ABSTRACT

Diversity?: The organization of difference in the European Union, the influence of the United States and the implications for gender policy

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Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

There is a transnational market in social equality policy ideas. This paper explores the origins of the notion of ‘diversity’ in the United States and its transference to policy making in the European Union. It compares the history of the concept of Affirmative Action and its transatlantic journey to the concept of ‘diversity’ that has recently become important in several European countries. Affirmative action from the civil rights movement in the United States made its journey to Europe under the name of Positive Actions in various formats of both a soft and a hard nature. Coalitions of groups suffering discrimination formed in the United States to use the tool to redress past inequities. The European version of positive actions has been primarily aimed at gender issues. In time, and through public debate, affirmative action on both sides of the Atlantic became a dirty word, as conservative forces managed to make the term synonymous with ‘reverse discrimination’ or ‘unfair preference’. The women’s movement was in part responsible for launching new approaches, based on dealing with racial, ethnic and class differences, and the need for coalitions. The notion of diversity as a positive attribute in society rather than a divisive one was an important strategy to take equal opportunities movements further and to include more groups, even if at the same time the concept was heavily criticized within the various sub-movements. This paper argues that ‘diversity’ as a policy approach in the United States glosses over issues of inequality and is primarily directed at creating a profitable work force. Further, recent developments in the US show that conservative intellectual forces are successfully transforming the word diversity into yet another ‘dirty word’. What are the potential costs for equality actors of utilizing the concept of ‘diversity’ in the European Union and how is this linked to the ongoing organization of diverse anti-discrimination movements working on gender, sexuality, nationality and anti-racist issues? The paper utilizes interview data with informants in the United States and information from an ongoing project on the relations between transnational movements and national equality policies.