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Paper 93

Social stratification, patterns of interaction and conviviality as a structure: Notes on Oud-Berchem

by

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**Social stratification, patterns of interaction
and conviviality as a structure:
Notes on Oud-Berchem**

Jan Blommaert

Discussion note, International seminar with Ash Amin, "Solidarity in an age of diversity", Antwerp University, 31 March 2014.

Introduction

These notes must be seen as complementary clarifications to the research documented in Blommaert (2013). In that book, I offered a detailed analysis of the patterns of social life in a superdiverse neighborhood – Oud-Berchem in inner-city Antwerp (Belgium). I must refer the reader to that source for general introductory and background information on the case and the terrain.

The methodology I deployed in that book was a combination of longitudinal ethnography – I have been living in that neighborhood for close to two decades now, and started making structured observations on it since 1997 – and a sociolinguistic technique called ‘linguistic landscaping’ – analyses of publicly displayed language. The methodological claim that drove the study was that disciplined attention to the details of publicly displayed language in the neighborhood offered us an extremely sensitive diagnostic of rapid social change and of the minutiae of patterns of everyday social conduct.

I have no reason to weaken that claim now. The continuously changing linguistic landscape is still the closest and most immediate index of who lives there, how and in which kinds of relationships with others. The choice of language combined with the displayed levels of proficiency in languages chosen – in other words, the often truncated quality of public language – points towards histories of production as well as to selected and targeted audiences; signs, thus, indexically reveal a time axis from past to future. Their specific emplacement – the fact that they are put in specific, nonrandom chosen spots – creates a synchronic (syntagmatic) dimension of contrast or similarity with surrounding or competing signs. Together,

these three directions of analysis and interpretation – past, present and future – provide us with rich and detailed insights into the processes in and upon which the signs operate.

In what follows, I will draw on observational data on interaction patterns in the neighborhood: who talks to whom, when, how and where? And I will try to define a form of ‘light’ social cohesion often called ‘conviviality’ and consisting of seemingly routine and generally unproblematized patterns of social encounters within the infrastructure of the neighborhood. This infrastructure was again described in considerable detail in Blommaert (2013), and consisted of a complex system of facilities – shops, cafes, spaces for encounters – that to differing degrees operated ‘oecumenically’ (open to all) or were ‘specialized’ and focusing on specific groups of the population.

The complex infrastructure enables as well as constrains patterns of interaction in the neighborhood: routine forms of conduct are conditioned by the availability of places where to perform them. And mobility trajectories within the neighborhood, likewise, are conditioned by the location of relevant infrastructures – in order to go to the Belgian hairdresser, one has to pass a Turkish supermarket, a Belgian hardware store, a Turkish and Bulgarian café, a Turkish kebab shop, a Moroccan butcher and a Gujarati grocery. These trajectories evidently condition the patterns of interaction.

Social stratification in Oud-Berchem

Oud-Berchem has seen, since the mid-nineties, a massive and highly elusive influx of new migrants from various parts of the world. These new migrants are themselves a highly heterogeneous category, containing relatively long-term new residents, short-term residents, and labor ‘commuters’ traveling around various sites in Europe doing construction work.

This superdiverse population has generated an infrastructure, and in the genesis of the infrastructure, the already resident Turkish community played a major role. Being owners of a major portion of the real estate in the area – traditionally lowly valued properties – the Turkish community converted large portions of their real estate patrimony into new small (and often Spartan) rental accommodation for newly arrived immigrants. Houses whose market value used to be exceedingly modest

suddenly became highly profitable rental properties, and Turkish community members experienced a sudden economic windfall as an effect of superdiversity.

They grasped that economic opportunity with the help of a new generation of young, highly educated and specialized professionals from within their community. Over the past decade, the ‘traditional’ Turkish ethnic commerce – groceries, small kebab restaurants, cafes, bakeries – have been joined by accountant firms, lawyers, a medical clinic, a dentistry, a bank and insurance company, as well as by several specialized DIY shops and a publicity designer and printer. This new professional ethnic middle-class has ensured that the social and economic status of the Turkish community in the neighborhood has sharply improved . They are the most prominent social group in the neighborhood, next only to a newly (and almost simultaneously) arrived stratum of double-income, native-Belgian middle class, often professionals attracted to the neighborhood because of the relatively moderate real estate prices there. Together with the new Turkish-origin professional middle class, these native-Belgian middle class have pushed a more traditional layer of native-Belgian merchants down in the status hierarchies of the neighborhood. Figure 1 attempts to represent the current social stratigraphy in the neighborhood.

