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# The unbearable burden of diversity

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Events relating to the management of diversity and transformation on the campus of the University of the Free State led to a national and international outcry when the existence of the so-called “nauseating Reitz video” came to light. The ensuing debates to a large extent centred on the meaning and content of concepts such as racism, diversity and transformation. This article offers anthropological perspectives on the abovementioned concepts. Various semantic layers are exposed. It also points out the way in which underlying power issues tend to distort the appropriation of these concepts as well as the way in which they come to serve as guises for racism.

## Die ondraaglike las van diversiteit

Gebeure op die kampus van die Universiteit van die Vrystaat wat verband hou met diversiteit en transformasie het nasionale en internasionale rimpelings veroorsaak toe die bestaan van die sogenaamde Reitz walg-video bekend geword het. Daaropvolgende debatte het grootliks gesentreer rondom die inhoud en betekenis van begrippe soos rassisme, diversiteit en transformasie. Hierdie artikel bied antropologiese perspektiewe op die genoemde konsepte. Verskeie semantiese inhoudes word blootgelê en die wyse waarvolgens onderliggende magskwessies die gebruik van hierdie konsepte verwing, word uitgewys. Daar word ook aangetoon hoedat hierdie terme as dekmantels vir rassisme dien.

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Early in 2008, the so-called Reitz walg-video (the “nauseating Reitz video”) hit the campus of the University of the Free State (UFS) with such momentum that shock waves reverberated nationally and internationally. Reactions to the video, including student riots and the resignation of the previous rector, are still felt on the campus. Responses to the Reitz incident varied from condemnation of racism, on the one hand, to pleas for greater freedom of movement and recognition of diversity, on the other. The latter extremity includes arguments that the students’ behaviour “wasn’t racism”, but rather an example of the “harmless, innocent” initiation traditions and culture of the residence in question. In order to prove that he was not a racist, one of the four former students involved in the production of the video defended himself by arguing: “I am not a racist ... I play soccer with the black children on the farm.”

In our society apartheid accorded a specific place to race, ethnicity and nation; it produced a set of practices concerned with boundaries between these categories, and it created what Thornton (1996: 144) refers to as the logic of difference. In compliance with the international recognition of linguistic, cultural and identity rights (Darnell 1994: 7, Kuper 1994: 537), the South African Constitution aims to balance the processes of, to use Waldman’s (2007: 168) terminology, “nation-building” and “ethnic safeguarding”. To this end, the Constitution contains a clause which makes provision for the establishment of a “Commission for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities”. On the adoption of the relevant legislation, the then vice-president, Mr Zuma, stated that, while nation-building needed to be promoted, diversity also had to be recognised (Van der Waal 2002: 87).

Although the racial hierarchy that formerly regulated South Africa’s social relations has been broken down, inter-group relations in post-apartheid South Africa have undoubtedly become more complex (Adhikari 2005: 175). Paradoxically, the emphasis on racial and ethnic differences has continued into the new democratic dispensation.<sup>1</sup>

1 Cf Erasmus & Pieterse 1999: 170-1, Maré 1999: 246-7, Todeschini & Japha 2004: 189, Reddy 2001: 64.

One of the many reasons for this situation is the new government's transformation policy, which relies heavily on racial classification used during apartheid (Reddy 2008: 217). At this stage, transformation is viewed as a "numbers game" in which representation is the key term. Another reason pertains to the fact that, apart from so-called "first- and second-generation" human rights,<sup>2</sup> minority groups are increasingly demanding "third-generation" collective rights as facilitated by the commission referred to above. There is also the persistence of racism, as well as the tendency of racism to reinvent itself in new postcolonial and postmodern forms (Harrison 1999: 610). Prominent scholars feel compelled to make the pessimistic claim that racism will persist whether "races" exist, or are ideologically marked, or not.<sup>3</sup> Harrison suggests that, at this postcolonial juncture, racism often fits into a framework of discursive practices, in terms of which the once largely biologised notion of race is now commonly recoded in terms of "culture". The feature common to both "culture" and "race" is their concern with the allocation of power, privilege and wealth (Smedley 1998: 699, Hendry 2005: 3-4, MacDonald 2006: 3).

