Urban Matters



Ghetto, preppy & hipster: class, race and ambiguous figures in a divided city

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There seems to be a tension in Norwegian society between two contradictory ideals: On the one hand we have the ideal of egalitarianism and equality, on the other we find the ideological promotion of an 'ideal citizen', a person characterised by productivity and self-development, classed as middle- or upper class, or as successfully upwardly striving.

In interviews with high school students in Oslo, the youth used the labels *ghetto*, *preppy* and *hipster* to discuss the hierarchical differences they encountered when choosing between different high schools. While the ideal of egalitarianism makes it hard to talk directly about social injustices and difference rooted in systems of class and 'race', the complex ways the youth used the labels, reveal that these topics are in fact of great importance. By looking at these labels as figures – *collectively imagined social types* that are both classed and racialised – it is possible to explore the ideological context of structures such as racism and class, as well as the role they play in people's lives.

The ghetto figure, which will be the focus in this text, has several layers of meaning:

- Racist notions of 'the bad foreigner' as a dangerous, unproductive and far from ideal citizen. -A way of speaking about classed and racialised difference, without naming it as such, but as having something to do with individual behavior.
- A category of belonging giving value to that which is deemed less than ideal by society at large.

When held together, these layers of meaning show how signs interpreted by the youth as having to do with class and 'race' moderate each other: For example, the more middle class you act, the less ghetto you can become. In addition, notions of *Oslo west* and *east* are used as proxy for classed and racialised difference, and as a means of describing how these forces combine in people's lives. Categories of 'Norwegian-ness' and 'foreignness' are then fused with notions of west and east, resulting, among other things, in the mysterious disappearance of any White/'Norwegian' members of the urban working classes.

Elias le Grand, drawing upon Raymond Williams' notion of keywords, describes the concept of figures as

> *(...) creatively constituted subject positions that embody, manifest, and, to some degree comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are not always easy to grasp in concrete terms.*
>
> Barker and Lindquist 2009:37 in Le Grand, 2019, p. 417

In a similar way Imogen Tyler (2015) uses the term to show how social types such as the *chav*, the *illegal immigrant* and the *benefit cheat*, are publicly imagined in excessive, caricatured ways, revealing hierarchical struggles between dominant and dominated groups.

What I will claim here is that collectively imagined figures such as the ghetto kid, reveal important problems tied to understandings of Norwegian-ness, racialisation and class. Further, they speak of a need to address the evident, but seldomly acknowledged contradiction between hegemonic ideals of an egalitarian, meritocratic society where

everyone can (and should) strive to become ideal citizens, with the classed and racialised differences the youth observe when entering a hierarchised educational 'market.'

The compulsory freedom to choose

The backdrop for this discussion is a larger study of how Oslo high school students navigate a landscape of social and geographical difference, building on 120 qualitative interviews with youth from three different schools (Oslo School of Commerce (Handels), Oslo Cathedral School (Katta) and Kuben Vocational Arena (Kuben))

Oslo is a city divided between an affluent west and a poorer, working class, east. This is true in a concrete sense (see Andersen og Ljunggren (2014), Ljunggren, (2017), Kriznik (2015), Holgersen (2020)). However, in interviews the concepts of east and west were used also in more abstract ways, to describe something/someone/ways of being saturated by notions of class and 'race', while not articulated directly as such.

