Urban citizenship in the context of narrative practices

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This paper is linked to the activities of an international scientific research community that brings together researchers from various disciplines (sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and educationalist) around the theme of ‘diversity and plurality in the urban context’. This network of researchers wants to understand better how the experience of difference and otherness in cities is dealt with in a variety of democratic practices. Against the backdrop of this broader initiative we have recently set up a research project with students of the first master year of social pedagogy at the Leuven University in Flanders/Belgium. In this research project we analyse practices in which people are stimulated to tell their story about their neighbourhood. In various cities of Flanders, there is a profusion of narrative practices. In these practices narratives are employed in view of different aims. Some practitioners use these stories as a means of oral history, trying to know more about the daily life of people at a particular time in history. Others see storytelling as a community building process, fostering inhabitants to develop a sense of belonging to the place and the people they live with. Still others support stories as a voice making process by which ordinary citizens can speak out loud about the way they experience their daily environment.

With our paper we want to elucidate how we came to understand these narrative practices as a particular ‘educational space’ (Schugurensky and Myers, 2003). We have a particular interest in how the looseness and open-endedness of storytelling possibly open new ways for citizens to name and explore narratively the dilemmas and contradictions of living with the plurality and globality of an urban context. Following research questions will guide our paper:

1) How to understand these narrative practices in relation to the attention for the more cultural side of citizenship today?

2) How can storytelling strengthen citizens to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of diversity in cities today?

Diversity and plurality in the urban context

On April 12th 2006, central railway station in Brussels. Joe van Holsbeek, a teenager of fifteen, is stabbed to death because of his MP3-player. In the public media this murder was commented on at length and raised several questions. How could this happen in a railway station, a public space where hundreds of people come and go everyday? Are railway stations no longer safe places where people can meet in an unprompted and pleasant way? To what extent can we still trust the other, who we don’t know and who will always stay a stranger for us? This fear was further intensified as, after some weeks, the murderers of this crime were caught and it became apparent that they were two Polish brothers. And there was not only the death of Joe van Holsbeek, there was also 9/11 attacks, the outrage in London and in Madrid, the murder on Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands etc. In the reports on these shocking incidents, time and again, the other is presented as a threat and as totally different to oneself.
One can criticise the above as too pessimistic. But these comments happen to be the way in which public opinion on diversity and multiculturalism is more and more articulated. Not only the broad public but also social scientists are increasingly questioning too optimistic perceptions of multiculturalism. In the Netherlands Paul Scheffer wrote in 2000, even before the shocking incidents we mentioned above, an essay called ‘Het multiculturele drama’ (The multicultural drama). In this essay, published in a Dutch newspaper, Scheffer shows how the multicultural society where different groups are living together in a respectful manner is not an empirical fact in the Netherlands. People of different populations live separately alongside each other and also the figures Scheffer studied on criminality, unemployment and school failures of migrants are alarming. They are an indication of the degree in which inequality and segregation are persistent symptoms of the multicultural society. In the cities, Scheffer writes, segregation in education and in housing seems to increase. And this is not a desirable development, as schools and the neighbourhood are beside work vital places where people of different population groups can have contact on a daily and informal basis. What Scheffer is pointing at is the risk of a downward movement when islands of poverty and inequality are not broken out of.

Scheffer was not appreciated for these observations and his essay led to a major public debate in the Netherlands. For seven years Scheffer travelled all round the country to discuss his ideas and tried to make visible what was really happening beneath the surface of the multicultural society. In his new book 'Het Land van Aankomst' (our translation: Land of arrival) (2007) he further underpins his ideas and, as he indicates in the introduction, he isn’t searching for an answer to the question ‘who is to blame’. What he observes is that the Netherlands, as a receiving country, is tense towards newcomers and that far more residents avoid any contact with them. Simultaneously many migrants continue to live with the idea to go back to the land of their origin and don’t commit themselves to their new country. As Scheffer is looking at the multicultural society from different sides, at the same time, he observes many deficits and ends up with a lot of doubts about the idea that the multicultural society is an enriching experience for most people nowadays.

