



Diversity as Business Opportunity and Instrument of Thought Control

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Diversity and Inclusion are two of the modern virtues that have been embraced by the corporate world, as well as most public and private institutions in the UK. The diversity agenda has found a way to prosper, where other egalitarian movements like multiculturalism, feminism and anti-racism have not only floundered but have also been obstructed at every turn. To my mind there are two reasons (at least); the first has to do with the bottom line – money, and the second has to do with the fact that the diversity agenda lends itself to be readily bureaucratized so that organizations are able to look good without actually needing to do good.

Both are part and parcel of the neo liberalist ethos that has come to rule our planet. The prior equality movements required a redistribution of wealth. They presumed (rightly) that the world and its resources are finite; and so the only way for a finite cake to be distributed more equitably was for the well-to-do to take a smaller slice. Unsurprisingly this strategy found no favour with those in the Board Room. The diversity idea succeeded by the device of claiming that if organizations were to increase the diversity of the workforce it would benefit the *already privileged* as much as anyone else. The cake itself would get bigger – and so all will benefit from it. You will recognize this as the same trickle-down line that neoliberalism has been trying to sell us for the last fifty years ('leveling up' in its most recent incarnation). In the organizational diversity literature this has been referred to as 'lucrative virtue' (Thiederman, 2003) and "diversity dividend" Haq (2004). Meanwhile Henry says:

[there is] a market opportunity *servicing* the 'bottom of the economic pyramid' namely the four billion people with incomes less than \$1500 a year'. Another excitedly says: 'In the U.S... Older Americans, people with disabilities and gays and lesbians control ... \$1.6 trillion' (Henry, 2003:6).

In order to exploit this market, companies need to find out about 'the ethnics' and *their* ways of life so that *their* needs and desires can be catered for. Second, the company needs to give itself a makeover in order to look more ethnic friendly. Happily, both these birds can be killed with the same stone: by employing some of *them*. Not only will *they* be able to tell *us* what kinds of things *their* people like, it will also make *us* look good in the eyes of the world

A well thought out marketing plan targeting the ethnic market [begins with]...the company having diversity represented in its ranks that will better relate, better understand, better serve these customers (Henry, 2003:58)

Here, 'serve' is of course simply a code word for 'make profit from'.

When notions of diversity and inclusivity are not being used to make profits, they are used to stifle thinking. For example, in the fourth edition of a mainstream book for social workers *Anti-discriminatory Practice*, Thompson says

[In the diversity approach] differences are best seen as assets to be valued...rather than as problems to be solved...The 'diversity' approach seeks to tackle discrimination by presenting differences as positives to be benefited from, rather than the basis of negative, unfair discrimination" (Thompson 2001:34-5)

This gives rise to their strap line: 'Celebrating Difference'. Not only is the diversity agenda uncritical, it is actually anti-critical. You *must* celebrate differences, whatever you may think about those differences, else you are being oppressive. This version of diversity is relentlessly positive. This is a sanitized version of recognition, one amputated from power and politics. It is seemingly only sterile and vacuous, but it is actually dangerous. Dangerous, because it has essentialised culture and decoupled it from politics as well as ethics. To explain, I need to whizz back and start with the Enlightenment.

The early Enlightenment philosophers thought that *all* persons – princes, priests and paupers – were equally deserving of respect, whatever their differences. The Enlightenment advocated for equality and respect *despite* differences, equality and respect between humans qua humans. The Romantics thought otherwise. They turned inwards claiming that each person had a unique internal authentic true self; not only was it their ethical duty of individuals to live in accordance to it, Liberalism guaranteed them the *right* to do it. In this way the Romantics became the champions of difference: each person had a *right* to be different and a *right* to be treated with respect, *because of that difference*.

Here then we have a tension – respect and equality *despite* differences, and respect and equality *because* of differences. Liberalism came to embody both sets of values by the device of granting individuals the right to their unique differences in the private sphere. But in the public sphere they are all considered to be equal to each other. The other critical ingredient of liberalism pertinent here, is that of ownership. I have rights over what I own, and what I own is private to me. This includes not only my property, but also my beliefs and values. All this is private, and nobody else's business but mine.

