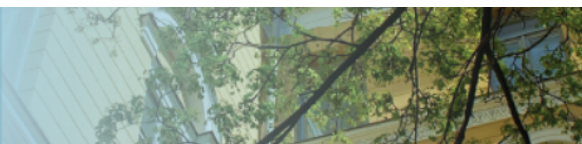*Language and the Scientific Imagination*
The 11th International Conference of ISSEI
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)
28 July – 2 August 2008

Requests for Public Housing: A Contribution to the Study of 'Ordinary Writings' in a Social Policy Context

I

When sociologists discuss the graphic media through which individuals communicate, represent the world and account for their existence, they raise the whole question of the diffusion of reading and writing techniques and its impact on how modern society is organised. Thus, Talcott Parsons uses the spread of writing as a criterion to distinguish between intermediate and traditional societies.[1] Similarly, Max Weber concludes in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* that the administrative apparatus of the modern state could not have been created without the possibilities opened up by writing and record-keeping.[2] Jack Goody's major works on the consequences of literacy are in the same intellectual tradition, although they originated in ethnographic research. They demonstrate the close correlation between on one hand, the development of writing systems, the uses of writing and the spread of writing ability, and on the other the evolution of social organisations.[3] In contrast to this work, 'new literacy studies' approach the topic more prudently.[4] Their professed aim is to use ethnographic micro-studies to illuminate writing practices in a wide variety of social contexts, but without confining the study to so-called traditional societies. Here, literacy does not just signify just a capacity for cognitive reflection, but it also appears as a practice inscribed in daily life.

In this paper, I would like to focus on a writing drama played out on the stage of the French public administration. With the help of two documentary corpuses, I will outline a problematic which tries to bring together the two approaches mentioned above. I will show how ordinary writing practices can be linked to more general social phenomena. The corpuses consist of letters and applications for public housing addressed to the bodies responsible for the HLM (*habitat à loyer modéré* = low rental accommodation). They are therefore part of the safety net put in place by different French social security organisations. Within this vast network of public and semi-public institutions, public housing forms a very precise sub-set, which nevertheless overlaps with other institutions at several points. My paper presents some preliminary observations from research in progress, the purpose being to describe different writing methods appropriate to public organisations, and to understand the role of writing practices in the way these institutions function, especially concerning their relations with the people they deal with. Several similar corpuses could be studied, to accumulate a series of micro-studies which illustrate the complicated network of overlapping and competing institutions which intersect in the lives of ordinary citizens.

My research is based on two corpuses of applications for public housing. The first consists of 533 letters sent to *Habitat et Humanisme-Rhône*, an organisation in Lyon which manages about a thousand public accommodations in the Rhône-Alpes region. In this corpus, 267 letters were signed personally by the applicants, and 265 were written by third parties who were mostly social work professionals or belonged to charitable organisations. They were sent between January 2005 and April 2007 and most of them were rejected (56 were successful, just 11 % of the whole corpus). They

were collected at my own request by a secretary of the association, after this research project had begun, in other words from June 2006 onwards. The second corpus consists of 302 requests for public housing addressed to the Paris Town Hall, and preserved in the housing and accommodation archive. I obtained permission to consult them over two weeks in November 2007. The requests are registered and archived, as they are in all French municipalities, and if they are renewed annually, they are kept until accommodation is allocated to the applicant. Unlike *Habitat et Humanisme*, which does not keep a register of applicants, it includes files which are sometimes 20 years old and they contain documents which the applicants needed or wanted to enclose and which they can consult at any time.

II

After carefully studying the life stories which frequently occur in both corpuses, I isolated several problems, and drew a few conclusions:

1. The first question raised is simply about the reasons why the letters exist. Why do individuals describe all kinds of details about their lives when they make a housing application? Why did they *write* their request? To answer this, we need to set the request letters in a context of events, representations, social relations and practices. This will both help us to understand why they decided to write and to relate the various misfortunes which punctuated their lives, and it will also give us information about the form and content of what they wrote. We need, therefore, to ask what place biographical writing occupied in the practices surrounding the allocation of housing.

Firstly, the letter of application is part of a social configuration composed of different players in the French housing market, specifically in the Ile-de-France and Rhône-Alpes regions. The background to this ordinary writing is the substantial imbalance between offer and demand for public housing, reinforced in large metropolitan areas by rising rents, which makes renting accommodation in the private sector more and more difficult, especially for people on modest incomes. In Paris, for example, about 12,000 accommodations were allocated for 110,000 applications received by the Town Hall in 2006, that is to say 11 %. Furthermore, there is a long waiting period between making an application and eventually finding accommodation: between one and five years for 80% of applicants, according to Paris Town Hall statistics. The writings show that the applicants are well aware that they are virtually competing against all the other applicants: 'I know my case is not the most desperate and I hope it doesn't become so', 'Although I am not a priority, my situation is serious'. The letters are making a bid – the authors must tell a story of suffering to establish the uniqueness of their own 'case',[5] to attract the reader's sympathy and make him forget for a moment about the anonymous mass of other applicants, whose situation is 'perhaps less urgent'. The biographical mode allows the applicants to personalise their requests. The second function of the letter is to short-circuit the 'official' allocation process, which is subject to long delays and, according to the applicants, cannot respond to the urgency of their request and the need for an immediate solution. This frequently features in the letters, especially in the case of longstanding requests in Paris, where the wait for an allocation leads applicants to multiply and intensify their letter-writing activity.

