

STEVEN VERTOVEC

“Diversity” and the Social Imaginary

Abstract

“Diversity” is the focus of a wide-ranging corpus of normative discourses, institutional structures, policies and practices in business, public sector agencies, the military, universities and professions. Here, a brief account of the rise and diffusion of the term is provided. It now addresses a wide variety of social differences, while at least six distinct facets or goals of diversity policy can be discerned. Ambiguity, multivocality and banality are key characteristics of diversity discourse, but these function to strengthen, rather than weaken, the spread and acceptance of the notion. In many settings the commitment to diversity is mainstreamed, expected, and even taken-for-granted. Diversity discourse is related to ongoing processes of social diversification, but its diffusion is not driven by these processes. Overall, despite its many imprecisions, the impacts of the diversity corpus entail a transformation, or at least refinement, of the social imaginary.

Keywords: Diversity; Difference; Discourse; Policy; Management; Social imaginary.

WE ARE LIVING IN THE AGE OF DIVERSITY. While it can be argued whether or not the present is actually characterized by more social difference than earlier periods, one thing is for sure: the current period is pervaded with *discourses about diversity*. Such discourses are especially to be found in abundant policies, programmes, campaigns and strategies in state agencies, universities, NGOs and private businesses across Western societies (and increasingly in non-Western and developing countries). Indeed, some observers have detected a widespread “diversity turn” in governance and management. Despite a wide variance of meanings and usages, the concept of diversity has been described as providing a new “normative meta-narrative” (Isar 2006) for public understanding.

How did this state of affairs arise, what is the provenance and content of diversity discourses, and what – if any – are their broader impacts? One approach to answering these questions is to focus on the rise of social movements among people who feel oppression based on group belonging. This would be a legitimate undertaking since:

287

Steven VERTOVEC, Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen [vertovec@mmg.mpg.de].

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The emergence on the political stage of local communities, indigenous peoples, deprived or vulnerable groups and those excluded on grounds of ethnic origin, social affiliation, age or gender, has led to the discovery, within societies, of new forms of diversity. The political establishment has in this way found itself challenged (UNESCO 2009, p. 4).

Indeed, as is evident in a recent UNESCO *World Report* (2009), UNESCO itself appears to be one such establishment that, due to the growing prominence of such movements, has undergone a profound shift in the ways it addresses difference and diversity (see Vertovec 2011). There is no doubt that the development of diversity discourse is deeply influenced by the “minority rights revolution” (Skrentny 2002) and the rise of so-called identity politics (see, for instance, Bernstein 2005). Relatedly, Will Kymlicka (2007) describes how there has been an internationalization or global diffusion of multiculturalism, which he defines broadly as political measures, laws and legal norms surrounding minority rights. Around the world, political and legal instruments have arisen in response to local social movements, among which, too, there has been a global diffusion of idioms, strategies and activities (e.g., Della Porta *et al.* 2009). But it is not identity politics, minority rights nor multiculturalism that I have in mind by diversity discourse; rather, I am referring to public and corporate language, activities and institutional structures that specifically invoke the notion “diversity”.

In this article I will use “diversity” to denote a wide-ranging corpus of normative discourses, institutional structures, policies and practices that specifically cite some concept of diversity. My lines of argument are that these discourses, policies and practices: have arisen and been developed by a confluence of factors; include definitions of diverse subjects that are ambiguous and ever-shifting; are directed toward rather differing facets, goals or orientations; have become institutionally mainstreamed to the point of banality, predictability and cliché; are related to, but not necessarily driven by, modes of social diversification; and, despite vagueness, have cumulative social impacts that are transforming the social imaginary.

The rise of “diversity”

There is no clear, straight-line story of the emergence of “diversity” discourse, policies and practices. This is mainly because, over the last few decades, the factors influencing the development of “diversity”

have been many, the goals of “diversity” have been multiple, and the notions of social difference which comprise the focus of “diversity” have been several. Still, despite a variety of institutional phenomena, trends and orientations, it is sensible to talk of a “diversity” corpus – not least because various modalities commonly refer to something deemed “diversity”, but also because they do share common concerns with accommodating social differences.

The roots of “diversity” lie in the United States. The civil rights movement and civil rights legislation of the 1960s was instrumental in establishing, in public discourse as well as in government policy, the framing notion of disadvantaged minorities. Foremost attention was given to Black Americans with a view to opening up avenues for fair treatment, legal protection, equal opportunity and redress stemming from historical harms of racist discrimination. Affirmative Action (often referred to in the literature as AA) was initiated as a key institutional instrument for attempting a course of action to promote equal opportunities, fight discrimination and help minorities gain better positions in employment and education. Government agencies were central arbiters of AA, but other public sector agencies and businesses eventually adopted some form of AA. Beyond Blacks, other groups could be considered for AA and concomitant anti-discrimination measures if they could convince authorities of their “analogy with Blacks” in terms of oppression and victimhood (see Skrentny 2002). Latinos, American Indians and Asian Americans were eventually deemed officially analogous in this way. This was a harder task for women’s advocates, but by 1968 they had won an analogous status for women too. By 1973, disabled people were deemed analogous with Blacks and added to official anti-discrimination lists. Other self-organized groups lobbied but, at this time, failed in their quest to be considered analogous with Blacks and covered by anti-discrimination policies: namely “White ethnics” (southern and eastern Europeans) and homosexuals (*ibid.*). In these ways a broad range of subjects – grounded in comparison with, but not necessarily defined by, race – were addressed by a single set of discourses, policies and institutional practices. These developments initiated an understanding of what we might call the equivalence of differences – Blacks as analogous to women as analogous to the disabled, and so on – an understanding found in many subsequent ideas surrounding “diversity”.

