



**Camille François, De gré et de force: Comment l'État expulse les pauvres [Willingly and Not: How the State Evicts the Poor], 2023, La Découverte, 240 pages**

Pascale Dietrich-Ragon

► **To cite this version:**

Pascale Dietrich-Ragon. Camille François, De gré et de force: Comment l'État expulse les pauvres [Willingly and Not: How the State Evicts the Poor], 2023, La Découverte, 240 pages. Population (English edition), 2024, Book Reviews, 79 (1), pp.168-170. hal-04680152

**HAL Id: hal-04680152**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04680152v1>**

Submitted on 28 Aug 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Camille François, *De gré et de force: Comment l'État expulse les pauvres* [Willingly and Not: How the State Evicts the Poor], 2023, La Découverte, 240 pages.

In France, in a time of skyrocketing income and wealth inequalities, the number of evictions from rental housing is growing every year. The Abbé Pierre Foundation regularly decries their dramatic impacts for tenants. The scale of this phenomenon in France remains less massive than in the United States (Desmond, 2016), but it remains a threat weighing on numerous precarious households that struggle to pay the rent. While the housing conditions of the poor are the subject of a considerable sociological literature, few studies have focused on the processes that culminate in their loss of their homes. Camille François' book is a timely contribution to filling this gap. Written in a lively and accessible style, it plunges the reader into the logics that lead tenants not to pay their rent, and describes how agents of the French State exert their coercive power over these 'delinquent tenants'. François focuses less on the lived experiences of indebted tenants and more on the dogsbodies (*petites mains*; literally, 'little hands') of evictions, and the ways they exercise the 'legitimate' violence of the State.

In a 3-year study in the suburbs of Paris, François investigated the entire chain of institutions involved in the evictions process, with their diversity of individual actors (judges, local government administrators, police officers, but also elected officials, collections department employees, and social workers). He explored each step that families go through along the way, from the first missed rent payments to physical expulsion by the police. In the book, François fruitfully combines statistics, archival materials, and ethnography to shed light on his subject from various directions.

First of all, the book provides data essential to understanding the phenomenon of rental debt. While such debts are common and often chronic among the tenants of the social housing authority that François studies, they are also generally brief and transitory. Moreover, in direct contradiction to the widespread idea that the poor are economically incompetent, he shows that these households contract these debts precisely because they offer room for manoeuvre that is adapted to their budget. Not only are these debts cost-free (in contrast to loans, which accrue interest), but they allow these households to go into debt without 'losing face', since they require no formal process or face-to-face encounter with a creditor. In these conditions, holding back the payment of rent, most often temporarily, can be understood as a rational means to confront a lack of money.

The second chapter focuses on the activities of the debt collection department within a social housing authority. How do these predominantly female employees 'make the poor pay' without being overly troubled by moral qualms? As often, these employees are themselves members of the stable fractions of the working classes who are given the task of disciplining poor families, which they see as the 'dirty work' of social housing. They use a variety of techniques to get households to pay off their debts (instalment plans, negotiation on monthly payments,

encouragement to move into a less expensive apartment, etc.). Their strategy involves focusing mainly on women, perceived as the cornerstones of households. This evidence of the gendered character of rental debt recovery is an important original contribution of this study. On one side, those tasked with getting the poor to pay are mainly women, while on the other side the role of motivating family members to act usually falls upon mothers, wives, or sisters in indebted households.

In the third chapter, François brings the reader into the courtrooms where eviction cases are processed. Based on observations of hearings and interviews with judges, along with a quantitative analysis of 795 cases, he shows that the outcomes vary depending on the characteristics of the tenants. The more indebted a tenant and the lower their income, the greater their chances of eviction. Their presence on the day of the hearing also influences the verdict (tenants who do not appear before the judge, which happens in more than half of cases, are at a disadvantage), as does the status of the landlord (the chances of eviction are greater from migrant workers' hostels and private housing). Support from social services and the presence of dependent children in the household make eviction less likely. Overall, tenants who are employed and who do not contest their debts in court are more likely to be granted the additional time they need to repay the debt and avoid eviction.

The next stage in the study focuses on the office that issues administrative authorizations to call in the police to enforce an eviction order. François' observations in this department show how the employees' relationship to tenants is characterized by a logic of distinction, aimed at accentuating the social differences that separate the two groups. This distancing is also based on the social and racial stigmatization of tenants (in conversations amongst themselves, the employees of the department regularly evoke ethnic and racial stereotypes), which contributes to decreasing the emotional and mental burden associated with the work of eviction.

The final chapter, on police eviction operations, reveals the work of making evictions invisible and avoiding 'public disorder' on the day. In the end, almost all eviction operations unfold smoothly. The author concludes: 'Through a skilful mixture of coercion and persuasion, each year State officials drive thousands of families to leave their homes, willingly and not.'

The book concludes with avenues for reform, such as the proposal of a clause for 'suspected indecency' (which would reaffirming the rights and responsibilities of each party in case of unsanitary or substandard housing) and a universal rent guarantee. François also presents the extremely stimulating idea of setting a legal rate of return on private investment in rental housing, which would guarantee stable and predictable returns while limiting real estate speculation.

This book fills a gap in the sociological literature and sheds light on an invisible phenomenon that nonetheless impacts large numbers of low-income households. François' arguments are solid and convincing (although the statistical

data are not presented in the book). The writing, which is extremely spirited and never overburdened with jargon, brings the reader close in to these women, the 'little hands' of eviction. The great strength of François' book is its placement of the question of housing back at the centre of relations of domination. He also makes the perspective of the largely female participants in the evictions apparatus intelligible, presenting a finely detailed analysis of their social trajectories and characteristics, and unveiling the social relations that play out behind the scenes.

François does not, however, provide insights into the experiences of the tenants themselves, and the processes that lead them to step over the red line into debt and the risk of losing their home. Future research should seek to tell us more about the individuals who are unable to settle their rental debts and are ultimately evicted. Research on homelessness has shown that the trajectories of the unhoused are marked by a succession of disruptions and debts, leading them either to choose to leave their housing or to be evicted. What can be done for these individuals who are chronically unable, or made unable, to respect the terms of a rental contract and who end up being identified by institutions as 'unhouseable' or 'unplaceable' (*incasable*) due to their complex combination of problems (precarity, health problems, mental disorders, isolation)? Investigating these questions would provide insights into the impasses that institutional actors come up against, and offer a more complete vision of evictions, presented here exclusively as class judgements and processes of the reproduction of capital. They are also the result of institutions' inability to offer solutions for these 'unhouseable' individuals.

Pascale DIETRICH-RAGON

## Reference

Desmond M. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. Crown.