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STEVEN VERTOVEC

Conceiving and Researching Diversity

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The talk* I'll give today concerns the development of a conceptual framing device or an exercise towards how to launch a new department. Put yourself in the position I was placed in: It's a nice one to be in, given all the resources and admin to support the creation of a substantial new Max Planck Institute and a new department within it. Where do you start? How do you begin to think about framing an entirely new research programme, theoretical things you want to look into, empirical work you want to do, kinds of staff you want to hire, and so forth. I just want to take you through the kind of things that I've been thinking about so far. I stress that this is all still work in progress – so in the discussion after the talk, criticism, comments and suggestions will be much appreciated.

Formulating a research framework

In setting out to create a new department, a new research agenda, one of the first things I want to set out is: what's the prime task, what's the basic approach, what's the purpose of having such a department or research framework? Obviously you want it to be somehow systematic or strategic. You want to make sure that the research you and your colleagues are going to do is to contribute someway to fill gaps in knowledge. That's pretty obvious. Particularly for work in this field on diversity at large – and I'll come round to what I mean by the topic – you have to be contextual, take history into account, political economy to be sure, and policy conditions. I've been engaged over the last ten years in what they call the research-policy nexus, working with the British Government, European Commission and the like. And I've come to realize just how much policy matters, especially around issues of immigration, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism. And importantly you've got to take public awareness into account as to how it influences various kinds of dynamics we are looking at.

You certainly want such an institute's research to be comparative in the broad sense. Even though our Max-Planck-Institute is being led by anthropologists – it is supposed to be a multidisciplinary institute including sociology, law and political science, religious studies, social psychology and others. Overall we want the research to be comparative historically, internationally of course, as well as between urban centres. Further – I put this in italic because this is something I've been adamant

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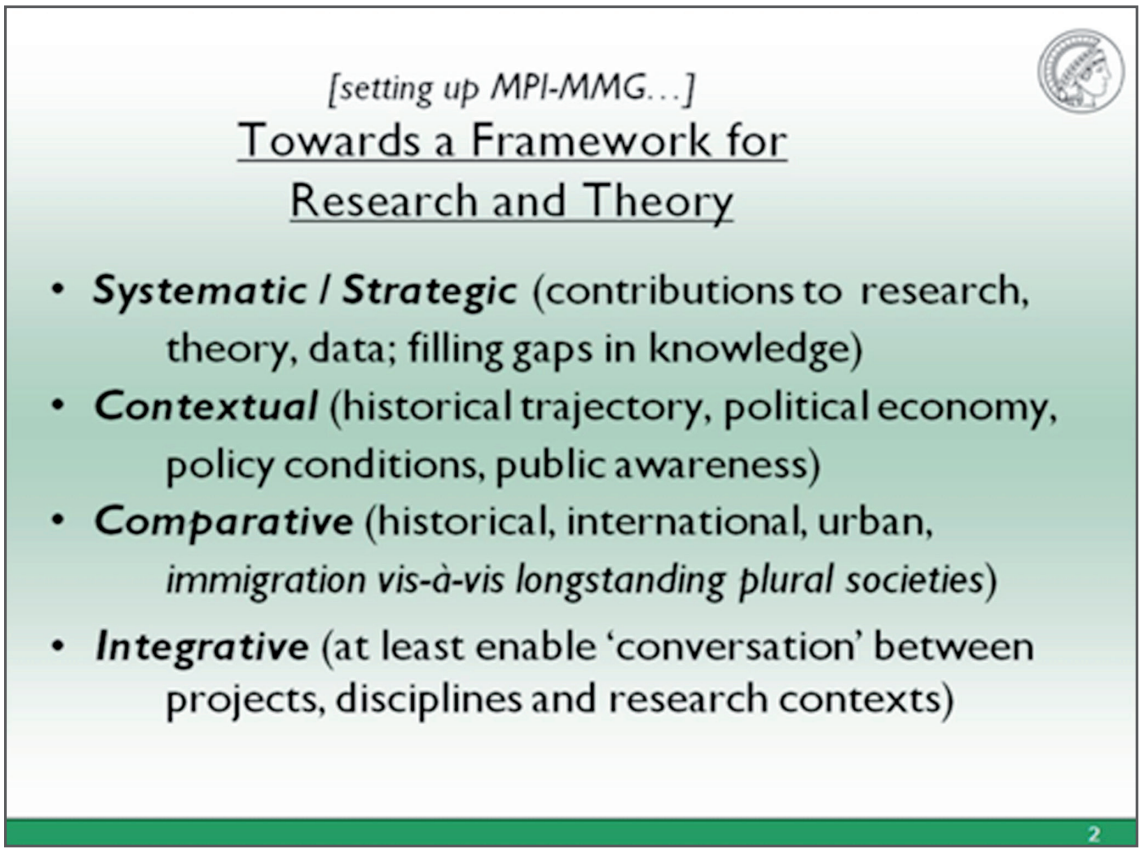
* Transcript of a talk given at the Institute for Advanced Study, Munich, 19 November 2008.

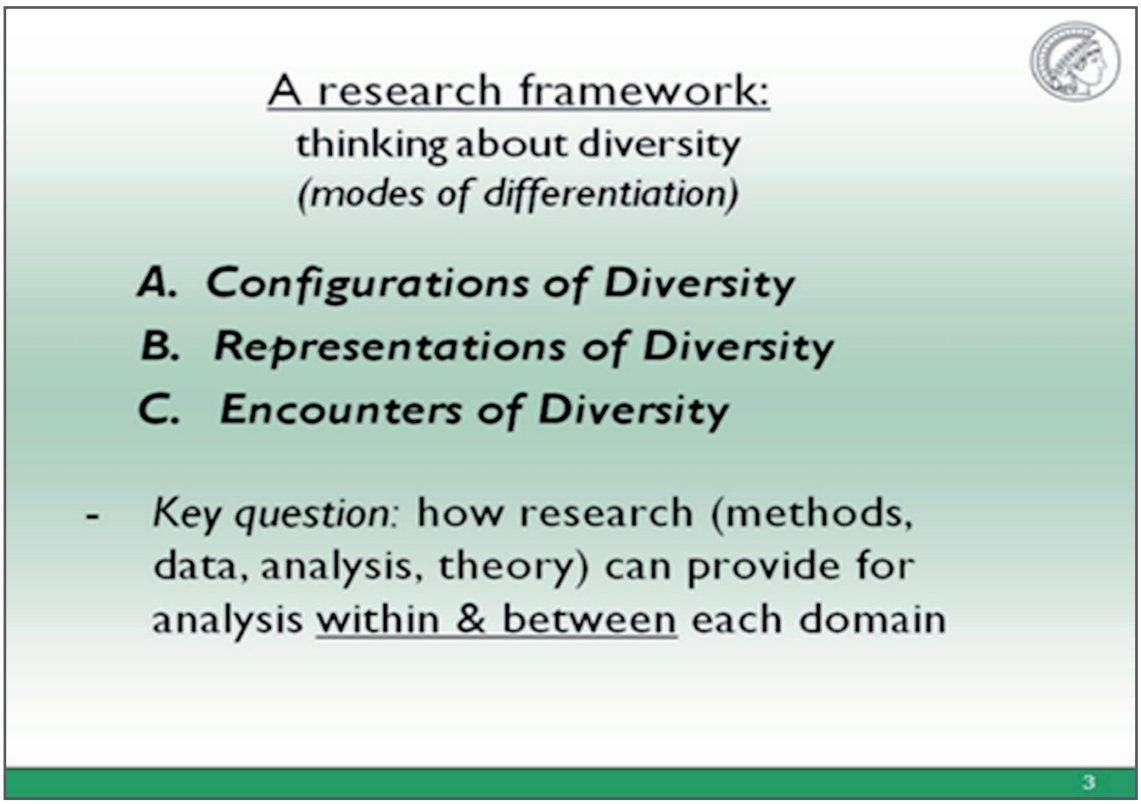


about in first of all accepting the job of creating this new centre – when the Max Planck Society cooked up the idea to have this centre on diversity issues, the original documents were really looking at the nature of the topic in terms of immigration, *Ausländer*, ethnic minorities and so forth. As I've been working for many years in the field of migration, one thing that I was blunt with the Max Planck Society about is that "Europe does not need another migration study centre." I am already in a European network of over 40 migration research centres in Europe, and that's not even all of them.

What isn't being done anywhere in Europe or in the US, Canada, Australia, any place that I know is that they have some sort of institute, research programme and theoretical agenda that looks at migration societies and what we might call long-standing plural societies in the same framework – for example India, China, Brazil, South Africa, and most of Africa. We want to try to work together empirically and theoretically to put together research in such varied contexts in order to get a better understanding of what we might mean by 'diversity'. So here, that's what we also mean by 'comparative'.

And then finally, the goal is to put together a research framework that will allow for some sort of integration between all the different kinds of research that we're going to undertake at least in my Department. That doesn't mean that we're all going to be doing the same thing, but at least to come up with some sort of core research framework that will allow what I call a *conversation* between projects or between the disciplines that we are going to have within the new institute. What have I formulated for this sort of thing is a research framework divided into three broad domains. I'll go through each one of these and point out what kinds of things can be studied within each, how they can be studied, and what diversity might mean within each domain.

