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AGAINST INCLUSIVITY: BOUNDARIES, BAD CONCEPTS, AND WHY WE SHOULD

RESIST UNIVERSALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The idea of inclusivity is everywhere. From myriad sources and encompassing a range of more or less broadly understood definitions the concept of inclusivity and its general, implicit ideology that in some sense people are better understood by abstract ideas of ‘sameness’ than particular and material conditions and experiences, and consequently that boundaries, whether definitional, logical, social, or spatial, are things to be ignored, transgressed, or even abolished, is an increasingly pervasive part of social life. In this paper, I question the logic underpinning the concept of ‘inclusivity’, and suggest that it is a bad concept of which we ought to be wary. Drawing on Adorno’s negative dialectics (1973), I suggest that inclusivity, far from being a complement to diversity – with which it is frequently paired – can be seen as its opposite; and that the uncritical acceptance of inclusivity as a social desideratum not only lacks coherence, but can be read as a particularly insidious form of universalization, through which significant material and social inequalities can be rendered invisible, marginalized, or ignored. This paper invites a discussion on the importance of recognizing the value of particularity; on when (and where) boundaries may be sensible, valuable, and desirable, and how research and practice should resist the pressures of universalization.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is something of a thought-piece. An attempt to give some kind of shape to some ideas which have been building gradually for a while from a number of different directions and in connection to different pieces of research, which seem to share a common thread, but have only recently started to coalesce into anything like a general thesis.

There are perhaps some people in the audience expecting me to say something terribly unorthodox, seditious, perhaps even blasphemous, or at least fairly outrageous in this paper. Despite the somewhat deliberately provocative title, however, I don't intend to say anything particularly outrageous here – that is to say, I don't believe that anything I have to say here is especially outrageous. This paper is not a polemic; I am not embarking on a sustained attack on a particular flavour of liberal values, nor am I taking a swipe at any particular organizations, social groups, or individuals for whom the concept of inclusivity is held particularly dearly. This paper is intended to stimulate conversation and debate, and perhaps as a reminder of the old sceptical adage to question everything.

At its core, the argument I make here is about concepts and conceptualization. Specifically, it is about the relationship between concepts and the entities – material, cultural, psychological, or otherwise – to which they relate. Because parts of the argument I'm making here apply on a rather general level I'm going to refer to these entities as phenomena, but for the most part this could easily be taken to mean people, and my conclusions refer especially to situations in which this is the case.

Arguments about the relationship between words and the world they seek to describe is of a certain, and rather well-trodden, philosophical nature; but they are by no means merely an issue over semantics or a language game. It is something with very real, material, and everyday implications that ought to be taken seriously. However, that is absolutely not to say that concepts and phenomena are simply the same thing. Rather, the two spheres exist in a changing, contentious relation with one another.

The theme of this conference, of course, is boundaries, and what I have to say here is concerned with boundaries of two closely related kinds: firstly, the boundaries between words and objects – between concepts and phenomena; and secondly, the boundaries between different objects or phenomena, or collections or assemblages of objects or phenomena, or the experiences associated with different objects or assemblages of phenomena.

I want to suggest here that the concept of ‘inclusivity’ is problematic in regards to both of these types of boundaries. Specifically, it fails to adequately contend with the first (the boundaries between concept and phenomena): which is to say, it fails as a concept – as a *signifier* - to relate meaningfully to the phenomena, or the experiential reality, it purportedly *signifies*; and, this failure is because it also fails to acknowledge the important *reality* of the second. Actually, my overall argument is that the concept and practice of ‘inclusivity’ is in itself an attempt to deny that reality through universalization.

I’ll start with the first sort of boundaries – between concepts and phenomena.

THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN CONCEPTS AND PHENOMENA

There are many concepts – both in the technical lexicon of science and philosophy and in everyday discourses – that give rise to enormous debate over definition, application, and value. These are not reserved for technical or academic concepts, but are an intrinsic part of the linguistic and conceptual apparatus through which we make sense of our everyday lives. In fact, manoeuvring the troublesome terrain of contested and often ambiguous concepts and their consequences is an unavoidable everyday reality. One need only consider any collection of everyday concepts such as ‘love’, ‘truth’, ‘home’, ‘Brexit’, to appreciate the weight and complexity of the words we use and their (often multiple, contextual, and profound) meanings. The problems with these conceptualisations (indeed,

all conceptualisations) lies in the fact that they *are* so very important – necessary, in fact – in making sense of the world, and at the same time *so very difficult to be precise about*.

