

Networking Diversity

For **Steven Vertovec**, Director at the **Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity** in Göttingen, basic research need not necessarily be confined to the ivory tower. His Department of Social Diversity was responsible for contributing hard facts and suggestions for the city of Frankfurt's newly drafted integration and diversity plan.

TEXT **BIRGIT FENZEL**

A while ago, a journalist from one of the smaller Berlin daily newspapers penned the phrase: “peace, love and falafel” in connection with a piece on integration. If the way to the heart truly is through the stomach, then, given the number of kebab shops, pizza stands and sushi bars that crowd our city centers, the issue should actually have been settled long ago. That the problem is far from solved, however, is clear from the fact that even acknowledged municipal integration policy experts such as those working in Frankfurt are still seeking new ways for people from different cultures to coexist constructively.

The metropolis on the Main River has a fair amount of experience in such matters. In the late 1980s, municipal authorities came up with the idea of a Department of Multicultural Affairs – commonly known by its German initials, AmkA. The task of this department was, and is, to promote the peaceful coexistence of people of German and foreign nationality, as well as differing origins and religions. This move contrasted strongly with the prevailing attitude at the time, when most citizens

generally preferred to ignore the social reality of immigration. The concept of integration was also taken to mean that the immigrant minority should adapt themselves to the dominant – German – culture of the majority.

NEW PLAN CALLS FOR A RADICAL CHANGE OF COURSE

To mark the 20th birthday of AmkA, Frankfurt's multicultural pioneers set to work on a special anniversary “present”: a 236-page draft of an integration and diversity plan in which guest contributors describe the social realities in the city from their own perspective. The scientific elements of the plan were entrusted to cultural anthropologist Regina Römhild, now a professor at Berlin's Humboldt University, and Max Planck Director Steven Vertovec.

Conceived as a blueprint for an open discussion with the citizens of Frankfurt, the work contains some surprises. Aside from the fact that it makes AmkA appear at least nominally obsolete, it suggests a radical change of course.

On the basis of Vertovec's observations, the standard multicultural view of people from different cultures living side



Photo: Culture Parade – F. Bischof



» Thanks to its traditional role as a center of trade and its interwoven transportation, financial and business infrastructures, the city of Frankfurt am Main may fairly be described as Europe's most important urban hub.



Frankfurt is a global city, home to people from 176 nations. Their countries of origin are as diverse as those, for example, of the population of London.

by side with one another no longer fits with the social conditions he has encountered – and not just in Frankfurt. As a social anthropologist for more than two decades now, he has been studying the phenomena of international migration, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in the major cities of the world.

In 2007, Vertovec became a Founding Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, where he established the Department of Social Diversity. Today, the unpretentious new building on the edge of Göttingen's inner city is populated by young scientists of various disciplines who make use of the latest techniques and methods in sociology, social psychology and anthropology to gather data on urban populations. The material they collect will help them analyze the changing forms, dynamics and consequences of social coexistence.

The invitation from AmkA in Frankfurt to join cultural anthropologist Regina Römhild in contributing to the scientific basis of the plan fit in very well with 52-year-old Vertovec's own plans. "Frankfurt interests me not least because it is a global city," he says, citing another reason for his willingness to take a general inventory of the city's immigrant society. Thanks to its traditional role as a center of trade and its interlinking transportation, financial and business infrastructures, Frankfurt am Main may fairly be described as Europe's most important urban hub. Despite having a relatively small population of some 670,000, Frankfurt is nevertheless a "city of superlatives," the only one in Germany to rank alongside such global cities as New York, Tokyo and London.

In the view of the social anthropologist, the link between these global cities is not limited to their role as syn-

apses in the global economy – a role they acquired by virtue of their position as the headquarters of multinational companies and institutions, as financial centers and international transport hubs. Vertovec, who has an eye for diversity, also sees parallels in their social structures.

FRANKFURT IS GERMANY'S MOST INTERNATIONAL CITY

Like all global cities, Frankfurt also has a markedly international population: 40 percent of its citizens are either migrants themselves or have an immigrant family background, making it the most international city in Germany, according to the Max Planck scientist. The mix of countries from which these migrants originate is just as colorful as previous research has revealed in other global cities.

