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***HOMELESSNESS, DISORDER IN PUBLIC SPACE
AND THE REVANCHIST CITY***

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Summary : This paper analyses new forms and expressions of solidarity and then highlights more concrete utterances of solidarity with the homeless in a particular neighbourhood in Brussels (Les Marolles) which is rapidly gentrifying. Our findings are based on interviews with a wide range of concerned actors. One key-finding is that post-Fordist solidarity continuously creates disorder in public space and hence it is the seedbed for contemporary forms of disciplining urban culture.

Mots clés : solidarité, urbanisme normatif, gentrification, sans-abrisme, Bruxelles.

Keywords: solidarity, disciplining urbanism, gentrification, homelessness, Brussels.

Homelessness, disorder in public space and the revanchist city

Since the mid-1980s, there are numerous examples of changing policy-related attitudes towards the homeless in the Western world. These changes clearly reflect a more repressive trend. Cabrera's (2004) fruitful analysis of the news covered by *El Mundo* and *El Pais* on homelessness in Spain's major cities (between the 1st of January 2003 and the 30th of June 2004) highlights the changing attitude of the population towards the homeless. He found that both newspapers regularly report a continuous trickle of news items where the victims of violent events are usually found to be excluded homeless people. He also argues that the most terrible item of those that the newspapers reported during the period he analysed was the case where a group of "well-to-do" young people were arrested in Barcelona "*accused of humiliating beggars and recording it on video*", ... just to have fun (2004, p. 21).

These examples suggest that roofless people are continuously confronted with a hostile (urban) environment, which not only blames them for residing in public places, but which in a most dramatic perspective also becomes a death threat. At first sight, these examples refer to Smith's notion of a revanchist urbanism, entailing a post-industrial urban landscape which:

'portends a vicious reaction against minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women gays and lesbians, immigrants' (Smith 1996 p. 211).

While Smith's revanchist city is approached by ongoing processes of gentrification, this paper discusses the revanchist city and related disciplining urbanism, starting from analysing nowadays solidarity practices towards the homeless.

1. CHALLENGES TO THE UNIVERSALIST NOTION OF SOLIDARITY

1.1. Solidarity as a research object

Solidarity cannot simply be understood in terms of static, one-dimensional and black-and-white categories (Van Oorschot 1997). Solidarity is always contextually situated and therefore there is a need to approach solidarity by taking into account a wide range of societal events and processes (in the past and at present). At the same time and seen from a micro perspective, social reality can be conceived as a framework which takes shape by human interrelations.

Within the empirical context of this research, two macro social processes were of particular interest to investigate: first, the transition towards a post-fordist society, entailing inter alia an important

redefinition of the welfare state; second, the rise and breakthrough of the political extreme-right.

The consequences of both societal trends are considerable. We distinguish two central effects. First, the new role of the State gives cause for the development of the so-called "Third Sector": a whole blend of (often subsidised) civil-society organisations and individual actors, entailing private enterprises (also informal), volunteer groups, religious or philosophical organisations and so on which play a key-role in organising solidarity at present. Second, the way the State prescribes a set of criteria in order to define the limits of eligibility leads towards a complex situation, entailing that criteria for eligibility which are applicable to one specific social field not always match necessarily with criteria defining the eligibility for another social field. Illegal immigrants for instance are non-eligible for political asylum. However, one can assume that they should be eligible for relief in shelters for the homeless, while the daily experiences show that this is not always the case. This proves that criteria prescribing eligibility in one domain can neutralise and even counteract criteria for another domain.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The ethnographical approach of the underlying research of this paper was chiefly based on the performance of a series of in-depth-interviews with several key-actors which are at stake in the present debate and daily organisation of solidarity with the homeless: policy-makers, third sector organisations (such as grassroots committees, Salvation Army, community workers and so on), individual citizens (young gentrifying residents), (trendy) local shopkeepers, security guards and the homeless themselves.

3. ABOUT LES MAROLLES

According to the Belgian 2001 census, about 4750 people live in The Marolles. Of course, this figure excludes those people who are not officially registered, such as some homeless and undocumented and illegal immigrants. Despite the ongoing process of gentrification, census data still betray the desperate socio-economic position of the neighbourhood. Notwithstanding the ongoing gentrification, the neighbourhood is characterised by a modest, if not negative, increase of the average incomes. This can be explained as mostly rather young urban pioneers, who recently rediscovered the assets of the city, embody the gentrification process of the Marolles. Between 1991 and 1998, the neighbourhood showed a significant increase of young adults, resulting in a much younger profile

comparing to the situation in the Brussels Capital Region in 1998 (the share of the age group of 20-34 years increased from 19 % in 1991 to 25 % in 1998). Here, in the southern part of the Brussels centre, a young population is rejuvenating. Because of their specific position in the life cycle, their rewarding on the labour market is rather modest, which explains the limited impact they have on the evolution of the average incomes in the neighbourhood between 1996 and 2001. Moreover, about 50 % of the neighbourhood's population has a non-Belgian nationality, lives in large families and is hit by high unemployment rates. The corresponding yearly average income was only 5040 Euro per inhabitant in 1996, while 10 460 Euro per inhabitant in the Brussels Capital Region.

4. SOLIDARITY AND DISCIPLINING URBANISM

4.1. The visibility of the homeless

According to the federal law on homelessness (1993) homeless people should be treated in special reception centres which should prepare them for reintegration in society. While the previous colonies for the vagrants were situated in the rural periphery of Belgium, third sector organisations are since 1993 established (or continued their work) in the neighbourhoods where the majority of the homeless actually lived. Thus many homeless use during day-time the Brussels public space, in order to beg or just to rest on a bench or to chat to other people. This all makes them a very visible group in public space.

