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**From the Intercultural Model
to its Actual Implementation in a Spanish Neighborhood**

Jaime Palomera and Mikel Aramburu

DRAFT

Introduction

During the last decade, Spain's economy became an exceptional case in European history. Between 1998 and 2010, the country attracted 6 million immigrants (5,747,734¹), who now represent 12 percent of the total population. Most of these immigrants entered the low-skilled sectors of the labor market. At the residential level, they were pushed to small villages or working-class neighborhoods.

During the last five years of the socialist government, the state acknowledged this reality, stating that the new population “cannot be considered immigrants anymore but new neighbors,” and that even though “they are still perceived as immigrants” many had been able to reunite their nuclear family and had acquired Spanish nationality. Finally, the government—like many others across Europe—showed anxieties about the possibility that “residential concentration” and the current economic crisis might lead to “ghettoization” and hostilities, particularly between Spanish neighbors and foreigners (PECI, 2011:32²).

In view of these dangers, the socialist government took upon itself the designing of a model of diversity governance. Two “Citizenship and Integration Plans” were designed (2007–2010 and 2011–2014). Through these plans, the language of

¹ Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Revisión del Padrón municipal 2010. Datos a nivel nacional, comunidad autónoma y provincia.

² PECI: Plan Estratégico de Ciudadanía e Integración 2011-2014 (2011), Ministerio de Trabajo e Inmigración, <http://publicacionesoficiales.boe.es/>

interculturality, explicitly borrowed from supranational entities such as UNESCO and the European Council, entered the high spheres of the Spanish state.

Our aim in this presentation is to go beyond the Intercultural Model to scrutinize how intercultural projects are actually put into practice in particular localities. With this aim, we move to a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of a Spanish city, where a “community project” allegedly based on the tenets of interculturalism is currently being implemented. What we will show is that issues of equality and social justice, although promoted in the official rhetoric, are actually hindered in everyday processes of governance.

Current forms of multiculturalism, defined as “interculturalism,” place high value on the question of “living together” or “conviviality,” not only in Spain but also abroad (EU, 2004; UNESCO, 2009). However, in actual practice, local governments do not see local “intercultural/community” projects as a means to promote social justice and allow the people to have effective rights, but as an end in itself, often devoid of content. In the current stage of predatory capitalism, processes of interculturalism are narrowed down to the prevention of conflicts that may arise as “side effects,” and possible initiatives regarding socioeconomic inequalities are co-opted or eroded. In other words, interculturalism can become, in essence, a rhetorical device designed to implement sheer social control and appeasement in those social spaces where inequalities and processes of exploitation are more severe.

The Intercultural/Convivial Model

Spain never had a multicultural model. However, its diversity policies have been designed in the context of what some authors call a “post-multicultural era” (Uitermark et al., 2005), or what we could now call “the intercultural era.” But what exactly is the intercultural model, in the Spanish case?

On the one hand, this model is influenced by the view that assimilationism is untenable given the growth of cultural diversity and proliferating ethnic identities (Soysal, 1994; Kymlica, 1995). The Spanish model designed by the socialist government explicitly rejects the possibility of a simple assimilation to the dominant cultural forms, while recognizing that this is however the most widespread view in public opinion (PECI, 2011:19). On the other hand, while it praises multicultural policies for having supported equality and the recognition of cultural diversity, the new Spanish model criticizes such policies for stimulating the proliferation of cultural groups that lead parallel lives, isolated from each other, and for having an acritical or ahistorical notion of culture (PECI, 2011:110). Obviously, this view is influenced by the European Council (2000) and progressive intellectuals who have emphasized the danger of reifying cultures and of underplaying differences within ethnic groups (Baumann, 1996; Vertovec, 1996; Grillo, 1998). Interculturalism places a high value on the recognition of difference, but at the same time looks for “communication, critical dialogue and interaction between people pertaining to diverse cultures, on the basis of shared common values... The result of this communication and interrelation is the production of new cultural realities, in which all individuals and groups can be transformed and enriched” (*ibid.*). Apparently, it is a view that emphasizes the dynamic nature of cultural identifications, in line with some post-multicultural critiques (Parekh, 2000).