Despite the prediction by many social scientists that cultural differences will ultimately disappear due to modernisation, globalisation, and westernisation (Castles 2001: 13), individuals in widely separate parts of the world are reclaiming their cultural identity (Hendry 2005: 3-4). The significance of cultural perspectives in human affairs can partly be attributed to our desire for meaning and order, and our fundamental need for a sense of stability, continuity and belonging. Much has been written in anthropology on the meaning, value and place of culture. One may refer to Borofsky *et al* (2001) and Sharp (2006) in this regard. For the purposes of this article, it is not necessary to enter into this debate. What is necessary, however, is our point of departure regarding culture, namely that culture is what people perceive it to be. To argue that the concept is free from hegemonic and political overtones, that culture cannot be (mis-)used as a conservative force

2 These human rights relate to people's liberty, their political involvement, social and economic rights (Waldman 2007: 161).

3 Racism is a social, political and cultural construct and has nothing to do with intrinsic, potential, or physical qualities. Nor has it any relation to variations within *Homo sapiens*.

by marginalised groups to mobilise against transformation and that power does not determine culture, transformation or diversity is to fall into the rhetoric of populist “banality” (Gibson 2007: 167). The vital role played by culture and identity politics in processes of transformation must not be underestimated.

Concepts such as culture, transformation and diversity do have very different meanings for different people. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to make sense of the different expressions in this regard, and to identify their core meanings. This will be done with reference to local and international case studies.

## 1. How culture misdirects diversity

Traditional culture is increasingly recognized to be more an invention constructed for contemporary purposes than a stable heritage handed on from the past (Hanso 1989: 890 in Wax 1993: 99).

After the Second World War the UN gave the directive to a human rights commission to prepare a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* for incorporation into its Charter. In 1947, at the request of the American Anthropological Association, Herskovits submitted a document entitled *Statement on Human Rights* to this commission in which he assesses human rights in terms of a dominant cultural-relativistic point of departure. He argued that individuals’ personalities were manifested through their culture; he validated respect for cultural differences by the fact that no technique existed for qualitative cultural evaluation, and that standards and values were relative to the culture within which they were encountered (Bidney 1953: 693). Against this background, Herskovits (1947: 543) concludes that

[t]he rights of Man in the Twentieth Century cannot be circumscribed by the standards of any single culture, or be dictated by the aspirations of any single people. Such a document will lead to frustration, not realization of the personalities of vast numbers of human beings.<sup>4</sup>

4 Bidney (1953: 693–4 and 1963: 13) rejects this exaggerated form of cultural relativism on the basis of the existence of moral values that are universally shared (cf also Renteln 1988). In his view, relativism merely reflects the negative right to be different and to adhere to one’s own culture. It opposes the idea of the existence

The same framework prevails in the 1995 UNESCO report, *Our creative diversity*. This report puts forward two definitions for culture. First, it argues that culture is not merely one domain of life, but it is “constructive, constitutive and creative” of all aspects of life. Secondly, it points out that the world is made up of discrete cultures or peoples (Wright 1998: 12). According to the report, peoples are intermingling as never before, and their distinctiveness is thus becoming threatened. By ignoring the boundaries between distinct cultures people gain ideas for alternative ways of living. Consequently, distinctiveness should be encouraged. Human civilisation thus depends on creative diversity and, in order to guarantee creativity, experimentation, innovation and dynamic progress, the report recommends a diversity of distinct entities with clear boundaries.

