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Empowering diversity:
*A dialogue between political theory
and business management*

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Empowering diversity:

A dialogue between political theory and business management

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1. Introduction

Contemporary society is more and more the result of what is commonly known as Globalisation, a phenomenon boosted by the development of modern transportation and communication technologies which is increasing the interconnection among places, favouring the formation of social and economic networks (Held & McGrew, 2003). As a direct consequence, we observe a surge in mobility of people and in migration flows beyond national boundaries which increase ethnic and cultural diversity within societies. In parallel, the XX century has witnessed the emergence of movements within minority groups asking for equal rights and full recognition from the State and the community, like the feminist movements in the United States and Europe or the civil-rights movement of the African American.

Diversity has always characterized human societies – departing from gender diversity - but it has been channelled into patterns of domination that secluded individuals of non-dominant groups into subaltern roles. While the position of power was reserved to the white bourgeois man, the woman was deemed to be wife and mother and the African American slave or servant. More recently, the rise of multicultural societies together with the diffusion of equal rights movements lead political theorists to question the prevalent system of protection of rights, opening the debate over new models to ensure substantial equality to all members of society, without denying their differences.

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Within this debate, the concept of diversity has been developed to conceptualize the range of differences characterizing the identity of individuals, such as age, race, gender, marital status, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, personality (Chemers & Oskamp, 1995; Kossek, Lobel & Brown, 2005). Diversity concerns all domains of human society, from the private domain, to the working and the political domain. The complexity and pervasiveness of diversity make “easy solutions” inadequate to fully grasp the challenges, as well as the potentials, of managing differences within society. Although the debate over diversity has started within the political sphere addressing the overall organization of society, it has progressively extended to the business sphere.

Within corporations, the positive impact of promoting diversity is double: it can improve the overall well-being of workers, by ensuring equal treatment while giving value to differences, and it can challenge the persistent stereotypes within the society in general. Positive examples in this sense are the marketing campaigns promoted by international and companies representing gay couples in a family environment⁵, which sparked a public debate within society on this issue and gave visibility to different conceptions of family, or the marketing of new gender-neutral toys for kids that challenged the dominant perception on gender roles⁶.

From the businesses' point of view, the increasingly heterogeneous workforce has brought both new challenges and opportunities. On the positive side, organizations benefit from diversity in terms of selection and placement by having access to a broader pool of talents, and, in terms of innovation capabilities by leveraging on a wider set of skills, perspective and abilities (Bantel & Jackson, 1989; Shaw, 1976; Wanous & Youtz, 1986). On the negative side, diversity among new and traditional organizational members might cause distrust, misunderstanding and sometimes conflict that can result in high transaction costs due to emerging problems in coordination and cohesion within organizations (Ostergaard et al. 2011). Thus, scholars defined diversity within firms as a two-edged sword (Milliken & Martins, 1996) or as a mixed blessing (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), emphasizing how the specificity of the context may influence the prevalence of positive vs. negative outcomes. On top of that, organizations face external pressures from governments, trade unions and NGOs to implement anti-discrimination policies and laws that promote the inclusion of diversity (Gröschl, 2011). In practice, these factors demand for the

⁵ *Family Day, le grandi aziende si schierano per i diritti di tutti. I post di Coop, Ikea, Vitasnella e il canale Real Time*, L'Huffington Post, 30/01/2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2016/01/30/family-day-grandi-aziende_n_9120172.html

⁶ *Il giocattolo è troppo sessista*, L'Espresso, 10/06/2014, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/visioni/societa/2014/03/10/news/il-giocattolo-e-sessista-1.156439>

reshaping of organizational culture and practices to integrate different value and beliefs and to adopt new approaches to effectively manage a heterogeneous workforce.

The aim of this article is to review theoretical debates over diversity within political theory, and to extract and transpose relevant insights in the management field. With this purpose, the paper outlines the main reasons characterizing the need of recognising diversity within society and organizations, and the advantages and challenges that this objective poses. On the basis of the theoretical insights derived from political theory, the article suggests approaches and practices that can boost the positive potential of diversity management while limiting its drawbacks within organizations.

2. Context of the paper and methodology

This paper emerges from the intention to further elaborate and contextualize the topics discussed during the Conference recently held at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, in Pisa on "Diversity – an interdisciplinary approach"⁷. This event hosted both academics and practitioners to initiate a multi-lateral dialogue on the current challenges and opportunities, highlighting critical reflections on diversity and good practices for its effective management within organizations. The constructive combination of two distant approaches stimulated the identification of possible trajectories of actions at policy level: on the one hand, the philosophical and social dimension provided the theoretical goals, on the other hand, the articulation of financial and business factors defined the feasible incentives and the instruments available to policy makers to pursue such goals. Motivated by the relevance of the subject and by the general engagement during the conference, this paper attempts to follow up on the key inputs and to insert them within a more structured framework, tackling individual and corporate needs and ambitions. Ultimately, the main objective of our outline is to reconcile different point of views in order to highlight a common basis to take the debate forward.

Within the socio political debate, we present the seminal theories characterizing the core of the discussion over diversity. Building upon the reflections provided during the conference, we depart from the feminist contribution, continue with the multiculturalist approach and conclude with a reflection on potential new perspectives embracing different aspects of diversity. We chose to

⁷ Organized on December the 13th, 2016 by the DIRPOLIS - Law, Politics and Development - Institute of the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies (Pisa) and Trim2 (Florence).

engage in the analysis of the feminist theory – departing from the works of Iris Marion Young and Marta Nussbaum – and of the multiculturalist debate – focusing particularly on the contributions of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka – because their confrontation led to the development of a new approach based on the individual rather than on the group. Inspired by the work of Anne Phillips, who stressed the fluid nature of cultures and the importance of individual agency, we underline how the complexity of the different layers composing diversity – gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, disabilities, etc. – prevents the possibility of enclosing this diversity within defined categories of gender, ethnicity, etc. Consequently, we propose a reflection on how this approach can contribute to the debate over diversity management in the business sector.