The Spanish intercultural approach understands that “social cohesion is a bidirectional process, of mutual adaptation, which affects all citizens, both Spanish and immigrants” (PECI, 2011:92). In so doing, it adds to the multicultural view the “liberal” critique of multiculturalism that not enough attention is paid to the obligation of minority groups to recognize the ways of the majority (Sartori, 2000; Barry, 2002).

Moreover, theoretically, the principle of interculturalism is linked to principles of social justice, namely: equality, citizenship and inclusion. The government acknowledges that “intercultural hostilities” in multicultural neighborhoods are linked with poverty and the lack of resources and emphasizes that “social cohesion” or “integration” cannot be achieved unless the state guarantees that citizenship rights are ensured. The actual participation of citizens in their economic, political, social and cultural environment is seen as a key element. In order to encourage such participation, the state endorses the notion of “civic citizenship,” promoted by the European Commission (2000:19), which recognizes rights and obligations after a certain period (five years) regardless of nationality.

In fact, the city is seen as the primary site where actual citizenship rights can become effective.³ The neighborhood is defined as the main space where both participation in public affairs and cross-communal linkages can be generated. Based on the work of some experts (most notably Carlos Giménez, a Spanish anthropologist⁴), the aim is “to go from a satisfactory level of coexistence—a peaceful coincidence in space and time—to an optimum level of *convivencia* [conviviality], which implies harmonious interactions and relations” (PECI, 2011:32).

Consequently, one of the specific aims of the Spanish model is the “promotion of intercultural citizen conviviality in neighborhoods” (ibid:116). The neighborhood or the small village, where neighborhood relations take place, are privileged sites of intervention, via “community projects” based on notions of community development. In a context of economic crisis and huge social cuts, it is key for the government to generate processes of “intercultural community conviviality” (ibid:113) and thus overcome potential situations of hostility.

³ Although no literature is quoted, it is impossible to ignore a number of authors who see the city as the site where cultural identities and processes of inequality negotiated: Amin, 2002; Isin, 2002; Purcell, 2003; Uitermark et al, 2005.

⁴ See Carlos Giménez (2005).

The Neighborhood

Let us go now to Los Bloques, one of the few localities in Spain in which an attempt has been made to implement a project of intercultural conviviality.⁵ Los Bloques is a housing project located in the periphery of a Catalan city. It is secluded from the rest of the urban fabric and has the highest levels of poverty in the city. Between 2001 and 2007, the area became an experiment in “bubblenomics” and was engulfed by the housing boom. In the process, approximately 4,000 immigrants from overseas moved in, which allowed many Spaniards to sell their properties and move out. 40 percent of the population changed.

As a result, the neighborhood presents a social morphology that is quite peculiar. First, there are two distinct migrant waves coexisting in the same space: that of the Spanish southerners who settled in the 1970s and that of the foreign migrants who settled after the year 2000. Secondly, the new migrant population is extremely diverse in terms of country of origin: at least 60 nationalities from all over the globe coexist in the neighborhood (some 179 in Catalonia). As a result, the social landscape is, to quote Vertovec, one of “super-diversity,” characterized by “new, smaller, less organized, legally differentiated and non-citizen immigrant groups” (2007:1027).

The Project

There have been several local projects in Los Bloques, financed by the government in order to promote processes of “conviviality.” However, currently, there is an ongoing project that for the first time is allegedly based on the principles of interculturalism. Interestingly, though, it is funded not by the state but by one of the biggest banks in Spain. In fact, the organization that funds it is not the bank, but its

⁵ All the names that appear in this text, although based on real places and real people, are fictitious.

Social Foundation, which belongs to what is defined as the ‘third sector.’ This bank dedicates, through the Social Foundation, a small part of its profits to endeavors that are deemed beneficial for society. The importance of this project is such that the socialist government referred to it in its Plan for Integration and Citizenship, defining it as “an example of the new initiatives of conviviality in neighbourhoods” (PECI, 2011: 195).

