

Diversity Management and the politics of difference

"Diversity ... stands for a comprehensive approach in understanding the differences between employees as an opportunity not only for the employees themselves, but also for the company as a whole. [...] Ford is becoming an "employer of choice" ... for whom one gladly works or would like to work in the future" (Ulrich Schumacher, Ford Cologne):

Diversity management is not so much a question of social justice, but an instrument to gain a highly qualified, creative, and loyal workforce, which identifies happily with its employer.

Economists argue that acknowledging demographic development diversity management even becomes a necessity, because in the field of highly qualified personnel there is sharp competition to get hold of the best people on the labor market. A workforce with a wide range of cultural knowledge also promises advantages in marketing strategies, since the specificities of customer groups are represented in the company. Last but not least, people who feel acknowledged, self-assured, and part of a supportive social group can be expected to produce a higher work-output than those who are/feel devalued or discriminated against.

Therefore from an employees' point of view quite a few reasons speak in favor of diversity management. It is not surprising that up to now self-employment has been a fairly attractive (if not the only available) form of work for lesbians and gays, and even more so for transgenders and transsexuals. The workforce of public and private employers might change significantly if they decided to install measures and practices to end discrimination – as well as the more subtle normativities of a naturalized heterosexuality, whiteness, able-bodiedness, Christianity.

There is something very interesting about the way diversity management conceptualizes difference. It not only problematizes the stigmatizing effects of categorizations (as 'other' or 'minority' if not 'deviant'), but it also avoids the kind of individualization, which understands difference as any one's private business and any one's personal responsibility to cope with discrimination. Rather, diversity management explicitly takes up the task of understanding (the construction, regulation, management of) difference as a communal task. By translating it into diversity, that is, from problem into promise, it even challenges dominant norms.

Ideally, it includes anybody in his or her specificity in the field of diversity.

But this is, indeed, the way diversity management forecloses questions of how socio-historical relations of power constitute differences. In referring to a liberal model of individual freedom, diversity management depoliticizes difference. Though difference is not privatized, it is personalized and understood as a trait of individuality. It is captured as independent of the economic class relations and capitalist principles that organize the companies that promote diversity. These capitalist principles imply that employees produce surplus value, which becomes profit of the company, and it also implies that global economic processes are

fueled by exploitation of humans and resources. In other words, contradictory interests rule the socio-economic field, but these contradictions cannot be expressed or even politicized under a regime of diversity management, which suggest a common interest of employers and employees within “our rainbow company family”.

Therefore it is not very realistic to hope for unconditional acceptance. Certain normative standards, certain unspoken rules have to be fulfilled in order to gain acceptance or recognition. An extended integration and diversification at work, marketed under the label of diversity management does not guarantee that the newly integrated subjects gain the power to participate in organizing the field of integration. Maybe, heterogeneous forms of gender and sexuality can be expressed openly – but what about expressing political differences and critique?

Diversity management can be understood as a moment of precarisation, because it addresses people as individuals, and asks them to submit their individuality to the companies' interests, while they will gain individual recognition. Solidarity has to be limited within the company's walls. Still, one does not know whether this kind of depoliticizing and regulation of social relations succeeds. Is it really the case that employees do not question power dynamics and economic injustice? It would be interesting to analyze processes of communication and/or negotiation between employers/management and employees, and ask particularly how power relations are challenged and structures of economic exploitation addressed.

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