HISTORICIZING MULTICULTURALISM

DANIEL R. MEISTER

Daniel R. Meister is an independent scholar with a PhD in Canadian History. He has taught at Queen's University, held a Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, and worked as a Researcher at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. His book, *The Racial Mosaic: A Pre-History of Canadian Multiculturalism*, is published by McGill-Queen's University Press this fall.

What on earth is historicizing and why should multiculturalism be subjected to it? Historicize is a somewhat uncommon word that simply means to treat something as historical, to place it in its historical context. Historicizing is not synonymous with celebrating, criticizing, or even debating – and multiculturalism has already endured more than enough of all that, with no end in sight. Indeed, the study of multiculturalism in Canada is a rather curious subfield if it can even be called that. Typing "multiculturalism" into an academic search engine triggers an avalanche of results from a host of disciplines with no apparent unifying theme.

However, much of this scholarship engages with a debate initiated by political philosophers about the place of multiculturalism in liberal political theory. These debates have been as vigorous as they have been voluminous. But it is important to note that this theorizing has all been done after the fact. Despite what some have argued, the Canadian policy of multiculturalism was not based on any pre-existing formal political theory or philosophy by that name.

Turning away from the theoretical, it becomes obvious that little of the policy's history has been traced, leaving important questions, such as why and how Canada came to have this policy, completely unanswered.[1] Although fifty years have

1 Consider, as a prime example of the paucity of literature on the subject, that one of the few works on the history of multiculturalism consistently cited by leading theorist Will Kymlicka is an unpublished thesis dating from the 1970s. Will Kymlicka, "The Canadian Model of Multiculturalism in a Comparative Perspective," in *Multiculturalism and the Canadian Constitution*, ed. Stephen Tierney (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 87n23.

elapsed, we still have no clear understanding of why Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau introduced the policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Given that reality, I can't help but argue that a bit of historicizing is in order (although I recognize it is terribly cliché for a historian, when asked to think about the future, to call for a closer examination of the past).

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It is well documented that, after being introduced in Canada, multiculturalism become an international phenomenon, with several nations adopting policies with that name, and others using the term to apply to various policies and practices relating to immigration and diversity more generally. In these other, predominantly European, countries there has since been a backlash against multiculturalism and repeated statements from European political leaders that the policy has "failed."[2] In Canada, however, multiculturalism continues to enjoy wide support from the public and all major political parties and in fact has become integral to national identity.[3] The national importance of this public policy makes it all the more surprising that its history has not yet been adequately traced.

The study of multiculturalism is further confused by how the term itself can be defined in many different ways. It is typically used in one of three senses: sociological, ideological, or political. That is, it can refer to the fact of human diversity, the idea that multiple cultures can (and perhaps should) peacefully coexist within a single nation, or to a government policy. As sociologist Richard Day persuasively demonstrated over two decades ago, many people, including Canadian government officials, have blurred definitions, suggesting that Canada has always been both sociologically and ideologically multicultural, and therefore that the policy was a natural progression or an outgrowth of this specific history.[4]

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This is, of course, untrue. When thinking about multiculturalism as an ideology, it is important to heed historian and theorist Quentin Skinner's

2 See for instance Steven Vertovec and Susanna Wessendorf, eds., *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies, and Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

3 According to a 2015 report by the Environics Institute, "multiculturalism continues to be seen as one of the country's most important symbols, and this view has strengthened since 2010." Over half of Canadians identified it as an important symbol, placing it above the Queen, the RCMP, and even hockey. See their Canadian Public Opinion About Immigration and Multiculturalism (Spring 2015), 1 and 2.

4 Richard J.F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 6.

warning that intellectual historians should not imagine that a philosophy was somehow "always immanent in history."[5] That is, we should not imagine that it was inevitable for Canada to have a policy of multiculturalism, regardless of the country's sociological diversity. In other words, we should not go back through history, eagerly seeking out people and their writings which supposedly 'anticipate' the policy. We should instead examine the history of Canadian policies and practices relating to culture and immigration, tracing their evolution over time, and seeking to understand the social, political, and cultural conditions that made it possible – and even expedient – for such a policy to be announced.

Most existing attempts to provide a thumbnail sketch of the policy begin with Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's statement in the House of Commons in 1971, one of the few times he spoke about the policy and certainly the lengthiest. In it, he explained that it was a policy of culture, not of immigration. Though its purpose was scantily defined, the policy was intended to support and encourage cultural and ethnic groups to "share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians."[6] For most of Canadian history up until that point, policies and practices relating to culture and integration were rooted in the belief that peoples of non-British, non-French European descent should assimilate, that is, abandon their respective cultures and adopt Anglo-Canadian culture as their own. While Trudeau may not have presented it as such, multiculturalism was clearly a break with these past policies and practices, which makes understanding this context crucial to any account of the policy's history. And while Trudeau insisted that the policy of multiculturalism was not one of immigration, immigration policies dictated what cultural and ethnic groups were allowed into Canada to share their "cultural expressions and values" in the first place. Therefore, the history of multiculturalism must also be placed within the context of the history of policies and practices relating to Canadian immigration.