Each year, lists are published with information on admission requirements for all high schools in Oslo. These lists serve as an informal ranking of schools, placing those with the highest average grade needed for access at the top, and those with the lowest, or without any requirements at all, at the bottom. This grade-based system of admission, so called Free School Choice (Fritt skolevalg) was implemented in the early 2000s (Innset, 2020, p.176) and can be seen as part of a quasi-marketisation of the educational sector in Oslo, again part of a larger, neoliberal shift towards the marketisation of collectively owned sectors (Harvey in Mayer [2016], Peck, Brenner and Theodore in Mayer [2016]).In this system, both schools and students are encouraged to compete in ways that are imagined to 'lift' everyone: Students will strive for higher grades so as to be able to 'choose' the most desirable schools in a form of consumer citizenship (Paton, 2014, pp. 125-126)At the same time, the quality of the schools is intended to increase, as they (without extra funding) work to attract more applicants. According to more critical voices (Malkenes, 2014, 2018) the result is rather a sorting of students into different schools for high and low achievers, a system benefitting those already in possession of socioeconomic resources, while those without resources to 'make the right choice' are seen as deserving of their fate. Although there are elements of ridicule and critique present in the use of the hipster and preppy figures, they can still be seen as marking the positions of what Beverly Skeggs and Vik Loveday (2012) call 'subjects of value'.While subjects of value are able to comply with ideals of self-development and productivity, the ghetto figure describes the more problematic position of a 'useless subject', failing to live up to these ideals. Although demands to constantly improve the 'self' put stress on most of us, being continuously portrayed, directly or indirectly, as a *useless subject*, becomes a much more severe 'assault on the self' (Kenneth Hardy, quoted in Maté, 2022, p. 315). Creative, complex forms of meaning-making then, turning accusations of worthlessness into symbols of belonging and solidarity, becomes necessary tools to defend one's sense of self and to restore one's humanity and worth.

The Ghetto Figure – The Bad Foreigner

Many of the students interviewed shared values, cultural preferences and socioeconomic

backgrounds with their school mates, while describing a sense of distance to other schools, attended by completely different *types* of youth often labelled preppies, hipsters and ghetto kids. They related to these categories with irony and ambivalence, but the consensus was that Handels was to be considered a preppy school, Katta a place for hipsters, while Kuben was described as 'a bit ghetto.' Few referred to themselves by these names, but many used them to describe their fellow students, or claimed that this was a negative name *others* had for *them.*

The Whiteness of the preppy and hipster figure seemed too unimportant to mention for most students at Handels and Katta. The non-whiteness and non-Norwegian-ness of the ghetto figure, however, was an important theme in all accounts. White students often struggled to put this in words, mumbling and pausing a lot, ending up using vague phrases like '… immigrants', 'uhm minorities' or 'other cultures' while describing something deemed ghetto. Among students self-identifying as *foreigners* on the other hand, the ghetto figure was described as something prejudiced *others* said about *them,* but sometimes also as representing coolness and social inclusion.

Residential areas seen as having high levels of poverty and 'immigrants' were often associated with the term. Dina (Handels), having grown up in an affluent part of western Oslo, but going to school with people from a less affluent area nearby describes it like this:

> *D: It's… there are a lot of rumours about this place. It's, how do say this, the east side of the west side, that's what we refer to it as. Because it is a bit ghetto. Like, we used to call it G-town.*
>
> *K: (Laughing) Throwing signs?*
>
> *D: Yeah, we used to joke about that.*
>
> *K: But why is it like that there?*
>
> *D: Well, it's because there's a lot of, how do I say this, immigrants there, and because – The area around is kind of pricey you know, when it comes to living, and there's … not that many immigrants who live there, to be – well, statistically. So that's why (this place) is kind of different I guess.*
>
> *K: Because there is public housing and stuff, in that area?*
>
> *D: Yes, there's public housing. And there's been a few episodes and there are a lot of drug addicts who live there, so it's been a bit – when you're younger, that it's like "wow, this is a little bit ghetto, a little scary.."*

In Dina's account, we see how notions of west and east function symbolically. There is also a double layer in her description: the ghetto-ness of the nearby area was both something she and her friends would jokingly identify with, and something she found scary, especially as a child.

