

## Cultural diversity and urban development in European towns: essay on problematization

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The objective of this discussion consists of interrogating the issues concerned in cultural diversity by putting forward the idea that it constitutes a major priority of cultural and urban development of European towns, and that it needs conceptual clarification, observation, and comparison, all of which are useful for knowledge and for action.

First of all let us understand that this generic idea covers a multiplicity of possible subjects. They can be identified for heuristic reasons, bearing in mind that reality is likely to combine them in order to vie with each other: -

- Diversity of "cultural exceptions", that is to say, cultural values and models of cultural development around the world;
- Diversity of artistic and cultural forms backed up by public cultural policies, the autonomous strategies of actors or peripheral, independent, cultural industries, as opposed to uniform models conveyed by global cultural industries;
- Diversity embodied by native, local, regional, or even national cultures, confronted by hegemonic neighbourhood cultures;
- Diversity of global cultures, minority cultures arising from immigration, diasporas;
- Artistic diversity, that is to say diversity of aesthetics, form and language, places, disciplines and artistic interdisciplines.
- Diversity of artistic and cultural universes of people and social groups. This theme brings us back to the logic of construction of the imaginary and of personalities, to the plurality of generational cultures, to the variety of erudite and popular cultures and to hybrid forms arising out of their crossbreeding.

How do European towns apprehend and accompany the multiple aspects of this diversity? What are the strategies for enabling cultures to meet co-presented on their territories and set up by the institutions and public, private, professional and voluntary actors? How do towns put this into a global project of urban development? How are their approaches to cultural diversity linked to the national context in which they are situated? In what way are they autonomous constructions, fruit of the cultural, social and urban artistic dynamics that are inherent in them? How do cultural diversity and globalisation meet, knock against each other in the symbolic, private or public spaces of the town, and what comes out of this meeting?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is relevant to look closely into this opposition. It seems that it is not so Manichean as it first appears: diversity resists also, it is even sometimes entrenched in its existence by the steamroller of cultural globalization which encourages local cultures to become self-confident, to find themselves, or to defend themselves. But globalization also has the possible virtue of bringing together far-flung cultural models and to establish a fertile dialogue between them. In other words, it is the paradoxical and ambivalent character of cultural globalization which is meant here: it is at the same time, and sometimes, a vector of

In spite of the differences that characterize European towns in their urban and social structure, in political and institutional traditions, do we notice a certain transversality of questioning relative to the theme of cultural diversity? Under what conditions can cultural diversity stimulate city life, have its own identity, its influence, its “living together”? How can evaluative work carried out in an endogenous and exogenous way, how can co-observation and comparative research work help European towns in their management of cultural diversity and transform it into a more efficient vector of development? This could be the general theme of the research/action project, which we are debating today.

Moreover, the idea of cultural diversity seems to mobilize a series of concepts that it is useful to identify and to define in order to see if it is possible to establish a common language or, in any case, to locate differences in analysis generated according to the researchers, or even in the European context: it is a question of discussion, in particular with minority cultures, interculturality, multiculturalism, interculturalism, multiculturalism<sup>2</sup>, cultural identities, or emerging cultures.

### **Cultures in towns and urban development**

Having read the presentation of the typology mentioned above, one could understand that the notion of diversity is extraordinarily... plural. In order to approach the debate in a more precise and complex fashion, each identified “entry” merits a particular problematization and a close, specific look at urban development. At the same time, one cannot help but study the interactions between the different dynamics of cultural diversity, which flows through all urban territory in open societies in the first place. Let us stop a moment to consider one possible approach.

Thus, a reflection on cultural diversity can lead us to ask questions notably on the state of interculturality and multiculturalism in towns, on the methods of recognition of cultural identity, of minority cultural expressions, on immigrant communities in public spaces, on public policies. Minorities, immigrant communities: the rhetoric relevant to these questions fluctuates according to political traditions in Europe. Even more particularly, it is a question of asking ourselves how this cultural diversity is apprehended in artistic and cultural policies, and not only social or educational policies.

- How are the artistic and cultural expressions of regional, ethnic or non-ethnic, minorities from immigrant backgrounds, represented, symbolized in the public space?
- In what way do they participate in the living patrimony of their host territories, and what priority is given to increasing the value of memories embodied in immigrant communities (can the same question be applied to native minority cultures?)
- What are the links in this diffusion? community associations, artistic and cultural institutions, the town administrative services... different kinds of actors at the same time, in separate or concerted actions?

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homogenization, a vector of increased value, media coverage of cultural differences, a matrix for mixing and blending and interculturality.

<sup>2</sup> In order to understand this subject and without prejudging a complementary reflection, I should like to mention that to my mind the notions of interculturality and multiculturalism define the characteristic cultural processes of society; the notions of interculturalism and multiculturalism mean more particularly politics or voluntary strategies.

- What kinds of projects are set up? episodic programming, background work in the form of workshops, possibly cultural, specific?
- What are the symbolic and social effects of these manifestations? What evaluations need to be implemented in order to better understand them?
- How are certain kinds of artistic and cultural innovation fed by urban multiculturalism and interculturalism?
- How can the accompaniment of cultural diversity favour urban development, and what do we mean by a notion as extensive as that of urban development?