The second part tries to reconcile the theoretical insights with the business realm leveraging on the comments advanced at the conference. The focal point is the “business case” for diversity, i.e. the recognition of potential performance benefits steaming from embracing diversity at organizational level. To illustrate this process, we adopt a deductive approach, going first through the antecedents of diversity management to understand the paradigm in place today. Then, we detail the best practices adopted within the organizations: starting from the proceedings presented at the conference, we draw a more comprehensive picture based on the existing literature. Finally, we provide a concrete example of the strategic potential of diversity management by studying its impact on creativity and innovation. This last part touches upon a growing stream of research which provides some decisive arguments in favour of the “business case” of diversity management.

3. Diversity within Political Theory: towards the definition of an individual-centred model

The debate over diversity within Political Theory can be divided into two main schools of thought that both departed from the same criticisms to the predominant liberal theory, but later developed separately and even came to clash: the gender theory and the multicultural one. The point of departure for both theories is the criticism to the apparent neutrality of society and to the system of rights that does not acknowledge diversity in the promotion of equality. The following two sections present the main arguments of the feminist scholars and of the authors promoting the multicultural approach. The third section presents the challenges raised by the application of the multicultural model into reality and its confrontation with the feminist studies. In its conclusions, the chapter presents potential developments able to reconcile the multicultural model with the feminist one.

3.1 ‘Equality within differences’ – the feminist contribution

The theoretical debate about diversity is intrinsically linked to the one about gender, as the baseline of ‘equality within differences’ was firstly investigated by feminist studies. Specifically, they gave an important contribution to the re-definition of ‘equality’ by proposing a more complex version grounded on the inclusion of diversities. In this sense, they challenged the neutral conception of the liberal equality by opening towards the recognition of diversity within the concept of equality. Indeed, they suggested that the right choice was not between *equality* and *difference*, but among *different declinations of equality*. Considering women’s peculiar lives’ experiences, it is not sufficient – and not even recommended - to aim for inclusion within the material and symbolic spaces already enjoyed by men following a pre-arranged model. Instead, it is necessary to question the context of inclusion, seeking for the commonly shared notion of equality that characterizes it. In this respect, the reasoning of the feminist scholars focused on two main interconnected issues: the false neutrality of the rights’ system and the patriarchal society.

The former is linked to the concept of equality based on the liberal idea of the individual, which would not acknowledge diversity in its materialisation into reality. Assuming that social relationships – in particular the ones between genders – are characterised by inequalities and asymmetries in terms of power, resources, and opportunities, a rights’ language grounded on the principle that individuals are autonomous and independent can prove to be ineffective in counterbalancing inequalities and opposing discriminations. It is therefore important to reason in terms of a ‘relational nature’ of rights (Young, 1990; Habermas, 1992), and to turn the neutrality of rights into a form that better captures gender diversity as well as to define a language of duties and responsibilities that is capable to deal with asymmetries in human relationships. In this sense, two events played an important role. On one side, the normative reflection within the United Nations (UN) that led to the Conferences of Vienna (1993) and Beijing (1995) where it was clarified that the inclusion of women into the rights’ language was not simply adding them to the bearers of human rights, rather, it was recognizing peculiar women’s rights as universal (Coomaraswamy, 1999). On the other, the feminist social movements of ’50s and ’60s which redefined equality as a complex concept that, if misunderstood, could lead to more inequality and discrimination. The core issue behind these phenomena is the questioning of the so-called *universalism* of human rights, as defined in the ’48 UN Declaration. More precisely, it was suggested not to reject *in toto* this *universalism*, but to reinterpret it in light of its own ambiguities and contradictions. In this sense, rights could continue to be effective precisely because of their ‘two-fold nature’: abstract and universal, and at the same time particular and specific (Loretoni, 2014).

The second issue largely treated by the feminist scholars is the persistence of the patriarchal system in many aspects of our contemporary societies. Notwithstanding the political recognition coming from female progressive acquisition of citizenship's rights, gender studies revealed how the actual strategies of inclusions have most of the times reinforced the pre-existent institutions and social norms. In these systems, equality is thought by men and, when put in practice, it favours men: insisting on gender neutrality in political and normative realms means ignoring diversities, power's asymmetries, and material and symbolic disadvantages by renouncing to promote an integrated society (Dworkin, 1977). According to Iris Marion Young, the key problem with inclusion's strategies is that excluded groups – in this case women – are asked to participate to an 'already started game', with pre-fixed rules and 'out of size' rights (Young, 1990). As a consequence, women find themselves in a *double blind* condition: on one side, they have to conform to a male model for being included in this 'game', by disguising their own specificities that do not correspond to the model; on the other, through this 'obliged conformism' they internalize and adopt cultural and behavioural models that risk to undermining their self-esteem and respect.

The already complicated relationship between women and citizenship is also influenced by the 'hierarchical' distinction between the public and the private space. Notably, at the basis of this distinction lies, on one side, the link between woman, her body, and life related needs; on the other, the correlation between man, *logos*, and *polis*. The division of tasks within the family, established on biological basis, has always been perceived as something originating in a pre-political sphere (i.e. the private one), thus it is hardly affected by the increasingly frequent changes that democratic and economic processes impose to other spheres (i.e. the public ones). Even if women had recognised their full citizenship in normative terms (as in the Italian case), their real life experience remains a "halved model of citizenship" (Elshtain, 1981), since they face several obstacles in affirming their public role. As a matter of fact, the division of tasks originated in the pre-political sphere is then exported to the others, from the political to the business one, reinforced through time by both social codes and stereotypes. Actually, while the partial or total economic dependence of wives from their husbands is manifest in social codes, the dependence of husbands from the *care's* work of their wives is at least inadequate, if not neglected. Martha Nussbaum extensively wrote about the importance of the *care's* work (towards child, old people, sick and disabled persons), and the necessity to recognize its social value, granting rights both to the benefiting person and to the carers. According to Nussbaum, a discussion on full gender citizenship should entail the different forms of dependency that characterise the relational aspects of our individual lives (Nussbaum, 2000).

