Social Dynamic of Group Identities

Living Together[1] in the Neighbourhood

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The establishment of immigrants and ethnic minorities in the neighbourhood could be perceived as a threat to local identities and existing norms of living together. This may create potential divides between "we" (the established) and "they" (the newcomers) – a probability, very much dependant on the social dynamic of intergroup relations. This paper poses the questions: *What factors may create, reproduce and reinforce divides between "we" and "they"? What factors have the potential to reduce them?*

The main subject concerns the evolvement of social institutions in the established-newcomer relations. It is seen as a continuous process with different dimensions, which may include social bargaining in decision making, changes in values, attitudes and behaviours in informal relationships and face-to-face interactions. The different dimensions are seen as interrelated and consecutive stages in the process of living together. Their interplay defines the social dynamic in established-newcomer relations. In this context, the configuration of group identities is analyzed through a sequence of happenings on a local level. They refer to the development of social institutions in the interaction between the *Gitano community*[2] (the newcomers) and the *non-Gitano residents* in the Spanish town of Avilés.

"We" and "They"

The existence of divides between established and newcomers should not be taken for granted. The incorporation of newcomers into societies of settlement creates competitive situations concerning access to opportunities such as spatial or other local resources. These circumstances explain the need for legitimization of power differentials. Accordingly, the significance attributed to ethnic origin may become stronger or weaker, coinciding or not with other dimensions of social relations. In the case of Avilés, ethnic differences are sharpened by differences in lifestyle and social status.

> …In the 1950's Avilés became an iron and steel industrial town enjoying strong economic growth. That generated unplanned migratory movement including the *Gitano community* from the region. It concentrated in several shanty towns and counted around 121 families or 500 persons. They were living in appalling health and hygiene conditions and had serious difficulties in gaining access to resources such as housing, education, health and employment…

The concentration of the *Gitanos* in shanty towns is an indication for a shared group identity. It implies the alignment to co-ethnics in everyday interactions and distinguishes the community as such from the other residents of Avilés. Yet, shared group identity is an interactive process– not only does it reflect a subjective perception, but also an objective one. The town of Avilés took no measures regarding the appearance of shanty towns; therefore, it passively supported the decision of the *Gitanos* to live apart.
Spatial distances became a reference point for the existence of divides between "we" and

"they". The divides were deepened by past discrimination experiences - historically, the community has lived separately from the rest of the population, relying on temporary and insecure employment and characterized by low educational levels.

Only twenty years after the establishment of the *Gitanos*, a change in social relations can be observed. That is explained with external factors including the economic crisis, which began in 1970 and the demographic pressure exercised by the community (high birth rates and short generational cycles). Under these circumstances, for the first time the municipality of Avilés seemed to be concerned about the existence of the shanty towns.

> …In the 80-ties the abolishment of the shanty towns and the integration of the *Gitano* population became political and social concern. In 1989 the municipality put into place the "Initial Plan for the Integration of Ethnic minorities" and "First Plan for the Eradication of shanty towns"…

Social control

The new configuration of social relations consisted in growing power differentials, manifested in social control. While before, the divides between "we" and "they" have been maintained by the acceptance of the shanty towns, now, the municipality has set explicit measures targeting their abolishment. A particular settlement (the Promotional City of Valliniello) was created for the initial re-location of *Gitano families*. It was a transition dwelling, built up in the outskirts of Avilés and represented, in fact, an isolated enclave with serious deficiencies as regards access to resources and infrastructure. The creation of the Promotional City has only deepened ethnic differences. At that time the *Gitanos* lacked any association of their own to represent their interests and actions were taken without their consent. Under these circumstances the municipality has decided upon the re-location policies, imposing social control over the community. As a result, affected *families* were very reluctant about the policies. That led to re-definition of the relation between the community and the town of Avilés, resulting in a Second Plan for the eradication of shanty towns.

Social bargaining

In 2000 UN-Habitat recognized the Second Plan as a good practice in improving living environment and as a best practice in 2006. The Plan renounced the construction of particular settlements like the Promotional City. New measures were agreed upon through a process of social bargaining. This process was characterized by the creation of a large network: a Working Group for ethnic minority's issues was established within the structures of the Town Council. The Group included local authorities, syndicates, NGOs, interest organisations (such as the Spanish Foundation Secretariado General Gitano) and affected families living in the Promotional City. In this context, a consensus was reached about the integration of the *Gitanos* in normalized dwellings.

> *Gitano families* were re-located proportionally, as far as possible, within the town. To avoid overloading, only one dwelling per building was bought or rented to them. By 2006 all shanty towns were abolished and in 2007 the Promotional City was eradicated. Finally, the Second Plan led to the re-accommodation of 117 families in decent flats (from 2000 to 2007).

