

Immigrants in Belgium: The Sociocultural Structure

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Introduction

In this contribution, I want to investigate how immigrants of the "gastarbeider" (guest worker) type and their children have become implanted socioculturally in Belgium. At the same time, I will try to clarify how their relative status, their subjective and objective culture, and their interethnic or international orientations are dialectically interrelated. I will limit myself to the strictly scholarly anthropological literature. Characteristic of the anthropological approach is that the researcher attempts to assimilate the language and the culture of the target group and lives a few years among the immigrants both in their homes and in their host countries. In this way, he can interpret their actions on the basis of their own conscious and preconscious reference frames.

The number of strictly anthropological studies that have been done in Belgium on the immigrant phenomenon is very limited. Nevertheless, the work of J. Leman (1979, 1982) on Sicilian immigrants, the doctoral thesis of M.F. Cammaert on Berber women (1983), and the long-term research of other Flemish anthropologists like C. Joris (1984), P. Hermans (1983), and A. Gailly (1983) allow a number of general outlines to be sketched that can be relevant for the evaluation of the situation and the design of a policy.

But first I would like to call attention very briefly to the interethnic or intercommunity structure of the host country, Belgium. It seems to me that the way in which the two autochthon majority groups in Belgium, the French speakers and the Dutch speakers, relate to each other has created a semiconscious or preconscious perceptual framework that assigns the immigrants from the very outset to a very specific place.

The Autochthon Interethnic Relations

Several prominent historians and sociologists have pointed out in recent publications that the very widespread notion that Belgium is a state that was created by a forced marriage between two peoples who have always lived in opposition to each other—the "Flemish" and the "Walloons"—is incorrect (De Shrijver 1981; Polasky 1981; Stengers 1981; Huyse 1981). The two major communities have indeed not always been the same as they are today. When Belgium was founded in 1830, the general cultural language of the so-called better class was French, even in Flanders. The enmity of both the North and the South was then directed against the common oppressor, King William. The present opposition between Flemish and Walloons has developed gradually. Only a small group of Flemish were of the opinion from the beginning that it was an injustice to impose French on the people in the central political, judicial, military, cultural, and administrative areas (De Shrijver 1981). Gradually, by their demographic expansion and the democratization of political institutions, the Flemish succeeded in having Dutch recognized as a national language and then fixed the use of the language geographically so that, from both sides,

the respective language and ancestry and the respective territories have become congruent (Huysse 1981).

This process of ethnogenesis proceeded smoothly, particularly for the Flemish, because with their own language, they could define themselves in opposition to the French-speaking population that shared its language with the national institutions, and moreover, leaned strongly on the cultural world of France. "Wallonia" came into use as a term only after 1850. In comparison with Flemish nationalism, the Walloon phenomenon is more recent. Until recently, most of the politicians who considered themselves responsible for the southern part of the country spoke about Wallonia as an *economic* region, the viability of which they must defend, rather than about a region that is lived in by a people with its own culture. Flanders, on the contrary, first created a Flemish national consciousness by means of the symbolism of language (*De taal is gans het volk*: "The language is the people"), of the enhancement of the value of their own cultural tradition, and of renewed cultural creation. It was only later that one began to speak more *explicitly* in economic terms.

However that may be, today the relationships are such that the territorial dimension, the language, the culture, the ancestry, and the economic potential together have become symbols in the political discourse of the two camps as well as in the language used by the mass media. *Flanders' Technology* is an eloquent symbol that refers not only to what is for sale in Flanders. And the language used by the Burgomaster of Voeren in the exercise of his office incarnates the relative status relationships between the two communities.

These years of explicit association of language, territory, relative status, ethnic belonging, and rights that pertain to this ethnic belonging automatically assign a special status to people who enter Belgium as immigrants: they are "foreigners." Along with "Walloon-ness" and "Flemish-ness," "foreign-ness" comes to be felt as a kind of natural given to which are attached a number of rights and duties on the basis of a kind of natural law. It seems today that there are few Belgians who are prepared to see Belgium as a country where, alongside the Flemish and the Walloons and a small German-speaking community, still other peoples with their own cultural traditions could be established and remain established. It is expected that the "foreigners" will either return to their country of origin when they become too numerous and too expensive or that they make themselves invisible by allowing themselves to be culturally assimilated or by applying for naturalization.

