By Gavan Titley

Charting a similar course with different maps: reflections on the research seminar Diversity-Participation-Human Rights

Good things and bad things

In the world of reality television, there is a vogue for programmes with titles such as "When Good Pets go Bad", featuring footage of animals who, when asked to jump through a hoop once too often, psychologically snap and savage their owners. Is there room for a programme called "when good ideas go bad"? Certainly there would be no shortage of material. Writing in November 2006 in the online journal Open Democracy, Mike Muller - a water affairs development specialist working in South Africa - argued that the "currently fashionable" language of human rights and the "unthinking application of the fashion for local participation" have hindered progress in his context. Muller's point is precise, and must be understood as an attack on how institutional discourses and practices operate, rather than on principles of human rights and participation per se ("when good ideas go bad", not "when good ideas are bad"!)

Muller documents the ways in which the priorities and objectives of development aid have shifted over time, and notes that in recent years the "Washington consensus" emphasis on development through privatisation has begun to give way to a "language of human development" that insists that "the way forward is based on human rights, participation and decentralisation". Good news, but the focus of his argument is on how priorities dictated from above may fail to take account of the dynamics of local experience. Commenting on a water project in southern Africa, he notes:

Down by the river, the project had worked well – perhaps 150,000 people had more water and better sanitation than they had three years before. But it could and should have been 300,000 people who benefited, because only 40% of the project's money was used for building water infrastructure. The rest was spent on the software, including a memorable component of "training in a human rights-based approach to planning" – just what the hard-pressed administrator, with 500,000 people without water, did not need.

This criticism of top-down "empowerment" is not new in thinking about development issues, but how does it relate to the new European campaign on diversity, human rights and participation, and more specifically, to the research seminar that engaged with these themes?

The challenge of translation

A campaign provides a set of ideas that are widely disseminated, but that must be translated – through institutions, projects, actions, conversations, confrontations – into political positions and educational capital in different national, local and cultural contexts and networks. The value of a perspective such as Muller's is that it provides a caution; **the ideas and priorities of a macro-campaign do not walk in straight lines into micro-contexts**. Instead they are translated, and as a part of that, transformed. The brief vignette of unneeded HR training resources in a crisis situation may be extreme, but it does recall something that most youth leaders or workers have encountered – that one's virtuous intentions must connect with the needs of a target group and context. As a new campaign promoting diversity, human rights and participation washes over Europe, there is plenty of room for good intentions to encounter the rigours of translation and transformation. Looking back at the research seminar held in May 2006, it strikes me that much of the value of the research presented is in the fine-grained attention it pays to these processes of transformation, and the ways in which good ideas can become, if not quite bad, then altered.

An example may be helpful here. Katarina Batarilo, in her seminar presentation on the implementation of human rights education in Croatian schools, cites studies conducted in the 1990s in "transitional" countries which suggest that "a negative correlation seems to exist between civil liberties and guarantees for an adequate living standard". In other words, the students surveyed associated civil and political rights not only with "human rights", but with what they saw as the market-driven individualism of the West and the economic distress of the immediate post-communist years. In this act of local translation, human rights are transformed from a

universal discourse to a particular one, and intimately connected with difficult social conditions and contested politics of 'transition'. The research which emerged from the seminar illustrates that **while campaigners may all be charting a similar course – towards increased respect for diversity and human rights – they must do so with a range of different maps. Research, like a good cartographer, can help to map out the hidden rocks and dangerous currents which influence navigation.**

