

All Things Counter, Original, Spare, Strange: Why are We so Bad at Difference?

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Diversity is a key component for resilience within systems, including human societies. Our natural tendency towards homophily, however, impedes diversity within human societies and economies. Bio-diverse ecosystems, though themselves threatened, can act as a model for diverse and more resilient human societies. The link between social, economic, and ecological diversity is explored and linked through a modern day context, Keswick, Ontario. This journal article is also an attempt to distill a vast amount of research literature into a form that is eminently readable by diverse audiences communicating how critically important diversity is for human survival on many different levels, as well as to innovation and competitiveness in a dynamically interconnected global marketplace.

I

Canada prides itself on being a tolerant nation and a model for multiculturalism. We congratulate ourselves on our ability to incorporate people from around the world into a society that values difference, but how real is this view of our tolerance? This view of ourselves was shaken recently and many of us are still wondering exactly what went wrong. It started as a simple bullying incident. Two students in Keswick, Ontario, one Caucasian, one a Korean-Canadian, were helping the gym teacher clean up after class. The two students started to argue, and the Caucasian student tossed a racial slur at the other, and threw a punch. He had chosen a poor target for a fight, however. An expert in Tai-Kwan-do, the Korean student was more than able to defend himself. Under attack, using his non-dominant hand, he broke the white student's nose. Violence between young boys isn't exactly international news; but what is shocking is the complete and utter failure of judgment that ensued. Though both students were suspended, the Korean student was given a much harsher suspension and was charged with assault by police. The principal was preparing to have the Korean boy expelled from the entire school district.

Keswick has been in the news before; in 2007 a rash of incidents in which Asian fishermen were pushed from bridges into Lake Simcoe brought national attention to the region. And though police have now dropped charges against the Korean student and though he has been reinstated at the school, the incident has left many of us wondering if we are all as progressive as we think. What happened in Keswick is not an isolated incident, however, as other Canadian communities have struggled with 'differences' and difficult questions of secular versus religious rights and freedoms, and indeed, the meaning of multiculturalism.

II

Though the struggle to embrace social diversity might seem as if it is far removed from the struggle to sustain the earth's ecosystems, this is not the case. Building a sustainable world of vibrant ecosystems, healthy societies, and just and rewarding economies might in fact hinge entirely on our ability to embrace diversity in all its forms-- ecological, social, and economic. For diversity is an essential factor in the creation of resilience, the capacity of a system to undergo change and still

retain its basic function and structure. Resilience is what allows us to weather the inevitable but unpredictable modern challenges that threaten our societies. Resilience allows us to self-organize and to learn and adapt in the face of change. Societies that weed out diversity tend to become very homogenous. They are often remarkably efficient, but when faced with a new and unexpected challenge they have no alternatives to draw upon. They have reduced future options by simplifying their world, but sameness has terrible costs, although in the short-term it is comforting.

Diversity as a deliberately designed and planned strategy becomes even more important when social-ecological systems are coupled or co-evolving as is the case now with our highly globalized world. System inter-relationships are complex and impossible to predict, in terms of scale and time. Resiliency then becomes a critical strategy for sustainability as such systems are dependent upon buffering capacity and the ability to absorb disturbances. In such complex, interdependent co-evolving systems, it is impossible to predict or 'manage' multiple variables, and barriers. Diversity may be the primordial missing link, and must be actively sustained at multiple scales.

If diversity is an important and essential factor for long term success, why are human societies afraid of that which is different? If we look to nature, diversity is by far the rule rather than the exception. Nature abhors a monoculture; ecosystems take many paths to the same goals. Psychologists have long puzzled over our fear of difference even in situations where it is harmful to our goals. Known as homophily, or the tendency of humans to form groups with people who are similar to them, this desire for sameness walls us off from new ideas, different points of view, and the innovation needed to solve difficult problems. Homophily occurs as cultural similarities and differences provide a basis for cohesion and exclusion. We feel more comfortable with those most like ourselves. This preference for the company of similar actors is a barrier to the pursuit of diversity, as well as the capacity to adapt and innovate.

