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Social mix in public urban action in Brussels: project or political language?

La mixité sociale dans l'action publique urbaine à Bruxelles : projet ou langage politique ?

Sociale gemengdheid in de openbare stedelijke ontwikkeling te Brussel: project of politiek taalgebruik?

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Social mix in public urban action in Brussels. Project or political language?

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After regaining momentum in the mid 1990s, the principle of social mix crystallised at the beginning of the 2000s in a political approach to 'reinforce social cohesion'. Since then, it has become a watchword for public urban action in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe. This article endeavours to give an outline of the political and ideological context in which it takes place, as well as attempting to show what is included in the social mix 'project' in the case of Brussels – its intentions, instruments and matters left unsaid – and the urban challenges it reveals.

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Introduction

1. In fifteen years, social mix has become a widespread watchword of urban action in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe. This watchword refers to a utopia which inspired certain thinkers (in particular Fourier with his Phalanstery) and Catholic leaders [Godard, 1998] at the end of the 19th century, i.e. that of a city characterised by the harmonious cohabitation of various social groups. What were the social and political transformations which led to this renewed interest in social mix in neighbourhoods 'in difficulty'? What does it teach us about contemporary representations and values? And what is its role in Brussels urban action in particular? Based on a semantic documentary analysis,¹ this article provides answers to these questions by highlighting the conditions and meanings of what constitutes a true contemporary ideology. This ideology is found in various sectors of social life, and the body of texts analysed is an incarnation of this. They deal with urban action in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) during the past two decades and represent the main focus of the political discourse on social mix: urban action programmes² and (legislative and self-legitimation) texts providing a framework for the implementation of their instruments,³ and declarations of its main defenders.⁴

1. A new social action model

2. Without being a regional particularity, the watchword of social mix is trumpeted in BCR in a special urban and political context which colours it with somewhat specific challenges. But its prominent position in the discourse on the city and the action to be taken is largely due to the emergence of a new social action model which is widespread in western Europe. This new model is related to a reformulation of the 'social question'.⁵

1.1. *From the fight against poverty to the fight against exclusion*

3. According to several observers [Rosanvallon, 1995; Castel, 1995], the development of the social state during the 20th century was aimed at resolving the dysfunctions of industrial society. Beginning in the *Golden Sixties*, the favourable economic situation and the Fordist model created the illusion that the social question had been resolved once and for all. But the economic crisis which hit Europe at the end of the 1970s changed this belief. Due to the appearance of structural unemployment, the decline in salary conditions and the transformation of methods of sociality (deunionisation, family transformations, etc.), poverty was considered in terms of stability and the social question was raised once again, but the context had transformed the terms. On the one hand, the liberal ideology which had been making its return led to a more limited public response: increase in direct measures in favour of

¹ This analysis is based on the dominant vocabulary, semantic associations (notions associated with words) and the registers of the discourse on social mix in a sample of documents (see notes 2, 3 and 4). It has taken place in the framework of doctoral research on the experience of cohabitation in old neighbourhoods which have been the focus of much effort on behalf of the public authorities in Brussels, and has benefited from the wise comments of Christine Schaut, co-director of research, as well as two anonymous reviewers.

² Regional Development Plan (2002), International Development Plan (2009) and *Programmes de la Politique des Grandes Villes* (2005, 2009), mainly. A complete list with references for the documents consulted appears at the end of this article.

³ The instruments considered are the Neighbourhood Contracts, the *Société de Développement pour la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* and the 'Social Cohesion' Decree (2004).

⁴ Electoral programmes of the ECOLO (2009) and PS (2009) parties, political declarations of C. Picqué (municipal and regional strategies) and A. Hutchinson.

⁵ The term 'social question' appeared at the end of the 19th century to thematise the main dysfunctions of industrial society. It has been used again since the 1980s to refer more generally to the social problems caused by a particular method of economic and social organisation.

target groups and delegation to the 'left hand of the state' of the treatment of those who had been left out of the traditional social protection system. On the other hand, the term 'new poverty' was being used more and more in academic contexts and designated situations which degrade according to economic conditions and affect 'vulnerable' groups, i.e. those with 'handicaps' in terms of socioeconomic integration (single-income families, lack of a diploma, etc.). As a result of this dual treatment, poverty is now represented as a risk which is no longer collective, but *attached* to certain vulnerable social groups, and the social problem has been redefined by focusing on *situations* of exclusion from social and economic life rather than on the political and economic processes which cause them.

