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# Diversity in local political practice

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**Abstract:** This article frames and introduces the contributions to a special issue. Their focus is on France and Germany, not only two major immigration countries in Europe, but also countries where local authorities have a relatively strong position within the state structure. While other studies have often focused on policy declarations, the eight articles in this special issue provide rich evidence on the content and implementation of policies. Furthermore, several articles offer theoretical insights into the factors driving or hindering policies that acknowledge socio-cultural heterogeneity, ensure more equality and inclusive public services. Results of a project at the Göttingen Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity are presented together with other contributions. The introduction concludes with reflections on the difficulties of “intercultural” communication among scholars and comparison of France and Germany.

**Keywords:** Local policies; France; Germany; cities; diversity; comparison

Cities have traditionally been described as being marked by heterogeneity. Such heterogeneity takes different shapes. Even within the homogenizing framework of a nation state, cities may be more or less segregated along lines of wealth and ethnicity, have a more or less varied

cultural life, and more or less welcoming public spaces, to name just a few potential differences. In what ways are such differences shaped by the interventions of urban actors? And how do such actors intervene to make differences, for instance of physical ability or cultural backgrounds, matter – or not – for the life chances and everyday lives of their city's residents?

This special issue presents articles aiming to contribute to a more precise picture of urban interventions into the contours and relevance of societal diversity. Some of the contributions emerged as parts of an umbrella project at the Göttingen Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. Contributions by colleagues from other institutions complement this selection.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this set of articles is on France and Germany, two major immigration countries in Europe. Germany and France are the leading powers of the European Union and countries traditionally shaped by immigration. In both countries, local authorities have a relatively strong position within the state structure (Wollmann and Bouckaert 2006, 27). They are thus able to intervene, in relevant ways, in the shape and relevance of diversity. In Germany, municipalities perform a wide range of tasks. They represent the state at the local level and implement national as well as regional laws, but also have autonomous functions. Land use, cultural policies, childcare, some aspects of social welfare provision, support for associations, and the promotion of the economy fall within their competences (Bogumil and Holtkamp 2006).

In centralized France, the local level has altogether had a functionally weaker position, but cities have traditionally been well represented at the national level. "Owing chiefly to the influence that the *cumul de mandats* gives powerful mayors in national politics, French local authorities have traditionally tended to be politically strong but (until well into the 1980s) functionally weak." (Kuhlmann 2006, no page; Wollmann et al. 2010, 26–33). However, decades of decentralization measures have strengthened local government in France.

Municipalities have responsibilities with regard to town planning, culture and education. Local councils and in particular large municipalities also develop policies in fields formally assigned to the regions (Borraz and Le Galès 2005, 13, 15).

### **Where and how local actors intervene**

This special issue is motivated by the belief that our understanding of how localities and local actors shape the life chances of immigrants and other disadvantaged groups of the population still has gaps. While there is a considerable body of scholarship on immigration-related discourses and positions (e.g. Scuzzarello 2015), other interventions of local actors and their effects have been less studied. Furthermore, while scholars have emphasized the important role of cities in immigrant policies and their commonalities, we should aim to develop a more precise understanding of this role by considering the specific competencies of local government and how they vary across states. Local government takes on distinct roles in different policy fields. It may be a relatively independent actor, a mediator and moderator, or a dependent executor of national law.

- In some policy fields, major decisions are taken at the local level. Local councils and local governments, for instance, determine spatial structures and thus influence patterns of residential segregation and public space. Whether central city areas are inhabited by mixed populations or not, whether disadvantaged parts of the population live in areas that are particularly polluted is, if not determined by, at least influenced by decisions of the council. The cultural life of a German or French city is strongly influenced by local decisions over programme orientations and funding for theatres, museums, and other institutions (Tandé 2020). The opportunity to practise sports and use leisure facilities may depend on local regulations (see Michalowski and Behrendt 2020) and on local decisions about access to public sports grounds for different clubs.
- Local actors may also get involved in policy fields where their formal competences are weak. Education in Germany, for instance, falls within the competences of the regional states, but local governments may become active to further the cooperation between schools and employers (Aybek 2014). Such activities can improve the employment chances of disadvantaged youths. Further, local authorities are major employers and thus actors that co-determine opportunities for work and access to careers. While in both Germany and France, local public employment follows more general public service regulations, local authorities can take measures that influence fairness of access (Lang 2020; Mezziani-Remichi and Maussen 2017).

As Rächle and Schmiz (2018, 7) recently argued, “municipal politics play a crucial role for migrant economies.” The extent to which residents of a city experience discrimination can be influenced by active local policies scandalizing such discrimination and providing support to victims (Flamant 2020).