ADORNO, CONCEPTS, AND THE PARTICULAR

In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argued that philosophy had failed to provide solutions to humanity's problems because it (and society in general) had largely forgotten the distinction between concepts and phenomena, and had been treating our abstract concepts as if they in fact *were* reality itself.

Adorno argued that the concept is never sufficient in describing the particular object or class of phenomena to which it relates, and likewise no particular phenomenon fully defines the concept. The concept of 'chair', for example, can never describes all the physical, material, social, cultural, symbolic, or emotional attributes of every chair, nor could any individual chair ever embody the entirety of what is meant by the concept of 'chair'.

This does not mean that we must attempt to live in a world of infinite multitudes. Adorno is clear that the use of concepts is inevitable, we must develop conceptual systems and categories in order to render the world meaningful to any degree, but these concepts and categories exist only as our ideas or impressions of the particular phenomena which they seek to represent, they can never be equal to one another. In Adorno's language, there is no *identity* between the object and its concept, and every attempt at conceptual categorization inevitably fails to capture part of the particular. There are always things left behind: 'objects do not go into their concepts,' Adorno argues, 'without leaving a remainder'; something which the concept fails to capture, and which is consequently erased, lost. What is lost, ultimately for Adorno, is the very idea of difference itself.

Concepts do not stand alone, but are always part of conceptual systems. At one level this is simply because they are part of a language, which permeates our everyday abilities to understand the world, but also because they relate to each other as parts of varying discourses, which implicitly, or perhaps

explicitly, seek to define, influence, and shape the world in various ways. Consequently, Adorno maintained that all concepts, all conceptualizations – indeed all thinking – carried the inherent risk of totalitarianism. Because concepts seek to erase the differences between and within the phenomena to which they relate, they lead not simply to inaccurate or *bad* understandings of the world, but actively work to *enforce* an entirely artificial *sameness* upon the phenomena and experiences they totalize. In other words, they destroy the ‘*crucial differences*’ that make up the material world of phenomena.

This boundary between the sphere of concepts and that of the phenomena to which they relate is not simply a philosophical concern, but has significant implications for people’s everyday lives, and the concept of ‘inclusivity’ provides a particularly apposite example of the failure to recognize this crucial distinction.

INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY

An important aspect of any concept is how well it describes, represents, or corresponds with, and therefore enables us to understand or make sense of, the phenomenon or phenomena to which it relates. The history of empiricist philosophy and scientific inquiry has been concerned with establishing the basis on which concepts, or claims to describe or explain material phenomena can be considered successful, and this has largely come down to relying on concepts or ideas which are capable of making meaningful, and particular, statements or predictions about reality that can withstand empirical scrutiny. And it is here that we should first start to be critical of the value of ‘inclusivity’.

The idea of ‘inclusivity’ of course comes in many forms and with various definitions, and I’m not going to dig around in this; instead, I want to draw a parallel between the idea of ‘inclusivity’ and the concept of diversity, with which it is frequently associated.

Diversity, according to the University of Sunderland's equality and diversity staff training module, is concerned with 'understanding that people are different,' with 'valuing those differences,' and people being 'treated fairly according to their needs'. The emphasis here is on the characteristics of people – the all-important particularities and differences which shape our lives. Diversity, therefore, relates to material reality, it is fundamentally concerned with and anchored to the actual, material, objective conditions of the world within which people's lives are formed and carried out.

Compare this with a typical example of a definition of inclusivity (taken from the website of an occupational therapy company). Inclusivity 'is seen as a universal human right. The aim ... is to embrace all people irrespective of race, gender, disability, medical or other need. It is about giving equal access and opportunities and getting rid of discrimination and intolerance'.

There are lots of things to pick at with this definition, but I'm concerned here with one issue in particular. Whereas the concept of diversity is both particular and empirical, and relates to the material world and our experiences of it, according to this (entirely typical) definition, 'inclusivity' is neither. The idea of 'inclusivity' is universal and abstract. It *merely* asserts – that those *diverse* phenomena, those different people and experiences, *ought* to be grouped together '*irrespective of the differences* between them, and treated *the same* according to a universal principle that does not necessarily relate to – and actually implicitly denies – their particular experiences. Moreover, it asserts the normative implication that those differences must be relegated to the background in order that everyone can be *understood and treated the same*, united under a single abstract explanatory concept. Effectively, that diversity must give way to 'inclusivity'.

