

THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION

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I am very grateful to the organization of this International Seminar for the opportunity to share with you this space for reflection. I've been asked to speak on the socio-cultural integration in multiethnic cities and I am going to approach this by doing some theoretical considerations about the interesting queries put on the matter by the Program of this seminar: *how to reconcile cultural diversity and urban integration, avoiding the double trap of forced assimilation and ghettoisation? How to acknowledge and enhance community-based settlement patterns and models of social organisation? How to give a common meaning to urban settings and facilities accessible to different communities, and open public spaces for trans-cultural exchange?*

Urban integration and cultural diversity

Here we go with the first question: *How to reconcile cultural diversity and urban integration, avoiding the double trap of forced assimilation and ghettoisation?* From a theoretical point of view, this query invites us to define two key concepts: urban integration and cultural diversity.

From an Anthropological point of view, urban reality is a kind of weave of different ways of life experienced on space. In fact, it is purely experienced space (Delgado, 1999; Lefebvre 1972). That is to say, it is not only a set of places but a superposition of complex movements of different people practicing places and giving them meaning (De Certeau, 1984). If we understand "integration" as the process of linking together different objects or subjects, we

can see urban integration like the process by which various movements of people are connected. Those movements are very diverse and fluid but they are also relatively controlled and planned through dispositions of social institutions and groups' habits, values, hopes, norms, knowledge, social roles and relationships that cement urban integration.

Then, urban integration results from a double process. By one hand, there is a process of institutionalisation that clarifies what movements and practices are normal in the urban space. By the other hand, we have habits, values, hopes, norms, knowledge, social roles and relationships that constitute cultural diversity.

The process of institutionalisation represents a first step to answer our question. In his works on second generation immigrants in the United States, Alejandro Portes and his colleagues (2001) suggested that modes of incorporation were central in the socio-cultural integration of immigrant descendants. In other words, the political and social structure of reception of immigrants and that of insertion of their children were vital factors of socio-cultural integration. When there were a negative perception of the group of origin and practices of social discrimination of its members in labour market, education system and civil rights, exclusion was the principal route to incorporation into society. Forced assimilation is one of the outcomes of this exclusion. Others are spatial concentration of immigrant population in poor and low-income housing or low qualification jobs. In this situation, immigrants usually are not placed in a good position in the process of institutionalisation. That means that their practices and even themselves are going to remain at social margins of the urban space and probably they will be considered alien actors of the city. Consequently, they will become protagonists of a process of urban insertion in exclusion situation.

The second process in the construction of urban integration is precisely the creation of cultural diversity through different habits, values, hopes norms, knowledge, social roles and relationships. Let me return to our definition of urban reality. We saw that it is constituted by different people practicing places and giving them meaning. So, urban space is a container of intrinsic cultural diversity and people are engaged in there whatever they don't want to be.

Participation in urban space is a cultural matter. That is to say that it is included in a non stop process of construction of meaning through different habits of consumption, forms of commercial distribution, expectations on urban infrastructures and public services, modes of sociability, norms of conviviality and styles of use of streets. Thus urban integration is always more or less unsteady. Anyway, people build it from their participation basically in social groups based on family, friendship and job or association membership. When the condition of being immigrant becomes pertinent to be included or not in this groups, urban integration turn into a problem and cultural diversity become also a problem.

Therefore, we can reconcile cultural diversity and urban integration contributing to the deproblematisation of the first. For instance, in our fieldwork in Valencia, we observed gangs of young Latin American men sitting on a bench back in some recreational areas. Some neighbours of those areas and local and national newspapers gave us the idea that they were something like potential criminals. But recent studies on the matter¹ and our interviews show that those gangs are not criminal organisations. Sometimes there are quarrels against other bands but in general, the gang is an important mutual aid organisation and its members normally go out for dancing and chatting. Police and some neighbours sometimes watch over them, even if they are only chatting. Their presence on urban space is not completely seen like something normal. Suspicions and fears surround them. And this is not the only example of its kind. We found similar attitudes on maghribians staying at street corners and Latin American people playing football in public grounds and watching the matches. In exchange, we didn't find any worries on apparent Spanish people doing the same things. Altogether, these practices are manifestations of cultural diversity, but it seems that they haven't got the same worth on the urban space depending on who are its protagonists.