4. In contemporary – including academic⁶ – discourse, the phenomenon of poverty is thus considered as an accumulation of social disadvantages whose combined effects widen the gap between those who are *included* and those who are *excluded*. The category of vulnerability has allowed the approach to be characterised (target the beneficiaries of the action), and the development of the theme of exclusion – with its specific terminology – contributed to defining new challenges as well as a new strategy for action in the 1990s: the 'fight against exclusion'⁷ resulted in a cross-cutting social policy, with a diversity of actions dealing with several aspects of the lives of beneficiaries at the same time.

5. This reformulation of the social question places a new accent on the socio-spatial dimension. For several years, researchers have pointed to the 'fragmentation' and 'dualisation' of the city as expressions of dividing lines in social life [Navez-Bouchanine, 2002]. As regards political discourse, 'spatial isolation' is targeted as the catalyst of the different forms of exclusion [Francq & Vanneste, 2010] in the access to institutions, housing, etc. Neighbourhoods are therefore among the preferred targets of the new cross-cutting social policy, as an anchor

point for multi-category action. Urban action is thus one of the means implemented to deal with the social question.

6. All of these semantic shifts express the two heavy trends which have transformed the social action model: the switch from a global policy to a targeted integration policy and the system's new focus on local situations. Through these evolutions, the main systems of reference concerning the 'problem of exclusion' were made up of structural principles of urban action as it developed in western Europe and in particular in Brussels, beginning in the 1990s: indiscriminately social, economic and material vulnerability; the social disadvantages in the access to rights and services; and socio-spatial fragmentation. At the same time, they revived the former utopia of the mixed city.

1.2. Social mix as an 'answer' to the lack of social cohesion

7. By putting the spotlight on the 'new' forms of inequality of a socio-spatial nature, the principle of social mix constitutes an opportunity to formulate a new voluntarist political discourse. In this discourse, it is almost always associated with another notion, i.e. that of social cohesion. It is this former reformist notion – a cross-cutting frame of reference for contemporary social action – which allows the ideological virtues of social mix to be revealed and to act as a favoured 'remedy' for modern urban troubles, with the condition – specific to the neoliberal context – that the semantics of social cohesion must be rebuilt.

1.2.1. Social cohesion: renewed interest and change of meaning

8. Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, is generally recognised as being the first to have popularised the concept of social cohesion at the end of the 19th century, in a Europe undergoing social and economic changes. As pointed out by Jenson [1998], Durkheim defined social cohesion as a social and political interdependence, inspired by the political philosophy of solidarism whereby cooperation in the face of common destiny is more important than the modification of social hierarchies. This definition underlined the collective rather than

⁶ 'Poverty is a network of social exclusions which spans several areas of individual and collective existence and which has the effect of separating people who live in poverty from generally recognised ways of life'; Vranken (2005), cited by Francq & Vanneste, 2010, p.3.

⁷ Strategy established in 2000 at European level during the Lisbon Summit.

conflicting character of society; governments were therefore requested to promote consensus and shared values rather than the defence of special interests. In spite of its current extensive use – calls to 'restore social cohesion' are made from all sides – the notion has therefore always had an ideological character and has conveyed a political project based on 'what is common'.

9. But today, the prism of common destiny has lost its mobilising force. In neoliberal society, the idea of society itself has lost its substance [Gauchet, 1979]. Under the effect of a series of well-known factors,⁸ it is now considered more in terms of pluralism and free association of single individuals than in terms of interdependence and social relationships. In this context, the use of the notion of social cohesion would require a semantic reconstruction, which has borrowed considerably from the rhetoric of social ties which has been popular since the end of the 1980s. According to Genestier [2006], this rhetoric fulfils three functions. Firstly, it allows a diagnosis to be made again, namely that of a 'lost world': fundamental values and institutions which disappear, the loss of long-standing social interaction, etc. Secondly, it is used to establish a therapy – that of *rehabilitation* and *recreating ties* – as an alternative to action with respect to social relationships, but nevertheless maintaining the postulate of collective belonging. Thirdly, it allows social management techniques such as dialogue and pooling to be defined.

