Cultural diversity is without a doubt one of the hottest topics in cultural policies around the globe within the fields of both administration and research. This is true regardless of the focus, be it on the arts, media, cultural and creative industries, cultural identities, signifying systems, or lifestyles of national or ethnic groups. In fact, one can say that it is even more likely to be true because of the circulation of the topic and the understanding of what the concept of diversity actually touches upon and frames. Perhaps the first well-known occasion in which diversity was explicitly defined and discussed within the context of international cultural policy was UNESCO’s 1995 report, “Our Creative Diversity”. This report defined – rather tight-lippedly – ‘diversity’ as a synonym for ‘multicultural’, meaning the variation of cultures as sets of lifestyles, languages and ways of thinking, not only in a given territory but also in a global sense. Its promotion was an act against the presupposed tendency of homogenisation caused by economic and cultural globalisation. The perspectives of development and creativity were seen as indelible parts of the discourse on cultural diversity in this document. “Our Creative Diversity” had been influenced by the earlier work of many researchers and intellectuals, but it was the pre- and post-discussions at UNESCO’s Stockholm conference in 1998 that truly set the scene for research intervention on the topic. The concluding definitions of the conference shared with “Our Creative Diversity” an understanding of ‘diversity’, a strengthened bond between diversity and development issues, and with the socioeconomic qualities of nations and communities. UNESCO’s 2002 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity continued this trend.

Many researchers and students of cultural policy also recognise Tony Bennett et al.’s 2001 report, “Differing Diversities” as one of the first widely spread research texts to tackle diversity from a perspective partially other than that found in “Our Creative Diversity”. In the introduction, Bennett cautions that ‘we should be wary of grouping together all kinds of diversity if this is at the expense of recognising significant differences among them’. The definition of diversity in their report was as follows: ‘the specific focus in this study is limited to those forms of diversity associated with the
patterns of migration that have characterised the post-war period, and in situ forms of cultural difference that have resisted assimilation within dominant national cultures’. So Bennett and crew narrowed the parameters of their view on something that was and still is commonly referred to as ‘multiculturalism’ in the fields of humanistic and social sciences. The innovative capabilities of the nations and communities were not so much harbingers as principles and themes of cultural democracy and cultural rights.

As we know, cultural diversity has come a long and turbulent way since the aforementioned significant ‘events’ in our field. The conceptual transformation has been both instilled and established, in particular after the so-called ‘Florida-turn’, when instead of artistic or cultural expressions there has been talk of creativity, of creative rather than cultural industries, and of the creative instead of cultural sector. When the administrators or researchers of cultural policy now speak of diversity, they do not only refer to the diversity of lifestyles, ways of thinking and social groupings. In fact, they do so relatively rarely these days – the positioning of more or less static social groups has remarkably lost its significance in the definition, depiction and use of diversity. Now the word is used more often when referring to ideas, products, services, users, consumers, audiences, producers, art forms, artistic expressions, and, of course, when speaking of innovation, creativity and economic benefits of culture.

This latest conceptual trend is evident in the field of cultural policy research: a little over half of the papers and presentations on diversity at this year’s conference and the one held two years ago in Istanbul approach, at least in part, diversity through the variety of expressions or positions, such as consumers and producers. This tendency is even clearer in national and local cultural policies. When we look, for instance, at the recent strategies and reports of the Nordic ministries of culture and education, we can see that diversity is often mentioned alongside creativity, artistic expression, the economy, interests of administration, production and consumers of culture and material or immaterial cultural expressions. For example, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture defines diversity as follows in their recent “Future Report of Culture”: ‘It encompasses mainstream culture, but also traditional part- and sub-cultures and minorities, old and new ethnic groups and lingual groups and indigenous peoples. New diverse “virtual tribes” shape the future of Finnish society. Age groups, local cultures and individual differences, different customs among cultures, expressions and the ways of sharing, distribution and consumption of cultural heritage are all part of the diversity. […] Cultural diversity and interaction among different cultural influences comprise the basic precondition for creative capital.’

The new trend has captured the interest of the field of international governance of culture in particular: the speech on diversity has become a fundamental element in discussing culture and cultural affairs for the European Union, UNESCO and WTO, for example. In terms of political-economic pluralism, their purpose is to expand market possibilities for the artistic expressions and commodities of cultural and/or creative industries originating in different areas of the world. This orientation is clear in the European Community’s enouncements: the objective of the diversity speech is to make way for country-specific and supranational European cultural industries, actors and products in the markets here and abroad.
Pros and cons of the ‘diversities’

To sketch a more profound and overarching picture of the discussions and definitions, it is good to start with categorised naming of these different diversities or diversity discourses in order to observe their pros and cons from the perspectives of cultural policy practices and research.

