

ANNEX I: Social ecology of the Brussels Canal Zone

A common space of values for D'Broej and Odisee

In the beginning of June 2016, a year before the official start of the Conrad research, a researcher from Odisee (a school of higher-education) and two youth workers of youth organisation DBroej met in a café in the centre of Brussels. They discussed the possibility to both join in the drafting of a research project proposal on “radicalisation”, which was steered from and conceptualised by the Criminology department of KU Leuven. It was the beginning of June and the collective shock of the terrorist attacks of Paris and Brussels were still fresh in their minds.

Before attentively listening to the needs and interests of the practitioners, the Odisee researcher explicated the rough contours of the academic research design, as well as the social engagement of his school. The youth workers then sketched their story of the last months since the attacks. They told the researcher how one of their youngsters, a member of their box club, left for Syria and was linked to the terrorist network who prepared and executed the attacks. They also told us how they were caught up in a media storm, accused of being a home base for radicalising youngsters. The attacks, and its consequences, confronted them with a deep, existential questioning on the essence of their role and mission of their youth work. However, their story was not only about doubts, it was also one of determination and hope. A group of youth workers from D'Broej already started a taskforce on “radicalisation”, aiming at getting clear on what the phenomenon of “radicalisation” reveals with regard to vulnerable youngsters in Brussels and their living conditions, but aiming also at defining the specific expertise that D'Broej could offer in a responding appropriately to the threat of “radicalisation”. They drafted an image of specific profile of youngsters who feel in many respect excluded from society, having lost every trust in society's key institutions. They explained the researcher how D'Broej is one of the rare youth organisations in Brussels who succeeded in developing long-standing trust relations with youngsters who have already gone far in withdrawing themselves from society.

They also sketched the nature and purpose of one of their projects, called 'rupture', a series of trekking trips in the mountains, to face youngsters with rough and defying nature, and to help questioning themselves profoundly regarding the challenges of their existence.

The youth workers of D'Broej and the Odisee researcher easily found common grounds for research cooperation. Together with the youngsters they became the key-actors of the Brussels action research site of the CONRAD project. At this preliminary stage of the research project the common aims and interests crystallised already in two goals: (1) exploring the deeper existential needs of youngsters at peril; (2) articulating and further developing the practical wisdom of youth workers in responding to these needs. This synergy didn't come as a surprise.

Both partners are located in or nearby the historic centre of Brussels. The organisations are a 1,5km walk away from one another. Odisee is a school of higher education, containing a variety of professional bachelors, one of which focuses on social work. The social work department of Odisee is located in the heart of Brussels, nearby the famous St-Hubertus Gallery, the Cathedral of Saint Michael, and 500 meters from 'La Grande Place'. The school is not only near the touristic centre, it is also surrounded by administrative buildings, the

national bank, and important cultural institutions such as Opera house 'La Monnaie', and the Flemish city Library (Muntpunt). As a federation of 8 local youth sections, D'Broej is spread all over the city, but its headquarter is in Molenbeek, one of the 19 municipalities of Brussels Capital Region. The administrative and coordinative centre of D'Broej is located at the Henegouwenkaai, bordering the Brussels Canal, nearby the historic centre of Molenbeek, and amidst the heritage of its once flourishing industrial past.

The policies of Odisee and D'Broej are strongly influenced by the urban setting in which they operate. Within a short lapse of 25 years Brussels has shifted into a metropolitan city, marked by the presence of around 140 nationalities. A strong divide between the rich and the poor, between the over- and underprivileged this is reflected in the urban geography of the city. While the east side of the capital is inhabited by wealthy habitants, the western part of the city is marked by impoverished, diverse, dense areas where unemployment is very high. The decline of the old 19th century industry created a 'neckless', some phrase it as a 'croissant' of impoverished neighbourhoods around the Canal, with lack of decent housing, lack of green, open spaces, and scarce employment futures.

This rapid characterization of the urban living conditions in deprived neighbourhoods, explains partly why both partners easily find a common ground for mutual cooperation. But there is more. Both partners share networks, goals and values.

The social work department of Odisee strongly identifies with a conception of social work that aims better access to human rights and capabilities in socially deprived neighbourhoods. The school educates future social workers who are capable of supporting and empowering vulnerable groups and help them to collectively claim their right to the city. Since the region of Brussels with its multiple social challenges is its living, learning site, the school of social work has built a dense network of cooperation between social work organisations, but also between more informal civic initiatives. These networks enable students to learn on the spot, and by experience. One of the recent interests of the department is to invest in community service learning, in shared spaces of co-creating practical knowledge with lecturers, fieldworkers, citizens and students concerning pressing urban issues, such as migration, poverty, conflicts in public spaces. In order to facilitate such a cooperative environment, practice-based researchers often prepare the field. Their skills consist of spotting needs of social work professionals and their users, starting with negotiating cooperation, drafting project proposals, and finding financial funding. Their research is socially committed, and follows almost naturally the principles of participatory action research, for these social work researchers have a tradition of cooperatively defining social problems with stake-holders, developing, conceptual frameworks, explicating practical wisdoms and good practices, teasing out innovative methodologies emerging from challenging urban environments.

As already mentioned D'Broej is a federation of 8 local youth sections. These youth sections have a large autonomy in the choice, pedagogy, coordination of their activities, given the profile, age, and needs of youngsters, and the specific characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which they are located. What binds these local youth sections is a common interest in the emancipation of youngsters living in deprived neighbourhoods. These youngsters face challenging living conditions caused by poverty, deplorable housing, discrimination, lack of public spaces, stereotyped framing of their neighbourhood, failing educational environment and reduced employment possibilities. Furthermore: the youth sections of D'Broej all

embrace a positive vibe, by offering valorising and stimulating youngsters in the talents and competencies, and this offering numerous activities (school support, football, boxing, theatre, dance...). At the same time youth workers are attentive to social issues (poverty, learning issues, drop out of school, family conflicts, isolation, deviance) surfacing through daily interactions with youngsters and their parents. In order to address these issues the local youth sections display a variety of strategies (ranging from referral to external organisations, over concrete cooperation with partners around specific projects, to personal following of youngsters).

