

BEYOND THE ESSENTIALISM OF GROUPS: CHALLENGING COMMON SENSE IN THE EQUALITY MOVEMENT

Dalal, Farhad (2012) **Thought paralysis: The virtues of discrimination**. London: Karnac Books. ISBN 978 1780490526 pbk. Pages xi + 264.

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Challenging title this one: “thought paralysis”, and then making a “virtue of discrimination”. Farhad Dalal - a psychotherapist, group analyst, facilitator and consultant - divides the 13 chapters of the book into two halves: “If the first half of the book is loosely thought of as having to do with ‘ideas’”, the focus of the second half is (equally loosely) on “practice” (p 22). Chapters one and two respectively introduce the issues and provide an overview of “the philosophy of liberalism” (especially in regard to perceptions of “difference” – the individual and/versus the group – one of the first links to the South African problematic for this reader/reviewer). Chapter three, again directly pertinent to local debates, deals with the role of legislature and legislation (the focus is on Britain), “making aspects of the situation worse” despite intentions to the contrary: “One reason ... is that the legislature begins by taking it for granted that the ‘kinds’ of people just exist as eternal facts of nature” (p 21). In chapters four and five the “ideas are developed” that are essential to and which “form the basis of the critiques that follow” (p 21). Relying on “psychoanalytic and group analytic understandings of the human condition” is critically developed to “dismantle the naïve understandings of the cultural groups and the individual found in the equality movements” (those that act against a wide range of inequalities and discriminations – race, gender, sexuality, etc).

Most of the comments made in these first-half chapters read as already familiar to me, but within a literature that is not mentioned by Dalal, one located in contemporary philosophy, sociology, and economic and social justice theorists (although an early work by Martha Nussbaum does appear in the reference list).

Chapter six, “practice”, deals with the collection of race-based data (sounds familiar?), and is headed “Counting discrimination”; and seven with the content of “diversity” (as in “celebrating diversity”). Dalal makes the important point that the “nineteenth-century scientific racism” is “alive and well” in the notions of fixed cultural attributes (p 23). Chapter six is worth returning to because it reflects not only on issues pertinent to the South African context, but because it refers to the complexity that is hidden when categories are addressed within a simplified notion of diversity and because of the need for simplicity in legally recognised categories. Dalal starts off with a story which reflects not only the messiness of lives lived, but of the selective manner in which we draw on conditions to support already existing ways of looking at social life. Here age,

religion, race, culture, relationships, all feature. Dalal concludes his scenario by noting that “there will always be a number of reasons as to why something has occurred, *and each of the reasons might have a validity*” (p 104). Similar to South Africa, “ethnic monitoring” occurs in the UK (job applications, visits to hospitals, police statistics). The standard form, however, allows one of 16 boxes to be ticked, in terms of self-ascription, the completion of which form is meant to be voluntary! However, Dalal notes that a seventeenth box, “not stated” (required by the supposed voluntary nature) is deliberately left out, and appears only once capturing takes place for those who happened not to have ticked any box (p 108)! In South Africa “self-classification” is meant to be the approach, but is either ignored or “mistaken self-classification” is corrected by classifiers.

The already existing paradigms that inform the notions of diversity with which the equality movement function are looked at in chapter eight, while chapter nine explores speech as applied to “them”. Chapter ten explores “unfair discrimination” in existing equity practices.

Dalal uses the final three chapters to go beyond what is wrong, as outlined in the first ten chapters, and now to “say what ways may be more helpful” (p 24). His argument can be summarised in quoting from the final paragraphs:

“I have been arguing that the celebrators of diversity, with their apolitical emphasis on respect and their apolitical reframing of difference from difficulty to asset (sic), have done the battle against the processes of marginalization no favours; in fact they have seriously undermined it.”

“But having said that, I also need to stress that I am not against the principles of respect, acceptance, tolerance. What I am against is an indiscriminate respect and tolerance that requires the tolerator to disengage from their own discriminatory processes. In doing so, they would be abandoning their own humanity as they suspended living according to their own ethics. ... the price for allowing the other their ‘authenticity’ is being paid by abandoning one’s own ‘authenticity’. My argument is that in order to exercise the faculty of respect (...) I have to *discriminate*. ... we need more discrimination, not less.” (p 246)

This not an easy book to read, but one that I largely found worth the effort for the range of stimulating ideas and explorations it contains. I have a habit, instilled through many years of teaching and examining theses, of having the author tell me what she or he intends, and then testing whether that succeeds before yielding to the temptation of, at times, imposing my own alternative approaches. These authorial pointers in what I am reading I mark with a circled asterisk. My first critical comment is that there are too many of these in the introductory chapter (and sometimes subsequently) in the book. If the “In conclusion” (pp 245-6), quoted above, had featured more pointedly in the introduction it would, for me at least, have been a more rewarding read. A clearer line of argument with fewer large issues briefly explored, structured around the major points, would have contributed to the critical engagement and further debate which these issues deserve. Some of the issues could have been relegated to later writing or footnoted indicators.

The second point is that class is absent. It is absent as it is, largely, in the South African context too when issues of diversity, diversity management, cultural respect, and tradition feature. The focus on the “existing paradigms”, as Dalal points to, does not only distort, but hides other ways of looking at these issues. He does leave the way open, but does not take it himself, when he explores the use of “race” (pp 168-9) and indicates problems: “The way ahead is unclear, but we can inch our way forward by asking, each time ‘race’ is used, why is it being used and who is using it? What is being described? What is intended? And in asking these questions, we would have some chance of laying bare the processes of marginalization themselves” (p 169). Exploitation? At least in part?

It is a book to which I will return to compare his approach to issues that remain central to thinking in South Africa on “discrimination”, on “natural groups”, and where “thought paralysis” is a widely shared disease.