

Comparing deconcentrating poverty policies in the United States and the Netherlands: A critical reply to Stal and Zuberi

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1. Introduction

In a recent article in this journal, Stal and Zuberi (2010) discuss two policy programs targeting areas of concentrated poverty, and argue that a multifaceted approach to socio-spatial integration policies can provide significant social benefits to the poor. They base their claim on a comparison of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program in the United States and the urban renewal program of the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In their article, they make several thought-provoking points with regard to the theory of neighborhood effects (p. 4-5). Also, they make the important point that MTO programs should also focus on those left behind (p. 9).

Nevertheless, there are several problems with their conclusions. We believe that there are at least three fundamental flaws in the comparison made by Stal and Zuberi. First, it isn't really clear what the authors try to compare: three types of comparisons seem to be mixed in a rather confusing manner. Second, the comparison of the two programs is problematic because they are entirely different in nature and embedded in different policy contexts, which makes transfer of the urban renewal program to the American context rather difficult. Third, from a Dutch perspective there is insufficient evidence to support the claim that urban renewal in the Bijlmermeer is a success. After discussing these three flaws, we will discuss some issues related to displacement and social networks. By way of conclusion, we reflect on the nature of comparative urban research.

2. What is the object of comparison?

Our first problem is with the comparison of different types of policies. Stal and Zuberi have chosen to compare the relocation program MTO in the US to the renewal of the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam with the objective to evaluate policies and draw lessons while making several comments about neighborhood effect studies. Their case selection seems to be based on the condition that both policies seek to deconcentrate poverty.

The renewal of the Bijlmermeer has displaced some of its residents regardless of their income or ethnicity. However, there is no data presented on these dispersed residents. Consequently there is no comparison between those who are dispersed by MTO program and those who are dispersed by the renewal program of the Bijlmermeer. Furthermore, the authors put a lot of effort in discussing and evaluating the renewal program. However, the Bijlmermeer renewal program tries to accomplish a place-based change in terms of physical appearance and social composition (see Van Gent, 2010), while the MTO program aims to

alter poverty at the individual level. This key difference complicates a comparison of MTO and the Bijlmermeer renewal: both the objectives (i.e. renewal vs. dispersal) and the object (i.e. neighborhood vs. individuals) of the policies are quite different.

Frankly, it appears somewhat odd to seek learning lessons from a renewal program for a dispersal program – and *vice versa*. In our opinion, it would have made more sense either to compare the renewal of the Bijlmermeer with renewal in the US HOPE VI program, or to compare outcomes of the poor dispersed residents from the renewal with the participants of the MTO program. The former option implies a comparison of renewal policies and their social outcomes, which may lead to statements about neighborhood effects for those who are allowed to remain *in situ*. The latter, comparing dispersed or displaced residents, would make some sense when the objective is to study socio-economic outcomes and possible neighborhood effects of dispersed poor people in two different contexts. The form and objectives of the policy that brought about dispersal would then be less relevant. A third option could have been a comparison of the protest and resistance against the policies – a point brought up several times. However, the authors grossly overstate the involvement of ‘the community in all aspects of the renewal’ (p. 10). Residential involvement was only introduced after protest and could merely make small and ‘cosmetic’ changes to the renewal plan (Aalbers et al. 2004; Dukes, 2007; Van Gent, 2008). The presented data to make such assertions are sorely lacking in Stal and Zuberi’s paper.

In sum, it seems to us as if the authors were ambitiously trying to accomplish three different types of comparison (area-based policies, individual outcomes, resident protests) for two different types of research goals (evaluating policy, contributing to debates on neighborhood effects), which has resulted in a rather confusing argument.

3. Is the Bijlmermeer comparable to disadvantaged neighborhoods in the US?

Our second concern with the comparison is with Stal and Zuberi’s lack of appreciation for the actual importance of differences in urban and institutional context. The authors do not really grasp the differences in depth and scale of poverty in Dutch or Western European cities compared to those in the US. Context is extremely important in understanding poverty and social exclusion (Van Kempen, 2001). Several authors have outlined how social and political urban context in Western Europe structure the social differentiation and policy responses thereon (e.g. Häussermann and Haila, 2005; Kazepov, 2005; Le Galès, 2002; Van Kempen and Murie, 2009; Wacquant, 2008). Important elements are the strong influence and support of the interventionist state, the process of welfare state reform, the meaning of ethnicity and immigration, regional variations in economic restructuring after deindustrialization, and the legacy of public-owned, -regulated or -funded housing. These are important factors in explaining both the meaning and mechanisms of poverty neighborhood formation, as well as in understanding policy responses.