In sum, both the professionals of D'Broej and Odisee share a similar engagement with deprived populations and their human rights, they share social work values, attitudes. They share a common space of values, and ideas. Furthermore, both organisations have already a previous basis of cooperation, are familiar with urban challenges, embrace positive affirmation of youngsters, their talents and competences, and, finally, they have an interest in developing practical knowledge and good practices in the field. This common social ecology facilitated the grounding of a common endeavour, but it also triggers a highly engaged type of research on "radicalisation", one that puts knowledge building at the service of empowering youngsters coping with difficult life conditions. It is therefore to be expected that the action research in Brussels will develop its insights on "radicalisation" and the impact of (de)"radicalisation" discourse from an understanding of the urban life-worlds of youngsters, their youth workers, their key schools of social work, and from their shared desire for social change. One of the worries with regard to such a committed style of research is of course the possibility of taking a self-critical position towards these life-worlds.

When the project proposal was accepted and the first meeting of the Conrad team took place, the modalities of cooperation became sharper. From June 2017 on, two youth sections of D'Broej engaged actively in the action research project. Tom Flachet, one of the trainers and co-founders of the Brussels Boxing Academy brought his expertise in the project as a practice-researcher. Ali Moustatine, youth worker in the Association of Moroccan youngsters of Molenbeek (AJM) engaged himself to reflect and experiment with a group of youngsters on religion, identity and social exclusion.

The conflicted feeling and the difficult consideration towards a potential engagement for the CONRAD-project is put into words in ethnographic notes of Tom Flachet, thinking back on this period:

After a nocturnal meeting on a terrace at the Stalinggradlaan we decided to contribute to the research project. We propose three conditions: the interests of youth people and their personal development need to be the starting point for the research, the word "radicalisation" cannot be used and additional funding for action research activities with young people need to be found. Looking back, these conditions already put the finger on the gaps in the current approach of "radicalisation": (1) seldom are young people involved, rather researchers work around them, (2) the term "radicalisation" is misused to the extent that it has become useless and (3) the means that are invested in "radicalisation" that are beneficial for the nearest people involved (the young people themselves) usually is peanuts.

Similar affective spaces for D'Broej and Odisee

In order to further understand what triggered both actors to join their energies on the topic of “radicalisation”, it is important to sketch the social ecologies of both partners shortly after the terrorist attacks of November 2015 and March 2016.

Within D'Broej a specific interest in the phenomenon already existed before the terrorist attacks, when youngsters began to leave Molenbeek to Syria. Three youth sections, the Association of Moroccan Youngsters, the Brussels Boxing Academy and D'Broej Peterbos began to exchange their worries and experiences. These sections have developed a long-standing experience in working with strongly isolated and marginalised youngsters, who have locked themselves up in bolsters of anger and disengagement with society. Marked by the difficulties of their own youth, and driven by a strong mission of empowerment, the youth workers of these sections invest massive time and energy in building a relation with these youngsters. They intensify their presence, they wait patiently for these adolescents to convey their trust, to enter 'un temps sincère' and to listen to their stories, their fears, indignations, disappointments, and longings. Against the background of departures to Syria, a sense of urgency emerged within these three sections. A youth worker from the Association of Moroccan youngsters in Molenbeek had already developed a training programme on identity, religion and social insertion with workshops, visits, reflections. Youth workers from Peterbos organised courses on the geo-political situation in the Middle East to inform youngsters and make them more resilient to forge their own opinions. Times were very confusing at that moment. The motives of departure to Syria, varied from fighting for freedom against dictator Assad, over giving humanitarian help, to fascination for the religious ideologies of Islamic State. The decapitation clips, of IS, just started to go viral on social media. And public officials were still hesitant in interpreting the growing number of foreign fighters, before the term “radicalisation” was integrated in the official discourse of media and public opinion.

A local professional working for the municipality of Molenbeek puts it like this:

Oui, tout a fait. Donc, on est vraiment dans la vague, avant la vague des terroristes. On est vraiment juste en moment de proclament du Kalifat et donc, euh, encore dans cette idéale que les jeunes qui partent sont de combattant de liberté. Avec, euh, en 2012 – 2013 les autorités belges qui, euh, qui insistait, disait, beh, il est démis, c'est vers Bashar Assad. Donc une série des jeunes sont partis combattre (...). (I) : Et le concept de la radicalisation, le mot radicalisation. Quand est ce que c'est rentré dans le discours, a partir de quelle ? Parce que ce mot c'est quand même aussi récent que se mot radicalisation a pris le sens qu'elle a maintenant ? (V) : A partir de 2014, au moment on avait des subsides, pour lutter ou prévenir la radicalisation. C'était 2014 .

The attacks of Paris on 13 November and the link with youngsters and young adults from Molenbeek, changed the scene “radically”. In the week following the shootings at the Bataclan, and at a Parisien Café, the youth workers of Brussels Boxing Academy, AJM, and Peterbos participated at a conference of youth work platform Uit De Marge. A spontaneous initiative emerged to discuss the challenges of youth work in the light of these terrible incidents. There, the already informal exchanges transformed into the decision of D'Broej to set up a task force on “radicalisation”, with objectives, and an agenda. From November 2015 till November 2016 the taskforce exchanged ideas, made their intuitions explicit, engaged in discussion, participated in expert-boards, exchanged with local and federal authorities,

signed up for project calls, refused funding, but were also sucked into a media storm around the Boxing club.

The increasing information about the link between the terrorists of Paris and Molenbeek, the search for public enemy no 1, Salah Abdeslam, the military deployment in Molenbeek, the march of extreme right wing radicals upon Molenbeek, the discovery of Abdeslam in the Vier Windenstraat, the attacks of 22 March in Zaventem and Brussels, provoked a web of often divergent feelings.

