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Book Review: Challenging Diversity: Rethinking Equality and the Value of Difference

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DAVINA COOPER, *Challenging Diversity: Rethinking Equality and the Value of Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 246 pp., £17.99.
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In *Challenging Diversity* Davina Cooper is engaged in defining how to approach equality in the contemporary developed world, where a politics of diversity has complex manifestations. Cooper's preoccupation with equality and the possibility of furthering this value effectively in complex contemporary societies leads her to criticize the way in which current academia argues about diversity politics. She illustrates theoretical limitations and deficiencies of this conceptual space by means of case studies that disclose the complexities of engaging in a discussion about equality today when dealing with minorities. Diversity politics theoretically lies at the confluence of liberalism, multi-culturalism, communitarianism, post-structuralism, post-Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, and queer studies and she engages critically with what these approaches have had to say on the political issues that her cases illustrate. Although she concedes that there are important contributions from these theoretical perspectives, Cooper wants to highlight that diversity politics is not very clear about some of its key concepts and the changes it aspires to. She contends that discussions about diversity ought to produce adequate analytical and normative accounts of the complex issues raised by contemporary politics and social interaction. So she draws on the politics of diversity and analyses its claims in order to tackle a set of debates and questions about how to conceptualize equality at all in order to pursue it, how social disadvantage can be characterized and related to structural inequality, what are the politics of social norms, and how to protect and enhance ways of being and living that do not conform to dominant normative principles. Her book proposes that a closer observation of the effects of social relations may clarify how norms may reinforce existing inequalities and how dominant norms may be transformed to embed more radical or oppositional values. From a sociological stance, she proposes a radical politics of inequality that having 'deconstructed' dominant normative principles, values the construction of new social relations as a means to legitimize counter-normative ways of life; not as abstract deontology, but as actual instances of lived opposition to mainstream practices.

Cooper's first case study concerns the conflict over the establishment of a symbolic space that enabled orthodox Jews to carry on the Sabbath beyond their homes, called the *eruv*, for the first time in downtown London through the 1990s. This shows how public authority's permission may be motivated by a progressive acceptance of minority communities allowing them to use the public space in this particular manner, but this concession is not without contradictions and dilemmas. She points at how the concepts of identity, freedom, harm and private space are problematic when contemplating opposition from neighbours who were not orthodox Jews and who regarded the *eruv* as a transgression of public space in their residential area. Her

second case refers to politics that give a negative treatment to smokers and discusses how smokers have appropriated traditionally left-wing discourses to contemplate themselves as a disadvantaged and oppressed minority. With this case, Cooper contends that without a proper conception of the social and knowledge on how relations of inequality operate, we cannot establish what constitutes an unacceptable form of oppression. She explores two strands of analysis from feminist writings that refer to systems and axes of oppression and subordinate group membership, but she considers them insufficient. She proposes a conceptualization of inequality that is based on structural asymmetries of power and takes into account social norms and values that shape institutions, and how social dynamics relate to capitalism and the intimate/impersonal.

Challenging Diversity then goes on into theoretical considerations of the social in order to put equality at the centre of radical theory and show that it can avoid problems such as the post-structuralist fear of equality sliding into sameness that may jeopardize freedom. Her strategy to avoid these problems is engaged in defining equality's 'who': the individual; 'what': power; and 'how': the undoing of social relations of power. She proposes individual equality of power as the goal or ideal to be pursued, even if it is unattainable. But this does not matter, for this kind of ambition is important to provide impetus and focus to political struggles for justice. And yet, Cooper explores the difficulties around undoing relations of inequality when there is disagreement about the differences of the composition of particular ones. She illustrates this by means of a case study on how radical feminists and transgender activists differ over the character of the gender problem. On top of the problems of equality and an uneven distribution of power there arises the role of values as normative principles that organize society. Cooper criticizes the way diversity politics is drawn towards either power or value, but fails to clarify the relationship between the two. She explores how social values may constitute themselves as norms and thus further social asymmetries structurally. The case study she resorts to is the struggle for same-sex spousal recognition and proposes the concept of normative organizing principles that work at the level of social relations to construct lived social reality and protect it. I consider this a very clever and useful move, because it emphasizes the weight that values have in providing or taking power away, and how their social importance transforms them into norms. She then resorts to normative principles such as proper place and the public/private, and contends that the effects of legal reform will eventually be shown in how these new social forms are lived and acted out in society.

