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GEOGRAPHIES OF WHITENESS AND WEALTH: WHITE, MIDDLE CLASS DISCOURSES ON SEGREGATION AND SOCIAL MIX IN FLANDERS, BELGIUM

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ABSTRACT: *While policy makers in different parts of the world are worried about the supposedly negative consequences of spatial concentrations of ethnic minorities and/or disadvantaged people, researchers continue the debate about the desirability and feasibility of social mix. In this article, we add to this literature by focusing on the often neglected, but crucial practices and discourses of the privileged in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 74 white, middle class residents of eight different neighborhoods of the Ghent urban region in Belgium, we demonstrate that few middle class whites actually want to live in a mixed neighborhood. We also make it clear that those living in diversity do not necessarily take up the roles they are expected to take up by the advocates of social mix policies. Drawing on these findings, we propose to broaden the research agenda of studies on segregation and social mix.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In different parts of the world, policy makers assume that the promotion of social mix is to the benefit of poor people and/or ethnic minorities living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Because of this assumption, public housing complexes in American and Australian cities are being demolished and redeveloped as mixed-income communities (Arthurson, 2013; Chaskin & Joseph, 2011; Rose et al., 2013). While countries such as Malaysia, India and South Africa enforce inclusionary housing policies (Calavita & Mallach, 2010; Klug, Rubin, & Todes, 2013), countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden try to counteract socio-economic and ethnic segregation by deploying housing diversification measures, social housing allocations and other desegregation policies (Bolt, Philips, & van Kempen, 2010; Holmqvist & Bergsten, 2009; Munch, 2009; van Kempen & Bolt, 2009).

Both in developed and developing countries, such policies are often supported by research on the negative consequences of spatial concentrations of ethnic minorities and/or disadvantaged people. In the international literature, at least three arguments recur (Bond, Sautkina, & Kearns, 2011; Bolt & Van Kempen, 2013; Chaskin & Joseph, 2011; Fainstein, 2005; Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber, 2007). First of all, it is often underlined that neighborhoods with weak socio-economic profiles have difficulties attracting a diverse set of amenities and services (Alwitt & Donley, 1997). Especially in countries without a strong welfare state, it is assumed that both the quality and the quantity of shops, banks, neighborhood schools and police stations is higher in mixed-income neighborhoods (Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber, 2007).

Secondly, it is added that poor people living among other poor people often adopt an 'anti-social' behavior which counteracts their upward social mobility through employment or education (Marks, 1991). In his famous study on the 'urban underclass', Wilson (1987) remarked, for instance, that socialization processes make early school-leaving, teenage pregnancy, crime, drug abuse and dependency on the welfare state more socially accepted in ghetto communities than in the rest of society.

A third argument focuses on the social consequences of contact between members of different socio-economic or socio-cultural groups. In the geographies of encounter literature, it is stressed that the spatial proximity of different members of such groups can bring about more personal contact, mutual understanding and respect (Leitner, 2012; Valentine, 2008). Scholars interested in the distribution of social capital add that reciprocal networks are more extensive and more diverse in mixed neighborhoods than in homogeneous ones (Tigges, Browne, & Green, 1998). Based on a longitudinal study in some of England's poorest districts, MacDonald et al. (2005) inferred, for instance, that their residents found it hard to escape social exclusion due to the local embeddedness of their social networks.

Even though policy makers across the globe draw on these arguments to legitimate the establishment of mixed neighborhoods, a lot of academics are convinced that the potential gains of many social mix policies do not outweigh their costs. Drawing on empirical evidence, a growing number of researchers argue that efforts to bring about diverse neighborhoods might actually lead to the displacement of their most vulnerable residents (Davidson, 2008; Lees, 2008; Walks & Maaranen, 2008). Even if that is not the case, other scholars stress that the realization of social mix may have

only low or even negative effects on the precarious situation of the original residents (Uitermark 2006; Veldboer, 2010). In the words of Bolt and van Kempen (2013, p. 2), “many studies have shown that mixed neighborhoods are not necessarily better places to live than other neighborhoods”. According to Lees (2008, p. 2461), “the positive aspects of social segregation are dismissed in policy discussions on social mixing”.

In this article, we will reconsider the feasibility and the effectiveness of social mix policies by looking at the practices and the discourses of middle class whites living in homogeneous and heterogeneous neighborhoods. Stimulated by the growing interest in the geographies of wealth (Beaverstock, Hubbard, & Short, 2004; Butler & Lees, 2006) and whiteness (Baldwin, 2012; Shaw, 2007), we will address Atkinson’s (2006, pp. 819–820) assertion that “higher-income households have largely been absent from contemporary academic and public policy discussions about how to achieve a socially just or inclusive residential patterning”. In his own words, “the segregation expressed by upper-income-groups through schooling, transport and housing has demonstrable impacts on those left out of these social circuits and yet are ignored as private and legitimate decisions that do not require public intervention” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 830).

