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Place, voice, representation
Shifting boundaries of class and culture in Amsterdam New West

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(This is a work in progress.)

Abstract:

This paper zooms in on conflicts over urban renewal in a socially and ethnically mixed neighborhood in Amsterdam. Plans for large-scale urban renewal have opened up space for white, working class residents to find and express “voice” in “discourses of displacement” and to name and maintain boundaries with cultural and social others: political elites, “the rich”, and migrants and their children. The sense of a shrinking life-world in an increasingly heterogeneous city is projected upon urban renewal and spatial and aesthetic transformation. Taking an ethnographic approach, the paper shows that white Dutch residents often discuss these dynamics as exemplary of their lack of democratic voice and representation. A sense that “others” are being privileged while white Dutch residents are being displaced has become potent and persuasive. The first part of the paper zooms in on the socio-spatial history of Amsterdam New West, whereas the second part consists of a “deep” ethnographic description of recent events. In the final section, I will argue that discourses of displacement and voicelessness can and must be read through the lens forced upon us by the rise (and spread) of a deeply autochthonous populism in the Netherlands (and beyond).

Like other neighborhoods in Amsterdam New West, sometimes called the largest building pit of Europe, the specter of urban renewal has haunted the *Louis Couperusbuurt*. In December 2009, the local municipality in the district *Slotermeer* ratified far-stretching plans for the almost total demolition of the quarter. A completely new vicinity was to arise. The project was part of the large-scale urban renewal of the working class areas of Amsterdam built after World War 2, New West - also known as the *Westelijke Tuinsteden* (Western Garden Cities). In this paper, I situate the socio-spatial restructuring of New West historically, while zooming in on recent conflicts and struggles over the future of the *Louis Couperusbuurt* - a report based on almost two years of ethnographic field work in the area. I show that plans

for the demolition of the quarter have opened up space for white, working class residents to express a sense of self in “discourses of discontent”, and to construe, name and maintain boundaries with cultural and social others: political elites, ‘big business, and migrants and their children. A sense of a shrinking life-world in an increasingly global, heterogeneous city has been projected upon urban renewal and socio-spatial transformation, and talked about in terms of a lack of democratic voice and representation of “ordinary people”. A notion that (migrant) others are privileged while white Dutch residents are being displaced has become increasingly potent and persuasive. The first part of the paper zooms in on the socio-spatial history of this particular part of Amsterdam, whereas the second part consists of an ethnographic description of recent events. I will argue that discourses of displacement and voicelessness can and must be read through the lens forced upon us by the rise (and spread) of a deeply autochthonous populism in the Netherlands.

Westelijke Tuinsteden

The *Westelijke Tuinsteden*, or Amsterdam New West, were built on the basis of the *Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan* (General Expansion Plan, *AUP*) of 1934. Its genealogy can be traced back to the socio-spatial ideologies of modernist urban design, planning and architecture: the social utopianism of the movement for the Garden City of Ebenezer Howard and the organicism and functionalism of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*. As James Holston argues, modernism in architecture and planning can be looked at as a “discourse on the good government of society which proposes architecture and city planning as instruments of social change and management” (1989, 12). The emergence of modern planning, presupposing the city as an object of knowledge and intervention, can be traced back to the birth of the nation state and the industrial working class (cf. Holston 1989; Scott 1998). Industrialization went hand in glove with an escalation of urban growth and the concomitant need to develop instruments to control and contain the city and its populations.

The construction of the *Westelijke Tuinsteden* in the 1950s offered Dutch modernist architects the chance to bring their convictions about urban organization

and architectural design to material life (cf. Van Rossem, 2010). Working class people were to be freed from the cramped and unhygienic circumstances of life in the old popular neighborhoods. Light, air and space were the new principles guiding urban design; and building activities started only after extensive scientific studies on typology and building techniques, hygiene, functions and the use of public and private space (cf. Hellinga, 1983; 2005; Van Rossem, 2008). The closed building blocks that characterized the traditional city were banned; Sloterveer became the first garden city in the Netherlands, an “organic residential district in open construction” (Van Rossem, 2008)). The closed building blocks of the traditional inner-city were replaced by *portiekflats* - “flats with open entrance halls with east-west facing apartments surrounded by green spaces” (Ibid.: 55) - and *court yards* - rows of low-rise houses in half open squares, around carefully designed public gardens. Open construction entailed a conscious effort to create a new kind of urban experience for inhabitants, and denoted a new mode of urban regulation.

