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TRANS MIGRATION

Social work in a world of superdiversity

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Chapter 1

Transnational living in a superdiverse society

To understand the growing impact of transmigration, it is crucial first to have insight into the changing patterns of migration and diversity in society. Consequently, in this first chapter we will sketch briefly the transition towards a superdiverse society and the increasing importance of transnational living environments.¹ In the following chapter we will attempt to define the concept of transmigration more closely and assess its significance.

At the start of the 21st century, West European societies are undergoing a demographic transformation. Ethnic-cultural diversity is growing more rapidly than many people imagine, certainly in the major cities and also in some of the continent's former mining regions. This transition can best be understood within the perspective of the new concept of superdiversity, which reflects a number of key differences with the patterns of migration and diversification that were characteristic of the 1970s and early 1980s. The word 'superdiversity' was first coined in 2005 by Steven Vertovec to characterize the transition that had taken place during the previous two to three decades. He described changing flows of migration and their impact on both London and wider British society.²

Superdiversity is not simply a synonym for what to date has generally been referred to as 'diversity' or 'a multicultural society'. It is a new concept that seeks to reflect a rapidly changing reality and to make possible the analysis of the resulting demographic and social transitions in a manner that can be translated into policy and practical action. In this respect it deals not only with the growth in

diversity but also – and primarily – with the increasing diversity within diversity. So what exactly do we mean by ‘superdiversity’ and why can this concept help us to better understand today’s changing reality?

Superdiversity as the new reality

By using the term ‘superdiversity’ Vertovec wished to indicate that our current diversity can no longer be understood simply in terms of increasing differences on the basis of ethnicity and/or nationality. This increasing ethnic diversity in Western Europe also resulted in a growing diversity *within* different ethnic groups on the basis of other diversifying factors, such as language, gender, age, place of residence, religion, residential status and transnationality.³ The concept of superdiversity describes this increasing complexity but also points to its practical and methodological implications: namely, that the recognition of superdiversity also means recognizing how the experiences of individual immigrants are shaped by the interaction between ethnicity and other defining identity characteristics.

The transition towards modern superdiversity therefore involves both quantitative and qualitative changes. On the one hand, there is a strong quantitative increase in the number of people with a migration background and on the other hand there is a qualitative transition towards an ever stronger diversification within the diversity of those migrant communities. Taken together, both dimensions create a new superdiverse society, with a greater complexity in its demographic composition and therefore a greater complexity – and ambiguity – in its interactions between people. This increasing differentiation makes it essential that we have a multi-dimensional perspective on diversity.⁴ We will now look at both these dimensions in more detail, as a framework for better understanding the ever-growing transmigration flow.

Growing ethnic-cultural diversity and the evolution towards majority-minority cities

Today, it is possible to find residents with a migration background in every Belgian city. Even in the very smallest municipalities, ethnic-cultural diversity is on the increase. But there are strong regional differences. There is least diversity in the large rural areas of West Flanders, and most in the former mining districts of Limburg and in the big cities like Brussels, Antwerp or Ghent. This latter aspect is typical. In the 21st century, the impact of migration will be most heavily felt in the major conurbations. Migration in Western Europe in recent times has first and foremost been migration to the cities. Cities are the pre-eminent places of arrival, where newcomers can most easily find not only their first accommodation, but also their first contact with others who share their nationality, language and beliefs. The cities also have (informal) work and social infrastructures that can support new arrivals during the difficult early months. It was for this reason that we decided to conduct our explorative research study into transmigration in Brussels and Antwerp.

In an ever-growing number of European cities, residents with a migration background now form the majority of the population. World cities such as New York, São Paulo, Toronto or Sydney have already been '*majority-minority cities*' for many years: in other words, cities where the largest part of the population is made up from a wide range of different minorities. Some of these minorities have been present for decades; others have only arrived much more recently. This phenomenon is now also beginning to manifest itself in Belgium and the Netherlands. In cities like Brussels, Genk, Rotterdam and Amsterdam the inhabitants of indigenous Belgian or Dutch origin now form less than half the population. Many other comparable cities elsewhere in Europe – Birmingham, Malmo, Marseille, Stuttgart, etc. – will reach this same situation in the near future, where people with various migration backgrounds will predominate.⁵

