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PART TITLE III: POLICY ISSUES

017 Chapter**09**

Taking Discourse Seriously for Underpinning Changing

Regulatory Frameworks

The Case of social rental housing in Flanders

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Introduction – words, just words

PROBLEMS: residualisation, marginalisation, ghettoization, concentrated poverty, asocial behaviour, social ghetto's, poverty ghettos, poverty neighbourhoods, warehouses, barracks...

SOLUTION: social mix.

STRATEGIES: sale, demolition, changing legislation & regulation.

This selection of 'words' or 'ideas' are frequently appearing in popular texts as well as in housing policy papers and academic literature. Terms like 'ghetto', 'asocial

behaviour', 'social mix' etc. are ideas that impact the policy-making process. According to Stoeger (2013), analysing the impact of the term 'social exclusion' in Austria, the impact can be understood in at least three ways.

First, ideas can serve as 'cognitive maps' that guide the design of policies over longer period of time. It is like a 'policy paradigm'. According to Stoeger this can be defined as a cognitive (and normative) framework which, besides specifying the types of policy measures and instruments, fundamentally shapes the perception of a problem that has to be solved – e.g. concentrated poverty in social housing - and the objectives of public policy making.

Second, ideas can be understood as a 'blueprint' that provide policy-makers with a concise model for policy reform. Following Béland (2007), Stoeger argues that ideas can offer a coherent understanding of actors' interests, institutional opportunities (and constraints) and the economic pressures, where through they help actors to coordinate their efforts and build coalitions.

Thirdly, ideas can be effectively used as 'tools' or 'weapons' in (political) struggles. According to Schmidt (2010) ideas (words) can be understood as political discourses that help actors to convince other actors, the public or the media that a particular (and perhaps) unpopular reform option is urgently required. This implies, still according to Stoeger, that actors have the ability of using discourse (or 'storylines') strategically to impose their particular perception on others. This perception can be based on sound empirical evidence, but sometimes this is not, since, as Sahlin (1996), argues with respect to social housing that *'the public definition of housing problems is partly independent of what residents think'*.

In this chapter we unravel how (popular) discourses have influenced the policies and legislation on social housing and what the underlying historical and contextual factors were that have influenced the formation of such a strong discourse that was able to influence policy. Until the early 1990s, complaints on the role and functioning of social rental housing in Flanders had the following features. In general they were nothing more than a relative unproblematic narrative in the margins, which was absorbed into everyday life practices. The problematisation of the sector came about during the 1990s and was influenced by the large influx of poor people and migrants into social houses. Thus, what was a low-scale debate or a sudden upsurge at a higher scale became a highly politicised discourse leading to controversial legislation and regulations, which worried international organisations. E.g. the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (7/3/2008) rose in its report on Belgium critical concerns with regards to the adapted Flemish housing legislation, the ‘Flemish Housing Code’ (15/12/2006). More specifically the language requirement (aspirant social housing tenants have to speak, or commit to learn, Dutch) was questioned and the Committee urged the Belgian State to *‘ensure that linguistic requirements do not lead to indirect discrimination affecting both citizens and non-citizens who do not speak Dutch, on grounds of their national or ethnic origin, thus impairing their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, in particular their housing rights’* (UN-CERD 2008:4).

Also Thomas Hammerberg (2009) in his report to the Council of Europe showed concern, fearing that *‘the obligatory language requirements for accessing municipal services may stigmatise persons whose mother tongue is not Dutch and jeopardise efforts to foster tolerant communities with respect to diversity’*.

The fear for possible racial discrimination wasn't only formulated on the international level; already during the preparations of the 2006 decree a lot of protest was heard. Voices of concern resonated in the media from institutions involved in human rights protection (in the broadest sense) to academics (Blommaert, 2005; De Witte, 2005; Delruelle & Torfs, 2005; Liga voor de rechten van de mens, 2005; RISO Antwerpen, Team Hoogbouw, 2005; Vlaamse Huurdersbonden, 2005; VOB, 2006; Animotto, 2008).

The 'language element' wasn't the only concern. The introduction of a probation clause, which granted the social housing institutions the possibility to terminate a contract with those tenants who do not fulfil their obligations or are troublesome within or after a 2 year period, was also contested since it makes the social housing company party and judge at the same time.

Both elements, the language clause and the probation period, and precisely the fundamental critique on them made the Constitutional Court rule that the decree had to be modified on the mentioned issues. Consequently the Flemish Government rephrased parts of the decree, altering the 'probation period' to a 'training opportunity' and the insufficient knowledge of Dutch could no longer result in being evicted or rejected as tenant but could still be penalised.