Underpinning much of the inherent thinking surrounding AA was the notion of “statistical proportionality” (Prewitt 2002). The premise was that through counting members of designated groups *vis-à-vis*

jobs, incomes, universities, contracts, elected offices, housing, educational attainment, health outcomes and such, discrimination in these sectors would be evident if the number of a given group fell below what could be expected given the group's proportional size in the overall population. This logic continues in various ways within "diversity", too.

During the 1980s in the United States, the Reagan administration curtailed the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and brought about the virtual demise of government AA and equal opportunities frameworks. In response, Erin Kelly and Frank Dobbin (1998) observe that, within the corporate sector, AA specialists who had been embedded in human resources departments reinvented themselves as "diversity management". This was in order to ensure by another name the continuance of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination measures (to ensure proportional numbers in recruitment and promotion) for a variety of groups – women and Blacks foremost. The newly-deemed diversity managers promoted practices focused on creating, maintaining and managing diversity in the workforce and ensuring AA-type compliance.

Another influence for the development of "diversity" came with a 1987 report, commissioned by Reagan's Department of Labor and entitled *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the Twenty-First Century* (Johnston and Packer 1987). The report forecasted fundamental demographic shifts, namely that the near future would see fewer Whites and more ethnic minorities in America. Many businesses realized they were not prepared for such a future in which: minorities would comprise a large part of the labor market (and, following "statistical proportionality", should be represented in a firm's workforce); minorities would contribute more to the economy overall, including greater consumer power; minority employees could help companies reach a growing population of minority consumers; and, in light of the ongoing globalization of markets, minority employees could help deal with overseas business partners. While AA policies had been premised on the correction of past injustices, a new awareness of demographic shifts re-oriented "diversity management" to focus on the future.

Kelly and Dobbin (1998) suggest that business goals helped distinguish "diversity" from AA. And it is particularly in the corporate sector that, since the 1990s, we have witnessed the enormous rise, elaboration and diffusion of diversity management – a body of activity that one observer calls the "diversity machine" (Lynch 1997). Diversity management quickly became *de rigueur* in the corporate sector. For instance, by the early 1990s, 70 % of Fortune 500 companies had

diversity management represented in training, explicitly named staff positions and/or in their mission statements (Kelly and Dobbin 1998, p. 980).

Besides reshaping companies and institutions through a new demographic awareness, anti-discrimination continued to be a concern. This was particularly revitalized through the effects of a 1996 racial discrimination lawsuit against Texaco Inc., in which the company was forced to pay out \$176 million – the largest such settlement ever – including \$115 million in damages to 1,400 black employees and \$35 million to develop company-wide “diversity training” programmes and “diversity performance” objectives within management (*New York Times*, November 16, 1996). As one commentator wryly notes, this case greatly “heightened awareness” throughout the corporate sector in America (Wrench 2007, p. 18).

Still following a logic of “statistical proportionality”, the early focus of “diversity” in the corporate sector remained on numbers – especially the visible number of Blacks, women and other minorities among company employees. Low numbers might imply discrimination, so companies pursued “diversity” to avoid this perception. As “diversity” policy developed, focus expanded from mere recruitment to matters surrounding minorities and their contractual terms, promotion and career advancement, termination, dispute resolution, and other forms of accountability – all with anti-discrimination as the major concern.

Eventually, however, by the 1990s the “business case for diversity” was also increasingly promoted by consultants. Here the shift entails “viewing difference not as a source of deficiency but of productive relationships” (Blackmore 2006, p. 183), amounting to a positive approach toward “diversity”, “rather than the negative one of simply avoiding transgressions of anti-discrimination laws” (Wrench 2007, p. 3). In the “business case for diversity”, the assumption is that a diverse workforce (definitions of which vary widely; see below) greatly enhances the creativity, productivity and competitiveness of a company (see Herring 2009). The arguments, among others, are that a diverse staff: can be more innovative, can spot market opportunities better, can understand customers better, and can influence customer perceptions of the company in progressive ways.

Now, at least for the larger corporations, John Wrench (2007, p. 22) observes that, “it seems that in the US a diversity management policy is a relatively normal and uncontroversial business practice”. Beyond businesses, “diversity” policies are also prevalent in key institutions such as the military and public sector, universities and professions (see Waters

and Vang 2007). It is not surprising that “diversity” began and developed in the US, Wrench (2007) claims, given its substantial ethnic minority population, history of Civil Rights and strong anti-discrimination legislation, contract compliance and affirmative action, greater readiness to resort to courts, and greater financial penalties for transgressions.

With origins in the US, we can now observe the diffusion of “diversity” worldwide. Of course, as described by Kymlicka (2007), there have been many independent, and interdependent, processes accounting for the internationalization of minority rights and minority protection. Principles of non-discrimination and minority protection have comprised core features of numerous international statements and agreements over the decades, from the United Nations charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity to the various conventions of the Council of Europe and European Commission.

Despite declarations of one kind or another, anti-discrimination actually had relatively little legal bite in Europe until the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam combatting discrimination across a spectrum of categories including race/ethnicity, religion, handicap, age and sexual orientation. Thereafter the 2000 EU Directive on Race Equality prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity in key areas such as housing, employment and education while the 2000 EU Employment Equality Directive prohibits all forms of discrimination in employment. The 15 old EU member-states had to comply with these Directives by 2003, the 10 new EU member-states by 2004: compliance meant that each member-state had to find its own way to meet the Directives within its respective legal framework. The result is, at the member-state level, “great variation in the means and prerogatives” (Guiraudon 2009, p. 537) and, “at the EU level, there is no common definition of positive action or clear guidelines on means and goals” (*ibid.*, p. 538). EU countries have rolled out a range of government agencies, policies and programmes aimed at anti-discrimination and – following the EU itself – packaged as promoting “diversity” (see for instance the EU’s “For Diversity/Against Discrimination” campaign; www.stop-discrimination.info).

