

## Introduction

# Excluded youth in itself and for itself—Young people from immigrant families in Scandinavia

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The Nordic countries are widely perceived as the home of egalitarianism and minimal social inequalities, and critics of social injustice often look to this region for positive alternatives. In the migration waves of the last decades the Nordic countries are often seen as decent hosts, who adhere to the principles of multi- or interculturalism and not least emphasise that young people from immigrant families should get a fair chance in an egalitarian educational system. In terms of practices in education, on the labour market, in housing and in various other areas, there are however, to say the least, some rather dark sides to this picture.

This anthology looks at the experiences of youth from immigrant families in relation to education, housing and cultural production against a common background of Nordic Welfare Societies. Most of the chapters are based on intensive ethnographic work in immigrant communities and in schools in immigrant-dense areas, but other (both quantitative and qualitative) methodological tools are also used. Theoretically we have learned from a variety of approaches: from critical studies on subcultures and resistance, from urban studies on territorial stigmatisation, from critical perspectives on racism and postcolonialism, and from classical sociology and various other sources.

Taken together, the chapters show that youth with immigrant backgrounds in the Nordic countries encounter various processes of exclusion, not least in school, and experience many of the effects of territorial stigmatisation of the immigrant-dense areas they live in. Inclusion and multiculturalism are key words in Nordic educational policy, but analyses of curricula, teaching practices and experiences of young people show that these goals to a high degree remain abstract and are far from being realised. Educational practices are segregated from other experiences of young people from immigrant families and for a large part of them, these practices do not open any roads for equal participation in society. For large segments of the young immigrant population, viable *capabilities* (Amartya Sen) are found in cultural responses based on resistance against

processes of marginalisation and on a search for forms of expression that suit their experience of being stigmatised and excluded.

This anthology is a result of four years of cooperation between researchers of youth from immigrant families in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. The research network has discussed each other's research projects intensively and repeatedly and sought inspiration by arranging larger seminars with invited international guests who have analysed the situation of youth with immigrant backgrounds in French, British and American cities. Most of the articles are based on ethnographic research in the cities of Gothenburg, Oslo and Copenhagen (three of the four biggest cities in Scandinavia), but other methods are also mobilised, such as comparative discourse analysis of curricula and the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

The network has an interdisciplinary profile. The authors work within the academic fields of cultural studies, youth studies, urban studies, sociology, education and anthropology. Discussions in the network and the editing process have simultaneously aimed at strengthening the specific approach of each article and at making them understandable across the interdisciplinary field of research on young people with immigrant backgrounds. The authors of the anthology are firmly based in the Nordic, interdisciplinary tradition of youth studies, which means not least that cultural expressions and social background are neither examined separately nor is one reduced to the other. Some contributors focus more on culture, others on social background but all consider that both sides are at work and intertwined.

We will shortly present the chapters in the book and the specific key concepts and theories that are at play in each of them. However, first, the twin concepts of social exclusion and inclusion will be briefly presented. Like the ethnographic approach these concepts are central in our common box of intellectual tools. They are more directly on stage in some articles, whilst in other articles they remain rather more in the background.

The conceptual pair of social exclusion and social inclusion has been a part of the sociological vocabulary since the middle of the twentieth century. Talcott Parsons (1951) used this conceptual pair to analyse contradictory developments in the situation of immigrants. In his analysis, *exclusion* means that minority groups as a whole are denied economic, social and/or cultural privileges enjoyed by the rest of society. Later some favoured member of the minority group may gain access to these privileges and become *assimilated*, but the problem of exclusion is not solved until the minority group as a whole gets access to positions

and full participation in society without having to give up its own culture—a situation that is covered by the concept of *inclusion*.

The concept pair of exclusion-inclusion moved to the centre of social theory during the 1990s without much reference to Parsons but rather as a remedy against the oppressive implications of the integration concept that had dominated discussions and analyses of underprivileged groups. Critical theorists like Erving Goffman (1961) and Michel Foucault (1975) informed an understanding of exclusion as more or less misrecognised aspects of power relations. The concept of inclusion was often (re)launched to direct attention to the responsibility of privileged groups and the need for institutions to change in order to give room to newcomers and the underprivileged.

