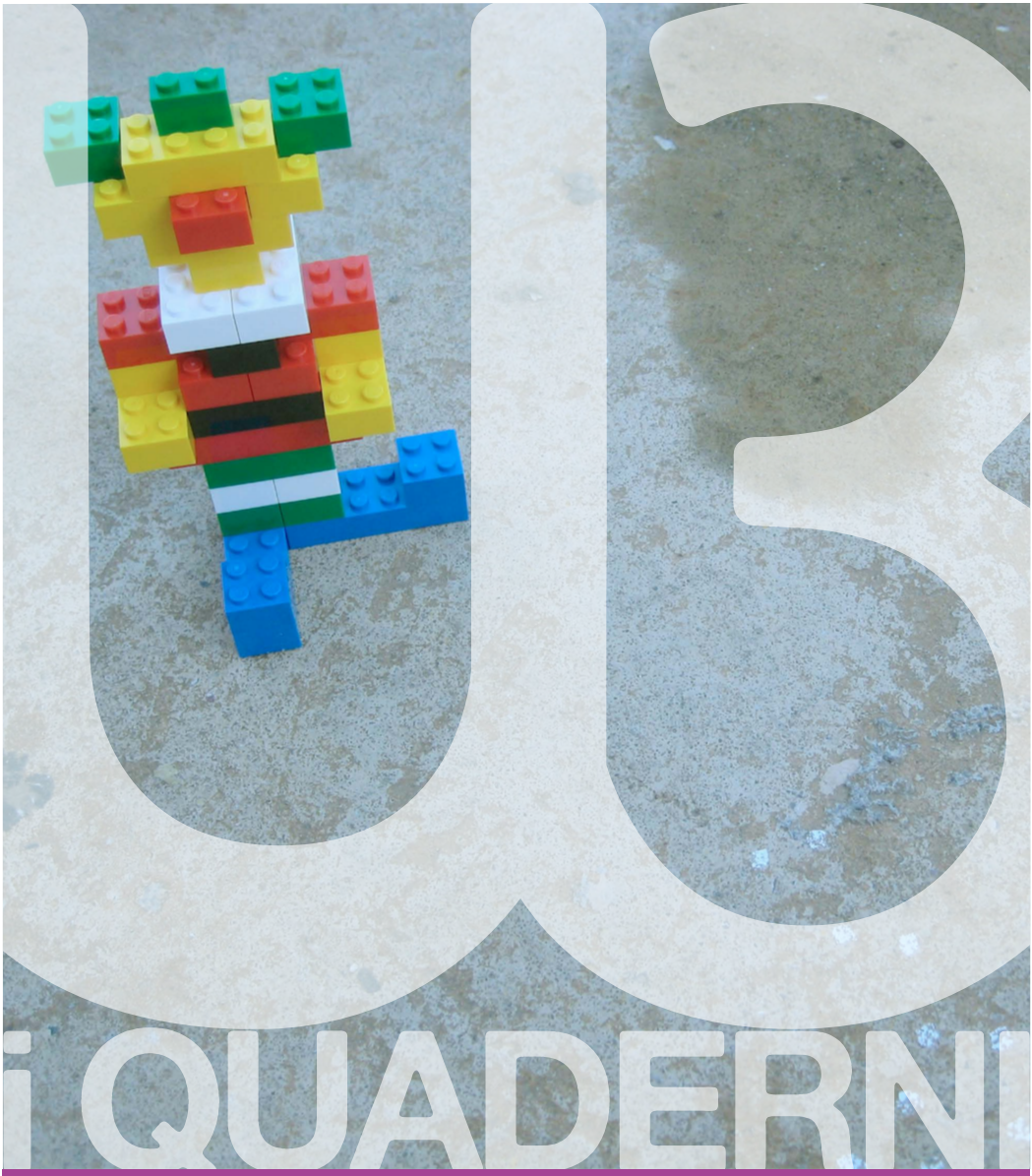

#03

Rappresentazioni urbane
Urban Representations

a cura di **ETICity**

• Simone Tulumello & Giacomo Ferro |
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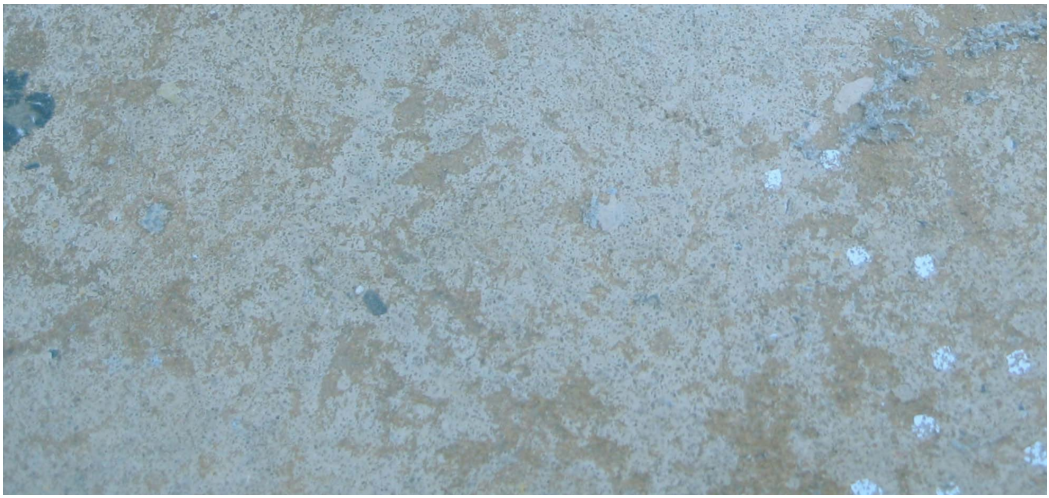

City representations and the selective visibility of the (ethnic) 'Others'.
A short note on the fervent 'diversity discourse' in Europe

@ *Ifigeneia Kokkali* |

Diversity |
Visibility of 'Otherness' |
City-representations |

Praising ethnocultural diversity of cities is a discourse that has acquired increasing importance in urban research and policy. In this latter, it has had such an echo that city leaders often find themselves chasing the 'diversity advantage' of their cities, which struggle to become multi-ethnic, pluricultural, 'open to difference' and so on. The object of this short article is to stress the selectivity with which diversity becomes visible in the cityspace. In seeking to capitalise on the diversity, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism (and so forth) of their cities, city-governments shape and promote specific city images; they thus construct and/or re-invent city identities and city representations for all kinds of city users.

The interest of scholars for the cultural diversity of urban dwellers is not new. Already in the 1960s, American activist Jane Jacobs viewed diversity as the key factor of a city's success. More recently, however, the "creative capital" thesis (Florida 2002) made diversity central to discourses on city growth. Florida suggests that diversity is essential to the economic success of a city, because it can contribute to the development of the "creative" sector, namely services and knowledge industry in the health sector, cultural production, economics, finance, law, journalism, R&D. The "creative class", which is a segment of the population highly educated and well-paid, supposed to be

attracted by cities with a widely diverse population, would be the main drive of the knowledge-based urban economy.