The choice to build a homogeneous, working class neighborhood on the westside of Amsterdam was directly linked to the development of the Amsterdam port and its industrial areas, which were projected to extend westward. The new neighborhoods of New West were to become the labour reservoir for these industries (cf. Hellinga, 2005). After the war, however, the plans to create a socially homogeneous district of industrial laborers and their families were modified: mounting costs of construction had led to higher rents than anticipated, which most laborers could not afford. The target group was extended to other socio-economic categories, including teachers, civil servants and other members of the emergent middle-class. Moreover, everywhere in New West arose relatively comfortable, expensive homes on so-called ‘golden edges’ to attract wealthy people; while returnees from Indonesia (the former colony), and ‘migrants’ from rural areas in the north of the country, were perceived and treated as outsiders (Hellinga, 2005). Although the population of the new neighborhoods consisted mostly of young couples raising children, New West was a socially and culturally heterogeneous district (Ibid.).

Architects involved in the construction of New West were among the first to criticize the “dressed-down” implementation of the plans that resulted from financial restrictions and the massive housing need after World War 2. “While the General Expansion Plan already provided very little autonomy to the architect, after the war the little freedom there was became even more constricted” (Oudenampsen, 2010b). In a 1959 article, the architect Aldo van Eyck went as far as to argue that “functionalism has killed creativity [and] leads to a cold technocracy, in which the human aspect is forgotten” (Van Eyck, 1959; quoted in Oudenampsen, 2010b). Moreover, the new suburbs offered little possibilities for (social) mobility. Due to the pressure to build massive numbers of housing units as cheap and as fast as possible, most houses were too small to accommodate family growth, and the capacity to facilitate the demands of the socially mobile was limited. Between the late 1960s and early 1980s a rising number of people started leaving the *Westelijke Tuinsteden* for towns in the vicinity of Amsterdam. (Post)migrant families slowly took their place. In 1981, less than five percent of the residents of Amsterdam New West were categorized as of Surinam, Turkish or Moroccan origin¹ (cf. Hellinga, 2005: 62). The number of (post)migrants rose to twelve percent in 1987, and 38 percent in 2002. In 2010, the total of ‘*niet-westerse allochtonen*’, the taxonomic category now employed for residents with a (partly) ‘non-Western’ genealogy, was 49 percent. In the *Louis Couperusbuurt*, 47 percent of residents was categorized as ‘non-Western allochthonous’; 41 percent was qualified as ‘autochthonous’.

Migrations in and out of New West notwithstanding, it remained one of the most popular districts of Amsterdam until the 1990s, with comparatively low levels of joblessness, social marginalization and petty crime (Hellinga, 2005). But starting in 1990, Amsterdam municipal services, local district boards and city advisors began drawing what Hellinga refers to as “doomsday scenarios” (2005: 8) for the future of the garden cities. A new narrative emerged, staging the post-war areas of Amsterdam as the future arenas of a “new social question” (Scheffer, 2006). The main thread of that narrative was that a combination of physical decline of the housing stock and a culmination of social problems would lead to a downward spiral and “ghettoization”. The concentration of low-rent social housing and the projected

growth of the share of ethnic minorities became construed as perils to the stability in what had become named and known as “concentration neighborhoods” (see Uitermark, 2003).

To facilitate the social management of working class and ethnically mixed urban areas in the context of new challenges - associated with the globalization of the city; increasing ethnic and class segregation; the stagnation of social mobility among certain social groups; and the perceived lack of “livability” in these districts - a large-scale socio-spatial restructuring of concentration neighborhoods was proposed. The genealogy of these shifts in socio-spatial policies can be traced back to the early 1980s, in which a new market oriented policy strategy in the city took shape as part and parcel of a “broad administrative reorientation” in urban policy (Hajer, 1989). The goal of policy started changing from people to places (Oudenampsen, 2010a: 34) and became focused on branding and marketing the city and changing the image and demographic composition of particular places, promoting the *location* Amsterdam for investors, tourists and higher educated (Oudenampsen, 2010a: 34). This process articulated global urban redevelopment strategies aiming for an economic regeneration of cities. Urban areas were to become competitive and cities “entrepreneurial”, which depended on attracting high income residents and visitors (cf. Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 2008; Swyngedouw, 1996). Oudenampsen argues that this transformation of policy orientation can be understood as a shift from social to spatial makeability. Whereas the former combined the wish to regulate the city with efforts to emancipate and “elevate” its inhabitants, the latter concentrated on the elevation of a spatial location (Oudenampsen, 2010a: 33), to attract new urban populations. This shift thus denoted a new mode of urban regulation in which gentrification, referring to the “production of space for – and consumption by – a more affluent and very different incoming population” (Slater *et al.*, 2004: 1145) became “the sine qua non for promoting liveability” (Uitermark *et al.*, 2007: 128).

