

## **Intercultural and institutional sociology. Attempts at integration within the information society.**

### **Abstract**

In a global modernity, individuals and communities from different parts of the world are now able to build new models and aspirations at the same time thanks to the opportunities offered by new communication tools that constantly provide resources for the definition of individual and collective identity.

What we call “globalization” today is mainly characterized by machines: industries, institutions, ideas, images, news and values □□ have developed around the new technologies.

The media-migration relationship is today one of the possible keys to scientifically interpreting modernity, as it interpenetrates much of the contemporary characterization of sociality, of the traditional boundaries within which we manage memberships and differences.

### **Introduction**

The media is a key element around which contemporary phenomena move, such as migration, and become a considerable part of the flow of meaning in contemporary societies through production practices. For Hannerz (1998) the cultural flow consists at the same time in the expressions of meanings that individuals produce through general forms, and in the interpretations that individuals make of such manifestations.

Culture and identity become less and less what Pierre Bourdieu would call *habitus* (a space of practical and reproducible provisions) to become the arena of aware choices, justifications and representations, the latter often aimed at a diverse audience and spatially dislocated (Appadurai, 2001). Above all with the diffusion of the Internet, public and private spaces merge with ever greater evidence, the public sphere becomes more inclusive, as it is accessible and privatized and it invades the domestic environment by making the latter lose its characteristics of private space.

Television, radio and the telephone make the places once private more accessible to the outside world, and therefore more public. Through these media, everything that happens almost everywhere can happen wherever we find ourselves. But if we are everywhere, we are not even in one particular place ( Meyrowitz, 1993 ).

### **1. Spaces, identity and network**

In the habermasian hypothesis, the means of communication intervene radically in the processes of representation, influence and production of forms of identity and belonging. The concept of public sphere is not linked to the idea of □□ organization or regulatory structure that sets roles and competences, but it is connected to the “social space generated by unitive action ” ( Habermas, 1996 ). This network that does not generate contents of daily communication, but presents itself as a communicative situation capable of incorporating information flows and positions, thus generating opinion. For the circulation of goods, there is therefore an “international trade” of information and culture that sees as its main consequence a “refederalization” of the public sphere (Habermas 1971, Thompson 1998) where there is the complexity of the new communication technologies to generate a new dimension of public, completely changing the conditions for access and participation.

The expressive nature of the media and the fusion between public and private generates two important changes in information systems: it makes access to information homogeneous and blends the types of image projected by different actors in the public space. What we see is also a restructuring of the “social stages”: the change of the public leads to a change in social representations, the merging of different situations and the meeting of different audiences helps to bring out a completely new situation that includes physical environments and information environments created by the media that can, on the one

hand, bring out a strong sense of belonging and sharing, on the other a sense of isolation and exclusion, strengthening or weakening a feeling of “them against us” (Meyrowitz, 1993).

The point from which to start is the experience and production and maintenance of common sense, understood as “expression and precondition of experience” (Silverstone, 2002). The media environment filters and frames everyday reality through unique and multiple representations, the individual actively participates in this process and it is through the media that we are forced to recognize common sense and cultural difference, confronting each other and diversity.

It is clear that we are moving also in media spaces, in reality and in imagination, in a material and symbolic sense.

The link between experience, identity and space is connected to the relationship between access to the place and information. Once, in fact, accessing the territory of a group meant being able to integrate within the group itself, while the advent of new media compromises this traditional link between physical location and social situation, confusing group identity previously separated, thus allowing individuals to “escape”, from an informative point of view, to groups anchored to a defined place and letting “outsiders” and “strangeness” invade an ever more fluid private dimension. The crumbling of traditional group ties leaves room for other types of associations and communities.

The diffusion of new media has led to everyone’s involvement, everyone’s problems have helped to flatten times and places, and have made the experience “repeatable” (Boorstin, 1978).

In this way it is possible to see how the new forms of communication can also influence the socialization process by changing the ability of many groups to control access to their own backstage behavior, by merging or confusing previously separate social situations, public and private behaviors, creating a significant fracture between physical position and social position. For Mead (1995), the information networks promoted by the media modify “the other mediate-generalized”, parameters, values and convictions that no longer belong to traditional groups and which offer individuals an unprecedented perspective from which to observe actions and identities.

