

Ethnicity on the Move: Young People Experiences and Identities between National Models and Local Urban Settings.

Abstract submitted to the session 'Youth geographies and spatial identities'

Agathe VOISIN

This contribution explores the transformations of ethnicity in youth lives within two working class neighbourhoods of Paris and London. Young people's everyday urban experiences and representations of their place in society are deeply influenced by ethnicity. This is the heritage of national models and philosophies, as well as a consequence of the specific urban experience of living in outlying neighbourhood marked by post-colonial immigration¹. But great changes are happening at both national and local levels. How do these changes impact young people's experiences and representations, sense of identity, belonging, and citizenship?

The paper is based on a qualitative study in two outlying working-class neighbourhoods that are undergoing great social changes unrolling from the economic crisis, urban regeneration and new waves of immigration. Individual semi-directed interviews, participant observations and focus groups were carried out with young inhabitants aged 15 to 25.

First I'll show how ethnicity is omnipresent in everyday-life of young people in both fieldworks. This salience of ethnicity is deeply ambiguous: it underlines the social and urban disqualification of young inhabitants (which are faced with a multidimensional stigmatization in the public space) while at the same time it means sharing a working-class experience marked by a common heritage of immigration. I'll show how, quite similarly in Paris and London, ethnic categories defined nationally are reworked by young people through a local and present-day cultural "bricolage" that gives birth to new ethnicised youth cultures.

I'll then focus on everyday interactions : in London, everyday encounters favour a separation in socialization and sociabilities between "White", "Black" and "Asian" young people, while in Paris prevails the feeling of a common destiny of "jeunes de banlieue" – youth from deprived suburbs. This questions divergences in local heritage (local history of social housing and racism). Now local and individual processes come into play: urban structures (segregation and/or regeneration), individual discourses and practices (especially that of adults) and demographic changes (new immigrations unrelated to colonial history are revealing contradictions in the British and French representation of ethnicity). Up to a certain extent, these processes help reshaping sociabilities and representations.

¹ I understand ethnicity in a constructionist perspective that goes back to Max Weber and Frederik Barth; it's the product of a socio-political activity. Ethnicity is constructed in an articulation between macro and micro processes. Indeed, ethnicity is closely linked with national models and philosophies (I contrast Multiculturalism in Britain with Integrationism in France). But at the same time, ethnicity is produced, reworked, contested in everyday interactions that take place in specific local contexts.

At last, by exploring young people's mental geographies, I'll show how representations of the urban landscape are a base for diverging collective identities and sense of belonging between Paris and London. Young people's relationship to local institutions, to global society and to citizenship reveals opposite patterns; this highlights the specificities of national models, and their transformation in contemporary French and British societies.

Contact:

Agathe VOISIN

PhD candidate in Sociology, Sciences Po / OSC (Observatory for Social Change)

106 BD Richard Lenoir, 75011 Paris, France.

+33 6 25 49 31 65

Agathe.voisin@sciences-po.org