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The agenda setter: how Steven Vertovec's work mirrored and advanced major shifts in migration research

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the major conceptual innovations that are reflected in and advanced by Steven Vertovec's work. It contains four such innovations each separated from the next by roughly 5 years: from the term diaspora (from 1989 onward) to multiculturalism (from 1994), then transnationalism (from 1999) and (less prominently) cosmopolitanism (from 2000), and finally super-diversity (from 2005). The author offers some speculations about how this conceptual trajectory is related to more general trends, situating Vertovec's intellectual development within the broader history of migration studies and within some even broader changes in migration patterns and immigrant policies in the West. The essay concludes with some remarks, written from the point of view of an extended historical perspective, about trend diagnosis and its potential limits.

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Steven Vertovec looks back on a remarkably successful and productive career. In the cross-disciplinary field of migration studies, he certainly is one of the most influential thinkers as well as an incredibly entrepreneurial leader heading funding initiatives (such as the ESRC program on Transnational Communities), institutions (such as COMPAS at Oxford and the Max-Planck Institute in Göttingen later on), book series (such as the one on *Global Diversities* published by Palgrave-Macmillan), journals (such as *Global Networks*), and so on. He left a deep trace of ideas in the writings of others, in the minds of people who had the privilege of working with him closely, and in the public sphere more generally. In this short article, I will focus on the evolution of his research and more specifically on the key concepts that have guided this trajectory forward. Given that this is an introductory article for a special issue, it cannot delve deeply into the analytical prospects and problems of these key concepts or review the many academic and political debates they are associated with. I will begin, for better or for worse, by analyzing the list of his publications and by using some common bibliometric measures of influence, such as citations. In later sections, I add more substance to this overview and offer a short analysis of his distinctive analytical style.

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Main themes

As is well known, Vertovec's first publications originated in his ethnographies of the Hindu diaspora first in Trinidad and Tobago (Vertovec 1992), the site of his dissertation research, and later in other Hindu communities in the United Kingdom and beyond (Vertovec 2000). From the beginning, Vertovec's research thus embraced a translocal, transnational perspective connecting various places around the globe with each other. This signature global outlook has stayed with him throughout his career.

Moving on from his pre-occupation with diasporas – ethno-religious communities that span countries and Continents – Vertovec began focusing on the consequences of the diasporic multiplicity of orientations for social cohesion and for policy making in specific locales, such as cities or countries. He approached this second major theme from the point of view of multi-culturalism (Vertovec 1996): What happens if many different communities with different (sometimes diasporic) orientations are brought together into a shared political space, such as the diverse countries of the developed West, some parts of the global South, and East Asia, and into a (mostly urban) social field they cohabit? From this diagnostic of multiculturalism as a lived reality and as a long-term policy approach, in which diversity and cultural autonomy were celebrated, Vertovec then derived his more recent analysis of the backlash against and criticism of these policies. Like many others, he put the finger on the economic and cultural strains brought about by increasing globalization, to which many natives reacted with a longing for national unity and for the restoration of the old, mono-cultural order (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).

The third major theme that emerged and where his work proved to be especially influential is transnationalism (Vertovec 1999a) – generalizing the insights that he had already gained from his study of religious diasporas. He put the finger on border-spanning processes, including but not limited to migration, that produce a densely woven web of social relations crisscrossing country boundaries and Continents. Vertovec, as many others working in this field, initially thought of this as a new trend, as assimilation pressures decreased in what then seemed to be the beginning of a post-national world and as unprecedented levels of economic, financial, and social globalization produced much denser exchange networks across borders than ever seen before.

Following up on his engagement with multi-culturalism and in conversation with visions of a coming post-national, transnational age, Vertovec also picked up and expanded upon the idea of cosmopolitanism – an attitude of self-reflexive dislocation, of assuming the position of different peoples in what was rapidly becoming a mosaic of mingled perspectives, communities, and experiences. He urged researchers to expand this classical notion to take cultural difference, the experience of marginalized migrants, and the transnational orientations of many communities into account (Vertovec and Cohen 2002).

