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Space and Politics at the neighbourhood level: Making sense of neighbourhood problems and ethnic diversity

My talk today comes in three parts. The first is about problematic neighbourhoods and the ways their main problem –which is, in one way or another, the lack of resources– is mystified and turned to a different issue often involving the cultural diversity of their population.

The second part is about the contextuality of this mystification. I will briefly discuss the different approaches to problematic neighbourhoods between the US and Europe and will also depict differences of approach within Europe making special reference to the South European context.

The last part is a brief presentation of a particular case –that of multifaceted problems in the centre of Athens– where a broader urban problem is turned to a problem of immigrant presence through rewriting the city's social geography and its recent history.

Defining and mystifying neighbourhood problems or problematic neighbourhoods

Problems of decay and, sometimes, of conflict in large European cities seem primarily located in neighbourhoods with substantial immigrant population and/or ethnic diversity. Dealing with interethnic coexistence at the neighbourhood level and with modes to promote [dynamic] tolerance and mutual understanding is, therefore, something that most large European cities seem to need. Cultural and post-colonial studies have been revealing to us, for many years now, the importance of diversity and of fluid and hybrid identities on the ways social and political relations may be deconstructed and reconstructed in respect to norms and patterns we were used to when our cities were less diverse.

On the other hand, focusing on diversity to make sense of neighbourhoods in difficulty or in crisis is suggestive that cultural differences are at the root of the problems we witness in our cities. In this way, cultural diversity usually takes the rap for all the ills

observed at the local level. Without discarding the importance of cultural diversity, my argument today will be more old-fashioned, framing neighbourhood problems primarily in socioeconomic rather than in cultural terms.

Neighbourhoods usually become problematic due to the scarcity of resources that are attributed to meeting social needs following the dominance of neo-liberalism in ideas and policies of social regulation and the prolonged crisis of the welfare state. The constant retreat of social objectives before those of growth and productivity have especially affected those neighbourhoods which lack the means to function within the standards of their broader urban surroundings. This has impacted negatively on neighbourhood hierarchies produced by the uneven spatial distribution of unequal social groups in urban space and of the shortcomings of social services and entitlements to even out this unevenness. Neighbourhood hierarchies embody segregation; and they contribute in reproducing social inequality and discrimination through the differentiated neighbourhood effects they inflict upon their population. This simple depiction of sociospatial inequality is buried, however, under a fourfold mystification that evicts the social nature of the problem.

The first mystification is to consider neighbourhood problems as spatial rather than social. This takes us back to the Chicago School tradition and the substitution of social by spatial dimensions on the assumption that the latter can be effectively used as a surrogate in the study of the former (Park, 1957??). In this way, different types of spaces –like inner cities in the Anglophone world or the French banlieues– are attributed some inherent features associated each time with particular types of space rather than with the underlying social processes. Spatializing the problem is evicting or, at least, putting aside the question of social inequality; it is also often inviting to look for solutions that would cure spaces rather than tackle their problematic social content.

The second mystification is to consider neighbourhood problems as legal rather than social. This takes us to moralist and normative approaches with a focus on what ought to be happening rather than what really happens. When neighbourhoods with acute social problems are primarily identified as places of deviance and anomie, social inequality is put aside by bringing to the fore the rules and norms that should be observed by everyone on the basis of their presumed equal legal rights (and obligations). The receding concern

for social inequality in the name of legal equality invites reasoning in terms of individual responsibility and promotes solutions towards imposing adequate behaviour to those that fail to act as they are expected and as they ought to.

The third –and increasingly powerful– mystification is to consider that the local problem should be faced as economic rather than social. This usually takes the form of either seeing neighbourhoods in difficulty as opportunities for investment –regardless of, and often in spite of, their social content– or to consider investment for their improvement as ineffective and, therefore, as wasted. The liberal economic doctrine considers, more generally, social spending as inefficient, on the assumption that it often encourages passive behaviour and dependence on welfare. The social legitimation of this prescription stems from the broader liberal assumption that investment immediately contributing to increasing productivity and growth will create wealth that will eventually trickle down to all parts of society and this is why it should replace direct social spending. The downplaying of social inequality before economic necessity leads to systematically de-prioritizing and de-legitimating social objectives and to subjecting everything to an economic rationale.

