MULTICULTURALISM VS (ANTI-)RACISM:

Duelling Discourses or Discursive Partners?

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ABSTRACT

Of the many paradoxes to engulf Canada's official Multiculturalism, few are as egregious as the belief that multiculturalism and anti-racism are mutually incompatible in the struggle against shifting notions of racism. This paper contends that such a perception is wrong – in part because Multiculturalism is not about diversity but disadvantage, that is, advancing inclusiveness by removing difference-based discrimination. This is in part because the structural changes envisaged by conventional anti racism do not materialize by themselves but with a multicultural mindset. Canada's Multiculturalism remains an ongoing and unfinished project that is evolving in response to the many and changing faces of racism. An official multiculturalism remains in the vanguard of making Canada safe for diversity, safe from diversity. Its role as an anti-racism partner should therefore not be underestimated.

Introduction: The Paradoxes of Multiculturalism

Canada is one of several democratic societies to have capitalized on multicultural principles for managing diversity. Originating in part to harmonize competing ethnicities without losing control of the overall agenda, Canada's official multiculturalism prevails for a variety of practical reasons, in effect reinforcing its status as a political act to achieve political goals in a political acceptable manner (Peter 1978). Not surprisingly, some embrace an official multiculturalism as a solution to Canada's diversity 'problems'; others dismiss it as a problem in search of a solution; and still others see it as problem and solution depending on the criteria.

However much revered or vilified, Canada's official Multiculturalism is prone to paradoxes. To one side, a multicultural Canada is inclined to accommodate diversity; to the other side, it must do so without compromising national unity, the rule of law, or common values (Cardozo 2005). In doing so, it must balance the rights of minority groups without disrupting either majority rights or the rights of individuals within these communities. In short, a commitment to multiculturalism must grapple with the quintessential paradox of society-building: How to make Canada safe "for" diversity, yet safe "from" diversity, while at the same time, making diversity safe "from" Canada yet safe "for" Canada (see Schlesinger Jr. 1992; Pearson 2001).

There is yet another multicultural paradox. Canada embraces a commitment to the principles and practices of an official Multiculturalism as a principled basis for living together with differences. And yet Canada remains a site of racism and racial discrimination, despite concerted anti racist initiatives at interpersonal and institutional levels. How, then, do we account for the persistence of racism within a context of Canadian multiculturalism, why is racism proving a moving target, and what is the role of multiculturalism in 'erasing' racism?

De-constructing Multiculturalism: Towards Inclusiveness

Canada is widely proclaimed as one of the world's most robust multicultural societies whose commitment to multiculturalism constitutes its foremost contribution to global peace. For the most part, Canadians tend to be supportive of multiculturalism, according to a raft of survey results over the years (Berry 1977 et al; Jedwab 2002; Biles et al 2005), although the nature and depth of this commitment remains open to question. But support for multiculturalism is one thing; understanding is something else, and the interplay of uncertainty with misinformation tends to complicate and confuse. To the extent that most Canadians are unsure of what an official multiculturalism is trying to, how, and why, the prospects for a cooperative coexistence are somewhat diminished.

If taken as a normative framework rather than specific government program with specified goals and timetables, there is much to commend in Canada's commitment to an inclusive model of multiculturalism. With an inclusive multiculturalism, a Canada of many cultures is thought to be possible as long as people's cultural differences do not preclude full and equal involvement in society. Cultural differences under this liberal universalism are deemed to be less important than what we share in common, especially since true equality arises from treating everyone the same ("equal before the law") regardless of differences. And yet Canada's official multiculturalism also acknowledges that a society of many cul-

tures may require that differences be taken into account when the situation arises, particularly when minorities want these differences to be seriously taken.

After 35 years as official policy, what can be said about Canada's official Multiculturalism? Imperfections and criticisms aside, Canada's Multiculturalism has proven a workable exercise in making Canada safe for diversity yet safe from diversity. An inclusive Multiculturalism underscores a commitment to the integration of new and racialized Canadians, in part by renegotiating a two-way process of incorporation ("you adapt, we adjust"), by fostering tolerance toward diversity, reducing prejudice and ethnocentrism, removing discriminatory barriers, enhancing equitable access to services, expanding institutional involvement, improving intergroup encounters and highlighting citizenship (Duncan 2005; Kymlicka 2005). Cultural differences are tolerated under an official multiculturalism, but limits apply: differences cannot violate individual rights, break the laws of the land, or contravene core constitutional values like gender equity. Clearly, then, Canada's official Multiculturalism is not about promoting diversity or celebrating differences. More accurately, it's about removing those difference-based disadvantages that preclude new and racialized Canadians from full institutional involvement and equal citizenship rights (Fleras 2007).