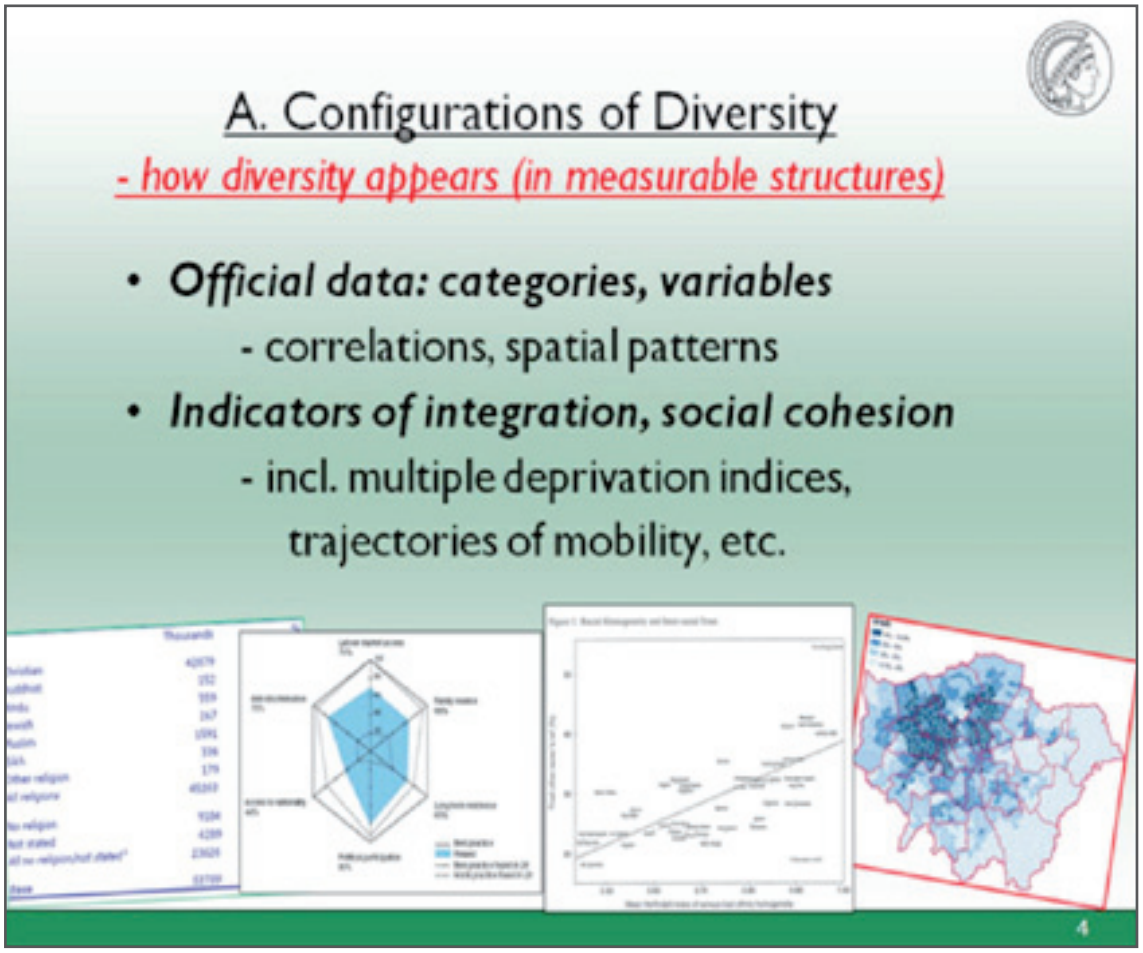
What do I mean by diversity? I think it's important to take, as a starting point, a very broad definition. I just call it modes of differentiation. We are talking about social organisation and different principles by which people, from context to context, situation to situation, mark themselves and each other as different. So even though in the title of the institute that the Max Planck Society delivered to us, it's 'ethnic and religious diversity', we're taking from the starting point all manners of differentiation by way of social organisation: age, gender, sexuality, locality, nationality, etc. – as well as ethnicity and religion. Taking that broad definition allows us to mark out different kinds of diversity that arise and think about how we can study them through different disciplines. I'll go through these different domains. [In formulating



them I have been particularly influenced by my mentor, J. Clyde Mitchell and his colleague Max Gluckman, who together founded what's called situational analysis – a technique for unpacking the ways wider social orders influence specific events. In doing so Mitchell stressed the interaction of three levels of abstraction: *the set of events* or actual activities, *the situation* or meanings actors' attribute to activities, and *the setting* or structural context in which these things occur.] As researchers come to think through these domains, importantly the questions gradually become: what's happening in these different domains? how do you relate these domains to each other? Together, how can they provide analysis and theory building?

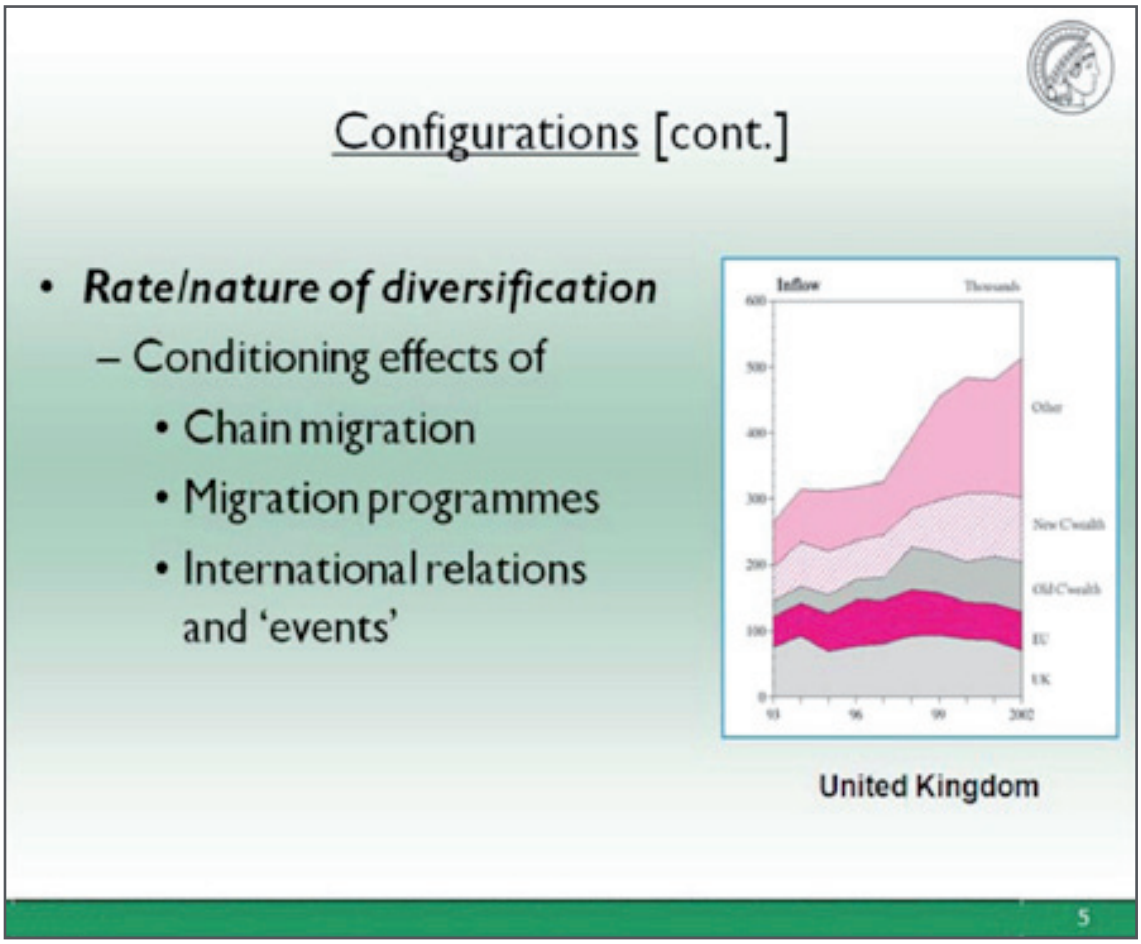
I. Configurations of diversity

The first domain I call 'configurations of diversity'. We can say this is how diversity appears in structural and demographic conditions. These are most apparent in, as it