Despite the rulings of the court, over the course of the next years the underlying presuppositions were enforced in other pieces of legislation of which the 'Social Rental decision' of October 12, 2007 (and the changes since then) is exemplar. Again, the Flemish government rephrased in a positive tone the rules they intended to imply: the language requirement was being described as an opportunity to empower the tenants, as it would enhance communication and engagement with the institutions. Additionally

it was stressed that it would enhance the safety and liveability of the complexes, because for example in emergencies people could communicate efficiently (Vlaamse Overheid 2008:7). Furthermore it was argued that in order to increase the 'liveability' of social rental estates '*exceptional measures*' were justified, such as the refusal to allocate a dwelling if that would influence the liveability of the estate. The discretionary power to make this sort of interpretations was pushed to the local government, e.g. in Antwerp the local regulation introduced a threshold on the number of allocations to homeless persons (Meeus & De Decker, 2013). Another strategy to counter the further residualisation of the social housing sector is the promotion of social mix through the increase of the level of maximum income of the beneficiaries. In this way the governments hope to attract more middle income families in the sector.

Some of these arguments, as well as the implicit meanings behind them, are also present in the Decree on Land and Building Policy, voted on 27th of March 2009. This Decree is as controversial as the aforementioned change and execution of the Housing Code. Two elements are important. A first one is the 're-formulation' of the Housing code's social mix goal. The construction of new social housing in municipalities that already have a share of 9 per cent of more is suspended in order to avoid a further concentration. Secondly, in order to avoid that large numbers of poor(urban) inhabitants move to the new (non-urban) social rental estates, the government gives priority to households with local ties, a measure that in the meantime is also introduced in the social rental legislation). This 'Living in Your Own Region' has in the meantime been quashed by the Court of Justice of the European Union (Judgment of 8 May 2013 in Joined Cases C-197/11 & C-203/11 Libert and Others). Soon after the approval of the decree on Land and Building, a big public controversy unfolded: important

stakeholders, the private developers to be more precise, were extremely hostile as the decree obliged that developments of a large number of dwellings had to preserve 20 per cent of the units for social housing¹. Numerous politicians backed up the building federation's protest of the decree. And during a debate on the national radio the Flemish minister of housing emphasized that he understood the concerns of the developers, referring to social tenants as 'the Flodder family'. This pejorative notion to refer to social tenants comes from a Dutch movie, released in 1986. It tells the story of an anti-social marginal family that is relocated from their deprived neighbourhood to a luxurious villa in a posh neighbourhood. The use of this movie, which seriously exaggerates all possible clichés of social tenants and the reaction of the elite neighbours, is therefore a painful reflection against the new decree.

The above illustrates how, explaining the 20 per cent reserved for social housing from a concern for the poor, the Flemish government uses a public discourse, a 'sermon' (Bemelmans-Videc et al, 2003) in such a way that it looks very social while the controversy that arises indicates that there is more to it than meets the eye. The *aim* of this chapter is to unravel the hidden reasons that fostered the discourse, and additionally to deal with their consequences, being a decrease of affordable social rental housing in the cities (if the mentioned laws are executed within the letter of the law). In what follows, we will explain how discourses on social housing were used by different actors to achieve specific goals. An how, after a period when housing was high on the political agenda, the main discussions on social rental housing shifted to local settings and almost disappeared from the national plan. How they suddenly reappeared on the Flemish regional scale at the beginning of the nineties and affected the legislation, because of the popularity of the apparent coherence of the discourse

and its rising popularity among influential people (see e.g. Schmidt 2002).

We first dismantle and analyse the discourse on social rental housing for which we build on both Deleuzian ideas and concepts and Foucault's approaches of discourse analysis. This knowledge can help to elucidate, in a third part of the paper, how the discourse on social housing became a highly politicised story. Both the theoretical frame and the analysis will be paralleled by and interwoven with the chronicle of social rental housing in Flanders/Belgium in an intermediary. All of this will finally enable us to draw some concluding remarks and to unveil the power of the social rental housing discourse in Flanders.

Theoretical Frame

Discourse analysis emerged during the late 1960s as a practice, which was influenced by several disciplines (Van Dijk 1988:17). Since then, discourse analysis has become commonly used in many social science domains. Because of its broad application, numerous definitions of discourse analysis can be found. We start on the basis of Hajer's (1995; 2008) conceptualisation. For him discourse is 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations through which meaning is allocated to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduces in an identifiable set of practices' (Hajer and Uitermark 2008:3). A discursive event has, according to Fairclough (1992) three dimensions: discourse as a piece of text, discourse as discursive practice and discourse as social practice. Fairclough's and Hajer's approaches to discourse analysis, which integrate both discursive and social practices (Macleod 2002) lead us on to Foucault's conceptualisation of discursive practices.

In 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' (1972) Foucault shows that "discourses", in the

form in which they can be heard or read, are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and words: an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words'. He argues that the task we should set for ourselves 'consists of not - of no longer treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. Thus, through the use of language, meaning is attached to social phenomena, but these phenomena are not merely being described, since through the discourse, significant meanings are attached to them. Because of this, discourse also reproduces the social phenomena it is 'talking about' or paves the way for changes. Precisely this element will be significant when discussing the position of the social tenants.

