Diversity: A Politics of Difference or a Management Strategy?

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'Promoting equality and diversity is a duty the entire UK government take very seriously, and is a responsibility shared by all government departments.' (Home Office, 2005)

'We are committed to promoting equality and diversity within the staff and student bodies in higher education. This commitment runs through all of our strategic aims.' (HEFCE, 2005)

'At Microsoft, we believe that diversity enriches our performance and products, the communities where we live and work, and the lives of our employees.' (Microsoft, 2003)

**Introduction**

The injunction to promote diversity has become ubiquitous in the UK. The Learning and Skills Council offers ‘Equality and Diversity Guidance’; Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) has ‘equality and diversity advisers’; major banks have ‘equality and diversity strategies’ and most universities now have ‘equality and diversity teams’; the ‘Equality and Diversity Forum’ promotes dialogue across the equality strands; and ‘The Government’s recent ‘Equality Review’ was called ‘Equality and Diversity – Making it Happen’. Diversity management, which encourages employers to recognise cultural differences between employees and make practical allowances for these differences in organisational policies, has emerged as a central tool for combating discrimination, complementing (or perhaps replacing) equal opportunities approaches in the sphere of employment in the UK (Wrench, 2005).

The promotion of diversity has also emerged as a central political priority within Europe. While the concept of equality has been central to the European Union’s legal order, with the Charter of Fundamental Rights enshrining a range of equality principles (Shaw, 2005), the concept of diversity has recently also been explicitly recognised in the EC Treaty: Article 149 EC protects the ‘cultural and linguistic diversity’ of the educational systems of the Member States, whilst Article 151 EC calls upon the Union to respect the ‘national and regional diversity’ of Member States (Shaw, 2005). Additionally, the European Union now recognises, in Article 13 EC, six key characteristics as requiring measures to combat discrimination: sex, racial and ethnic origin, disability, age, religion and sexual orientation. In 2003, the European Commission launched a five-year, EU-wide information campaign, ‘For Diversity – Against Discrimination’, aiming to ‘promote the positive benefits of diversity for business and for society as a whole’ (EC Green Paper 2004:13). These developments have led commentators to suggest that EU equality policies now comprise three strands: ensuring formal anti-discrimination, working towards substantive equality, and managing diversity (Bell, 2003).

And, across the Atlantic, diversity emerged as a significant concept in US affirmative action debates in 1996, with a Court of Appeals ruling that the race-conscious affirmative action program at the University of Texas (Austin) Law School could not be justified on the grounds of the desire to promote ‘diversity’, only to be overturned by a Supreme Court decision in 2003 in two cases (*Gratz* and *Grutter*), which established that promoting diversity...
could indeed provide the central justification for affirmative action policies. This ruling established diversity as a central concern in US college admissions debates, with the Association of American Universities and Colleges proclaiming diversity as ‘a comprehensive institutional commitment and educational priority’. At the same time ‘diversity management’ emerged as a key human resource management strategy within the corporate sector and is now a central element of good business practice in North America. 84 percent of human resource professionals at Fortune 500 companies say their top-level executives think diversity management is important. As the Society for Human Resource Management tells us: ‘appropriate management of a diverse workforce is critical for organizations that seek to improve and maintain their competitive advantage.’ (13/09/04)

Accordingly, North American diversity management consultants predict that Europe will follow North America in embracing diversity management (Wrench, 2005:74)

What are we to make of the ubiquity of ‘diversity’? Where did this preoccupation with diversity come from, and what does it signify? I aim to interrogate the presuppositions implied in the policy commitment to promote diversity: if valuing and managing diversity is widely viewed to be a desirable aim, what is the problem that it is addressing, and why has this come to be seen as significant? In order to consider this question, I want to explore the contingent struggles that have given rise to this concern with ‘diversity’, considering the possibilities and limitations inherent in the construction of diversity debates. How did diversity come onto the political agenda? What does the promotion of diversity facilitate? And what does it obscure?

One might consider, rather schematically, two quite different narratives regarding the emergence of ‘diversity’ as a central policy concern. The first would view the emergence of ‘diversity’ as reflecting the claims of marginalized cultural groups, social movements, and difference theorists. The second would view ‘diversity’ as a managerial policy and modality of governance, devised as a means to pursue economic productivity with greater efficiency. These represent two distinct frames from which different constituencies seek to negotiate diversity (Benford and Snow, 2000). These frames map the ways in particular stakeholders make sense of ‘diversity’, define the sort of problem that it represents and the types of actions that should be taken in response to it. I hope to show that social movement actors

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1 The University of Michigan Law School case, *Gruett v. Bollinger*, was decided by the Supreme Court in June 2003. Justice Sandra Day O'Conner's lead opinion declared: 'today we endorse Justice Powell's view that student body diversity is a compelling state interest that can justify the use of race in university admissions.' *Gruett v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003), at 330.

2 See ‘Diversity Web’, an interactive resource hub for higher education [http://www.diversityweb.org/](http://www.diversityweb.org/) run by the Association of American Universities and Colleges. The site is designed to serve campus practitioners seeking to place diversity at the center of the academy's educational and societal mission.

3 See, for example DiversityInc.com, which was launched in 1998 to provide education and clarity on the business benefits of diversity. DiversityInc magazine is published nine times a year and has a circulation rate base of 150,000.

4 As Carol Bacchi suggests that, 'every policy problem contains within it an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem' (Bacchi 1999:1-2). She reminds us that an awareness of the presuppositions implied in the representation of the policy problem allows reflection on the ways in which responses would differ if the problem were represented otherwise (Bacchi 1999:1-2).

5 I am using 'frames' here to signal basic cognitive structures that guide the perception and representation of reality. 'Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters.' (Gitlin, 1980: 6)
and corporate human resource managers frame diversity in distinct ways. This assumes that both social movements and corporate managers are actively engaged in framing and reframing their projects in ways that construct strategic choices in line with their own interests and beliefs. I will also suggest that diversity has become a 'bridging frame' that brings social movement concerns within dominant cultural belief systems (see Veldoo 2001). In this way the current concern with 'valuing diversity' does indeed reflect certain of the demands of social movements and difference theorists, however these demands have been inflected by the concerns of the business sector in general and human resource managers in particular. This demarcates its scope in very particular ways.

