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**Myth and reality of the “black housing movement” in Britain**

**A critical perspective on community empowerment**

Working paper presented by

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Housing policy plays a central role in the making of urban neighbourhoods. It is one of the main policy fields around which the policy discourse around community participation and empowerment has developed, notably in Britain (Somerville, 1998). Because of the strong ethnic segregation observed in British cities (and more generally European cities, see Huttman, ed., 1991; Musterd, Ostendorf, ed., 1998), the issue of community participation within housing policy is tightly linked to the issue of minority ethnic communities and their potential exclusion from the policy process. The theme of “empowerment” has grown up against this general background. In this paper, we propose to attempt to go beyond the rhetoric of empowerment and to explore the conditions of possibility, forms and effects of the participation of ethnic minorities in social housing policy, through the example of what has been called the “black housing movement” in Britain. This study will rely on fieldwork carried out in Birmingham.

The public recognition of ethnic inequalities in housing and especially of ethnic discrimination in access to social housing has led to the development of diverse policy measures in Britain. Alongside the race relations legislation and local anti-discrimination policies, the support of the Housing Corporation to the creation and development of black and minority ethnic (BME) housing associations has been one of the more original aspects of British national policy for ethnic minorities housing since the 1980s. These associations are defined by the Housing Corporation by the fact that they have at least 80% of ethnic minorities on their board. More generally, they present the specificity to have a direction, a staff and tenants with for most of them an ethnic minority background. They are generally strongly rooted in a specific neighbourhood. The “black housing movement” has its roots in an associative and militant movement initiated by ethnic minority people in the 1960s, especially around the issue of homelessness within the young Afro-Caribbean population (Federation of black housing organisations (FBHO), 2000-2001).

**Notes:**

1 This study is part on a PhD thesis about the construction of ethnic boundaries by social housing policies in France and Britain (Sala Pala, 2005). Our inquiry is based on two case studies of Marseilles in France and Birmingham in Britain. It mainly consists of interviews with local actors involved on the issue of housing and/or of ethnic relations. We carried out about fifty interviews in Marseilles and as much in Birmingham. Within this paper, we mainly rely on the interviews that we made with leaders of the BME housing associations operating in Birmingham, that is around 10 interviews led between 2000 and 2005. We also rely on documentary sources, especially documents issued by these associations.

2 The Housing Corporation is a quango regulating the housing associations.

3 The traditional social landlords in Britain are local authorities themselves. Since the 1980s, the national policy has favoured the role of private housing associations (housing associations, also called Registered social landlords, RSLs) as social landlords. On the other side, local authorities have been deprived of their prerogative to build new dwellings and encouraged to transfer their existing stock to housing associations. In Birmingham today, the city council manages around 80 000 dwellings and housing associations around 40 000, including 2300 dwellings managed by BME housing associations.
The Housing Corporation policy relies on the assumption that each BME community can better satisfy the housing needs of its members. It vehicles an ideology of community independence and empowerment. However the national policy context has changed a lot since the mid 1980s and today the support of the Housing Corporation to BME housing associations is much more limited. These developments of the national policy reflect the contradictions between the promotion of diversity and the promotion of value for money and competition between housing associations. Thus the structure of opportunity for the mobilisation of BME housing associations has been changing a lot for twenty years.

The existence of BME housing associations leads to several questions regarding the way in which such organisations can play a role in neighbourhood politics and community participation. These associations have been surprisingly little studied by social scientists. Moreover, most of the existing studies reflect a kind of enchanted vision of that black housing movement and do not really deconstruct the public policy repertoire on which this policy relies: “community independence”, “community strength”, “empowerment”, “diversity”. Little fieldwork has been carried out on this theme. We would like to adopt a more critical perspective, relying on fieldwork in Birmingham. There are today five BME housing associations operating in Birmingham against two in the mid-1980s, before the beginning of the Housing Corporation BME housing policy.

We would like to raise two main issues regarding the role of this so called “black housing movement” in neighbourhood politics and community participation. The first one refers to the ideology and reality of “empowerment”. The question here is twofold. First, we will consider the ideological mechanisms leading to a framing in terms of empowerment, and the dominant arguments legitimating the existence of such minority ethnic organisations. What is there behind the word “empowerment”? How can a consensus be built around the existence of separate BME housing associations? Is there really a consensus? Here we will insist on the mobilisation of the notion of ethnic “different needs” in legitimating separate organisations and on the contradictions of the discourses related to these different needs. We will also underline the contradictions within the national policy towards BME housing associations. Secondly, we will raise the issue of the reality of that empowerment. Who are the BME housing associations? To which extent do they represent BME communities and give them some power? To which extent are they independent or rather integrated to the mainstream system of social housing? The second point that we will explore is the concrete action of BME housing associations. In which way is their activity specific and different from the one of mainstream social landlord? Do they provide an effectively different answer to the housing needs of BME groups? Are they an effective instrument of community participation and of promotion of race equality in access to housing?

It is this problematical background which will form the basis for our analysis of BME housing associations in Birmingham. In this perspective, our presentation will follow three steps. Firstly, we will describe the different BME housing associations operating in

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4 These developments are reflected in the different policy documents produced by the Housing Corporation from 1986 (1986; 1992; 1996; 1998).


6 For instance, according to M. Harrison, « the development of black and minority ethnic (BME) housing associations in England was one of the housing policy success stories of the 1980s and 1990s » (Harrison, 2002, p. 114).
Birmingham, their origins, their developments and main features. Secondly, we will raise the issue of the independence or incorporation of BME housing associations: in other words, we will raise the question whether these associations constitute a community and independent movement. Thirdly, we will study the concrete action of these associations in order to see whether they are effectively a channel of redistribution of resources amongst ethnic groups and of reduction of ethnic inequalities.

I. BME HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS IN BIRMINGHAM: ORIGINS AND CHANGES

Five BME housing associations are today operating in Birmingham. Together, they manage a stock of about 2300 dwellings, which means that they have very little weight relatively to the municipality (80 000 dwellings) and mainstream housing associations, the biggest of which manage several thousands of social dwellings. The biggest is HAMAC, with a stock of 1000 dwellings, followed by Ashram with 800 dwellings. Three of them are Afro-Caribbean (HAMAC, Nehemiah and UCHA), one is Asian (Ashram) and the last one is Irish (CARA). The landscape of BME housing associations in Birmingham has been tremendously changing since two decades. If the first ones were born in the 1970s, three of them were created only in the 1980s and one in the 1990s, within a favourable national context. The origins of these associations are diverse.

