

# "Diversity" and the social imaginary - Vertovec

Vertovecs concept of diversity encompasses an aggregation of discourses, structures, policies and practices. He attributes them to consist of multiple converging factors with their own definitions of fleeting ever-changing subjects. While they all do possess differing goals and ambitions, their repeated use in mainstream-media has compromised them. Predictable slogans and recurring word sequences are obscuring their intended purpose.

## The origin story of "diversity"

It started in the US in the 1960s under the name of **Affirmative Action** — the initial goal was to create equal opportunities in terms of employment/ education for Black Americans while fighting discrimination. The primary motivation behind it was to rectify „[...] historical harms of racist discrimination.“ (Vertovec 2012: p.289) **Statistical proportionality** was used to compare different groups in all fields of life. In the coming years the so called **equivalence of differences** further tied an analogy of minority between Blacks, Latinos, Natives, Asians, women and the disabled. The 80s saw a shift of perspectives occurring. A focus on the past was traded for a focus on the future and AA got rebranded as **diversity management**: growing awareness of opportunities caused by a demographic shift in society. **Diversity mainstreaming** promoted this newfound outlook in the public sector. This soon to be prevalent view turned into a must-have for companies because of societal pressure and the possible benefits of a diverse work place involved. Overall a trend, from ascribed group-based attributes towards self-attributed individual characteristics, was taking place.

## Facets of diversity

### aimed at minorities

- redistribution: access to goods and services once denied
- recognition: support of social and political participation
- representation: politics of presence, mostly focused around quotas

### aimed at majority

- provision: catering to the needs of citizens/ customers
- competition: company marketing and public image, gaining monetary benefits
- organization: maximizing performance of teams and workforce

## Ambiguity, multivalency, banality

**Semantic bleaching** refers to the varying definitions of diversity that contain an appealing, aspirational but diffuse and abstract quality. The majority of citizens in the USA, UK and Germany are confused about the actual meaning behind the term. Even though its meaning is unclear to a vast majority, diversity spreads out into every aspect of daily life and thereby turns into a norm for

institutions/ companies to adhere to. Social expectations are built and a need for predictable phrases is constructed, regardless of the fact that the words being thrown around are devoid of substance.



Vertovec claims the dissolving usage of the term plays a key role in the widespread dissemination and its acceptance in society.

## Diversification and Diversity

Migration-driven diversification and diversity are linked. A conflict arises between the need of classification by self-identification (diversity policy) and minority rights classification (e.g. race-sensitive policies). Self-identification based on differentiation from others stands in contrast to the essentialistic approach of assigned group characteristics.



„Prewitt foresees two possible outcomes: either a push toward measurement (like censuses) using ever more finely-grained classifications, or system collapse – the end of measurements of difference.“ (p.304)

Additionally, one has to consider the aspect of intersectionality and its impact on policy-making as a whole. Governments will need to make intersectionality measurable to allow quantification of multiple disadvantages.

## Transforming the social imaginary

The **social imaginary** represents a set of presumptions that people have about their collective social life: „[...]a moral order, a sense of how we ought to live together.“ (p.305) Vertovec suggests that diversity is a refinement of the already existing concept of equality in its context of the social imaginary. Its **interpretive elasticity** allows for big coverage and a sense of natural belonging.



„Diversity advocates the basic social and moral code that everyone manifests „difference“ in some way, indeed multiple ways, and that this fact should be integral to the way that everyone treats each other in society“ (p.306)

Diversity raises awareness of individual differences and has the potential to allow access to social complexity. It creates a basic set of rules and instructions to further expand everyday social customs upon. Continuous exposure to the same set of ideas shapes the social imaginary. Previously new introduced rules are being taken for granted without question. The increased attentiveness to presumed categories like ethnicity, gender, age etc. changes the way people perceive and interact with one another. This heightened understanding of each other leads to more openness and reveals a fraction of the complex underlying social structures. In other words: „diversity increasingly aids us in imagining ourselves“ (p.308).

## Conclusion

The process of diversification will continue and diversity will become more and more prominent in the future. Depending on the differing methods used to tackle growing diversification and its implicit consequences, the resulting public opinion will vary immensely. Vertovec mentions different scenarios ranging from cosmopolitanization (sympathetic openness) to negative recognition (indifference and detachment) to anti-cosmopolitanization/ diversity backlash as possible outcomes.



Open discourse and equivalent communicative effort is required of societies to usher in a new age of world openness. A learning process spurred on by mutual recognition and understanding is the basis for transformative action. These values overlap with a cosmopolitan approach, though they do not necessarily bring about a cosmopolitan world view.

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## Literature

Vertovec 2012. »Diversity« and the social imaginary«. European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie, 53(3), 287–312.

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