The Social Foundation’s plan is currently being deployed in 17 localities across the Spanish landscape. Every project is led by a local organization, which previously applied through a selection process. More than 200 organizations applied and only 17 were granted a project. Since September 2010, each local organization started receiving funding from the Foundation, which they have to use to hire a team of 4 “interdisciplinary” social workers. These workers are expected to provide technical expertise and coordination during the three years of the project, whereas leadership is allegedly assigned to the local organization.

An Exceptional Organization: A Neighbourhood Association

Among the 17 organizations that are currently developing this project, 16 are professional institutions or NGOs that employ professional workers and have a strong dependence on the state or other corporate organizations. What makes Los Bloques an interesting site to look at the logics of intercultural governance is that the local organization that got the project, La Tanda, is the only one that was not a professional institution. It is a grassroots organization formed by residents from the neighbourhood who have a tradition of participating in local politics to improve their living conditions, with no profit motive in mind. They are all migrants who settled in the 1970s, now in their fifties, and who therefore do not have the technical expertise that social workers in the Third Sector usually have, necessary for crucial aspects in the

bureaucratized Third Sector, such as applying for funding or projects.⁶ In other words, unlike the rest of institutions that got the project, La Tanda is formed not by young professionals, but by people who actually live in the territory and who therefore are directly affected by its internal conflicts. This is a factor that has been of great significance in the first two years of the project, since it has emphasized divergent views among the different actors.

Thin Interculturalism versus Substantive Interculturalism

At a superficial level, this grassroots organization shares some of the basic tenets of the Social Foundation. Both the Foundation and La Tanda argue that there is a danger of social fragmentation and hostility among ethnic groups and that therefore it is first and foremost necessary to foster cross-cultural linkages. The intercultural axiom is not to create separate communities but to generate the bonds and trust between different individuals usually associated with ethno-national groups. In this way, moreover, information about opportunities, rights and obligations can be more evenly distributed among individuals that might be disconnected from the mainstream channels of citizen participation.

During the first year, the four experts were deployed in order to reach groups of immigrants and encourage them to create their own organizations and/or to become part of the existing grassroots association. From then on, a certain pattern was established: these informal groups are encouraged to participate in different kinds of activities, both festive and informative. In these events, organized by the social workers and the organization, two kinds of approaches are taken. On the one hand, cultural diversity and anti-discrimination measures are promoted. On the other hand,

⁶ In fact, La Tanda would probably have not been able to go through the application process had it not been for our support as members of the academic system, who are very used to all the bureaucracy involved in applying for funding.

there is a constant search for dialogue and commonalities.

For instance, people are encouraged to participate in small festivals where different cultural expressions are presented, especially in the form of cooking. These activities are seen as a chance not so much to express cultural differences but to foster encounters and meaningful interactions between neighbours, usually around commonalities such as a “neighbourhood identity.” Most activities are used to allow people who perceive themselves as culturally different to find commonalities and create bonds. Another interesting activity is the ‘school for parents,’ where people from very different backgrounds had the chance to realize that they had very similar problems and anxieties when it came to child-rearing. Also, forms of leisure such as football and local Olympic games are promoted, where young neighbors from allegedly different communities are encouraged to organize specific activities on their own. The logic, according to the experts, is to organize the community “from below.”

However, this is as far as resemblances go between the Social Foundation’s view of interculturalism and the grassroots association’s own perspective. As one social worker told us, “For the scientific committee of the Foundation, in the same way as the local government, the final aim is simply that there are no conflicts in general.” Intercultural conviviality is an end in itself, not really a means towards more equality or social justice. However, for the grassroots association “not all conflict is bad. If we have to fight, then we’ll fight.” This is because, for them, fostering intercultural relations and looking for commonalities is a long-term project ideally aimed at transforming their social conditions and diminishing social inequalities. This underlying tension between the grassroots organization, on the one side, and the Foundation and the local government, on the other, became manifest in their everyday relations.

