

From Superdiversity to Social Difference: A Critique of Vertovec's Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

Due to Vertovec's standing as a celebrated social theorist and his influence, we wish to discuss his condensation of sociology's most crucial concepts to make a convenient model of "the social organization of difference." Having performed a close reading of Vertovec's works, from the era in which he touted "super-diversity" up to his phrasing of "difference," we have concerns that his body of work leaves out the collective experiences of the "Global South," perhaps unintentionally. In charting this so-called difference, Vertovec limits his scope of discourse to the boundaries of his knowledge. Yet, he is optimistic about positing this model as a one-size-fits-all approach, encompassing the entire human experience. We use examples from the Global South, focusing on the postcolonial societies of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, to illustrate the gaps in Vertovec's approach. We do not wish to debunk Vertovec's ideas entirely; we merely want to signpost the existence of other "different" experiences. Thus, we apply the theories of Southeast Asian scholars to extend this scope of discourse—everyday-defined realities, the social organization of difference, and sociological theory.

Keywords: *Everyday-Defined Realities, Global South, Social Organization Of Difference, Sociological Theory, Super-Diversity.*

Introduction

We are compelled to respond to Vertovec's recent 2021 article, "Vertovec, S. (2021). The social organization of difference. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44(8), 1273-1295.", due to his stature as an essential theorist bridging the fields of sociology and anthropology. Though he has made and continues to make critical contributions to social theory, we observe that he has left out several components, which our article intends to refine. These components are related to Vertovec's ontology and epistemology, and we have written this rejoinder to offer our insights.

"The social organization of difference" was a contentious project by the British colonial powers during their occupation of Malaya, with lingering adverse side effects. In their attempt to "define and rule" (Mamdani, 2012) and "divide and rule" (Xypolia, 2016), the British colonial powers classified the peoples of Malaya into neatly demarcated conceptual categories and, in so doing, colonized the ways of thinking, or the epistemology of the local peoples. However, today, Vertovec claims that "difference" is entirely new. Shying away from his past affinity with the concept of "super-diversity," it is as though Vertovec has made a detour towards the acknowledgment of a mere "difference."

We explain our reasoning by adding point here, namely that in his paper (Vertovec, The social organization of difference, 2021, p.1), Vertovec mentioned that "rapidly diversifying societies, rising inequalities and the increasing significance of social differences are concurrent processes calling for a re-examination and reworking of certain conceptual and theoretical tools within the social sciences"; and also "this article is an exercise in reviewing and regrouping, from across the social sciences" (p.1). Hence, Vertovec has promised to transcend the boundaries of sociology versus anthropology and, therefore, is accountable for knowledge of social theory, encapsulating sociology (Mansoor et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Vertovec also mentioned that "diversity" is not a very satisfactory concept for framing this task within social science. It is a largely unwieldy concept for research and theory due to its ambiguity, normativity, and polysemy (Vertovec 2012, 2015; in Vertovec, The social organization of difference, 2021, p. 4). This shows that Vertovec has critiqued his concept of diversity and thus has taken a revisionist

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standpoint to his work. In this vein, “social organization of difference” does not appear to be less “unwieldy” compared to “superdiversity.”

It is noteworthy that Vertovec’s sudden change of direction occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. The pandemic and its lockdowns worldwide, including social and physical distancing (enforced and self-initiated), have led to new manifestations of survival interest. There is possibly a retrograde descent into survival mode, brought about by health scares and their ensuing moral (and medical) panics, such as whether anyone is wearing a mask. Social unrest, including hooliganism, has occurred to individuals suspected of harboring and transmitting the disease based on assumptions of ethnicity. In our reading, Vertovec has glossed over these possible new forms of racism with a placid description of “difference.”

