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The difference of 'being diverse': City branding and multiculturalism in the 'Leicester Model'

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ABSTRACT

This city profile on Leicester focuses on the representation of ethnical diversity in city branding. Through a historical approach, the paper discusses how the local authorities have taken advantage of the arrival of different migration flows into the city, in order to redefine its post-industrial identity in terms of multiculturalism, tolerance and inclusivity. In so doing, the paper emphasises the combination of deliberate marketing communicative activities, the provision of services for attracting and retaining foreign businesses and the creation of an open urban *milieu* where various ethnic groups are free to express and celebrate their own cultures through festivals and events. The paper identifies the alignment between place communication and place 'offerings' development as the crucial element underpinning Leicester's model for multicultural cooperation and critically assesses the recent challenges that are being posed to the sustainment of a multicultural city image.

1. Introduction

Leicester is an English medium-sized city located in the region of the East Midlands. With a total population of 329,839 in 2011 (UK Office for National Statistics, 2011), Leicester is the thirteenth most populous city in the United Kingdom and offers, together with London, one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse urban areas of the country. Before the unexpected victory of Leicester City Football Team in the 2015/16 Premiere League, which rapidly boosted the city's international profile, for decades Leicester seemed to share the stage with (and the destiny of) several other British cities. Once brick-and-mortar landscapes for myriads of manufacturing plants and multitudes of low-skilled workers, from the mid-Seventies onwards British cities have been concerned in reshaping their socio-economic structure. For this purpose, most of them have sought to pursue alternative models of urban regeneration based on 'soft' assets and resources.

Notably, reaching the status of a *knowledge* city (Carrillo, 2006), *culture* city (Griffiths, 2006) or a *creative* city (Evans, 2009) worked as an orienting principle for recent urban policy making in a context of perceived inter-urban competition (see Gordon, 1999; Gordon & Buck, 2005). In this view, culture is ascribed a "redeeming role" (Rabbiosi & Giovanardi, 2017, p. 250) by city managers, in the effort to boost economic performances and urban development. It is in this neoliberal scenario of city 'boosterism' that British cities have steadily become testing grounds for place marketing (Paddison, 1993), tourism promotion techniques (e.g. Bradley, Hall and Harrison, 2002) and subsequently place branding (e.g. Hankinson, 2001; Lloyd & Peel, 2008; Koller, 2008). Larger cities like Manchester (Young, Diep & Drabble, 2006; Warnaby & Medway, 2013) or Liverpool (Houghton & Stevens, 2011), and even smaller cities like Oldham (Koller, 2008) or Bradford (Trueman, Cook, & Cornelius, 2008), have reported the task of overcoming the negative perceptions of their industrial legacy. In this context, branding has been a favourite tool that enables the creation of compelling narratives, which are supposed to facilitate economic innovation and change. Furthermore, the experience of British cities have often revealed that social-related issues, such as the quest for "social cohesion" and "social inclusion" (see for example Turok, 2009), often become extremely challenging aspects in the process of redesigning post-industrial urban identities. This is the specific domain of contribution of this city profile of Leicester, which endeavours to illuminate a widely debated social dimension of city branding practice: the representation of *difference* and, in particular, *ethnical diversity*.

On the one hand, local policy makers and city branding practitioners agree that the co-presence of different ethnical groups can be a distinctive and desirable characteristic of a reputable 'knowledge city' (see for example Selby, 2004, p. 28). This is in respect of the 'desired' urban demographic profile but also the features of place 'products' and services. For instance, Toronto showcased its multicultural character by celebrating the diversity of ethnic food (Boudreau et al., 2009), while Sidney claims to be one of the word's

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multicultural cities (http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/research-and-statistics/the-city-at-a-glance/our-global-city). Analogue assertions of multicultural identity underpin the branding strategies of cities that claim to be 'global' (Paganoni, 2012) or 'cosmopolitan' (Young et al., 2006; Colombino, 2009), reinforcing the tendency to emphasise cultural variety so as to appeal to transnational creative workers (see Florida, 2002), international tourists (see Selby, 2004) and other sophisticated elites (see Shaw, 2007). In this view, not only is ethnical diversity itself an enviable aspect of modern and vibrant urban areas, but it is also a key component of creativity. In their review of the literature on 'creative cities' and city branding, Trueman et al. (2007) identify ethnicity as a distinguishing dimension of urban creativity, which could work as a pivotal asset for presenting the city's milieu to external audiences.

On the other hand, critical commentators have repetitively noted that the frequent celebration of cultural and ethnical diversity in city branding has often eroded the meaningfulness of diversity. This tendency may negatively affect the effectiveness and credibility of city marketing messages (e.g. Turok, 2009) and, furthermore, holds contradictory socio-political and ethical implications, because it can often portray a "narrow cosmopolitanism" (Young et al., 2006). Accordingly, the repeated incorporation of diversity in city branding narratives and discourse might sustain a 'representational regime' whereby social exclusion, rather than inclusion, is promoted, and where only certain forms of difference are tolerated or accepted (see Gibson, 2005). In other words, advocates of the multicultural city have often treated multiculturalism in a simplistic way. Multiculturalism might then become a mere attribute of a 'loft-living' style that is showcased in city tourism brochures or in a leaflet advertising newly refurbished cosmopolitan districts, aiming to attract a highly-selected and mainly bourgeois type of resident (Gibson, 2005). In this view, the practice of city branding contributes to a dominant discourse, where certain cultures are commodified for the needs of tourists and where "semiotic violence" (Jensen, 2007) is committed against ethnical minorities, being spectacularised as 'exotically' diverse.

