HOMInG interview

with **Stijn Oosterlynck**
(University of Antwerp)

conducted by Milena Belloni
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**What does home mean in your work?**

I have always been interested in places and in the relationship that people develop with them. We often define places – similar to what many do with home – in terms of feelings of belonging, intimacy, fitting in or being close to one another in virtual or physical terms. It is proximity that defines places and that makes places generate certain effects. My team and I are interested in how proximity may generate solidarity in diverse neighbourhoods. Many European welfare states are based on the idea that people have to share cultural values and norms for the solidarity mechanisms underlying the welfare systems to work. Yet, it is hard to expand these values across ethnic boundaries. This is the legacy of the history which connects welfare states and nation-building. Solidarity is often understood in national terms, it is often defined through ethno-cultural attributes such as language, religion and local customs. However, as we found out, place-based forms of solidarity do not imply that people assimilate to a certain culture. Although it does not automatically happen, superdiverse neighbourhoods offer the opportunity to develop place-based interethnic solidarities. The basis is that different people inhabit the same place. How do people then take shared responsibility for the places they inhabit in diversity, and how do they make that space home for them? This is how we addressed the question of homing.
If we bring the question of solidarity down to the places that people share, then many of the assumed high profile conflicts about, for example, the perceived incompatibility between Islam and European values will be more easily managed. These issues become practical problems that can be accommodated in a very pragmatic way. The question is then: how should we organise these places to accommodate for each of our desires and ambitions?

**What kind of examples of bottom up solidarity have you found?**

In a company for instance we observed how practices of solidarity across cultural boundaries emerged because people have a joint aim – whatever that company produces is the joint aim. They are strongly dependent on each other to work efficiently and are acutely aware of this. If you work in an assemblage chain, for instance, you need to watch each other's back, so you need to teach

newcomers how to work together. Once people realise that they are interdependent, they tend to develop joint responsibility for that work process and solidarity. We did research with people working in a company in the haven in Ghent, Belgium. They were working in a subcontracting company for Volvo. There were 190 different nationalities working there. It is not a very well-paid job and working conditions are not so great. However, people felt that they were belonging there. One of the black employees for instance told us: "This is the only place where I don't feel like a black guy." As long as you contribute your share to the work that is to be done, you belong.

**How is solidarity different from social cohesion?**

You can have social cohesion in very unequal circumstances. Instead solidarity is about sharing resources and redistributing. Social cohesion means that there is no conflict, but this could happen in very unequal circumstances. Another difference between our approach and the one of those who talk about social cohesion is that we focus on the present. The past is often divisive in multicultural societies and the approach of many governments is focused on the past. They try to create social cohesion that is based on a presumed shared past. The new Belgian government has the ambition to create a cultural canon – copying the idea from the Netherlands – which newcomers should learn. The idea is that 'we, as a national community' have come a long way, and that newcomers should learn about the past. But our idea is that if we want to build solidarity in diversity we should also focus on what we share in the present.

**How does solidarity take place in superdiverse neighbourhoods?**

Solidarity happens when there is a common cause that brings people together. We looked at a neighbourhood school in Leuven for instance. The neighbourhood had changed quite dramatically as a result of new people coming in, mostly migrants with a low socioeconomic status. Some teaching staff reacted with a sort of nostalgia for the time in which society was different and their pupils attained high exam scores. Yet, after a while this school managed to change attitude and build a community together in a diverse society, by engaging with the neighbourhood. One of the obstacles was that the teachers were all white middle class and the neighbourhood was mainly composed by ethnic minorities. So the new school director decided that there was a need to re-establish a connection to the neighbourhood with small daily acts. The director was at the school gate in the morning to say "Hi" to the parents coming in every morning. Teachers went for drinks in the neighbourhood after school meetings, they connected with small homework classes association etc. Teachers also made sure that stories and news from far away places connected to the origin of some pupils would be given attention in class. However, these practices of solidarity do not emerge spontaneously. They depend on professional interventions.

**So it is not completely bottom up… it needs to be stirred by someone at a higher level.**

Yes, but professional interventions do not necessarily come from a higher level. It could be someone with a specific intercultural expertise, maybe a volunteer… we see professionals as a very broadly category. They are people with a specific expertise. It does not have to be top down.