In Brussels two out of every three residents already has such a migration background. In Antwerp, roughly 46% of the population has migratory roots.⁶

The current evolution towards majority-minority cities is not only a consequence of new migration patterns, but is also related to the age profile of the existing populations in many of today's European cities. In general, these cities display only a very limited degree of ethnic-cultural diversity amongst their older citizens, as organized labour migration to Western Europe only began after the end of the Second World War in 1945. At the other end of the age spectrum, the profile of children and young people is almost a mirror image of the older generation. In a growing number of European cities, juveniles with a migration background are now in the majority. This is the case for two out of every three young people in both Brussels and Antwerp. Just as importantly, during the next two decades these young people will grow to become the majority of urban residents of a marriageable and reproductively fertile age, so that the trend will be strengthened still further.

In other words, the age structure and ethnicity of urban populations is not only a photograph of the situation today, but also a film which shows us what we can expect in the years to come. Even without further new migration, the level of ethnic diversity among children, young people and city inhabitants in general will increase significantly. It is not so much new migration influx but rather the current demographic composition of urban populations that will quickly transform Europe's cities into majority-minority cities.

What's more, within Belgium this demographic transition is not only taking place in the cities where we focused our research, but also in every other Flemish town of any size and even in many of the smaller municipalities. Although the figures are at lower levels than for Brussels and Antwerp – for example, in Ghent one in three of the city's residents has a migration background – the demographic

distribution is displaying greater diversity among children and young people almost everywhere.

According to the Dutch sociologist Maurice Crul, everyone who lives in a major European city will soon belong to an ethnic minority, as, for example, has been the case in New York for many years.⁷ Even the largest indigenous group will have become a minority, representing less than 50 percent of the population. The children of the migrants of previous generations, who are now in the second and in some cases even the third generation, are starting to ‘inherit the city’, to use the term coined by Philip Kasinitz and John Mollenkopf in their study of the same name about New York.⁸ Taking this a stage further, Crul argues that in these new majority-minority cities we need to think carefully about who needs to adapt to who. Does the immigrant community need to integrate? Or does the indigenous population need to change its attitudes? Until recently, we lived in a society where one ethnic group formed a clear majority and where minorities were expected to adjust to the opinions and the usages of that majority. In the new situation, where no ethnic group is in the majority, we are evolving towards a new context, certainly in the cities, where everyone will need to adjust to everyone else. Diversity will become the new norm – and it is a norm that will make necessary the greatest psychological change of our time.⁹ Brussels, as the capital of both Belgium and Europe, is already an example of this kind of superdiverse city, where the question ‘what is the majority culture?’ can be answered in a number of different ways.

The qualitative dimension: diversity in diversity

In addition to the increase in ethnic cultural diversity, the most fundamental dimension of superdiversity is the diversification of diversity. Or to express it in slightly different terms: the *growing diversity in diversity*. In our major cities – and gradually in smaller towns and municipalities – we can now see a multiplicity of

countries of origin, languages, cultures, religions, civil statuses and social positions. This not only ensures diversity between groups and communities, but also diversity within these groups and communities. The complexity and interaction between all these different factors lies at the core of superdiversity.

The basis of the concept is to be found in a crucial *change in the basic pattern of migration*: away from ‘people from a limited number of countries of origin moving to a limited number of countries of arrival’ towards ‘people from a large number of countries of origin moving to a large number of countries of arrival’.¹⁰ After the Second World War, Belgium concluded labour agreements for its post-war reconstruction with Italy and Poland. Later, additional labour was also recruited from Southern Europe (particularly Spain and Greece), before switching to the large scale ‘importation’ of migrant workers from Morocco and Turkey in the 1960s.