Despite the severe criticism this thesis has often received, the question of the (positive) correlation of diversity to economic growth of cities has undoubtedly inspired much of the recent literature in the field of urban studies and geography. Based on a limited account of studies that treat this topic (see for instance, Ottaviano & Peri 2004; Damelang et al. 2007), I am not able to maintain a general assumption admitting that ethnocultural diversity is a factor of growth for cities, and for European cities in particular. I think that the state of research on this subject seems to evoke strong contextuality. Some cities benefit from diversity while others not, and it is not always possible to identify any direct correlations between diversity and city growth. Even more importantly, whenever there exist benefits, they concern some very specific segments of the urban dwellers, even if these benefits can be potentially spread to other groups.

Still, treating the correlation of diversity to city-growth is a growing trend in academic research, a fact that has also had considerable impact on decision-making at the local level. Ethno-cultural diversity is often launched as de facto factor for development or enrichment for cities and it is seriously promoted as such to European policymakers and city governments (see the 'Intercultural Cities' programme at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/Default_en.asp).

It is understandable that the popularity of this topic is certainly related to the new challenges urban Europe has to cope with. Namely, the demographic changes due to population flows within and towards the old continent. Given that these flows are mainly intended for cities, immigration and, in turn, the ethnocultural, religious and other diversification of the population are phenomena that concern in particular cities and urban dwellers. It is then safe to say that, either we like it or not, diversity is here to stay. And, it has thus to be taken into account and dealt with at all levels: symbolic, political, social, economic. Initiatives such as the aforementioned "Intercultural Cities" programme definitely contribute towards this realization and the promotion of new ideas in policymaking.