To illustrate, the 1990 report of the Physical Planning Department of Amsterdam points out that the housing situation in New West was appropriate for the “current population”, but not for “higher segments” (Bouw- en Woningdienst

Amsterdam, 1990; cf. Hellinga, 2005). The arrival, in the garden cities, of families of “foreign origin” was explicitly defined as having bad consequences for the image of the housing stock in the area and the report warned for depreciation processes. This shift from social to spatial elevation has been described as characteristic of the emergence of a post-political, neoliberal city (cf. Swyngedouw, 2007), denoting a “reduction of democratic life to the management of local consequences” (Rancière, 2004; quoted in Swyngedouw, 2007, 60). A consensus based urban management emerged, in which public space became the domain of the market and of technocratic management, as opposed to a domain of political struggle over dissenting perspectives. It is in this historical context that the case of the *Louis Couperusbuurt* must be understood.

A ‘respectable’ place

I stumbled upon the case of the *Couperusbuurt* in the late summer of 2009, during a festival, organized by the local municipality, celebrating urban renewal. In the margins of the festival I encountered a group of residents on the less festive side of the politics of urban restructuring: residents who were happy to be living in the *Couperusbuurt*, but who would have to leave their home and community if the renewal plans would be ratified. This group of people - mostly white residents of the *Couperusbuurt* in two neighboring quarters - used the occasion of the festival to demonstrate their resistance.

The *Louis Couperusbuurt* consisted of 670 homes, most of them ‘social housing’ - low-rent apartments owned by semi-public housing corporations. In the plans for the renewal of this quarter, most of these homes were designated for demolition. A central figure in the resistance against these plans was Rick, who shared a low-rent apartment in the quarter with his partner and three cats. The 32 square meter home was “small”, as Rick would put it, but located in spacious surroundings. Like other parts of New West, the *Couperusbuurt* was conspicuously green, denoting the massive attention that was given to the construction of green spaces in New West (cf. Feddes, 2011). Rick himself worked in that industry: he was a foreman at a large gardening company that constructed green spaces - public gardens, court yards - in urban

renewal areas. Rick thus knew that urban restructuring was on the Amsterdam agenda. He told me he had known a various number of people who had been “demolished away” (*weggesloopt*), or “deported” (*gedepoorterd*), as he and other residents would often call it. But Rick had not expected the “renewal mania” (*sloopwaanzen*) to come his way. He thought his neighborhood quiet: “*netjes en gewoon*” - *respectable and ordinary*. The fact that half of the residents of the *Couperusbuurt* were of (post)migrant origin notwithstanding, Rick told me several times that in his perception the quarter was predominantly white.² He also emphasized that he considered most of his neighbors hard-working people, who had a job to go to in the morning. “*Sixty percent of the people here have a job. The other forty percent are either too old to work, or they are jobless. And it’s the jobless people who are causing trouble! Those people should be disciplined instead of demolishing the whole neighborhood.*”³

Rick thus emphasized that the quarter was a neighborhood of *ordinary Amsterdammers* (*gewone Amsterdammers*) and a quiet place to live. He impressed upon me, many times, that his neighbors did not cause trouble. I asked Rick about Mohammed Bouyeri, the Dutch-Moroccan Islamist who lived in the *Louis Couperusbuurt* when he murdered the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 (cf. Buruma, 2006; Stengs, 2009; Uitermark and Gielen, 2010). That had caused some uproar in the neighborhood, as journalists and television crews had suddenly roamed the quarter, looking for the ghetto. But Rick asked: “*Because one lunatic Moroccan lived here it is supposed to be a bad neighborhood?*” He strenuously defended the *Couperusbuurt* as respectable and its inhabitants as hard-working, ordinary people, and talked about the demolition in terms of punishment and displacement

Voice and voicelessness

It was in the spring of 2008 that residents were invited to a first public meeting about the renewal of Sloterveer. That meeting was later referred to as “*de wolkesavond*” (“*the night of little clouds*”): residents were asked to discuss annoyances and problems and write down, in drawings of clouds on large strips of paper, their dreams for the future. The meeting was part of a trajectory that had started several months before, in which an external bureau, the *Joop Hofman Alliantie* (JHA), was

hired by the *Slotermeer* municipality and the housing corporations to gather information on the wishes and problems of residents. Five field workers of JHA organized a series of activities to get to know the neighborhood and its inhabitants. They interviewed active and less-active citizens; organized small and larger meetings; participated in activities: JHA claimed that over 1600 residents had participated, in one way or another, in the trajectory.⁴

Looking back, several of my interlocutors complained that, at the time, they had had not idea what JHA was doing in the neighborhood. The bureau's activities were part and parcel of a trajectory leading up to the formulation of plans for the renewal of *Slotermeer*, but many residents were oblivious to this. Had they known the future of their home was at stake, they would have thought twice about complaining: *"Nobody ever asked me if I wanted my house to be demolished,"* Rick said. The questions had been posed in more general ways. How did residents feel about the neighborhood? What problems did they encounter? And what dreams did they have for the future? Many residents had jumped to the occasion. When I spoke to Rick about this, his narrative shifted from defending the respectability of the quarter's residents to summing up *"real problems: prostitution; burglaries; noise; annoyances between neighbors"*. Rick complained that the housing corporation, *Stadgenoot*, had been making a mess of the neighborhood, echoing complaints of other residents about the lack of maintenance of the houses and the housing allocation policies. *"People from the Jelinek; people with psychiatric problems; criminals. In our eyes, they have done that on purpose. No wonder there's trouble."*⁵