From a pile on his desk, Steven Vertovec pulls out a chart that was plotted using statistical data on Frankfurt's population: a pie with many colored slices showing the percentage breakdown of the population by country of origin. Vertovec already has a chart in his drawer that was plotted during his study in London – a very similar chart, in fact, since there are almost exactly the same number of nations coexisting in the two cities: 179 in London, 176 in Frankfurt.

"What we have found here contradicts the common perception that the larger groups always originate from Turkey and southeastern Europe," the scientist explains. On the one hand, the traditional countries of origin of the first generation of "Gastarbeiter" (foreign workers) – particularly Turkey and Italy – still form the largest segments of the chart. "But their proportions are declining in the face of large numbers of new immigrants in small and very small groups from all over the world," says Vertovec, describing a statistical trend that does not match the image

presented by previous surveys, such as the Frankfurt integration study of 2008.

However, this relatively recent work differentiated only between “non-Germans” of various nationalities and “Germans,” with a distinction drawn even between Germans with and without an immigration background. As Vertovec and Römhild have discovered, such statistical categories do not match the reality.

On the contrary, they found a dynamic variety of social realities in Frankfurt on a par with that which Steven Vertovec had already identified in London as a basic feature of “new migration.” In London, as in Frankfurt, immigrants from the traditional countries of origin – in this case Britain’s former colonies and the Commonwealth countries – have long since ceased to form the largest migrant groups. The proportion of new citizens from the Middle East and the European Union is steadily growing larger.

When he published his study of London in 2007, Vertovec coined the term “super-diversity” to describe this new pluralism – a phrase that, at the time, did not appear in the sociological lexicon. His intended meaning of the term is not restricted to the observation that a large part of society has first- or second-hand migration experience. Describing the broad reach of the phrase, he explains that super-diversity is diversity at all social levels – but especially within individual groups.

As examples of this comprehensive heterogeneity he cites differences in ethnicity, language, religious traditions, regional and local identities, and cultural values and practices. In addition, within each group of immigrants there are a variety of different social strata and claims to residence that are

Linguistic diversity: The media, too, have adjusted to the large number of foreign citizens in Frankfurt. This photo shows a newsstand in the city’s Gallus district.





associated with the reasons that brought the individuals to the city. As the center of the European financial and service industries, Frankfurt's economic success is closely linked to mobility and immigration, insofar as the city not only offers jobs for highly qualified immigrants at foreign and multinational companies, but also employment in related sectors and services.

A FOCUS ON ORIGIN CONCEALS SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

As a result, there are a variety of migration paths that create a distinction even between individuals of the same geographic origin. As Vertovec points out, offering food for thought, there is a difference between seeking asylum and coming to study in Frankfurt. He has identified every possible migration path in Frankfurt: from a rising number of seasonal workers and nursing staff to foreign specialized and managerial staff and educational migrants with grants and student visas through to refugees and asylum seekers and those who have come simply to join their families.

The immigrants' needs are as varied as their motives. "The same applies to the nature of their contacts with others

and with public institutions," says Vertovec. Sometimes people of differing origins who nevertheless migrated by the same route have more in common than those who share the same nationality but whose intentions in coming to Frankfurt vary. Focusing solely on groups of shared national origin conceals these social differences within the group, Vertovec believes. "The resulting statements about, say, 'the Turks' tell us as little about the underlying social strata, lifestyles or religious attitudes of the community in question as do comparable statements about 'the Germans.'"

As another key feature of Frankfurt's super-diversity, Vertovec and his colleague Regina Römhild identified extreme variations in the legal status of the city's immigrants, as well as in some cases of glaring contrasts in their social situations. One of the major causes, they believe, lies in the amendments to national immigration law. However, the more restrictive demarcation of Europe's external borders and the regulations limiting third-country immigrants and refugees have also led to an "immense spectrum" of widely differing legal statuses ranging from a lawful, long-term secure entitlement to residence to an unlawful status that is devoid of all legal security.

