

Laura Na Blankholm, Andy Lautrup, Katja Sara Pape de Neergaard & Caroline Anna Salling

Chapter 9

Aggregating like a state: discriminatory data practices of legislated ghettoization in Denmark

1 Introduction

The residents in the social housing area of Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen, Denmark, have invited politicians to a panel debate in the context of the upcoming general election. It is the autumn of 2022, but despite the cold weather the meeting will take place in an outdoor tent because the residents' community house was demolished. When participants arrive in Mjølnerparken they will notice the entire housing area is one big construction site surrounded by fencing, making it difficult to access the area (see Image 1).

The formerly vibrant area has been turned into a construction site as part of a larger renovation plan that aligns with the objectives of the so-called Danish 'ghetto to law'¹. In 2018, a majority in the Danish parliament voted for a 'ghetto package' ('ghettopakken') with the declared intention of eliminating what are termed 'parallel societies'² (Regeringen 2018). The ghetto law enables discriminatory state intervention into social housing areas based on aggregates of census data and statis-

Note: We have used authors' last name as guiding principle for order of authors. This order does not reflect the amount of contribution to the piece, which has been based on the principle of equal contribution.

1 According to housing company Bo-Vita, renovations in Mjølnerparken are not connected to the ghetto laws but implement a renovation plan previously agreed upon by residents. However, from a political perspective, this plan is currently used to carry out evictions that align with objectives of the ghetto plan. It is thus disputed whether the renovations are a direct consequence of the ghetto plan, but we argue that they are connected.

2 Before the definition 'parallel society' emerged in 2021, official documents referred to social housing areas as 'ghettos'. The political agreement from 2021, however, underlines that the use of 'parallel society' is not intended to police general descriptions of the areas (Indenrigs- og Boligministeriet 2021, 2). Therefore, popular accounts, news media and political parties often still refer to the targeted areas as ghettos. To reflect the continued use of the word ghetto, and the material and political implications of this classification for social housing areas, we retain the term 'ghetto'.

tics. Most significant is the controversial category of ‘non-Western heritage’³ determining which social housing areas are subject to intervention under the law.

The consequences of this legislation are fundamental for residents living in Mjølnerparken and other affected social housing areas. Because of the area’s label as a ‘hard ghetto’⁴, buildings are demolished and residents forcibly relocated. These changes should be understood in tandem with increased Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric in the public debate. Propositions that elderly people should be entitled to refuse care workers wearing a Muslim headscarf (Skærbæk 2022) and ongoing rhetoric about the necessity of safety for Danes – safety that is allegedly challenged by the presence of brown or Black bodies⁵ (Broberg and Redder 2022) – are among the many examples of a prevailing narrative in Denmark. This narrative relies on the idea that there is a growing population group in Denmark whose culture is incompatible with the Danish community, and thus must have their rights and access to welfare benefits limited.

In December 2021, news broke that a private equity real estate firm, based in Luxembourg, is to carry out the ghetto law’s policy by renovating and selling former cheap and public rental properties in Mjølnerparken to make it “a safe, open and attractive area of Copenhagen” (NREP 2021). After the renovation, the monthly payment for an apartment is expected to increase by 50 % (Dahlin 2022). In protest against these changes, the residents of Mjølnerparken are organizing their meeting in the tent.

The Danish state forcibly intervenes into ghettoized social housing areas more than any other residential districts within the nation⁶, and the residents in Mjølnerparken are being dispossessed of their homes (Christensen 2021). This is despite the conclusion of the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on contemporary

3 The category of ‘Non-Western’ as a data point in Denmark originates from the public, official keepers of statistics *Danmarks Statistik*. This means that the category is used to construct several legislative interventions.

4 ‘The Parallel Society Package’ was initially introduced in 2018, but has since been reworked. The 2018 Parallel Society Package referred to certain areas as ‘ghettos’ and to the same areas as ‘hard ghettos’, if they had been on the list for five consecutive years. In 2021, a number of new concepts were introduced that function as euphemisms. ‘Parallel societies’ has replaced ‘ghettos’, while ‘restructuring areas’ has replaced the designation of ‘hard ghettos’.

