

Urban Geographies of Multiculturalism

THE CITY OF PROPINQUITY

Defining multiculturalism or 'the multicultural society' has been the object of recent debate. Sociologists, anthropologists and cultural geographers insist that the multicultural society is a defacto product of our times. Multinational migration is the primary reason for the growth of major cities in the industrialized world,¹ yet the unstoppable forces of globalization

amalgamate and homogenize the urban landscape, creating one 'global culture', engulfing everything into a unified, non-descriptive pattern. How is that urban societies can be 'multicultural' and 'globalized' all at the same time? The very essence of the definition of multiculturalism might provide answers to this conundrum.

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According to Wieviorka (2012) Multiculturalism [is] "A Concept to be Redefined and Certainly Not Replaced by the Extremely Vague Term of Interculturalism."² Following Colin Rowe's formal logic in which fragmentation, and collision, of diverse ideas are imposed by successive generations, each with its own idea of the city, it seems the very essence of 'multiculturalism' today, is a hybrid. Cultural values are superimposed on each other leading to new concepts as evidenced by cultural twists like the Korean Taco in Los Angeles or Japanese-Brazilian Post funk music from São Paulo.³ While the Kebab stand in Berlin's Kreuzberg or the Spanish signs in Miami's Little Havana have become mainstream manifestations of the urban spectacle, they are in essence nothing more than collaged/pasted-in spatial manifestations of culture, integral to the landscape of the contemporary city.

Yet, a definition of multiculturalism catering to the pure visual spectacle bypasses the very cause of the multicultural society: the hardship of the migratory process itself, and the need of establishing a spatial empathy and a sense of community. A "multiculturalism [that] is characterized as a feel-good celebration of ethnocultural diversity, encouraging citizens to acknowledge and embrace the panoply of customs, traditions, music, and cuisine that exist in a multiethnic society"⁴ is a misleading model of what 'multicultural' means, rejected by a number of scholars.⁵

There are specific programs and uses of urban private and public space that respond directly to the concept of multiculturalism. The illegal sweatshop basements in New York's Canal Street or in the outskirts of Barcelona and the multiple occupants' time-shared dwelling of minuscule apartments at Corralas in Madrid's Lavapiés district,⁶ are manifestations of what I have called *ethnospace*. Ethnospace is characterized by transnational dynamics and fluid occupancy with the capacity for rapid change to the urban landscape. The occupation and appropriation of urban residual sub-spaces, and the over-density created by time-shared spaces of dwelling and over-crowded housing are hidden characteristics of Ethnospace.

Furthermore, virtual connections of both financial, social and human capital are part of the ethnic configuration of the city, which impact both physical and abstract landscapes. Multinational urban migration transforms entire sections of the city into 'ethnic enclaves' hosting new arrivals. Such enclaves translate into extrapolated patches of these flows' geographies of origin, producing a new urban polynational metropolis. The results of this extra-national presence in the city generates transnational connections in financial, media and political terms, which simultaneously reverse the flow back to the point of origin. These flows operate as a continuum: *Biopower* (Negri) form the input, while *Immaterial Labour* (Lazzaratto) configures the output. Together they constitute the *Ethnoflow*.⁷

Consequently, an ethnic occupation of urban spaces is dictated not only by ethnographic values, but also by cultural practices that have a direct impact on urban space.⁸ Aesthetic pollution and retail programming (i.e. satellite dishes allowing access to international media as a medium to connect to cultural origins, or the proliferation of money transfer and long-distance calling/phone outlets at the street level) emphasize ethnoflow, while mixed programming such as the micro-Mosque in the back of the Halal butchery, or the daytime showroom turned nighttime sweatshop emphasize *ethnospace*.

Notwithstanding, the definition of multiculturalism remains unclear and undefined in spatial terms. Perhaps the clue to untangle this definition can be provided by the concept of propinquity—or spatial empathy⁹—to define the kaleidoscopic cultural values that make up urban space. The more in common inhabitants have with their urban surroundings, the more propinquity there is between built space and its inhabitants. Spatial propinquity derivatives from the idea of *erthäunis*, or the relationship between objects and people. Globalization is the conducting medium for the urban phenomena of ethnic/multinational occupation of urban space. Following the Roland Barthes' sequence from the myth—as described in *Mythologies*—we could say that globalization becomes the *signifier*, while urban ethnicity becomes the *signified*.¹⁰