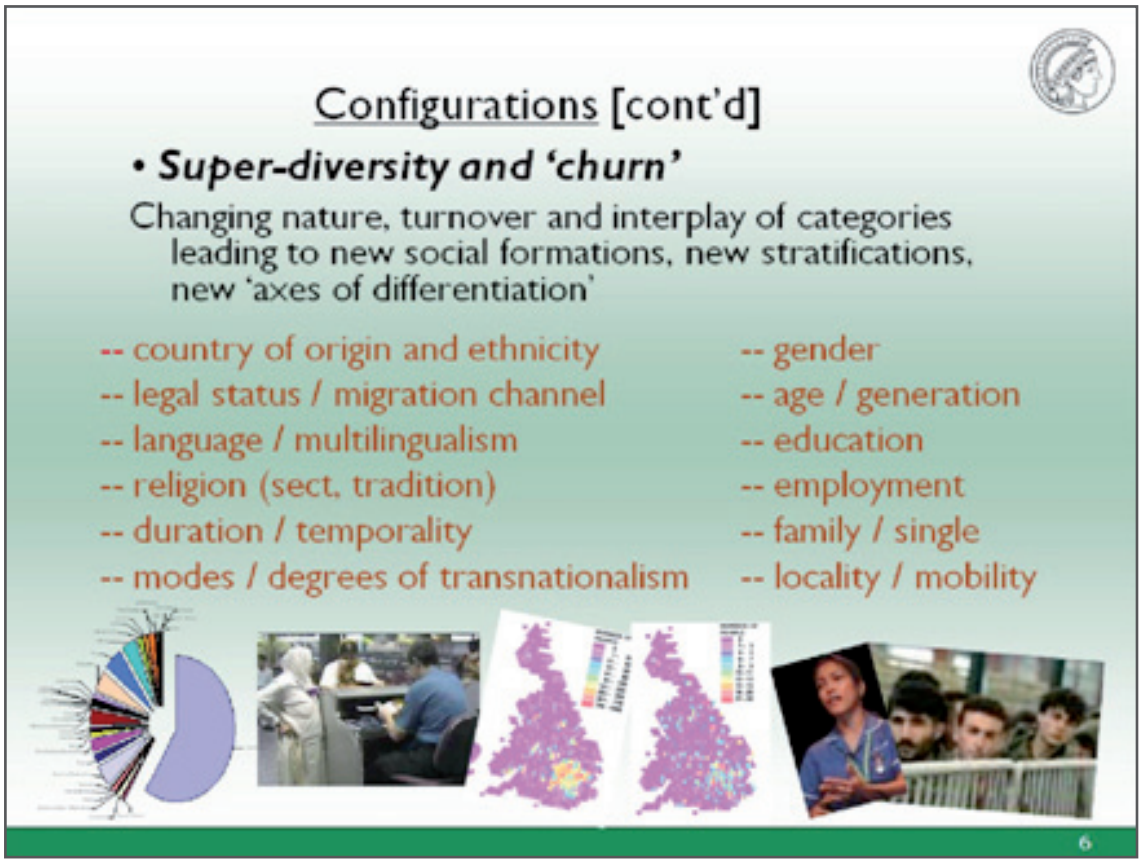


were, ready-made categories, measurements, statistics and such. I have to start with this one because I deal with a lot of policy makers and the press, and this is the first thing they ask about. They want numbers. They want distributions. They want variables and correlations. It is how a lot of people think about diversity first of all. It's through categories and statistics relating to all these different packages of people: Christian, Buddhists, Hindus, Africans, Whites, Chinese – all these categories you can count and with which you can have correlations between different measures: unemployment and education and so on. You can have maps of distributions too. An important example of this, right now throughout Europe the 'integration' paradigm is really dominant – there are all sorts of initiatives underway right now practically everywhere, including Germany, to try to create and examine so-called indicators of integration: how different groups measure up and can be lined up next to each other in terms of achievement and education and jobs.

Statistics and data categories are just one initial part of this domain of what we are talking about as configurations of diversity. But of course these sorts of statistics don't stand still. They unfold in processes as well. Particularly over the past couple of



years I've been interested in the rate or nature of diversification, how diversity itself is diversifying, how these different ready-made categories of 10 or 20 years ago themselves are breaking down or becoming more complex. So for instance – I'll come to it a little bit later – I've been particularly interested in the UK how, within immigration statistics, suddenly in the mid-1990s you have almost a doubling of the 'Other' category: people from other parts of the world outside of the British Commonwealth. I'm trying to figure out why and how these numbers are diversifying through new processes of migration.

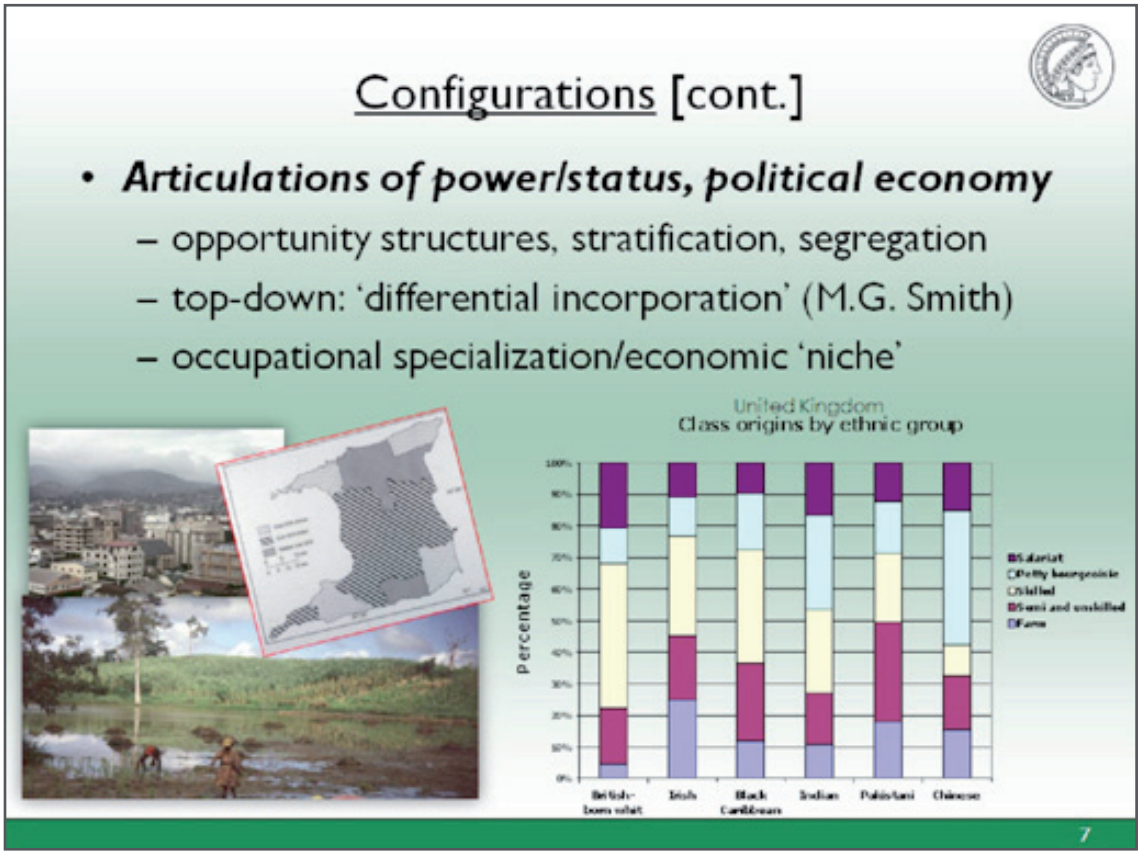


Also by way of configurations, or things they can be measured or enumerated, there is this whole area of what I call 'super-diversity'. This is the topic of another lecture altogether and here I won't go into it too deeply. But the point is that over the last ten years in the UK, in Germany, across Europe – basically by way of changing global patterns of migration – we've seen a lot of the long-standing patterns of migration diversifying, particularly by way of the relationship between all these sorts of variables (country of origin, gender, legal status, duration of stay, etc.; see slide).

So now you have a new configuration, indeed , of all these different variables in relation to each other.

The traditional patterns and characteristics of Pakistanis and African Caribbeans and Bangladeshis in the UK are no longer representative of current migration groups of ethnic 'communities'. There has been a diversification of places of origin but at the same time changing dimensions of gender, age, education, transnationalism and so forth, usually connected to specific migration channels. Now, for instance, if you talk about 'the Philippino community' in the UK you're talking about a community comprised of 70% women aged 20-30 working in the health services. Or you can talk about the Afghani community in the UK, a 'community' of 70% men aged 30-50 who are asylum seekers and prevented from entering the labour market. The new configurations of groups and their characteristics represents a specific new set of factors conditioning social processes of differentiation.