- In implementing national immigration law, local authorities may have some leeway to interpret the law and determine how exactly they implement it. Whether residents are met with a welcoming attitude in the offices of the municipalities, or encounter distrust, is importantly influenced by mayors and other leading civil servants. German municipalities have been shown to differ, for instance, with regard to whether and how soon refugees are granted a work permit (Schader 2020). Mayors in France may have handled their duty to report fake marriages or to issue certificates of “decent housing”, decisive for the immigration of family members, in different ways (Nicholls and Uitermark 2017, 191).

Other local actors, beyond the council, mayor and administration, contribute to a local political culture and influence power structures. Such a local culture affects the practices of the administration as well as the policies of council and government. It further presents a more or less encouraging context for minority political articulation and participation.

While local authorities and other local actors thus clearly have an important role, scholars disagree on whether the powers of the local state have grown or diminished in the past decades.

In the immigration literature, we often find an enthusiastic emphasis on increased local powers in Europe. Some scholars suggest that the autonomy of cities has grown due to European Union policies that encouraged city networks and provided additional funds (Borkert and Caponio 2010, 9; Gesemann and Roth 2009, 21–2). Others even identify a “local turn” in immigrant integration policy. In contrast, another strand of scholarship points at the loss of power through EU-enforced liberalization, the privatization of public services and the budget crisis of many cities (Bogumil and Holtkamp 2006, 77; Heeg and Rosol 2007). And yet, there are many ways in which politics and policies in cities influence the lives of immigrants and other minorities. Local decisions not only determine the extent to which residents have equal access to some resources and services, they also contribute to the societal standing of minorities. The public presence of minorities through prominent buildings or festivals, their visibility in a city’s cultural and political life, conveys recognition and thus contributes to the status of minority members (Morris 2009; Phillips 1995). The urban culture of cooperation importantly influences how minority claims can be articulated.

The Göttingen “CityDiv”-project underlying several contributions to this special issue started from the assumption that the development of sociocultural heterogeneity in French and German society and the presence of “diversity” as a positive narrative in national politics and public life present conditions that influence responses to immigration and immigration-related change. Certainly, immigration itself is a major source of sociocultural differentiation. But it is not the only one.

Immigrants have brought with them and developed differing lifestyles, languages, value systems and religious practices, but the pluralization of the forms of life, of cultural preferences and norms also results from other developments, such as rising levels of education and individualization processes. The declining relevance of the once standard heterosexual family with children, all living in one household, and the broadening scope of what life in old age means, illustrate the trend towards more varied forms of living within many highly industrialized, democratic societies. The urban culture of cooperation importantly influences how minority claims can be articulated. The Göttingen "CityDiv"-project underlying several contributions to this special issue started from the assumption that the development of sociocultural heterogeneity in French and German society and the presence of "diversity" as a positive narrative in national politics and public life present conditions that influence responses to immigration and immigration-related change. Certainly, immigration itself is a major source of sociocultural differentiation. But it is not the only one. Immigrants have brought with them and developed differing lifestyles, languages, value systems and religious practices, but the pluralization of the forms of life, of cultural preferences and norms also results from other developments, such as rising levels of education and individualization processes. The declining relevance of the once standard heterosexual family with children, all living in one household, and the broadening scope of what life in old age means, illustrate the trend towards more varied forms of living within many highly industrialized, democratic societies.



Furthermore, some differences that were long forced to the background of public social life are now visible and have vocal advocates demanding recognition, participation in the life of cities and their share of the resources. In the 2000s, it has become common in Western Europe that mayors and other prominent politicians take part in Gay Pride events, thus underlining the legitimacy of such minority claims. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in force since 2008, has strengthened the rights of disabled people to participate in all spheres of social life and put pressure on public institutions to ensure the preconditions for inclusion. Disabled people themselves have also organized more publicly and increasingly demand visibility and access to all services and resources. As the public life of cities is increasingly marked by a multifaceted heterogeneity, immigration becomes just one aspect of a more complex social reality.

Sometimes, a positive image of “diversity” is used to capture such multiple features of contemporary societies. The usage and meaning of this term differs across Europe. And yet, not least due to the presence and politics of large global businesses, positive diversity campaigns are a familiar discursive framework that may be taken up by urban actors and impact on their policies. Scholarship is divided as to the relevance and character of these developments. Is “diversity” just a management rhetoric without positive (or negative) impact on the lives of minorities? What do we find if we look beyond the rhetoric and search for de facto responses to socio-cultural heterogeneity regardless of their labels? In German localities, “diversity”-framings have increasingly entered into immigrant integration policies (Pütz and Rodatz 2013).