A second ploy is to bypass the existing selection criteria for housing allocation, which presumes that the applicants have some knowledge of them. Writing a letter enables them to present other relevant criteria, especially when the applicants in the present corpus come from quite modest backgrounds, and do not always fit the profile of the 'good tenant' who is generally successful. The 'good tenant' usually enjoys a stable professional situation (with an employment contract of indefinite length), his or her income comes to at least three times the rental, and their family situation is stable and 'normal'.[6] Thus, 72% of the requests received by *Habitat et Humanisme* do not specify the exact level of income, although this is a major criterion for selecting tenants. The applicants adapt their requests in advance to the possibility they will be stigmatised as 'bad tenants', by hiding some elements of their situation. Another way of avoiding this kind of stigma is to denounce the injustices of the allocation criteria, which favour public servants over workers in the private sector, for instance. So the purpose of sending a letter is to give the organisation a biography supporting an argument quite removed from those that generally govern the selection of candidates.

Different ways of bypassing the selection criteria in advance do not spring from individual creativity, but are inspired by contacts with relevant people, like social work professionals dealing with housing problems for the municipalities or other associations, as well as family and friends who are present when the letter is written, who advise the authors on style and argument or encourage them to write about themselves. 'The person I saw advised me to send several letters to many organisations including your own, to see if you had any apartments available in the 17th *arrondissement'*. 'I dare not ask people to write a letter in my place because they don't know what I really feel deep down'. Professionals have an important influence

on the writings, and so do friends, acquaintances or family members who tell the applicant about a vacancy, help to compose the letter and in some cases write it themselves. Here is what a child from Paris wrote:

> I have lived in hotels since I was born./ With the humidity, the cockroaches and so on./ I can't even do my homework because of my little brother he's so little. Only once or twice a week I can. The shower is on the first floor and we are on the third. The toilet is down the corridor. There is no hot water conclusion we can't do anything about it. It's cold. Our neighbour is drunk we can't even play *or he shouts at us. It's my birthday soon and since I was little I have always had* [this phrase is written over a patch of white correcting fluid] my birthday in hotels. Please help us, imagine what it is like in my place. My mother has only got one kidney we live on the 4th floor my mother sometimes has trouble climbing the stairs sometimes she faints.[7]

The proliferation of writing is also encouraged by personnel employed in the allocation process. They present it as a necessary part of the selection procedure, but in fact this is an excuse to distance themselves from the barrage of insistent hard-luck stories by referring them to a higher level. At *Habitat et Humanisme*, for example, the person who mans the office on a weekly basis advises some candidates for housing to send a letter to the director of the association. Allocation statistics show that spontaneous requests are considered very sporadically (2% of allocations in 2005 and

5% in 2006). The decision is thus delegated 'upwards' and the higher official in question can only be contacted in writing.

2. The second stage in understanding the corpus, in my view, is to reconstitute the themes employed by authors in their stories, which shows us the different arguments, which sustain their applications. Five recurrent themes explain the applicant's vulnerable circumstances and demonstrate how life will change with a housing allocation.

The image of a child often appears fundamental in housing applications. Children appear in two forms, as the absent child or the child who makes the application. In the first of these cases, the mother or the father live separately from the child, perhaps because childcare has been entrusted to a former spouse, perhaps as the result of a divorce, perhaps because the child is just living somewhere else or simply hasn't been born yet. The story then focuses on the emotional relationship between parents and children and the ways that inadequate housing arrangements damage this relationship. At the centre of this scenario lies the concern with not appearing a 'good mother' or a 'good father', and with not being able to exercise due authority as a parent. If the applicant cannot have accommodation large enough to house his (or her) children, his (or her) relationship with them will get even worse. Couples often write that they cannot either start or grow a family for lack of sufficient accommodation. The child is too far away, or in some cases too near, as when the applicant is sleeping in the same room as the child, an 'unhealthy' situation for their relationship, or when the place is

so small that the parent cannot enjoy any privacy. Another ploy is to argue that the welfare of the child rather than of the applicant is primarily at stake in the request. 'I am requesting accommodation for my children and myself'. Detailed descriptions of how poor housing affects the welfare, health and above all the education of the child puts that child at the centre of the application, eclipsing the applicant who is not the priority. The priority actually given in Parisian housing allocations to families, and particularly single-parent families, shows that the emphasis on the child is not accidental, but is based on a reasonable hope that if a request promises to drag a child out of a miserable situation it will stand a better chance of success. So a variety of scenarios are described, in which the child does his homework in the kitchen because he has no room of his own, children fall behind at school, children fight because they live on top of each other, children suffer from various illnesses, handicapped children, children harassed by locals, children traumatised by the physical abuse they have endured, children with a promising but uncertain future.

