

DISCOURSES AND COEXISTENCE, INTERCULTURAL COHABITATION IN THE BELGIAN CITY OF VERVIERS¹

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European cities face the challenge of increasing diversity. This paper examines the case of a Belgian medium-sized city. The leading question is twofold: how does a native population perceive immigrants and what kind of practices are developed to live together. The first part of the paper introduces the Belgian context of immigration and the city of Verviers. The second focuses on categorization of otherness. In the third part, intercultural relations are put forward in different spaces of the city. Finally, the paper reveals the ambiguous coexistence of categorizations and anti-immigrant discourses with practices of tolerance and conviviality between the populations.

Keywords: Belgium, City, Immigration, Categorization, Intercultural Relations

Las ciudades europeas se enfrentan al desafío de la creciente diversidad. Este artículo examina el caso de una ciudad mediana en Bélgica. Nuestra principal indagación tiene una doble dimensión: ¿cómo la población nativa percibe a los inmigrantes y qué tipo de prácticas desarrollan para convivir. La primera parte del documento presenta los antecedentes del contexto de inmigración en Bélgica y en la ciudad de Verviers. El segundo se centra en la categorización de la alteridad. En la tercera parte, las relaciones interculturales son analizadas en los diferentes espacios de la ciudad. Finalmente, el documento pone de manifiesto la coexistencia ambigua de categorizaciones y discursos anti-inmigrantes con las prácticas de la tolerancia y la convivencia entre las poblaciones.

Palabras Claves: Bélgica, Ciudad, Inmigración, Categorización, Relaciones Interculturales

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INTRODUCTION³

Most European cities are nowadays multicultural cities. Their population has slightly evolved and is still changing. They are simultaneously in migratory and post-migratory situations (Martiniello, 1993). As a consequence, some authors would describe them using the concept of “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2007) or would highlight the “diversification of their diversity”⁴ (Martiniello, 2007). This new process of diversification exceeds the criteria of the country of origin. The diversity is also displayed in terms of spoken languages, religious affiliations, migration channels or immigration statuses, for example. Moreover other lines of diversification are at play such as social situation or even gender (Martiniello, 2007). Given this evolution, multicultural situations appear more complex, with new lines of differentiation between groups and individuals beyond national or ethnic criteria. Therefore, it is very useful to study how populations, at a local level, live together and interact in this new context of “diversification of the diversity”. In this perspective, the question of the categorization process is important and specifically the construction of “otherness”. In fact, the State is not the only actor in the identity assignment process as identity is also built at the level of inter-individuals relations and collective representations (Martiniello and Simon, 2005). How local populations perceive and classify immigrants in a context of growing complexity? How do they draw the identity line between them and the others?

In terms of intercultural relations, two different but non-exclusive processes seem to characterize many European cities: “a trend toward social, economic, ethnic, racial and religious fragmentation but also a trend toward cohesion, group border-crossing and interculturalism” (Martiniello, 2007). Municipalities are therefore confronted with the challenge of managing the peaceful coexistence of their diverse populations and even before to manage their encounter, exchange and confrontation. Some intend to develop public policies to promote the participation of all residents to the social, economic, cultural, and even political life of the city. This paper aims at a better understanding of multicultural situation approaching the process through the representations and interactions of various populations in the city and through which the notion of “otherness” is constructed at a local level.

For this purpose, we examine the particular case of a Belgian French-speaking medium-sized city (56,104 inhabitants)⁵ that has experienced immigration in the

³ This article is based on a research realized by the CEDEM (Centre for Ethnic and Migrations Studies - University of Liège, Belgium) in the Belgian city of Verviers between December 2011 and April 2012. The research was mainly funded by the CRVI (Verviers's Regional Centre for Integration) and the local authorities of the city. It has been also supported by the ARC Research Programm TRICUD funded by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and Wallonia-Europe Academia. A final report is available in French on the Internet website of the CRVI: <http://www.crvl.be/liens-mainmenu-71/liens-mainmenu-71/200-cedemdoc.html>

⁴ The notion of “diversification of diversity” was introduced by David Hollinger, in a book published in 1995, to describe the dynamics of cultures and identities in the United States.