Research Objectives

This article aims to debate Vertovec’s paradigm shift from superdiversity to social difference, which left a big question mark on his action. He coined superdiversity, a new term that is equally important as the Big Bang theory, to examine the super diversification of ethnic groups due to migration in most Anglo-Saxon countries that motivate the state and society to overcome the challenge of managing the impact of migration with refine approach of humanity and humility. However, the sudden shift from superdiversity to social difference is more of a revisionist standpoint of his work that demoted the conceptual evolution of social theory.

This conceptual debate is fundamental in social science. It demands skills in articulating philosophical approaches and historical analysis to develop a persuasive body of arguments supported by secondary evidence and instances that exhibit the flow of ideas and thought patterns that have evolved significantly, specifically in understanding migration studies.

Literature Review

To take a brief starting point, the collection of literature reviews debating the colonial impacts that have left most former colonies managing complex challenges of social difference resulting from British approaches of define and rule as well as divide and rule will spearhead the discussion on Vertovec’s negligence in acknowledging the colonial knowledge as a fundamental construct that left the Global South perplex in managing diversity [a construction of colonial power to change the demography by bringing the migrant workers to work at the British mines, plantation, factories, etc. and left the host society with no choice but to accept the influx of migrants; ironically Vertovec is now addressing the grievances and challenges of Anglo-Saxon in managing superdiversity later turn social difference which their predecessors left.

Historical epochs evolve due to social change, creating new material conditions influencing ideas and behavior. In the history of the Anthropocene, numerous historical epochs have come and gone, and it is certainly not true that only now has there been a need to manage “difference.” Everywhere in any era, the ruling classes have always been the ones to set the bar, while the “others” have had to follow suit. Hence, even the concept of difference etymologically derives from a comparison against the norm. Once again, this begs the question of why has “diversity” now morphed into “difference”? Unless, of course, Vertovec intends to envision this variance in a negative sense, where “difference” implies going against the standards. But standards set by whom? While “diversity” entails a certain whiff of egalitarianism, “difference” is loaded with this conflict-based connotation. Hence, at any rate, there is no straying away from the conflict perspective in sociology or even social theory. As such, we intend to debate three discrepancies from Vertovec’s essay.

Our task in this essay is to subject Vertovec’s statements to several challenges, such as “Why is there a need to rebrand social structures into something transient such as “configurations”? “Does Vertovec ignore sociology’s basic classifications of sociological perspectives into structure/agency and

functionalist/conflict/individualist approaches?” and “What about the experiences of the subaltern/Global South?”. We wish to extend the discourse surrounding the promising idea of super-diversity, an ideal type to be aspired to, to a larger populace. Our objectives are to fill up the gaps in Vertovec's boundaries of knowledge by offering a more in-depth literature review along the following lines: providing arguments for the importance of acknowledging the tangibility of social structure, filling up the gaps where Vertovec ignored the contributions and cornerstones of sociology such as classical sociological theory (European), American structuralist and individualist sociology, the modernization and development perspectives, the French structuralist and deconstructionist paradigms, up to Giddens' reflexivity; and inserting the complex and nuanced experiences of the Global South, through quoting the works of its homegrown researchers, or those focusing strictly on the region.

We aim to refine some of Vertovec's claims in his essay “The Social Organisation of Difference.” This necessitates picking apart the direct epistemologies he relies on to make his arguments. Vertovec (2021, p.1273) states, "Now is a vital time to study diversity and social change." He further elaborates the meaning of "now" as "rapidly diversifying societies, rising inequalities and the increasing significance of social differences are concurrent processes" and that the present context is "calling for a re-examination and reworking of certain conceptual and theoretical tools within the social sciences." However, one must ask, has this phenomenon never occurred before in human history, only to be necessary now? Were social differences not significant before this?

Vertovec also explains that his essay is an exercise in “reviewing and regrouping a large number of insights on difference and social change from across the social sciences.” However, this attempt does not visibly contain any effort to classify sociological perspectives into functionalist, conflict, structure, or agency paradigms, and it lacks a sufficient interrogation of epistemology. Moreover, he raises issues, such as “group categorizations, social interactions, and social stratification,” that appear to be sites of perennial debates since the beginnings of sociology, which appear tautological.