Yet, this alone does not provide satisfactory explanation for the fervor with which the "diversity" discourse keeps making its way in urban research and policy in such un unambiguous fashion. Other factors are also at play.

Let me remind that with the decline of the manufacturing industry, cities faced the urgent necessity of their economic survival. They had to abandon their classic sectors of economic activity and they sought to differentiate themselves in order to attract investments and a share of spatially mobile capital. De-industrialisation resulted in the cities' struggle for the diversification of their economic bases, which were increasingly directed towards the new tertiary sector (knowledge, education, TIC, R&D), (Rath 2005).

It is worth noting, however, that cities were incited to take this option instead of other possible. In this context, "culture", as a location factor for foreign investment and capital, played a very significant role. Generally speaking, in the 1980s, it has been instrumentalised in the urban renewal programmes to create visual attractions and appealing consumption spaces, as well as to attract investors, skilled labour forces and tourists. Urban regeneration of inner cities, waterfront revitalisations, establishment of urban entertainment centres and museum quarters (often in old manufacturing industries and quasi-empty railway sites that have been rehabilitated) were – and still are – some of the main ingredients of this process (Merkel 2011). Every city seeks to be an arts Mecca, have a waterfront, offer interesting landscapes as well as a fascinating heritage (Rath 2005). More recently, the potential of the so-called "creative industries" in generating urban growth and renewal has consolidated the role of cultural production in the urban political economy.

In the pre-financial crisis period, as Nina Glick Schiller (2012) rightly reminds us, the mantra *"urban restructuring through diversity"* has been widely disseminated. Urban leaders world-wide were encouraged to *'rebrand their cities, recruit "new-economy" industries, compete for "global talent," and attract such talent by ensuring that the city provided a diverse and cosmopolitan urban ambience'* (Florida 2002). As aforementioned, city governments in Europe through various initiatives were advised to develop and enhance the 'diversity advantage' of their city (Wood 2009, p. 17). Following Florida (and his successors) quite uncritically, it has been widely diffused that openness and multiculturalism promote a city's creativity and thus its chances to a more successful economic restructuring. And this, despite the ambiguous research outcomes as regards the direct correlation of diversity to city growth; and also despite alternative voices who sought to attract the attention on the difficulties which diversity might involve in citylife (see the famous critique to multiculturalism by Robert Putnam, 2007, on the basis of social cohesion drawbacks).

David Harvey very accurately summarises these processes: "consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy". As in all urban history, the expansion of the urban process has brought significant transformations in urban life that is in lifestyles. In this context, "quality of urban life has become a commodity, as city itself" (Harvey, 2008, p. 31). Harvey cites two eloquent examples of this commodification and touristification of cities and citylife: "In New York City, […] the billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, is reshaping the city along lines favourable to developers, Wall Street and transnational capitalist-class elements, and promoting the city as an optimal location for high-value businesses and a fantastic destination for tourists. […] In Mexico City, Carlos Slim had the downtown streets re-cobbled to suit the tourist gaze." *(op.cit., p. 38)*.

If city-leaders opt for reshaping the image of their cities in order to

attract tourists, capital, the "creative class" and so forth, this then partly means that there is a clientele and a prosperous economic niche for cities, that is a market. Sharon Zukin (2008) reminds us indeed that "consuming authenticity", namely living the authentic experience in the city, is extremely valorised and chased by some segments of the urban dwellers, particularly some young urban elites.

In a global context in which the ideas of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism are extremely fashionable, and in which openness and diversity of cities are idolised, making new experiences eventually involves discovering "interesting" landscapes, "exotic" tastes, etc. It is obvious therefore that the commodification of cities and citylife draws importantly into the commodification of ethnocultural diversity. Here again, the examples are eloquent. In many European cities, we have been observing, in the recent years, an increasing fervor for "ethnic" celebrations, be it "tropical" carnivals (Notting Hill, Berlin, Paris), Bollywood film festivals (the Hague) or the Chinese New Year celebrations (in almost any Western European capital). And even if such initiatives might have been marginal in their infancy, it is without any doubt that they were later backed and even sponsored by local governments.

