

Anti-immigration populism: Can local intercultural policies close the space?
Discussion paper

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Abstract

In this paper, I defend intercultural policies as a third way between assimilation and multiculturalism, centred on local policy and confronting the root cause of anti-immigrant populism. The paper is divided into three main sections. In the first I briefly overview the current context of European discourse, moving on in the second section to what I call the economy of reactive political discourse, and the root cause approach. The final section introduces interculturalism as a policy strategy that is essentially focused on the promotion of interaction – a policy focus that has been neglected by multiculturalism. It entails a complete change of local policy and offers a lens that can be applied comprehensively (to all policy areas) and in an integrative way (following all stages of a process).

Introduction

From a social psychological point of view, we know that when there is social fear of an unknown community, citizens tend to search for arguments to explain their feelings. These arguments help them rationalise their emotions. In hermeneutic terms, immigration is an interpretable reality where perceptions determine attitudes and behaviour. Managing feelings and perceptions has therefore become a matter for policy, moving us into a research framework which I call the “politics of discourse”. This is based on the argument that politicians are much more concerned with answering the question of what to say than the question of what can we do. The framework is inspired by the common assumption in the immigration debate that there is a clear difference between discourse and practice.

In this paper, I defend intercultural policies as a third way policy between assimilation and multiculturalism, centred on local policy and confronting the root cause of anti-immigrant populism. The paper is divided into three main sections. In the first I briefly overview the current context of European discourse, moving on in the second section to what I call the *economy of reactive political discourse*, and the *root cause* approach. The final section introduces interculturalism as a policy strategy that is essentially focused on the promotion of interaction –

a policy focus that has been neglected by multiculturalism. It entails a complete change of local policy and offers a lens able to be applied comprehensively (to all policy areas) and in an integrative way (following all stages of a process).

1. The current discursive context in Europe: the new, the old and the current normative challenges

In recent years, European policy has tended to be based on the assumption of the “national interest” and focused on arguments based around security, welfare and identity. These three categories drive discourses of populism and xenophobia, which are anchored in arguments generated by tradition (new conservatism), an emphasis on the primacy of the interests of existing citizens (populism), and the fact that diversity is categorically seen as socially “abnormal”. In Europe today, it is the interplay between conservatism and populism, covering the entire European discourse spectrum, which fuels the rise of negative public opinion against immigrant-related diversity. This suggests that xenophobia is a political and media construction, rather than a social fact. Anti-immigrant policies are therefore responsive to the rhetoric of electoral strategy.

In this contextual framework, we can ask two key questions. First, what is new and what is old in this European discursive trend? Second, what normative challenges can we identify?

What is new and what is old in this European discursive trend?

The existence of political parties with anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourses is not new. What is relatively new is the fact that some of these political parties have penetrated the political system by democratic means, and in some countries play a central role as real power alternatives or as part of government. France in 2002 was already a starting point, when Le Pen reached the second round in the presidential elections. The populist wave gaining ground in most of the traditional political parties when discussing immigration, due to the difficulty of managing negative public opinion on the issue, is also relatively new. Traditional conservative parties are beginning to use these populist arguments to gain electoral space.

The entrance of governments as new actors in this discursive context, in addition to political parties, is a recent development. An example is the increasing establishment of institutional arrangements that limit certain expressions of diversity. With this development we are seeing confusion in public opinion and a convergence of the citizenship debate and the immigration debate (as in France in November 2005), and irregular immigration and criminality (as in Italy).

What are the main current normative challenges in this European discursive context?

We can identify at least three normative questions arising from the current European discursive context in which governments are becoming new leading actors.

a) Diversity management: legal, not political

Governments are taking on a role as an agent in the discourse of immigration. This is being undertaken through both speeches and policy initiatives that seek to regulate the dynamic of diversity in the public sphere. The fact that governments are beginning to use legal rather than policy means to do this is important, suggesting that governments see that policies alone are not enough and restrictions are needed on a juridical level, thereby criminalising diversity-related actions if these rules are not met. The way in which governments justify these legal restrictions is also related to their own view of tradition and national identity.