The first black housing association that has been created in Birmingham – and politically the most radical one – was Harambee, born in the 1970s. Harambee was anchored in the Afro-Caribbean self-help organization (ACSHO), first called Afro-Caribbean coordinating committee. In Birmingham, black mobilisation strongly developed in the 1960-70s in neighbourhoods with a strong Afro-Caribbean population such as Handsworth. The ACSHO was then the organisation which the strongest rejected the existing paternalist and integrationist policies such as the ones led by the Community relations council (CRC). It started in 1966 when a few young Afro-Caribbean residents influenced by the black consciousness movement in the world and by racial riots in the United States started to meet and discuss the problems of black people in Handsworth. They considered a radical breaking with the existing situation as necessary to the freedom of the black man and his identity restoration. They attempted to copy the model of the black Panthers, notably by establishing a 10 point programme including the development of a black party and the promotion of black

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7 At a national scale, according to a series of indicators (dwelling stock, staff, new building), there were in 2003 64 BME housing associations representing about 1,5% of the activity of the housing association sector (Harrison, Phillips, 2003, p. 83). According to the FBHO, in 2000, 63 black housing associations were registered by the Housing Corporation, managing together 21 000 social dwellings and employing 40 000 persons (FBHO, 2000-2001, p. 35). Twenty years before, in 1983, only 6 amongst the 200 housing associations registered by the Housing Corporation were black.

8 The ACSHO was described by J. Rex et S. Tomlinson in their analysis of ethnic minority mobilisation in Handsworth (Rex, Tomlinson, 1979, pp. 257-264).

9 J. Rex and R. Moore have highlighted the way in which indirect ethnic discrimination in access to council housing (especially the eligibility rule referring to at least five years of residence in Birmingham) led to a residential concentration of Asian and Afro-Caribbean immigrants in some degraded neighbourhoods of the inner city (Handsworth, Sparkbrook, Sparkhill) from the 1950s onwards (Rex, Moore, 1967). J. Henderson and V. Karn have shown how ethnic discrimination (stemming notably from the contradictions between official and officious objectives and from the strength of ethnic stereotypes within the municipal housing department) in the allocation of council housing favoured the reproduction of ethnic segregation patterns in Birmingham even after the five year rule was suppressed in the 1970s (Henderson, Karn, 1987). On contemporary patterns of ethnic segregation in Birmingham, see de Winter, Musterd (1998) and Birmingham City Council (2005).
cooperatives. At the same time, the ACSHO started sustaining very concretely the Afro-Caribbean residents of Handsworth. It opened a bookshop and a nursery. Two members of the association, who were black social workers, launched in 1972 a project called Harambee. They were mainly worried by homelessness amongst the Afro-Caribbean youth. Their project was multi-dimensional, including social work, housing and education. It was influenced by a self-help ideology: “harambee” is a swahili word meaning “working together for the progress”. This self help ideology was underlain by references to Pan-africanism, African socialism and some elements of the Black Power thought. The organisation aimed at favouring community development and producing goods in non capitalist conditions. Owing to varied subsidies, it created a hotel for young homeless Afro-Caribbean people. Later, it acquired other houses and transformed them into flats for the ex-residents of the hotel. At that time, it constituted a housing association.

Today, this association Harambee still exists but it has changed a lot. It manages a bookshop, a nursery and a hotel for homeless people (Harambee House Hostel). It lost its politically radical character. As to Harambee housing association, it does not exist any more. In the middle of the 1990s, as it was managing about 500 dwellings, it endured severe financial stress. Its dwellings were taken over by Focus, a mainstream housing association strongly present in Handsworth. Then they were taken over by a newly created black housing association called Black Star, which was less radical at a political level.

In 1999, Black Star itself joined an urban consortium, the Prime Focus Group (which also includes Focus housing association). Recently, this kind of strategy has been adopted by many BME housing associations, which as small and recent organisations face particularly hard financial difficulties in the context of a strong liberalisation of social housing policy in Britain (Murie, 1997; Bramley, 1997; Malpass, 1999). In 2003, it melted with another black housing association, HAMAC (Handsworth Single Homeless Action group), created in Handsworth in order to cope with homelessness amongst Afro-Caribbean youth. HAMAC developed actions not only in the field of housing but also in education and access to employment. But it did not have the impact and the politically radical character of Harambee. The association resulting from the 2003 merging kept the name of HAMAC. Today HAMAC manages 1000 dwellings and is the biggest BME housing association of Birmingham. Following the merging, it was first led by a black Caribbean director. This man had previously led several housing associations and worked for the Housing Corporation. Since 2005, he has been the president –and the first black president – of the Chartered Institute of Housing, one of the main housing professional organisations in Britain. Since his departure, the association has been led by one of the main managers of Focus housing association, specialised in new building development and financial matters. It must be stressed that this new director is white: HAMAC is thus one of the very rare BME housing associations in Britain led by a white director. Even if this white leadership is presented as a provisory solution after the departure of the previous director, this tends to corroborate the hypothesis according to which the merging of BME housing associations within bigger urban consortia leads to a loss of their specificity.

The history leading from the creation of Harambee in 1972 to the designation of a white director for HAMAC in 2004 gives a striking insight into the very contemporary structural transformations of BME housing associations in Britain. But it must also be stressed that all BME housing associations do not share a such history, anchored in a radical black mobilisation inspired by Pan-African ideology or by the Black Panthers movement. The
history of other BME housing associations in Birmingham gives evidence of the extremely diverse roots of these associations.

Two of these, United Churches housing association (UCHA) and Nehemiah, stem from community mobilisation linked to black Afro-Caribbean Churches. These Churches (especially Pentecostal ones, known for being the most radical) played a great role in the mobilisation of Afro-Caribbean people in Birmingham (Rex, Tomlinson, 1979, pp. 265-266). The mobilisations based on black Churches adopt a different perspective from the radical mobilisation embodied by Harambee: look for racial harmony, defence of the poor more than of the black people. UCHA was built following the 1985 Handsworth riots, which made some people conscious of the necessity to create organisations in order to cope with community needs in this neighbourhood. If the association is linked to a black Church, the role of public institutions and of the political context was also important in its creation: it benefited from the BME housing associations policy promoted by the Housing Corporation from 1986. Today, it manages a stock of 300 dwellings, most of them in areas with high concentrations of black Caribbean residents (notably Handsworth and Lozells).

Nehemiah (which means God’s care) is linked to a pentecostal Church, the Church of God of Prophecy. It was created in 1986 when a few clergymen based in Handsworth started thinking of doing something in order to answer the housing needs of Afro-Caribbean elderly. Today it also deals with the housing of families. Its stock of 400 dwellings in the West Midlands (amongst which 125 in Birmingham) is thus made up of 50% dwellings in residences for Afro-Caribbean elderly and 50% standard dwellings. Its staff comprises 20 persons. Its director is a pastor whose father came from Jamaica to Britain in the 1950s. He first had a bachelor’s degree in ceramics (licence). In 2000, he obtained a Masters degree in Business Administration (MBA), which illustrates the professionalisation of BME housing associations.