Especially following these measures, “diversity” is now established in much of the state sector throughout Europe. “Diversity mainstreaming” has emerged as a key policy idea throughout member-states of the European Union (Steuerwald and Ünsal 2012), in which it is advocated that “diversity” considerations should be realized at all levels and positions in the public sector. For example in the UK (which has a history of

stronger anti-discrimination and multicultural measures than most other European countries), since 2004 across the British civil service there has been a Diversity Champions’ Network which promotes best practices among government departments alongside a Diversity Practitioners’ Network and Diversity Delivery Board. Each ministry’s Permanent Secretary is now personally responsible for ensuring that his or her department delivers fully on its “diversity” commitments. Within the Department of Education and Skills alone, “There are, indeed, a plethora of diversity teams, diversity toolkits, workforce diversity initiatives, diversity awareness training programmes, and diversity deliver plans, summed up in a commitment to mainstream diversity and equality into all the Department’s programmes” (Aspinall 2009, p. 1420). In British government documents and policy, moreover, “The language of ‘diversity’ has largely replaced and substantially outpaced that of ‘multiculturalism’” (*ibid.*, p. 1420; cf. Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).

Across the EU we see the rise of “diversity” policies at all levels of government and administration. Core policy documents aimed at immigrant integration and social cohesion are replete with messages for ensuring and promoting “diversity” (see, for example, Home Office 2005, European Commission 2007, Bundesregierung 2007). Such policies are implemented in various areas of city administration, including municipal staffing and training, service provision, public relations and image management (Bosswick *et al.* 2007). In the *Orte der Vielfalt* (“places of diversity”) initiative, 159 German municipal authorities locally promote anti-discrimination measures and organize tolerance-building activities. Europe-wide, cities also network and communicate for benchmarking and sharing best practices in public sector “diversity” policy (see, for instance, CLIP 2008, Eurocities 2010).

The corporate sphere has been significant for the internationalization of “diversity” (see Nishii and Özbilgin 2007). For instance, it has been demonstrated that the growth of diversity management in Germany owes much to the pace-setting role of US company subsidiaries based in that country (Süß and Kleiner 2007). Throughout the 1990s “American-owned companies in the EU became exposed to diversity management ideas from the parent company, and some European managers and consultants came back from visits to America and Canada enthused with the new idea to spread the word back home” (Wrench 2007, p. 27).

The ubiquity of “diversity” in the European corporate sector is evident in the European Charters for Diversity (see www.diversity-charter.com). Drawing on a French Diversity Charter of 2004, these are statements which companies (and some public sector employers) sign to signal

their efforts to promote “diversity” and combat discrimination. According to the European Commission, which promotes the linking of national diversity charters,

Diversity charters are among the latest in a series of voluntary diversity initiatives aimed at encouraging companies to implement and develop diversity policies.

A diversity charter consists of a short document voluntarily signed by a company or a public institution. It outlines the measures it will undertake to promote diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace, regardless of race or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability and religion.

The diversity policies developed within companies adhering to a diversity charter recognise, understand and value people’s similarities and differences as representing huge potential sources of innovation, problem-solving, customer focus, etc. (http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/diversity/diversity-charters/index_en.htm).

The German *Charta der Vielfalt* includes some 1,250 signatory companies while the French *Charte de la diversité* includes nearly 3,000.

How-to textbooks for “diversity” management and practice have proliferated greatly over the past twenty years. The American Institute for Managing Diversity provides an annotated bibliography of over 75 books in English on diversity management (www.aimd.org), while the International Society for Diversity Management list a further 37 books in German. In addition to the rise of diversity management publication as an industry in itself, “diversity” has also emerged as a major field for education and teacher-oriented books (with titles such as *Cultural Diversity and Education* (2005), *Educating Teachers for Diversity* (2003), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (2007), *Diversity in Early Care and Education* (2007), and *Diversity Awareness for K-6 Teachers* (2011)). Indeed a range of professions addressed the topic in publications since the early 2000s, as demonstrated by book titles such as *Cultivating Diversity in Fundraising* (2001), *Intentional Diversity: Creating Cross-Cultural Relationships in Your Church* (2002), *Diversity in Counseling* (2003), *Cultural Diversity: A Primer for the Human Services* (2006), *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity* (2007), *Diversity, Oppression, Change: Culturally Grounded Social Work* (2008), *Diversity and the Recreation Profession* (2008), *Aging and Diversity* (2008), and *Cultural Diversity in Health and Illness* (2008). Beyond these, books concentrating separately on gender, sexuality, race and disability have increasingly been couched in terms of “diversity”.

“Diversity” discourse arose and developed for a range of reasons. From its roots in AA and the goal of redressing historical disadvantages

and patterns of discrimination, it was adopted to avoid the risk of discrimination lawsuits, through the desire to meet changing demography, and as a strategy to reap benefits for an organization. In these ways “diversity” has been considered as a means to an end: namely, enhanced organizational success (Lorbiecki and Jack 2000) – or at least the avoidance of conflicts, lawsuits or bad press. In any case, “diversity” has moved into multiple domains. Before the turn of the millennium, Frederick Lynch (1997, p. 33) was critical of the fact that “the diversity machine” “has spread from university curricula, to news and information services, jury selection, legislative redistricting, mortgage lending, and personnel policies in public and private sector employment”. The concept has taken on more meanings, addressed more spheres of concern, and been adopted as a driver of change. It has also, often confusingly, been applied to more and broader constituencies.

What’s the “difference”?

The development of the “diversity” corpus has, in recent times, entailed a swing from ascribed, group-based attributes to self-attributed, individual characteristics. As presented in diversity management textbooks (see Lituin 1997, Lorbiecki and Jack 2000), the types of “difference” addressed by “diversity” discourse, policies and practices often distinguish between dimensions of difference that are considered either “fixed” (inborn or immutable: age, ethnicity, gender, race, physical abilities, sexual orientation) or “fluid” (“can be changed”: education, religious belief, work experience, etc.). Closer to the origins in AA, some “diversity” agendas focus on race and gender, or solely on the range of what are considered to be “fixed” characteristics; others are often additionally oriented toward a much wider set of presumed differences, “fixed” and “fluid”.

