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**Super-diversity and the social production of space in
a small Catalan town**

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IRIS WORKING PAPER SERIES, NO. 17/2017

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Martin Lundsteen

Abstract

Taking its point of departure in the case of Salt, a small Catalan town located next to Girona, this paper analyses the everyday negotiation of the emerging 'super-diverse' reality outside the metropolis, yielding a specific focus to space. Employing the conceptual distinction developed by Setha Low between social production and social construction of space, recent historical developments in this rural-urban locality are analysed, accounting for the contested understandings of space and belonging. Often analyses of social problems in poor neighbourhoods ignore the deep connections between everyday interactions in space and the structural tensions, due to ethnic, racial, class and/or gender inequalities, that underlie them. In this paper, however, a critical analysis of the vernacular groupings that are actually put into practice in the specific context of a small town, the social construction of space, reveals the neglect of its relation to the larger context, the social production of space.

Keywords

Social production of space; social construction of space; small town; super-diversity, symbolic communities

Citation

Lundsteen, M. (2017) 'Super-diversity and the social production of space in a small Catalan town', *IRIS Working Paper Series*, No. 17/2017. Birmingham: Institute for Research into Superdiversity

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Introduction

New social conditions have arisen in rural or semi-rural areas which had often not been exposed to a high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity, areas which are often also characterised by another kind of sociality and inter-relatedness, and which thus somehow suppose an interesting context of possible conviviality or “living with difference” (Valentine 2008; Goonewardena & Kipfer 2005).

While, until recently, a large amount of research in migration studies has focused mainly on the transformations brought about in the social composition of the urban spaces of the big cities or metropolis of the world of the Global North (such as London, Paris, New York, Chicago, and Barcelona, to name a few). However, recently a new focus of attention has developed in migration studies – although largely originating within the disciplines of geography, anthropology and sociology – on studying these inter-ethnic relations in the setting of small and medium-sized towns (Lundsteen 2015, 2010; Berg & Sigona 2013; Rogaly & Qureshi 2013; Phillimore 2013; Erel 2011; Goebel 2011; Bell & Jayne 2009; Garland & Chakraborti 2006). In fact, in recent decades we see a geographical spread of ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007), i.e. the diversification of diversity.

The main aim of this paper is to critically analyse the everyday negotiation of this ‘super-diverse’ reality which has emerged in a small Catalan town, Salt (Girona), during the last decade with around 40% of migrant population from about 65 different countries (Lundsteen 2015). It is based on a fieldwork brought about in Salt during 2011-2013, where the author resided in three different parts of the town, carrying out intensive participant observations across ethnic groups both in the intimate space of the homes as well as in the street (Lundsteen 2015).

Via a proposed theoretical framework, built upon the ideas of Norbert Elias and John Scotson (1965) and Setha Low (1999), this paper thus analyses the space and place-making, the social construction of space, in relation to the social production of space in Salt in relation to the relatively recent social integration of people from outside the European Union (mainly from Morocco, Senegal and Gambia, Honduras and Pakistan). A new migratory phenomenon which, nonetheless, inserts itself in a context of continued migration patterns both from within the territory of the Spanish State as well as from other parts of the European Union. A foregoing and continuous history of mobility and social production of space which, nonetheless, is being silenced to such a level that migration and diversity are concepts only used to describe the extra-European migration.

We see that amongst a great part of the Spanish (national) residents a social construction of the space is being called upon as means to justify an exclusionary/primary belonging in place as opposed to the recent arrival of migrants, who are primarily depicted as 'invaders'. Similarly, a moral representation is made in terms of commitment and work in the neighbourhood, where the 'foreign populations' are depicted as civic and moral transgressors mainly due to their different form of being.

However, the main argument of this article is that these changes cannot be fully understood *sui generis*, they should rather be analysed in relation to changes in real estate market and labour market demands (in this case, however, I will mainly focus on the first one), that is the social production of space.

As a matter of fact, the starting point of this analysis is profoundly inspired by Elias and Scotson’s (1965) analysis of the ways in which internal divisions among workers were produced in several

neighbourhoods in a suburban area of a large and wealthy industrial town in central England in the 60s. In their account the neighbourhood is historically a politically charged category that gives symbolic meaning to the social space: it can promote certain forms of exclusionary belonging, based on class inequalities or certain local ideas of belonging and native-ness, while also providing solidarity and equality. I believe this is an interestingly open-factorial analysis which shows the importance of locally produced categories in close relation to space and time. However, it also tends to ignore underlying structural categorisations on which these symbolic communities depend, categorisations which are often translocally (global) important (Southerton 2002).

