The Many Dimensions of Belgian Diversity

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ABSTRACT

Like the other countries of the European Union, Belgium currently finds itself in both a migratory and post-migratory situation. This paper describes the various dimensions of Belgian diversity and the process of diversification of Belgian diversity, to use David Hollinger's expression (Hollinger, 1995). The conclusion presents some observations on the political construction of the democratic multicultural society.

Just as other societies, Belgian society is far from being homogenous. The persistence of a certain diversity within Belgian society has essentially been recognized since the failure of attempts to "French-ify" the country in the 19th century. Traditionally, this diversity corresponds to the fundamental schisms within Belgian society (Martiniello and Swyngedouw, 1998): the linguistic and community-related divisions separating the French-speaking population and the Walloons from the Dutch-speakers and Flemings; the socio-economic division between the working class and the capitalists; and the philosophical division between Christians (especially Catholics) and secular liberals. Given these conditions, the dilemma of reconciling such diversity with a necessary unity continues to be significant in Belgian society. The issue of national identity, in particular, has proved to be extremely complex. As much as a Belgian identity was considered possible, it could only be a composite of collective identities (somehow including everyone by respecting them) more or less corresponding to the three historical divisions listed above. Even if the questions "Who are we?" and "What are we?" were never met with a simple response in Belgium, a Belgian was, at the very least, allowed to be either a Fleming or a Walloon, a French-speaker or a Dutch-speaker, a Catholic or a secular liberal, a worker or a capitalist (Martiniello and Swyngedouw, 1998).

With time, the importance of these traditional societal rifts in Belgium changed little by little. Belgian diversity has become even more diverse over the course of the last fifty years, adding to the country's currently changing appearance. It regroups a mainly heterogeneous population demographically, economically, culturally, and politically – revealing a great variety of collective identities. Combining this diversity with a sufficient amount of unity in order to make communal life more or less harmonious remains, today as yesterday, one of the major worries of this little society that is less peaceful that it often appears.

What are the main dimensions of the Belgian "diversification of diversity," (Hollinger 1995)? Firstly, the linguistic and/or community-based divisions that traditionally oppose the Flemish and the Dutch-speakers to the Walloons and the French-speakers has grown enriched by new collective identities often perceived as "autochthonous" due to the process of federalization. In this manner, the German-speaking community has progressively affirmed its desire to be recognized as a unique cultural entity in Belgium and, more specifically, in Wallonia. The tens of thousands of German-speaking Belgians that live in a handful of towns and villages near the German border peacefully demonstrated that all attempts to assimilate them were useless. They expressed their profound attachment to the German language and their cultural identity while at the same time exhibiting a solid Belgian identity.

Secondly, immigration has profoundly changed Belgian society (Martiniello and Rea, 2001). Perceived at the beginning as a temporary phenomenon linked to the economic conjuncture, immigration slowly revealed its structural dimension. Without realizing it very well, Belgium – like its neighbours – had become a country of permanent immigration. The settlement of immigrants and their descendents significantly contributed to the process of Belgian "diversification of the diversity" in every sense. Demographically, immigration certainly contributed to slowing down the ageing of the population and to putting the breaks on the growing imbalance between generations. In addition, immigration implied the coexistence on Belgian soil of several dozens of nationalities from throughout the world (see Table 1.). In 2000, the foreign population of the country reached 8.8% of the total population. This figure does not include foreigners living illegally in Belgium nor does it include Belgians of foreign origin, those who acquired Belgian citizenship either via naturalization or by other legal procedures. Therefore, the immigrant population and the population of those of immigrant origin clearly surpass the official national figure of 8.8%.

Belgian and Foreign Populations in Belgium by Region (2000)						
	Foreigners (EU)	Foreigners (Non-EU)	Foreign Population	Belgians	Total Population	Percentage of Foreigners (%)
Belgium	563,556	333,554	897,110	9,341,975	10,239,085	8.8
Flanders	164,569	129,081	293,650	5,646,601	5,940,251	4.9
Wallonia	270,228	71,813	342,041	3,068,306	3,410,347	10.0
Brussels-Capital	140,356	133,257	273,613	685,705	959,318	28.5

Source: Martiniello and Rea (2001); Institut National de Statistiques (2000)

Additionally, the foreign population is unequally distributed throughout the country. While the foreign population makes up 28.5% in the Brussels-Capital Region (with concentrations sometimes remarkably higher in certain disadvantaged neighborhoods located in the former industrial belt), foreigners make up only 5% of the total population in the Region of Flanders and 10% in the Region of Wallonia (the region that is home to the oldest immigration in the country). The foreign population in Flanders is above all concentrated in the provinces of Limburg and Antwerp, while the foreign population in Wallonia is mainly situated in the former industrial provinces of Liège and Hainaut.