The breadth of differences covered by diversity discourse is apparent through an examination of mission statements, policies, websites and training materials among corporate, public institutions (e.g. health services), state agencies, non-governmental organizations and universities in the US, the UK and Germany. Across such a set of sources, which all explicitly invoke (or in their own respective terms: celebrate, value, foster, acknowledge, understand, appreciate, include, utilize, represent, negotiate, respect) diversity, the categories of difference include: race, gender, ethnicity, culture, social class, religious

beliefs, sexual orientations, mental ability, physical ability, psychological ability, veteran or military status, marital status, American state of residence, nationality, perspectives, insights, backgrounds, experiences, age, education level, cultural and personal perspectives, viewpoints, opinions. Such breadth is exemplified by the US Navy, whose Office of Diversity and Inclusion states that “Diversity is all the different characteristics and attributes of individual sailors and civilians that enhance the mission readiness of the Navy” and that the service envisions “A Navy that harnesses the team-work and imagination of a technically proficient workforce that is diverse in experience, background and ideas” (www.public.navy.mil). Similarly, the Ford Motor Company states that:

Diversity in the workplace includes all differences that define each of us as unique individuals. Differences such as culture, ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, experiences, opinions and beliefs are just some of the distinctions we each bring to the workplace. By understanding, respecting and valuing these differences, we can capitalize on the benefits that diversity brings to the Company (*in* Wrench 2007, p. 9).

In urban planning and city promotional material, the breadth of meaning suggests “conceptual chaos” (Lees 2003) as “diversity” refers not just to characteristics of people, but also to architecture, products, lifestyles, land uses, job opportunities, amenities, services, and arts. Despite such broad scope, in the US “diversity” is nevertheless strongly associated in people’s minds first and foremost with race (Bell and Hartmann 2007). In Europe it is mainly associated with cultural differences arising from migration (Lentin and Titley 2008). In both contexts, gender remains highly associated with the term, too. However, in various studies it is clear that many people are still not quite sure who is addressed by “diversity” (*cf.* Ahmed 2007, 2012). Such uncertainty is evident with regard to the purpose of “diversity” as well.

Facets of “diversity”

Davina Cooper (2004, p. 5) has written of how diversity encapsulates a “broad, discursive space”; Thomas Faist (2009, p. 173) has noted how “diversity as a concept and a set of – not necessarily coherent – policies, programmes and routines straddles many worlds”; and Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley (2008, p. 14) have described “diversity” as an “ambiguous transnational signifier”. The corpus of “diversity” seems marked by its elusive multivalence (speaking or having meanings to

many audiences), if not outright vagueness. This is not only because of uncertainty with regard to its subjects, but also with regard to its purpose. What is “diversity” – that loose set of discourses, policies and practices – actually for? The answers to this question are framed in various ways.

The multiple purposes of different “diversity” initiatives roughly lie between anti-discrimination and positive acceptance. Moreover, anti-discrimination measures assumed under “diversity” are mainly intended to benefit “the diverse” (assumed minorities, either self- or other ascribed); positive acceptance measures are often promoted to benefit the organizations in which “the diverse” are found. This becomes apparent when considering numerous facets of “diversity” which straddle the poles of anti-discrimination and positive acceptance.

The metaphor of “facet” is adopted to suggest, like a jewel, a common object with numerous aspects or surfaces pointing in slightly different directions. Below I outline six facets of “diversity” discourses, policies and practices. These are not to suggest that the goals are mutually exclusive: actual “diversity” programmes, mission statements, campaigns and guidelines within institutions often make allusion to more than one of these. This fact, of course, adds to the ambiguity and multivalence of “diversity”. The first two facets are directly related to sides within a debate in political philosophy, notably among Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young and Axel Honneth (see for instance Taylor 1992, Young 1997, Fraser and Honneth 2000). The other four are directly related to practical measures in public services, business and management.

Redistribution

This facet includes policies intended to redress historical discrimination against groups, especially “economic harm”. Here, the purpose of “diversity” is largely akin to Affirmative Action, with goals towards helping minorities gain better access to scarce economic and societal goods – especially jobs, equitable income, housing and education.

Recognition

“Diversity” policies for recognition are also directed toward a kind of historical redress, but here with respect to “cultural harms”. Measures under this heading seek to foster dignity and esteem among

minorities, promote positive images, and facilitate their fuller participation in social interaction and political processes through renegotiating their “terms of incorporation into the state” (Eisenberg and Kymlicka 2011).

Representation

This facet of “diversity” can be characterized as a politics of presence. Here the goal is to create an institution – a company workforce, teaching faculty, student body, health service, civil service, military, police, or chamber of political representatives – that looks like the population it serves. This may include the use of monitoring or quotas. It is a facet still based on the logic of “statistical proportionality” (Prewitt 2002).

Provision

Public services today often employ this facet of “diversity”. It entails identifying, developing skills around, sensitizing staff to, and responding adequately to the specific requirements of customers with reference to their myriad group and individual differences (variously and broadly defined). In other words, the overall objective is “to design services around the different needs of the diverse citizens who make up modern society” (NAO 2004). These policies and initiatives are designated by practitioners as “needs-led diversity” (Johns 2004).

Competition

Often known as the “business case for diversity”, this facet takes in strategies to improve a company’s marketing and, ultimately, market share (see Herring 2009). Promotion of “diversity” and a diverse workforce is aimed at achieving a better understanding of customers, spot market opportunities, thereby increasing competitiveness, improving product quality, appealing to a wider consumer base and increasing sales. It is also sometimes intended to tap globalization by utilizing the linguistic skills or ethnic affiliation of staff to win contracts, gain access to sourcing and penetrate markets overseas. The promotion of “diversity” in a company’s public relations is also meant to influence customer perceptions by improving its image (or at least deflecting image damage by not having a visible “diversity” commitment). It is also, at the same time, a measure to avoid grievances and discrimination lawsuits.

