

Commentary: Questioning the Diversity Dividend, and then Moving On

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There has been a growing emphasis on the benefits of engaging diversity amongst government agencies, community organisations and businesses in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last three decades. This focus reflects the very substantial impacts of population diversification that has occurred via migration since the late 1980s (Spoonley & Bedford, 2012) as well as the arc of political and research rhetoric in other Western settler colonial states and its adaptation in Aotearoa New Zealand (Fleras, 2009). That it is beneficial to embrace the diversity of peoples and cultures who live in Aotearoa New Zealand would appear inarguable. The particular value that is placed on human difference, however, does create a political framing for understanding societal diversity that is given force in migration and diversity policies, as well as their articulation with economic structures and experiences of social inclusion and exclusion.

As Terruhn and Rata (2019) argue in framing this special issue, the *diversity dividend* has often been deployed as a technique for countering populist fears about population diversity and its purported challenges, and has been concerned primarily with economic indicators of value, placing a premium on productivity, profits and prosperity. This tendency is unsurprising given that the dominant meanings associated with the term dividend are economic, raising questions about what the political project of a diversity dividend seeks to achieve, the people it benefits, and the place of those who are framed as not generating profit.

In this commentary I reflect on these concerns in order to contribute to the critical evaluation of the diversity dividend, which is a key dimension of this special issue. I begin by drawing attention to the way in which the

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idea of a diversity dividend operates as a neoliberal technology that creates an imperative around the policies that governments and businesses might develop to respond to population diversity. Secondly, I reflect on how the diversity dividend has circulated through migration and diversity policies in Aotearoa New Zealand. Lastly, I argue that academic, policy and popular debates need to move beyond the relatively reductive focus on the diversity dividend. In its place, a critical and transformative agenda for studying and engaging population diversities needs to grapple with the structures of settler colonialism and the complex social positions generated through migration-led diversification.

Diversity dividend as neoliberal technology

The notion of a diversity dividend, or analogous terms such as ‘diversity advantage’ (Wood & Landry, 2008) or ‘productive diversity’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997), hinges on a conception of socio-cultural difference as a generator of economic benefits for countries, regions, cities or firms. These terms first started being used in the 1990s by politicians, academics and consultants making claims about the economic importance of ethnic diversity and migration in particular, although references to diversity dividends also sometimes incorporate an emphasis on gender and other social differences. Initially these terms emphasised programmatic claims about the need to reconstruct societal or institutional norms in order to address ethnic heterogeneity, particularly in terms of making a business case for promoting diversity. Speaking at the launch of *Multicultural Australia: The Way Forward* in Melbourne in 1997, for example, then Australian Prime Minister John Howard asserted the need to explore “the ways in which we can reap what some have described as the diversity dividend” that comes about via immigration, settler history and geographical positioning (Howard, 1997). In a like manner, political leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1990s placed significant emphasis on the economic and strategic value of building diverse populations, particularly in the context of a geo-economic pivot towards Asia (Larner, 1998). Migrant populations, in particular, were viewed as conduits to economic growth, a human resource available for extraction that reflected the wider neoliberalisation of society and the economy that was underway at that time (Kelsey, 1995).

One way to understand the diversity dividend, then, is to conceive it as a mobile technology that supports neoliberalisation, an attempt “to respond strategically to population and space for optimal gains in profit” (Ong, 2007, p. 4). The concept has emerged through networks of academic, business and policy knowledge formation and circulation (Watson et al., 2009) that have normalised an argument that it is possible, ethical and desirable to extract value from populations that are ethnically heterogeneous. Wood and Landry (2008) provide an apposite example in their programmatic policy text *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage*, which has been taken up extensively by urban governments, including Auckland (Collins & Friesen, 2011). Their argument is that “there are enormous untapped resources, which our societies can scarcely forgo, available from the creative power of heterogeneity and dissonance” (Wood & Landry, 2008, p. 11). In making a programmatic ‘business case’ for what they alternately call the diversity dividend and advantage, Wood and Landry highlight three ‘advantages’ of diversity: 1) that diverse teams of people bring new skills and aptitudes that can enhance business activity leading to new products, processes and innovations, 2) that the ‘supplier diversity’ of heterogeneous employees or populations make it possible to access new markets at home and abroad, and 3) drawing on Florida (2002), that the competitiveness of cities, and by extension regions and nations, is influenced by their ability to be places characterised by openness, tolerance and diversity in order to “attract and hold wealth creators” (p. 12). Their text places a considerable emphasis on creating environments where people of different backgrounds can interact to create new opportunities and build social connectiveness, although the emphasis is always on the business case and a ‘hard nosed’ consideration of the factors that make what they deem functional and good places.