There is, first of all, the conceptualisation of diversity, which leans on the broad, anthropological definition of culture, the one that encompasses ways of life, beliefs and signifying systems. This strand could be justifiably labelled ‘multiculturalism’. In addition, there is a framework of diversity, which includes social differences and focuses on access and participation. It emerged from the aftermath of ideas, discourses and practices of cultural democracy and democracy of culture. I call this strand ‘social diversity’. And then there is this relatively new, very wide and flexible, even centrifugal definition, which I call as ‘superdiversity’. As previously mentioned above, this definition or one might say this definition – tends to emphasise heterogeneity in everything that even slightly relates to creativity and culture. One of the major departures from the two other definitional frameworks is that here, diversity is evaluated as foundationally positive for the economic well-being of the persons involved, people and populations, national economies and the world economy.

We all know that the term ‘multicultural’ is used for depicting the variety of the ethno-cultural groups in a given societal or regional sphere. As such, it refers to the differences in lifestyles, belief-systems, norms and social institutions of these groups. Multiculturalism is then an idea, ideology or political programme for governing these kinds of differences. Needless to say, this kind of conceptualisation of life-world heterogeneity can be very inflexible – people rarely identify with only one set of cultural identifications, signs and significations. In addition, it obscures internal differences of groups: its scope is too narrow when one wants to grasp a special kinds of varieties inside groups, such as differences related to the arts or gender. When one acknowledges the hybridity and constructed nature of these groups and identities, both multicultural and multiculturalism are, however, relevant for analysing questions of ethno-cultural identity, group-formation and difference, and the role of religion and religious desires, identities and actions in cultural policy. Although this dual definition seems relatively clear, it has not, however, settled very comfortably into western social policy systems. As those who work in cultural policy administration are aware, this kind of definition poses challenges for profiling tasks of different administrative sectors. Ethnocultural diversity questions continuously blur sectoral limits and the understanding of administrative tasks, because issues related to it are connected to the labour market, and educational and family matters – to name only a few – which comprise the core issues of social and labour sectors. The question remains, then, whether or not cultural administrators should deal with these issues.

What ‘social diversity’ brings into the picture is attention to group differences other than ethno-cultural. It shifts the focus to other kinds of manifestations of heterogeneity which are highly significant for artistic production and consumption, and also for organisation of cultural services. These manifestations can arise, for instance, from differences related to gender, sexuality, age, residence, education and income. In order to realise equality in cultural life, the identities, significations, desires and interests of these groups need to be taken into account both when considering their access to organised cultural activities and participation in their organisation. Another benefit of this conceptualisation is that it allows one to observe the internal differences of ethno-cultural groups. At its best, this leads the members and policy-makers of the majority to recognise the differences amid them and, thus, may reduce the more or less conscious pressures to see others as stereotypically different, deviant and probably problematic for the “normal” ways of
dealing with cultural issues. However, within this framework, the analysis of policies toward e.g. immigrated groups and indigenous peoples can lose its sharpness of focus, as previously noted in the study by Tony Bennett et al. This again, and even more strongly and justifiably than above, leads one to ask: what is the relation of cultural, social and economic policy regulations and administrative tasks? Should the cultural participation of the different groups be taken care of within the social sector or should the cultural policy sector tackle the challenges of social equity?

Currently trendy ‘superdiversity’ is the most problematic framework or definition from the viewpoint of evaluating benefits and drawbacks. Its benefit is that it shows off the breadth of the social scope, wherein different forms of culture are effective and should be taken into account. However, this leads to major challenges both in research and policy. First of all, as Bennett and his colleagues noted, there is a risk that the concept of diversity will become void of any critical or productive content if its usage becomes too widespread. It raises the question of whether it is possible to critically evaluate political, cultural, social and economic cases and impacts of ethno-cultural and/or social differences using this broad notion. If everything is diversity and all diversity is foundationally positive, then how should we handle its negative sides? How can one, for instance, tackle or even notice in the first place the disparity in access and participation to the cultural activities derived from the ethnic and cultural qualities of some group with this notion? This naturally positive comprehension can also prevent one from evaluating the meaning of the external conduct of diversity; i.e. the fact that every form of diversity is somehow produced by the interaction of power, knowledge and subjectification.

Critical observation of the ‘superdiversity framework’ also leads one to ask if cultural policy has the resources – knowledge-related and practical instruments – to tackle the continuous extension of what is counted as diversity, and where the limit of diversity should be drawn. To my eyes, this somewhat aconceptual character can potentially create more confusion among the cultural policy stakeholders, especially policy makers and administrators, as it is already now difficult for them to separate, which tasks belong to the cultural sector and which ones to the social sector. Especially when dealing with people and groups of immigrant or minority backgrounds. If cultural diversity is observed in every part of societal life, which sectors should deal with it? Or should cultural policy become a sub-branch of all sectors?