The later Romantics like Herder, took this picture of individuals and their rights, and transposed it wholesale onto entities called national and cultural groups. Now nations and cultures were deemed to be living entities with authentic natures, which it was their moral duty to live in accordance with. But the principle of privacy also meant that no one 'outside' a culture has any right to comment on or make judgments about what is 'in' the culture, precisely because each culture 'owns' its beliefs and values, and so is private to that culture.

This then results in a picture of a series of encapsulated, mutually exclusive cultures, each different in themselves, but each of equal merit to the others. In this sort of

situation, the injunction to celebrate and only celebrate means that one is forced to subjugate one's own ethical sensibility when it finds itself in conflict with the ethical sensibility of another culture. The injunction to respect has morphed into the injunction not to offend. But 'to offend' is not the same as being deliberately offensive. This is the territory in which the diversity movement situates itself.

One of the mistakes being made by both Herder and the proponents of Diversity is that they take cultural groups to be unproblematic monolithic natural givens. Nor do they keep in mind the power distinctions between those who are able to name themselves and those who find themselves named. It is the case that human groupings are generated by the vicissitudes of power relations. For example, the religion that I was born into is Zoroastrianism. Although this is important and meaningful to me in various ways, as I live in the UK and being secular, Zoroastrianism is not at the centre of my sense of self, and mostly not in the forefront of my mind.

However, if it turned out that Zoroastrians started to be actively vilified, targeted and marginalized because of being Zoroastrian (in the way that Muslims are being in the UK, India, and elsewhere), then my relation to that category would shift from it being at the margins of my sense of self, and migrate to the centre; it would become my primary and perhaps my entire identity. And if pushed sufficiently far into a corner, I would likely become a Zoroastrian zealot.

Now, I have two strategies open to me. I might turn militant and fight for the lives and rights for me and mine, at which point I would no doubt be swiftly characterized as a terrorist. The other option open to me (in the UK) is to try to use case law to have the category Zoroastrian recognized as a racialized ethnicity in order to be able to receive the protection of the Equality Acts (previously the Race Relation Acts). In this way I would join the other group of racialized ethnicities that have done the same. The current list consists of Pakistani, Black American, Irish Traveller, Roma/Romany Gypsies, Chinese, White British, Jews and Sikhs. Notice: 'Black American', but not 'Black British', nor simply 'Black'. In doing so, I would find myself entrenched in the territory of identity politics.

The point is that groupings have been (and are being) generated by psycho-social power relational processes of inclusion and exclusion in the first place. Once excluded, once backed into a corner, the excluded try to turn the tables by using the very category of exclusion to mobilize and fight back, for example by turning the sullied notion of 'Black' on its head to say: 'Black is Beautiful', 'Black Power', and so on.

It is the fact that the diversity agenda appears to be blind to the contradiction between respect 'despite differences' vs. respect 'because of differences', that allows it to be used to stifle thinking. What is the ultimate end point that equality movements are aiming for? Is the goal going to be the Enlightenment solution – a world in which people are treated as equals *despite* differences. Equality and respect between humans qua humans? Or is the end point the one being proposed by the Diversity agenda and some

proponents of multiculturalism? This being the entrenchment and retention of different identities, with the requirement for equality and respect *because* of those differences.

It is this latter route that the proponents of diversity pursue, which in turn generates a number of confusions. The aforementioned Thompson makes the bizarre suggestion that we should stop using terms such as ‘the elderly’...because ‘it is through the identification of differences that discrimination...take place’. He says ‘We should avoid grouping people together according to age...abandon the ‘us-them’ mentality (Thompson 2001, p.102). Thompson reasons, if you stop using a name, then the grouping won't exist; because the group won't exist, there will be no possibility of discriminating against it. Remove the name, remove the discrimination. But now, when it comes to other groups such as Black or Muslim, he calls on the Diversity agenda to propose the opposite strategy, that of ‘*emphasis[ing] the differences* between individuals and across groups...[because] such differences are best seen as assets to be valued’. (Thompson 2001, p. 34-5). Why is the strategy proposed for the elderly not applicable to Blacks and Muslims? Because (allegedly) Blacks and Muslims are ‘real’ groups, whilst the elderly is a mere construction. Hindus are not a homogeneity either. The Brahmin’s experience of Hindu culture is very different from untouchables and those in the lowest castes. In my view, the caste system is a structure consisting of sedimented power relations, masquerading as culture, a culture that legitimates the oppression of some people by other people. To my mind this is the case for all cultural practices: sedimented power relations, naturalized and legitimized by divine authorities.