Groups of people, whether they are friends, coworkers, or activists attempting to change their communities, tend toward similarity for several reasons. Groups focused on one place magnify the lack of diversity of their communities, and groups that require a certain skill or credential can magnify age-old barriers to entry in the particular field of endeavour. Without new members coming and going, human groups tend to become more homogenous over time as they deepen ties with each other and exclude those whose points of view vary. Baudrillard argued that groups define themselves both through their similarities within the group and their differences from outsiders, and these tendencies are self reinforcing. Atypical members tend to stay in the organization a shorter time than typical members. However atypical members often have the very resources and connections that a group needs to survive and innovate.

If a group loses its diversity, it loses its bridges into the wider community and thus loses agency for change. The core members know only each other, and have no larger pool to recruit from. Homophily limits peoples' life in ways that effects the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience. Without the variety needed to access different kinds of resources and spheres of influence, a group's agency will decrease over time and the group runs the risk of failure and/or collapse.

Richard Florida has long demonstrated the link between the diversity of a region and the prosperity of a region. He has shown that a diverse social fabric is a bell-weather for innovation. What is interesting is that so few researchers have addressed why certain areas are more diverse than

others. Certainly diversity tends to create diversity; people are drawn to places they feel they will be accepted. Planning and urban form also play a role; when Jane Jacobs noted that "new ideas need new buildings" she was identifying that a mixed use, heterogeneous urban form allows different people to mingle in the same spaces, and to establish the connections that make new ideas possible. However hubs of diversity are also guarded by policy makers and figures of authority who personally value difference. It is almost certain that incidents such as that in Keswick happen in Toronto schoolyards as well. However the educators and law enforcers in hubs of diversity are likely to behave very differently. At least currently, diversity within society must actively be protected against tribalism if multiculturalism is to flourish, adapt and respond to modern conditions.

Culturally, however, a political system that has collapsed into a race towards the next election has shrunk the public sphere for dialogue over shared meanings about our future. Without dialogue, communal identity also shrivels, as does social capital and social cohesion over shared futures and the best ways forward. In nature, there is a term called functional diversity, that is, there is a certain threshold over which the system becomes too diverse and becomes at risk. Without state leadership around unity through diversity, so too do human societies risk fragmentation, alienation and risk of escalating violence between ethnic groups who do not feel included in the Canadian fabric.

III

As noted above nature provides an astounding model of how diversity creates resilience. Earth's diversity, referred to as biodiversity, has endured billions of years on a changing planet, populating every nook from deep within fissures in the Earth's crust to high in the atmosphere. Nature flies, swims deep into the oceans, and engineers astounding self repairing structures that our technology cannot match in precision and elegance. An entire field of study, biomimicry, has emerged to study the miraculous designs found in the natural world.

Biodiversity, however, is in peril. Ecologically, one in three amphibians and a quarter of the world's coniferous trees, on top of the one in eight birds and one in four mammals is known to be in jeopardy. The conservation of biodiversity is considered to be one of the most urgent environmental issues globally. Creeping homogenization threatens all of the world's ecosystems, our agricultural practices, our industrial practices, and our increasing globalization make the world look more and more the same. Although there may be some comfort when travelling to know that a McDonald's or a Starbuck's will be the same in Kuala Lumpur as in Montreal or Vancouver, the cost of this homogenization is a missing diversity of species and of culture. The North American lifestyle throughout the world has many unanticipated and unintended consequences for diversity and community sustainable development.

Our ability to understand the threats we pose to our fellow species has not evolved as quickly as our power to alter the natural world we are a part of. Western culture has developed an ethos in which nature is to be overcome, to be tamed. This grand narrative pits us very firmly as "other"; as forever outside nature, in the Christian tradition quite literally the children cast out of the garden. This separation, however, is quite artificial, and it has hobbled our ability to sustain the earth's biodiversity, and our own diversity, languages and cultures. We have overwhelmingly taken one approach to species management; the creation of reserves with minimal human presence.