Even experts begin to flounder when faced with the variety of criteria that determine how long an individual may stay here and the hierarchy of entitlements and restrictions. Vertovec knows this to be the case from discussions with a Frankfurt-based lawyer specializing in these matters who described the legal situation as "highly confusing." Other factors that affect the social situation of many migrants also include their educational backgrounds and professional and vocational qualifications, and thus also their prospects in the employment market.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES MUST MAKE A GREATER COMMITMENT

"However, given the continuing lack of recognition accorded to foreign educational qualifications, what credentials they do have are often not accepted," Vertovec says, describing another problem faced by many immigrants. This applies especially to individuals of restricted and precarious legal status. Their social situations are also particularly influenced by whether they receive support from social and family networks and local aid organizations.

There is a colorful mix of nations represented in global cities. Street parades that celebrate ethnicity are part of the typical pattern of life in cities known for their super-diversity.



Vertovec sees a considerable need for action in this respect, and not just in Frankfurt. A greater commitment of local authorities to the socially weakest immigrants should not only be considered a basic human right, it is also essential to any form of integration. Social status, across the board but especially in the case of illegal or legally undefined immigrants, is crucial to how these persons enter the country, settle down and obtain employment, find homes and access schools, social services, health care and other public services. It affects whether or not they remain tied to their place of origin and how they interface socially and culturally with other migrants and with the German population.

What the researchers found when they analyzed data from the register of the city's residents is likely to be of interest in Frankfurt and beyond. They looked at the geographic distribution of super-diversity across the entire urban area. "Our findings clearly show that it is not concentrated locally, but distributed widely throughout the city," says Steven Vertovec. In the researchers' opinion, these findings plainly contradict the widespread fear of urban "ghettos" and "parallel societies."

The statistical fact that, during the period from 1998 to 2006, districts with a traditionally high proportion of foreigners actually experienced the steepest fall in this proportion also contradicts the idea of consolidated ethnic structures. As the social anthropologists have observed, the adjacent northern city districts saw the greatest increase.

Here, too, in the case of surveys like these, it pays to look into the data a bit more deeply. "There are differences in the pattern of settlement depending on whether one distinguishes between non-Germans and Germans with an immigration background, or between people with and without personal migration experience," Vertovec explains.

Whereas actual immigrants prefer to settle on the north bank of the Main, predominantly near the railway station and in the Gallus district, Germans with a migration background evidently opt mainly for districts such as Griesheim and the northwestern precincts, as well as the heavily populated areas in the north of the city.

Considering these differences, it becomes clear that an integration plan focused solely on the criterion of "foreign nationality" falls short of the mark. An integration policy that takes account of

the difference between indications of immigration and actual immigration experience and the specific distribution of the population would more closely reflect social reality and thus be more effective.