10. Drawing from these three registers, the notion of social cohesion is used first of all to make a diagnosis of a deteriorating society, expressed in terms of withdrawal, incivility, communication problems, etc. It is then used to support injunctions to establish ties in order to 'recreate society' and designates favoured settings such as street parties, for example. In the new social action model, the location is endowed with attributes – proximity and particularity – and qualities – roots and solidarity – which are supposed to be able to produce a sense of community [ibid.]. Finally, the discourse on social cohesion designates means of action to favour inclusion (participation) and the building of a collec-

tive structure (interculturality, intergenerationality, social mix). This meaning therefore builds social cohesion as a global political approach.

1.2.2. A euphemisation of the social question

11. As we have seen, the reformulation of the social problem in terms of exclusion has focused the attention on situations as though they were responsible for producing it on their own. This focus has had the effect of producing a simplified image of the social structure, 'dramatising a division between two worlds [that of those who are *included* and those who are *excluded*] implicitly considered as homogeneous' [Rosanvallon, 1995: 88]. In this image, there is an affirmation of almost natural differences. But instead of trying to neutralise them, the political approach to social cohesion – which refers to the legal model of equal opportunities – takes them into consideration in order to particularise action. The vocabulary of plurality, the system of reference of diversity and the calls to 'respect the differences' which characterise it mark a dual transformation. On the one hand, the specific objects of discrimination (gender, race, etc.) are dispersed in a global conception of difference [Bereni & Jaunait, 2009]. On the other hand, diversity is presented as a value and an ideal to be attained, which tends to substitute for that of equality [Junter & Sénac-Slawinski, 2010]. By embodying this ideal, the image of cohesive society euphemises the social problem: by viewing difference as a collective wealth and harmonisation as a political end, this discourse suppresses the repertoire of conflict and effaces the power relationships.

12. In this euphemised discourse, the figure of social mix has a prominent position, firstly due to its localist character which suggests the possibility to act at infrasocial level, below confliction and social relationships. Mix may be presented as a remedy for diagnosed urban problems – socio-spatial segregation, tensions, communitarianism, etc. – thanks to its 'intrinsic' qualities of creating ties and chances to meet. 'Creating a mix' is supposed to establish ties and prevent disadvantaged neighbourhoods from falling out of society once and for all. Secondly, this mythical figure conjures up images of a supposed golden age of the city and thus provides an answer to the criticisms regarding

⁸ Let us mention de-institutionalisation, widespread mobility, the rise of the idea of self-referential individuality, etc.

a deteriorating society, by allowing a conceivable return to a city where diversity is experienced in harmony.

2. The political project of social mix in Brussels-Capital Region

13. The reformulation of the social question described above established the city as the object of specific intervention. In BCR, this process led to the development of true urban action from the mid 1990s with its own challenges, programmes, instruments and protagonists, and has played a unique role in global social policy. Through this action, a social mix project has emerged for Brussels, gradually receiving the support of the political class as a whole and more and more attention in discourses.

2.1. Construction of urban action in Brussels

2.1.1. Vulnerability and integration as a frame of reference

14. Although general, the terms of reference of urban action in BCR translate certain challenges of the social and political context in Brussels. In particular, they express the transformation of the integration policy which has taken place in two stages. The first stage corresponds to the gradual backing of integration policies onto the issue of immigration beginning in 1974, when the Belgian government decided to put an end to the immigration of workers. The dual observation of the huge presence of immigrant workers and the lack of positive socioeconomic perspectives for them resulted in several political initiatives with cultural overtones in order to improve their social situation.⁹ But the emergence of the theme of social exclusion in the 1980s [Vranken, 1998b] reorien-

tated these initiatives towards more social and economic actions [Ben Mohammed & Réa, 2000]. Gradually, the integration policy financed these initiatives for the most part to the detriment of actions for the integration of all citizens in the various institutions [Vranken, 1998a]. The creation of an Integration and Cohabitation regional fund for local communities in 1990 and the use of the concept of integration translated this reorientation of the integration policy from a general question into a category-specific question. New challenges were defined for Brussels society, whose multiculturalism was a recognised fact: the promotion of 'positive' differences and the preservation of a common social order.¹⁰

15. The second stage took place around 1991. At that time, two events – the 'urban uprisings' in Forest in May and the sudden xenophobic display on 'Black Sunday' on 24 November¹¹ – led the political world to favour a more global approach to social exclusion aimed at avoiding an explicit reference to the opposition between natives and immigrants, which would play into the hands of far right parties [Francq & Vanneste, 2010]. In connection with the new language of social cohesion, the cultural challenges and the ethnic and religious questions were removed from the discourse on exclusion – without being removed from the action (see below) – to the benefit of more general terms such as 'social disadvantages', 'poverty' and 'socioeconomic delays'. In 1995, the abovementioned fund was renamed the Integration and Cohabitation Programme.