Ashram is the only BME housing association in Birmingham targeting the Asian community. Until the 2003 merging of Black Star and HAMAC it was the biggest BME housing association operating in Birmingham with 800 dwellings, amongst which 78% standard dwellings, two residences for Asian elderly (60 rooms in total), two hostels for Asian women victims of domestic violence and a project for Asian women with mental health problems. Most of the dwellings are located in the south east of Birmingham inner city (Sparkbrook, Sparkhill), in neighbourhoods featured by high concentrations of Asian groups. Its staff comprises more than 80 persons. The creation of Ashram was initiated in 1993, less by local community organisations than by housing professionals working within existing organisations. Its first director did not have a traditional militant profile. He had an engineering degree and had previously worked in the industrial sector and in managerial accounting. Since 2000, the association has been changing considerably. Because of great financial difficulties and corruption problems it was put under supervision by the Housing Corporation. The latter nominated a new director, who is still in place today. He is Indian, licensed in sport and sociology and has a master in housing. He previously worked for several local authorities. He is the director of the BME Regional housing network (BMERHN), which gathers the BME housing associations of the West Midlands. He is also a board member of the FBHO. In 2002, Ashram became a subsidiary of Accord housing association, which owns 5000 dwellings. If the staff of Ashram is mostly Indian, the one of Accord is “white British” up to 89%.

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10 It was registered by the Housing Corporation in 1989.
Lastly, CARA (which means “friend” in Irish) is one of the rare BME housing associations in Britain targeting the Irish community. It was created in 1984 in London “by the Irish community.” It is based in London but a regional office for the West Midlands was opened in 1998 covering the areas of Leicester, Coventry and Birmingham. It manages 60 dwellings in the West Midlands, amongst which 40 in Birmingham. It employs 40 persons in London and 4 in the West Midlands. First oriented towards Irish men living on their own, it then also turned to families of diverse origins. It was engaged in the “Be Irish – Be proud” campaign of the Federation of Irish societies, in favour of the introduction of an “Irish” category in the 2001 census.

This cursory glance at the “black housing movement” in Birmingham sheds light on the main features of these associations (cf. Table 1): they are recent (most of them are less than 20 years old); they have diverse origins (black Churches, radical black mobilisation, housing professional initiatives); they are the fruit of community mobilisation and of the institutional system (many of them have been strongly supported by the Housing Corporation); they are experiencing a rapid evolution, if not a crisis, because of the collapsing support of the Housing Corporation and of an increasingly competitive environment that is particularly difficult to resist for young and small organisations. These trends raise the issue of the autonomy and independence of this movement, and finally of its capacity to empower BME communities.

### Table 1: BME housing associations in Birmingham: general features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Ashram</th>
<th>CARA</th>
<th>HAMAC*</th>
<th>Nehemiah</th>
<th>UCHA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic profile of the director</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of dwellings</td>
<td>-Ashram: 800 -Accord housing association: 5000</td>
<td>63 in the West Midlands, amongst which 42 in Birmingham; 400 in London.</td>
<td>-HAMAC: 1000 -Focus housing association: 12 000s</td>
<td>400 in the West Midlands, amongst which 125 in Birmingham</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of the dwellings</td>
<td>Mainly south-east of inner city (Sparkbrook, Sparkhill)</td>
<td>Mainly Irish quarter (Digbeth)</td>
<td>Mainly Handsworth</td>
<td>Mainly north-west of the inner city (Handsworth, Lozells)</td>
<td>Mainly north-west of the inner city (Handsworth, Lozells)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic composition of tenants</td>
<td>-75% BME (62% Asian) -25% white</td>
<td>-92,7% Irish -2,8% British -1,6% Asian -2,3% Mixed/ Other black -9,6% Other white.</td>
<td>-87% black -13% white</td>
<td>-64% black (49% Afro-Caribbean) -36% white</td>
<td>-85% black -15% white</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Resulting from the melting of ex HAMAC and ex Black Star in 2003.

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11 There are 5 Irish housing associations in England (Randall, Brown, 1997).
II. EMPOWERMENT OR INCORPORATION?

In this section, we will raise to main issues: empowerment as a discourse and as a reality. Firstly, on which arguments does the claim for a separate black housing sector rely on? Secondly, what is the reality of the independence of BME housing associations?

A. The legitimation of a black housing movement

The analysis of the discourse of BME housing associations leads to observe, first the strength of the discourses legitimating the separatism, but also, secondly, the fundamental contradictions inherent in that discourses.

1. The claim for separatism

BME housing associations very strongly claim for the existence of a separate black housing sector, which is presented as necessary to answer BME housing needs. And yet this representation is not taken for granted; for instance in France, mainly because of the republican ideology, this separatism is not claimed. So how can one explain this belief in the necessity of a black self organisation, this legitimacy of a separated, community-led management of BME housing? The examination of the discourses of BME housing associations leads to the identification of three arguments on which their legitimacy is based.

The first argument is the one according to which there is a specific issue of BME housing. BME housing associations underline the specificity of the issue of BME housing and particularly stress the existence of “specific needs” or “different needs” of BME communities.

According to the second argument, mainstream institutions badly cope with these specific needs. This fact is considered as established as well regarding local authorities as mainstream housing associations. All these institutions are blamed by BME housing associations for neither recognising nor treating BME “specific needs”. The main explanation put forward is the fact that mainstream institutions do not “reflect” the “community”. BME communities are badly represented within them, as well at the leadership level as at staff level or as regarding tenants’ participation. The importance recognised to the ethnic identity of the staff (and of the director) is linked to the representation according to which the community itself is the best able to answer the needs of its members. There is here a strong element of ghettoisation of public policy towards ethnic minorities, since self help and self responsibility of BME communities regarding their own needs is valorised and constructed as the best policy solution.

“Our problem with mainstream housing associations is that historically they have not well responded to the needs of BME communities. They don’t give power to BME staff and they provide no culturally sensitive service, housing provision. And the BME communities are not represented on their boards. That is our quarrel with mainstream housing associations.” (Interview with the director of Nehemiah, 22/5/2002).
“One of the problems with mainstream housing associations in the past, and still now, is that their workforce does not reflect the communities where they are operating. You find BME people at lower grade, but very few are seen at management level. Therefore typically people at the top are white, middle class, predominantly men. And the unfortunate consequence is that equality of opportunities is not fully appreciated as it should be.” (Interview with the director of UCHA, 19/12/2000).

Here, it is the domination of “white, men, middle-class” in mainstream institutions which is considered as an impediment to equality policies. The argument is worth underlining since it is noticeable that BME housing associations leaders in Birmingham are all men and middle-class. That fact raises the issue of the capacity of these associations to “represent” ethnic communities. Indeed, these communities which may be ethnically unified are crossed by gender and class cleavages and BME associations appear to be led by “dominant” groups according to both cleavages.

The third argument is that BME housing associations are the best placed to answer BME specific needs, because indeed they “reflect” the community and are close to the community. They put forward a specific ethos, because of the belonging of their staff and leader to BME communities.

“We operate in Handsworth, Aston, Lozells, many areas which have Afro-Caribbean communities. [...] They know we are a black organisation, they feel more comfortable to come to us than going to a mainstream housing association. And the staff that we employ reflects the community that we are operating. My staff is Afro-Caribbean.” (Interview with the director of UCHA, 19/12/2000).

