THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF DIVERSITY

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Apartheid accorded a particular place in our society to race, ethnicity and nation; it produced a set of practices concerned with boundaries between these categories; and it created the logic of difference (Thornton 1996:144). In compliance with the contemporary international recognition of linguistic, cultural and identity rights (Darnell 1994:7 and Kuper 1994:537), the South African Constitution aims at balancing the processes of nation-building and ethnic safeguarding (terminology used by Waldman 2007:168). To this end, the Constitution contains a clause which makes provision for the establishment of a *Commission for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities*. On the adoption of the relevant legislation, the then Vice-President, Mr Zuma, said that while nation-building needs to be promoted, diversity also needs to be recognised (Van der Waal 2002:87).

Although the racial hierarchy that formerly regulated South Africa's social relations has been broken down, inter-group relations in post-apartheid South Africa have become more complex (Adhikari 2005:175). Paradoxically, the emphasis on racial and ethnic differences has continued into the new democratic dispensation (Erasmus & Pieterse 1999:170-171, Maré 1999:246-247, Todeschini & Japha 2004:189 and Reddy 2001:64). One of the many reasons for this situation is the new government's transformation policy, which relies heavily on apartheid racial classification (Reddy 2008:217). Transformation at this stage is viewed as a "numbers

game" in which representivity is the key term. Another reason pertains to the fact that, apart from so-called "first- and second-generation" human rights[1], minority groups are increasingly demanding "third-generation" collective rights, as facilitated through the above-mentioned commission. Then there is also the persistence of racism, as well as the ability of racism to reinvent itself in new postcolonial and postmodern forms (Harrison 1999:610). Prominent scholars feel compelled to assert the pessimistic view that racism is permanent, whether "races" exist or are ideologically marked or not[2]. Harrison (1999:610) suggests that, at this postcolonial juncture, racism often fits into a framework of discursive practices, in terms of which the once largely biologised notion of race is commonly being recoded in terms of "culture".

The significance of cultural perspectives in human affairs can partly be attributed to our desire for meaning and order and our fundamental need for a sense of stability and continuity. However, to argue that power does not determine culture, transformation or diversity, is to fall into the rhetoric of populist "banality" (phrase used by Gibson 2007:167). Concepts like culture, transformation and diversity have very different meanings for different people. Therefore, the main objective of this contribution is to make sense of the different expressions in this regard, and to identify core meanings.

2.   HOW CULTURE MISDIRECTS DIVERSITY

Traditional culture is increasingly [being] recognized to be more an invention constructed for contemporary purposes than a stable heritage handed on from the past (Hanson 1989:890, in Wax 1993:99).

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[1] These human rights are concerned with people's liberty, political involvement, social rights and economic rights (Waldman 2007:161)

[2] Racism is a social, political and cultural construct and has nothing to do with intrinsic, or potential, physical qualities, or with variations within *Homo sapiens*. On the contrary, it has much to do with the allocation of power, privilege and wealth (Smedley 1998:699).

UNESC0's 1995 report, *Our Creative Diversity*, puts forward two definitions for culture. Firstly, it argues that culture is not just one domain of life, but that it is "constructive, constitutive and creative" of all aspects of life. Secondly, it points out that the world is made up of discrete cultures or peoples (Wright 1998:12)[3]. According to the report, people are intermingling as never before, and their distinctiveness is thus becoming threatened. It is by looking across the boundaries between distinct cultures that people gain ideas for alternative ways of living; and hence, distinctiveness should be encouraged. Human civilisation thus depends on creative diversity. In order to ensure creativity, experimentation, innovation and dynamic progress, the report recommends a diversity of distinct entities with clear boundaries.

The above-mentioned ideas in respect of culture should, according to the report, form the basis for world ethics and development policies. Put differently, cultural diversity in the world should be protected by a code of global ethics. The report claims that it would be possible for the world to reach consensus in respect of such a code. However, in the setting out of the parameters of this global ethical code, value judgements can be discerned in the report, as pointed out by Wright (1998:13). For example, only cultures that have "tolerant values" would be respected and protected by the global code. (The question is: whose definition of tolerance would be valid?) Of course, "repulsive" cultural practices should be condemned. (Once again: according to whose definition of "repulsive" should such condemnation be applied?) In response to a reported criticism of human rights for fostering an individualism which is alien to non-western values, the report points out that human rights are not unduly individualistic; they merely comprise an appropriate way to regard all humans as equal. UNESCO's vision of a code of global ethics to order a plural world ultimately rests on a contradiction between the stated objective of respecting all

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[3] The world population is comprised of about 10 000 distinct societies in 200 states.

cultural values, on the one hand, and the value judgments regarding "acceptable" and "unacceptable" diversity that are made in UNESCO's report, on the other.