Indeed, the Bijlmermeer is a high-poverty neighborhood by Dutch standards. However, anyone studying neighborhoods in the Netherlands should be aware that even in the poorest neighborhoods in the three largest cities, the share of middle-income households outnumbers the share of poor households (Pinkster, 2006). Similar statements cannot be made for US cities. This dissimilarity is extremely relevant when assessing policies which seek to deconcentrate poverty. It raises the point whether deconcentration has the same meaning, urgency and implication in the Netherlands as it has in the US. Perhaps a US deconcentration policy would be considered successful when it would have reached the lower levels of poverty concentration as exist in “high” poverty neighborhoods such as the Bijlmermeer. Unfortunately, Stal and Zuberi do not consider this. Rather, by citing mostly the work of Kruythoff (2003), they continue to equate the Bijlmermeer with US high-poverty neighborhoods (on p. 7). However, Kruythoff’s characterizations of the neighborhood as an “enclave” refers to the Dutch context and should not be taken at face value when doing an

international comparative study. Also, the casual assertion that there is a ‘culture of poverty’ (p. 7) is objectionable for its stereotyping (see Wacquant, 2007). Such a statement should at least receive further investigation, contemplation and citation.

So, how disadvantaged is the Bijlmermeer? In the year 2000, about 90% of the housing in the Bijlmermeer consisted of social rented housing.¹ This is a lot, but one should not forget that 55% of all housing in Amsterdam in that year was social housing and that there were many city neighborhoods that consisted of more than 75% social housing. This implies that social housing in Amsterdam is not a residual sector that only houses the poorest residents. Rather, social housing in Amsterdam accommodates the majority of low- and middle-income households as well as some high-income households. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation in the US where only about 2% of the population lives in social housing (although the numbers are significantly higher in many cities). In the Netherlands, social housing was, and to some extent still is, built for the masses; in the US public housing is, and has always been, a residual sector, only meant to accommodate a small fraction of the lower classes (see e.g. Harloe, 1985): mostly the non-working poor, although, in some US cities, part of the working poor do also live in public housing. This implies that an American neighborhood with a large share of public housing, by definition, has a high degree of poverty; while in the Netherlands neighborhoods with a large share of social housing usually merely have a slight overconcentration of low-income households. Of course, some neighborhoods with a large concentration of social housing are considered the least attractive by local residents and will have a relatively strong concentration of poverty – i.e. relative to other Dutch neighborhoods.

This also explains why in 2000 18% of the Bijlmermeer residents were unemployed compared to 11% for the City of Amsterdam (O+S, 2000). This is a worrisome figure by Dutch standards, but if unemployment rates in public housing dominated neighborhoods were less than twice as high as the city average, this would probably have been considered a success in the US. Or perhaps this would have been considered impossible in the US because public housing would, by its very nature, accommodate a very high share of unemployed residents. In 1999, 40% of the Bijlmermeer residents were considered low- to moderate-income; in the city at large this was 30%. The Bijlmermeer also accommodated 13% high-income people, city-wide this was 20% (Stedelijke Woningdienst, 1999). The average annual disposable income per inhabitant in the Southeast district (65% of which is comprised of the Bijlmermeer) was only slightly lower than in the city at large (respectively 9,100 and 10,500 euro); while the average annual disposable income per household was almost equal (19,400 euro for the Southeast district compared to 20,000 euro for the City of Amsterdam) (CBS, 1998) due to the relatively high rate of female participation in the labor market in the Bijlmermeer. In sum, the City of Amsterdam did not really need to deconcentrate poverty in the Bijlmermeer – it was already a mixed-income neighborhood in 2000.

In addition, even though frequently referred to as a ghetto in the Dutch media, the Bijlmermeer is not comparable to the blighted areas characteristic of many American cities. If we look at key publications on US ghettos (e.g. Hannerz, 1969; Jargowsky, 1997; Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987), we can see many differences between the Bijlmermeer and its supposed US counterparts: in the Bijlmermeer there are no absentee landlords; there are no buildings which are completely falling apart; there is no sub-standard housing; there are empty lots only if old housing has been demolished to make way for new construction; there are no bars blocking access to the windows of flats or shops; there are more supermarkets than liquor stores; and cash checking facilities exist along bank branches. Also, because of the Dutch welfare state tradition, the poor are generally less poor and receive better and more

¹ We have chosen to focus on the data from 1999 and 2000 because these data give a better impression of the Bijlmermeer prior to most of the renewal plans than more recent data.

regular health care. In other words, the Bijlmermeer and its residents appear less bad off than their American counterparts (Aalbers, 2010).