⁵ 1st January 2011 source: Unions des villes et communes de Wallonie.

past and it is still receiving new immigrants. The leading question is twofold: on the one hand, how the native population perceives the immigrants and on the other hand, how the diverse populations live together, what kind of practices do they develop and what kind of institutions supports intercultural relations. The paper is based on fieldwork using participatory observation, 76 semi-structured interviews with various local actors (inhabitants, associations, leaders, politicians, etc.) and two focus groups⁶. It is structured in three parts. In the first one, elements regarding the Belgian context of immigration and immigrant policy are highlighted. The city of Verviers is also briefly introduced in terms of demographic, socio-economic, politic and geographic features. The second part focuses on categorization of otherness and cleavages between the populations. In the third part, the intercultural relations are put forward in the different spaces of the city, from the public space to the closer space of neighbourhood. Finally, the paper reveals the ambiguous coexistence of categorizations and anti-immigrants discourses with practices of tolerance and conviviality between the populations.

VEVIERS, A MULTICULTURAL BELGIAN CITY OF WALLONIA

Belgium is a particular European laboratory of coexistence of otherness. Firstly, Belgium is a federal state with both territorial and group based federated entities⁷. Flemish and Walloon people live in Flanders and Wallonia and in the bilingual region of Brussels Capital. Secondly, Belgium has been a country of immigration for several decades. After the Second World War, Belgium signed several bilateral agreements in order to organize the recruitment of migrant workers towards its coal mining sector first, and later other industrial sectors⁸. In 1974, like other European countries, the Belgian government decided to stop the immigration of workers. However, data on immigration during the following decades show that, in spite of this decision, immigrants continue to arrive in Belgium. Since the mid 1980's, immigration has been constantly increasing in Belgium (Perrin and Schoonvaere,

⁶ This research has been supported by the CRVI (Regional Centre of Verviers for the Integration of foreign people and of foreign origin) in close collaboration with the municipality of Verviers. The aim of the research was to give an updated state of the intercultural situation of the city and to present policy recommendations for the municipality.

⁷ The three regions are Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels capital. And the communities are the French-speaking community, the Flemish-speaking community and the German-speaking community. Each entity has its own government; however the Flemish-speaking community and the region of Flanders have merged their governments. Belgium has thus the federal level government and five governments of federated entities.

⁸ The first agreement was concluded with Italy in 1946, followed by others with Spain and Greece in the 1950's, Morocco, Turkey and Tunisia in the 1960's and at the beginning of the 1970's with Algeria, Yugoslavia and Portugal. Migrants came thus from these countries but also from neighbouring countries like France and the Netherlands.

2011: 21). It has happened particularly through six patterns of migration: mobility of European Union citizens, asylum applications, foreign student's mobility, highly skilled worker's migration, irregular migration and not least, family reunion (Gsir et al. 2003:62-63). Emigration has also increased but the net migration remained positive since the mid 1980's (Perrin and Schoonvaere, 2011: 21). Nowadays Belgium is thus in a post-migratory with immigrants who settled from 60's to present and migratory situation with diversified migrations mostly and increasingly European origin but also from other parts of the world such as Africa (Congo, Cameroun and Guinea), Asia (China and India) or South America (Brazil)⁹.

In 2010, Belgium's foreign population reached 9.7% of the total population¹⁰. Most of the foreigners are EU nationals (52% in 2009) mainly French (10.5%), Poles (8.2%) and Dutch (7.4%). The other non EU foreigners widely represented are the Moroccans (7.8%) followed by the Turks (3%) (Perrin and Schoonvaere, 2011: 33). Moreover, the foreign population is unequally spread around the country. In 2010, 30% were located in the Brussels-Capital Region, 9.5% in Wallonia and 6.4% in Flanders¹¹. In the latter, the foreign population is especially concentrated in the provinces of Limbourg and Antwerp, while in Wallonia; it is concentrated mainly in the old industrial provinces of Liège and Hainaut (Martiniello and Rea, 2003).