This first normative challenge raises questions that need to be answered within our framework of liberal and democratic resources. Why use legal means? Why are policy means not thought sufficient? Why use legal means for protection rather than innovation, given the advantages of diversity?

b) Limiting diversity: Who watches the watchers?

By accepting these legal attempts to manage diversity, are we also accepting the arguments used to legitimise these practices based on tradition and national identity, or must we also ask for other justifications in terms of social trust? We are now in a "discursive laissez faire", in which it seems that anything goes in discourse and practice, with legal limits only existing against the promotion of physical violence.

c) Can we move away from a national sustainability approach?

There is a general discursive trend in Europe today towards a rhetoric of "national sustainability", based on security, welfare and identity arguments. It is now the driving force behind most diversity management policies. This tendency is becoming increasingly explicit in the context of the current EU Stockholm programme (a "Europe that protects"), characterised by economic crisis, a factor contributing to the rise of negative public opinion. We are witnessing a re-nationalisation of citizenship, which is highly reactive. Why do we have this citizenship policy rhetoric here (Europe) and now (within the crisis of multicultural policy approaches)? Can we envisage any moral, political or legal limits to these restrictions on diversity, given the liberal values and principles of European nation-states?

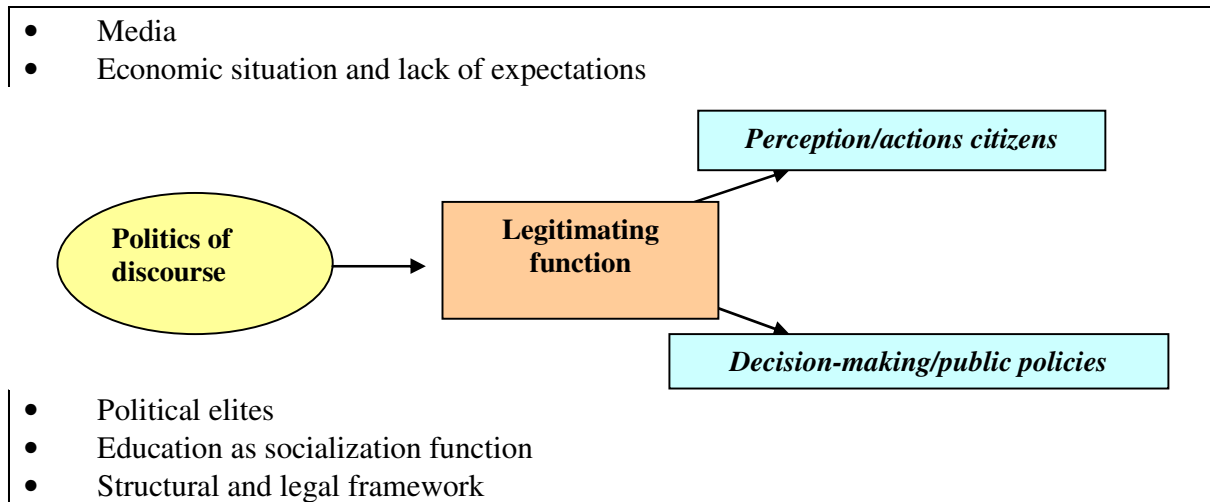
I will try to argue that intercultural policies applied at local level could help us to answer this question. But first, from this overview, I will look at what I call the economy of political discourse to analyse the situation.

2. The economy of political discourse and the root cause approach

To understand the structural reasons for the reactive politics of discourse we need to look to what I call the economy of political discourse. This can be broadly defined as a system of contextual restrictions that act to promote one type of discourse rather than another. It has a legitimating function for both the perception/actions of citizens, and the decision-making and

public policies that are applied to manage immigration-related diversity. It is summarised in the diagram below.