For whilst social movements activists and difference theorists can choose to frame diversity in politically strategic ways, they do so within interpretive repertoires, or discourses, that are not of their choosing (Potter and Wetherell, 1990: 205-6). Given that diversity emerges as a central political project at a point when neo-liberalism has become the 'common-sense of the times' (Peck and Tickell 2002: 381), it is worth considering whether diversity management could usefully be understood as one of the political projects that now constitute the current neo-liberal order. As diversity comes to be associated with modernization, so diversity becomes discursively bound up both with the pursuit of creativity, flexibility and adaptability - and hence economic success. As it comes to be associated with efficiency, so diversity becomes discursively bound up with the pursuit of transparency, responsiveness and inclusivity – and hence good governance. In these ways the pursuit of diversity increasingly appears to be complicating in a technocratic managerialism that normalizes neo-liberalism. The hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism could be said to constrain the possible framings of diversity, making it more difficult for social movement activists and difference theorists to frame diversity in relation to their pursuit of social justice than it is for corporate managers to frame diversity in relation to their pursuit of economic productivity.

Hence, those who have the responsibility for devising, articulating and implementing equality strategies are generally acutely aware of the pressure they face to make these strategies 'fit' with other policy priorities. Neo-liberal approaches to the running of public services, for example, have brought a greater emphasis on new managerialism, markets, audit cultures and performance targets, developing priorities such as efficiency, effectiveness and value for money rather than workforce equality (see Deem and Morley 2005). As a result, equality professionals are all too familiar with the importance of making a 'business case' for greater equality, of showing the ways in which 'diversity' is a central element of 'modernization', of convincing sceptics that 'equality and diversity' is a route to greater economic productivity, or institutional efficiency.

However, if one accepts that neo-liberalism is not in fact a monolithic project but is rather a confluence of a plethora of discrete political struggles (Latter 2005:1-2), it becomes possible to view the pursuit of diversity as a product of both managerial governance and other more oppositional social movement aims and achievements – but with different values and goals.

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6 See Benford and Snow (2000: 613) on social movements engaging in purposeful framing strategies, and Kaplan (2005: 4) on strategic framing within the firm.
attached. In this way, it becomes possible to assess different framings of ‘diversity’ for their political potential and dangers, and to explore the ways in which ‘frame bridging’ allows actors to pursue diverse aims, whilst acknowledging that these frames are inevitably discursively constrained and therefore not freely chosen. The important issue for consideration, is not whether diversity emerges as a result of the priorities and activities of either difference theorists or corporate managers – for it is clearly both – but rather to explore whether difference theorists have been successful in their attempt to strategically frame their pursuit of social justice in terms of key organisational goals of the corporate sector; or – on the other hand – whether difference theorists have become rhetorically entrapped by the corporate frame such that a subordinate discourse of social justice is eclipsed by a hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism.

In order to illustrate the way in which the emergence of diversity is a product of distinct projects, each of which aspires to certain goals, and obfuscates certain others, I will firstly survey social movement and difference theorist’s claims that aspire to recognition and democratic inclusion; and secondly outline corporate human resource management practices in pursuit of economic productivity. I hope to show that these two constituencies frame diversity in distinct, but interlocking ways. This suggests that one might usefully consider whether difference theorists have been successful in strategically framing social justice in terms of diversity, or whether they have become rhetorically entrapped by corporate managers into framing diversity in terms of economic productivity.

Social Movement Recognition Claims

It has been suggested that policy-makers and political theorists operate on an ‘egalitarian plateau’, in which everyone accepts that citizens should be treated as equals (see Kymlicka, 1990: 5). However, there is a profound disagreement as to what ‘treating people as equals’ requires. Whilst previous generations debated the relative merits of equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome (see Tawney, 1931: 291) few now hold equality of outcome as a political ideal (Dworkin, 2002). Perhaps because equalising outcomes has come to be viewed as denying choice (see Phillips 2004:1), and so deliberately impinging on the effective functioning of the neoliberal market, the liberal egalitarian literature is characterized, with a very few exceptions by consideration of different sorts of equality of opportunity (Swift, 2001).

Yet the dominance of this approach to equality has been challenged by various social movements, who insist that liberal egalitarianism has privatized gendered, cultural, religious and other differences, failing to focus on the importance of the diversity of ways of thought, of life, tastes and moral perspectives. From this perspective, treating people as equals requires giving due acknowledgement to each person’s identity, and this entails recognition of what is peculiar to each (Taylor, 1992: 39). This assertion of the importance of group difference challenges the individualism of liberal egalitarianism, emphasising instead the culturally embedded nature of people. Whilst liberal egalitarians do of course acknowledge that individuals differ culturally and religiously, they tend to view these differences as contingent and politically non-pertinent. From the perspective of a politics of recognition, this move is suspect: far from abstracting differences, liberal politics and policies have more frequently institutionalised the values and norms of the dominant culture. Difference theorists therefore suggest that the state should: acknowledge the diversity of cultures within
the polity; grant laws that exempt some groups from laws and not others; create political institutions that give special group representation rights to marginalized groups; and modify cultural symbols in recognition of the presence of diverse groups (see Kymlicka 1995). This gives rise to a concern with the recognition of difference.

Cultural recognition is therefore introduced onto the egalitarian agenda, eclipsing the primary status previously given to issues of redistribution. In this way the shift in concern from economic to cultural inequalities is accompanied by a shift in focus from sameness to difference. Equality now appears to require a respect for difference rather than a search for similarities. It also tends to focus on the importance of equality between groups rather than between individuals, incorporating analyses of the systems and structures that constitute and perpetuate the inequalities under consideration in the first place.

Nor was it only theorists of cultural and ethnic diversity that turned their focus from formal equality to a concern with the recognition of difference: similar developments also characterised other social movements. For instance, authors working within the framework of gender justice tend to critique liberal-egalitarian theories of distributive justice as gender-blind and androcentric. For example, many theories of egalitarian justice assume that the concept of justice applies only to the public sphere, taking distributions within the family as given. Feminist political theorists have argued that analyses of social justice that are sensitive to gender need to include the private sphere and consider the gendered division of labour within it (see Bubec 1995, Okin 1989, Pateman 1987 and Phillips 1997). Feminist theorists argue that, in the context of a patriarchal society, the pursuit of gender equality is constantly entraped by exaggeration and denial (Rhode 1992:149).