2. Contradictory discourses

While examining the discourse of BME housing associations, one can highlight fundamental contradictions, particularly regarding two aspects of these discourses: firstly the existence of BME “specific needs” and secondly the specific added value of BME housing associations.

a) « Specific needs » : the contradictions of a taken for granted fact

The first problematic aspect of these discourses is the category of “specific needs”\(^\text{13}\). Like in official governmental or municipal discourses and policies, the existence of specific needs is presented as an obvious fact by BME housing associations. And yet these specific needs are never really defined, and when they are, it is in the limits of the traditional stereotypes (for instance about the supposed residential preference of BME communities for the inner city\(^\text{14}\)). In our interviews with local actors, we tried to lead the interviewees to precise the idea of specific needs. This allowed us to observe the contradictions of this notion which is though central in their discourses and practices.

\(^{13}\) On this point, see also C. Neveu (1993, pp. 190-193).

\(^{14}\) And yet some studies have shown that residential preferences of households within BME communities are far much complex than that. A significant proportion of young households with a BME background in Birmingham may aspire to a dwelling in the outer city (Birmingham City Council, 1998).
Some actors finally underlined that BME housing needs are not fundamentally different from those of the ethnic majority or rather of the less favoured households of the ethnic majority: for all, the main problem is to access to good and affordable housing.

“There is a cultural issue, in terms of family composition, how people live, and therefore traditionally you will find in certain BME groups that sort of wider family structures. That requires quite large types of accommodation. So yes, you can argue that there is a specific need, which is different. But if you just look at housing generally, BME communities like indigenous population’s need is to have a good quality housing, which is affordable.” (Interview with the assistant director of Black Star, 20/12/2000).

Ultimately, the discourses on specific needs are not separable from the distinction between the first generation of immigrants and the next generations. If the “specific needs” of immigrants seem to refer to a palpable reality, it is not the case for second or third generations. One can by the way notice that a certain number of BME housing associations are strongly oriented towards elderly clients, stemming from the first generation. Ashram, CARA and Nehemiah build and manage at once residences for elderly and standard social dwellings and the management of residence for elderly is an important aspect of their activity. For instance, the regional director of CARA recognises that it is mainly elderly Irish people who have specific needs, such as living in the community and staying next to the main Irish institutions (Churches, pubs, restaurants, etc.).

“The real need is the one of elderly Irish men who still live alone.” (Interview with the regional director of CARA, 28/5/2002).

In a similar vein, the director of Nehemiah distinguishes the case of residences for Afro-Caribbean elderly and the one of standard social dwellings for British families with an Afro-Caribbean background. According to him, Afro-Caribbean elderly people have clearly identified specific needs:

“There are specific needs, in terms of design first. If you were able to have a look at some of our schemes for elderly Afro-Caribbean people, you would see that it reflects a Caribbean flavour in some form or another, the corridors are more spacious, they have more light… […]. We also try to take account of the language and other cultural issues, like hair care and skin care. We feel that it is important to employ people who will understand the culture within the scheme – not exclusively, but we need to have people in the scheme who understand the language, the lifestyle etc., to be able to provide a sensitive service.” (Interview with the director of Nehemiah, 22/5/2002).

On the other hand, independent, standard dwellings, targeting British families with an Afro-Caribbean background, do not really differ from social dwellings proposed by mainstream institutions:

“You will find that, especially amongst the African-Caribbean, lifestyles are similar to the host community. There is hardly any difference with mainstream dwellings. They speak the language fluently, they are integrated, there is no special needs as far as families are concerned. So housing standards are similar.” (Interview with the director of Nehemiah, 22/5/2002).
b) A specific contribution of BME housing associations?

If specific needs are de facto limited to a few expectations of the first generation clients (mainly in terms of language, life within the community and access to community infrastructures), then one can raise the forthcoming question: are BME housing associations really indispensable? Are they necessary to the implementation of a general BME housing policy (and not only a policy for BME elderly)? Do they have something to bring that mainstream institutions could not bring? In other words, in which way are they more able to cope with the needs of second and third generations, which today constitute the bulk of BME communities in Britain? The answer proposed by the leaders of BME housing associations that we met in Birmingham is tautological: according to them, such associations better answer the needs of BME communities merely because there is a preference of these communities for BME housing associations, even though the needs of these communities are not fundamentally different from the majority needs and even though, as a consequence, BME housing associations do not propose a fundamentally different service.

“Difference really is about preference. You will find that most people from the BME community, if they had the choice, would choose a black housing association, because they know it is one that is supporting their own community, that is likely to understand their needs, their preference to move to other areas etc. They have more confidence.[…]. It depends on who is it affiliated to, what is the composition of the board, what is the composition of the staff. That creates the link between the organisation and the community. We keep links with the community. We have links with all of the other BME organisations: Churches, the voluntary sector, the commission of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago…” (Interview with the director of Nehemiah, 22/5/2002).

From the moment where these organisations draw their legitimacy from their capacity to “represent” the communities, to stem from them, a fundamental question is to be raised: to which extent do BME housing associations reflect or represent the community? And upstream, what is the “community”? Does it make sense to speak about a black community, an Afro-Caribbean community, an Indian community, etc.? Ultimately, these questions raise the issue of the reality of community empowerment.

B. From the myth of empowerment to the reality of incorporation

The « black housing movement » relies on the idea of empowerment, a community separatism, a community independence. The strength of that ideology within the British context makes it necessary to reflect on the two terms of that expression, namely “community” and “independence”. First of all, in which way are these associations community associations? In which sense do they represent the community? Secondly, to which extent are they separated and independent of mainstream public or private institutions?

1. A community movement?

Two features of BME housing associations are generally considered as giving evidence that they are community organisations, representing the community and giving it the power: their community origin (they are perceived as the fruit of community initiatives) and
their ethnically representative character. The Housing Corporation itself has in a certain way ratified this second criterion by defining a BME housing association by the fact that 80% of board members have a BME background. We are now going to examine these two elements.

\textit{a) The fruit of community initiatives?}

Firstly, are these associations the fruit of community initiatives and energies? Are they close to the communities that they serve? As we have seen in the brief account of the black housing movement given in the first section of that paper, some BME housing associations have indeed been created from a community initiative, may it be a black Church or other community leaders. However some elements indicate that all of them should not be regarded as a mere product of community mobilisation. First of all, the developments of these associations indicate a kind of “normalisation”. Two of Birmingham BME housing associations have been at a moment of their development put under supervision of the Housing Corporation and endured a radical transformation under the control of that quango. In the case of Harambee, the housing association was purely suppressed and replaced by Black Star. In the case of Ashram, the Housing Corporation nominated a new director whose role was essentially to promote good performance and good management. Moreover, a significant number of these associations were created during the first years of the Housing Corporation programme in the second half of the 1980s. It is this institutional framework which made their creation possible. Their community roots are less obvious. They seem to result from the initiatives of black housing professionals employed in mainstream institutions rather than from the mobilisation of community organisations or leaders. In any case, it can be stressed that only Harambee was created within an explicitly subversive community project, aiming at restoring the sense of black identity and claiming for community separatism. It is the only one which has really been influenced by the Black Power ideology.

