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The Idea of Ethnic Homogeneity
The Danish Case

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The idea of ethnic homogeneity: The Danish Case

Abstract

This working paper seeks to address three overall empirical, theoretical and methodological issues, all related to the study of social cohesion, based on data collected with one specific national and one specific local context. The working paper will discuss (1) the political/politicized implications of the concept as it is used within Denmark – a national context where the concept has gained significance within the public debate over the last decades; (2) the context dependency of the concept and (3) a possible qualitative approach into the field according to the expectation of context dependency. The paper is based on analysis of the use of the concept of social cohesion in Danish newspapers and Danish politics from 1990 onwards, as well as a qualitative study of the multiethnic neighborhood Nørrebro in Copenhagen.

Keywords: Social cohesion, Danish politics, politicization, Nørrebro, qualitative methods.

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Introduction

Between February 1 and December 31 2014, I was fortunate to hold the Willy Brandt Professorship at Malmö University. It did not take me long (and I was not that surprised) to notice how the effects of migration, how migrants are perceived and some of the concepts used to frame the discussion – both within academia and politics – differed considerably between the two nations. This working paper is not a comparative study, but I will start out with contextualizing the Danish case via a short comparison with Sweden.

One important difference between Denmark and Sweden is that while Sweden since 1974 has had a stated policy towards “ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities”, and where a minister of immigration already in 1986 described the country as “on its way to become multicultural” (Svanberg & Tydén 1999:91-92), Denmark has still not officially recognized itself as a country of immigration. However, political initiatives targeting immigrants had a much longer history in both countries. Denmark did, for example, introduce its first Alien Act in 1875 (Schmidt, forthcoming a). Getting into the country was easy – passports were not required – but immigrants should show some kind of legitimation and be able to support themselves. Sweden, on the other hand, issued its first Alien Act in 1914. Or rather: The act focused on the issue of deportation and the Swedish government’s right, under certain circumstances, to regulate the access of immigrants to the country via a demand of visas and passports (Hjarnø 1988: 76).

As noted by e.g. Andreas Wimmer Nina Glick Schiller (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002) migration research cannot be separated from the political understandings of migration in a given moment in time. In 1988 Carl-Ulrik Schierup noted that a change had happened in European migration research throughout the 1970s: Whereas the initial interest focused on migration in relation to employment, the research focus slowly changed towards an interest in “integration” or (perhaps more truthful to how the concept of integration was used and perceived) “assimilation” (Schierup 1988: 239). Schierup notes that Sweden in the 1970s applied a “cultural pluralist” policy, while the debate in Denmark in the same period resembled the immigration debate in the United States “in former times” (Schierup 1988: 243) focusing on assimilation as both “ideology, political program and theme within the social sciences” (ibid.).

The debate over integration and assimilation – both within research and in the public debate – underlines the inaccuracy by which these concepts are used and how difficult they are to define. In a working paper from 2002, Danish sociologist Ruth Emerek noted that the concept of “integration is unclear, and the use of it so problematic that it possibly is unsuitable for scientific studies” (Emerek 2002: 7). Still, integration has unmistakably become a political buzzword, at the same time as it is used extensively in research studies (not only in Scandinavia but certainly also beyond). Yet, how the concept is used is far from coherent. The link between politics and research is, for example, underlined via studies of “cultural integration”; a topic that e.g. is argued relevant since: “The concepts of cultural diversity and
cultural identity are at the forefront of the political debate in many western societies.” (Algan et al. 2012). The variables that Algan et al. include in their study of cultural integration can be discussed (for example: How does the number of times a person prays relate to the issue of integration?). How research, at times, stumbles after concepts used within politics, and employ them without truly scrutinizing their relevance, is an issue that calls for larger attention within the research community. While migration research (and other social science and humanities disciplines) may include a critique of existing political paradigms it may also contribute to their reinforcement, for instance by including a particular vocabulary and concepts (social cohesion, integration, assimilation); a particular research perspective (e.g. the nation state and immigrants as potential “problems”), a certain set of questions; and a certain catalogue of suggested interesting topics (e.g. religion, radicalization etc.).