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The participation of the *Gitanos* in the decision making process, their involvement in the elaboration of the concrete measures is an indication for a new configuration of social relations. Social bargaining has reduced tensions between the community and the municipality. The affected families were this time willing (and not reluctant) about the re-accommodation. Yet, re-location in the town implicates sharing common spaces with *non-Gitano residents*. Of note is that no measure that is successful at increasing the spatial proximity between population categories is necessarily also successful at making the encounter peaceful. That poses the question about *how significant are ethnic differences in face-to-face interactions in the neighbourhood*. In this context, attention will be paid to the relationship between *tenants* (re-accommodated *Gitano families*) and *non-Gitano owners*.

Change of relative values

Social bargaining has determined the new patterns in the development of the relation between the municipality and the *Gitano community*. At the micro level that has opened a possibility for a change of stereotypes, attitudes and behaviours. This process has been encouraged by the introduction of the role of the intermediary.

> Since 2005 the Foundation of San Martín (contracted by the municipality) has been facilitating the access of *Gitano families* to decent housing. As an intermediary it has contacted owners and guaranteed the payment and the maintenance of the dwelling.

The work of the intermediary has decreased the significance of the ethnic dimension in tenant-owner relationships. Owners have become more willing and have more frequently rent a dwelling to *Gitano* families and/or individuals. This effect has spread over to a wider group of potential tenants including *immigrants* as well[3].

Intermediaries have played a key role also in other types of face-to-face interactions. That refers to initiatives targeting work with neighbourhood organisations, which foster the communication between *Gitano* and *non-Gitano population*. Additionally, an awareness raising campaign has been launched on local radios and in the press. The campaign "Sharing Aviles" ('Compartiendo Aviles') addressed negative stereotypes associated with the *Gitanos* (such as the "thief", or the "lazy person") as well as stereotypes related to *immigrants* (referred to as "those who take our jobs").

Change of relative values in neighbourhood relations is a long-term and a time consuming process. In Avilés, it has been initiated by social bargaining and was accelerated through the introduction of intermediaries. In this way conditions have been created, which have reduced the importance of ethnic differences in everyday interactions. That has had a positive effect also on the reception of *immigrants*.

Multidimensionality of social relations

Change in attitudes and behaviours concerning the ethnic dimension may correspond to changes related to other dimensions of social relations. One may assume that reducing socio-economic differences between groups could also reduce the significance attributed to ethnic characteristics.
This assumption is particularly important in the case of the *Gitano community*, which has suffered past discrimination experiences. The reaching of a consensus about the re-location

policies has also included a provision for accompanying measures in employment and education.

> In the period between 2001 and 2007 the Spanish Foundation Secretariado General Gitano carried out the ACCEDER project ("access") supporting *Gitanos* in the access to jobs. By 2007 the project has attended 34,596 persons and managed 24,495 employment contracts. Additionally, in the Local Employment Plan has been introduced a preferential condition for persons undergoing re-location, therefore, increasing the employment chances of the *Gitanos*. Furthermore, campaigns about the importance of formal education have taken place in public schools with higher representation of *Gitano pupils*.

The measures described aimed to reduce social differences between *Gitano* and *non-Gitano residents* in Avilés. That implies also decrease in power differentials regarding access to local resources. In this context, the re-location policy alone could not have been successful without other accompanying measures. The social bargaining process has had broader effects in addressing past discrimination experiences of the *Gitano community*.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the evolvement of social institutions in the interaction between different population groups in Avilés. "Living together" has been presented as a dynamic process of configuration of social relations. It included several consecutive stages: (i) acknowledgement of the existing divides between "we" and "they" (manifested in spatial distances); (ii) imposing re-location policies by means of social control; (iii) reaching of an agreement about re-accommodation through social bargaining; (iv) change of relative values, attitudes and behaviours in relation to the *Gitano community* as well as to *immigrants* (v) interdependence between ethnic and socio-economic dimensions of social relations. These stages could appear with more or less variations also in other local contexts. Consequently, the lessons learned go beyond the geographical scope of Avilés.

Notes

[1] The term of "living together" has been used as an alternative to the concept of social cohesion. The latter is a politically charged concept, while living together is a neutral term, focusing on the dynamic character of social relations.

[2] The direct translation of "gitano" in English is "gypsy". The assignment "gypsy" community may be related to negative connotations and that explains the use of the original term – "gitano". Moreover, it is the way, in which the community denominates itself.

[3] Recently, the population of Avilés has been characterized by growing diversity trends. As at November 2008, the total population of town was 84,797 residents. Foreign citizens counted 3,388 persons, of whom non-EU nationals were 2,118 persons (INE, Padrón Municipal).

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