The problems in the neighborhood had, argued Rick, nothing to do with ordinary, respectable residents, but was the result of policies that brought troubled outsiders in. The corporation's slack in maintenance and its (alleged) policy of placing *"troubled people"* in the neighborhood were interpreted as deliberate acts, as a strategy to push ordinary people out. These assumptions were well captured by Rick, in one of our conversations: *"They care about only one thing: breaking off the neighborhood. They do everything to create the arguments for demolition. They are deliberately down-grading the neighborhood!"* When the *Slotermeer* Labor Party leader Van Rijssel spoke badly about the *Couperusbuurt* in a debate on its future - *"Slotermeer*

South is the worst neighborhood of Sloterveer" - this was interpreted as part and parcel of the metaphoric demolition of the neighborhood.

When the JHA's research results were published in the summer of 2008, the bureau concluded that people considered the mess and physical disarray in public space as their main problem. Garbage not being deposited in the right way; stack and disorder in the halls of apartment buildings. Residents also felt, JHA concluded, that the supply of shops and services in Sloterveer was one-sided and the weekly market boring. But people did not want to leave the neighborhood; and would judge renewal plans first and foremost on a financial basis. Would they be able to pay a future rent?

The outcome of JHA's field research notwithstanding, in 2008 and early 2009 a project group of local civil servants and housing corporation officials developed plans for a dramatic restructuring of Sloterveer, including the demolition of the *Couperusbuurt* and the replacement of a majority of the low-rent social housing by high rent apartments and resale property. In March 2009, almost a year after the *"wolkjesavond"*, the residents of the *Couperusbuurt* were again invited for a meeting. It was the first time most residents heard of the plans. One of my interlocutors, Marian, told me she had gotten an ominous feeling when she received the invitation for the new public meeting in the mail. *"The invitation said that the meeting was going to be held to discuss 'our neighborhood and our home'. I suddenly realized... 'Oh no, this means demolition'."*

Marian grew up in Amsterdam New West, in a middle class, social-democratic family, only a six minute bike-ride away from her current home in the *Couperusbuurt*. She was a single woman with a job as an educator in a school for special-care children. She had just turned fifty when I first spoke to her, and had lived in the neighborhood since the early 1980s: it had been her first apartment after she had left her family home. As a long-time resident of New West, she had seen urban restructuring at work in other parts of the area, and had always had a sad feeling when confronted with it. *"It is like they drop a bomb, and gone is a complete neighborhood, with a history, you know. A place where people used to live, where children played."* But like other residents - like Rick - Marian hadn't considered the possibility that her home

would be targeted. She emphasized that she simply saw no rational reason for the demolition of the *Couperusbuurt*: nothing really bad ever happened in this neighborhood; there were no big problems there, she said. While she knew people who were sometimes afraid, especially at night, she said this was nonsense. *“Media and politicians fabricate this sense of a lack of safety. It has nothing to do with reality. These politicians have their own agenda.”*

Marian remembered the March 2009 meeting as dramatic and emotional. She told me: *“It was the way they went about things. The corporation and municipality officials, I mean. They employed a divide and rule-strategy. [...] We didn’t really have the chance to build some kind of collective opposition.”* Various of my interlocutors expressed similar sentiments, and did not tire to impress upon me how they had felt when the plans were announced. *“It felt like a bull dozer,”* an older resident that I bumped into while drinking coffee in the mall in the heart of *Slotermeer*, told me. The man, who had lived in the *Couperusbuurt* since the 1960s, had recognized me from my picture in the neighborhood paper, which had published a small article on my research in the area. He had been a member of the Labour Party (PvdA) most of his life, but he had felt abandoned by that party’s support for the renewal plans. *“It seems they want to get rid of the normal working man,”* he said.

Such utterances could also be heard during the December 2009 meeting of the borough’s representative council, where the local politicians would ratify or revoke the renewal plans. The meeting, for which hundreds of *Slotermeer* inhabitants had been mobilized, gave residents who wanted to speak a final chance to influence the decision making. Several of them jumped to the occasion. A man in his nineties, Mr. Engel, recalled his resistance against the Nazi’s, born out his anger and frustration about the massive deportations of Jewish citizens. *“But five years of resistance was apparently not enough,”* he said. Today, he was once again confronted with *“deportations”*.