\textit{b) A representation of the community?}

The second element refers to the politics of “community representation” followed by these associations. The will to “reflect the community” is one of their leitmotive and it is from this “representative” character that they draw their legitimacy. Here we are sent back to central questions of political science: what is to represent and what are the criteria of representation? Does a group have an existence outside its representatives? We are now going to discuss this aspiration of BME housing associations to represent the community and the idea that they “give the power” to the communities merely because they are ethnically representative. Within BME housing associations, the quest for representativity can be perceived at three levels: leadership, staff and tenants’ participation.

Regarding the leadership, until the nomination of a white director at the head of HAMAC in 2004, all BME housing associations in Birmingham had a director with a BME background. This feature is presented as a fundamental element of their identity and specificity, only two mainstream housing associations in Britain being led by a BME director. However, it must again be stressed that most of the leaders of BME housing associations have less a community leader profile than a housing professional profile, or even a manager profile. The director of Nehemiah, pastor of a pentecostal Church, can be seen as an exception; simultaneously, the fact that he recently had an MBA is a good evidence of the professionalisation of these associations. Within a context of liberalisation of housing policy, increasing competition on the housing market and technicisation of housing issues, faith or community engagement are not enough any more to manage a BME housing association.
These developments raise the issue of the professionalisation of community organisations and of its possible effects in terms of increasing distance between these associations and the communities themselves, their problems and aspirations (Lapeyronnie, 1993). The same trend can be noticed regarding the composition of the boards. As we have pointed before, BME housing associations have been defined by the Housing Corporation as associations aiming at coping with BME housing needs and whose board has at least 80% of members with a BME background. But here again one can notice the increasing professionalisation of these boards, where law and finance specialists (with a BME background indeed) are as numerous, if not more, as the representatives of community organisations. In the booklets and annual reports issued by BME housing associations, professionalism tokens are put forward much more than community engagement tokens.

These remarks lead us to raise the issue of the definition of BME housing associations given by the Housing Corporation. By choosing the criterion of the ethnic background of board members rather than other criteria (notably community engagement within community associations, may they be religious, voluntary, self help, cooperatives, linked to social work, etc.), this definition may favour an autonomisation of these associations from the communities, or at least from the most disadvantaged sections of these communities. It may favour the professionalisation of these associations, the constitution of a group of professionals which are much closer in their socialisation, professional career and social mobility, to their homologues of mainstream associations than to the disadvantaged members of their ethnic community. It is the assumption of a relationship between ethnic belonging and community belonging that is indeed questioned here: is the sharing of an ethnic identity sufficient to found the community? Undoubtedly not: individual experiences within a group are very diverse. Ethnic belonging does not sum up individual experience and does not automatically found the feeling of a shared community. Beside ethnic belonging, other categorial assignations and other social cleavages shape individual experiences and identities as well as collective mobilisations. The evidence of the professionalisation of BME housing associations has engendered deep debates in Britain about the objectives followed by these associations (FBHO, 2000-2001, p. 13): do the latter aim at improving BME housing conditions or rather at opening new job opportunities for BME middle class members in the housing sector? In these sentences pronounced by the director of a BME housing association operating in Birmingham, this ambiguity is palpable:

“[The BME housing association policy] is the largest initiative in Europe in promoting BME issues. So that is really a plus. There is not such a thing anywhere else in Europe. And for instance, it gives me the opportunity to progress, myself, it has given my colleagues opportunities, it has given my tenants opportunities.” (Interview with the director of UCHA, 19/12/2000).

A staff reflecting the community is the second leitmotiv of BME housing associations. Here, the aim is twofold again: to give job opportunities to black people discriminated on the job market but also to recruit some staff assumed to be more able to answer the expectations of customers. For instance, according to the terms of the application sheet for a job within CARA housing association, “CARA recognises that some groups within the community have been disadvantaged in their search for a job. We also recognise the advantages, for our service provision, of a diverse staff”15. As to Ashram director, he underlines that “the team is not constituted only of ethnic minorities, it is mixed, there is no ethnic qualification to work in

Ashram”, but he adds that “the majority of our staff is probably Indian” (interview, 10/5/2002). The fact is that the staff of BME housing associations has a clear majority of BME members, even if the employment strategy is not exclusive, which would be considered as discriminatory within the British legal context.

Thirdly, BME housing associations often regard tenants’ participation as important. It is indeed presented as an evidence of their closeness to the community that they serve. According to the 1999 Ashram annual report, “we promote community ownership by empowering the tenants and giving them the means to actively participate to the evaluation process in order to guarantee the respect of quality norms”. The assumption is that tenants’ participation must strengthen the link between association and community and grant the effective representation of the community within the decision-making process. However, one can wonder about the effective means and impact of that tenants’ participation: must one talk about empowerment, participation, or merely of consultation? In many cases, tenants’ involvement within the decision-making process seems to be very limited. In Ashram, for instance, the participation process is led in a top-down, bureaucratic way. It is initiated by the head of the organisation and its impact is very circumscribed. What is expected by the organisation is a mere feedback from the tenants, a consultation, much more than a deep transformation of the power relationship between tenants and managers, an empowerment of tenants.

In the end, this analysis strongly shows the necessity to distinguish between the myth and the reality of empowerment. The “community identity” of BME housing associations must not be taken for granted. The BME background of their leaders, board members and staff and the strategies developed to favour tenants’ participation or empowerment are not enough to define them as “community organisations” which would necessarily be close to the communities that they serve or representative of those, even less to guarantee a redistribution of power to the benefit of these communities. If the community identity of these associations – and beyond, the notion of community itself – has to be deconstructed, one must also wonder about their effective autonomy and independence.

2. An independent movement?

In the official discourses and policies about BME housing, notably the ones of the Housing Corporation, “independence” is a central theme. The BME housing strategy of the Housing Corporation for the period 1992-1996 was thus entitled “An independent future” (Housing Corporation, 1992). What is the real autonomy or independence of BME housing associations? To answer this question implies to locate these associations within a political, institutional and economic context, within power relations between institutions. From this point of view, one must examine as well the institutional constraints faced by BME housing associations as the institutional resources that they can use. The institutional context can be considered as a set of constraints and resources for their action. The question is thus whether this context makes the self-governing and independent development of these associations more or less possible: to which extent can they develop self initiatives, alternative projects, define their own objectives, policies and instruments? One must also wonder how the power relationships between the diverse institutions more or less constrain the activity of these associations. Two main points are worth underlining. The first one is the strong dependence of BME housing associations on the Housing Corporation; the second one is their dependence on mainstream housing associations. These two observations will lead us to
conclude to the very limited independence of these associations and their sharp incorporation within the mainstream institutional process.

\[ a) \text{ The Housing Corporation or the normalization of BME housing associations} \]

From 1986 and the start of its programme for BME housing associations, the Housing Corporation played a great role in structuring a black housing movement by favouring the creation, the development and the institutional recognition of BME housing associations (Housing Corporation, 1986, 1992). As summed up by the director of Nehemiah: “We exist today because we were supported by the strategies of the Housing Corporation” (interview, 22/5/2002). Then the policy of the Housing Corporation evolved from a policy supporting BME housing associations to one favouring the mainstreaming of BME housing issues and supporting equality policies within all housing associations, may they be BME or mainstream (Housing Corporation, 1998). This change reflects the tensions between two public policy orientations, namely separatism and mainstreaming. The 1990s witnessed a come back to mainstreaming and a simultaneous collapse of the support of Housing Corporation to the creation of new BME housing associations. This deeply upset the rules of the game for BME housing associations: whereas they had been the central players of the first version of Housing Corporation policy, they were marginalized by the 1998 version. In its new strategy, the Housing Corporation defined three main policy orientations regarding BME housing associations: to favour the development of existing BME housing associations notably through stock transfers from local authorities, to grant their viability and lastly to promote the development of partnerships and relationships between mainstream and BME housing associations or between several BME housing associations.