Henceforth, this initial framework has been paired with the ideas of Setha Low (1999) on the social production and social construction of space. In her account, **social production of space** includes all the factors –social, economic, ideological and technological- which pretend to construct the material setting physically:

“The social production of space includes all those factors – social, economic, ideological, and technological – whose intended goal is the physical creation of the material setting. The materialist emphasis of the term social production is useful in defining the historical emergence and political and economic formation of urban space” (Low 1999, p.112).

Social construction of space, on the other hand, refers to the spatial transformation of space - through the social interactions, conversations, memories, sentiments, imaginations, and uses- into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning:

“The term social construction may then be conveniently reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. Thus, the social construction of space is the actual transformation of space –through people’s social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting– into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning” (Low 1999, p.112).

Ethnographic material

Indeed, Salt is an interesting case: it is a small town located in the north of Catalonia, it is semi-rural and has about 30,000 inhabitants. Of these, little more than 40% have another nationality than Spanish, and so there are more than 60 different nationalities, and even more languages spoken. According to the great majority of the neighbours this super-diverse context had seemingly not been problematic, until 2009-2010 when several tense moments and social conflicts took place between Spanish-nationals and foreigners. Conflicts which were dubbed “cultural conflicts”.

In fact, the initial idea that laid the ground for my research, was that these social conflicts could serve as an interesting analytical moment for an analysis of the local negotiation of social boundaries, as well as unravelling the importance of other more global political and economic processes in this. And through the ethnography (see Lundsteen 2015 for more details) we see how a great majority of the Spanish nationals express a divide between “those from outside” and “the ones from here” or “the usual ones”, divisions which could easily cross the symbolic boundaries of ethnicity and culture, and which mainly refer to the temporal settlement of the inhabitants. However, in this case, they coincide with a grouping of the ‘old migrants’ -from other parts of Spain- and the Catalans against the foreign nationals, the ‘newly arrived’.

In fact, in the hegemonic vision of the social space of the town, its social construction, these so-called “foreigners” are continuously blamed for the negative changes perceived in the town: for instance, it is said that they are the reason a large group of Spanish nationals have left town, and that the social and physical space of the Centre neighbourhood has deteriorated. However, I argue that these changes should be understood in relation to changes in real estate market and labour market demands, that is the social production of space.

As will be clear from the following section, the liberalization of the real estate market in the late-90s created a completely new situation, which fostered speculation in the real estate market and, above all, important urban transformations. A process which implied, and at the same time produced, specific kinds of mobility and immobility (people who would move in and out, and others who could do neither), to which end these ‘foreigners’ played an essential role.

The social production of space in Salt in the 2000s

At the beginning of the 21st century a large percentage of the Spanish nationals living in the Centre neighbourhood moved to other neighbourhoods of Salt. Meanwhile, new inhabitants mainly from outside Spain arrived and settled. When studying these transformations, four stages can be determined.

A first one (from the late 90s to the beginning of the 21st century), in which we see how the liberalization in the laws of land ownership and valuation, promoted a greater commercialization and speculation with the housing sector, of which a great proportion had until then been semi-public. In this context, a great deal of home-owners benefitted from the huge increases in the valuation of their flats (between 1998 and 2008, the prices increased by 180% in Spain, see the Instituto Nacional de Estadística: www.ine.es). As a consequence, many neighbours of Spanish nationality took advantage of this moment and moved out, often in search of bigger and/or better apartments and neighbourhoods, and sometimes even other towns.

(...) it's the same, it's the same, they might have left because due to their standard of living it was possible to buy a house in Caldes (Malavella) and so they left, the first ones... of course, at that time (...) an (real estate) agent would come to you and say «you put your flat for sale because now you can acquire a house or a living standard», «great» and so they start to sell (..) the real estate agencies start selling flats, and they sell them to the immigrants (...) the first ones went for this reason

Concepción, Spanish woman, 48 years old, living in the Barri Centre

This foundational stage is however often ignored, focus being put instead on the second stage and the subjects who would arrive in order to make it possible.

A second stage (from the beginning of 21st century until the advent of ‘the crisis’), in which the abovementioned mobility continues and intensifies. At this point people were beginning to leave now also as a consequence of their old neighbours moving out, and due to fear and/or racism with regards to the people arriving.

A third stage (2007-2009, at the beginning of the crisis), in which flats were still being sold at increasingly high prices (the peak was reached in 2009), accompanied by a strong stigmatisation of the space, due to the increasing number of foreigners; the latter development seems to have incited

some of the remaining neighbours of Spanish nationality to move out as quickly as possible. The idea, often promoted by real estate agencies, was to take advantage of the situation and earn some money and get out before the flats would lose value and thus they would lose out on an upward social mobility. Ironically, though, they were often already too late, and accepted expensive mortgages they would not be able to pay, subsequently moving back.