Though parks and reserves play a critical role in species preservation, given our numbers and the amount of land we impact they are simply not enough. Given the interactive effects of human

impacts and their far ranging scale, such as climate change, protection of diversity must be ubiquitous in both built and non-built environments. Environmental Historian William Cronin presented one of the first serious critiques of the separation of culture and nature in his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness”. He felt that we needed to rethink the concept of wilderness, as firstly our pristine wilderness areas were in many cases landscapes that had supported humans in the past and undergone significant human intervention. However more importantly for the argument at hand, Cronin felt the North American conception of wilderness created a dualism that gives us permission to evade responsibility for our actions. To truly encourage biodiversity and learn from the inherent resilience of ecosystems, we must bring nature firmly back into our cultural spaces. It is a question of how we see ourselves in the universe, whether we are a part of nature or apart from nature.

A growing number of thinkers have brought this argument into the modern city; in her essay “Zoopolis”, Urban Geographer Jennifer Wolch argues that the nature/culture dualism is deeply destructive as it puts our dependency on nature in the background. She rightly points out that all cities contain an “animal town”. We would go further; the plants and animals are not just skeletal remainders of the natural fabric that once existed in that place; they are a separate ecosystem of their own in symbiosis with the city around them. The plants and animals in an urban environment are adapted to the environmental effects of the city, and the food sources that our culture produces. These ecosystems, in turn, provide us with a critical but nearly invisible resource.

If mundane nature is healthy for urbanites, it is also healthy for the environmental movement. Future conservation of mundane nature depends on urban dwellers maintaining a connection to nature. This is called the “Pigeon Paradox”; the remaining wilderness, if it is to be saved, will only be saved by urbanites who might never see it in person. However a love of wilderness is correlated to exposure to nature. A study conducted at the University of Sheffield found that the more biologically diverse the green space, the higher its psychological value. One key measure was the ability of green space to foster reflection, which referred to the participants’ reported ability to clear their heads, gain perspective on life and think more easily about personal matters. Generally the richer, more complex green spaces provided more restorative benefits than did simpler areas with just trees and grass. Of paramount importance to any reconciliation model, namely, the ecological, is guaranteeing access to the natural information as a part of reality especially necessary for renewal. In *The Trouble with Wilderness*, Cronin claims that “nature is all around us if we only have eyes to see it”¹ By focusing upon this mundane nature and expanding its scope, we could realize significant social, economic, and ecological gains in our lives. The choice of what kind of ecological world we want to live in and the choice of what kind of cultural world we want to live in are linked; loons and polar bears are critical to how we define ourselves and to how we define our multiculturalism.

IV

The argument that social and ecological diversity are beneficial to society is perhaps not a greatly challenging one. The role of diversity in the third pillar of society, the economy, is another matter entirely. Today's economists are deeply committed to a model of thinking completely devoted to maximization of production and completely ignorant of the concept that what we really need are resilient communities. We can perhaps blame the classical economist and "father of free trade" David Ricardo for this point of view. In framing his competitive advantage, Ricardo argues

that “for the happiness of mankind ... labour should be distributed such that each country produces that which it has an advantage in”² He argues that trade not only increases the amount of economic activity, but that it increases profits as well. Ricardo believed that profits rose mainly when wages fell, and that trade would lower wages by making goods cheaper.

In arguing for the benefits of trade, Ricardo makes two assumptions; he did not believe that either capital or labour were mobile across national boundaries. In explaining this assumption, Ricardo makes the statement that there is a “natural disinclination which every man has to quit the country of his birth and connections, and entrust himself with all of his habits fixed, to a strange government and new laws, which checks the emigration of capital.”³ Competitive advantage contained an inherent social control to protect society from a devastating race to the bottom. This social control no longer functions in a highly interconnected global world.