During the last decades social scientists have increasingly pointed out that social groups and individuals can simultaneously meet processes of exclusion and inclusion in a differentiated and segmented society. Immigrants may be included into certain subspheres of the economy and the educational system but highly excluded from other subspheres, some residential areas may be characterised by exclusion and others by inclusion, and similar differentiation can take place in the different sections of culture, leisure and social and political life. Such mechanisms may meet different groups with immigrant background in different ways.

In the history of migration it is well known that new groups of immigrants often find niches in an otherwise closed occupational structure, and that in some cases such niches turn out to be dead-end streets while in other cases they become gateways to wider opportunities. It is often reported that girls from immigrant families appear more included than boys in the educational systems in general. Some educational tracks, like medicine, natural and technical science and business and economics seem to include fewer obstacles for many groups with immigrant background than humanities and social sciences that are more strongly and tacitly embedded in the inherited culture of the host country. However, few studies focus on the prices of inclusion, when young people with immigrant background are successfully included in certain realms of work and social life but excluded from others and at the same time often painfully alienated from their family and ethnic peers.

The multiplicities of social exclusion and inclusion of immigrants are in most research reduced to a few measurable variables, especially educational achievement, position on labour market, income and residence. These are important indicators but they are also used because they are available and their

validity can and should be questioned. Furthermore they can only in a very limited way point to the mechanisms that lead the one way or the other. An important step is taken in the article of Fangen and Frønes who draw up some general patterns of exclusion and inclusion from a quantitative approach and then examine through qualitative material some of the processes and mechanisms that lie behind such outcomes.

Mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion are often cumulative and much international research has pointed to residential segregation as a factor that reinforces other mechanisms of exclusion. In terms of social capital such segregation minimises bridging social capital and isolates the bonding social capital of the neighbourhood. It has been documented in research and journalistic inquiries on how residential segregation often becomes a decisive factor that turns the multitudes of inclusive and exclusive processes into a vicious circle: young people with an immigrant background, who have completed education that usually gives access to employment, are often turned down by employers because they have the wrong address. Such experiences teach their younger siblings that it is useless to pursue education. Often, dramatic events are necessary to turn the general attention to this exclusion, and often such attention only confirms widespread convictions that it is the population of the 'ghettos', the '*banlieues*' and other such areas that is the problem. The vicious circle of exclusion is reinforced and takes the form of *territorial stigmatisation* that labels the immigrant inhabitants of certain areas as troublemakers that do not want to adjust to the norms, laws and aspirations of their new country.

The egalitarian aura of the Nordic countries may lead some outsiders to believe that such extreme forms of exclusion cannot happen in these welfare countries, but the fact is that all the Nordic countries have immigrant-dense parts of town that show similar signs of stigmatisation as those found in other European countries. In many Nordic towns such areas were built as a part of the victorious march of welfare state planning in the 1950s and 1960s. They provided the rising working class with decent housing and good facilities for cultural and leisure activities and spurred their social mobility. Gradually, however, other aspects than social mobility became prevalent: these areas were segregated from the rest of the city and looked down on from middle class areas; the more mobile part moved away and left those with limited education and low status jobs, if any. Gradually, a new population group with aspirations of social mobility moved into these areas. These were mainly immigrants and their descendants, but now the spiral of mobility had turned downwards and

many of the inhabitants experience their neighbourhood as chains that keep them in inferior positions.

This territorial stigmatisation is an important part of the background of several studies presented in this volume. Åsa Møller shows how a school, which intends to be inclusive, writes off the experiences of their pupils in their own neighbourhood and indicates that most valuable experiences are found outside. Jonas Lindbäck and Ove Sernhede show how the innovative offerings of an Upper Secondary School in such an area attracts students from other parts of town, where they can add to their own cultural capital, while the homegrown students look outside of their neighbourhood in hope of getting a slice of the established cultural capital.

Such crossings do not necessarily soften the division of the city between social groups; through the narratives of young people from both groups Lindbäck and Sernhede show how the city's spaces and people are described, categorised and positioned in stigmatising ways that affect the image of these spaces and their inhabitants and how people relate to them. Åsa Möller shows how the school recommends 'Swedishness' as the inherited native culture and argues that social differences become racially constructed and need to be deconstructed. Möller provides such a deconstruction based on *postcolonialism* and *critical race theory*.