In terms of the nationalities of foreigners legally residing in Belgium, Italians top the list with around 200,000 people. They are followed by Moroccans, with 121,000 people more or less concentrated in Brussels. The French, a population rarely discussed in studies on immigration, come in at third place with more than 107,000 people living in Belgium. They are followed by the Dutch, with more than 85,000 people. In fifth place are the Turkish with 69,000 people. In addition, there are more 45,000 Spaniards, more than 34,000 Germans, around 26,000 British, close to 12,000 Americans and Congolese each, etc. Contrary to popular belief, a significant majority of foreigners living in Belgium hail either from an European Union member-state or another "developed" Western country. Those from non-Western countries remain the minority, even if their concentration in large urban areas make them particularly visible and can at times aggravate the notion that the country is being overwhelmed by non-Western immigrants, despite the fact that such a belief does not at all correspond to reality. For others, the presence of immigrants and foreigners is, on the contrary, an additional bonus for Belgian towns that quickly draw a population attracted to cultural diversity.

Culturally, immigrants and their descendants were not satisfied with submitting to some sort of assimilation that was often implicitly expected of them. They clearly judged it to be problematic, given the inexistence of a strong national culture. Thus, while adapting to the local culture, they encouraged it to evolve along with their own often rural cultures that they had brought with them. The cultural diversity of Belgium subsequently grew, whether referring to the material culture or to the more profound dimensions of the culture (Martiniello and Swyngedouw, 1998).

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Among the more profound dimensions of culture, religion assumes a fundamental position. Following the settlement of immigrants from predominately Muslim countries, Islam became the country's second religion. As a result, the classical philosophical division between Christians and secular liberals found itself altered. It was necessary to examine the place of this new religion in society (Dassetto, 1997; Panafit, 1999). As a result, besides traditional Belgian groups, there now exist Moroccan Belgians, Turkish Belgians, Italian Belgians and Muslim Belgians that present "new" collective identities and that underscore the diversification of Belgian society. These categories have no formal legal existence because, like France, "Belgians of foreign origin" are not included in the law.[1] Sociologically, however, they correlate to unavoidable realities, in the eyes of some social actors in any case.

Thirdly, European construction had a considerable impact on the diversification of Belgian society, principally in Brussels, one the capital-cities of the European Union. Within and around Brussels, the presence of European institutions has engendered the formation of a category of inhabitants sometimes pejoratively referred to as "Eurocrats." The European workforce, hailing from all of the European Union's member-states, enjoys a quality of life noticeably better than that of the average Belgian. Their integration into local society often leaves much to be desired, however, given that many have very little contact with Belgians and live more or less in their own world with expatriates of the same nationality and socio-economic status as themselves. The local population is far from being entirely favorable to the presence of a population sometimes perceived as being remarkably rich and privileged by comparison. Others scarcely take note of this barely visible European presence

in Brussels' many neighborhoods. This immigration of European employees will, in any case, only continue with the enlargement of the European Union. In time, these distinctive early immigrants will influence the urban fabric of Brussels.

Conclusion

Belgian "diversification of diversity" practically touches all spheres of human existence, from the cultural to the political, the social to the economic. Thus, the question of unity for this society is of fundamental importance: what is it that can unite a worker who is originally from a rural area in the Rif Mountains in the north of Morocco and is a Muslim, a Flemish businessman who heads a large computer technology company, a homeless man living in Brussels, a European Union employee posted permanently in Brussels and a young manager of Turkish origin living in Wallonia? What might be the meaning of Belgium for these individuals whose histories and plans are so radically different? Can they see themselves as participating in a common project? Must they necessarily be participating in a common project? Opinion is divided on this issue. For some, the respect of a type of "constitutional patriotism" (Ferry, 1990), of law and order is enough. For others, the population, whether it is immigrant or non-immigrant, must share a foundation of common values.

