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THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF DIVERSITY DISCOURSES: REGENERATING CROYDON METROPOLITAN CENTRE

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Challenges of diversity in urban planning.
- Diversity discourses influencing perceptions on the scope of planning and imagination of new urban spaces.
- Potential of diversity as a politicized notion.

ABSTRACT

Discourses on diversity are increasingly criticised in many fields of public policy. This study draws on the example of regeneration in the Centre of Croydon, a diverse outer-London borough, in order to explore the role of diversity discourses in the imagination and creation of new urban spaces. A framework put forward by Fincher and Iveson (2008) is utilised, who contend that any local effort to plan for diversity should follow the norms *recognition*, *redistribution* and *encounter*. It is argued that questions on recognition are largely absent in the regeneration of Croydon Metropolitan Centre, and redistribution is discursively substituted by an individualised focus on economic opportunities. As such, discourses provide particular sets of rationalities about the influence and scope of planning as well as the imagination of new urban spaces. Nevertheless, counter common criticism, discussions and contestations about inequality are clearly on the agenda in Croydon. Top-down framings of diversity are contested and especially the strong politicisation of encounters between socio-economic groups provides the potential to develop alternative forms of socially oriented planning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a socio-political notion that emerged as a discursive space during the 1980s and 90s (Cooper, 2004). It enabled people to mobilise and fight for their demands based on social differentiations, with "each of these struggles and their associated claims [having] impact on, and in, the sphere of the built environment" (Sandercock, 2000a, p.15). In recent years, however, the notion of diversity has been increasingly criticized for becoming a 'normative meta-narrative' in many fields of public policy, rendering it both politically and conceptually vulnerable (Titley & Lentin, 2008). Concerns are raised that diversity discourses function as 'ideological franchises' providing "gently unifying, cost-free forms of political commitment" (Ibid, p.13) signalling a new stage of depoliticisation, for example by replacing questions of inequality as a dominant political concern in an attempt to mask growing economic polarisation (Michaels, 2007).

In London, discourses on diversity are prominently featured in various policies, and directly linked to planning. The supplementary planning guidance to the city's overall strategic plan *Planning for Equality and Diversity* recognises that diverse communities are often subjected to inequalities (Greater London Authority, 2007). Additionally, it considers "matching regeneration efforts to areas of deprivation a key way that disadvantage and deprivation can be tackled through spatial planning" (Ibid, p.24). Nonetheless, existing research suggests that whereas regeneration in London has been beneficial in creating economic and cultural revitalisation, it lacks behind "in terms of social inclusion and social sustainability, and may well be implicated in contributing to the widening of social and economic inequalities" (Imrie, Lees, & Raco, 2009, p.5).

Even though the importance of discourses has been highlighted for planning policies and actions (Fincher & Iveson, 2008), surprisingly little has been written about it. Policy discourses do not "automatically determine material and spatial outcomes" but, as this research illustrates, can "become the frame of mind for social agents" (Richardson & Jensen, 2003, p.10). Focusing on regeneration in Croydon Metropolitan Centre (CMC), this study asks: *What role do diversity discourses play in the imagination and creation of new urban spaces?*

2. PLANNING FOR DIVERSITY

Fincher and Iveson (2008) put forward a trialectic framework arguing that any local effort to plan for diversity should follow the norms *recognition*, *redistribution* and *encounter.* However, the realization of these norms has proven challenging in many urban contexts.

The built environment is a space where political discussions play out and through which differences are communicated and negotiated (Fincher, Iveson, Leitner, & Preston, 2014). As both academics and practitioners tend to explore the relationship of narrowly-defined groups with a planning system, they run the risk of making homogenizing assumptions which reinforce stereotypes (Beebeejaun, 2012). Conceptualising differences is a process imbued with power. Therefore, the first norm *encounter* rejects static perceptions of identities. A person cannot be reduced to a single factor such as ethnicity or class, as identities are multifaceted, intersectional and subject to change (Tasan-Kok, Van Kempen, Raco, & Bolt, 2014). *Recognition* entails the premise that group identifications are not the result of pre-existing, fixed differences, but political acts of establishing a collective reference point to bring a claim across. With this in mind, planners should try to identify the forms of "diversity that warrant recognition" (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p.84). However, decreasing public expenditures make it