As a result, debates about equality within feminist writings have been shaped by a perception, frequently referred to as 'Wollstonecraft's dilemma' (Pateman 1989:196-7), that equality and difference are antagonistic aims. 'Throughout its history,' argue Bock and James 'women's liberation has been seen sometimes as the right to be equal, sometimes as the right to be different.' (Bock and James 1992:4) The central tension between these two positions arises from a dispute as to whether a commitment to gender-neutrality can ever be achieved by pursuing a strategy of equality. Whilst some argue that women should demand equality within existing institutions, others feel that, in the context of a patriarchal society, the pursuit of equality might inevitably result in requiring everyone to assimilate to the dominant gender norm of masculinity. Those who believe the former to be possible fall within the 'equality' perspective; those who are sceptical adopt a 'difference' perspective. Put bluntly, women appear to be faced by a clear choice: in a society where the male is the norm, one can - as a woman - pursue either assimilation or differentiation. One can aim to transcend one's gendered particularity, or to affirm it: pursue 'gender-neutrality' or seek 'gender-visibility'.

As Fraser notes, '(f)rom the equality perspective, then, gender difference appeared to be inextricable from sexism. The political task was thus clear: the goal of feminism was to throw off the shackles of 'difference' and establish equality, bringing men and women under a common measure.' (Fraser 1997:100). By contrast, difference theorists accept and even
celebrate gender differences. The nurturing, peace-loving, intuitive and emotional qualities of women are celebrated rather than subordinated. The individualistic, competitive, rational qualities of existing social structures are viewed with suspicion and hostility rather than admiration and longing. The existence of these two distinct strategies has haunted feminist debates since their inception. As Joan Scott notes: 'When equality and difference are paired dichotomously', she argues, 'they structure an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable.' (Scott 1997:765) One can see clear traces of this 'impossible choice' within the current invocation of 'equality and diversity'. The assertion that minority cultures' or women's perspectives are of value and that equality is problematic if equated with sameness are now to be found echoed in current 'diversity' discourses.

Another feature of these earlier social movement reflections on equality was the assertion that knowledge is not objective and the social identity and interests of the enquirer always delimit knowledge claims. The acknowledgement of the situated nature of knowledge reinforced demands that difference be positively recognised. Theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, argued that women as a group are more likely to use concrete knowledge and dialogue than are men (Collins 1991:201-19). Feminist standpoint theorists argued that in a patriarchal context, what is perceived to be objective will actually prove to be an articulation of men's experiences and men's perspectives (Harding 1991). Whilst Joan Tronto argued, more generally, that there was a distinct form of moral reasoning common to all marginalised social groups as a result of their particular historical exclusion (1993). The aim of these theorists was not to break the link between experience and knowledge, but to enable a different set of experiences to provide the basis for new knowledge claims. This claim focused attention on the link between identity and knowledge, reinforcing arguments for the recognition of difference.

Yet social movement theorists have voiced concerns about this celebration of difference, suspicious of the tendency towards reification of group difference. These concerns lead to the development of a theory of intersectionality. Critics argued that the politics of recognition formalizes and freezes identities that are actually subject to constant change and thereby reinforcing the tendency of such groups to become exclusionary to outsiders and coercive to insiders (Kiss 1999:194). Benhabib, for instance, argues that it is 'theoretically wrong and politically dangerous' to assume that the individual's search for authentic subjecthood should be subordinated to the struggles of groups (2002:53). From this perspective, the celebration of group difference is too unitary to be sensitive to the contradictions and antagonisms within as well as between groups.

As a result of these charges social movements and difference theorists become increasingly attentive (in theory if not in practice) to the intersections between multiple forms of group exclusion, with arguments regarding 'intersectionality' being explored amongst equality professionals. As Craig Calhoun notes: 'To combine gender with race, language, sexual orientation, concrete interpersonal relations, and a host of other dimensions of identity is no easy or uncomplicated thing. But it from the recognition of this complexity and these contradictions that we must start.' (Calhoun, 1995: )
Social movements frequently started from the premise that their group members share common experiences of institutionalized discrimination, legalised marginalisation, and cultural oppression, and that these shared experiences provide the basis for a collective politics. Many of these analyses depended on a logic of group solidarity, which critics suggest equates all too easily to a presumption of group uniformity. Sceptics fear that the work of recognition theorists proceeds from an assumption of a readily identifiable, homogeneous, singular essence, which leaves little space for explanation of intra-group differences. Intersectionality emerges as a critique of this logic, exploring the effect of in-group essentialism, in which a sub-set of a group seeks to fix the characteristics of a specific identity, marginalizing those group members who differ in other aspects of their identity (Hancock, 2005: 8). The pursuit of diversity from this frame is therefore motivated by a perception that those who share multiple marginalized identities face challenges that are qualitatively different from those who do not (see Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Those who remain sceptical about diversity do so from a fear that the particular forms of inequality suffered by their group will be marginalized.

What becomes clear from this brief survey of the politics of difference literature is that from this perspective diversity signifies the recognition of difference, the acknowledgement of situated knowledge, and the acceptance of intersectionality.

Corporate Human Resource Management Practices
Meanwhile, within the corporate world, there is an increasing emphasis on diversity policies as an important complement to equal opportunity policies (Price 2003). These diversity initiatives are widely argued to improve the quality of organizations’ workforces and act as a catalyst for a better return on companies’ investment in human capital. They are also argued to help businesses to capitalize on new markets, attract the best and the brightest employees, increase creativity, and keep the organization flexible (see Cartwright 2001).

As one management guru tells us: ‘People are the most precious resource that any organization has... In managerial and organizational terms, diversity presents the opportunity provided by new skills and ideas as well as the opening up of new markets.’ (Cartwright, 2001:2) Tapping into the benefits of diversity requires new managerial practices, which recognize that ‘there will be different personalities and aspirations’ within any workforce (2001, 2). Once managers recognize that ‘nobody is better than anybody else’, they will be able to harness diversity to make their organisation more productive (Thomas, 1992).