Finally, in the past decade or so, Vertovec introduced what is perhaps his most original contribution to the field, the idea of super-diversity (2007). He diagnosed the end of the multi-cultural era and the coming of a much more heterogenous social configuration that no longer fitted into the model of multiple communities. Increasing migration from a dramatically larger number of source countries, increased heterogeneity of immigrants along the lines of class background, education, and channels of migration produced, he argues,

a "super-diverse" configuration of experiences with its own, boundary dissolving and boundary re-configuring dynamics. Super-diverse neighborhoods, regions, and indeed countries, in which majorities become a minority among others and in which people share many aspects of their lives, their jobs, their neighborhoods, and their intimate relationships with people from different cultural origins, generated an unprecedented intersectional multiplicity (though Vertovec did not adopt this term, as far as I can see).

A bibliometric view on the succession of themes

The following graph shows this intellectual trajectory across the five themes. It displays the publications dedicated to the topics by year of publication (limiting myself here to those articles, books, and chapters with a minimum citation count). The five overlapping waves of themes, each lasting between 11 and 19 years, are clearly discernible in this graph: The diaspora wave from 1989 to roughly 2006, the multiculturalism wave from 1994 to 2013, the transnationalism wave from 1999 to 2010 (with a late publication in 2023), the cosmopolitanism wave from 2002 to 2018, and finally, the super-diversity wave from 2017 to today (Figure 1).

In all of these thematic fields Vertovec's writing proved to be enormously impactful, as measured by Google Scholar citations. The following table (Table 1) shows that around 80 per cent of all his publications are linked to one of these five themes – and that his writings about transnationalism are by far the most influential, accounting for roughly half of all the topic related citations.

Finally, we can visualize these themes by generating a word cloud from all the titles of Vertovec's very long list of publications, focusing on books, journal articles, and book chapters – in a small tribute to Vertovec's recent forays into and passion for data

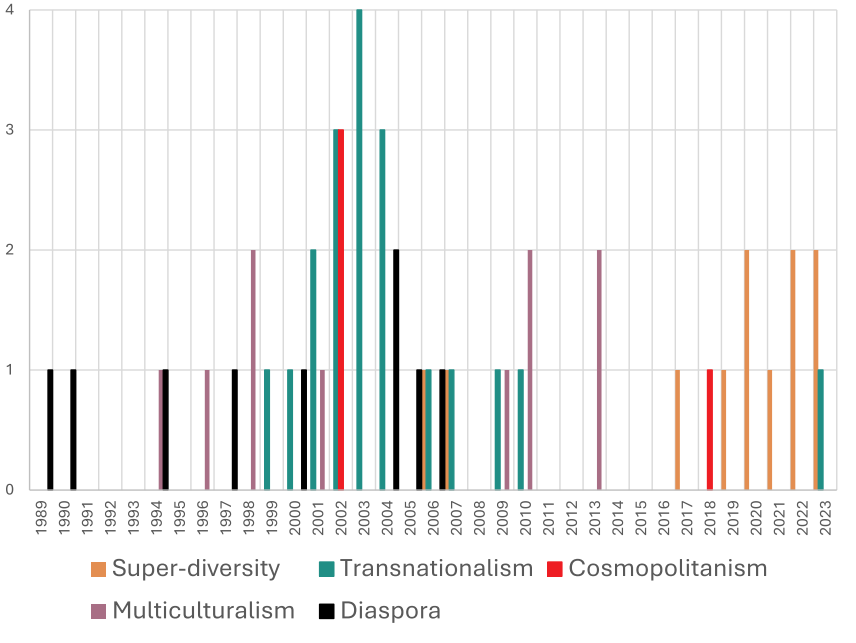

Figure 1. Vertovec's publication by theme and over time.