Organization

“Diversity” management policies, training programmes, structures and staff positions within corporations or other institutions serve the purpose of developing and delivering many of the facets listed above. Additionally, they are undertaken with the aim of maximizing the performance of teams or workforces. The positively charged rhetoric surrounding this facet of “diversity” includes terms such as: leveraging the benefits, unleashing talent, meeting challenges, working to full potential, achieving objectives, creating a richer work environment, problem solving – often paired with adjectives such as rewarding, successful, productive, creative, innovative, enabling, competitive, flexible. The premise, drawing from a large body of management and human relations materials, is that more diverse teams outperform less diverse ones (*e.g.*, Page 2007).

Diversity measures within a single organization might entail a combination of these facets. For instance, Alexandra Kalev and her colleagues (2006) discern three key types of corporate diversity initiatives:

1. Efforts to moderate managerial bias through diversity training, such as making managers aware of their stereotypes and biases (which one could consider aspects of “recognition”).
2. Efforts to attack social isolation (an aspect of “organization”) and foster promotion (“redistribution” and “recognition”) through mentoring alongside networking through regular lunches, meetings, etc. (“organization”).
3. Efforts to establish responsibility for diversity through affirmative action plans (redistribution), diversity staff positions (“recognition” and “representation”) and committees to monitor development (“provision”). In these ways, the facets seem mutually reinforcing, but not all enterprises pursue a combination of measures.

These various facets, and their mixing, have been internationally diffused through corporations and their subsidiaries, professional associations and networks, conferences, trade journals, websites, and various forms of media. As with any process of diffusion, they have manifested with locally contextualized meanings.

For some practitioners, employees and members of the public, however, the multiple purposes of “diversity” seem to pull in several directions. This is reflected in the fact that many people are not quite sure what it is all for (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Or who it is for. As raised earlier, is “diversity” for “the diverse” (minorities), in order to

provide them with more social and economic standing and to make them feel better? “Redistribution”, “recognition” and “representation” seem to be aimed at this purpose. Or are “diversity” measures for “the non-diverse” (majority), in order to change their habits of perception? “Provision”, “competition” and “organization” seem aimed at this audience. Or is it for both? Most “diversity” practitioners and managers would be likely to answer this latter question in the affirmative, but specific programmes are usually targeted to one or the other presumed constituency.

“Diversity” is not without its critics. From academics to social movement and community organizers, a substantial number of negative assessments of “diversity” policies and programmes have been made. Among the foremost critical appraisals of the “diversity” corpus, the following are among the most widespread or hard-hitting. In these, “diversity” is considered in a negative way because:

- it is instrumentalist, conceiving that some people comprise “the diverse” who are to be managed by someone else;
- it reinforces normativity, with the White, male, able, sexually straight person as the model from which others are different;
- it is patronizing, claiming to function for the benefit of some purportedly downtrodden group;
- it amounts to social engineering, attempting to artificially create a (normatively conceived) perfect team, company or society;
- it equalizes differences by assuming that, in terms of experiences of discrimination (and, following this rationale, measures for anti-discrimination), race is like gender is like disability, and so on;
- it dissipates politics (especially of group-based movements), carrying a divide-and-rule logic to extremes of individuals and their innumerable attributes;
- it shifts attention from inequality, placing emphasis on esteem and “feel-good” measures rather than a genuine improvement of structural conditions;
- it is just a “formality” or façade for companies or other institutions to give the appearance that they are doing something positive for minorities;
- it is easily cut-off from other programmes within a company or public institution – that is, it is specifically for the minorities rather than being for all;
- it amounts to little more than “counting people who are different”, which some – especially those deemed “different” – might find offensive.

Each of these critiques could be considered “true” in its own right – but it would depend on which facet of “diversity” is being criticized. The point is that many “diversity” policies and programmes incorporate a number of facets to which only some of the critiques are apt. The critiques themselves are scattered across variegated programmes and meanings of “diversity”. None of these critiques has dealt much of a blow to the diffusion and acceptance and endorsement of “diversity” writ large.

Ambiguity, multivalency, banality

There is no single set of definitions, reference groups or goals of “diversity”. Yet rather than being a drawback, this has perhaps added to the rapid diffusion, popularity and strength of the corpus “diversity”. It is a term for everyone, it seems. “Like motherhood and apple pie”, Loretta Lees (2003, p. 622) suggests, “diversity is difficult to disagree with.”

Joyce Bell and Douglas Hartmann (2007) conducted a broad set of interviews on the structure and function of “diversity in everyday discourse” in contemporary America. They found that, although many Americans consider “diversity” “mainly as a euphemism or ‘buzz word’ for talking about race” (*ibid.*, p. 899), a majority conveyed confusion about what the term actually means. This was evident in people’s blurred distinctions when referring to “diversity” and its open-ended orientation both to individual characteristics and group boundaries, abstract universals and concrete measures. Nevertheless a large share of the interviewed population accepts “diversity” – whatever its intended meaning – as “more of a social project or initiative, a moral imperative dictating both the recognition and acceptance of differences in the modern world” (*ibid.*).

Similar findings are reported by Gabriella Modan (2008), who examined local uses of the term in a Washington DC, neighbourhood. Modan believes the term “diversity” has undergone a “semantic bleaching”, through which it has been emptied of content. “In the bleaching of ‘diversity’ in local discourse,” she says (*ibid.*, p. 210) “the word is used to promote some unspecified social good.” Lentin and Titley (2008, p. 22) likewise discern “diversity’s elasticity and somewhat abstract, aspirational quality”. In the UK, Sara Ahmed (2007) also observes how public sector practitioners (in her case, in universities)

define diversity in many different, conflicting or indefinite ways. Nevertheless, she notes the “appealing” nature of “diversity”, and describes how the term “secures rather than threatens” (*ibid.*, p. 238).