To begin with, the local administration, despite stating that it wanted to support the project, made it very difficult to progress, from the very beginning. Why? To begin with, the city government has another “community plan” in the neighbourhood, supported with public funding and led by a professional institution (an NGO) that depends on the council and has limited independence. From very early on, it became clear that despite their rhetoric, the city officials wanted to support their own community project, which they could control. According to our informants, the city council was not at ease with a grassroots organization leading a project: “they don’t like the fact that the father of our project is a neighbourhood organization instead of a Foundation that depends on their subsidies.” La Tanda does not have anything to lose; it is not attached to the city council and is composed of voluntary neighbours. This allows it to be ambitious about the claims it makes.

Several conflicts took place, through which this tension emerged. To begin with, the council manipulated the channels of participation by not allowing the association to be part of the public community project, on the basis that there were other organizations that did not get on well with them. However, the biggest conflict took place during the second year, when city officials boycotted an important step in the Intercultural Community Project. According to the project’s agenda, in the second year social workers were supposed to gather workers from all institutions in the neighbourhood (hospitals, schools, social services), in an attempt to make a shared diagnosis and raise awareness about common problems and possible solutions. In order for this meeting to take place, the Foundation made it mandatory that the city council representatives be part of it. In fact, this was a general requisite: for any activity, experts had to previously reach a consensus with their three parents: The Foundation’s scientific committee, the city council representatives and their alleged leaders, and the grassroots organization. This gave great power to the city council,

which was able to boycott the meeting simply by ignoring their calls or postponing it.

Why did the administration act like this? According to the experts working for the project, the administration was not enthusiastic about workers in the neighbourhood getting together to share knowledge, because it could eventually become counterproductive for them, with people making claims against their policy of social cuts and other important lacks regarding investment. Interestingly, the Foundation's committee would not let the organization organize the meeting without the council, but did not try to push the council to participate in it either. For the social workers, it was very hard to understand why members of the Foundation's committee were not intervening and using their clout to put pressure on the council. As a grassroots organizer said, "the Foundation is investing 150,000 Euros in this territory, at a time of public cuts. Do you think the council wouldn't get down on their knees if the foundation threatened to withdraw that kind of money? They have the power to influence the council." The fact that they did not made something evident in the eyes of both experts and La Tanda's members: the Foundation did not really trust the organization's members. As one expert told us, "it is just different, La Tanda is made of neighbors... From the day we sat for the first time with the Scientific Committee of the Foundation and the members of the organization, it became quickly evident to them that they had an unusual speaker. They were talking to the actual residents of the neighbourhood, people with the potential to make political claims, not to experts or professional social workers like us."

If the conflicts with the city council were very clear to the grassroots association, tensions with the Foundation were particularly felt by the social workers working for the project. Since social workers have three "parents" (the grassroots organization, the Foundation and the city council), they are more acutely aware of the diverging orders they get from each other and thus of the contradictions between

them. Although both La Tanda and the Foundation share the view that it is crucial to generate meaningful relations among neighbours from different groups, this is as far as the resemblance between the two goes. For the Foundation, as one social worker said, the final aim was to avoid conflict in general, to generate a state of apparent peace, a sort of harmonious state of conviviality that does not touch on key questions such as access to resources. However, for the grassroots organization, generating common spaces of dialogue is seen as a necessary step in the construction of a neighbourhood identity that can help neighbours to make collective demands. Conviviality cannot be detached from sheer survival, precisely because most interethnic tensions are predicated on social inequalities and competition over scarce resources.

From the very beginning, the organization tried to convince the Foundation of the need to focus on issues related to work and housing: the two main sources of inequality in a neighbourhood where unemployment, evictions and household debt are extremely high. From the point of view of the organization and the social workers, unemployment and the lack of public resources are at the base of conflicts among neighbors: unemployed Spaniards that accuse the church and the schools of giving goods to immigrants and not to them; groups of immigrants accusing other immigrant groups of getting more support from the government, etc. For La Tanda, it is evident that at the heart of inter-ethnic tensions lies a bitter struggle for survival, but precisely for that reason they believe that this is the issue on which forms of inter-communal unity should be forged.