4. Is the Bijlmermeer renewal a success?

In order to support their claim about the success of the Bijlmermeer the authors refer to a limited number of sources. Based on these, they claim that the Bijlmermeer renewal is a success because residents were included in the planning process, developers hoped it would be a success, and the marketing as a multi-ethnic neighborhood worked well (Stal and Zuberi, 2010, p. 9). However, very few of these papers actually evaluate the renewal plan (only Bodaar, 2006; Bruijne, 2002; Helleman and Wassenberg, 2004). To address this shortcoming, the authors refer to a Dutch study from the City of The Hague from 2003, hypothesizing that the findings can be transferred to the Bijlmermeer (on p. 8). However, this ‘review’ of the Dutch literature refrains from any critical discussion of the findings that are reported and – more importantly – is far from complete, ignoring much of the recent literature. In fact, the success, or lack thereof, of Dutch urban renewal programs is a hot topic of debate amongst Dutch academics.

As mentioned above, unemployment rates in the Bijlmermeer were considerably higher than the city-wide average. Although the City of Amsterdam likes to stress that the situation has improved as a result of the renewal, we should be careful with this conclusion for at least four reasons (Aalbers et al., 2003). First, the decline in unemployment was slightly lower than the city average. Second, there is an increased concentration of unemployment within the Bijlmermeer in the non-renovated high-rise estates. Third, like many other immigrant areas, the Bijlmermeer still accommodates a significant amount of *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants), people without a legal residence status in the Netherlands who are therefore not recorded in most city statistics. Most *sans-papiers* are concentrated in the Bijlmermeer’s non-renovated high-rise buildings. Some move from one building to the other and can be considered “revitalization nomads”. Many of them find low-paid and insecure work through informal networks.

Fourth, it is hard to measure the effects of the prospering economy of the 1990s and part of the early 2000s in combination with the physical renewal of the Bijlmermeer. Residents who lived in the estates that were or are now torn down, were and are forced to move, and many move out of the Bijlmermeer. The question is: has the Bijlmermeer renewal “artificially” lowered unemployment levels by “exporting” unemployed individuals and households depending on social benefits to other areas in the city? Based on the available data it is impossible to answer this question, but what we do see, for example, is that the influx of Bijlmermeer residents in certain parts of Amsterdam-North comes with an increase of individuals depending on unemployment and social benefits (Dignum, 2002). We can, however, not commit to an empirical fallacy and conclude that the declining unemployment in the Bijlmermeer is a consequence of the outflow of unemployed individuals.

The renewal of the Bijlmermeer appears to be very successful, transforming it from a stigmatized high-rise area with social housing into a “normalized” low- and mid-rise area, where owner-occupied housing is mixed with social housing. Even though degeneration has been “planned out,” it is not an unqualified success (Aalbers, 2010). The residents complain about the area’s drug users and homeless population. Even though city-wide research shows that the Bijlmermeer is no longer the least popular area of the city and slowly climbing up to the lower end of the averagely appreciated areas (Van der Veer et al., 2004), a resident survey (Aalbers et al., 2005) shows that a large share of Bijlmermeer residents is dissatisfied, in particular with the level of drug use, garbage on the streets, crime, and lack of safety. Most residents do acknowledge the improvements made by the renewal initiatives; however, they also find them to be insufficient. Not surprisingly, 22% to 62% the Bijlmermeer residents

(depending on the estate) want to move within two years. These percentages are higher for people who live in the old high-rise units than for people who live in the renovated or new buildings (Aalbers et al., 2005; Van Heerwaarden et al., 2004).

5. Renewal: displacement, limited social benefits and broken networks

The physical and social transformation of the Bijlmermeer has been quite persuasive and from a territorial point of view even successful. The neighborhood as a whole is ‘doing better’, which is not surprising considering the fact that the program has radically changed the built environment and social composition. However, does this imply that the ‘socio-spatial reconfiguration’ has worked for everyone? In other words, did all residents benefit socially from the renewal? Residents who moved to the higher priced owner-occupied dwellings appear to be somewhat satisfied (Aalbers et al. 2005), but how about the other residents?