As an immediate response to the attacks, there were feeling of consternation, powerlessness inner doubts, but also a desire for profound self-questioning. How is it possible that some of our youngsters and young adults were able to commit such atrocities? What is still the meaning and the impact of our youth work in Brussels?

The violent, condemning reaction of media and politicians regarding Molenbeek and its habitants, the massive international attention, the omnipresence of armed military forces, the raids in safe houses, pushed the youth workers of the taskforce in a defensive position. They strongly felt how the discourse on cleansing the neighbourhood, “disinfecting” youngsters with “de-radicalisation” programmes, or counter-narratives, endangered their youngsters, but also discredited their work. An inhabitant:

That was the worst. That shouldn't have happened. That are heavy, for me personally, for everyone, that are heavy trauma's that have not yet healed. A feeling of inferiority and yes (...) and of offender because yes there are two or three who did this, but you are also an offender because you live in Molenbeek. And then you hear so much in the press.

A local youth professional:

But someone with a responsibility that names things such as “we're going to clean up a municipality.” Then you know that you're going in a particular direction, that can society can fall in more traps (...) But someone with a political, executive mandate, that prefers to divide and stigmatise people rather than unite them. For me that is not the right function.

Impulses of survival brought the youth workers in an ambiguous position with regard to the topic of “radicalisation”.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of violent religious “radicalisation” and its direct link with young adults from Molenbeek involved in the attacks of Brussels and Paris, or left for Syria to combat with IS, prompted the youth workers of BBA, AJM and Peterbos to come with a story that highly valorises empowering engagement towards marginalised youngsters desperately seeking for a place in society. Persuading politicians and public opinion of the pressing needs of youngsters, persuading public officials and the public of the value of youth work as the last bridge between society and youngsters at peril became a question of necessity. In the same logic of this narrative “radicalisation”, prompted the youth workers to put their relevance and expertise in the spotlights.

On the other hand, the youth workers experienced the discourse on “radicalisation” as a growing threat. Where initially “radicalisation” and the first “de-radicalisation” strategies focused on the risk of youngsters leaving for Syria, the discourse shifted to the risk of youngsters living in deprived urban neighbourhoods and adhering to (or sympathising with) radical religious ideas. Suddenly the term “radicalisation” changed into a lens designating a

whole generation of youngsters with migration origins, living in Molenbeek and having Islamic confessional beliefs as a group at risk, as a group to be watched and monitored, to be exposed to 'a good, harmless' Islam and to counter-narratives that successfully compete with IS propaganda circulating on the Internet. As a local professional puts it:

Certainly, but that has already started, the big turning point were the attacks in New York. That moment is when Islam became suspect because it was seen, and still is, as a source of extremism and violent extremism. (...) And with the attacks of 2015 and 2016 the link with the Muslim, the link with Molenbeek, so people felt even more targeted.

But not only key-actor D'Broej, also Odisee, and in particular the department of social work was deeply affected by the attacks of Paris and Brussels. At 16 November, a few days after the terror scenes in Paris, social work students just started their yearly week in Molenbeek, exploring some basic skills of interaction and communication. The atmosphere was enthusiastic, full of energy, and whit. But things changed rapidly when the link between Paris and Molenbeek became clear, when media began to diffuse images of military deployment of Molenbeek as a 'warzone' and when parents of students contacted the director of department to convey their increasing feelings of insecurity. Pushed by fear, the school decided to call back their lecturers and students. It was an absurd and embarrassing situation. The very spot in Molenbeek where the students were housed was in effect completely safe, but the virtual world appeared more convincing than reality. The students were sent to their 'safe' homes (some of them to their families in Molenbeek, a few blocks distanced from the 'dangerous' spot they were asked to leave). Weeks after the Paris attacks, security measures were increased around the schools. A private security company controlled every entrance. Each of us was obligated to show his/her identity cards. The image of a highly securitised city and of the school of Odisee as a protected shelter created a sharpened contrast with the ambitions of the social work department to connect with difficult neighbourhoods, to learn on the spot from huge social challenges, but also from new experimental expressions of solidarity. Some lecturers and researchers were deeply disappointed, affected in their integrity and credibility since fear and security overshadowed their love for the city. What is the sense of teaching on urban social work, on human rights, and social change, when a school is locked into a safety logic, sends back his lecturers and students and betrays his solidarity to the Brussels work field, the neighbourhoods habitants, and youngsters in need?

These deep existential questions surfaced even stronger after the Brussels attacks of 22 March 2016. The lockdown was total, the gates of the schools closed, the students and lecturers imprisoned, the atmosphere unreal. A few days later, when students and lecturers came together to exchange their feelings, the impact of terror and its counter-reaction became palpable. One of the students was severely wounded by the explosion in Zaventem, a student missed by chance the metro who has blown up in Maalbeek. And what about the school's beliefs in the ideals of a super-diverse urban society, capable of managing peacefully its social spaces? Have the attacks destroyed our professional ideals?

Like the youth workers of Dbroeij, the department of social work was struck in its reasons of existence and at the same time realised that the engagement with future of youngsters in deprived, urban neighbourhoods, with their precarious access to basic human rights, with

their loss of belonging, and their desire for full recognition, is not an option anymore, but a social and moral necessity. The Odisee Department of social work expressed its awareness in an op ed, published in an electronic review on social work. Part of this intensified engagement is expressive of a collective consternation with regard to the evil of terrorism and the dark path towards it, thereby transforming itself into a desire to understand the phenomenon in its complexity, in its connection with personal and urban fragilities, in its connection with broader social transitions. Another part of this sense of necessity pushed Odisee to intensify its contribution to vulnerable youngsters, and to further develop its expertise in close cooperation with youth work professionals.

