Senegalese Networks in Switzerland and USA – How Festive Events Reflect Urban Incorporation Processes

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Introduction

For a long time after the Second World War, politicians as well as researchers have perceived immigrants from West and North Africa as being part of the working class and, in the French case, as inhabitants of the former colonies. Only after 9/11, these people began to be perceived as Muslims. How does this changing image affect their own positioning in the European and North-American societies? As I will show in this chapter, current migration processes from West Africa, in particular from Senegal to Europe and the United States are characterized by a high degree of diversity concerning social class, religious practices and political participation. The migrants’ trajectories and urban incorporation strategies are also various. The average level of education of the Senegalese in the United States is e. g. higher than the average level of education of the U.S.-American citizens, which is a general fact concerning recent immigrants from African countries. Consequently, the recent phenomena are far more complex than in the 1960s, when mainly working class migrants from Senegal and Mali – who were not perceived as Muslims either by politicians or by researchers – came into France.

Building on a long-term empirical research on religious networks of the Senegalese abroad (underlining the will for political change that had unified the followers of different Sufi and Christian groups), the present chapter focuses on festive events that reflect urban incorporation processes. Following Glick Schiller and Çağlar, I consider “incorporation” as a process of building or maintaining ongoing social, economic, political, and religious relations so that an individual or organized group becomes a participant in multiple and diverse social fields of uneven power composed of networks of networks (Epstein,

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1 Some aspects of this research have been published in M. Salzbrunn (2013).
Although beginning on the level of observable interaction, this approach to incorporation traces the linkages between individuals and institutions that are situated within multiple scales, configurations, and layers of governance (Esser, 2004; Portes, 1995; Schmitter Heisler, 1998) (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2011, 190).

In order to contribute to developing such a new methodology that reaches beyond methodological nationalism, I bring together elements of network analysis and event analysis, while paying attention to the positioning and restructuring of locality. As Nina Glick Schiller and Andreas Wimmer (2002) have written, it should not be assumed that people who share the same nationality constitute a homogeneous group in a transnational context. Once we trace migrants beyond their ethnic connections to other networks present in the locality, we are able to see how networks enable migrants to become rooted in an urban context. The Manchester school pioneered event and network analysis and still faces methodological problems related to this research focus. Mitchell (1982/2006, 26) reflects on these methodological problems, going back to van Velsen (1967, 145). The latter points out that the question of typicality of an event can be solved ‘by arguing that the object of the analysis is not in fact ‘culture’ or ‘society’ of which the events studied might be considered samples but rather social processes which may be abstracted from the course of events analysed’. Mitchell related the reflections on event studies to the general issue of case studies, concluding that the ‘rich detail which emerges from the intimate knowledge the analyst must acquire in a case study if it is well conducted provides the optimum conditions for the acquisition of those illuminating insights which make formerly opaque connections suddenly pellucid’ (1982/2006, 40). Social sciences have produced a huge amount of studies focusing on festive events like carnivals (Cohen, 1991; Bakhtin, 1986; Bausinger, 1983; Davis, 1965/1975; Ozouf, 1976/1988) and on rites of passage and rituals of transgression (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1982; Evens and Handelman, 2006; Köpping and Rao, 2000, etc.). The specific locality and its political, social, economic context determine the evolution of the networks linked to this locality. It is particularly useful to trace members of these networks as they negotiate their participation in festive events.

From the ‘Blue March’ of Abdoulaye Wade during his electoral campaigns in New York and Dakar to the ‘Murid Parade’ in Harlem and the ‘Festiv’arènes’ wrestling festival in Lausanne, I will show how the occupation of public space creates an arena for political and religious claims-making in a metropolitan city (New York) and in a middle range city (Lausanne). Referring to situational analysis, I will show how migrants put forward ethnic, national, religious or cultural belonging according to the political, historical and economic context.