Astrid, a Kuben student with an upper middleclass background, uses the word ghetto to describe some of her fellow students, focusing on style as well as behavior:

> *A: Ehm, I would say that you are quite loud, eh, and then it's like – it's like those ghetto-clothes, I don't know, a lot of track pants and crop tops, that I just think is kind of…*
>
> *K: On the girls?*

> *A: Yes. Crop tops and like large earrings, and sometimes when I'm in the hallways I think to myself, oh my god this is such a parody because… this is so crazy, if any of my friends from Handels would see these girls, like walking around shouting in the hallways with their big earrings, crop tops and tight track pants, hehe –*
>
> *K: And hijabs too?*
>
> *A: Yes, then they would be just like "Wow. Ghetto."*

By imagining what her friends outside of school would think, Astrid is able to distance herself indirectly from the girls she describes. There is an unspoken understanding between interviewer and interviewee (both White) of the difference between Astrid and the loud girls in the hallways, touched upon by the interviewer asking if they wear hijabs too. She describes both style and behavior as connoting something 'unruly' that she does not identify with.

Sven, having grown up in a small place far from Oslo is a bit of an outside observer. He uses the word ghetto to describe the youth culture most common in Kuben, and has a positive yet ambivalent view on what it entails. It seems to be something he would like to be included in, representing something cool, like mastering the local slang. At the same time, it connotes something aggressive and slightly dangerous. He describes his classmate Iman like this:

> *So this one troublemaker in my class, she speaks a lot of ghetto. She knows a lot of words that I don't have the faintest idea about. She makes a lot of trouble, everybody likes her. But she can be very aggressive and very loud.*

While Dina's familiarity with the word ghetto comes with a hint of irony, and Sven's description is perhaps more naïve, they both describe the word as a mixture of coolness and danger. Emre, (Kuben) associates the word, like Sven, with a type of slang, but does not mention the theme of danger at all. Having grown up on the east side of Oslo, he describes 'speaking ghetto' as something defining social inclusion and belonging, a cozy and *warm* way of speaking:

> *E: Here we speak more ghetto in a way, hehe.*
>
> *L: What does that entail?*
>
> *E: Eh, chill, schpaa, words like that. Let's get outta here. (la oss avor) Which means let's go. That's the kind of words we use here. But when a Norwegian comes along, he'll say "Hello there, should we leave perhaps? Good evening, how are you doing?" (Speaks in an exaggerated, formal and silly tone) That's why we say "What's up? With that dude." And then we'll start laughing. (…) Since I was little, I haven't been able to speak proper Norwegian, like they do on the west side. Or I can if I want to, but I don't like it, I dunno why.*
>
> *L: So is this the same as kebab Norwegian (Kebabnorsk)*
>
> *E: Yeah, ghetto and kebab are the same.*
>
> *L: How do you feel about that?*
>
> *E: I, I guess I think it's more … a warm kind of speaking. Like, it gets warmer. Cozy in a way.*

Emre distances himself from what he sees as the most correct way to speak Norwegian by

saying that he is not able to speak that way, nor does he want to. Between the lines there might be a sense of exclusion from the 'proper' way to be Norwegian. But by ridiculing those who are, and embracing the ways of himself and his friends, he is able to turn feelings of exclusion into fellowship and cultural mastery.

For her first year of high school, Iman (described by Sven as a troublemaker) went to a school on the west side where she did not feel particularly welcome. She associates the word ghetto clearly with something prejudiced that others, the preppy majority at her former school, would say about her and her friends:

> *I: Yes, I – we are called ghetto. When we were at (former school) we were called ghetto.*
>
> *K: What do you think they meant when they said that you were ghetto?*
>
> *I: Foreigners I think. I don't know.*
>
> *K: Yes. But it's not a word one would use to describe oneself?*
>
> *I: No, I'm not ghetto (laughing)*
>
> *K: Do you think they meant that ghetto could be a style or something too?*
>
> *I: I think it was more like weed and stuff. Ghetto. Hanging around down town. Beating up people and stuff like that.*
>
> *K: Ah, right. So doing things that are kind of bad-*
>
> *I: Yes, that we were like negative people and such.*

The themes of danger and crime are there, but unlike the other accounts, they are not tied to notions of coolness or belonging. Instead, Iman describes the word as an unjust accusation, that all 'foreigners' are bad people, hanging around town, smoking weed and beating up people. She wants nothing to do with this label.