Also by way of configurations we have to consider the important conditioning aspects of political economy or what we might call articulations of power and status. Let's say we are dealing with a place like Trinidad, where I've worked before: it's not just marked by a population largely comprised of African origin, ex-slaves, and



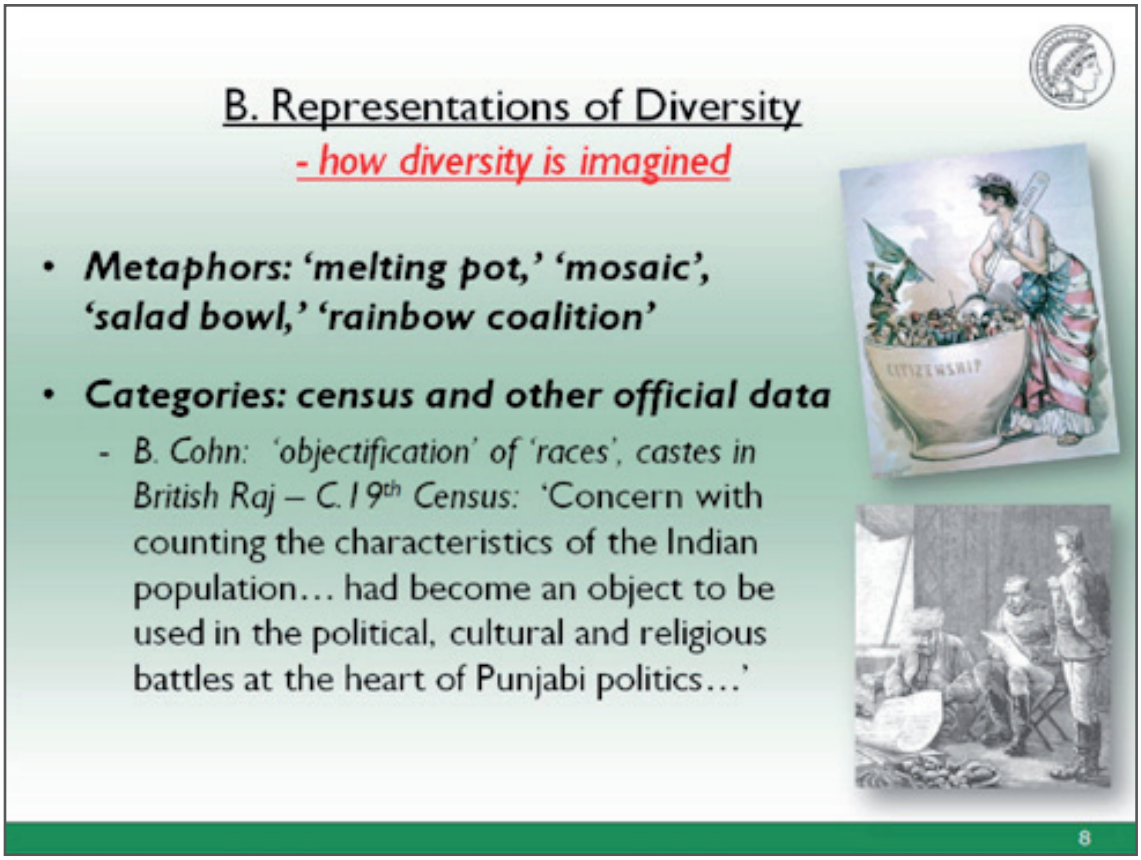
Indian origin, ex-indentured labourers. There is a broad set of historical processes surrounding political economy and particular top-down-policies that have led to one population (Indians) being largely rurally-based in the centre of the country, another population (Africans) largely urban-based with each dominating particular economic niches. A configuration approach takes account of political economy as well as geography, economic niche, and location within a political structure.

Considering the United Kingdom, we witness another example of the framing conditions of political economy and the articulation of power and status. (Referring to slide) These are a number of key ethnic groups – Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, Irish and so forth – by way of their class position or professional or occupational position. Here [above slide] you see significant class and professional variation between the groups. This is not due to any inherent characteristics of the group themselves, but to the whole structural arrangement of migration histories, of how people entered into the labour market, and the conditions under which they migrated. A configurational approach – here looking at aspects of political economy – helps us understand how various groups end up where they do in the social structure.

II. Representations of Diversity

Now shifting gears altogether, the second domain is what I call 'representations of diversity' or how diversity is imagined. In this way we are moving away from ready-made statistics and enumerations and economic aspects to looking at images, representations, symbols and meanings.

So what kind of things can we look at here? Obviously one of the first things that comes to mind is simply metaphors – ways that diversity is often talked about: 'melting pot', 'mosaic', 'salad bowl', 'rainbows' and so on. You can look at this historically as well. So for instance [referring to slide] this is something I got a kick out of: from the 1880s, a great American metaphor or image of the melting pot. Here you've got a kind of Mother America with a big pot of all sorts – in which you can see in it all sorts of assorted ethnics – and she's stirring it with a spoon that says 'Equal rights'. In this way they are all supposed to blend together. That's the typical American model. And, if you are interested, there is one bloke who just won't go into the pot: he's is an Irishman. It tells you something about 1880s America! But again it's just an entry point to thinking about different ways that diversity, here particularly



ethnic diversity, is imagined. Right away one could go into all sorts of discourse analysis of the metaphors…

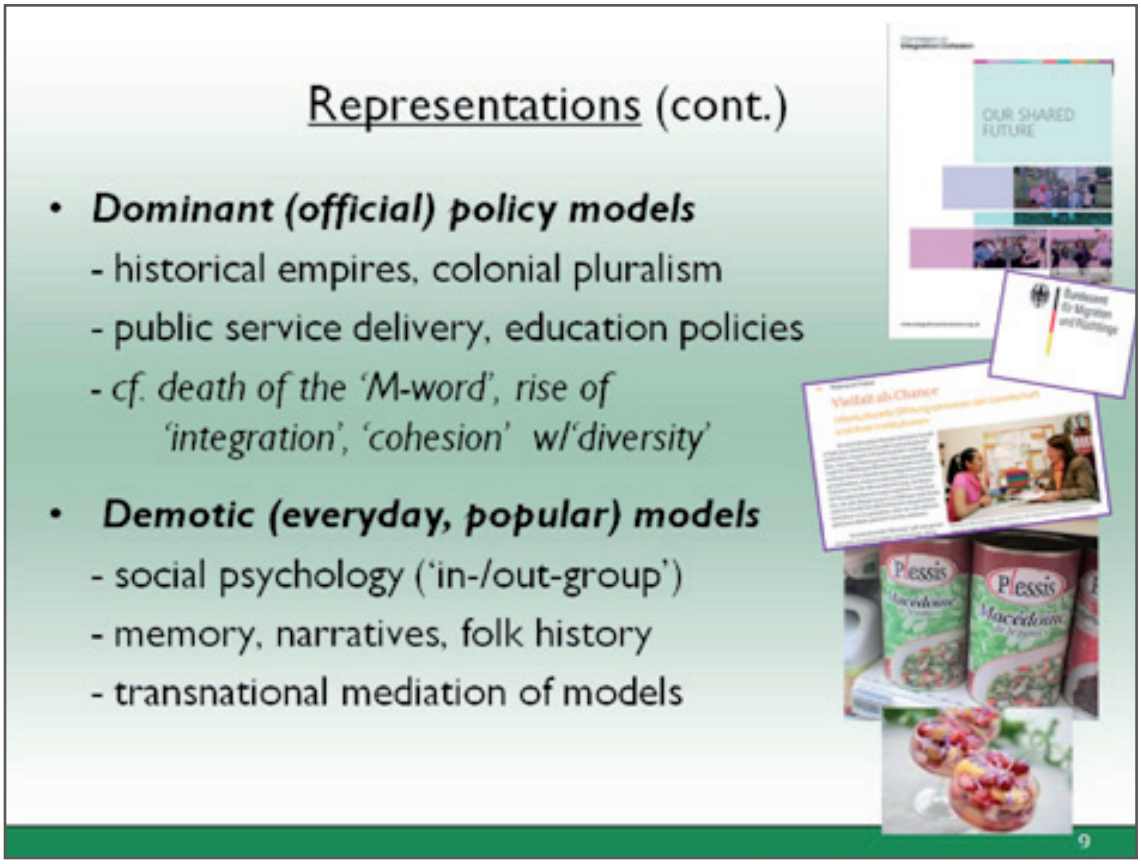
One thing I especially want to come to, however, is in reference to those ready-made categories I mentioned under the first domain. Of course all of these categories themselves are social constructions, themselves representations of reality. They get reified through quantitative study, through policies and public debate. With regard to such categories, I was particularly inspired years ago by a kind of classic piece by Bernard Cohn in which he looked at the British Raj in India and the impact of creating a census – for the first time counting castes and various groups. And it's a great article where he talks about how the census served actually to objectify certain so-called races and castes in India, so that a lot of the castes that get organized and have special political significance today were actually invented in the 19th century British census. This is an important lesson to learn. Yet talking to policy-makers, they often don't quite get it that the categories that they regularly use to talk about ethnic minorities are social constructions that objectify or, in the parlance of the 1990s, to essentialize particular groups.

This leads us to think about official policy and the way that policy constructs social reality out there. As representations of diversity, we can look at, again, things like the British Raj or how in historical empires groups were conceived and then governed through to today's public services and the whole gamut of multicultural policies.

Again at risk of raising a topic that's the subject of another lecture altogether, right now we are seeing the overturn of one policy model and the creation of another. That is, over the past five or six years or so multiculturalism – the term that is a kind of policy umbrella – has taken a huge beating particularly in places like the UK but also across Europe. Susanne Wessendorf and I have a book coming out about this backlash against multiculturalism. Basically we are witnessing the death of the 'M-word' of multiculturalism, but a lot of the policies and institutional arrangements are still in place. Instead we are seeing the rise of 'integration' and 'cohesion'. These terms convey a new policy representation of how to incorporate immigrants and ethnic minorities: but while the M-word is nowhere to be seen in all of these drives to promote integration, diversity remains a key part of that representation.

In Germany this is the case: there are now a lot of German policy documents promoting integration, but as elsewhere throughout Europe, it's always 'Integration *und* Vielfalt' ['Diversity']. Look at the German integration plan from the Bundesministerium and on every other page is Vielfalt, Vielfalt… So multiculturalism is not dead. It's just taken another name, a new representation in the policy market.