Mayors of big cities routinely celebrate the diversity of their cities' populations. Urban actors in big cities are altogether convinced of the relevance of diversification and embrace its positive effects (Moutselos et al. 2020). Furthermore, as a recent analysis by the "CityDiv"-project team demonstrated, cities also implement a range of policy instruments aiming to accommodate and recognize the socio-cultural diversity of cities. They include, for instance, changes to recruitment practices, image campaigns and concepts for local museums or libraries. Maybe more surprisingly, such policy instruments are not only common across big German cities, but were also found to exist in the big French cities (Martínez-Ariño et al. 2018). Apparently, the French Republican ideology of equal citizens does not preclude difference-conscious policies. Christophe Bertossi has pointed at the "variations and malleability of the French model" (2012, 252) and criticized "the degree of normative density scholars assign to" it (2012, 249). Similarly, Christopher Downing (2015, 1557) has pointed at "the various formations and applications of difference-orientated policies in French cities". The *label diversité*, a reward issued by a French government agency to various organizations, including local authorities, is one example illustrating the recognition of difference, or diversity, in French society (Bereni, Epstein, and Torres 2020). We refer to "diversity policies", or "diversity policy instruments", regardless of whether the actors involved use the term "diversity". This is an analytical term, distinct from diversity concepts for instance in business strategies. Unlike terms such as "multiculturalism", it captures responses to disadvantage more broadly, and not only for ethnic minorities, including measures "aiming to adjust the public administration and its services to a heterogeneous

population and to publicly acknowledge the socio- cultural diversity of the population” (Martínez-Ariño et al. 2018, 2).

In a comparative light, it turns out that explicit references to “diversity” in the public discourse serve different functions in different contexts. While in Germany the term is associated with a positive affirmation of immigration- related change, in France its function has been ambiguous. In French politics, *diversité* has been used as a concept allowing explicit reference to ethnic difference (Escafré-Dublet and Simon 2009, 138). However, as Bereni, Epstein, and Torres (2020) argue, it may have “lost that meaning in later years”. And often diversity is also seen as a concept that makes equality conditional on individual performance, a neoliberal logic incompatible with demands for equality (Sénac 2012, 260–1). In cities in the Netherlands, “diversity” has functioned as a counter-concept to multiculturalism, and sometimes an individualized perception of social positions serves to depoliticize issues of inequality (Hoekstra 2015). Researchers should closely study how an affirmation of diversity is linked with particular policies, rather than assuming that it generally serves neo-liberal or social justice- oriented purposes. Furthermore, both may not be clear-cut alternatives. As the CityDiv-team could show in a recent study of German urban actors’ positions, market-oriented perceptions of diversity often go along with support for justice-oriented interventions, such as accommodating the disabled and representing societal diversity in municipal councils (Moutselos et al. 2020).

Another key theme addressed by the Göttingen project – and a number of articles in this collection – are the changing structures of local politics and their implications for the representation of immigrant concerns

in urban politics.

While other studies have investigated representation in elected councils, that is urban government (e.g. Bloemraad and Schönwälder 2013), a further area that deserves more interest is the broader development of “governance”. In the past two decades, as several scholars have pointed out, we have witnessed the development of “new forms of governance and participatory politics on the local scale” (Blokland et al. 2015, 662; see also Guarneros- Meza and Geddes 2010). Already in 2005, Borraz and Le Galès (2005, 24–5) pointed out that “new forms of non-electoral participation are emerging”. The term governance aims to capture the increasingly blurred boundary between state, market and civil society actors in policy-making. Further, as Giersig (2008, 55) underlines, “governance points to a diversification and proliferation of policy-making coalitions that only in part consist of representatives of the state”. Local political cooperation can help empower disadvantaged groups of the population, help incorporate them in mainstream politics or, rather, exclude such groups and contribute to their marginalization. Funding for associations, their involvement in larger fora, participation in governance structures and local decision- making, the election of minority representatives to political office may convey confidence, allow an articulation of group-specific claims and support an implementation of group interests. At the same time, political incorporation can also come at a price. As Nicholls and Uitermark argue (2017, 234, 33–4), movement organizations and spokespersons may “come to serve rather than challenge the status quo” and “effectively become outposts of the state within urban civil society”.

If new forms and fora of deliberation and decision-making in local politics become more common, it is imperative to assess empirically how they reflect power structures and impact on the position of minorities. To what extent are immigrant representatives or advocates of immigrant and minority interests present in such coalitions? In one rare optimistic piece, Korteweg and Triadafi-Iopoulos (2015, 663) argue that, in European municipalities, “immigrant groups are regularly integrated into policymaking and implementation efforts on issues ranging from youth criminality to language learning and lagging labour-market participation”, an involvement they term “multicultural governance”. Can other studies confirm this tentative finding? Drawing on more systematic empirical evidence, Schiller, Martínez-Ariño, and Bolívar (2020) find support for this broad assessment for German and French cities.