Social cohesion – the Danish case

Another area where there is an obvious discrepancy between Sweden and Denmark is in research into the issue of social cohesion. As a researcher I have been – and am – involved in two large state-funded research projects dealing with the topic.¹ One recurring question in this work has been to understand what social cohesion is and how we can study it. Is social cohesion tangible; can we study it empirically and according to which parameters? Importantly, most attempts to study social cohesion are quantitative (e.g. Putnam 2007; Lolle & Torpe 2011). But can we also study social cohesion qualitatively – and how? Given that social cohesion is a vague concept and at the minimum can be described as “a multidimensional concept” (Ariely 2013: 578), qualitative research can be one of the means by which it is both studies and thoroughly defined. If and how we can understand and study social cohesion as a phenomenon still remains under dispute (Ariely 2013: 579).

One challenge of studying social cohesion is to situate the concept sensibly vis-à-vis both a research-based and a political understanding of the concept. In this working paper I will:

1: Discuss the political/polticized aspects of social cohesion in Denmark

2: Discuss the context dependency of the concept, and

3: Discuss a possible qualitative approach into the field according to the expectation of context dependency.

The working paper is based on a study of ethnic minorities and ethnic minority history in the Copenhagen neighborhood Nørrebro (2009-2014) (Schmidt forthcoming a). Further, the working paper includes perspectives from my work on discourses on social cohesion in Danish debates 1990-2010: A topic that I started working on in detail during my time in Malmö.

¹ See www.soced.dk and http://news.ku.dk/all_news/2013/2013.6/sapere_aude_social_cohesion/.
The political/politicized aspects of social cohesion in Denmark

As noted by political philosopher Rikke Peters, social cohesion, at least in the political debate, is a “discursive concept of power” marked by such a high level of abstraction that its content becomes unclear and can thus be changed according to the preferences of a (powerful) sender (Peters 2011: 241). In this section of the paper I will offer a presentation and analysis of the political and popular (media-based) use of the concept in Denmark between 1990-2014. In terms of data the section is based on existing scholarly literature on the topic as well as an analysis of the content of newspaper articles including the concept of “cohesion” from the period. The reason for omitting “social” in this analysis is that although social cohesion (in Danish social sammenhængskraft) is the correct academic term, there is a tendency in both political and media texts to shorten the term to “sammenhængskraft” (cohesion).

Politiken is one of Denmark’s oldest and most widely known and read newspapers. Since newspapers come and go, and since online media has increased as a venue for the publication of news that also find its way to databases such as the Danish Infomedia, table 1 (below) presents the use of the word sammenhængskraft over the last fourteen years in this newspaper only. The subsequent qualitative analysis of the use the concept relates to the use of the concept across Danish media and political debates. The figure includes data on the use of both “cohesion” (sammenhængskraft) and “social cohesion” (social sammenhængskraft). Interestingly – and as already noted – the concept of social cohesion is rarely used (eight times in 2014); cohesion is simply used in a way that is synonymous with social cohesion.

Between 1990 and 1995 (six years) the word sammenhængskraft was only used 16 times in Politiken. In 2013 alone the word was used seven times more. As noted by philosopher Jens Peter Kristensen, the use of the concept of social cohesion has over time included both pro-active and defensive understandings in the Danish context (Kristensen 2007). A proactive understanding implied that the (perceived) cohesion of the Danish nation was used as a backdrop for innovative, political and financial strategies in a globalized world. Between 1990 and 2000 the focus was mainly proactive; after 2000 the use of the concept became defensive. Social cohesion in Denmark was after that year something that was perceived and presented as under attack and something that should be defended.
In the 1990s the concept of social cohesion in the Danish press (also beyond *Politiken*) mainly referred to a political system’s ability to maintain itself. Most often articles focused on aspects of foreign policy, for example how the Soviet Union, the European Community/Union or NATO. The Soviet Union was falling apart: A process that was described as a challenge to the political system’s (social) cohesion. The idea of social cohesion as relating to issues of culture – an understanding that later became a central component in the employment of the concept – can be found from 1996 and onwards. This particular focus is, for example, noticeable in an article in *Weekendavisen*, discussing a UN brief that discusses the prospects of a globalized world and the (potential) rise of violent ethnic and religious conflicts:

