

The Contingent Value of Diversity: Reassessing Its Role in Advancing Justice and Social Cohesion

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Abstract. This article critically analyzes the prevailing focus on diversity within society, questioning whether it is a core societal ideal or merely a transient political trend. The research situates variety within overarching frameworks of social development, utilizing both modern and traditional philosophical theories, alongside Marx's assertion that the economy determines the superstructure. Aristotle's Eudaimonia, Rawls' fairness, and Confucius' "Great Unity" all promote the premise that equality, fairness, and peace are still the most important goals for society. Diversity is only a short-term fix for these long-term goals. The article warns against seeing variety as a good thing in itself, even as historical movements like civil rights, feminism, and LGBTQ+ advocacy show how diversity can help society. Conflicts over racial quotas and generational loneliness are two examples of how accepting variety as a goal can cause society to fall apart, become more relative, and lose its purpose. According to the conclusion of the article, justice, equality, and peace are reaffirmed as enduring fundamental principles. The author argues that diversity, despite the fact that it is advantageous in reducing discrimination and fostering inclusion, should be regarded as a temporary instrument of social advancement rather than a definitive societal objective.

Keywords: diversity, political fashion, justice, equality, social cohesion

1. Introduction

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, sociologist Morrie Schwartz tells a fable: A wave joyfully floats in the ocean, enjoying the wind and air, until it discovers that the waves ahead keep crashing onto the shore. It exclaims in horror: "My fate is so tragic! We will eventually crash onto the shore and cease to exist." But another wave responds: "You are wrong -- you are not just an independent wave, but a part of the ocean" [1]. The story demonstrates that when individuals isolate themselves from society, they lose their sense of belonging and become emotionally vulnerable. Excessive emphasis on individual differences can encourage extreme individualism and eventually weakens social cohesion.

Diversity is becoming increasingly popular: Major corporations routinely include diversity statements in their employee handbooks, emphasizing the importance of inclusive workplaces; In political campaigns, candidates frequently underscore their commitment to representing diverse communities. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, diversity is defined as "the practice or

quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc.” [2]. Although the promotion of diversity in corporate and political contexts brings numerous benefits, diversity, as a political fashion, is valuable only as a means to social development but not as an end in itself. When pursued as an intrinsically valuable social virtue, diversity will lead to social fragmentation and individual nihilism.

2. Political fashion and social development

Political fashion depends on social development, which comes in different stages. The emergence of political trends in a democratic system is determined by the social attitudes of voters, and the social attitudes of voters represent the state of social development. As Karl Marx noted in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, “the economic base determines the superstructure” [3]. When a society reaches a certain stage of development, corresponding conflicts inevitably emerge. These conflicts give rise to specific ideological trends. Politicians and governments, in order to gain public support, must adopt public opinion and align with prevailing social trends, thus giving rise to political fashions. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between political fashion and social development, and diversity, as a current political fashion, is itself a product of social development.

3. The ultimate goals of social development

What is the ultimate goal of social development? The ultimate goal of social development has always been peace, justice, and equality, regardless of era or prevailing trends. This universal principle finds vivid expression in Confucius’s vision of the “Great Unity” from the *Book Liki*: “Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves” and “Men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons” [4]. This describes a society of complete peace and equality. This third-century BCE concept was no mere utopian fantasy, but revealed how such fundamental values serve as non-negotiable standards for all societies. Aristotle’s notion of “Eudaimonia” in *Politics* echoes this view, stressing that a true political community must prioritize virtue over mere survival interests [5]. The shared insistence of these two traditions shows these values are not temporary tools for short-term goals, but essential requirements for any claim of social perfection.

Moreover, the human pursuit of peace, justice, and equality transcends temporal boundaries. In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls states that “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought” [6]. As a representative figure of contemporary liberal and social justice theories, Rawls believed the ultimate goal of social development is to eliminate historical evils such as war, oppression, and poverty, and to build a stable, free, and equal society. This goal shares the same core essence as the views held by Confucius and Aristotle two thousand years ago.

4. Diversity as political fashion

Political fashion is not merely shaped by social development; it can also drive societal progress and ultimately help achieve the highest goal. Before the 20th century, due to racial segregation and other factors, equality and justice for all humanity were not properly valued in society. The Civil Rights Movement brought racial diversity, the feminist movement brought gender diversity, and the LGBTQ+ movement brought sexual orientation diversity. These political fashions objectively promoted social development and moved humanity closer to its ultimate goal. Therefore, as a

product of social development, political fashion must be evaluated by its contribution to ultimate virtues: peace, justice, and equality.

Now we are back to the value of diversity. After the previous discussion, it can be concluded that diversity is both a means to achieve the ultimate goals of society and can be an outcome of social development. Before further discussion, two key concepts must be distinguished:

- Intrinsic value: something is intrinsically valuable for society if it is the ultimate goal of the society; it should be pursued for its own sake because it is intrinsically beneficial.
- Instrumental value: something is instrumentally valuable if it brings what is intrinsically valuable, but it is not among the standards of a good society [7].