Enabled by its multivalency and optimistic orientation, “diversity” has become an omnipresent emblem of openness and fairness. It is now an essential component of corporate responsibility: there is a widespread expectation for companies to show their commitment to “diversity”, elements of a “diversity” policy and evidence (*e.g.*, smiling pictures) of a diverse workforce in annual reports, websites, promotional and recruitment materials. Indeed, Süß and Kleiner (2005, p. 10) found that one of the foremost reasons why German companies adopt “diversity” management programmes is “social expectations” (*gesellschaftliche Erwartungen*). This expectation goes far beyond businesses, too: a vast range of local to national government agencies, universities, NGOs, clubs and associations are compelled to show their adherence to “diversity”. A Google Images search for “diversity” reveals pages and pages of colourful, upbeat images associated with these kinds of public institutions. Diversity days, diversity weeks and diversity fairs are organized and pro-diversity campaigns are conducted. “Diversity” messages show up everywhere, including board games, cartoons, T-shirts, campaign slogans, posters, billboards at transport hubs, and even – spotted in Barcelona airport – a combined can crusher and waste receptacle colourfully painted with a sign (in three languages) extolling the virtues of diversity:

Diversity: a set of visible and non-visible differences, including such factors as sex, age, education, ethnicity, disability, personality, sexual orientation, style of work, and so on. Taking advantage of these differences creates a productive atmosphere where everybody feels valued, and where their talents are fully harnessed to meet the organization’s objectives.

“Diversity” is an essential requirement, a must-have, a *sine qua non* for contemporary institutions and their public face. In these ways and for these reasons, “diversity” has become ubiquitous. It has also become banal: commonplace, clichéd and predictable. These processes have occurred also at a time of increasing social diversification. What are the connections between these trends?

Diversification

We have already seen, above, that demographic change – as forecast in *Workforce 2000* – provided one stimulus for the espousal of

“diversity” policies. In many quarters, the demographic rationale is still primary: the population is becoming more diverse, and policies need to engage this fact. For instance, underpinning its justification for promoting “diversity” policies in public services, the British government underlined the emergence of the following “key facts on the diversity of the UK population” (NAO 2004, p. 2): one in 5 adults and one in 20 children are disabled; the proportion of women in the workforce increased from 58 % in 1984 to 70 % in 2003; one in 12 individuals has a minority ethnic backgrounds, with a recent increase due to shifts in migration; it is estimated that one in 15 individuals is homosexual or bisexual; one in 20 belongs to a religion other than Christianity; and by 2041 one in 4 will be over the age 65. In these ways the country is deemed diverse and becoming ever more diverse; it therefore follows that “diversity” policies are needed.

Over the last 30 years we have witnessed the “intensification and multiplication” of identity-based movements and struggles across many countries (Eisenberg and Kymlicka 2011, p. 1). These have stimulated significant processes of political change. At the same time, there has been a discernible proliferation of urban lifestyles (Zukin 1998) and a differentiation of social milieux (Vester 2005) that produce marked dissimilarities in patterns of interest, association, residence, consumption and identification. Also, over the previous three decades the world has seen new patterns of diversification associated with global migration, creating conditions of “super-diversity” (Vertovec 2007). In numerous societies around the world, migration-driven diversification has brought changing configurations not only with regard to the movement of more people from more varied national, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds, but also a diversification by way of distinctions of migration channels, the differentiation of legal statuses and their associated conditions, diverging patterns of gender and age in migration flows, and variance in migrants’ human capital (education, work skills and experience).

Various modes of population diversification do not drive “diversity” discourse, but diversification and “diversity” are linked. Recognizing the twin processes of diversification and the emergence of “diversity”, Kenneth Prewitt (former Director of the US Census Bureau) has reflected on their challenges to conventional classification, counting and policy (2002, 2005). Due to both diversification and the emergence of “diversity”, Prewitt observes that “classification is now a moving target” (2002, p. 17). With new interest groups and identity categories arising, he (*ibid.*, p. 18) states that, “A classification rooted in diversity

policy would be orders of magnitude more complex than the minority rights classification, with its attention to people of color, women, and the disabled". "Diversity" has prompted a trend toward expressing "who you are": this is now reflected in multiple box-ticking or write-in self-identification of categories in many national censuses. Prewitt (*ibid.*, p. 17) notes that such categories were not introduced for the purpose of redressing discrimination but "about the assertion of social identity [...] If this makes the classification less useful, or perhaps even useless, for race-sensitive policies, that is the price to pay for the right to be recognized for what one is". What is more, "We might require a measurement system that reflects the dozens if not hundreds of different cultures, language groups, and nationalities represented in the fresh immigration stream" (*ibid.*). With regard to the latter source of diversification, Prewitt (2005, pp. 13-14) notes that, "new immigrants add a complexity and uncertainty to ethno-racial classification and to the policies that flow from it". Precisely because of the "moving target" presented by diversification and the expectation to represent new groups through "diversity", Prewitt foresees two possible outcomes: either a push toward measurement (like censuses) using ever more finely-grained classifications, or system collapse – the end of measurements of difference. In either case, Prewitt (*ibid.*) thinks, "it is increasingly doubtful that policies aimed at making America more inclusive will center, as they did in the 1970s, on numerical remedies using statistical disparities as evidence of discrimination".

Peter Aspinall (2009, 2012) also examines debates around the need to change census questions and category formats in order to more adequately deal with the multiple forms of diversification. He observes the confluence of:

a dual emphasis on *diversity* (encompassing race/ethnicity, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation/gender identity, and disability) and the more traditional concerns of *equality*. This has brought about a new set of demands on government to identify the different communities that comprise the population. How this will change the nature of ethnic/racial classifications and their role in policy-making, both now and in the future, has not yet become clear but will likely comprise a new set of pressures. These may include demands for measures of multiple disadvantage ("intersectionality" across the six diversity dimensions) (2009, p. 1418; emphasis in original).