### **The contributions to this special issue**

The eight articles in this special issue provide rich evidence on the local political practice of diversity. While other studies have often focused on policy declarations, the content and implementation of policies is central here. Furthermore, several articles offer theoretical insights into the factors driving or hindering policies that acknowledge diversity and serve to reduce discrimination, ensure more equality and appropriate public services. The first two contributions examine how local authorities respond to initiatives from the national and local state. Labels or prizes issued by a public institution or a foundation have become common instruments for furthering broader societal aims, such as openness to diversity, family-friendly employment conditions, etc.

Thus, Germany has a *Charta der Diversität* and France the *Label Diversité*. Bereni, Epstein, and Torres (2020) examine the motivations and strategies of the very small number of French local and regional authorities who so-far received the label. Do such instruments actually help change practices or do they just provide cover for not doing so? The authors argue that local actors actively used the national instrument for their own purposes by interpreting it in a specific way. The *Label Diversité* provided an opportunity, albeit taken up by only very few local authorities (four by mid-2019). In one case examined here, it was associated with the “institutionalization and managerialization of pre-existing antidiscrimination policies”. In two other cases, it resulted in “a process of deracialization of these policies”. Interestingly, pragmatic rather than ideological considerations seem central when human resources officials, seeking indicators to measure performance, favour interventions where such indicators are available, i.e. gender, age and disability – but not ethnicity or ascribed “race”.

Local conditions more generally, the mayors as potential policy entrepreneurs, and the Human Resources departments in the urban administration are identified as crucial for the varying outcomes. German local administrations can, to some extent, draw on such statistics, but Lang (2020) equally points out how organizations resist innovations that do not align with what they perceive as their core functional needs. Her contribution examines the implementation of a German regional-state initiative to promote the “intercultural opening” of public administrations. Looking at three local administrations, she discusses what factors caused differences in the extent to which the regional policy was implemented.

Once again, the existence of such differences, ranging from “practically unaltered continuity of established hiring routines” to “structural changes with substantial effects on staff composition”, underlines the significant room for manoeuvre that local political and administrative actors can exploit. The employment of persons with an immigrant background is at the centre of this investigation. Unlike in France, reference to migration background is not a taboo in German politics and administrations, although a belief in the fairness of existing, allegedly “colourblind” procedures is common. Three factors are found to determine the local responses: political leadership, the fit of new initiatives with functional requirements, in this case in the recruitment of personnel, and the population structure of the locality, where high immigrant shares can increase the urgency of the issue.

In Anouk Flamant’s study cities do not respond to a national initiative but instead, they change their policies on their own accord. Three named French cities, Lyon, Strasbourg, and Nantes, following elections in the early 2000s, introduced new organizational units in order to implement changed immigrant policies. The directions of the changes differed, and Flamant investigates why this was the case. Differences concern the conceptualization of policy as related to equality more generally, to antidiscrimination, integration, or citizenship – important differences as Flamant stresses. Thus, reference to citizenship tended to imply a focus on political participation, while “integration” likely signalled a perception of immigrants themselves as responsible for their socioeconomic incorporation. Policy instruments and aims also varied.

Four factors are found to account for the different urban policies: the power of the leading politicians, the experiences and convictions of leading civil servants, the influence of civil society actors, in this case immigrant advocacy groups, and the influence of European Union initiatives. Participation in EU-programmes and networks may play a particular role in French local developments, as thereby a big political player introduced the recognition of (ethnic) minorities into a context where this was, and still is, heavily contested.

In France in particular, in a sharply divided polity, as Paul May points out, the theme of multiculturalism is “a structural element of the left–right ideological divide” (2016, 1349). Pro-active policies with regard to diversity are often put into place by Left-leaning governments (see Martínez-Ariño et al. 2018). As in Thatcherite Britain, during the Sarkozy presidency in particular, they sometimes became instruments of protest against a right-wing government. Moutselos (2020) is interested in the exceptions. His study contrasts, on the one hand, a city governed by a conservative major which still implements policies of minority recognition and, on the other, a Socialist-dominated city that stays distant from any diversity or explicit ethnic minority policy, but furthers social equality. Drawing on theories of the policy process, he tests the role of policy entrepreneurs and advocacy coalitions for promoting change. In Marseille, the existence of an established policy network, or coalition of actors advocating a recognition of minority presence, enabled the continuation of diversity policies under conservative rule, albeit without a focus on anti-discrimination measures. In contrast, in Grenoble, a stronghold of the political Left, municipal policies are marked by an absence of



presentations of the city's diversity, and politicians refrain from co-operating with ethnic or religious groups. Traditional colourblind universalism, in a Socialist-dominated form, goes along with social policies for disadvantaged, often heavily immigrant-populated, neighbourhoods, with anti-discrimination policies and support for immigrant associations. Thus, the two cities represent a multicultural recognition policy, on the one hand, and a colourblind anti-discrimination policy, on the other.

