



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 11, Issue 1

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.91461>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

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Critical Diversity Studies at a Juncture: Mobilizing Theories of Difference in and beyond Capitalism

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In this contribution to the roundtable, I reflect on the evolution of critical diversity studies, as part of the broader field of critical management and organization studies, from its origins in the 1990s to date. After reviewing its unique strengths in generating knowledge on the relation between difference and power, I discuss how the economic crisis of 2008 has transformed and radicalized this field of study. I conclude with a plea to engage more with the burgeoning Marxist scholarship. Such engagement is not only essential to theorize the role of difference in organizing unequally in capitalism, but also to envision anti-capitalist struggles and a post-capitalist, more equal organization of the economy, work and life as a whole.

What is critical diversity studies?

Over the last decade, critical diversity studies as part of the broader critical management and organization studies has come to age (Prasad et al., 1997; Zanoni et al., 2010; Zanoni & Van Laer, 2024). The term ‘critical’ qualifies this scholarship as foregrounding power in the conceptualization of difference along gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, race and ethnicity, religion, language, age and class, to name only a few, as well as their intersections. Drawing on a wide variety of theories and conceptual vocabularies, critical diversity studies investigates the discursive, material, affective and institutional making and unmaking of such differences. Taking an explicitly non-positivist, non-essentialistic epistemological stance, it assumes that differences are not universally ‘given’, but rather social constructions produced through social practice in multiple ways across contexts and dynamically over time. This entails that differences remain inherently instable and contested. On the one hand, to become hegemonic and ‘taken for granted’, their specific meanings need to be continuously reaffirmed. On the other hand, precisely this necessity makes them susceptible of being more or less overtly disputed and transformed.

Differences are understood not as characteristics of individuals, but rather as ‘principles of organizing’ work and life in unequal ways, which includes the unequal distribution of the symbolic and material rewards attached to it (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Nkomo, 1992). We draw on feminist theory, decolonial theory, queer theory, Marxist theory, critical discourse analysis, neo-materialist theory, and more to unpack how difference deeply imbues our understanding of what is work and what is not, which activities deserve to be paid and which should be carried out without compensation, what are essential

competences for a certain job and – relatedly – who is a suitable candidate for it, who is a good leader, what is equitable pay, what is a ‘normal’ career... In other words, work and organizations are not simply the context in which difference is constructed. They produce such differences while at once being produced by them.

In this sense, organizational critical diversity studies is fundamentally distinct from ‘mainstream’ studies of diversity and diversity management that take both difference and organizational contexts as given. Often grounded in social psychological theories, these studies operationalize difference as one or more demographic traits to empirically assess their relation to unequal individual work and career outcomes and/or groups’ and organizations’ performance outcomes. Critical diversity studies is also markedly different from the legal literature that focuses on formal norms, discrimination and equal opportunities for legally protected demographic groups in work contexts.

Why is critical diversity studies theoretically and politically worthwhile?

In my evaluation, critical diversity studies is a theoretically and politically relevant and exciting tradition for scholars of gender and diversity for at least three important reasons. First, it foregrounds power rather than a specific social identity: from its very origins, it is a field that is open to multiple differences, and has attention not only for their specificities, but also for their similar functioning as principles of unequal organizing, their intersections and their queering. Individual scholar and communities have distinct types of expertise and might privilege some areas of inquiry over other ones. However, luckily, there is a shared sense that social identities are not in competition and little appetite for field-broad debates about which one should gain ontological primacy. Overall, there is a lot of dialogue, theoretical sharing and cross-pollination. This stance is well reflected in Tatli and Özbilgin’s (2012) plea for a radically inductive approach to intersectionality that, while keeping power up front, avoids mechanically operationalizing intersectionality as gender, race-ethnicity and class background. Indeed, although not all contemporary critical diversity research is fully intersectional, it is rather attentive to how multiple differences jointly play in specific situations.

Second, critical diversity studies has produced theoretically quite sophisticated critical analyses of empirical cases of difference, work and organizing. This sophistication originates in a thorough engagement with critical traditions from the humanities and the social sciences. Yet, management and organization studies also sets the bar really high concerning the interpretation of empirical material. How empirical analyses are precisely informed by the theoretical approach, its core assumptions and concepts, needs to be carefully explained. This results in theory-informed empirical scholarship as opposed to purely descriptive story-telling-from-the-field or eloquent theorizing disconnected from the empirics. We are required to enter in a double dialogue with the knowledge of science and the knowledge of social practice, to take both as seriously in order to weave them into a scholarly account told in our own voice.