Table 1. Vertovec's publications by theme and citation counts.

Super diversity	Transnationalism	Cosmopolitanism	Multiculturalism	Diaspora	All terms	Total citations
10,758	18,794	2,183	3,353	3,059	38,147	47,731

visualization techniques (Vertovec et al. 2024). Apart from the topics mentioned above, we see a number of themes showing up, including some word combinations that outline his specific approach to the five topics: a focus on (European) cities as well as the ideas of complexity, the social organization of difference, and contextual conditions. These words outline the specific analytical stances that Vertovec has consistently pursued throughout his intellectual career. They are deeply inspired, in my reading of his work, by his education in the political anthropology tradition of Oxford, where he got his PhD, and which showed up in the works of Clyde Mitchell, Max Gluckman, and others writing in this tradition. Sociologist Robin Cohen, with whom Vertovec worked for many years after completing his PhD, encouraged Vertovec to bring this anthropological sensibility to the study of international migration, diasporas, and related fields (Figure 2).

Analytical stances and intellectual style

Vertovec's analytical style has, in my reading, five characteristics. The first is to emphasize how cultural difference is organized within complex social configurations historically shaped by social hierarchies, political movements, and institutional orders. This gives the study of cultural complexity a social structural momentum and keeps it clear from both cultural and psychological reductionism – seeing difference as a reflection of innate cultural structures or a mere perception generated by individual minds – as well as from economistic forms of analysis where the collective configuration of difference result from individual acts of maximization. In recent years, Vertovec (2021) has returned to this enduring theme of his work in more explicit and more theoretically systematic ways, distinguishing between configurations of social inequality, forms of social categorization (such as ethnicity), and everyday social interactions and to study, in the tradition of Fredrik Barth, how they mutually constitute each other to generate different contextual dynamics.

Figure 2. Word cloud characterizing Vertovec's publications.

At the more empirical level, Vertovec has brought an acute awareness of social structural context to the study of group contact, a theory and research field long dominated by social psychologists who study people in the experimental lab, rather than their given social environment (Christ et al. 2014). Transnationalism, to give another example and to return to one of his most famed contributions to the literature, is both a structure of social relations maintained across boundaries (or a "social morphology" in his terms), a form of identification and orientation towards the world shaped by these ties, a strategy of culturally socializing the next generation, a political field shaped by the structure of ties, the prevalent nature of identity claims, and structures of power, as well as an economic domain within which co-ethnics around the world form interconnected niche markets (Vertovec 1999a; similarly his earlier analysis of the "Three Meanings of Diaspora", Vertovec 1999b).

The second analytical stance, also inherited from the anthropological tradition, is to ground every analysis in its particular context and to be sensitive to how such contextual conditions vary across cases, times, and places. Rather than seeking recurrent patterns, as in the more "normal science"-oriented branches of migration studies, this perspective emphasizes the uniqueness of these contextual conditions. For example, the structure of the Hindu diaspora (Vertovec 2000) is shaped by and in turn shapes the various social ties within which its members find themselves embedded, or, in other words, the logics of alliance and opposition in specific social fields, as Bourdieu would say. In the Caribbean, Hinduism has been deeply influenced by indentured labor migration, leading to hybrid religious practices reflecting various local cultures and a constant struggle against the dissolution of caste and ritual bonds. In North America, Hindu communities are emanating from voluntary migration, maintaining stronger links to India compared to the Caribbean, emphasizing professional success within the reputational systems of these communities, and building distinct ethno-religious institutions that set them apart from the rest of American society. In Britain, Hinduism interacts with established Christian and Muslim communities, navigates dominant multicultural policies and a highly secular environment all the while maintaining a separate cultural and religious identity.