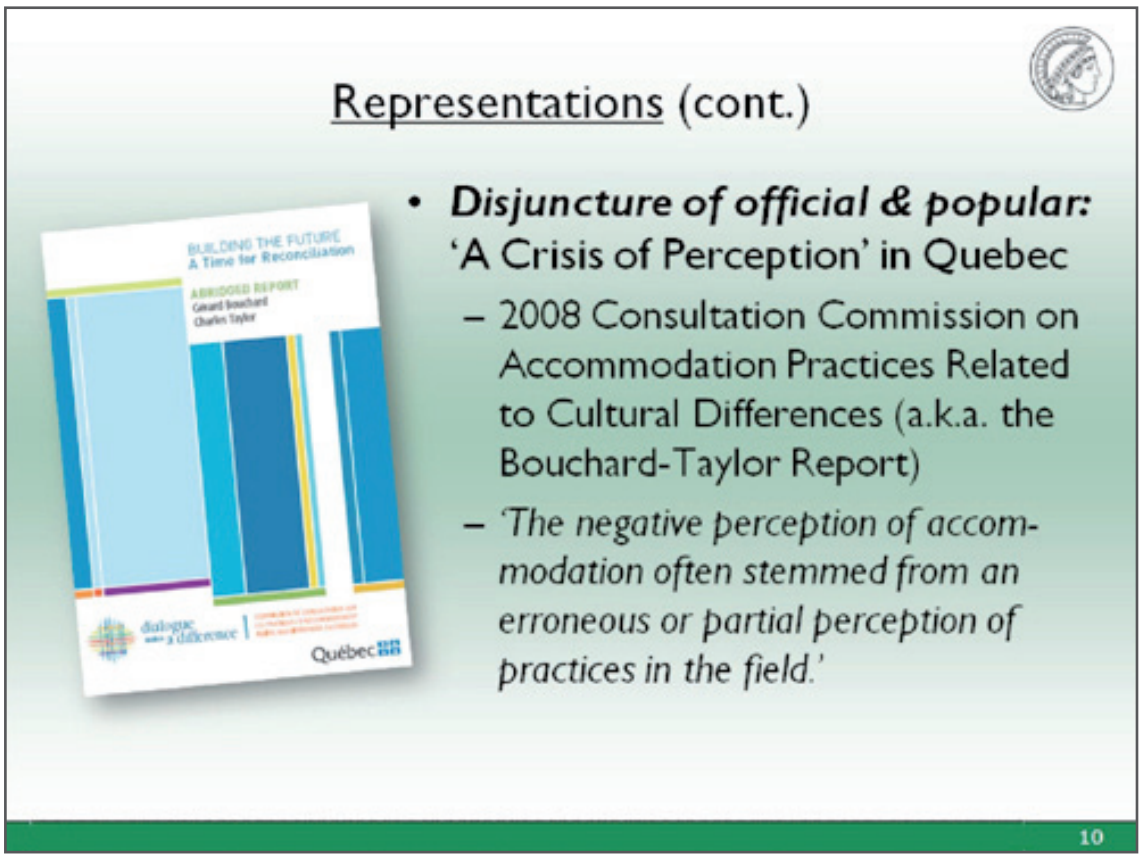
Now a lot of you who know Gerd Baumann's work see [referring to slide] the reference here to his notion of dominant and demotic discourses of cultural difference: these too should be considered as key models or representations of diversity. One can look at how people in everyday parlance, and in their own heads, model or represent diversity. Currently we're working with social psychologists and we've already hired a social psychologist at our institute. They traditionally look at ways that so-called in-groups and out-groups are conceived and how they mutually relate to one another. We've also got work going on about collective memories and narrative histories, indicating other ways how diversities and relationship between groups are imagined and represented. I also just put this here [referring to slide] as a kind of imaged diversity, too: a couple of months ago I was in a grocery store in France and saw these cans of Macédoine de legumes – 'Macedonian vegetables', which are of course mixed vegetables (invoking the traditional ethnic mixture of Macedonia)! Similarly when you go to Italy and you want 'a Macedonian', you get a mixed fruit salad. Popular representations of diversity are everywhere…



Here are some other things that can be looked at by way of the models of diversity that people carry around in their heads. There's one kind we can talk about as a transnational mediation of models. I was particularly prompted to think about this by Boris Nieswand, one of our post-docs. Often in migration studies there is a kind of inherent assumption that migrants, whether they are from India or Africa or some other place, are coming from rather homogeneous, bucolic, rural backgrounds and suddenly thrust into super-diverse urban European or American or Canadian contexts. And of course that's nonsense. Quite often migrants themselves are coming from dense, diverse, multilingual and urban places where they already know how to deal with a multitude of ethnic groups, with a range of different kinds of diversity. So when we talk about transnational mediation of models we refer to how people used pre-existing, pre-migration or transnationally shaped models of diversity in order to make their way through a Berlin, London or Toronto.

The public importance of representations is another key area to look at. [Referring to slide] This is an import report that just came out in the middle of last year. Over the past year and a half or so in Quebec, there's been a kind of moral crisis around multiculturalism – not surprisingly in the run up to a recent election as well.

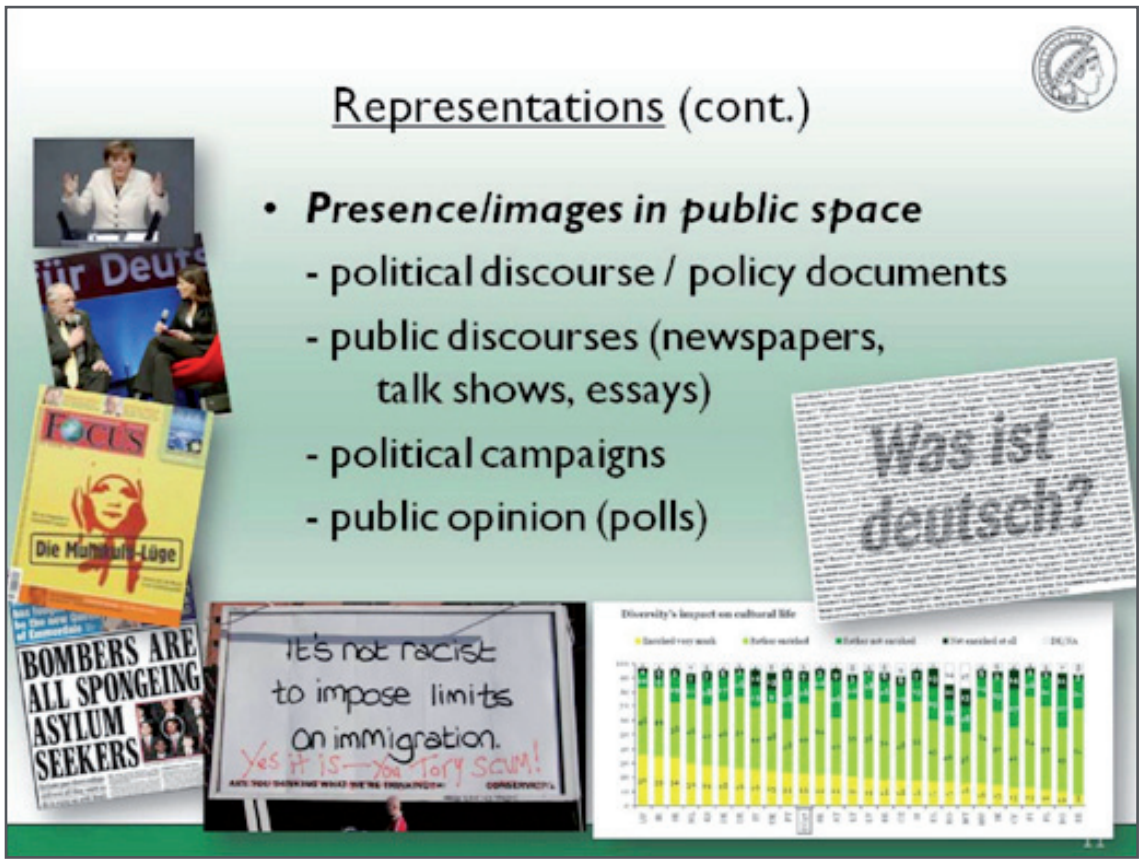
During this time various stories started in to show up in the media here and there, and eventually became elevated into a province-wide crisis. What the Canadians call 'accommodation practice' is directly related to cultural differences, that is multi-cultural policies in British or Canadian parlance. These are special practices that are sensitive to cultural difference, policies and institutional structures. In Quebec all sorts of scare stories start coming out at this time: for instance things like accounts of pre-natal classes, or birthing classes for expecting parents, in which it was said that all men were kicked out of prenatal classes in Quebec because Muslim women didn't want them there. Or a story that local celebrations somewhere were cancelled because Muslims objected to the music and dance. And these sorts of stories got into the press and became elevated and taken up by politicians, becoming a real alarm about the whole notion of accommodating cultural difference. It became such a crisis that a provincial commission was set up headed by Gérard Bouchard, a prominent sociologist, and Charles Taylor, the famous philosopher. Five million Canadian dollars were spent to look into these things and basically what they found is that none of the stories about prenatal classes, about festivals and so forth were really true. Instead there what they called 'a crisis of perception', a representation of how Canadians deal with difference



that became elevated and blown up out of proportion. So the negative perception of accommodation stemmed from erroneous or partial perception of actual practices. This is one recent example of the importance of representations and being able to study representations and their effects.