When we are cautious about the discourses present in a society, we are able to understand the relationships between the actors and the *regimes of truth* that are produced. Every society has its own regimes of truth: norms, values and discourses that are considered to be the legitimate ones, and which organise and normalise society. These are articulated by those who are regarded as being authorised to do so. Thus, discourse is able to (re)produce power relationships. Deleuze (2004 (1988):154-55) also stresses that language and the way it is used is much more than some sort of coding used to communicate, it is '*...a political affair before it is an affair for linguistics;...*'. Since often, as Blommaert (2007) writes, language and the messages they contain, include a series of evaluations (e.g. the Flodders are bad neighbours). And when articulated in the public sphere by people with authority like members of parliament, (former) ministers, mayors or university professors, they contain an appeal to essential truthfulness (Blommaert 2007:52).

Additionally Deleuze (2004 (1988):229-55) brings to our attention that ‘macro-societal’ ideas, concepts, norms, etc. are not only present on the macro-level level, but also on the lower everyday life level. And it is precisely because they interact that power and control can be exercised. Or in Deleuze’s words: ‘...*but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics*’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004 (1988):235). In this paper we try to understand where and how these relations between both levels have been established.

Deleuze (1980) stresses that a discourse should not be analysed through deconstructing merely the linguistic propositions, but that it needs to be placed within its contexts. What follows is grounded in the knowledge that by working from a rigidly framed definition of discourse analysis will not be useful. Instead discourse analysis is approached as a way to understand why people are talking (or acting) about certain matters in a specific way. What is their motivation for doing so, are there hidden assumptions that influence their thinking, which are then reflected in their speech? Discourse analysis is used to investigate if dominant norms and values are dispersed within the actions, and within the habitus of certain groups, even if these norms are in fact oppressing them.

We partly follow Macleod (2002:21) who emphasis that a discourse is more than mere text; it is also the gestures that accompany it, or it can be the act that is a consequence of it (consider the actual increase of income levels for social tenants, which is the translation of the societal discourse that tries to sell to people that ‘mix is the max’, (De Decker 2005). Accordingly, we strongly adhere to Foucault’s notion that a discourse is ‘a practice that systematically forms the object of which it speaks’. Additionally Foucault points to the unspoken: ‘The manifest discourse, therefore, is

really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say...’ (Foucault 1977). Accordingly, it is also important to analyse these hidden messages, which might actually tell us more than the spoken word.

Finally Schmidt (2010) brings to our attention that paying attention to the interactive process of discourse, thus trying to understand who said what to whom and where, is an important factor to help to get an insight in the dynamic processes of institutional change. I can help us to see where ‘*discursive coalitions*’ are formed and how these coalitions can push legislation and policy. These ideas and thoughts that are brought together in the discursive practice do not appear from nothing, they are grounded in the society and the social changes and crisis’s it is confronted with. In what follows we will give a brief sketch of the context in which the anti-social discourse, that pushed the abovementioned pieces of legislation, was able to emerge.

Social rental housing in context

In Flanders, only a very small share of the housing stock can be considered as social rental housing. This follows from a longstanding and stable policy option to solve housing problems by stimulating the homeownership of a single family dwelling preferably outside the (industrial) cities (De Decker, 2011). As a consequence a large majority of Flemish households own their dwelling. Conversely, only a small 6 per cent of Flemish households rent a dwelling provided by a social housing company, while the Western European (EU15) average fluctuates around 11 per cent (figures for 2001-2002). Neighbouring countries such as France (18 per cent), Germany (15 per cent) and The Netherlands (38 per cent) have percentages considerably in excess of the average (Edgar et al, 2002).

Important here is the historical continuity of the housing policy choices (De Decker et al, 2009). The policy started with the 1889 Housing Law. This law, born out of fear for the consequences of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation has industrialising urban areas from the start (1880-1920) put in place *'not only most of the institutional components of this policy developed, but also most of the perceptions commonly associated with it'* (Mougenot 1988:532). From the beginning a negative discourse emerged around social rental housing. Mougenot (1988:546) explains that social tenants and collective housing solutions were already a century ago regarded as inferior and consequently *'limited rights were associated with the social and moral unworthiness of the inhabitants'*. The first social housing agencies were established shortly after 1900, and although generally represented as being successful, little effect was observed on the field and inhabitants had difficulties identifying themselves with *'these mass-produced small homes which the local building societies are now able to build'* (Mougenot 1988:545). In the public discourse tenants were perceived as truly destitute, and should be thankful for the possibilities created by the new policy. Consequently *'the political power was, at the same time, confirming in a naturally obvious manner their inability to belong to the category of real-estate owners. Proletarians, without any social recognition, have only duties towards the housing societies (even today these duties can be described as feudal); the inhabitants of these houses cannot be differentiated or identified in any way. This negative attribute, this inability to be anyone else other someone 'receiving aid', is materially visible in the very existence of the social housing estates with compare negatively with the vast variety of individual housing'* (Mougenot 1988:545).