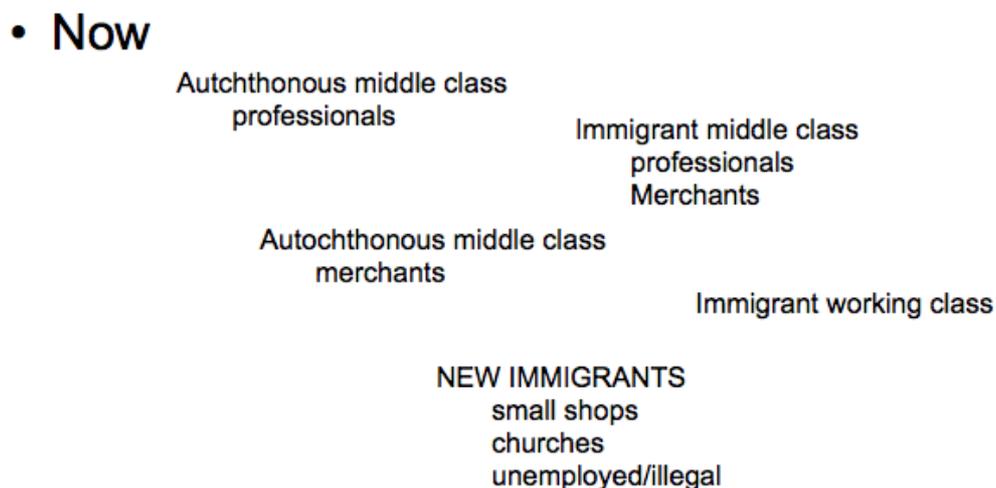


Figure 1: social stratigraphy, Oud-Berchem

The new immigrants – the superdiverse layer that started making its appearance in the neighborhood in the mid-nineties – ranks lowest. Members of that layer of immigrants

operate (an amazingly large number of) evangelical churches drawing large constituencies to the neighborhood for their weekend events; apart from that, they also run night shops, Internet cafes and money transfer bureaus. Large numbers of them are officially unemployed; but their presence in the neighborhood has created a flexible informal labor market on which almost every entrepreneur in the neighborhood draws – especially those upwardly mobile Turkish middle-class professionals whose businesses flourish, among other reasons, because of the availability of a supply of cheap labor in the immediate vicinity.

Social cohesion

Given the social stratigraphy, and given our focus on the importance of infrastructures as conditioning factors on patterns of interaction in the neighborhood, let us take a look at Figure 2. I describe there, roughly and tentatively, the patterns of interactions between the various groups mentioned in the social stratigraphy.