However, the Foundation has, since the first day, forbidden the social workers from helping La Tanda organize around issues of work and housing, arguing that the project's predefined targets were health and education. As one expert uttered: "it is an absolute contradiction: the Foundation is supporting "conviviality" while the Bank to

which it is linked is evicting neighbours from their homes.” In fact, in the neighbourhood there is a movement organized by another group of residents who are carrying out a fight to stop evictions in the area, which according to their own data amount to 400 since the housing crisis began. The financial corporation behind the Foundation is one of the banks that have been foreclosing on a very high number of homes in the area and evicting many families. Interestingly, some of these residents, aware that the experts and the association were close to the Foundation, approached them to ask if they could use their influence to stop the bank from evicting them. In fact, Los Bloques is the only neighbourhood in Spain where the Foundation’s board cancelled a press conference in which they were expected to publicize their intercultural project. According to one of the social workers, this happened because the Foundation is very aware that, as the anti-eviction movement has stated, Los Bloques is one of the neighbourhoods in Spain with the highest numbers of evictions. In other words, they were “scared” that neighbours could boycott their press conference and damage the image of the project.

Moreover, one aspect that is often criticized by neighbours is that the local government often sees intercultural activities such as sports or food gatherings as end-products that do not actually generate meaningful and sustained interactions among neighbours. Government officials and the kinds of foundations and projects that they fund tend to evaluate the success of “community” projects in terms of the number of pre-designed activities that they have funded or generated, and the number of people that has attended them. This form of governing ‘diversity’ is attractive for those who are detached from the territory because it is easily quantifiable. Governmental success is therefore measured in numbers. The problem, however, is that these forms of governance do not, in the mid- and long-term, bring groups of people into contact with each other, and therefore do not challenge existing sources of fragmentation:

among generations, ethnic groups, and local institutions (which work in the same territory and experience common difficulties but whose workers are segregated from each other). In fact, the feeling that conflicts among neighbours are avoided is destined to remain a mirage as long as structural barriers are not dismantled. Once in a while, conflicts emerge between groups, whether racially or otherwise defined, and then the council answers with emergency measures, i.e. employing social workers that try to restrain the conflict by acting as temporary retaining walls.

The grassroots organization and its social workers, on the contrary, do not see the project as a series of isolated activities, but as a process in which cross-communal linkages are constantly looked for. The problem for them is, as one social worker told me: “that we have to constantly be thinking of how to put what we want to do, which is open-ended, in the language that they expect to hear, which is always based on very specific short-term goals. They have an amazing fear of anything that is abstract [such as the idea of having a meeting with all the public workers in the area]. They want very specific things.” Protocols and the language of bureaucracy therefore have the power of mitigating any potential process of transformation that goes beyond the sheer accumulation of festive activities.

Conclusion

The shortcomings of interculturalist policies become quite visible when problems of social reproduction emerge, as it is currently happening in Los Bloques and in working-class Spain in general. Unemployment, housing evictions and household debt are common problems that affect working-class citizens of all ethnic backgrounds and ages. In this context, it is impossible to think of a state of “conviviality” as an end in itself, without connecting it with fundamental questions of survival. “Convivir” (conviviality) and “Sobrevivir” (survival) go together. What

becomes visible in local projects of ‘diversity management’ is that they are seen as a tool to simply mitigate the potential conflicts that the dismantling of the state is generating. The potential paths towards a form of interculturalism that would have social justice as its main axis—based on the creation of durable cross-communal linkages—are constantly hindered through bureaucratic mechanisms. The key discussion around issues of work, housing and other basic resources, which are at the foundation of the ‘conviviality’ problem in poor neighbourhoods, are left out of the public agenda. However, it is precisely this kind of discussion what would really allow poor people to emancipate not as members of an ethnic group but as citizens, as current interculturalists like to say (Amin, 2002). In other words, though in theory interculturalism should “emphasize what different people have in common,” in the path towards achieving real forms of participation and citizen emancipation actual policies are narrowed down to the mere task of preventing conflicts, of whatever kind they might be.

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