Another concept that is relevant to understand relations of inequality is that of harm, and yet Cooper points out that this is a highly charged concept with respect to values that may change from one social location to another. And so she explores it through the legal concept of nuisance and deconstructs it in order to look at underlying normative principles such as freedom, proper place and responsibility, and how it may point at inequalities within the categories that poverty relates to: class, gender, race. She also considers the possibilities of nuisance as a form of protest to disrupt existing norms, and yet she views these as temporary and theatrical displays without necessarily lasting effects.

The above considerations prepare the ground for Cooper's own proposal and challenge to diversity politics from a radical perspective. She wants to demonstrate that an active search for equality involves much more than just good arguments and rhetoric. This is when she abandons her post-structuralist inclination to deconstruct and embraces the need to construct new social practices that may challenge and oppose dominant normative principles, but that constitute legitimate ways of living that may eventually be absorbed by the social establishment and become stabilized. Cooper initially considers what she calls *de jure* and *de facto* 'pathways' and questions the

effectiveness of *de jure* pathways that are imposed from above. The case study that illustrates this is how British local governments tried to produce officially constructed lesbian and gay equality policies, which were not as effective as had been foreseen, as they were legal provisions that were at odds with what people were willing to abide by. Cooper goes on to consider the establishment of new practices opposing dominant normative principles from below, that is, by means of intentional or prefigurative communities. Her case studies to illustrate this possibility are the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, established next to the US military base outside Newbury as the culmination of a peace march led by women in 1981; the local exchange trading systems (LETS), that began on Vancouver Island in Canada in the early 1980s and spread to the UK, Australia, the US, Japan, New Zealand and Ireland among others, and that consisted of a way of reconnecting economic relations to local social networks; and Summerhill School, a progressive school founded on the values of individual autonomy and community self-governance. These cases illustrate how it is possible to construct pathways that may oppose dominant normative principles with spatial, normative and other boundaries installed to protect practices and community. And yet, these boundaries may prove to be porous when the practices they protect are resisted and forced to conform to certain general principles by the social environment in which they situate themselves (on tax policy with LETS and standards of education with Summerhill, for instance). But according to Cooper, this is not necessarily a bad thing, for permeability allows their survival and may further their impact in changing and opposing dominant norms and values.

A central principle that Davina Cooper's book focuses on is that of equality in a diverse world. However, most important – if somewhat tuned down – is her concern with change and essentially with what possibilities a radical politics of equality has to further it in order to protect legitimate ways of being and living, which oppose dominant normative principles. It is indeed very refreshing and somewhat surprising to find a post-structuralist approach that proposes construction of new practices and social pathways. About this latter concept though, the emphasis has generally been on how they perpetuate practices inherited from the past. But Cooper proposes to use the same theoretical basis to produce an imaginative alternative for a radical politics of equality with an investment in the future: the possibility of counter-normative settlement by means of building bounded communities that are not absolutely closed off from their environment and will pursue legitimate ways of life. Cooper concedes that counter-normative pathways are constantly being built on an individual and socially networked basis, and yet with the little support they get, they are hard to sustain over time. At the beginning of the 19th century, de Tocqueville announced that equality was unstoppable and had to be mediated by the virtues practised in traditional community. At the beginning of the 20th century Ortega y Gasset spoke with pessimism about how equality leads to sameness and this to a lack of virtue in the self-indulgence of the masses. At the turn of the 21st century, Cooper seems to be telling us that the tyranny of the masses and their mainstream norms make equality a fragile principle that ought to be preserved by means of building intentional or prefigurative communities and counter-normative practices that will further minorities' ways of life. How these communities will impact dominant values and institutions though, remains to be explored.

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