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Book Review: Farhad Dalal (2012) 'Thought Paralysis: The virtues of discrimination' London: Karnac Books. ISBN 978 1 78049 052 6

Reviewer: Kenneth McLaughlin

In this engaging and thought-provoking book Farhad Dalal offers a critique of the 'equalities agenda'. However, this is not written from the desire to disparage equality *per se*, as is the case with many who use the excesses of some within the equality movement as an excuse to rehabilitate racist or sexist norms. His concern is with some of the 'dead ends' that influential proponents of the equality agenda, in particular those who urge us to 'celebrate diversity', have led us into. He attributes this to them having 'a singularly impoverished version of human psychology as well as sociology' (p.3), which has led to the institutionalisation of 'anti-discrimination' and of bureaucratic procedural attempts to combat it, something that Dalal sees as counter-productive. He is also concerned with the tendency towards cultural relativism that can ensue from the desire to be inclusive and non-discriminatory; we can be afraid to judge, to discriminate, between different beliefs, values and practices. He points out that the racists and some promoters of diversity share a similar essentialist premise, each believing that the 'difference' emphasised is real and incontrovertible; the former see a homogenous 'race' the latter a homogenous culture or ethnicity.

The book provides an overview of the philosophy of liberalism and the competing values of the Enlightenment (which blinds itself to difference) and that of the Romantic movement (which deifies difference). There then follows a discussion of legislative attempts to improve equality which have thrown up many contradictions and which, contrary to the intention, have made aspects of the situation worse. Two chapters discuss psychoanalytic and group analytic understandings of the human condition, with the equality movements being accused of holding a naive psychological understanding of both individuals and cultural groups. The second half of the book begins by looking at organisational issues and discusses the commodification of difference, whereby diversity consultants and others can make a healthy profit from training the workforce and producing more and more rules and regulations, something which has seen the modern workplace become akin to the Panopticon, 'with procedures and protocols used as instruments of surveillance resulting in a culture of fear and timidity' (p.32). The rise of procedural and institutional measures to combat discrimination are also criticised for being anti-human in nature, in effect the solution to bias in institutions is seen as being to remove human beings as much as possible from any decision-making process and replacing them with procedures and protocols.

There then follows a discussion of whether Islam is the new Black, which attempts to account for the hostility by some in the West towards Islam and Moslems. Of most interest here is Dalal's account of the way in which elements within both the revolutionary left and some in Western government have fallen into the relativist trap, and in the process can fête those with extremely hostile attitudes towards homosexuals and/or women as well as other ethnic groups. The penultimate chapter discusses the issue of tolerance, particularly asking what are we to do when faced with the intolerable. The book concludes with a defence of rationality and the Enlightenment, and with an acknowledgement of the complexities of the emancipatory project, something that risks being simplified and obstructed by the simplifications foisted on us by the celebrators of diversity.

Perhaps of most interest to those in the social work field is Dalal's critical discussion of aspects of Neil Thompson's book *Anti-discriminatory Practice*, a core text within the social work education

curriculum (Thompson, 2001). He accuses Thompson of according too much significance to language, of implying that by refraining from the use of certain words or categorisations, such as 'the elderly', we can confront and challenge marginalisation. This has echoes of the 'political correctness' debate, where terminology became a terrain of cultural and political dispute. Dalal points out that the policing of language is more likely to result in changes to social 'performance' rather than actual practice. He gives the example of the British National Party urging all its members to be careful of what they say on social networking sites such as Facebook. In effect, the BNP is mastering the art of *performing* PC-speak, but not of putting into practice any of the values that underpin anti-racism. Whilst I agree with Dalal here, he at times seems to reify words himself, for example he favours the removal of 'toxic terms' from public life, which is remarkably similar to the policing of speech favoured by those with whom he disagrees; in each case the word is reified, the context and intent minimised.

Thompson is also criticised because in the practice case studies used in his textbook 'it is *always* the social worker that is at fault and in need of adjusting their attitudes and practices; the "user" of the service is always in the right in each and every case' (p.179, emphasis in original) which can miss the fact that life is much more complex than that. It is not only social workers but service users also who can hold prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and resultant behaviours. Again, whilst this is certainly the case it is slightly unfair to Thompson, whose book is an introductory text, a means of providing a starting point for students who will hopefully then go on to discuss and deal with more complex cases as they go through their course and career, and Dalal is obviously unaware of the way in which ADP can actually be reduced to a mechanism with which social workers admonish their clientele for expressing such prejudicial or discriminatory views, a form of state-imposed public discourse that is not dissimilar to that which he criticises elsewhere in the book .

Whilst this is not a book that will benefit social work practice *per se*, it certainly warrants a wide readership. It will be extremely useful for advanced level students, perhaps those undertaking dissertations, and all those who are politically and socially engaged and who want a succinct and critical account of the complexities and problems we face as we pursue social justice.

References

Thompson, N. (2001) 'Anti-discriminatory Practice', Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.