An alternative rendition of the entanglement between city branding and multiculturalism is offered in this paper. Through an illustration of the historical development that led to the "Leicester Model" – a set of policies based on a political commitment to multiculturalism – the paper discusses how local authorities in Leicester have taken advantage of the arrival of different migration flows into the city, in order to redefine its post-industrial identity as characterised by openness and inclusivity. The paper also discusses the tensions and implications of two recent unexpected events: the discovery of King Richard III's mortal remains (and the resulting tourism-oriented policies) and the victory of the local football club in the Premier League. The paper ends with a critical assessment of the challenges posed by de-globalisation to the sustainment of a multicultural city image. This task is fulfilled by reporting relevant findings from a three-year archival research conducted by the first author in the city of Leicester.

2. From manufacturing prosperity to industrial decline

During the inter-war period, Leicester was internationally known as the city that 'clothes the world' thanks to the diversity of its manufacturing industries, such as boot and shoe, and its wide variety of hosiery and knitted goods production (Nash & Reeder, 1993). Leicester's economic prosperity relied on a buoyant industrial sector that employed two-thirds of the 283,000 people residing in Leicester during the year of 1950. Unemployment was non-existent and vacancies were waiting to be filled (Authority of Leicester Corporation, 1946, p. 20). It was in this moment that the city began to experience a significant influx of migrants coming from the Caribbean and the sub-Indian continent to meet the 1950s' labour shortages.[1] While the British National Act 1948 enabled all Commonwealth citizens to migrate to Britain, it further encouraged people to move and start a new life in Britain. From this very first moment, migrations flowing into Leicester started forging its multicultural character.

Leicester's buoyant manufacturing base meant that the city at the time was "one of the wealthiest in Europe" (Beazley, 2006, p. 170), and to attract visitors, shoppers and buyers from many overseas places the first Leicester Trade Fair was organised in May 1949. This was emblematic of Leicester's industrial power and helping to convey the image of a successful and economically dynamic city. Visitors to Leicester could remark on a culture of well-being and economic success within the city, with its prosperous shops and well-dressed people – a proud city that could manufacture any type of products from umbrellas to jet engines, from boats to cosmetics, from cigars to lenses. Leicester's industrial potential was reflected in the quality of its products that were praised for bearing the "true stamp of the Leicester craftsman" (Authority of Leicester Corporation, 1946, p. 20).

However, this temporary success came to an end as its greatest manufacturing centre collapsed due to the phenomenon of deindustrialisation and the economic recession of the 1970s. The city felt the full force of economic restructuring, and optimism diminished when it failed to sustain a dynamic image. The decline of long-standing firms in traditional industries was the direct result of foreign competition. The expansion of the tertiary sector led to a change in the nature of occupational structure as employment in banking, commerce, insurance, public administration and health sector were flourishing - managerial professions increased by 57.4% from 1981 to 1991 whereas occupations in metallic good manufactures decreased by 36.6% over the same period. The local authorities had to tackle difficulties that emerged in a post-industrial era, and a high unemployment rate that reached 11.5% in 1981 in contrast to 4.7% in 1975 (UK Census, 1982; UK Census, 1991; Leicester City Council, key facts about Leicester, 1991).

This novel post-industrial scenario led to a genuine challenge for Leicester's local authorities, as they had to deal with the negative public perception of the city as an industrial relic – the best days of which were now firmly in the past (Leicester Mercury, 1986). While the city's industrial power was in decline, another migration flux occurred in Leicester. The arrival of Asians from East Africa in Leicester happened for political reasons, as the Ugandan president Idi Amin was persecuting this ethnic group for having control of over important economic sectors such as trade. Asian families were then expelled in a context where African nationalism and inter-communal tensions were strongly felt. This exodus resulted in more than 20,000 people arriving in Leicester during the period 1968–1978 (Panesar, 2005). Although Ugandan Asians were first perceived as a menace by some far-right anti-immigration activists, this new migration wave had profound implications for the prosperity of the economic and cultural urban life, paving the way for the multi-cultural character of Leicester (Jones, 2014). According to the 1991 census, its ethnic minority population accounted for 28.5% of the population whereas the UK average was 5.5% (Bonney, 2003, p. 18). The presence of ethnical minorities became even more predominant over the decades. Leicester gained a reputation for being the home for refugees and asylum seekers: in the early 2000s Leicester welcomed Somalis refugees; since Poland became member of the EU in 2004, there has been exponential growth of Polish people in the city; more recently new groups of migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Kosovo arrived in the city as refugees. Leicester is now considered one of the first UK cities, outside London, to have a majority of the population with ethnic minority origin (see Leicester City Council, 2008, p. 11).

[1] Leicester was a favourable destination for series of migration flows to occur which first started in the middle of the nineteenth century with the arrival of Russian Jewish refugees. They were followed by the migration of other European Jews in the 1930s who were escaping Nazi Germany persecution.

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