The Belgian constellation, much more so than is the case in immigrant areas such as the American state of California (De Vos 1977; Patterson 1977; Ogbu 1978; Thernstrom 1980), unconsciously structures the reactions and perceptions of every autochthon in this sense, however open and altruistic his or her disposition might be. The customs, values, and institutions of the "foreigners" remain, therefore, "foreign" phenomena that do not belong to our territory as permanent realities. In Flanders, Flemish; in Spain, Spanish; in Italy, Italian. Parallel to the hierarchy of ethnic groups, one finds a hierarchy of cultures in which one is more "foreign" than the other, but in which none is felt to be of equal value with the autochthon cultural traditions. This hierarchicalization is reinforced by the prevailing economic relationships between the Belgians and the foreigners of the "gastarbeider" type. The very fact that these people originated from economically less-developed countries or regions classifies them immediately as an underclass (Roosens 1981:64-71; Rex and Tomlinson 1979). Moreover, many immigrants do not speak the standard language of their country but one or another dialect; a great many of them are also illiterate or semi-literate, which confirms the inferior rank of their culture. This explains why most of the features of the immigrant cultures are classified within a kind of evolutionary perspective: many of the dominant majority see it as self-evident that it would be a good

thing for the immigrants, and certainly for their children, to transfer from their "backward" religious beliefs and customs to the majority's, a kind of advantage for which they will have to strive in the course of an inevitable evolution.

The First Generation

As noted above, all of the large populations of "gastarbeiders" in Belgium originated from regions where the economic situation stimulated or forced emigration (Leman 1982:17-34; Heinemeijer 1977:134). It is accurate to say that immigrants from these regions left in order to enhance their relative status, but this does not yet mean that "they only came for money." Many came to be able to survive and to make their remaining family members' conditions more bearable. Most of them never abandon this perspective: all studies indicate that the vast majority of the first-generation immigrants declare that they will sooner or later return to their country of origin (Cammaert 1983; Marques Balsa and Martins-Boudru 1979:85). But at the same time, it is noted that this return is postponed in many cases. Similar findings have been reported in our neighboring countries (Entzinger 1982). From the behavior of many immigrants, it can be concluded that they do indeed take this return seriously: they send money—and not rarely considerable sums—to their families in their home countries, or buy land there, or build a house or apartment there. Many immigrants maintain contacts with their family members via third parties or spend a great deal of money on international telephone calls "home." They go there on vacation for extended periods every year or two. On these occasions, many of the immigrants demonstrate, mostly in striking ways, the success of their venture. Expensive, conspicuous gifts of consumer goods, expensive automobiles, expensive clothes, and gadgets demonstrate the success stories and make them credible (Joris 1984; Bundervoet 1977).

It seems to me worth noting that the immigrants successfully enhance their relative status in their home regions by means of products that symbolize the "modern," "new" world, apart from their possibly higher use value, which, of itself, also incarnates the more advanced character of the world of the host country. In this way the immigrants alter the objective culture of their home country while enhancing their relative status. This also implies that those who remained behind wanted these products. But this being recognized in a higher status coexists with the immigrants' respect for a number of traditional basic values, rites, and customs. For example, a father who cannot succeed in safeguarding the virtue of his women in Belgium is also dishonored in Morocco, Sicily, or Turkey, and this loss of honor cannot be compensated for by the accumulation of possessions. Thus, the orientation to the home country also has a conserving effect.

From the above, it seems that the alteration of the objective traditional culture—which for outsiders can appear to be a "Belgianization"—does not mean that the immigrants abandon their ethnic belonging. Thus, one must not confuse ethnic belonging with aspects of an external, observable life-style.

By preserving the home country as an ultimate reference frame, life in Belgium is rewarding for many immigrants because, considered in this perspective, it contains a promise that is already honored on the occasion of vacation visits home. By building their own social networks in the host country, by maintaining stores, bars, cafes, and restaurants, and by organizing markets in their own style, the immigrants can give form to the continuity with the past and with their region of origin on the social level (Leman 1982; Cammaert 1983). With this situation in mind, it is understandable why there is no need for the first generation to become naturalized Belgians and why they see little purpose in doing so. Moreover, an immigrant can only lose psychologically and socially should he try to compare the relative success that he has achieved by immigrating with the success of the local

population: he is generally too far behind. He has every interest in using his home group and his co-immigrants as norms.