In Belgium, the question of immigrant integration emerged in the mid-1980's when the government took finally into account the process of settlement of immigrant workers and their families. Various approaches of immigrant integration coexist in Belgium. Since 1994, the regions are largely responsible of this policy. Wallonia has adopted in 1996 a decree regarding the integration of foreign people and foreign origin people. It has allowed the creation of several centres of integration and one in Verviers. Its mission is to promote the participation of the foreigners to social, cultural and economic life of the Belgian society and to foster intercultural relations. The Walloon approach of immigrants is influenced by the French Republican approach to immigration which defends assimilation in the name of equality. Integration policies target social exclusion and ethnic minorities are not specifically focused. Integration of immigrants has to be based on a social policy targeting territories rather than groups. In Flanders, immigrant integration is first characterized by a multiculturalist dimension. Ethnic minorities are recognized and they can promote their culture of origin. Nevertheless, since 2004, a trend towards a more assimilationist approach has emerged in order to promote equality rather than cultural identities (Adam, 2010). The Flemish government has also developed

⁹ Europe (including Turkey) is the first continent of origin of immigrants. Almost half of the new immigrants come from these countries. The second one is Africa. Asian population represented 11,6% in 2009.

¹⁰ http://www.belgium.be/fr/actualites/2011/news_plus_d_un_million_d_etrangers_vivent_en_belgique.jsp

¹¹ http://www.belgium.be/fr/actualites/2011/news_plus_d_un_million_d_etrangers_vivent_en_belgique.jsp

a specific integration policy for newcomers (inburgering or “citizenshipation”¹²). Therefore, since 2004, each newcomer settling in a Flemish city must follow an integration program including Dutch courses and civic courses.

Verviers is a medium-sized city located in the region of Wallonia, in the French-speaking community of Belgium. It is located at the crossroad between three bigger European cities: Liège (Belgium), Aachen (Germany) and Maastricht (Netherlands). The city is built along the river Vesdre, the inner city is located in the valley on the banks, and peripheral neighbourhoods are on the hillside surroundings. This location creates a dichotomy between the urban lower town and the more rural uptown. In the downtown area, housing is dense and urban and on the heights of the city there is more residential housing with single family houses with gardens. During the industrial period, Verviers was been a thriving international wool center renowned for its water washing quality. From the second part of 20th century, the industry declined due to the development of new chemical processes for washing wool. Inhabitants and merchants left the city with, as a consequence, the city impoverishment. Today despite of the industrial decline background, the city has diversified and developed its economy through tourism, trade and small and medium enterprises. Employment rate has raised and was 53.2% in 2002 with a stable unemployment rate of around 20%. Nevertheless since the economic recession the unemployment rate has increased.

Verviers has been a multicultural city, with a multicultural population, for years. It reflects Belgium’s immigration history and the evolution of its migration patterns. Despite the lack of documentation about its immigration history, it seems that Verviers has attracted migrant workers because of its wool industry. Already during the 18th century, the British businessman William Cockerill established in Verviers and contributed to its prosperity. After the Second World War, immigrant workers from various countries, as mentioned above, have been actively recruited and settled in various urban cities such as Verviers. More recently, spouses, students and asylum seekers increased the city population.

On January 1st 2011, the Verviers population was around 56 100 inhabitants. The percent foreign is higher than the national average: 11.15% of the total population. The distribution of immigrants by citizenship is the following: 15.2% Italians, 14.6% Moroccans, 9.6% Turks, 8.3% Spaniards, 7.6% French, 4.4% Russians (Russian Federation), 3.6% Greeks, 3.4% other Russians, 3.2% Congolese (DRC) and 2.7% Romanians. But there are 117 different nationalities in the city. Nevertheless immigrants from EU represent the main part of the foreign population in Verviers. There is also irregular immigration which is more difficult to estimate. Moreover,

¹² Translation from french: *citoyennisation*.

these figures do not reflect the population of immigrant origin who acquired Belgian citizenship.

The different populations are unevenly distributed over the space of the city. African and Asian populations are concentrated in the city-centre whereas Europeans are more located uptown and particularly in richer neighbourhoods. Almost all Moroccans and Turks live downtown whereas French, Italians or Spaniards are spread over other neighbourhoods. The city-centre, particularly several neighbourhoods located on the South bank of Vesdre, is characterized by an important foreign population. And foreign populations are overrepresented in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The following parts of the paper focus on the social relationships which do, or do not, develop between the native inhabitants of Verviers on the one hand, and immigrants on the other. We have sought to identify the ways in which these interactions develop, paying particular attention to the representations that the inhabitants construct for themselves. It aims to explore empirically how the notion of “otherness” is constructed at the city level, and how it develops and evolves in the light of real or imagined relationships between immigrants and the native population.