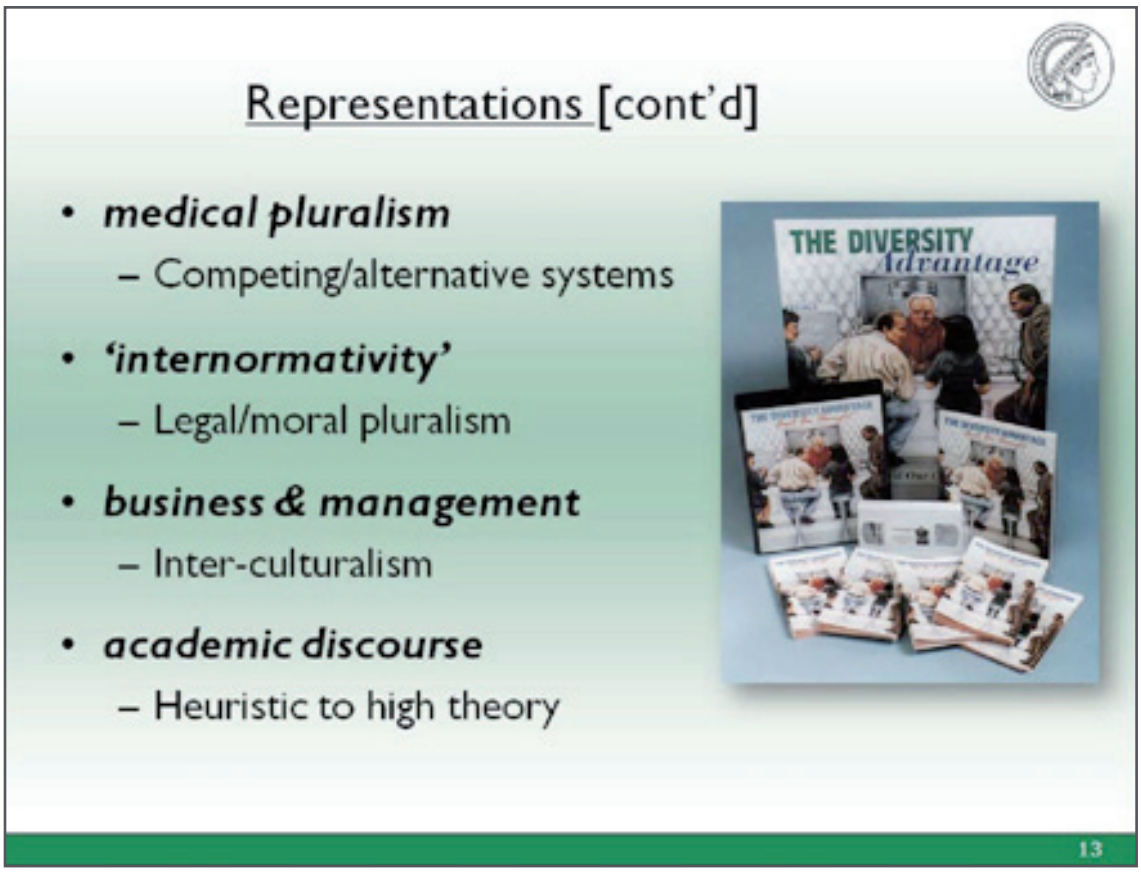
I'll just quickly go through some of the other things, some of the other sites that you can look at by way of representations of diversity, and through different disciplinary tools. Obviously one can look at all sorts of political discourse: as I said, policy documents, public discourses in newspapers and talk shows and so forth. Again, this book that Susanne Wessendorf and I have coming out is all about how, in newspapers, talk shows and and elsewhere, multiculturalism has been talked about. (Referring to slide) For example this is *Focus* magazine: "Die Multikulti-Lüge". There are also political campaigns of all kinds, both anti-diversity and pro-diversity.

Public opinion polls show another kind of representation of diversity… Here's one interesting public opinion poll by Eurobarometer (it's a European Commission funded annual opinion poll across Europe, across 27 countries with 1,000 people in each country). 27,000 people were asked a variety of questions including ones about attitudes towards diversity, towards difference. Basically they found that across



27 countries close to 80 per cent of people actually have pro-diversity views – despite the last ten years of public attacks on multiculturalism. If you are interested Germany, it's right here [pointing to bottom of slide]. Together 77 per cent of people in Germany think that cultural diversity 'enriches very much' or 'rather enriches' the nation. So this a surprising finding. Then of course you've got to start to ask: what do people think they mean by diversity and what are they actually agreeing to? But that's another study in itself.

Again, just pointing to a range of different kinds of sites that can be looked at… With a more kind of cultural studies approach, there are all sorts of things in the media, in the arts, TV, film, literature which depict different representations, or ways of looking at diversity. There are particular novels in which diversity itself is the subject [referring to slide showing book covers for *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *Bridge over the Drina* by Ivo Andric] or television shows like "EastEnders" These are examples of different books or TV-shows in which diversity itself is practically the subject. Or there are arts festivals, different consumption patterns, the ubiquity of ethnic foods or these sorts of world shops were you go in and buy African music,



Nepalese carpets and Mexican sculptures or whatever you like. These are also sites where diversity appears, images are managed and conveyed and indeed sold.

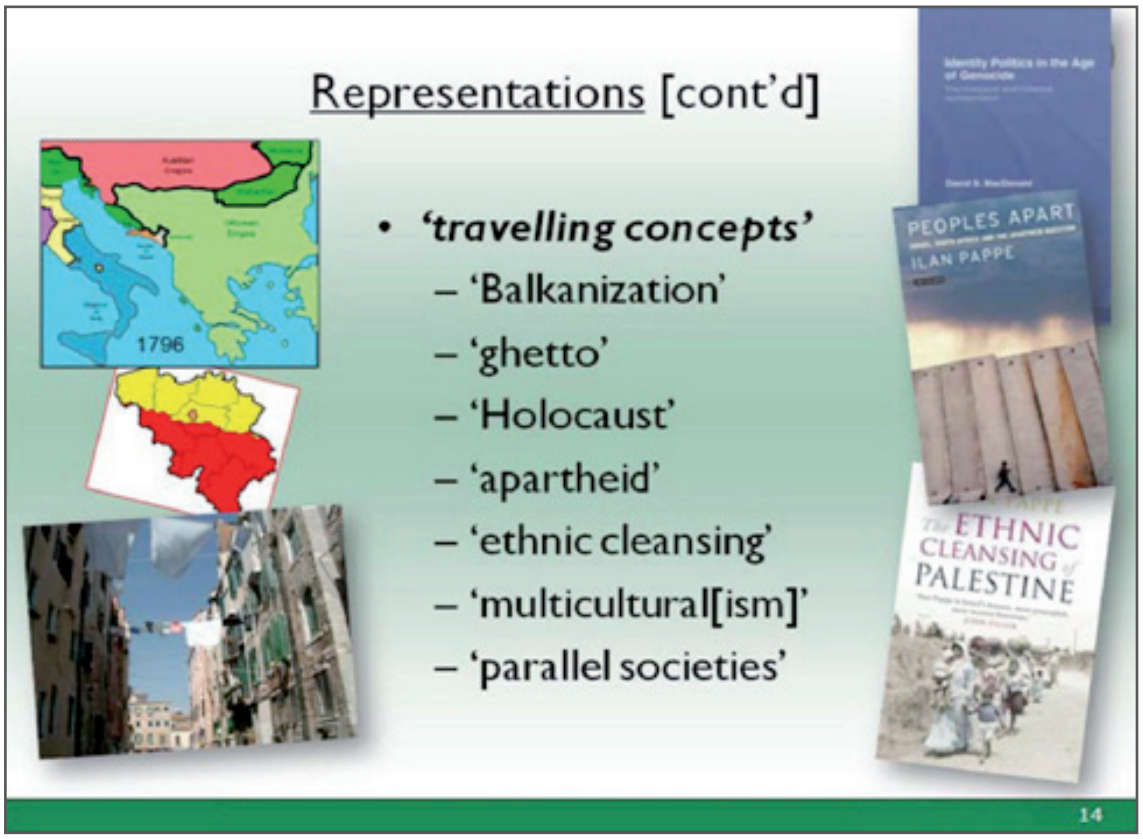
These are all different kinds of representations that that are important to look at to get a better idea of the field of study. In our institute we will also be having work on medical pluralism, or the way that different health concept. For example, the ways healing systems are conceived and managed within a particular, complex population such as India – we've got one person working in this, Gabi Alex – often coincides with different castes and classes and ethnic groups. Hence studying medical pluralism is another mode of studying diversity representations.