From these considerations, feminist scholars have tried to shed light on the many obstacles encountered by both women who subordinate their participation to the job market to their care's work and by those who commit to this task on top of a paid job. While the formers do not succeed in gaining economic citizenship and autonomy, the latter have to strive among several difficulties in order to find equilibrium between familiar and professional life. To address these limitations, it is necessary to reflect upon the classical liberal notion of *negative liberty* as a liberty of doing what the individual wants without any interference from others or, in the words of Isaiah Berlin in his famous 'Two concepts of liberty' (Berlin, 1969), a "freedom from". Probably due to the historical political context in which Berlin elaborated these concepts – namely the Cold War – he seemed to prefer *negative* to *positive liberty*, i. e. a liberty allowing for the provisions enabling conditions to help the individual do what he/she wants, a "freedom to". Indeed, the difference at the basis of the two concepts of liberties is that *negative liberty* assumes that all abilities must be contained within the individual, whereas *positive liberty* allows that abilities can come from external sources. In our reasoning, it is important to underline how *negative liberty* is grounded on the individualistic idea that individuals are disconnected and self-contained; whereas *positive liberty* on the social-communitarian conception of the individual as innately social and immersed in social relations, in a way that he/she cannot be understood outside of those relations. Women's experience, as we saw above, shows how the liberty to do what they want concretely depends on the specific relations established with the others both in the public and the private space that could favour or limit this liberty. In other words, "the foundation and starting point of (their) freedom is socially constructed" (N. J. Hirschmann, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that feminist authors stress the limits of a *negative* conception of *liberty*, a conception that is not sufficient to those who are not favoured by economic, social and political existent conditions. Indeed, following Gerald MacCallum, what matters in these cases is not only the absence of interference, but also the concrete opportunities that can arise from this absence (MacCallum, 1967). In this view, *negative freedom* is only a 'potential' freedom, that requires specific actions from public institutions aimed to grant an equal access to opportunities to all the members of the society, included the most vulnerable ones. This reflection on the limits of *negative liberty* can be translated also the business realm in order to re-think the role of agents in the specific actions that could better accommodate diversity.

3.2 The value of differences – the multicultural model

The multicultural approach emerged from two main arguments that are strictly connected and complementary to the feminist ones: the necessity to recognise cultural differences and the criticism to the myth of the ethno-cultural neutrality of the State. The argument on recognition of cultural

differences is particularly relevant not only as it leads to the development of the multicultural model, but especially because it emphasizes the need of developing a system able to acknowledge diversity in all sectors of society. One of the main authors that opened the debate in favour of the recognition of ethnic differences in public space is Charles Taylor. The Canadian author, in his well-known essay *The Politics of Recognition*, argues that “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need”, and as such it should become a priority of public action. In his reasoning, Taylor departs from the work of George Herbert Mead on the crucial role of the interaction with the others for the development of the individual identity (Taylor, 1994; Henry & Pirni, 2006).

Contrary to the classic liberal model that conceives the individual as an atomistic entity able to develop his/her own identity and autonomy independently from the surrounding context, Mead and Taylor assert that the individual learns to understand him/herself, to define who he/she is and the role he/she plays in a dialogical way. This means that he/she develops such awareness in relation and sometimes in struggle with what the others see in him (Mead, 1934). Consequently, the interaction of recognition and mis-recognition highly affects the individual’s ability to define him/herself and to be autonomous (Taylor, 1994). Anderson and Honneth develops the argument departing from “vulnerabilities” that are crucial for the individual autonomy: “self-respect”, “self-trust” and “self-esteem”. Among them, self-esteem is particularly relevant within this article since it refers to the individual’s ability to think of him/herself and his/her values, preferences and aspirations as worthy of consideration. In a society, or in an organization based on the principles of equality and anti-discrimination, specific roles, preferences or needs may still bear a negative connotation, influencing the way individuals perceive them. This represents an obstacle to full individual autonomy as it endangers the capacity of freely choosing among the possibilities that the context offers. The two authors present the example of the stay-at-home dad, which in a patriarchal society is still taken as an euphemism for “unemployed” rather than a free and worthy individual decision (Anderson & Honneth, 2005).

Apart from emphasizing the relevance of relations of recognitions, the reasoning of Anderson and Honneth shows the complexity of what “recognition” means in practical terms. It is not sufficient to accord formal equality to the individuals, but it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that the society is organized around a set of principles that accord different values to different roles and choices. Consequently, if a specific lifestyle, common for a minority group, is negatively connoted by the culture of the majority, the autonomy of the individuals belonging to such minority is threatened. Recognition means to question and reflect upon the basic principles regulating the society as a

whole, in order to be able to substantially ensure equality to all individuals. Furthermore, the work of these two authors highlights the relevance and the implications of ensuring relations of recognition in all sectors of society, including the business sector. As in other social settings, the individual develops and negotiates his/her autonomy in relation with others: if certain aspects of his/her person are denigrated, his/her autonomy is threatened. It is therefore necessary to ensure relations of recognition also within corporations. With this purpose, nevertheless, it is not sufficient to avoid discriminatory practices, but it is also necessary to develop values and mechanisms able to prevent the denigration or mis-recognition of different ways of life.

The mechanisms that ensure the reproduction of relations of mis-recognition and domination are not always evident. For instance, the maintenance of relations of power within both the public and private sphere is mainly due to the supposed ‘neutrality’ of the State in front of diversity. This topic has been firstly tackled by the feminist scholars and later by the multicultural debate. Will Kymlicka is among the main authors that analyse the liberal myth of ‘ethnocultural neutrality’ of the State, which implies its non-intervention in the protection of minority cultures. In principle, by assuming a neutral position without actively promoting a specific culture, the State would ensure equality between cultural differences, allowing for their preservation. Kymlicka challenges this statement by showing how the liberal State is actually implicitly promoting a dominant culture at the expenses of the others. The most evident example in this sense is language. In schools, children are supposed to learn one majority language, which is the one that will be used at work, in public offices and so on, regardless of whether this language corresponds to people’s mother tongue or not (Kymlicka, 2001). Iris Marion Young explains how this neutrality, that she calls “impartiality”, is strictly based on the division between private and public space and on the idea that the individual should manifest his/her own identity (culture, desires, interests and so on) exclusively within the private one, while acting for the common interest within the public. Young shows how the impartiality is just a fiction: on one side, the possibility of the individual to develop his/her own personality in the private sphere is strongly influenced by the public policies; on the other side, the common interest within the public is forcibly the product of a majority culture (Young, 1990).