In sum, one cannot simply respect and celebrate ‘their’ differences, because ‘they’ are not a homogeneity, and nor are ‘we’. The fact that Black people in the UK are subject to outright acts of violence and institutional racism, does not make them a community. There can be no spokesperson for *the* Black community nor *the* Muslim community, because there are any number of contesting views and voices within the so-called ‘them’. When Tony Blair conversed with Imams as spokesmen for the Islamic so-called community, he actively sided against other differing, dissenting Muslim voices.

All criticism from ‘outside’ a culture is dismissed by those who profit from culturally sanctioned social arrangements, invariably *men* of various kinds. They do so on the grounds that *you* have no right to judge *our* ways of life on the basis of *your* ways of life. Meanwhile those who voice critical perspectives from within the culture are characterized as heretics, apostates, traitors and anti-nationals. I call these defensive strategies *culturalism*, when Romantic readings of culture are used to legitimate a politics of hate and oppression.

A very recent example: The political party currently in power in India, the BJP and its Hindutva henchmen have been fanning the flames of ethnic hatred, by fostering supremacist readings of Hinduism and rewriting Indian history as Hindu history. Last year (2021) there was to be an international academic conference critical of this trend, *Dismantling Global Hindutva*. The Hindutva elites and their attack dog mobs predictably reacted by characterizing the conference as an expression of Hindu-phobia and

intellectual colonialism. More troublingly, several Indian scholars having received death threats, withdrew from the conference. Hindutva ideologues foster ethnocentric and purist readings of Hinduism which keeps the caste system intact. Ambedkar, born an untouchable, a radical thinker who fought for Indian independence, argued that the only way to do away with the caste system, was to do away with Hinduism. For him, *to defend the structures of Hinduism, was to defend racism*. (Ambedkar 1944).

Although allegedly illegal, the caste system is alive and well in India. Not only is intermarriage between castes frowned upon, so is inter-dining, even in modern metropolitan India. Persons from the lower castes cannot share food with the upper castes. The consequences of transgression are often literally deadly. Not so long ago a young Dalit was killed by upper caste Brahmins because of having the temerity to sit on a chair and eat in front of them (Punetha, 2021). There are tens of thousands of such stories, with most of the violence being inflicted on Dalit women who are raped and murdered with impunity and frightening frequency. The conviction rate of the guilty varies between abysmal to negligible. Despite appearances to the contrary, the incense filled ashrams of modern India, as well as its booming, buzzing technological cities are all infected by a Jim Crow-like canker that sits at its heart.

But caste has also migrated into the ‘Western’ world along with the Indian diaspora. Suraj Yengde, a Dalit activist, an untouchable who made it against all the odds to Harvard where he gained a doctorate says ‘even today I’m still an ‘Untouchable... You have to understand that. Being at Harvard or being at the Kennedy School...my primary identity...is not going away.’” Wherever he goes, caste follows him like a shadow (Martin, 2019). One has to be extremely careful then, that whilst making a stand *against racism*, one is not also simultaneously inadvertently taking a stand *for casteism*.

In sum, one cannot simply respect and celebrate Hindu culture or Black or Christian or Muslim culture without taking an active stand *against* other kinds of Hindu culture and Black culture, and so on. Let us not forget that Christians of one kind have mutilated and murdered Christians of the wrong kind over the centuries, as have Muslims, as have Hindus, as have Black people. The diversity movement has abandoned the principle of redistribution in favour of a hollow depoliticized version of recognition. I am arguing, and have argued more fully elsewhere (Dalal, 2012), that there are no values inherent to Blackness per se – nor to Islam, Jewishness, and so on. There are of course claims as to what is authentic to each of these groupings – but these claims are always interest driven and always contested by others with other interests ‘within’ the designated grouping.

Let me return to the UK context, to look briefly at the members and workings of the current ruling party in Great Britain, the Conservative Party, as it reveals how the contradictions in the diversity agenda can be exploited for divisive ends, even whilst it is characterized as benevolent and as doing good.

