INTRODUCTION

# MULTICULTURALISM @ 50: CHAINS OF THE PAST AND DREAMS OF REBIRTH

WILL KYMLICKA

Will Kymlicka is the Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy in the Philosophy Department at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, where he has taught since 1998. His research interests focus on issues of democracy and diversity, and in particular on models of citizenship and social justice within multicultural societies. He is co-director, with Irene Bloemraad, of a new CIFAR program on Boundaries, Membership and Belonging. He is also the co-director, along with Keith Banting, of the Multiculturalism Policy Index project, which monitors the evolution of multiculturalism policies across the Western democracies. Will's most recent work in this field focuses on issues of solidarity in multicultural societies.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the adoption of official multiculturalism in Canada, but it's safe to say that most Canadians are not in a celebratory mood. After the discovery of 215 unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in May 2021, many towns and associations cancelled their "Canada Day" festivities, and Canadian flags on federal buildings were lowered to half-mast (and have remained that way), to honour and acknowledge the Indigenous victims of Canadian settler colonialism. The powerful mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement around issues of systemic racism in Canada has reinforced the perception that this is a moment, not for celebration, but for sombre acknowledgement of our failings, and for re-evaluating our institutions, policies, and narratives, including our policies and narratives of multiculturalism.

> **"The historical soil from which multi-culturalism emerged, we might say, was not propitious for a truly inclusive and emancipatory policy, and Canadians are continuing to live with the consequences."**

The papers in this issue of *Canadian Issues* provide some historical context for this moment. Several of the authors argue that the limits and shortcomings of multiculturalism are not failures of implementation or communication or funding, but rather have deeper historical roots. The conception of multiculturalism adopted in 1971 was rooted in the prevailing ideologies and power structures of the time,

and so has ended up reproducing many of these long-standing hierarchies and exclusions. The historical soil from which multiculturalism emerged, we might say, was not propitious for a truly inclusive and emancipatory policy, and Canadians are continuing to live with the consequences.

Each of the authors focuses on somewhat different aspects of this historical soil, and on different dimensions of the ideologies and power structures at play in the lead-up to the adoption of the policy. For some authors, the crucial ideology and power structure is colonialism: multiculturalism encouraged ethnic groups to align themselves with settler society (English or French), and thereby recruited them into the ongoing project of dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Foster; Blanding). For other authors, the crucial ideology and power structure is racism: ideas of multiculturalism emerged from the same toxic stew that included ideas of eugenics and racial hierarchy, consolidating a sense of white privilege amongst English, French and white ethnic groups, while relegating nonwhites to the margins (Meister, Augustine, Guo). For yet others, the crucial ideology and power structure is class: multiculturalism emerged as part of a project of building a society around middle-class traits of "ambition, dependability, self-reliance, discipline, perseverance, and self-mastery", while relegating 'non-productive' immigrants (and native-born) to the margins (Elrick). Others suggest the crucial ideology and power structure is secular liberal legalism: multiculturalism has operated to consolidate the power and legitimacy of the liberal state, and hence marginalizes non-liberal religious groups that dispute the right of the state to govern all of society (Berger). And finally, there is the long-standing critique that multiculturalism reflects and perpetuates the power imbalance between French and English, drowning the Quebecois nation in the multicultural sea of Anglophone North America (Warren).[1]

These are all important insights into the roots of multiculturalism, and while the authors focus on distinct aspects, they are in many ways complementary analyses. After all, ideas of race, class and culture are all intertwined in practice, and justifications for power hierarchies often move subtly between these different registers. Each of these papers can be seen as capturing one dimension of a complicated web of ideologies and hierarchies that structure Canadian society and politics.

