DEBATING QUÉBEC'S INTERCULTURALISM AS A RESPONSE TO CANADA'S MULTICULTURALISM: AN EXERCISE IN NORMATIVE NATIONALISMS?

Darryl Leroux is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at Saint Mary's University. He studies the intersections of nationalism, racism and memory in the French Atlantic. He is currently working on an edited collection on the politics of multiculturalism in Canada and a manuscript on the commemoration of Québec's 400th anniversary in both Québec and France. He can be reached at darryl.leroux@smu.ca.

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that normative debates about the relative merits of interculturalism in Québec are evidence of a particular type of nationalism in both Québec and Canada, one that continues to centre the experiences of the "two founding" nations of Canada. In order to resituate this debate, I locate interculturalism within the rise of tolerance discourses in Western liberal democracies since the 1980s. The first section of the paper presents a brief overview of some of the major claims for the rise of interculturalism in Québec. The second section of the paper provides a concise analysis of the racial politics of the intercultural discourse in Québec. By doing so, I argue that despite their respective legitimacy, interculturalism and multiculturalism must be read as continued attempts to manage and limit expressions of racialized diversity in the social and political realms.

Since the release of the final report of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission in Québec, English-Canada has become increasingly aware of the differences between Canadian and Québécois approaches to diversity management.[1] Besides normative reactions favouring Canadian approaches as more tolerant and tolerable – thus building on English-Canada's stubbornly consistent claims about Québec's intolerance and/or racism – much of the scholarly interest in this question remains mired in the politics of nation-building in Canada and Québec. The purpose of this short intervention is to propose an alternative avenue of research, one that critically engages with the politics of interculturalism in Québec by tying these dynamics into broader ideological trends in Western liberal democracies, including in Canada.

The first section of the paper presents a brief overview of some of the major claims for the rise of interculturalism in Québec. The second section of the paper provides a concise analysis of the racial politics of the intercultural discourse in Québec. By doing so, I argue that despite their respective legitimacy, interculturalism and multiculturalism must be read as continued attempts to manage and limit expressions of racialized diversity in the social and political realms.

INTERCULTURALISM IN QUÉBEC: A DIFFERENT APPROACH?

As we have seen throughout this special issue, Québec has a unique approach to managing racialized diversity, in which the concept of multiculturalism common in Canada has been formally abandoned for the concept of interculturalism – or the set of institutional rights and responsibilities associated with policies on tolerance and respect of differences within a French-language social environment. The 1990 policy document *Au Québec pour bâtir ensemble: Énoncé de politique en matière d'immigration et d'intégration [In Québec to Build Together: Policy Declaration on the Question of Immigration and Integration]* is often seen as the first document to fully articulate the unique policy implications of interculturalism (see Marhraoui, 2005; Rocher et al, 2007). These include three main tenets: French as the language of public life; a democratic society, where everyone is expected and encouraged to participate and contribute; and an open, pluralist society that respects democratic values and inter-communitarian exchange (Gouvernement du Québec, 1990, p.16).

While there are many different views about interculturalism in Québec (see Labelle, 2008 for an overview), the general scholarly consensus is that the intercultural approach is more favorable to inter-ethnic and interracial harmony. Within these arguments, interculturalism is taken to mean an openness to the Other, to cultural exchange, and to respecting identities; it thus stands in stark contrast to Canada's more amorphous and individualistic multiculturalism (Juteau, McAndrew, and Pietrantonio, 1998; Labelle, 1998; Labelle and Rocher, 2004; Lefebvre, 2008). Capturing this analysis, Alain Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino (2005, p.30) explain how Québec's intercultural approach is based on a process of "cultural convergence" that diverges substantially from the Canadian multicultural approach:

> *[Interculturalism] contends that the incorporation of immigrants or minority cultures into the larger political community is a reciprocal endeavour – a 'moral contract' between the host society and the particular cultural group, in the aim of establishing a forum for the empowerment of all citizens – a 'common public culture.'*

The authors state perhaps the main tenet of the position that favours interculturalism over multiculturalism in academic literature, the idea of a metaphorical moral contract between newcomers and Québec society, one that places Québec's "common public culture" at the forefront.