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE DISCOURSES : A CLEAVED IMAGE OF VIEVERS

The results of the research show how people designate immigrants living in Verviers. The diversity of the words used raises the question of categorization practices and their effects on social interaction. In a matter of fact, “beside the function of classifying, to simplifying and to make intelligible the social environment, the social categorization process and the resulting categories are a part of – or make, depending of the point of view – the reality they designate : they are its representation and, in this way, contribute to model it constantly¹³”. (Poglia Miletì, 2000: 3-4). Given the importance of these categories, several questions have been studied: How does the population of Verviers designate or name

¹³ Translation from French : « [o]utre la fonction de classer, de simplifier et de rendre l'environnement social intelligible à l'individu, le processus de catégorisation sociale et les catégories qui en résultent font partie de – ou font, cela dépend des points de vue – la réalité qu'elles désignent : elles en sont la représentation et par la même contribuent à la modeler constamment. » Translation from French : « [o]utre la fonction de classer, de simplifier et de rendre l'environnement social intelligible à l'individu, le processus de catégorisation sociale et les catégories qui en résultent font partie de – ou font, cela dépend des points de vue – la réalité qu'elles désignent : elles en sont la représentation et par la même contribuent à la modeler constamment. »

immigrants? Is this categorization linked with social attribution of some essentialized characteristics to these groups? Is the categorization process linked with a demarcation process? Three ways have been used to answer these questions. First of all, we observed the categories used by the local population to designate immigrants and the characteristics assigned to them. Secondly, we focused on the social distinction between “good” and “bad” immigrants. Finally, we studied how these categories define otherness borders¹⁴.

CATEGORIZATION AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE INMIGRANT

During the study, respondents often used a distinction between “Belgian” and “foreigners”. The latter designates people with foreign background regardless their legal status. In a matter of fact, immigrants with Belgian citizenship or Belgian youngsters with foreign background are included in the “foreigners” category. Even if some respondents acknowledge that immigrants and their children may have obtained Belgian citizenship, this is more used to make a distinction between different categories of “foreigners” than to include them in the “Belgian” category. In the same way, the juridical status – like asylum seekers or refugees for instance – is not used by the native population to name immigrants.

The categorization used by both people of foreign and Belgian background to designate immigrant population is generally built around ethnic criteria that are on the identification of groups, supposed to be characterized by some physical, cultural or psychological features. Categories used by the Verviers’ population are many : “Moroccans”, “Spaniards”, “Italians”, “Turks”, “Maghrebis”, “Arabs”, “Chechens”, Somali”, “Africans”, “Blacks”, etc.

Among these categories, two are particularly globalizing. The first one is the “Eastern people”. It refers to people originated from the Balkans or from Chechnya. The second one relates to people from sub-Saharan Africa, so called “Africans” or “Blacks”. In addition with its globalizing character, this category is built on the identification of physical criteria. In this case, the ethnic categorization slides to a racialized categorization, which focuses on skin color.

Finally, another categorization refers to real (or supposed) religious identity of the immigrant. The “Muslims” are often designated in opposition to the “Catholic”

¹⁴ As seen in the introduction, the categorization process can be studied at different level (classifying institutions, collective representations, inter-individual interactions). According to the methodology used during the research, the level of the collective representations will be privileged here.

immigrants. This distinction – which is generally built on an amalgam between Muslim populations and North African populations – is linked with the idea, shared by a part of the native population, that the Islamic religion is a factor of difficulty in the integration process. The argument put forward a posteriori is that previous migrants who were Christians, such as Italians or Spaniards, integrated more easily the Belgian society because they could share with Belgians during religious practices. This lack of common religious practices and standards is therefore seen as an obstacle to a successful integration, though Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, and others were actually also confronted by the rejection of the Belgian population when they immigrated.