Problematizing Racism

Canada in the 21st century must confront yet another inescapable paradox. Most Canadians are no longer racists in the classic sense of blatantly vilifying minority women and men. Yet racism continues to fester in unobtrusive ways, deliberately or unconsciously, through action or inaction. Racism is rarely experienced in an immediate and obvious manner, but through constant and cumulative impact of demeaning incidents that quietly accumulate into a 'ton of feathers.' Consider the contrasts: Canadians at the cognitive level have internalized a commitment to tolerance, justice, and equality; yet Canadians continue to rely on racially-based prejudices at subconscious levels. Institutions are increasingly reluctant to openly discriminate for fear of backlash or costly litigation; yet institutions are known to discriminate through rules and practices that have an exclusionary impact. Canada remains at the forefront in fighting racism at individual and institutional levels; yet awareness is mounting that racism is an everyday reality for many Canadians of colour, that racist practices affect individuals in very real ways, and that racism is not some relic from the past, but is dynamically invasive and socially toxic.

References to racism are nearly limitless. From the openly defamatory to those systemic patterns that reinforce existing power relations, racism encompasses those subtle and discreet forms that generally escape detection unless experienced by victims. Or in the words of Senator David Oliver (cited in the Conference Board of Canada 2004), racism is:

> "*…not something readily discernable by the senses: you cannot see it, hear it, smell it, touch it, but it does exist. It is subtle, invisible, and ethereal*"

Some expressions of racism are unplanned and unpremeditated, but expressed in isolated acts at irregular intervals because of individual impulse or insensitivity. Other expressions are systemic and structural, and manifest through discriminatory patterns that inadvertently exclude or exploit. Certain actions are undeniably racist; other actions are labeled racist to shut down debate. Racism can be directed at some because of who they are (racism as race) or at others because of their cultural differences (racism as culture). Some see racism as something individuals do; whereas others claim racism involves what people don't do. Exaggerating people's difference (culture-conscious) when irrelevant may be racist, yet ignoring their differences (culture-blind) when necessary may prove equally racist. Even agreement on the scope and nature of racism in Canada is subject to debate. A racial divide (racial rashoman) can be detected: Those who are unlikely to experience racism are prone to underestimate the amount, nature, and degree of racial discrimination; while those more likely to be racially profiled are more likely to emphasize the scope and magnitude of racism. A growing realization that there are many racisms rather than a single racism makes it doubly important to unmask this complex and evolving dynamic.

It's relatively easy to reduce racism to a personal problem. Common sense dictates that people are the cause and conveyors of racism. As individuals, people must reflect critically upon our degree of complicity in perpetuating racism through daily actions or inactions.

In short, the faces of racism are shifting in response to a changing and diverse society. Racism is proving to be a "scavenger" ideology that parasitically pounces on the most unlikely of sources, bobbing and bending to escape detection, and losing its precision when used loosely and unreflectively to describe a dislike toward others (Frederickson 2002). Of particular salience is a shift in its conceptualization. Racism is no longer seen as a "thing" or "person" out there that can be isolated and reformed. Rather racism is increasingly envisaged as a "process" or "verb" involving an attribute that is applied to an action after the fact, depending on the context or consequence. This focus on process reinforces a definition of racism as those

> *"ideas and ideals (ideology) that assert or imply the superiority or normalcy of some over another because of perceived differences, both physical and cultural, together with the institutional power to put these beliefs into practice in ways that control, exclude, or exploit" (Fleras Elliott 2007).*

But debates over re-conceptualizing racism tend to overlook the painfully obvious: Racism costs all Canadians: The costs of racism are absorbed unevenly across society, with some capitalizing on racism for preserving privilege or power while others suffer (Bonnett 2000; Bishop 2004). Racialized minorities live in perpetual fear of physical retaliation. They experience a loss of personal security which, in turn, intensifies isolation and self-defensive behaviours. They endure a restricted set of economic and social opportunities; and their self-worth is diminished by a constant barrage of negative media messages. Exposure to racism may contribute to the poor health of minority women and men – with corresponding pressure on Canada's much beleaguered health care system (Picard 2005).

With racism, in other words, mixed messages are conveyed that often contradict the ideals of Canada's constitutionally protected human rights. As well, racism diminishes the number of people who can contribute to Canada, while useless energy is expended that otherwise could be funneled into more productive channels. The end result is nothing less than a blot upon Canadian society because of racism's capacity to squander our potential and reputation. Finally, institutions that cannot capitalize on a diverse workforce because of racism are destined to lose their competitive edge in the global market place.

