the same place, the aims are various and heterogeneous (raise public awareness, settle comfortably in a place, etc). We will here present the tensions the actors face by grasping the difficulty they have in making that pragmatic heterogeneity hold over time.

C.1. Occupation: a public event

Buildings requisitioned by DAL open on the public space and the street, and catch the attention of the passers-by. The buildings loose their neutrality as the bright yellow logo of the association is posted up and various banners are displayed on the walls. The object is to draw the attention of the public to a particular issue. DAL focuses on the people responsible for the situation, by blaming directly the proprietors of empty

buildings. Before the action itself, the activists patiently prepare for it. A requisition action begins with identifying the place to be occupied, which is 'carefully chosen according to an objective and symbolical values' – as in the workers' demonstrations of the 19th century (Perrot, 2001: 552). The activists deem a situation as critical, identify causes, and build up lines of criticism. For these awkward 'practical accomplishments,' the place chosen must facilitate denunciation, enable to establish links to other issues defined as public issues – for instance, an occupied building may belong to the Crédit Lyonnais, a bank that has already been the centre of attention due to another scandal – and give the critique more generality and legitimacy (Cefaï, 1996). Such conditions require prior recording work over weeks during which activists check deed titles, cadastre, mortgages, always being careful not to 'rush decisions' so as not to 'loose face'.

Thus, requisitioned places right from the start are turned to the public space and open to the public and media. Then the way poorly-housed people possess themselves of the place and adapt it so as to be comfortable is often questioned, constrained, checked and even put to a stop in the name of the principles of the collective that identifies threatening tendencies and specific dangers to come. For example, a situation which is very hard for the activists to handle is the way poorly-housed people set up neighbouring relationship that lead to regroupings depending on affinity. When a building situated Rue du Dragon, Paris, was occupied, the occupiers had effectively regrouped on ethnic grounds. 'Black families regrouped with black families, North African families refused to live next to black families,' an activist reported. Of course, such attitude confronts the civic posture of the collective. By the way, the same activist added: 'It's completely opposed to DAL's principles of mix and brotherhood, that is all that we fight for; it should not be forgotten. If we allow a storey to the Blacks, a storey to the people from Maghreb, that won't do the trick. I not only fight for them to get a roof, but also for principles that must be respected'. Personal conveniences related to the home are likely to be stopped by the public dimension or by the

identification of a principle of justice. But, in turn, the public dimension is ceaselessly questioned too.

C.2. A home to live in daily

Occupation not only aims at raising public awareness but also at providing temporary accommodation to poorly-housed families while fighting for their definitive rehousing. Therefore, the building to be occupied is also chosen for its capacity to house people in the medium run. In some cases, the buildings may be right from the time of their construction conceived to receive inhabitants. However, not all the places occupied are immediately suitable to live in over time – office buildings – and some of them are no longer suitable for such use because they have been empty for too long. In such cases, the activists must '*recuperate*' the buildings, turning them into inhabitable places while avoiding to damage them, which would do wrong to the movement and alter the individual relationship with housing. One of the first concerns of the activists is to know whether a place can be '*recuperated*' or not. That is why activists patiently prepare for the occupation of a building, visiting the places. That task is also performed during the occupation itself, that is when poorly-housed people begin to put their belongings into the building. Little by little, the place is subjected to intimate scrutinizing, is more or less successfully adapted by the poorly housed to their needs, and accepts, though not always comfortably, individualised, particular usages and manners. Some people settle in to sleep, have a rest, or relax. The inhabitants make themselves comfortable.

The legitimacy of basic needs for a family or a person to obtain a home may confront advertised common dimensions and lead poorly-housed people, as well as activists in some cases, to question the precedence of political aims. In the same way, poorly-housed families sometimes ask for urgent, personalised help, as early as the moment they settle in the building. They may be families with young children, or poorly-housed people dissatisfied with the flat they have been housed in, who