So, with roots in the development of the 1889 law, by the end of the First World War,

the Belgian 'housing model' (Mougenot's words) is established around the following features:

- a private rental sector with hardly any state intervention and landlords who can independently set their rents and easily terminate contracts, consequently creating an unattractive sector;
- a small and visible and thus 'stigmatisable' social rental sector, and in the long run an unattractive sector;
- wide support for homeownership based on (1) household initiative (self-promotion and self-construction), (2) single family housing, (3) with a garden and (4) located outside the cities.

Being unpopular from the start, social renting would remain marginal. All successful later housing laws would promote and stimulate homeownership, using a wide range of techniques (grants, cheap loans, social purchase dwellings; social plots of land, tax exemptions...), creating an obsession of the federal and regional governments with homeownership and individualised provision.

The ever limited budget that was allocated to the social rental housing sector and the very narrow sighted and unimaginative vision on the subject made that, very soon, boring (high-rise) estates were constructed and equally uninspiring small scale social neighbourhoods in the suburban zones. Consequently architecturally homogeneous small extensions of existing village cores were developed all over Flanders/Belgium. Around these, the typical Flemish sprawl spread further (De Decker, 2011). In almost every corner of the region, cities, towns and villages have their Chicago building(s) (Antwerp, Genk), their Dallas estate (Lokeren), their Formosa (Wetteren) or Korea

(Ieper); or - as in Aalst - their 'sex blocks' (figure 1), where the people who did not have the resources to build or buy their own dwelling were housed and where the local neighbourhood residents had funny stories about, but which were not regarded as problematic. It is only around 1990 that we see the tone of the discourse change.

The residual position of social rental housing within housing policy did not really change the last few decades. But this structural marginal share of social rental housing was generally not perceived as social or policy problem as long as homeownership rates rose fast enough and the construction of new private dwellings was defined as successful. But this changes when the economic crisis of the late 1970s, early 1980s hits society. Unemployment skyrocketed as did poverty, and the first wave of Asylum seekers enter the country. This had major consequences for the housing market in general – although the existence of a housing crisis was never officially accepted (De Decker, 2002) - and management of social rental housing in particular. A first consequence is the strong increase of the pressure on the waiting lists. Although this is not documented at that time the impression pumped up – and stayed until today - that the waiting list become longer and that less people could enter a social rental dwelling, what in turn augmented the pressure on the even problematic private sector (De Decker, 2001). The second consequence follows from the first and considers an ongoing lamenting as well in the public as the political sphere about the shortage of social rental dwellings, including 'incomprehension' with respect to the small market share of social rental housing given the 'huge' amounts of money put in it. So at different occasions in parliament, the minister and the social housing companies were reprimanded for the weak delivery.

A third consequence of the crisis was a dramatic and structural change of the

composition of the population. This can be caught with two words: impoverishment and colorization, as increasingly poor people and immigrants entered social housing. For the social housing companies this implied not only a decrease of rental incomes and thus a thread for the financial liveability of the sector, but also the entrance of poor immigrants with social problems (e.g. unemployed) and people with personal problems (e.g. ex-psychiatric patients, Verstraete et al, 2013) what led to the perception of rising liveability problems following lifestyle conflicts (Cools, 2003, 2004). The importance of this change of the composition of the population for the discourse to come cannot be underestimated. For the social housing companies, it was very clear: the underinvestment in social housing and especially the increase of poor and alien tenants made it more difficult to manage the housing stock.

Taken together, the fertile ground for discourses that start blaming the disadvantaged populations for the 'assumed' failure of social housing as it stood at the dawn of the 1990s can be summarized as follows: On the one hand an image of a badly performing sector came to the public, while on the other hand more and more poor and alien people came into the social housing sector erasing its the financial stability. These 'structuring' contextual features wherein social housing companies had to work would remain feeding and even reinforcing the discourse in the years to come since the tenants became even poorer, the share of aliens higher and the waiting list longer. Above that the financing of the social housing system would remain inefficient and as time passed by also quality issue in general and more specifically that of high-rise estates would become a new problem. This all left the head players in the social rental housing field, be it the managers, the tenants and the boards, very frustrated and feeling inferior. And as a consequence a seemingly rational, seemingly factual and

justified demand for investment and commitment changed to become demagogic and a not documented discourse that would finally lead to changes in legislation and regulation, and the demolition of a first estate (Rabot towers in Ghent, see figure 2).