According to the report, the ideas relating to culture outlined above should form the basis for world ethics and development policies. In other words, cultural diversity should be protected by a code of global ethics. The report claims that the world could reach consensus in respect of such a code. However, as Wright (1998: 13) points out, there is evidence in the report of value judgments in proposing the parameters for this global ethical code. For example, only cultures that have “tolerant values” would be respected and protected by the global code. The question arises as to whose definition of tolerance would be valid. In addition, the report states that “repulsive” cultural practices should of course be condemned. Once again, one has to ask whose definition would determine “repulsive” cultural practices. In response to a reported criticism that the concept of human rights fosters an individualism which is alien to non-western values, the report points out that human rights are not unduly individualistic, but merely comprise an appropriate way of regarding all human beings as equals. UNESCO’s vision of the establishment of a code of global ethics with the view to ordering a plural world ultimately rests on a contradiction between the stated objective of respect for all cultural values, on the

of universal human rights because of the fear that communities’ freedom and cultural values will be violated. According to him, relativism is so obsessed with cultural differences that its opposite pole, namely a common core of universal, objective values, is ignored. Cohen (1970: 78) and Geertz (1975: 28) share this view.

one hand, and the value judgments made in its report of what is “acceptable” and “unacceptable” diversity, on the other.<sup>5</sup>

In her discussions on the imposition of politics on culture, Wright (1998: 10) refers to “cultural racism” to indicate that people use the concept of “culture” to distance themselves from the taint of “biological” racism while reintroducing exclusive practices in an insidious cultural guise. Anti-racist language is used to propagate what is described as an imperative to “respect” cultural differences. However, this usually does not mean rejoicing in cross-cutting differences and fluid identities, or celebrating the creativity inspired by such hybridity. Instead, the meaning of “difference” is inverted to oppose the reduction of separateness and to turn difference into an essentialist concept in order to reassert boundaries. In this instance, Wright (1998: 11) uses the illustration of the “new rights” approach which resulted from an amalgamation of liberal economic and conservative political theories that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s in Britain. In terms of this approach, race is redefined as a feeling of

- 5 If it is assumed that the plurality of cultures, groups, organisations and value systems represents a relevant variable in respect of the structuring and functioning of societies, the following question arises: If it is not possible for a government to accommodate everything that is inherent in this plurality simultaneously and on the same level, on what grounds can choices be exercised? According to Hatch (1983: 8) and Renteln (1988: 67-8), the answer lies in the reinterpretation of cultural relativism on a meta-ethical level, by taking cross-cultural universal values into account. This argument amounts to the following: the rationale behind defining rights and privileges essential to the dignity and welfare of the individual rests on an appeal to common social values. However, this does not mean that government is obliged to defer to all individual claims or preferences at all costs. For example, where an individual decides, for some reason or another, that the right to vote should be abrogated, government would not be obliged to abolish this right. In such a case, the respect for democracy would be deemed a higher social value than an individual’s motivation for destroying democracy. In other words, what is beneficial to the society as a whole is also beneficial to the individual. Naturally, the government should clarify which opinions or values should be ignored and which taken into account. In addition, no dictatorial or inconsistent action must be taken in the implementation of decisions, and a paternalistic policy must not be adopted towards the opinions or values that are being censured (cf Haskar 1979: 261, 283; Heyman 2005: 14; Borofsky *et al* 2001: 438 for more details).

loyalty to people of one's own kind. Defending one's "culture" from being attacked by people not of one's own kind was defined as legitimate self-defence. Traditional values, especially in the context of education, were at the core of the "culture" which was to be defended. The new rights mobilised "culture" to reinforce exclusion, using it as a guise for renewed racism, with profound implications for public policy and people's lives.

Social and political manipulation similar to that applied according to the new rights in Britain in order to "secure" traditional educational values manifested itself in the US under the guise of the concept of multiculturalism (Wax 1993: 105-7). In Van der Waal's (2002: 87) view, multiculturalism is a "politicked" reaction against monoculturism, and against assimilationist approaches in public policies, especially with regard to education. He identifies two types of multiculturalism: critical multiculturalism (which is affirmative and democratic) and difference-based multiculturalism (which emphasises difference and separatism).