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7 Much of the work on intersectionality draws on the writings of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who highlights the problems that arise when a legal system (in this case the US legal system) allows ‘women of color’ to claim either racial discrimination or gender discrimination, but offers no space to argue that a particular policy targets Black women disproportionately (Crenshaw, 1995).

8 R. Roosevelt Thomas, founder of the American Institute for Managing Diversity and author of Beyond Race and Gender 1992), is widely viewed to have alerted corporate America ‘of the need to move beyond equal employment opportunities in addressing the challenge of empowering a diverse workforce’ and is cited by Human Resource Executive as one of HR’s Most Influential People. See: http://www.ethoschannel.com/prodevelopment/r-thomas/r-thomas_bio.html
The business case for diversity advocates not just ‘valuing diversity’ but ‘managing diversity’. The Society for Human Resource Management makes this distinction explicit. Valuing diversity entails awareness, education and positive recognition of the difference among people. Where workplace equity initiatives introduced as part of affirmative action strategies focused on changing the representation of under-represented groups in the workforce, these ‘valuing diversity’ initiatives focus on the quality of the work experience in addition to participation rates. Diversity management, by contrast, focuses on the business case for diversity. ‘Under this scenario, capitalizing on diversity is seen as a strategic approach to business that contributes to organizational goals such as profits and productivity. It also does not involve any legal requirements and is not implemented just to avoid lawsuits.

Managing diversity moves beyond valuing diversity in that it is a way in which to do business and should be aligned with other organizational strategic plans.’

(www.shrm.org/diversity/businesscase.asp 13/09/04)

So Microsoft publicly endorse valuing diversity – ‘We need to value each other’s differences and treat one another fairly and with respect and dignity, and promote diversity management – ’Levenging diversity is also critical to the success of our business. Our workforce must reflect the diversity of our customers, partners, stockholders and the communities around the world in which we do business. We need the insights, creativity, and diverse perspectives that a range of employees can bring to the table in order to become a better, stronger, and smarter company.’ How these public affirmations relate to practices within the company is – of course – crucial, but here I simply want to signal that there is a public affirmation of diversity.

The ‘Business Case’ for diversity usually entails three claims: that there is a talent shortage; companies need to reflect their customers; and diverse teams produce better results. Firstly, it is suggested that where there is a shortage of qualified talent and that employers who are committed to promoting diversity attract interesting employees, so improving recruitment and retention ⁹. Moreover, where employees expect more from organizations in terms of non-discriminatory, ‘hostile-free workplaces’ ¹⁰ and family-friendly policies, a company’s return on investment is reduced if employees lack commitment and motivation and money is spent on legal fees and settlements. Secondly, it is argued that customer bases are becoming ever more diverse and where employees mirror the customers they can understand these customers, identifying their needs and suggesting potential new markets. Thirdly, it is argued that the bringing together of employees from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds will generate a ‘dynamic synergy’ of increased creativity. Additionally, amongst organisations that do not have customers per se, such as the International Monetary Fund for instance, diversity is perceived as a matter of corporate legitimacy and accountability, enabling them to claim good governance in terms of being ‘modern’, representative and expertly staffed. For such organisations diversity management is less about managing a diverse workforce, or

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⁹ For example, Gene Tucker, Director of Equal Employment Opportunity and Workforce Diversity in Schering-Plough’s Pharmaceutical Division, states: ‘In order to ensure that we are competitive with anyone in the global marketplace, we have to be sure that we’re getting the best help we can. If you exclude any particular group, by gender, race, or religion, you would be excluding the person who’s going to discover the next blockbuster product or someone who can contribute in another meaningful way in marketing engineering, or elsewhere.’ http://www.professionalpractice.asme.org/communications/diversity/1.htm

¹⁰ The idea of ‘hostile-free workplaces’ is used to describe workplaces in which sexual and racial harassment is absent. See Workplace Solutions: http://www.wseap.com/membercomp/harassment.html
understanding a diverse customer base, than it is about legitimising or transforming elite and unrepresentative workforces. The fact that such institutions also have diversity strategies and diversity managers, largely as a process of corporate legitimisation, is testimony to the strength of the corporate diversity frame.

Diversity has also emerged as a central concern for personnel managers within the public sector. The International Personnel Management Association (IPMA), which aims to optimise organizational and individual performance in the public service by providing human resource leadership, professional development and services, uses ‘diversity’ as an indicator of best practice amongst its members. Its Benchmarking Committee states that: ‘diversity efforts in the workplace facilitate the exchange of new perspectives, improve problem solving by inviting different ideas, and create a respectful, accepting work environment, all of which makes good business sense.’ They maintain that ‘organisations can be strengthened by leveraging differences that mirror the diversity of its citizens.’ (UN Expert Group Meeting, May 2001)

These claims emerge at about the same time as social theorists were suggesting that knowledge has replaced labour and property as the ‘constitutive’ basis of social relations, and that knowledge has become ‘immediately productive’. (Bohme and Stehr 1986: 18) As IBM state, when offering consultancy in knowledge management:

An organization’s strength is no longer measured by physical assets alone. Today, experiences and insights – in other words, knowledge – are the most critical elements of a successful portfolio. Knowledge is not housed in the ‘organization’, however; knowledge lives in people. Knowledge Management focuses on ways of sharing and storing the knowledge of individuals, as a means of improving the competency, speed, efficiency – and profitability – of the larger whole.’