The point is that the flow of new information, images and ideas is now constant and can no longer be interrupted and therefore the privatization of the public sphere is also accompanied by a sort of “publicizing the private sphere” (Riva, 2012) that changes radically the situational geography of social life. The public and spectacularized dimension of human emotions, for example, does not seem to have led to greater tolerance, as mass culture theorists said, the constant presence of suffering may have even attenuated our sensitivity to it. Indeed, cases of verbal violence and of “incomprehension of the Other” present in new online communication platforms, in particular linked to the immigration issue, will help us to reflect on this aspect.

At the same time, however, transparency, which strongly characterizes the new communicative scenario, makes some “hated” groups appear once hated and feared, with access to the expressive information of an enemy’s backstory, could help to lower the level of hostility towards them, even in the face of a rather violent verbal communication content. This may help us to re-think new migration policy strategies that have as a reference the global cultural-communication changes.

## 2. Strategies for integration in the transnational public sphere

Migrants move within a public and interconnected space that is re-defined precisely by the new technologies that represent their economic-social condition. They give meaning to their mobility, create the new conditions for forms of identity experimentation, favour new forms of media-action and intercultural sensitivity between migrant and host society. Therefore, they lay the foundations for trying to identify and define a possible transnational-digital public sphere in which fruition and media content define a new communication environment where it is possible to draw on specific identity resources, promoting the interaction of different cultural experiences and creating unprecedented forms of narration of diversity and otherness.

The relationship between third-country nationals and the host society is based on the ability of the latter to

guarantee the migrants a way to participate in the social, cultural, civil and economic life of the country, but this “pact of reciprocity” means that, on the other hand, immigrants participate actively in the integration process, respecting the values and norms of the host culture, without renouncing their own identity.

The definition of “integration” suggested by the European Commission, is a two-way process based on mutual rights and obligations. The main objective is the harmonization between different cultures where the term “cultural integration” does not indicate a point of arrival, but rather a path made of active and progressive measures that aims to improve skills (*skills*, citizenship rights, awareness of their cultural identity and therefore of their values and their history) of a minority in the host country .

Over time, contemporary societies have adopted different solutions to manage the problems of relationships between different cultures; solutions, which social scientists have defined with the term “models” (Zincone , 2009). However, since the end of the eighties a lot of research has repeatedly highlighted the failure of such theoretical models regarding the problem of integration and the lack of effective social policy strategies. The root cause seemed to be linked to the implementation of actions based on interventions by trial and error, or to the abstract configuration of such models, which were not suitable to be applied to contexts that were constantly changing.

The strategies most frequently mentioned by scholars, whose debate is still quite fluid and open today, are “assimilationism” and “multiculturalism”, which with their variations within inhomogeneous contexts have, on the one hand, solved part of the problems linked to integration, while aggravating others at the same time.

In the first case, the model provides direct integration strategy, addressed to individuals. More precisely, the aim is the complete adaptation of the subject, in other words the migrant is fully adapted to the culture of the host society assimilating symbols, meanings, lifestyles and social relationships. In this way, however, it de-socializes with respect to the rules and internalized values and re-socializes according to the rules and expectations of society that welcomes them into all-encompassing way.

The acceptance of the deconstruction of the original culture therefore makes room for learning the new culture, through a scheme that anthropological sciences would define as “acculturation” ( Zincone , 2009); the main objective of this approach is the achievement of “political and juridical equality of the subjects” based on a public culture that recognizes neutrality and secularity to the State. The assimilationist model in fact attributes the rights to the individual accepting it as the only interlocutor, but not to social or ethnic groups, moreover the State maintains a strong, secular role, that of guarantor of cultural and religious freedom as long as it does not invade the public sphere and remains a private matter (Zincone, 2009).

However, the emergence of ethnic conflicts and racist and xenophobic political attitudes and proposals, in countries such as France, has put this strategy in crisis for achieving cultural integration, through the assignment of political citizenship and legal equality.

The second and third generations of immigrants have unfortunately only known a reality of inequality in every context, from school to the world of work; the psychological, cultural and socio-economic discomfort has generated cases of revolt in the Parisian suburbs and has changed into new forms of ideological, political-religious extremism, typical products of modernity, like in the case of Islamic radicalism (Pace, 2008).

