



## PRESS RELEASE

Trento, 1 June 2009

**Verdier: between rejection and a multiethnic society, the third route is multiple identity**

### THE INTEGRATION OF FOREIGNERS? SEX IN THE UNIVERSITY!

**Different processes in the assimilation of minorities have different implications on the acceptance of redistribution and welfare policy by public opinion. When identities are more marked the promotion of such policy is more difficult, but there is an antidote: social capital**

Speaking at the “Focus” session on the subject of “Cultural integration, the formation of identity and political support for the welfare state”, Thierry Verdier, Professor of Economics at the Paris School of Economics, identified a third possible route somewhere between anti-immigration policy and policy to promote a multiethnic society, both difficult to implement and not altogether without risks: the promotion of a multiple identity, originating in the interaction of the diversities that tend to form in separate communities and identities. So where is the place where such a multiple identity can most easily be created, then reflecting on the whole of society? It is the home of culture, education and the university, rather than the urban environment. Verdier summarised the concept with a wisecrack: “Sex in the university rather than sex in the city”. And who better than he can bear witness to this? The son of a dark-skinned Caribbean mother and a French father, married to a Brazilian, Verdier immediately discouraged those who ask themselves whether the election of a black President in the USA may speed up the integration of black people: “Is Obama black? In the USA you need only have a single drop of black blood to be considered black, but in Brazil, for example, where there are three groups: whites, blacks and Indios, it is enough to have a single drop of white blood for a black to be considered white, and Obama's mother is white!”

The starting point of Verdier's analysis was the consideration, coming from an economist rather than a sociologist, that in the light of immigration trends between countries, cultural diversity, cultural integration and the formation of identity are and will continue to be central elements in modern society. Clearly the global economic crisis will slow down this process, but this is the trend. The question asked by the French economist regarded the ways in which different processes of assimilation of minorities influence the degree of popular support for redistribution and welfare policy.

Given that immigration towards Europe will not stop (although it will increase more to Spain rather than to Italy), it is a question of dealing with various tensions, both economic (pay and fiscal competition) and social (cultural diversity). Recent studies carried out in the USA on the influence that ethnic diversity has on the distribution of assets and public services would seem to show that there is a negative influence: when there is a greater ethnic mix, less tends to get done. However Verdier identified an antidote: social capital, understood as the presence of community spirit. "Where there is more social capital, people tend to have more confidence in people in general and more civic sense and commitment. This leads to a greater capacity to control political decisions. The costs of social policy are also lower and all this helps to select more efficient and effective policy. So if people are interested in the public good, it is likely that the bureaucracy will be more efficient and that corruption will be reduced, something which in its turn leads to greater confidence in the institutions. In short, the quality of government increases".

Thus social capital is a force that acts as a "bridge between groups". Verdier admitted that the debate has been considerably influenced by the American situation, where only 24 per cent of citizens affirm that it is right "to help the poor", whereas in Europe the percentage is del 60 per cent.

How much does religion influence the formation of identity? "Increasingly less, religious differences tend to become less important and disappear over time, just as identity tends to make increasingly less reference to belonging to one social class rather than another". However, these are considerations were not sufficient to make Verdier look to the future with optimism. "The situation is depressing". Nor was the French economist able to indicate (with the familiar caution of economists at the Festival!) what the best route to follow would be: whether citizenship laws (the vote, rights and duties for immigrants), the development dynamics of which we know little about, or on the contrary, rejection and refusal, something that causes the stigmatisation of foreigners. It is thus better to leave things to the students: "Sex in the University!"