The idea that knowledge is a force for wealth creation is now widely articulated by our political leaders. The DTI, for example, told us back in 1998 that:

A knowledge driven economy is one in which the generation and the exploitation of knowledge has come to play the predominant part in the creation of wealth. It is not simply about pushing back the frontiers of knowledge; it is also about the more effective use and exploitation of all types of knowledge in all manner of economic activity. (DTI 1998, para 1.5)

This preoccupation with the ‘knowledge driven economy’ makes political and business leaders particularly receptive to claims that certain social groups (especially ethnic and religious) have particular forms of knowledge arising from their particular experiences, and

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11 A Government White Paper, ‘Our Competitive Future - Building the Knowledge Driven Economy’ (Cm 4176), was published in December 1998. It set out the competitive challenge facing the UK, a new model for how public policy can help business meet the challenge, and flagship programmes to promote entrepreneurship, innovation, business learning and modern, competitive markets. Announcing the Paper, Tony Blair stated: ‘The modern world is swept by change. This new world challenges business to be innovative and creative, to improve performance continuously, to build new alliances and ventures. But it also challenges Government to create and execute a new approach to industrial policy. That is the purpose of this White Paper.’ http://www.dti.gov.uk/comp/
particularly concerned to tap into these diverse knowledge bases by including these social
groups in the corporate sector. Significantly, politicians also increasingly appeal to the
concept of diversity as a management strategy, such that 'diversity has become one of the
catch-phrases of equality law' (Fredman 2002: 8). The UK Cabinet Office, for instance,
suggests that: 'A diverse workforce can be more creative than one which has been recruited
in the image of a particular manager. It may be able to establish new clients for the business,
and help to reach a wider market.' (Cabinet Office, 2001: 18). Meanwhile, Barbara Roche
(then Junior Minister for Women) told an Institute for Public Policy Research conference
that equality and diversity 'are good for business too.' (Roche 15th May 2002) A couple of
months later she asserted that 'the business case for diversity is becoming harder to resist as
a diverse workforce gives employers a competitive edge.' (Roche 15th July 2002). This
suggests that the business case for diversity as a management strategy has been embraced by
our political leaders as well as by our corporate and public sector managers.

Human resource managers in both the corporate and public sector frame their concern with
diversity in ways that clearly resemble claims made by social movements about situated
knowledge. They are also attentive to the fact that many of their most highly prized
employees have themselves been schooled in the politics of social movements and bring
these values to their employment negotiations. Yet they channel these claims into their
preset priorities and inflect them with their own preoccupations. As a result, for businesses
diversity signifies (at least in their official corporate statements), a better return on their
investment in human capital, a way to capitalize on new markets, increase creativity, and
secure economic gain.

Limitations and Possibilities
The current preoccupation with diversity appears to be a product of a number of inter-
related political projects, which have come together to define the contours of a new equality
frame – one which focuses on individual diversity but does not talk about economic
inequality. This frame makes certain things seem possible or desirable, and others as
impossible or undesirable.

By way of considering what diversity facilitates and what it obscures, I will briefly consider
whether diversity strategies build upon prior equality strategies, offering a more sophisticated
way to achieve equality. Or whether the celebration of diversity eclipses equality concerns,
merging the concern with social justice in favour of a narrow corporate managerialism.
I will suggest that both accounts have some validity. Valuing diversity does augment
previous equality of opportunity and positive action programmes to the benefit of
marginalised groups. It has greater corporate support (in North America and increasingly
the UK) than do positive action policies and is therefore more likely to be implemented. It
extends the criteria of skill, talent and knowledge to the advantage of previously marginalized
social groups. And it has the potential to reconsider differences whilst avoiding the
reification of groups. However, there are limitations to the current celebration of diversity
as well. There is a concern that the shift in focus from group difference to individual
diversity will lead to the marginalisation of the expertise and concerns of particular equality
strands, and more generally may result a loss of attention to structural disadvantage.
Moreover, the corporate commitment to ‘managing diversity’ is a narrow project, aiming to
increase the economic productivity of businesses, which prioritises a ‘business case’ for
diversity rather than a wider concern with social justice in a manner that demeans claims to social inclusion.

**What Diversity Facilitates**

Diversity management has gained much wider degrees of corporate support in North America than did affirmative action policies, which were the favoured equality strategies prior to the emergence of the diversity approach. Affirmative action is widely understood to be ‘...a policy that gives a preference to individuals based upon their belonging to designated groups who are under-represented not only in the most desirable occupational classes, but also school admissions and government contracts.’ (Boylan, 2002:117). Maximalist approaches to affirmative action have frequently been criticized on the grounds that they establish quotas ‘that unjustifiably elevate the opportunities of members of targeted groups, discriminate against equally qualified or even more qualified members of majorities, and perpetuate racial and sexual paternalism.’ (Beauchamp, 1997:143). Diversity management avoids these charges by excising all reference to ‘groups’ and structural inequality, focusing instead on individuals and their multifaceted talents. Where affirmative action attempts to address the structural disadvantage of certain social groups, diversity management aims only to recognise the different personalities and aspirations of individual employees.

This approach melds more readily with the norms of individualism and meritocracy that characterise neo-liberal politics. So, for example, in the US - where public debate, Supreme Court rulings and the Clinton Affirmative Action Review have rendered hard affirmative action measures both unpopular and illegal - there has been a trend towards developing diversity management programmes, which do not rely on numerical targets and quotas. There is much greater support for these types of programmes, not least because there is evidence that promoting workforce diversity is correlated with high quality employees, reduced rates of absenteeism, and increased customer satisfaction (Beauchamp 1998:152-3). This facilitates the wider adoption of equality strategies throughout the corporate sector than might otherwise have been possible.

Indeed, European businesses and public sector organisations appear to be following North American companies in embracing diversity management techniques (see Wrench, 2005:75). For some equality professionals – in both the public and private sector - have found that the emergence of a diversity framework can facilitate positive change, not least because of its newness and lack of association with increasingly stigmatised projects of social justice such as positive discrimination policies, thereby escaping the trap of ‘equity fatigue’ (see Ahmed, 2005: 4).

Moreover, the pursuit of diversity management broadens the criteria of ‘merit’, which has proven so controversial in previous equality debates, to the advantage of previously marginalized groups. Critics of affirmative action tend to argue that educational attainment, test scores, school grades, years of experience and so on, are our best measure of skills and talents. This suggests that the hiring or promotion of those with weaker measures along these dimensions over those with stronger ones constitutes ‘reverse discrimination’. On the other hand, proponents of affirmative action frequently distinguish between ‘credentials’ and ‘performance’, arguing that credentials are a weak predictor of performance in many cases and so individuals with weak credentials might be hired or promoted if there is other
evidence of expected high levels of productivity (see Holzer and Neumark, 2000). Diversity management makes a distinctive contribution to this debate by offering a broader conception of skills, talents and knowledge. For example, Boylan maintains that consideration should be given only to applicants capable of performing the job, engaging with the academic work at a comparable level and executing the contract(s) to the requirements of proposals, yet he also notes that identically qualified candidates do not exist per se and that a broader, more flexible vision of someone capable of fulfilling the job is required (Boylan, 2002).