4.2. Practices of conditional solidarity and disciplining urbanism

The search for (new forms of) solidarity and specific disciplining practices towards the homeless was assessed regarding different key-players in the concerned neighbourhood: social rental agencies¹ (SRA's), residential gentrifiers, traditional and trendy (gentrifying) traders (also including a large-scale, market-led and solidarity related supermarket) and security guards at work in the South Station. One of the key-findings of this research is that the criterion of solidarity matches in all possible variations with the fact whether disciplining practices are performed or not. The practice of disciplining is twofold: correction of otherness if possible, removal if correction is impossible.

¹ SRA's are basically grassroots organisations founded since the mid 1980s dominantly by welfare work institutions who try to socialise the private rental market (De Decker 2002).

4.2.1. Gentrifiers : the tolerant

These newcomers develop a passive attitude towards the social deprivation of their neighbourhood. They do not contribute actively to the redistribution of wealth in The Marolles. Although feelings of unsafety were expressed, not one of these young gentrifiers associated otherness with a need for more repression. This also illustrates their tolerance towards otherness in their neighbourhood.

4.2.2. Traditional shop and bar keepers: Conditional donors

Traditional shop and bar keepers consider solidarity with the poor as one of their tasks to perform in The Marolles. However their solidarity is only conditional. Support is clearly reduced, if not refused, to foreigners and to homeless who abuse alcohol, to those who reflect otherness in comparison with those who approach the normality according to these donors of solidarity.

4.2.3. Trendy shop and bar keepers: the opportunists

These new traders are not concerned at all about the ups and downs of the neighbourhood. They do their business and they cleverly anticipate and valorise the "commercial centres contracts" which were launched by the Brussels Capital Region in order to revitalise the neighbourhood. This opportunistic attitude is accompanied by a refusal of solidarity with the poor, even in its conditional form. At the same time, they are not afraid of exerting their status of urban renewer to chase away the homeless from public spaces as they suppose that the homeless will damage their image and thus also their commercial activities.

4.2.4. Social Rental Agencies: Institutional correcting donors

Despite the official recognition of SRA's by the State, they are free to develop a set of criteria which they can use to accept or to refuse possible dwellers. Most SRA's develop their own view, their own target group and their own interpretation of their task. Both SRA's which were interviewed in the running of this research stated clearly that all future tenants have to join a specific body which guides them individually in order to learn managing a budget. Hence, access to decent housing, to be provided by the SRA's, becomes more and more conditional and that these institutions also aim to adjust, to correct the attitude and the related behaviour of the homeless in relation to housing.

The conditions they impose are clearly more flavoured by aspects of disciplining practices.

4.2.5. Market-led solidarity: the market-led correcting donors

Since 2003, a new supermarket with extremely low prices has settled in The Marolles. The location of this supermarket is the result of a well-defined procedure, entailing that all public social welfare agencies of Belgian municipalities and welfare ngo's have the right to apply for the settlement of such a social supermarket. A procedure of "competitive bidding" is installed and this entails that welfare agencies of local authorities and social ngo's have to prepare a file in which they prove as much as possible that such an extremely low-budget supermarket is mostly welcome in a specific neighbourhood within their territory or sphere of action. Once such a partner is selected, this partner has to propose a number of people who are, according to them, entitled to shop in that specific market.

This initiative perfectly reflects the new post-fordist interpretation of solidarity with the poor. Only a chosen share of the inhabitants is allowed to shop in this so-called "social supermarket". Again, a disciplining approach is put to the foreground: potential shoppers have to promise that they will learn about managing their budget, so that a further financial failure can be prevented. The supermarket also strictly regulates the budget people can spend in the social supermarket: 4 Euro a week for adults, 3 Euro a week for children. Prices are extremely low: about 20 % of the prices which are common in the normal supermarkets of Carrefour. The goods that are sold differ each week and they are always defective, which makes them non-saleable in their normal stores.

4.2.6. Private security guards: the removers

B-Security is the internal surveillance service of the Belgian railway company, founded in 1999 and currently staffed with 160 policemen. Their presence is extremely visible in the South Station, together with a series of other police services, such as Group 4, a private company.

The task of these policemen is almost literally to clean the railway station, to remove potentially and effectively disturbing otherness, in order to avoid that the interests of both commuters, businessmen and traders are not disturbed and injured by the presence of deviating behaviour and feelings of unsafety. This explains also why the homeless are mostly to be found in the periphery of the South Station, at minor entrances, out of the commercial activity range of the traders in the station.

5. CONCLUSION

Not all needy persons can access post-fordist organised solidarity institutions. Hence, finding any form of relief for the concerned households means that they have to rely on all kinds of informal assistance, ranging from mutual support among the poor (however, what else can they mutually switch than poverty?) until being caught-up in power relations where they systematically get the worst of. This inherent process of further marginalising the "at all times non-eligibles" starts with their exclusion from public assistance, subsequently their transfer to third sector ngo's where they are also refused and then finally their referral to informal and frequently exploitive forms of solidarity.

In sum: social polarisation, restructuring of solidarity services and disorder are mutually linked. Unless a structural intervention in the two firstly mentioned processes, the problem of disorder is unsolvable. That way, disciplining urbanism in order to fight disorder in trendy public space, is only the last stage in a succession of exclusionary mechanisms which make people to become disorder. Post-Fordist solidarity thus continuously creates disorder and hence it is the seedbed for contemporary forms of disciplining urban culture.

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