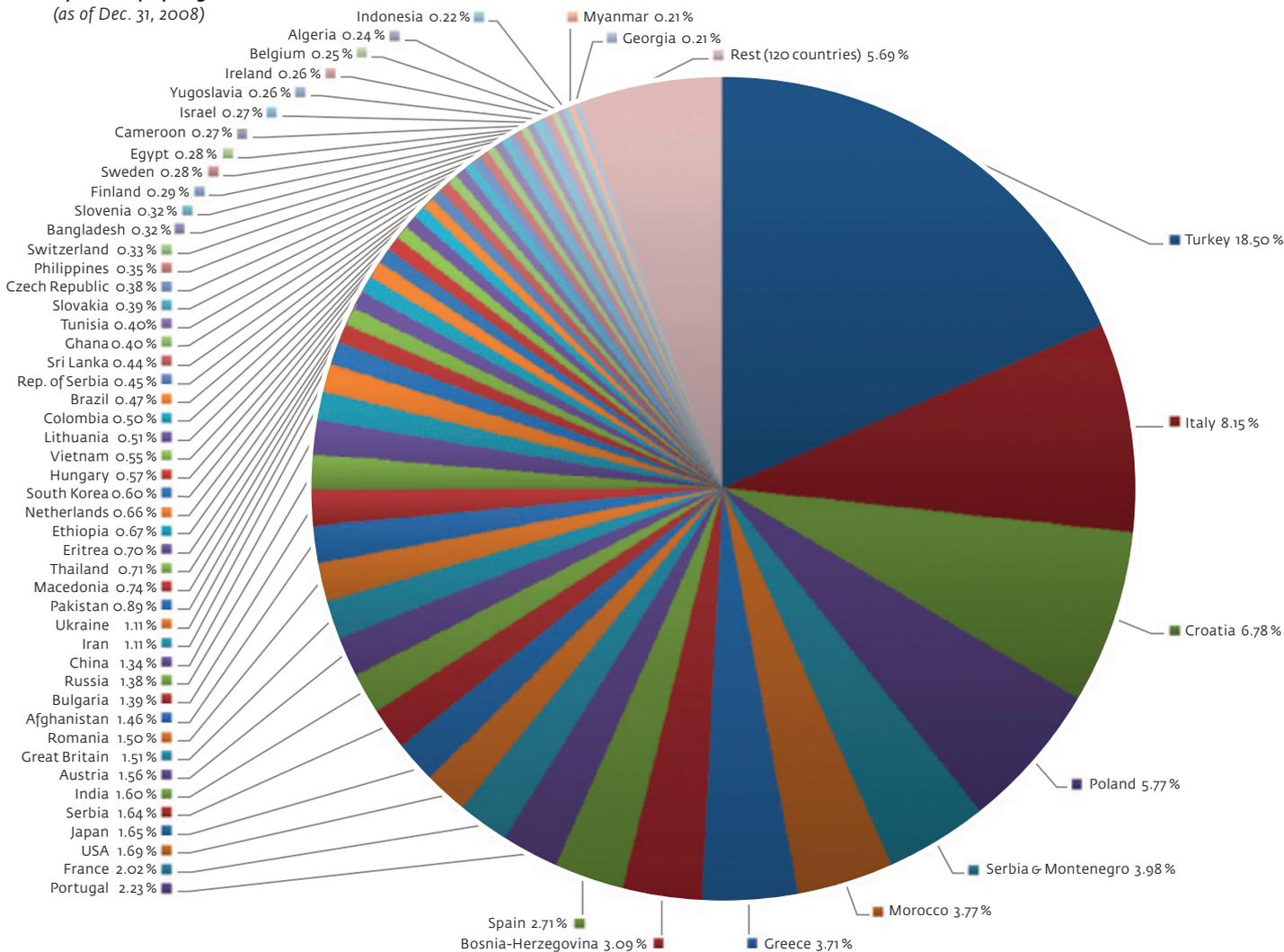
MANY MOVE IN – JUST AS MANY MOVE OUT

A look at the statistics revealed another feature of Frankfurt that could well set a record: "Around 300,000 people – equal to around half the entire population – come into the city each day and then head back out. This gives Frankfurt the highest proportion of commuters in Germany," says the Max Planck researcher. The marked predilection for moving is also worthy of the record books. According to data from the register of residents, over a period of about 15 years, the number of people who moved into and out of Frankfurt was equal to the city's average population. A particularly high level of fluctuation among the population need not necessarily lead to social instability, Vertovec believes. On the contrary, he sees advantages for the city. "New consumers and new people in paid employment tend to stimulate the local economy."

Vertovec also sees opportunities rather than risks in the transnational orientation that is increasingly evident in Frankfurt and other global cities. In recent years, the inexpensive international tariffs offered by telephone companies, coupled with affordable travel costs and the Internet, have enabled migrants, more than ever, to maintain close ties with people and places abroad. A common fear is that such a transnational orientation will be accompanied by an absence of any feeling of belonging and a lack of loyalty to the immigrants' host society.