increasingly difficult to request and implement special service provisions for particular needs (Phillimore, 2011).
The second norm *redistribution* follows the premise that planning for diversity should always entail the reallocation of resources to the benefits of the disadvantaged. It further emphasises the need to counter facility-poor areas by an "equity in the allocation of resources" (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p.38) and particularly highlights the power of discourses in this respect: If those in need are described as unworthy, redistributional interventions will not be met with public acceptance and might result in the stigmatisation of areas and people as inferior. Similar to special service provisions, scholars observe that the execution of redistributional planning becomes increasingly difficult (Fraser 2000). Neoliberalisation mobilises urban space into a place of "market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption" (Sager, 2011, p.149) and diversity is predominantly embraced "as a means of attaining the higher goal of economic development" (Lees, 2003, p.623). Often, these 'hard' planning frameworks frequently based on Richard Florida's paradigm of the creative class leave little room for "democratic reflections about how people may want 'their' city to be" (Baeten, 2012, p.6).
In light of disputes whether diversity leads to meaningful experiences or fosters distrust and separation (Thrift, 2005), the third norm *encounter* follows the conviction that "welcoming and/or accommodating strangers creates a form of convivial inclusion and identification" (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p.170). It advocates the creation of safe and accessible places, and the provision of local infrastructure in form of micro-publics such as community facilities, schools and public transportation (Amin, 2002). However, the fear of 'the other' or the 'unknown' also affects planning (Sandercock, 2000b), and perceived threats to property and personal safety go increasingly hand in hand with a securitisation of places (Coaffee & Fussey, 2015). Furthermore, social mix policies have become popular planning tools in Western Europe as efforts to avoid concentrations and produce more liveable cities (Galster, 2007). Yet, these policies often disperse low-income groups while leaving the rich untouched (Blanc, 2010). For instance, the creation of 'balanced communities' in London does not "involve an active redistribution of resources from London's wealthier residents, but the opening up of new 'opportunities' to the city's poorest" (Imrie, Lees, & Raco, 2009, p.10). Practices as such accelerate social and economic inequalities.

3. DIVERSITY DISCOURSES IN THE REGENERATION OF CMC

Croydon is a borough located in the South of the Greater London Authority and home to a diverse population of approximately 363.400 (Croydon Council, 2014a). It has one of London's youngest populations with 24.6% younger than 17, and one of the fastest growing percentages of people identifying as Black and Ethnic Minorities (BME), currently at 45% (Croydon Council, 2013a). More than 100 languages are spoken in the area, and the presence of the UK Border Agency adds a diversity of legal statuses (Ibid). Croydon is also a borough of socio-economic contrasts, accompanied by a corresponding geography: Affluent, green, rather suburban areas predominantly in the South are home to a larger population identifying as White-British. In contrast, nine of Croydon's neighbourhoods mostly in the North are some of the most deprived areas in England (Croydon Council, 2014a). The North is characterised by a more densely built environment, high population turnover and higher percentages of BME inhabitants (Ibid).
In the 1960s, Croydon "took advantage of national policy to ban office development in central London to develop a major office and retail centre" (Holman & Thornley, 2015, p.3). Subsequently, the borough's administration applied several times to receive city status, with the last unsuccessful attempt in 2012. Due to its peculiar role within London, the longstanding ambition to create its own city identity, and a complex political scene, Croydon is said to possess a particular style of urban

politics characterised by the strong influence of business interests and entrepreneurialism of the local council (Phelps, Parson, Ballas, & Dowling, 2006).
Today, much of CMC constitutes a designated 'Opportunity Area' by the Mayor of London to accommodate new, large-scale developments focusing on the creation of new jobs and new homes. The ten key projects that are planned until 2019, concentrating on CMC, are "comparable in scale to the Olympic Park" (Croydon Council, 2014a, p.15). Due to these conditions, regeneration in CMC offers a suitable case to understand the politics and spatialities of diversity discourses. The analysis is based on policy and discourse analyses, supported by 12 in-depth interviews with policy makers, planners, community sector representatives and active residents.