beg for urgent repairing or even other housing. They urge activists to focus on issues departing from collective action. On such tense occasions, the activists are torn between public engagement, which requires detachment and *desingularisation* (Cardon et al., 1995), and personalised attention to individual situations of distress. From the outset, that tearing apart paves the way for further tensions within the movement itself. On one occasion, over the course of a requisition, while the families were settling and the show-down was growing with the police beginning to expel people, a young activist whose task was to help African families settle took issue with the association's leaders who had remained downstairs to negociate the evacuation of the place with the police and prepare their press release: 'I'm disgusted, exactly! We were three of us up there, upstairs, looking after the families, children, panic-stricken people, crying children, split-up families. We didn't even know if the children were safe down here, and they were about twenty-five down here, around Schwartzenberg and the like[10], discussing strategy'. The young activist, engulfed in real and particular suffering, came to the point of understanding neither the strategic meanders of activist action, nor the filing of cases. To her, at that moment, the poorly housed were not suffering because of housing policies or real estate speculation. The only thing which counted was the urgent needs expressed by the 'crying children'.

C.3. Remaining at home without faltering

Faced with such tensions, the actors make an effort to classify situations so as not to exhaust the movement. The object is to keep in touch with the aims of the *action*. Both the posters advertising demonstrations, whether past or to come, and the placards giving information on the association and mobilisations that are underway (undocumented people, unemployed...), constantly bring the occupiers back to the community they belong to, namely a collective comprising

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[10] Here the activist refers to the key figures who support DAL, including MD Léon Schwartzenberg.

struggling poor people. If having a home is regarded as a good as such, It may also be perceived as a shaky ground for collective action, a place to retreat to in the sense that the subject who looks for peacefulness tends to shy away from the public sphere (Dagognet, 1994: 55). The main problem DAL is faced with is that the mobilisation of the participants weakens over time. Of course, there is the well-known difficulty to have the poorly-housed people remain engaged once their own problems have been overcome. Most of the time, the poorly housed 'forget' the collective and the cause it fights for once they have obtained definitive rehousing[11]. As a former poorly-housed person who is now an activist puts it: 'Well, they've got new housing, they've fought for it for years in some cases, now they can relax. Sometimes they come back to activism after a couple of months has elapsed. However, it's true that very often they completely forget the question of housing because it's no longer their problem and they don't come back'.

However, disengagement from activist activity is not always due to new enjoyment of home comfort. In fact, disengagement sometimes occurs in occupied buildings, when an action doesn't achieve its aims and poorly-housed people have occupied buildings for several months or years without obtaining decent housing. To activists, a requisition is dragging on when the occupiers begin to form habits and live like inhabitants, while loosing their engagement with the actions of the collective. For instance, the occupiers' participation in the actions known as solidarity actions, that is to say more general demonstrations or actions supporting other poorly-housed people. Usually, though the limit remains unclear, the activists perceive it all the same: 'Avron[12] made DAL step back' assessed a long-time activist come from the *mouvement des Autonomes* – autonomous people movement – during a discussion between DAL members comparing requisition actions that had been carried out since the beginning of the 1990s. Another activist added that, to her, the critical watch weakened

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[11] Susana Bleil's contribution to that collective work aptly describes the way of maintaining the solidarities in the political capacity-building process.

[12] The activists are used to giving each building requisitioned the name of the street in which it is situated, here it is the case of Rue d'Avron, 20th district, Paris, where a building was requisitioned at the end of the year 1997.

when the occupiers began to regard the place they occupied as a flat as such, a home of their own, and permanent housing rather than as a temporary place to be occupied. 'In any case, to people, housing is what matters in real life. When housing is no longer temporary, people can't see the point of struggling any more, it's got far away from them'.

To that activist, the lack in activist engagement is similar to a form of withdrawal into oneself. To her, the occupation must be temporary and not *too* comfortable, which means that the occupiers mustn't make themselves *too* comfortable. They should instead consider the building they occupy as a place to stay at for a short time only – that is the short period of collective action, rather than the long one of attachment. DAL is wary of the requisitions that drag on. When an occupation is lasting, the association merely provides emergency services, including finding a shelter for destitute families, and an asymmetry is gradually cropping up in the relationship between the activists and the poorly-housed people, though DAL usually tries to fend off that type of asymmetry. Sometimes, a 'successful' requisition, that is when the occupiers are not expelled by the police, make DAL step back, for when poorly-housed people find a shelter both secure and comfortable, they are likely to gradually devote themselves to their renewed intimacy and cut themselves from public engagement, a concern now far away from them. Then, each requisition plan is given a careful thought by DAL.