The context of the attacks, and their deep existential impact on the mindsets of youthworkers of the DBroej and lecturers/researcher of Odisee, drove both partners to each other. The attacks forged a common affective space in which understanding “radicalisation” from the urban predicament of youngsters in Brussels, was closely connected with a shared vulnerability, and with an urgency to rise up again, to reposition themselves, to recollect the reasons and the legitimacy of their existence as engaged professionals. From the early beginning of the project, for D’Broej and Odisee, social work research on “radicalisation” manifested itself not as an interesting field of study, but as a mission, as a passionate answer to a call, as a joined will to make sense of the senselessness of destruction, not as a desire to control, to secure, protect and prevent society from harm, but as an aspiration to reconcile themselves with an irreconcilable world.

Identifying the youngsters

Up till now this social ecology is reconstructed around two key actors, Odisee and D’Broej, but what about the youngsters themselves? How do they enter into the scene of action research. What are their life-worlds, and their interests and how do they connect with understanding and responding to “radicalisation”?

There are at least three reasons explaining the difficulty of identifying the youngsters engaged in the action research on “radicalisation” in Brussels.

1. While in the previous paragraphs, we reconstructed the social spaces departing from the identification of two key actors, their interests, urban environment, strong evaluations and deep existential questioning, a similar strategy is much more difficult to deploy with regard to the third key-actor of our action research on “radicalisation”: the youngsters. Up till now we didn't select yet the youngsters who will actively engage in action research with DBroej and Odisee. Youngsters haven't entered the scene of research yet. They only appear in the minds, stories, worries, in the arguments and convictions and passions of the youth works. Or, they are part of the environment, the settings, backgrounds in which researcher and youth workers have their discussions, in the box club of the BBA in the youth house of AJM. One of the aims of the action research is that youngsters become actors on the research scene, that they shift from the background to the foreground of our research activities. This implies a difficult and delicate process of delimitation and selection of a sample of youngsters that are relevant to objectives of action research and the types of research questions that issue from it.

2. A second reason that complicates drawing a social ecology from identifiable youngsters, derives from the topic of “radicalisation” itself. At this stage of the research it is not entirely

clear how to define “radicalisation”, and, consequently, to delimit which type of youngsters is relevant for our action research. Moreover, we realised that a considerable bias has glided into the initial project outline of Conrad. The project, with its explicit choice for Verviers and Brussels, suggests that youngsters with Muslim, migrant background, living in precarious neighbourhoods around the Canal are to be identified as the target group of research on “radicalisation”, as if the process of “radicalisation” would naturally link up with social deprivation and Islamic religion. At the beginning of our research we realised that these biases could be remedied by better examining the defining features of “radicalisation”, and by detecting different expressions of this phenomenon. Upholding the implicit assumptions of the initial project outline is also ethically highly problematic, because it risks to stigmatise and criminalise a huge group of youngsters who have already accumulated a whole series of stereotypes (violent, destructive, dealing, steeling, lazy).

Is there still a possibility then to characterise the youngsters who, for the moment figure in the background of our research on “radicalisation” in Brussels?

3. Here another, a third, difficulty emerges. Identifying this group, by designating a set of characteristics is nearly impossible, because the group is simply not homogeneous. The youngsters frequenting the box club and the youth house differ in age (from 8 till 25), gender, origins, beliefs, socio-economic status. The box club as well as the youth section host boys and girls, young men and young women. The trainers of BBA welcome youngsters from all kind of nationalities, or migration origins. They train migrant youngsters from the third generation as well as newcomers, and attract young amateur boxers from different kinds of socio-economic status.

How to address these difficulties?

1. A first strategy pertains to the background group that frequents the Brussels Boxing Academy and the youth house of AJM. We will not try to identify a group, or subcategory as such, but try to reconstruct the living conditions of youngsters growing up or arriving in the neighbourhoods surrounding the Canal. We will try to identify a few strategies that youngsters and their families pursue in order to address these difficult conditions.

2. In a second strategy, which falls out of this ecology report, we will articulate our notion of “radicalisation” on the basis of the lived experiences of the youth workers of D'Broej, the days and weeks after the November Attacks, when became clear that a few members of the club left for Syria, and that one was suspected to be involved in the preparation of the attacks. We will base ourselves on the diaries of one of the youth workers, actively involved in BBA as box trainer, and on an open letter of D'Broej to the youngsters of Brussels. Trusting on D'Broej's ability to see clear on which account of “radicalisation” articulates best their first intuitions, we'll hope to find a set of elements regarding “radicalisation” that allow us to select youngsters in a non-stigmatising way.

[The social ecologies of youngsters living around the Canal](#)

It is not easy to furnish a nuanced map of the living conditions of the bulk of youngsters frequenting box club BBA and youth house AJM. This is because the social ecology of the neighbourhoods around the Canal is layered through a series of important economic, political and social transitions. Moreover, the spatial organisation and local policies of the neighbourhoods where they are living are different. Nevertheless, on the basis of their

demographic realities, it is possible to sketch a few general characteristics that can be nuanced according to each specific neighbourhood.

1. Bad and relatively expensive housing conditions

Designed to cover the population explosion during the industrial rise of Brussels, the neighbourhoods around the Canal have been rapidly and densely constructed from the second half of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th Century. Whereas the bulk of the tiny working-class houses were replaced in the 1960s by modernist social housing towers in the historic centre of Brussels and near the Canal in Molenbeek, most of the modest middle-class houses remained intact. These houses are not or badly renovated, they are badly isolated, divided up in different apartments, have badly equipped bathrooms, and often moisture in walls and ceilings.

Two developments have aggravated these precarious housing conditions. The first one relates to the city-flight of the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century. Middle class citizens moved to the countryside around Brussels, the migration population, often struck by poverty due to the gradual closure of local manufactures, remained. They rented or bought the relatively cheap houses without having the means to renovate according to quality standards. Other buildings deteriorated rapidly due to vacancy. Affected by this process of suburbanisation, political interest in the housing conditions of these neighbourhoods was hardly existent, and impoverished local authorities lacked financial means to invest in the real estate of their townships.