This seems to be a logical outcome of recognizing myriad social differences. Even in the relatively early days of "diversity", Lynch (1997, p. 34) noted how, "within the diversity machine, theoretical trends are clearly moving away from the simplistic race and gender focus toward more complex formulas". Within emergent "diversity"

discourse, increasing complexity includes not just recognizing more identity-based groups and dimensions of individual difference, but acknowledging their convergence in compound and intersectional forms of discrimination. This is what Jane Jacobs and Ruth Fincher (1998, p. 9) refer to as “the importance of recognizing the sheer multiplicity of differences that may cohere around any one person. Social distinctions are constituted in specific contexts through multiple and interpenetrating axes of difference”. While intersectionality has usually been a term for feminist theorists, there is evidence of its acknowledgement by policy-makers and law-makers concerned with “diversity” (see Baer *et al.* 2010).

In these ways “diversity” has come to reflect social diversification and conceptual complexification. What are its overall effects?

Transforming the social imaginary

“Diversity” – in public discourses, policies and practices – is pervasive. This pervasiveness suggests a fundamental sensitizing process, a gradual transformation of the social imaginary. Here I draw on Charles Taylor’s (2007) description of the social imaginary as a set of presumptions that people have about their collective social life. The social imaginary, he (*ibid.*, p. 23) says, entails “the ways that people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”. Amongst ordinary people there is an unarticulated “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (*ibid.*). The social imaginary comprises a moral order, a sense of how we ought to live together. Accordingly, it supports a repertory of practices. Taylor traces the historical development of the modern Western social imaginary, especially with regard to the rise of fundamental notions of equality and the individual.

As shown by the beginnings and rise of such notions, newness penetrates the social imaginary from time to time, and people are exposed to a fresh set of ideas and practices. Taylor considers how certain notions move from being theory or discourse among experts to becoming integral to the collective social imaginary. A new idea or perspective, carried and reproduced in multiple ways including stories

and images, gradually becomes a background understanding and “begins to define the contours of [a given people’s] world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention” (*ibid.*, p. 29).

I suggest that “diversity” represents one such set of ideas and practices that has been added to the social imaginary, the moral order. It began as a kind of social engineering idea advocated by specialists, and has eventually been elaborated, promoted and variously codified to the point that it is now part of everyday understanding. “Diversity” may not altogether be changing the basic structures of the social imaginary, but perhaps it marks a refinement of earlier notions of equality and the individual that were premised in thinking based on an intrinsic homogeneity of subjects. “Diversity” advocates the basic social and moral code that everyone manifests “difference” in some way, indeed multiple ways, and that this fact should be integral to the way that everyone treats each other in society.

The ambiguity, multivocality and banality of “diversity” have not acted as obstacles to the transformation of the social imaginary; rather, “diversity” has been able to transform the social imaginary *because* of its ambiguity, multivocality and banality. Ambiguity facilitates the breadth and reach of the corpus of discourse and policies: this is shown in Lees’ (2003, p. 621) study through which she discerns that the term’s “interpretive elasticity” is part of its appeal and power through which “diversity” has assumed “an almost iconic status”. Multivocality ensures its uptake by a variety of constituents: “Janus-like, it promises different things to different people” (Lees 2003, p. 622). Banality underscores its taken-for-grantedness: this is evident in Modan’s (2008, p. 216) finding that “discourses of diversity have started to become naturalized and commonsensical”. The inherent moral and ethical dimension of “diversity” can be evidenced in the social expectations that have arisen around it: organizations have to demonstrate their commitment to “diversity” because it is obviously (now) “the right thing to do”.

In addition to modifying meanings and moral attributes of the social imaginary, “diversity” has perhaps also contributed to complexifying its conceptual framework. By repeating the message that “diversity” entails a wide variety of modes of individual difference, the categories of “diversity” have begun to take hold of the ways people perceive others. Ethnicity/race, gender, age, sexuality and disability are now categories that people are arguably more aware of, alongside other axes of difference right down to outlooks and experiences. This trend is akin to the development of what John Urry (2006, p. 11) calls

a complexity “structure of feeling”, an ability to think in more complex terms: “Such an emergent structure of feeling involves a greater sense of contingent openness to people, corporations and societies”. Through the extension and reproduction of “diversity” discourses, policies and programmes, it could be that people are increasingly able to think about and perceive society in terms of more, if not more complex, social categories. Such ability is particularly useful – and necessary – in an era of increasing social diversification. In this way “diversity” might be helping to bring about a kind of consciousness of social complexity.

These developments also run in parallel to what Ulrich Beck (2006) describes as “cosmopolitanization”. By this Beck refers to processes of change arising from a range of global flows and interconnectivity among people, commodities and images. The presence of the global other in our midst (however virtual) and the recognition of the differences that this initiates, Beck (*ibid.*, p. 10) suggests, entails a “quiet revolution in everyday life” leading to a “banal cosmopolitanism”. Directly relevant to our current discussion, Beck and Edgar Grande (2012) propose that “cosmopolitanization is a theory of diversity; more precisely, of a specific way of interpreting and coping with diversity” by “internalizing” the other, complete with his/her differences.

Such an “internalization’ of the other” can be the product of two entirely different processes. On the one hand, it can be the result of an active, deliberate and reflexive opening of individuals, groups and societies to other ideas, preferences, rules and cultural practices; on the other hand, however, it can also be the outcome of passive and unintended processes enforcing the internalization of otherness (*ibid.*; emphasis in original).

Here, I submit, “diversity” policies can be read as deliberative practices, with the complexification of social imaginary as the passive process.