C.4. The consequences of pragmatic tensions and activist exhaustion

When activists say that a successful requisition may 'make DAL step back,' they do not put the blame on a particular category of actors, namely the poorest, potential free-riders, which differs from the analyses on the 'urban struggles' mentioned above. Activists rather insist on the exhaustion induced by some situations (here Avron's case). Thus, within a set of conflicting pragmatic requirements, the requisition can be regarded as trying for two reasons: first because the activist aspect of the action is at stake, and second, because exhaustion gradually overcomes the actors

when they make an effort to maintain a composition between a plurality of engagement regimes (Doidy, 2004). The requisitioned place is more than a mere backdrop to activist action, it is raised to the rank of 'active support' and 'quasi-protagonist' (Lussault, 2000: 32). That protagonist is ambiguous inasmuch as it is hard to define it. Politically meaningful, the requisitioned place also appeals to the consideration of the individual relationship with housing. That protagonist is both an open public place with people passing by and a place to live in daily, a home to intimacy and solidarity among relations. Over the course of an occupation, activist activity is tense and unclear. Actors can't fully inhabit the building they occupy, since the place is precarious and sustains public engagement. Symmetrically, however, actors adjust the place to their personal conveniences, make it relatively comfortable, which tends to drive them away from public action. The occupation consists in a set of heterogeneous, warped situations that 'can't be held easily' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991: 58). The evolution of a situation can't be smooth, for the various engagements are ceaselessly questioned. Constant pragmatic tensions weigh heavy on the actors and their engagements, and prove to be difficult to be managed[13]. In fact, those pragmatic tensions make situations uncertain and imply permanent moves between several pragmatic and emotional regimes, which leads to activist exhaustion, not only in the sense of exhaustion of the movement when it slowly dies away, but also in the sense of exhaustion of the occupiers, that is the feeling of exhaustion the occupiers themselves often describe at the end of an occupation. The occupation is an important stage in activist activity and seems to be particularly trying for those who take part in it. Then some of them express the need to go back to the intimacy of their homes and gather their thoughts, safe from the constraints of public action. Exhaustion is marked by the need to gather one's thoughts and go back home, where one retreats from the public sphere. As an activist put it: 'For sure, tiredness, tensions, and so on... it's true I spent ten days, yes, ten

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[13] Some diseases may be related to the fact that someone is plunged 'in a world they can't recognise, with their own self left to indecision in the evanescent and elusive centre of this world' (Dagognet, 1994: 11).

days, away [from the movement], ten days during which I stayed at home'. Having carried out a collective action or conducted a requisition, participants need to give themselves to the retreat they had to fend off over the course of the occupation.

Conclusion

Those forms of exhaustion, both of the movement and activists, are felt and feared by the actors, and still remain difficult to be assessed inasmuch as the theoretical tools used tend to focus on a particular regime of action. The compositions between public regimes (general views on common good and action regime) and private regimes (the individual relationship with housing, familiarity regime) made within DAL would be left out by maintaining right from the start the actors concentrate on one dimension only. Here, rather than insisting on the assessment of the actors as regards the regime of action, which is tackled by the notion of 'selective incentive,' our aim has been to focus on the plurality of engagement regimes and on the efforts made by the activists to maintain that plurality. Without denying the heterogeneity of the trajectories, possibilities, or resources of the actors in 'mobilisations of poor people,' and even considering that heterogeneity as a problem to actors, we have wilfully considered activist activity in its development and completion, through practical situations and problems the actors are faced with, by insisting notably on the temporal dimension of mobilisations. The exhaustion of those mobilisations and their 'precariousness,' are not really due to the precariousness of poorly-housed people, but rather to the difficulty in maintaining a plurality of critical and action regimes over time. That exhaustion is necessarily an exhaustion of the actors too. Mobilisation dynamics are then viewed as 'trying dynamics' in both senses of the word: they are 'trials' with the quality of the activist being at stake – the 'good activist' doesn't *falter*, always keeps in mind the cause to struggle for, and makes themselves available to others, that is he is able to hold the various compositions – and they are definitely trying for the actors themselves.

References