Conclusions

Bearing in mind the principal theme of the 6th International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, one might say that cultural diversity – in its present form, superdiversity – is one of the key taboos of cultural policy. Not because it itself is not discussed, but because its fundamental meaning remains not discussed. Or, more likely, it has become almost impossible to discuss, because all more or less culturally relevant things and creative activities are placed under its umbrella. This makes it difficult to define diversity in detail, or to even recognise the basic elements that construct it. If we think of the ‘superdiversity’ with respect to Roland Barthes’ definition of ‘myth’, we can see a correlation. There is a danger of diversity turning into myth as it becomes a naturalised and accepted ideological truth-concept without necessarily referring to a particular issue or phenomenon that actually exists in the life world, at least in the sense that a critical value would be yielded in analysing it. The concept’s reference to social reality has been blurred within the discourses of creative economy, industries and happiness economy, which are based in great part on striving for national, local, organisational or private economic success. If there is no clear agreement on what diversity refers to and if it becomes a universal meta-concept for all good cultural action and state of affairs,
it is easy for the creative industries and market actors to instrumentalise cultural features, arts and phenomena for their purposes. Diversity is then judged by its market use and value. Good diversity creates profits and employment, increases GDP and lowers policy expenses. For a critical observer it seems that the ‘superdiversity’ has already become a special but very effective kind of image polishing and branding tool for the companies, states, and for regional and municipal institutions. In that sense it is inessential whether diversity is taken to mean poor people living in ghettos or migrant workers in barracks, so long as it can be used in a rhetorically beneficial way.

In international cultural policy the success of superdiversity relates directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, to the spread of the joy of capitalism worldwide, even among the most ‘peripheral’, non-industrialised and non-marketised societies and communities; i.e. those which still represent the most authentic forms of cultural diversity in the age of globalisation. One might even interpret that in the international context this superdiversity can re-enable colonialism and challenge sustainable cultural development, because it opens up a door for marketisation of the cultural expressions and, thus, economic – and most probably also cultural – homogenisation.

To my mind there is a real risk of implosion for the concept in ‘superdiversity’ discourse. When it refers to everything, it can become an empty signifier, to borrow terminology from Claude Lévi-Strauss. What should researchers and policymakers then do to avoid inciting this implosion? First of all, it is important to define diversity within the context of its use. My intention, here, is not in any way to claim that it should not be used when talking about kinds of diversities other than ethnocultural or social differences, but to suggest that it is important to be clear what the concept case-specifically stands for. Diversity is found in all spheres of cultural life and activities, but should one conceptualise all kinds of variation with the same concept as used to describe and observe ethnocultural differences or social differences within cultural democracy discourses? Or is it better to use the concepts and conceptualisations of a given social and cultural context instead of using universal metaconcepts, transcendent for the studied life-world? The observer or the actor would then use terms emerging from the actors and the field themselves. This principle – which is one of the key guidelines of Bruno Latour’s and Michel Callon’s Actor Network Theory and many action researches – would, for example, better guarantee the specific conceptual understanding of the cultural and other heterogeneity in question and reveal what exactly constructs the diversity in a particular case.

Secondly, and this thought is mainly addressed to researchers, we have to reconsider our theoretical frameworks and approaches when studying diversity. To my mind, the old divisions of intrinsic, market-oriented and instrumental understanding and use of culture are not completely valid in the context of diversity. We need – and this comes very close to what I just said – delicate analysis of the diversity rhetoric, concept and practices, because its use and treatment is mixed in relation to these basic spheres of cultural behaviour. Typical examples of the mix are UNESCO and European Commission programmes and documents, in which diversity indicates different ethno-cultural or national groups, social groupings and strata, and commodities of creative industries. If we take cultural diversity as being universal and granted, we cannot really follow how the discourses and practices of these spheres reshape it and how the intrinsicness, market orientation or instrumentality of diversity are actually products or by-products of different discursive and power practices. Thus, we need concepts and approaches, which allow us to analyse how the diversity is used in different occasions and by different subjects, but also must be prepared to observe their contextual interlinkedness in aiming at particular goals. We need also historical studies of the notion: how has it emerged from and been disseminated throughout different epochs and societal contexts, and to which systems of thoughts and policy practices does it relate?
Thirdly, I suggest that we get back to basics, so to speak. By this I mean a critical analysis of the practices and knowledge formations that effect differences with negative impacts – theoretic or concrete – on objectified individuals, groups and ways of action. While it is certainly important to study and introduce positive sides and best practices, it is also essential to analyse who and which forms of creativity are marginalised or left out, i.e. to study the hegemonies, hierarchies and domination within diversities.