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Arguing for Deep Diversity in a Globalizing Era

Paul James

Across the globe we are witnessing a change of life for the age-old siblings of cultural identification and differentiation. With the intensification of the various processes of globalization we are seeing, on the one hand, an increasing structural interconnection of cultures and, on the other, a subjective reassertion of cultural difference and diversity. Beneath this layer of overt changes, profound ontological differences continue, but it seems that once relatively separated cultural histories are now connected by no more than two degrees of separation. In the context of a Diversity Conference co-organized by Australians and Americans in Hawaii, it is worth remembering that this globalization involves lineages with unexpected cross-overs. Places as separated by different national and tribal histories as Hawaii and Australia have unheralded connections of blood and history. For both places, modern European mythology began its narrative history with colonial 'discovery' and the arrival of Captain James Cook—in 1770 and 1778 respectively.

In tribal-traditional Hawaii in 1778, Cook was first sacralized as a demi-god, and then a year later killed as a god out of place when he returned at an untimely juncture in the cultural season. The remains of Cook's body were unceremoniously returned to England. Australia, caught in the throes of a modern 'settlement' against tribalism, took a different pathway in response to James Cook's life and death. While Cook was largely forgotten by mainstream America, the mythologists of the Australian nation came to revere the extender of the British Empire in stories, money and commemorative stamps—much as the Americans came to venerate Thomas Jefferson. Emissaries were sent to England to try to bring back a symbolic token of the great white man. Ironically, Australians wanted the kind of embodied attachment to Cook that the Hawai'ians had already unintentionally effected by rejecting him and spilling Imperial blood on the sand. All that the Australian emissaries could bring back were the stones of the modest cottage that James Cook had lived in when he was growing up. The cottage was dismantled, shingle by shingle, pitcher by pitcher, and brought out to Melbourne where it is now located in the Fitzroy Gardens walking distance from RMIT University, the co-organizer of the present conference. In the final ignominy, it is now mostly tourists from elsewhere who visit Cook's cottage—not locals. Australia meanwhile has increasingly closed its borders to the movement of people—except for tourists or those who bring skills and money—and tied its fortunes to a very different empire; and Hawaii, now firmly part of that same postmodern empire, is dependent for its economy on the mean blond twins of tourism and militarism.

Broadening out the significance of this story for a conference on Diversity held in Honolulu, we can say that despite profound differences, we live in a common world

structured by an imperial past and caught in a globalizing future of contradictory closures and openings. Across the world we are all, to some extent, caught in the contradictions of our time: for example, between desire for cultural authenticity and love of commodified fabrication; between a desire for our own cultural autonomy and a fear of those others who too vigorously express the signs of their autonomy. In other words, while one of the dominant cultural desires in the contemporary period is for depth and authenticity, the expressions of this take two equally unsatisfactory directions: firstly, a reassertion of cultural closure and romanticized 'deep' identity, to the extent that wars are now being fought across the world in the name of ethnic, national and religious difference; and secondly, a reclamation of superficial cultural difference, managed by and for the global marketplace.

The underlying argument of this essay thus has two themes. At the dominant level of social relations, it argues that as a globalizing and abstracted world of thin and fetishized 'diversity' assumes dominance we are either becoming homogenized or we are reactively reasserting cultural difference in increasingly counter-productive ways. At the same time, notwithstanding this dominant level, I want to suggest that there are always possibilities at the level of the lived embodied relations of people to re-create critically what might be called *reflexive deep diversity*. This does not mean arguing for the romanticized version of 'depth' that politicians as diverse as Hitler, Milosevic and Bush have proclaimed. Enacting this alternative possibility entails actually doing things together, within and across permeable but sustainable cultural borders. It means setting up political structures that defend the rights of difference, both within and across those borders. To be clear, it should be emphasized that I am not advocating a 'borderless world'. Rather, in Walter Mignolo's phrase, I am arguing for a kind of 'border thinking' or working across the continuing boundaries of epistemological difference. As Mignolo argued during the Diversity Conference, uncritical discourses of cultural diversity can overlook the continuing importance of racism that underlay classical modernist and Eurocentric philosophies of practice. Such rationales can actually have the effect of subalternizing and diminishing other forms of knowledge as folklore and therefore quaint, or fundamentalist and therefore dangerous. In the words of Ashis Nandy, for diversity to qualify for limited acceptance under the hegemony of modernism it has to be judged rational, sane and able to fit in with the proper structures of thought. These 'proper' diverse cultures are then put into museums and tourist precincts, and studied by anthropologists. The kind of 'border thinking' that I am advocating is thus not merely modern pluralism with all its potentially homogenizing tendencies, but the recognition that there are fundamentally different ways of engaging with the world.

