



# Cultural Base

Social Platform  
on Cultural Heritage  
and European Identities

## Cultural hybridization in Europe

Vision Document  
(cultural creativity axis)

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### Abstract

Cultural diversity and cultural complexity has dramatically increased in Europe in recent times. Cultural hybridization is very important in this context as the relationship between diversity and creativity becomes crucial in assuring social cohesion and progress. However, assimilationist standards predominate in Europe, therefore the potential represented by this increased cultural diversity is not conveniently exploited. So, one central question arises: **How can cosmopolitan scenarios of cultural hybridity in Europe be favoured?** In order to clarify this question we consider different future scenarios and the challenges that they pose: current anti-cosmopolitan trends that promote hostility and rejection instead of cultural hybridization in European societies, the necessity of reinforcing and taking full advantage of the existing European cosmopolitanism, and the deficit represented due to the lack of a solid and coherent policy framework favouring cultural hybridization on the continent. Then we examine the factors influencing the possibility of cultural hybridization in general terms: the social and material conditions experienced by immigrants and people of immigrant background, the frames of cultural encounters, and the influence exerted by the field of cultural policy. Finally, we deduce key questions for research and action: in relation to the way cultural hybridization develops and contributes to cultural creativity, to the reasons as to why cultural hybridization processes are less effective in Europe than in other parts of the world, and to successful examples of cultural dialogue and artistic hybridization.

### Introduction

The interpenetration and transformation of cultural repertoires that are produced by the exchange of artistic and cultural expressions can be interpreted in terms of processes of hybridization. Hybrid identities and products have always been present in Europe. But nowadays they are much more common than in the recent past due to the extreme increase in diversity of current European societies. That said, in contrast to traditional immigrant countries, **in Europe artistic and cultural hybrid expressions have not gained much prominence in the public sphere or in the market, nor have they been significantly promoted, socially**



**or politically.** Consequently, in spite of its strategic importance, as a basis for cultural creativity and a key for preventing social conflict, cultural hybridization has not been analysed thoroughly enough at the European level. Hybridization processes have been scrutinized only in some particular cases and fields, mostly in relation to popular music, but hardly at all in many others. Mainstream research in the urban context, where most of these processes take place, tend to ignore them, so disregarding or misunderstanding the potential role of diversity in urban dynamics.

Cultural hybridization is a universal and never ending process. In Europe, however, the rise of nationalism during the XIX century produced the institutionalization of some strong and closed collective identities, giving way to assimilationist cultural patterns and to the parallel decrease and regimentation of cultural exchanges (contact points were replaced by official borders). Hybridity lessened and became relatively invisible in the Continent as a result. This situation has since evolved but it has not changed substantially.

The conditions for the development of cultural contacts have been variable. Different traditions of citizenship (liberal or republican) have been more or less favorable to the integration or recognition of cultural diversity in different European countries, and thus also to cultural hybridization. They have also changed over time. Some relevant policies, such as immigration policies, have experienced ups and downs over the years, so conditioning in a positive or negative way the possible integration of immigrants. On the other hand, cultural policies in general have tended to be more inclusive with time, evolving from a first phase of support for "ethnic minority" cultures, to another of multiculturalism, in which cultures present on the territory were considered on equal footing but basically segregated, and subsequently to a third phase, characterized by the appreciation of "the intersections and intermixings of, and crossovers between, culturally different perspectives and traditions ... and their new and unpredictable consequences", as well as for the will to contribute to their accommodation and promotion, especially at the local level (Bennett 2001). In the last years, after the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) this trend has intensified. But on the whole, despite the temporal and geographical variability of political contexts, it can be said that in Europe the assimilationist standard persists, though attenuated. After the recent



economic crisis, and even more so now, with the immigration boost associated with the refugee crisis and the strengthening of far-right parties, the situation tends to be even predominantly regressive.

The assimilationist pressure no longer achieves its objectives in the present conditions of increased cultural flows due to globalization: now cultural homogenization is no longer feasible in the context of liberal societies (Rodríguez Morato, 2012). However, this pressure is able to render invisible and devalue the cultural hybridity that immigrants promote. In general, it tends to even block the hybridization process with dire consequences in terms of the conflicts that this blocking feeds and the loss of cultural dynamism and creativity that it derives.

### Challenges

The evolution of the situation affecting cultural diversity is likely to be uneven in Europe, but existing trends suggest the prevalence of possible opposing scenarios, which pose different challenges.

#### **Challenge 1: Current anti-cosmopolitan trends make intercultural dialogue difficult and promote hostility and rejection instead of cultural hybridization**

A first scenario is given by the most regressive of these trends. Racism and xenophobia are on the rise. The populist distrust of foreigners grows, most notably the rejection of Muslims, who are stigmatized as the other par excellence on the basis of an exclusivist conception of European cultural heritage. Far-right parties and movements that foster these feelings are reinforced almost everywhere. In such a context, links and affinities with others tend to lose sight of and tolerance towards cultural difference decreases. This is an essentially anti-cosmopolitan scenario.