Graph1. Economy and the legitimating function of the *politics of discourse*



This “economy of discourse” draws on the following contextual factors:

- The presence of parties and/or discourses that are clearly racist and anti-immigrant. Given the prevailing “discursive laissez-faire” situation, meaning anything goes in the discussion surrounding diversity and immigration, there is a clear hegemony of these extreme discourses, which lead all other positions. This creates pressure on governments to implement anti-immigrant and xenophobic measures through political and even legal means.
- The logic of media and market news. The influence of the media in forming opinions is well known. The way in which the media talks about immigration has a direct effect on opinion and behavior. Why the media only concentrate on emotional-negative news, instead of highlighting pro-active policies produced in city councils which have opted for intercultural policies, for instance, is a matter of debate.
- Political elites and political bargaining. At this level we are not talking about the discourses produced by politicians in general, but those generated by leaders, who have a direct effect both internally within their party and externally, influencing the opinion and behaviour of their voters and the population in general. The way immigration is used in political bargaining between parties is also apparent to citizens and thus influences their opinion and behaviour.
- Education system. Education is seen as an instrument for social integration and a means for constructing identity, and more than ever remains the most crucial institution for socialisation. The ways in which the dominant cultural majority frames the educational

system determines its perceptions of its own identity and understandings of the “other”. At this level, the way diversity is introduced, or even the lack of discourse directly aimed at preventing racism, is crucial, and has legitimating function.

- Economic situation and expectation of populations. Many studies attempting to explain how negative public opinion is determined share the argument that the individual’s personal economic situation is crucial in shaping opinions, and even more so when there is a lack of prospects for people to resolve their situation in the short term. Here we see how the “other” becomes a “scapegoat”, particularly when the personal situation is in a low social class in terms of labour skills.
- Structural and legal framework. We already know how structures shape behaviour. In this case, the way structures differentiate between people, and even govern people according to their nationality and legal status, is a clear example of visible differentiated treatment that legitimates the way citizens view immigrants and some expressions of diversity.

By concentrating the analysis on the politics of discourse, the importance of focusing on the causes of xenophobic rhetoric, as well as its effects on social cohesion and trust, becomes clearer. To follow a policy-oriented perspective, we need to focus on the system of factors that nurture this reactive discourse. This is why from a policy point of view, I propose to adopt a root cause approach, rather than an effects approach. I will defend the intercultural policies strategy as a root cause approach that can inform policies and the governance of proactive discourse.

In practical terms, this approach is basically aimed at providing people with resources and tools to manage particular diversity-related conflicts and to promote trust and what I call a culture of diversity. Interculturalism as a policy strategy that seeks to close the public space for xenophobic discourse.

3. The “local turn”: Can interculturalism close the space?

We are moving from a state-centered policy framework to a more city-centered framework. The EU is also considering this “local turn”, and actively promoting municipal networks and research programmes, creating a strong EU-municipal relationship. Cities are becoming increasingly active in drawing up their own key questions/answers to challenges related to the accommodation of diversity, since it is at the city level that the development of anti-immigration populist discourse takes place. This local turn can contribute to a better understanding of how the economy of discourse works, and how intercultural policy can be seen as a political engineering strategy against the root cause of reactive discourses and practices.

The main aim is to prevent segregation and the lack of trust whereby different ethnic individuals restrict themselves to their own ethnic groups. This intercultural approach is a reaction towards a diagnosis of multiculturalism. It asserts that multiculturalism has missed a very important point: interaction between people and groups. I will articulate the key features of interculturalism, and its differences from multiculturalism.

Intercultural policies: key features

Intercultural policies as a strategy for cities expressing a commitment to diversity are on the increase in Europe (see intercultural cities, a joint action programme between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, and the seminal book *The Intercultural City* by Phil Wood and Charles Landry). As a promotion of institutional pluralism, this policy can be viewed as a response to the reactive trend towards problematising diversity, which by connecting diversity to disunity and distrust, presents it as an obstacle to the development of the city and its inhabitants. It can also be seen as a policy reaction to the so-called retreat of multiculturalism, or even the crisis of alternative assimilationist policy approaches. Interculturalism represents a new policy trend which is at the crossroads of various new European perspectives on dealing with diversity advantages.

What are the key features of this new policy focus? First of all, it witnesses a turn towards the city and away from the traditional state-centric way of thinking about diversity. This expresses the growing conviction that the accommodation of immigration-related diversity is first of all an urban phenomenon, which implies practical answers in local policy rather than state policy orientations.

Second, it tries to shift from an agent-based way of applying policies to an interaction-based focus. This means that the policy lens does not target an agent, either individual-based or group-based, but instead a process of interaction between at least two or more agents, and seeks to produce a specific innovative outcome: cohesion, development, trust, public culture and socialisation. Because of this potential outcome, intercultural policies can be viewed as a convincing reaction against xenophobic discourse.