The current superdiversity has resulted from subsequent changes in this basic migratory flow. Nowadays, migration to Belgium takes place from a much larger number of countries of origin. More than 60 percent of the 122,079 new migrants who were officially registered in Belgium in 2013 came from elsewhere in the European Union. The remaining 40 percent came from every other continent in the world. The initial post-war patterns of migration are still marginally evident in the form of so called ‘family stream’ or ‘family reunification’ migration from Morocco and Turkey, which remain the most important countries of origin outside the EU. Having said that, Morocco only provided 6 percent and Turkey just 2 percent of the total number of immigrants arriving in Belgium in 2011.¹¹

Globalization, the fall of the Iron Curtain, the subsequent expansion of the European Union, the refugee crisis and economic migration are all equally important factors in the exponential rise in the number of countries of origin. In particular, the refugee crisis that dominated the news for much of 2015 and 2016 seems set to strengthen still further this trend towards ever greater superdiversity.

The result of these many different forms of migration is a *growing fragmentation* in the ethnic, linguistic, legal, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds of migrants. This diversity in diversity makes itself felt in a number of different ways. For example, the *number of nationalities* represented in our cities is on the rise. Antwerp and Brussels both have about 170 different nationalities among their populations. Ghent has 156. Most other cities in Belgium have over 100. This diversity of nationalities and ethnic-cultural backgrounds also results in a greater *number of languages* in our urban centres. Superdiverse cities are multilingual cities, even though this is often a sensitive matter at both the local and the national policy level. Less than 40 percent of the inhabitants of Brussels live in a family where either Dutch or French is spoken exclusively. Almost four out of every ten children in primary education in Antwerp speak a different language at home than the language they speak at school.

Not surprisingly, *religious diversity* is also increasing. This does not simply mean the growing importance of Islam in Western society. Religion also plays an important role in many other ethnic-cultural groupings, as witnessed, for example, by the celebration of Polish Catholic masses in existing churches or the appearance of various small churches – often located in former shops, pubs, theaters or even garages – in African and South American communities.¹²

The diversity of *migration motives* and differences in the planned length of stay in the host country is yet another rapidly expanding trend. There are still many people who migrate to find work, but others do it to reunite their families, to escape from (political) danger in their homeland, to flee from war or simply to seek a better life. Students often only plan to stay for the duration of their studies. Likewise, the practitioners of circular migration do not intend to stay in their host country permanently, but their peripatetic lifestyle contributes significantly to that country's superdiversity.¹³

A further consequence of this superdiversity is a growth in different types of *residence status*. Some migrants were born as Belgians; others were naturalized. Some are asylum seekers; others have been recognized as political refugees, while yet others are awaiting the outcome of their appeal procedure. EU citizens can stay here temporarily as tourists or can make use of the EU's provisions relating to the free movement of labour within the Union. A number of migrants have been regularized for humanitarian or medical reasons, sometimes for a fixed period, sometimes indefinitely. Some people have a dual nationality; others have none at all and are effectively stateless. Finally, our cities also conceal a large and important group of people who have no legal residential status, who may or may not have submitted an application for regularization. What's more, we must remember that a person's residential and civil status can evolve over the course of time, and that each different type of status brings with it a different set of (social) rights and entitlements.¹⁴

Superdiversity also means growing differences in *socio-economic position*. This can range from rising middle-class migrants earning sufficient income from their own labour (sometimes self-employed and often owning property) to destitute migrants who are confronted with an unacceptably high risk of poverty. More than half of all people in Belgium with a Moroccan background and one in three of those with Turkish or East European origins are living below the official poverty line.

Similarly, *gender differences* also lead to greater diversification in migration experiences, motives and residential status. Gender plays an important role in shaping a migrant's available options before, during and after the migration process. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the 'feminization' of migration, so that the typical image of the migrant no longer corresponds quite so closely to the traditional picture of a male migrant worker who emigrates alone for work. Women, who in the past were much more

likely to emigrate as the (economically dependent) partner of their husband, are now increasingly migrating as independent breadwinners in their own right; a development that reflects in part the growing demand for care workers in the West.¹⁵

Superdiversity and intersectionality

Superdiversity allows us to look beyond the multicultural society. Growing ethnic-cultural diversity and the evolution towards majority-minority cities go hand in hand with increasing diversity in diversity. These transitions mean that we need to develop new ways of looking at society that allow us to recognize, understand and accept these new dynamics. The classic 'us-versus-them' thinking of the past will no longer suffice in a society where the differences within groups can often be greater than the differences between groups.