Another resident, Denise, who spoke with a heavy English accent, had moved to the *Couperusbuurt* three years earlier, and was appalled by the restructuring plans. The problem, she said, was not the housing but the corporation’s slack behavior, their lack of maintenance of otherwise perfectly good homes. The real reason for the

restructuring, Denise argued, was the central location of the neighborhood; close to the *Sloterplas*, train station *Sloterdijk*, and Amsterdam airport. *"The grey suits see dollar bills,"* Denise said. The contemporary inhabitants of Sloterveer were *"of the wrong kind"* and *"had apparently to be replaced."* If the council members would say yes to the plans, they would give the *"greedy grey suits what they desired. Is that what a social-democratic party wanted?"*

During the break that evening I spoke to a lady who told me that although she was angry, she also felt a sense of realism was needed. *"We"* shouldn't become totally obsessed by the demolition plans, she argued. *"Big money"* was behind them, and nothing could really be done. She expressed a notion that I heard over and over again: a sense that the renewal plans were driven by financial and big business interests, beyond ordinary people's control. One of my interlocutors, a neighborhood activist called Truus, in one of the public meetings discussing the renewal plans, said: *"There is much talk about the greater good, about general interest. But what do they mean? Do they mean the greater good of residents, or the general interest of 'big money'. The city and the corporations have decided, years ago, that they wanted this large-scale transformation of Sloterveer. And now we are invited to 'participate'. But that has nothing to do with reality. We may give our opinion, but who decides what is the right opinion? Big money?"*

Especially the Labor party representatives, who formed a majority group in the local council, were blamed for supporting the plans. John, a resident from another part of Sloterveer that I spoke to many times, for instance argued: *"Look, they used to be social, but now they only care about money. Do you know what I mean? The Labor Party. Look at Wim Kok⁶. He used to be a union man, a socialist. But now he is making big bucks and has all kinds of friends in big business. The Labor Party is in the pocket of big business. They aren't 'social' any more. They want rich people to live here, who pay a lot of taxes"*.

Sloterveer residents thus spoke of the participation trajectory - as discussed above - as a farce. While the local municipality talked of *"making plans together"*, my interlocutors emphasized that they felt they had no real say: no voice. This sense of 'voicelessness' was reinforced by the symbolic demolition of the neighborhood by politicians like Labor-party leader Van Rijssel, as recalled above.⁷ Moreover, several

residents had themselves contributed to this symbolic break down by jumping to the occasion when they had the opportunity to complain, as was pointed out to me by one of the community workers in Sloterveer, Mahmut. *"You know the people in the Couperusbuurt, right?"* He asked me, laughingly. *"The demolition is their own fault. They have given the municipality and the housing corporations many arguments in favor of demolition. They complain a lot! They are very good at complaining in that quarter. About living circumstances. A drug house here; illegals there; that there is no good. The people in the Couperusbuurt are difficult - they complained bitterly and had no idea they were digging their own grave."*⁸ Mahmut thus pointed to the paradoxical situation that the symbolic demolition of the *Couperusbuurt*, a major source for people's sense of voicelessness, was reinforced by these residents' own discourses of discontent.

The sense of lacking real voice was also reinforced when an alderman reportedly said: *"You can jump up and down all you want, your house is going to be demolished anyway."* This story gained momentum and started circulating soon after the remark was allegedly made, and gained a certain performative power. The remark exemplified what people already suspected and discussed: that the participation trajectory was a coverlid meant to conceal residents' lack of voice. *"They do as they like; we are just numbers to them,"* is how one resident gave words to this suspicion. And Rick argued: *"They tell us that we have the right to participate, that there is still time to give our point of view. But it is all bullshit. The decision has been made. Nobody really cares about what we think. They just want to demolish our houses. They care about making money. Money rules. The truth is that we are being fucked over."* Marian summarized this discourse of voicelessness when in one of our conversations she said: *"Not for one moment I had the idea that there was room for real discussion. You just felt that everything had already been decided"*.

The discourse of voicelessness indicates a failure of voice. The problem is not that people's expressions of discontent are not heard; it is that the residents of the *Couperusbuurt* suspect that there is no real space where their 'voice' is incorporated into political discourse, and employed to constitute a representative link between people's demands and the political leadership. It is voice that has no place to arrive and that therefore remains noise as opposed to becoming speech (cf. Rancière, 2004:

13). This failure of voice evolves into a sense of abandonment, political marginalization and frustration, as can be seen, quite literally, in the rhetorical employment of the notion of ‘deportation’, pointing back to the experience of fascism and war to emphasize the gravity of the situation.

The failure of voice signifies a problem of democratic representation, erupting into a discourse in which an opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is expressed and reinforced (cf. Mouffe, 2005; Oudenampsen, 2010). In these processes, the notion of ‘ordinary people’ is relationally constituted vis-a-vis ‘grey suits’, big money and political elites. This language offers an everyday vocabulary for the expression, construction and maintenance of boundaries between the people and the elite, the “internal frontier” on which populism rests (cf. Laclau, 2005; cf. Oudenampsen 2010).