As the Hindu diaspora example, his perhaps most deeply researched empirical topic, already suggests, Vertovec has also inherited a truly global and transnational perspective from anthropology. He has initiated, funded, or participated in research on sites around the world, from Singapore to Johannesburg, from London to New Delhi and back to Berlin. In that, he offered a much-needed corrective to the massive Western-centrism that has characterized the study of multi-culturalism, of transnationalism, and especially of migration from the beginning, like so many other fields of social science inquiry. Vertovec's own research and the conceptual apparatus that it offers, and perhaps more importantly, his various funding and organizational activities have greatly helped to legitimize studying "far-away" places, and crucially, to study them in their own terms, rather than as mere reflection of or deviations from Western patterns.

Fifth and finally, Vertovec has consistently engaged in what I call trend diagnosis. I don't think this analytical habitus relates back to his education in the Manchester school of anthropology, but is perhaps connected to major currents of British sociology, such as the study of post-modernity, globalization, the post-national age, and so on. This intellectual strategy consists in seeking out new patterns that distinguish the present

from the past; pointing at a development that has reached a critical threshold and thus changed the predominant social dynamics; identifying a sprout that lets us preview the shape of the tree of the future. This ability to spot trends carries all his analysis through: identifying an increase in the number, size, and social structural consequentiality of diasporas; teasing out the contours of a new, more diverse, and transnationally situated reality that leads us to rethink cosmopolitanism; pointing at the intensified levels of globalization that make transnationalism the new game in the world town; and most starkly, showing how the increasing diversification of migrant streams, compositions, and destinations pushes the world of clearly bound ethnic communities into the past.

These claims to newness have gathered considerable critical attention by migration scholars and beyond, as Nancy Foner's article in this volume makes clear. Perhaps not surprisingly, the diagnosis of ruptures with the past have gained more traction in Europe than in North America, where discussions of super-diversity, for example, remain sparser. Since the 1960s immigration reform, the social landscape of cities like Los Angeles or New York has been characterized by a plethora of origin groups, migrant statuses (from the highly skilled to the undocumented), class backgrounds (with a super-elite immigrant stream from India, for example), and so on. These developments are indeed newer in Europe and especially in Britain, which had not seen much immigration from outside the Commonwealth until the global wave of asylum migration arrived on the island from the 1990s onward and until the Maastricht treaties of 1992 created an integrated European labor market. Moreover, the idea of "intersectionality" (e.g. Hancock 2007), meaning that multiple forms of social differentiation combine in various ways to produce a range of different social experiences at the sub-group or even at the individual level, is perhaps more prominently present in the American social sciences, especially among the younger generation, and competes with super-diversity for terminological space.

But what distinguishes Vertovec's work perhaps more than anything else is his admirable capacity to synthesize: to bundle disparate work on a topic from various adjacent disciplines together, to sift through massive amounts of materials and case studies, to offer meaningfully complex and yet simple enough typologies as sorting devices to make sense of contemporary trends, to sharpen the conceptual lens so that we can see a phenomenon in heightened relief. This synthesizing work – often captured in titles such as "conceiving XY" – has offered thinking guidelines, arguments to engage with, and orientation posts to many researchers entering the field of migration studies. Synthesizing is perhaps no longer as well regarded as was the case twenty years ago, now that most social sciences have moved to the analysis of massive data, to the deployment of rigorous research design in search for a single, but impeccably identified cause, and to the exploration of ever smaller and more precisely focused research questions. And yet, agenda setting, a genre that Vertovec has come to master so well, remains more important than ever. We need an orientation towards a synthetic vision of the social world, a direction to follow, otherwise the research engine spins in the empty, chasing effect after effect of this or that cause. Vertovec's introduction of the term super-diversity – simply and catchy, to be sure, and yet powerfully evocative – is a good example of this guiding function. It has spawned a cottage industry of new, generative research in Europe that has delivered new insights into the ever-changing social configurations brought about by contemporary migration (see the overview by Vertovec 2022).