A second development is more recent and again mainly demographic in nature. Since the second half of the 90s, new migrants (especially young adults) from all over the world (eastern Europe, South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East) settled into the neighbourhoods around the Canal. Some neighbourhoods became transit zones, with rapidly leaving newcomers. The Anneessens neighbourhood for example has an internal mobility of 86% of its habitants between 2001 en 2006. Other neighbourhoods absorbed the migrant groups in a more sustainable fashion.

Another consequence of these demographic transformations is the growing number of youngsters. In the Capital Region of Brussels 40% of the habitants is younger than 30 years. In neighbourhoods around the Canal such as Anneessens young people even add up to 48% of the population. Within a period of 25 years the arrival of newcomers transformed once abandoned neighbourhoods in highly dense and diverse neighbourhoods with a young population, living with multiple families in 19th century houses, cheaply divided in different, tiny apartments from the basements to the attics. According to the statistics of the neighbourhood monitor almost half of the habitants of Anneessens and Old Molenbeek are living in an apartment smaller than 55m².

This over-population has contributed to a further degradation of housing conditions. Families of three children are now often living in small, badly isolated apartments affected by humidity, regularly disrupted by noisy neighbours, with almost no privacy for adolescents and their parents. Because of the high demand and limited supply of these living spaces, free market mechanism has raised the rental costs artificially. Consequently, for families living from a replacement income more than half of the budget is spent on rent.

Youngsters living in these deplorable and relatively expensive housing conditions are bereft of their access to basic fundamental rights: their right to healthy living, the right to privacy, to private space, to spaces of learning and studying, and consequently their right to education is seriously diminished or endangered. The available resilience of youngsters to respond to and overcome these diminishing living conditions depends on the socio-economic situation of their parents, the supporting resilience of their networks, and their own determination.

2. Density of the neighbourhoods

The new demographic reality of the urban area around the Canal not only aggravates the housing conditions, it also creates dense neighbourhoods with scarce green and public spaces. This contrasts with the fact that the more than the Capital Region of Brussels contains green and open zones for more than 40% of its territory. Unfortunately access to these spaces is unequally distributed, privileging neighbourhoods at its eastern and southern borders (Ouderghem, Uccle, Boitsfort), and devouring the neighbourhoods around the Canal. Compared with an average of 6751 habitants per km², neighbourhoods around the Canal double, triple and even quadruple their numbers. The Dansaert neighbourhood bordering the location of the box club BBA counts 16171 habitants/km². The neighbourhood of Anneessens counts 23629 habitants/km². Old Molenbeek, the location of youth house AJM, hits the number of 25439 habitants/km². The density of these neighbourhoods is of course also anchored in history. The industrial revolution and the explosive increase of the population in the 19th century required a strategy of compact building in a limited space, allowing only scarce green, public spaces. Remarkably, a similar strategy seems to surface at the beginning of 21st century. This pressure is already visible in some neighbourhoods. In the Anneessens neighbourhood for example, parts of the Fontainas park will be annexed by three new housing complexes.

Scarcity, need for, and pressure on public space are part of the daily living conditions of youngsters. Because of living space at home, youngsters are inclined to occupy streets and street corners to create a space of their own, with their own implicit rules of inclusion and exclusion. Lack of space to talk, to move, to express oneself, to find a break, is also reflected in the Brussels Boxing Academy located in the Kogelstraat. The Academy is housed in the gymnastics hall of a primary (De Kleurdoos) and secondary school. Each day the club attracts easily two hundred youngsters and young adults between 4 p.m. and 11 p.m. When 100 youngsters are training the session bursts out of its space. Assisting to a training session gives you a strong impression of the dense, diverse and young population longing for spaces of physical expression, deployment of force and discipline, resistance and resilience. And at the same time the crowdedness of the training space mirrors the preciousness and precarity of public space. At the same time, the density is experienced by many inhabitants as liveliness and cosiness:

Oud-Molenbeek is a typical popular area with a high density in the centre of the city. I think it is a real asset compared to other cities with high density where these popular neighbourhoods are located in the *banlieues*. I think it is a real asset that the neighbourhood lies so close to the centre and the heart of the city. It is a lively area. It also hosts many organisations that are situated in Molenbeek. So it isn't just living, also networks, living together, search together, much effort is being invested in it. I

think, (...) it is also a very young neighbourhood. Geographically, there is a large young population in those neighbourhoods, which will bring a dynamic and which implies much potential for the city.

3. Precarious education conditions.

Besides density and poor housing conditions, youngsters living in 'the croissant' lack access to a decent, qualitative education system. A European PISA research indicated a dualisation of the educational system in Brussels. Colleges and Athenea at the borders of Brussels, with a low degree of migrant youngsters, meet significantly higher standards of education than secondary schools in the historic centre of Brussels and in the neighbourhoods around the Canal. The evolution towards "concentration schools" and towards a factual segregation is due to an interplay of various factors. Suburbanisation in the 70s and 80s, flight of the 'belgo-belge' population from the inner city, absence of political interest in integration and emancipation issues, poor linguistic and intellectual abilities of parents, lack of ambitious and coherent policy due to the split between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking networks, led to the sociological reality of "monocultural" schools.

Especially schools of the French-speaking network are marked by a high concentration of migrant youngsters. Due to a lack of financial means of the local and federated authorities these schools struggle with an inadequate, up to date infrastructure. They often fall short of a performant managing board, with ambitious objectives and coherent pedagogy. The directors and managing teams of these schools face difficulties in finding competent teachers. They are confronted with a rapid change of teaching staff and a high degree of non-attendance, pushing students into time zones of non-activity. Teachers themselves often lack ambition and motivation, and negotiate with their students a 'workload' that convenes to both. Youngsters and parents themselves are aware of these structural neglects and have called these schools 'écoles poubelles' (dustbin schools). Through this expression they interpret the failing school system as another expression of discrimination, social injustice, and institutional exclusion.

