Debates over Cultural Phenomena

On December 10th, 2025, the Geography seminar course of the 11th grade at Walther-Rathenau-Gymnasium in Berlin, focusing on the central themes of home, integration, and inclusion, visited the nearby “Forum Transregionale Studien” for a workshop entitled “Debates over Cultural Phenomena.” The workshop was organized and led by the Ukrainian sociologists Viktoryia Sereda and Lidia Kuzemska. Throughout the day, we engaged in discussions, group work, and comparative policy analysis to better understand the complexities of multicultural societies and the challenges they are facing today.

We came to the forum because of the subject of “home”. What is a “home”? What can you truly call your “home”? We were greeted with a warm and welcoming buffet, inspired by the quote “ The way to a person‘s heart is through their stomach”, signalising that we could happily start our workshop.
Firstly, we were given historical input by the Ukrainian sociologist Victoria Serena. She answered the questions : What is multiculturalism? What threatens today’s multicultural society? Having discussed the subtleties we moved over to group projects. Each group chose one person, a single mother, a young man, a person with a disability etc. , and had to come up with ideas how they could be successfully integrated into our society. This task provided a great opportunity to reflect on the unique
needs of each individual. This exercise made us realize how complex integration truly is. It is not just about adapting to a new country, but about recognizing individual stories, struggles, and strengths. We began to understand that integration requires empathy as much as political structures.
After discussing and recollecting our thoughts, a small break followed.
The next step was to find out about the 8 policy areas of integration. We checked how other countries, in comparison to Germany, are economically, financially, and socially developed. Therefore, we were handed out web charts. With the help of the policy indicators, we were able to conclude a country’s candor towards newcomers. Germany, upon 56 other countries, had its strongest points in democracy and political participation, as well as anti- discrimination policies and access to nationality. But this result also made us reflect critically on our own country. While it was encouraging to see Germany performing well in certain areas, we also asked ourselves where improvements are still needed and how policies translate into everyday realities for migrants and minorities. This gave us time to reflect on the idea that protecting a multicultural society requires us to reconsider and overcome our outdated stereotypes and policies. It means being open to change and embracing people from different backgrounds.

After the workshop, these questions continued to resonate with us. The concepts we discussed were no longer abstract theories from a textbook but felt connected to real people and real experiences. People, as human beings, are social creatures shaped by their culture. So culture plays an important role in everyone’s life. In a multicultural society, we have to accept the cultures and ethnicities of different minority groups and acknowledge them within the dominant culture. In Germany, we do have such an experience. We use the word “Multikulti”. Cultural diversity is important. It enriches society and offers alternatives. But sometimes the dominant culture, which is strongly represented in the society due to its economic development and history, might pose a threat to this diversity.

Multiculturalism should be an integral part of a developed society. All ethnic groups should have the right to play their own music, keep up their traditions, speak their language, and enjoy their cuisine. It is a way to bring everyone together, according to the so, called “salad bowl” principle. However, at present, we observe a retreat from multicultural policy due to some economic factors, malfunctioning of integration, and unpredictable political development. The point is to educate tolerance towards one another and to understand its value. We must promote cultural plurality, as it is the only way to achieve a peaceful and friendly society, where people might develop a sense of belonging while maintaining their own identity. Thus, we might enrich our social life, support human rights, and develop mutual respect.

A different phenomenon is acculturation, which describes the process of change that occurs when two cultures blend together. It involves the cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting traits from another culture. Walk the streets of nearly every major world city—

whether New York, Paris, or Bangkok—and you will come across people from an astonishing variety of cultures. In today's world, human migration is the norm, whether it be migrants fleeing from conflicts, immigrants hoping for a brighter future, or simply travelers seeking experiences. Spending time in a foreign culture means coming into contact with values, attitudes, norms, and expectations which may be very different from your own.

Acculturation has a closely related term, assimilation, though the two phenomena differ. Although both refer to changes due to contact between different cultures, there are notable differences. Contrary to acculturation, assimilation refers to the process through which individuals and groups of different cultures acquire the basic habits, attitudes, and modes of life of an embracing culture. One group simply mixes itself into another.

Another social phenomenon closely connected to cultural and societal processes is marginalization. Marginalization is the act of treating someone or a group as if they are not important, making them less able to access basic services or opportunities. This is also called social marginalization or social exclusion. It can happen in areas like schools, healthcare, and employment, but also through everyday inequalities, such as living in a neighborhood without safe roads, public transit, or buildings equipped for disabilities. People who are marginalized often feel they don't belong to any group, are not recognized between groups, and are "pushed to the margin".

Social marginalization occurs when people don't have the same social opportunities as others. They may be unable to join clubs, access certain services, or live in socially integrated communities. This often affects ethnic minority groups and can last across generations. Economic marginalization happens when people cannot equally contribute to or benefit from the economy. They may struggle to get good jobs, attend schools for skill development, earn enough to live decently, or access healthcare when needed. Political marginalization exists when some groups are excluded from democratic decision-making. Without a seat at the table, their voices are ignored, and politicians focus on the majority. These types of marginalization are often interconnected. Social marginalization often leads to economic and political marginalization, creating barriers that are difficult to overcome individually. For example, education requirements for jobs can reinforce marginalization across multiple areas of life.

Closely related to marginalization is stigmatization. Stigma refers to a socially constructed attribute or mark that signifies disgrace and devaluation, through which an individual is perceived as possessing shameful or undesirable characteristics associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or identity. The term stigma originates from Latin, meaning "burn" or "mark," and denotes a characteristic that distinguishes a person from others. Stigmatization describes the social process through which individuals are labeled and associated with negative stereotypes on the basis of such characteristics, often resulting in prejudice, social exclusion, and discrimination, ultimately leading to the devaluation of those affected.

Stigmatization can manifest in different forms, including physical stigma, stigma related to individual shortcomings, and tribal stigma. Beyond interpersonal interactions, stigmatizing attitudes may also be embedded in social structures, norms, and institutional rules. At a societal and institutional level, stigma can restrict the well-being of affected individuals, for example, through disadvantages in legislation, unequal resource allocation, or limited access to health care. In some cases, individuals internalize these negative societal attitudes, a phenomenon referred to as self-stigmatization, in which people accept and adopt prejudices directed toward them. Stigmatization is particularly evident in health-related contexts. It exists when people with particular diseases are viewed as being unworthy of social investment.

In short, marginalization pushes people to the edge of society, limiting their access to social, economic, and political opportunities, while stigmatization attaches negative labels and stereotypes to individuals, leading to prejudice, social exclusion, and discrimination.

By understanding the distinct dynamics of multiculturalism, acculturation, assimilation, marginalization, and stigmatization, societies can better promote tolerance, inclusion, and mutual respect. Only then can cultural diversity truly enrich social life and support the development of a fair, peaceful, and respectful community. Looking back, the workshop showed us how valuable it

can be to discuss social and cultural issues directly with researchers and experts. Engaging with scientists outside the traditional classroom setting gave us new perspectives and encouraged us to think more critically about our own role in society. Initiatives like this, perhaps even within school clubs or future seminars, could help foster open dialogue and deeper understanding among young people. Ultimately, the experience reminded us that shaping an inclusive society begins with informed discussion and personal reflection.

Laura, Lisa, Sofie