As mentioned above, the renewal restructured the housing market and lowered the amount of low-income housing. This means that not all of the old residents could return to their neighborhood. Consequently, some level of displacement is unavoidable (see e.g. Bolt et al. 2009; Kleinhans, 2005; Musterd and Ostendorf, 2005). Research on displacement through urban renewal has shown that as much as 46% of residents prefer to return to the old neighborhood (Slob et al., 2008). In the case of the Bijlmermeer, findings indicate that a much smaller share of displaced residents stays in the neighborhood² (Van Paassen, 2008). This is not only related to the 2-year residence criterion mentioned by the authors (p. 8), but also to the fact that demolition often precedes the construction of alternative housing and social housing residents are only allowed to move into the new dwellings if they have not had nuisance complaints or rent arrears. In other words, even if alternative dwellings are available, the “least desirable” renters are excluded. When the most marginalized households are excluded from returning, they tend to end up in “weak” neighborhoods (Bolt et al., 2009; Musterd and Ostendorf, 2005), i.e. other neighborhoods that have relatively high shares of low-income people and that are often considered the least attractive neighborhoods within the city. The position of these displaced households is unlike the MTO participants who are deliberately placed in “better neighborhoods” (although MTO participants may not be the most marginalized residents either, see Clampet-Lundquist and Massey, 2009). So, there is reason to be skeptical about the argument for desegregation through forced dispersal and renewal. Rather, displacement may amount to nothing more than the relocation of individual and neighborhood problems. However, there is still insufficient research about the subsequent employment and educational trajectories.

What about the old residents who have remained in the Bijlmermeer? Perhaps for them, the renewal is experienced as an improvement, mostly as a result of living in better dwellings and the changes in the built environment, but did they also benefit socially from their new middle class neighbors? Even though Dutch renewal policy strives for this (Musterd and Ostendorf, 2008; Van Gent et al. 2009), research has indicated that there is limited exchange and contacts between groups that share large differences in terms of income, interests or culture – not only in the Netherlands, but also in the US (Blokland, 2002; Cole and Goodchild, 2001; Galster et al., 2008). Usually, contact and social capital exchange are limited to a few idealistic members of the new middle class (Van der Graaf and Veldboer, 2009). However, the wider social benefits of middle class presence for marginalized households, as professed by renewal policy, are insufficiently supported by research evidence (see Galster, 2007; Pinkster, 2009).

² In Amsterdam, of those who were forced to move because of renewal between 2004 and 2006, 31% returned to their own neighborhood and 39% ended up in an adjacent neighborhood; in Bijlmermeer-Oost, about two-thirds ended up outside the area (Van Paassen, 2008).

Lastly, both for those who were forced to move away and those left behind, the radical transformation may even have negative effects when their local support networks have been affected and decimated. As their reluctant middle class neighbors are less likely to help, at least initially, poor households will have fewer network opportunities to find (low-wage) work and help with babysitting, education, dealing with bureaucracies, etc. (e.g. Blokland, 2003; Gans, 1991; Hartman, 1974; Pinkster, 2007; Young and Willmott, 1957).

In sum, the social benefits of urban renewal in the Netherlands are not as obvious as Stal and Zuberi state in their title. Urban renewal is by no means the most effective and reliable way to end the 'cycle of poverty'.

6. Conclusion

This article sought to correct, amend and add to the claims made in Stal and Zuberi's article. In addition, we would like to make two more general points with regard to comparative urban studies. First, it may seem somewhat obvious, yet it is important to stress the importance of taking context into account when doing comparative research. Social processes and policy interventions are embedded in social context, which generate social outcomes and social change. Thus, understanding social change through policy is only possible when the context is taken into account sufficiently (see Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Rose, 1991). Stal and Zuberi (2010) do recognize the existence of 'differences in socio-economic status, social infrastructure and population densities' (p. 5) and the complications of direct comparison, but argue that they can draw lessons nevertheless. We agree with the suggestion that lessons can be learned. However, the authors merely recite the importance of context and have failed to take the implications into account in their appraisal of the renewal, lamentably leading them to come to conclusions too quickly.

Our second point is related to the previous point but refers to the conduct of research and the treatment of theory. In short, 'some terms do not travel well' (Mollenkopf, 2009, p. 272), implying that concepts used in an American setting may not apply to, or be useful in, a Dutch setting. We have already noted the problematic use of 'poverty', 'urban poverty neighborhoods' (Stal and Zuberi, 2010, p. 10), and 'high poverty neighborhoods' (ibid., p. 4), when comparing the Bijlmermeer to the US. Similarly, the terms 'ethnic minority population' (p. 5), 'socio-spatial segregation' (p. 7) and 'community' (notably p. 8-9) have a different scale, meaning and application in the Netherlands. For instance, the concentration of ethnic minorities in neighborhoods is related to different mechanisms in the two countries. Particularly the important differences with regard to the role of the state, the status of public-funded housing, and the meaning of race, 'blackness' and minorities (see Wacquant, 2008), make it almost impossible to use the same concepts in both countries. This is not to say that urban researchers on both sides of the Atlantic should stop talking to each other and go their own way; rather this is a plea to reflect on the use of concepts in international urban comparative research.

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