Precisely this fear is often one of the reasons for intensified integration efforts that are aimed at persuading immigrants to "unambiguously" adopt their new homeland both culturally

**Foreigners resident in Frankfurt
by country of origin**
(as of Dec. 31, 2008)



and socially. “The fact is, however, that cultural and social scientific research has long since demonstrated that life in late modern societies is generally accompanied by multiple orientations and identities with increasingly transnational dimensions – a phenomenon that is by no means restricted to immigrants,” says Vertovec. As he is aware from numerous interviews, these people feel a bond with their countries of origin and their communities, and reap the benefits of new, low-cost communications. Vertovec continues: “Nowadays, they have the opportunity to cultivate and intensify such feelings, while at the same time building a new life in their new home with a new livelihood, social ties and political commitments.”

As to the future activities of Frankfurt’s integration managers, networked diversity seems to the researcher to be a more up-to-date alternative to the multiculturalism of the early years. In

practical terms, many of the suggestions put forward as a follow-up to past work essentially involve bringing people together to talk to one another and exploit shared interests to reduce the barriers between them. Describing the potential new mandate for integration in Frankfurt, the researchers believe that, given the “considerable expertise” and plentiful existing contacts to various groups that AmkA can call on, it is in a “unique position” as a public agency to play a leading role in the development of contacts and networks.

HOBBY GARDENERS CREATE A MINIATURE PARADISE

For example, AmkA could identify and stimulate discussion on overarching issues that affect and demand a commitment at all levels of society, or develop initiatives of general local interest – such as setting up and operating a com-

munity or youth center, organizing street parties, working with children, encouraging local flea markets, or helping people to jointly acquire knowledge or special skills.

Building social connections at the neighborhood level is another of the long list of suggestions that an agency might undertake. AmkA can draw on a wealth of experience garnered from the many effective projects it has carried out over 20 years of integration efforts. A successful example cited by the researchers is Frankfurt’s “Intercultural Gardens” initiative, through which hobby gardeners of widely varying provenance come together to create colorful flower and vegetable paradises.

In many cases, all that is required of the city is to provide suitable space. “There is often no shortage of ideas for joint activities. What is lacking are the resources and the room to turn these ideas into reality,” says Vertovec. This

also explains why public institutions should use the options available to them to promote durable contacts and interaction. In turn, contacts and interaction of this kind should be developed into more sustainable social networks that transcend ethnic and religious boundaries and legal restrictions and integrate refugees, asylum seekers and people with limited or undefined legal status on an equal level.

Ultimately, it is a question of bringing people together to talk to one another and exploit shared interests in order to lower the barriers between them. “The discussion we have prompted about how and where immigrants live, and the changes and coexistence in the districts of the city, is motivated by a concern to strengthen the district-specific relevance of integration policy,” explain Steven Vertovec and his colleague Regina Römhild. Precisely what that means for any given district or neighborhood can only be decided for each specific place in discussion with those directly involved.

What is more, a common language is needed for all of these strategies and the actions and programs that may potentially develop. “From this perspective, the policy of networked diversity can go hand in hand with help in learning the German language,” explains Steven Vertovec. Then again, he doesn’t want to see the bar set too high. It is not so much a question of acquiring general linguistic competence as of learning the language skills needed to interact in a variety of everyday situations, for instance at work, in conversation with other parents at school, and when dealing with public institutions.

In his field studies of social diversity, Vertovec once came upon a scene at a flea market by chance that he happily relates in this context, as it conveys the image he has in mind: “Two men, neither of whom could speak German terribly well, were discussing a tool that one of them wanted to sell and the other was keen to buy. They praised its qualities and talked about the price, cracked jokes and got on splendidly in a lan-

guage that was clearly not their mother tongue and of which they had only a moderate command.” A good example of what a successful policy of networking might look like in real life. ◀

GLOSSARY

Transnationalization

A scientific term that seeks to embrace the social, cultural, political and economic ties that migrants maintain with their countries of origin.

Super-diversity

A plan describing the change in international migration and the population structure of the destination countries since the 1980s. Instead of large groups of migrants from a small number of countries, there are now small groups arriving from widely differing places of origin.

Global cities

A term coined by urban sociologist Saskia Sassen. Global cities are mutually networked centers of finance and services that fulfill central control functions in the global economy.