The juxtaposition of ethnic groups on the Belgian territory can, as has been shown up to the present, go together with relatively peaceful coexistence. However, this form of segregation also means that the immigrants are poorly informed about the country in which they are spending many years of their lives (Roosens et al. 1979:23-32). Also, because of their ignorance and their lack of cultural skills, the immigrants remain dependent on many social assistance activities and lack opportunities for promotion in their working environment. In addition, by their living in segregation, the autochthons and the allochthones have developed a number of stereotypes that complicate their daily relationships and aggravate conflicts (Roosens et al. 1979:23-32).

The de facto segregation, which, in my opinion, is maintained from both sides, is obvious in its complicating effects in the sectors of life in which the migrants are forced to come in contact more intensively with the autochthon system—namely, in matters concerning their children, or the “second generation.” Through their children, the immigrants are confronted, whether they want to be or not, with autochthon values, symbols, eating customs, sex and youthful behavior patterns, hygienic prescriptions, and so forth, in such a way that they cannot remain indifferent to them (Roosens et al. 1979:33-54).

The Second Generation

It has become commonplace to say that the second generation sits between two cultures. In fact, this expression conceals as much as it reveals. From the above, we have seen that the immigrant family never maintains perfectly the culture they acquired in the home country. Instead, an immigrant version of the home culture is created in which the social context which gives many elements of a culture meaning and significance has been lost. In Sicily, for example, the *piazza* life brings together the men of the village or small town every evening. In the home country, the *piazza* life gives form to a good portion of the social and economic life and through it social control is exercised; in Belgium it degenerates to a rather banal cafe visit. This change involves a considerable loss of function (Leman 1982:319-341).

A father in the immigration situation can do very little or nothing at all for his family or for the employment of his children because the people he meets in the cafe are also “foreigners” who have little or no influence on the Belgian reality. Moreover, both parents very soon appear to be incompetent in the eyes of their children when it comes to orienting themselves in the autochthon reality; many children have to help their parents in their contact with local authorities, such as health centers, social services, and administrations. In the language that the immigrants eventually begin to speak in Belgium, many old expressions disappear, and new words—generally bastard words and pidgin structures—appear (Leman 1982:619-629). Furniture and household apparatus on the Belgian market are acquired and alter the form and social context of the women’s domestic tasks (Cammaert 1983:293-294). In addition, many immigrant couples marry in another social structure than the Belgian structure; in the home country, men and women spend the greater part of their day in single sex groups of relatives and friends. The couple that lives a rather isolated existence in an apartment is, for many people who come from the southern countries, in a situation that requires adaptation (Cammaert 1983:341-355; Roosens et al. 1979:37-47).

With these realities in mind, one can state that the children who grow up in an immigrant family perceive or acquire norms, values, expectation patterns, dress codes, and the like that are impossible for them to link to a broader meaningful context, because they have never experienced the world of the home country as an everyday, direct reality. A Berber living in Brussels can demand that his daughter dress as in the country of origin, that she strictly shun the company of unrelated men and boys, that she never visit a disco bar, and that she help her mother with household chores after school. But the entire Belgian context demonstrates that he is "wrong" and she knows it. Immigrant parents thus fight with unequal weapons for the preservation of behavioral patterns that they consider essential because of their own internalizations and because of pressures from both the surrounding immigrant environment and the home region.

In summary, one may, as does J. Leman (1979), argue that the children of an immigrant family are confronted not by a coherent culture but with cultural fragments and that they psychologically internalize this fragmentation. A relatively coherent synthesis that grew from generalizations of experience and has been found to be viable—which is precisely what is called a culture—is not offered to the second generation. Although no cultural pattern ever offers a perfect synthesis, there is still a great difference between what many Belgian children receive from their homes in the way of coherent reference frames and what immigrant children get.

