

Urban Recycling – the City in Migrant Economy

Erol Yildiz

Over the centuries, Europe's cities have been shaped by various different movements of migration. Urbanization without migration is downright inconceivable. To that extent, the labour migration after WW II was only a new phase in which numerous towns and cities were lastingly transformed. Today as well, migration is part of urban everyday existence and increasingly is leaving its indelible stamp on urban reality, even if this development scarcely surfaces in public memory. Instead of acknowledging the living realities of migrants on the ground, they are virtually scandalized and stylized as disintegrative elements. The result is that the constituting nexus between migration and urban development is lost sight of, and the contribution by migrants to urbanity was scarcely acknowledged. Consequently, it is not surprising that another perspective more aware of diversity is being called for in critical migration research in recent years, a vantage point that opens up the horizon of observation for urban transformation processes determined by migration (Yildiz 2013).

Sometimes all that is necessary is an initial visit to some locality or a conversation in order to change one's point of view. It becomes evident that just due to structural reasons alone, the so-called parallel societies are hardly conceivable. That is because urban structures motivate, indeed compel individuals in varying ways and differing contexts to engage in urban communication. Economic activities, social networks, and other initiatives serve to connect the cities and their neighbourhoods with the regional, national, and global world. We see that only few residents were actually born and grew up in a given city neighbourhood, and that not all those who migrate into the city remain forever in one place.

Today the Mom-and-Pop Small Corner Store is Uncle Ali's

Instead of passing judgment from the top down and deprecating residential neighbourhoods marked by migration, the discussion here is on their relevance for urban development and the urban economy. Seen from this vantage point, it becomes evident that often the stories of immigrants are about success, even if realized under precarious conditions. Many such neighbourhoods, which city planners and agencies gave up on and decided to leave to their fate, as a result of de-industrialization and the exodus of population groups previously long-term residents there, did not start moving again until immigrants began to locate there. Those new arrivals, despite an array of diverse legal and political barriers, chose to move into dilapidated or empty houses and apartments; they opened *Uncle Ali* shops¹ and established informal networks. Moreover, the strategies involved here were ones where people are forced to organise their existence and social advancement outside of the official labour markets, and whose accomplishments for that reason are scarcely included in the rosters of *national accounting*. Yet it is precisely those urban districts that are marked by a huge density of provision of services, shops, and gastronomic pleasures on offer. We see how the residents in these neighbourhoods have organised their lives under difficult conditions, how

neglected urban spaces can be revitalized, and thus in a sense “recycled”, through specific economic activities (Yildiz / Mattausch 2009).

Migrant economies today in all European metropolises have become impossible to overlook, and they leave their contouring imprint on the image of the ‘European city’. In many cities, immigrants organise a substantial portion of the business infrastructure, and through their social and economic activity make a significant contribution to urban living quality. We can observe here a kind of self-organised integration. Although politically deemed “undesirable”, many *Gastarbeiter* gradually came to settle permanently in European metropolitan centres and tried under legally compounded and aggravated conditions to appropriate urban localities as their own, and to create and shape new places. In the 1970s, immigrants who were traders set up rows of shops in urban neighbourhoods that, due to global processes of economic restructuring, were losing their local tradespeople. In so doing, they injected new life and vitality into the streets and unto sidewalks, contributing in the process substantially to the renovation and modernization of urban spaces that had deteriorated. Kiosks, small local restaurants, and grocery shops became their principal source of livelihood, gradually leaving their mark on numerous neighbourhoods and streets, so that in many places in the meantime the streets took on a ‘Mediterranean-Oriental flair’. By their presence and through their independent activity, immigrants have left their imprint on the changing face of many cities, giving them stimuli and fresh impetus, and providing many urban districts with a newfound stability once again. They made a virtue of necessity, transforming unemployment into a life in the labour force to meet their subsistence needs.

Prime textbook examples are the urban neighbourhoods near railway stations. As old films show, it was the train stations in particular that served in the years when guest workers were being recruited as the main meeting spot for such workers, and became the imaginary link to their places or origin. E.g. in Germany most of them were living in barracks and huts on the grounds of companies or in collective accommodations. They knew little German and had but scant contact with the local population. Given the state of telecommunications at the time, their connections with their family back home were also initially largely interrupted. Under these conditions, a walk down to the central train station, their first point of arrival in town, was linked with the hope of meeting some acquaintances from their region of origin. Consequently, railroad stations were always a locus of encounter, a place to meet and communicate. It is thus not surprising that precisely in these areas of the cityscape, the first tea houses, small restaurants, and cultural meeting places and hangouts were established by immigrants. The train stations were at the same time points of arrival and loci of departure for urban developments, regeneration, and renewal.