Kymlicka, among other authors such as Parekh (2006), Young (1990), Hylland Eriksen (1991; 2000) and Taylor (1994), focuses his work on concepts such as culture, group and community, defending their crucial role for individuals and opposing to the traditional liberal thought that denies their relevance for the individual well-being. According to these authors, culture refers not only to the folklore and the high culture (museums, art), but also to the set of values and principles that direct and channel individual life choices. Kymlicka argues that culture provide the individual with

a ‘context of choice’ within which he can freely choose his/her identity and values (Kymlicka, 1995). Therefore, culture plays a crucial role in defining individual’s choices and possibilities and devaluating or denying such ‘context of choice’ represents a form of oppression. Young (1990) explains this point by talking of “cultural imperialism”, defined as the tendency of a majority group to impose to other minority groups its values and principles as the norm, representative of humanity as a whole. In this situation, minority groups will not only find more difficult to cultivate and reproduce his/her values, but cultural difference will also be represented as a form of deviance and inferiority by the majority group. Individuals belonging to minorities, in order to have the same possibilities of individuals belonging to the majority, will be obliged to renounce to their culture and group identity. This means that individuals from minorities will encounter more difficulties in competing within a community that is not the one in which they have been socialized. Furthermore, the stereotypes attached to their bodies (e.g. skin color) by the majority group will continue to hinder their possibilities of being considered a fully equal citizen (Young, 1990). This argumentation is relevant also for the business sector. First, organizations operate in specific cultural contexts and tend to organize and manage their activities following the norms of the majority group, as for example, for the language used or the work schedule. Second, the current global economic and financial systems are grounded on Western capitalistic values and norms, which have been constructed around the white bourgeois man. For this reason, it is necessary to acknowledge the potential difficulties that the members of minority groups may encounter in entering this sector and in achieving positions of power at its inside.

3.3 From the group back to the individual – a new approach to diversity

From the State to the firm, the strong presence of a dominant culture which promotes specific values instead of others makes simple anti-discriminatory measures ineffective in ensuring substantial equality. The mechanisms in place will tend to favour the dominant group, unless they are questioned and changed as to include and empower the members of the minority groups. As we mentioned before, the feminist scholars and the multicultural model share the criticism to the neutrality of the State and of the society, emphasizing the need to further recognize differences in the promotion of equality. Yet, the forms that such recognition should adopt in public policies are still a topic of debate, causing disagreement between the two schools of thought.

The first scholars addressing the relevance of group membership for the individual, such as Taylor and Kymlicka, supported the development of policies aimed at protecting the so-called collective rights i.e. those protecting specific features of a minority (e.g. language, traditions) whose

entitlement is reserved to the members of the group only. The objective would be the promotion of a multicultural society where different cultures coexist, avoiding the imperialism of one over the others (Kymlicka, 1995). The multicultural model has been strongly criticized both at the theoretical level and for its practical consequences, especially by the feminist scholars. In particular, Susan Moller Okin in her famous *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* (Moller Okin, 1999) questions the concept of collective rights and the recognition of these rights to minorities. This author bases her criticism on the fact that, for example, American Courts invoked the ‘cultural defence’ argument several times to assign reduced penalties for crimes related to discriminatory practices within the culture of reference (e.g. MGF, early marriage etc.). In her view, the recognition of collective rights could legitimate this kind of practices. In response, scholars supporting the multicultural model presented a series of solutions that are not always convincing. On one side, Kymlicka proposes a model that places the liberal principles of individual autonomy and human rights as undeniable requirements for protecting minority rights (Kymlicka, 1995). On the other side, Parekh criticises the liberal model of Kymlicka because it would represent a new form of imperialism, but proposes to solve the issue through the promotion of intercultural dialogue (Parekh 2006). Although fascinating, Parekh’s proposal alone does not seem to meet the challenges presented by Moller Okin.

Indeed, the feminist author rejects the possibility of reconciling multiculturalism and feminism since they start from two completely different principles. Gender equality is the principle at the basis of feminism, whereas the grant of specific rights to groups the one underlying multiculturalism. After Moller Okin, Anne Phillips tried to reconcile multiculturalism and feminism in her *Multiculturalism without culture* (Phillips, 2007), by arguing that multiculturalism had been blamed for encouraging the oppression of women – forced marriages, FGM, school girls wearing the hijab – because critics and proponents alike exaggerated the unity, distinctness, and intractability of cultures, thereby encouraging a perception of men and women as dupes constrained by cultural dictates. With this argumentation, Phillips clearly summarises the main issue causing the two theories to clash: the false fixity of culture. Indeed, on the one side, the multicultural model risks to bound individuals under a cultural label which may not represent them. The collective rights approach treats cultural features as fixed, while in fact they are deeply fluid and continuously negotiated. On the other side, the feminist criticism to multiculturalism risks to represent women belonging to minority groups as passive subjects of traditionalist fixed cultures.

For this reason, according to Phillips, it is necessary to restore the concept of individual *agency*, in order to allow each individual to negotiate his/her cultural background and to avoid policies that

define him/her under pre-determined cultural features that would deny his/her agency. Actually, Phillips does not reject the multicultural approach *in toto*, since she still acknowledges the need to recognize different lifestyles, values and objectives that individuals may pursue depending on their cultural background. However, by redefining the concept of culture and by restoring the one of agency, the author traces the basis for a new model, based precisely on the fluidity of cultures and on individual agency. This new model should not focus on groups but on individuals, allowing for the possibility of choosing which values to follow and which identity to assume through a right-driven approach, rather than interventionist policies aimed at protecting determined features. This approach is bottom-up, since it allows individuals to decide whether to follow a traditional culture or to negotiate their identities according to their personal aspirations, beliefs and values. In order to promote this approach, the role of the State is to recognise all the life choices as worthy and to protect the right of the individual to negotiate them. With this purpose, the State has to protect individuals who decide not to follow the cultural dictates of their own group, as well as the one who decide to follow them.

