The diversity of the Other

Excerpt from the 1233 Exchequer Roll, a tax record of the payments made by Jewish people in the city of Norwich (Source: nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Diversity is today widely seen as a social good and is actively promoted in ‘diversity policies’ such as those of Australia, the EU or the UK. Additionally, many institutions have their own policies devoted to managing diversity. These usually extol the virtues of diversity and oftentimes regard diversity as good for business and as a way to increase profits.

The parameters of ‘diversity’ in these policies usually include disability, ethnicity, gender, language, religion and sexuality. In diversity policies, differences along these parameters are taken to be cultural (rather than, say, having a material base). Diversity is seen as residing in the individual and diversity resulting from a group comprising members from different ‘communities’ is celebrated.

It’s easy to confuse this celebration of diversity with a progressive agenda. However, contemporary diversity discourses are also part of social processes that reify difference, create boundaries and hierarchies and undergird social inequality, as Floya Anthias (2013) argues in “Moving beyond the Janus face of integration and diversity discourses: towards an intersectional framing.”

The fact that diversity discourses are binary and divisive is perhaps most obvious in Australia, where the absurd term ‘culturally and linguistically diverse,’ or ‘CALD’ for short, is widely used to refer to those who speak English as an additional language and/or are not of Anglo-Celtic stock. Logically, everyone is culturally and linguistically diverse. By exempting English speakers and those of Anglo-Celtic heritage from being diverse, it is obvious that ‘diversity’ has become a euphemism for ‘outside the mainstream.’

Published research is, unsurprisingly even if disappointingly, not immune from seeing ‘diversity’ only in the minoritized Other, either. A recent article* finds it necessary to distinguish between “new diversity,” “old diversity” and “very old diversity.” In their use of “new diversity,” the author follows Vertovec (2007), who has identified the period since the 1990s as the age of ‘super-diversity’: people of different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds are said to be in contact as never before. Hence, migration and cultural, linguistic and religious contact pre-1990s has become “old diversity.” In the UK, “old diversity” is said to be an outcome of the Commonwealth migrations of the 20th century and British Muslims and Sikhs whose forebears migrated to Britain from the Indian subcontinent are listed as examples of “old diversity.”

What is “very old diversity” then? The author’s example of “very old diversity” are Jews in Britain.

According to the Wikipedia entry for “History of the Jews in England,” Jews first arrived in the British Isles from France with William the Conqueror in 1066. Anti-Jewish sentiment started to spread during the Crusades and in 1290 Jews were expelled from England. From the mid-17th century onwards, Jews were again allowed to settle in Britain and have thrived there ever since.

http://www.languageonthemove.com/the-diversity-of-the-other/
The “very old diversity” of the Jews in Britain is where it ends. However, let me take this line of thinking to its logical conclusion: the Jews arrived together with William the Conqueror's Norman invaders from France so surely the descendants of the Normans should be considered as exemplars of “very old diversity,” too. The Normans were preceded by the Vikings from Scandinavia and so they must be regarded as “really old diversity.” Before them, the Anglo-Saxons had arrived from what is today northern Germany and southern Denmark from the 4th century AD onwards so we'll have to consider them as examples of “ancient diversity.” The Anglo-Saxons came after the Romans, which makes the Romans examples of “time-honoured diversity.”

Where does all this leave the Celts who – as far as the historical record goes – were the original inhabitants of the British Isles? Should we consider them as examples of “no diversity” or “diversity immemorial?” I'll leave it to you, dear reader!

The logical conclusion of this periodization of diversity is obviously leading ad absurdum. Nonetheless, it is an instructive exercise: to consider the descendants of Jewish, Muslim and Sikh migrants to Britain as examples of diversity seems perfectly natural but to consider the descendants of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norman, Roman and Viking migrants to Britain as exponents of diversity seems quite wrong. In fact, to speak of “Anglo-Saxon migrants to Britain” sounds positively unidiomatic.

In sum, it is only those who differ from the imagined white, Christian and English-speaking norm who are considered examples of diversity.

Furthermore, “diversity” becomes an essential attribute of the individual: the descendants of Jews, Muslims and Sikhs are forever marked by the migration of their forebears, even if that migration took place centuries ago. By contrast, no such essential attribute is seen to mark the descendants of mobile whites.

It is a foundational observation of the social sciences that all societies are diverse. Anthias (2013, p. 323) cites George Herbert Mead’s dictum “society is unity in diversity.” Being, as it is, undergirded by the assumption that only the Other is diverse, contemporary diversity discourse not only re-creates boundaries between Us and Them but also blinds us to our commonality.


* I won't cite the article in question because citation would serve no purpose other than to embarrass the author. I will mention, though, that the article is published in a peer-reviewed journal and thus the usage must have seemed unremarkable not only to the author but also to the peer reviewers and the editors.