Economies stamped by immigrants in many large cities show how labour migrants and their descendants, living under discriminatory conditions, developed a culture of independence in the truest sense of the term, which would have been unimaginable without the use of informal resources. In most instances, these were family businesses, and oftentimes entire families were actually involved in some capacity in the respective shop or business. In addition, it is evident that it was specifically these family *mom-and-pop enterprises* that in difficult times and in desolate locations were prepared to take risks and open businesses, thus contributing to a fundamental improvement in the supply situation in the urban neighbourhoods.

Economic activities and social networks are closely intertwined. Since migrants find themselves marginalized in the formal labour market, they are forced to develop

other strategies and social skills than in the case of the local population. The development of migrant economy shows that the businesspeople can rely on networks and resources necessary to them for survival. By mobilizing networks and resources, they are also automatically strengthened, “they accumulate social capital” (Saskia Sassen 2000: 103).

Neighbourhoods or streets marked by the presence and activity of migrants should not be seen as a reflection of their *society of origin*, but rather should be viewed as a local and specific arrangement that reflects the living situation of people in the cities. In this way, local expectations are mirrored and expressed, traditions are cited, and new global impositions are reacted to. Retail traders orient themselves, for example, to the tastes of their local clients. Their shops and restaurants, their products and range of services on offer are often a concession to the European conceptions of the imagined “Orient” or “Mediterranean culture”. They are stagings in which the most diverse elements blend and coalesce into a new image, a ‘new tradition’. Here we see the staging of a German Orientalism that Edward Said famously termed *imaginative geography*. (Said 1979: 49ff.)

Robert Pütz also shows in 2004 in a qualitative study on entrepreneurial activities of Turkish migrants in Berlin how “being Turkish” is invented in the local context, staged as a business strategy, and how it is successfully employed. In his view, that is not ethnic behaviour but a transcultural practice, an economic strategy for action. In addition, the businesspeople often find themselves forced to react to ascriptions from the outside, labelling processes to which they are exposed on a daily basis, i.e. they are forced to deal flexibly, playfully, or even with a touch of irony, with clichés of an ethnic or cultural kind. Such strategies or tactical moves, that for outsiders sometimes are confusing or irritating, basically contribute substantially to the economic success of businesses established and run by immigrants. Ethnic clichés are reinterpreted and marketed, becoming a positive self-definition. In this way, migrants create through their economic activities hybrid *multi-home spaces* beyond national and ethnic myths, and beyond the either-or binary of *culture of origin and majority culture*. These places differ from social spaces in which non-ambiguity and monocultural habitus is the norm. These are in a certain sense a kind of *transtopia*², in which economic strategies and new ways of dealing with ascribed clichés are developed in order, at one’s own expense so to speak, to configure and enable one’s social advancement up the ladder (see Péraldi 2009).

These developments specific to a neighbourhood long since reflect an urban daily reality that is distinctively marked by both locality and globality (Yildiz 2004). In the cities, reflected in innumerable examples, we can observe what I have termed *multi-home (mehrheimisch)* everyday praxis, namely social and cultural experiences that are multiply superimposed, intersecting, and overlapping, a multiplex of hybridity. They point to and prove how the residents of urban neighbourhoods utilize for themselves economic, social, and cultural elements and networks that transcend boundaries, defining these anew, combining and fusing them into new structures and life plans, in this way creating urban transtopias. Along with the Oriental and Mediterranean stagings described above in retail trade and gastronomy, this mixture is very evident, specifically manifest in the youth scene culture and its trends, whether hip-hop, Orient Lounge or the ‘Kanak Sprak’³.

It is high time to acknowledge the development of neighbourhoods marked by migration and their economic structures as genuine success stories of immigrants and to bring the cultural and economic stimuli generated by migration to centre

stage in urban policy. Such neighbourhoods have become pacesetters and innovators for the globalized world. It is precisely the informal networks which immigrants in their economic activities can fall back on that constitute in times of economic crisis an important resource and strategy for survival.

Translated from the German by Bill Templer

Notes

1 This is a contemporary play on the traditional German expression *Tante-Emma-Laden*, the equivalent of a *mom-and-pop store* in American parlance.

2 *Transtopia* refers to spaces in which differing, contradictory, plurivalent, ambiguous, local and transborder elements are fused with one another and coalesce into urban structures and forms of communication. *Transtopia* can be places of transition, where marginalized actors and kinds of knowledge move into the center centre of observation, are rendered privileged, and in part also cultivated; loci where dominant norms are interrogated and another and different urban matter-of-course naturalness is generated.

3 *Kanak Sprak* is a German sociolect created by Turkish youth in Germany in late 1980s.

References

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Erol Yildiz is a Turkish-born sociologist. Since March 2014, he is full professor at the Institute for Education and Educational Research, Department for Migration and Education, at the University of Innsbruck. His research focuses on migration and postmigration and their contribution to the urban development. He is author and editor of several publications in the field. The most recent is together with Marc Hill *Nach der Migration. Postmigrantische Perspektiven jenseits der Parallelgesellschaft*, published in 2015.