Multinational migration persists in urban history. The ethnic enclave dates back almost to the origins of urbanity itself. Jewish Ghettos became a norm in 15th Century Europe, and *Mellahs* in Moroccan cities were pockets of disambiguation within Northern African Arab societies. What is

different today is that globalization operates at a much faster pace, providing instant spectacles and cross-cultural programming, and pop-up spatial territories of tension and harmony. Talking about urban geographies of multiculturalism opens a dialogue and a means of analysis into the ethnic occupation of the city, based on cultural, economical, and political values. What we have called the multicultural city or the polynational metropolis, the city of spatial values culturally transformed by multinational migration, is now the city of propinquity. ♦

ENDNOTES

- 1 Wilson, Franklin D. "Aspects of Migration in an Advanced Industrialized Society." *American Sociological Review* (1988), 53:983-996.
 - 2 Wieviorka, Michel. "Multiculturalism: A Concept to be Redefined and Certainly Not Replaced by the Extremely Vague Term of Interculturalism." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* (2012) 33: 225-232.
 - 3 Korean tacos are a fusion dish popular in the U.S. state of California, often as street food. It consists of Korean-style fillings, such as bulgogi and kimchi, placed on top of small, traditional Mexican corn tortillas (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_taco). Akira S E As Garotas Que Erraram ("Akira S & The Girls Who Fucked Up") were a conceptual outfit made up of Brazilian/Japanese maverick Akira S on bass and programming, writer and activist Pedreira Antunes (formerly Número 2) on vocals and lyrics, Ana Ruth on bass, Corina on keyboards, and Edson X on drums. Their music had a punk/funk/disco feel with great half-spoken, half-sung vocals (<http://www.last.fm/music/Akira+S+&+As+Garotas+Que+Erraram>).
 - 4 Kymlicka, Will. "Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future." Transatlantic Council on Migration, Migration Policy Institute of Europe, 2012.
 - 5 Erskine, Nathan "What is Multiculturalism? Why is so Controversial? Can it Solve Ethnic Conflicts?" In: *Theories of Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict* (2010).
 - 6 "Corrala is a typical representation of Madrid's architecture from XVI and XIX century. The necessity to accommodate a great number of newcomers gave a birth to this kind of buildings, especially popular in the districts of Lavapiés, Latina and Palacio. The entrances to all the apartments in Corralas are communicated through a central patio, where the social life of the community of neighbors take place. Formerly, the apartments were no bigger than 30 square meters and the neighbours shared toilets. Nowadays there are about 500 *corralas* left in Madrid, some of them are in a pretty bad condition although there are some citizen movements taking an initiative of restoring this beautiful sign of Madrilian architecture." (<http://www.360cities.net/image/la-corralla-a-madrid-typical-building#0.00,0.00,70.0>)
 - 7 Negri, Antonio, and Hardt, Michael. *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). According to Hardt and Negri's book *Empire*, "Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it—every individual embraces and reactivates this power of his or her own accord. Its primary task is to administer life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself." (http://www.cyberfeminism.net/biopower/bp_aboutbp.html)
 - 8 "Ethnoscape thus evokes an intricate and dynamic relation between people (ethnos) and place (scape). Cultural identity (ethnicity) has become a prominent way of building individual and collective subjectivities and constructing urban lifestyles. The ideal of public spaces—open, accessible, inclusive, and capable of supporting encounters of difference—makes them privileged sites in this quest [...]... Public spaces are also sites for the negotiation of values, rights, duties, and rules of sociability in a community. Identity politics—issues of legal status, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity—are increasingly played out in public spaces, thus creating Ethnoscapas"
- Irazábal, Clara. "Ethnoscapas", in Banerjee, Tridib, and Loukaitou-Sideris, Anastasia (Eds), *Urban Design: Roots, Influences, and Trends. The Routledge Companion to Urban Design* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010).
- 9 In social psychology, propinquity (from Latin *propinquitas*, "nearness") is one of the main factors leading to interpersonal attraction. It refers to the physical or psychological proximity between people. Propinquity can mean physical proximity, a kinship between people, or a similarity in nature between things ("like-attracts-like") Two people living on the same floor of a building, for example, have a higher propinquity than those living on different floors, just as two people with similar political beliefs possess a higher propinquity than those whose beliefs strongly differ. *Propinquity* is also one of the factors, set out by Jeremy Bentham, used to measure the amount of (utilitarian) pleasure in a method known as felicific calculus (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propinquity>)
 - 10 Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).