The strength of a model based on individual rather than group is also given by the fact that it better acknowledges the complexity of diversity. At the beginning, the debate on diversity was strictly based either on gender or on ethnicity, categories taken as main lenses of analysis in the study of the identity of the person and consequent implications. African American scholars (Crenshaw 1991; bell hooks 1990) and post-colonial studies (Mohanty 1988) have claimed the inadequacy of these approach in representing the condition and those women and men whose identity is determined by the intersection of different categories. According to Kimberle Crenshaw, policies shaped around defined identities – cultural or gender based - fail to acknowledge inter-group differences and risk reinforcing boundaries between groups. Furthermore, it veils the different shades that characterise the identity of each individual and ignore the complexity of the violence suffered by individual belonging to different groups. The example provided by the author is the one of the African America women, whose discrimination cannot be interpreted through the simple lenses of gender or race, but rather as the product of the intersection of the two (Crenshaw 1991). This discourse can be applied more broadly to all individual belonging to different minority groups. Diversity, indeed, is not only determined by ethnicity and gender, but also by a whole series of characteristics that influence the identity of the individual: sexual orientation, social class, disabilities, etc. Consequently, the experiences and discrimination suffered by a lesbian woman are different from the one of all other women; similarly, the needs of a person with disabilities and belonging to an

ethnic minority will be different from both the needs of other persons with disabilities and the one of the individuals belonging to his/her ethnic group.

To summarize, the debate over diversity within the socio-political theory presents two main points that are worthy to re-consider in the management field. First, the identification of pre-determined group identities and the development of top-down measures for protecting specific group features risks of reinforcing stereotypes and hindering individual agency in negotiating his/her own identity. This approach, results unable to grasp the complexity of diversity, determined by the intersection of different categories. Second, social contexts need to provide individuals with the freedom and opportunities to define their own identity, claim their rights and contribute with their different backgrounds to the development of society. The firm, then, may facilitate this process by reinforcing dialogue with employees, by recognizing and receiving the different instances that may emerge and by ensuring that such instances are accommodated accordingly and equally.

4. Diversity within Organizations: towards a “performance boosting” practice

The concept of “diversity” appeared in the management field starting from the 1960s. In that period, the increasing heterogeneity in workforce composition started to challenge the traditional “white male” model and gave rise to a debate over the value of recognizing and managing diversity within business organizations. The first formalization of diversity in the workforce emerged in the US in the 60s with the introduction of affirmative actions, which were “a set of laws, policies, guideline and government-mandated and government-sanctioned administrative practices, including those of private institutions, intended to end and correct the effects of a specific form of discrimination” (LaFollette, H., 2003). The premises leading to this commitment were related to adult, white males being the business mainstream despite the increasing share of minorities within the workforce. The stability of the US economy and its institutions allowed for the setting up of a more inclusive job market, weeding out the widespread ethnic, racial and sexual prejudice by means of social and legal coercion (Thomas, R. R., 1990). In practice, these provisions were enforced within universities and organizations by setting “target goals” rather than quotas, i.e. they required a good faith effort to be made in order to identify, select and train sufficiently qualified people belonging to minorities (LaFollette, H., 2003). Affirmative actions functioned as anti-monopoly policies by impeding a single group capturing all the jobs in an industry and granting advantages to they fellow ethnics in having access to future job positions. Overall, the main intention was to promote inclusion by influencing the behaviour accepted in the workplace (LaFollette, H., 2003).

Over the decades, the conditions changed and new challenges emerged: above all, a simple “boarding pass” to the job market for women and minorities was no longer enough, instead they needed an upgrade (Thomas, R., 1990). As the demographic proportion evolved, the target became business survival rather than common decency and such an objective required another approach. In this respect, affirmative actions should be regarded as a transitory intervention to correct imbalances, not as an ultimate solution for upward mobility (Thomas, R., 1990). Over the decades, these practices have been often criticized for setting up a mechanism of reverse discrimination, as they were inherently conflicting with meritocracy (LaFollette, H., 2003). Furthermore, by acting as a form of collective rights’ protection, affirmative actions strictly based on groups risk strengthening supposed boundaries differentiating individuals rather than promoting their fluid integration within organizations. Based on these considerations, the focus of the diversity paradigm has progressively shifted from a collective towards an individual dimension. This has also been related to the strong concept of individualism within the US, which favoured a shift towards a managerial approach over a state intervention (Kirton and Greene, 2000; Kossek and Lobel, 1996). On a more contingent ground, the dramatic changes in the demographic balance pushed the effective management of diversity up in the priorities in many Western economies (Bassett-Jones, 2005).

The concept of diversity management was therefore introduced in the United States in the late 1980s. Following the 1987 release of Workforce 2000⁸, both academics and practitioners focused on establishing a “business case” (for example, Cox 1991; Robinson, G., & Dechant, 1997; Gilbert & al., 1999; Wentling, 2004) i.e. the arguments and empirical verification that workforce diversity is positively related to organizational performance (Jonsen & Maznevski, 2009). Specifically, this correlation would result from increased market competitiveness, enhanced legitimacy, capacity to address a variety of markets and consumers, and improved learning and innovation (Jayne & Dipboye; 2004; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Wilson, 1999). Among corporations, leading companies as Google initiated and committed to increase a diversity task-force stating that “a diverse mix of voices leads to better discussions, decisions, and outcomes for everyone” (Lee, 2016). Analogous arguments stand at the team level, as diverse groups are more capable of dealing with complexity by providing multiple perspectives to single challenges, thus enhancing adaptability, problem solving, creativity and innovation (Milliken & Martins, 1996; DiStefano and Maznevski, 2000).

⁸ A report published by the Hudson Institute emphasizing “gaining the diversity advantages” from changing demographic trends (Cuckier et al., 2016; Johnson & Packer; 1987)

Diverse teams are also expected to bring within organizations a wider set of social networks, and consequently, they provide a wider array of sources of knowledge (Jackson et al., 2013).