Understanding our society as a superdiverse society can also help us to transcend the current 'for or against' debate about the merit of multiculturalism. Superdiversity is not an ideological concept, but a theoretical and empirical framework that must help us to interpret and come to terms with a rapidly changing reality. In other words, superdiversity has the potential to provide us with a new conceptual and analytical context in which to explore the complexities of the 21st century world, making those complexities both clear and manageable. According to Fran Meissner and Steven Vertovec, the concept has a descriptive, methodological and practical functionality, which helps to identify and evaluate changing demographic patterns, differentiation processes and their convoluted interactions.¹⁶

Superdiversity is about the transition to a society in which diversity is no longer something that is exclusively associated with minorities; it is no longer something specific to the 'exceptions' in an otherwise ethnically homogenous community. Instead, superdiversity emphasizes the normalization of diversity, which will become the

new standard for the societies of the 21st century. Superdiversity seeks to give expression and offer insight into the processes of diversification, not only those resulting from migration but also from greater individualization and the development of new lifestyles and personal identities.¹⁷

When diversity in diversity grows, ethnic origin is no longer the only or even the most relevant characteristic to monitor and assess the interaction and/or differences between groups. Sometimes gender or religion will be more relevant; on other occasions differences in levels of education or income may be more crucial factors, possibly in combination with ethnicity but just as possibly not. Whatever the relative importance of the individual characteristics, superdiversity is, above all, about the coherence, connectedness and interactivity of all these different forms of diversity. A focus on ethnicity will continue to be relevant, but no more relevant than differences in country of origin, duration of stay, mother tongue or religion. In other words, ethnicity is not the only angle of approach for understanding superdiversity. Being aware of the diversity in diversity necessarily means involving these other forms of diversity in your analysis.¹⁸

Superdiversity shares a number of characteristics with the intersectionality theory. This is an approach that was developed in recent decades within feminist theory and likewise focuses on the understanding of differences and social differentiation. In particular, intersectionality grew out of the criticism levelled by Afro-American women against first and second wave 'white' feminists, who assumed that women share the same experiences; without taking due account of the specific forms of oppression to which black women were subjected based on their ethnicity and the colour of their skin. Intersectionality theorists focused in the first instance to the specific positioning of men and women at the intersections of gender and ethnicity, so that differentiations *within* these social categorizations became visible. Other axes of differentiation – such as social class, sexual orientation, age and religion – were quickly recognized as

additional ordering principles that are inextricably interwoven with each other, shaping individual identity.¹⁹

Intersectionality differs from superdiversity in its greater emphasis on processes of power and inequality. In this respect, intersectionality is ‘simultaneously a theory of identity and an instrument to analyze the social positioning of people’.²⁰ Meanings and relative differences in power are attached to categories of identity, so that certain characteristics become more valued than others. For this reason, some positions yield certain advantages, whereas others lead to exclusion and oppression. This means, for example, that (trans)migrants might experience exclusion as result of their residential status. At the same time, their position in terms of gender and level of education may offer them benefits (if they are a man and/or highly qualified). Unless, of course they are a woman and/or poorly qualified, in which case it will lead to additional forms of discrimination.

Viewing transmigration from the perspective of superdiversity in combination with the intersectional perspective means having an eye for the diversity of experiences within the category of ‘transmigrants’. It also makes it possible to understand the processes of privilege and deprivation within this group: dependent on their specific positioning, individual transmigrants will either be more or less socially vulnerable.²¹

Transnationality or contacts across national borders

Transnationality is a component of modern-day superdiversity. As a result of the intense migration processes of recent decades, more people, particularly in the cities, can no longer be defined by a single nationality or identity. In this age of globalization and superdiversity, many people are part of processes that transcend the national borders of a single country. The concept of transnationality refers to a wide

variety of thriving cross-border contacts. In their research, Kris Vancluysen and Maarten Van Craen distinguish three main types of transnational activity: social-cultural contacts (ranging from telephonic or digital contact to the viewing of television stations broadcast from the country of origin), economic contacts (ranging from sending money 'home' to full-scale trading relations) and political contacts (from following developments in the home country to actively initiating and/or taking part in those developments from abroad).²²