The process of categorization does not only consist in the distinction of several groups, it also imputes or denies some characteristics to these groups. Some of them can be negatively judged, as opposed to the social norm. Then, the native population qualified them to be “noisy”, “dirty”, “violent”, “dishonest”, “conducting illegal activities”, “layers”, “aggressive”, “rude”, “poorly educated”, etc. In contrast, others are qualified positively, in agreement with the norm. They are described as “clean”, “working hard”, “honest”, “law-abiding”, “polite”, “educated”, “graduated”, etc. Therefore, these categories take an essential dimension, as the characteristics associated with them are seen to be shared by all members of the group. These essentialized characteristics are not used only by the native Belgian population of Verviers. They can be used by actors having immigration background too. These stereotypes can also be claimed when they have a positive connotation (hospitality, respect for the elder, sense of family, etc.). Finally, some populations are also attached to ambivalent representations. It is the case of the “population from Eastern Europe”. Thus, two kinds of stereotypes are linked with this group: violence and thievery on the one hand, and goodwill, especially at school, on the other hand. The tendency to stereotype the other in essential or racial terms is far from absent.

During the interviews, people with foreign background are designated through three main figures which reflect an ambivalent dimension in the social perception of the “other”.

The first one is the figure of the young thug. This group generally designates youngsters, Belgian or not, with immigrant background. Their occupation of the public space –the street for example – is seen as a nuisance by the people from several neighbourhoods and so, even if their acts are not really objectionable. Thereby, there are various practices condemned by a part of the Verviers population: playing soccer in the street, staying out until late, playing with firecrackers, etc. As we can see, this perception is not based on the transgression of some kind of law or formal regulation, but on the transgression of the accepted

social norm, which supposes that a street cannot serve as a soccer playground, that young people must go to bed early and cannot stay too late on the street. It is interesting to notice that when a violation of law is evoked (drug dealing or degradation for example), the people to blame are generally seen as stranger to the neighbourhood.

The second social representation of the immigrant population is the figure of the fraudster. In a matter of fact, people with migrant background are often suspected to be in Belgium only to gain some economic resources or public welfare. For example, the fact that an immigrant benefits welfare is hardly perceived as normal, but often as an excess. In these cases, immigrants transgress the dominant standard far more than they transgress the law. In other words, the access to welfare by a part of the immigrants is seen as illegitimate by a part of the interviewed population, not because it would be an illegal access, but because they are suspected to not deserve welfare benefits.

The third social representation that has been observed is the image of the victim through the example of the phenomenon of slum landlords who take advantage of the precarious situation of a part of the local foreign population by renting substandard housing. In the same way, some interviewed people insist on the phenomenon of the foreign “mafias” and “networks” suffered by immigrants. The social representation of the Verviers’s population with an immigrant origin is so built on an ambivalent figure of guilt and victim.

“GOOD” AND “BAD” IMMIGRANTS

The categorization process of the immigrant population involves locating the categories compared to the dominant norms in the society. These norms can be juridical but they are, most of the time, social. They generally most refer to a conception of an acceptable lifestyle than to the respect of an institutionalized settlement. Interrogating these norms is therefore interesting because they are a part of the process of construction of otherness.

A first factor legitimating the presence of immigrants in the city for a part of the population is employment. As observed by Abdelmalek Sayad in his research about immigrants in France in the 1960’ and 1970’:

“The presence we permit for immigrants fully subject to work, the only *raison d’être* we recognize to him. [...] We understand therefore the difficulty, which is not only technical, there is to define unemployment in the case of

immigrant [...], the difficulty there is to think the conjunction of immigrant and unemployment: being an immigrant and unemployed is a paradox¹⁵ (Sayad, 2006: 50-51).

This attribute is used for distinguishing populations from older immigration movements (“Italians”, “Spaniards”, “Greeks”, etc.) related to the need of workforce in mines and industries before the 70’ from populations designated as “new comers” (“Africans”, “people from Eastern Europe”, etc.) and often suspected of taking advantage of the public welfare in Belgium.

Beyond work as a factor of social legitimization, the “good” immigrant is also, for a part of the Verviers’s population, the immigrant who corresponds to the socio-economic success criteria. In the city, the representation of the socio-economic success is particularly related to the residential status. Living on the heights of the city, in a single-family house, is socially valued while living downtown – seen as a space of poverty, insecurity, marked by the presence of immigrant populations - is generally devalued. In this perspective, the social representation of people with migrant background – who are over-represented in the center of the town – is generally linked with the social representation of popular classes. In other words, attitudes of contempt or hostility against individuals with an immigrant background often mingle with the contempt against poverty. An example of this is the discourses of the town’s store merchants who mainly define immigrants as “bad customers” (without money and who do not practice shopping) without excluding those matching with “the good customer” (with money and willing to consume). More generally, immigrants are mainly seen as poor and therefore bearer of the characteristics assigned to the popular classes (lack of education, lack of culture, etc.).