Agenda setting and harvesting the fruits of this agenda always went hand in hand. Vertovec has edited or co-edited an incredibly large number of special issues and edited volumes (I counted 30 in his CV), often around the topics he helped to put on top of the research agenda of migration studies and often bringing together research that came out of the many research and funding initiatives that he spearheaded. These volumes – among them a great many handbooks and other encyclopedias – further helped to bundle the research enterprise and provided a shared focus for dozens of authors working in the field.

Mirroring and enhancing broader trends

Vertovec's agenda setting obviously did not happen in a vacuum. He never set his sight on an entirely new idea – with the exception perhaps of super-diversity – but spotted emerging concepts and helped them gain traction within the research landscape. His work is thus embedded in and mirrors larger trends in the field of migration studies.

Migration studies in the age of John Rex, Robin Cohen's academic advisor and an influential figure in Britain's migration studies from the 1960s onward, and of the American post-war scholarship that has for so long dominated research on both sides of the Atlantic, was largely concerned with and silently adopted the perspective of national majorities. The gaze was firmly directed at immigrants and at the question of whether "they" would assimilate "into the mainstream", in other words, whether they could incorporate into society so completely that they would become indistinguishable, in terms of their social class position, their cultural habits, and their forms of identification, from "us", the non-migrant majority (e.g. Wimmer 2009). This research tradition emerged within Fordist, solidly middle-class societies characterized by tight national integration, supported by a host of welfare policies, and grounded in a thick understanding of the national "we", forged in the fire of two World Wars.

The first shifts away from this perspective came with the emergence, initially at the corners of the research field, of anthropological studies that adopted the perspective of migrants themselves and traced their experience and perceptions faithfully, often from their places of origin where researchers had originally done fieldwork (see Kearney 1986; Kearney 1995; this tradition goes at least back to Oscar Lewis' study of domestic migrants in Mexico City). New concepts gained traction, including "diaspora", an old term used to describe classical cases such as Jews. It connotated the multiple orientations that migrant communities often maintained, including an orientation towards places of origin, seen as the well-spring of a share ethnic culture and the destination of an eventual return. Vertovec's work on the Hindu diaspora was rooted in this movement away from the assimilation paradigm, especially as he pivoted from his original Caribbean field sites to immigrant societies such as the United Kingdom and the United States.

A second, related development was to re-conceive destination societies of migrants as a conglomerate of (diasporic) communities, rather than as a melting pot. Assimilation as an analytical term and as a socio-political program was replaced with the idea of tolerance for difference, the celebration of the diversity generated by diasporic migrant communities. Multi-culturalism, as a political philosophy (Kymlicka 1995), a political vision, and an analytic term, was the order of the day, and many immigrant societies, especially in the Northwestern corner of the world, from Canada to Sweden, embraced the new

idea, which had of course a long history in ways of imagining heterogenous communities in the colonial world and in post-colonial nationalisms of places like Singapore or the Caribbean. Competing with the long-established, classical liberal individualism, much of this new mode of seeing and politically acting in the world was rooted in a communitarian view of society, which was now divided into a multiplicity of self-contained, culturally distinct communities each maintaining its own set of border-spanning connectivities. Vertovec's work inserted itself, in the middle of the nineties, in that ongoing trend and codified some of the principles of analysis of describing the conglomerate society, adding a healthy dose of anti-essentialist complexity by recognizing the internal heterogeneity of the component communities.

With the intensification of global integration from the seventies onward, a parallel trend emerged. Largely forgetting previous periods of intense global political, economic, and cultural exchange, as it had peaked in the age of empire and of the free-floating Northern migration before World War I, many scholars saw a new area dawning where nation-state containers would be irreversibly broken up by the world-wide flow of goods, peoples, and ideas. The term "transnationalism" gained currency as part of this larger movement, along with "globalization" (e.g. Held et al. 1999), "post-national" (Heller 2011), "global ecumene" (Appadurai 1996), and the like. The social world now looked decisively de-centered, compared to the assimilation paradigm, and was composed of webs of relationship, unconstrained by national boundaries, that connected people of various origins with their kins back home, their co-ethnic across the world, and with their neighbors in the places of settlement. Oscillation across space – the back-and-forth between origins and various destinations – replaced the metaphor of absorption into a stable body. Whatever the national policies of migrant integration, what really mattered were the intentions, the strategies, the experiences of globally connected migrant populations.

