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Making Diversity Research Matter for Social Change: New Conversations Beyond the Firm

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Abstract

This paper argues that, to fulfil the ambition to foster equality and social justice, diversity research should move outside the empirical and ideational boundaries of the firm, which have historically limited our knowledge production on diversity and social change. We first look back at 30 years of diversity research, reflecting on how the main theories, concepts and models of diversity are entangled with four root images of the firm – a neutral container, an economic entity, a cultural entity and a space of inequality – which have fundamentally shaped and limited our way of thinking about forms of action to achieve social change. We then present four illustrations of diversity research that broaden our empirical and ideational horizon: the global garments value chain; the gig economy; a public library; and a dance organization. These examples show new re-conceptualizations of diversity and open up possibilities for new conversations and politics of action to make diversity research matter for social change.

Keywords

diversity management, diversity, gig economy, global value chains, inclusion, inequality, ordinary multiculturalism, practice theory, social change

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Introduction

In the last 30 years, diversity research in management and organization studies (MOS) has evolved from an emergent field into full maturity. Despite its heterogeneity in terms of topics, theoretical approaches and ontological assumptions, this body of research has been remarkably homogeneous in one respect: it almost invariably studies diversity in firms. The prominent place of the firm reflects the historical origins of the notion of diversity. This concept was launched under the Reagan US presidency by a liberal-conservative think tank in the late 1980s (Johnston & Packer, 1987), ideologically framing social identities – in the first place, race, ethnicity and gender, and later also religion, age, ability and sexual orientation – for the first time as potential repositories of economic value for employers. At the time, it turned social differences into resources to be deployed by firms to attract specific skills, foster innovation and creative solutions, and enhance client orientation (Robinson & Dechant, 1997). By doing so, it replaced the emancipatory social justice imaginary of the civil rights and feminist movements by a business one (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998).

In this article, we argue that the almost exclusive focus of diversity scholarship on the firm as the natural setting of diversity has fundamentally limited our ability to produce knowledge that helps to envision and cultivate more equal and socially just, diverse organizations. Traditional understandings of the firm have fundamentally shaped what we, as researchers and practitioners, consider 'valid' knowledge of diversity and, relatedly, what type of action we envision for social change (cf. Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2003). Scholarly reflection on how the firm is not value-neutral is not new. The firm's underpinning by modernity, the market logic and managerialism and its inescapable impact on the production, transmission and legitimization of knowledge has long been at the core of critically oriented MOS (e.g. Calás & Smircich, 2003; Willmott, 2003). Commenting on the firm's institutional and ideological dominance as early as 1992, Deetz wrote:

> The modern corporation has emerged as the central form of working relations and as the dominant institution in society. In achieving dominance, the commercial corporation has eclipsed the state, family, residential community, and moral community. This shadowing has hidden or suppressed important historical conflicts among competing institutional demands. Corporate practices pervade modern life by providing personal identity, structuring time and experience, influencing education and knowledge production, and directing entertainment and news production. (Deetz, 1992, p. 2)

Indeed, diversity research has to date taken the firm for granted, producing knowledge of diversity within its ideational boundaries. Yet, as the firm is predicated on inequality (Bell, Leopold, Berry, & Hall, 2018; Zanoni, 2011), current diversity concepts and policies have proven largely ineffective in fostering equality (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Benschop, Holgersson, van den Brink, & Wahl, 2015). Whereas the tradition of critical diversity scholarship has taken issue with this inequality (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010), it has also largely failed for its part to produce knowledge that informs social change. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed (2007), we ourselves have, as a critical community, too often been 'doing the studies' (the critique) and too seldom been 'doing the doing' (change towards more equality and justice). Or, perhaps, we have insufficiently theorized social change because our theories do not provide us with vocabularies that take us beyond the (necessary) deconstruction and critique of the firm as a dominant institution.

Yet, the need to produce diversity research that matters for social change is particularly pressing in light of the rising awareness that firms play a key role in (re)producing inequality in contemporary societies (Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw 2020), and the structuring of this inequality along social identities (Acker, 2006; Holck, 2017). As already argued by Gibson-Graham

(1996a) in the 1990s, because our research is performative of social reality, changing reality requires producing other types of knowledge. Limiting ourselves to condemning and rejecting extant views paradoxically risks the reproduction of the hegemonic reality we intend to question.

To explore new understandings of diversity and more effective action for social change, we first engage in a meta-theoretical reflection on how root images of the firm have limited our knowledge of diversity as well as action for social change in particular ways. We then broaden the intellectual horizon of possibility by presenting four studies that take diversity outside the setting of the firm. Based on their insights, we conclude by suggesting how diversity research may be taken further in ways that matter for social change.

How Knowledge of Diversity and Social Change is Constrained by Root Images of the Firm

Our reflection on the knowledge produced to date by diversity scholarship was guided by two questions. A first question refers to to the status of diversity reseach as science: *What counts as valid knowledge of diversity and why?* A second question refers to what such knowledge performs: *How, and in what ways, is the knowledge generated in diversity research related to action and policy?* (Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2003, p. 4). Through multiple discussions of the vast diversity literature, we came to realize how particular conceptions of diversity and proposed actions for social change are grounded in four distinct root images of the firm; as a neutral container, an economic entity, a cultural entity and a space of inequality (see Table 1).

