

Interculturalism as conservative multiculturalism? New generations from an immigrant background in Milan, Italy, and the challenge to categories and boundaries

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This paper analyses the relation between national and local models of integration of minorities emerging from international migration processes in Italy – using as a case study Milan. First, the paper will contextualize migration processes in Italy and Milan (§ 1). Then, there will be a focus on immigration and immigrant policy, based on literature review and interviews (administered within the EU-funded FP7 project Divercities) to policy-makers and stakeholders at national and local level (§ 2).

The focus will be on how “interculturalism” is interpreted and practiced by relevant actors, since it can have many nuances – from a conservative multiculturalism (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997), close to an implicitly assimilationist non-policy, to a quasi-multiculturalist pluralism. In particular, nativist stances included in the association of interculturalism and social cohesion will be stressed, since they may well imply the subordination of minority and immigrant rights and chances – considered less deserving as less part of the host society – compared to those defined as autochthonous and “more legitimate” members of the society (Castro 2004). In this respect, interculturalist emphasis on social cohesion can be part of a coercive discourse of exclusion and subordination, even though presented as a pragmatic and sympathetic welcoming policy strategy.

As an example of the ongoing institutional practice, we will focus on local measures dedicated to new generations from an immigrant background, that challenge the boundaries of nation-state and require a rethinking of national and local identity.

Studied initiatives seem unable to structurally reverse vulnerability factors, scaling up and generalizing the institutional answers they provided. Public authorities seem not able to systematically contribute to successful measures. Unmet expectation may reduce individual and organisational commitment. This is a serious problem connected to the issue of sustainability that is considered as the main factor that affects the success of considered actions negatively. Because of this lack of resources, indeed, initiatives are short-term, with poor or no chance to become institutional in the longer run.

Local and national discourses on integration and interculturalism we analysed show a public discourse much more focussed on reducing negative effects of diversity on social cohesion, primarily through a nativist vision that requires adaptation from those labelled as “diverse”, and secondarily working on social participation and inclusion by facing inequality. A discourse on recognition and appreciation of diversity and its potential positive role is much less present, and usually comes as a reaction to negative politicization, blaming and labelling of mixed communities operated by political entrepreneurs of fear.

Diversity seems to be considered positive, acceptable and enriching when it's not too much related to public visibility and inequality. Rarely there's an appreciation of minorities, especially those

stigmatized, by themselves: the two discourses on inequality and recognition stay largely separated.

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