Modern segregation

I was out with a good friend last year, in search of a late breakfast, when I was struck by the extent of modern segregation. It was a crisp and bright Sunday in late November. We were strolling down Eisenbahnstrasse in the German city of Leipzig which had, until recently, been considered the most dangerous street in the country[1]. But a whirlwind of gentrification had moved through the area, removing all signs of former threats. We'd been out all night and barely slept and I was craving a coffee as we walked past a colourful mixture of cafés, run-down casinos, vintage shops and shisha bars, discussing the night's events and taking in the Sunday sights. At first glance, the neighbourhood appeared to be a bustling, multicultural hub, with people of a variety of backgrounds going about their day. Yet on closer inspection, the scenes in Leipzig – recently praised by the New York Times as Europe's new ''cool-kid-town''[2] – were among the most segregated I've ever seen.

While the groups sitting in front of cafés and second-hand shops were almost exclusively white, the young men gathered around shisha bars and small casinos appeared to be mostly of Turkish or Arabic descent. There was no mingling between these groups and the pattern was consistent throughout the neighbourhood. Judging from a mixture of personal experience and my own prejudice, I began to wonder about other distinctions between their lives, increasingly certain that they were separated by more than their preference of café. It seemed likely, for instance, that their past school achievements and their future salaries were different. At the same time, I'm all but certain that their respective pools of talent didn't differ in any significant way.

I was reminded of a conversation I'd had just a few weeks earlier during *my country talks*, an event at which participants are matched with a person with opposing views based on a short questionnaire on current issues. I had met Irene*, a polite film-maker in her mid-fifties, at a local bar in Berlin Schöneberg. Our conversation initially followed the slightly right of centre (her) vs. slightly left of centre (me) pattern of many economic discussions I've had in the past years. Towards the end of our meeting, however, we started discussing the neighbourhood of Neukölln, home to a large share of Berlin's immigrants. Irene spoke openly about her distaste for headscarves and male-dominated tea shops and voiced concerns about feeling increasingly foreign in her own city. I asked Irene whether she was close to any families with a background of migration in Berlin and admitted that I wasn't, either. Having grown up in the London Borough of Redbridge, with its extremely diverse population (42.5 % white; 42 % Asian; 9 %

black; 4 % mixed; 3 % other according to 2011 Census data[3]), I told her about my multicultural high school. Though mostly born in London, I told her, many of my peers had considered themselves to ''be'' Ghanese, Guyanese, Jamaican, Indian or Pakistani, to name just a few. A significant proportion of girls wore headscarves. During Ramadan, active participation in physical education shrank; certain privileges came with fasting, and no one complained. I voiced my increasing frustration at the homogeneity of my peer groups since having returned to Germany. Careful not to accuse Irene of a racist sentiment, I was pleasantly surprised when she agreed that she might well feel differently were she to spend more time with the people she feared.

As we sat down in one of Leipzig's trendy coffee shops (I noticed guiltily), I contemplated the stark difference between my experience in London and various other cities I've come to know. To be sure, the descriptions of my childhood should not be mistaken for a meditation on a perfect world. A chronic lack of funding for state schools meant that many opportunities were lost. Considering the wealth of culture sitting in each classroom, our religious education and foreign language lessons were a disaster. Classes were mostly limited to maths, science and specific episodes in British history; most of my peers never learned about Marx, capitalism or global warming. At the age of 19 I moved to study medicine in Freiburg in Germany and was impressed by the wealth of knowledge of my fellow students.

I also noticed, however, that the background of my new peer-groups and their families increasingly mirrored my own. I initially blamed this on the size and location of Freiburg, a small university town neatly nestled at the foot of the Black Forest. When I moved to Berlin, a multicultural hub where around 35 % of the population has a background of migration (including 11 % EU citizens, 4.8 % Turkish, 4.1 % Arabic and 3.85 % from the former Soviet Union[4]), I was excited at the prospect of a more diverse and representative crowd. In some ways, Berlin has lived up to expectations, offering an abundance of exciting people and culture. Yet in terms of the homogeneity of my peer groups, little has changed. The chances of meeting Turkish, Arabic or Eastern European men around my age have been invariably higher during night shifts in the emergency room than at a party or among my colleagues. Since arriving in 2017, the only close personal contact that I've had with a person born outside of Western Europe was through my mentorship of an Afghani refugee, organised by a local NGO offering psychosocial help to the politically displaced. Though of undoubted benefit to us both, our relationship was marked from the outset by a type of hierarchy which all but precluded the type of camaraderie I've found to exist only in organically formed friendships.

On the train back to Berlin that night, I felt a pang as I thought back to my childhood and how far we were, back then. I'm aware of the shortcomings of my privileged perspective; many of my school friends will doubtless have faced varying forms of racism as they entered higher education and the job and housing markets. Yet I do believe that, for a brief window of time, our school enabled something special. Day after day we were afforded the opportunity of natural exposure to cultural differences. This, in turn, allowed the focus to shift towards individual qualities, which always seemed to matter much more than ethnicity.

What would have to change for the groups in Leipzig to mix more naturally, for Irene to feel comfortable around women with headscarves, or for me to have an experience reminiscent of my high school? Though segregation is a complex issue with multiple causes, my experience has led me to believe that education is a crucial structural factor for facilitating or hindering integration. In desegregated schools, children of varying skin colour, religious backgrounds and languages have the opportunity to learn to feel comfortable around one another and form lasting friendships at a young age. Yet with schools in Berlin and the entire country divided into three different 'tracks' between their 5th and 7th school years, children with a background of migration continue to be underrepresented in the highest track[5,6,7]. This has resulted in an unequal distribution of different ethnic backgrounds within the various types of school. In such a system, the type of multicultural environment I witnessed in my British high school, where access was solely determined by catchment area, becomes less likely. One possible policy, then, would be to ensure desegregation of schools, either by means of reforms to the track system or through the abolition of tracks in favour of comprehensive schools[8].

Apart from being a matter of justice, measures to counter structural segregation within but also far beyond our schools could prove to be extremely useful for society as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, I believe that they would be effective in addressing racism and xenophobia. Over the last few years, Germany has seen the rise of increasingly hostile far-right and antidemocratic forces seeking to divide us, including the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Neonazis at demonstrations against Coronavirus restrictions. In the face of such threats, more successful integration and the resulting long-term friendships and bonds among our citizens could prove to be an effective antidote. After all, people are much more difficult to dislike if we've shared classrooms, sports teams and office spaces and are thus allowed to accept and even cherish our differences.

[1] https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article167731839/So-soll-Deutschlands-gefaehrlichste-Strasse-entschaerft-werden.html

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/travel/places-to-visit.html

[3] 2011 Census (numbers rounded for simplicity)

[4] https://www.berlin.de/aktuelles/berlin/6092347-958092-berlin-international-migrationsanteil-be.html

[5] https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/schueler-mit-migrationshintergrund-soziologe-der-positive.680.de.html?dram:article_id=466077

[6] https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/WorkingPapers/wp13-schulische-bildung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=11

[7] https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/datenreport-2018/bevoelkerung-und-demografie/277841/die-lebenssituation-der-kinder-mit-migrationshintergrund

[8] See for example chapter 7.2 in ‚Thoughts for a New Social Contract‘, available for download on isolatarium.org