Both among policy makers and in academic circles, interest in the spatial clustering of poor people and ethnic minorities continues to be legitimated by the idea that it hampers their social, economic and cultural integration. As such, Bauder (2002, p. 85) contends that “the idea of neighborhood effects implies that the residents of the so-called ghettos, barrios and slums are ultimately responsible for their own social and economic situation”. Drawing on this argument, Slater (2013, p. 12, his emphasis) concludes that “‘neighborhood effects’ is therefore more than merely a concept – it is an instrument of accusation, a veiled form of class antagonism that conveniently has no place for any concern over what happens outside the very neighborhoods under scrutiny”. Inspired by these lines of thought, our research is based on the hypothesis that the *outside* is very central to what happens – or could happen – *inside* disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

In spite of the growing body of research on white, middle class residents of homogeneous and heterogeneous neighborhoods, we aim to address two crucial gaps in the literature. First of all, it needs to be remarked that most research in this field focuses on gated communities and gentrifying urban neighborhoods. Numerous studies show, for instance, that the success of gated communities does not only rest upon (fear of) crime and the need for security, but also on the desire to live among like-minded people and the quest for status and prestige (e.g., He, 2013; Kenna, 2007; Low, 2001). It has also been demonstrated that such class-based strategies of exclusion create barriers for meaningful contacts between the rich and the poor (Lemanski, 2006). Along the same line, researchers studying gentrification indicate that preferences for urban life are often based on an appreciation of the cultural diversity of the city and a rejection of the homogeneity of the suburbs (Karsten, 2007; Ley, 1986; Shaw, 2007), but that this preference for local diversity does not necessarily translate into meaningful encounters, heterogeneous social networks or neighborhood engagement (Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Lees, 2008). While debates on gentrification and gated communities have started to question the involvement of the privileged in practices of segregation and social mix, relatively little

work has been done in less spectacular, but more mundane non-gated suburbs (Lupi & Musterd, 2006, p. 802; Watt, 2009).

Secondly, it needs to be acknowledged that scholars interested in the do's and don'ts of the privileged in situations of segregation and social mix have mainly paid attention to processes of stigmatization (e.g., Garbin&Millington, 2012; Slater&Anderson, 2012;Wacquant, 2007). Detailed studies conclude that employers associate an address with the capacity to do a good job or the willingness to work hard (Bauder, 2002; Hastings, 2004) and that teachers lower their educational expectations based on their cultural interpretations of the neighborhood and its residents (Bauder, 2001; Bunar, 2011). While we do not want to underestimate the importance of territorial stigmas in the marginalization of places and people, we aim to point out that there are other reasons to focus on middle class whites in the evaluation of social mix policies. By investigating whether middle class whites living in urban and suburban neighborhoods are willing to move to heterogeneous neighborhoods, we aim to shed new light on the feasibility of social mix strategies. By focusing on the way in which urban and suburban middle class whites interact with underprivileged neighbors, we intend to question the effectiveness of such strategies as well.

In order to address these two gaps in the literature, this article is based on in-depth interviews with middle class whites living in both urban and suburban neighborhoods in Flanders, Belgium. Special attention goes to the way in which the discourses, the practices and the experiences of our respondents affect the feasibility and the effectiveness of social mixing policies. To elaborate these arguments, the next section introduces the Flemish research context. Afterwards, we explain our research methodology. Drawing on two sections with empirical findings, the conclusion proposes a broader research agenda for segregation studies. This research agenda incorporates the often neglected, but crucial role of middle class whites in both homogeneous and heterogeneous neighborhoods.

2. SETTING THE SCENE

With more than 6million people living on less than 15,000 km², Flanders is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. Nevertheless, most Flemings do not live in high rise buildings in densely populated urban areas, but in single-family dwellings in more suburban settings. According to Kesteloot and De Maesschalck (2001), the origins of this spatial pattern can be found in the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. To counteract the growth of the socialist labor movement, the catholic and liberal political parties tried to oppose urban concentrations of laborers by facilitating cheap commutes between the city and the countryside and by promoting home ownership outside the urban centers (De Block & Polasky, 2011; De Decker et al., 2005). After the Second World War, the democratization of home ownership deepened this pattern. Encouraged by housing subsidies, a growing number of middle class families was able to build single-family dwellings equipped with all modern comfort on cheap land outside the industrialized centers (De Decker, 2011). Kesteloot and De Maesschalck (2001) conclude, therefore, that the legendary brick in the Flemish stomach, by which it is meant that it is the dream of all Flemings to build their own house on their own plot, is not genetically determined, but the symptom of 120 years of anti-urban politics.

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Moroccans and Turks in the Ghent Urban Region

FIGURE 2 Average Income (in Euros) in the Ghent Urban Region

Nowadays, the geographical dispersal of middle class families still explains the relatively high levels of socio-economic and ethnic segregation in Flanders (Kesteloot, 2006). In the 1960s and the 1970s, immigrants did not only fill in the low-paid jobs left by the Flemish middle class on the urban labor market, but also their houses and flats on the urban housing market. Even though the absolute number and the diversity of immigrants has increased strongly over the last decades, this geographical pattern has turned out to be rather persistent. The poorest immigrants are still mostly concentrated in the nineteenth century urban belt of small and badly equipped dwellings (Vanneste, Thomas, & Vanderstraeten, 2008). In the case of Ghent, Figure 1 exemplifies that most Turks and Moroccans are clustered in a couple of nineteenth century neighborhoods such as Brugse Poort and Ledeborg. Figure 2 visualizes how the richest neighborhoods of Ghent are located in the suburban fringe around the city, while the poorest ones are situated in the nineteenth century belt around the city (cf. Kesteloot & Meys, 2008).