Third, interculturalism attempts to make a commitment to a specific determinate concept of category-based rather than national origin-based diversity. It promotes the capacities of immigrants and citizens. It promotes diversity as a driver of innovation and creativity and as a public resource for the development and cohesion of the city.

This new focus for policy is entering the diversity debate and is initially welcomed as the only viable policy against the nationalist turn. It is presented as a third way between assimilation and multiculturalism.

The conceptual core of interculturalism is interaction in its obvious meaning – inter-action, namely to act together; joint action. What is important is that the agents of interaction act voluntarily, without any categorisation of diversity previously defined by any administration. In this respect, interculturalism respects the will of individuals or groups and is thus consistent with the core principle of liberalism: autonomy. It has a very open view of culture, since people can change from one to another without being “condemned” by their origin or public institutions (a person can be Moroccan and agnostic, or French, republican and of Algerian origin).

Despite this, interculturality does not predefine the agents of interaction. This does not mean that interculturality does not pay attention to agents, since a condition for interaction is that it has to be between heterogeneous agents. When homogeneous agents interact, that is not interculturalism, but simply interaction. Interculturalism requires at least two agents having something in common, but they must also be diverse, and it is this diversity that is to come into interaction because it has potential effects on the root cause of xenophobic discourse.

Another condition is that these interacting agents share at minimum an interest, or a project. Without this shared precondition, the interaction cannot be labelled as intercultural. In short: the minimum conditions are that the interaction is voluntary, between diverse agents, either individuals or groups, sharing a minimum project, but diverging in terms of religious, cultural, linguistic, or national identity.

The principal idea of this public culture is that one of the basic preconditions for living in a diverse society is to view diversity as something normal, a feature of contemporary society.

The difference between intercultural and multicultural policies

Unlike multiculturalism, which seeks to promote differentiated public spheres, intercultural policies designate the process of building a shared common public culture in which all forms of diversity are recognised, respected and have equal opportunities to develop. The result of intercultural policies is that they comply with the first principle that must be followed in a diversity context: diversity itself. Multiculturalism has neglected this personal principle, since it has not asked people and groups to accept living in diversity, and it is this shortcoming that creates the space for a reactive politics of discourse.

What are the main preconditions for promoting a culture of diversity? The main precondition is self-recognition by each of the diversities: that all expressions of diversity taken separately are without any exception in a new context, and are self-perceived as part of a whole that is the diversity. The principle of equal respect and self-respect is essential. Intercultural policies therefore imply a policy of recognition of difference understood in terms of identity, and assume that we are in a process of transformation, in which all parties mutually agree to take part in building a shared public project because they are in a new diverse context.

Indeed, intercultural policies are not about a pre-existing cultural context, but rather assume that diversity is a context-dependent concept. From this perspective, intercultural policies seek to promote diversity as an asset, as a resource, as a source of enrichment for pre-existing and new culture. What intercultural policies cannot do is cancel the existing culture, but they can enrich it and incorporate diversity as a tradition.

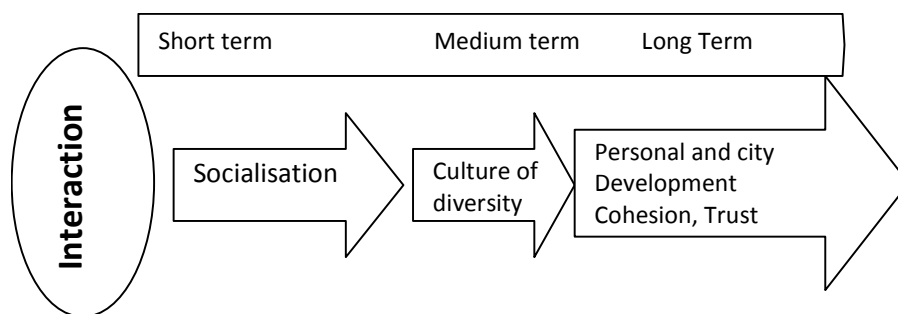
In this context, intercultural policies are the way to accommodate diversity, based mainly on promoting interaction between different forms of diversity, and encouraging them to see the relationship as a gain rather than a loss. The key idea is to move away from seeing diversity as a source of conflict, distrust, insecurity and disunity, and to promote diversity as an advantage and an opportunity for innovation. Intercultural policies must also be understood as a way of managing and promoting the benefits of the dynamics of diversity.