The groundbreaking work done by historian Howard Palmer in the 1970s and '80s provides a valuable overview of this historical context. In an important essay presented to the Second Canadian Conference on Multiculturalism (1976), Palmer examined what he called three Anglo-Canadian theories of assimilation. The first, Anglo-conformity, demanded immigrants adopt the behaviour and values of Anglo-Canadians and was predominant between 1867 and 1920. It then fell into disrepute and was replaced by the 'melting pot' theory, which emerged during the 1920s and suggested that the blending of immigrant cultures would create a new Canadian culture. Palmer argued that a "third theory of assimilation – 'cultural pluralism' or 'multiculturalism'" was vying for public acceptance by the 1960s and into the 1970s. This view developed after the Second World War and recommended that some aspects of immigrants' culture be preserved "within the context of Canadian citizenship and political and economic integration into Canadian society." However, Palmer suggested

5 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53, quote at 10.

6 House of Commons, *Debates* (8 October 1971), 8545.

that the earliest expressions of "full-blown pluralist ideas" came much earlier, in the 1930s, in the writings of John Murray Gibbon (a publicist with the Canadian Pacific Railway) and Watson Kirkconnell (a professor and translator of so-called new Canadian poetry).[7]

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In my forthcoming book, *The Racial Mosaic,* I have studied this period more closely. Taking a biographical approach, I examined the lives and thought of Gibbon and Kirkconnell, as well as one of their peers, Robert England (an administrator with the Canadian National Railways).[8] All three of these men expressed what I have called philosophies of cultural pluralism, however, their philosophies were crafted at particular times and expressed in particular works, each of which had their own unique purposes. Many of their calls for the acceptance of non-British, non-French, European cultures in Canada came in the context of the interwar increase in immigration and the heated debate over the suitability of these immigrants, especially Ukrainians. But their calls for acceptance were limited in important ways, shaped as they were by notions of race, racism, and eugenics. More specifically, these early expressions of cultural pluralism were limited by scientific racism and rooted in settler colonialism, with the result that the only cultures that these men considered worthy of retention and celebration were those of Europeans. All those racialized as non-white, such as people of African, Asian, and Indigenous descent, were excluded from the pluralistic Canada they imagined, which they described using various phrases and metaphors, such as tapestry, kaleidoscope, garden, and – most famously – mosaic.

It remains unclear of the degree to which official multiculturalism at the time of its announcement differed from these earlier expressions of cultural pluralism – more historical research is required.[9] However, some parallels are immediately apparent. Although critics on both the left and the right alike have suggested that multiculturalism was introduced to somehow "manage" the increase in non-European immigration, this was clearly not the case. Rather, and as Will Kymlicka has put it, multiculturalism was not created with non-European immigrants in mind but rather was "demanded by,

7 Howard Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century," in Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism, *Multiculturalism as State Policy: Conference Report* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1978), 81–118.

8 Daniel R. Meister, *The Racial Mosaic: A Pre-History of Canadian Multiculturalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

9 I have done some preliminary work in this vein; see for instance Daniel R. Meister, "'Chasing More Precise Details': Canadian Multiculturalism in the 1970s," paper presented at the "Between Postwar and Present Day" conference (May 2021). See also the work of Lee Blanding in this issue.

and designed for, European immigrant groups."[10] Further, the policy focused on the colonizers, not the colonized, responding as it did to the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, which excluded Indigenous peoples from its terms of reference (to say nothing of the subsequent, deeply assimilatory proposals of the Trudeau government's White Paper on "Indian Policy" [1969]).[11]

When announcing the policy of multiculturalism, Trudeau echoed the imagery and metaphors of the early pluralists, such as when he spoke of the "mosaic pattern" that made Canada a "very special place."[12] But it would seem that some of the underlying logic, aims, and limitations of the earlier projects, not just their metaphors, influenced the subsequent policy. As we look to lay the groundwork for the next 50 years of multiculturalism in Canada, we might fruitfully begin by looking back further than the last 50 years, and reflecting on this much longer and more complicated history.

10 Kymlicka, "The Canadian Model of Multiculturalism," 70.

11 Theorists have suggested that official multiculturalism made a turn towards anti-racism in the 1980s, but this claim has not yet been rigorously examined. Furthermore, the broader question of whether or not multiculturalism is a useful vehicle for addressing racism in the first place remains unanswered. See for instance Augie Fleras and Jean Elliott, *Engaging Diversity: Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Nelson Thomson Learning, 2002), esp. 60–70; and Charles W. Mills, "Multiculturalism as/and/or anti-racism?" in *Multiculturalism and Political Theory*, ed. Anthony Simon Laden and David Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89–114.

12 These lines are from Trudeau's speech to the Ukrainian Canadian Congress on 9 October 1971, reproduced in *The Essential Trudeau*, ed. Rod Graham (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 145–6.