The firm as a neutral container

A first root image of the firm, mostly characterizing diversity research on discrimination leading to minority employees' unequal work-related outcomes, represents it in a neutral background against which interpersonal processes between individuals with different socio-demographic backgrounds take place. Or, in the words of Calás, Smircich and Holvino (2014, p. 20), diversity is examined within 'the confines of a neutral "container"'– "the organization." The organization functions as a stage on which individuals act but – with few exceptions – the stage is rarely examined'.

The root image of the firm as a neutral container typifies diversity research that draws on social-psychological theories also widely used in the adjacent fields of organization behaviour and human resource management (Nkomo, Bell, Roberts, Joshi, & Thatcher, 2019). Grounded in this image of the firm, diversity is understood in terms of cognitive categories and related theoretical concepts such as in/out group dynamics, stigma, prejudice and similarity attraction. These latter are used to explain why minority employees, compared to majority ones, experience more negative work-related outcomes such as higher absenteeism, less satisfaction, lower promotion chances, higher layoff chances (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Roberson, 2019). Diversity itself is conceived in terms of categories: given, fixed (and easily measurable) socio-demographic traits (mostly the single category of gender or race/ethnicity) that characterize minority employees. These categories form the basis for social identity distinctions (for a critique, see Litvin, 1997) and are conceptualized as ontologically independent of the setting, as if the firm were a neutral container.

Conceiving diversity in this way further leads to locating both the causes of inequality and its remedies in individuals and interpersonal relations. The legitimate knowledge of diversity as cognitive micro-processes of biases and discrimination is translated into a form of action designed to counter those known causes of inequality. On the one hand, diversity training, mentoring and networks are forwarded as practices expected to counter biases by increasing individuals' awareness (Kulik & Roberson,

Table 1. Knowledge of Diversity and Social Change in Diversity Research along Four Root Images of the Firm.

Root Image of the Firm					
		Neutral container	Economic entity	Cultural entity	Space of inequality
Valid knowledge	Theoretical grounding	Cognitive, social psychological OB/HRM perspectives	Resource-based view, information/decision-making perspective	Acculturation theory, contact theory	Critical theories
	Key theoretical concepts	Bias, prejudice, discrimination, social categorization, similarity attraction	Performance, competitive advantage, creativity	Inclusive culture, diversity-friendly climate	Power, discourse, othering, resistance
	Conceptualization of diversity	Individual socio-demographic traits	A wide variety (demographic and functional) of traits	Socio-demographic groups	Socially constructed, power-laden identities
Knowledge generated for social change	Forms of action to achieve social change	Selection & promotion, diversity training, networking, mentoring	Recognition of minorities' skills and unique perspectives	Leadership behaviour that facilitates belonging and uniqueness	(Discursive) struggles and individual resistance against dominant discourses
	Actors involved in social change	HR department	Top management	Line management	Diverse employees
	Desired outcome of social change	Positive work experiences of historically excluded groups	Optimal use of human resources	Relationship quality for all employees	At best, individual micro-emancipation
Main limitation		Neglect of historical asymmetric power relations	Limited to achieve greater economic utility	Relational focus remains individual and instrumental to firm's functioning	Limited to deconstruction and critique
Examples of published articles		Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly, 1992; Powell, & Butterfield 1994; Ibarra, 1995; James, 2000	Watson, Kumar & Michaelsen, 1993; McLeod, Lobel & Cox, 1996; Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009; Ali, Kulik & Metz, 2011	Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013; Nishii, 2013; Dwertmann & Boehm, 2016; Chung et al., 2020	Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Dick & Cassell, 2002; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004; Romani, Holck & Risberg, 2019

2008), and building social support and developmental relationships (Blake-Beard, Kram, & Murrell, 2017). On the other hand, individual decision-makers' discretion is reduced by making selection and promotion systems 'objective' to reduce the effects of possible individual bias (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Accordingly, social change becomes a task of HR departments, which focus on achieving a more equal representation of different categories of employees in the firm as a whole and its sub-entities. They adopt initiatives and change systems and procedures to prevent biased decision-making and foster equal treatment to eliminate differences in outcomes (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999).

Although this form of action is prevalent among diversity practitioners, it has increasingly been criticized for its ineffectiveness (Kalev et al., 2006; Nkomo et al., 2019). More fundamentally, we argue that the image of the firm as neutral setting leads to a technocratic approach to social change. Such approach evades the unequal nature of the firm, reflecting and reproducing societal power and privilege relations both in terms of relations between groups of employees and between the employer and its employees (Bapuji et al., 2020; Bell et al., 2018; Zanoni, 2011). As patterns of stereotypes and biases are not merely inside the heads of people (Calás et al., 2014), but rather inextricably embedded within historical asymmetric power relations and the privilege of some, remedies cannot be limited to addressing individual behaviour.

The firm as an economic entity

A second root image, characterizing diversity research that investigates the business case of diversity, represents the firm as an economic entity to which employees' differences should contribute. Grounded in a view of the firm as understood through contracts, resources, incentives, value creation and/or efficiency, diversity is defined along the economic rationale of profit maximizing.