16. The appearance of these terms led to the transformation of the frame of reference of integration which, from then on, has been related to that of particularised vulnerability and generalised difference. Due to

⁹ This was the beginning of a policy for the reception of immigrants, as well as gradual access to certain rights related to work and citizenship. It was also in 1981 that the 'Moureaux' against acts of racism and xenophobia were passed.

¹⁰ The report written in 1990 by the *Commissariat royal à la politique des immigrés* pleads 'for the notion of integration to be back-to-back with that of inclusion, which is "situated at an equal distance from assimilation and segregation"' (cited by CBAI-CRAcs, p.70).

¹¹ That day, the federal election ended in an objection vote against the outgoing coalition (democrats-Christians, socialists and Volksunie). Although until then they had been relatively loyal to the traditional parties, 35% of the Belgian electorate voted for small parties which were more or less new on the Belgian political scene. This included the xenophobic parties which obtained what was qualified as a 'landslide vote' in their favour, in particular the Vlaams Blok (former Vlaams Belang), which won 10% of Flemish votes.

socio-spatial polarisation and the concentration of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the 'poor area' in the heart of the city, as well as urban tensions in certain neighbourhoods with a mainly immigrant population, this frame of reference has clearly influenced the development of Brussels urban action. This has taken place according to two types of intervention and with new stakeholders, with an aim to reintegrate 'disadvantaged neighbourhoods' and their inhabitants in 'urban society'.

2.1.2. Two types of intervention

17. The first type of intervention is that of housing. Once synonymous with socioeconomic stabilisation [Zimmer, 2007], social housing has become the symbol of relegation since the economic crisis. The housing policy was initially aimed at the universal right to housing, and its scope was widened to include the fight against exclusion, focusing on a target area, namely the EDRLR.¹² The regional authorities thus asserted their dual will to cleanse the social housing stock and to support access to it by the very poor. In 1993, the Region established stricter allocation criteria¹³ and announced its intention to extend the social housing offer. But, later it became evident that housing is also a tax issue, and the regional policy to promote the purchase of a home acts above all in favour of more well-off households [Romainville, 2010]. In keeping with this, at the end of the 1980s, the *Société de Développement pour la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* (SDRB) was entrusted with the mission to produce subsidised housing in neighbourhoods 'abandoned by the public authorities and [private] investors' in order to keep middle-income households in BCR, forced by the housing market to rent their homes or to invest elsewhere.¹⁴ In order to better justify the instrument with regard to the declared orientation of the housing policy, the SDRB and the principle of access to property – in reality excluding

poor households – were integrated into the social policy for housing in 2011, via the Hutchinson order whose scope included any real estate operator 'who manages, rents or finances housing'.

18. The second type of intervention corresponds to a trend which is not specific to Brussels, i.e. that of integrated urban action which is translated by the move from the concept of 'urban renovation' to that of the 'revitalisation of neighbourhoods'. The first concept characterised the block renovation operations (1977-1992) carried out by the city of Brussels, which were based on the 'light rehabilitation' of damaged blocks as a counterpoint to the demolition/reconstruction policy between 1960 and 1970, and to amend the damage caused by functional urbanism. The aim was to stop the exodus of the population of old central neighbourhoods affected by this dual trend. The second concept involved a 'revitalisation' of disadvantaged neighbourhoods through the intervention of a multitude of public, community and private operators acting simultaneously at three levels of the 'living environment': material, social and economic. In 1994, the first regional instrument of this new philosophy was implemented: the neighbourhood contracts (see below).

19. This trend was confirmed in 1999 by a global reorganisation of the urban action policy which confirmed its role within the general social policy. At regional level, the different scopes of activity related to this revitalisation were grouped in a *Politique Intégrée de la Revitalisation Urbaine*. At federal level, the *Commissariat à la Politique urbaine des Grandes Villes* (PGV) was created, whose notice of intent identified a series of 'urban problems' which it intended to deal with actively: 'ghettoisation' and the 'crystallisation of social exclusion' were indicated along with employment problems as 'causes of cohabitation

¹² *L'Espace de Développement Renforcé du Logement et de la Rénovation* (EDRLR) corresponds more or less to the 'poor area', to which was added part of the pentagon.