So, the papers in this issue help to explain why, fifty years after the adoption of multiculturalism, we remain very far from the 'just society' that multiculturalism seemed to promise (Ghosh). However, in solving one puzzle, these papers arguably raise another puzzle: namely, why has multiculturalism remained so popular in Canada? According to many of the analyses in this issue, multiculturalism has operated to uphold and exalt the white secular liberal English-speaking settler middle-class, and so it is perhaps not surprising that individuals in this group endorse multiculturalism. But the evidence suggests that support for multiculturalism in Canada is much wider than this. In his paper, Varun Uberoi cites some of the survey evidence that shows surprisingly high and stable support for

1 See Raymond Théberge for an alternative interpretation of how multiculturalism relates to the French fact in Canada.

multiculturalism in the general Canadian population, including amongst minorities.

In fact, support for multiculturalism can be found in some surprising places. One particularly striking example is a recent study of attitudes towards multiculturalism amongst prisoners in provincial jails in Alberta.[2] This population is heavily racialized and economically disadvantaged, very distant from the white middle-class whose values and power are said to underpin multiculturalism. Yet it appears that they too have internalized the multicultural ethos. This is just one of many examples where critical social scientists in Canada have gone looking for those who are said to be excluded or banished from multiculturalism, only to discover that members of these groups often express genuine appreciation, even gratitude, for multiculturalism. While critical academic theories tell us that multiculturalism stigmatizes and disempowers certain groups, surveys and interviews with the members of these groups often suggest that they feel empowered and respected by multiculturalism.[3]

In my view, this is an equally important part of the 50-year history of multiculturalism in Canada, and one which requires explanation. What is it that so many Canadians – across various racial, religious and class divides – see in multiculturalism? And here the papers by Jeff Reitz, Varun Uberoi and John Berry are helpful, identifying both sociological and psychological factors at play. At a sociological level, multiculturalism can enhance "social capital": it helps to facilitate trust and cooperation. At a psychological level, multiculturalism may help to meet some basic human needs and motivations. It seems that for many people, multiculturalism facilitates a sense of belonging, one that operates in two directions: people feel a sense of belonging to the larger society, but also that the *society belongs to them*, and hence that they have a right to a say, a right to complain, a right to refashion society.

It is not easy to know how to reconcile this popular sentiment with more critical academic analyses which suggest that multiculturalism was never intended to give certain groups the right to remodel the house we call Canada. It seems that multiculturalism has slipped anchor from its moorings, and that many Canadians see in multiculturalism something more than, or other than, the sum of its historical sources. They see multicultural futures that are not destined to reproduce the prevailing hierarchies and ideologies of its origins fifty years ago.

> **"Canadians in 2021 are living through a particularly vivid moment of this "unhappy consciousness", torn between aspirations for rebirth and the chains of the past."**

Of course, this may be naïve. And Canada will never achieve these multicultural futures unless we make

2 Tetrault, Justin EC, Sandra M. Bucerius, and Kevin D. Haggerty. "Multiculturalism under confinement: Prisoner race relations inside western Canadian prisons." *Sociology* 54.3 (2020): 534-555

3 To cite just one other example, see Iqbal, Maleeha, Laila Omar, and Neda Maghbouleh. "The Fragile Obligation: Gratitude, Discontent, and Dissent with Syrian Refugees in Canada." *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* 8/2 (2021): 1-30.

an honest reckoning with the past. Foster captures this dynamic when he writes:

> *multicultural Canada began life like an orphan. It had some idea of an ancestral history that especially dominant Canadians–or some of them–wanted to retain and even preserve. Truly an unhappy consciousness, it was like the modern individual uncertain of how much this heritage was preparing it for a new life on its own, that could only occur through a mythological rebirth, or of how much of this legacy was like those chains every Scrooge individually was destined to drag into the future unless there is a fundamental and honest recounting and recanting of past deeds.*

Canadians in 2021 are living through a particularly vivid moment of this "unhappy consciousness", torn between aspirations for rebirth and the chains of the past. Several of the articles in this issue help to identify why indeed multiculturalism is so anchored to the past, but there are also glimpses of why and how multiculturalism can be part of a better future.