This root image of the firm as economic entity is theoretically grounded in the resource-based view of the firm and a decision-making perspective, which some diversity research uses to explain the relationship between diversity and organizational or group effectiveness. Typically, studies model and measure the effects of a wide variety of employees' traits on group processes and performance outcomes, predicting that diversity in knowledge, skills and experiences generates better-quality solutions – the so-called value-in-diversity hypothesis (Bell, Vilado, Lukasik, Belau, & Briggs, 2011; Joshi & Roh, 2009; van Dijk, van Engen, & van Knippenberg, 2012). Organizational effectiveness is argued to be especially enhanced when employees' perspectives deriving from their differences are incorporated into core organizational processes. The economic rationale of this type of research leads to broad definitions of diversity. It extends this notion to include not only socio-economic traits but any individual characteristic that might contribute to the bottom line, such as functional expertise, personal values, and leadership styles.

Within this type of diversity research, social change is seen to automatically emerge from the recognition of minorities' skills and unique perspectives and their deployment as resources to improve performance. This view is seen to help put diversity higher on top management's agenda, in turn increasing the opportunities of minority employees in the workplace (Robinson & Dechant, 1997). The envisioned outcome is that equality will be achieved because firms will make optimal use of all their human resources, ultimately rewarding individuals' contributions, independent of their socio-demographic profile. This approach to change thus rests on the implicit premise that organizations have economic incentives to operate as meritocracies.

This trajectory towards social change is however fraught with peril. Scholars have not only put forward many boundary conditions that need to be fulfilled for the diversity–performance relationship to hold in practice (Joshi & Roh, 2009; Van Dijk et al., 2012), but have also documented that firms do not function as meritocracies (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Romani, Zanoni & Holck, 2020). More fundamentally, critics have emphasized how the highly instrumental

understanding of diversity promoted by the business case makes equal treatment conditional upon minority employees' ability to prove their superior economic value for the company. Knowledge of diversity and its relation to action is thus no longer generated to redress inequality and foster social justice (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Noon, 2007) but rather to achieve greater utility.

The firm as a cultural entity

A third root image of the firm portrays it as a cultural entity. Firms are seen as 'cultures' or sets of values, customs and norms that are ideally widely shared by employees and that govern collective behaviour. This image underpins recent diversity research that is dissatisfied with firms' failure to create true 'inclusion' of minority employees and emphasizes the need to create cultural contexts that proactively foster positive day-to-day intercultural relations for all employees.

The root image of firms as cultures defines diversity research that has turned to classics in psychology – Allport's contact theory and Berry's model of acculturation – which have long since prescribed the importance of equal status, cross-cutting ties and bilateral acculturation for positive intercultural group relations. Building on these theoretical insights and the well-established notion of 'organizational climate', these studies investigate the diversity-friendly or inclusive climate of firms to better understand why and how diversity leads to positive outcomes (Shore et al., 2011; Mor Barak, 2005; Nishii, 2013). Studies in this vein typically measure how all employees perceive the multiple dimensions of an inclusive organizational climate (e.g. fair treatment, integration instead of assimilation, valuing of whole selves, inclusion in decision-making. . .) to then investigate their relation with psychological outcomes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction and personal well-being, attending in particular to differences between employee groups (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013; Nishii, 2013). In the attempt to identify the characteristics of inclusive organizational cultures, an inclusion lens shifts attention away from minority employees' negative work-related outcomes to positive outcomes for all socio-demographic groups, including the historically dominant group (usually, white male employees).

Seeing the firm as a cultural entity shapes an understanding of social change as interaction patterns through which diversity-friendly cultures are created. Building on conceptualizations of an inclusive climate, scholars explicitly formulate change efforts intended to alter the socio-relational context within which heterogeneous individuals interact, moving a 'plural' organization into an 'inclusive' one (Nishii & Rich, 2014). The focus here is no longer on the HR department or top management, but on the unit-level manager who plays an important role in setting interaction norms and providing possibilities for participative decision-making, both leading to positive outcomes. This role has further stimulated studies to conceptualize such processes as 'inclusive leadership', prescribing a set of positive leader behaviours that would facilitate diverse employees' experiences of inclusion (Brimhall et al., 2017; Randel et al., 2018). The envisioned outcome of this form of action is the creation of a cultural context in which all employees feel welcome and valued for who they are.

While this scholarly work explicitly aims to reduce the potential problems associated with demographic diversity such as high levels of conflict and turnover (Nishii, 2013), critically oriented scholars question whether the proposed form of action is radical enough to achieve equality and social justice. Some argue that changing a firm's culture will not do the job, as elimination of discrimination at its roots requires redesigning organizations in ways that make them more suitable for the diverse people who populate them (Nkomo, 2014), or a change in discursive, bodily and material practices rather than in interpersonal behaviour (Janssens & Steyaert, 2020). Still others argue for a need to break with organizations' instrumental appropriation of socio-demographic differences to pursue organizational performance (Ahmed, 2012; Tyler, 2019). A focus on organizational 'culture' and 'climate' leaves the commodification of difference largely

unquestioned. Therefore, without radical change, the danger exists that this body of literature on inclusion is merely 'a case of old wine in new bottles' (Nkomo, 2014, p. 580).

The firm as a space of inequality

A fourth and final root image, characteristic of critical diversity research, is that the firm is a space of inequality. This image considers firms as political, power-laden entities where struggles of domination and subordination are the norm rather than the exception. In explicit contrast with the previous three root images, this last one leads to an understanding of diversity as socially (re)produced in ongoing, context-specific processes and thus deeply intertwined with institutionalized power relations (Ahonen, Tienari, Meriläinen, & Pullen, 2014; Holck, 2017; Zanoni, 2011).