Finally, native population often uses the notion of “integration” as a criterion to distinguish “good” and “bad” immigrants. The “good” immigrant is the integrated one. If we accept the definition of integration as “the process of inclusion of immigrants in the institutions and relationships of the host society” (Bosswick and Heckmann, 2006: 1) – so focusing on the different actors of integration who are: migrants, host society and its institutions – the native population often sees the process of integration first as a responsibility of immigrants who are expected to adapt their behaviour to the social norm (speaking the local language, respecting the law, respecting “local customs”, being quiet, sorting waste correctly, etc.). In

¹⁵ Translation from French : « le séjour qu'on autorise à l'immigré est entièrement assujéti au travail, la seule raison d'être qu'on lui reconnaisse. [...] On comprend dès lors la difficulté, qui n'est pas seulement technique, qu'il y a à définir le chômage dans le cas de l'immigré [...], la difficulté qu'il y a à penser la conjonction de l'immigré et du chômage : être immigré et chômeur est un paradoxe. »

certain circumstances, an invisibilization behaviour can be seen as a good sign of integration. This is the case for some Italian immigrants who take as an example the fact that their parents forbade to speak Italian at home, forcing them to learn French. Then, the integration process is sometimes seen as an assimilation process where “immigrants (...) are supposed to abandon their characteristics and their cultural identity to unconditionally adopt, at least in the public space, schemas and cultural behaviors of the majority and defined by her”¹⁶ (Martiniello, 2011: 68).

“US” AND “THEM”, A CLEAVED REPRESENTATION OF THE VERVIER’S POPULATION

Through the categorization process, the native inhabitants of Verviers build a demarcation between “us” and “them”. While migratory and post-migratory situation diversify, this demarcation does not strike all groups equivalently. Indeed, some populations with immigrant origin escape this categorization process. It is widely the case for the French people or for the children of European immigrants like Italians. On the contrary, for some population, the attribute of otherness has a hereditary dimension. In a matter of fact, children of extra-European immigrants remain perceived as strangers despite the fact that they were born, they grew up, they studied, and they socialized in Belgium.

A second point is that the category of “them” does not appear homogenous in the native population’s discourses. A distinction is made between people identified as “first immigrants” and those identified as “immigrants”. The “first immigrants” category designates mainly the Italian, Spanish and Greek populations perceived as a work migration. “Immigrants” designate populations often perceived as newcomers (Moroccans, Turks, Sub Saharan Africans, Chechens, etc.). Then a symbolic demarcation emerges with the social attribution of differentiated characteristics we can outline like that:

“Us”	“First them”			“New them”
	Hard workers			Unemployed
	Integrated/Melted society	in	the	Remaining them/ghettoized
				between

¹⁶ Translation from French : « les immigrés (...) sont censés abandonner leurs caractéristiques et leurs identités culturelles pour adopter sans réserve, dans l’espace public du moins, les schémas et les comportements culturels propres à la majorité et définis par elle. »

Catholic	Muslim
Worker	Tradespeople
Culturally close	Culturally distant
	Taking advantage of the public welfare
	Not respecting the law
	Violent
	Noisy

As we can see, the “new them” category is carrying more negative representations than the “first them” category. In that way, it represents the higher level of otherness for the native population. The categorization process is carrying some important symbolic issues for the actors. According to the native population of Verviers, the distinction between “us” and “them” is often a way to stand out from the city’s changes perceived in a negative way (neighbourhood’s impoverishment, feeling of insecurity, etc.). In the same manner, actors seen as “first them”, whose presence is considered as more legitimate by the native population, often try to distinguish themselves from newcomers with whom they may be identified. For the non-European immigrant descendants, categorization issues are particularly important because they are durably identified as “strangers” and so trapped in a position of “otherness” with some consequences as a persistent injunction of integration whereas they were born and have always been living in Belgium.