Moreover, it is noticeable that this policy change is corollary of an implicit critique of the legitimacy of the BME housing associations by the Housing Corporation. This disqualification is clearly expressed by the person in charge of the BME housing strategy within the Housing Corporation regional office for the West Midlands (interview, 24/5/2002). According to that person, the capacity of these associations to represent the community is uncertain. BME housing associations are blamed for being more interested in their own survival and development than in responding to BME housing needs. They are blamed for getting autonomous from their grassroots, self-centred, disconnected from the experiences of communities. As a consequence, mainstream housing associations are seen as quite as able to cope with the specific needs of BME communities. BME housing associations are also seen as too weak, small and marginal actors in an increasingly concentrated housing market. This argumentation sharply contrasts with the one which the Housing Corporation used to rely on in the 1980s, when BME housing associations were presented as the best solution to face BME specific needs.

It is also striking to see that the trends which are criticized by the Housing Corporation are for a large part the fruits of its own policies. If BME housing associations are losing touch with the communities and getting more professionalised, it is largely because the regulatory framework within which they work, and which is a product of the Housing Corporation and governmental policy, constrains them (as well as mainstream associations) to bow to very rigid performance and good management norms. If they are weak and marginal actors, it is mainly the consequence of the liberal reforms of housing policy led by the government since the 1980s and relayed by the Housing Corporation. The Department of Environment and the Housing Corporation have themselves imposed the choice of liberalism against diversity. And
yet, in the discourse of the Housing Corporation, the limits of BME housing associations are often presented as the mere product of an internal drift of these associations, for which they would themselves bear the responsibility: their leaders and their staff only follow their own interests; their programmes are less good than the ones of mainstream institutions. This argumentation leads to consider a new and more modest role for BME housing associations, namely a role of service providers for mainstream institutions:

“The management of specific services to BME communities provided by BME RSLs, that is one thing that we have to explore.” (Interview with the assistant director for investment, Housing Corporation regional office for the West Midlands, 24/5/2002).

This interviewee gives the example of a BME housing association in the West Midlands, ASRA, which prepares Asian meals and sales them to social services that then provide them to Asian elderly at home. The only possible future for BME housing associations would be to provide very circumscribed services, more or less linked to housing, to mainstream institutions. In this vision, BME housing associations are totally marginalized within the BME housing policy. Such a conception of their role greatly contrasts with the empowerment discourse held by the Housing Corporation when it first launched its BME housing policy in 1986.

If the developments of the Housing Corporation policy towards BME housing have very strong implications for the future of BME housing associations, one must also remind that, more globally, the Housing Corporation has a mission of regulation of the whole housing association sector. For this reason, it strongly frames the action of all housing associations, may they be BME or mainstream. As a regulatory agency and funding organisation, it decisively orient the content and modalities of the activities of housing associations. In particular, it defines the legitimate activities and projects, that is those which “deserve” the support of public funding. Moreover, it distributes its subsidies within a competitive framework, on the basis of biddings, according to its evaluation of the quality of the projects presented by the housing associations. This competitive framework which puts the housing associations in competition in order to obtain funding introduces within the BME housing movement centrifugal forces which are contrary to the logic of empowerment.

To put it in a nutshell, it appears that BME housing associations are strongly dependent on the Housing Corporation, for two main reasons. One the one hand, like every association, BME housing associations must conform to the conditions imposed by their main regulatory and funding organisation. The Housing Corporation imposes a normalising framework, based on norms of liberalism, efficiency and concurrence and on the tight control of performance criteria. On the other hand, as BME housing associations, they violently endure the uncertainties of the Housing Corporation policy for BME housing. After working for the structuring of a BME housing association sector, the Housing Corporation policy is today an element of destructuration -or at the very least of fragilisation- of this sector. Beyond the rhetoric of community and empowerment, these associations are strongly incorporated to the institutional system and structured by this system. Their margin of autonomy is very weak. This appears nowhere as clearly as in the strategies of joining mainstream housing associations or urban consortia that several of them have been constrained to display.
b) Merging strategies: the end of the black housing movement?

The liberalist orientation of national housing policy seems to be hardly compatible with a policy of promotion of diversity and of BME housing associations. The liberal reorientation of housing policy since the 1980s has been weakening BME housing associations. It is clear in the case of Birmingham, where most of BME housing associations are small and young. Most of them are confronted to viability issues. Some of them have joined bigger groups. Since 1999 three of the six BME housing associations of Birmingham\(^{16}\) did resort to that strategy. Black Star and HAMAC have joined the Prime Focus Group in 1999 and 2001, and merged within this group in 2003 under the name of HAMAC. Ashram joined Accord housing association in 2002. These strategies inevitably raise the issue of the identity of BME housing associations and question the project of a community self management of housing. BME housing associations which are still independent from mainstream institutions perceive these strategies as high risk strategies and as a breaking down with community identity:

“I think it is very bad. They will lose their identity. I know their directors do not want that but I think it will happen to be.” (Interview with the regional director of CARA, 28/5/2002).

The assistant director of HAMAC – whose new director is white – expresses a blended opinion on this new situation:

“My personal opinion on this is that it is better for a BME housing association to be led by a community member but that it is not essential. You can be from the BME group and not deliver the service satisfactorily. The problem is not to be black, the problem is to understand the problems, to be close to the community, to live in the neighbourhoods.” (Interview with the assistant director of HAMAC, 17/2/2005).

This opinion is striking as it is very contradictory with the idea of a legitimacy relying of the community representativity as we could analyse it above.

Beyond these merging and joining processes, all BME housing associations have completely interiorised the issue of financial performance as an integral part of their objectives. A glance at their annual reports indicates that all of them give some importance to that issue and underline their good financial performance. The rhetoric of community is constantly crossed with the discourse of good performance, for instance when the director of Nehemiah writes that “a good, affordable, choice-based housing is at the heart of the activity aiming at building strong communities, social justice and economic competitiveness” (Nehemiah, Annual report 2002, p. 2). Even the associations which have preserved their independence until today have been able to do it only while largely integrating efficiency, concurrence and market norms. The contrast between this attitude and the project of Harambee initiators to promote forms of production and development alternative to capitalism has to be underlined.