3.1 Hesitant Recognition, Impartial Planning and Neutral Urban Spaces

At first glance, Croydon's diversity seems to be an acclaimed feature. The local government is "celebrating Croydon's diversity and future" (Croydon Council, 2012a, p.4), and private-sector initiatives advertise the "incredibly diverse borough" (*Develop Croydon*, 2014) or praise the local markets' "unusual and exotic offerings" (*Croydon BID,* 2014, p.19). While representations of a heterogeneous population embellish the borough's main vision, only few references to particular spatial needs are made in the actual policies, and hardly followed by concrete measures. The needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities and mobility requirements for the disabled (Croydon Council, 2012a) are few exceptions. The growing number of BME communities, in contrast, has rather negative connotations and is connected to "challenges for individuals, communities and organisations that need to be addressed" (Ibid, 2012c, p.5).
Overall, discourses in Croydon's policy framework often brush *recognition* aside in favour of an approach that, on the long-term, aims to diminishes differences between people and treat everyone equally. This was reflected in a particular idea about spatial planning during conducted interviews. Questions on special spatial needs were largely met with discomfort. The Council's *"open and transparent"* approach was emphasised, and considered vastly superior to *"singling out particular groups"*. Inquiries on group-specificities that warrant recognition were consistently referred to Equality Impact Assessments ensuring that regeneration was *"transparent and fair".* While research often reveals that besides positive efforts, planners revert to homogenizing assumptions (Beebeejaun, 2012), mainstreaming in the regeneration of CMC represents a consciously-chosen approach. Planning for particular spatial needs is seen as incompatible with this form of mainstreaming and new urban spaces were imagined as neutral and unpolitical. Mainstreaming can provoke "more technocratic and managerial approaches to governance" (Raco, Kesten, & Colomb, 2014, p.14), and correspondingly some planners denounced community consultation in CMC's regeneration as *"odd"*. Residents were not necessarily considered to have the right to decide what is happening concerning regeneration in their area.
These findings resonate with the argument that besides being crucial to neoliberal strategies (Keevers, Treleaven, & Sykes, 2008), local knowledge is seldom acknowledged and incorporated in political decisions (Andrew, 2006). However, in Croydon, this approach to diversity and a rather top-down perception of planning is disputed. Interviewed residents denounced any formal recognition by the Council as largely discursive, and local media criticised the use of diversity in Croydon's politics as a 'point-scoring exercise' that objectifies BME communities (Rose, 19 March 2014). At the community level, there is strong acknowledgement of different abilities to organise and have a say in regeneration practices. As one respondent explained*: "For the most part, I think that the majority of the communities are ignored. If you are white, middle class and reside in a leafy suburb your voice is listened to; otherwise forget it!"* While the majority of interviewed residents felt that regeneration projects solely cater for a specific form of diversity based on economic affluence, local groups such as *Residents for Regeneration*

(2012) illustrate that opinions concerning regeneration can highly vary: It is not only resisted against, but also welcomed.

3.2 Aspirations, Vague Planning and Restricted Spatial Imaginations

Discourses represent regeneration in CMC as beneficial to the local population. The Council states that it aims to "regenerate the whole of Croydon for the benefit of everyone, not just a few people or a proportion of society" (Croydon Council, 2013a, p. 10) and "to stimulate regeneration that maximises benefit to the most deprived areas and communities" (Ibid, 2014a, p.7). Thereby, the main focus lies on raising aspirations and creating opportunities for individuals in order to diminish socio-economic differences. In interviews, policy makers emphasised that a lot has already been done *"in the area of behaviour change",* reflecting that "under the Brown and Cameron administrations the principal objective of urban policy has been to re-shape and re-forge the 'low' aspirations and self-esteem of 'problem' citizens" (Raco, 2012, p.43). Planners described the physical regeneration in CMC as the stepping stone to social regeneration, providing *"opportunities to individuals"* and profits were anticipated to *"ripple out to benefit the community".* In line with neoliberal ideology encouraging individuals "to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being" (Larner, 2000, p.13), the preferred approach was "*to draw in the importance of aspiration rather than just focusing on what might be unfair".*

This view disregards that "areas of deprivation are the spatial manifestation of economic and cultural injustice" (Perrons & Skyers, 2003, p.281). Yet interviewees expressed perceptions of a rather vague position of planning concerning redistributional measures. While the norm *redistribution* is inherently spatial, planning's task was considered to create opportunities, and the built environment and new urban spaces perceived as rather disconnected from welfare obligations. Talking about social objectives in the regeneration of CMC, one planner for instance disclosed that "*you wouldn't necessarily plan it in a regeneration scheme as such"* and another described planning as not *"the place to do this".* Interestingly, a clear separation was made between Council-led and privately-led regeneration projects in terms of social benefits for the local community. However, reflecting on decreasing public expenditures, and consequent inevitable collaboration with private parties, planning's scope of influence was perceived as limited, highlighting a difficult situation of personal and professional values on the one hand, and market pressures on the other (Sager, 2009).