The Verviers population’s discourses are characterized by a cleaved representation of the Verviers’s society where immigrants are mainly seen through the category of otherness. But the discourse is just one of the aspects of the interethnic relationships which does not always correspond to the daily practices of the actors (De Rudder, 1993). Then, it is important to focus on the integration and cohabitation practices observed in the city of Verviers.

INTERCULTURAL PRACTICES AND COHABITATION

Beside the categorization and distinction process we just underlined, the coexistence of different populations is a reality in many social spaces in Verviers. As a matter of fact, the center of the town is frequented by a multicultural

population as well as a lot of neighbourhoods, many shops are run by immigrants, schools welcome children with different origins and so on. How do the relationships between these populations work in Verviers? In order to answer this question, we will focus on the public space in a first time and then on the closer level of neighbourhood.

IN THE PUBLIC SPACE : BETWEEN AVOIDANCE AND VALORIZATION OF INTERCULTURALITY

In Verviers, immigrant population is concentrated on several parts of the city and particularly in the center of the town. Even if a non-negligible part of the foreign origin people adopted the native's residential strategy and went to live in the outskirts, as mentioned in the first part of the paper, they are much more visible in the downtown and in particular in some neighbourhoods. Verviers is therefore characterized by the social identification of some parts of the city as "strangers" or "immigrants neighbourhoods". These spaces are often described with a negative vocabulary ("dirty", "noisy", "unsafe", "degraded", etc.). The social representation of the immigrants presence in the city is strongly spatialized and some parts of Verviers are almost automatically linked with the phenomenon of immigration in the population's discourses (neighbourhoods "Hodimont" and "Prés Javais" for instance).

In the public space, the interethnic relations are mainly characterized by two attitudes of the Verviers population. The first one is an avoidance of the parts of the city perceived as "stranger neighbourhoods". This phenomenon also concerns the downtown where immigrants are particularly visible. A lot of native inhabitants – but also some people with foreign origin – adapt their practices and strategies (shopping, choice of the children's school, etc.) in order to avoid several parts of the city seen as degraded neighbourhoods. On the contrary, the second attitude is a valorization of the cultural diversity in Verviers. As Marco Martiniello describes the notion of "soft multiculturalism" (Martiniello, 2011), the presence of cultural elements seen as exotic (food, music, shops etc.) can be celebrated by some inhabitants. A good example of this kind of practices is the frequentation of the "stranger's shops" in the Hodimont neighbourhood. Often described as a degraded place, this neighbourhood attracts inhabitants because of its "ethnics" stores. Products' originality, products' quality, lower prices and the friendly attitude of the sellers are some of the advantages attributed to these shops.

The valorization of the cultural diversity of Verviers is also defended by different institutional actors such as policymakers and associations. Firstly, a specific

service of the municipality is in charge of intercultural relations issues. Moreover, local authorities promote cultural diversity through many initiatives like cultural and festive events or communications campaign. Secondly, many associations provide services or activities supporting integration. They are coordinated by the regional center for integration of the city (CRVI). These activities target immigrants (French classes for instance) but also the whole city population (education and training programs on interculturality, employability supporting actions, etc.).

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD RELATION : BETWEEN DISCOURSES, DE FACTO COHABITATION AND CONVIVIALITY

When they describe the immigrants' presence in their own neighbourhood or in the city, many inhabitants use the language register of "immigrants invasion" and often develop racist and xenophobic discourses. The cohabitation with immigrants is generally described through examples of nuisances (noise, insecurity, dirtiness, etc.) attributed to this population and the "integration" of people of foreign origin is often considered as difficult or even impossible.