Ever since the postwar Keynesian macro-economic conditions that fuelled the suburbanization process started falling apart, these spatial patterns have been considered to be problematic. Every policy document that has been published in Flanders about urban renewal since the 1970s has been based on the assumption that it is necessary to bring the middle classes back to the central city (De Decker, 2004, p. 477). While the lure of double-income families was certainly inspired by tax motivations, policy makers also seemed to be convinced that underprivileged people have more chances to climb the social ladder when they share their residential environment with more privileged people (Loopmans, De Decker, & Kesteloot, 2010, p. 188). Already in the beginning of the 1980s, a Christian Democratic minister explained that the “attraction of newcomers must focus on a demographic rejuvenation and revival of neighborhoods for the benefit of those who already live in the neighborhood” (Akkermans, 1983, p. 57). Once urban policy had become a regional competence, this idea was reinforced by the first Flemish minister for urban policy. Talking about double income households, the social democrat underlined that “the challenge is to create neighborhoods that keep these people in the city in such a way that also the poor and vulnerable people take advantage of it” (Peeters, 1995, p. 64).

Since the end of the 1990s, urban revitalization policies focus more on urban development and interurban competition for wealthy visitors, taxpaying inhabitants and rich investors than on the living conditions of poor people in deprived neighborhoods (De Maesschalck, 2011; Loopmans, 2007, p. 224). In order to stimulate private investments, Flemish cities beautify their medieval centers. To improve their tax base, they also try to attract double income households. Even though this entrepreneurial stance towards urban revitalization is much less focused on poverty alleviation, the belief in trickle down effects on the urban poor has not disappeared (De Decker et al., 2005). Talking about urban revitalization, the former mayor of Ghent stated, for instance, that “it is about the attraction of young, double income families to the city and about the consolidation of the social cohesion in the city” (Beke in van Bouchaute, 2013, p. 63). “When I attract young families, preferably with a job”, a local functionary explained, “that will improve my social fabric, my tax base and my neighborhood life” (Temmerman in van Bouchaute, 2013, p. 41).

Looking at the motivations behind social mix policies in Flanders, it is problematic, to say the least, that the attitudes and the behavior of the white middle class remain largely out of sight. By emphasizing the need for social mix in disadvantaged inner city neighborhoods, policy makers in Flanders problematize the concentration of poor immigrants in neighborhoods with a bad housing stock, but not the selective suburbanization of the better-off residents (Loopmans, De Decker, & Kesteloot, 2010). Research in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods shows, however, that the living conditions of their residents are heavily affected by the discriminatory practices and discourses of more privileged people living there and elsewhere. In her study on the use of public space by Moroccan women in Antwerp, Peleman (2002) found out, for example, that the white majority set up territorial strategies to preserve its authority in certain places. Because racist remarks prevented some of her respondents from undertaking activities outdoors, she concluded that it is crucial to conduct research that explicitly deals with the practices and the discourses of autochthonous Belgians.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to address the challenge put forward by Peleman (2002), we draw on in-depth interviews with 74 middle class whites living in the Ghent urban region. To reflect the geographical, cultural and socio-economic diversity of middle class whites living in this region, we selected eight different neighborhoods along a southwest oriented transect moving away from the city center. Within the borders of the city of Ghent, this transect included a very wealthy neighborhood developed in the interbellum (Miljoenenkwartier), an ethnically diverse working class neighborhood that has recently started to gentrify (Ledeborg), a richer urban neighborhood with a longer gentrification history (Gent-Zuid) and a large social rental housing estate (Nieuw-Gent). In the suburban municipalities around Ghent, we conducted interviews in one of the wealthiest municipalities of the city region (De Pinte), a more middle-income suburban area (Eke-Nazareth), a suburbanizing village with beautiful scenery (Huise) and a similar village along a busy thoroughfare (Ouwegem). Pictures and statistical indicators about these eight neighborhoods can be found in Table 1. Figures 1 and 2 visualize their position within the Ghent urban region.

Two important remarks have to be made concerning our methodology. First of all, we need to emphasize that we distributed dozens of letters with an invitation to participate in the study, but that only four per cent of the letters eventually led to an interview. Even though such a low response rate is not unusual in qualitative research based on a mail drop, it is important to recognize that the respondents in our study are a self-selected group in which home owners, pensioners and highly educated people are overrepresented (cf. Camina & Wood, 2009, p. 463). As a result, we cannot claim that our results are statistically representative for all middle class whites in the Ghent urban region. We are also unable to draw statistically representative conclusions about the (dis)similarities between the residents of different neighborhoods. By using the eight different neighborhoods as a proxy for the diversity of lifestyles, residential environments and socio-economic situations among middle class whites in the Ghent urban region, we ended up with a rich diversity of respondents that allowed for analytic generalization (in the meaning of Polit & Beck, 2010).