This root image characterizes diversity research that relies on critical traditions of thought to show the political and contested nature of diversity and the ways in which its celebratory rhetoric and its management obscure power dynamics and reproduce inequality. Often taking a discourse analytical approach, critical diversity studies uncover how the language of diversity represents the Other in essentialist and instrumental ways, granting minority employees subject positions and identities that reproduce their subordination (Peterson, 2007; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). They also typically examine how such socially produced understandings of diversity are contested and reappropriated by minority employees to resist (Dick, 2015; Jammaers, Zanoni, & Hardonk, 2016; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019). Diversity is thus no longer conceived as a trait, but rather as socially (re)produced in ongoing context-specific processes. Here, the emphasis is on how diversity is deployed to exert power and itself constitutes the object of contestation (Zanoni et al., 2010).

Shaped by the image of the firm as a space of domination and subordination, critical diversity research has emphasized critique as the eminent modality of valid knowledge-making (Fournier & Grey, 2000), highlighting how patterns of domination are intertwined with social identities. From this perspective, theorizing practices that foster equality and social justice is hampered by the understanding that power is pervasive and constitutive of the firm, including any attempt to resist. Social change thus becomes hardly conceivable. At best, it remains limited to individual employees' micro-modalities of emancipation (Thomson, 2020; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007).

Reflecting a rising awareness of the need to broaden the scope of critically oriented diversity scholarship, scholars have recently called for moving away from deconstruction and critique to instead explore novel action performative of social change and emancipation (e.g. Bell et al., 2018; Fleischmann, Holck, Murgia, Muhr, & Liu, 2019; Pullen, Vachhani, Gagnon, & Cornelius, 2017). Promising in this regard are studies that explicitly focus on interventions to achieve transformational change, exploring the conditions that stop the (re)production of institutionalized inequalities (Janssens & Zanoni, 2014; Lansu, Bleijenbergh, & Benschop, 2019; Leenders, Bleijenbergh, & Van den Brink, 2020).

Conclusion

Despite their merits, the four types of diversity research discussed above have largely failed to produce knowledge that is performative of social change. The main reason, we argue, is that this knowledge has until now been confined by the ideational boundaries of the firm. In particular, four root images of the firm are entangled with current conceptions of diversity, shaping and limiting the proposed actions for social change. The firm as a neutral background is entangled with an understanding of diversity as individual socio-demographic traits, leading to action focused on changing cognitive processes which neglects structural asymmetric power relations. The firm as an economic entity produces an understanding of diversity as a possible economic resource for the firm, reducing change to an automatic consequence of profit. The third root image of the firm as cultural

entity shifts attention towards an organizational context in which all employees feel equally included, but its focus on leadership as the main driver of change continues to individualize diversity and makes it instrumental to the firm's functioning. Finally, the root image of the firm as a space of inequality produces knowledge that is mostly concerned with unmasking power in the ways in which diversity is socially constructed, but in doing so it largely excludes the real possibility of social change.

For diversity research to matter for social change, we thus argue that diversity studies should not confine themselves to the firm as their ideational and empirical horizon of possibility. If we aim to produce knowledge of diversity that matters for establishing equal and socially just organizations, we need to start new conversations by stepping outside the firm to explore how diversity takes place, and is enabled, controlled and resisted elsewhere.

New Conversations Beyond the Firm: Towards Alternative Knowledge of Diversity and Social Change

While there are many possible ways to explore new settings (Davis, 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Mair & Rathert, 2019), here, we expand the horizon in two ways. We first present two illustrations that decentre the firm to reflect the contemporary conditions of many workers – the global value chain and the gig economy. These illustrations point to new modalities of action that reconnect diversity to a diverse, global workforce's struggle for equality and social justice vis-a-vis capital. We then turn to yet two other settings – a public library and a dance organization – that expand our ideational horizon further away from the firm. These particular illustrations show how normativity of diversity is disrupted through a bottom-up and emergent process of establishing new kinds of encounters and self–other relations.

Two illustrations originate in our own work; the other two are based on studies of colleagues in organization studies and sociology that we found inspiring. They show how studying diversity in non-firm settings comes with new answers to the questions of what is valid knowledge of diversity, and how this translates into action for social change (see Table 2). For each illustration, we start with describing the non-firm setting, we then briefly introduce the new theoretical grounding and discuss the re-conceptualization of diversity and the novel actions for social change. These studies in no way pretend to be exhaustive; they are illustrations of the possibilities offered by stepping outside the firm to develop knowledge of diversity and social change.

Diversity as gendered and racialized workers in the global economy: Social change through recognition, voice and protection of women workers' rights

Our first illustration builds on three studies (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Chowdhury, 2017; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015) published on the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 in Bangladesh. Housing five local garment factories that were producing clothes for 31 Western multinational corporations (MNCs) in the 'fast fashion' industry including Primark and Walmart, the disaster led to international pressure on actors in this global supply chain to take action against labour abuses of the mainly female workforce. Working at the lowest minimum wage in the sector and in premises lacking building and fire safety protections, these women factory workers belong to the 'most-disadvantaged category of workers who are never considered, represented or recognised' (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020, p. 298). It was only in the wake of the Rana Plaza collapse that global attention emerged, focusing on their labour rights and the ethics of procurement of ready-made garments, resulting in two unprecedented agreements to improve labour standards in the Bangladesh apparel industry: the 'Accord for Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh' and the 'Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety'.