Relatedly, the old term "cosmopolitanism" regained new currency. It was supposed to represent the appropriate outlook on the world for the global age, if only it could be re-adapted and re-formulated to embrace the perspectives not only of the hyper-mobile global elite (the "airport lounge cosmopolitanism" à la Calhoun 2002), but of their humbler brethren, the migrant workers, the suitcase traders, the undocumented domestic laborers. Vertovec's work on cosmopolitanism followed this lead and helped to popularize this re-formulated understanding of the cosmopolitan outlook.

Finally, the communitarian perspective associated with "diaspora", "transnational communities", and "multi-culturalism" became under fire both within and outside academia. The "ethnic lens" (Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006), the "Herderianism" (Wimmer 1996; Wimmer 2009), or the "migranticization" (Dahinden 2016) implied in these forms of analysis did not take variation within "communities" serious enough and prevented to see the many different individual experiences that migrants, their children, and non-migrants underwent. It also over-emphasized cultural differences, the stability and relevance of ethnic forms of identification, and under-estimated the class dynamics that shaped both migrant and non-migrant individuals up and down the social hierarchy. Politically, multi-culturalism was criticized from the left and the right as a form of "cultural racism" or as a dangerous neo-tribalism, as a sly way of dividing up and thus politically weakening the working classes and papering over the destruction of the welfare state that neo-liberal globalization brought about.

Other paradigms gained traction, such as a Barthian perspective on the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries (Wimmer 2008), an "intersectional" approach focusing on the multiplicity of social realities when gender, race, ethnic background, class, etc. combined in manifold ways (e.g. Espiritu 1994), a "critical migration studies" (e.g. Favell 2022) perspective that put the emphasis on the enduring nativist, male-centered, and/or racist legacies of previous research paradigms. As part of this larger post-communitarian trend, Vertovec coined the term super-diversity, which indicated that ethnic communities (including transnational ones such as diasporas) had been broken up, in the wake of diversified and intensified global migration, by internal heterogeneity along the lines of gender, class, legal status, and wealth, generating new "super-diverse" neighborhoods and cities in which a multitude of new social configurations, including multi-ethnic alliances and forms of everyday sociality, could emerge, no longer contained in, bundled by, and politically represented as "ethnic communities". Politically, super-diversity suggested a move away from the community-representation approach that had characterized multi-culturalism and a move towards a fully participatory, liberal society that politically disregarded, but culturally respected the various origins of its members – and thus opposed the neo-nativist, neo-nationalist anti-immigrant sentiment that had grown into a powerful political force all over the world.

Outlook: extending the time horizon into the past and future

What will come next? I look forward to peeking around the corner of the present into the future, by reading the work that Steve Vertovec will continue to share with us. I'll end this essay with a tangential, more general comment on trend diagnosing. From the point of view of my own research in the tradition of comparative historical sociology, the trends that terms like transnationalism or super-diversity capture are of a rather short-term nature, and correspondingly, they often disappear sometimes soon after they are diagnosed. Few would argue that cosmopolitanism is still the order of the day, or that we life in an age of increasing transnationalization. Indeed, during the past 10 years or so we have seen a re-nationalization of politics: "national interests" in trade, investment, technology, and migration have powerfully surged back to the center of political attention; nationalist conflicts over border, territory, and self-determination have spread again. It doesn't look as if the liberal order propels itself into an ever more universalist future, driven forward by its own inherent logic, as some had thought in the not-so-recent past (Joppke 1999; Soysal 1994).