Both Moutselos as well as Schader point out how a crisis (or critical juncture) can provide the impetus and political space for reforms. In the study of Schader (2020) the impulse for change was an external shock - the mass refugee arrival in central Europe in 2015. Taking a stance against a common perception, she insists that the events did not cause German urban bureaucratic machineries to fail in their duties. Instead, she outlines how a situation that required improvisation and extraordinary efforts could, in some cases, provide a push for reforms. At least two of the three investigated urban administrations restructured their immigration-related services and built up more comprehensive departments handling previously separated tasks. As Schader argues, the alleged "crisis" thus provided the stimulus for a much-needed adjustment of administrative arrangements to the realities of diverse population structures and requirements. What role do immigrants and ethnic minorities themselves play in the development and implementation of policies affecting them? Flamant's article (2020) identifies immigrant advocacy groups as one factor impacting on the direction and shape of urban policy. In her case studies, foreigners' councils are the organizational form through which their advice is communicated to the city government.

Schiller, Martínez-Ariño, and Bolívar (2020) provide a birds'-eye-view of the place of immigrant advocacy actors within urban networks for 40 French and German cities and qualitative evidence from selected cities. Based on the Max-Planck CityDiv-survey, they show that such actors now have a well-founded place within the networks of a broad spectrum of the cities' corporate and collective actors. At the same time, they find indicators suggesting that participation in governance networks mainly takes place with regard to immigrant integration issues, and to a lesser extent in other fields of urban policy. As they further suggest, such networks often go back to the existence of organized forms of co-operation in urban fora, roundtables, councils, or similar gatherings. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in selected cities, the study develops a number of hypotheses regarding mechanisms through which such fora enhance cooperation.

The two final contributions to this special issue investigate specific policy fields: Tandé (2020) explores an aspect of the cultural policies of cities, the development of public libraries in France. Cultural policies are one of the main responsibilities of local authorities, both in France and in Germany. In France, libraries are traditionally seen as helping to transmit high culture and the French language. However, increasingly they are also confronted with demands of a diversifying population, for whom libraries may also provide access to information, meeting spaces, or even serve to represent cultural plurality. Like other articles in this collection, he points at the variety of policy responses and the agency of the officials. Tandé's contribution underlines that even in centralist and often assimilationist France, local organizations respond in flexible and varying ways to the pluralization of urban populations.

Sports and leisure facilities are another area largely controlled by local authorities. Michalowski and Behrendt (2020) present results of a survey examining to what extent religious minority demands have become an issue for pools in German localities, and how they accommodate such demands. Their study forms part of a growing literature examining the renegotiation of secularity and religion in organizations. Body practices are a particularly sensitive issue. Not surprisingly, Muslim concerns and issues of clothing and gender separation predominate. More surprisingly, perhaps, the authors find that most pools have rather smoothly introduced regulations providing e.g. for the use of unconventional bathing suits. Such regulations are, maybe surprisingly, at best loosely related to the concerns of citizens and pool users.

Altogether, the contributions to this special issue illustrate what different shapes diversity policy in practice can take. Further, several contributions provide insights into actors and conditions that further, hinder and crucially shape such policies. In producing these results, we also learned about some difficulties of “intercultural” communication among scholars. French scholars are often centrally concerned with the question of whether broader aims like “diversité” or “equality” serve the interests of ethnic minorities and often fear – or assume – that inclusion in a broader policy context will “dilute” or undermine the interests of ethnic minorities. “Diversity” itself is a negatively loaded term, and French scholars seem to prefer terms such as anti-discrimination or equality policies. This is not just a terminological difference. Implied is a low regard for policies of recognition and presence – expressed e.g. in cultural policies or image campaigns.

In German academic contexts, the recognition aspect of diversity policies seems to be accorded more importance, and diversity framings are, at least potentially, often also seen as possibly benefitting immigrant populations. In the end, these are of course empirical questions that we should further pursue. Studies on the effects of diversity, anti-discrimination, or multi-cultural policies are still scarce. We should make sure that terminological differences do not stand in the way of that effort.

### **Disclosure statement**

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