Cases (no of interviews)	Gent-Zuid (8)	Ledeberg (7)	Miljoenenkwartier (12)	Nieuw-Gent (8)

Tot. population (2008)	2089	5215	3162	3510
No. of households (2008)	1288	2396	1632	1904
Av. income by declaration (2009)	23599€	21833€	34653€	17988€
% single* (2008)	61%	43%	53%	55%
% university degree (2001)	29%	12%	48%	11%
% 65+ (2008)	14%	14%	21%	23%
% Moroccans & Turks (2008)	1 %	7%	0,5%	2%
% Foreigners (2008)	12%	17%	12%	16%
% home-owners (2001)	28%	55%	54%	7%
% free standing houses (2001)	1%	1%	7%	3%
Cases (no of interviews)	De Pinte (8)	Eke-Nazareth (8)	Huise (8)	Ouwegem (8)

Tot. population (2008)	8515	4617	1688	1518
No. of households (2008)	3339	1707	658	593
Av. income by declaration (2009)	35651€	28545€	27349€	26674€
% single (2008)	22%	23%	22%	22%
% university degree (2001)	30%	17%	16%	13%
% 65+ (2008)	18%	17%	23%	16%
% Moroccans & Turks (2008)	0%	0%	0%	0%
% Foreigners (2008)	1%	2%	1%	1%
% home-owners (2001)	79%	78%	84%	84%
% free standing houses (2001)	71%	62%	71%	76%

Secondly, we need to underline that the interviews were not specifically meant to reconsider social mix policies from the white, middle class perspective. Since they were part of a larger research project on the housing pathways of white middle class Flemings, several other topics were discussed in the one to two hours that we sat down with each of the respondents (see Meeus, De Decker, & Claessens, 2013). In the beginning of each interview, we mapped the housing careers of the interviewees. Afterwards, we asked them why they had moved from one place to another. More often than not, the theme of ethnic and cultural diversity was brought up spontaneously and was discussed rather extensively. If this was not the case, we tried to introduce it ourselves when we asked respondents about changes in their own neighborhoods and the potential of the city as a living environment. While this approach may have generated less information than targeted interviews about social mix and segregation would have done, we find it crucial that the topics discussed below appeared rather unexpectedly in nearly all interviews.

In the two following sections, we present the results of our NVivo driven analysis of the interview transcripts. In the next section, we will demonstrate that the feasibility of social mix policies needs to be questioned because few middle class whites are actually willing to live in heterogeneous neighborhoods. While respondents in both urban and suburban settings are positive about existing urban revitalization processes, many refuse to move to certain urban neighborhoods (or parts thereof) because of their ethnic and socio-economic diversity. Through an explanation of the underlying rationales, the subsequent section makes it clear that people living in diversity are not necessarily ready to take up the roles which the social mix literature expects them to take up. By demonstrating that discourses about urban diversity are linked to cultural stereotypes, class identifications, language issues and fear of crime, we infer that political rationales to decrease the socio-economic and ethno-cultural segregation in Flemish cities are rooted in naive assumptions about the comings and goings of the white middle class.

4. REVITALIZATION, RACIALIZATION AND CLASS-IFICATION

Notwithstanding deep-seated anti-urban sentiments, it is clear that a house in the city of Ghent has become much more desirable than it used to be some decades ago. Several respondents who had moved to the city in the sixties, seventies and eighties, indicated that urban living used to be hard to defend at a time when a lot of peers who could afford it moved to the suburbs. A 61 year old woman told us, for instance, that she had been happy to buy a terraced house in Gent-Zuid at the end of the 1970s, but that her colleagues were not filled with admiration when she announced her purchase in the office. A 69 year old man living in the same neighborhood argued that such an anti-urban mentality had changed in the meanwhile:

“In those years, everyone wanted to build out of town. Many of my friends as well. To buy a piece of land or a small farm, that was the thing. While hundreds of houses were for sale in town. Nobody bought them. It was the flight to the countryside, the rural idyll. (. . .) That mentality has changed now as well. Nothing is wrong anymore with living in a terraced house in the city with a small garden. At that time, that was not the case. You needed to have a garden and trees.” (Man, 69, Gent-Zuid)

If urban living has become much more socially accepted in middle class circles, it is in large measure due to the belief that the city has changed for the better. Many urban residents confirmed that the beautification strategies of the city council are paying off. Asked whether the city had changed over his lifetime, a 72 year old man from the Miljoenenkwartier answered, for example, that *“it has become much more attractive than twenty years ago”*. A 83 year old woman from Ledeberg confirmed that the city used to be *“completely dilapidated”*, but that *“Ghent has become a magnificent city nowadays”*. Middle class whites who consider living in certain urban neighborhoods often do so because they have been upgraded or because they are expected to be rejuvenated. Many respondents anticipated that the actions of the city council would turn disadvantaged neighborhoods such as Ledeberg into good places to live as well. It seems that these actions help middle class whites to carve out imaginary spaces of Flemish middleclassness in these disadvantaged neighborhoods:

“Back then, we didn’t consider that neighborhood. But now you notice that it’s going through a serious upgrade. The City of Ghent invests a lot of energy to make it liveable there. If that would have been the case back then, we would have been looking [for a home] there as well.” (Woman, 51, Miljoenenkwartier, about Ledeberg)