Be that as it may, these seemingly insignificant questions in reality shed light upon the difficulty of imagining the connection between social cohesion and cultural, economic and social diversity. In effect, some type of social cohesion is crucial in order to be able to assure society's continuity. Yet, certain current trends in Belgian society do not go in the direction of this indispensable cohesion. Firstly, the growing fracture between the haves and have-nots, given the difficulty to patch it up, is in and of itself an undeniable threat to cohesion. Is a society in which the unemployed remain unemployed from generation to generation and in which the wealth circulates almost exclusively in particular social milieus still united and cohesive. Secondly, does not a society in which collective identities and cultures that are considered legitimate and dominant (i.e., groups recognized by the Belgian State) coexist with identities and cultures considered illegitimate and dominated (i.e., populations for whom their presence in Belgium has been a result of migratory fluxes and with those fractions of the Belgian population who try to span the gaps between different cultural communities) lead to a gradual separation from the ideal of social cohesion?

Clearly, Belgian democracy must somewhat re-examine its foundations if it wishes to continue to exist. To do this, it is crucial that a powerful majority of those who live in Belgium recognize one another in these foundations in order to give place to, with their participation as citizens, a social life and to control the centrifugal forces that continually call Belgian society into question. To better take into account the sociological evolution of the population of the country, two principles must be well recognized as foundations of Belgian society and thoroughly well applied: multiculturalism and social justice.

The term "multiculturalism" is ambiguous. It is often masked by a variety of sometimes contradictory definitions. For some, multiculturalism reflects a fragmented society, segmented in the way in which ethno-cultural groups lead more or less discrete crusades to attain power and resources and within which the concept of "common good" has completely disappeared. For others, multiculturalism is, on the contrary, a principle of reciprocal acknowledgment that is supposed to help avoid the weakening of society. We must then be careful in our usage of the term (Martiniello, 1997).

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Applied to the Belgian case, it supposes an awareness that the process of "diversification of diversity" that Belgium has experienced is probably irreversible. Loyal to its history, Belgian society is assuredly diversified culturally as well as in terms of collective identifications. There is, then, space to examine the need to recognize "new" identities that arise as well as the methods of recognizing them. The unity of Belgium cannot rely uniquely upon one culture nor can it rely upon a single and exclusive national identity. The multicultural project consists of better accommodating the principle of political unity – not in institutional terms but rather in terms of the project and of the fundamental rules of political functioning – and the principle of mutual respect of the cultural and identity-based diversity that is specific to the country. In other words, "multiculturalism" is much more than a slogan confined to debates on the integration of immigrants. It identifies a project belonging to a democratic society in which citizenship and cultural belonging would be decoupled.

This project is however largely dependant upon the improvement of social justice. It is foolish to disassociate the debate about multiculturalism from that about the fight against social exclusion and inequality. In effect, if the social and economic divisions and inequalities continue to increase, if they superimpose themselves upon ethno-cultural belongings, any project for a democratic multicultural society will remain an illusion. Socio-economic

"balkanization" would be much more dangerous to the concept of public interest than cultural and identity-based diversity that is so often stigmatized.

Two questions are at the same time being posed in Belgium. Do not all identity-based and cultural expressions that respect human dignity have the same right to some sort of collective recognition? Should not all human beings have the right to a dignified existence regardless of their identity choices or their cultural practices? If Belgium responds positively to these questions, it could even become a model for the construction of a multicultural Europe. If it ignores or responds negatively to them, what will the Belgian experience mean to its inhabitants in the future? At best, it will be an abstract space in which every group will selfishly pursue its own particular interests without any thought to the respect of the common good. At worst, Belgium will disappear, at least as a democracy, not because of its diversity but rather because of the inability to extract the riches from the diversity or, in other words, to manage it. Today, Belgium oscillates between the project for a multicultural democracy and the slow movement towards a small "balkanized" enclave in the heart of Europe. The future remains uncertain and will largely depend upon the choice and the involvement of democratic people in all of the country's regions and communities, regardless of their cultural belonging.

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Note

[1] However, administrative information that is more or less official often permits references to "Belgians of foreign origin."

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