5 When we write Black with capital B we follow the praxis of Black scholars and activists who emphasize the importance of acknowledging the historical and political dimensions of identity (Nana Adusei-Pokus 2021).

6 Ghettoization refers to the process through which the Danish state ‘culturalizes’ social housing areas by applying a collection of laws: ‘the ghetto package’. In sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, the term ‘ghetto’ was used to designate areas where Jewish communities were confined (Schwartz 2019).

forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerances leading to discrimination. It can thus be considered a case of deliberate state-led stigmatization (Aldarafi, Bravie, and Holck 2022; Risager 2022; Olsen and Larsen 2022). Despite that almost one million people live in Danish social housing areas, this issue is largely absent in the election debate in 2022, as there is a parliamentary majority for the ghetto package. By hosting the debate, the residents of Mjølnerparken are pushing to get the ghetto law back on the political agenda.

In this chapter we explore the relationship between digitalization and social justice through the case of the ghetto law by focusing on the data practices that have enabled the ghetto law and the discriminatory practices it legitimizes. We aim to show that the eviction of residents and the material changes to the social housing landscape that the picture below testifies to (Image 1), are made politically possible through aggregates of census data and statistics.

We propose that the digital component of the digital state is not only to be found in apparent digital practices such as making non-digital services digital or in attempts to harness the power of big data. The digital state, we demonstrate, is also produced within spaces which – ‘the ghetto law’ being one such example – are not commonly perceived as digital per se. We label these aspects of the digital state’s practices ‘veiled digitalization’ and argue that there is a pertinent need to attend to how veiled digitalization creates conditions for data injustices.

Addressing and critiquing the harmful and discriminatory practices of algorithms trained on biased data and their implications for social justice is the core content of an emerging scholarship in critical data studies and related fields (Chun 2021; Gebru 2020; Benjamin 2019; Keyes 2018; and many more). Part of this literature attends to how the use of digital data in state governance enables specific renderings of the world through increased access to citizen data and the ability to cross-analyze different data registers (see for example Cakici et al. 2019; Birk and Elmholt 2020; Walter and Suina 2019). Such studies emphasize the importance of continuously working beyond the individualist potentials for citizen data insights and instead attend to the sanctioning consequences of large-scale data aggregation (Douglas-Jones 2021). We build on these analyses as we engage with the Danish legislative ‘ghetto package’ as a specific rendering of the world incited by ideology and enabled by particular data practices.

Accelerating public digitalization in Denmark, and an EU comparison calling Denmark the world’s number one digitalized nation (*Erhvervsministeriet* 2021), has created a national narrative about Denmark being in the vanguard of digitalization. What we aim to show in the following is that digitalization also includes projects that are not heralded as efficiency by design, digital solutions, economic growth, and innovation. Digitalization is also how data collection and aggregation matter in people’s everyday lives because of targeted governance projects, even



Figure 1: An effect of the Danish 'ghetto law' as Mjølnerparken in December 2022 is rebuilt and upscaled after the eviction of residents. Photo © Caroline Anna Salling.

when the task is not administered by the public institutions that are formally driving digital transformation, nor the companies that are to engineer the software for this imagined digital future. In other words, we suggest that there is potential to be nurtured within the relationship between digitalization and social justice in spaces where the agencies in power do not benefit from framing these as data projects.

This practice of veiled digitalization, we argue, creates the conditions for data injustice. In the example we present, we take a closer look at the annual ghetto lists published by the Danish Ministry for Interior and Housing, and continuously supported by most Danish parliamentarians.

First, we offer a set of reflections about the empirics and writing this chapter as a collective. We then provide a background to the social housing areas that have been policy listed through data aggregation in Denmark. Next, we move into our analytical framework in which we elaborate on the Danish welfare societal context that upholds ideas about Nordic ‘exceptionalism’ that treats equality as sameness, and digitalization as an inherent good. And last, we analyze and discuss the implications of our analysis while making suggestions to future data injustice studies.