By way of a hypothesis, and without wanting to diminish this approach, I should like to indicate what the notion of urban development means as far as this subject is concerned. It can lead to the improvement of cultural and social inclusion of inhabitants in urban space, to the production of better social cohesion, even to fruitful encounters between different communities of a town which in turn lead to real intercultural exchanges, to the dynamic and transversal circulation of inhabitants throughout different parts of a town. It goes without saying that other dimensions of urban development can be taken into account.

This kind of subject does not date from today; we recall that in the eighties, UNESCO and the Council of Europe promoted study and observation programmes designed to create a debate on the cultural contribution of foreign communities in European towns. But the issue, at that time defended by a few militant pioneers of intercultural dialogue in international institutions, has evolved a great deal since then, in particular because the old colonial empires, after having had to manage a political phase of post-colonialism, seem henceforth engaged in the cultural phase of this story.

Consequently, the topicality of the issue of cultural diversity is linked to the historic times European towns are today living in. Such reasoning must nevertheless take into account the fact that the towns have different cultural histories, and fit into national frameworks or regional ways of thinking, which can be very dissimilar. Towns are on the same level in this time of globalization, exchanges, communication, the diffusion of globalized or internationalized cultural models. They are sometimes in the time of the affirmation of cultural identity for themselves, and/or sometimes in that of the communities' demands for recognition of their cultures and total integration into citizenship and democracy. Undeniably, they are also in the time of weakening of overtaking of national models of integration.

For example, Great Britain made a choice as from 1972 of a policy of integration associated with a tolerant approach towards cultural diversity. It abandoned a policy of assimilation in regard to immigrants, claiming that this policy incurred a bland uniformization of society. That is to say, Great Britain chose tempered multiculturalism, after the United States in the sixties and Canada in the seventies, which, moreover, did not stop multicultural radicals from denouncing the limits of cultural recognition in Great Britain on the pretext that religious minority festivals are not recognized in public life in the same way as are Christian festivals.

At the same time, France, which embodied another type of Nation-State model, managed its exit from the colonial era differently. Having abandoned its policy of assimilation, it promoted the idea of republican integration. This project rested on the principle of a strong communal relationship to the national cultural project, and on the relegation of cultural diversity expression to a private space. This

model had to change direction, and in the seventies was disrupted by the recurrent regional culture movement because it was regarded as too abstract, and also by the fact that all sorts of communities were making their voices heard in the public space, more and more clearly.

These national models, and there are others, are subject to re-interpretation in the field, notably by local authorities. They are also subject to question by cultural practices on the one hand and by artistic and cultural strategies or projects on the other. The first were faced with the management of their communities and were very aware of relationships between the inhabitants which had not only been pacified but had become dynamic, that is to say, with the rise of associations, interactions, mixing and blending, as well as the necessity to invent a more audacious concept of citizenship. As for the actors in art and culture, they carry out autonomous measures in which are to be found, in a consubstantial manner, dimensions of multiculturalism or interculturalism, and mixing and blending.

These reflections most likely concern a number of European towns and cultural agents in particular who, thanks to the national law on which they depend, allow immigrants to participate in local political and electoral life. This is not the case in France, except for European immigrant workers, as in all European Union countries. Even the cultural effects of this action are still limited, in their early stages.

This problematic of cultural diversity gets regular media coverage and appears more and more frequently on the agenda of decision-makers and cultural actors, if one judges by the reflections and decision mentioned here and elsewhere, and by the number of colloquies, meetings of local councillors and experts, which have taken place in Europe these last few years.<sup>3</sup>

These preoccupations are relatively ancient for certain towns (Nottingham, Frankfurt, Lyon), more recent for others (certain Spanish towns, Genoa), or again differently, unequally apprehended according to European countries, and also inside each European country. Which goes to prove implicitly that towns do not progress in the same way and that they are the most confronted with the necessity to come up with concrete answers, adapted to the management of cultural minorities in their space.

Let us also remember that in towns the artistic and cultural milieu does not necessarily develop a concerted strategy for intercultural problems. A good number of cultural actors plan their intercultural connotation programmes in an entirely spontaneous way. Now, a growing paradox emerges between the desire of cultural sector agents, and more and more local authority decision-makers, to concentrate on this question, to dream up projects and instigate actions, to programme policies; at the same time, this kind of work can be very feeble, there can be a lack of observation and of evaluation.

To be precise, we have plenty of general studies, of socio-political theories on multiculturalism, notably in Europe. We also have ethno-anthropological studies on immigrant minorities or specialised work on the management of cultural diversity, in the educational field, health, and work. But very little research work has been done on cultural diversity or interculturalism and artistic and cultural policies,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. The Seminars of Amsterdam and Lille in 1999 and 2000 «Culture and urban regeneration » (Eurocities, Lille Métropole agency, European Union); *Les Rencontres* (the meetings) of Rotterdam in autumn 2001: "*Cohésion sociale et diversité culturelle*" (Social Cohesion and Cultural Diversity); the workshops of *l'Agence pour le Développement des Relations Interculturelles en France* (Agency for the development of intercultural relations in France) "*Vers la démocratie culturelle*" (Towards cultural democracy) 4-5 Octobre, to take a few examples among many others.

apart from a few auto-evaluations or disparate observation studies: here is a challenge that we can take up in the framework of this research/action project.