The politics of voice and democratic representation signified a first trope in a discourse of displacement employed by white, working class residents in the *Couperusbuurt*; a discourse that construed “ordinary” white residents as the victims of displacement and of forces beyond their control. A second trope in that discourse circled around a politics of entitlement. This logic of entitlement sometimes evolved into a discourse of autochthony (cf. Geschiere, 2009) and a logic of welfare chauvinism, denoting the construction of an opposition between ordinary Amsterdammers and (post)migrants in terms of welfare entitlement and distribution (cf. Ceuppens, 2006). These tropes of displacement are central elements of the logic, the architecture, of autochthonous populism in the Netherlands today (cf. Oudenampsen, 2010a).

Scheefwoners and (post)migrants

When Marian in March 2009 realized that there were plans for the demolition of the *Couperusbuurt*, she worried that her whole life might be turned upside down. Both she and Rick exemplified a category of residents of the *Couperusbuurt* for whom the demolition of their homes would have large personal, financial consequences. Both rent in the low-rent, social housing sector, in which they arrived respectively 16 and 30 years ago, when they still had a much lower income than today. Hence, they enjoyed a non-commercial rent. Both Rick and Marian had been socially mobile, but

had not moved (up) in terms of their home. The percentage of their monthly income that went to rent had thus gone down considerably since they first moved into the *Couperusbuurt*. People like Marian and Rick were referred to, by policy makers and housing corporation officials, as *scheefwoners*: “skewed inhabitants”. Like several others in the *Couperusbuurt*, Rick and Marian had built their lives around these low rents. Although they had an average income, they could afford things others could not. Marian travelled. When I visited her home, the first thing I saw was a huge map of the world with hundreds of pins in it, indicating all the locations she had visited. She told me: *“Ten years ago I thought of moving. I had met a guy; we thought of living together. And we did for a while, in this house, but it is small, too small for two people. So, I looked around for a bigger apartment; thought of buying something in that new flat they had just built five minutes from here. But the costs! The transition would be extreme. And I thought: but I want to keep driving a car; and I want to keep traveling. I was to happy with the way I lived. And since then the housing prices have just exploded. The transition would be even bigger now.”*

Rick and his partner had a “Japanese garden” outside of Amsterdam, where they resided during weekends and the summer. They also spent a lot of money on charities for animals. I once asked Rick if he would consider buying an apartment if the demolition could not be stopped: *“No! That would mean I would have to change my whole life and I don’t want to do that. It is as simple as that. We want to keep going to the theater. [...] And we have the speedboat, a big one, which costs a lot of money. And I can do these things because I have a low rent, because I am satisfied with this small home. They call us skewed inhabitants, but what are skewed inhabitants? We pay 240 euro rent every month, which is not much, but look at what we get for it: 32 square meters and a little garden, that’s all. It is the choice we make.”*

Confronted with the plans for the demolition of their home, both Rick and Marian were thus faced with the prospect that not only their house, but their whole way of life would be ‘demolished’. For both of them it would be impossible to find a new home in the low-rent sector, as their income was too high. They would be forced to search for much more expansive housing on the stressed-out, overheated Amsterdam housing market. And that meant that they would have to give up many

of the things they valued in their life. This produced a sense of displacement, as became clear from Marian's words: *"Am I allowed to have a home at all? Do I have rights, as a single person? Do I have to make room for all those families? [...] It is other people's opinion that my home is too small for me. That I don't belong here. Yes, uhm, it's a difficult question. Yes, I simply do not agree. I do not want to leave. I could have left if I wanted to, but I do not want to pinch and scrape for a large and expansive apartment."*

Rick responded to the discourse of *scheefwonen* with a counter-discourse on welfare state entitlement: *"You can call this scheefwonen, but if I would take a look at what some people pay who have housing benefits. People who live in a house of almost 100 square meters - and that house should be much more expansive compared with what I have. Perhaps 800, 900 euro. And they have benefits. Everything. They pay 300 euro. A nice place. So what is scheefwonen? That people live in a home they can only afford because they get benefits, or what I do? It is because I work and pay taxes that I make that possible. So people who can't afford it are put in those houses and I pay 240 euro for a very small apartment, but I also pay for the home of those other people. Do you understand?"*⁹

Later in the same conversation, Rick's counter-discourse evolved from a story on entitlement into a form of "welfare chauvinism" (Ceuppens, 2006), constructing a culturalized opposition between the hardworking 'in-group' Rick belonged to, and "indolent scroungers", parasitizing on the labor or profits of the first group (Ibid., 164). Echoing a familiar narrative among white people in Sloterveer, Rick insisted that ordinary Dutch people like himself were being displaced by '*allochtonen*'. He told me how years ago he had a flower business in a white neighborhood, which had become populated by "*immigrants*". His *regular customers* moved out and the shop couldn't be sustained, because, Rick argued, "*allochtonen* didn't buy flowers and stuff like that". Most of his friends, he said, shared the view that "*ordinary Amsterdammers*" were being pushed out of town. "*That is not a feeling I have, it is the truth!*" The renewal had reinforced the conviction that immigrants were being favored and he was being displaced. "*Now I am being driven out of my home again. And why? Because they want larger apartments! And why do they want larger apartments? For allochtonen! Because Dutch people (Hollandse mensen) are up to a maximum of four in a family. So I am*

again being driven out of my apartment. The houses that will be built here are for large families."