One of the biggest dilemmas that humanity faces at the end of the 20th century is the rise of religious and ethnic conflicts. The faith of earlier periods that the gradual modernization, globalization and secularization – especially after the end of the cold war – would create a more peaceful world where we as humans could live in mutual respect for each other’s religion and ideologies in ordered and democratic nation states has been put to shame ... These conflicts have undermined the economic progress and social cohesion in a number of societies over the last couple of years (*Weekendavisen* 1996; emphasis added. My translation)

One interesting aspect of the article is its presentation of a dichotomy that has come to characterize the Danish debate over social cohesion (without hereby emphasizing the impact of
this particular article) in the following years. Religion, culture and ethnicity are, according to the article, elements that via the forces of globalization have accelerated into open conflict. These forces threaten the social cohesion of secular and democratic nation states and the building of such. According to this paradigm, social cohesion is linked to and defined by the structure of the nation state (an aspect worth remembering).

The link between a nation state perspective and the concept of social cohesion becomes more outspoken in the newspaper articles in the following years. Whereas the use of the concept mainly refers to international events in the early 1990s the focus shifts to a local, national context in the late 1990s. Social cohesion in this period is now presented as something that is “under threat” (fjellandsposten 1998), challenged by an increasing polarization of society (Information 1997). One element that politicians, participants in the public debate and newspaper articles present as corrosive for social cohesion is that of individualism. In that respect polarization is not presented as a question of group conflict, but rather as based on the tendency of a (growing) group of individuals who only marginally define themselves on the basis of a (national) community. Here, a slow but important culturalization of the concept takes place. In 1998 then minister of culture, Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen (The Danish Social Liberal Party) noted that the government’s cultural policies were made to create a sense of “we-ness” and accordingly more social cohesion (Aktuelt 1998).

The national focus on the effects of migration gains momentum throughout the 1990s. By the end of the decade the debate took a noticeable turn towards an emphasis on culture, values and religion (see e.g. Schmidt 2007, 2011). Immigration was, as illustrated in national surveys, perceived as an issue of major concern. Politically, the concern was fuelled by the steady increase in power of the Danish Peoples’ Party (Dansk Folkeparti): a party with an unmistakably nationalist and anti-migration political agenda. Unsurprisingly, globalization, the Danish welfare state and migration came to play central roles in Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen’s opening speech in the Danish parliament Folketinget in October 1999. On one hand, the Prime Minister noted, the Danish welfare state had to positively relate to the challenges and use possibilities of globalization. On the other hand, the Danish welfare state was facing a major challenge as a result of globalization, immigration and the cultural norms and values that some immigrants brought with them. Rasmussen spoke about forced marriages, crime and violence as some of the challenges in the wake of immigration that the Danish welfare state had to deal with. The Prime Minister presented such trends as threats towards social cohesion.

In the autumn of 2001, just after the terror attacks in New York and Washington DC (and much colored by those tragic events) a new liberal-conservative government took office in Denmark. The table over articles in Politiken including the term (social) cohesion shows a remarkable increase in the use of the word in the following years. The development can be seen as an outcome of the political priorities of the new government (Peters 2011: 217ff; Peters 2014). When national elections were held in the spring of 2005, their campaign was
flagged under the themes of safety, welfare – and social cohesion. The new government’s political project was known as the “value battle” (værdikampen) and included a strong reaction against expert knowledge, a strong focus on Bildung (dannelse), and a strong skepticism towards what minister of culture Brian Mikkelsen (from the Conservative Party) in 2006 formulated as “a multicultural ideology: “We have fought a multicultural ideology that says that everything is fine – because if everything is fine, it does not matter. And we cannot accept that” (TV2, internet, 2006).