Health setbacks appear constantly in applicants' daily lives. If the applicant or a dependant has a physical handicap recognised by other institutions, this can act as a passport to public housing, especially since the handicapped person's allowance provides a stable income, which enables them to pay the rent. Psychological weaknesses of family members and tiredness felt at different times of day are also mentioned. The narrow staircases of the apartment building seem impossible to climb with a child in one's arms, neighbours or family members are too noisy, people on the street at night interrupt one's sleep, smoke stops the children from breathing – in fact a whole range of factors affect the applicants' heath and prevent them from getting a good rest. Then comes the notion of the 'environment'. Present housing is seen as an

environment hostile to personal development, - an argument which works on the level of health and sanitation, but which also relates to a vague global awareness of factors on which the applicants seize. They tell of bad hygiene, stifling humidity, the lack of light, cockroaches invading the apartment (in some Parisian files this is demonstrated by photos) and their physical impact on the applicants. Alcoholism is absent from the story when written by the applicants themselves, but it appears systematically in letters written by professionals, who meticulously set out the aetiology of addiction, insisting on the close correlation between the standard of accommodation and the state of one's health. Similarly, medical diagnoses imply that patients' health problems can only be resolved by the allocation of housing.

A third theme is the drama of lodging with other people. Letters make a great effort to show that this situation, although providing relatively stable accommodation, erodes social ties of family or friendship. Cohabitation with others might have been originally offered 'to help out', but applicants find themselves in a situation full of friction, there is bad feeling because help is hard to accept, accompanied by feelings of obligation, guilt and embarrassment. Increased intimacy, an ambiguous relationship with one's hosts, and the small size of apartments create a tense environment which applicants find it hard to tolerate. For some applicants, returning to their parents' home seems demeaning, because it often happens after a period of independence which has been cut short by a painful or even violent separation from a spouse, or by eviction from a former apartment.

The fourth key idea in the letters is that of beginning a new life. They develop an abstract notion that the life they have lived, now live and will live in the future

requires a quite fundamental change. The life story reflects disappointment about one's past, one's present existence and one's future prospects, even if this is not readily visible in accounts of their daily life. In the first place, there is the intangible idea that they have been condemned to an existence they did not wish for, which surfaces as a general malaise present in many mundane details. In communicating their hardship, it is difficult to write their biography and their 'projects' take on a significant role. Applicants rapidly pass over their previous life and all its sufferings, attributed to an unlucky destiny. One applicant uses the phrase 'my path strewn with thorns'. In these brief sketches of fragile lives, a few past events are stressed to show how devastating their consequences were and how they ruined a promising future they are usually referred to as 'accidents of life'. The more or less failed life story of the applicant is thus used in his favour to argue the need to 'turn over a new leaf'.

The fifth theme is the embarrassment about declaring one's income and one's insecure job situation. Both the Lyonnais and Parisian sources reveal the applicants' fragile financial and professional positions. Some are ashamed to reveal their income, always too low, and they make much of their serious intention to look for work. Letters also mention the idea of 're-integration' into society, no doubt suggested by social workers in the places where the applicants live (20% in Lyon, 17% in Paris followed their advice). 'Without housing I would be nothing and I would have trouble finding a job'. To prove their genuine wish to find work once they are housed, applicants often enclose their *curriculum vitae* in their letter. In fact, applicants find themselves in an impossible situation, because financial stability and a certain level of financial resources are the main selection criteria. They are hesitant about discussing their income because they are afraid that an official will read between the lines and

decide that they are bad tenants who do not pay their rent regularly. Applicants have their own criteria for access to housing: for them, being out of regular work and having no resources ought to be an argument in their favour. But the housing allocation system is not conceived that way.

3. A third problem is that of the other documents to which the application letters refer. There are attached documents, absent from my corpus, subcutaneous writing practices which interlock with other institutions. Both corpuses show that requests for public housing are closely linked not just to other written applications addressed to other institutions, but also to a whole range of writing by professionals involved in the process.