Wright (1998:10) uses the term "cultural racism", by which she means that the concept "culture" is used in such a way that people can distance themselves from the taint of "biological" racism, yet reintroduce exclusive practices in an insidious cultural guise[4]. Anti-racist language is being used to propagate what is described as a need to "respect" cultural differences[5]. The meaning of "difference" is thus inverted to oppose the reduction of separateness and to turn difference into an essentialist concept, in order to reassert boundaries. The "New Rights" approach (resulting from an amalgamation of liberal economic and conservative political theories) that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s in Britain serves as a good example in this regard (Wright 1998:11). In terms thereof, race was redefined as a feeling of loyalty to people of one's own kind. Defending one's "culture" from being attacked by people not of one's own kind, was defined as legitimate self-defence. Traditional values, especially in the context of education, were at the core of the "culture" which was to be defended. The New Rights mobilised "culture" to reinforce exclusion, using it as a euphemism for renewed racism, with profound implications for public policy and peoples' lives.

The same kind of social and political manipulation that was applied in terms of the New Rights in Britain in order to "secure" traditional educational values, manifested itself in the USA under the guise of the concept of multiculturalism (Wax 1993:105-107). In Van der Waal's (2002:87) view, multiculturalism is a "politicked" reaction against

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[4] A common explanation for the Reitz incident, for example, was that it "wasn't racism", but rather an example of the "harmless, innocent" initiation traditions / culture of the residence.

[5] This usually does not mean rejoicing in cross-cutting differences and fluid identities, or celebrating the creativity inspired by such hybridity.

monoculturism, and also against assimilationist approaches in public policies, especially with regard (again!) to education. He identifies two types of multiculturalism: critical multiculturalism (which is affirmative and democratic) and difference-based multiculturalism (emphasising difference and separatism).

McAllister (in Van der Waal 2002:87) demonstrated that, although the official policy and ideology in Australia entailed giving recognition to all social categories in society, in practice much of the exclusion remained. The dominant Anglophone culture was taken as the norm; stereotypes prevailed; and diversity was regarded mainly as a problem, associated with negative issues in the lives of non-English-speaking Australians. In the USA, research has made it clear that, while some may find multiculturalism to be liberating, multiculturalism only works for some individuals and some minorities (Wax 1993:107).

During 2002, the South African Academy of Science and Art [*Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns*] organised a symposium at Stellenbosch on *The Power of Diversity in South Africa.* The premise implied in the point of departure for the symposium is quite clear from the chosen topic. Although racial exclusivism and the associated policies of the past were criticised, the majority of the presented papers, according to Van der Waal (2002:89-90), tended to emphasise group differences, along with the purported positive nature and outcomes thereof, as a given. Only a few papers did not emphasise diversity as an end in itself, or were in favour of a non-exclusive notion of diversity.

According to McAllister, there is no need in South Africa to emphasise multiculturalism, as this may lead to renewed competition based on ethnicity. Unfortunately, McAllister's warning came too late! For example,

we are all aware of the incidents that unfolded on our campus earlier this year. The UFS's ambitious proposal, entitled *Institute for Diversity*, advocates an attempt to build new values, identities and tolerant spaces as part of the solution.

From the discussion thus far, it is clear that human diversity can be regarded as a concept and a practice, in more than one sense. One view of diversity is more inclusive and affirmative, while the other is more exclusive and conservative. It is also clear that the notions of culture and diversity are not self-evident terms; they are ambivalent conceptual constructs used in the ideological processes that are involved in the creation of meaning.