The boundaries between concepts and phenomena mean that all concepts fail to adequately encompass their object. Moreover, as Adorno warned, all concepts, by virtue of their character as concepts, are potentially totalitarian – losing, denying, or erasing those differences which escape their definition. The concept of 'inclusivity' is particularly vulnerable to this criticism because the nature of its conceptual content argues for universal inclusion – rather than acknowledging the *differences* –

the particularity – of the world, it asserts, without recognizing material difference, that we can, or indeed *should* all be, or be treated, the same.

And this brings us to the second type of boundary – those between different phenomena.

BOUNDARIES BETWEEN DIFFERENT PHENOMENA

At its simplest, conceptualization is categorization – an attempt to establish a meaningful category of phenomena in order to make the world intelligible. But the particularity of phenomena, and the inability of our concepts ever to fully describe it mean that our categories are always flawed. The broader the category, the farther we cast our conceptual net, the more heterogeneity it inevitably contains, and thus denies. When those phenomena are people and their experiences, the denial of difference becomes especially problematic. ‘Inclusivity’, as we just saw, is seen as ‘a universal human right’, implying a single category of humans who can be included together. The universal category of ‘human’, which is the basis of the UNHCR, highlights aspects by which we are all the same but tells us virtually nothing about any individual human. It tells us nothing, for instance, about life expectancy, susceptibility to disease, or the requirement of specific medical or social interventions or provisions, or likelihood of involvement in armed conflict, enslavement, or sex-trafficking, etc. which are all contingent upon and inseparable from myriad and complex issues of social geography and political economy as well as biological and psychological variation. All of which are readily ascertainable through empirical research which pays attention to differences in, and disaggregates data according to empirical and material factors including, for instance, geography, sex, ethnicity, and socio-economic class. All the ways in which we are the same – the *merely* human – are, for many but certainly not all people, in actuality, very small parts of their everyday experiences. Of course, this does not mean that they are not important or relevant; but nevertheless, for a significant proportion of people living on the planet, our lives are defined far more by what separates and distinguishes us than by those things

which unite us – the *merely* human. The fact that for so many people basic human subsistence and safety is an everyday concern while many others can spend their days concerned with the implications of concepts like ‘inclusivity’ should in itself be ample proof of the limits of its traction as a useful concept.

The specific factors facing, for example, Black women in the United States of America, victim/survivors of domestic violence and abuse in same-sex relationships, youth deviance in Sao Paulo, etc. cannot be adequately addressed simply by ‘including’ these disparate and particular people and groups under broader categories. Nor should we assume these groups are themselves internally homogeneous. Instead, there are differences – boundaries – between groups of phenomena, and particularly people, which are real or meaningful, although certainly not necessarily positive (or negative).

As I have already mentioned, inclusion within a concept or category is not just a linguistic or philosophical issue: it potentially has significant material implications where category membership forms the basis of behaviour, or is a requisite for access to places, practices, or experiences. The logic of inclusivity implies that it is always positive to be ‘included’ – and therefore negative to be ‘excluded’ – but this is too simplistic a picture, and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that grouping diverse populations together, particularly for ‘inclusion’ within general or mainstream services or institutions does not promote integration or equality, but can, for some, further entrench inequalities.

Inclusive education, of course, sought to remove the social disadvantages experienced by disabled children and those with special educational needs by ‘mainstreaming’ their education, believing barriers to learning were largely, if not entirely, a question of social definition and being ‘excluded’. While for many this was advantageous, for others it meant denying the physical, psychological, neurological, and cultural underpinnings of learning difficulties and disabilities – to eradicate the *differences* – the *particularities* – that were, and are, so central to people’s lives. That mainstream schools often lacked the expertise, the resources, and the capacity to provide the services many disabled children required in order to fulfil their potential was – at least on an ideological level – a

secondary concern, as inclusion in mainstream education was seen to be better axiomatically, and therefore inevitably preferable for children with diverse needs, many of whom were happy and thriving in environments which, although *different*, were none the worse for it.

A similar point can be made in regards to the closure of separate hospital facilities for mental health. The old 'asylums', while not beyond reproach, were in many ways better suited to providing for their patients than the wards in general hospitals that replaced them, precisely because they were not general, but particular, *specific* services. Affording mental health care the same respect as physical health care should have meant respecting their differences as much as acknowledging their similarities, and recognizing that the effective treatment of borderline personality disorder or PTSD does not demand the same facilities and approaches as the treatment of a pulmonary embolism or a broken leg.