But the focus on social cohesion became stronger still. The table over articles in Politiken including the concept of (social) cohesion shows a noticeable increase in 2005. Far from all these articles relate to the immigration or the role of immigrants vis-à-vis Danish society and the debates hereof before and after the national elections. The concept was used for processes and phenomena as diverse as middle class values, morality, the inner cohesion of political parties and the Danish national church (Folkekirken) and family dynamics. Within political discourses the focus on social cohesion still concentrated on two issues: the possible corrosive influence of individualization and the suspicious influence of immigrants and their values on Danish society. Some of the intensified attention towards national values and outside pressure was undoubtedly a reaction towards the cartoon controversy in the autumn of 2005 when the Danish newspaper Jyllandsposten published twelve editorial cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The printing resulted in an unprecedented international conflict with Denmark at its center. While Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen (e.g. via an interview in the Arabic TV station al-Jazeera) tried to calm down the situation internationally, other strategies were applied within the national context. During the annual meeting of the Liberal Party in November 2005 Fogh issued a new party program towards 2015 (Jyllandsposten 2005a), which included a focus on lower taxes and more social cohesion. Just after the party meeting Fogh Rasmussen (in an article in the Danish newspaper Berlingske Tidende) gave a more specific description of his perspectives on the fight for social cohesion. Social cohesion was, the prime-minister noted, important for the existence of Denmark as a nation, and although the country should stay open to the practice of different religions (religious freedom is a stated right in the Danish constitution), Islam in particular should abide by the Danish “democracy of dialogue”. Religious – and in particular Muslim – fundamentalism should be fought vigorously.

Interestingly, at the same time as the concept of social cohesion gained influence in politics, in the press and among public debaters, there were (and still are) remarkably meager attempts of defining the concept. In the book “The happy Danes: A book about cohesion” (De lykkelige danskere: En bog om sammenhængskraft) by former minister Karen Jespersen (formerly a Socialdemocrat; Now a member of the Liberal Party) and her husband Ralf Pittelkow (see Jespersen and Pittelkow 2005), the authors briefly tied the concept to trust, underlining the book’s being influenced by the work of Robert Putnam, and his equating social cohesion with trust. Whether the concept could be framed in such a way was questioned by other participants in the debate. Søren Krarup, an ordained minister in the Danish People’s
Church and member of the Danish parliament for the Danish People’s Party in a review of Jespersen’s and Pittelkow’s book criticizes the authors’ use of the concept. In Krarup’s eyes, the concept of social cohesion approach culture as something measurable; an impossible endeavor since culture is something spiritual, relating to God himself. Among national conservative debaters – for example the author Kasper Støvring, who in 2010 published the book “Cohesion” (Sammenhængskraft) (sic.) – social cohesion is a matter of cultural integration (Jyllandsposten 2005b) and “a culturally founded trust” (Støvring 2010: 11). The national conservative edge to the discussion created a reaction among leftist and liberal debaters. The journalist Georg Metz, a frequent writer in the leftwing newspaper Information, wrote in a critical essay about social cohesion in 2005 that the concept expressed of exaggerated nationalism, bigotry and “mark magic”.

In the fall of 2011 a new socialist-social-democratic-liberal government took office in Denmark. Social cohesion was from then no longer a prioritized political project. One aspect that remained unchanged, however, was the unclear definition of what social cohesion means. In the governmental white paper from 2011, sammenhængskraft is used three times: once about quality of life in the cities; once about sports; and once about the fight against terror (Danish government 2011). In the description of social cohesion and the war on terror, the strong culturalization of Danish national identity as brought to the fore (Schmidt, forthcoming b). The foundation for social cohesion in Danish society was presented as “our basic values, gender equality and equity, separation of politics and religion, democracy and human rights and the democratic rearing of children” (ibid.: 61). How these elements – and why exactly these elements – are important for social cohesion is not discussed in the document.

This section has granted an overview of the particular use and understanding of the concept of social cohesion over (almost) the quarter of a century. The analysis shows that both the use of the concept and the intensity by which it has been used has changed over time. Changes have mainly been a result of changing political discourses and strategies and to some extent international crises. Thus, as we discuss the relevance of social cohesion, I find it relevant to ask whether and how we should approach and use it as a context dependent phenomenon.

