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Diversity

Jodi Melamed

What is the best way to manage unlike human capacities in the name of human progress and improvement? This deceptively simple question has preoccupied Western political modernity, especially in the United States. The positive connotations often adhering to the keyword “diversity”—a term commonly used to reference human differences broadly considered—arise from its importance in high-status discourses that have sought to discern the best management of human differences, including eighteenth-century liberal political philosophy, nineteenth- and twentieth-century natural science (especially the so-called race sciences), and twentieth- and twenty-first-century law and education policy. In contrast, research in American studies and cultural studies has come to look on the endeavor of managing human differences in a suspicious light (Ferguson 2012).

It recognizes that ideologies of progress and development from Manifest Destiny to multiculturalism have consistently, and sometimes in surprising ways, divided people into good (desirable) and bad (undesirable) forms of human diversity, creating hierarchies that evaluate groups as more or less civilized, capable, advanced, or valuable according to a shifting catalogue of criteria (Horsman 1981; Cacho 2012; Melamed 2011). This research suggests that these attempts to divide humanity are symptomatic of a fundamental contradiction between political democracy, which defines citizens as equal and working cooperatively for collective well-being, and capitalism, in which individuals of unequal material means and social advantages compete with one another for profit (Lowe 1996).

Viewed in this light, discourses of diversity are a form of crisis management; they portray the inequality that capitalism requires as the result of differing human capacities, inaccurately representing groups dispossessed by and for capital accumulation as being in need of the improvements of civilization, education, or freedom. The result is that “diversity” has come to be seen as an ambiguous term that endows its referent—human differences—with only an indistinct and opaque legibility, making it easier to displace the causes of capitalism’s structural unevenness onto naturalized fictions of human differences. Karl Marx’s example of the nursery tale told by bourgeois political economists to explain the origin of capitalist wealth speaks to this cultural process (1867/1976). The tale involves two kinds of people who lived long ago: diligent, frugal elites who conserved the fruits of their labor so their progeny could become capitalists; and lazy, spendthrift masses who burned through their substance in riotous living so their heirs (wage laborers) have nothing to sell but themselves. This fable about the origins of human diversity (versions of which are still told every day) substitutes for the real acts of force that have expanded capital flows, including conquest, enslavement, land grabbing, and accumulation through dispossession (Harvey 2003). Diversity operates here as a ruse that naturalizes social inequality by inverting cause and effect.

The intertwined usage histories of the keywords “diversity” and “race” are central to this ruse. They appear together first across two disparate yet interrelated domains that influenced the organization of U.S. modernity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: liberal political philosophy and the race sciences. Both of these discourses were concerned with discerning and cultivating human differences, though to very different ends. Liberal political philosophers ranging

from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1968) to John Stuart Mill (1859/1869) advocated the free play of the “good” diversity of European talents, interests, and beliefs as the means and end of a free society. In contrast, the race sciences of the period were concerned with controlling “bad” diversity, conceived as the biological inferiority of nonwhite races, through sterilization, termination, incarceration, and exclusion. Harry Laughlin, for example, the United States’ leading eugenicist in the first half of the twentieth century, argued in the context of debates over the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 that “progress cannot be built on mongrel melting-pots, but it is based on organized diversity of relatively pure racial types” (Laughlin and Trevor 1939, 18). The naturalization of race in relation to the category of diversity is what made credible these otherwise contradictory frameworks for understanding human difference. Concepts of diversity and race worked together to define “the white race” as so superior to others that freedom and self-cultivation were only beneficial and available to them, thus assuaging conflicts between philosophical commitments to individual liberty and the realities of economic systems dependent on the coercions of slavery, poverty, and industrialization.