Beside this discursive register, practices are much more complex. Then, in a lot of cases, even people defending racist and xenophobic arguments develop a de facto cohabitation with people of different origins. The exigencies of the everyday social life – as common as maintaining good relationships with neighbours or buying food in the local store for instance – give opportunities to build interethnic relationships. The particularity of this kind of interactions, often kept silent in the discourses, is that they do not put the "ethnic" factor in the center of the relationship (De Rudder, 1993). A person with extremely hard discourses against immigration can meet foreign inhabitants during his free time as well as a tenant who has denounced bad manners and dirtiness of the "strangers" can ally with a "black" neighbour when she needs to talk with the owners of the tenement. Moreover, Véronique De Rudder underlines the importance of impersonal and formal interactions (tenant/owner, employer/employee, customer/storekeeper, etc.) because they "have the merit to integrate a conflict dimension and offer mediation ways - [they] also build social ties, objectively interethnic, lived or ignored as such"¹⁷ (De Rudder, 1993). In some occasions, the city services can provide such formal environment. In a district of Verviers for example, the organization of a "neighbourhood comity" with citizens and city animators offered a way to express

¹⁷ Traduction of : « [Les relation impersonnelles formalisées ou contractuelles] ont le mérite d'intégrer une dimension conflictuelle et d'offrir des voies de médiation – [elles] tissent aussi du lien social, objectivement interethnique, qu'il se vive ou s'ignore comme tel. » In : De Rudder, V., 1993 "La Cohabitation pluriethnique et ses enjeux." *Critique Régionale*, 18, http://www.ulb.ac.be/socio/tef/page_revue/tef_revues.htm.

and resolve a conflict between inhabitants and young people with migrant origins. The negotiated solution was the construction of a soccer playground in the neighbourhood allowing youngsters to play without disturbing the others. Even if ethnical categorizations are still present in the discussion, the formal negotiation allows setting them apart.

The cohabitation between immigrants and native people in the neighbourhood can also be characterized by practices of conviviality and mutual services. A good example of positive exchange often related by the respondents is sharing of culinary specialties. Beside this kind of relation, practices of mutual help (as keeping the mail of a neighbour during holidays or helping someone to fill in an administrative form for instance) are also important. Moreover, beyond these daily interactions, intimate relationships exist between native and immigrants. Friendship or mixed marriages cannot be underestimated even if they often disappear in the discourses behind the general consideration about “the strangers”.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to shed light on the notion of otherness as it is constructed at the local level when different populations (native, new immigrants, people of foreign origin but with Belgian citizenship) interact in the public space and in the neighbourhoods. It tried particularly to examine intercultural relations in the context of an increasingly diverse city. We have shown that there is ambivalence between how, in the one hand native inhabitants describe immigrants and express prejudices, and on the other hand, the way the different populations live together. Our point is not to deny problems which can exist between different ethnical groups. But we have noticed the ambiguous coexistence of categorization and anti-immigrants discourses with practices of tolerance and conviviality between diverse populations. This confirms the simultaneous development of two trends one of openness and acceptance to the other and one of closure and reject. It also reminds the inexistence of permanent and fixed cultural and ethnic identities but rather their dynamics and continuous exchanges. The results show also that relationships between different ethnic populations are shaped beyond ethnicity. Other factors such as social and economic situations but also location and spread in the city geography should be taken into account. According to these findings, several policy recommendations can be suggested in order to improve populations integration and social cohesion at the local level.

First of all, it could be useful to consider interethnic relations as a transversal question. Accordingly immigrants policy or integration policy could promote

collective projects focusing not only on cultural or intercultural matters but also on other dimensions such as improving public equipments, sustaining neighbourhoods organizations, etc.

Secondly, the existence of categorization and anti-immigrants discourses underlines the need of immigrant policy targeting not only immigrants but also native populations.

Thirdly, the research has put forward clearly in the chief of the native population the existence of stereotypes regarding immigrants and their offspring. Some elements indicate that immigrants develop also this kind of xenophobic or even racist prejudices regarding native or non-native population¹⁸. Therefore local integration policy should definitely promote and develop means to favor the encounter and the exchanges between various populations. It should be inclusive rather than always targeting some groups. And, moreover it should at the local level inform regularly the whole city regarding its demography and international immigration. The immigration history of the city has also to be remembered regularly.

Finally, developing a local immigrants or integration policy which would aim at improving immigration reception and immigrant settlement in an open way of respect and knowledge of each other, would probably enter in conflict with an immigration policy which still favors border closure rather than immigration and mobility. This risk of discrepancy between local and national policies and discourses on immigration could be overcome in the case of a closer coordination and cooperation between the different levels of governance in Belgium.

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¹⁸ However, the research was focused on perceptions of native population. Further research regarding immigrant representations is certainly needed.

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