The obvious flaw with an economy that is massively specialized by region is that global changes can totally destroy a local economy in an unpredictable way. One technology change leading to a factory closure can kill the job base in a region overnight. Ultimately this is not what a society should want; at some level we have to make the decision that maximizing profits is not in the long run, the holy grail of society, rather, it may be all about optimization of diversity in all its forms. What makes for an interesting life; more of the same, or a diversity of experiences over time? Even economists have noted cases in which diversity strengthens a local economy. When opening a restaurant, often the best possible place is a neighborhood crowded with other restaurants. Rather like a coral reef, a complex ecology of restaurant entrepreneurs, staff, and patrons arises; though individual restaurants might fail restaurant districts can thrive for astoundingly long periods of time.

Diversity is also important within firms. Economically, heterogeneous diversity is important to human systems. In a study comparing the financial performance of the DiversityInc Top 50 companies for diversity to a matched sample, evidence demonstrated that firms with a strong commitment to diversity outperformed their peers on average. Other researchers have discovered that a commitment to diversity in an organization’s human capital, CEO commitment, corporate communications, and supplier diversity contribute to what a company's ‘invisible assets’. Dalton has found that a significant body of research on top management teams proves that heterogeneous (diverse) teams tend to produce superior outcomes as compared to homogeneous teams.

Much research reveals that diversity may also be a critical strategic economic factor for both local and international comparative advantage. Barney describes three primary conditions that make a resource difficult to emulate: (1) a unique historical position endows the firm with resources that are not dominated by competitors and are not easily appropriable; (2) the link between firm resources and competitive advantage is not understood so that competitors do not know which resource to imitate; and (3) the resources are socially complex, as happens with culture, relationships, or systems. The latter may be strategically even more important to comparative and competitive advantage. Maybe the least substitutable capital in the long run is us. Research by Crockett has found a more diverse board translates into a more profitable business (Crockett 2006), while Hamel further argues that strategic innovation is the result of bringing a diverse set of voice into the strategy dialogue, among other issues.

V

One of the defining questions of our time may well be how do we embrace diversity and

difference given our background of tribalism, separation of nature and culture, and maximization of economic processes? Education is emerging as a critical first step; what is telling about the incident in Keswick is that it only really reached the mainstream media after four hundred of the students in the school walked out of class in a show of solidarity for the Korean student. These children have listened to us beat the drum of multiculturalism their whole lives, they now live it, and were quick to identify an act that was wrong and let us know that they intend to hold society to the standards we have been mumbling about. Ecologists and economists need to take this lesson to heart. We need to educate a new generation to understand that nature and culture are by their very essence deeply intertwined; a generation who will view a sterile city devoid of nature as incomplete and inhuman. A generation that will forgo near-term profits to preserve the ecological diversity that we might need in the future, and that understands we only get one chance with our environmental riches. This education must reach the level of our planners and policy makers; our leaders and lawmakers. For though we have a handful of shining examples to look to, for one of the richest countries in the world these examples are few and far between. For the most part, this is still a country where the same ecological mistakes are being made over and over again.

As for our economy we have even further to go. We are a society wedded to the idea of the savior industry, the one big category-killer that supports a town and region. This vision, however, has not really resembled reality in quite some time. What we need to be doing is encouraging a diversity of ideas; and we need to be funding research and development at a much higher level. Though capitalism encourages us to believe that there is an optimal path we should follow, in a globalized world there is no optimal path that can't be swept away in an instant by external forces that we will never control. The only path to sustainability that is viable is to encourage a diverse range of economic endeavors in every region of the country.

Learning to embrace diversity may prove to be one of the hardest challenges of sustainable society-building, a greater lifestyle change than any change to how we use energy or what we consume. We need to embrace all that is counter, original, strange, and spare; if the options we need to survive the challenges of the future are to be there when we need them, it is our most critical evolutionary change.

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