The fourth mystification –and the one more directly related to today's topic– is to consider that neighbourhood problems are cultural rather than social. Angela Merkel recently declared that multiculturalism has failed, David Cameron has followed suit soon afterwards, while Sarkozy and Berlusconi are actively proving to be on the same wavelength. Countries that used to be quite open to the 'Other' –like most north European countries and Australia– are changing their attitude, while support for parties and groups preaching intolerance and xenophobia is growing fast. This changing political attitude towards alterity by conservative parties and electorates (and often by less conservative ones) should be interpreted, in my view, on the basis of two facets and functions of alterity that are partly contradictory.

The first is alterity's function as a dividing and ultimately as an individualizing principle and tool. The postmodernist legitimation of difference and hybridity and, in fact, the acknowledgment of increasingly sub-divisible collective identities has nurtured the capacity of social and political systems to break free from the collective identities which had been fundamental for the modernist project and for the social rights associated with it that culminated in

the development of the welfare state. In this way, the broad collective identities –around which social rights had been anchored– were undermined by the diverse and sometimes contradictory identities they carried internally: age, race, gender or ethnicity have had a dismantling effect on class identity and politics, and this should theoretically be part of a continuous process of deconstruction of collective identities, leading to the liberal Thatcherite ideal of society being the mere aggregation of individuals free to compete with each other and rational in terms of the selfish disposition that drives their competitive choices. In this sense, the story of the "invention of alterity" (Tsoukalas, 2010) may be read not as a step towards emancipation and mutual understanding, but rather as a device that has ultimately served to undermine collective organization and collective action on the basis of difference. In spite of the theoretical possibilities for different political outcomes offered by intersectionality, neo-liberalism has been feeding on this dismantling fragmentation of national and class identities for several decades and has generally prevailed as the way to restructure social and political systems.

The second facet of alterity is its opposite function that re-forms collective identities, especially that of the 'not-Other' as an embodiment of claims on the resources the Other is attributed. The increasing political significance of the 'not-Other', within national and sub-national boundaries, witnesses that it is the turn of multicultural identities to come under severe attack. This time not as they used to be in the assimilationist ethos of French republicanism, but as a redundancy allegedly threatening the local not-Otherness in multiple ways. However, not all collective identities pertaining to alterity come under attack. Some become mainstreamed. Those at stake are the ones whose collective organization, action or mere presence become an impediment to the neoliberal project by reclaiming resources, even though these claims are usually far less than claims for true equity and redistributive justice. Multiculturalism becomes a problem when it denotes the social rights of vulnerable groups that need resources for all sorts of social services and affirmative action irrespective of economic effectiveness. Attacking multiculturalism today is not negating difference; on the contrary, it is considering difference as incompatible with the local 'not-Otherness' and refusing –on that ground– the worth of spending resources for large segments of today's societies, using the growing political support of crisis stricken electorates and the political weakness of groups under

attack. Attacking multiculturalism is in fact deepening the attack on the welfare state and pleading instead for cheaper solutions in the form of police-states.

The contextual limits of definitions and mystifications

Now, a few thoughts about the contextual limits of what I have said. The way I presented the character of neighbourhood problems and its multiple mystification is to a large extent Eurocentric. Neighbourhood problems and problematic neighbourhoods are approached quite differently on the other side of the Atlantic, for instance.

The contextual character of approaches to problematic neighbourhoods becomes clear in the policies that are supposed to deal with their problems. These approaches are deeply affected by the ideological substratum on which they stand. On the American side they are lastingly founded on the dominance of economic liberalism, market meritocracy and on a very high residential mobility. Thus, from the era of Chicago School's *natural areas* people and places were dissociated, forming two separate hierarchies: the hierarchy of (bad and good) places that could be accessed by the hierarchy of people according to merit. In this sense, everyone gets to live in the place that she or he deserves. Segregation in such a context is not a problem *per se*, and society does not need to improve places since those who deserve good places will be able to access them in a context of very high residential mobility, while those who are not able to access them are theoretically those who do not deserve a good place.