¹³ The decree of 9 September 1993 defines a housing code which would reform the registration system, among others.

¹⁴ At the end of 2011, only 387 social housing units were built, and 563 of the 6000 announced in 2002 were still being built, while the SDRB counted more than 3000 subsidised housing units sold since 1989 (source: Kuyken, 2012).

problems'.¹⁵ The political concern for the 'harmonious cohabitation' of various constituent elements of Brussels society was starting to make itself heard. The *Programme Politique des Grandes Villes* thus established a new social section allowing several local actions to be developed to promote cohabitation in the neighbourhoods located 'at the heart of urban problems'.¹⁶

2.2. Three plans of action for social mix

20. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the social mix 'project' in BCR was clearly asserted, at a time when the lasting effects of the socioeconomic crisis of the 1980s – exaggerated socioeconomic differences, less chances for social mobility, limited choice of housing – were starting to be felt and socio-spatial segregation was considered as a problem to be resolved [Kesteloot & Mistiaen, 1998]. However, the premises already existed in the 1980s. Referred to in other terms, social mix and its qualities were then mobilised by some to justify a will to transform the populating of certain neighbourhoods. This was the case in particular with Charles Picqué (PS), who declared in 1985 that if

*'...in the neighbourhoods in the lower part of Saint-Gilles] sociological transformation is the objective, urban renovation is the tool.'*¹⁷

21. The arguments put forth already drew from the toned-down conception of the conflict which characterises the language of social cohesion: the declared intention was to remove the problems of 'mistrust' and 'incomprehension' from these working-class – not to mention immigrant – neighbourhoods. But the discourse itself emerged in an institutional context marked by more mundane challenges. In particular, the question of the financial viability¹⁸ of the young Region – based mainly

on taxes collected from its residents – made the transformation of the socioeconomic profile of the inhabitants of Brussels an interesting option for many. Compared with other countries, in Brussels there are few levers for direct action to promote social mix in a concrete manner, given the large number of private housing owners¹⁹ [Baillergeau, 2005]. The new city project was therefore promoted through more indirect actions.

2.2.1. Neighbourhood contracts²⁰

22. The Neighbourhood Contracts are one of the project's main mechanisms. They implement the regional policy to enhance the attractiveness of the living environment through its rehabilitation, which began in the 1980s. This is done via several aspects of the mechanism regarding the revitalisation of the residential function and public space, thus involving new types of protagonist in urban action: architects and urban planners now have a role to play to attract new households to the targeted neighbourhoods. But the mechanism emerged in a context in which the increase in the level of insecurity and feeling of insecurity was one of the main concerns, thus shaping the first contracts [Sacco, 2010].

23. While a 'return to the city' of the middle class has been a central concern since the implementation of the instrument in 1994, it was initially accompanied by social measures aimed at rehousing the inhabitants and at curbing the increase in rental prices. However, the social aspect gradually came to include other initiatives (professional training, development of social cohesion) which were entrusted to local associations, replacing the residential support provided to the inhabitants. Furthermore, beginning in 2000, 'urban marketing' measures were intensi-

¹⁵ The Chamber (2005), Document 2045/011, 4th session of the 51st legislature (online).

¹⁶ Brussels-Capital Region (2003), *Vivre au coeur des Quartiers. 1993-2003, dix ans de Revitalisation des Quartiers en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* (online), consulted on 15 August 2011.

¹⁷ Presentation of the strategy for lower Saint-Gilles, 1985, cited by Debry, 1998.

¹⁸ This question is related to several factors, mainly: the urban exodus of well-off households since the end of the 1950s and the concentration of poor households in the capital, the considerable management and facility costs related to its national and international functions and the increase in social expenses.

¹⁹ The housing stock held by the 34 social landlords operating in the Brussels-Capital Region represents only 8% of the total stock [Bernard, 2009].

²⁰ The mechanism was renamed Sustainable Neighbourhood Contracts in 2010.

fied with the dual objective to improve the living conditions of resident households and to favour social mix in order to deal with what was identified as being a source of 'social problems' – in addition to unemployment – in the neighbourhoods concerned, i.e. the 'imbalance of populations'. The first priority of the Regional Development Plan (RDP) in 2005 thus indicated that it was necessary to:

'reinforce residential attractiveness and promote social balance [in these neighbourhoods] by improving the quality of the urban environment, through an integrated and ambitious policy, in particular in terms of urban renovation, public spaces, community facilities, waste management and heritage.'