Cultural diversity becomes a problem due to a prevailing image of urban space restricted for practices and conceptions of autochthons. It is necessary to work towards institutionalisation of other practices. For example, it could be

¹ See, for instance, Carles Feixa's works, and specially his "Jóvenes latinos en Barcelona" (2007).

good to support crystallization of young gangs in cultural associations or to hold up football competition organised by Latin Americans on public grounds. Furthermore local governments, educational centres, social researchers, civic associations and not associated neighbours should make an effort to see that nobody is only “immigrant” and everybody is relative, friend, co-worker or associate of somebody. In fact, “immigrant” is a category too large and sometimes meaningless. As a Social Anthropologist suggested, everybody is alien in the city (Delgado, 1998). Urban integration is based in social groups and we should consider that to talk about immigrants as a social group is not always pertinent.

Community-based settlement patterns and modes of social organization and its acknowledgment

The second question put by our program is *How to acknowledge and enhance community-based settlement patterns and models of social organisation*. We need to face again the query from some theoretical considerations. Let me begin with the concept of community. It has been one of the largest used in social science. But, at the same time, it is a very elusive concept. Although there are various definitions, we can characterize community like a symbolic category that represents all or most of the next aspects for somebody: a) a togetherness of the past; b) contemporary common behaviours, values, believes, traditions, norms, knowledge, language, dress, and so on; c) political solidarity; and d) an utopian future. These aspects characterises a concept of usually positive evocation and evaluation, whose always symbolic usage expresses and draws out a socio-cultural grouping and scene to which people would expect, advocate or wish to belong (Rapport and Overing, 2000).

If we talk about settlement patterns based on community, we must define the limits of the latter. Who are its members? How people can be considered and consider themselves community members? Community is often further specified by a qualifying or amplifying phrase: the ‘ethnic community’, the ‘national community’, the ‘local community’, etc. It has ethnic members, national members, local members, and son on. Thus, the membership usually is defined intersubjectively putting attention on those aspects which people identify with or

differentiate themselves from one another. Urban space contains lots of communities and, thus, different settlement patterns. For instance, when an urban sector is associated with the presence of members of certain nationality, it can attract newcomers from the same origin. Usually this influx is an outcome of the proximity of friends, relatives or ancient neighbours. The construction of community comes after that. Community ties are a social construction. There is no community before groups. For our purposes, it is interesting to notice that a quarter can be the territorial base of a sense of community. In other words, the varied population of a quarter can construct a feeling of community based on a shared meaning of urban space. This left us to another theoretical concept: models of social organisation. It also brings us to another question: How to give a common meaning to urban settings and facilities accessible to different communities?

What do we mean when we say “models of social organisation”? From an anthropological point of view, the notion of social organisation refers to the internal differentiation of human societies in more or less institutionalised components. These constitutive units are groups of different level (kinship, locality, nation, association, profession, and so on) and communities. The latter are defined by principles of membership (consanguinity, residence, nationality, etcetera) and the former are based on those principles and on criteria of recruitment (age, professional activity, social range or gender). Every society is built on relationships between those units (solidarity, opposition, hierarchy and so on) and is constructed through the way as each unit contributes to social activities (Lenclud, 1991). These relationships and contributions are also institutionalised. All this building that we call “society” implies patterns of cultural behaviour and understanding because of which we can talk about models of social organisation. Immigration process increased the plurality of models from an ethnic and national point of view in European cities. Recognition of these different models could be possible from social research on them, and also because of the process of incorporation of new citizens into public space. Their voice should be listened and there should be a public debate on which patterns of social organisation are acceptable in European cities. To know the priorities of the members of those groups that construct urban reality every day is

essential. But also, we must consider the possible construction of civic communities in different urban sector. This leave us, finally, to the last question of this section: *How to give a common meaning to urban settings and facilities accessible to different communities?*