He provides special mention to several social theorists whose works he considers influential, citing that "before introducing a model of the social organization of difference, I must highlight the ideas of certain prominent scholars who have made substantial contributions toward these three fields and shaped my understanding of the inherent relationships between them." (Vertovec, 2021, p.1274). However, he needs to summarize classical sociologists' work and the evolution of various sociological perspectives successively. While other recent papers are debating the concept of super-diversity and comparing it to intersectionality and other competing paradigms, Vertovec still needs to acknowledge these, even in disagreement, sufficiently.

He states that “Diversity” is not a very satisfactory concept for framing this task within social science. It is a largely unwieldy concept for research and theory due to its ambiguity, normativity, and polysemy (Vertovec 2012, 2015; in Vertovec, 2021, p.1275). This appears to "drop the mic" or abandon the debate regarding his conception and leave other supporters (and detractors) of his theory grappling in the dark.

There is a romantic and almost Panglossian view of "organizing difference" after Barth (1969) developed a "tripartite scheme" which contains the definitions of: “social” (concerning interpersonal interactions and behaviors), “organization” (relating to patterns, forms, institutions and structures of society) and “difference” (referring to socially constructed categories), applying it to “applicable to numerous modes of difference: race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, age, disability, legal status and citizenship” (see Vertovec 2015: in Vertovec, 2021, p.1275).

Meanwhile, Vertovec introduces us to his new schema of understanding "difference" by rebranding primordial social phenomena, defined as: "by configurations, I refer to a variety of phenomena embodying stratified social structures (cf. Grusky 2014: in Vertovec, 2021, p.1276)." While Vertovec does mention the term social structure here, it only lends weight to the futility of rebranding it as "configurations", implying that it is like building blocks that can be rearranged or "re-configured." These building blocks of society are often static and intergenerational. After all, in which part of the world can we truly and so optimistically say

that class concerns are just mere "configurations" and not concrete entities? This is akin to applying "postmodernity as a blanket condition to the entire world.

Next, Vertovec explains his other term: "Representations," drawing from a related discipline, claiming that "categorization and classification are of particular interest in Social Psychology." But why is there a need to suddenly intrude into psychology, where the basic unit of analysis is the study of the mind? In sociology, the basic unit of analysis is interpersonal relationships governed and guided by social structures. Citing Brubaker (2004; in Vertovec, 2021, p.1278), he further posits that "social categories or representations tend to be "groupist" in nature." Again, Vertovec comes across as somewhat tautological, given that a group consists of individuals.

While we are aware that one might take issue with this phrase, we justify this by adding a quote here from Loic Wacquant about Pierre Bourdieu: "The concepts of habitus, capital, and field are thus internally linked to one another as each achieves its full analytical potency only in tandem with the others. Together, they enable Bourdieu to sociologize the notion of doxa elaborated by Edmund Husserl. First, they suggest that the "natural attitude of everyday life," which leads us to take the world for granted, is not an existential invariant, as phenomenologists claim, but hinges on the close fit between the subjective categories of habitus and the objective structures of the social setting in which people act" (Wacquant, 2006). In quoting this, we relate to a particular sentence by Vertovec (2014): "Loic Wacquant, for example, believes 'the term diversity is very often used to obfuscate marginality' (personal communication)." We thus channel Bourdieu via his student Wacquant towards this conversation on diversity. Bourdieu also stated, "The representations that individuals and groups inevitably engage in their practices is part and parcel of their social reality" (Bourdieu 1979/1984: 564; in Wacquant 2006). We shall contrast this with Vertovec's idea of representations. Furthermore, "Insofar as they enter into the very constitution of class, social classifications are instruments of symbolic domination and constitute a central stake in the struggle between classes (and class fractions), as each tries to gain control over the classificatory schemata that command the power to conserve or change reality by preserving or altering the representation of reality" (Bourdieu 1985; in Wacquant 2006).