2 Positionality and writing as a collective

We have created this text as a collective with different resources for participating in the research and writing process and with different areas of expertise. As a collective of four different authors, we write from several partial perspectives that enable us to produce a particular, collective situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). We have attempted to harness our varied perspectives to create an analysis that bridges the lived experience of the consequences of the ghetto law and the socio-technical arrangements that enable the law.

The empirical examples grow out of first author Blankholm’s ongoing collaboration with residents and ethnographic insights into the resistance against the ghetto law in the ghettoized social housing areas. Our common concern about the use of data in governance grows out of a PhD course that we were involved in organizing at the IT University of Copenhagen in August 2021. After engaging with a wide range of literature dealing with feminist, postcolonial, and anti-colonial perspectives on technoscience, we were left wondering in which ways the issues attended to in the literature map onto a Danish context in comparison to the US – from which many of the texts were originating. We asked ourselves what the major data injustices are in the Danish context, and how discriminating projects unfold in a context where the state is expected to be the main actor of equalization, in social engineering and in the (re)distribution of rights and goods. In contrast to a North American context, historically shaped by the explicit demands for rights from abolitionist and civil rights movements linked to enslavement, we are concerned with how datafication is utilized and countered in a context in which rights are generally expected to be already universal, already distributed, and already settled – a context in which trust in policy-making for social change is higher, but in which, we argue, there are also many data projects that discriminate, op-

press, and harm, yet are more difficult to notice as such due to the neutralizing and veiling language of social democracy.

3 Background: ghettoization of social housing areas in Denmark

The Danish ‘ghetto law’ is an example of how technologies used by governments are dependent on the concept of ‘the population’ as it is created through data production and analysis. Population work is characterized by how it governs which bodies are deemed valuable in state-making and economic terms (Murphy 2017). In Denmark, digitalization is not a new process solely dependent on digital capitalism, software development, and innovation, but rather a state project (Schou and Hjelholt 2018). By viewing the ghetto law as a case of data injustice, we extend digitalization into the history of the Danish state’s instrumentalization of extensively produced population data. Social science scholars Birk and Elmholdt (2020) draw attention to how census data have historically been collected in Denmark through the ‘CPR’ (central register of persons) number. A personal number, assigned at birth or upon taking up residence in Denmark, follows people throughout their life, amassing data about their addresses, age, health, gender, etc (*Retsinformation* 2022). These data points are aggregated with public registers of census data on ethnicity, deaths, births, income, reported crimes and contacts with social welfare authorities. As we will show, these data practices are pivotal for the creation and implementation of the ghetto law and affect the lives of residents who serve both as data points and subjective targets of the ghetto law.

Danish social housing schemes usually consist of several apartment blocks and are autonomous non-profit initiatives enabled by public funding. The workers’ movement played a central role in the establishment of the first Danish social housing models in the early 1900s. Later, in the years following the Second World War, the construction of affordable, high quality social housing areas marked the culmination of the universalist welfare state’s housing policy (Arbejdsmuseet 2023a, 2023b). Presently, roughly a sixth of the Danish population lives in social housing, which is an exceptionally high number compared to other countries (Christensen 2021, 8). Social housing areas are usually structured through a democratic housing model (AAB 2023), but the ghetto law breaks with this principle as it superimposes demands and restrictions on the social housing areas.

In a policy stretching back to 2010, every 1st of December the Danish government announces the lists that deem social housing areas as either *non-ghettos*,

ghettos, hard ghettos, or preventive areas. The definitions have changed during the shift from a liberal right-wing government to a Social Democratic government. Ghettos are now officially called “parallel societies” but the criteria for becoming a “parallel society therefore a ghetto” have been maintained: A social housing area can only be labelled a ghetto if the numbers of residents within the constructed category, “non-Western heritage”, are more than 50 % (Indenrigs-og Boligministeriet 2021). Only people whose heritage is traced to Europe, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia escape the category of “Non-Western” (Birk and Elmholt 2020). Ethnicity is thus the ruling metric that enables the ghetto definition in combination with the following four other criteria calculated on a two-year average. To be classified as a ghetto, the housing area must also fall within two of the following four categories:

1. The number of residents aged between 18 and 64 who are unemployed exceeds 40 percent
2. The number of residents convicted for being in violation of Danish crime, weapon or drug laws is more than triple the national average
3. The number of residents aged between 30–59 whose educational level does not exceed Danish elementary schooling, exceeds 60 percent
4. The average income for residents aged between 15 and 64 makes up less than 55 percent of average income compared to the same group in the larger region to which the specific area belongs (Indenrigs-og Boligministeriet 2021, 2).