Despite the potential benefits, organizations tend to prefer homogeneity rather than heterogeneity in their workforce (Jonsen & Maznevski, 2009). Several studies demonstrated that a critical issue is the ‘similarity attraction paradigm’ (Byrne, 1971), that is the tendency to recruit, hire and retain individuals with similar attitudes and values (Harison et al., 2010). Also, the ‘business case’ comes with some caveats: above all, a heterogeneous group would be effective in delivering results as long as members share the values and beliefs which allow for the achievement of a “strategic consensus” (Knight et al., 1999). While diversity may generate benefits in terms of problem-solving and innovation, strong differences may lead to fragmentation and dispersion (Martin, 2004), challenging organizational performance with lack of consensus, low coherence and possible tensions (Cox, 1993).

Starting from these considerations, organizations interpret and implement diversity management in different ways, depending on the perception of its strategic potential. Although a substantial body of literature has highlighted the relevance of the ‘business case’, little research investigates the rationales behind the characterization and the adoption of diversity management within organizations issues (with exceptions for Kirton & Green, 2015; Dass & Parker 1999; Ely & Thomas, 1996). Following the work of Dass and Parker (1999), we provide a short taxonomy of different organizational behaviours in relation to diversity management.

- i. *Resistance to diversity*: Resistance to diversity rests on a negative perception of including ‘non-traditional’ employees in the workforce, especially at higher levels of the organization. Diversity is perceived as a threat to organizational stability and, consequently detrimental to performance. Organizations resisting diversity may consciously or unconsciously discriminate minorities and may not comply with the law. Their strategic response is reactive, characterized by denial, avoidance or manipulation (Dass & Parker, 1999). Organizational change is regarded as inefficient or not acceptable to shareholders due to increased growth and shrinking profits. The strategic response is maintenance of traditional structures and routines, and prevalence of white male employees.
- ii. *Compliance to legislation*: The compliant organization has a narrow orientation towards diversity, deriving from moderate exogenous pressures to incorporate minorities. Responding to the pressures of legal requirements and stakeholders’ moral and ethical expectation, compliant organizations follow legal obligations and norms and claim to be an

equal opportunity employer, releasing positive information on diversity. Yet, they do not display specific initiatives or policies to promote diversity; their activities are based primarily on conformity to legal imperatives, particularly on affirmative action policies and Equal Employment Opportunity legislation (Dass & Parker, 1999). Indeed, diversity is regarded as a problem to be solved in order to avoid sanctions and/or to gain stakeholder credibility. The focus of inclusion is on minority groups rather than individuals within the organization. The strategic response is defensive and directed at balancing different interest groups within organizations, minimizing tensions and conflicts. For example, organizations may choose the director for affirmative actions from a minority group so to signal commitment to equity and fairness. Compliant organizations perceive diversity as a strategic issue in so far as it represents alignment and conformity with external expectations, either explicit or tacit (Jonsen, Schneider & Maznevski, 2011).

- iii. *Legitimation and access to business opportunities:* The legitimation seeking organization has a rational functionalist approach to workforce diversity, which is conceived as a “means to a desirable end” (Jonsen, Schneider & Maznevski, 2011, p. 36). Under this approach, diversity enhances legitimacy by appealing to diverse stakeholders that can look inside the organization and identify with people like themselves. In this way, organizations can enter new niche markets with business potential and leverage on internal diversity for interpreting and responding effectively to customer needs. Besides favouring entrance in new market, diversity is conceived as a business necessity creating opportunities to maximize profits by reducing costs, reducing turnover and improving market value. Legitimation seeking organizations usually integrate diversity as a choice and value it internally to exploit its full potential. Indeed, initiatives are adopted on the basis of cost-benefit analysis and calculations on the possible advantages and disadvantages of alternatives. The strategic response to is accommodating diversity in so far that it proves to be instrumental to exploiting business opportunities (Dass & Parker, 1999). These organizations are likely to promote a higher level of heterogeneity in the workforce and to value diversity as a strategic asset.
- iv. *Learning and innovation:* The learning organization views diversity as a valuable asset and adopts a pro-active strategy in order to integrate a heterogeneous workforce into the existing strategy and organizational culture. Learning organizations seek multiple objectives from diversity, such as efficiency, customer satisfaction, employee development, social responsibility and innovation, and tend to consider both short-term and long-term impacts of DM (Dass & Parker, 1999). Additionally, learning organizations encourage active

engagement of employees in suggesting new perspectives on both internal and external business challenges and learn from such different views and ideas. The general attitude towards diversity is that of “unity-in-diversity”, which focuses on identifying differences and similarities and managing them for long-term learning. The strategies adopted by learning organizations are strongly related to notions of organizational identity and values. Indeed, effective DM initiatives require integration within the organizational identity and alignment with existing values, norms, policies and other strategic initiatives to be legitimized as strategic issues (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). When an issue is related to and perceived to be aligned with other issues, it improves the propensity of decision makers to invest resources in the issue (Dutton, Stumpf & Wagner, 1990).

4. 1. Diversity and performance: the impact of DM on creativity and innovation

The general investigation of the complex interrelationship between diversity, creativity, innovation and competitive advantage, points out that creativity is a *sine qua non* condition for innovation, and that both creativity and innovation benefit from the existence of diversity (Bassett-Jones). Innovation is commonly considered as one of the most important drivers of long term economic growth in general and of firms’ competitive advantage in particular. Given its importance and pervasiveness, the understanding of the determinants of innovation has been the main subject of a bulk of studies both within the evolutionary economic and the strategic innovation management literature. Since the very beginning, the access to a variety of input within and outside an organization was recognized as a fundamental driver of innovation (e.g., Nelson and Winter, 1982; Cohen and Malerba, 2001)

While technological variety remains an important factor, in the past few decades the progressive shift towards a knowledge-based economy has increased the relevance of intangible resources, above all human capital, in producing successful innovations (Teece et al., 1997). In this respect, diversity in human capital enhances the innovation process by positively affecting the searching/creative phase: innovation is an interactive process where researchers collaborate to develop, modify, discuss and realize, therefore diversity within groups is likely to promote an innovative behaviour (van der Vegt and Janssen, 2003). The picture becomes more complex as we shift from a within firm to a between firms perspective. As firms decide to leverage on external sources of knowledge, successful innovations are increasingly emerging from networking activities where workers composition come to be especially relevant (Nieto and Santamaria, 2007). In fact,

employees' diversity not only brings positive effects to learning, creativity and flexibility, but also it improves the work group external relationships (Østergaard et al., 2011).