Third, as critical diversity studies is largely located in business schools and faculties of business economics, it has historically mainly dealt with difference and organizing in companies. This location provides a valuable vantage point at a historical time in which capitalist relations dominate not only the globalized economy but societies more broadly, both in the Global North and the Global South of the world. It encourages us to theorize difference as part and parcel of the instrumental relations that capitalism imposes on us and the logic of value that comes with them. In this sense, we are uniquely positioned to theorize how class – as a relation, an identity and a modality of politics – articulates with other differences and the politics that come with them. Such perspective can help overcome the false and sterile opposition between class and ‘the rest,’ which has long dominated the debate in political theory and the social sciences. We can do so by showing how capital produces and leverages difference in multiple ways that are all functional to its valorization and how, conversely, these differences enter struggles to counter exploitation and oppression (Romani

et al., 2020). The contribution of critical diversity studies is thus not only theoretical and empirical, but also explicitly political.

My own intellectual path is indissolubly tied to critical diversity studies, in which I grew up as a scholar and which I have helped build through my own work, alone and with others. When I started my PhD on diversity in 2001, this field was still in its infancy. The notion of diversity and the first diversity policies that had emerged in the late 1980s in the US were being introduced in Belgium and other European countries as well as in the rest of the world, largely through multinationals and by consultants (Klarsfeld, 2010; Risberg & Söderberg, 2008). Most critically oriented scholars of gender and ethnicity were highly skeptical and even explicitly against diversity, a business concept that overtly essentialized and instrumentalized difference and threatened to undermine the long-standing struggles for anti-discrimination and equal opportunities in the workplace (Liff & Wajcman, 1996; Noon, 2007). Less convinced about the possibility to obtain equality through legislation, I was keener on exploring the potentialities of diversity, despite its obvious shortcomings. I was really intrigued by this notion which, for the first time in history, explicitly understood difference as a repository of economic value, a potential waiting to be ‘tapped’ by employers (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). To me, this represented a true ‘Copernican revolution’, away from historically dominant claims that subordinate groups owe their subordination precisely to the fact that their work does not produce anything of value. I believed then (and still do), that this association lays the fundamental grounds for all workers to be recognized and resist exploitation and oppression, advance claims on that value, re-organize work in more equal ways, and even move towards post-capitalist forms of work and livelihoods.

The economic crisis of 2008 as a watershed in critical diversity studies

The critical diversity studies community has known an enormous expansion since its origins in the 1990s. This success is reflected in the success of dedicated scientific journals such as *Gender, Work and Organization*, but also the structural presence of gender and diversity related scholarship in reference journals *Organization, Human Relations, Culture and Organization, Organization Studies, Scandinavian Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, British Journal of Management*, the Academy of Management journals, and more sociological journals such as *Work, Employment and Society*. Critical gender and diversity scholarship is also structurally embedded in the annual meetings of the Academy of Management (AoM) and the European Group of Organization Studies (EGOS), the two largest professional associations in management and organization studies.

When the global economic crisis hit in 2008, we experienced a collective wake up call. The crisis made the extreme fragility of life under capitalism visible to the naked eye. It threw millions into destitution world-wide, and brought it closer to home, into high-income geographies and even the self-declared middle-class. It also foregrounded global interdependences, and the disproportionate effects of crises on those populations in the Global South where production had been delocalized since the early 1980s. Critical diversity studies were only partially equipped to theorize what was happening, as it lacked a fully-fledged theory of capitalism. It drew much more from the post-structuralist (feminist) traditions, critical discourse analysis, gender studies, and, to a much lesser extent, decolonial and queer studies.

The community responded to the crisis in multiple ways. A first response was the shifting of attention towards workers in the lower ranks of organizations, in less well paid and protected jobs, as well as more precarious work statuses, such as the self-employed and, increasingly, those working in the informal economy and through platforms (e.g., De Coster & Zanoni, 2023; van Eck et al., 2021; Zanoni, 2011; Zanoni & Pitts, 2022; Zulfiqar, 2022). While these groups were never completely absent, the public discourse of the knowledge-intensive service economy prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s had generated research funding and thus concentrated scholarly attention on white-collar jobs. The increased presence of highly educated women in these jobs had also stimulated research on the glass ceiling they

encountered, including topics such as work-life ‘balance’ and leadership. Although the need to pay more attention to class in studies of diversity was occasionally mentioned, class remained largely absent (Romani et al., 2020). In the wake of the crisis, some mainstream business scholars gained interest in the role of organizations in reproducing inequality, yet tellingly managed to largely ignore the long-standing critical tradition of scholarship on gender as well as the more recent diversity one.