A number of scholars of Québec have argued that such policy differences are evidence of Québec's adoption of a more republican model of citizenship, underlining integration to an emerging common public culture (see Juteau, 2002; Couton & Blad, 2009). In this understanding, Québec's approach is influenced by political and philosophical currents originating in French republican ideologies. Those familiar with the heated debates over a number of policies associated with governing diversity in France might find echoes in Québec's recent trials on similar questions. Many of those promoting the "republican" approach in Québec argue that Canada adheres to a more liberal conception of citizenship, emphasizing individual rights within a pluralist society. In other words, Canada promotes the construction of disparate publics, while Québec promotes integration to one broader conception of the public.

Regardless of what approach – interculturalism or multiculturalism – one favours, there seems to be notable agreement in either scholarly or popular accounts that these two approaches are markedly different. In fact, after reviewing the literature on this question, I argue that the inter/multi-culturalism debate has reinvigorated one of the key features of Canadian and Québécois nationalisms: the persistent focus on the English – French divide. Yet, as I explained previously, I position my analysis of the inter/multi-culturalism debate purposefully outside of its normative parameters.

WHITHER MULTICULTURALISM?: THE RISE OF INTERCULTURALISM AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY OF CONTAINMENT

Despite the general agreement in Québec (and to lesser degree, in English-Canada) that Québécois and Canadian approaches to cultural pluralism are different in *practice,* some scholars argue that any differences between these two approaches are more of a political concern. For example, political scientist Daniel Salée (2007) has argued that, "Such differences, though, matter more for political reasons than for analytical or taxonomic reasons in the minds of those who stress them" (p.113-14). Concluding her review of the two policies, Amy Nugent (2006), a former public servant for the Governments of Canada and Québec working on their respective cultural-pluralism files, makes a similar argument: "National mythologizing [is] more important in explaining popular and academic discourse than substantive policy differences" (p.21).

Thus, due the many *political* positions against multiculturalism in Québec, and the newfound interest in interculturalism in the rest of Canada, I suggest that it is instructive to understand both the Québécois and Canadian approaches to cultural pluralism as deeply politicized tools for constructing national subjects. In this spirit, I would now like to analyze the theory of interculturalism in Québec using recent research on the rise of tolerance in Western liberal democracies.

TOLERANCE IN THE WEST

Wendy Brown's work on the rise of tolerance discourses in the West since the 1980s provides us with some theoretical language to explicate the development of interculturalism in Québec. By replacing the English-Canadian concept of tolerance with that of accommodation, interculturalist discourses in fact point to new forms of state-based discursive efforts to define the "problem" of diversity. Brown (2006) explains that tolerance, or in our example of Québec, accommodation, is part of a civilizational discourse that pits a "cosmopolitan West" against "its putatively fundamental Other" (p.#). Tolerance discourses, in these circumstances, identify both tolerance and the tolerable with the West, "marking," as Brown argues, "nonliberal societies and practices as candidates for an intolerable barbarism that is itself signaled by the putative intolerance ruling these societies" (p.6). Those familiar with the Hérouxville Code of Conduct (2007),

the City of Gatineau Statement of Values (2011) or the new Canadian Citizenship Guide (2008), "Discover Canada," will recognize the rather explicit language of barbarism and (in)civility these documents employ as evidence of an innate Canadian or Québécois tolerance over imagined racialized Others. As Brown explains, under this discursive regime, civility exists in the West, and tolerance of incivility becomes a fundamental Western value. While this argument may seem far removed from my discussion about inter/multi-culturalism, allow me to situate it within the deliberations that took place in Québec during 2007-2008 (viz. Bouchard-Taylor Commission), through a brief review of my most recent research (Leroux, forthcoming), which analyzes a sample of the written briefs presented to the Commission by individuals and organizations in Québec. For the purposes of this paper, I highlight the most salient feature of this discourse, that of gender equality as a fundamental Québécois value.

THE BRIEFS

In many ways, the question of gender equality has been at the forefront of the debate over racialized diversity in the West. Québec is not unique in this regard, as feminist scholars across a wide spectrum have written about the Western preoccupation with the figure of the endangered Muslim woman struggling against patriarchal norms (Yegenoglu 1998; Jiwani 2006; Razack 2008; Haque 2010). In the aftermath of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, several Québec-based feminists have argued that a narrowly liberal understanding of gender equality generally operates to uphold Western civilizing norms in Québec (among them, Chew, 2009; Ramachandran, 2009; Mahrouse, 2008).