A social climate as above poses the greatest difficulties for fruitful intercultural dialogue. Given this scenario, the forced assimilation is the only perspective offered to cultural minorities. But additionally the substantive conditions of cultural encounter are in this case the most negative, as the prejudices of the majority towards cultural difference leads to discrimination. Any cultural creativity



or productivity can be derived in principle from a situation of this kind. In the absence of recognition, cultural cross-fertilization is impossible. As long as a discriminatory social relationship prevails, the predisposition of minority groups will be, in the most favourable hypothesis, a reluctant and partial assimilation of the majority culture. Another likely result, however, is hostility and rejection (Delanty 2011), with the possible consequence of an even more negative reaction: that of an alienated, fundamentalist and radically antagonistic development, such as that we can observe in young children of immigrants that are nowadays converting to Jihad in different parts of Europe.

***Challenge 2: European cosmopolitanism provides a cultural and institutional basis favourable to cultural hybridization that needs to be reinforced and fully exploited***

A different future scenario is linked to other rooted European trends that stand in opposition to those previously mentioned. Europe also cumulates a tradition of individual freedom, tolerance, pluralism and democratic inclusion, having given rise to a particular form of cosmopolitanism. The European project, in particular, though relatively blocked and in crisis today, has come to embody these principles. In this sense, from the project itself, but also beyond it, from various bodies, official and unofficial, and from both local and national and supranational levels, the recognition of cultural diversity has been favoured and intercultural dialogue has been encouraged in different ways. The Council of Europe, for example, sometimes together with the European Commission, has promoted important programs and recommendations for cultural diversity. A particularly significant initiative in this regard was the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008), supported by the European Union (European Parliament and European Council). The actions in this respect have been multiple at many different levels. All these actions, though intermittent, have had continuity and are projected into the future, defining a scenario that can be considered much more favourable to intercultural dialogue.

In contexts defined by the above actions there are dynamics of cultural expression and exchanges that result in hybridizations and in reflective cultural interrelationships. The results of these processes culturally energize the public sphere, enrich local and national artistic scenes and are capitalized, privately or



collectively, by immigrant populations and the ethnicized minorities, giving way to expressive entrepreneurship, with significant benefits in terms of the integration of these populations (Martiniello 2015).

### **Challenge 3: The lack of a solid and coherent policy framework favouring cultural hybridization is a fundamental deficit**

Obviously, the scenarios described are not radically exclusive, as the contexts in which cultural encounters unfold are not usually one-dimensional and coherent. There are a variety of instances that can act in contradictory ways: immigration policies do not have to pace themselves with cultural policies, nor the central government to act in the same way as local governments, contexts of cultural policy and social policy do not need to exert a similar influence, nor do the cultural and sociocultural sectors have to operate in the same way, and of course, cultural institutions, within the margin of their autonomy, can develop favourable or unfavourable policies in relation with cultural diversity. On the other hand, there are also more or less propitious perspectives for addressing this issue that inspire different kinds of political action. The conception of cultural diversity from the point of view of collective identities is, for example, much less favourable to cultural hybridization than the perspective based on the idea of individual cultural rights.

All of these different instances and perspectives operate as propitiatory keys to alternative futures. To the extent that they can influence the situation of intercultural dialogue in contradictory ways they also pose a crucial challenge of coherence to political action.

### **Keys of Change**

The factors influencing the possibility of cultural hybridization are manifold. These include, first, the social conditions experienced by immigrants and people of immigrant background, meaning "the external arrangements that enable or constrain (their) opportunities for action and social or physical mobility" (Vertovec 2015: 15). The structural conditions of their existence are linked to political and economic variables of different types, which determine their levels of economic



inclusion and urban and educational integration. The exclusion, segregation and discrimination in these various fields are, in this respect, crucial factors that hinder cultural hybridization.

Another set of influencing factors are linked to the frames of cultural encounters. In this regard, the prevalent power relationship could be an important factor in explaining the feasibility of cultural hybridization processes. Likewise, specific contexts – such as given traditions in the expression of national culture identities, ethnic representations or discursive configurations regarding cultural value - could play a significant role in the cultural valorization of hybrid products.

Finally, a major factor is given by the complex context that today represents the field of cultural policy, a field in which the actions of a variety of actors intertwine: local, regional, national or supranational actors in addition to cultural institutions and third sector organizations or associations of immigrants. As noted, international bodies such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Union, have launched conventions and programs that have had a great importance in the transformation of the parameters from which the questions about cultural diversity are addressed in the field of cultural policy as a whole. The aforementioned European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID 2008) led to a great number of national, regional and NGO activities in all participating countries. The Intercultural Cities project, also promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Union, led to assessments and changes of integration and diversity policies in around 50 local and regional administrations throughout Europe.