Somewhat relatedly, scholarship increasingly addressed the work and employment conditions of racialized women and men workers located in the Global South, at the bottom of global value chains, where most of the commodities we consume are produced (e.g., Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan & Calás, 2015; Zulfiqar, 2022). Workplace accidents, of which Rana Plaza in 2013 is perhaps the best known, increased public scrutiny on these workplaces, and called for making Global North brands accountable. By unveiling how difference plays in dispossession, exploitation and oppression beyond the confines of single organizations located in high-income geographies, these studies have since given a renewed boost to critical diversity scholarship. Grounded in decolonial theories, indigenous epistemologies, various strands of feminism, and more sustainable ways to organize livelihoods in the Anthropocene, they have fundamentally broadened prior understandings of the relation of difference, work and organizing (Banerjee et al., 2021; Ergene & Ergene, 2024; Jammulamadaka et al., 2021).

In the last fifteen years, a wide array of antagonistic social movements, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and Fridays for Future, have stimulated a flourishing research on alternative organizing, including social movements, informal solidarity associations, non-profit cultural organizations, feminist collectives, work cooperatives, indigenous organizations, commons, and co-working spaces. While this scholarship is seldom positioned as diversity research, it does often theorize the economic practices, affective caring relations and solitary subjectivities constitutive of these spaces as ontologically embracing difference (e.g., Alakavuklar, 2024; Daskalaki et al., 2019; Fleischmann et al., 2022). It is precisely by putting what is Othered under capitalism back at the center of organizing that novel practices, relations and subjectivities can emerge which prefigure a world beyond capitalist hegemony. These studies enter in dialogue with the tradition of scholarship on alternatives in human geography, feminist studies, critical sociology, and unorthodox economics, making a distinctively organizational contribution.

These significant theoretical and empirical developments show the vibrancy of critical diversity studies today. Its dynamic nature is also visible in the expansion of research to include differentiations that have become increasingly more visible and contested and therefore essential to understand power today. I am thinking of queer and transgender studies, whiteness studies, but also studies of migration and displacement, incarceration, ‘fat’ and menopause studies, to name only a few, and the novel bodies of theory that come with them.

Where should we go from here? An (anti- and post-)capitalist take on difference

These developments undoubtedly move critical diversity studies into the right direction, renewing our take on the organizational production of difference and its relation to power. On the one hand, they shift empirical and theoretical attention towards subordinated subjects, the most precarized workers, also in non-western contexts. On the other hand, they denaturalize the firm as the setting where difference takes place, expanding the repertoire of organizations where social change takes place (Janssens & Zanoni, 2021).

At the same time, these developments are in my opinion theoretically and politically found wanting, in that we still largely miss a broadly shared vocabulary to properly embed the relation between differences and power in contemporary capitalism. Given the capitalist hegemony and the deepening systemic crises that come with it – including sustained environmental destruction, subsequent waves of mass displacement, pandemics, right-wing populist politics, and armed conflicts –, such vocabulary is no luxury. It is essential to understand how the construction, mobilization and contestation of difference takes place

within specific political economies and cannot be fully understood independent of them (Lazzarato, 2006; Zanoni & Miszczyński, in press).

The renaissance of critical theory we are witnessing across the humanities and social sciences invites us to become theoretically and politically more ambitious in our own scientific endeavors. We need to engage more with the vibrant scholarship theorizing how difference is variously and dynamically created, mobilized and contested to sustain capital accumulation through key concepts such as social reproduction, racial bordering, surplus populations, securitized global logistics, and algorithmic management (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2017; Chua & Cox, 2023; Mezzadri, 2022; Zanoni, 2020, 2023; Zanoni & Miszczyński, in press). While highly diverse, this scholarship offers radical anti- and post-capitalist vocabularies that build onto the most intellectually and politically stimulating strands of contemporary Marxism, such as feminist Marxism, Black Marxism, Decolonial Marxism, but also environmental Marxism, Open Marxism and Operaist Marxism.

I believe that critical organization studies should rely much more often on these theoretical strands. They are key to advancing common understandings of how differences enter the organization of our livelihoods, including yet not limited to the sphere of wage work. Conversely, we should rely on our own strengths to envision alternative modalities of organizing the economy and life that mobilize the multiple contradictions and struggles inherent in capitalism, to broaden the horizon of life beyond its confines. Taking capitalism more seriously is essential if critical diversity studies is to reveal capital's intimate relation to difference and to dismantle it.

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