Equality Diversity and Inclusion Conference 2012

*Proposal of contribution – Extended abstract.*

*Stream 2: International perspectives on belonging and othering in Higher Education*

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**Ethnic Minorities in Higher Education: a Critical Integration**

This paper analyses how ethnic minority students experience their entry into higher education and how they cope with mainstream student social life. Based on a field enquiry among four major London universities, this research plays down the paradigm of ‘black scepticality’ proposed by P.M. Allen (1998), according to which ethnic minority students feel ill at ease in these purely ‘white’ institutions. It also criticizes the controversial conclusions of the ‘Islam on Campus’ enquiry led by Thorne and Stuart (2008), which interprets ethnic minority students’ habits and opinions in terms of a lack of commitment to the British society.

Whereas ethnic minority families suffer from a class structure disadvantage, their emphasis on university curriculum as a symbolic and material achievement of the migration project largely explains why ethnic minority children proportionately outnumber their white counterparts in higher education. Ethnic minority students’ discourses reproduce this ‘preference’ for education, but they also show a resistance to this collectivization of their schooling with proper hopes and career aims. Moreover, the university is rather perceived as a cocoon, a politically correct arena where ethnic and religious difference is very rarely a stigma. It allows a ‘banal’ integration which coexists with the upholding of close sociability more often among color and religious peers. Those who invest in such relationships as well as confessional or cultural societies are less guided by the need to strengthen such aspects of their identity than by an ambiguous quest for a ‘sameness comfort’. Religious and cultural identities can be forgotten precisely in circles where they provide the reason to be together. Besides, the free mixing credo is counterbalanced with an ethos of dignity, which for example keeps some ethnic minority students away from entertainment places regulated by alcohol.

For these students, feeling of discrimination does not really stem from individual concrete situations of unfavorable treatments, mainly because they had not yet been confronted with the employment market. However, a collective remote feeling of discrimination emerges from the confrontation with mainstream media, whose discourses are quite systematically accused of demonizing minorities and Islam. Adversity has thus been virtualized and extended. We then review ethnic minority students’ interpretative framework of the political game. Initial empathy to the Labour has been largely (but temporarily?) annihilated by international issues and British participation to the war in Irak.

Ethnic minority students’ integration to higher education is therefore understood as a natural generational achievement which provides them by the same way cognitive resources to elaborate a specific critique of media discourses and political stances.