Even though some respondents living outside of Ghent appreciated the urban revitalization process almost as much as the interviewees in town, most suburbanites indicated that they would never consider moving to Ghent. Asked to explain why that was the case, two profiles appeared. A first group had never taken into account nor experienced an urban residential setting. In line with suburban white flight in the United States (e.g., Kruse, 2005), a second group had been living in Ghent in the past, but had decided to move to the suburbs. While both groups pointed at the dilapidated state of the city some years ago, the open nature of our questions revealed that the presence of migrant communities and ethnic minorities was an important consideration as well. Talking about the yearly festivities in the gentrified Patershol district, a member of the first group argued that he applauded the renovation of the city center, but that he disliked the company of so many ‘strangers’ (cf. Oosterlynck & Debruyne, 2010). Members of the second group underlined that they still felt attracted to the employment opportunities and the cultural activities in the city, but that the growing diversity of the urban population had motivated them to buy a house in the suburbs. Representing the discourses in the second group, a 43 year old man explained that he had always felt connected with the city of Ghent, but that he had suburbanized because of the immigration of ‘allochthons’ in his childhood neighborhood:

“Sometimes I go to the Patershol festivities, but that is the real city center. And I applaud the renovation, but I am going to say it as it is. I think it is just a little bit too much strangers.” (Man, 59, Huise)

“I have a connection with the city of Ghent, but I moved away because of the immigration of allochthons, just like my parents. The Brugse Poort has now become Little Turkey.” (Man, 43, Eke-Nazareth)

Many respondents in Huise, Ouwegem, De Pinte or Eke-Nazareth developed their spatial imaginaries through deeply classed and racialized interpretations of city life and city-dwellers (cf. Bonnett & Nayak, 2003; Sundstrom, 2003). A metaphorical link between race and space was evident, for example, when the 43 year old man quoted above talked about Brugse Poort as if it was 'Little Turkey'. Asked how he thought about the social housing estate of Nieuw Gent, a 71 year old man from Miljoenenkwartier also answered that his cleaning lady was living there and that she *"did not see any white people, only blacks and browns and all kinds"*. While he considered Ledeborg to be *"the neighborhood of the allochthons"*, another person commented that it had become *"a foreign country"*. While a 43 year old woman in Eke-Nazareth explained to us that she wanted to move to Brussels after her studies because she felt attracted to its cosmopolitan and multicultural population, most respondents stressed that they could not imagine living in places they saw through racialized glasses:

"That's already a foreign country there. In the past, it was not like that, but now it's terrible. Actually, we drove through this week and my wife told me "I really don't want to live here". (Man, 60, Eke-Nazareth, about Ledeborg)

In the interviews, this racialization of (parts of) the city was often complemented by a mental chain that connected the suburbs with whiteness and middleclassness (cf. Schuermans & De Maesschalck, 2010). In the same way as the English village has been described as a "potent symbol in the construction and control of a racialized set of specifically middle class values" (Tyler, 2003, p. 408) and a "repository of white values, ideologies and lifestyles" (Hubbard, 2005, p. 12), the Flemish suburb is imagined to be a white, middle class residential haven away from the poverty and the diversity of the city. While someone told that he had moved to the suburbs *"because of the immigration of allochthons"* in the city (cf. supra), others stressed that they lived outside of Ghent because they did not want to have neighbors with different cultural habits and lower standards of living.

As such, it should not come as a surprise that a lot of suburban respondents were worried that the assumed homogeneity of the suburbs was under threat. In all four suburban neighborhoods concerns were voiced about issues such as the proposed construction of an asylum center or the immigration of rich foreigners. The interviews demonstrate, however, that the increased visibility of foreigners outside cities did not disturb the discursive construction of the suburb as a white and middle class space. Through a logic of social confinement and a logic of spatial containment, suburban dwellers did not need to cast doubt on the racialization and the class-ification of their living environments. The first quote below illustrates the logic of social confinement. A respondent from Huise indicates that the socio-economic mix in his village will remain limited because the property prices are so high. Another quote from Huise exemplifies the logic of spatial containment. Confronted with the opening of an accommodation center for asylum seekers in the neighboring village of Zingem, the respondent stresses that the poverty of his municipality is concentrated in Zingem:

"We don't run that risk here. There won't be an inflow here because it's unaffordable anyway. The house nextdoors has been for sale for one week and it was sold immediately. For 300 000 euros. And that's a house without comfort" (Man, 44, Huise)

"The region around Oudenaarde is not really threatened by strangers. And the poverty of our rural municipality is concentrated in Zingem. The local accommodation initiative for asylum seekers is located there. I must say that we did some effort to make sure that the asylum center would not come to Huise, because the rectory stood empty at that time. There is no problem with foreigners here in Huise. It simply doesn't exist." (Man, 59, Huise)

Even though the urban respondents were generally much more positive about living in the city, their discourses about urban diversity were not fundamentally different from those in the suburbs. As they usually had a better knowledge of the city and its residents, urbanites generally refrained from talking about *all* 'strangers' or *entire* neighborhoods in stereotypical ways. Yet, the three quotes below demonstrate that the selective geographical imaginaries through which specific living environments come to be avoided because they are associated with specific population groups work very much in the same way for city dwellers as they do for suburban residents, albeit at smaller spatial scales. While many suburban residents who visit the city only occasionally talk about the whole city or entire neighborhoods in racialized and classed ways, urban residents often draw boundaries between some streets or buildings and others. In-stead of racializing and class-ifying entire neighborhoods, urban residents use the logics of social confinement and spatial containment to associate problems related to diversity with particular people (*"Kosovars and I don't know what else"*) and specific places (*"in that direction"*, *"a couple of streets"*, *"this building"*) (cf. Loopmans, Cowell and Oosterlynck, 2012):