Yet, while diversity can enhance the *search* for new ideas and solution, it may hinder the *selection* phase: following Bassett-Jones (2005), as the concept develops into a product, the technical problems leave room to the human problem, arising from the need to promote the diffusion of the innovation within the firm and along the supply chain. In this instance, a diverse team may struggle or even fail to reach consensus. Still, even though homogeneity and heterogeneity are related to different types of challenges, the author questions whether firms willing to build their competitive advantage on innovation do actually have a choice. Considering the current demographic trends, competition intensity and legislative pressure, the implementation of diversity management practices will soon become inevitable. For this reason, organizations which are actively promoting output-based HR strategy should not be questioning whether or not to embrace diversity, but rather, which is the best way to do it.

4.2. Managing diversity: the role of human resource management and transformational leadership

In order to prioritize diversity as a strategic issue and benefit from its full potential in terms of learning and innovation, organizations need to weave diversity and diversity management within the organizational identity and culture. Fine-tuning organizational culture with diversity requires promoting narratives and practices that embrace openness and appreciation (Hofhuis et al., 2012). Essentially, changes in organizational culture need then to be reflected in changes in organizational practices and climates (Roosevelts Thomas, 1990), and as such, represent a human resource management issue (Ashikali, & Groeneveld, 2015). In this regard, managers and their leadership style play a crucial role in implementing HRM practices and imparting the new organizational culture so to influence positive employees' perceptions and behaviours towards diversity (Gilbert et al., 2011; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Accordingly, we can think of diversity management as 'the aggregate effect of HRM sub-systems, including recruitment, reward, performance appraisal, employee development and individual managerial behaviours in delivering competitive advantage through leadership and teamwork' (Bassett-Jones, 2005).

i. HRM and diversity

Firms should operate in a high-commitment context whereby the HRM promotes the achievement and maintenance of a high skill level within the organization by actively shaping the internal labour market (Bassett-Jones, 2005). By comprising strategic thinking and people-centred policies, the HRM function often overlaps with diversity management, as they both focus on practices for nurturing human resources by favouring the development and well-being of every employee to optimize their contribution to business strategy and performances (Shen et al., 2009; Truss et al., 1999). Past research has emphasized that diversity management can actually be supported by the use of appropriate HRM strategies. By enabling organizational learning and understanding, knowledge creation and sharing, and flexibility, effective HRM strategies can lay the groundwork for advancing diversity management as a strategic asset (Goodman et al., 2003; Burbridge et al., 2002; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995).

Following Shen et al. (2009), we can identify a set of strategies to be pursued at different stages which make HRM functional to diversity management. To start with, in the *recruitment and selection* phase interviewers should be encouraged to positively value diversity and to attract individuals whose values and attitudes are dissimilar to those of gatekeepers. To serve this purpose, they ought to be conscious of the attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes which might influence their behaviour and judgement (Shen et al., 2009). Aware of the potential risks of selection-bias, recruiters need to focus on the specific competences and knowledge of individuals and assess both their fitting and disrupting potential for the organization. As a next step, *training* is fundamental to foster high quality diversity awareness and to build a common understanding around it, at the individual, group and organizational level (Kosseck, 2005). A top-down training strategy might be more appropriate as top management commitment to diversity is likely to produce trickle down effects on the entire organization. Accordingly, coaching practices should endow employees with specific (soft) skills and competences to deal with diversity in their daily organizational life (Shen et al., 2009).

Professional development and career planning are other areas that need to be carefully taken into consideration in designing diversity management programs as they tend to be sensitive to discrimination (Richard & Kirby, 1999). Organizations should ensure equal opportunities for career advancement by, for example, including minority groups in the evaluation and promotion panel and/or having non-traditional managers in assessing candidates for promotion (Shen et al. 2009). In order to ensure equity and fairness, criteria for performance management should be objective, formalized and relevant to the job and the organization (Schuler et al., 1993). The language adopted for appraisal should be as culturally neutral as possible, and focused on individual performance

rather than personality traits (Fulkerson & Schuler, 1992). Moreover, diversity management in remuneration should apply the principles of equal pay and performance-based pay systems, designed in terms of employees' ability, knowledge and skills (Shen et al., 2009).

Lastly, *job design* is crucial for combining organizational requirements with employees' social and personal ambitions in ways that optimize organizational performance as well as individual job satisfaction, well-being and recognition. In designing job tasks, HRM should seek to customize job requirements by fitting operative imperatives with personal aspirations, attitudes and needs. With the aim of supporting the self-esteem and autonomy of the individual, it is crucial to avoid denigrating different life choices and to value their different contribution to the working environment (Anderson & Honneth 2005). In this regard, flexible employment represents a valuable strategy over traditional employment systems as it provides employees with the freedom to adjust the working schedule based on their personal capacity and needs (Shen, 2009; Cox, 1993). As remarked in political theory, providing individuals with flexibility in the work context is likely to improve their well-being and perception of acceptance by others, which in turn will positively affect their engagement and commitment to the organization (Cox, 1993).

ii. *Transformational Leadership*

Managers and supervisors are critical players in the implementation of DM policies and HRM practices and in building a culture that values diversity across the organization (Gilbert et al., 2011). To translate diversity in learning and innovation, top management commitment is fundamental at all business levels as it is reflected in the organization vision and mission and integrated into core business strategies. Line managers should then implement these guidelines through the adoption of HRM practices that favour diversity in daily organizational life.