24. One of the main examples of this 'ambitious policy', which many Neighbourhood Contracts are part of, is that of the gradual redevelopment of the banks of the canal, where most of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods are located. This general plan devised by all levels of authority is clearly aimed at the renovation of the area along the waterway and new uses for it (promenades, events, cultural and commercial centres, lofts, etc.) to create a 'trendy' area attracting a new type of population. But the canal is also one of the 'strategic areas' defined by the International Development Plan (IDP) allowing Brussels to reposition itself with respect to other major European cities, which in actual fact involves the Neighbourhood Contracts concerned in a 'sales' strategy for the area targeting potential investors, with the resulting economic effects.²¹

25. This example illustrates the two types of reasoning behind the promotion of social mix via Neighbourhood Contracts. The first is aimed at encouraging private or public real estate investment intended for middle-income households. The second more implicit type is aimed at improving the image of neighbourhoods through interventions centred

mainly on feelings of well-being and security (improved street lighting, more green spaces, creation of community facilities partly intended for 'idle' young people, etc.). Such operations, which without doubt make neighbourhoods nicer for inhabitants, also make them more appealing to households seeking a home in the city, in turn arousing the interest of more nervous households.

2.2.2. The *Société de Développement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*

26. The grants for private construction and renovation operations from the *Société de Développement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* (SDRB) constitute another public instrument aimed at attracting new households to working-class neighbourhoods. The principle here is to minimise the risks for pioneer investors, by issuing grants allowing the housing produced to be sold at sub-market prices according to certain income conditions. These first investments must make the neighbourhood more attractive, both through the improvement of living conditions and through the arrival of beneficiary households, and thus lower the risks for future private investors. Given the fact that revenue conditions have become more relaxed, middle- and even high-income households²² benefit most from this mechanism [Romainville, 2010].

27. Until now, the SDRB has not assumed social mix as a targeted objective, but only as a 'collateral effect' of the operations carried out. However, the principle of emulation depends on a gradual transformation of the socioeconomic profile of the neighbourhoods concerned. Furthermore, the desire for this transformation is clearly expressed by other stakeholders, such as the regional MP (PS) Alain Hutchinson, who stated that

'our Region does not always meet the criterion of quality of life in terms of mix – above all social, but also cultural – in the neighbour-

²¹ In addition to improved attractiveness, the Neighbourhood Contracts mechanism provides for the decrease in the charge on land for investors via operations for the long-term lease of buildings or plots of land.

²² According to a recent study which has not been published [Verdonck *et al.*], buyers of SDRB housing are generally situated above the income bracket for the Brussels middle class, which was between 15,107 and 30,213 euros per year (and per tax declaration) in 2008.

hoods. It is a true problem. The SDRB [...] is an important tool for this policy';²³

or the RDP (2005):

'The mixed projects – which associate different partners (private investors, SDRB, social housing aimed at various types of public) in the same renovation or construction operation – contribute to the promotion of social mix [...] and must therefore be encouraged.'

2.2.3. The 'social cohesion' decree

28. In BCR, the social cohesion policy is governed by a decree passed in 2004 by the French Community Commission. As a pure product of the new social action model, this mechanism is intended to provide an answer to socio-spatial dualisation by financing local actions led by associations with groups and in 'vulnerable' municipalities. This third mechanism – initiated later, when the discourse on mix had become widely accepted – is intended to implement mix in all of its dimensions (social, cultural, intergenerational, gender related). The decree thus indicates the desire to fight

'against all types of discrimination and social exclusion through the development of policies for social integration, interculturality, sociocultural diversity and cohabitation of the different local communities.'

29. In this case, the reasoning behind action to promote mix is not the 'importation' of middle-income households in working-class neighbourhoods, but that of integration from the bottom up: the mixing of different target groups is advocated as a means of promoting local solidarity and of building a collective sense of belonging, which are presumed to revitalise socially marginalised neighbourhoods. The public vegetable gardens which have sprung up everywhere in Brussels are an example of places devoted specifically to this mixing.