**The contextualization of social cohesion**

The issue of context dependency (i.e. social phenomenon being affected by their immediate environment) has already been mentioned in several studies as an important variable that research of social cohesion must take into consideration (e.g. Lolle & Torpe 2011; Ariely 2013). One question that needs to be taken further into consideration is the implication of context. Another question is how we study social cohesion and its implications. And a third, how diversity is framed vis-à-vis notions of social cohesion. To take the later issue first, there is a clear tendency in existing studies to frame diversity as an issue produced by ethnic diver-
sity. Ethnic belonging – not least when based on immigration – has become the prime marker of diversity. This working paper will question this assumption, based on empirical research.

Included in the ongoing academic discussion is an evaluation of the cause and effect of aspects understood as relating to social reality. Marc Hooghe, for example, notes that while the absence of generalized trust may be seen as an indicator of social disintegration, it may just as well be understood as a consequence of inequality and conflict within society (Hooghe 2007: 710). Hooghe further criticizes existing research of social cohesion for an exaggerated focus on generalized trust. Such a focus, according to Hooghe, can be argued both narrow and dated, based on a 1950s academic assumption that societies maintain their stability via homogeneity and allegiance to a common identity (ibid: 713). Generalized trust is not necessarily socially productive, and the expectation of social, cultural and ideological homogeneity can be a stumbling block for dynamic and progressive societies. Social homogeneity can be both the cause and effect of social control. One might just as validly argue that cohesion can be based on the recognition of diversity and pluralism as a fundamental backdrop for social reality and human interaction. Hooghe’s suggests that instead of a rather narrow focus on the interrelation between social cohesion and trust – with the inclusion of a negative view on diversity – a more useful path ahead would be to look at the interrelation between social cohesion and segregation. A strategy that this working paper supports, based on a qualitative study of – among other things – social cohesion in Nørrebro, an ethnically and socially diverse neighborhood of Copenhagen. As suggested by Hooghe, approaching social cohesion as a result of reciprocity and recognition rather than generalized trust can prove fruitful.

The following analysis is based on results from the research project SOCED (Social Cohesion and Ethnic Diversity), funded by the Danish Strategic Research Council. The central purpose of SOCED was to investigate social cohesion and ethnic diversity within four neighborhoods of Copenhagen. My research site was as mentioned Nørrebro: A neighborhood located close to the city center and known for both its ethnic diversity, its working class legacy, political (left wing) activism and – most lately – ebbs and flows of gang related conflicts over territory. My approach to social cohesion was open-ended. Neither I nor my research assistants used the concepts during interviews; rather, we were interested in investigating what the locals – both of ethnic minority and majority backgrounds – expressed as elements that made the neighborhood hang together and what made it (eventually) fall apart. Some of the respondents had lived in the neighborhood for decades; others had left. Some were academics, others worked in the social sector; some were activists and dedicated to bettering the livelihood of the neighborhood; some were students and some worked as blue collar worker or were pensioners.

Nørrebro is, as noted, a neighborhood, and neither the analysis nor the conclusions I make are transferrable to Denmark as a whole. Nor would I claim that they are immediately trans-
ferrable to other local or national contexts. My specific aim here is to investigate whether we, through local, immediate and qualitative studies can get a better and more direct understanding of social cohesion as a (potential) everyday social phenomenon and academic concept, based on one single context. Whether the results from the present study can be transferred to and compared with other studies must be the aim of further qualitative and eventually quantitative research.

Importantly, the concept of social cohesion was used only two times during the interviews; and this in spite of the prevalence that the concept had gained in the surrounding society. However, some respondents underline how societal debates and skepticism towards migration has an impact on the neighborhood and people living there – regardless of the internal dynamics and priorities of their conviviality. As noted by Nadine, a long-time resident of Nørrebro who migrated to Denmark in the late 1960s:

You may say that what happens in Denmark as such also has an effect on Nørrebro. Many of the people with immigrant background walk around as if they are afraid to be seen. They do not feel welcomed; they feel that they are a burden. It is something that has to do with the entire country, it is not particular for Nørrebro. Not at all. Not at all. (Nadine)