Finally, this inquiry leads us to break with the notion that BME housing associations would embody a form of community self government and empowerment. The development of these associations since the 1980s fundamentally raises the issue of the institutionalisation of

\(^{16}\) We take into account Black Star, which does not any more exist under that name since it merged with HAMAC in 2002.
community mobilisation (Piven, Cloward, 1979). The creation or the support of these associations has been clearly promoted by public or para-public bodies, but at the expense of a weakening of their independence and closeness to the communities. If that policy has, in a modest way, contributed to the satisfaction of BME housing needs, it can also be read as a strengthening of social control on these community organisations, a canalisation and an instrumentalisation of community mobilisations. BME housing associations today seem to be as much the expression of a social movement, of community claims, as an artefact produced by the policy of a quango and whose future is seriously jeopardized by the collapse of this policy.

The incorporation of BME housing associations within the bureaucratic machine can also be shown through the identification of some forms of circulation of actors from one institution to another. One can indeed notice that actors commonly circulate from one to another of the four poles structuring local public policy for BME housing, that is local authorities, Housing Corporation, mainstream housing associations and BME housing associations. To give a few examples, the person in charge of BME housing within the Housing Corporation regional office for the West Midlands previously worked in a municipal housing department, as well as the director of Ashram; the assistant director of Ashram used to be the director of the allocation service within Birmingham housing department; the director of Black Star and HAMAC from 2002 to 2004 formerly worked in the Housing Corporation and in housing associations (one mainstream and one BME); the nowadays director of HAMAC is one of the top managers of the mainstream housing association Focus (of which HAMAC has been a subsidiary since 2001). These circulations translate and favour a kind of symbiosis, of institutional but also ideal incorporation.

Finally, what our inquiry shows is that black housing associations are deeply incorporated to the local policy network and very much dependent on other actors, mainly the regional Housing Corporation but also mainstream housing associations. One can therefore identify a gap between the ideology of empowerment and the reality of the social conditions in which black housing associations operate. Given this, shall the black housing associations be considered as a social movement or rather as mere service providers? To answer this question implies to go further and examine the concrete action of BME housing associations.

III. THE CONCRETE ACTION OF BME HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

In which way do BME housing associations propose specific answers to the issue of BME housing? From the point of view of their concrete activities, are these associations a real means of resource redistribution and fight against ethnic inequalities in housing? The first thing to remind here is the scale of that activity: taken together, BME housing associations own 2300 dwellings in Birmingham. This figure reveals how much their capacity to improve the housing conditions of ethnic minorities is limited right away. While keeping this fundamental point in mind, we will successively analyse their new building, allocation and peopling strategies, in order to see whether these policies are specific and to which extent they can favour the effective empowerment of BME communities in the fight for equal access to housing, but also, indirectly, to urban space and public facilities.
A. New building policy: which « cultural difference »?

Regarding new building policy, the first thing to stress is the slowness of this new building development amongst BME housing associations. For reasons linked to the economic, financial and political context in which these associations develop and which makes them particularly fragile, they build few new dwellings in order not to threaten their financial basis:

“Most BME housing association are quite new. When we came into existence, the subsidies arrangements for housing associations were much more generous. Now since the 1988 Housing Act, it is more difficult to develop. When we develop, we do not have the same surplus as longer established housing association.” (Interview with the director of Ashram, 10/5/2002).

Within that context, two main questions must be raised to attempt to determine the specificity of the new building strategy of BME housing associations. First of all, is the design of their dwellings different from the one of dwellings built by mainstream organisations? Secondly, is their location specific?

Regarding the first question, as we have seen, a distinction must be operated between residential schemes (essentially for elderly) and standard social dwellings. The specificity of the design is quite clear in the case of residential schemes for elderly. The case of residences for elderly of associations such as Ashram or Nehemiah can be quoted as an example (Ashram, 1997). However, even in the case of residences, the specificity is not so much in the design of the scheme than in its cultural environment. On the opposite, fast any notion of specificity disappears in the case of standard social dwellings, conceived in most cases for black British younger households. Here, the specificity is often reduced to the fact that these households are bigger than average and that it is thus necessary to foresee relatively big dwellings. But except the number of rooms, the design of the dwellings is not specific. In that sense, it is difficult to talk about a cultural specificity: big dwellings dedicated to BME households do not differ from the ones dedicated to ethnic majority households. Here again, the stress is mainly on the cultural environment, the assumption being that BME groups prefer an environment marked by the presence of the community culture. The strength of this representation explains the importance given to the location of the dwellings, to their inseparably geographical and cultural environment. This regards as well residences for elderly as standard social dwellings.

BME housing associations generally concentrate their new dwellings within neighbourhoods whose proportion of BME households is relatively high, within the inner city. The dwellings of HAMAC and UCHA are thus strongly concentrated in the north west part of the inner city, notably in Handsworth, where there is a large Afro-Caribbean population. The ones of Ashram are concentrated in the south east of the inner city (especially in Sparkbrook and Sparkhill), where the Asian population is strongly present. In a similar way, the biggest residence of CARA in Birmingham is located in Digbeth, in the heart of the Irish quarter. With Birmingham City Council, architects and other community organisations, CARA is one

17 Nevertheless, the National Federation of Housing Associations (NFHA) has issued in 1993 a guidance about “culturally sensitive housing design” (NFHA, 1993). This guide indicates for instance that British anthropometric data are not necessary valid for all BME groups and that Muslims have a preference for green colour.
of the main organisations involved in the Digbeth project group, which aims at promoting an Irish quarter in this neighbourhood (CARA Annual report, 2001, p. 4).

However, some BME housing associations have a policy of diversifying the location of their stock and building outside traditional BME neighbourhoods. This policy orientation does not aim at promoting the dispersion of BME groups but at promoting individual residential choice. In this perspective, Nehemiah for instance developed a new building strategy targeting the outer city, where one third of its dwellings are now located:

“We build in other neighbourhoods in order to create choice.” (Interview with the director of Nehemiah, 22/5/2002).

However, one must stress the strong ambiguity of strategies that aim at allowing choice whereas the idea that the norm for BME households is the preference for residence within the community remains prevalent. At a global scale, the dwellings of BME housing associations are still very much concentrated in the inner city. This favours the segregation of BME groups within these neighbourhoods and thus disadvantages them in the access to a whole range of public urban facilities, amongst which schools.

**B. Allocation policy : the ambiguity of the ethnic criterion**

Instead of examining the whole allocation policies of BME housing associations in the details, we will focus on one question: how is the ethnic criterion taken into account in these policies? Are the dwellings of BME housing associations exclusively allocated to BME groups? Do these associations follow a separatist logic from this point of view? To which extent do they favour BME groups in access to social housing?

The study of BME housing associations operating in Birmingham shows that they do not claim a totally separated and ethnically exclusive allocation policy. They are not by principle close to white candidates or to BME groups other than the one that they “represent”. All these associations put forward their openness to all candidates whatever their ethnic background:

“We do not discriminate against anybody, regarding gender, religion, colour, anything. And we are very proud of that. The 15 houses we have are completely a mix of Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Irish groups.” (Interview with the regional director of CARA, 28/5/2002).