If a social housing area is placed on the ‘ghetto list’ for five consecutive years, it becomes an “area of conversion” (*omdannelsesområder*) – formerly known as “a hard ghetto” (*hård ghetto*). The consequences are substantial. A hard ghetto label mandates eviction of residents and demolition or sale of the buildings to private investors.

Residents being evicted from their homes describe a high level of uncertainty, a lack of formal procedures of rehousing, and no consideration of their rights as tenants under the Danish tenancy law (Christensen 2021, 65–66). Tenants from Mjølnerparken, for example, have been directed towards new social housing with unaffordable, much higher rent (Wang and Dahlin 2020), and families from the Vollsmose area in the city of Odense have reportedly been spread across the municipality (Hansen 2021). In short, forcible relocations are destroying well-established communities.

STS scholars Birk and Elmholt have argued that “statistics and data registers are crucial data practices for making ‘ghetto spaces’ and carving out the geographical boundaries of the areas [...] because numerical criteria (e.g., of unemployment, or criminal records) are only established through data practices” (2020, 150). Though the ghetto law is usually presented as not having anything to do

with digitalization, Birk and Elmholdt assert that the ghetto law is enabled by governance based on the collection of personal information and aggregation of data. Enabled by such data practices, the lists perform a particular kind of population governance work, destabilizing marginalized, racialized, and working-class communities and the spaces which they are documented to inhabit. The main objective of the list is, quite literally, to decide which housing areas should cease to exist.

The abundance of readily available citizen data has been instrumental in making the ghetto law. In most nation states, the collection of such large amounts of personally identifiable data across such a wide range of categories is illegal, due to the cruel history of how such registers have been used for racialization, for example during the Second World War (Munn 2020). In Denmark, as we will show in our analysis, the collection of personal data is not only defended with reference to arguments towards, for example, a more frictionless educational and health system, but is also utilized by politicians in targeting, moving, and afflicting minority groups.

4 Analytical framework

4.1 The Danish context: Scandinavian welfare, equality, and sameness

Digitization is not a one size fits all approach, and state digitization cannot be understood without paying attention to the national context. Situated in Scandinavia, Denmark is one of the economically richest countries in the world and a declared welfare state. The welfare state is an ingrained part of Danish national identity and is often understood as a mechanism for creating equality through universal welfare services funded by a redistributive taxation system. This implies an important question, which is how equality is conceptualized in a Danish context.

Historically, the welfare state in Scandinavia grew out of sentiments following WW2. As Norwegian sociologist Marianne Gullestad notes, the welfare state was “legitimated by a national discourse uniting people of different classes and living in both urban and rural areas” (Gullestad 2006, 77). With this unification also came the need to determine ‘the people’, who would receive welfare benefits and services. This need has in recent years resulted in intense debate over who rightfully belongs to the nation state and thus qualifies to benefit from its services (Gullestad 2006, 77). In Denmark this demarcation between a rightfully belonging ‘us’ and a disruptive ‘other’ is solidified through the harmful political category ‘people of non-Western descent’ entailing a move from services to sanctions.

While the external boundaries of the welfare state are often determined via logics of similarity and difference, there are also internal demarcations to the welfare state's objective of creating equality. Equality has a particular cultural meaning in Scandinavia, where it is often conflated with sameness (Gullestad 1989; Gopal 2000). Gullestad notes that in Scandinavia "sameness is more or less synonymous with equality" which "means that in many social situations it can be problematic to handle differences" (Gullestad 1989, 116, our translation from Norwegian to English).