It follows then that attitudes which seek to promote equality and 'inclusion' can often have the opposite effect. The argument that racism is defeated by 'not seeing colour' makes a clear example. The 'Black Lives Matter' campaign which sought to draw attention to the fatal shootings of young black men in the US by police officers, was almost immediately subject to an attempt to erase the very actual, material, and particular experiences of Black people via the monstrously insulting slogan of 'All Lives Matter', which effectively denied Black people's *particular* experiences by *including* them with the general experiences of all people – including, naturally, those people whose lives do not face the same existential threats whenever they leave their homes.

Acting on the principles of 'sameness' carries a number of major risks, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to be more dangerous for already disadvantaged groups. Pharmaceutical companies commit to market medications often trialled on incredibly narrow populations – and often, ironically, entirely healthy people – exposing people with countless very real genetic, bio-chemical, neurological, behavioural, geographical, and social differences to an unknown range of potential side-effects, or at the very least treatments of unverified efficacy. A recent study by Caroline Criado Perez has drawn

particular attention to this and a host of other inequalities experienced by women as a result of the 'default male' model of testing.

Perhaps worse still, services which aim to help some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society are increasingly pressured in operating on a model of 'sameness'. Domestic violence services, which have suffered tremendously under austerity, have been forced to retreat back into the provision of core services – prioritizing 'general' provision at the expense of specialist, particular services, which are in as much demand as ever, and government funding for such organizations increasingly becoming conditional on achieving 'value for money' by demonstrating the wide – indeed, universal – appeal of their services.

None of this should be taken to suggest that no good has come from programmes to address inequalities – of course, there has been much achieved – but rather to stand as a reminder that the categories we employ, if they are to mean anything at all, must acknowledge and relate to the particular and material differences that underpin experience. And crucially, that reality does not neatly fit into our concepts, but is complex, conflicted and contradictory, and it is entirely possible that in our eagerness to progress, we become blind to the implications of forcing our concepts onto contradictory experiential reality – particularly when those concepts, like 'inclusivity', insist on a universal account of the world.

CONCLUSION: UNIVERSALIZATION, AND WHY IT SHOULD BE RESISTED

Adorno quite famously remarked that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz' was 'barbaric'. The horror of the material reality of totalizing worldviews, which had led to so many people and their particular lived experiences – material, flesh and blood reality – being treated according to universal, abstract conceptualizations, had rendered the idea of thinking about life in purely aesthetic or abstract terms

unconscionable. It was only by acknowledging and engaging with the actual, and particular, lived experiences of everyday life, that human endeavour could progress successfully.

I've spoken about two kinds of boundaries that, like it or not, are inescapable aspects of our lives: the boundaries between concepts and phenomena, and those between materially and experientially different phenomena. I've argued that these boundaries raise significant obstacles for the idea of 'inclusivity', which fails to appreciate the importance of one, and denies the reality of the other. In so doing, it promotes an agenda of universalization, based not in the material particularity of reality, but merely in the abstract sphere of conceptuality. It quite inexorably seeks to deny and restrict the particularity, the diversity, the differences, which are so crucial in generating and shaping the everyday lived experiences of our lives, within a single, totalizing image of the world. In consequence, it inevitably seeks to ignore, to deny, or to erase those differences which are so important and meaningful, not only as sources of very real, material disadvantages and inequalities, but also of the variation and *diversity* which brings richness and wonder to our lives.

But one size does not fit all, and we risk committing egregious intellectual error, and causing enormous harm, if in seeking to be 'inclusive' on political or normative grounds we forget that, as Adorno argued, 'no object ever goes into its concept without leaving a remainder', and that material differences are not washed away, but often further entrenched by conceptual abstraction. In this way the material inequalities faced by so many people in so many ways are made invisible, rendered unimportant (or even nonexistent) by abstract conceptual schemes which cannot contend with the inherent diversity of the particular.

I said at the beginning that despite the slightly provocative title, I wasn't intending to say anything outrageous or provocative, so obviously I want to finish by saying something that is just a little bit provocative.

David Hume, the great Scottish empiricist, *bon vivant*, and rattler of cages, suggested that when we go through libraries we should ask of the books we encounter whether they contain 'abstract reasoning about quantity or number,' or 'experiential reasoning about matters of fact and existence,' and those which do neither, Hume concludes, are of no value to us. If a similar logic is applied to concepts, we should ask ourselves whether they clarify the relations concerning our ideas of logic, or either describe or explain matters of fact concerning material reality. The concept of 'inclusivity', I argue, does neither of these things. Following Hume then, I suggest that we 'commit it to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.'

Thank you.