Developing his perspective, Rick thus composed a narrative in which an opposition was construed between 'Hollandse mensen' and (post)migrants, between 'autochthonous' and 'allochthonous', by imposing issues of entitlement and distribution upon the debate about the socio-spatial restructuring of New West.

Rick: Look, I understand, those people with big families also have to live somewhere. But, well, sorry, I have other ideas about that issue, but that is my own personal..."

PM: What is your idea about it then?

Just make sure they have fewer children. Why do they have four children, five? Yes. Look, I will tell you again, they came to the Netherlands as guest workers back then. Yes - and at one point that changed very quickly to allochtoon. Yes, you know? So. Look, if people have to be helped, that's fine with me, but not when it's only for economic reasons. And that is how it happened with them. Look, most of our problems we have with all those people.

[PM] But, one second, which people?

Rick: Allochtonen! [...] The neighborhood here is mostly white people. A couple of them live here. They got a house here in the past. Because they came alone. But now they let their little woman [hun vrouwtje] come over. And, well, then kids will follow soon; and, well, these homes are too small for that. And those are the people who are in favor of the demolition. That's the hard reality; that's the truth.¹⁰

In the trope emerging here, a sense of displacement has become interwoven with issues of entitlement and distribution in the welfare state. In Marian's discourse, as opposed to that of Rick, these questions were entwined with the question of immigration. Moreover, Marian would in our interviews take considerable pains to distance herself from the anti-immigrant rhetoric of some of her neighbors. She had personal and financial reasons for not wanting to leave, and mobilized a discourse of individual rights. Did she not have a place in the *Couperusbuurt* as a single woman? Why should she 'make room' for all those families?

Rick took this discourse a few steps further. For him, displacement was intimately tied up with the question of immigration, entitlement and welfare distribution. He asserted his right to live in the *Couperusbuurt* by developing and reinforcing a discourse in which white “ordinary people” became narrated as victims of “allochtonous [welfare] spongers” (cf. Ceuppens, 2006) and their elite sponsors. *Why am I being driven out of my home*, he asked? *“Because they want larger apartments! And why do they want larger apartments? For allochtonen!”*

Conclusion

After local elections in March 2011, the Dutch prime-minister, a free-market liberal, said: “We are going to give this beautiful country back to the Dutch, because that is our project.” The premier’s words echoed his earlier promise, made when he presented his cabinet in September 2010, to “give the country back to hard-working Dutchmen”. These words provoked commotion among the premier’s liberal and leftist adversaries, in political and media arenas, who accused him of appropriating the vocabulary of the neonationalist and anti-immigrant right. Right wing populist leader Geert Wilders has indeed grounded his political project in the construction of a notion of ordinary Dutchness vis-a-vis (post)migrants, especially Muslims, and liberal and ‘left church’-elites. It is this logic, in which society becomes symbolically divided between ‘the people’ and its (elite and migrant) ‘others’ (cf. Panizza, 2005: 3), that the prime-minister was tapping into when he promised to give the country back to ‘the Dutch’.

The rise of Dutch right-wing populism rests on a political discourse that divides the Netherlands into two camps; a discourse that pits ordinary and “autochthonous” Dutch people against (post)migrants on the one hand, and a liberal, state-entrenched elite on the other, while suggesting intimate ties between the latter two groups. In a recent article, Merijn Oudenampsen quotes Wilders, developing this discourse on the “two Netherlands” in a parliamentary debate: “On the one side is our elite with their so-called ideals. A multicultural society, outrageously high taxes, the insane climate hysteria, the unstoppable Islamisation, a Brussels super state and senseless foreign aid. [...] The other Netherlands, my

Netherlands, consists of the people who have to pay the bill. Literally and figuratively. Who are robbed and threatened. Who are weighed down by the harassment of street terrorists, burdened by high taxes and who yearn for a social Netherlands" (quoted in Oudenampsen, 2010a: 11).