This effort to be seen as opened associations, refusing ghettoisation, can also be noticed in the way in which they present themselves on their websites or in their information booklets: on the website of Nehemiah, it can thus be read that “Nehemiah is a progressive housing association with a stock of more than 400 dwellings, oriented towards multicultural Afro-Caribbean, Asian and European communities in the West Midlands. […] Nehemiah is committed to serving the community and aims at constructing the community into a dynamic social unity in which persons of all ethnic belongings will feel valorised.”

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This absence of ethnic exclusivity can be mainly explained by the British legal framework, which forbids any ethnic discrimination. However, the attitude of BME housing associations does not lack ambiguity since these associations claim for a specific competence in housing some BME groups. There is a strong ambiguity around the use of the ethnic criteria within allocation policies and procedures. If this criteria is not formally recognised, ethnic minorities make up a very clear majority of BME housing associations’ tenants. The percentage of non BME tenants amounts to 0.6% for CARA, 13% for HAMAC, 15% for UCHA, 25% for Ashram and 36% for Nehemiah. Local authority nominations, which rarely reach the official level of 50%, are the main channel for white customers or BME customers with a BME background other than the one targeted by the organisation. It must also be stressed that BME housing associations use local and community channels such as ethnic minority press and radio, local restaurants, local Churches, in order to get known by local residents. This tends to direct towards them customers who mainly belong to the targeted BME group. In the end, BME housing associations undoubtedly favour BME groups in their allocation policy, on the opposite of mainstream social landlords, which tend to favour ethnic majority households.

C. Peopling policy: ghetto or community pride?

We will now deal with one last question: how do BME housing associations perceive and manage the issue of ethnic segregation and the peopling of their housing stock? Ethnic segregation neither is considered as an issue for the central government (Home Office, 2001) nor for the municipality. What about BME housing associations? Do they develop another point of view?

1. Segregation as a no problem

They do not. Like municipal actors, BME housing associations strongly adhere to the representation according to which ethnic segregation is not a problem in itself. Segregation is perceived at the same time as positive and negative: positive as far as it is chosen by BME groups, as far as inner city neighbourhoods offer them appropriate ethnic infrastructures (shops, religious places, etc.) and grant their security; negative as far as it is not chosen and leads to ethnic inequalities in access to a whole range of urban resources. But the conviction that housing BME groups in the inner city is better for their security and that outer city neighbourhoods are not ready to receive them is strongly integrated by BME housing associations.

“[Ethnic concentration] can be a problem and it can be an advantage. It is a problem in so far as the government thinks the communities should integrate. But historically the reasons why the communities have clustered is for their safety, safety through numbers, and also for access to infrastructures, to all services. […] When there are efforts being made to put black or Asian families in white neighbourhoods, neighbourhoods are not ready to receive them. So you cannot impose people into neighbourhoods in that way. I think it is very difficult. I do not have the answer.” (Interview with the director of Ashram, 10/5/2002).

This quotation is particularly interesting because it raises the issue of the racism of white residents in outer city neighbourhoods and illustrates the widespread idea that social
housing organisations can do nothing but take into account the existence of this racism. The conclusion is fatalist: there is nothing to do if white neighbourhoods are not “ready” to receive ethnic minorities.\(^{19}\)

Moreover, one recurring element of the discourse of BME housing associations actors is the belief in the community pride, the community strength, and simultaneously a certain occultation of the constrains explaining ethnic segregation patterns.

“People living in those areas do not perceive them as ghettos. People working and living in Handsworth would say there are problems to be addressed, but the communities are proud of the cultural diversity of the area. They are proud of the community strength. These areas have a lot to offer within themselves. And sometimes I think that the issue is that people who look from outside into these areas think ‘that is a ghetto’.” (Interview with the assistant director of Black Star, 20/12/2000).

In this way, the choice dimension of the residential concentration of BME groups is valorised whereas the constrain dimension (especially ethnic discrimination and racism) is underestimated.

2. A peopling strategy?

Because such representations prevail, social mix is not an objective followed by BME housing associations. Moreover, as we have seen above, most of their dwellings are located in inner city neighbourhoods, which tends to strengthen ethnic residential concentration. Do these housing associations lead peopling strategies? Yes and no. On the one hand, the fact to favour then construction of dwellings in the inner city and to consider that ethnic concentration is chosen more than constrained tends in itself to reinforce ethnic concentration. On the other hand, BME housing associations seem to show a will not to decide at the place of the households, not to impose a residential situation to them.

“I think that, in the public sector housing, people should be given opportunities to feel safe when they are making their housing choice, and go to areas which are traditionally seen as no go areas for BME communities.” (Interview with the assistant director of Black Star, 20/12/2000).

More than imposing a peopling strategy, BME housing associations aim at giving a residential choice to the households. The new building strategies aiming at building dwellings in the outer city take all their sense within that perspective of reinforcing the expression of residential choice by BME households. Nevertheless, this choice remains objectively limited in two ways: first by the concentration of their dwellings in the inner city, secondly by the strength of stereotypes about the aspiration of BME groups to live within their community, in the inner city neighbourhoods. For these reasons, BME housing associations are not in a position which would allow them to reverse the trend of existing deep ethnic inequalities in access to social housing and to public facilities in the British society.

\(^{19}\) On this point, one can refer to the analysis of the discourse about the “tolerance threshold” proposed by V. de Rudder (1991).
Finally, the analysis of the building, allocation and peopling policies of BME housing associations in Birmingham leads to the conclusion that the services that they offer are not so specific, except the fact that they are provided by BME organisations. One can even wonder whether black housing associations could in some way, paradoxically, participate in urban fragmentation. In particular, black housing associations have most of their dwellings in the inner city, which reinforces the ethnic segregation patterns of the urban fabric. This raises the question of the potential contradictions of an antiracist mobilisation based on the ambiguous recognition of “ethnic difference”. By validating the idea of ethnic difference, BME housing associations might contribute to the construction of an essentialist vision of minority ethnic issues. This is a paradox of the differentialist antiracism, as it has been highlighted by P. Gilroy (1995, 1991).

Conclusion

From this analysis of BME housing associations in Birmingham, three main conclusions can be drawn. The first one is the very strong incorporation of these associations within the institutional system, in spite of the discourse about community independence and empowerment. The second one is the noticeable convergence between the construction of the issue by these associations and by the local authority policy and, beyond, by the government policy. This convergence can be noticed at two main levels: firstly, BME housing associations strongly vehicle the notion of “cultural difference” and “specific needs” of BME groups; secondly, they do not consider ethnic segregation as a problem that they should deal with. The third conclusion is that the difference between their action and the one of mainstream social landlords appears to be very relative. In the end, three main specificities of their action can be stressed. The main one is the fact that they favour BME groups in their allocation policies and procedures, even if the resort to an ethnic criterion is not completely explicit; moreover one can assume that, the staff having a BME background, ethnic discrimination are less widespread than amongst mainstream organisations. Secondly, they develop residences for specific groups within BME communities, notably for BME elderly. Thirdly, their dwellings are strongly concentrated in the inner city, which results partly from their history and partly from the belief that it is where BME groups want to live. The attention to “cultural difference” then leads to favour the reproduction of BME segregation in the inner city and to minimise the role of racism and discrimination in the historical construction of segregation patterns.

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