The discourse opposing so-called Western values of gender equality with purported non-Western patriarchal practices was on very clear display throughout the commission's hearings, whether in the *Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec's* (CSFQ) proposal that the Québec Charter of Rights and Freedoms be amended to ensure that the equality of men and women supersedes the freedom of religion or in the Government of Québec's eventual modification of the Charter on these same grounds.

Nevertheless, through my analysis of a sample of briefs presented to the Commission, it becomes clear that an opposition to accommodation through the gender equality versus religious freedom binary is commonplace. Flowing from this belief, Québec is often celebrated as a model student of Western civilization, with a global mission to spread its superior values and norms. In fact, among the many briefs that express elements of this discourse, naturalized immigrant "traditions" are largely to blame for gender inequality in Québec society, not practices inherent to Québec, which is held up as an egalitarian space for women.

Several organizations, including the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec,* an important Québec-based social and political institution, also made their call for limits related to cultural and especially, religious practices quite plain by repeating the commonsense formulation that in many ways has become "fact" in Québec: the idea that human rights commissions and courts are overrun with requests for accommodation that infringe on norms of gender equality, what the CSQ called the "return of religion" in the public sphere earlier in their brief. Yet, as Yolande Geadah (2007) demonstrates, no more than 85 of the 5,482 (or 1.5%) official requests for accommodation to the *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse* [Québec Human Rights Commission] in the five-year period preceding the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (2000-2005) were of a religious nature, and only fifty-five of these made requests for accommodation. Of these, Geadah (2007: 23-25) confirms that the majority was made by Protestants, including mainstream Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, requesting accommodation for religious symbols and practices in the public sphere (e.g., establishing prayer rooms, the wearing of religious symbols, etc.). What purpose, then, does it serve respondents to suggest that the *majority* of the requests for accommodation involved conflicts between minority religious demands (viz. Muslim and orthodox Jewish) and gender equality? Sirma Bilge (2010, p.198, my translation), writing specifically about the discourse on gender equality in Québec, argues that "the gender equality and sexual freedoms discourse is an integral part of the homogenizing and totalizing processes that go hand in hand with the constitution and reaffirmation of national identity [in Québec]." Indeed, for respondents, gender equality becomes the legitimating practice and/or value that points to Québec's national genius and places it within a civilizational order based on European white supremacist discourses. In other words, gender equality becomes Québec's contribution to Western civilization. One need only focus on the cultural practices of racialized Others, even when similar practices occur regularly in Québec society (e.g., violence against women). In this way, none of the respondents speak explicitly about race; yet, race haunts the spectre of nationalism in Québec, much like it does in Canada, through what Brown (2006, p.6) calls the depoliticization of tolerance:

> *Depoliticization involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalization, and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious, or cultural on the other.*

We see over and over again in the briefs efforts to depoliticize difference by relying on the culturalization of race – race as innate cultural practices, in this case, violence against women.

While a small but important number of the briefs in my sample resist the common discourse of opposition that pits Québec values to those emanating from elsewhere (spatially, religiously, culturally), for the most part written by organizations representing Muslims in Québec, the large majority relied on the civilizational discourse I present above. Nowhere in the briefs is there an explicit discussion of racial difference; instead, respondents enumerate a number of values and practices that position Québec and the Québécois within frameworks of Western civilization and white supremacy, laying bare the problematic *racial* assumptions that are at its foundation. In this sense, arguing the relative merits of interculturalism or multiculturalism might serve broader ideological purposes, such as managing and limiting expressions of racialized diversity in the social and political realms.

NOTES

[1] This essay is a modified version of a presentation I delivered at the Association of Canadian Studies/Canadian Ethnic Studies Association sponsored conference "Multiculturalism Turns 40: Reflections on the Canadian Policy" held in Ottawa in September/October 2011. Thank you to Eve Haque, Carrianne Leung, Lynn Caldwell, Andrea Fatona, and Rinaldo Walcott for their helpful comments.

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