I think that the key to give a common meaning to urban settings is that all actors concerned with urban policies understand those different voices and experiences that constitute urban reality. Also, it could be useful to institutionalise different uses of urban space and an active role of citizens. Although there can be different groups and communities in the urban space, its members probably share similar daily preoccupations as citizens. Surely anybody of them would wish good urban transports, high-quality health services, lovely recreational areas or clean streets, and so on. Most of them are probably worried about having a job or getting decent accommodation. A good way to improve urban facilities and urban settings is to pay attention to this social needs without taking for granted the existence of essential communities with a kind of determined and specific needs.

It can be said that there is a cultural perception of those wishes. In other words, we could say that there is a cultural conception of good urban transports, high-quality health services, loving recreational areas or clean streets. But it could be a mistake. We must remember that those things result from the action of political local, regional or national administration. So, if there is a cultural problem it depends on a cultural definition of politics. There is no cultural conception to know or to fight against, but a cultural conception of citizenship and a local administration action to construct.

An example of all this is provided with one of the activities introduced by City to city project in a valencian area called Orriols. Last June some Orriols' associations performed an intercultural meeting. The committee of organisation of the event included three great types of associations: associations *for* immigrants, associations *of* immigrants and other kind of associations². First category was integrated by Non-Governmental Associations, second by the

² The first two categories of associations were suggested by Simó and Jabbaz (2004). As they defined them, associations for immigrants are organisations created mainly by Spanish people and work to support immigrants while associations of immigrants are composed by immigrants of specific origins and also hold up them.

Islamic cultural centre representing Maghribian community and Latin-American and Ecuadorian Migrants association “Rumiñahui” representing Latin American community and, finally, third category was composed by neighbours’ and traders’ associations.

The meeting was understood as a space opened to the relationship between organisations and among them and non-affiliated citizens. The intercultural character of the meeting was reflected in different kind of activities. First, some stands showed manufactures from different countries. Second, there was a workshop on cultural mediation in secondary school. Third, visitants could watch some videos about sport activities of Ecuadorians and a performance about stores owned by alien citizens. Finally, there was a football match by Ecuadorian children. All this things gave a multicultural picture of Orriols and was useful for contacts between people from different national or religious communities. Some of the associations are preparing a second meeting where we are trying to introduce another communitarian dimension. People from different nationalities in Orriols have a common condition of urban citizens that implies sharing hopes and critiques about urban facilities and settings and about local politics. In the first meeting one member of a neighbour association proposed to make a poster composed by visitants’ pictures about what they like and what they dislike concerning the quarter. Finally, the proposal wasn’t performed because the association oriented its participation in the meeting towards giving information about its activities. We proposed to make the mural in a second meeting next November. It will be a space to share a communitarian condition based on urban neighbourhood and it will be a chance to give a common meaning to urban settings and facilities. This space will be accessible to different national communities through the participation of members of associations of immigrants with other kind of associations.

Opening urban public spaces for trans-cultural exchange

The last question put by the program of this seminar is how to open public spaces for trans-cultural exchange. It is a good question to close this intervention because it touches on two key aspects for socio-cultural integration: public spaces and trans-cultural exchanges.

From an anthropological point of view, we could define public space in relation to urban reality like a conceptual instrument to understand different human movements and experiences of external urban places. Streets, squares, recreational areas and so on are examples of public spaces where people encounter themselves usually ignoring who they are, where they are going to or why they are there. Anonymity is the natural condition of public space for people that can perform there various roles alone or with others (Delgado, 1999). From this standpoint public space is always opened to all kind of exchanges. This includes those exchanges that we can label “trans-cultural” because of their property to connect different collective constructions of reality. We shouldn’t need to ask ourselves how to open urban spaces to trans-cultural exchanges. If we do, probably is because public space is also the scenario of clashes for the control of what is being performed in it and who is authorised to take the chief role in the show. I think that we need to recover this intrinsic aperture of public spaces to trans-cultural exchanges reclaiming the right to anonymity or the right to indifference.