Meanwhile, the flats were often sold under fraudulent conditions. In the real estate sector, they were surely aware that this prosperous moment would not last long, and thus they made people sign mortgages although the agent knew they probably would not be able to fulfil them.

Finally, a fourth stage (2009–), in which the crisis in the real estate sector kicks in. In this phase the inhabitants cannot move out, due to the fact that mortgages were no longer granted as easily and that the prices of the flats had decreased considerably. At the same time, due to the foregoing process of stigmatisation, a lot of these people had ended up feeling “trapped in the misery”. Simultaneously, the crisis contributed to an increasing instability and precarity among the workers (both Spaniards and ‘migrants’), who were often forced to turn to informal economic practices in order to sustain.

Situations which would often cause conflicts in the neighbourhood communities due to non-payments and debts, mainly among the newcomers, who were also the most affected by the increasing unemployment and precarity.

The social construction of space and the historical formation of communities

Despite previous experiences of depravity and deterioration, especially in the 80s due to the economic crisis, often when I spoke to inhabitants who had been living in the town for several decades, they told me stories about how “great it was before” and how “well it worked socially”. In their memory a specific kind of feeling or belonging in community, which they often felt that they had lost, as the following quote illustrates:

A: We have lost our identity... It’s that simple

Q: And what was that identity?

A: Look, for a starter you didn’t see any satellite dishes when walking the street (...) in all the shops we knew each other well, established shops we’d know each other the ones who’d always been living here... You’d go to the parquet and play with the kids and you wouldn’t be afraid of leaving them alone for a while, and now it’s not like that, now you don’t know anybody... All the shops are Moroccan, blacks, and so on... And the square... you won’t go there because the only thing you’d find is young people selling drugs... And the children, none of them are from here (...) Everything has changed, everything... Before we all knew each other, and now we don’t know anybody

Pilar, Spanish woman, 58 years old, living in the Barri Centre

An idea very similar to the traditional communities as described by Durkheim, Weber and Tönnies, and which presupposed some kind of previous cultural homogeneity. As a matter of fact, these inhabitants would often talk about a cultural homogeneity based on shared histories of migration, as they had often come from the same region in Spain.

However, equally important they often shared residential spaces and spaces of leisure, and a lot of them even worked in the same factories. In this sense the neighbourhood as a notion does not simply refer to a geographical space, but rather a complex social process and a collective project; a practical experience and a common feeling – built upon different experiences of coexistence and conflict – which is translated into a collective conscience (Williams 1977). As a consequence of the social struggles aimed at improving the neighbourhood the neighbours became known to each other and created social ties that would bind and remain, and which would foster certain experiences of sociability. A specific moral community and “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977) which they shared, and which had emerged from their everyday experiences of conflicts and sharing coexistence; a kind of “place habitus” or neighbourhood conscience similar to the working class conscience that Thompson (1968) talked about.

In the 90s, however, important socio-economic changes took place which would lay the foundation for the future changes to the neighbourhood and the city. The increasing improvement in the labour conditions, social mobility, consumerism and individual prosperity of some, seem to have induced a need for social improvement in terms of housing and living (or at least this idea of progress was promoted), thus producing the first rupture of the social ties.

Meanwhile the neighbourhood was in decline and new attractive zones were being built, and at the same time housing values were increasing which meant that the dream of a better life seemed to become reality. For instance, according to some of the neighbours, one of the reasons they moved out was that the neighbourhood was deteriorating, while the neighbourhood to which they moved was completely new. Hence, whereas before the deteriorated state of the neighbourhood had been the reason to put in collective efforts and mobilisations, now each inhabitant would seek out his own fortune individually, this way leaving the neighbourhood in a deteriorating state and with broken social ties.

Nonetheless, when talking to some of the Spanish neighbours who didn't leave, the reason for the 'native flight', as they coined it, can be found in relation to the arrival of the new foreign inhabitants. This way the deterioration is presented as the result, and not the reason, for the mobility.

Those who stayed, now seemed to direct their struggle against the socio-urban degradation *and* territorial stigmatisation. The symbolic formation, however, was based on a romanticizing of the past. Despite the fact that an aim for a good life and social justice -i.e. improving the social space as opposed to the speculation and focus on private interests- is inherent to their struggle; an aim which in fact might largely be shared by all the neighbours. Hence, the question of socio-spatial inequality has been displaced discursively: from putting emphasis on the aspects of the common conditions of neighbours and workers now the struggle seemed rather to be expressed in cultural terms; a social construction of space and community which poses the newcomers, the other neighbours, the migrants (as a generalized social category), as the degrading agent.