It is acknowledged, however, that racial discrimination has been distorting the meritocratic system obstructing potentially deserving African Americans –for instance– from accessing better places, while the cracks of the market also produce barriers to deserving White poor. Always following the liberal doctrine, the problem is framed as an equal opportunity problem, but the opportunity given is to escape from a bad area rather than to improve it. Thus people may be 'moved to opportunity' –following the rationale of a big pilot project in the US that moves people from downgraded social housing projects and controls how they fare in less disadvantaged surroundings– or students living in highly segregated areas who may be bussed to non-segregated schools to redress the equal opportunity balance.

The tendency to dissociate between people and places in the US should certainly be related to the long history of racial discrimination that flagrantly obstructed access to the land and housing markets for substantial parts of the population. At some point, the free movement of individuals for residential location anywhere they could afford became at the same time a recommendation of economic liberalism and a progressive claim for the civil rights movement. In Europe, on the contrary, concern was developed regarding the negative impact of the freely relocating individuals and households through the mechanism of land and housing markets that produces an uneven spatial distribution of social groups and, at the same time, uneven living conditions and life prospects in different localities.

The western and northern European city is, therefore, substantially different in this respect, because the fates of people are much more tied to places. This may be partly due to the much lower residential mobility, but mainly to the fact that the ideological influence of economic liberalism has been comparatively reduced, and questions of residential area quality are constitutive parts of citizen equality in the French republican ethos, or of social rights in Scandinavian welfare societies. Such frames do not dissociate between people and places and were the grounds on which *area based policies* were developed as a way to combat segregation in several countries around Europe.

Intercultural cohabitation and tolerance in the neighbourhood is, therefore, a quite different issue when addressed in the European or the US context. In Europe, however, there are various sub-contexts, some of them quite distant from the dominant West European pattern. The south European context is certainly quite distant form this pattern.

Problematic neighbourhoods and segregation issues more generally have not figured frequently –until recently at least– as a broad concern on the social and political agendas in southern Europe. There are several reasons related to this:

Urbanization in this region has been much less dependent on industrial development compared to the classic industrial city. *Push* rather than *pull* factors have triggered the spectacular population growth after WW2 in southern European large cities. In most of them there was absence of the rationale and the organization patterns that especially the heavy industry imposed on the industrial city under the form of activity zoning, of organized housing provision for workers near the factories, of different forms of transport infrastructure and of services related to maintaining and reproducing the work force. The absence of corporate needs for large

numbers of workers in specific places and with specific skills has reduced the social and political pressure for organizing amenities in the classic welfare state form and facilitated governments to opt alternatively for less comprehensive regulation and less expensive solutions for state funds. Authoritarian regimes and clientelism have monitored the process and driven it away from welfarist approaches to partisan, discriminating and individualised and family centered practices of welfare provision.

The residual welfare state model in southern Europe has been the outcome of these processes and housing is probably its most characteristic part. Social housing has been poorly developed, with very low rates for social rented housing in particular. New settlers in urban areas have often been left to devise their own housing solutions, and were encouraged to do so through self-promotion, haphazard construction or through affordable private sector schemes. In spite of the diversity of housing provision schemes in the region, the outcome was a comparatively very high rate of homeownership which reduced residential mobility, facilitated the establishment and reproduction of family and common origin self-help networks and –ultimately– reduced the formation of socially segregated areas.

Reduced residential mobility in southern Europe has contributed to the gradual improvement of traditional working class areas through the social mobility of their residents who have not followed the expected pattern of moving to a better area as soon as their social status improved. The relative spatial fixity of the socially mobile –due primarily to the local social networks they depend upon– and the absence of massive concentration of outdated social housing projects has prevented most south European cities from developing important pockets of segregation and deprivation. This is not only true for the first post-war decades of intensive urbanization; it is also true for the last 20 years when southern Europe became the host of an important wave of immigration from the south and the east.

Due to the structure of the housing market and the spatial distribution of the different types of housing stock, immigrants with low means have not been compelled to coalesce in space and enhance segregation. In most cases they had to use the private rented sector since no other alternative was present. The outcome is that this important inflow of economically deprived people was broadly distributed in the urban tissue rather than isolated in some of its parts. Segregation indices for migrants in general in most large south European cities are rather low. Indices for particular small ethnic groups are usually misleadingly high. Ethnic groups tend to coalesce in space due to the ways they access the housing market, but

also to the wish to be near relatives and friends. The classic segregation index of dissimilarity measures the degree of this coalescence, which is not the negative aspect of segregation. Small immigrant groups are almost always a minority in their neighbourhood, which means that, even though their members can be found only in some parts of the city, they are never isolated from the rest of the population and they hardly ever represent the majority in the neighbourhoods where they live.