This emphasis on dividend generation or extraction highlights a view that the principal value of individuals to society comes in their economic productivity. It is worth questioning the effects of this blunt economisation as well as the critical debates that are obfuscated in the process. Indeed, it is notable that in much of the literature on diversity advantages, benefits and dividends, little concern is given to the needs and aspirations of people, or even to fundamental rights-based debates around citizenship, inclusion and wellbeing (Watson et al., 2009). Instead, as a technology for advancing forms of neoliberalisation, the diversity dividend

frames individual human worth and worthiness in relation to skills, wealth, entrepreneurialism and a willingness to consume. The policies that follow such prescriptions are also well known – a privileging of talent and skilled migration alongside increased regulation of labour and unauthorised migration (Boucher, 2008), investment in forms of economic development or urban regeneration designed to attract and retain wealth creators (Hall & Rath, 2007), and corporate diversity strategies that provide window dressing at the level of the boardroom but do not disrupt the inequities that intersect with workforce diversity (Marques, 2010). Put simply, an emphasis on advantages, benefits and dividends from diversity implies that people must be economically valuable to be included, recognised and celebrated.

The diversity dividend in Aotearoa New Zealand

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the emphasis on the diversity dividend and analogous terms that highlight the economic benefits of diversity has been particularly pronounced in relation to migration discourses and policies. Indeed, key changes to policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s were anchored around a shift from an emphasis on recruiting migrants by nationality towards a focus on meeting the needs of the New Zealand economy. The Burke report on immigration (1986), for example, emphasised the need for immigration to shift towards “the selection of new settlers principally on the strength of their potential personal contribution to the future well-being of New Zealand” (p. 10). While the notion of “personal contribution” can vary, subsequent policy interventions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially the introduction of a points system for migrant selection, have emphasised the need to evaluate and manage migrants based on potential economic contribution over other factors (Spoonley & Bedford, 2012). Over the three decades since these changes, the economic emphasis in immigration selection has continued to intensify. Initially this trend was apparent with changes such as English language tests, requirements for job experience and two-stage residence applications progressively sharpening the focus on “the economic benefits and costs of both flows of settlers as well as flows of people on temporary work and study visas and permits” (Bedford, 2004, p. 58). In the last two decades, there has also been a marked shift towards the management of populations of temporary students and workers who are being increasingly delinked from long-term residence rights, and

characterised by increasing stratification within categories of migrants (Collins, 2020).

The political rationalities that underpin claims about the diversity dividend are also apparent in other arenas in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many large corporations now place a significant emphasis on diversity messaging and the development of diversity policies in relation to a range of social differences but particularly focus on creating “a work environment that values and respects different cultures” (Diversity Works New Zealand, 2019). Similarly, organisations such as the Superdiversity Institute advance a range of tools that aim to “enable Government, business and NGOs to maximise the benefits of the ‘diversity dividend’ arising from New Zealand’s transition to a superdiverse society” (Superdiversity Institute, 2019). The circulation and normalisation of this emphasis on diversity appears to offer an attractive antidote to assertions of Pākehā-dominated New Zealandness in the workplace. The emphasis on diversity management, however, “can be a means of evading hard choices about equality and justice at work” (Wrench, 2005, p. 73) because it offers a convincing impression of inclusion while providing few tools for addressing entrenched inequalities. In Aotearoa New Zealand, substantial inequities in employment levels and incomes, particularly for Māori and Pacific peoples but also other non-European populations (Perry, 2013), suggest that corporate diversity policies have little impact on addressing systemic racism, discrimination and the ongoing effects of colonialism. As Simon-Kumar (2020) notes, the positive connotations that make up the official face of diversity can be drawn apart from the quotidian reality of a ‘preferred multiculturalism’ where legal status, occupation and economic capital shape the coal face of inclusion.

Researchers who address migration and diversity are also part of this sphere of activity, with the potential to play roles as supportive agents of diversity dividend discourses and practices of stratification or to provide a critical knowledge foundation for alternative futures. The Capturing the Diversity Dividend of Aotearoa/New Zealand (CaDDANZ) programme of research that the papers in this special issue are drawn from is one such example. The initial impetus for the project rests on identifying ways to “maximise the benefits associated with an increasingly diverse population” in Aotearoa New Zealand (CaDDANZ, 2019). While it would be wrong to suggest that research within this and similar programmes only supports the advancement of neoliberal political rationalities, this is a feature that cannot

be ignored. Indeed, as researchers we have to reflect on the ways in which the knowledge produced in CaDDANZ and related projects advances particular kinds of ideas about migration, ethnicity and society and the purposes to which such knowledge is put. Does our knowledge only replicate or validate government and corporate claims that the focus needs to be on 'high priority' migrants, that the value of migration should be determined by 'success' in economic outcomes, or that migrants should be treated differently depending on who they are? Or does the knowledge generated in our research serve as a platform for critical conversations about the broader values of migration and diversity in Aotearoa, about the rights of people beyond economic productivity, and the significance of thinking about population futures in a context of ongoing settler colonialism and migration-led diversification?

