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English 102

The Point of Diversity

Thirteen percent of Idaho's population identifies as Latino. So if the Idaho Legislature has 105 representatives, House and Senate combined, we can expect 13-14 Latino representatives – in a perfect world. The actual number is 0 Latino representatives. Zero. In fact, only two representatives in the whole Legislature *aren't* white. If the government is supposed to reflect its population, there should be around twenty-one. Beside race, what about political leanings? Well that's up to the electorate right? Occupation? Wealth? Talents? Favorite colors? Pitch of voice? When do we stop pushing for a more diverse legislature?

Diversity is a great thing. It gives us new perspectives that we might not be aware of, individually, and it increases our versatility as a society. I think we need a better angle, however, as do David Brooks and Walter Benn Michaels under comparison, though they both have odd takes. In both of their respective articles, "People Like Us" and "The Trouble with Diversity", the authors argue that racial diversity isn't the end-all, and that it could shortchange total diversity, or even economic inequality. Both authors have legitimate concerns about society's approach to diversity, but both also seem to forget why diversity, especially racial diversity, is strived for in the first place: to boost the unfairly underrepresented and expose new perspectives.

In his article, "People Like Us", Brooks asserts that it is human nature to want to be around others like themselves, arguing that many efforts to increase diversity (typically racial diversity, he claims) might not actually help total diversity. He supports his point with data from precision marketing firm, Claritas, as well as a study on the political leanings of elite university professors.

Both studies show similar people grouping themselves into areas and institutions, respectively. The underrepresentation of certain political and religious views among professors is particularly ironic, Brooks notes, since those same professors tend to support and push for greater diversity. The problem I have with Brooks' opinion on the political diversity among professors is that he treats the words "Republican", "Democrat", and "Evangelical Christians" as if they were just labels, but those labels reflect stances and beliefs, which an individual determinedly subscribes to. For diversity's sake, I think we should incorporate as many of these different views as we can, and he's right that many perspectives are underrepresented. But these views don't exist in a vacuum. Some views will be inherently incompatible with – or crucial to – some aspects of advanced education (or any sort of institution). Evangelical Christians aren't going to line up to teach modern Anthropology courses. Modern anthropologists are probably not delivering sermons on the Creation. Flat-earthers will not and should not be respected in the same way legitimate scholars and scientists are. To give an extreme example, Nazis shouldn't be welcome anywhere. On the other hand, the same progressive outlook that pushes a scholar to make a scientific breakthrough will surely influence other aspects of their lives, maybe even their politics. Dr. Cato T. Laurencin wrote before the Roundtable on Black Men and Black Women in Science, Engineering and Medicine, "With so many groups, success in achieving diversity is increasingly measured in a pick-and-choose manner, where progress is defined through any lens that shows success." Which lenses *really* matter?

Unlike politics or religion, race and gender does not reflect stances or beliefs. It's not a choice. In a perfect, fair world, it's reasonable to expect the racial/gender demographics of an institution, when extrapolated, to match the demographics of the greater population. They often

don't, if not usually, because here in the real world, past and present, discrimination keeps some ahead of others. Anthropologist Dr. James Herron explains:

Opponents of affirmative action are often individualistic in how they think about the topic. They just think, there are two individuals: a white person and a black person. And, hypothetically, the white person in this case is more qualified than the black person. Therefore, the white person should be admitted. But that's a myopic viewpoint.

If you understand that we live in a society that systematically channels resources toward white people at the expense of black people, then you realize something: the fact that this white person is more qualified might itself be unfair.

If society values the concept of 'equal opportunity', racial diversity is a diversity that *needs* to be pushed for. Other ways to diversify are honestly just nice to have. Brooks' argument here is more nuanced than I might make it sound, but it's important to remember which diversities are morally necessary, and which are frivolous.

Like Brooks, Walter Benn Michaels points out in "The Trouble with Diversity" how diversity is often only being approached from certain angles, mostly race. Concerning diversity on university campuses: "My university – the University of Illinois at Chicago – is ranked as one of the most diverse in the country, but well over half of the students in it come from Chicago". Michaels' take on diversity in academia seems to be more focused on the lack of new perspectives than the lack of representation, which I think is fair. With a racially diverse body of students, it sounds like the University of Illinois at Chicago is on solid ground morally, but I agree that it's a

mistake for them to not seek diversity outside of race (but maybe not to expect it, as Brooks does).

Where Michaels differs from Brooks is his overarching argument: that diversity as a whole is overrated – distracting from inequality at its best, or detrimental to it at its worst. I agree that economic inequality deserves more attention. What I don't understand is how diversity is supposedly being strived for at economic equality's expense – the two issues aren't mutually exclusive. If anything, a huge chunk of economic inequality past and present is directly or indirectly caused by racism, sexism, ageism, and any number of divides in the population, but Michaels overlooks this. Analyzing data on the poverty rate according to race in 2018 in the U.S. (gathered by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation), non-whites are twice as likely to be in poverty as whites. The only explanation for this is that poverty itself is often a *symptom* of racism. Michaels, like Brooks, forgets *why* racial diversity is being sought specifically.

There's also plenty of evidence that fostering diversity is *beneficial* to the general population in any context, whether someone is a minority or not. Obviously this can only help the economy. A study on racial/ethnic diversity in the classroom by Patricia Marin, Ph.D. found that in a classroom context:

1. racial and ethnic diversity is necessary but not sufficient for creating the most effective educational environment;
2. racial and ethnic diversity increases the educational possibilities of the classroom; and
3. multi-racial/multi-ethnic classes enhance educational outcomes.

In terms of gender diversity, it's well known that women stand on uneven ground in the workplace, though there is evidence in a study by Letian Zhang that if a firm *does* have gender

diversity, and if the country it's in is generally accepting of gender diversity, it is more likely to be performant. This is yet another example of diversity *helping* the economy rather than hurting it as Michaels claims, or an example of diversity within an institution improving that institution while Brooks misses the benefit.

David Brooks' "People Like Us" and Walter Benn Michaels' "The Trouble with Diversity" both raise some good points about how frivolous society's pursuit of diversity can be. There really should be more eagerness to promote diversity that isn't racial for the sake of experiencing new perspectives, and Brooks' idea to promote "diverse lives" is intriguing. Poverty affects so many lives, and Michaels is absolutely correct to demand its higher priority. But neither author had to throw racial diversity under the bus to make their points. Not only is diversity inherently beneficial to a population, a correlation between the racial or gender demographics of a school/industry/workplace/area and the greater population is a good sign that people aren't being discriminated from those institutions. It's proof that your birth doesn't dictate your future – so a depreciency isn't something we should shrug off. Now, why *aren't* Latinos being represented in Idaho?

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