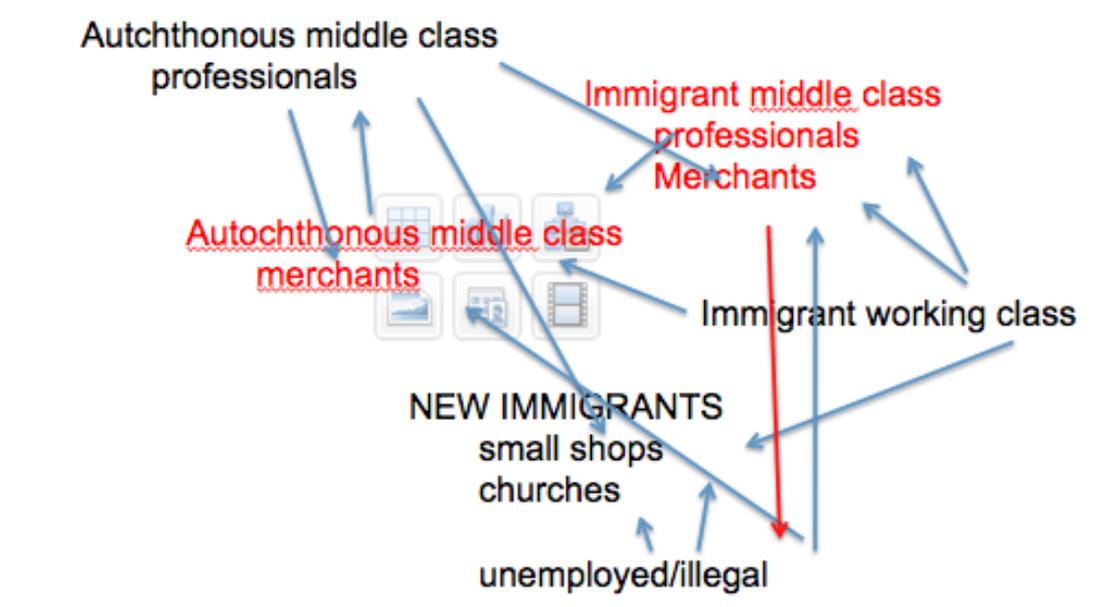


Figure 2: Interactions in the neighborhood

What we see here is a system in which almost every group interacts with almost every other group, through the logic provided by the available infrastructure. The night shops are typically seen as an infrastructure for the poor, and they do sell items typically addressing a precariat: cheap beers and alcoholic beverages, and cheap

prepaid phone cards, But the native-Belgian double-income people are regular customers as well – because their working schedule brings them back home often after closing time of the supermarkets and more upmarket shops. Thus, what the available infrastructure appears to generate, is a dense network of interactions between almost everyone in the neighborhood, usually in the form of short and routine commercial transactions. Such transactions are typically performed in Dutch – but ‘Dutch’ must be understood as a very elastic category of varieties here – as well as in any other available and common language.

The pattern sketched in Figure 2 ensures that it is hard to avoid meeting certain people in the neighborhood; or in the opposite direction, that it is hard to isolate oneself or withdraw into group-specific networks in the area. The infrastructure in the area pushes one – in a rather compelling sense – towards zones of frequent encounter with an undifferentiated (oecumenic) population. Even if one is not sure whether the other customer in the shop is Polish or Russian, one notices that other customer and murmurs a greeting when passing by. This inevitable proximity and interaction has an effect: in survey research currently underway, neighborhood folk would often underscore that they “feel at home” in the neighborhood because “everybody knows me” there.

There is very little reason to draw all of this in bright and happy colors – I am not suggesting an ideal superdiverse community here. But what we cannot miss is the density of cross-whatever contacts, as an effect of the specific infrastructural organization of the neighborhood. Even if such contacts are superficial, often limited to a handful of routine exchanges (greetings, passing orders...) performed in very unfinished varieties of vernacular Dutch, they generate a level of social cohesion which is quite often underestimated as to its value and importance.

This level is a *structure* in the neighborhood: a ‘superficial’ and inconspicuous structure of so-called ‘weak’ ties between people that generates a general sense of peacefulness, security and comfort in the area. When routine exchanges with unknown people are as a rule friendly rather than hostile, it tends to create a sense of place and belonging. Referring again to the ongoing survey work, it struck me that many immigrant inhabitants of the neighborhood referred to the native-Belgian population with terms such as “friendly”, “nice”, “open minded” and “patient”, while over 20% of the district voted for the extreme right-wing (anti immigrant) Vlaams Belang party during the last elections.

One structure – that of conviviality – appears to meet another one – that of widespread politicized xenophobia among the native-Belgian population. I find it impossible to say which of the two structures (both of them enduring features) dominates or determines social outcomes in the neighborhood. I also am hard pressed to stick a label such as ‘solidarity’ to the patterns observed in the neighborhood. Yes, there is a great deal of expressed sharedness of concern and interest; but yes too, immigrants who find work in the local informal labor market get as little as 3 or 4 Euro per hour, for often dirty and demanding labor. A high degree of social cohesion does not cancel exploitation, just as it does not cancel politicized intergroup hostility.

It seems to me that this layered nature of ‘structure’ destabilizes current discourses on solidarity, equality and tolerance in relation to social and cultural superdiversity. And the reason for this is that such discourses, perhaps, assumed a monodimensional, horizontal, linear and distributional imagery of social processes and political structures, while current empirical investigation never stops telling us that such images no longer work.

Reference

Blommaert, Jan

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