Settler colonialism and migration-led diversification and stratification

A critical and transformative account of population diversity must address the complex realities of contemporary society, their embeddedness in historical processes, and the persistent intersections between ethnic differences and socio-economic inequality. The problem with much of the international and domestic literature on diversity advantages, benefits and dividends is that it presumes a business case can be made for population diversity without paying attention to structural conditions. If only people, businesses and governments knew that diversity makes money then they would not be racist, societal structures would reconfigure in more inclusive-cum-productive ways, and a great symphony of opportunity would emerge in intercultural encounters. The reality is that population diversity is bundled up with complex and entrenched inequalities; the knowledge foundations of society, including those that privilege economic gain, persistently devalue difference; and social and technological infrastructures that militate against socially just and inclusive approaches to population diversity are pervasive.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is absolutely necessary that questions of population diversity are examined in a way that recognises that settler colonialism is an ongoing characteristic of institutional and daily life. Settler colonialism involves the ongoing transformation of places and peoples into a

racially stratified order based on claims about superiority (Veracini, 2013). It manifests in two ways that are particularly pertinent to thinking through the diversity dividend: 1) the erasure or indeed elimination of Indigenous peoples as significant to national life (Wolfe, 2006), and 2) the construction of Whiteness as “the unseen, normative category against which differently racialized groups are ordered and valued” (Bonds & Inwood, 2016, p. 717). As Kukutai and Rata (2017) have eloquently demonstrated, Māori have been consistently excluded from debates about migration and diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the implication that such border matters are not the concern of Indigenous peoples. Concurrently, the purported benefits of population diversity that come through non-White migration are assessed in terms of their benefaction to a society that remains overwhelmingly dominated economically by Pākehā. Read in this way, the diversity dividend is quite apparently a mechanism for advancing settler colonialism’s political projects. A transformative approach to population diversity does not come in revising those mechanisms but rather in generating models that start from outside of settler colonial logics, such as Rata and Al-Asaad’s (2019) account of whakawhanaungatanga as an avenue to relationship building between Indigenous peoples and settlers of colour.

There is also a need to take greater account of the multifaceted dimensions of migration-led diversification. Typically, accounts of population change since the 1980s in Aotearoa New Zealand have told a story of ethnic change, the growth in populations from or with links to Asia and the Pacific in particular, and the construction of a multicultural fabric for the 21st century (Spoonley & Bedford, 2012). What is less highlighted in such accounts, however, is the way in which the experience of migration to Aotearoa New Zealand has been cut through with inequality – not only historically through race-based policies but also in the contemporary effects of migration policy, employment, discrimination, electoral politics, urban inequality and other socio-economic differences (Simon-Kumar, Collins, & Friesen, 2020). Of particular significance is the growing number of people living in Aotearoa New Zealand on temporary status. In 2018, approximately 270,000 people were living long-term in Aotearoa New Zealand on temporary status (up from 140,000 in 2008), around 5.6% of the population.¹ The growing population living in Aotearoa New Zealand with work and study visas matters because people on temporary status are subject to what Meissner (2018) calls “legal status diversity”, which

manifests in different formal or meaningful rights in the labour market, access to social resources and the ability to remain with family. In the last few years, the stratified treatment of migrants has shifted to assessments of income as a measure of value wherein the government “prioritises higher-paid and higher-skilled migrants” while “ensuring that migrants with no pathway to residence do not become well-settled in New Zealand” (Immigration New Zealand, 2017). What is apparent, however, is that these ostensibly economic measures intersect with nationality and gender (Collins, 2020), inflecting ethnic population diversity with other social differences that shape the social status, rights and future prospects of people in ways that are not equitable. Claims about the diversity dividend hinge on an acceptance of these inequalities and, as such, cannot actually offer avenues for enhancing socio-economic equality and more-inclusive societal formations.

As researchers, our task is to apprehend these societal structures and systems, to make clear the manner in which they sustain inequities in relation to population diversity, and seek partnerships with communities who aspire for different futures. The papers presented in this special issue do some of that work: questioning how institutions can alter their capacity to actually address diversity (Stone & Peace, 2019); highlighting the importance of everyday engagements with difference (Peace & Spoonley, 2019) and identifying the sites within which such encounters might take place (Maré & Poot, 2019); developing tools for visualising population diversity (Brabyn, Jackson, Stitchbury, & McHardie, 2019); and tracking trends in ethnic diversity over time (Cameron & Poot, 2019). Some also raise critical questions about the fraught logics I have discussed here: questioning the dehumanising messaging around immigrants in the news media (Lee & Cain, 2019); unpacking the use of diversity to sell urban developments (Terruhn, 2019); and exploring alternative approaches to relationship building beyond the limits of settler colonialism (Rata & Al-Asaad, 2019). Notwithstanding its framing around the notion of the diversity dividend, these papers demonstrate that the CaDDANZ research programme has also generated debate that has potential for advancing alternative visions for understanding population diversity for an inclusive society. The challenge now is to tackle the histories and systems that maintain racism and inequality in the face of 21st-century population diversity.

Note

- 1 Derived from the 'Population' data (https://mbienz.shinyapps.io/migration_data_explorer/) available on the Migration Data Explorer run by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the usually resident population count from the 2018 Census.

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