Rethinking Anti-Racism

Failure to conceptualize racism as a problem makes it difficult to pin down or put away. Admittedly, most of us would agree that discrimination against someone because of their differences is racism pure and simple, and that something should be done about it. But doing nothing in a society where racism and racial discrimination persists may be no less racist. After all, fence-sitting (through inactivity or silence) is neither impartiality nor neutrality but tacit acceptance of a racialized and unequal status quo. Put bluntly: in the struggle against racism, one is either part of the problem or part of the solution.

The ranges of direct actions that openly challenge racism are known as anti-racism (Dei 1996). Anti-racism entails active involvement in changing those cultural values, personal prejudices, discriminatory behaviour, and institutional structures of society that perpetuate racism. Two styles of anti-racist strategy can be discerned: interpersonal and institutional. One is concerned with modifying individual behaviour through law, education, or interaction; the other with removal of discriminatory structural barriers and systemic roots of racism.

It's relatively easy to reduce racism to a personal problem. Common sense dictates that people are the cause and conveyors of racism. As individuals, people must reflect critically upon our degree of complicity in perpetuating racism through daily actions or inactions. It is equally valid to situate racism within a system of vast and impersonal forces that are largely beyond individual control. But such an approach runs the risk of shifting the blame from individuals to blaming the system, thus exonerating individuals from doing anything. Neither of these positions is entirely correct. Individuals may not be the root cause of racism; nevertheless, racism is located within and carried by the person. Systems may generate root causes; nonetheless, institutions do not exist apart from patterns of interaction that create, support, and transform patterns of racism.

What is required in an integrative anti-racism approach? In rejecting an either/or approach for a both/and perspective with its embrace of contextuality, connectedness, and simultaneity of unequal relations, an integrative anti-racism acknowledges the interplay of structure with agency. People must take responsibility for improving their awareness, commitment, and actions. They must also and simultaneously challenge institutional structures that deny or exclude. An integrative anti-racism also recognizes the interlocking nature of racism (Bishop 2005). Racialized minorities do not find themselves excluded because of race or class or gender. Rather, each of these 'jeopardies' intersects with the other to amplify overlapping patterns of exclusion and denial (Spafford et al 2006).

Imagining the Improbable: Multiculturalism as Anti-Racism

Another paradox stalks the land. For many, multiculturalism and anti racism are seen as opposing discursive frameworks. For critics, multiculturalism is dismissed as little more than 'happy face' celebration. The aim of multiculturalism is largely attitudinal, that is, to enhance sensitivity by improving knowledge about cultural differences. By contrast, anti-racism involves a commitment to challenge, resist, and transform racially discriminatory barriers at interpersonal and institutional levels through direct action.

Predictably, then, critics attack multiculturalism as a new racism because of its tendency to equate a group's identity and experiences with race or ethnicity, while glossing over entrenched inequalities and power imbalances (Berliner and Hull 2000; Dei 2000). Minority underachievement is not necessarily caused by cultural differences. Nor will cross-cultural understanding contribute to any fundamental change in uprooting the structural roots of inequality (Kivel 1996). In that cultural solutions cannot solve structural problems, moves toward re-priming the lives and life chances of minorities must focus on the behavioural and structural components of racial inequality, along with the power and privileges that sustain racism through institutional policies and procedures. Sweeping structural changes are needed, in other words, rather than tinkering with multicultural cosmetics.

What, then, could be further opposed? Multiculturalism is about attitudes and culture; anti racism is about systems and structure. However true in theory, a different conclusion appears upon closer inspection, namely, a realization that Canada's official multiculturalism is quietly in the vanguard of anti racism activity. First, as noted, Canadian multiculturalism is *not* about celebrating differences but focused on eliminating racial disadvantages created by prejudicial perceptions of cultural differences. Second, Canada's commitment to an inclusive multiculturalism is consistent with the goals of anti racism: to ensure all Canadians are fully and equally included regardless of their differences. Consider, for example, how interpersonal anti racism initiatives are predicated largely on changing people's attitudes toward acceptance and

inclusion. Third, references to structural changes under an anti racism sound good in theory. In practice, neither power relations nor institutional structures undergo change without applying human agency. In short, structures don't change, people do, and a commitment to multiculturalism is crucial in mobilizing the critical mass for structural change.

The paradox between multiculturalism and anti racism is a false distinction. Even those critics who dismiss official multiculturalism as little more than politically correct eyewash to paper over the contradictions of capitalist society will concede the unavoidable. The inception of an official multiculturalism 35 years ago has helped to construct a Canada in which racism is no longer socially acceptable in public or polite company. The conclusion seems inescapable: Both multiculturalism and/as anti racism are critical as partners in the discursive struggle to 'erase' racism as basis for living together differently yet equitably.

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