How do parents and their children respond to this structural educational failing? How do they deal with unequal access to decent education? Several coping strategies can be distinguished.

A. Searching for better schools: Middle class families leave the poor croissant neighbourhoods and send their children to better schools. They coach their children, control the work of their children and project a future of higher education. They are fully conscious that education and qualification to a better future. In neighbourhoods like old Molenbeek and Anneessens, we see families responding to the pressing need of good education by sending their children to Dutch-speaking schools managed by the Flemish community, who have a better reputation. In this regard, it is seen as a real opportunity that the Flemish elite school Sint-Jan-Berchmans college is investing in Molenbeek with the plan to build a new school:

A: There are two real problem areas, West station and umm Vierwilgen and on the other side ummm.

Q: Maritiem

A: yes, that Sint-Jan-Bergmans is going there is really, it is the best answer I've heard to far on what has happened here in the last years.

B. Spaces of redress: Parallel to the previous strategy, we also see a high demand of parents to socio-cultural organisations (especially youth organisations) in order to redress linguistic or learning deficiencies. Thus parental aspirations are felt in the streets and are echoed in the urban life of organisations, while youngsters try to escape parental control in public space. While walking in the early evenings through the streets of the neighbourhoods of Anneessens or Old-Molenbeek one can see children entering 'écoles de devoirs'. These alternative educational circuits are multiplying themselves rapidly within a web of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking organisations. Moreover, these organisations reframe their objectives of emancipation more and more explicitly in terms of access to learning, to developing talent, to work and decent income. In doing so, they try to redress the failing schooling system.

C. Alternative spaces of learning: In order to respond to deficient spaces of schooling, socio-cultural organisations offer not only complementary spaces of schooling, they also provide in alternative spaces of learning in a context of leisure. Sport, art, visits, climbing in the mountains: all these activities can be seen as opportunities to stimulate talents, skills, to keep youngster motivated to learn, not by books, but by experience, and in a climate of inclusion.

D. Tenir le mur: Despite parental control, 20% of the youngsters fail to obtain their secondary school diploma. They disconnect from the schooling system, accumulate failing school results, find no motivation, hang out in the streets, don't get out of their beds, develop their bizz. These youngsters reproduce what they are deprived of: they deprive themselves actively of their learning opportunities, and, consequently, their access to the labour market.

4. Economic dualisation

The dualisation of Brussels is not only mirrored in the schooling system (Vandermotten e.a. 2007:5), it is also deeply anchored in its economic structures. Since the rapid shift from an industrial economy to a service economy in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century economic activities moved from the Canal zone in the centre of Brussels to the administrative centre and to the borders of Brussels Capital Region. The Brussels Capital Region evolved now into a Metropolitan area, housing major political institutions, and harbouring a thriving service economy which rapidly transforms into an innovative knowledge based one, requiring passionate, talented, creative, entrepreneurial and highly educated professionals. Economically Brussels is a dynamic region. According to the wealth produced per capita Brussels is the second wealthiest region, scoring 241 points compared to an average in Europe of 100 (Corijn, 2009).

This major economic shift bears its consequences on the labour market. 47% of the jobs are located in the service sector, requiring a high degree of knowledge. By contrast, employment for the low educated requiring manual labour, once available in abundance in the Canal Zone, have become scarce. The traditional industry continues to regress and counts only for 10% of the labour market (Corijn and Vloebergs, 2009).

These developments lead to a strong mismatch between qualifications offered by young people from Brussels, on the one hand, and the required qualifications on the labour market, on the other hand. Twenty percent of young adults living in Brussels left school with only a degree of primary education (Vandermotten, 2005). As a consequence of it, families and

communities with a migration past, as well as newcomers arriving in the deprived neighbourhoods of Brussels, are often poorly equipped to enter the service oriented labour market, due to lack of diplomas, and required competencies. Instead, often highly qualified young professionals from the east part of Brussels, from its borders, the periphery or even outside Brussels are supplying the labour demand.

The region of Brussels may harbour a thriving economy, its wealth and access to well-paid jobs are unequally distributed, at the cost of the urban neighbourhoods around the Canal zone. The segregated educational system and the failing schools around the Canal zone, produce and reinforce this precarious, and unequal right to decently paid and fulfilling work.

Precarious access to the labour market, facing a spatial dualisation between a rich Brussels at the borders and the east part, on the one hand, and a poor Brussels around the Canal, undeniably affects the lives of youngsters visiting the box club BBA and the youth house of AJM. The statistics of the neighbourhood monitoring objectify these divides.

For the Anneessens neighbourhood income issuing from labour is low (from 37% in 2002 to 40% in 2009). The portion of long unemployed is about 63%. Youth unemployment counts 47% in 2011 (compared to 37% for the metropolitan region). This low activity degree is translated into an average year income €7800 per habitant (compared to an average of €12600 in the metropolitan region). These figures indicate a very low score on the welfare index. The average income of an inhabitant of Anneesens is 50% lower than the rest of Belgium.

How do youngsters and their families respond to this deprived economic ecology? Five responses can be distinguished.

A. Some youngsters finish their school career successfully and manage to enter the service economy. They often show a strong desire to leave the neighbourhoods of their youth, and to settle elsewhere. They release themselves from urban spaces of economic deprivation. Often they distance themselves from their past.

B. The second strategy leans on talent, creativity and ambition. A small group of youngsters manages to escape the burdens of bad education through their will to pursue their dreams and develop their talents. They refuse to see themselves as victims, they take opportunities and stubbornly fight for their success.