Applicants add various certificates and statements referring to their correspondence with institutions like the Family Allowance Fund, ANPE (Agence National Pour l'Emploi), the Ministry of Economics and Finance, commissions for the handicapped, hospitals, doctors, social workers, the courts, the police and so on. Compiling a dossier for the housing authorities forces them to multiply these written contacts if they have not already done so. If they ticked the box 'Are you expecting a child?', they need a certificate of pregnancy from a doctor. If violence has occurred between cohabiting individuals, this must be confirmed by evidence of an official complaint to the police. Other professional writings have to be added to the application. The medical certificate is a good example. Some doctors describe the applicant's state of health in neutral terms, while others explicitly link their state of health to poor accommodation and support a housing allocation. Other professionals lend credibility to an application. Thus social

workers describe the candidate's relative stability, his history as a tenant, and imagine the impact that a housing allocation will have on his life, human resources offices depict a serious and reliable employee, friends and relatives confirm the applicant is living with other people and sometimes say that relocation is an urgent need. A whole theatre of ordinary writings is mobilised around the applicant and his request.

4. If we take 'ordinary writings' to mean both writing which has no literary ambition, and the writing of 'ordinary people', we confront a classic sociological problem. How does an individual's social position influence his or her writing ability, as well as the frequency and the way in which they write? My two corpuses can suggest only approximate answers. For historical reasons, public housing is one branch of social security which attracts requests predominantly from the lower classes, and this has been accentuated by recent changes in the housing available.[8] Obviously, the vast majority of applications derive from insecure and needy personal circumstances. But if we look more closely, we discover that some applicants are from relatively comfortable social backgrounds: this is true for 7% of applicants in Paris. Out of 30 files from managerial staff analysed, 12 contain a letter (of course it would be dangerous to draw firm conclusions from such a small number). Their stories, perhaps more sophisticated than the rest, betray the same worries about the future of their children, the same fear of finding oneself without anything to fall back on and losing social status, the same events which have upset their plans. They describe children whose psychological state is threatened, who are unable to study and so will not qualify for entry to good schools, an undesirable neighbourhood which is a brake on

upward social mobility, expenses which never stop increasing, a painful

separation from a spouse, the attrition of ties with family and friends, and finally

the same tale of lodging with other people. Social status does not necessarily

reduce the feeling of being caught up in circumstances out of one's control. The

figure of the child shows how the sense of being blocked and obstructed is shared

across the letters. There is hardly any discernable class difference in the effort to

provide assurances and present oneself as a 'good tenant', to find strategies to

establish an intimacy with the reader and to engage the other's sympathy.

III

My conclusion will be brief. The two corpuses I have presented illuminate a scenario

of ordinary writings, which is sufficiently interesting to merit special attention. I argue

that if we are interested in how writing is and has been practised and disseminated, we

should look closely at what happens in the daily lives of people who have been

dependent on an institution, whether or not this has been historically linked to

political organisations like the modern State. Public housing, which developed in

France in the 19th century, provides an example of how, historically, institutions have

been established to offer solutions to social conflicts, in this case between owners and

tenants, and their operation is closely linked to the practice of writing. The

management of this social problem, which involves finding accommodation for

underprivileged groups, generates writing from applicants who wish to assert their

eligibility for public housing. The historic function of public housing is to provide for

the lower classes, whose insecurity, ill health and the upheavals experienced by their

children make it urgent to re-house them. As a result, their requests depict precarious

existences eager for some security, and they may pass over in silence the question of

income and resources. So the institution encourages applicants to give written testimony of the disorder of their lives, while creating *ipso facto* alternative channels, writings which try to bypass and deflect some normative expectations. This writing is a space in which power relationships operate and different strategies confront each other. We should pay special attention to the ordinary writings which form the sediment of this relationship, and which are lying dormant in obscure administrative archives.

[Translated by Martyn Lyons]

Axel Pohn-Weidinger

University of Paris-8

---

[1] Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and comparative perspectives*, Englewood Cliffs NJ (Prentice Hall), 1966.

[2] Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, Tübingen (JCB Mohr), 1980.

[3] Jack Goody and Ian Watts, 'The consequences of literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5, 1963, pp. 304-45; and his *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge (CUP), 1986 among others.

[4] Brian Street, *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge (CUP), 1993.

[5] Michel Foucault*, Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth UK(Penguin), 1979.

[6] See e.g. Hervé Vieillard Baron, 'Les attributions de logement sociaux: des contraintes techniques au bricolage local', in Nicole Haumont & Jean-Pierre Lévy, eds., *La ville éclatée: quartiers et peuplement*, Paris (L'Harmattan), 1998, pp.175-90.

[7] Consult the original French for the full flavour of the spelling and grammatical errors.

[8] Jean-Paul Flamand, *Loger le peuple: essai sur l'histoire du logement social*, Paris (La Découverte), 1989; Annick Tanter & Jean-Claude Toubon, 'Vingt ans de politique française du logement social', *Regards sur l'actualité*, sept-oct 1995, pp. 30-50.