During and after World War II, white supremacy and biological concepts of race were discredited by an accumulation of sociopolitical forces including worldwide rejection of German National Socialist (Nazi) racism and antisemitism, anticolonial and antiracist struggles, and global labor migrations from the rural South to the metropolitan North (Winant 2001). As a result, the usage of the terms “diversity” and “race” became even more complexly related. The geopolitical context shaping their new meanings and relationship was the rise of the United States to the position of Cold War superpower and leading force for the expansion

of transnational capitalism. In order to accomplish these postwar leadership goals, the United States began to sanction and promote a specific kind of liberal antiracism. The intent of this form of antiracism was to modernize and extend freedoms once reserved for white/European Americans to all U.S. inhabitants regardless of race. These liberal freedoms became the meaning and goal of antiracism: possessive individualism, the right to self-cultivation, abstract legal equality, and access to the field of economic competition. Yet strengthening political democracy by ending white monopolies on liberal freedoms could not serve as an antidote for the structurally uneven relationships developed within global capitalism. The problem was and is that the conceptual framework for liberal antiracism overlapped with the knowledge architecture of global capitalism through the promotion of individualism and economic competition as foundational for racial equality and capitalist development.

As conflicts between democratic ideology and capitalist economy continued to emerge under new conditions, questions of how to best manage unlike human capacities in the name of progress, reform, and improvement continued to provide cover for the next phases of global capitalism. The ruse of racialization lives on: forms of humanity are valued and devalued in ways that fit the needs of reigning political-economic orders. Conventional understandings of race as skin color or phenotype no longer dominate the process. Instead, criteria of class, culture, religion, and citizenship status assume the role that race has played historically, positioning individuals who benefit from differential power arrangements as “fit” for success (good diversity) and those who are structurally exploited or excluded by power arrangements as “unfit” (bad diversity). As “racial difference” gets redefined as “cultural,” the language of diversity takes on the burden

previously borne by race. Though race never vanished as a means of managing difference, the emphasis on culture creates a situation that is both flexible and productive, allowing new categories of difference and diversity to evolve in relation to the crises perpetrated by global capital.

Beginning in the 1970s, law and educational policy became the dominant domains for these discussions of how to manage human differences in the name of progress and reform, with affirmative action law being most prominent. Beginning with Supreme Court Justice William Powell’s watershed decision, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (438 U.S. 265 (1978)), affirmative action discourse has conditioned the meaning of diversity and, in the process, redefined how the state can recognize and act on racial inequality. In his decision, Justice Powell deployed the keyword “diversity” no less than thirty times. His point was to invalidate all but one of the reasons offered by the University of California–Davis School of Medicine for reserving a few admission slots for students identified as “economically and/or educationally disadvantaged” or members of “minority groups” (*Regents*, 438 U.S. at 274). He found it unconstitutional to use race in admissions to counter discrimination, to break up white monopolies on medical training, or to increase the well-being of communities of color (by training more physicians of color). The only admissible ground for taking race into consideration was “obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body” (*Regents*, 438 U.S. at 306). By ruling that “educational diversity” is protected under the free speech clause of the First Amendment, Powell negated material social change as a racial justice goal, replacing it with consideration for higher education’s mission to provide all students with opportunities for self-cultivation through exposure to diversity. The decision rests on the capacity of diversity

to abstract and generalize human differences in a way that forestalls more precise and relational analysis. It positions “racial justice” as anathema to “genuine diversity,” defined only vaguely as “a far broader array of qualifications and characteristics” (*Regents*, 438 U.S. at 315).

Twenty-five years later, the next wave of Supreme Court affirmative action cases (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003), and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003)) were decided in a context where universities, corporations, and government agencies had all adapted to this definition of diversity by hiring an array of diversity managers, diversity consultants, and diversity directors, many of whom were assigned the task of finding the most efficient and profitable way to manage human differences of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and national origin. Sandra Day O’Connor makes this logic apparent in her findings for *Grutter v. Bollinger*: “Diversity [in education] promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce” since “major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse peoples, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints” (*Grutter*, 539 U.S. at 330). O’Connor’s reasoning reflects a new common sense developed within multinational corporate capitalism. Bestsellers such as *The Diversity Toolkit: How You Can Build and Benefit from a Diverse Workforce* (Sonnenschein 1999) and *Managing Diversity: People Skills for a Multicultural Workplace* (Carr-Ruffino 1996) promised to teach corporate managers, in the words of the World Bank’s Human Resources website, “to value [human] differences and use them as strategic business assets” (Office of Diversity and Inclusion 2013). One might argue that more is at stake than hiring multiracial, female, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) employees to