C. The third strategy responds to economic dualisation by engaging in socio-cultural organisations, as volunteers, animators. They try to find a grip within a youth house, a sport club. There they find a structure, a home, recognition, dignity. Often they use volunteering rewards as a supplementary means to survive.

D. The fourth strategy brings youngsters to follow professional formations, to acquire work experiences, often supported by youth organisations who accompany them towards the labour market.

E. The fifth strategy follows the dynamics of the streets, of illegal economy, drug trafficking, robberies... It is a kind of survival strategy, a negative engagement, that reproduces, or masks, strong feelings of discrimination and injustice. A local professional indicates that "radicalisation" and illegal economy and deviant behaviour by young people all could be variants of the same culture, of the same strategy of flight and rupture:

Q: So, we can say that radicalisation, assuming that it is really a phenomenon, is a variant on a negative engagement that was already there since a long time?

A: Yes, it is a form of umm a violent subculture, except that at a certain moment it is aren't necessarily the same profiles and the same approaches.

5. Superdiversity

The demographic shift in the urban areas around the Canal since the second half of the 90s until today, didn't come alone. Since the riots of migrant youngsters in the early 90s, and the political rise of extreme-right, political minds shifted. Something needed to be done to prevent these outbursts of violence and discontent that disrupt social cohesion. New financial instruments, in the shape of impulse financing and neighbourhood contracts, were created to give streets, corners and parks a facelift, to build new kindergartens. Community work and youth work were supported by a new policy framework and structural financing. The municipality of Molenbeek created its own city organisations to combat social exclusion. The Regional development society of Brussels attracted young middle-class groups to come and live in the Canal zone through construction of attractive purchase apartments. The philosophy around this social-mix policy was underpinned by three baselines. A. Mixing populations socially gives deprived people an example of social ascension. B. Mixing populations creates new cross-cultural networks and social capital. C. These networks, and their related solidarities will help redistribute unequal access to basic fundamental rights.

This political strategy of social cohesion, and social mix has left its layers on the social infrastructures of the poor, abandoned neighbourhoods of Brussels: islands of renovated buildings and houses, a rise of socially supported housing, a dense network of subsidised organisations steered by professional social workers, but, not in the least, the arrival of white, educated middle-class populations.

Of course, human and social interest, and the political efforts flowing from it, revealed also a more economic flipside. Officially recognised as the Capital of Europe at the turn of the 20th century, the Capital Region of Brussels aimed at attracting new investments by presenting the inner city and Canal zone as prioritised zone of investment in the innovation economy.

In the meantime, migrations from all over the world (from Rumania, Russia, Ukraine, Albania, Brazil to Ghana and Sudan) began to arrive in several neighbourhoods of Brussels. Molenbeek, with the highest concentration of habitants from Moroccan origins, attracted firstly newcomers from North Africa and Moroccan transmigrants coming from Spain, but also minorities from Sub-Saharan Africa. Combined with social mix policies, and middle-class populations buying new apartments or renovating 19th century houses in the historic centre or around the Canal, neighbourhoods like Molenbeek, Anneessens and Chicago, the city evolved rapidly as one of the most cosmopolitan areas of Europe, shifting from a majority/minority to a majority of minorities morphology. As a result reading and understanding city-life becomes extremely layered and complex. A super-diverse mosaic of groups and subgroups interact, collude, intersect, oppose and compete according to a variety of strategies, necessities and desires. In his nuanced monograph on Molenbeek, Hans Vandecandelaere (2017) offers a map to read these complexities. A few dynamics can be induced from his analysis.

For the first dynamic we'll use the term 'individuation', referring thereby to the fact that responses to superdiversity are complex and differentiated. Their meanings depend upon the biographies of each individual person engaged in and submerged by diversity. Telling the

story of superdiversity in a neighbourhood like Molenbeek, comes down to telling personal stories and to uncover family resemblances between these stories (Vandecandelaere, 2017: 191).

The second dynamic revolves around creating hierarchies between social relations (Vandecandelaere, 2017: 110-111). Established communities with migration roots tend to mark their dominance and status with regard to newcomers. Within the group of newcomers, social status depends often on civil status (legal/illegal). These relations of power and status are mingled with dynamics of solidarity, which often result in temporary and illegal employment of newcomers.

The third dynamic relates to strategies of competition and social ascension. Due to density, bad housing, scarcity of employment relations of competition and exist between newcomers, often steered with an ambition to succeed in life, on the one hand, and habitants with migrant origins, on the other hand. This dynamics of competition and rivalry of course affects all migrant groups, between as well as within communities.

The fourth dynamics pertains to what antropologists call ethnicisation. Vandecandelaere himself uses the term communautarisation, referring to mechanisms of self-censure, traditionalism. Following this strategy some migrant groups strongly identify themselves with regard to their origins, cultures, religion, and take these as a refuge for the formation of their own identities, their dignity and solidarity. They strengthen their mechanisms of social control, in order to differentiate them from groups with other migration origins. This can lead to racism between different migration communities.

The fifth dynamic pertains to differentiation with regard to practicing and interpreting religious beliefs. This differentiation has, of course, many faces. It is reflected in the many branches of Christianity spread out in Brussels. In a neighbourhood like Molenbeek, with 40% of the population belonging to the Muslim community, superdiversity also contributes to differentiation with regard to the Islam, ranging from an open progressive adherence to Islamic belief, to a more conservative, literal reading of the sacred texts. According to the many explanations of Vandecandelaere's interviewees (2017: 128-156), not only diversity of cultures, but also differences in socio-economic backgrounds, divergences between mosques, as well as the impact of Internet Imams appear to be responsible for these differentiations.