It is no small thing that “diversity” is normative, expected, a “can’t-do-without” notion in corporate and public institutions. This fact is not “just superficial” as some contend, although in many quarters “diversity” pronouncements may indeed amount to lip-service. The repeated message, even if without real conviction, has cumulative effects. Yes, people are not sure what “diversity” refers to, but most will nevertheless say something to the effect that “diversity is good”. “Diversity” is gradually making people aware, affording comprehension, providing a moral grounding, and shaping people’s views on individuals and the increasing complexity of society. The “diversity” corpus and “its ambivalence and interpretive flexibility provides space for imagining other possibilities for diversity” (Lees 2003, p. 630).

In these ways “diversity increasingly aids us in imagining ourselves” (Lentin and Tittley 2008, p. 20).

Conclusion: whither “diversity”?

Two parallel transformations are currently taking place: diversification and the emergence of “diversity”. Increasingly, multiple modes of social differentiation and fragmentation are re-ordering society: the processes are at once economic, social and cultural, and through them people are identifying themselves and others with reference to a number of categories. At the same time, the public is becoming self-conscious about recognizing difference: difference is more perceptible, people themselves pronounce their differences, and acknowledging others’ difference is deemed proper. “Diversity” discourse is not wholly driven by diversification, but the former is probably helping to mitigate or buffer the latter’s effects.

Where are such trends leading? It is a fair guess to say that processes of diversification will continue – perhaps, as Gerard Delanty (2006, p. 35) opines, they are “inevitable”. For Delanty, too, trends of diversification are seen as stimulating what he calls the cosmopolitan imagination. This includes the relativizing of one’s own identity and the shaping of one’s ethical commitment to others. As factors shaping this imagination, Delanty draws attention to the importance of the “articulation of communicative models of world openness in which societies undergo transformation” (2006, p. 35), the formation of “discursive spaces of world openness” (*ibid.*, p. 44), and “a particular kind of learning process that makes social change possible” (2012, p. 352). Changing perspectives and discourse provide “the means by which individuals, groups, societies etc. undergo changes in their self-understanding” and “progressive forms of learning by which social actors seek solutions to problems in the objective order of society” (*ibid.*, p. 349). These are discursive phenomena analogous to “diversity” discourse and its transformative effects. “Diversity” consciousness, we might say, is a subset of the cosmopolitan imagination.

As Beck (2006) himself stresses, processes of “cosmopolitanization,” or internalizing the other, do not necessarily lead to cosmopolitanism (sympathetic openness to others). To be sure, anti-cosmopolitanism in many forms remains rampant. Similarly, the “diversity” corpus does not necessarily and automatically sensitize everyone. Racism, sexism,

homophobia and such are not going away soon. The discourse can trigger “diversity” backlash too. Conservative American radio shows are full of voices critical of the fact that everyone should be recognized and catered-to according to their individual traits and identities. However, the corpus of “diversity” in the corporate and public sectors cannot easily be rolled back (like Affirmative Action in the US and multiculturalism in Britain and elsewhere): this is because its meanings are so broad, and it has become too mainstreamed, accepted and expected. “Diversity” has been institutionalized, internationalized and internalized – and is here to stay in one form or another. But the impact of “diversity” need not be profound. The transformation of the social imaginary via “diversity” may merely lead to what Zygmunt Bauman (2001, p. 144) calls “negative recognition”.

A “let it be” stance: you have the right to be what you are and are under no obligation to be someone else [...] Negative recognition may well boil down to the tolerance of the otherness – a posture of indifference and detachment rather than the attitude of sympathetic benevolence or willingness to help: let them be, and bear the consequences of what they are.

Already in some contexts, people are displaying indifference to myriad forms of difference and super-diversity is increasingly being seen as “commonplace” (Wessendorf 2011). However, through the “diversity” corpus, even if nothing more enters the social imaginary than the prosaic perspective that “everyone is different in different ways, and that’s OK,” this will still be quite an achievement, marking the age of diversity.

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“DIVERSITY” AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

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Résumé

On trouve la diversité : au centre d'un grand nombre de discours normatifs : textes institutionnels, politiques et pratiques d'entreprises, agences publiques, universités, professions libérales. On peut distinguer au moins six faces ou objectifs d'un usage politique de la diversité. Ambiguïté, polysémie et banalité sont les caractéristiques principales de ces discours qui loin d'affaiblir renforcent la diffusion et l'aura de la notion. Dans de nombreux milieux, l'engagement pour la diversité devenu croyance dominante est attendu, voire tenu pour acquis. La mise en avant de la diversité est allée de pair avec les processus de diversification sociale, mais sa diffusion n'est pas tirée par eux. En dépit de ses multiples imprécisions, l'impact du corpus diffusion entraîne une transformation, ou au moins une ramification de l'imaginaire social.

Mots clés: Diversité ; Différence ; Discours politique ; Gestion ; Imaginaire social.

Zusammenfassung

Der Begriff Diversität ist in zahlreichen normativen Reden anzutreffen, angefangen bei Institutionen, über Politik und Wirtschaft, hin zu Behörden, Universitäten, Freiberuflern. Die politische Verwendung stützt sich auf sechs Varianten oder Ziele der Diversität. Die wichtigsten Merkmale dieser Stellungnahmen sind Mehrdeutigkeit, Polysemie und Banalität, die anstatt den Begriff zu schwächen seine Verbreitung und seine Aura unterstützen. In vielen Bereichen wird die zum vorherrschenden Glauben Einsatz in Sachen Diversität erwartet, ja sogar vorausgesetzt. Die Hervorhebung der Diversität geht mit den Prozessen der sozialen Diversifizierung einher, wenngleich ihre Verbreitung nicht von diesen gefördert wird. Trotz diverser Ungenauigkeiten führt die Diversität zu Veränderungen oder zumindest zu einer Verästelung der sozialen Vorstellungswelt.

Schlagwörter: Vielfalt; Differenz; Diskurs; Politik; Management; Social imaginären.