More than acknowledging epistemological difference, it also entails living both within and across the boundaries of ontological difference, including finding ways of holding together formations of tribalism, traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism. This includes their symbolically important expressions and practices. One of the counter-indications of this possibility is shown in the intense, passionate, sometimes ugly, and sometimes bureaucratically stupid ways that many people and governments have responded to basic questions about difference as part of the human condition. For example, in France, in response to increasing numbers of ethnically motivated incidents, the Bernard Stasi commission (2003) recommended banning conspicuous traditional symbols of difference such as Islamic headscarfs, yarmulkes and large crosses from public institutions. In the same month, the German state of Bavaria banned the headscarf for teachers. While laws on racial vilification may be

useful, and legal state-enacted responses against identity-based violence are imperative, banning public symbolic expressions of difference is senselessly short-sighted and counter-productive.

Recently President Jacques Chirac gave a speech calling for French citizens to observe ‘the elementary rules of getting along’. He was responding to instances of Islamic men refusing to allow male doctors to minister to their hospitalized wives. ‘Nothing’, Chirac said, ‘can justify a patient’s refusing on principle to be treated by a doctor of the other sex’.¹ As writers such as Christopher Caldwell have pointed out, there is a paradox here. When it comes to symbolic practices, France, the Western symbol of a reluctance to engage in wars that could be interpreted as provoking a civilizational clash, is in other respects acting to curtail religious and cultural freedoms in ways that the United States, the leader of the new militarist pack, has not yet even entertained. The hardline modernism of the mainstream French intelligentsia blinds them to the fact that publicly suppressing cultural difference merely drives people to find other sometimes more absolutist or reactionary ways of asserting the boundaries of their culture.

Modern liberal pluralism, it seems is only tolerant of differences so long as they do not challenge the dominance of modernism. Modern liberals do not enjoy being uncomfortable. In the present argument for reflexive deep diversity, I am suggesting that confronting ontological otherness is and should be uncomfortable. Do we aim for ‘difference’, ‘identity’, ‘sameness’ or ‘hybridity’? In the terms that I am presenting, this is not a useful question. There is no point in making a politics turn on any of these modalities, much less revering something like ‘hybridity’ as some postmodernists have recently done. Rather, as Ien Ang has suggested in the Conference we should be considering how to live with the dialectic of difference and identity in a way that enhances the complexity and cultural richness of the social life without descending into the hell of culturally driven violence. As Ashis Nandy argued in his contribution, being comfortable with difference does not necessarily sustain peace, and ethnocentrism does not necessarily lead to violence:

Cochin is a city with a recorded history 3,000 years old, with fourteen communities living harmoniously for the last 600 years without being beset by communal violence. Why? ... Each community respected the right of the other communities to dislike them, but they could not imagine a social life that was not bound up with these hostile others in their midst. Ethnocentrism thus does not necessarily lead to violence. However, in the modern world it is seen as a negation of civility. It is only permissible to say that you are different, but I am the person that you will be tomorrow—better and more developed.

This argument for uncomfortable diversity is briefly repeated over two more phases of the essay: first, a deconstruction of contemporary images of diversity; finally, some concluding substantive propositions.

Images of Diversity

Distinctly modernist images tend to portray diversity in ways that carry the expression of national, ethnic or communal differences through the faces of actual persons lifted

1 Christopher Caudwell, ‘Faith v. the State’, *The Age*, 27 December 2003.

out of their particularities. *Year in the Life Of* books are full of the idiosyncratic faces of ‘ordinary people’ who despite their diversity are brought together into a clichéd whole to construct the face of the nation. Music videos, such as Madonna’s rendition of ‘American Pie’, use quaint dioramas of local difference to extend their national-universal appeal. In the case of ‘American Pie’, hoe-down country folk become the backdrop for her singing of an ironically rendered but deeply homogenizing national song. In front of images of people that she has probably never met, Madonna wears cut-off blue jeans and drapes herself in the stars and stripes.