Many of the residents in our towns and cities are in close contact with people in other parts of the world. Their social networks operate beyond the limits of national boundaries. Migrants keep in touch with or even financially support their families in their country of origin or elsewhere. This not only applies to newcomers, but also to migrants who have been living in Belgium for years. This has led to the creation of complex 'worldwide' families, with shared and divided loyalties.²³ Anthropological research conducted in and around the Heyvaertstraat, a street on the boundary between the districts of Anderlecht and Sint-Jans-Molenbeek in Brussels, revealed how the second-hand car business was largely run from major West African cities, such as Dakar, Nouakchott, Lagos, Conakry and Lomé.²⁴ The Brabantstraat in Schaarbeek, another district of Brussels, is the hub for a trading network with branches 'all over Europe, as far as the Maghreb and Near, Middle and Far East.'²⁵ Religious communities and political movements link Brussels and Antwerp with other cities across the planet. During the Arab Spring the steps of the Brussels Stock Exchange were a platform where political dissidents defended points of view that would have led to their arrest and possible execution in their countries of origin. Demonstrations in the Matongé district in Elsene (Brussels) similarly showed how strongly the day-to-day life of the local community was influenced by political events in Kinshasa (Congo).

In this way, transnational spaces and groupings are created, in which it is not geographical mobility but the nature and intensity of the migrants' cross-border contacts that are the determining factor.²⁶ Transnational social spaces presuppose a connectedness or an interconnectivity of networks, organizations and communities across national boundaries. This means that as superdiversity grows, the development of these transnational spaces and communities grows correspondingly.

Some transnational contacts are public, but more often than not these networks are private, and therefore invisible to the outside world. For example, telephoning and e-mailing are usually done at home. At the same time, there is also a visible infrastructure that facilitates and supports such contacts. In arrival areas and other superdiverse districts in major cities, the prices published in the telephone stores and internet cafés can tell you much about the origins of the people who live in the neighbourhood, irrespective of whether these people are officially registered with the authorities or not. The offices of Western Union or MoneyGram create an effective basic framework to conduct financial transactions across borders. The total amount of these money transfers or remittances back to the country of origin is now greater than the total amount of official international aid.²⁷ In a similar manner, specialist travel agencies provide cheap transport and accommodation for family visits to Morocco and Turkey, or for the pilgrimage to Mecca, or for other transnational journeys. At a more local level, specialized shops sell products imported from the country of origin or organize the export of products from Belgium in the opposite direction. Last but not least, the thousands of satellite dishes in superdiverse districts show that the vast majority of migrants do not confine themselves to watching national television, but prefer the familiarity of programmes broadcast from 'home'.

According to Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, transnationalism means *living in one country while also living somewhere else at the same time*. This requires people to combine

different living environments and cultures by travelling backwards and forwards between countries, if not physically then at least (and more often) mentally.²⁸

For people with a migration background transnational contacts are the cement of their cross-border social and familial networks. Many migrant families become world families and have a truly transnational family life: they have family in Belgium, family in the country of origin and often in other European countries as well. Solidarity plays an important role in these extended family networks, frequently stretching across different generations and several national frontiers. In some migrant families children from the second or third generation still marry partners from the country of origin of their parents or grandparents.

From sporadic to intense transnationality

Earlier definitions of transnationality often placed the emphasis on the connections between the country of origin and the country of arrival. Portes e.a. describe transnationality as the social field made up from an increasing number of people who live a dual life: they speak two or more languages, have a house (and/or a home) in two countries and conduct almost non-stop communication across different national borders.²⁹ In more recent literature transnationality is defined more broadly than these contacts between the country of origin and the country of arrival, referring instead to multiple contacts with multiple locations in multiple countries.³⁰

Transnationality is, of course, nothing new: in previous centuries countless migrants tried their best to stay in contact with their country of origin. *What is new is the intensity, impact and geographical plurality of today's transnational contacts.* Whoever emigrated to America or Australia during the 19th century could do little more than send an occasional postcard or letter back home.

Even then, they took months to arrive. During the 1950s and 1960s the distances involved for European migrant workers were shorter but this did not mean that communication was any more direct. People wrote (or dictated) letters or recorded messages on cassettes, which were then posted to the home country. This no longer took months, but it still took weeks. For really urgent messages it was always possible to send a telegram and for the few city-dwelling migrants with sufficient financial resources there was also now the option of installing a telephone.