The mentioned studies examine in depth how the two agreements came into being and

Table 2. Knowledge of Diversity and Social Change in Four Illustrations of Diversity Research Beyond the Firm.

		Global value chain	Gig economy	Public library	Dance organization
Valid knowledge	Theoretical grounding	Global labour governance, right to representation and recognition	Marxist feminist, Social Reproduction Theory	Multiculturalism	Practice theory
	Key theoretical concepts	Coalitional power, voice, structural injustice, elite	Social reproduction, living wage, means of subsistence	Conviviality, curating space, mutual care	Practice, nexus of intertwined practices, social order
	Conceptualization of diversity	Gendered and racialized workers in global capital	Institutionally precarized workers	Embodied ordinary multiculturalism	Multiplicity as the effect of practices
Knowledge generated for social change	Forms of action to achieve social change	Work standards, remediation activities, worker training, awareness about rights	Self-organization, mobilization, negotiation of legal compliance through algorithm	Embodied mundane practices (knitting together)	Documenting novel practices (mixing, inverting, affirming) that serve as reflection
	Actors involved in social change	Global and local trade unions, NGOs, consumers, social movements, ILO	Trade unions, grassroot workers' organization, national and supranational legal bodies	Subjects participating in the practice	A range of stakeholders who act within horizon of intelligibility
	Desired outcome of social change	Recognition, voice and representation of women workers' rights	Better status, living wage, social protection for workers	Space of cosmopolitan intimacy	Community formation through new types of relationships

were applied. Turning to the literature on global labour governance, Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) attend to the emergence of the 'Accord' and show how the coalitional power of production-based actors (trades unions in Bangladesh and global union federations) and consumer-based actors (consumer and social movement organizations) had the leverage to improve labour standards in this global supply chain. The two other studies complement and qualify this account of institutional transformation by attending to the experience of the women factory workers themselves in the subsequent process of application of the new regulations. Building on representation and recognition as fundamental conditions for a sustainable policy formulation process, Alamgir and Alakavuklar (2020) show how the day-to-day management practices that were supposed to improve labour conditions failed to address structural injustice. In particular, categorizing the women factory workers as genderless led to a lack of consideration for their needs, rights and entitlements and hence 'the codes' failure to constitute changes in social structural disparity' (p. 306). Chowdhury's (2017) 'Speaking Out' article also shows how, despite the creation of compensation funds for the victims of Rana Plaza, their suffering continued. Through the story of Rahima, one of the victims, he points to the role of 'elite' NGOs in the scheme's failure to serve the victims. Complicit with MNCs and funded by Western donor agencies, these NGOs reproduce inequality by denying voice to and legal representation of the victims in the compensation and rehabilitation process.

Transcending the boundaries of one firm, this type of research foregrounds a subject of diversity that is at once classed, gendered and racialized in global value chains. Although most commodities are today produced and circulated across firms, countries and continents, this type of subject has to date been largely neglected by diversity research. Here, diversity is no longer merely synonymous with socio-demographic traits or social norms that structure social relations. Rather, it points to how subjects' difference (in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and also geographical location) is key to their integration into capitalism on profoundly unequal terms and is enforced through dispossession, misrecognition and severe forms of exploitation. Taking a broader political economy perspective, as opposed to one solely focused on what happens within the firm as a bounded entity, this research attends to the multiple forces determining working and living conditions and the experiences of the global, diverse workforce on whose undervalued work contemporary global commodity flows rest (Ozkazanc-Pan & Calás, 2015; Zanoni, 2020b).

This novel theoretical lens and understanding of diversity leads to a different form of action than the actions prescribed by extant diversity research. The route to social change passes through initiatives that counter the erosion of workers' rights, such as building labour standards across national boundaries, activities to remediate unsafe working conditions, and extensive worker health and safety training (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015), as well as forms of recognition and representation that enable workers to assert their right to challenge exploitation (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020). This shift entails that social change is no longer the sole task of HR, or of line and top management. Rather, organized labour, from local labour unions to global union federations, and other stakeholders such as consumers, social movement organizations, NGOs and global civil society institutions like the International Labor Organization play a pivotal role. The desired outcome of this form of action is the recognition, voicing and protection of (women) workers' rights.

Diversity as institutionalized precarity in the gig economy: Social change through the living wage for all

A second study by Zanoni (2019) unpacks the public policy discourse on the gig economy by examining how European Union and national policy documents represent crowdsourcing

platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon Mechanical Turk, as key to a more inclusive labour market. These official texts cast platforms as a unique opportunity to stimulate economic growth and enhance competitiveness. They consistently rehearse the idea, originally formulated by a Report by McKinsey published in 2015, that platforms 'positively disrupt' global labour markets, which are allegedly less and less able to match offer and demand. Platforms are presented as the solution to this problem as they can 'empower millions of individuals by connecting them to the right work opportunities in a much more seamless, personalized, and efficient way' (McKinsey, 2015, p. 16). More specifically, it is argued that platforms provide 'flexible' working arrangements that allow the 'activation' of groups who have long been excluded from the labour market, such as (ethnicized) youth, (female) individuals with caring responsibilities in the home, people living in remote areas, individuals with a disability, and even all individuals in the Global South.