Although it is not a conflict-driven policy, intercultural policies involve a way of resolving “conflict zones”. In this respect, intercultural policies involve looking for tools to facilitate communication, dialogue, exchange and mutual understanding between people of different origins. While socialising and fostering a culture of diversity are the immediate objectives, the long-term priorities are social cohesion and city and personal development. Faced with a mosaic model of society in which differences are made visible by the existence of symbolic boundaries and impermeability, intercultural policies seek to foster convergence to the extent that diversity is no longer a criterion that explains the disadvantages of power and social stratification, and diversity is not a factor reproducing social inequalities. By encouraging the joint construction of a system of values and a shared public culture, intercultural policies can invert the relationship, with diversity becoming the rule and homogeneity the exception.

Conclusion: Why is the promotion of interaction good?

Interculturalism as a paradigm is found in many areas of public policy: business and urban studies, as well as in intercultural communication, social psychology, and education studies. From urban studies, this “wave” tries to consider diversity as an asset and as a resource, and attempts to increase individuals’ intercultural competence, optimising diversity as a resource for increasing social benefits. In this emerging literature, S. E. Page (The difference, 2007) is one of the scholars who best expresses this initial connection between business and urban studies, when he states that in a problem-solving situation, diverse groups have better tools and resources to give a variety of answers than a homogeneous group. He then gives an empirical argument as to why interaction within diversity can be an advantage to society. Using this idea as a starting point of public policy is what intercultural policy is about.

Intercultural policies can create a new context for the accommodation of diversity when there are spaces for interaction and joint projects. In this regard, intercultural policies denote not a state of affairs but a process. As a policy strategy, interculturalism has as a short-term effect socialisation; in the medium term it creates a culture of diversity; and its long-term purpose is the development of the city and personal development, building trust and cohesion. This strategy tries to answer the key question: why is the promotion of interaction good, and how can it be a tool against the root cause of anti-immigrant populism?



Let us briefly consider the practical effects of this promotion of interaction.

In the short term: There can be no socialisation without interaction and without socialisation, there can be no mutual understanding. This means that mutual understanding is one of the basic objectives of interaction, which is expressed in the socialisation process. This process in turn has two immediate effects: an ethical effect, in that it fosters equal respect (if one does not know or understand the other, it is difficult to have the means to express “respect”). It also has a cognitive effect, as it leads to a process of deconstruction of the prejudices “inherited” from each of the homogeneous cultures that are now interacting. Through interaction, we assume that we are in a process of deconstruction. We thus accept that “we must deconstruct to be able to construct”, or in other words, to live in an environment which recognises that no expression of diversity exists on its own, and where diversity itself acquires the status of culture.

In the medium term: A culture of diversity and interculturalism feed off each other. Interculturalism is impossible without a culture of diversity, and it is difficult to foster a culture of diversity without interculturalism. It is an awareness of living in a diverse society – as well as the application of principles for action that foster acceptance, recognition and respect for individual behaviour and various interpretations of the world – that can help people from different backgrounds and with different identities to interrelate. The assumption that defines this strategy is that the objective is not so much to promote cultural diversity, but rather to make diversity into a public culture and to defend a culture of diversity. The culture of diversity removes any moral (good/bad) and evaluative (positive/negative) dimension that justifies the political, social and ethical associations linked to the dynamics of diversity. It moves away from: (i) a political sense of diversity: that diversity is linked to power relations, (ii) a social sense of diversity: that diversity is linked to social structure and inequality, and (iii) an ethical sense of diversity: that diversity is linked to racist and xenophobic behaviour, and mistrust.

In the long term: After achieving socialisation and some degree of a new culture – a culture of diversity – in the long term the policy will achieve its basic outcome: personal and social development, social cohesion and trust between people, or will at least avoid distrust nurturing a politics of reactive discourse.