In this regard, transformational leadership style appears particularly suitable, as it occurs “when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group” (Bass, 1990, p. 21). This is a charismatic leadership style focused on understanding the emotional needs of employees, inspiring them to embrace the new organizational vision and encouraging them in adopting new task-related practices in ways that create a sense of belonging conducive to pro-active behaviours and positive outcomes both in terms of DM and organizational performance (Avolio et al., 1999).

In practice, transformational leaders are the champions of diversity within their organizations. Transformational leaders are highly committed to diversity management and act as “role models” who “lead by example” in building employees’ confidence to freely express their own needs and identity while at the same time recognizing and accepting other’s identity and aspirations (Bass et al., 2003; Avolio et al., 1999). Furthermore, transformational leaders inspire and motivate employees to value diversity by creating a sense of collective purpose for adopting DM practices in daily business functions (Bass et al., 2003). For example, transformational leaders can stimulate employees to be creative and pro-active in interacting with each other and finding together solutions to solve tensions or common problems (Ashikali & Groneveld, 2011). Finally, transformational leaders act as coaches and mentors, that are capable of understanding individual needs and provide opportunities for achieving professional growth and individual recognition, removing eventual psychological and operational barriers (Shen et al., 2009). This is likely to promote the positive effects of diversity of and reduce its drawbacks, while improving organizational climate and organizational outcomes (Gebert, 2009).

5. Concluding remarks

The argumentation developed in this paper illustrates two different approaches dealing with diversity. In the first part, we presented how different streams in political theory elaborate and interpret the concept of diversity at societal level, pointing out the theoretical and practical challenges associated to the goal of ‘equality within differences’. In the second part, we provided the rationale behind the implementation of diversity within business organizations, highlighting the role of DM in fostering creativity, learning and innovation as well as the importance of HRM and transformational leadership to promote their achievement.

The theoretical foundation of the debate highlights the importance of ensuring relations of recognition in order to protect the autonomy of the individual. Contrary to the liberal approach that denies the role of social relations in the development of the individual identity and autonomy, scholars from gender studies and the multicultural scholarship have argued the fundamental role of these relations in the development of the individual. Consequently, practices that denigrate certain features or life choices hinder significantly the individual capacity of conducting an autonomous life. Furthermore, these scholars have deconstructed the supposed neutrality of the State in front of gender or ethnic differences, as the rules regulating social and political life are decided and developed around the needs of a majority. For this reason, simple anti-discriminatory policies result

insufficient, as the business rules and dynamics may itself pose a challenge to the recognition of diversity. Nevertheless, the initial approach to ethnic diversity, based on the protection of supposed groups' features, resulted inadequate in promoting the rights of the individual belonging to groups within groups as for women belonging to minorities – and in facing the inner fluidity of such cultural features. The confrontation between feminist scholars and the multicultural theory, together with the rise of the intersectional theory, push the debate towards a new approach, based on individual rather than on group. Following the reflection of Anna Phillips (2007), the new model would require a reinforcement of a bottom up and right-driven approach, rather than a direct intervention of the State.

The business sector has been touched by the debate on diversity only recently. The potential advantages of fostering diversity within companies are many, both at the organizational and at the societal level. Within the business sector, diversity management can be applied to the extent that the strong potential of diversity in boosting firms' success, qualifies it as a strategic asset. By broadening the range of capabilities available, heterogeneity within teams promotes creativity and problem solving skills that are conducive to innovation and organizational performance. As we mentioned before, such awareness should motivate the progressive shift of organizational rationales from resistance, compliance and legitimation towards a learning approach, reconciling private with public priorities. Still, when it comes to a more formal evaluation, a “nuanced view” of the business case seems to be more appropriate as the impact of diversity management of firms' performance is conditional to several factors (Kochan et al, 2003). For this reason, in terms of corporate culture, whilst there is room for changes and adjustments when defining common values and aspiration, there is still an equal if not stronger emphasis on homogeneity and coordination. From a strategic point of view, diversity management entails benefits as well as risks, depending on the employees' role and department. More in general, organizational practices tend to rely on a top down definition of group identities which may exacerbate stereotypes, limiting individuals' agency, or be unable to fully acknowledge differences, while still imposing falsely neutral values.

Nevertheless, the experience at the political level can provide useful insights on new approaches for managing diversity in business organizations that advance its productive and social potential while limiting its drawbacks. For instance, individual needs and aspirations can be accommodated by enhancing flexibility in working hours and designing customised job tasks in ways that enable recognition of personal identity and perceptions of job significance by each employee. A second insights deriving from political theory regards the importance of developing DM programs that encourage employees to collectively define their personal needs and problems and to suggest

common solutions which can benefit both the individual and the organization. For example, the creation of diversity committees championed by transformational leaders can play an important role in creating awareness and commitment to diversity at all level of the organizations. In this regards, HRM practices can play an important role by recruiting employees on the basis of competences rather than personal characteristics, by training employees to acknowledge and value diversity in business operations and by providing career opportunities that reflect personal aspirations and needs.

Our research presents some limitations, both conceptually and methodologically, which could be addressed by future research. Conceptually, the study poses the basis for an academic dialogue between political theory and business management, by extrapolating from theories that have addressed diversity within the socio-political debate useful insights for the management field. Of course, in order to strengthen the conceptualization of diversity as both a strategic and a social asset for the firms, this dialogue needs to be further explored both in the political theory and business management academic fields. From a methodological point of view, the seminal theories and the managerial approaches analysed have been derived from the discussion over diversity that characterized the conference which inspired this research. Starting from our contribution, future research might follow a more systematic approach in strengthening the theoretical framework adopted in this paper. Moreover, empirical examination of diversity management programs within organizations can provide evidence on the effectiveness of HR practices and transformational leadership as well as of other organizational practices in promoting both employees' well-being and organizational performance.

Despite its limitation, we believe that this study contributes to the diversity management literature by combing theoretical insights from political studies with management studies. Our analysis highlights the importance of focusing attention on individuals rather than groups within organization in order to develop programs that accommodate personal aspirations and needs rather than building on stereotypes. In so doing, it also provides managers with practical insights for effectively integrating diversity and leveraging its innovation potential.

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