The current cabinet of the Conservative Party is surely a poster child for the idea of Diversity. It is full of Black and Brown people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and even a Buddhist. Included here are Rishi Sunak (Indian heritage, Hindu), Sajid Javid (Pakistani heritage, Muslim), Nadhim Zahawi (Iraqi born, Muslim), Priti Patel (Ugandan-Indian heritage, Hindu), James Cleverly (British/Sierra Leone heritage), Kwasi Kwarteng (Ghanian heritage), Shailesh Vara (Indian-Ugandan heritage, Hindu), Alok Sharma (Indian origin, Hindu), Suella Braverman (Indian origin, Buddhist), Kemi Badenoch (Nigerian origin, Christian), Munira Mirza (Pakistani heritage, Muslim) – to name eleven of the most prominent; an impressive one third of the thirty or so cabinet members and significant officers.

This band of Black and Brown people have had no difficulty in unleashing and supporting one of the most heinous attacks on other Black and Brown people living on these islands. Their affiliations do not appear to have much to do with belongings having to do with the categories glorified by the diversity merchants: religion, colour, heritage or culture. Rather, their allegiance is to the monied classes and their interests, something that the diversity agenda takes no account of and makes no allusion to. The reason for this lacuna being that ‘diversity’ in its current form is an instrument of neoliberalism, designed to preoccupy us in order to distract us from the malevolent actions of the elites.

The function of the legislation contained in the Equality Acts, and movements like multiculturalism, anti-racism and even the diversity movement, is to ensure that all ‘kinds’ of people should be dealt with equitably. It is more than ironic then that the legislation that is being pushed through by these Black and Brown people in government goes out of its way to target and criminalize ordinary Black and Brown people. For example, even though the ‘hostile environment’ policy and the Windrush scandal that followed (and continues to follow) was initiated by the ‘White’ Home Minister Teresa May, her work has been continued with malicious enthusiasm by the ‘Brown’ Priti Patel. It seems to me that many of the UK government’s actions go against the values of equity that are supposedly enshrined in the celebrating diversity movement. A case in point being the treatment of Ukrainian refugees (White) in contrast to those from the Africa, South Asia and the Middle East (Black and Brown).

So even whilst the government welcomes in White Ukrainian refugees (surely deserved), in the same moment it is forcibly deporting Black and Brown refugees from the Middle East and elsewhere to Rwanda, the Caribbean and ‘back to where they came from’. Not only are the diversity principles of ‘respect’ and ‘valuing difference’ completely absent in the government’s responses to the experiences of ordinary black and brown citizens, they go out of their way to vilify them as well as their protests at mistreatment. One example from many too many: When the terrified mother of a twelve year old boy spoke of her experience of *armed* police entering her home and arresting her son for possession of a toy gun, the Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch *attacked the mother* for using ‘rhetoric’ to ‘inflammate the situation’! She also defended the extraordinary conclusion of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities which claimed that Britain is not institutionally racist. She was supported in this view by Munira Mirza, Boris

Johnson's Head of Policy, who has gone out of her way to cast doubt on the very existence of institutional racism. Meanwhile in his quest for the leadership of the Tory Party, Rishi Sunak has promised to criminalize those with an 'extreme hatred of Britain'. This is going down the same road as India, where mere criticism of the government and its policies is readily characterized as hatred and anti-national, resulting in journalist and ordinary citizens being branded terrorists and cast into prison.

It seems to me that the 'coloured folk' in the Tory Cabinet are advancing racist agendas on behalf of White elites. The situation is not dissimilar to the colonial era when local elites were co-opted by the forces of Empire, to do the dirty work of oppression and exploitation for them, in effect 'blackwashing' it, making it seem other than what it was. In sum, Diversity is indeed a panacea, and a dangerous one at that as it sanitizes and legitimates all sorts of inequities. It is often nothing more than a PR exercise, an example being the smiling black and brown faces populating police recruitment posters, even whilst racist policing practices continue apace in broad day light.

The lessons to be drawn from this discussion is not that notions of respect and acceptance are redundant. What is rendered redundant is an uncritical, indiscriminate respect for 'them' as a homogeneity. What is required is a discerning respect, an ethically driven respect (even whilst keeping in mind that these ethics are not universal and nor are they unassailable). We cannot just respect them – we have to take sides with some of them and so inevitably, against others of them. And if we shirk this ethical responsibility then all we can do is fall silent and in doing so, not only abandon them, but also ourselves.

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