While there is a valiant effort at capturing the experiences of minority groups in Britain, Vertovec should account for the rise in violence against Asians ascribable to renewed forms of racism. Although he mentions that "following the COVID-19 pandemic, Asians in America and many other countries have been, once again, portrayed by many as a threat – this time, to public health", the complexity of this issue cannot be succinctly encapsulated into this simple sentence. Instead, he needs to account for the potential rise in racism again due to association with disease/eating practices, as well as the likelihood of degeneration into a "survival of the fittest" Social Darwinism lifestyle, which could lead to social unrest.

In the final part of Vertovec's tripartite, he explains "encounters," which reads, "representations and unequal social structures are formed, manifested and remade through interactions across social categories and boundaries of difference. Such interactions are increasingly the subject of cross-disciplinary literature on "encounters" (Vertovec, 2021, p.1280). Again, this unnecessary repackaging of basic sociological concepts into new jargon exists. Vertovec's whole discourse both relies upon and ignores the basic tenets of Sociology and subaltern/Global South (e.g., Asian) approaches and models. In the following sections, we pose three main questions to Vertovec regarding his ontology and epistemology. We believe Vertovec should engage with the "dominant" theory or embrace the "subaltern" perspective.

Where does Vertovec draw the baseline from? According to Vertovec (2014, pp 4=5) in the Routledge Handbook of Superdiversity: "The issues encapsulated by 'diversity' are not altogether new to social science. Rather, some of them lay at the core of the social scientific endeavor. As Brubaker suggests, 'in a sense "diversity" is just a more recent term for concepts that have been central to sociology from the very beginning – the idea of differentiation, for example, or the notion of heterogeneity.'" In saying the above, Vertovec himself refers to the centrality of sociology as a basis for his arguments. He continues, "Since at least the time of Durkheim, social science has addressed how differentiated or complex societies are held together. 'Diversity' can provide a particular entry or perspective on the question." On Page 10 of Vertovec (2014), he states: "Diversity studies should not be about celebrating, empowering, recognizing, promoting

self-esteem or valorizing particular modes of difference – or creating some cheery picture of unity-in-difference. It should not represent an exercise in privileging, reifying, or validating any particular categories of difference, but rather in social scientifically scrutinizing social categories, processes of differentiation and outcomes in social, political, economic and geographical spheres.” Yet, in proposing a “social organization of difference,” has Vertovec now reneged on his statement, as his new proposal seems to do the former than the latter?

We raise this because we agree with his observation (Vertovec 2014, p.10) that “I suggest that diversity studies should entail two distinct, but inherently related, topics of investigation. The first topic concerns studies of diversity as modes of social differentiation: how categories of difference are constructed, manifested, utilized, internalized, socially reproduced – and what kinds of social, political, and other implications and consequences they produce.” Page 12 Vertovec also notes that the study of social differentiation spans “Within a variety of disciplines – sociology, anthropology, social psychology, political science and geography – these questions, and many arising from them, have been engaged through several concepts, methods, and theories.” Further, Vertovec claims (2014, p.10): “Sociological and social psychological works on categorization often concern the ways that certain classifications – otherwise described as modes of difference: race, gender, sexuality, etc. – come to carry with them (pre-) judgments, valuations and perceptions that create or reproduce group belonging and symbolic status (see, e.g., Tajfel et al. 1971). An accumulated set of status-ranked categories comprises a system of social stratification – which, in turn, tends to have explicit material or political outcomes.” Thus, we strongly note the potential in maintaining the concept of super-diversity rather than the social organization of “difference.”