Fixed yet flexible categories: Norwegian-ness and foreign-ness as questions of quantity?

Interestingly, many students drew upon categories that were both fixed and flexible when trying to define what it means to be a foreigner or a Norwegian: A person might start out as a 'foreigner', but if enough preppy or hipster traits were added, the more 'Norwegian' they became. This also applied the other way around. A White 'Norwegian' might be considered a foreigner if they mastered enough 'ghetto skills'.

Seen from Kuben, both the hipster, and the preppy in particular, represented first of all Norwegian-ness, contrasted by many with 'people like us', often termed 'foreigners'. Yusra (Kuben) moved to Oslo from another Norwegian city as a young teenager. She observes the way the labels preppy, hipster and ghetto overlap with the labels foreigner and Norwegian:

> *Y: It's a bit weird to be honest, because I've seen some foreigners who like fit in with the preppy-label, and I have heard people talk shit about them, and then they always say: "Oh, he thinks he's so Norwegian. So in a way you feel like the ethnic Norwegians are the ones who fit the most with that preppy label. And when a*

foreigner tries to fit within the preppy category, then he's trying to be something he's not. And then it's like, if a Norwegian – if someone who's ethnically Norwegian come and tries to be more like … speaks in slang and uses words like wallah and jalla and such – Then that's a bit weird, but then they are described like – You're so "oh, she's Norwegian, but she's not that Norwegian". She's not too Norwegian, do you understand?

K: Yes, so then it's thought of as something positive?

Y: It depends if they are trying too hard or not. Because if you are ethnically Norwegian but have grown up on the east side and you find it natural to speak in slang and it is natural for you to wear those clothes, then it's natural, then it's not something you are trying too hard to do. But if you are from a different area and you are just trying really hard, and just "wallah, wallah, in every sentence, then people will be like "What the fuck." Like "What's up with this one?" So it depends if it's natural, if it is who you really are or not.

What Yusra shows here is how the categories of what she refers to as 'ethnic Norwegians' and 'foreigners' are fundamentally fixed categories, you are born as one or the other. However, she also shows how these categories can be modified by clothing or language, either accentuating or contradicting 'your' initial category.

Anwar (Kuben), who also came to Oslo from a different place in Norway as a young teen, has a similar experience:

K: So, about this thing with foreigners and Norwegians, what does it mean really?

A: Foreigners – Norwegians, most Norwegians are like quiet … foreigners, they shout a lot, that's it.

K: Haha, but what does it take to – cause I remember, (when working at a different high school) people would – they used those words, but you could be born in Norway and still be a foreigner.

A: Foreigner, heh, I actually have –- Norwegian citizenship, all of that. But I am looked upon as a foreigner since I am Somali, really.

K: Yes?

Y: But Norwegians are like Norwegian, do you understand?

K: Yes, that you –

Y: The white kids

K: Yes, you are white?

Y: Yes, then you are Norwegian

Anwar starts out by defining what a foreigner is, by talking about behavior, but continues to describe how he feels the category is imposed on him from the outside. More explicitly than Yusra, he ties being seen as Norwegian to having white skin. Citizenship is not enough. He then goes on to describe how the way you are seen by others can be modified through style and language:

Y: So what I have noticed, is that if you speak real nice, then they look at you like a Norwegian. And if you wear preppy clothes, they look at you like a Norwegian. But if you wear like a track suit, or a Nike sweater, well then, they see you as foreigner.