Drawing on social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Vogel, 1983/2013), Zanoni argues that crowdsourcing facilitates a predatory business model that allows platform companies to pay their diverse, global workforce less than the living wage, that is, a wage that is sufficient for the worker to obtain the means of subsistence to biologically and socially reproduce his or her own labour-power and any dependents. Building on Marx, social reproduction theory emphasizes that those means are not universal, but rather depend on the 'race, nationality, and gender of the worker' (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 74), reflecting a variable standard of necessity. The business model of platform-based firms is based on crowdsourcing workers whose standard of necessity can be minimized by externalizing part of the cost of their social reproduction. Employed in extremely casualized work through self-employment statutes, piece payment and the absence of insurance and pension rights, they need to rely on means of subsistence provided by their family, the community and the state, through welfare service provision.

Yet the policy discourse of the gig economy legitimizes an understanding of extremely casualized platform-mediated work as a suitable, desirable and legitimate modality of employment for 'diverse' workers. It leverages the rhetoric of inclusion, 'unprecedented' employment opportunities, and the emancipation and empowerment of 'inactive', 'diverse' individuals to institutionalize the historical inability of the most vulnerable workers to command living wages in societies structured along class, patriarchy, ableism and racism (Bhattacharya, 2017). Looking into the policies and the public discourses that make emergent modalities of labour such as crowdsourcing possible allows to reconceptualize diversity as the institutionalization of precarity for the more vulnerable, diverse segments of the population. These workers occupy the labour market as 'disposable' workers whom platform companies are allowed to pay less than the living wage.

This perspective points to social change interventions through political action directed at securing a less precarious working status (e.g. as an employee, better pay rates, and including health and social security insurance). To date, the literature has pointed to a number of relevant potential actors, including grassroots unions, union-affiliated guilds, mainstream or longstanding unions, labour market intermediaries as labour mutuals or quasi unions, and worker-led platform cooperatives (Vandaele, 2018). Some studies have started documenting instances of self-employed, crowdsourced workers' mobilizations and (self) organization, for instance through strikes (Cant, 2019). Other scholars rather argue for trade unions' collective 'negotiation of the algorithm' with platform firms (De Stefano, 2017), and lobbying for legislation that allows using the data collected by platforms to run operations to enforce compliance (Söderqvist, 2017). In all cases, the desired outcome is better terms of crowdsourced work (e.g. wage and social protection), which would certainly benefit this diverse workforce. While these forms of action

feature in studies of organizing vulnerable workers in sociology and industrial relations, they are largely absent in the diversity literature in MOS (yet see Alberti, Holgate & Tapia, 2013; Soni-Sinha, 2013).

Diversity as ordinary multiculturalism in a public library: Social change through knitting together

A third illustration is Robinson's (2020) recent ethnography of multiculturalism in a knitting group in the Community Room of the Thornton Heath public library, located in the culturally diverse borough of Croydon in south London. Started in 2011, the group is primarily made up of middle-aged and older women with South Asian, Afro-Caribbean, British and European backgrounds who gather together to knit on a two-weekly basis. It is organized in an informal way, free of charge, and counts between 10 and 12 women. A few members attend all meetings and have become central figures, whereas others join on a drop-in basis, out of a larger group of about 20 women.

The detailed ethnography portrays the informal conversations occurring within the group, the sharing of knowledge about how to knit, and the knitting materials, books and magazines. Through this 'texture of lived experience', the author conveys a sense of ordinary, everyday multiculturalism in the group's doing, which contrasts the mere naming of identities. Her analysis focuses on the embodied, material micro-practices of learning to knit as a communal endeavour, which enables these women to connect through reciprocal gestures of mutual care and recognition. The repeated participation in this stable space of 'cosmopolitan intimacy' enables these women to share diasporic experiences, memories, grief and mourning. Women bring their social competency into the group and build mutual connections only gradually through their shared engagement with knitting. Robinson avows how gestures can however also be ambiguous and cause embarassment and incomprehension, pointing to the Other's vulnerability.

Central to Robinson's analysis is the juxtaposition of the 'ordinary', 'inferential' multiculturalism in this 'space of understated connection and care' (p. 2), on the one hand, and the institutional multiculturalism of the library enacted through 'official multicultural policy projects, which positioned racialized forms of difference as either a celebration or an intervention' (pp. 1–2) on the other. The mundane nature of the knitting group escapes inscription into either category of policy, remaining unnoticed and unrecognized. However, it appears to perform diversity differently, in a way that effectively enacts the official 'outreach' ambition of the library.

This study points to the central role of embodied practice for more inclusive and equal performances of diversity, in this case across racial, cultural or migration lines and age. These insights suggest that MOS knowledge of diversity might fare better if we were to include, among our empirical objects of study, the more mundane, everyday granularities of diversity, as it is materially enacted through the body. At the same time, it brings into the conversation the idea that multicultural encounter and affective connection might be fostered more effectively through setting up semi-curated public spaces that create the boundary conditions for togetherness and conviviality, as opposed to classical diversity policy-making where difference can no longer be lived 'ordinarily' but is forced to the foreground.

Exploring semi-curated settings where conviviality occurs to reproduce life, instead of producing profit, is warranted. This type of study points to the fostering of equality by creating the boundary conditions for new practices and meanings of diversity to emerge, rather than imposing them through policy. In this sense, it helps to redefine the role of actors in positions of power in processes of social transformation from one of managers to one of facilitators. Engaging with the forms of sociality routinely occurring in 'micropublic places' (Amin, 2002), where embodied, affective practices are mundanely repeated, represents in itself no guarantee for more equality and social

justice. However, it does extend our theoretical and political imagination of performances of diversity that recognize and care for the Other, disconnecting difference from subordination in the relation to the Self, a key condition of equality and social justice.