Research Methods

This article uses secondary data from Vertovec’s publications, which discuss superdiversity and the sudden paradigm shift to social differences over the years. Most reading materials from publishers like Routledge, Taylors and Francis, Springer, and other indexed journals are available online. Also, this paper utilizes the historical analysis highlighting the colonial knowledge that fundamentally impacted how the Global South perceives migration within the lens of superdiversity and social differences that left a gap in interpreting the migration phenomenon commonly addressed by the Anglo-Saxon. Tilly’s (2001) process tracing method connects historical analysis with contemporary realities by identifying social phenomena and systematically describing them by gaining insight into the causal mechanism. Later, the analysis can be used to assess the challenging problems by comparing different cases.

Result

The Global South Experience on Diversity in Postcolonial ASEAN Countries

Now, we interrogate and compare the ontologies, epistemologies, and evidence of Vertovec alongside theorists of ethnic diversity focusing on Southeast Asia, particularly the postcolonial nation-states of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Malaysia and Singapore were once British colonies, while the Dutch colonized Indonesia. Thus, categories of ethnicity, among others, are legacies of colonial epistemology in these countries. The colonial powers initially sorted the diversity witnessed in these countries into official categories. These affect peoples’ mindsets regarding racial and ethnic superiority, especially where there is a belief in white supremacy in some quarters.

In ethnically diverse occasions, for example, in Indonesia, there was a colonial hierarchy of ethnic groups. When Indonesia was under Dutch colonial rule, society was divided into several classes. The Dutch colonial masters were at the top, followed by the Eurasians or Dutch-Javanese people by intermarriage, the ethnic Chinese merchants, and finally, the indigenous people, including the Javanese. By the 1930s, the ethnic Chinese had developed a settled community that included “locally born Peranakans” (William Tai Yuen, 2014). However, after Indonesia achieved Independence, the indigenous people achieved nationalist self-rule and abolished the former social hierarchy.

More ethnically homogenous societies also faced the influence of British colonial epistemology. Meanwhile, in Singapore, an ethnic Chinese-majority society with a history of British colonialism, Yeoh & Kong (2012, p.120) explain that “Chinatown’s demography in Singapore during the colonial period was characterized in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries by either indentured labor systems or kinship-based chain-migration of predominantly men.” Though Singapore has an ethnic Chinese majority, it contains a phenomenon known as Chinatown, which is usually the product of Chinese migration to foreign countries apart from mainland China and Greater China in search of employment. It serves as an ethnic enclave to facilitate the migration process. These Chinatowns often contain Chinese businesses such as restaurants, medicine shops, laundries, and social services such as business guilds and clan associations. Yeoh & Kong (2012), therefore, also note the residue of British colonial epistemology on contemporary ways of thinking by stating that “As Anderson has noted, the term “Chinatown,” both as a spatial entity and an idea, was ascribed by European society.” So is the term “Chineseness,” a product of colonial urban planning (Yeoh & Kong, 2012, p.121).

In his essay on colonial epistemology, Shamsul AB (1998; in the tradition of Cohn, 1996) also interrogates the archaeology of knowledge behind the formation of the "Malaysian studies," which consists of a corpus of social scientific knowledge on Malaysia. Thus, Shamsul investigated the role and influence of 'knowledge baseline' in creating artifacts - ethnographies, official reports, analyses, and descriptions of the society and culture of Malaysia. The 'ethnicity' and 'class' paradigms are the dominant ones whose origins can be traced back to the colonial period, while 'culture' and 'identity' paradigms emerged during the post-colonial era. Social categories such as 'race' (in biological and social components and meanings) and 'nation' entered into local cosmology and worldview through colonization have yet to be sufficiently considered. Instead, the Western-based worldview has dismantled and replaced the traditional thought system. For example, what seemed to be a 'harmless' bureaucratic practice of census-taking has helped to create and consolidate 'racial categories' such as "Malay, Chinese, and Indian" in Malaysia (Shamsul AB, 1996).

