Housing Policy and the State

SOCIOLOGY, POLITICS AND CITIES

Editor: JAMES SIMMIE

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Housing Policy and the State

Allocation, Access and Control

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Editor's Preface

The eruption of conflicts in cities on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1960s has led to dissatisfaction with the urban paradigms of the 1920s and new scholarly attempts to explain the relationships between social and spatial structures. The series 'Sociology, Politics and Cities' is designed to provide a platform for these debates.

The series focuses on alternative theoretical formulations of the social and political factors forming and developing cities. Emphasis is laid not only on single-disciplinary approaches to such understanding but also on attempts to build transdisciplinary ways of theorising about urban settlements. These contain elements of history and economics as well as sociology and politics.

Two types of book are being published in the series: small works containing reviews of existing theoretical formulations or excursions into new ones; and substantial works usually based on original research and combining both theory and evidence in the analysis of various aspects of cities.

The small books contain work on various schools of urban sociology and politics ranging from those based on Weber to those based on Marx. The large books contain analyses of many aspects of cities ranging from slums to ecology and from power to policy.

In addition to the theoretical and empirical analysis of cities the series also focuses on the problems of and prospects for intervention in the development of settlements. In many cases this engages a concern for public policy although examples of such private initiatives as shanty towns are also examined. Policies such as the urban programme, housing, race relations and planning are included in this vein.

Housing Policy and the State: Allocation, Access and Control illustrates a

number of important characteristics of the British contribution to the renaissance of urban sociology and politics.

In the first place it remarks on the growing dissatisfaction with the old paradigms for the study of cities based on the works of the important Chicago School. This leads to the original adoption of an action frame of reference for the study of the relationships between actors in the housing problems found in the inner areas of cities like Birmingham. The rise of the Paris School during the course of the research is also reflected in criticisms and modifications of the original theoretical starting points. Secondly, the book provides an example of one alternative to the traditional British empirical approach in sociological analysis. Instead of the familiar survey a participatory action – research method was employed. The insights into the meaning of situations and problems from the point of view of the actors concerned are discovered as a result of the adoption of this technique. Finally, the book illustrates the growing sense of disenchantment and futility felt by consumers of some of the outputs of the welfare state. Having had a generation of experience with the operation of such policies as comprehensive redevelopment in the name of planning, many people now question the relevance and ability of, for example, local planning bureaucracies to deliver goods on the ground that match the castles in the air of local and central government promises.

In total the book brings readers to a point in the mid-1970s where the social and economic problems of the poorer inhabitants of cities are relatively well documented. It poses the question now facing scholars and policy-makers alike of how best to explain these problems in terms of theory and what to substitute for previous failed policies and inadequate forms of local government. These are questions which will be taken up by other books in the series.

London 1977

JAMES SIMMIE

Acknowledgements

This book derives from research undertaken in Birmingham between 1970 and 1974. The methods adopted mean that the number of contributors who should be acknowledged is especially large. Most of the informants were unaware that they were helping a small research team based at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies to fulfil a project funded by the Social Science Research Council. Broadly speaking, these anonymous and unwitting contributors were of two sorts: the residents of the neighbourhoods in which we worked; and various employees in departments of Birmingham City Council. Our debt to each group is considerable. We hope that some of our work with the groups and organisations trying to represent the interests of 'ordinary' people in the neighbourhoods in some part repays a debt. Regarding the 'managers', we would not like a careless reader to construe the book as an attack on the incompetence of local officials and councillors. To do so would be to 'blame the victim': our concern is that the potential and limitation of local government be recognised and that the efforts of those who labour in large 'faceless' offices with scarce resources and contradictory guidelines be more clearly appreciated. Perhaps if we point out that one of us has now joined their ranks without any sense of contradiction, given our 'findings' reported here, our point will be made.

Some of our aiders and abettors were not anonymous and we would like to put on record our debt to them. During the research John Lambert was employed by the Sparkbrook Association, which allowed him to maintain a part-time appointment to perform his research duties. We are grateful to the Association's Council and Executive for allowing this. The Balsall Health Association, the Lane Neighbourhood Centre, the Midland Area Improvement Housing Association, and

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Joint architect of the whole project was Camilla Lambert, whose full-time involvement was foreshortened by the demands of motherhood. Thereafter hers was a more diffuse but no less considerable influence on the outcome. At the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, the initial project was supported by Professor J. B. Cullingworth. After his leaving the Centre, Professor Gordon Cherry provided valuable support and encouragement. The Social Science Research Council provided funds for a pilot project – 'Ethnic Choice and Preference in Housing' – and for the main project – 'Neighbourhood Associations and Housing Opportunities'.

Secretaries and typists too numerous to mention suffered the tasks of turning too many pages of impossible handwriting into legible typescripts of various kinds culminating in the preparation of this book: we are grateful for the facilities provided by University College Cardiff and the City of Birmingham Polytechnic as well as the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies.

It will be apparent that our debt to the above merits more than the conventional acknowledgement; and by the same token the conventional disclaimer that none should be held responsible for the views expressed in this text but ourselves can hardly be overstressed.