The school situation of the second generation is comparable with the family situation: there too, the immigrant children have to work through meaning and emotional systems that do not occur in a global experiential context. The home environment offers only a limited number of contact points with the cultural elements that are transmitted to the children in the school context, while the home experiences are virtually ignored by the school programs. Conflicts between norms, belief content, attitudes, and role patterns are not explained, and in most cases, no assistance is offered in working through them. The vast majority of the teachers have never received the necessary training to do so. The immigrant children are thus raised with diverging fragments of a world image and with diverging experiences, and they themselves must create a viable synthesis that is usable for everyday life (Joris 1984; Bundervoet 1977). In many cases, the school, the peer group, and the world of mass media will win out over the parents. Gradually, the parents come to be seen and judged by their children with the reference frames of the dominant majority. Although definitive ruptures between children and parents are not strikingly frequent, it still remains a manifest reality that the children distance themselves culturally from their parents, objectively and subjectively. They have learned to speak the language of the autochthons, strive to obtain fashionable clothing and entertainment "of their time," and they ask for "modern" food, if not Belgian "national dishes." Globally, the life-style of the parents is perceived as that of comic and out-of-date people who know no better (Cammaert 1983:356-401; Roosens et al. 1979:33-54). This does not mean that the parents lose the respect of their children completely or that all affective bonds are broken. On the contrary, in many cases the mother, at least, plays a more affective role than is the case in the country of origin (Leman 1982:515-569; Cammaert 1983:356-389). Nor does it mean that the second generation definitively breaks with or discounts all of the cultural characteristics of the home country.

The question of relative status is clearly different for the second generation than for the first, for the members of the second generation cannot refer to a promotion in status with respect to the country of origin that most of them barely know. Their point of departure is the point of arrival of their parents, but measured with Belgian norms. Because of the aspirations of their parents and also through their own aspirations and the schooling they receive, a certain percentage of the second generation inevitably enters into

competition with a number of autochthons. In this competition, the latter frequently resort to the argument of autochthony. This appeal to "being first" to force priority seems to be a universal human phenomenon (cf. Roosens 1971). However, one must not forget that many immigrant children are born in Belgium and would have particular difficulty in returning to the country of origin of their parents with some chance of socioeconomic success, partially because of the almost totally "Belgian" schooling they have received.

For their part, the parents themselves, generally without consciously wishing it, launch their children into another cultural world by encouraging them in their striving for socioeconomic improvement. There is only one way to achieve this improvement, and this route runs inevitably through extended schooling or an intensive training period in one or another industry. Even if the Belgian schools would put special language and cultural courses into their curricula, the logic of the competitive technological world system and the service sectors that go along with it would impose a certain degree of uniformity in the life pattern that cannot be reconciled with large portions of the culture from the home countries. Only the symbolic-expressive sector of the culture and some individual cultural emblems that lie in the line of the culture of origin could be maintained.

It is very much questionable whether people who work all day long with autochthons in the context of highly technical operations and who are also open to the same mass media as the surrounding majority will still cling to a particular culture that is more than a certain style that manifests itself occasionally in folkloric occasions where one dances, sings, or cooks in the Italian, Spanish, Turkish, or Berber manner. When one traces developments in immigrant countries like Canada and the United States, where there is even an official policy of giving individual ethnicity a chance, one notes that, in reality, one ends up with such folkloric final results (Gans 1979).

However, this does not prevent people who adopt large portions of the surrounding culture from firmly maintaining their own *ethnic identity*. This self-affirmation by means of origin and historical background seems to me to be a way of having oneself recognized as being socially equal by "the others." At the same time, this self-manifestation provides a feeling of psychological continuity and uniqueness to the group and the individual. That one is recognized in terms of one's ethnic belonging by outsiders seems to be more important than holding to objectively verifiable cultural traditions (Barth 1969; De Vos 1975; LeVine and Campbell 1972; Epstein 1978; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Bentley 1983; Jacobson-Widding 1983). In other words, it could well be that someone who wants to be recognized as a Berber or as a Muslim is very similar to me culturally, but that he would also take great offense if I were to misjudge his specific ethnic identity on the grounds of this cultural similarity. More generally, one may state that we are evolving toward a world that is becoming ever more uniform on the instrumental level, but that, at the same time, is becoming more keenly aware of symbolic expression in areas of life not dominated by the instrumental sector.