McAllister (Van der Waal 2002: 87) demonstrates that, although the official policy and ideology in Australia entail giving recognition to all social categories, much of the exclusivity remains in practice. The dominant Anglophone culture is taken as the norm, stereotypes prevail, and diversity is regarded mainly as a problem associated with negative issues in the lives of Australians who do not speak English. In the US, research has made it clear that, while some may perceive multiculturalism to be liberating, in practice it only works for some individuals and some minorities (Wax 1993: 107).

In 2002, the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (the *South African Academy for Science and the Arts*) organised a symposium in Stellenbosch on *The power of diversity in South Africa*. The point of departure for the symposium is quite clear from the chosen theme. Van der Waal (2002: 89-90) thus found that, although racial exclusivity and associated policies of the past were criticised, the majority of the papers presented were inclined to take group differences along with their purported positive nature and outcomes for granted. Only a few papers did not put the accent on diversity as an end in itself, or were in favour of a non-exclusive notion of diversity.

From the discussion thus far, it is clear that human diversity can be regarded as a concept and a practice in more than one sense. One view of diversity is more inclusive and affirmative while the other is more exclusive and conservative. It is also clear that the notions of culture and diversity are not self-explanatory; they are ambivalent conceptual constructs used in ideological processes in the creation of meaning.

One of the UFS's responses to the transformation crisis on the campus has been the ambitious proposal to found, what is preliminarily referred to as, an *Institute for Diversity*.<sup>6</sup> This response advocates the building of new values, identities and tolerant spaces as part of the solution to the crisis. For this reason, the following section considers the correlation between diversity and the creation of spaces or places.

## 2. Diversity and the creation of a collective place or space

Human beings think spatially, and spatial arrangements provide them with symbolic "maps" to other domains. Aspects of places are experienced as most important by those who normally inhabit and shape them (cf Levinson, 1996: 356-357, Owens 2002: 272). Social scientists have always been interested in "places" and "spaces" (Pandya 1990: 776), and distinguish between categories such as embodied spaces, gendered spaces, inscribed spaces, contested spaces, transnational spaces and spatial tactics (Dirlik 2003: 231). Despite a twenty-first-century world that is globally and spatially interconnected, places still epitomise a unique reality to their inhabitants, and this reality contains meaning which is shared with other people (Hendry 2005: 3-5). Experienced places and spaces represent an informed set of conceptual schemata (Pandya 1990: 776) which come explicitly into being in the discourse of their inhabitants, not only in the rhetoric that such places and spaces promote, but also through the practices that are carried out in them (Owens 2002: 272).

6 However, the proposed name is problematic in that it places the emphasis on diversity (its acknowledgement, perpetuation, management, and so on), and the factor of universal human imperatives as a point of departure is absent.



Space is often inappropriately regarded (cf Owens 2002: 271) as a cultural construct where social relationships are expressed through their own rules of combination and articulation. As a result, homologies between spatial categories and categories of distinctive socio-cultural practice are easily taken for granted, while the distinctiveness of societies, nations and cultures is based upon a seemingly unproblematic division of space on the grounds of the claim that people “naturally” occupy discontinuous spaces (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 6).

The influence of diversity and power in the production, promotion and maintenance of discourses, knowledge, ideology and practices in the organisation, as well as in the representation of space and place, is often detrimental. When there is a lack of agreement on issues considered important to core values and identity, aggrieved groups are inclined to portray themselves in terms of their need for autonomous, sovereign spaces and places (Mattes 1999: 262). Marginalising oneself and/or the “other” necessitates a complex dialectic reflection on egalitarianism, and the defence of self-determination and distinctiveness often seems to emerge as the obvious course of action.

When creating collective symbolic, ceremonial, ritual, and tolerant spaces or places such as a university campus, the challenge is to relinquish the notion of communities and cultural groups as literal entities while remaining sensitive to the profound “bifocality” that characterises locally lived lives. This is necessary, because we need to change our social practices and the way we think about ourselves and others. According to Todd (2005: 429), it is only when institutional changes are accompanied by changing self-perceptions and institutional identities that institutions begin to create a new dynamics of interaction. And this is what real transformation is all about, rather than having numbers of the different “racial” groups roughly proportional to the numbers belonging to these groups in our society as a whole.