30. Paradoxically, the call for social mix is linked to that of outreach work. Local action does not always enable a heterogeneous mix, as the beneficiary neighbourhoods are most often made up of a homogeneous population [Ansay *et al.*, 2007] in terms of poverty and ethnicity. In fact, although the target group with an immigrant background is no longer a category of beneficiaries defined as such, a considerable share of subsidised projects target this public. The intentions to create a mix as provided for by the decree appear above all to constitute a politically correct discourse – in the true sense of the expression – to include actions aimed at this public in the more generally accepted framework of the fight against social disadvantages. In the language used in this discourse, the 'cohabitation of local communities' more than likely signifies an avoidance of ethnic withdrawal.

31. At a closer look, the watchword of social mix is not often accompanied by arguments in the texts providing a framework for these three instruments, or in the political discourse in general. It is almost never carefully defined, except as a state of socioeconomic and/or cultural composition of the city as a whole or in certain areas. Beyond the attraction of new household profiles and the development of new social uses in targeted areas, the means of action proposed to guarantee social balance are also quite vague. On analysis, social mix thus appears as a language serving to legitimise other political ends or operations with sensitive challenges, rather than as the political project of a more egalitarian city²⁴. In BCR, two purposes are particularly noticeable in the discourse on mix: that of urban marketing in areas with commercial or tourism-related potential, and that of breaking the close-knit communities of immigrant populations, presented as one of the main threats to social cohesion. This language corresponds overall to the very consensual language of social cohesion and diversity, which presents social mix as an objective in itself needing no justification. It also serves to express a democratic ideal which has become common

²³ Housing Commission in the Brussels Parliament, February 2011.

²⁴ It was also mobilised by the social housing sector to unofficially play on a somewhat hazy dispensation system, introduced at the same time as the Housing Code in 1993, which authorises positive discrimination, allowing it to reconcile the spirit of the code with management reality [Harze, 2011]. This point has not been developed due to the article's length restrictions.

sense (the Region speaks of 'necessary mix'²⁵) and which easily mobilises the political stakeholders as well as public opinion. For the same reasons, this discourse also has a polysemous character – it serves to diagnose urban problems as well as proclaim the objective to reach and the means of action – which produces the desired effect: that of legitimisation to the benefit of politics itself [Genestier, 2010].

Conclusion

32. The central position of social mix in urban action in BCR may be explained in part by the positive connotations and ideological qualities of the notion. This position is also due to joint social and political transformations which brought to the fore the 'problem' of vulnerable territories as the main source of inequality. The multicultural reality associated with socio-spatial segregation, the redefining of exclusion, the political philosophy of integrated action and the neoliberal reorientation of politics in general have made certain areas in Brussels the preferred objects of the incantation to social mix, which does not seem necessary in the 'beautiful neighbourhoods'. According to a lightened conception of social justice, the notion is mobilised to call for the same living conditions to be shared by the various social entities in these areas, leaving it up to individuals to take full benefit of it in order to climb the social ladder. Social mix may be presented as a miracle remedy because it also operates in a pragmatic way: by condensing the semantics of integration from the bottom up, it provides the possibility to create a community of thought [Genestier, 2010] which unites the left without being questioned by the right.

33. But this localist and irenic thought contradicts the analysis according to which the situations of 'new poverty' and the processes of exclusion (or 'disaffiliation', according to Castel) originate in the system. Beyond the declaration of intentions, the notion appears above all to play a role of legitimising urban action in general and less noble ends in particular, thanks to its integration in the ideological language of social cohesion. Behind this language, the 'problem' of vulnerable neighbour-

hoods is that they are unattractive areas in the eyes of more well-off households and the capital, due to their material deterioration and a presumed disintegration of social order. In this sense, in the call for social mix, is it not possible to distinguish a type of 'all-encompassing' will to redeploy the systems of collective regulation (school, work, citizenship)? The principle according to which social justice exists through shared living conditions does not specify that it does not apply to the existence of a neutral individual. On the contrary, the mixing of 'vulnerable' groups and the so-called middle class – more precisely the upper middle class, who are well-off and endowed with cultural capital – is based on an implicit model, i.e. that of the values and consumption practices of the latter. It is through these targeted social groups – inclined to 'fashionable' cultural consumption and creators of trends – that the revitalisation of Brussels is supposed to take place.

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²⁵ Brussels-Capital Region (2003), *Vivre au coeur des Quartiers. 1993-2003, dix ans de Revitalisation des Quartiers en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* (online), consulted on 15 August 2011.

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