The welfare state is also an integral part of what Loftsdottir and Jensen label Nordic Exceptionalism, referring to the idea that the Nordic countries were not involved in colonialism (Loftsdottir and Jensen 2021, 84; see also Khalid 2021; Hunter 2021): "the idea of Nordic Exceptionalism as disconnected from European colonialism has enabled the association of these countries with peace, rationality, and progress. It has led to a view of Nordic people as having a particularly elevated moral character that has been interwoven with the association between Nordic countries and the welfare state" (Loftsdottir and Jensen 2021, 84). This self-perception, Loftsdottir and Jensen argue, enables a peculiar ignorance and dismissal of racism as something that does not occur in the Nordic countries. By showing how Nordic welfare states were established with wealth gained from direct or indirect colonial involvement, they unsettle "the assumption of a peaceful, innocent, European North" (Loftsdottir and Jensen 2021, 77–78). What these arguments about equality as sameness and Nordic exceptionalism ultimately suggest in a Danish context, is that the understanding of Denmark as a welfare state makes it difficult to point out instances of oppression, because oppression is culturalized as simply 'un-Danish'.

4.2 Dominant ideas about digitalization as inherently good

The proliferation of digital technologies has radically transformed the public sector worldwide. In Denmark, the 'digital transformation' has earned the country the status of a European frontrunner in digitalization (*Erhvervsministeriet* 2021). Increasing datafication promises insights for decision-making, smooth processes, etc. However, this transformation entails more than a practical application of digital technologies; as work is done to put digital solutions into effect, democracies and societies are undergoing major changes (Hofmann 2019). Because humans experience their surroundings through the technologies at their disposal (Bell and Dourish 2007), this type of data-driven public management does more than present data to a welfare professional – it defines what counts as important and perpetu-

ates a vision of cities as collection sites of unproblematic data, ready to be optimized (Mattern 2015).

A similar process is taking place across the welfare state, for example in relation to receiving benefits. Here, data is used to know and make individuals legible to the state (Amoore 2011; Scott 1998), enabling both civil servants, parliamentarians and algorithms to evaluate with grave consequence for individuals, who are increasingly supposed to serve themselves via mandatory digital services. This change produces new forms of relation between state and individuals, and perpetuates an idea of the normative digital citizen (Schou and Hjelholt 2018). With this, it becomes clear that digital technologies and data are not only tools that can be employed to produce an effective, seamless welfare state. Rather, such entities are also architecture our social worlds. Data construct cities and human relations. Yet, digitalization processes do not seem to slow down. As Jørgensen (2021, 1) warns, Denmark is in danger of creating “a digital technocracy that treats its citizens as data points suited for calculation and prediction rather than as individuals with agency and rights.”

We bring together these perspectives of equality as sameness and digitalization as inherently good to write up the situated Danish context in which data is used to forcefully create sameness through governance. With this in mind, we will now move into the next section that explores the sanctions of what has been legislated as ‘the ghetto package.’

5 Analysis: experiencing the consequences of legislated ghettoization

The following analysis include examples from four specific housing areas: Lundtoftegade and Mjølnerparken in the city of Copenhagen, Skovgårdsparken in the city of Aarhus and Vollsmose in the city of Odense. Through these examples we show the social and material consequences of the data aggregation enabling the ghetto law.

5.1 Demolishing and selling homes

In Mjølnerparken, formally a ‘conversion area’, two apartment blocks have been sold to a private investor, forcing residents to move. The apartments are to be renovated and rented out at a much higher price. In total, the ghetto package will remove 11,000 homes in Denmark within the targeted areas. The list of criteria for

labelling a housing area a ghetto is in itself an interesting object of concern; how was the list constructed and decided upon, and what values and interests does it reflect? The metrics on the list are presented as rational, but, as it turns out, the categories they are built upon are not stable. For example, the primary metric enabling these sanctions, the number of so-called “non-western” residents, was recently destabilized.