The demographics of Malaysia are as follows. Malaysia’s population for the third quarter of 2020 was estimated to be at 32.69 million, with an ethnic composition of Bumiputera (20 million), followed by Chinese (6.7 million), Indian (2 million), “others” (305 300), and non-Malaysian citizens (2.9 million); and 16.82 million male and 15.88 female citizens (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020; in Chan, forthcoming 2022). Population growth rates for the main ethnic groups have been substantially different over the entire period since 1970. The main ethnic groups are Bumiputera (including Malay, Orang Asli (the Aboriginal people), the native communities in Sabah and Sarawak), and Chinese and Indian. The growth rate of the Bumiputera population has more than doubled that of the Chinese throughout 1980-2010. The Bumiputera share of Malaysia's population has steadily increased from 56 percent in 1970 to 66.1 percent in 2010. Over the corresponding period, the Chinese and Indian shares fell from 34 percent and 9 percent to 25 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively. Almost 80% of the total population is located in Peninsular Malaysia, and just under 10% each in Sabah and Sarawak (Shamsul & Anis, 2011, p.15).

Longitudinally, the major ethnic groups lived in specific locales away from the others and played a significant role in specific economic activities, i.e., Malays in the rural agricultural sector, Chinese in the urban economic industry, and Indians, mostly Tamils in the plantation sector. Post 1969, after the ethnic riot and the ensuing implementation of the National Economic Policy (NEP), there was a deliberate effort to demolish these boundaries to enable the convergence of Malaysians physically and in non-physical spaces (Shamsul & Anis, 2011: 16). The Department of National Unity which was founded in 1970 was tasked with building unity and integration from a top-down approach among the multi-ethnic communities to create the ideal national identity called “Malaysian.” Successful policies implemented by the Department stretched from educational programs to neighborhood watch campaigns, which included multi-ethnic cooperation and involvement. Today, these activities have become “naturalized” and “given” part and parcel of Malaysian society (Shamsul & Anis, 2011, p. 16).

Within this phenomenon, Nagata also discusses the issue of cultural assimilation, noting that the likelihood of classic assimilation into Malay society and culture has to be tweaked in several ways, even after several

generations, since there are remnants of Indian/Indonesian/Arab identity, which remains due to census definitions and other definitions, which has resulted in the sustainability of unique communities possessing their institutions and organization (Nagata, 1974, p.345). Furthermore, Nagata (1974: p.345) observed that assimilation mainly occurs within the Muslim community and in different ways among communities, such as the Chinese or Hindu Indians. Nagata's (1974) choice of framework was a plural society one, where she remarked that in the final analysis, there is no one universal or unified assimilation among Malaysian society as an entirety, and neither is there a single consensus on the ideal type of the Malaysian which combined the qualities of all three major ethnic groups.

On a structural level, Abdul Rahman Embong (2014) asserts that during the pre-colonial feudal era in Malaya, the "*kerajaan*" (government) did not have racial or communal overtones because the "*rakyat*" (citizens) were subjects of a ruler, irrespective of their racial origin. He chronicles the evolution of the term "*rakyat*" in denoting its centrality to pre-colonial and postcolonial administration in Malaya, proposing that the "*rakyat*" paradigm is an inclusive paradigm that has the potential to break through the dominant race-based societal paradigm that has dominated Malaysian history of nation-building in the last fifty years. He explains that "while historically the "*rakyat*" was a subject class in a highly hierarchical *kerajaan*-centered society, it was elevated to the dignified status of "*bangsa*" (nation) during the modern period that saw the rise of nationalism and the independence struggle and also during the post-Independence era" (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2014, p.79). Thus, Abdul Rahman Embong (2018) raised the question of whether a multi-ethnic or class-based paradigm is possible in academic analysis and social interaction. He asks whether the class-based paradigm is excellent and concise enough and therefore offers the "*rakyat*"-based paradigm (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2014), as it is an inclusive paradigm originating from the bottom-up and not ethnicity-driven.