The up scaling of the local skirmishes

The range of local discourses on social housing hardly extended the local neighbourhood setting and the immediate environment but since the estates and the related local gossip were spread out over the country, almost everyone could easily quote a story or two about some deviant social renters in their hometown. In the early nineties, local discourses - fostered by strategic gatekeepers like mayors and members of parliament, combining parliamentary work with local activities (e.g. being in the board of a local housing company) - started to reach the national media.

From inclusive to exclusionary

At the end of the 1980s the discourse on social rental housing started to jump scales and since then underwent major changes. At first the discourse promoted inclusion, later the discourses became exclusionary.

The discourse changed from promoting (larger shares of) social rental dwellings for poor and/or foreign people to advocating lowering intake of certain categories of people. The 'labelling' of certain categories changed during the time, depending on (a) who was the minister and (b) who spoke out. With the risk to simplify, speakers from left wing political parties or organisation used a more euphemistic phrasing than right wing parties, who were more direct in blaming the 'offenders' (the poor and vulnerable tenants). But both sides very quickly agreed on the causes and solutions. These contemplations and the fear to get convicted for racism and discrimination stimulated

the use of other 'concepts' and 'words' to describe the problems. 'Migrants', 'low income people', 'poor people', 'anti-social people', 'social frauds', 'addicts' became largely interchangeable terms, depending on who was speaking and to whom one was speaking.

What people say at home, or at the bar in a pub, or discuss within an organisation, even a local social housing association, is not a discourse. In order to be successful - this is e.g. provoking a change in legislation or the rejection to build new estates - it has to be systematic and coherent, it should be pronounced by people appealing to essential truthfulness, link local with central level and reach the public through mass media. It should be, as Blommaert & Verschueren (1998) argue, '*quotable*'. Or as we have elaborated earlier using argumentations of Foucault, Deleuze and Blommaert, it – politics - happen on both a macro and micro level of society and discourses (re)create power relations.

Here we cannot fully elaborate on every quote of a politician or journal article. We want to stress that although a multitude of actors (politicians, academics...) and institutions (media, NGO's, human right organisations,...) all had and still have their say in the debate, it are people active in the social housing sector that have the actual steering capacity. Presidents and managers of social housing companies and their umbrella organisation VVH² often have a very direct impact on the agency's policies. This is significant as it is often politicians who hold a chair in the board of these agencies. As we will conclude further, they eventually jeopardised their own organisations. This also illustrates, following Deleuze's argument, how the link between, or jump from the everyday practice to the national scale is made. People who cumulate jobs and functions at different levels are in a prime position to take certain

narratives to a higher level. Let us look at e.g. C. Decaluwé, when writing governor of the province of Western Flanders. Before he became Flemish Member of Parliament for the CD&V (Christian Democratic party) he was working at the research unit of the Christian labour union ACW from 1987 to 1995. Besides numerous other functions, he held board positions in the following housing associations: ‘Domus Flandria’³ (1991-1995), ‘Elk zijn huis’⁴ (1993-current) and even in the umbrella organisation VHM (1989-1999) and the VLM⁵. Thus, Decaluwé isn’t only politician on two scales (he was also a member of the municipality council of Kortrijk), he is also a ‘social landlord’ on two scales and part of the top of the biggest social movement in Flanders. Like Decaluwé, many others can be named⁶.

The second point we want to make is about the important role played by the media, which are full of ‘illustrations’ (see e.g. figure 3), sound bites, quotes from prominent persons and reportages following incidents⁷. Let us consider the infamous ‘*jar of chocolate paste*’ incident. The high-rise estate on the left bank of the Schelde in Antwerp was already suffering from a bad reputation for a while. On 17 March 1997 the local newspaper reported an incident about a glass jar that was thrown from a high floor of the ‘Chicago building’⁸. The article titled ‘*Are our children inferior?*’ and the tone of the article went from a general feeling of unsafety amongst the inhabitants because of objects that are thrown (even a shopping hamper was mentioned) to a feeling of unsafety because of youngsters who are hanging around... ‘*not often with good intentions*’⁹. The next day an article in the same newspaper titled ‘*Life in the Chicago block is like hell*’. In this account the mother of the girl on who the jar fell spoke out: ‘*It is not a migrant’s problem. The majority behaves, it is those ten out of 200 families that don’t show good manners and throw their stuff around, because they*

are too lazy to walk to the garbage bin'.

One day later the same newspaper could already publish a reaction of Leo Peeters, then the housing minister. Although he was not a supporter of levering up the minimum income (as an eligibility criteria), he did state that a social mix might be a future solution for 'problematic social housing estates' (in the broadest sense), while in the meantime he emphasised that priority should be given to interventions that enhance the liveability of these neighbourhoods.