In April 2022, the Danish Minister of Immigration, at the time, Mattias Tesfaye, was supported by a nearly complete consensus in the Danish parliament to pass an exception-law for Ukrainian refugees. The law makes it possible for municipalities to assign Ukrainian refugees housing in the listed housing areas. Ukrainian refugees will not count in the data aggregation that produces the annual lists, even though in the Danish person register Ukraine is formally classified as a non-Western country. The choice to make exceptions for Ukrainian refugees has sparked controversy about the arbitrary nature of the categories and their relationship to the category of non-western ethnicity (see for example Munksgaard 2022; Skadegård 2022).

On the topic of descent in the housing areas, a resident of Mjølnerparken said:

Recently, a representative from Bo-Vita, the organization responsible for the redevelopment of Mjølnerparken, said in an interview that residents in my neighbourhood, especially those of Arab descent, are prone to have “non-Western worldviews,” which could make these areas feel potentially unsafe to Ukrainian refugees. He says directly what is the unspoken intention behind the permanent removal of homes in ‘ghetto’ areas: that these policies and demolition projects are driven mostly by racial prejudice. (Justice Initiative 2022).

The quote points out the politics of deliberate categorization that produce the list. In late 2020, residents in Mjølnerparken resisted the conversion of their housing areas when they filed a historic civil lawsuit against the state for racial discrimination. Lawsuits against the Danish state are extremely uncommon. In March 2022, the UN intervened in favour of the residents, calling the case “remarkable” due to the violation of residents’ human rights, including the right to housing without discrimination. With other housing areas filing similar lawsuits in 2022, the resident coalition hopes to pause demolitions and the sale of buildings.

We put forward such examples of the eviction of residents and demolition of homes to underline the very real personal and material consequences of the data practices enabling the sanctions of the ghetto law. We want to emphasize how the ghetto law as policy, and the data aggregations enabling it, do in fact problematize certain forms of inhabitancy over others. A resident of Vollsmose in the city of Odense described the experience of the law with the statement: “my ethnicity has been made a problem” (Khalid 2020, our translation). Living and housing situations are problematized based on ethnicity to give legitimacy to the ‘bad differ-

ences' articulated in the standardizing welfare ideas of equality as sameness (Gullestad 1989).

Ethnicity-based targeting shows how traditional population governance in the Foucauldian sense is architecturing who gets to live where and how, through the means of contemporary, detailed, personal, aggregated data creating the category of 'non-Western' (Oliver-Didier 2016). This category is further stereotyped as the umbrella category onto which patchy, selected data on education level, age, income level, and criminal record are attached. In that sense, the stereotyped category of "non-western" comes to be a simplified and stereotyped figure through data.

5.2 Proof of education: ringing doorbells in Copenhagen

For residents of several social housing areas, the annual 1st of December announcement of the lists that determine which housing areas are on the so-called ghetto list is a source of trepidation. The anticipation of this list and its consequences is the reason why Fatma spends yet another afternoon tramping up and down staircases in the area of Lundtoftegade. She is part of a bigger effort to prove that residents of the housing area have a sufficient level of education to avoid the discriminatory sanctions.

"Hi, do you have 5 minutes to talk about how the area can avoid getting on the ghetto list?", Fatma asks, when one of the residents opens the door. For many of the residents with migration experience, their life up until migration has been neglected and erased. Tight integration laws and discrimination in the Danish labour market generally disqualifies education achieved outside Europe (Hassani 2020), which impacts many people's success with job applications in Denmark. This is partly because the non-western population is not perceived as a valuable asset to Danish society, but merely regarded a challenge due to a cultural heritage that is seen as incompatible with Danish culture (Jöhncke 2011; Danbolt and Myong 2019; Skadegård and Jensen 2018). But even though an Iraqi degree or a Moroccan high school diploma is not culturally validated by Danish employers, the education diploma might provide a sufficient proof of education in the calculation model that constitutes the ghetto lists. In an area like Lundtoftegade, where in 2019, 50% of the residents were classified as non-Western, the number of residents aged between 30–59 whose educational level does not exceed Danish elementary schooling cannot exceed 60 percent.

By collecting evidence on educational background, Fatma is working to change the classification of the housing areas on the list. This will decrease the chances of Lundtoftegade becoming a conversation area, which ultimately leads to eviction

and demolition. Lundtoftegade avoided the hard ghetto list in 2020 through door-to-door collection of educational diplomas.