Within legal anthropology, there are significant questions about legal pluralism, including aspects of 'inter-normativity'. This is what's often talked about as competing moral systems that people have often within their own heads, often drawn from different cultural and religious traditions. People are trying to juggling different moral systems and trying to figure out how to behave properly and life a good life.

Another area that I hope someone in our institute might eventually address is within business and management. In this field, diversity is big business right now. The corporate world spends millions on diversity management courses, diversity

management specialists and more. Once more this points to particular ways of thinking about diversity. You can look at any of these course materials (referring to slide). A good book has just recently come out by John Wrench looking at diversity management programmes and what they seek to achieve and how they conceive of different kinds of diversity.

Finally by way of representations, well our own academic discourse should not be immune from an objective look and analysis. How are we talking about diversity or think we are talking about diversity? Here I am interested also in what we might call 'travelling diversity concepts', how concepts originating in one context are used to describe other contexts. [Referring to slide] 'Balkanization' is an obvious one of those. Balkanization originally refers to an historical process in one part of the world, but has come to be used in very different parts of the world. One of the big criticisms of multiculturalism in the United States is that it's going to 'balkanize' the country. Or this little graphic here is taken from a website complaining about the 'balkanization of Belgium'. I've also found a website that complains about the 'Belgiumization of Canada'! So these kinds are terms are flying all over the place.



It is an interesting exercise to kind of unpack or do a kind of archaeology of concepts, looking into ways that they're taken from one context to another. 'Ghetto',

coming out of 15th century Venice, has come to refer to several different kinds of scenarios. 'Holocaust', a term that predates the Second World War experience, has come to refer to a specific event – yet some commentators use concepts like 'holocaust' and 'apartheid' and 'ethnic cleansing' now to talk about what's happening in Israel and Palestine. 'Multiculturalism' is a concept coming out of Canada and Australia in the early 1970s and now being used in places like Malaysia and South Africa. And right now we're seeing, particularly coming out of Germany and are being applied to several other places, 'Parallelgesellschaften', 'parallel society' discourse being used in the UK, Canada and as far away as New Zealand. So I think it's very interesting to look at how people have picked up these terms from one situation of diversity, and what they think they are meaning by applying these terms to other sorts of contexts.

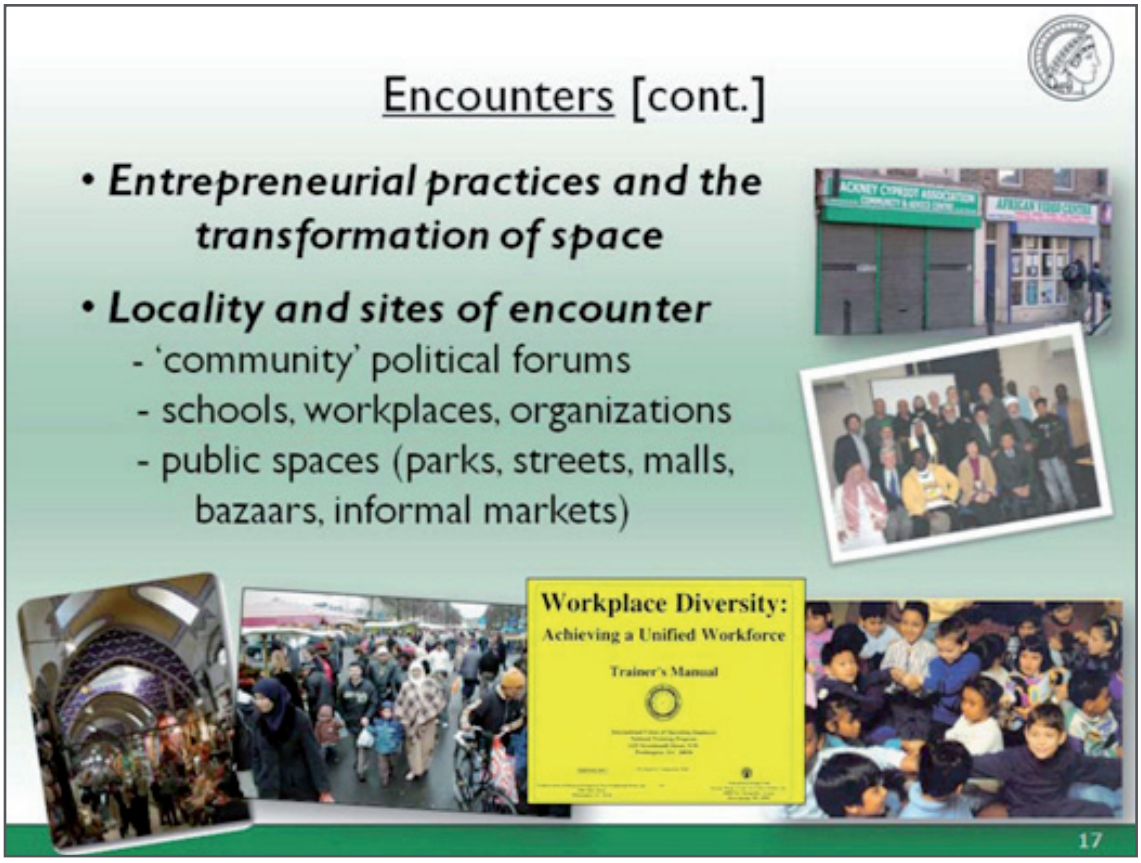
III. Encounters of Diversity

Final domain – how diversities are actually experienced or encountered. This includes examining what social psychologists often to talk about: contact theory, how differ-

ent modes of relating to each other changes attitude. Within social anthropology a big part of our whole industry concerns processes of boundary making, boundary marking, different scenarios where different kinds of diversity come into salience and out of salience, and the rise of cosmopolitan and creolized practices. Another related field is, multilingualism, the way that people code-switch and the creation of pidgin languages. Also within the domain of encounters we can look at different sites of conflict or – we're hoping to do some research at our institute on this – we talk about societies on the edge of conflict, societies right next to places where serious ethnic conflict is taking place, and also why conflict *hasn't* broken out in place where you expect it would.

Once more looking at official multiculturalism, we can observe how different inter-group programmes have been enacted, and also the creation of multicultural festivals.

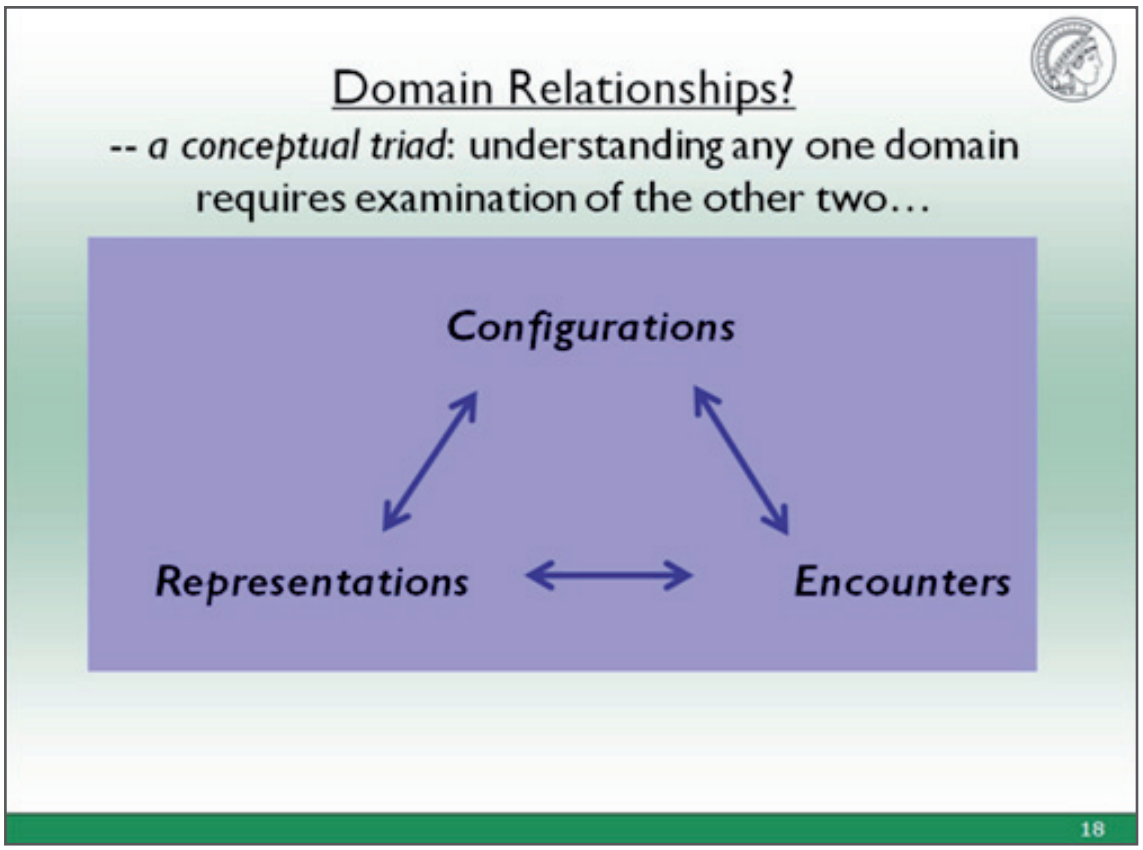
Not to leave out our colleagues who study material culture, one can look at all the effects of different kinds of encounter, fusion and so forth, within material culture. [Referring to slide] There is something called fusion-fashion and fusion food. Here is a sort of sushi with avocado and salsa. There is fusion architecture and other sorts of



buildings or physical environments that we can look at as modes of diversity encounters. We can look at transformations of space, the way that localities themselves are transformed, including neighbourhoods, schools, bazaars – these are terrific, quintessential sites of encounter.