In this way the situated knowledge of diverse groups comes to be valued as potentially productive, which gives employers grounds for reflecting on the way in which they construct their criteria of merit. As Young points out, it is a widely held principle of justice that positions and rewards should be distributed according to individual merit, measured as the greatest skill for performing the tasks that positions require (1990: 2000). Many liberal egalitarian theorists have tried to challenge this reliance on merit, distinguishing between talent and effort (see Dworkin 2002:87), but these theoretical moves have had little impact on practical equality policies. Yet the theoretical assertions of standpoint theorists appear to have borne more fruit in terms of diversifying measures of job performance. Acknowledging the limited nature of previous measures of merit, such as aptitude test scores that measure a candidate's learned ability to make quick strategic guesses, many university admissions officers are increasingly rethinking their criteria of merit in line with research that shows that the ability to work collaboratively and to learn from diverse perspectives constitutes a kind of emotional intelligence that is highly correlated with career advancement and leadership, but is not measured by numerical scores on aptitude tests (Guinier, 2001). The recognition that the criteria used to determine qualifications tend to embody culturally specific values and may not be the best indicator of job performance could be a vital development in eroding group disadvantage in employment equality.

In addition, diversity management tends to focus on individual diversity rather than group difference. In this way it may be better able to negotiate issues surrounding intersectionality than are group-based equality policies. Liberal egalitarians have argued that the politics of recognition formalizes and freezes identities that are actually subject to constant change and thereby undermines solidarity across groups. Anxieties about ‘the problem of reification’ (Ferber 2000: 108) have led advocates of a politics of difference to argue that groups can best be viewed in relational rather than substantial terms. In this way they hope to ‘retain a description of social group differentiation, but without fixing or reifying groups...’ (Young 2000:89-90) The question remains, however, how this reconceptualization of ‘groups’ impacts on the actual political strategies advocated in the name of these groups. Diversity management might conceivably avoid this problem of reification by focusing on diversity amongst individuals rather than groups. For example, in the US Grutter v. Bollinger case, Justice O’Connor noted that: “The [Law School’s] policy aspired to “achieve that diversity which has the potential to enrich everyone’s education and thus make a law class stronger than the sum of its parts.” [...] The policy does not restrict the types of diversity contributions eligible for substantial weight in the admissions process, but instead recognizes “many possible bases for diversity admissions.”” (Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U. S. 306, at 325) This suggests that diversity policies could be used to address social exclusion whilst remaining flexible regarding the particular groups deemed to be
excluded. In this way diversity policies might manage to embrace many of the challenges levelled against liberal egalitarianism, without falling into the pitfalls of a politics of difference \(^2\). This no doubt explains, in some part, its current appeal. \(^3\) This suggests that diversity management facilitates the increased adoption of equality strategies by the corporate sector and extends the criteria of merit in employment practices to the advantage of previously marginalized groups. It also opens up the possibility of valuing diversity without assuming group homogeneity.

**What Diversity Obscures**

However, the pursuit of diversity management also obscures certain issues and approaches in ways that limit its potential. One of the most immediate concerns of equality professionals and social movements is that the claims of their particular group will be marginalized, and the resources devoted to their demands reduced.

For instance, critics have suggested that these policies will dilute policies against racism and ethnic discrimination ‘by mixing them with policies relating to other groups’ (Wrench 2005: 76). These arguments frequently entail claims that some social groups have suffered greater oppression than others, raising debates about hierarchies of oppression, but also include concern that forms of exclusion have simply differed, and therefore remedies need to be tailored accordingly. Women’s advocates, for instance, have focused attention on the importance of private sphere discrimination (Lovenduski, 2005). Whilst an ‘additive’ model of politics that leads to competition between marginal groups for scarce resources has its own attendant difficulties, the alternative in which groups are fractured into ever more sub-categories generates concerns that structural analysis will be replaced with ‘mere description’ (Hancock, 2005:11).

The fear that structural analysis will be lost is borne out by the tendency of diversity management to treat all differences as of an equal status, shorn of the political concern with structural inequality. In this way human resource managers address not only those differences that intersectionality theorists focus upon – such as race, gender, age, disability and sexuality, but also diverse personalities, working styles, and speed of learning. As BankBoston make clear: ‘Diversity at BankBoston is defined broadly to include group differences (based on age, race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, parental status or job group, for instance) and individual differences, includes communication styles, career experience, and other variables.’ (http://www.hrasm.org/DiversityInitiatives/)

Critics of the human resource management frame argue that diversity has come to mean little more than the diversity of opinions, wants and desires in a consumer’s market. As

\(^2\) Indeed, one of the most influential diversity management texts, by Roosevelt R. Thomas, is called *Beyond Race and Gender*, suggesting that diversity does not focus on groups in the way that affirmative action programmes do.

\(^3\) However, Justice O’Connor also notes that: ‘The policy does, however, reaffirm the Law School’s longstanding commitment to “one particular type of diversity,” that is, “racial and ethnic diversity with special reference to the inclusion of students from groups which have been historically discriminated against.”’ (Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U. S. 306, at 323)
Clark et al (1994) argue, the new managerialist emphasis on diversity individualises the notion of disadvantage, and reduce it to individual needs and wants and not collective or systemic disadvantage to a group over time or discrimination against an individual due to their colour, race of sex. To the extent that diversity management is 'severed from the histories of wider structural and cultural inequalities premised upon race and racism, gender, ethnicity and class' (Mohanty, 1997: xiv) it obscures the sources of the differences it seeks to exploit, focusing on the characteristics of employees or applicants rather than the structures that create and perpetuate these characteristics.