In Shamsul AB's (1996) understanding, there are four significant challenges to the study of identity in breadth and depth. These are the "conceptual" challenges of perceiving identity in either a "static" or "dynamic" mode. The "static" mode refers to a fixed quality, while the "dynamic" mode implies that identity, once assembled, can still be redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted, and altered, hence problematized (Shamsul AB, 1996, p.476). Secondly, the challenge of "describing and explaining" the origins, solidification, and evolution of identities (Shamsul AB, 1996, p.476). Thirdly, there is an ongoing theoretical revisionism in social thought straddling the functionalist, structuralist, and post-structuralist classifications (Shamsul AB, 1996, p.476). Finally, the "authorial" challenge relates to the "objectivity vs. subjectivity" tussle, which encircles the locus of the author-scholar and the author-politician regarding whether they are the object of the research or is aligned with any politically involved party in an "identity struggle" (Shamsul AB, 1996, p.476). Hence, for Shamsul AB (1996, p.477-478), identity formation occurs within two social realities, the "authority-defined" social reality and the "everyday-defined" social reality, with the former being defined by members of the dominant power hierarchy, while the latter being the daily lived experience of the people. Vertovec's epistemology is that social "difference" is unidimensional, whereas Shamsul AB (1996) envisioned diversity, especially the ethnic kind, as operating on two levels, namely the "authority-defined" and "everyday-defined" ones.

In Shamsul's analysis, he acknowledges the existence of the top-down approach, i.e., the "authority-defined" identity, inherited as a product of British colonization of physical and metaphysical space, but also enlightens us about the underlying foundations that feed the societal infrastructure (to take a Marxian sense), that of the actual grassroots self-definition. Shamsul, therefore, defines society as being composed of dual social realities: the polished exterior and the actual organic "underbelly." The latter is not to be seen as derogatory; it is merely a composition of all the daily informal phenomenological underpinnings that make up one's perceived social position. This cornucopia would best be termed "multiplicity" or "*aneka*" in Malay. This has been demonstrated in Nagata's definition of Malay-ness as situational, Abdul Rahman Embong's concept of "*rakyat*," as well as Shamsul's and Abdul Rahman Embong's understanding of the British colonial policy of 'define and rule' and "divide" and rule," which separated individuals into clear-cut categories.

Mixed-ethnic groups also face their identity definition issues and "fitting in." For example, Pue & Shamsul (2012) discuss the Peranakan Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia in the context of being "an ethnic group

that is often overlooked in the discourse of ethnicity as a way to organize social difference in a society into different ethnic categories" due to its origins "whose formation stemmed from amalgamation as part of assimilation process which occurs continuously in interethnic relations between the majority ethnic group and the minority" (Pue & Shamsul, 2012, p.10). Pue & Shamsul (2012, p.50) further note that the "current dilemma faced by Peranakans in Malaysia is mainly associated with authority-defined social reality on how diverse ethnicity is categorized" and advocate for the use of the term Peranakan to be able to describe amalgam ethnicities in a positive sense. As Banton and Mansor (1992) also remarked, in Malaysia, group membership choices must sometimes be made between individual responses and group alignment or between alignment based on class, ethnicity, or religion.

To discuss "representations," since Vertovec favors the term, Malaysia is branded as a nation through the process of "interpellation," where its local ads operate through a mechanism whereby "the intended audience must be Malaysian to understand these socio-cultural codes and respond to it favorably, and secondly, whatever that is outside of this symbolic identification is not considered the identity of Malaysia" (Shazlin, 2010, p.27). Shazlin (2010, p.32) elaborates on this visual diversity by explaining, "The question of ambiguity arises here as advertisers continue to admit multiple identities for us. None of these identities, collective as they are, maintains a dominant conceptualization of the Malaysian sole identity. This then results in abstract ideas of the national identity." In essence, Shazlin writes about how the diversity of imagery relating to the idealized Malaysian identity is encapsulated within a continuously shifting boundary. However, the boundary is a must to maintain the definition of "what is Malaysian." Similarly, Kartini (2014 p.25; 2018 p.183-184) explains that media communications featuring multi-ethnic actors and actresses are helping the government to disseminate the ideas of unity through captivating advertisements and films since the meaning of political consensus does not require each ethnic group to abandon its values, norms, and beliefs in favor of a new identity that rejects its traditions (Kartini, 2014, p.25).