The discourse of displacement explored in this paper must be understood in the context of the growing salience of this political narrative. If populism rests of the political construction of the notion of the people, this poses the ethnographic question if and how this notion resonates in the context of people's everyday lives. As shown in the case study above, the discourse of displacement rests upon an everyday vocabulary that shifts the class and cultural boundaries between 'ordinary people' and a number of 'others': politicians, big business, (post) migrants. The discourse of displacement circulating in Sloterveer thus resonates, albeit unevenly and asymmetrically, with the discourse of autochthonous populism that has become increasingly salient in the Netherlands today.

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¹ The Netherlands does not have an explicit race discourse but the state and statisticians do categorize people along ethnic lines. The categories currently employed are: 'autochthonous', used for people whose parents and grandparents were born in the Netherlands; 'allochthonous' (used for people not from the Netherlands, but from 'western' countries); and 'non-Western allochthonous' (people with a relatively recent genealogy in non-Western countries like Turkey, Morocco and the former Dutch colonies). See for an extensive analysis and critique of the use of these categories and the production of populations that are part and parcel to them: Geschiere (2009); Yanow and Van der Haar (forthcoming).

² "De wijk hier is voor het grootste deel witte mensen."

³ "Het zijn de werklozen die problemen geven. Laat ze die werklozen aanpakken in plaats van de hele buurt slopen."

⁴ See Brunel et al. (2008) for a resident's view of the activities of Joop Hofman Alliantie: http://www.meerwaldt.nl/downloads/20080825_EvaluatieVanParticipatie.pdf.

⁵ "Wat er hier is gebeurd is een verkeerd woning toewijzingsbeleid. Mensen uit de Jelinek; mensen met psychiatrische problemen, criminelen. Dat hebben ze bewust gedaan, in onze ogen. Geen wonder dat je problemen krijgt." ("De Jelinek" is a rehab clinic for alcohol- and drug abusers).

⁶ Wim Kok was prime-minister between 1994 and 2002 and a long time leader of the *Partij van de Arbeid*, the Dutch Labor Party.

⁷ Thanks to Irene Stengs for this argument.

⁸ 'Dat hebben ze ook aan zichzelf te danken. Je kent ze toch wel, die mensen? Ze hebben zelf de politiek en de corporatie heel veel argumenten voor sloot gegeven. Heel veel geklaagd. Klagen kunnen ze heel goed, in die wijk. Over woonomstandigheden. Over daar een drugspan, daar illegalen, daar niet goed. [...] De mensen van de Couperusbuurt zijn moeilijk - ze klagen steen en been en wisten niet dat ze hun eigen graf aan het graven waren.'

⁹ "Je kunt dat wel scheefwonen noemen maar als ik ga kijken wat sommige mensen betalen die huursubsidie hebben... Die zitten op een woning van bijna 100 vierkante meter en die woning zou eigenlijk veel meer moeten kosten... Wel 800 of 900 euro als je het vergelijkt met wat ik heb. Die mensen krijgen huurtoeslag. Alles. Ja, dan denk ik: wat is dan scheefwonen? He? Mensen die prachtig wonen en wij die daarvoor betalen of ik? Ze betalen maar 300 euro. Een mooi huis. Dus ja, wat is dan scheefwonen? Dat er mensen in een huis wonen die ze eigenlijk niet kunnen betalen en dat gesubsidieerd wordt, of ik? Maar doordat ik werk, belasting betaal, maak ik dat mogelijk. En daarvandaan worden dus mensen in woningen gestopt die ze eigenlijk niet kunnen betalen en ik betaal 240 euro huur voor een kleine woning, maar ik betaal ook mee aan de woning van andere mensen. Snap je wat ik bedoel?"

¹⁰Rick: Kijk, ik snap het wel - mensen met grotere gezinnen moeten ook ergens wonen. Maar ja, sorry, daar heb ik weer andere ideeën over, maar dat is mijn persoonlijke....

PM: Wat is jouw idee dan?

Rick: Gewoon zorgen dat ze minder kinderen krijgen. Waarom moeten ze vier vijf kinderen hebben? Ja. Kijk, ja ik zeg het nogmaals ze zijn hier toen naar Nederland gekomen als gastarbeider, ja - kijk en dat is op een gegeven moment heel gauw veranderd in allochtoon. Ja, weet je. Dus. Kijk ik vind het best als mensen geholpen moeten worden, maar niet uit economische belangen en dat is het bij hun zo gebeurt. Kijk, de meeste problemen hebben wij met die mensen.

PM: Maar wacht even hoor. Welke mensen?

Allochtonen! [...] De wijk hier is voor het grootste deel witte mensen. Er wonen er wel een paar. Die hebben dus toendertijd zo'n woning gekregen, omdat ze alleen hier kwamen. Maar nu laten ze hun vrouwtje komen uit het land van herkomst. En ja, dan komen er al snel kindjes, en ja dat zijn die kindjes, ja, daar is deze woning te klein voor. En dat zijn dus mensen die voor de sloop zijn, om dus weg te kunnen komen.