The rapid development of new communications technology in recent decades and the availability of relatively cheap mass travel mean that the contact possibilities for migrants in the 21st century are fundamentally different than in the past. Even though some migrants still do not have direct access to the latest modern communication technology, staying in transnational contact is much easier for more people than it has even been before.³¹ Cheap cell phones make possible direct international conversations with any part of the world, no matter how distant. The widespread distribution of the internet (in local stores, if not in the home) facilitates equally cheap contact via e-mail, social network sites, Skype, Whatsapp and numerous other applications. Satellite dishes and the internet even make it feasible to follow the media in your country of origin almost as though you had never left, just like many other people on holiday now follow their e-mail traffic and the news on their favourite online sites via their smartphones.

Finally, the massive explosion in mobility, through the availability of cheap air travel and the expansion of road and rail networks, has revolutionized the options for migrants to remain in physical contact with the country of origin. It is now relatively easy and affordable to travel back and forth for holidays and special family events, even for families with a low and/or irregular income. If necessary, other family members often lend money to 'sponsor' these visits home by their relatives. In this way, the barriers of time and space can (to a

large extent and sometimes depending on one's residential status) be overcome through efficient interaction across national boundaries.

The availability of cheap travel in combination with the development of modern telephony and the internet during the past two decades means that transnational contact in today's world is both easy and cheap, which makes the resulting transnational networks more intense than ever before, bringing increasing migrant mobility in their wake.³² As a consequence, transnationality has become a basic characteristic of 21st century superdiversity.

Various studies have indicated the importance of transnational contacts for many migrants as a self-evident part of their lives.³³ However, it needs to be remembered that these contact networks can be burdensome as well as supportive. According to Boccagni, they have a double role. On the one hand they are a vital source of social capital. On the other hand they bring with them a whole series of expectations and obligations. Money transfers to the home front or to relatives in other countries can often be a serious drain on a migrant's limited financial resources. That being said, remittances travelling in the opposite direction can sometimes help a new migrant to survive or even start up on his own in his country of arrival (see chapter 5).³⁴

Transnational or translocal

While we usually talk in terms of transnational contacts and activities, a number of more recent research studies prefer to use the term 'translocal'. This is not just a synonym, nor is the difference between the two concepts simply a matter of semantics. They are two distinct approaches with two distinct emphases.

The concept of transnationality places its emphasis on national frontiers: activities only come into focus as transnational activities if

they are clearly cross-border in nature. Viewed from the perspective of a small country like Belgium, this seems self-evident enough. When someone changes their place of residence within our borders – from Antwerp to Brussels or from Brussels to the coast – this would not be considered as an act of migration but simply as moving from one place to another. However, a change of residence from Brussels to Moscow, Athens or Madrid would be regarded as an act of international migration and the contact between the new and former places of residence would normally be described as transnational contact.

However, the situation is very different in large countries such as Brazil, India or China. Internal changes of residence in these countries can sometimes involve thousands of kilometres. People can ‘migrate’ internally to a new region of the same country where a different language is spoken, where another religion is dominant, where the general environment is rural rather than urban, etc.

If we focus too strongly on transnational activities across borders, we will continue to view things from an essentially ‘national’ perspective, which might even be described as a form of methodological nationalism.³⁵ However, the reality of migration takes place both across and within borders. For this reason, several authors now prefer to speak of ‘translocality’, not only as a focus to take account of internal migration, but also to place mobility in a more central position. Greiner and Sakdapolrak use translocality to sketch the field of tension between mobility and locality and the relationship between movement and place.³⁶ For them, this notion represents a challenge to avoid thinking too statically about the contrasts between the former and the current places of residence and encourages thinking that moves beyond the importance of the nation state. They want to devote more attention to the perspective of the (trans)migrant as an actor in motion, who can combine several places or locations in time.

In this book we use the term 'transnational' to describe the contacts of people residing in Belgium with relevant others in other places. The increasing attention for mobility and the combination of different places in a single living environment nevertheless remain crucial focuses for defining transmigration.