Diversity as multiplicity in a dance organization: Social change through practices that mix, invert and affirm

A fourth and final illustrative study by Janssens and Steyaert (2020) centres on the real-time practising of a dance performance, 'Tornar', where diversity was central to its production process as well as final performance. This ethnographic study took place in Ultima Vez, a 30-year-old, entrepreneurial dance organization located in Molenbeek, an impoverished suburb of Brussels, Belgium. Considered one of the pioneers in contemporary dance, Ultima Vez is known for experimenting with differences, incorporating all kinds of diversity – different age groups, transcultural set-ups, blind dancers and different images of sexuality – in its performances. Tornar, an award-winning intergenerational dance performance, choreographed by Seppe Baeyens, addresses the theme of rebuilding a diverse group into a promising new community after the disorder caused by a tornado. Next to age, dancers differed in terms of gender, ethnicity, linguistic background and professional dance experience.

Turning to practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowksi, 2011; Gherardi, 2016; Nicolini, 2013), this study uncovers and documents the practices through which, in this affirmative case, an inclusive social order is accomplished. The notion of 'practice' is considered to be a theoretical notion itself – unlike the 'commonsensical' understanding in extant diversity research (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2016), conceiving it as a set of real-time doings and sayings, mediated by the way in which discourse, materiality and bodies are entangled, and connected with other practices in time and space (Nicolini, 2017). From this view, social life in a diverse organization is the result of a vast nexus of practices that creates a particular social order. Social phenomena like diversity, domination, inequality, social identities or inclusion are thus possible effects of practices.

This study opens a new conversation on diversity and social change by re-articulating how this organization practised diversity differently. It showed in-depth how three recursively intertwined practices – mixing, inverting and affirming – created a 'site' of practices that enabled the accomplishment of 'multiplicity'. Mixing involved an active combining of diverse individuals through which routine and habitual positions were suspended and new bodily relations and affective bonds could be developed with unfamiliar others. Inverting further enabled multiplicity through reversing typical roles and behaviours associated with a particular diversity trait. For example, children (not adults) were the 'teachers', and a 92-year-old man's physical constraints was an aesthetic quality. Affirming further reinforced these new meanings through constantly repeating and experimenting with the different, unusual and contrasting positions. It strengthened the newly established types of relations in an embodied way, developing implicit, collective skills and knowledge. The outcome is thus a diverse group in which the dancers' socio-demographic differences lost their meaning. Rather, new embodied and affective relationships where the quality of being multiple is central were developed.

Importantly, the message for social change is not to copy this form of action as practices are always situated accomplishments. Rather, the rich descriptions of practising diversity differently serve as a tool for reflection and inspiration for those people who want learn from other places for their own attempts to create equal and socially just organizations. They raise different questions and allow for seeing new or unexpected ways of doing (Feldman & Worline, 2016), which shows 'possibilities beyond what is currently the accepted norm' (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2017, p. 123).

The study further highlights how the social order of the dance organization and its contextual conditions are strictly related and mutually implicated (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). It shows how the practices extend into the dance organization's relationship with external stakeholders, hereby producing for themselves the context that enables and affirms the accomplishment of multiplicity. For example, the practice of mixing extended into close collaboration with various local organizations – schools, youth centres, meeting places for the elderly, refugee centres – to invite people who do not fit the image of the young, beautiful, well-trained and muscular dancer to dance workshops. Many other external (as well as internal) actors are thus involved in practising diversity, not as individuals as such but as actors who engage within the intelligible horizon of the practices (Nicolini, 2013).

Conclusion

In distinct ways, the four illustrations above move diversity research beyond the firm and its traditional root images. They empirically and ideationally broaden our horizon of possibilities by re-conceptualizing diversity through novel theoretical lenses that help envision alternative transformative action. Such empirical and theoretical moves, we hope, will produce images of how to organize diversity differently. The validity of this novel knowledge of diversity, we argue, should be gauged in terms of its ability to redress longstanding inequalities as well as perform equality and social justice.

Diversity Research as Performative of Social Change

Further reflecting on the four illustrations and the challenge to be performative of social change, we argue that diversity scholarship needs to take the capitalist economy at once more and less seriously than it has to date (Dean, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Healy, 2015). Taking the capitalist economy *more* seriously is necessary to unveil paths of social change that, acknowledging how diversity inscribes differences in capitalism, are more explicitly political and that confronting of capitalism in their objectives, demands, strategies and modalities of struggle. Taking the capitalist economy *less* seriously helps to unveil trajectories of social change that depart more radically from capitalism to envision the possible, enacting a type of politics that nurtures our imagination to take new roads, without knowing beforehand where exactly they will lead us.

Taking the capitalist economy more seriously

In the first two illustrations, diversity is reconceptualized as occurring through contemporary circuits of capital valorization, constituted in the relations between firms, through markets and networks, across continents and between individual 'entrepreneurs', large companies' new technologies that coordinate commodified work, and public institutions such as the nation state and the EU. In these complex political economic contexts, diversity is not a cognitive or cultural 'superstructure' to an underlying economic process, as suggested by much of the extant literature, but is rather constituted through the unequal terms of the commodification of labour. In this sense, these examples redefine diversity as diverse *labour*. Diversity is labour because it refers to a subject defined by the necessity to sell his or her capacity to make something in the (increasingly global) labour market. Yet, this capacity is symbolically inscribed in ways that mark the subject as less worthy than others to be rewarded and to obtain the means for a dignified subsistence, and for his or her social reproduction. Difference can thus not be thought of as outside the political economy of capitalism, as it is predicated on an institutionalized misrecognition and unequally distributed precarity that is brought about by modern capitalism.

