The Struggle to Belong: Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

Social life in public: ethnographic reflections

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Abstract of paper to be presented at the International RC21 Conference 2011

Session 21.2: Ethnographic Interventions

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In the last two decades the Netherlands has experienced the rise of a new realist politics (Prins 2002; Prins and Soharso 2010) that focuses on the 'problematic' presence of Others: 'allochtonen' or 'Muslims'. Whereas earlier waves of anti-immigrant resentment targeted socio-economic issues, particularly migrants' alleged abuse of welfare arrangements, in the last ten years migration issues are increasingly framed in terms of cultural difference and incompatibility (see Geschiere 2009; van den Berg and Schinkel 2009; Prins and Soharso 2010). Public space is where the incompatible presence of the Other makes itself known and becomes problematic.

Urban sites like the Amsterdam neighborhoods Diamantbuurt and Slotervaart have been pivotal to the popularization of an imaginary of spectacular dystopian cityscapes that are rent apart by ethnic conflict. These dystopian landscapes feature ethnic others, particularly Moroccans/Muslims, whose presence is figured as the cause a sense of disaffection, alienation and conflict among the rightful inhabitants of the city, native Dutch. My current research project, which is still in its early stages, explores Amsterdam's public social life as caught between a reality of everyday, multifaceted diversity and black and white narratives on urban space. It takes as its starting point people's everyday trajectories through and experiences of the urban landscape, thereby mapping what I've called urban trajectories of contested belonging in Amsterdam. This paper represents a provisional attempt to sketch out a theoretical-cum-methodological framework for the study of these urban trajectories.

My current project picks up on many of the themes I explored in earlier research on urban space in neoliberalizing Cairo, particularly the complex situational construction of anonymous social life and the reverberation of the political in the spaces of the street (see De Koning 2009a and 2009b). This paper is thus situated between two projects, using insights and questions from Cairo to speak to the realities of Amsterdam's public social life. Drawing on ethnographic anecdotes from Cairo and Amsterdam, it attempts to chart the matrices of social life in public.

I propose to conceive of social life in public through the concept 'identity in anonymity', and reflect on this concept in two ways. I first examine how social hierarchies, norms and a range of social identifications are taken up in, and performed through people's everyday urban trajectories. I then turn to the notion of 'reading urban scenes', which focuses on the idea of the projection of social

identities in anonymous city life, as well as on the ways in which narratives concerning the city, society and the nation permeate everyday interactions. I hope these efforts to sketch out a framework will eventually help better grasp anonymous social life in an urban landscape that has been the object of intense fears and hopes regarding the future or failure of multicultural/multiethnic society.