Another concern is that employers might not experience diversity as producing competitive advantage (Fredman, 2002): the diversification of the workforce may create institutional tensions rather than increased productivity, in which case the pragmatic business case for diversity loses its purchase. Alternatively, diversity management may be employed selectively in relation to certain social groups and not others if representatives of particular groups are perceived to offer greater business advantages than others. In which case 'diversity' would undermine rather than increase equality between groups. It may also entrench cultural stereotypes in the process by assuming that a person's age, religion, gender, sexuality, race or disability are unproblematically associated with certain characteristics, and that 'customers of the same gender, age, orientation or religion share those characteristics or identity with them.' (Fredman, 2002: 9) To the extent that it relies on such assumptions, diversity management paradoxically affirms sameness.

The business case for diversity resonates with the logic of standpoint theorists, claiming that tacit knowledge is a significant asset, that this knowledge is accessed through identities, and shared by those with similar identities, into the knowledge economy thesis. In doing so, diversity advocates turn our attention away from the remedial argument previously used to justify positive discrimination or affirmative action policies, emphasising social gain rather than group grievance. This approach focuses on the future potential contribution of the individual, rather than their historical exclusion. It requires no admission of previous wrong, no acknowledgement of social injustice or structural discrimination. It focuses instead on the positive contribution that a diverse student body or workforce can have, for the institution, its clients and shareholders. In this way the argument is narrowed, no longer framed by issues of social justice, but reduced to issues of corporate productivity.

In so doing, it could be argued that diversity management diverts theoretical and practical attention away from issues of redistribution to those of recognition, just as liberal egalitarians warned it would. Brian Barry, for instance, asserts that: 'Diverting attention away from shared disadvantages such as unemployment, poverty, low-quality housing and inadequate public services in an obvious long-term anti-egalitarian objective.' (Barry 2001:11-12). By focusing on the characteristics of the employee rather the structures that create inequalities diversity management may contribute to the displacement of struggles to address economic inequality by allowing governments and businesses to claim that they are pursuing equality by recognising diversity, whilst doing nothing to address economic inequality.

Supporting this thesis, there is a growing literature that critiques the emergence of the 'diversity' discourse in terms of the loss of focus on redistributive justice. Deem and Osa, for instance, argue in relation to their work on gender equality in higher education: 'Whereas the concepts of equity and equal opportunities imply an underlying concept of social justice
For all and active endeavours to change this, the notion of diversity invokes the existence of difference and variety without any necessary commitment to action or redistributive justice.’ (Deen and Ozga 1997: 33) ‘Diversity’ is increasingly used to focus attention on economic productivity, which serves to obscure wider issues of social justice. In this way the emergence of diversity management reduces the scope of equality concerns, depoliticising social relations and containing equality objectives within a utilitarian market model (Wrench, 2005:78). The business case for diversity, which the current UK government is so keen to promote, therefore resonates with and adds weight to the pursuit of social inclusion via the creation of a modern ‘flexible’ labour market (Levitas, 1998). Diversity management becomes a strategy to increase the employment rates of certain currently under-represented sectors of society, facilitating both social integration and economic competitiveness. Whether this also facilitates social justice is another question.

For, one could argue that the entire human resource management framing of diversity is itself problematic, obscuring everything that constitutes our humanity that is not economically productive. As David Bernans argues: ‘The term “human resources” does not simply valorize only the commodified part of people’s existence; it denies that there is anything else to be said about the human beings referred to. From this perspective, human beings are resources with certain human “peculiarities” attached that have to be taken into account by the “HR” department in order to extract all the benefits that this form of capital can offer.’ (Bernans, 2002: 55) This suggests that the term ‘human resources’ is paradoxically dehumanising, with the focus on ‘resources’ obliterating the complexity of the ‘human’. By framing ‘diversity’ in terms of human resource management advocates appear to be taking differences into account whilst reducing ‘difference’ those characteristics of human capital that the corporation can take advantage of – which might be interpreted as a radical denial of difference 14. In other words, whilst diverting attention away from redistributive issues, ‘diversity management’ fails to offer ‘recognition’ in the manner that difference theorists advocate: indeed it entails systematic ‘misrecognition’ (Bernans, 2002: 55).

Strategic Frame Bridging or Rhetorical Entrapment?

I am suggesting that diversity has been framed as both a politics of difference and a managerial strategy. However, the relative status of these two framings is not comparable. This framing has been takes place within a hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism, which renders discourses of egalitarian social justice subordinate. Frame diversity effectively via the subordinate discourse is therefore inevitably more challenging. One can ‘bridge’ to the hegemonic discourse, thereby gaining political prominence, but this also entails altering the articulation of diversity in the process. Assuming the possibility that we can speak the discourse and well as the discourse speaking us (Ball, 1990: 17-18), the challenge is to reframe diversity within hegemonic discourse.

I am not suggesting that the politics of difference is peculiarly susceptible to rhetorical entrapment, or open to frame bridging. The arguments for a radical form of equality of opportunity, previously advocated by liberal egalitarians, have also become rhetorically

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14 Many thanks to Chris Armstrong for raising this point and for recommending David Bernans’ article to me.
entrappped in the pursuit of neo-liberal market agendas according to some critics. For instance, Ronald Dworkin articulates a radical form of equality of opportunity by recommending that people start with ‘equal resources’ (which may require the state to compensate some people for their ‘natural’ disabilities and lack of talent), and are then allowed to pursue their ambitions within the marketplace (with a laissez-faire state) (2002:87). The distribution of resources must be allowed to be ambition-sensitive, but not talent-sensitive - because talents are ‘traceable to genetic luck’ and therefore arbitrary with respect to social justice (2002:108). In other words, Dworkin starts with a presumption of equality, asks what would justify inequality, and suggests that whilst differential talent would not, differential ambition would.