"A negative process is the onrush of all those strangers, with their satellite dishes. (. . .) Everything that's for sale goes to foreigners. I don't have a problem with the Turks, but all those Kosovars and I don't know what else. (...) Not so much in my street. In my street it's good. Because it's all owners here. But in that direction it's phenomenal" (Woman, 40, Ledeberg)

"I didn't want to end up in a place with a lot of strangers. That's why I didn't consider certain neighborhoods. (. . .) I've also been looking in Ledeberg. There were a couple of streets where I would like to live, but there were also some where I definitely wouldn't like to live" (Woman, 57, Gent-Zuid)

"I don't see strangers moving into this building quickly. They are upgrading the neighborhood at several places. People say it will become the most beautiful neighborhood of Ghent." (Man, 58, Gent-Zuid)

These quotes show that mental connections between classes, races and spaces are not only important for the residential choices of suburban residents, but also for urbanites. A lot of urban respondents do not consider relocating to certain neighborhoods, specific streets or particular blocks of flats because of the poverty and the diversity of their residents. In the second quote above, the 57 year old woman from Gent-Zuid makes this the most explicit by saying that she did not "want to end up in a place with a lot of strangers". By expressing the hope that the physical upgrade of his neighborhood will keep 'strangers' out of his block of flats, the 58 year old Brusselse Poort resident quoted in the last citation above confirms that a lot of middle class whites will only consider living in revitalized parts of the city under the

condition that the ethnic and the socio-economic diversity of its original inhabitants is eliminated or displaced.

Drawing on a much larger sample than the one used in our study, Bral and Pauwels (2008) generalize these findings to the Flemish population as a whole. Based on face-to-face surveys with 1,500 Flemings, they confirm that diversity plays a major role in the living environment. Asked to assume that they could select their ideal neighborhood, less than two per cent of the respondents stated that the number of foreigners did not matter at all. While more than half of the rural and suburban dwellers chose a neighborhood “with almost no foreigners”, seventy per cent of the urban residents preferred a neighborhood “with a few foreigners”. No matter where people lived, very few opted for a neighborhood “with a lot of foreigners” (Bral & Pauwels, 2008, pp. 119–120).

5. IDENTIFICATION, INTEGRATION AND CRIMINALIZATION

The question is why ethnic and socio-economic diversity play such an important role in the residential choices of the respondents. By disentangling their discourses about poverty, diversity and urbanity, at least three motivations recur. A first motivation is related to the fact that place identifications are a crucial element in the construction of their identities. By associating themselves with idyllic representations of some places and by distancing themselves from the assumed filthiness of other places, middle class whites are not only able to construct positive place identities of their living environments, but also positive senses of self. While the scale at which this process works is dependent upon the place where the respondents reside, their position in the world is often dependent upon a powerful connection with the perceived order and purity of their white, middle class village / neighborhood / street and an equally powerful disconnection from the disorder and the poverty of multicultural cities / neighborhoods / streets (cf. Halfacree, 1996; Housel, 2009; Sibley, 2001).

In the first quote below, it is evident, for example, that the identity and the status of the woman from Ledeberg is not only reproduced through a distancing from “*the lower classes*”, the “*strangers*” and the “*blacks*” living in certain streets of her neighborhood, but also through an identification with the “*people like us*” living in her own street. In the second quote, a man and a woman who have recently bought a property in Ledeberg explain that they distance themselves from the poor in their neighborhood and that they do not feel a bond with them. While the husband celebrates the fact that cheap olives and delicious lamb are on sale in the corner shops, the wife advocates “*a more balanced composition*” and “*a bit less strangers*”:

“They used to be people like us. Nowadays, a lot of strangers, many blacks, are also living there. It has become much more social, you know. The lower classes have arrived there.” (Woman, 40, Ledeberg)

“Close to our home, you see a lot of what we call marginals. We distance ourselves from them”. “It’s not like we are repulsed by them, but we don’t have a bond with them either, really.” (Man and woman, 34, Ledeberg)

Apart from such processes of identification and distancing, a second motivation to prefer homogeneously white, middle class neighborhoods relates to cultural issues and to language in particular (cf. Blommaert, 2011). In the minds of a lot of respondents, veils, Arab street signs or Turkish chit chat reflect the unwillingness of many foreigners to learn Dutch and to integrate into the Flemish culture. In the words of a 55 year old woman from De Pinte, it is hard to imagine moving to Ledeberg because *“you can’t have a chat with the people in the neighborhood”* and because *“you can’t get in touch with them easily”*. According to a 42 year old woman from De Pinte, it is problematic that recent immigrants hardly speak any Dutch and that they have chosen to establish their own communities, rather than assimilating into their new environment. Saying that *“the atmosphere has become very strange there”* or that she *“wouldn’t feel at home amongst them”*, both underline that the process of identification elaborated above does not only relate to their classed and racialized understanding of the socio-economic and ethno-cultural diversity of the neighborhood residents, but also to the languages they speak and the cultural habits they display. For them, it would be hard to live in a neighborhood where the norms and values of an imagined Flemish community are not being adopted and where Dutch is not necessarily the *lingua franca* anymore. A 74 year old man from De Pinte even stated that *“you shouldn’t talk Dutch there”* and that *“it wouldn’t be accepted there”*:

“I don’t like to go there anymore, because you hear Arabic everywhere you go or whatever it is. During my youth in Steenakker, we lived among a lot of strangers already, but they were perfectly integrated. The women went shopping. Rarely were they wearing a veil. And the men had a job. And the children were playing with us. And they were much better integrated than they are now, because they talk . . . Those children hardly talk any Dutch any longer. The atmosphere has become very strange there.” (Woman, 42, De Pinte, about her parental neighborhood)

“It happens that I go to the market in Ledeberg. (. . .) A lot of strangers are living there, but obviously I don’t have anything against them. I wouldn’t feel at home amongst them though. You can’t get in touch with them easily, you see. I think the place has become flooded with strangers. To me, it seems hard to live there if you can’t have a chat with the people in the neighborhood.” (Woman, 55, De Pinte, about Ledeberg)

“Well, you shouldn’t talk Dutch there, say in the Brugse Poort, I think. For sure, it wouldn’t be accepted there.” (Man, 74, De Pinte)

Identity issues and cultural sensibilities are not the only two reasons why many respondents cannot imagine living in diverse neighborhoods, however. Looking at our interview material, it is obvious that a third motivation relates to crime and fear of crime. In the discourses of a lot of respondents, metonymic chains of association link the essentialist dichotomies outlined above with racialized, classed and spatialized discourses on crime and insecurity. In popular perceptions, a bi-polar cleavage persists between the safety of the suburbs and the unsafety of certain urban neighborhoods (cf. Neal, 2002, p. 445). While the countryside and the suburbs are generally thought to be crime free, cities are often said to be crime infested (cf. Halfacree, 1996, p. 63). This way of thinking is rooted in a triple connection between (certain places in) cities, crime and poor foreigners. Because of the illusion that

middle class whites do not commit crime, but only other social groups which are easily identifiable by their physical appearance, the former feel safe in places where they encounter unfamiliar white people who are well dressed, but unsafe in places where they come across unacquainted strangers:

"It used to be a nice neighborhood, but now it has become Little Turkey. Friday evening, it's all mosque hustle there. You also don't feel safe anymore." (Woman, 47, Eke-Nazareth, about Brugse Poort)

"Too many blacks. Beware, I am not a racist, but at my age I don't feel safe among them." (Man, 73, Eke-Nazareth, about Nieuw-Gent)

In this context, it is important to note that urban residents generally feel much more comfortable in the city than the suburban dwellers quoted above (cf. Schuermans & De Maesschalck, 2010). Many interviewees from Ghent were sure that previous experiences had made them feel less insecure when walking around in poor, multicultural districts. At the same time, they were convinced that friends and family members living in rural or suburban surroundings feel much more unsafe in the city because of their lack of confrontations with poverty and diversity. A 62 year old woman from Gent-Zuid explained to us, for example, that she would be less scared when she saw six Turkish women in her street than the average person in a remote rural village in the province of West Flanders. A ten years younger woman from Ledeborg argued that she got used to encountering different people, but that visitors from rural or suburban Flanders feel very uncomfortable in such circumstances:

"When you see six Turkish women walking around in Diksmuide, everyone will be surprised and gossip about it. But in the city it's not like that, so you're less scared of it." (Woman, 62, Gent-Zuid)

"Fifteen years ago, someone from the province of West Flanders came to visit me here in Ghent. And we were walking through Oudburg [in the Patershol district] and I still remember that my girlfriend asked me to avoid that street on our way back, probably because there were too many strangers. And you only have restaurants there. I also have a small niece who came here and started to cry because she saw a black guy. Meanwhile, that's all normal for me. I don't notice it anymore." (Woman, 52, Ledeborg)

When these three explanations are put together, it is clear that the fear of moving to diverse neighborhoods is not only rooted in a hyperbolic racialization and class-ification, but also in a caricatural understanding of the lifestyles of their residents. In the eyes of a lot of Flemings, certain cities / neighborhoods / streets are characterized by an overrepresentation of foreigners with a completely different culture, a totally unpronounceable language and a simply uncomparable inclination towards crime. By drawing up such a sharp binary between trustworthy Flemings who speak Dutch and dangerous allochthons with another culture – and by setting up a similar dichotomy between unsafe, multicultural places and safe, white, middle class living environments – they are able to construct a positive self-identity in the midst of a quickly changing Flanders. In the imagination of a lot of respondents, multicultural streets / neighborhoods / cities house so many "*blacks and browns and*

all kinds” that they have become places where they are ‘strangers’ themselves. To counteract such a feeling, a lot of them retreat in buildings / streets / suburbs / villages where they can feel safe and at home because of a lack of socio-economic and ethno-cultural diversity.

6. CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this article, we emphasized that academics and policy makers have considered the establishment and the effects of socio-economic and ethnic segregation for too long from the perspective of the underprivileged alone. Drawing on Bauder (2002), Atkinson (2006) and Slater (2013), we argued that it is impossible to ignore the role of the privileged living inside and outside disadvantaged neighborhoods. Based on our analysis of the discourses and the experiences of 74 respondents in eight different neighborhoods of the Ghent urban region, two points can be made.

