Reading ‘Super-Diversity’

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In 2007, I published an article that introduced the concept, or what I called a summary term, ‘super-diversity’. Since then, in both the worlds of academia and public policy, the concept has been subject to some interesting (and some downright weird) interpretations and usages. The following piece traces some of these readings of ‘super-diversity’ across a range of social science literature.

First, to briefly recap the idea: ‘super-diversity’ was intended to address the changing nature of global migration that, over the past thirty years or so, has brought with it a transformative ‘diversification of diversity’. This has not just occurred in terms of movements of people reflecting more ethnicities, languages and countries of origin, but also with respect to:

- a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live. In the last decade, the proliferation and mutually conditioning effects of a range of new and changing migration variables shows that it is not enough to see ‘diversity’ only in terms of ethnicity, as is regularly the case both in social science and the wider public sphere. In order to understand and more fully address the complex nature of contemporary migration-driven diversity, additional variables need to be better recognized by social scientists, policy-makers, practitioners and the public. These include: differential legal statuses and their concomitant conditions, divergent labour market experiences, discrete configurations of gender and age, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents.

- The dynamic interaction of these variables is what is meant by ‘super-diversity’. (Vertovec, 2007)

Since 2007, the term has been picked up by a wide variety of scholars from an array of disciplines and fields. (This is shown in a recent review of 300 publications that invoke ‘super-diversity’; see Vertovec, 2014.) These go beyond the expected ones – sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, migration and ethnic studies – to include linguistics, history, education, law, business studies, management, literature, media studies, public health, social work, urban planning and landscape studies. Moreover, while the original article described phenomena in London and the UK, the term has been used subsequently to describe social, cultural and linguistic dynamics in such widespread contexts as Brussels, Venice, New York, Jerusalem, the Baltic states, Italy, Cyprus, Egypt, Nigeria, French Guiana, Zimbabwe, Hong Kong, Hokkaido, Oaxaca, villages of south-west Slovakia, the German state of Brandenburg, the border province of Limburg, Manenberg township in Cape Town, and the city of Enshi in China.

In a rough typology, we can see at least six ways that ‘super-diversity’ has been read (so far). (1) Some social scientists have understood ‘super-diversity’ as meaning very much diversity, or more pronounced kinds and dimensions of social differentiation – particularly cultural identities. (2) In a more limited way, many writers invoke ‘super-diversity’ merely to mean more ethnicity – that is, that new migration processes have brought more ethnic groups than in the past. (3) Such a reading stands in contrast to another sense in which authors refer to ‘super-diversity’ in order to move beyond a focus on ethnicity as the sole or optimal category of analysis. (4) This understanding is extended by those who describe and elaborate what I would say is the original meaning of the concept, that is to say a changed set of conditions and social configurations which call for a multi-dimensional approach to understanding contemporary processes of change and their outcomes. (5) Recognizing this understanding, other scholars have urged a methodological reassessment of their respective field or discipline. (6) Finally, there are numerous academics who, although invoking the term ‘super-diversity’, actually mean something rather different (though often not wholly unrelated) to what was originally intended: examples include theories of non-linear social trajectories, mixed motivations for migration, broader geographical dispersal of migrants, blurred distinctions of racial categories, multifarious networking, multiple discursive practices and polycentricity of semiotic resources.

Across all of this emergent literature, furthermore, ‘super-diversity’ has turned into an adjective to describe a set of circumstances within which scholars want to describe some phenomena, process or topic with which they are respectively concerned. Hence we can read of ‘superdiverse characteristics of groups’, ‘super-diverse places’, ‘super-diverse circumstances’, and ‘super-diverse settings’; scaled up, some describe one or another ‘super-diverse population’, ‘a super-diverse society’ or ‘the super-diverse nation’; on yet a broader canvas, still others write of ‘a stage of super-diversity’, ‘the era of super-diversity’, ‘super-diverse realities’, and ‘a super-diverse world’.

What’s going on here? Why has there been so much attention, and such varied readings and uses, of ‘super-diversity’ – leading to what has been called the emergence of a ‘super-diversity lens’ and a ‘super-diversity turn’ in the social sciences? Rather surprised by the wide and
multiple readings of the original article, I would suggest that – for a range of good reasons – social scientists are avidly seeking ways of describing and talking about increasing and intensifying complexities in social dynamics and configurations at neighbourhood, city, national and global levels. We are getting better, I would argue, at developing what Nando Sigona has called ‘ways of looking at a society getting increasingly complex, composite, layered and unequal’ (2013). However, we are still struggling to describe it. Indeed, addressing ‘the super-diversity of cities and societies of the 21st century’, Ulrich Beck (2011) suggests that the rise of these are ‘both inevitable (because of global flows of migration, flows of information, capital, risks, etc.) and politically challenging’. However, Beck adds:

It is in this sense that over the last decades the cultural, social and political landscapes of diversity are changing radically, but we still use old maps to orientate ourselves. In other words, my main thesis is: we do not even have the language through which contemporary super-diversity in the world can be described, conceptualized, understood, explained and researched. [italics in original]

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a new notion like ‘super-diversity’ has been widely taken up – albeit in a variety of (sometimes unintended) ways. It is likely a – hopefully useful – placeholder until we develop more enhanced terms, theories and perspectives with which to depict and interpret the multiple modes and impacts of current forms of societal complexification.

References