The problem with diversity is it's so diverse

In the limited space of this article, I would like to concentrate on mapping out *diversity*, as this is not only a key, anchoring idea (and value) of the campaign, but it was also the idea which came in for the most sustained examination during the seminar. The basis of this criticism is obvious; diversity is a term that we can use to mean very different things, while apparently intending something shared and taken-for-granted. Diversity just is, right? And then it's a question of celebrating or criticising, right? On one level, perhaps. But diversity – sometimes explicitly differentiated from or overlapping with cultural diversity – means at least a focus on the interplay of ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, religion, marital status, family status, and so forth. Within different visions, policies and practices, generated within socio-historical contexts of recognised inequality, **diversity is offered both as a description of reality and as a response to it**. As a result, "diversity" as a campaigning idea is vulnerable to the kinds of associations that Batarilo details, whereby the dominant meanings circulating in a political climate can be overlaid on, and thus alter, the ideas of a campaign. As many researchers noted, the language of diversity politics is used by a range of social interests – including smokers and fox hunters – to advance their interests. Moreover, the logic of diversity politics is used in Europe by racist groups to argue that traditional, "normal" cultural identities are threatened in multicultural societies. Taken to extremes, I recently saw an Indonesian politician on BBC World argue that the colonisation of West Papua had enhanced the diversity of the region. So how campaigners articulate the diversity they envision and value, and - given these dynamics of socio-political communication - how they ensure that their vision can anticipate and counter other associations and meanings, is important. The following sections discuss examples raised at the research seminar that may contribute to this.In the limited space of this article, I would like to concentrate on mapping out diversity, as this is not only a key, anchoring idea (and value) of the campaign, but it was also the idea which came in for the most sustained examination during the seminar. The basis of this criticism is obvious; diversity is a term that we can use to mean very different things, while apparently intending something shared and taken-for-granted. Diversity just is, right? And then it's a question of celebrating or criticising, right? On one level, perhaps. But diversity – sometimes explicitly differentiated from or overlapping with cultural diversity – means at least a focus on the interplay of ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, religion, marital status, family status, and so forth. Within different visions, policies and practices, generated within socio-historical contexts of recognised inequality, diversity is offered both as a description of reality and as a response to it. As a result, "diversity" as a campaigning idea is vulnerable to the kinds of associations that Batarilo details, whereby the dominant meanings circulating in a political climate can be overlaid on, and thus alter, the ideas of a campaign. As many researchers noted, the language of diversity politics is used by a range of social interests – including smokers and fox hunters – to advance their interests. Moreover, the logic of diversity politics is used in Europe by racist groups to argue that traditional, "normal" cultural identities are threatened in multicultural societies. Taken to extremes, I recently saw an Indonesian politician on BBC World argue that the colonisation of West Papua had enhanced the diversity of the region. So how campaigners articulate the diversity they envision and value, and - given these dynamics of socio-political communication - how they ensure that their vision can anticipate and counter other associations and meanings, is important. The following sections discuss examples raised at the research seminar that may contribute to this.

Diversity just is?

The theorist of racism David Theo Goldberg writes in *The Racial State*: "The history of the human species, for all intents and purposes, can be told as the histories of human migration. It is the history – really the histories – of movement and resting, regenerative settlement and renewed mobility...the history of miscegenation (interbreeding) and cultural mixing,

of increasing physical and cultural heterogeneity" (2001:14). However Goldberg examines what many campaigners also acknowledge, that these histories and realities of diversity have been erased and marginalised:

Modern states, especially in their national articulation, ordered themselves not as heterogeneous spaces but in particular as racially and culturally homogenous ones. They have assumed themselves, falsely as a matter of fact, to be constituted upon the presumption, the insistence, of homogenous group identity, repressively embodying sameness as a value. ***In this sense, homogeneity is to be viewed as heterogeneity in denial*** (my bold) (2001:16)

Thus diversity just is, but ways of seeing diversity are often in conflict with ideas of who belongs, who is legitimately here, and who is entitled to what in society. To understand this, it is often useful to ask 'what is not diversity' in my society; in other words, who does not need to be seen as diverse to defend their identity and justify their needs and rights. This is illustrated by Dimitris Parsanoglou and his colleagues in a consideration of the ways in which "second and third generation migrants" find pathways of identification within Greek society. Cultural identification is a complex process, and children and grandchildren of Albanian immigrants to Greece use language, social networks, family relationships and engagements with institutions in different ways to fashion identifications with both Greece and Albania (a country, as they memorably describe it, of 'unlived memories' for young people who have never been there physically). However, the constant labelling of these young people as "second generation migrants" is part of a process which differentiates them from a Greek society that they live and participate in. This labelling is a widespread example of boundary maintenance, marking out the "diverse" from the "non-diverse". Furthermore, it is a label that is often legitimated by youth workers and researchers through discourses of diversity. While the young people they interviewed find nothing to identify with in this label, its usage even by those advocating diversity compounds the marginalisation of these young people by not challenging the ideological categories through which they are excluded. The question they pose, in other words, is whose version of a diverse reality is being campaigned for? Do people recognise themselves in it?

Diversity is about history and power

Julie Ringelheim provided a fascinating example of what can happen when the implications and consequences of diversity as a discourse are not considered. Examining case law from the USA that developed in relation to the question of "affirmative action" – anti-discrimination policies involving preferential treatment in hiring and admission for persons belonging to disadvantaged groups – Ringelheim traced the consequences of a 1978 US Supreme Court decision which defended the right of a university to practice affirmative action not because it was a remedy for past injustices, but because the aim of having a "diverse student body" was seen as being educationally valuable. Translated into the terms that are often heard in this campaign, the Supreme Court was arguing that diversity is a resource, and that the University and its students had the right to benefit from this. In the terms Ringelheim uses, it is an "internal educational good", rather than an "external goal" of increased social justice. Inevitably, problems with this position were revealed by subsequent legal challenges.

