

## Superdiversity's backstory

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SYMPOSIUM: STEVEN VERTOVEC'S *SUPERDIVERSITY*:  
*MIGRATION AND SOCIAL COMPLEXITY*

 OPEN ACCESS



## Superdiversity's backstory

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### ABSTRACT

In "Superdiversity: Migration and social complexity", Vertovec returns to the concept of superdiversity and reviews its uses in different disciplinary fields. Importantly, the book also offers a useful backstory to the concept which helps to better locate it into a long standing but not mainstream anthropological engagement with social complexity. While triggered by a new age of migration and the socio-demographic transformations it was producing in London, the concept was also since inception a way of capturing the diversification of world views and systems of categorisation brought by these processes. However, drawing from research I carried out with EU migrants in London after Brexit, I argue that profound movements and transformations are occurring under the surface of a city that remains "superdiverse"; changes driven by forces that fall outside the analytical reach of "superdiversity", leaving the question: what drives migration-driven diversification unanswered.

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### Prequel

Vertovec's new book puts the 2007 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* article which launched superdiversity (Vertovec 2007) into context. The article itself is republished in the book, while the following chapters engage with the concept from different entry points and perspectives. In Chapter 2, Vertovec (2019) returns to his previous review of the uses of the concept, and reflect on the many meanings and directions the term has taken in its first fifteen years, how it has been used and misused, interpreted and at times misinterpreted

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by scholars coming to it from a wide range of disciplinary traditions and guided by different research agendas.

The book, however, set to do also something else. It brings back the concept to its origin locating superdiversity into a longstanding, but minority lineage of anthropological work on pluralism, cultural complexity and social structures (see Berg 2023). Doing so, it provides a useful prequel to the term. Delving into the cultural as well as the political milieus in which superdiversity was initially developed, Vertovec offers a backstory and a genealogy to the preceding work. The reference early in the book to the 1985 Tanner Lectures delivered by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz on the uses of diversity, for example, gives out an important hint into the intellectual puzzle that led to superdiversity, namely the need for a new analytical vocabulary to describe, interpret and capture a world that was becoming increasingly connected and transformed by migration. The quest is for a new vocabulary that would replace the old conceptual maps we still use (Beck 2011) and offer not only an alternative to the widespread and often unchallenged methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) that has long been the default position of migration studies, but counter also essentialist approaches to social categorisations which constructs identities as fixed and one dimensional. Together, Vertovec observes, methodological nationalism and essentialism are central to the reproduction of key tenets of modernist and nationalist ideologies, namely “homogeneity-as-norm and diversity-as-exception” (Vertovec 2023, 3) which still provide the implicit or explicit basis of most “integration” policies and public discourses on migration (Favell 1998, 2022a).

Geertz’s insight also informs another key feature of Vertovec’s thinking on superdiversity, that “cultures” travel with migrants, complicating and unsettling taken for granted social categories and patterns of social difference. Migration-driven diversity contributes also to the diversification of world views and systems of categorisation through the “constellation of experience” (Barth 1989) that each migrant carries with them. But how do these multiple constellations coexist in contemporary societies? Vertovec and others ask.

## Recasting the multicultural question

How are people from different cultures, different backgrounds, with different languages, different religious beliefs, produced by different and highly uneven histories, but who find themselves either directly connected because they’ve got to make a life together in the same place, or digitally connected because they occupy the same symbolic worlds - how are they to make some sort of common life together without retreating into warring tribes, eating one another, or insisting that other people must look exactly like you, behave exactly like you, think exactly like you [...]? (Hall 2007, 150–151)

Stuart Hall’s “multicultural question” (2007) and its urgency echo in Vertovec’s thinking on diversity. Migration-driven diversifications transform societies

and their social imaginaries. The nexus between these two processes of social transformation is at the core of what Vertovec calls superdiversity and the foundation, he argues in the book, for a new politics of coexistence for the twenty-first century grounded “in a capability and competence in understanding social categories and their non-essentialist, flexible, multiple, and overlapping qualities” (Vertovec 2023, 205). For this reason, Vertovec also shares with Hall a dislike for the term “multiculturalism” which acknowledges the plurality of cultures but also reproduces ideas and imaginaries of difference as fixed, bounded and mutually exclusive.