Recent scholarship in, for example, STS, critical data and indigenous studies, and geography, points to the ways in which ‘counter data’ can be mobilized to push back against injustice and hegemonic power (see for example CLEAR Lab 2021; D’Ignazio and Klein 2019; Maharawal and McElroy 2018). Considering the collection of proof of education in ghettoized areas as a counter data practices opens a space for challenging the state’s monopoly on population data production. The people that decided to take legal action against the eviction from their homes, and the door-to-door data collection, have intervened into the data regime of the Danish state. While counter data practices are important agency-building instruments in the face of the state’s data-based injustice (see also Fallov and Birk 2021), the chances of success remain uncertain, as efforts to recalibrate the data foundation for estimating the educational levels of residents have in other cases been dismissed by the authorities (Fallov and Birk 2021, 157). This underlines the unequal distribution of the power to define which data eventually will count.

5.3 Equality as sameness rather than equality before the law

While residents in some areas are fighting the clock to avoid the lists, other areas are already facing the social and material consequences of the ghetto law. In 2020, the public housing area Skovgårdsparken in the city of Aarhus was labelled a “hard ghetto.” The cause: The criminally charged conviction of one resident. This one conviction via the second criteria of the ghetto law catapulted the housing area through the metrics of the list into the most heavily ghettoized group. Individuals’ misfortune resulted in collective consequence with the new label as a hard ghetto; half of the social housing area’s apartment-blocks were to be demolished and residents evicted. In other words, the data aggregation on which the sanctions of the ghetto law is based is extremely sensitive to individual rather than collective data points. Because social life within the targeted housing areas is quantified through data aggregation, a life event of one person can impact the lives of hundreds of people.

What we show through these examples is, firstly, that the data aggregation for law-making legitimizes the evictions of residents and the demolition of their homes, and secondly, that the data-informed lists of targeted areas are contested political entities shaped by power rather than neutral data practices.

The annual production of ghetto lists is an outcome of years-long parliament debates on immigration characterized by xenophobia and the logic of control (Birk and Elmhødt 2020). “The ghetto law” “Burqa Ban” and the “Safety and Security

Package (the foreigner law)” are a few examples of the state-sanctioned reproduction of inequality based on race and ethnicity. Such a turn in formalized politics has been observed in many places, but the case of Denmark shows how this attitude has resulted in literal, targeted housing displacement that has been continuously developed and supported by elected politicians over the course of 12 years.

The mobilized ghetto law shows how the ideal of sameness disqualifies *same rights* to mobilize the revitalized nationalist identity agenda of *same culture* that is a characteristic of racial prejudice (Gullestad 2006). In other words, *equality before the law* is compromised for the culturalized *equality as sameness*. This is evident in the sanctions of the ‘hard ghetto’ category. The sanctions are several – for example, compulsory day-care from the age of 1), forced public course participation on the topic of ‘Danish culture’, increased frequency of police custody, as well as the authorities’ mandate to enforce double sentences for any crime committed in one of the housing areas. This means that a criminal sentence will be twice as long, or a fine twice as much, solely based on the location of judged offense. Similar new reforms deliberately targeting people based on residency and immigration status have been shown to increase criminalization, especially in an economic context where people are already struggling to make a living (Andersen et al. 2019).

A consequence with major impact on the livelihoods of people living in or evicted from these areas is the feedback loop of ghettoization. In an interview for the investigative 2020 podcast “Mere end Mursten” (More than Bricks), a resident and social worker living in Mjølnerparken explains the individual consequences of the collective sanctions. Referring to the address-data that is logged within the national central register on personal data, the resident remarks: “You get criminalized because it says Mjølnerparken on your national security card and not because you have done something wrong.” (Khalid 2020, our translation). The ghettoization of the housing area produces a sense of collective criminalization. The quote underlines the societal consequences of having an address in a social housing area on the ghetto list. Residing in a ghettoized area means being perceived negatively by the majority of society, for example as prone to criminal activity. In stark contrast, however, sociological research shows that the social activities and tight community of many social housing areas produce upward social mobility (Balvig, Holmberg, and Soei 2017).