Obviously our intervention implies a nihilistic position that maybe doesn’t seem very useful to construct socio-cultural integration, but it let us open the door to consider that people are not always acting in the public space as members of national or ethnic communities. They can just be a part of this amorphous mass of persons moving through the city more or less freely. It becomes an attitude favourable for construction of socio-cultural integration. But this attitude could represent an ingenuous posture if it is not accompanied but some other aspects. Let me conclude this presentation with an account of these relevant aspects for socio-cultural integration, some of which were considered before by the European Commission (Communication of the Commission to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social European and the Regional Committee; Third regional information about immigration and integration COM/2007/0512).

1) In a social and attitudinal dimension, as this seminar approach appropriately suggest, integration is a socio-cultural process. This means that It is not a question of cultural practices or conceptions independent of their practitioners. Cultural aspects are appropriated by people who give them a

value and they acquire a sense in a social context. The way people dress, their use of recreational areas, their encounters on corner streets have not got any meaning independently of those people and those who are looking at them. Moreover, cultural practices are polysemic. It is needed a fight against stigmatisation and ethnisation of immigrants and autochthons. The use of ethnic identities and categories is not always pertinent. They shouldn't be relevant when somebody is looking for work, looking for accommodation, etc.

Furthermore, a diversity of aspects usually produces an anxiety enhanced by prejudices, stereotypes and misunderstandings. A better knowledge of immigrants' practices considering the interpretation of its own practitioners could improve social integration and a naturalisation of those practices and conceptions. Here we can add a proposal of the European Commission. It suggests that *basic knowledge of the host society's language and institutions is indispensable to integration*.

2) In a political and legal dimension, it is indispensable the empowering of people from different origins as citizens. This is only possible if there is a recognition of their political rights as a base of civic membership. Especially relevant is the voting right in a local level that permits to go away from *denizens* [permanent residents without naturalisation...] to complete citizens. Furthermore the right to association permits a social participation that can found an institutionalised relationship between immigrants and organisations and administration. This right makes possible another recommendation of the European Commission: it indicates that *the participation of immigrants in the democratic process and in the formulation of integration policies and measures, especially at the local level, supports their integration*'.

A step towards the empowering of immigrants and other citizens is to join work of associations *of* and *for* immigrants in social participation and political decision making. It involves their inclusion in consultative organs, social platforms and politic debate on public budgets. We find again interesting proposals from the European Commission about this point when it says that *frequent interaction between immigrants and Member State citizens is a fundamental mechanism for integration. Shared forums, intercultural dialogue, education about immigrants and immigrant cultures, and stimulating living*

conditions in urban environments enhance the interactions between immigrants and Member State citizens'. In this point we find two great difficult to be solved. First, the bad perception of political system and political institutions from citizens discourage them. Second, citizens need important compromise in urban plan and maintenance of urban and social facilities.

Even in legal terms, the European Commission sustains that *integration implies respect for the basic values of the European Union (human and democratic rights and values)*. We can add that also political administrations must keep up these rights with irregular residents.

3) In a cultural, economic and educational dimension, a key question is the integration of immigrant descendants especially through education system and labour market, as new citizens. Some interesting measures in this sense are the implementation of linguistic support in schools for parent and children or the introduction of religion as a general matter not from a confessional point of view.

The European Commission tells that *employment is a key part of the integration process and is central to the participation of immigrants, to the contributions immigrants make to the host society, and to making such contributions visible*. And also explains that *efforts in education are critical to preparing immigrants, and particularly their descendants, to be more successful and more active participants in society*'.

As we have seen, these three great aspects includes different dimensions. They are constitutive of the bidirectional socio-cultural integration process in which autochthons have a much bigger responsibility than newcomers, because of their position of socio-political domination.