Nadine highlights the importance of the outsider’s gaze; of how a national perception of specific groups in Nørrebro and national discourses affect everyday life and interaction within the neighborhood. Equally important – also in the light of how social cohesion is defined – is the impact of nostalgia and particular stories (Schmidt, forthcoming) about what a neighborhood (or a country) is essentially about. Nørrebro has over the last hundred years – for example in newspaper articles etc. – been associated with poverty and anarchy, but also a strong sense of solidarity and empathy. While such myths do not, of course, cover social reality in its fragmented totality, they still have an important impact on definitions of home and what one should expect within a given space of interaction. History, historically based stories about social, scalar-based spaces, whether local or national and nostalgia can have an effect on expectations towards the discursive field of social cohesion, and how it is defined in a given context and era (if used at all) (Schmidt 2015; Glick Schiller & Schmidt 2015).

The element of nostalgia was, for instance, apparent in Nadine’s reflection over past rules of interactions in Nørrebro:

Two boys had died in a motorcycle accident. And I knew nothing about Islam, I have no idea about the content of it, but they arranged some kind of morning ceremony in the backyard. The ceremony took several days. And there was an Imam, I think, who gave a sermon or something... And they prayed went through this long ritual every day. For two or three days. Only the men. And the rest of us agreed that we should not use the backyard, because we had to respect that they were using it for their morning ceremony... Then, after three days you could see
the women arrive with trays of food, and the children came as well. Now they seemed happy. And then we all started using the backyard again. There was really respect (Nadine)

Nadine was, as was the case for many respondents in the project, convinced that the former basis for solidarity but also giving each other space for difference. Solidarity and trust was not based on similarity but tolerance, as Nadine’s example illustrates. Here is, I argue, an important perspective on social cohesion as a social process that does not per se promote or demand homogeneity. The respondents in the study did not present homogeneity as a prerequisite for conviviality and – importantly – the sense of feeling at home. Some expressed how diversity (both ethnic, educational and socio-economic), in their eyes, was an element that characterized “a real city”. The appearance and content of diversity – the intensity by which various variables played defining roles – might change over time. But diversity in this context was defining for homeliness, solidarity and freedom to be “oneself”.

Some respondents were convinced that this kind of social cohesion – broadly defined as the emotions and perception and practices of belonging that people (in this case in a neighborhood) claim to share or describe as important for a peaceful coexistence – still existed and thrived in Nørrebro. Heba, a social worker and activist of Moroccan background who has lived in Nørrebro for more than twenty years was one of them:

I think here is [social] cohesion. People say hello to each other, and people talk. If you want to contact the residents [with ethnic minority background] you do not have to have an ethnic minority background yourself to knock their door. It may just as well be one of my Danish colleagues … Perhaps at times there is a problem with the language .. It may well be that people of ethnic minority background are better at contacting each other, but I really do not think so … Even when people do not speak the same language they find a way…(Heba)

Also Heba highlighted difference and diversity as characteristics of Nørrebro, but exemplified how such differences were overcome. People might different languages, but they “found a way” to communicate. However, to some having an ethnic minority background did have a negative impact on relationships and trust building in the neighborhood, as noted by Michael, a young man of Iranian refugee background:

There is much difference and we do not trust each other. You can feel it. When I walk in to help someone they get scared and think that I am a pick-pocket. So I am very careful not to be too close to a Dane or an immigrant and help them (Michael)

While both academic and societal use of the concept of social cohesion is centered on the impact of ethnic diversity and immigration, these variables were not presented as main challenges by my respondents. Two elements played much more central roles: Firstly, the impact
of gang and drug related crime in the area, and second, the impact of socio-economic inequality and polarization. Some respondents noted that they felt unsafe walking certain parts of the neighborhood and that they found such restrictions to be a violation of their private space and sense of home. Social cohesion in this respect was indeed associated with trust, but just as much with autonomy. Homogeneity was, once again, far from the ideal that people strived for or described as a community ideal.