Nationally, as shown in the database Compendium, the degree of political centrality and the involvement of the various territorial levels vary widely according to traditions and to the country's administrative configuration. Countries with strong historical traditions of cultural contact or experiences of internal cultural diversity, such as Belgium, Switzerland, Holland or UK, seem much more likely to advance in this line than more unitary and culturally isolated ones, such as Austria, Greece or Hungary, or also others whose experience of immigration is still recent, as in the cases of Italy or Spain. Cultural policy models (Zimmer and Toepler 1996) seem to be an important variable as well. Countries that can be inscribed in the Nordic model, traditionally linked to the principles of cultural equality, have tended to be particularly open to the equal promotion of cultural expressions from



immigration. Those linked to the liberal model, such as the UK, being less interventionist in general terms, have been more neutral or more pragmatically favorable to their expansion (Wood and Landry 2008). Finally, those representing the continental model, characterized by its hierarchical vocation, such as Germany or France, have tended to strongly differentiate (and privilege) high culture to the detriment of the so-called socio-culture, being in this area where they have come to interlock the cultures of immigrant origin. This discriminatory propensity, which relegates these cultural expressions to a culturally devalued circuit, has traditionally prevailed in these countries (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006) and is still present in others that adhere to its conservative principles, such as Italy and Spain.

### **Conclusion: key questions for research and action**

It is almost unanimously considered that in the relation between diversity and creativity lies one of the most important keys to addressing the key challenges of coexistence and progress in the complex, multicultural and intensely networked societies in which we live. Therefore, to clarify the positive contribution of cultural diversity to an improved creativity as well as the difficulties for making it effective should be considered as a crucial issue for European societies today. This issue poses both theoretical and practical questions. Among the most important are the following:

#### **Question 1: How can cultural hybridization develop and contribute to cultural creativity in Europe?**

Despite widespread awareness about the importance of the phenomenon of cultural hybridization, its study has been scarce and its understanding is still very poor. It is essential to advance this understanding, analysing the dynamics of hybridization processes in its different facets: institutional, social and symbolic. At the same time, it is also necessary to clarify the positive contributions that cultural hybridity promoted by immigrants and their children make to the European welfare and progress. In this regard, Marco Martiniello (2015) has identified a number of domains in which research can be considered a priority.



To begin with, it is convenient to investigate the impact of artistic and cultural productions of immigrants and the racialized and ethnicized minorities on the local and national cultural scenes, how they energize and alter them. It is also important to investigate how these cultural expressions and practices serve as a means for the intercultural dialogue within the local community, in what conditions and with what results. It is of paramount interest as well to study how cultural creations of immigrants and their descendants are incorporated into processes of mobilization and political representation. And finally it is important to also analyze the impact of immigrant and ethnic expressions on the local economy. All this research can be usefully addressed in a comparative perspective, both between situations and between processes.

**Question 2: Why are cultural hybridization processes less effective in gaining attention in the public domain and less weighty and visible in Europe than in other parts of the world?**

As said above, cultural hybridity in Europe has not reached the same level of prominence as in other areas of the world with more traditional immigration. That lower level of visibility in part corresponds to a lower level of articulation: hybridization occurs but the categorization of creation as hybrid tends to be avoided because it raises resistance or even rejection. What are the reasons for these European peculiarities? In this regard, it should be asked, from a comparative, intra- and extra- European perspective, to what extent the living conditions of immigrants in Europe account for less proclivity to cultural creation for its part, and to what extent what we have referred to as the frames of cultural encounters (representations of national identity or ethnic identities, for example) are less favourable in this case. Finally, and this is particularly important, it should also be asked how the specific configurations of the field of cultural policy, and their internal contradictions in the absence of a European cultural policy that harmonizes it, contribute to these results.

**Question 3: Can we identify cases and experiences in Europe representing successful examples of cultural dialogue and artistic hybridization with a positive incidence in the local cultural scene, in the social situation of immigrants, or in the cosmopolitan transformation of the local population?**



Beyond the more theoretical focus, in our exploration of cultural hybridization issues we would like to also look at concrete experiences and models from which we could learn. What are the artistic developments that can better represent successful examples of cultural hybridization and intercultural dialogue in Europe? In this regard, different cases can illustrate the potential of different types of initiatives and formulas. Some Italian "Social theatres", as Teatro delle Albe in Ravenna and Teatro Nascosto in Volterra, are examples of highly creative initiatives developed between the local and the global that have achieved an outstanding impact on the country's theatre scene. The Global Music Academy in Berlin is a private music school that works in areas with a high proportion of immigrants and which develops a holistic approach to the development of musical capacities (training musicians, musicologists, producers and cultural managers in the styles and practices of different music cultures around the world). It responds to the needs of the musicians in Berlin on the base of developing a hybrid musical practice. Finally, the successful "Resonant Community" project developed in Norwegian schools in the early 1990s focused on changing attitudes towards immigrants among young pupils by exposing them to music from around the world (Bergh and Sloboda 2010). Beyond these limited cases, the investigation in this regard should identify other models that could be inspiring for action, both in relation to particular initiatives, as well as to more structural policies.

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