**Is squatting a good example for your studies on solidarity?**

We explored one squatting case study in Brussels. There was a group of people in precarious housing followed by social work organisations. They squatted in Elsene in Brussels a vacant building of the social housing company and the social workers and the squatters negotiated a temporary stay. The social housing agreed to the occupation if the squatters promised to renovate the building and leave once the renovation work could start. They fought for this housing place together, renovated it together and had meetings on how to live together. This was a strong basis for solidarity. When new people were coming in, the problem was "what was the commitment of these newcomers". Indeed, the new people were asked to learn the history of the struggle and even to give lectures about this. Here it is clear that the struggle resulted in strong norms and values, which were uniting people, but this approach is also quite exclusionary because new people then need to show loyalty to this struggle and the values that developed in it. So we learned how also in activists' communities there are strong forms of shared values and norms-based solidarity.

**What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges to study home and migration?**

The main difficulty is that to understand how a place works we have to do qualitative research and select cases. But then generalisation becomes more problematic. I think we can use theory for abstracting from particular cases, but the focus on local cases often sits uneasily with the national focus of the debate on multiculturalism. What happens when people live together on the local level is crucial to understand bigger debates on integration and multiculturalism, but many scholars of multiculturalism think that the local is too micro and not relevant at a national level. And policies are devised along these national lines. I can imagine that these challenges also apply to homing studies. The micro scale which is the most crucial element is not taken into account.

**To what extent do the material conditions of housing affect the feeling of being at home?**

Home and house are completely different concepts. House is a material object that provides shelter, but homing is the feeling of belonging to a place. So there is a right to housing but this is not the same as a right to homing. Of course there is a material dimension to homing. If a house is cold with mould, people will probably feel less at home. However, people can live in very precarious circumstances and still develop an attachment to the place where they live.
If you look at the Flemish legislation around the right to housing when they describe the quality of housing they say that the house must be affordable, have specific qualities, must be in a liveable environment liveable and there must be some residential stability. This means that there is not only a connection with housing but also with the neighbourhood. You develop public familiarity there. The environment is known to you and you are to some extent known there. You can navigate that area, you know if one area is dangerous, to which areas you can go for which activities, where the playground is, and so forth. This does not mean that people have to like it. But just that they know what to expect from that place.
I don't think that homing should be equated to the fact that people like the place where they stay. We often see that people live in substandard places, but are still expressing attachment to it. It is cognitive dissonance. If you live in a place with leaking roof of course you don't like it but you can still feel at home there. Because it is hard to live in a place which you deeply hate. If you know that a place has to be your home for the future, as there is no way to find something else, you will start to accommodate yourself in some ways. You could not explain otherwise how all these people live in substandard conditions but do homing in a way or another. My idea is that the familiarity creates security because it becomes predictable. And I think you can get attached to things you do not like out of necessity, or because that is the way things have always been. It is

like solidarity. People do not have to like each other personally for them to be in solidarity with each other.

**What is the link between feeling at home in a house and feeling at home in a neighbourhood?**

The house is a private and intimate space. There is a threshold to get into someone's house. I think that intimacy partially extends to the neighbourhood or at least the streets around someone's house. The closer I go to my house the closer I feel home, and different people have different understandings of what is home for them. This also changes across the life course. For instance, we know from neighbourhood studies that when people have children and pets, this creates stronger attachment to the neighbourhood. Thus, public space can become more of an intimate space and then people become more defensive about it. It becomes a semi-private space. Sometimes, when you go to some neighbourhoods you can feel out of place there, isn't it? This means that there is some homing going on there.
Think about the De Koninckplein in Antwerp a couple of years ago. It is hard to imagine that people can develop some feeling of homeliness there: it was chaotic, there were trams and traffic, but alcoholic people and drug abusers were hanging out there all the time. They felt at home in one way or another. But this made others feel uncomfortable and that is why the municipality moved them out. They established a library and that attracted middle class audience with children and they did not feel at ease passing there. They felt they were passing into other people's intimate place. The work of Lofland (1998) is useful to interpret this situation. She writes that there are three kinds of places: private, public and parochial places. The latter are public places that groups of people turn into their places. Drug users appropriated De Koninckplein, just by putting a lot of beer cans on a doorstep or in a corner. Now some have moved to Sint-Jan square a couple of minutes and that works better because that square is so big it can accommodate many different 'homing' projects.

**Readings**

Oosterlynck, S. (2018), Moving beyond normative philosophies and policy concerns: a sociological account of place-based solidarities in diversity, *Comparative Migration Studies* 6(1): 18.
Oosterlynck, S., Loopmans, M., Shuermans, N., Vandenabeele, K., & Zemni, S. (2016). Putting flesh to the bone: looking for solidarity in diversity, here and now, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39(5): 764-782.
Oosterlynck, S., Schuermans, N., & Loopmans. (eds.) (2017). *Place, diversity and solidarity.* London: Routledge.