This account of equality of opportunity has been claimed as ‘radical’ by its advocates, however critics suggest that Dworkin’s account of equality of opportunity has been successful because it incorporates the key concerns of the anti-egalitarian right: choice and responsibility (Armstrong 2003:415). The liberal egalitarian literature assumes that one can distinguish between talent and ambition and be relatively sure which part of an individual’s life is the result of each. Armstrong suggests that it therefore focuses attention on the market and resonates with the neo-liberal rhetoric of economic competitiveness. Indeed, liberal egalitarians are increasingly likely to advocate the free market as the most appropriate route to egalitarian justice. This means that they maintain a concern with material and financial distributions, rather than distributions of power or status, ‘thus facilitating the colonization of all fields of human activity by the market.’ (Armstrong 2003: 421) Equality ceases to be a right of all citizens and becomes a discretionary privilege that one must earn. This evaluation of the liberal egalitarian theoretical contribution suggests that it might be viewed as rhetorically entangled within a neo-liberal discourse. By embracing the values of choice and responsibility luck egalitarians have tended to uncritically incorporate more of the logic of neo-liberalism than they have acknowledged, making their claims to radical egalitarianism less than persuasive (Armstrong, 2003: 411). The fact that the politics of difference literature, which in large part emerged in response to the perceived limitations of liberal egalitarianism, is now itself being invoked in relation to a business case for diversity, suggests that it too is becoming rhetorically entangled by the very interpretive repertoire that it thought to challenge.

Diversity might therefore be seen as a ‘management strategy’ in two distinct senses: narrowly, as a business strategy of corporate actors, and more broadly, as a type of management of individuals’ employing particular technologies of domination – as a practice of governmentality (Foucault 1988: 18-19). Diversity is a new notion that contributes to the ‘government’ of new domains of regulation. The reconceptualisation of employment equity in terms of diversity opens up previously untapped resources in the interests of commercial exploitation: the tacit knowledge of previously marginalized groups can be tapped for profit. By enjoining both employers and employees to ‘value diversity’ this management strategy promises to solve social problems not by addressing structural factors, but by altering the way we govern ourselves – a flexible labour market requires a flexible workforce.

Ingrid Robeyns, for example, suggests that Dworkin’s liberal egalitarianism is ‘structurally unable to account for the cultural aspects of gender, race, and other dimensions of human diversity that create unjust inequalities between people.” (Robeyns 2003: 541)
As a result this turn to diversity has served to eclipse, rather than augment, an earlier concern with inequalities of outcome. Anne Phillips, rather a lone voice arguing in defence of equality of outcome, acknowledges that it is widely assumed that defining equality in terms of outcome displays a ‘distressing lack of sophistication’ at best, and a ‘politics of envy’ at worst. Equality of opportunity is depicted as a more acceptable alternative to outcome equality. However, she suggests that equality of outcome, across a broad spectrum of ‘resources, occupations and roles, has to be taken as a key measure of equality of opportunity.’ (2004: 6) For, when outcomes are ‘different’ this suggests that opportunities were themselves unequal. This, in turn, suggests that equality of outcome is closely linked to equality of opportunity, rather than antithetical to it. Phillips therefore suggests that ‘invocations of “difference” should be treated with caution when they are employed to explain the positioning of social groups within the social division of labour or the distribution of income and wealth.’ (Phillips, 2004:14) Group disparities, Phillips suggests, are better regarded as a prima facie indication that opportunities are not yet equal.

Following this line of argument, I would suggest that the corporate endorsement of ‘diversity’ works to focus our attention on individual differences, thereby deflecting attention away from issues of group inequality, and on social inclusion via paid employment, thereby deflecting attention away from issues of social justice (Levitas, 1998). The more the Government uses this corporate diversity rhetoric to frame its own ‘equality and diversity’ agenda, the more it limits its horizons similarly. A concern with equality of outcome remains an important measure of group inequality, demanding that we be suspicious of systematic differences in outcome for different groups. To endorse equality of outcome as a social norm is not therefore to demand that outcome arguments be applied to the distribution of resources amongst individuals, as its critics like to suggest. Rather it is to acknowledge that reducing inequalities between group outcomes will facilitate diversity at an individual level, rather than reduce it.

Reacting against the assumption that justice could be understood in redistributivist terms alone, difference theorists asserted the importance of questions of culture and identity, yet in the process tended to lose sight of the fact the redistribution and recognition are complementary aims (Parekh, 2004: 205). In so doing they have contributed to the emergence of current diversity policies, with their strengths and weaknesses. If the current concern with ‘diversity’ is, as I have suggested, a confluence of various political projects, including social movement affirmations of difference and demands for recognition, the limitations of the current working out of diversity policies suggest that it might now be time for social movement theorists and activists to turn their attention to reclaiming and reworking earlier concerns with social justice and economic redistribution.

Conclusion
I have suggested that one should view the current concern with ‘diversity’ as a confluence of varied political projects with different stakeholders, integrated in a post facto rationalization into an apparently coherent equality strategy. These various projects include the social movement affirmation of difference and demand for recognition, coupled with an acceptance of intersectionality, the corporate scepticism of affirmative action programmes
and desire to capitalize on the tacit knowledge and creativity of its employees; and the governmental commitment to modernization and to social inclusion via paid employment. In this way, diversity should not be viewed as simply a politics of difference or as just a managerial strategy, but rather as an interesting complex of both. Given this, diversity management facilitates certain things and obscures others. To the extent that managing diversity is a corporate management strategy that is delimited by the concerns of economic productivity this rhetoric narrows the scope of equality to issues about employment and obscures wider issues of social justice. And yet, valuing diversity is clearly an agenda informed by difference theorists and egalitarian social movement activists, and reflects many of their concerns.

One could read this convergence as corporate human resource managers appropriating a radical political discourse and stripping it of its political purchase; or one could read it as political activists successfully deploying a managerial language to promote their own aims. I suspect that both narratives have validity. If, as Sara Ahmed suggests, diversity does not have any necessary meaning, we will not know what diversity does in practice in advance of its circulation within organisations (Ahmed 2004: 3). This suggests that we need to be attentive to the detailed workings out of diversity practices – both public and private, which appear to be developing via a kind of ‘pendulum politics’ (Lister 2002: 524-5) in which political activists argue for one vision of equality, only to find that the practical working out of this vision (inevitably entailing its modification to accord with other policy priorities) requires that an alternative vision then needs to be advocated to address the unforeseen effects of the first. If one accepts that this is so, the challenge is to continually renegotiate what a wider concern with diversity, motivated not by economic productivity but by social justice, might entail, and then to create spaces for the institutional working out of this broader vision. Moreover, the challenge also entails affirming the continued need for diversity and equality, reclaiming older – unfashionably universalistic – equality agendas.

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