Using the Conceptual Framework

How to bring all this together? I've just tried to sketch some of the kinds of things that can be looked at by studying diversity within different domains. [Referring to slide of three domains in a triangle] This make sort of triad, a conceptual triad I call it. I don't know if this helps or maybe this will give ammunition for criticism: You can also sort of think that the domain 'configurations of diversity' has more to do with structure, 'encounters of diversity' has to do with agency, and 'representations of diversity' is a mediating domain of meaning, of meaning management (in Ulf Hannerz's sense), that plays a role in between these two other domains.



Now again, these are just analytical abstractions. One can jump up and say 'you can't separate them like that, they're all entangled with each other'. On one level I certainly know that – but we have to go back to the initial exercise. I have to create a research agenda, not just a series of projects, and get people from different fields and disciplines to use a common framework in order to be able to talk to each other in an academically productive manner. So framing it as a conceptual triad is to suggest that whatever your particular discipline and whatever your research project and whichever domain it falls into, that to really get the best appreciation or deeper understanding of your project in your particular domain you have to take the two other domains into account. That's what's often meant by conceptual triad. Each of these domains informs each other.

[Referring to slide] This is a list of several projects we've got going. We won't go into that. It's all on the website – do have a look at it.

Now, coming to the final slide about how, in our department meetings as the projects develop, we might try to make use of such a conceptual framework. Once more, in order to understand any one domain you have to take aspects of the other two into account in your analysis or when you are framing your own project approach.

Dept. for Socio-Cultural Diversity – initial projects

Europe	(team) – diversity, contact, social cohesion – 5 countries
	(Heil) – transnational diversity models, Senegambia-Spain
Germany	(Schönwälder) – ethnic minority political careers
	(Nieswand) – Stuttgart integration policy
	(Römhild &) Vertovec – Frankfurt diversity policy
UK	(Wessendorf & Schmid) – perceptions of super-diversity
	(Meissner) – super-diversity (small groups) London-Berlin
Balkans	(Janev) – legacies of multicultural policies in Macedonia
	(Palmberger) – collective memories in Bosnia
India	(Alex) – multiple diversities & medical pluralism
	(sub-unit to be established with 2nd Dept MPI-MMG)
South Africa	(Haupt) – tactical cosmopolitanism in markets
	(sub-unit to be established: Jo'burg & Witts)

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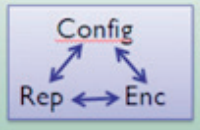
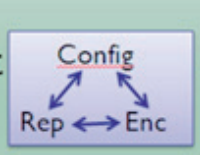
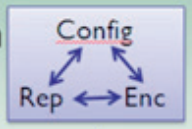
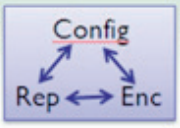
Some common approaches/uses of conceptual framework

- How does 

inform project *X* ?
- What does project *X* tell us about 

?
- In analyzing modes of change in project *X*, what is nature/cause/effect of '*domain lag*' between 

?
- Projects: comparison/'conversation' of 

models

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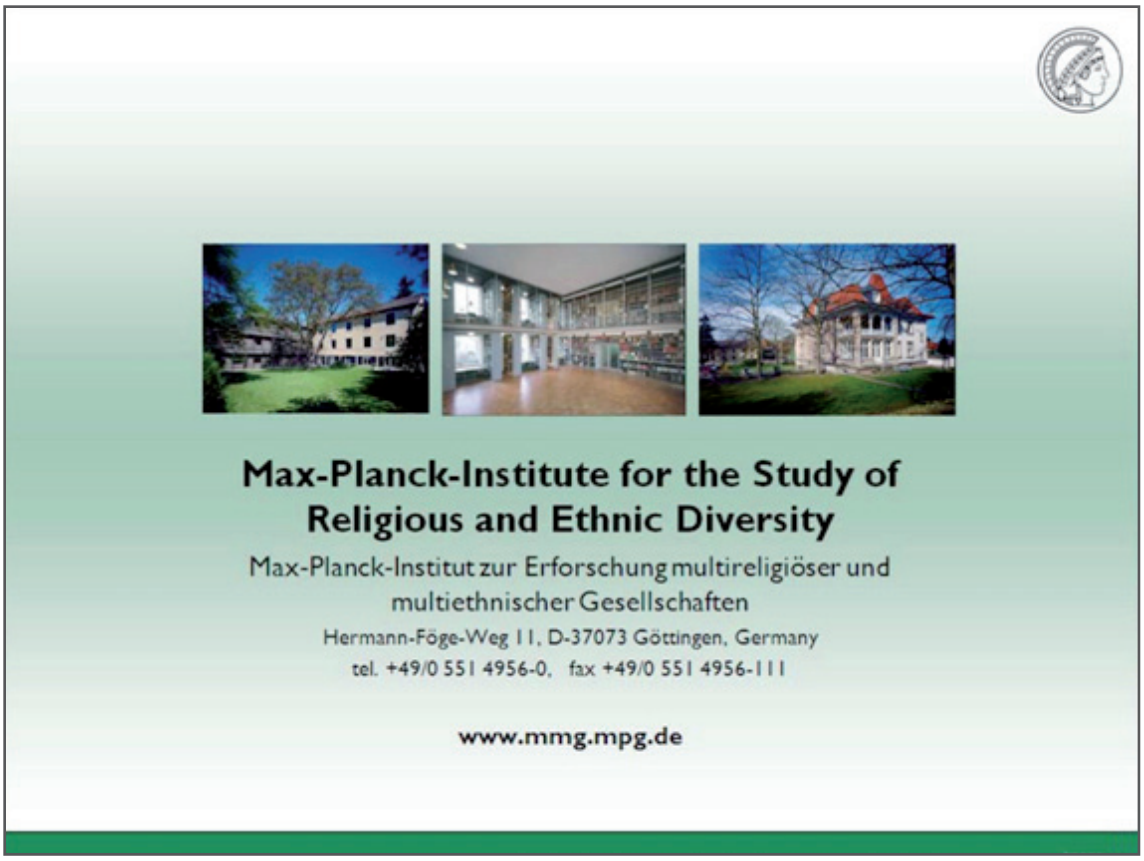
So whatever project a colleague is working on, how does our conceptual triad inform his or her project? How does the framework help one into approaching the subject, organizing data, analyzing material? That's one thing that we will try to use it for – in this way to help develop particular projects.

Secondly, whatever research findings and analysis we're getting out of whatever project, what does that tell us about the conceptual framework itself? Is it working? Does specific project research help us flesh out the framework a bit more? (Because right now it is just a skeleton.)

Finally – and what I am particularly interested in – in any aspect of research we're doing, we're inherently dealing with modes of change and comparison. When looking at the material and whatever project we're dealing with, what can we say about what I call 'domain lag' between the three different domains? A domain lag is what I refer to by the fact that specific modes of change take place at different speeds, as it were, in different domains (one is reminded of the processual disjunctures between Arjun Appadurai's various global 'scapes'). So let's say – to cut it short and make it simple – that the actual social encounters people have in the street in a complex diverse neighbourhood – actual relations that people negotiate on a day-to-day basis – are taking place, being negotiated and creating in hybrid forms at a much quicker pace than a lot of the representations, particularly in the official policy world, can make. There is always a lag behind policy concepts, institutional arrangements and what people actually work up for themselves on the street I would say.

Or for instance, this subject of super-diversity that I've talked about and have written about, i. e. the emerging configurations in contemporary migration between all these different variables, between a proliferation of legal statuses, between a diversification of places of origin, between a range of jobs and localities that people are ending up in through migration these days… these configurations are changing much faster than politicians and policy makers can keep up with in their concepts, discourse and policy. They basically don't know what's happening in term the rapid changes in migration and we have a set of policies designed for migration patterns of ten or fifteen years ago. These are the kinds of things I am meaning by 'domain lag' and how this sort of approach I am suggesting helps us to figure out what's happening and what kind of tension there is between social processes.

The notion of domain, and domain lag, helps us undertake a kind of conversation. If we have members of staff, whether they are an anthropologist or social psychologist or political scientist or whoever, who are at least willing for the point of team

meetings to adopt the same sort of language, it's enabling us to learn a little more from each other than we would otherwise in a multi-disciplinary environment.

So I hope that's a useful sketch to give you some idea of where we're starting out in our department at the new Max Planck Institute. Again this wasn't a talk about particular research findings or particular data or a particular theory. It's was just a broad conceptual framework. We trust we're going to find it useful. I hope to come back to this nice place in a year or two years and let you know what we've with this, whether we've elaborated or whether we've chucked it all together to find something better. But for now this is where we are starting and [referring to final slide] this is where it's going to happen.