Diversity : a problematic definition.

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Abstract

Introduction to an upcoming presentation, “Diversity in free software projects : a statistical analysis”. (Rather than propose a quaint definition I chose to present diversity as both a scientific and social problem instead.)

Introduction – Boston, or New San Francisco (draft)

I've put myself in the awkward position of having to tell you about diversity while in one of the elite parts of Boston; just above its most gentrified neighborhood.

Back Bay and South End, respectively. Their histories and sociology are connected :

From the second half of the 19th c., South End became an affordable place to live because its richest inhabitants left it for the even more central and soon-to-be even more exclusive Back Bay :

In *Good Neighbors*, the sociologist Sylvie Tissot retraces this history and explains : “(...) in particular immigrants (...) replaced them. First came the Irish, fleeing the potato famine (...) Then (...) Italians, East European Jews, and [rural, railway/factory workers from the North]” (ch. 1).

Back Bay, the “*traditional elite area*” (as Tissot further states, ch. 2), leads us to South End : a rediscovered, rather than new, area for the elite – extension not only by geographical association.

A once working-class neighborhood has become again too expensive to be afforded by most.¹

Elites always drop a shadow : the undesirables and abnormals, that they construct. Their histories too are linked – although the former try to avoid the latter as best as they can.

Poor black populations, poor Latino's, poor queer people, students without rich parents, artists-who-haven't-given-up-yet, etc..

These unwanted populations, these undesirables were pushed back – from the so-called “South end” (a central location, in fact) – to various other ends of the city;

and, from the “back bay” to the back of the back of the city; from Boston to “Greater Boston” (where “lower” classes live).

South, Dorchester and beyond; East; wherever they could be hidden and be done away with.

As white as the walls in this room, a neighborhood where once some diversity existed was purified.

I guess I'm telling you all of this as a way, not to alienate you (I'm very happy to be here), [but] to say that diversity is many things; and, certainly many different things to many different people.

Some would like to convince you that diversity is merely an issue of men versus women, or even straight versus gay (the latter of particular relevance for neighborhoods like e.g. South End).

These simplistic *formulae* have a straightforward nature which no doubt makes them attractive.

Reducing diversity to only these select characteristics has enabled today's self-appointed feminist or LGBT² thought leaders to erase a whole array of other issues; including but not limited to and not least economic issues. The great, lasting societal divides, of yesterday and today.

1 According to a *Boston Globe* article figure, based on Zillow data, the median value for an apartment (“condo” type) with a South End ZIP code was 670,000\$ in 2015 (compared with 150,000\$ in 1996).

2 Note the order.

One of these apologists is the billionaire and “lean in” author Sheryl Sandberg, better known as COO of Facebook, previously at Google :

An expert not only in tax evasion, but also ideological evasion.

Or, Ellen DeGeneres, who is friends with everyone, and no one.

The problem of “diversity” starts perhaps with the fact that its very definition is problematic itself.

And, how you define it, limits how you can answer it, and with what practical consequences, and what gains or insights.

It’s my hope that, having no ready-made answers or easy solutions for you, I’ll at least be able to examine this important issue from many different perspectives.

And, speaking of geography, it would be hard to not notice a few more facts – after which, I’ll start my presentation.

In Boston, you’ve got dozens of private institutions, but chose to put your only public university down South.

Meanwhile in Cambridge, MIT’s Media Lab and Institute for Cancer Research enjoy prime estate :

At one institution they took money from Epstein, and lent credibility to so-called “safe artificial intelligence”, while at the other they may do real research – we don’t know – but lent credibility to Koch.

Everything being upside down, the South became North here too.

“Free” means freedom, but freedom can also not be a luxury. In times when computer science and related technologies have an ever greater hold on our lives, it seems to me that one possible direction technology is headed towards is an old one : divide between rich and poor, both in terms of access to it, and protection against its ills.

In that context, free software is and remains the greatest act of liberation I know.

Its goals are noble. Unfortunately, in the process, it recreated some of the Old world’s worst structures such as predominantly when not exclusively male, white environments (whose antecedents are higher education and political participation until at least the 20th century, a. o.).

Thank you for sitting through this most bothersome science, and for listening to a most bothering scientist.

References

- Tissot, Sylvie. 2015. *Good neighbors. Gentrifying diversity in Boston's South End*. Verso.
- Johnston, Katie. 2015. "South End gentrification makes for variety of residents" [Prev. : "Awkward marriage" (?)]. *The Boston Globe*, 10/05.
- Kiel, Paul. 2020. "Who's Afraid of the IRS? Not Facebook." *ProPublica*, 23/01.

"Based on her time at Google, Sandberg soon decided that one area where Facebook was behind its peers was in its tax dodging. "*My experience is that by not having a European center and running everything through the US, it is very costly in terms of taxes,*" she wrote other executives in an April 2008 email"