If the rather low degree of spatial isolation is the bright side of ethnoracial segregation in southern Europe, there is also a dark side in the fact that deprivation for immigrant groups may be quite important without the support of intense segregation (Arbaci, …). Housing of very different quality may exist in the same area, the same street, even the same building; and households living in the same area may be using completely different commercial and social services (like schools for example) which may differentiate their living conditions and life prospects in decisive ways.

Moreover, lower levels of immigrant segregation do not lead necessarily to higher levels of acceptance of the Other's presence. In both the 1st and last (4th) round of the European Social Survey (2002-3 and 2008-9 respectively) the Greek and Portuguese samples were between the less tolerant of the Other's presence, amongst the more than 20 participating countries.

A further part of the dark side of ethnoracial segregation in southern Europe is related to the current dynamic of the public finance crisis. The profile of immigration is changing from that of the east European or Latin American economic immigrant to that of political refugee from war zones and sinistered areas in the broader Middle-East and Africa. This means that groups with greater needs and less personal resources (language skills, education level etc) –and therefore with greater difficulties for integration– are increasingly present in the region while an acute crisis of public finances is hitting primarily Greece and Portugal and reduces the means they could deploy to facilitate integration.

In this sense, the management of problematic neighbourhoods in southern Europe seems to become harder both because new immigrant groups have greater needs and less resources, while public funds come under severe stress at the same time. This negative dynamic facilitates greatly the mystification of neighbourhood problems as related to immigrants' cultural diversity.

Immigrants and the reinvention of the Athenian inner city

This brings me to the last part of this talk, where I use the case of the centre of Athens as a showcase of scapegoating of immigrant presence that creatively reinvents the history of the city's social geography.

The centre of Athens became an item on the social and political agenda in relation to the 2004 Olympic Games. At first, discourse was fraught with expectations about the boosting this occasion would bring in terms of tourism, commercial activity and neighbourhood revival. After the Olympics, there was disappointment with the unfulfilled expectations and the situation is increasingly described as decline and decay. The first feature that is invoked to describe decline and decay is the presence of large numbers of immigrants, especially of immigrants without legal documents. The list of negative features is completed by the lack of security for persons and property, the presence of other vulnerable groups (like drug addicts and homeless), the scarce police presence, the aesthetic decay, the frequent occurrence of political demonstrations and traffic congestion. Despite the long list of negative features, the focus of the dominant discourse and of media attention is on immigrant presence. Identifying the problem as such is in fact blaming immigrants for all the adversities in the area. This approach of problems at the city centre has become so dominant that even proponents of political parties that are not openly conservative have difficulties to oppose it, when they don't wholeheartedly embrace it.

According to the dominant discourse, the centre of Athens is a continuously missed opportunity in terms of tourist and commercial investment and of housing that should return to the city centre. The main groups and institutions involved in the discourse about the centre of Athens are the associations of entrepreneurs interested in the area (hotel and commerce businesses etc), groups of residents in sensitive areas, groups of candidate residents and investors, politicians related to the area in one way or another, state agencies and services, groups of academics and researchers and the media. All these groups have "voice" and can speak about the area as if they defended wider interests than their proper ones. Immigrant groups, on the contrary, have almost no voice in this matter and whenever they try to formulate an argument it is always defensive and localised. Within the academic discourse there are approaches that put forward the important interaction between locals and migrants in terms of daily practices that weave a thick tissue of solidarity and reciprocity. These approaches, however, are barely noticeable within the dominant discourse about the city centre.

The dominant discourse relies mainly on mystification. It mainly relies on the confusion between symptoms and causes of decay. The rationale is simple: decay and degradation is proved by the fact that higher and higher-middle social groups –the groups, that is, who have choice in terms of residential location– do not chose to live in the area anymore and the main cause is the presence of immigrants who have brought decay, as they are also held responsible for rising criminality, reduced attractiveness and decreasing commercial activity.