Throughout his book Scheffer is articulating another kind of experience that according to him is more close to what diversity and plurality in cities does to people. It is an experience of loss, an experience of losing the casualness of life, not only for the migrants who have to start a new life in a foreign country but also for the residents who already live there and see how the scene of their city is changing as new shops and houses of God arise. Up till now researchers have focused exclusively on the feeling of loss on the side of migrants and don’t consider the experiences of residents in a thoughtful way. Instead researchers labelled the withdrawal of residents away from migrants as xenophobia, as a resistance to change. Migrants brought the whole world in our cities and this was a shocking experience for a lot of people. Instead of condemning the reaction to this shock Scheffer wants to understand better the places where people try to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of the encounter with the other. He is interested in practices where citizenship is marked in a more cultural manner. Scheffer gives the example of setting up a memorial to the arrival of foreigners in a region or the efforts of a neighbourhood to write down the stories of migrants as part of the history of that area. What these and many other examples make visible is the importance of public places where people are stimulated to talk to each other and by doing that constructing stories about the diversity in a city. In these places people find an ‘indeterminate space’ where they cross the threshold of their private life and engage in the diversity of the city. In these places not only migrants but every resident is a newcomer in relation to the stories to be told about the past and the future. And as Scheffer writes these particular places and practices can strengthen the sense of being part of an urban community where the ambivalence in relation to others is not wiped out but handled with care.
Although Scheffer refers several times to the importance of stories, he never puts forward a comprehensive analysis of how narratives can deal with the diversity of a city. Another Dutch author, René Boomkens, whose book in 2006 called ‘De Nieuwe wanorde’ (‘The new disorder’), analyses the cultural meaning of globalisation in the daily life of cities. Throughout his book Boomkens makes a plea for narratives as an attempt to reconcile the overwhelming existence of otherness, chaos and disorder with an experience based on continuity or identity of who, and what we are, here and now. To listen to the stories people tell is according to Boomkens taking the chaos of globalisation seriously and accepting the tentative character of the knowing within these stories. For Delanty (2003) a key dimension of cultural citizenship is the way in which individual life stories are connected with public issues. Cultural citizenship is, for Delanty, the power to name and create meaning. ‘It concerns the language, cultural modes, narratives, and discourses that people use to make sense of their society, interpret their place in it, and construct courses of action’. (Delanty, 2003, pp.603).

Cultural citizenship and narrative multiculturalism

Delanty (2003) is one of the many researchers who argue for a ‘cultural turn’ in our understanding of citizenship, seeing citizenship not just in formal terms but also in regard to meaning, practices and identities. And as Hermes and Dahlgren (2006) indicate this cultural turn has ‘become increasingly urgent over the past decade or so, as changing sociocultural realities underscore the limitations of strictly legal–formal notions of citizenship; not least, for example, in the face of the social problematics in post-colonial multicultural societies’ (Hermes and Dahlgren, 2006, pp.259). Dahlgren is especially interested in a sociocultural view of the public sphere, in how to envision the potential richness and vibrancy of informal speech. As he indicates: ‘a certain idealized view of citizen interaction has come into prominence during the past two decades, galvanizing much of the reflection on democracy and discussion. Habermas’ notions about communicative rationality are among the foundations, but there have been contributions and developments from others’ (Dahlgren, 2006, pp.277). What Dahlgren wants to shed light on is that these common concepts of the public sphere hinders our understanding of the public sphere in more concrete, empirical and even ethnographic terms. ‘The idea of ‘public’ is associated implacably with reason, rationality, objectivity, argument, work, text, information and knowledge.’ (Dahlgren, 2006, pp.275). These associations do not help to understand how the individual’s identities as citizen is never an a priori given and often emerges via ‘meandering and unpredictable talk’ (Dahlgren, 2006, pp.279).

And as indicated before it is this messiness and unpredictability that is so central to the everyday life of a city and that is also the focus of the narrative practices we come to in Flemish cities. There were many examples of what we can call community art projects, e.g. a project called ‘BIZ Kolderbos’, a Turkish word for a play called ‘we of the neighbourhood Kolderbos’. People living in this particular neighbourhood told about their experiences of mixed marriages and on living together in a multicultural area. These stories were written down and transformed in a play of and for the people in the neighbourhood. Or a project called ‘consolation’ where people living in the city of Ghent and belong to different cultural groups were stimulated to tell about the way they comfort others and found comfort with others. Also these stories were put on stage by real actors. We also found some examples of ‘oral history’ practices where historians, often with the help of community workers, traced the stories of migration in a particular neighbourhood. A lot of examples of ‘oral history’ projects were on a particular event (e.g. expo 58 in Brussels), a specific place (e.g. a brownfield in the harbour of Antwerp) or particular buildings (e.g. community accommodation, a new museum). In all these projects a
The diversity of stories was stimulated and at the end stories were transformed into photos, material objects as a symbol for what was told (e.g. what a refugee brought with her to her new country), sound fragments that could be listened to etc. Some of the organisations we visited had as a main aim gathering the diversity of stories on the everyday life in cities in Brussels, Antwerp and Bruges. The issues of these stories were very diverse, e.g. the stories about bathrooms throughout different generations, the stories of refugees and the places and streets they know in Brussels, the stories about the everyday life in a particular neighbourhood etc.

As we wanted to understand better how the looseness of these everyday stories could foster the vitality of democratic life in cities, we looked for literature on narrativity, multiculturalism and community life. An interesting track of literature was on ‘narrative multiculturalism’, a concept that was put forward by Joan Phillion (2002a) in her 20-month study of teaching and learning in a diverse classroom in a downtown community school in Toronto, Canada. The purpose of her research was ‘to describe the details of teaching and learning in a multicultural classroom and to document successful strategies for working with immigrant and minority students.’ (Phillion, 2002a, pp.535) Phillion chose the classroom of teacher Pam as the ‘perfect’ teacher-participant: ‘an immigrant, visible minority, female teacher working in a diverse community school’. She knew this teacher from the research of colleagues in the same school and at the start of her research Phillion ‘walked into Bay Street School with notions of the perfect place, the perfect participant, and the perfect study of multicultural practices’ (Phillion, 2002a, pp.266).