The benefits of regeneration are also disputed by residents and activists in the borough. Acknowledging the potential job creation for some individuals, doubts were particularly raised whether regeneration would lead to improvements on a collective level. Especially residents from areas outside CMC were feeling *"marginalised within the places and within the town management and regeneration environment".* They were frustrated over the lack of repeatedly requested basic local infrastructure, such as a supermarket or a health care centre, while *"grand redevelopment takes place in the centre"*. Additional concerns were raised about a *"development-led Council"* and *"regeneration that is all about big businesses, developers, and making as much money as they can get".* The formal and informal links between public and private stakeholders and a complex intertwinement of key actors in the regeneration of CMC receives attention in local media outlets on a regular basis (Davies, 1 June 2015) rendering it not too surprising that many local residents feel powerless and left out in the decision-making processes.

3.3 Social Cohesion, Influential Planning and Spaces for Consumption

While discourses are rather avoidant concerning recognition and redistribution, diversity in Croydon is strongly linked to discussions on community cohesion. The creation of *encounters* is achieved through

the construction of socially-mixed neighbourhoods, with a focus on providing affordable housing (Croydon Council, 2013b)**.** Additionally, the importance of sufficient public and community facilities is stressed in policy documents. Another discursive focus is placed on the creation of an "accessible public realm" and public spaces which "give space to all the communities in the borough" (Ibid, 2012a, p.11) in order to promote community cohesion and wellbeing. In the masterplans, however, public realm improvements focus more on securitising aspects such as "the reduction of anti-social behaviour" and the creation of "natural/passive surveillance" (Ibid, 2012b, p.36).
Moreover, redistribution has been largely perceived as non-spatial, but the opposite is true for *encounter.* It is explicitly stated that planning "can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities" (Ibid, 2013b, p.95). Similarly, planners perceive their role as significant in the creation of new urban spaces that enable interaction. There was a strong conviction that these should be accessible and open for different uses: "*through the planning process, spaces should be created that all sorts of groups can use and where they can interact, be it an ethnic group or a chess club".* Despite the emphasis on open and accessible public spaces in interviews, another focus emerged: New spaces in CMC were particularly imagined as spaces of consumption. Notions of diversity were quickly associated with the existence of ethnic businesses, restaurants and cultural offers. Planners were *"keen on providing a European feel to Croydon"* through the creation of a *"café-culture"* and the upgrading of public spaces to increase the *"dwell factor that people stop and spend money".* Indeed, frequently "the move to ´being for diversity' signals the development of a form of politics shaped by and for increasingly affluent, reflexive consumer societies" (Titley & Lentin, 2008, p.14).

Figure 1: Luxury housing development in CMC. *Source: Author*

Simultaneously, many developments in CMC that might threaten *encounter,* particularly between different income classes, and especially the creation of luxury housing (e.g. Figure 1) and high-end consumption spaces, become controversial issues in Croydon. For example, a private developer planned separate entrances for the required social housing residents and private tenants in a new

apartment complex. The decision had been approved by the previous Conservative Council administration (Inside Croydon, 9 October 2015). However, when the story came out, these plans were heavily criticised on the basis that developments as such would be "*massively disconnected*" and hence be "*bad for communities having negative effects on cohesion".* Criticism was raised in local media, by residents and state actors.

4. CONCLUSION

In the context of regeneration in CMC, policy discourses celebrate diversity but only include hesitant recognitions of diverse spatial needs. They discursively focus on equality with raising aspirations and creating opportunities as a way to tackle inequalities and to achieve long-term positive change in the borough. Correspondingly, planning is perceived as being impartial, unbiased and new urban spaces are imagined as neutral, socially-mixed and beneficial to everyone. Thus, policy discourses on diversity can become influential factors in regeneration schemes by shaping perceptions on the role of planning and the imagination of new urban spaces.

However, not only is regeneration in CMC frequently experienced as exclusionary by residents. The forms of diversity that are encouraged represent controversial and politically disputed topics, especially with regards to the encounter of different social groups. Thus, counter criticism in academic literature about the discursive (mis)use of diversity and the consequent depoliticizing effects, in Croydon diversity is a politicized notion. The borough's special position on the outer fringes of London has given strong influence to business elites in local politics. It might be exactly this relatively visual and obvious impact of the private sector that leads to the strong politicization of socio-economic differences.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that there is no clear cut between public and business versus community actors. Diversity particularly in relation to affordable housing and social mix of economic classes is contested by both community and state actors, illustrating the complexities of the situation. Residents and community groups, local media outlets but also some state-actors suggest alternative visions of diversity, focussing on sustaining socio-economic variety in CMC and beyond: The potential of diversity as a critical notion and its related discourses in developing alternative forms of more socially oriented planning should not be too easily dismissed.

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