Such is the diversity in Malaysia today that a concept, *Mamakization*, was invented as a comprehensive analytical tool to investigate the reality of social cohesion through a specific social practice: eating out in a Malaysian food stall (Olmedo, 2014, p.30). Olmedo (2014, p.27) defines the Mamak stall as "the epitome of all Malaysian food stalls: the emotional charge at work during patronage calls for a second paradigm to frame this research, after the one of globalization." After Mauss, he postulates that the "social transaction" taking place at the Malaysian food stall between the Giver (the food stall owner), the commodity (culturally conditioned food), and the Receiver (the patron) constitute our acting unit. Thus, *Mamakization* embodies local pluralism and reactivity (Olmedo, 2014, p.29). Mamak stalls are unique to Malaysia and are much more than just a watering hole; they are also places where individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds can mingle and exchange or transform perceptions.

Likewise, Chan (2021, p.227) uses the example of "nasi lemak stalls" as evidence of this democratization of public space, especially in urban areas, by "acting as integration platforms which foster "moments of unity" as people mingle in the shared pursuit of obtaining their favorite dish." Chan (2021, p.227) also remarks that "the special characteristics of nasi lemak stalls further facilitate the mingling process between various social divisions, including but not limited to social class." Of course, with that said, the problem of income inequality continues to haunt perhaps every known society and is only a matter of variation. Thus, in Malaysia, there is an income disparity between the Top 20% (T20), Middle 40% (M40), and Bottom 40% (B40). However, "the definition of B40 and M40 may fluctuate over time, given the change in the minimum wage and overall exchange rate" (Chan, 2020, p.386). As Denison Jayasooria (2016, p.1) observes, "While Malaysia has achieved much in reducing hardcore poverty by lifting the quality of life for a majority of Malaysians, we are now faced with the reality of increasing inequality especially experienced by the urban poor and low-income families living in urban squatters and high-rise low-cost flats."

Conclusion

Having said the above, the most considerable deficiency of Vertovec's arguments is failing to account for a dual social reality, or even "*aneka*" or multiple social realities, which may underlie the official account of social reality. He leaves out phenomenological and ethnomethodological approaches that question the

formation of common sense. He leaves out the problem of self-identification, of mixed ethnicities, of the intersectionality between social categories, and fluid identifications such as transgender (with sex-change surgeries and reverse surgeries being available, e.g. Caitlyn Jenner, cited by Brubaker (2015, p. 414) in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*) or transracial (such as the case of Rachel Dolezal, an American transracial-black female academic, cited by Brubaker (2015, p.414) in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*). He does not partake sufficiently in debates surrounding these issues and has developed a seemingly oversimplified regressive worldview during the pandemic.

Regarding social class, it is surprising that unequal life chances are not even mentioned briefly (Todd, 2021) writes on how social class mobility in Britain is illusory and akin to a game of snakes and ladders). Works such as Savage et al. and other scholars on cultural capital (after Bourdieu), a closely related economic and social capital counterpart, have not been explored. Interestingly, even in Vertovec's earlier works, before super-diversity, he seldom discusses Bourdieu, though that may be a rather specific bone to pick. This leaves a big gap in the discussion of the social organization of "difference" from the metaphysical to the concrete. On this note, we end our rant, and we sincerely hope that Vertovec will take our comments to heart, as we believe that the framework of super-diversity holds much promise.

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