When members of the so-called second generation have passed through the Belgian educational system and experience that they, as young adults, are discriminated against in their search for work, housing, or leisure activities because they are "foreigners," it is not unusual for them to manifest themselves as "others" rather aggressively. The ethnic self-affirmation of minority groups then sometimes takes forms whereby the actors, with the means at their disposal, present an image of their cultural tradition that deviates considerably from the historical reality. For example, one might borrow strategic elements from a related cultural tradition to situate oneself as "better" with respect to the autochthon opponents: people from Central Sicily will point to great authors or film directors from Northern Italy to situate themselves above the "inferior" autochthon culture. One who finds himself in this ideological perspective will generally also soon charge that the

dominant majority has taken his cultural heritage away from him (Roosens 1980). Throughout the world, one notes that the leaders of strongly nationalistic movements are people who have passed through a profound acculturation phase and who rebel when they find that they are censured because of their origins.

When discrimination occurs in this context, it is understandable that those who suffer this discrimination and their sympathizers speak of "racism." The use of this word is technically justified in these circumstances, for if someone is subordinated not on the basis of incompetence, faulty language usage or lack of cultural skills, but only because of origin, then the reference is indeed to biological elements that are popularly attributed to "race." When the second generation immigrants are also recognizable because of their phenotype, it is almost inevitable that this "subordination" is seen as racism.

Conclusion

No culture is a static system. People change their life-styles more and more quickly than they themselves imagine. This certainly applies in the Northern European context in which the immigrants we are discussing here live. The will to survive and the search for enhancement of status also produce an almost spontaneous change in many cultural aspects among the immigrants. This functional cultural change proceeds almost imperceptibly among the members of the first generation. The actors consciously maintain a number of cultural features that lie in the line of what they have internalized as essential religious or moral values. The preservation of these cultural features also incarnates a feeling of psychological continuity and makes social reintegration, with possible status enhancement, possible in the home country. With the second generation, which was raised in Belgium, the assimilation of cultural features from the host country goes much further. This assimilation process can only be refused at one's peril. Entire portions of the cultural tradition of the southern countries are, indeed, irreconcilable with the cultural patterns that are generated by economic and technological competition on a world scale.

With these considerations taken into account, one has the impression that the cohabitation of different cultural traditions on one and the same territory would turn out to be easier than one would have initially supposed. Belgians, too, adopt many more life-style elements from others than they realize. This consideration, however, applies only when one limits oneself strictly to the *cultural* standpoint. Culture and ethnic belonging or ethnic identity must not be confused. It appears much more difficult to recognize others as equals on the *ethnic* level than to accept their cultural expressions. In my opinion, one runs up against the problem here of the recognition of fundamental human equality. The *obvious* nature of phenotypical and cultural differences provides a ready excuse for classifying people in terms of higher and lower. By the use of these obvious differences as indices of being more or less, the dominant majority groups maintain their position, and this position gives them at the same time a psychological sense of self-affirmation.

When a political authority defines the "immigrant problem" largely in terms of cultural differences, the task is simplified, but one can then, in my opinion, overlook the "solution" to the problem. While cultural differences as such are not to be underestimated if a relatively harmonious society is to be constructed, they are only one aspect of the global system and then not the most obdurate. What the cultural differences symbolize in the area of social relationships seems to be much more important, but then it is also much more difficult to alter. Certain forms of bicultural and multicultural education and of social work try to affect precisely this nucleus of the matter (Rosiers and Polain 1979; Roosens 1979; Foyer-Stuurgroep 1983; Foyer-Equipe 1984). In the context of these experiments, children or adults of various ethnic origins are given the opportunity to appreciate

each other, partially by becoming familiar with certain cultural aspects that belong to "the others." In this sense, bicultural or multicultural education is not only oriented to the cultural but also and probably more so to the improvement of the social relationships among children or young people. In all of this, getting to know and appreciate the other cultures is a necessary step. The autochthon interethnic relationships that have developed between some "Walloons" and "Flemish," however, clearly show that one may know the culture of "the others" perfectly without thereby appreciating the bearers of that culture.

Cultures make good neighbors much more easily than do the people who incarnate these cultures, for the simple reason that people constantly strive to achieve a relative "superiority" and thus continue to produce inequality.

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