The pre-eminent modern example of how we moderns represent diversity and multiculturalism is the photographic matrix—a grid of connected photographic boxes with individual faces staring out of each box. There are instances of this genre that end up showing lack of diversity, for example, the line-up of photographs used by the United States government after September 11 to convey its most-wanted list of world terrorists. However, for the most part, photographic matrices are carefully constructed to bring together and balance differences of ethnicity, culture, generation and gender. Telephone companies are fond of using such images in their advertising. Transnational corporations use the photographic matrix to show the diversity of their consumers. The effect of this facial matrix is akin to the geometrical grid of property that Michael Shapiro’s discussed earlier in the Diversity Conference, it safely abstracts from the differences so that any substantial differences are held in suspension and able to be safely, comfortably viewed from a mediated distance. His paper focussed Thomas Jefferson, the much more suitable candidate than James Cook for enshrining as a national hero. It is instructive that Jefferson enacted two grids: one of natural history, the other of nature as property. Thomas Jefferson’s garden was a microcosm of the Ordinance, a geometrical English garden. The second grid is evidenced in the Land Ordinance, a geometrical abstracting grid that worked to obliterate diversity and homogenize the landscape. As Andro Linklater has documented in his book *Measuring America* a congressional act of 1785 set in train a survey and sale of land west of the Ohio River that contributed to determining the shape of the nation-state that was to develop. In this modern land everybody could be different as long as they were ‘four-square’ and believed in private property.²

While photographic matrices have the effect of abstracting certain archetypes and confirming clichés of identity and difference, they are at least held in some qualified relation to actual people. A second kind of representation—postmodern assemblages—takes this safe distancing to a further level of abstraction. Recently we have seen this new kind of image of diversity overlaying the classic modernist form of grid. This postmodern form of depiction tends to leave behind the particularity of actual persons to project what might be called abstract hybridity. It involves presenting not actual people’s faces but developing composite computer-generated images of one face. It means overlaying a number of faces, all melded to make a generalized human face. Most typically found in advertisements it often takes the form of an androgynous Eurasian with an enigmatic Mona Lisa-like expression representing the diversity of the global community. The face of Benneton, for example, is made up of a sociologically calculated mix of the world’s population to form an ‘every woman’. The faces of SwissAir include a black woman with blue eyes

2 Andro Linklater, *Measuring America: How the United States was Shaped by the Greatest Land Sale in History*, Harper Collins, London, 2002.

and a white woman with brown eyes. In the advertisement the two women are cheek to cheek. The caption connecting their faces asks what first appears to be a serious modern question about social interconnectedness: 'I wonder if people are getting closer?' The answer comes further down the page—ironically technical, rationalist and pseudo-chatty:

Yes! We've added over 200 new flights every week! Indeed they are. In fact, we've added so many new daily connecting flights via our friendly Zurich hub, so that it's not just people that we are bringing closer together, but the whole world. And we're certainly making it a lot easier to get around. So relax. Think your thoughts.

Whether mean pitch or playful, these images leave behind particularistic difference to celebrate abstract empty difference: difference without consequence. We are celebrating a world of multiple differences at the very time when cultural difference is becoming as Stuart Hall has said, 'one damn thing after another or the difference that makes no difference'. In this, I can see the superficial similarity of this facial melange in the Sufi poem used by Majid Tehranian to conclude his address to the Diversity Conference. Tehranian argued for a renewed consciousness of post-diversity as the basis for renewal. He linked this possibility back to the importance of recognizing its long-term history, and took us back to the Central Asian mystical world-view of Sufism. Instead of developing this point analytically, he used the thirteenth-century poet, Rumi, to make the argument for him:

What shall I say, O' Muslims, I know not myself

I am neither a Christian nor a Jew, nor a Zoroastrian, nor a Muslim

Neither of the East, nor of the West, nor of the desert, nor of the sea.

