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Keywords

Diversity

Diversity is first recorded in Middle English in the fourteenth century as a direct borrowing from French. The derivation is significant: as well as meaning 'difference', Old French *diversité* carried the negative sense of 'oddness, wickedness, perversity', and this dual meaning is also found in the Latin root, *dīversitās*, which meant both simple 'difference' and 'contrariety, contradiction, disagreement'. The base term is the verb *dīvertĕre* – 'to turn/go different ways, part, separate, turn aside', hence also '*dīversus*', 'turned different ways.' In English, 'diverse' (from *dīversus*) slightly precedes **diversity** and, interestingly, in their early history at least, both terms bear pejorative connotation related to a putative departure from a norm ('contrary to what is agreeable, right, or good' including at its strongest, the sense of 'mischief, evil'). In each case, the negative sense drops relatively early in the history and the semantic weight is transferred to 'perverse' from the fifteenth century.

The earliest sense of **diversity** denotes the condition or quality of being different, or varied, as well as difference or dissimilarity itself. One of first examples relates to cultural difference: in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale' (c.1387), a Syrian Sultan falls in love with a Roman Christian, but a proposed marriage is difficult 'By cause that ther was swich diversitee Bitwene hir bothe lawes' (Because there was such difference between their two religions). And a slightly later example relates to gender in language: 'Dyversite of gendre is expressed onely in pronownes of the thirde persone' (1536). But such instances are slightly misleading since the general sense is that of differentiation in and of itself rather than specific modes of difference. This is reinforced in the general use of the term to refer to particular instances of distinction, including the notion of a kind or variety ('the White lily affordeth three diversities, two besides the common kind' 1665).

Diversity evinces a number of specialised senses. In the law, for example, a plea of **diversity** is in effect a claim for wrongful identity (usually entered by a convicted person alleging that s/he is not the same person who was charged with the offence). Later technical senses belonged to the fields of electronics and radio. A **diversity factor**, dating from the early twentieth century, referred to the generating load (the maximum demand made by a number of distinct consumers). While **diversity reception**, from the 1920s, meant the technical device whereby a radio signal is received simultaneously over a number of channels in order to ensure the best quality of reception. In all three of these usages, the underlying principle of difference is evident.

The contentious development of **diversity**, a specific narrowing that places the term at the centre of a number of contemporary debates, occurs in the late twentieth century, though there is an apparently isolated example from the mid nineteenth century. In an essay in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 'The castes and creeds of India' (1859), the author notes that 'Caste was found susceptible of such wide application amidst the heterogeneous population of India, that it became as it were a fashion, - an institution to be adopted in all circumstances, even where no racial diversity existed'. The *O.E.D.*, in a rather convoluted draft addition (2021), takes this as an example of the use of **diversity** to mean 'the fact, condition, or practice of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and (more recently) of different genders, sexual orientations, etc.'. But this seems dubious, given that the same

author uses **diversity** frequently simply to connote 'difference' ('diversities of temperament', for example).

The somewhat tentative definition given in the *O.E.D.* indicates two important but related facts about **diversity** in its contemporary usage. First, the relatively recent development of this sense, and second, its contentiousness. For rather than originating in a mid nineteenth century essay on colonial attitudes, the use of **diversity** to refer to specific forms of human difference grouped under broad categories (including those of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, culture and age) is first found in a set of debates around multiculturalism that began in the late 1950s ('multiculturalism' is first recorded in 1957, 'multicultural' in 1935). The first recorded use is from a contribution to *The Listener* in 1968: 'I define integration not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. As is clear from the use of terms such as 'integration' and 'assimilation' (and indeed 'equal opportunity' and 'tolerance'), the central concern of such debates was immigration and 'the race question'. Under pressure from a variety of social movements, however, and the political, cultural, and indeed legal shifts that they brought about, the arguments developed away from conceptions of multiculturalism and towards a recognition of social differentiation or **diversity**. This was an uneven process and it often led to a loose use of the term in a range of liberal discourses, ranging from corporate multiculturalism to the bizarre espousal of **diversity of opinion** as a necessary form of **diversity** at a leading British university. In turn this produced a series of coinages (from the 1990s on) such as **diversity officer**, **diversity quota**, **diversity training**, **diversity management**, and **diversity rate**. Underpinning such terms, there is a positive accentuation of **diversity** (as opposed to the negative normativity found in the early uses of the term that were noted above). And yet given the provenance of this sense of **diversity**, the point has been frequently made that the business of the **diversity industry** appears to be limited to counteracting the effects of social disadvantage, rather than dismantling the structures and practices that produce it. The task for radicals is different: to construct a social life that guarantees participation in democratic citizenship on an equal basis, while respecting and facilitating **diversity** in its many traditional and novel forms. In short, the goal, complex and difficult as it is, is a social order that embodies unflinchingly both a politics of equality and a politics of recognition.