The first problem with an argument for appreciating diversity as an "internal educational good" is that it does not specify "diversity of what". Without any compelling reason to consider race and ethnicity as a core aspect of diversity, there is no reason that they cannot be complemented, or replaced, by other aspects of diversity - as one judgement put it, "they can take into account a host of other factors in the admission process, like the ability to play the cello, make a downfield tackle, understand chaos theory"). Fundamentally what this "diversity as richness" logic compounds is the very power relations that make campaigning for diversity necessary. As Ringelheim puts it:

The diversity argument...tends to justify efforts to promote the inclusion of disadvantaged groups on the basis of its utility for the dominant majority, rather than as a matter of justice or moral obligation. Convincing the overall society that it should support the promotion of equal opportunities is important. But this line of argument may obfuscate more principled justifications and makes equality discourse more vulnerable to attacks based on claims that combating discrimination is not "efficient" and thus not in the interest of the dominant majority after all.

What this study suggests, from a campaigning point of view, is that being "for diversity" must be at some level a political position based on principles of equality and anti-discrimination. Social, cultural, sexual and physical diversity may be a richness, but it is not an objectively given one that everyone can or will appreciate.

Bring it on or Benetton?

Following on from this, a question raised by these examples of competing interpretations of diversity is the degree to which diversity is politically useful as a campaigning term. For many researchers, diversity is a de-politicised term, a "low cost" form of politics that sits very well with the aesthetic value placed on diversity in consumer societies (often known as "Benetton politics"). It could be argued that this "low cost" calculation informs the move away from "anti-racism" to "for diversity" in this campaign (because apparently it's too aggressive to be against things). The ambivalence of this position, however, is that it is easily marginalized in political debates as a form of liberal middle class politics, favoured by people who enjoy Indonesian food, world music, Rastafarian tree carvings and regular chakras maintenance. In Australia, the politician Mark Latham used to distinguish between what he called locals – "average" Australians worrying about "everyday" things – and tourists – Australians seen as detached because of their elite concern with and vested interests in multiculturalism and Aboriginal rights.

In the Polish context, Vanessa Trapani analysed how public debates during a period of absorption into the global economy and accession to the European Union were characterised by ideas of threats to national identity, tradition, and Polish values. In one fairly representative internet discussion, she examines how Europe becomes a cipher not only for foreign influence, but for elite, liberal orthodoxies that will be forced on unwilling Poles:

The New Euroconstitution in ten points:

1. God does not exist, there are (sic) only tolerance and political correctness.
2. European history begins with the Renaissance and the French revolution.
3. All the people are equal, but gays and lesbians are more equal.
4. Tolerance for all, but not for Christians and Jews.
5. All religions are equal, but Islam is more equal...
7. Social Europe defends the weakest and for this reason abortion and euthanasia are permitted and encouraged...
9. It is forbidden to use such words as "Muslim terrorist" or "homosexuals" and it's mandatory to use the dictionary of politically correct language.

It may be tempting to laugh, however this encapsulates a powerful political discourse in many societies, which inverts prevailing power relations and constructs "ordinary people" as victims of new, politically correct tyrannies. Similarly, a common strategy in our public spheres is to label those who are "for diversity" as elites acting against the interests of "ordinary people", and to regard an interest in social justice as the hobby of a privileged minority. Given how young people are often cast as political actors, it is conceivable that campaigning "for diversity" could be combated through the same logic.

In conclusion, the contextual research presented at the May seminar suggests that for a politics of diversity to communicate robustly in our societies, its advocates must be attuned to questions of power and 'what is not diversity', and to how different associations with and meanings of diversity flow in and through the terms of this campaign. In involving the experiences and interpretations of marginalised young people, this research is also explicitly political, and not worried about being aggressively against stuff.

Notes and references :

- Dimitri, Alvaro, Athanassios Marvakis, Dimitris Parsanoglou & Electra Petracou: "*Precarious trajectories: migrant youth regimes in Greece*" in Gavan Titley & Alana Lentin (ed.) *The Politics of Diversity in Europe* (forthcoming)
- Batarilo, Katrina, "*The impact of human rights education in schools: the Croatian experience*" in Titley & Lentin op. cit.
- Goldberg, David Theo, (2001) The Racial State (London: Blackwell)
- Muller, Mike: "*A global thirst: water, power and the poor*", Open Democracy 10-11-2006 ***www.opendemocracy.net***
- Ringelheim, Julie, "*Diversity and equality: an ambiguous relationship: reflections on the US case law on affirmative action in higher education*", in Titley & Lentin op.cit.
- Trapani, Vanessa, "*The discursive dimension of human rights: A discourse analysis of contemporary Polish debates*", in Titley & Lentin op. cit.

Contact :

gavan.titley@nuim.ie