As a higher education institution, the UFS needs to address issues such as equity, democratisation, development, quality, academic freedom, effectiveness and efficiency.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the debate about

7 Transformation at the UFS should be a process (or a set of processes) – appraised in terms of scope, intensity, speed and impact-generating activities – that

transformation on our campus focuses on these multidimensional issues. On the one hand, there are those who broadly criticise transformation in terms of the fear of falling standards or the importance of traditions or, finally, the undermining of merit and efficiency. On the other, there are those who bewail the lack of real transformation, alluding to the continuing prevalence of white racism, as well as new forms of racism that feed on old networks and double standards in the application of institutional rules and procedures. Each side has different ideas about what is ethically defensible in terms of content, goals and implementation practices. At many points in the debate, one system of thought strives to dominate the other.

The dichotomous and irreconcilable viewpoints taken in this debate confirm that the enlightenment of the rainbow nation has not brought an end to hegemonic cultural orders or identity-categories. However, these differing viewpoints also pointedly draw the attention to the possibility that an excessive emphasis on multiculturalism may lead to renewed competition based on culture and ethnicity. The fact that current processes of social transformation have hardly succeeded in creating any collective categories of identities, meanings, behaviour and boundaries emphasises the need for mutual understanding and tolerance on our multicultural campus.

In any situation of social change, the seeds of constructive growth or destructive conflict are present (Gilbert 1997: 276). On the diverse UFS campus, unequal distribution of power (such as the assumption that Western values and systems of knowledge are the universal norm) has given rise to physical violence – which is one way of changing formal structures or of breaking down secure positions of dominance. Such an approach, however, will certainly not bring peace, nor will it change relationships or attitudes. Social interaction is a more constructive catalyst and conditions the outcome of transformation more positively. However, it must also be remembered that a transformed campus will result in new forms of differentiation

embrace and promote change in terms of the social and symbolic organisation of academic and social networks and relationships, and that do away with stereotyping dualisms such as objective-subjective, modern-traditional and rational-emotional.

that different groups will perceive as either positive or negative. For this reason, the communication channels must remain open.

### 3. Discussion

The process of transformation at the UFS recently provoked considerable interest in the University's identity. Historically, three distinct and conflicting approaches towards the creation of an institutional identity can be distinguished. In the first phase (following the establishment of the UFS in 1904), although a liberal English involvement was initially envisaged, it came to be characterised by conservative Afrikaner sentiment which could be described as essentialist in its understanding and rationalisation of the nature of identity. This interpretation coincides with the popular, primordial view of Afrikaner culture and identity as a product of a nation constantly seeking self-awareness in a political as well as a spiritual sense, dating back to the earliest days of European settlement in the Cape.

In the second phase, which began in the 1980s when it was decided that black and coloured students should be admitted at undergraduate level, the UFS was confronted with cultural perspectives antagonistic towards traditional Afrikaner views. For the UFS, the key to dealing with this challenge lay in the application of the concept of "multiculturalism". This artificial concept arose from an instrumentalist approach and was imposed by the white management and the ruling establishment on an oppressed and vulnerable group of black students as a means of social control. These students were acceptable, provided that they were prepared to be assimilated in the dominant Western/Afrikaner/Christian-Nationalist character of the UFS.

The third, current, phase is constructionist: to an increasing degree, the fluidity of identity is being experienced and acknowledged. The identity of the UFS can therefore not be taken as a stable entity: it is the product of human agencies dependent on a complex, ongoing interplay of historical, social, cultural, political and other contingencies. Not everyone who is associated with the UFS accepts this approach, which explains the confrontation and uncertainties that characterise the current process of transformation.

Milan Kundera's novel, *The unbearable lightness of being* (1985), takes its title from the notion that each life is ultimately insignificant and every decision inconsequential; that is, they are "light". However, this lightness is an unbearable lightness. Unlike the lightness in Kundera's book, we are burdened with diversity which demands precise and consequential answers.

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