The last dynamic has been documented frequently under the umbrella of gentrification (Vandecandelaere, 167-168). This process issues from social mix policies and private investments in previously deprived neighbourhoods. A minority of high education middle-class groups attract new commerce, cafés, shops, but at the same time increase the market value of apartments and houses. These groups establish their own micro-culture, express their demands to public officials and impose their needs and values. Social scientists have pointed out that gentrification risks to undermine policies of social cohesion. Instead of embarking deprived groups into a process of social ascension, gentrification risks to produce new process of social exclusion. Again, this process doesn't emerge as a fatality, when appropriately managed it can generate successful spaces of social mix (for example, when middle class parents, active in superdiverse local primary schools, meet and exchange with mothers issuing from a variety migration origins) in parochial spaces characterised by everyday cosmopolitanism and commonplace diversity (Noble, 2009; Wessendorf, 2010).

How do youngsters of migration respond to the urban conditions of superdiversity and its variety of dynamics? Again, it is almost impossible to classify urban youth in Brussels into categories and subcategories. It seems more appropriate to formulate a variety of responses and strategies, some of which can overlap, or shift into each other, according to each individual life-story. In what follows we will distinguish four strategies.

A. Cultivating hybridity: Through a few interviews with young adults from Molenbeek Van De Candelaere shows how a diversity of cultures opens spaces of experimentation, mixing for example feminism, fashion, religion with a desire for self-expression. Typical for this response to superdiversity is an acceptance of co-existence of different cultural layers having left its mark in urban space, but also a curious desire to cross borders between cultures, cultural norms, between art and religion, fashion and austerity, consumption and contemplation, psychology and religion. Another aspect of this response is the recognition of the vulnerability and incompleteness of each cultural framework, which implies an acceptance of doubtful self-questioning, of searching and tentatively reinventing meaning. Within the youth sections of BBA and AJM spaces of cultural hybridity are facilitated and co-constructed with youngsters. In AJM youngsters, surrounded by an interdisciplinary team of youth workers, open spaces of exploration of their identities. Culture, religions, psychology are combined to strengthen youngsters' resilience. In the BBA culturally hybrid spaces are constructed around boxing, introducing rituals of fraternity, borrowed from Cuba, facilitating mix of gender, of cultures, nationalities. Before the attacks of 13 November 2015, the gym hall was decorated with all the flags of the national belongings of the boxing member, symbolising thereby the peaceful co-existence of different cultures and nations.

B. Starting up: Another response to superdiversity relates to entrepreneurship. Van de Candelaere sketches of few portraits of young adults who find in their outer and inner superdiverse worlds, potentials for innovation. They start up their projects, search for micro-credits and launch new products and search for new markets. Superdiversity often merges into a logic of capitalism and appears here as an economic resource for individual success.

C. Embracing associative life and its values: Another group of youngsters and young adults embrace associative life, explore and appreciate social and cultural mixity as a reality and intercultural solidarity as an ideal of living together. The diversity of these socio-cultural organisations appears a learning space for tolerance, for the adherence to common values, and confidence in the potentials of a resilient open society. In some cases these associative spaces, and their embodied values of tolerance, are perceived as the only safe spaces towards youngsters can turn to and believe. These spaces, arguably, are also important in "preventing" young people from "radicalising" by enhancing their social capital. As a local youth professional remarks:

A: Of the people that have left from a club... I only know one. (...) But I don't know about anyone else that left from one of the associations. I know... I know... from clubs, from our club with, in total, in the athletics club we have more than 150 young people. Nobody left.

Q: doesn't the fact that these young people are in a club already suggest that their social capital...

A: That their social capital is higher

Q: which makes them less vulnerable...

A: Yes, I have that impression

Taking stock

In the previous paragraphs we sketched a variety of social ecologies surrounding the key actors of the action research in Brussels. Three preliminary conclusions are at place.

We argued, firstly, that Odisee and D'Broej are both called to answer to the social challenges of Brussels, and in particular to the unequal access to basic human rights as it surfaces in the urban areas around the Canal. We also described how both partners share normative and affective spaces. They teach, intervene, examine and learn within a similar space of values and they're both deeply affected by the terrorist attacks of Paris and Brussels. This brings them both inevitably in a committed and reflexive research position regarding the topic of "radicalisation". How to train social workers meaningfully in an urban climate of fear and terror and how to engage as social workers in a meaningful way with youngsters, some of which risk to get completely disconnected and choose, or risk to choose the dark path of destruction? How to meaningfully understand society, urban life, including the soft structures woven by youth work, in which "radicalisation" of youngsters towards terrorism has been possible? For both Odisee and D'Broej, these existential questions point directly to the heart of their action research.

Secondly, by describing the living conditions of youngsters and the prevailing urban transitions that profoundly mark their life-worlds, we discovered, again a series of spaces to which youngsters are subjected, in which they act and to which respond. Youngsters are, firstly, affected by living spaces diminishing their development and basic rights, and still breathe a collective attitude of indifference, neglect and exclusion. But youngsters are also responding to these vulnerable spaces. If their (families') economic standing permits it, they sometimes move to the more suburban parts around Brussels. Or, they temporarily escape from it, by claiming free spaces on streets or parks, or by finding shelters in youth houses or a box club. Adolescents and young adults are also facing the impact of fragilised educational spaces, lacking the levers, resources and strategies to give them access to decent instruction, and prepare them with adequate skills to enter the 21st century knowledge economy. Socio-cultural organisations offer them alternative learning spaces in the shape of educational support, leisure, time-out, trips, visits, but it's unsure whether these alternative spaces are sufficient to repair structural educational deficiencies.

Thirdly, as already mentioned, youngsters (and their families) respond to these vulnerable living, educational and economic spaces. Their strategies are in almost all these cases a response to a collective experience of deprivation and rejection, and exclusion. They are, inevitably spatial responses through which youngsters express their powerlessness, experiment with strategies of escape and survival, but also find resilience in order to, at least provisionally, transform and redress these spaces of exclusion and rejection. Some of them disconnect, create solitary or silent spaces, in which they seek to respond to the quest of meaning and dignity. In the words of one participant: "the harm has been done, so now we have to regenerate confidence progressively."