When analysing this course of events several elements deserves attention. First of all we see that a local incident, caught by local media was able to ignite and upsurge 'common people's stories' and reshape them into highly public discourses with effect on a political scale. A second, and very important observation, is the change in the tone of the press coverage. From a non-coloured, non-racial, but nevertheless dangerous incident to a racially related discourse with a more 'aggressive' tone, as it went from the throwing of an object (which could have been done by anyone) to the expression of concern that certain families were responsible for the problems, explicitly emphasising that *'the majority is ok, but ...'*

Let us now reflect back upon Foucault's remark about 'the unspoken': an equally amount of information is inferable from that which is not explicitly stated (Foucault, 1977). Additionally let us also recall the fear for penalisation when caught making racist remarks. It then becomes clear that the messages that filters through to the readers of the newspaper and the general public as a whole was that of coloured people making trouble in social housing estates.

Although these sorts of statements are quite provocative and politically incorrect they

are in line with reality. But as stressed before it is not quite enough to have someone, most often a very local, middle-of-the-road, person telling scuttlebutts to speak of a discourse. It is only when people with authority rephrase these ideas, and when they can stay in society in a more lasting way that they can become a discourse and start influencing the things they speak about (see Foucault, Deleuze, Mcleod and Blommaert). It is precisely this that we will turn to now.

One condition to make a discourse successful is that it reaches the media in a more or less permanent way. As said, to be picked up it has to be quotable. This means that it has - in an over-mediatised society - to be either provocative or pronounced by a person with an important/relevant function and/or reputation; or all at once. This certainly was the case as one of the persons that lit the fire, Bob Cools, was (and when writing still is) a conspicuous, provocative, literate and catchy, communicable personality, and at the time he entered the debate, the socialist was in his second term mayor of Flanders' largest city Antwerp. Earlier he was alderman of spatial planning. He was a member of the managerial boards of Sabena (the national airline company) and the NMBS (the railway company) for the socialist party. He also was a member of parliament and of the central bureau of his political party. Given the fact that Cools was/is a well-known and respected person, who also wrote a book on the urban problems¹⁰ (Cools, 1993), and was the longstanding chairman of an Antwerp (socialist) social housing company (Onze Woning), made him, in combination with a provocative way of speaking - often seeking controversy - a very popular person for the media.

It was Cools who connected the rise of the Vlaams Blok, the extreme right party, with migrants in social housing. In a 1990 interview he made a plea for the concentration of

migrants, since, in his opinion, the dispersal of migrants, through the allocation processes of social rental housing led to an uncontrollable spread, dispersing xenophobic and racist feelings throughout the population.

‘If I put one Moroccan in a social flat, the whole building will vote for the Vlaams Blok’ (De Standaard¹¹, 9 June 1990)

Later he recalled that the concentration of migrants in social flats - up to 55 per cent in his company - gave a lot of trouble with respect to living together. And he suggested a threshold (De Morgen, 29 May 1997), basically implying that he replaced his concentration solution by a pro mix solution, which he would advocate by pleading to open up social housing to middle income groups¹². In his PhD he researched the possibility of an allocation strategy based on lifestyles (Cools, 2004), since he claims to understand why people concentrate

‘There are reasons for: social, religious, medical, ethnical, and even cooking and dining cultures’ (Het Nieuwsblad, 15 maart 1998).

In 2003 Cools emphasised, in the monthly publication of the VHM, that problems of cohabitation in social housing estates were induced by the differences in customs and habits of the inhabitants (Cools, 2003, p. 16), as such again implicitly pleading for some sort of ‘possible voluntary segregation’.

Another booster was Achiel Smets, yearlong chairman of another Antwerp social housing company (De Goede Woning, of Catholic signature), former Member of Parliament for the Christian Democrats (left wing), and member of the Antwerp council. He fluttered the doves under a heading in de newspaper De Morgen (28 jan. 1990) *‘The ghettos of the Goede Woning. Objective allocation does not work.*

Plead for the segregation of migrants'. Smets was even more fundamentalistic than Cools. The solution he put forward was the concentration of migrants in ghettos at the edge of the large agglomerations. He only wanted to allow migrants who were willing to integrate and some years later, he pleaded for a far reaching discretionary power in order to allocate social dwellings.

Different lifestyles can create frictions in the everyday, at local level. A provocative formulation of these events, incidents or animosity by local and national media can put the events in the spotlight. These sorts of occurrences can be read in a political way, as such being picked up by politicians and put on the national agenda, thus jumping scales. We have also shown that very quickly the discourses get 'coloured' and alternating associations are made with poverty, a-social behaviour, fraud, etc.