Superdiversity as a concept emerges from a body of scholarship that, since the 1990s, has questioned and problematised the boundaries and constructed nature of ethnic communities as units of analysis (Alexander 2002; Baumann 1996; Brettell 2003; Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006; Vertovec 1996), the intrinsic risks and limitations of methodological “ethnicism” (King 2001), “racialism” (Loveman 1999) and excessive “groupism” (Brubaker 2002) which contribute to reify differences *between* groups, while obscuring differences and power relations *within* them (Baumann 1996).

It is also a response to a change in the public and political discourse on multiculturalism. The backlash against multiculturalism (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) which came to the fore in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and following a series of attacks in European cities (e.g. London, Paris, Brussels, Nice, Berlin, Manchester, Barcelona, Madrid) which left European immigration countries that were *de facto* multicultural without an explicit policy for dealing with this fact. Politicians like Angela Merkel and David Cameron became vocal critics and declared multiculturalism an “utter failure” and in effect “dead” (Merkel 2010 and Cameron 2011 in Berg and Sigona 2013), leaving a discursive and policy vacuum in which “diversity” emerged as an alternative and more malleable term (Berg and Sigona 2013).

Despite its “death”, multiculturalism is survived not only by the lived multi-culture, the “stubbornly undead diversity” that terrifies the power that pronounced its death (Gilroy 2012), but by the term itself that occasionally resurfaces in public debate, as in the case of the recent speech by UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman – herself a unique product of British Empire-driven migration and diversity<sup>1</sup> – in which once again multiculturalism was accused to have “failed” “because it allowed people to come to our society and live parallel lives in it” (Braverman 2023).

### **What drives migration-driven diversification?**

Migration-driven diversity and diversification are often invoked in the book. Superdiversity sits at the nexus between these two phenomena, but what drives them? In the 2007 ERS article and to a large extent also in the book, the answer is the interplay of several factors, sometimes framed as an

expanded or enhanced version of intersectionality. But is this enough to understand and interpret the emergence of (space- and time-) specific configurations of superdiversity? And while there is an acknowledgment in the book that the weighting (power) of different factors may vary, the reader is left wondering why this may be the case (see Eriksen 2016).

As I have argued elsewhere (Sigona 2023), geopolitical and economic forces define and shape the realm of the possible with respect to mobility and migration, and create the particular political, social and cultural milieus and opportunity structures – the condition of possibility – within which a particular mobility may occur. Immigration and citizenship laws, passports, borders (digital or otherwise) are the instruments, the technologies of power, that nation-states, and before them empires, have used to discipline, manage and regulate these mobilities and the lives of those who move. They certainly play a role in producing social hierarchies and different modes of membership, but are not independent variables, the forms they take and how they operate are expressions of specific configurations and logics of power.

Returning to Hall (2007), the “multicultural question” is the product of a specific articulation of neoliberal globalisation we experienced in the UK under Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. In the same vein, different political and ideological projects are intimately connected to specific (geo)politics of migration and diversity – that in turn shape who can come or not to the UK and under what conditions. And if, as some suggest, neoliberal globalisation is in retreat in the West, for some since the financial crisis in the late 2000s, for others since Donald Trump, Brexit and the affirmation of nationalist and protectionist governments in several countries (Bello 2007; Jacques 2016) then we should start to think how and in what ways the new political and economic reality may affect migration and diversity in the years to come. From this perspective, the emergence of superdiversity as a phenomenon and a concept can be historicised and rooted in a specific historical conjuncture and cultural milieu – the era of neoliberal globalisation, overheating (Eriksen 2016) interconnectedness, “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) and the consolidation of the post-Cold War geopolitical order (Meissner, Sigona, and Vertovec 2023) – and its varied geographical articulations. If this is the case, can we expect events like the global Covid-19 pandemic, the call to renationalise strategic assets in response to the current energy crisis, or calls to move industrial production back to one’s core market and to put national workers first, also to affect migration governance, flows and patterns of social diversification?