In line with recent scholarship in England, our study demonstrates, first of all, that the clustering of the poor and the concentration of ethnic minorities should not only be explained by the structure of the housing market and the voluntary self-segregation of the disadvantaged, but also by processes of “middle class disaffiliation” (Atkinson, 2006) and “selective belonging” (Watt, 2009). While it is evident that most urban and suburban dwellers still feel attracted to the city center of Ghent and the revitalized neighborhoods in its immediate vicinity, it is also clear that very few people would consider relocating to “*the neighborhood of the allochthons*”, “*a foreign country*” or “*Little Turkey*”. Since the racialization, the class-ification and the criminalization of these locales strengthen already existing anti-urban attitudes, few suburbanites can imagine living in areas such as Ledeberg or Brugse Poort. While urbanites generally have a better knowledge of the city and its residents, many of them do not want to rent or buy in certain neighborhoods, streets or blocks of flats either. More often than not, the respondents in town also tend to carve out imaginary spaces of Flemish middleclassness. They generally discuss places at a more refined spatial scale, however. In both cases, the feasibility of policies to increase the social mobility of underprivileged residents of disadvantaged, multicultural neighborhoods by attracting middle class families is impeded by the fact that ethnic and socio-economic heterogeneity stop a lot of middle class whites from walking around in certain cities, neighborhoods or streets, let alone from moving there.

Secondly, it needs to be acknowledged that the effectiveness of social mix policies is affected by the do’s and don’ts of privileged people living amidst socio-economic and cultural diversity. Officially, social mix policies in Flanders are undergirded by the conviction that the introduction of middle class people in disadvantaged neighborhoods will help the original inhabitants to climb the social ladder. Reading through the arguments mentioned in the introduction, it can be seen that the new residents are expected to improve the level of the amenities and services in the neighborhood (cf. Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber, 2007), to be positive role models (cf. Wilson, 1987), to have meaningful interpersonal encounters (cf. Valentine, 2008) and to diversify the reciprocity networks in these neighborhoods (cf. Tigges, Browne, & Green, 1998). Our research in Flanders teaches us, however, that better-off residents do not necessarily take up the roles they are expected to take up by the

advocates of social mix policies. In reality, a lot of middle class, white Flemings do their utmost best to avoid contacts with ethnic minorities and poor people as much as possible. A lot of suburban interviewees explained that their choice to live in the suburbs was a deliberate strategy to avoid dealing with socio-economic and ethno-cultural diversity in their living environments. Confronted with the poverty and the diversity of their neighborhoods, a lot of middle class urban dwellers indicated that they preferred to hang out with “people like us” as well. A lot of them also distanced themselves, both socially and spatially, from the so-called ‘marginals’ around them. Several urbanites even described their neighbors and (parts of) their own neighborhoods in very stereotypical terms. In any case, very few were eager to become part of the kind of inter-class, multicultural networks policy makers seem to dream of.

When these two arguments are put together, it becomes evident that the lack of attention for the comings and goings of the white middle class is a serious shortcoming in scholarship that aims to evaluate the causes and the effects of segregation. Even when we accept that the statistical generalizability of our study is limited, and even when we acknowledge that our empirical findings are firmly rooted in the Flemish context, they still urge us to propose an alternative research agenda. First of all, this research agenda should go beyond the deeply disturbing cliché that the areas of the privileged should not be considered in studies on segregation and social mix (cf. Bonnett, 1993, p. 175). If we accept that the actions and the persuasions of those in the center have a serious impact upon the hardship of those who are socially and spatially pressed to the margins, we should not only examine European disadvantaged neighborhoods, North American ghettos or South African townships, but also the seemingly innocent and inconspicuous landscape of privilege that forms their mirror image. While most attention so far has gone to extreme case-studies in gated communities and gentrified urban neighborhoods, the results of our study call for more research on the seemingly ‘empty spaces’ in-between (cf. Kobayashi & Peake, 2000, p. 400).

The research agenda we advocate does not only target a fundamental modification of the spatial focus of segregation studies, however, but also a vital complement to the research questions being addressed. While scholars have started to take up the role of middle class whites in the (re)production of segregation and its supposedly negative effects, most of them have turned their spotlights on processes of stigmatization (e.g., Garbin & Millington, 2012; Slater & Anderson, 2012; Wacquant, 2007). Drawing on our case study in the Ghent urban region, we are convinced that there are also other good reasons why the do’s and the don’ts of privileged groups should be as central to studies on neighborhood effects as those of the underprivileged. All in all, our empirical work suggests that the supposed benefits of social mix are based on overly optimistic assumptions about the way in which prosperous residents act in mixed communities (cf. Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Lees, 2008). An unresolved issue relates to the effects of social mix on the attitudes and behavior of the privileged. While the discourses of urban dwellers were rather similar to those of suburban ones, the lack of generalizations about the whole city, the absence of cultural stereotypes about all foreigners and the nonexistence of widespread fear suggest that their experience of poverty and diversity may have a meaningful impact upon their actions and convictions (cf. Schuermans & De Maesschalck, 2010; Valentine, 2008). As such, we are convinced that a new

perspective on the social cost of residential segregation and the real potentialities of social mix will be opened up by enlarging the geographical focus of segregation studies and by incorporating research on the seemingly banal discourses and practices through which social, economic and cultural privileges associated with whiteness and wealth are protected and challenged in everyday life.

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ENDNOTE

1 These two nationalities have been chosen because they represent the two largest groups of foreigners from outside the European Union. The map is based on census data from 2001. More recent data are available, but do not include information about people who obtained the Belgian nationality. In 2000, a reform of the citizenship rules facilitated the naturalization process.

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