In terms of political rhetoric, radical nationalism and stances against migration and economic globalization have drifted from the far right to the center and can also be found on the radical left, as shown recently in Southern Europe, in Germany, the United States, in many Latin American countries, and elsewhere. Migration policies have also taken a sharp U-turn, with more restrictive and punitive admissions and border policies as well as neo-assimilationist language and cultural policies (first diagnosed by Brubaker 2002) carrying the order of the day almost everywhere. Border fences (including digital ones) are going up across the developed world and beyond (Mau 2021). Meanwhile, many trend diagnostics now circle around the term "post-globalization", and the production of conferences, edited volumes, and special issues of journals has pivoted accordingly.

Perhaps modern societies periodically undergo cycles of de-nationalization and re-nationalization (an idea some historically oriented sociologists have put forward a while ago, e.g. Bornschier 2018). The first opening, globalizing period, much of it connected to the expansion of the Western, Russian, and Japanese empires, ended with Word War I; the second began in the seventies and ended sometimes around the financial crisis of 2008. These are alternating with periods of increasing social closure along national lines, with decreasing levels of global integration and with a focus on assimilationist nation building policies. Our current period is thus structurally similar to the era between the end of World War I and ca. 1970 – while obviously also radically different with regard to other aspects, such as technology, levels of GDP, global configurations of power, and so on. Perhaps these ups-and-downs align along an underlying mega-trend pointing in the direction of increased global connectivity over the centuries? As soon as we extend the temporal horizon beyond the immediate past and present, these kinds of questions arise, many of which had been asked a while ago by scholars working in the world systems tradition. Wouldn't it be fascinating to try to address them again empirically?

Extending the temporal horizon beyond these ups – and downs of the last couple of decades and into the far away future, we might wonder how long the principles on which modern societies rest – such as the ideal of equality, capitalism, nationalism – will last, how they will change, and how they will eventually be replaced, since nothing ever lasts forever, by other such principles. What kind of society will our descendants produce in 50 or 200 years from now (see my own speculations along these lines in Wimmer 2021)? What role will migration – the old-fashioned movement of people across geographic space – play in that future? Will technological progress erase any movement restrictions – think of spaceship enterprise's "beamer" – or will it make movement across space obsolete because of new technologies of communication and of imitating spatial presence (think of holograms)?

Will political units no longer be territorialized with borders delineating mutually exclusive, clearly demarcated territories – the inheritance of the Westphalian order – and will "migration", "immigrants", etc. therefore no longer be meaningful terms? And in case these political units will continue to be based on the principle of territorial sovereignty: At which scale will they be organized? Will we see mini-states based on "identities" such as a separate state for Italian-speaking Swiss, a state for women, a state for Mayans, or a host of even more specific "intersectional" entities, compounding the problem of allocating location rights to citizens of different states? Or will we see states on a Continental, imperial scale (all of the Americas, all of Africa, etc.), within which migratory moves will be domestic and thus no longer a possible object of political scandalization? Will such societies return to the mosaic patterns of empire, with highly heterogenous social landscapes at the meso and macro level and highly homogenous, mutually segregated mini-spaces at the micro level?

Will super-diversity, to bring everything back to Vertovec's work, therefore not only characterize some metropolitan mega-cities today, but become one of the very principles of how the society of the future will be organized? Contrary to the research tradition of "future studies", I personally think it is impossible to read the shape of the long-term future out of the tea leaves of the present. As in Chinese drinking games where one throws five dices at the same time, so much depends on the combination of

unforeseeable developments that will push the future in one direction or another. But thinking about the long-term past and alternative long-term futures helps to put the contours of the present in sharper relief and to avoid chronocentrism (Fowles 1974): taking current trends all that seriously. As discussed above, even extrapolating current trends into the future is extraordinarily risky, given the unexpected turnarounds and left-and-right swings that history, this drunk bicycle driver, likes to take.

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