There are many examples of town and city planning projects conducted with varying degrees of deliberate or accidental stigmatization (see for example Davies 1974). But the social housing laws in Denmark, and the datafied means through which they are enforced, shows how a racialising policy induces targeted criminalization and displacement through the overall process we refer to as ‘ghettoization’.

6 Conclusion: veiled digitalization and data injustice by state design

In the example of the ghetto package, our analysis shows a straight line between the use of population data and people who lose their homes. Following the critical environmental scholars Liboiron, Tironi and Calvillo (2018), we think of such practices as aggregating toxic data because they are used to create categories and enact problems that produce a sense of legitimacy for the state to act upon the formalized, politically unwanted “bad differences.” Essentialized equality projects hinge on erasing differences to govern who and what is similar enough to fit within the demarcated space of sameness. We understand the demarcation of sameness in Denmark through the ghetto law, the list of housing areas, and the data aggregation as such an attempt. We suggest thinking of the state’s use of such toxic data as data injustice by state design. The main point we convey is that the digital state also operates in spaces that are not explicitly articulated as digitalized. Rather, this form of governance relies on what we label ‘veiled digitalization’. It is precisely in spaces where digitalization and its effects might be less apparent, we propose, that activists and scholars must be especially attentive to the production of data injustices.

As already emphasized, we draw on a large body of literature that highlights examples of data injustice and suggests methodologies for how to study them. Celebration and acknowledgement of difference in relation to decolonizing digitalization is not enough (Irani and Philip 2018). In the digital economy, differences between groups and individuals are already analyzed and constructed through the tools of design thinking to transform users or potential users into consumers (Irani 2019). However, as we point out, there are other data injustices than those afforded by the digital economy. We wish to centre data injustice by state design into the knowledge base of how the digital state is made and makes its effects. By that we mean the active processes of violent digital state-making and bureaucratic, policy-enabled projects that depend on data aggregation with purpose not wrapped in gift paper signalling innovation, digital economy, design thinking and big data. We argue that there is a pertinent need to attend to how such veiled digitalization practices create conditions for unjust data production and use.

Our proposal to attend to the digital state’s practices in seemingly non-digital spaces creates perspectives for research that question who gets to produce citizen data and what the boundaries of categorization through state data collection might be. We will end the chapter by elaborating on these questions.

The list of criteria for being labelled a ghetto relies on the state being able to ‘see’ very well. “The ghetto” is constructed through the aggregation of public data

and the sanctions such aggregations are made to enforce. Those experiencing these sanctions are thus victims of continuous ghettoization. In Denmark, digitalization projects are managed and funded as a social service, rather than as classic attempts of surveilling, architecturing, and city planning in which data and computational tools play a key role. This calls attention not only to how data is used but also how data is produced, and which data points are deemed necessary in relation to specific categories. And more importantly, it asks who gets to produce the data that, through aggregation, is supposed to be descriptive of a population.

The census data that creates the idea of the population might seem ordinary and universally useful in its initial production but becomes violent through the deliberate consequence that is intended via its aggregation. State-made data is not only produced for bureaucratic, mundane purposes, but equally for deliberate population-making, having a profound impact upon the livelihoods thus conditioned by and for the given population (Murphy 2017). Therefore, it might even be relevant to think of these practices as ‘double-veiled’; it is not only the practices of making and governing through data that might be veiled, but also citizens’ opportunities for intervening in such practices. To what extent are citizens affected by data injustices able to scrutinize the validity of the data and thereby negotiate with the state? And why is the Danish state still producing data on the category of ‘ethnicity’ and how is it done in practice?

In the context of recent debates about how data is produced and used by tech companies, we want to emphasize that questions about public data should equally be posed to politicians as well as the organizations they mandate to construct the datafied content which creates “the population.” What are the boundaries for the types of data that should be collected about people, which forms of aggregation-induced political sanctions does the collected data enable, and to what extent should citizens be able to intervene in these processes?

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