It responds to the needs of the present, Majid Tehranian said. And indeed it does, but not in ways that his Sufi poet would have anticipated. The crucial issue is the historical-structural context that frames such consciousness of transcending diversity. In the past the possibilities of post-diversity was confined to an elite. A few intellectuals *qua* intellectuals, could abstract from cultural identity and say that I am 'Neither of the East, nor of the West, nor of the desert, nor of the sea'. This was hardly an adequate basis for a politics. Now, however, it is even more problematic. Tragically as this sensibility is being generalized, it is being comfortably co-opted as a dominant ideology of the capitalist market. Its generalization has not had any effect in slowing, even for an instant, the internecine wars that rage across the globe in the name of freedom. While some combination of Christian, Jews, Muslims and Hindus continue to fight in the deserts of the West Bank or the mountains of Afghanistan, Aceh or Kashmir, consumers the world-over go about their daily business of buying aesthetic self-realization and voting for governments that do their dirty work at a distance.

This brings me to the final phase of the discussion: drawing together some substantive arguments about the present condition.

Concluding Remarks

Public responses to questions of diversity have over the last decade gone in two dominant directions. Firstly, for a small but increasingly vocal and electorally pivotal

minority in many Western polities, diversity is confronted as one of the excesses of globalization. It is a process towards which they are increasingly wary, treating globalization as an assault upon their way of life. This minority lie behind the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation in Australia, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in France, Jorg Haider's party in Austria, and Pym Fortyn in the Netherlands. As an aside, let me say that I don't agree with Jonathan Friedman that this is caused by the decline in the power of the hegemon. The hegemonic power of the USA is certainly in contradictory decline as he argued, but I would suggest that across the course of the late twentieth century we saw an evermore generalized and publicly debated self-consciousness about cultural difference caused by a manifold of processes disrupting embodied relations between people, from mass migration and refugee movement to mass communication.

Despite this, within the liberal mainstream, diversity tends to be tolerated, and even celebrated, to the extent that it takes the form of a one-dimensional diversity (understood as pluralist diversity on 'one plane'³). This is the second dominant direction. That is, diversity can be celebrated so long as it does not impinge upon the dominance of the taken-for-granted sense of neutral commonality. In places such as Canada, Singapore and Australia it is projected as multicultural difference; in New Zealand it is called bi-culturalism; in the United States it presented as a set of hyphenated identities where the point of difference becomes an adjective, such as in native-American or Italian-American. This is the colourful diversity of the moderns, most often expressed in terms of culinary variety and fashion diacritics. Difference is accepted, even promoted as a natural good, so long as it does not cause ontological discomfort. While these would appear to be antithetical directions, they are beginning to converge as mainstream political parties, from Tony Blair's New Labour to John Howard's Liberal Party attempt to have it both ways.

Despite acceptance of diversity, in fact largely masked by, the celebration of one-dimensional diversity, we are in danger of annulling the depth of cultural difference.⁴ This occurs either as we travel outwards in search of tourist-framed exotica or we experience that exotica from the comfort of home, brought in by the purveyors of global culture. Here the culture industry, from the distributors of world music to the advertisers of running shoes, treats global difference as a sign of ironic authenticity.

Recreating deep diversity will entail taking diversity beyond liberal pluralism towards what might be called ontological pluralism (that is, beyond the idea of special rights). Here Brendan O'Leary's conception of consociationalism provides a useful model of politics, particularly if it is given a further axis that takes more explicitly into account ontological differences as they affect political structure. Part of the challenge to effecting this kind of politics is the issue that within the West there is a prevailing intellectual tendency towards fearing boundedness, closure and attributed attachment, a fear and trivialising of tribal or traditional genealogies and ways of life.

In short, one of the central tasks as we enter this new age will be to learn to love our mongrel selves, but to do so without descending into two of the dominant dialectics of our time: between modern cultural romanticism and economic rationalism, or between

3 Geoff Sharp's term from 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', *Arena*, 70, 1985, pp. pp.48-82.

4 For a discussion of the prior history of this process see Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

postmodern complacency and the infinite deferral of a projected politics. Despite protestations to the contrary, the two dialectics are wandering into the future, hand in hand. In the end we need to constantly and critically renegotiate our sense of place and history by working and living with actual people, and that means being uncomfortable and unsafe.