Of course, those who migrated due to previous historical circumstances and conditions, do not just disappear, which is why our societies become increasingly layered, stratified and complex, with their very presence becoming a force and driver for social, political and economic change (Sigona 2023). The biographical and political trajectory of UK Home Secretary Suella

Braverman – Londoner, daughter of colonial immigrants, staunch Brexiteer, former Brexit minister and candidate in-waiting for the Conservative party leadership – encapsulate this complexity.

Brexit, London and the politics of migration in the age of “Global Britain” are the focus on the next section, in which I will briefly draw on my research on the impact of Brexit on EU families and their children ([www.eurochildren.info](http://www.eurochildren.info)) and the politics of migration post-Brexit ([www.migzen.net](http://www.migzen.net)) to show the significance of specific geopolitical shifts and related ideological projects factors in understanding the changing configurations of superdiversity in Britain.

## Back in London

These observations stem from returning to London in the wake of the 2016 EU referendum to carry out research on the impact of the referendum on EU families and their children (Sigona and Godin 2023), a decade after Vertovec’s seminal article used the analysis of migration-driven socio-demographic transformations in London to introduce the concept of “superdiversity”.

The city is waking up abruptly to a new reality. The majority of the United Kingdom has just voted for leaving the EU. In England, “Remain” only won convincingly in London and some university cities (Johnston et al. 2018). Few observers had anticipated this outcome at the beginning of the referendum campaign, lest of all, the 1.2 million EU citizens living in the city who have to come to term with a geopolitical earthquake that redrew not only the borders of the EU but of Britain and Britons. It took five years of tumultuous negotiations to formalise the UK’s exit from the EU and, in the process, turn millions of EU free movers – EU citizens exercising their right of freedom of movement in the UK and British citizens in the EU – into immigrants in their countries of residence. They didn’t move, and yet their legal status and their position in social hierarchies changed. Many considered moving, in social media the hashtag #Brexodus trended for a while, but eventually only a sizeable minority did (Godin and Sigona 2023). Brexit impacted not only the mobility of EU nationals but migration more widely. Since the 2016 EU referendum, estimates on net-migration by the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS 2023) have shown three trends: declining new arrivals from the EU (EU immigration), increasing departure of EU nationals formerly living in the UK (EU emigration), and substantial increase in non-EU immigration.

Brexit, however, has impacted not only on who comes, stays or leaves the UK, but led to a profound transformation of the migration regime which governs who is *eligible* to come to the UK, and under what terms and conditions. The geopolitical realignment and new ideological positioning of the UK in the world (Benson et al. 2023; Sigona and Benson 2022) had a significant impact on the definition of the new migration regime and the new political demography that emerged (Favell 2022b).

To be clear, this is not some kind of call for “Brexit exceptionalism”, our research (Lessard-Phillips and Sigona 2018) on the transformation of the EU population in London and the UK overall clearly shows the extent socio-demographic changes can be mapped against not only the macro political changes in EU membership occurred in the last four decades, but also the parallel closing down of entry routes and the introduction of a stratified migration regime in terms of eligibility criteria, costs, rights and entitlements for others (i.e. non-EU migrants). Elsewhere, for example, highlighting parallel and differences between the circumstances that led to the “Windrush scandal” and the risks of irregularisation of EU citizens in the UK, we pointed out how the end of freedom of movement in the Commonwealth that came in gradually through a series of increasingly restrictive legislative measures affecting in particular racialised Commonwealth citizens, also included a profound transformation of British nationality which culminated in 1981 with the formalisation of a six-pronged taxonomy of nationality for the UK and its overseas territories and dominions (Yeo, Sigona, and Godin 2019).

In conclusion, while today, despite these profound transformations in migration and migration regime, London remains in a broader and to some extent generic sense “superdiverse”, host of by far the largest and most diverse population of EU citizens in any European city and a cultural capital of “Europolitanism” (Sigona and Godin 2023), there are profound movements and transformations occurring under the surface that are changing the city and its population and are driven by geopolitical factors that somehow fall outside the analytical reach of “superdiversity”.

## Note

1. Braverman’s mother is of Hindu Tamil Mauritian descent and her father of Goan Christian ancestry and moved to Britain in the 1960s from Kenya.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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