Not only school practices but also the national curricula are in need of being critically examined, as shown in Frédérique Brossard Børhaug's comparative examination of French and Norwegian curricula as ideological key documents for school practice. The Norwegian curricula openly state that the school shall fight any form of racism and discrimination in school and society by promoting democratic values. On the other hand, the Norwegian cultural heritage, founded on Western humanistic and Christian values, is presented as a shared body of references. Thus, the curricula also stresses a universalist approach based on human rights to the detriment of a differentialist argumentation promoting the cultural rights and capabilities for youth with immigrant background, so the educational policy cannot be characterised as multicultural or intercultural.

Exclusion and inclusion are not sufficient as overarching concepts for migrant studies and the chapters in the anthology especially make use of the concepts of *resistance* and *creativity*. Here, as well as in our emphasis on ethnographic methods, our studies are indebted to the tradition of sub-cultural studies and theories of Chicago scholars and the well known Birmingham school tradition of cultural sociology.

Sune Qvotrup Jensen points out that those who have criticised the Birmingham school have tended to ignore its basic force, which is to study cultural responses in relation to social conditions. His study of hip-hop culture in immigrant-dense areas in Copenhagen, demonstrates that hip-hop provides youngsters of immigrant background, who are on the edge of exclusion, with tools to express, elaborate and unite in resistance and creative responses to their problematic social situation. For most of them this leads to higher self-esteem, for many it leads to careers in cultural activities, and it contributes strongly to a collective platform. Dennis Beach and Ove Sernhede discuss the hip-hop culture in broader terms, its ambivalences about crime, misogyny, commercialism and resistance, and dig into their rich material of ethnographic studies to show how this multi-faced cultural form provides possibilities for creativity and autonomous learning activities that challenge residential stigma and other forms of exclusion.

Henry Mainsah examines how minority youth in Norway use other channels of creativity, specifically for instance social networking sites, in relation to issues of identity construction, voice, and transnational social networks. Here young people with immigrant background can cross not only geographic and political borders but cultural and linguistic ones as well. They learn to navigate in different contexts of transnational social networks and experiment with the articulation of different identity moments, and Mainsah emphasises how they learn to tackle being members of multiple worlds and having multiple layers of identities.

These and other notions are brought together in the concept of *youth* which is over-arching and in some articles so self-evident that it is not worded. Youth is a social and cultural concept, opposed for instance to the most frequent uses of the adolescence concept as a term for a stage in psychological development. Sometimes the weight of the youth concept is laid on transition from childhood to adulthood, sometimes on a specific stage of shielded growth and experimentation, as in Erikson's moratorium. In this anthology youth refers roughly to the age sixteen to twenty-five years-old, as the age when young people in the Nordic countries gradually receive the rights and obligations of independent individuals and citizens—although some are kept longer in a continued dependent situation as unemployed.

Youth is a heavily loaded social construction, which has been associated with risks and promises in various ways. As Fangen and Frønes point out, youth is not least understood as the life phase in which future inclusion or exclusion is established; the increase in youth marginalisation is likewise seen as a

fundamental challenge in post-industrial societies. Beach and Sernhede find that in the Marxist sense, in the common media representation and in schools, according to our analyses suburban youth are in a sense generally to be viewed as a *class-in-itself*: objectified, exploitable and often vilified, downtrodden and symbolically exploited in the mainstream media and common understanding. Brossard Børhaug finds a similar objectification in the national curricula of France and Norway and the analyses of Möller and Lindbäck/Sernhede of educational practices reveal that this objectification is not only a form of expression. It is also carried out in schools.

Turning the attention to *youth cultures* Qvotrup Jensen evokes the other half of the Marxist class concept, the *class-for-itself*, in understanding youth sub-cultures as creative collective responses to a shared social situation. He finds that hip-hop offers a way to ascribe value to ethnic/racial minority status through a conscious identification with the marginal position of urban black USA that offers a repertoire to reflect and comment upon experienced marginality and ascribed otherness. Hip-hop is often postmodern in identity-play and aesthetics, but by no means de-politicised, and Quotrup Jensen discards the tendency of post-subcultural approaches to decouple structural conditions from the understanding of contemporary youth culture. He adheres instead to the neo-Birminghamian understanding that subcultures are sometimes still about a collective answering of shared situations—but also that these situations are *intersectional*. The analysis of Beach and Sernhede implies this same argumentation, and so do other articles that report on young people's attitudes and actions. Mainsah's analysis of internet communication furthermore reveals that even when young people are only meeting in cyberspace they, 'are capable of actively resisting and creatively negotiating resisting dominant discourses of place, identity, and belonging in society'.

## References

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