This applies as well to "ethnic neighbourhoods", which have been for long in the midst of controversies over migrant integration. Let me remind that urban segregation on an ethnic basis is generally considered to be at odds with integration. Because, ethnic neighborhoods are thought to preserve the differences of the segregated migrants. But, in the midst of the cosmopolitan/diversity lunacy, ethnic neighborhoods seem to acquire a new value, both symbolic and economic. For they add to the "exotic" tourist/urban experience, while seriously augmenting (and, even more importantly, rendering visible) the diversity and the cosmopolitanism of a city. For instance, Chinatowns are emerging in various European cities, and, as Rath (2005) points out, their image and appeal are so strong that, in many cases, they have become export products. There are many other examples: Kreuzberg or 'Klein Istanbul' in Berlin, the Passage Brady (Indian neighborhood) and Strasbourg -Saint- Dennis (Turkish district) in Paris, Brick Lane in London.

Yet, this is not a universal process, in the sense that not all areas or ethnic groups attract the interest of city leaders, of urban dwellers and of tourists. Preference (or said alternatively the "demand") has an impact on the nature of the production (the "offer"); and, as Zukin stresses, this bestows opportunities on some groups and their areas of the city, while simultaneously making other groups and other areas largely invisible.

In other words, the different minority (including migrant) or diverse groups are not treated equally in the city's "shop front". Attention is not attached to all groups nor do all activities and cultural aspects of these latter attract interest and excitement. Some minority cultures are classified as

exotic while others not. For instance, a Buddhist temple, Indian and Turkish restaurants or the Chinese New Year celebrations are generally perceived as exotic and interesting landscapes, while the minarets of a mosque or collective Muslim prayers outdoors during the Ramadan provoke resentment and are often classified as nuisance. The former might symbolically represent a welcome cosmopolitanism and "creative" open-mindness potentially economically interesting for a city or a neighbourhood; while the latter are often thought to be unacceptable, because – among other reasons – they alter the image (and the skyline) of the European cities.

In the Netherlands, in which the political mood has rapidly turned against immigration and the concomitant ethnic diversity, the main cities are conspicuously interested in the establishment of Chinatowns. In The Hague, where the immigration of Chinese is rather recent, the city actively promotes the transformation of the Wagenstraat, which is an insignificant shopping strip along the "exotic" City Mondial tour, into a Chinese quarter (Rath 2005, p. 239). In the late 1980s and 1990s mosques thrived due to the recognition of Muslims' claims to the constitutional right of freedom of religion, as well as to the approach that mosques would facilitate integration of Muslim immigrants. Since the late 2000s, however, official and popular discourses stress on Islam's incompatibility with Dutch norms and values and the Muslims' failure to integrate. Recently, any attempt to establish mosques has almost always generated conflict in the immediate locale, as mosques are associated to decline, marginalization, urban decade and ghettoisation (Es 2011, p. 254-256).

What this selectivity depend on is a complex question that cannot be addressed in the limited space here. It is certain, however, that the borderline between what is considered, by the different actors of a city (local governors, residents, entrepreneurs, tourist agents), as strange or disturbing, or, inversely, as exciting, interesting or simply acceptable is extremely volatile. It seems that the choices made at a particular moment are strongly correlated to the priorities of the city governments as regards the construction and reconstruction of city images, namely the city's' identity to be promoted; and, in turn, the city representations made available for "insiders" (urban dwellers) and "outsiders" (tourists and visitors). More generally, the different narratives each city develops and promotes regarding its minority and ethnoculturally diverse population groups overall are undoubtedly faithful to the selected and advertised city identities.

It is safe to maintain that promoting specific representations of cities involves specific representations and narratives for the "diverse" urban populations (minorities, migrants, etc.). The selected narratives, which involve selected groups, dictate, in turn, the local policies vis-à-vis these groups. But selectivity goes even further. Beyond decision making at this level, it is worth noting that the selected city images and representations prescribe also the practices of the "different" urban dwellers that are to be promoted. These are very specific practices and they are strongly

correlated to the commodification and the marketing of diversity. Making new experiences and discovering "interesting" landscapes involves mainly discovering "exotic" places yet while being at home, tasting ethnic cuisine, celebrating ethnic festivities and customs. All this is on strong demand on the part of young urban elites in many (European) cities. In response to this demand, and in concert to the diversity mantras, cities sought to promote their pluri-ethnicity and to invent it when absent.

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