Thus, focus is put principally on a supposed erosion of the imagined community of the neighbours, and above all, the loss of sociability related to it and a deterioration of the social life in the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood identity is for these inhabitants getting lost. According to them, this is clearly an effect or product of the new super-diversity. Following their argument, the arrival of culturally different inhabitants has made the coexistence difficult, because it makes social cohesion impossible.

Over and over again, the developments are seen with the lenses of “us” and “them”; a convergence between the ‘autochthonous’ community and belonging to the neighbourhood which is opposed to the migrant community, which thus is somehow not part of the neighbourhood community. So, for instance, they say that there are no young people, when now there are more than ever; that the local business is decreasing, when there is a very active local business community.

This perception of a loss of identity is related directly to the understanding that an invasion of public space is taking place, and that there is an imposition of other cultural values and norms. Discourses which end up taking the form of moral judgements about which values and social practices are more correct and appropriate. This way certain practices are deemed more acceptable than others, and thus, projecting culturally latent but hegemonic values onto the neighbourhood. The consequence is that some neighbours are deemed more ‘neighbours’ than others; more ‘at home’ than others.

“[B]ecause ‘home’ refers more to a structure of feelings than a physical, house-like construct, it is fragmentary images, rather than explicit formulations, of what the homely nation ought to be like that we obtain by listening to people's comments. Together, however, these fragments show the national home to be structured like many other images of homely life, around the key themes of familiarity, security and community” (Hage 1998, pp.39–40)

So, instead of producing a shared symbolic community of neighbours, certain symbols like a headscarf or certain skin colour, are seen as social markers of group boundaries which raise frontiers between culturally incommensurable communities, due to which people finally end up gathering according to the ethno-cultural appropriateness and comfort. This way, the culturalist readings finally self-fulfil their prophecies and naturalise the created divisions, as well as the cultural conflicts between them.

However, it is important to remember the foregoing social production of space and the relations produced, often ignored, and the huge stratifications put in practise as a consequence of the crisis, where the great majority affected by unemployment and foreclosures have been the migrant population; in this extreme precarity is the norm which leads to debts in the neighbourhood communities and as a consequence the degradation of the shared space, and social conflicts and sometimes even insecurity.

Final remarks

The patterns of diversity definitely seemed to have changed in 21st century Europe, as such the small town of Salt is an interesting illustration. “Super-diversity” as a concept seems quite capable of explaining most of them due to the multi-factorial analysis that it somehow proposes – as opposed to putting the main emphasis on the cultural aspects. Nonetheless, although I believe it is a good exercise to criticise the use of the discourses and find new ways of describing social reality observed, in practice this has often shown its limits. The ways in which different groupings are actually being put into practice or exercised in the setting and in relation to other socio-economic factors have often been ignored: an exercise which risks ignoring inequalities and racism often inherent to the different group formations in situ, and thus naturalising and reproducing them (Berg & Sigona 2013; Olwig 2013).

Following Palomera (2013, p.10), I believe this is the tendency we have seen developing in recent decades under another dominant strand which has been related to the concepts of social capital, social cohesion, and social mixing. A plethora of studies that tend to be highly influenced by the notion of social capital as developed by (Putnam 2000), a tendency which has run parallel to a revival of the role of 'civil society', as opposed to the State, and on promoting self-help and community programmes (Goonewardena & Rankin 2004, pp.118–119; Etzioni 1993; Palomera 2013, p.10). In this line of thought, the main focus is applied to the archetypical indicators of social cohesion as conceived in the heyday of the birth of sociology, thus classifying neighbourhoods in high or low cohesion according to whether they have weak or strong ties, little or strong civic engagement, and high or low inter-ethnic/social class mixing and so on (Koutrolidou 2012). As Palomera (2013, p.10) notes, "some authors have criticized this version of social capital in relation to neighbourhoods, reminding that Bourdieu's original concept involves a wider field of structural inequality and domination (Morrow 1999; Narotzky 2007)". In this sense, some studies even explain tensions in impoverished neighbourhoods as a result of 'low social capital', and/or see residential mistrust and apprehension as a result of a lack of common norms (Putnam 2007; Goodhart 2004). The fundamental critique that has to be put forward of these analyses of social problems in poor neighbourhoods is that they obfuscate the deep connections between everyday interactions and the structural tensions, due to ethnic, racial, class and/or gender inequalities, that underlie them.

In this sense I believe that super-diversity, and all the other contemporary variants, are quite interesting attempts to overcome methodological nationalism, but they somehow fall short in their attempt to conceive the interrelatedness of socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. Super-diversity as a concept is definitely capable of describing a certain new reality or even a new agenda in a post-multicultural era. However, in analytical terms, I have found it more useful to focus on the vernacular groupings that are actually put into practice in the specific context that we study and on how they employ one discourse or the other; an exercise which entails critically describing and analysing their use in relation to the larger socio-economic context.

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