This type of assimilationism , which we could define as “statist”, is very different from the “corporate” type, typical of the United States, where the role of guarantee in this case is entrusted not to the State, but to civil society and the market. Assimilation here is seen as a gradual process, so the migrant, thanks to interaction, will know the host culture and the socio-economic dynamics that govern the country. Today everything translates into a mixture of different cultures within a context social often non-dialoguing and only apparently homogeneous (Rosaldo, 2001).

American culture sees the migratory process as a “normal” mode of population growth and a direct cause

of market growth where the host is recognized as having a certain positive function in the labour market, developed through interaction in civil society, while excluding the issue of citizenship and political equality. The model examined, therefore, appears fragmented, incomplete and is considered a more ancient strategy than that of multiculturalism, which seems to represent the right response to cultural diversity on the part of Western societies.

This latter integration strategy is based on the idea that a true acceptance of diversity would lead to the creation of a system of parallel rights (specifically of the ethnic group within the regulatory system of the host society with the State as an impartial guarantor).

So it is configured as a model with prevalent public intervention, based on the recognition of the rights of groups and communities and on the acceptance of diversity (Zincone, 2009). The State guarantees legal treatment and differentiated services for minorities, the subject carrying a culture diversity is recognized through the legitimization of their specific tradition and its ethnicity.

Unless subtle pushes, uncontrollable aporias or risky critical elements, customs, beliefs, alternative lifestyles are introduced into the social system, everything is admitted and even encouraged; in this case the migrant is configured as a citizen to whom their rights are recognized, but limited by belonging to a specific ethnic group (Zincone, 2009).

The consequence of this is the loss of importance of the individual subject to their linguistic community and a “trivialization” (or *disneyfication*) of cultural differences (Kymlicka, 2012), as we not only witness the formation of hermetically sealed ethnic groups, but also to forms of intercultural dialogue that remain folkloric and superficial with a high risk of reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes, able to further polarize ethnic relations.

For the Canadian political scientist Kymlicka (1995), the multicultural model, modified over time in a more or less consistent way, has recovered assimilationist mechanisms (also called “civic integration”). Thus the scholar considers this model more as “corrective”, rather than as an attempt to abandon the multicultural model, which contributes to adapting the theoretical part of the strategy to different cultural-political and socio-economic realities.

### **3. Conclusions (Rethinking integration?)**

The most relevant interventions in this regard concern training, the linguistic question and the setting of learning paths that allow the migrant to familiarize with the language in order to interact with civil society and then acquire the basic knowledge that fosters the experience of citizenship and experimentation of intercultural communication strategies.

Recent data and field observation would however show a clear incompatibility between multiculturalism and civic integration: these forms of integration would be in all respects idiosyncratic because they descend from the explicit rejection of the multicultural model; more precisely it is possible to identify two main sources of friction between the policies of the two models:

- the shift of a culture of rights towards a culture of duties; there are, in fact, forms of liberal integration (The Netherlands and Denmark) that offer compulsory support and training programmes to the migrants because integration is conceived as a duty and not as a right: non-compliance with the rules then entails direct exclusion of the migrant from renewal of residence and social rights;
- the change in the definition of national identity from “open” to “closed”: a conception of the closed and all-encompassing national identity provides for a complete deconstruction of the migrant’s personality in order to embrace a new identity, devoid of all the previous identity components.

However, these frictions can be overcome through a “hybrid model” founded in large part on multiculturalism, corrected by assimilation measures of civic integration, which includes policies based on tolerance and an open conception of national identity, within a cultural framework of sharing ideals, defending human rights and seeking new relations of citizenship.

The hybridization of the models can work according to some very precise conditions that have a lot to do with the representations of the collective imagination and the attitudes of the social subjects:

- the migrant must not be perceived as a threat: relations between the state and minorities must be framed within the framework of an effective social policy;
- strong interaction, free from preconceptions, between host society and other cultures, respecting individual rights;
- perception of national borders as safe by citizens;
- avoid the polarization of the clash towards a single foreign culture, cultivating a culture of coexistence;
- perception of the migrant as an added value, a resource that can make the market more vital and therefore contribute to the economic growth of society.

The open debate among policy makers, which opposes the assimilation and multicultural model, is beginning to envisage the construction of new systems of “mixed” integration, with the aim of activating only the positive potential of both.

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