Both the Confucian concept of “Great Unity,” the Aristotelian notion of “Eudaimonia,” and John Rawls's vision of an ideal society demonstrate that peace, justice, and equality can be considered the highest goals of social development, they possess intrinsic value. However, political trends at certain periods of development are merely means to achieve these ultimate societal objectives, meaning that they hold only instrumental value. As a product of social development, diversity, too, serves solely as a means to attain society's ultimate ends. Thus, peace, justice, equality, as ultimate goals of social development, have intrinsic value, and diversity, as a contingent political fashion, merely has instrumental value. Historical patterns confirm this, the diversity of the Tang dynasty arose only after the establishment of regional hegemony, demonstrating that it was a byproduct rather than a driving force behind national flourishing.

5. Instrumental value misinterpreted as intrinsic value

On the other hand, we must admit that this phenomenon of pursuing instrumental value as intrinsic value is remarkably prevalent in reality. Take the pursuit of money as an example. Money functions solely as a means to attain those things that we ultimately desire, social status, health, happiness, things that cannot be measured by mere monetary value. However, for miserly people, they would rather keep their money hidden in the cellar than spend it. In other words, what they desire is money itself. In this case, the means have become part of the end, even more important than the original purpose. The same can be said for most of the grand goals in life, such as power or fame. Some might consequently contend that diversity, much like monetary wealth, undergoes a conceptual transformation from instrumental means to intrinsic end.

According to utilitarian theory, virtues were initially regarded merely as means rather than ultimate goals, as the utilitarian principle emphasizes that only the resulting utility is intrinsically valuable. However, when certain virtues were repeatedly proven to effectively contribute to social prosperity in practice, they gradually became institutionalized through education, customs, and cultural transmission. Eventually, these virtues broke away from their original instrumental associations and were regarded as independent value-oriented goals. People began to cherish them for their own sake rather than their utility [8].

However, such social consensus is necessarily contingent and incomplete, since due to varying life experiences, some individuals hold fundamentally different definitions of intrinsic value from societal norms. It is thus reasonable for them to adopt values in accordance with political fashions and pursue diversity as an end in itself. But undoubtedly, this set of values is not suitable for everyone. At present, there is no sufficient evidence to suggest that those small-scale behaviors and concepts are more worthy of pursuit. Therefore, when discussing the value of diversity, we should clearly distinguish between its intrinsic and instrumental value.

6. Problems with diversity as an end in itself

There is a view that the prevalence of diversity is historically inevitable, as it serves as an effective tool to address contemporary social conflicts: Just as the Enlightenment emerged in response to absolutism to celebrate rationality over dogmatism, the popularity of diversity precisely reflects its adaptability to current social issues such as discrimination and stratification. If we acknowledge its instrumental value, we cannot lightly dismiss its necessity, after all, ideas capable of resolving real-world dilemmas naturally become trends of their time.

Yet we must ask: Does promoting diversity as an unquestioned political trend truly advance justice, or merely substitute one form of dogmatism for another? The issue lies not with diversity itself, but with the uncritical adoption of it as an ideological orthodoxy. While diversity has indeed played a role in combating discrimination and fostering inclusion, the validity of its instrumental value hinges on whether it serves higher objectives.

In fact, when we mistakenly treat instrumental values as intrinsic values, it inevitably leads to problems, including social fragmentation and the spread of nihilism. Recall the story of the waves: It reminds us that excessive diversification leads to social division and nihilism, and ultimately makes individuals even more vulnerable. Generation Z has grown up in an era where diversity and individuality are highly celebrated. Research shows that 34% of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, with 39% reporting weekly childhood loneliness [9]. In practice, diversity initiatives have already shown signs of distortion, consider the controversy over racial quotas in U.S. college admissions, which has ironically intensified group divisions [10]. In summary, blind pursuit of diversity will lead to social fragmentation and nihilism.

Why do these problems occur? In fact, humans pursue the ultimate goals through political fashion just like we use tools to build houses. When building a house, we use hammers to nail and saws to cut. However, if a person always prioritizes one tool over others, they will never be able to build a house. Because hammers cannot cut wood. Using a tool purely for its own sake leads to misapplication, yielding paradoxical outcomes that undermine original objectives. The current disproportionate focus on diversity has been detached from substantive visions of human flourishing by overshadowing more pressing social problems.

7. Analogy: trade tariffs and misapplied means

We can find an analogy in contemporary trade policy: does the indefinite escalation of tariffs benefit domestic economic growth? On 2 April 2025, the US expanded its tariff policy after earlier hikes on steel, aluminum, and auto imports from Canada, Mexico, and China. The new measures imposed broad “reciprocal” tariffs affecting nearly all trade partners [11]. The Trump administration's imposition of tariffs was based on various strategic considerations, but its main purpose was to reduce the trade deficit and protect domestic industries. However, the tariffs ultimately backfired, costing the U.S. a net 2% welfare loss while disrupting supply chains and raising costs, with no meaningful long-term gains for protected industries. The case studies of diversification policies and tariffs jointly reveal a profound issue: when society overly focuses on specific means while neglecting the original goals, the actual effects of these measures often deviate from expectations and even undermine the social fairness and interests that should be maintained. Thus, it is crucial not to treat diversity as an intrinsically valuable political ideal.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, diversity is not a strength, nor a weakness, it is simply a fact. How we deal with it determines the outcome. Diversity, as a political fashion, is a product of social development and a means to achieve peace, justice, and equality. Moreover, treating diversity as an end in itself leads to social fragmentation and the spread of nihilism. Therefore, diversity as a political fashion is valuable as a means of social development, but not as an end in itself.

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