Fact is that, when the millennium turn was in sight, there was a broad consensus among most democratic parties on policies promoting social mix, which in fact should be read as an attempt to limit the in stream of a different category of people labelled as 'problematic'. Take e.g. the Christian Democrats. In the preparation of the elections of 1999, their Chairman, Marc Van Peel, MP, phrased the issue of social mix under the heading '*Security, tolerance and justice*'¹³. The text defines so-called '*end terms for tolerant living together*'. Statement 2 says: '*The presence of ethnic minorities is a richness, not a thread. Nevertheless we should, by 2002, have realised the 'social mix' in the urban quarters. The concentration of vulnerable people, migrants and other social weaker persons should not be higher than 20 per cent. A too high concentration of migrants and other socially weaker persons can be a major source of intolerance. Therefore, we should have a policy of spread and mix. (...) New construction of 'large blocks' should be decreased and replaced by a policy of small scaled projects.*'

Also some Antwerp Social Democrats joined the discourse. In a report, the journal *Gazet van Antwerpen*¹⁴, referred to Robert Voorhamme and Patrick Janssens, who were respectively the local Antwerp Chairman (and MP) and the nation chairman of the Socialist Party, both members were on the board of social housing companies¹⁵. Concerning the income levels, it was stated that: *'The thresholds should go up. Every social housing company in Antwerp, with far the greatest number of social rental dwellings in the country, is now confronted with financial losses. In order to give them more breathing space, the thresholds should go up. (...) If the minister doesn't change them, then he de facto causes the tearing down of the large social housing complexes. A building like the 'Chicago block' is destroyed by the income eligibility rules, since you do not have a mix of social classes'*.

Already earlier, in 1997, in a policy proposal note¹⁶, two members of the board of an Antwerp social housing company, therein appointed by the Green Party, called for *'a well-considered appointment by a screening of candidates in order to know his/her wishes and to avoid disturbance of existing equilibriums.'* They also made a plea for a selective increase of the eligibility income in problematic estates, the integrated dispersion of migrants, the allocation of not integrated migrants into heterogeneous estates with different live styles but with social and technical accompaniment¹⁷, a child density index for complexes around an inner square, no new social housing near existing complexes, the obligation of social accompaniment for problem tenants, who – at best – should not be located in high density complexes around an inner square.

Current discussions

Gradually the described debate cooled down. Basically because the social housing

sector pulled back, since eventually their worries were taken more and more serious by the successive ministers and governments. The vague concept of social mix and the consensus on the need to attract more middle income groups to social rental (what implicitly implies less poor – read: migrant – people) functions, next to the attempts of the government(s) to change the legislation in line with the complaints, as lubricating oil. And as currently incidents are as good as absent, more breathing space is created, as the mass media have no tit-bit, what is not surprisingly, since (largely ignored) research in de meantime shows no general malaise in social rental housing. On the contrary, the satisfaction of people living there is high (Pannecoucke et al, 2001; Stoop & Albertijn, 2003; Heylen et al, 2007).

In retrospect, the exclusionary discourse escalated after the new social legislation in 1994 imposing more restrict allocation rules. The discourses ‘in the end’ fostered a difficult search since new regulations – which in their consequence undoubtedly exclude people – had to compromise with (international) legislation concerning discrimination, xenophobia and racism. That this has been a delicate exercise was shown in the introduction, and resulted in a number of new rules. The new 1999 allocation regulation was withdrawn in 2000 and replaced by a new one; in 2006 the 1997 Housing Law was changed in order create a frame for new allocation rules, which were introduced in 2007, but changed already twice and the government that took office in 2008 announced an evaluation and adaption (Vlaamse regering, 2009) of the existing rules.

Taking things together the following three elements are of importance: (a) regarding the allocation criteria, the income levels have been (and will be) raised to allow middle class families to enter; (b) local governments are granted more autonomy with regard

to allocation criteria and the management of the estates, and (c) permission is granted to screen candidates before a dwelling is allocated to them.

The delicateness of the equilibrium was already illustrated by the hostile reactions to the Land and Building Decree of 2009. Intentionally this decree wanted to answer two issues. The first concerns a very general complaint about rising housing and housing land prices¹⁸; the second concerns the wish to disperse social rental housing outside the larger cities. This latter is a request from the cities who argue that the concentration of the necessary social rental housing channels low income households to the cities, as such affecting their fiscal base.

The resistance against this decree – which is a resistance against the obligation to foresee social rental housing and not against freeing building land – can be evaluated as collateral damage of the discourse. As shown, social rental housing was never a popular item and the social rental is the sector of the non-deserving. Developers argue that introducing social (rental) housing will have an impact on the saleability of the dwellings; and – to be honest – are the municipalities to blame when they refuse to house people who affect – so they think - their financial base negatively and are troublesome? So, currently, local debates on the spatial planning of new social dwellings are often overshadowed by the importance of this discourse that emphasises the ‘pathologies’ of the social renters.

To Conclude

When, concepts such as ‘social mix’ and ‘anti-ghetto’ are - from the early 1990s onwards - included in the motivation for legislation, consequently creating laws and regulations that in practice exclude certain population groups, we need to critically ask

what made this possible.