Coherent with an understanding of diversity as wedded to capitalism is a view of social change as necessarily entailing struggles to better protect workers from precarious and

particularly exploitative working conditions, which constitutively define them as 'diverse' and thus less deserving (Romani et al., 2020). From this view, fostering social change requires the appreciation of how one's recognition as a working subject, whose labour bears value, should be translated into modalities of organizing that can advance claims to its redistribution. Because contemporary capitalism is organized across firms and between firms and formally self-employed contractors, equality cannot be achieved solely through attempts to alter a single firm's HRM practices or through the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation. While these initiatives remain relevant, they are particularly ineffective when the 'diverse' workforce is structurally and disproportionately relegated into more precarious working statutes or is located in production in low labour-cost and low worker-protection countries.

Contemporary capitalism thus requires us to engage more in work that attempts to understand and transform work as a site of mobilization and struggle for diverse workers' rights, recognition and redistribution. Alternative theorizing for these new settings would involve theories that capture the mechanisms through which power, privileges and rights are produced and secured, and thus help to understand the economic and political nature of the distinction between the haves and the have-nots, those with voice and those without voice, the insiders and the outsiders, as well the (im)possibilities for recognition and redistribution. Theoretical traditions to do this include social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), black Marxism (Robinson, 1983) and bordering theory (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), which can help diversity scholars to unpack the mechanisms or the terms that produce socio-political boundaries and distinguish subaltern subjects in the capitalist economy.

Taking the capitalist economy less seriously

The last two illustrations also take us outside the firm, but in a different direction, into spaces of organizing that are not explicitly set up to produce commodities and abide by capitalist imperatives, although they are never completely outside capitalism. In these spaces, located at the 'interstices' of the capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham, 1996b), we can observe forms of diversity envisioning a more socially just future. Relying on theories that put embodied and affective practice front and centre (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019; Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Pullen et al., 2017), they zoom into the embodied practices of making (knitted objects, a dance. . .) together, foregrounding how diversity emerges as a joint accomplishment that can defy entrenched meanings and hierarchies of difference, blurring both. They show to us how a relation between the self and the other can be established, bottom up, through embodied enactments that are, in the moment, less observant of existing social norms, and thus potentially creative of forms of subjectivity, intimacy and conviviality that do not automatically and inevitably reproduce inequalities.

Coherent with studying diversity in this type of space is a view of social change as processual, emerging from activities and encounters that engage and experiment with differences in such a way that new imaginaries of equality and social justice become possible. Such understanding of social change departs from pre-established organizational ideals such as the multicultural organization (Cox, 1991) and its more recent reiteration, the inclusive one (Nishii, 2013), which have to date dominated the diversity literature. By normatively positing what a 'good' organization should look like, these understandings not only say too little about the process and practices to achieve the ideal, but also limit the possibilities beforehand.

This route to social change then moves us more towards work that attempts to understand the curating and choreographing of spaces in which hegemonic norms are less present or more easily bracketed. It implies attention to processes and embodied activities, material-discursive tools and affective atmospheres through which multiplicity and novel encounters and self–other relations are established. Theorizing

these emergent processes and activities may be guided by theoretical lenses that focus on understanding political possibilities such as corporeal ethics (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014), feminist politics (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) or queer theory (Ahmed, 2006). Affect theory and actor–network theory, and more broadly socio-material and other posthuman approaches, may further conceptually expand the understanding of affect and the material in these spaces (Gherardi, 2017; Sage, Vitry, & Dainty, 2020). A similar aspiration is currently reflected in MOS research on organizations that experiment with new forms of (economic) organizing, such as grassroots communities, cultural organizations, clubs, co-operatives, collectives, urban commons, volunteering organizations, solidarity economy organizations and social movements (Daskalaki, Fotaki, & Sotiropoulou, 2019; Farias, 2017; Fernandez, Martí, & Farchi, 2017). This literature leverages concepts such as hope, autonomy and solidarity to organize prefiguratively, that is, delineating the contours of a future beyond the present. Future diversity research may be inspired to imagine 'things to come', beyond existing boundaries. Conversely, we hope that such MOS research can illuminate how power inequalities along social identities are not automatically reproduced but rather how, in these organizations, new subjectivities and ethics of self–other relations are established.

Conclusion

Exploring diversity beyond the firm comes with novel theoretical vocabularies to interpret it differently. The theoretical lenses outlined above take distance from capitalism as a mode of organizing the economy, social relations and subjectivities; advancing more explicitly political types of action to understand diversity and envision social change. While distinct, these lenses both take seriously the idea that capitalist structures are not given, but are rather contingent, and thus can be challenged (Calás et al., 2014). Together, they encourage us not to be naïve and to engage with the inequality around us, yet at once to remain open to the possibility of social justice to come (Zanoni, 2020a). Future diversity research needs to make space for both understandings of politics and, preferably, attempt to articulate them by navigating between the necessity to oppose the unequal present and radically re-imagine a more socially just yet-to-be future.

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