A more attentive look at the city's social geography would reveal a quite different story. In terms of residential location of the higher social strata, Athens has followed a different path from the industrial metropolis of the Anglophone world in the sense that its centre was not abandoned early-on in the city's urbanization process. Athens is also different from the continental model where these strata remain in their central strongholds and even expand on adjacent ones. Higher occupational categories in Athens have started to suburbanize in the mid 1970s and have never stopped since (fig.1). At the same time, there is no considerable "back to the city movement" through gentrification –apart a few very localised and low scale operations– that could counterbalance the dominant movement of these strata towards the periphery.

This suburbanization of higher social strata in Athens has been gradual. At no point was there a rush to the suburbs. In most cases it was not even a *stricto sensu* relocation process as it mainly involved newly formed households choosing to locate directly to the suburbs, while their parental households remained in the centre. This intergenerational process has been facilitated by the fact that the higher social categories are very young since they expanded rapidly during the last decades. The question is why did these young and high occupational groups prefer the suburbs from the centre?

The answer lies in the way the centre was extensively rebuilt during the 1960s and 1970s through a peculiar housing construction system involving small land-owners and builders which led to the proliferation of condominium buildings in the central municipality. [There were less than 1.000 condominiums with five or more stories in 1950 and more than 35.000 in 1980.] The rebuilding of the centre led to the increase of its population by 50% during the 1960s alone. At the same time, basic infrastructures and services remained practically unchanged, while traffic congestion and air pollution surfaced as serious repercussions of overbuilding and increased car numbers. The overall result of this massive investment from higher and middle social strata was the precipitated decline of the centre in terms of living conditions and urban

aesthetic. It particularly affected the small apartments on the lower floors of condominiums produced in that period that became darker and noisier as overbuilding progressed, in comparison to the much more advantageous and larger apartments on higher floors that were less affected by noise, were brighter and could offer much less restricted views. The vast housing stock of small apartments on lower floors in central areas was rapidly depreciated in the late 1970s and in the 1980s leading to a peculiar pattern of vertical social segregation (often within the same building); it also led to a large part of this stock being gradually abandoned due to lack of demand.

This lasted until the early 1990s when immigrants started coming to Athens at a rate that within 10 years they formed 10% of its population compared to an initial less than 2% and 20% in the central municipality. As immigrants had no other housing alternative –the social rented sector being literally non-existent in Greece– they were drawn to this depreciated stock on the lower floors of centrally located condominiums reinforcing the vertical segregation pattern and giving it an ethnoracial dimension as well.

What I am trying to say is that immigrants came after the city centre was in decline and were drawn there *because* it was in decline and *because* they could afford it. For many years they were a solution since they revived part of the depreciated and often unused housing stock (as they have been a solution for several other problems such as the small family business or the domestic provision of care for the elderly which both survived on their cheap labour). They started becoming a problem when the economic climate changed at the same time as the new immigrant profile changed and their presence began to be considered an obstacle for certain influential groups' vision and plans about the city centre.

The discussion and the dominant discourse are focused on a rather small part of the central municipality of Athens. However, it affects negatively local-migrant and interethnic relations all over the city. Within such a context, interethnic coexistence is currently expressed under varied forms. There are areas where rather peaceful relations of solidarity and reciprocity intermingle with parallel but rather distant relations (socially not spatially) and other areas where extreme Right groups have managed to build support for an open conflict situation with bullying and banning of certain immigrant groups from public space.

Conclusion

In this talk, I have tried to argue that problematic neighbourhoods have been a privileged locus where dominant discourses were able to mystify the central problem of social inequality and redistributive justice and to hide it behind a series of other issues, one of those being cultural differences which grew rapidly during the last decades as our cities were becoming increasingly polyethnic. Even though problems related to modes of coexistence in conditions of cultural diversity may be very important, they have contributed in replacing claims for social equality by fuzzier claims regarding social cohesion and tolerance. The political potential offered by this growing diversity has been obviously used more in the process of neo-liberal domination than in an emancipatory and liberating direction. And lately, the stepwise process of this neo-liberal domination is expressed in the dismissing views about multiculturalism of conservative leaders in Europe and other parts of the world that weaken considerably the legitimacy of claims for social cohesion and tolerance. The attack on these weaker surrogates for social equality claims is paving eventually the way for economically efficient and low cost police states to replace welfare states. I hope that European socio-political traditions will resist this direction and its dire outcomes. (but I am less optimist than I used to be)