In retrospect, Phillion reflects on her struggles in becoming a narrative inquirer in a multicultural landscape. ‘I had in my mind the questions and the answers to the questions prepared, like a script of expectations, for Pam to follow. The truths of the script were what I personally and professionally believed in and tried to practise. Equally important to me at that time was the support for these beliefs in the multicultural literature. The script was a convergence of life experience, personal beliefs, and literature-supported truths. I realize, in retrospect, that this script served as an undetected, unspoken hypothesis for my planned inquiry.’ (Phillion, 2002a, pp.268) This script, and the truths contained in it, took on the quality of a sacred story that could not be fully and directly told, ‘because they lived, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of the celebrants’ (Crites, 1971, pp.295 cited in Phillion, 2002a). As the inquiry proceeded, Phillion became puzzled by what she saw in the classroom of Pam and had to admit that ‘real life was complicated, messy, laden with complex moral dilemmas’ (Phillion, 2002a, pp.269). The more time she spent in the classroom, the more she found that the multicultural literature was ‘insufficiently nuanced, too prescriptive’ (Phillion, 2002a, pp.269) to account for what she was experiencing with Pam. It is at this point Phillion was pushed into a narrative way of thinking about multicultural phenomena: seeing multiculturalism as fluid rather than as fixed, as contextualized in time, place and sociality. ‘As I began to think narratively by being in the midst of Pam’s life, it became more difficult to see Pam as a representative of the literature. She became less ‘immigrant’ teacher, less ‘Black’ teacher, less ‘minority’ teacher. Pam became Pam, with her own knowledge derived from years of working with students and years of personal experience. As we began to make meaning within our developing relationship, I began to recognize Pam’s personal practical knowledge … Pam’s personal practical multicultural knowledge demonstrated different qualities from the kinds of multicultural knowledge I was reading about in the literature.’ (Phillion, 2002b, pp.538)

**Narratives as a political space**

The narrative turn Phillion made in her research shows how a narrative process between
two or more people can counter the impact of ‘sacred stories’ or what Huber and Whelan (2001) have called ‘smooth stories’. These are stories in which the complexity of a practice is smoothed down to prescribed scripts of simplicity and sameness. This is probably one of the main incentives for many of the narrative practices in cities. Urban neighbourhoods mostly turn up within smooth stories, stories about globalisation, big projects of modernisation and many other elusive processes as poverty, criminality etc. Initiating a narrative practice is always about making space for the diversity of stories that can be told about the people and living within a neighbourhood. In one narrative practice stories were stimulated about the cheerful nightlife and the popular day life until the eighties in an old harbour neighbourhood of Ghent. It was in the first place a very pleasant project because this neighbourhood was for a lot of people the place where they met their first lover. But it was also a project about the commitment of people to a particular place and its plurality of meanings and this in spite of the big projects of urban renewal in that area.

In her narrative turn Phillion also experienced the necessity of attending closer to the stories about community life. Through her talks with Pam openings were created for understanding the particular of that multicultural classroom, an understanding ‘that demanded a more complex, more troubling conception of community’ (Greene, 1994, pp.12). Vasterling (2007) refers to Hannah Arendt who showed considerable interest in the issue of narrativity as an act of understanding the world. The world is, in contrast to nature, not a given, ‘it needs to be built and maintained, not only in its material infra-structure but also, and especially ….in the events and facts brought about by human actions’ (Vasterling, 2007, pp.85). For Arendt the world of acting and speaking people is very fragile and ephemeral as ‘acts, facts, and events lack impact and meaning, and can even disappear altogether, unless they are recorded and given meaning in stories of various kinds, ranging from official historiography to novels and news stories, and from discussions among friends to debates in the media and in parliament’ (Vasterling, 2007, pp.86). Arendt insists on the possibility of articulating plural viewpoints to come to a common and meaningfull reality which also has factual substance. In a globalized world Vasterling (2007) writes ‘plural viewpoints are replaced by a homogenized story —an increasingly common feature of the media in a globalized world—. The same images and sound-bites are repeated over and over again. Instead of illuminating the complex web of human affairs, the overexposure to the blinding light of just one perspective creates a sort of stark black and white dreamscape, which has lost all nuances and haunts us instead of guiding our understanding. (Vasterling, 2007, pp.86).

In relation to the urban narrative practices it is this particular possibility of many different views on living together with others that we want to investigate in depth. Huber and Whelan (2001) already explored that ‘a lack of spaces to openly name and explore the dilemmas, contradictions, and tensions shaping our lives’ create ‘still ponds’, ‘surreal places, often glossed over by pervasive and prescriptive stories of community’ (Huber and Whelan, 2001, pp.229 and pp.222). What are the more complex and more troubling conception of a multicultural community’ that can emerge from these narrative practices? Do these practices, as in the case with Phillion and Pam, stimulate participants to take a unique yet communicable stance on the diversity and plurality in cities? This focus on actualizing the distinct voices of participants is according to Arendt a political process. It is for us also a precarious educative process: to think and speak out contingent events in their contingency and to recover a narrative to tell as a singular being.

References


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