rainbow-wash corporate agendas. Corporate diversity’s deeper violence is to claim all differences—material, cultural, communal, and epistemological—for capital management, that is, to recognize no difference that makes a difference, no knowledges, values, social forms, or associations that defer or displace capitalist globalization.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, diversity’s referent tends to slip back and forth, indexing with equal frequency both human differences in general and idealized attributes of the global economy. This slippage corresponds to the rise of neoliberal ideology and its mantra that competitive markets are the best way to manage unlike human capacities and other resources in the name of growth and improvement. Within the vocabulary of neoliberalism, diversity affirms the goodness of values such as “freedom” and “openness” and helps these values penetrate previously anti- or noncapitalist domains of social life, including education, religion, family, nonprofit organizations, and social services. As early as 1962, Milton Friedman argued in *Capitalism and Freedom* that truly free and prosperous societies arise only beside an unregulated market, which has “the great advantage” that it “permits wide diversity” (1962/2002, 15). This argument has become mainstream, in part as a result of the work done by the term “diversity” in portraying access to all the world’s goods and services as the key to entry into a posttracist world of freedom and opportunity.

Are there alternatives to this yoking of discussions of human difference to the goal of capital accumulation? One countervocabulary that emerges alongside the rise of diversity as a form of corporate management involves an alternative keyword: “difference.” In contrast to “diversity,” the roots of the term “difference” are found in the Afro-Asian solidarity movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the social movement activism of the 1970s.

These movements sought to evade the contradictions of the Cold War by arguing that the different experiences of postcolonial societies—differences grounded in the history of having undergone and defeated white supremacist colonization, in cultural epistemologies unlike those of the West, and in indigenous and non-Christian religious practices—meant that they should not have to fit into either capitalist or communist frameworks, with their shared values of productivity and geopolitical dominance (R. Wright 1956/1995; Von Eschen 1997). The term thus valorized nonnormative and marginalized social subjects as agents of change, insisting that cultures and communities forged by people calling themselves Black, Brown, American Indian, Asian, Militant, Radical, Lesbian, Feminist, and Queer were too valuable to be lost to assimilationist versions of “global diversity.” “Difference” pointed toward economic justice, based on an understanding of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized nature of political economy, such as that developed in women of color feminism (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Hong 2006; I. Young 1990).

Since the 1970s, American studies and cultural studies scholarship has been caught up in the conflict encapsulated by this struggle between discourses of diversity and difference. The stakes of the struggle are large. Whereas discourses of diversity suggest that group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death is a problem *for* democratic capitalist society and resolvable within its political economic structures, discourses of difference insist that the globalization of capitalism and its compatibility with only weak forms of political democracy *is* the problem. “Diversity” consequently appears in American studies and cultural studies scholarship with both positive and negative connotations. Sometimes, as in the groundbreaking *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, the term

“diversity” appears in a positive light, signifying the belief that a politics of multicultural recognition can dramatically increase racial democracy in the United States (Lauter 1994). At other times, the category of diversity is itself the problem. Often, this skepticism about the term is accompanied by commitments to support social movement knowledges, ranging from women of color feminism to diasporic queer activism, whose critical interventions demand a reckoning with material relations of enduring structural inequality propped up by liberal-democratic and multicultural norms. The result is that much scholarly effort has gone into preventing critical knowledge interventions, such as intersectional analysis, subaltern studies, Indigenous studies, and queer of color analysis, from being subsumed within the generalizing rhetoric of diversity.

As market rationality saturates the usage of diversity within universities today, this scholarship draws on the genealogy of difference to point to the limits of diversity discourse as a means of advancing democratizing projects. In sharp contrast to the vague manner in which diversity discourse presents human differences, it cultivates new ways of thinking about the structural, historical, and material relations that determine who can relate to whom and under what conditions (Hong 2006; Manalansan 2003; Nguyen 2012; Reddy 2011). Innovating new comparative analytics, such scholarship replaces “diversity” with terms such as “partition,” “transit,” “affinities,” “assemblage,” and “intimacies” to expose and imagine otherwise the connections and relations that sustain capital accumulation at the cost of generalized well-being (R. Gilmore 2012; Byrd 2011; Puar 2007; Lowe 2006; Hong and Ferguson 2011; Chuh 2003).