K: Mmm. Can you be white and have two Norwegian parents –

> *A: And be –*
>
> *K: a foreigner, like?*
>
> *A: Yes, one of my friends is. We don't look at him like a Norwegian person.*
>
> *K: But do you – do you consider yourself Norwegian?*
>
> *A: Yes. Or that's what's a bit confusing. I had to learn it myself as well.*
>
> *K: Because things weren't like this in (former homeplace)?*
>
> *A: No.*

What we see here is Norwegian-ness and foreign-ness described almost quantitatively. The 'ingredient' making someone more or less Norwegian or foreign, can be tied to cultural objects connoting certain classed meanings: If you start out by being a 'foreigner', dressing like a preppy or doing well in school and listening to music like a hipster, this might make you more Norwegian. Starting out as a Norwegian, you might become *like* a foreigner by speaking the local slang or by dressing or behaving in certain ways. Yet, you cannot get around the category you *'really'* belong to.

There is a tension present in both accounts similar to the tensions around difference found in Norwegian society at large. Yusra and Anwar are both searching for ways to describe the differences they observe, trying their best to use correct wording, and avoid confronting the ethos of egalitarianism too directly. But for the categories to be both fixed and flexible is in reality an impossibility. The fixed-ness reveals the unspoken centrality of racialised categories in a seemingly 'colourblind', egalitarian society. The flexibility – how categories can be modified by adding certain meanings to cultural objects – shows how other structural forces, like class, are rather indistinguishable from the way racialised categories are built and experienced.

The two teenagers 'having to learn what it was like' upon moving to Oslo might be telling of how these categories of difference are highlighted and strengthened in a city where residential and school segregation is more noticeable than in smaller towns and rural areas. On the other hand, it may also entail that possibility of naming difference was even more restricted in more homogenous communities.

Conclusion

The youth in this study face a hierarchically structured landscape, with a city divided between sought after, expensive residential areas with an abundance of social goods, and less sought- after areas with fewer social goods. They are then asked to 'choose' from a hierarchically organised list of schools, where the currency for bargaining for their preferred choice consists of their grades from junior high school.

Individualising stories based in liberal ideals of meritocracy, emphasises how your own effort will make a difference, and that everyone can, and is indeed morally obliged to 'lift' themselves to their highest and most productive potential. Higher education and well-paid jobs are put forward by the schools, politicians and society at large, as something

everyone should strive for. These stories, together with those of an egalitarian, social democratic, colourblind Norwegian society, collide with the obviously hierarchical landscape the youth see before themselves, and they struggle to make sense of these under-communicated paradoxes. Using categories such as hipsters, preppies and ghetto kids, they find ways of naming the differences they observe, without confronting the ethos of egalitarianism too directly.

Sadly, the main theme in accounts of the ghetto figure was what I have come to term 'the bad foreigner', an oftentimes gendered, always racialised and classed, racist stereotype of the 'foreigner' as dangerous and behaving in undisciplined ways. While having some 'ghetto capital' might offer coolness and a feeling of belonging to others in a similar situation, this coolness can, if performed excessively, turn (back) into something that connotes dangerous Otherness.

The tendency to collapse categories such as *westerner/rich/Norwegian* and *easterner/poor/foreigner* into meaning one and the same thing, is strengthened through the current educational system. It also, paradoxically, fortifies the individualising stories held up by dominant political discourses of 'choice', productivity and human capital. But the position of the 'ideal citizen', promising status and economic reward, is not equally available to all. Hipsters and preppies symbolise subject positions with easy access to these rewards, while the ghetto figure symbolises a position barred from the resources needed to become productive. The ghetto figure can be seen as a derogatory name for this position, that of a 'useless subject'. But when tied to more positive meanings and practices, such as *belonging, community and solidarity,* it can also be seen as a refusal of being labelled as worthless.

Although the categories of preppies, hipsters and ghetto kids carry and to some degree reproduce the dominant discourse of 'subjects of value' as ideal citizens, as well as the racism at the core of figuring the ghetto kid as a 'bad foreigner', the ambivalence and negotiation present in the youth's descriptions expose the inadequacy of dominant stories and does speak of possibilities for critiquing and resisting these.

Continuing to explore the inconsistencies of the dominant discourse, like the youth rightly do, might just bring us closer to an understanding of the workings of social injustice.

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