3.   DIVERSITY AND THE CREATION OF A COLLECTIVE PLACE / SPACE

Human beings think spatially (Levinson 1996:356).   Spatial arrangements provide us with symbolic "maps" to other domains (1996:357); and aspects of places are salient for those who normally inhabit and shape them (Owens 2002:272). Social scientists have always been interested in "places" and "spaces" (Pandya (1990:776), and distinguish between categories such as embodied spaces, gendered spaces, inscribed spaces, contested spaces, transnational spaces and spatial tactics (Dirlik 2003:231). Despite a 21st-century world that is globally and spatially interconnected, places still comprise a unique reality for their inhabitants, in which meaning is shared with other people. Experienced places and spaces represent an informed set of conceptual schemata (Bourdieu, in Pandya 1990:776), which come explicitly into being in the discourse of their inhabitants, particularly in the rhetoric that such places and spaces promote, but also in respect of the practices that are carried out therein (Owens 2002:272).

Currently, space is (inappropriately – cf. Owens 2002:271) regarded as a cultural construct where social relationships are expressed through their own rules of combination and articulation. As a result, homologies between spatial categories and categories of distinctive socio-cultural practice are easily taken for granted, while the distinctiveness of societies, nations and cultures is based upon a seemingly unproblematic division of space – on the basis of the fact that people occupy "naturally" discontinuous spaces (Gupta & Ferguson 1992:6).

The role played by diversity and power in the production, promotion and maintenance of discourses, knowledge, ideology and practices in the organisation, as well as in the representation of space and place, is detrimental in its influence (*cf.* Giddens 1979, Bourdieu 1977 and Ortner 1984, in Hendricks 1988:216). When there is a lack of agreement on issues that are regarded as important for core values and identity, aggrieved groups tend to portray themselves in terms of their need for autonomous, sovereign spaces and places (Mattes 1999:262). Marginalising oneself and/or the "other" necessitates a complex dialectic reflection on egalitarianism; and the defending of self-determination and distinctiveness often seems to represent the obvious course of action.

The challenge, when collective symbolic, ceremonial, ritual, tolerant spaces/places (such as a university campus) are being created, is to relinquish the notion of communities/cultural groups as literal entities, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the profound "bifocality" that characterises locally lived lives. This is necessary, because we need to change our social practices and the way we think about ourselves and others. This is what transformation is all about, rather than having roughly proportional numbers of the different "racial" groups in the whole of our society.

As a higher education institution, we need to address issues of equity, democratisation, development, quality, academic freedom, effectiveness and efficiency. Hence, the debate about transformation on our campus is focused on these multi-dimensional issues. One side broadly criticises transformation in terms of the fear of falling standards, or the importance of traditions and the undermining of merit and efficiency. The other side bewails the lack of real transformation, alluding to the continuing prevalence of white racism, as well as new forms of racism that feed on old networks and double standards when institutional rules and procedures are being applied. Each side has different ideas about what is ethically defensible in terms of content, goals and implementation practices. At many points in the debate, the domination of one system of thought over the other tends to occur.

In any situation of social change, the seeds of constructive growth or destructive conflict are present (Gilbert 1997:276). Physical violence is one way to change formal structures, or to break down secure positions of dominance. However, such an approach certainly will not bring enduring peace, nor will it change relationships or attitudes. Social interaction – and not distancing – conditions the outcome of transformation in a strongly positive manner, as a result of which the communication channels can remain open. And at the very least, both sides on our campus are debating about transformation.

4   CONCLUSION

Milan Kundera's novel, ***The Unbearable Lightness of Being*** (1984), centres on the idea that existence is full of unbearable lightness. Each life is, ultimately, insignificant; every decision ultimately does not matter. Since

decisions do not matter, they are "light". The insignificance of our decisions, our lives, our being, is unbearably light.

Historical records suggest that in the Ancient World, very different principles characterised intergroup relations. For example, until the rise of market capitalism, wage labour, the Protestant ethic, private property and possessive individualism, diversity was not perceived as being indelibly set in stone; conflict among different groups was usually neither constant, nor the basis on which long-term relationships were established; peoples of different cultures coexisted for the most part without strife, with alien segments often fulfilling distinct roles in the larger cities[6]; and biological variations among human groups were not given significant social meaning (Smedley 1998:691-693).

Throughout the overseas territories of the colonising countries of Western Europe, the eighteenth century brought a powerful transformation in the world's perceptions of human differences. Ever since, diversity has become an "unbearable burden"!

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[6] As early as the Classical period, for example, one-third of the population of Athens was comprised of foreigners.

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