In the previous sections we have provided a broad insight of how this mechanism could work. To conclude we want to focus on two elements. First of all we can agree with the contemplation of Foucault and Deleuze when they argue that ‘discourse (...) systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972) and that language is ‘a political affair before it is an affair for linguistics’ Deleuze (2004). We have illustrated this by showing how the discourse - through jumping scales from small every day incidents to the regional political agenda - was able to steer the creation of new pieces of legislation and regulation. But this is only halve of the power of the discourse, as afterwards - this is after the new legislation is implemented - it is also used to legitimise it. Politicians and policymakers can stress that, following the discourse, they are actually doing what the sector - considered as holding the knowledge regarding a certain issue - is asking.

Secondly we want to argue that, in order to have full effect and as such to be regarded as a discourse the way it is defined by Foucault, Deleuze and Blommaert, it has to meet a certain set of criteria:

1. There has to be some sort of fertile breeding ground. In our case this has at least two dimensions. First, there is the historically marginal position of the social rental sector, with the consequence that no firm advocacy for them can be found. Today quasi nobody stand up for social rental housing. The second concerns real worries following from the impoverishment of the tenants, leading to decreasing rental incomes at a moment that more money for renovation and social support is needed¹⁹;

2. The discourse is experienced as a coherent and very rational line of reasoning. With regards to solving the problems in social rental housing estates with concepts such as ‘social mix’ on the one hand and ‘voluntary concentration’ on the other, the lines of reasoning, elucidated by some of the protagonists, can easily be followed and understood, even if it is against one’s own opinion.
3. The discourse is (partly) constructed and supported by leading figures, whose authority is widely acknowledged and widely respected. Their contemplations and views on the subject are considered as truthful, by the general public.
4. There are close personal and/or institutional links between the local and the regional level.
5. A counter-discourse is absent, not fully developed or is being ignored, as is possible research on the subject. Until today no solid third party report on the liveability of social rental housing exists. Neither one is under way.

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Endnotes

¹ Note that ‘social’ in this case refers to three different types of subsidised housing. In the first place it refers to ‘classic’ social rental housing. But next to that, it also refers to houses built by social housing companies for purchase and plots of land. In the latter cases the term ‘social’ refers more to the institutionalised way of allocation than to the target group, who are middle classes (De Decker, 2001).

² VVH stands for ‘Vlaamse Vereniging van Huisvestingsmaatschappijen’ or ‘Flemish confederation of social housing companies’. It is the trade union of the social housing companies.

³ A financial vehicle found in the early 1990s to build 10,000 additional social rental dwellings next to the VHM.

⁴ A local social housing company.

⁵ VLM stands for Vlaamse Landmaatschappij, the organisation that had its roots in the above mentioned SNPPT, the National Society for Small Land Owning

⁶ Our inventory reveals: mayors, aldermen, MP's, chairmen and board members of social housing companies, managers of social housing companies (local and regional), journalists, academics, ministers, employees of ministers, chairmen of political parties, organisations like tenant's unions and local welfare work, etc

⁷ A rough inventory of public quotes for the period 1988-2002 adds up to 174 pages (Tahome, 11).

⁸ Please note the naming of these estates, already addressed higher.

⁹ Quoted from the 'Gazet van Antwerpen' newspaper article by journalist K. Tuerlinckx on 17 March 17 1997.

¹⁰ Cools would later become chairman of the local social service of the city of Antwerp, and after his retirement, finished a PhD on working with different lifestyle in social housing (Cools, 2004).

¹¹ With a 2 paged follow up in the journal De Morgen (11 June 1990) with a reaction of the chairman of the socialist party, stating that he is pro social mix.

¹² Referring to earlier remarks in this paper we like to (re)stress that social housing was already opened up to more 'middle class' people, but one needs to be aware that this category becomes (or tries to become) a home-owner as soon as possible.

¹³ Fax: internal document that was widely covered by the media (journals, radio and television, 26 March 1998). Also because it provoked a young and at that time promising Moroccan female politician, working for a Christian Democratic Minister

(Lanjri, 1998). The topic got already dealt with before and later the thesis would be repeated.

¹⁴ It is not clear who said what (Gazet Van Antwerpen, 28 January 2002). One of the authors, being there, only heard the speech of Voorhamme.

¹⁵ Patrick Janssens combines the mayorship of Antwerp with a seat as MP. Voorhamme, who is a former MP, is an alderman in Antwerp since 2003. Both had/have functions in social housing companies.

¹⁶ Document dated 29 September 1997.

¹⁷ ‘Different life styles cause resistance, rejection, resentment and prejudices. A well-balanced mix of different life styles give opportunities for living together’.

¹⁸ This is actually a separate discourse, because it has already been illustrated by several authors that there is no real ‘affordability problem’ (Pannecoucke et al, 2001; De Decker et al, 2008; Winters & De Decker, 2009).

¹⁹ Note that welfare and housing policies are completely separated and that no money is going from the welfare department to housing.