Yet, individualism and the right to difference did not overshadow ideals of solidarity. Some respondents had a nostalgic perspective on solidarity, as an element that defined the ethics of the neighborhood. Others used the perception – the myth, as I have so far called it – as a backdrop for activism and call for changes in the neighborhood. Such initiatives were frequently directed against institutions or forces that were understood as violating neighborhood ethics and solidarity. Sometimes the police, sometimes drug dealers, and sometimes right-wing, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim movements were the target of such activism. As was and is often the case in Nørrebro’s history, protest walks and demonstrations were used to defend what groups within the neighborhood found precious within it: Tolerance, solidarity and diversity.

Historically, Nørrebro has been the home of many poor families. While there is little doubt that poverty has torn families and lives apart, poverty has also paid a both factual and “mythical” role for the building of solidarity in the neighborhood. People who were born and raised in Nørrebro around the turn of the 20th century stress, for example, how families living in the same apartment buildings helped each other in times of crisis or just when they were in need of basic necessities. They were all, so to speak, in the same boat. Such acts of solidarity of the precariat were undoubtedly necessary for survival and well-being, but they also became a part of the myth about the inner character of Nørrebro: A strong element of social cohesion. People in the neighborhood expected a noticeable level of solidarity; an expectation that could not always be fulfilled. At the same time, some of the older locals noted how the socio-economic status of residents in the neighborhood became more polarized. While poverty, as noted, had historically been a part of the neighborhood, a growing part of Nørrebro has developed into a trendy hipster area, characterized by fancy cafes and a booming housing market, where only families (or individuals) with a relatively high income had the money to buy. This change in the neighborhood population was seen as a problem to some. The problem was not what the hipsters and well-off people did; the problem was rather that they did too little. As noted by Nadine:

Yes, it changed a lot. I do not know how to describe it ... The neighborhood became much more polarized, I guess. I think there are many more people who look as if they have money. I can see it in the house where I used to live; wealthier people have moved in. It makes sense, given the rising prices of apartments ... Suddenly, you have couples, for example two doctors. It changes a lot...
Also Maren, a well-educated young woman who had moved out of Nørrebro when she had children, simply because she did not dare to stay due to the gang war noted that not only violence was a problem; the lack of solidarity and empathy was also a growing problem in the neighborhood:

You have these [people living] miserable lives... One day we were riding our bicycles in Ægirsgade close to Café Tivoli, and there was a man lying on the sidewalk. I think that he had been lying there for some time and it was really cold, perhaps minus 7-8 degrees C that night. He had p**ed in his pants, and all the urine had frozen to ice. Nobody had helped him. People had probably passed by on their bicycles... ...it was sad...

While there is no doubt that a number of ethnic minority families in the neighborhood suffered from deprivation and lack of resources and were unable to guide their children away from crime (a fact that the respondents in the study did not try to neglect), neither ethnicity nor diversity were described as factors in the neighborhood that in themselves included a threat towards trust, solidarity and social cohesion. Disturbing, corrosive element in the neighborhood were crime, selfish behavior and polarization. What these elements violated was both the traditional myth about Nørrebro, individual autonomy and communal solidarity. The act of “hunkering down” to use Robert Putnam’s term, was indeed described as a problem – the elements causing it as well as its consequences rather different from the results of Putnam’s study.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to do three things. (1) 1: Discuss the political/politicized aspects of social cohesion in Denmark, (2) discussed the context dependency of the concept (as noted in existing research) and (3) discuss a possible qualitative approach according to the expectation of context dependency.

Both this paper and the existing literature underlines the vagueness of the concept, both within academic and political/politicized writings and discourses. My argument here is that if we want to get a better (and possible less politicized) grip of the concept, we must apply a context dependent, bottom up approach. What do people locally describe as the challenges to their co-existence, their trusting each other and their building of solidarity?

My (qualitative) study from Nørrebro underlines that neither diversity, nor difference, nor ethnicity in themselves are perceived as problematic dimensions by the locals. Rather did my respondents stress the importance of “feeling home” as central, with an included mix of autonomy, right to movement, solidarity and respect. Importantly, social cohesion was not described as a matter of likeness and homogeneity. How diversity – a straightforward element of human coexistence – can gain a unproblematic role in the debate and analysis over social cohesion is worth further exploration.
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