EVERYONE'S A Critic

BY John Biles

CRITICISING MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA IS A GROWTH INDUSTRY. FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS CANADIANS, RESEARCHERS, CULTURAL COMMENTATORS, POLITICIANS (OR WOULD-BE POLITICIANS) OF EVERY STRIPE, AND NEWSPAPER COLUMNISTS ALONG WITH THEIR MEDIA BRETHREN HAVE RAILED AGAINST MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA. EARNSCLIFFE RESEARCH NOTED IN 1996 THAT, "OPPONENTS OF MULTICULTURALISM SEEM TO USE THE WORD [MULTICULTURALISM] TO INDICATE THEIR DISLIKE OF A NUMBER OF CHANGES OCCURRING WITHIN CANADA IN THE LAST THREE OR FOUR DECADES, WITH THE NATURE OF THEIR CRITICISM GOING WELL BEYOND THE NOMINAL TARGET OF OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM." IN THIS ESSAY I WANT TO EXAMINE THE CRITIQUES WHICH HAVE BEEN THROWN AT MULTICULTURALISM.

Before proceeding however, it is important to be clear on what exactly I mean by multiculturalism. Although I am a strong supporter of multiculturalism as public policy, and I believe that the federal policy has been key in the development of multiculturalism in Canada, I do not believe the federal policy is the be all and end all. Rather, it is one piece of a far larger exercise that Canadians have collectively pursued over the last thirty years, or longer if you believe the work of Joshee (1995), Pal (1993), Day (2000), or Biles and Panousos (1999). Every major public institution in the country has developed a policy on multiculturalism at one time or another, and every provincial and municipal government has tackled issues arising from our diversity. This great volume of policies and concomitant discussions has developed a commitment on the part of Canadians to a continual active discourse on issues arising from diversity. This is what Fleras and Elliott (1992) have dubbed, "multiculturalism as critical discourse."

Participation in this critical discourse occurs in a myriad of forms. Neil Bissoondath's claim that "few silences are as loaded in this country as the one encasing the cult that has grown up around our policy of multiculturalism" (1994: 4) rings as false today as it did seven years ago. This animated discourse may be integral to the lived experience of individual Canadians or of Canadian communities; it may be shaped by legislative or judicial decisions; it may be used by various opinion leaders; or it may be printed in the media, in peer-reviewed academic literature, non-academic publications or vanity presses. They make take the form of brief editorials or newspaper commentaries (O'Sullivan 1999, Loney 1998, Frum 1999, Amiel 1998, Lakritz 1998, 1999); articles in academic journals (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis 1992, Das Gupta and Iacovetta 2000); dialectic collected works (Charlton and Barker 1994, Cohen, Howard and Nussbaum 1999, Griffiths 2000, Cardozo and Musto 1997); or in full-scale monographs (Gairdner 1990, Bibby 1990, Bissoondath 1994, Gwyn 1995, Loney 1998, Foster 1998, Sugunasiri 1999, Bannerji 2000, Day 2000). Whatever the form, four major critiques predominate: (1) the divisive nature of pluralism; (2) political expediency; (3) threat to the status quo; and (4) cultural relativism.

THE DIVISIVE NATURE OF MULTICULTURALISM

The easiest and most often presented critique of multiculturalism in Canada is that it is divisive. This view is most clearly expressed by Martin Loney in his *The Pursuit of Division: Race, Gender and Preferential Hiring in Canada* (1998). Loney and others contend that multiculturalism is a centrifugal rather than centripetal force. This is nowhere more clear than in the most overworked of Canadian images – the mosaic. The mosaic as a central image for Canadian multiculturalism is disastrous. It conjures images of pretty little tiles which are cemented together to form a picture which can literally last millennia. It fails to capture the two-way nature of integration that has long been enshrined in the multiculturalism policy which was constitutionally entrenched through the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982); which was legislated in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988) and was recently recognized as a guiding principle of the *Immigration and Protection of Refugees Act* (2001). Perversely, the imagery of the melting pot seems much more applicable, even if its negative baggage renders it impolitic as an image of choice. In a melting pot the addition of every new ingredient alters the entire liquid – there is no cement! No belief in an immutable core.

Despite the inadequacy of the image, it persists and even flourishes today. John Porter's *The Veritical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (1965) is kept company by Leo Driedger ed. *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity* (1978) and most recently by Kelley and Trebilcock's *The Making of the Canadian Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (1998). In recent years a preoccupation with social cohesion suggests that governments are actively attempting to cement new mosaics into place (Jeannotte 2000).

In some part then, I want to argue that the conceptualization of multiculturalism as a mosaic by proponents of the approach, actually opened the doors to the critique that multiculturalism is divisive or forces minorities into ghettos. Going further, as Blommaert and Verschueren argue in their *debating diversity: Analysing the discourse of tolerance* (1998), even the most well-meaning can lapse into systemic discrimination if the starting point is flawed: one could even end up entombing inequality in the drying cement of social cohesion!

On the first count, the divisive nature of multiculturalism, Gairdner claims "Opinion polls in Canada, the U.S.A., and Australia consistently show strong to overwhelming majorities opposed to multiculturalism policies that erode the core culture. . ." (Gairdner 1990: 389) I am left wondering why an Environics poll in 1996 found that multiculturalism is identified as a common Canadian symbol more often than our winter national sport – hockey (Environics 1996: 61). Every opinion poll I have seen since actually strongly

supports multiculturalism. I also wonder if, in some sense, the very ubiquitous nature of public discourse on multiculturalism suggests that it actually unites Canadians. More work can, and should, be done in this regard to evaluate the extent to which multiculturalism represents a core belief of Canadians and respect for diversity as a core Canadian value. A periodic national opinion poll like that done by Angus Reid in 1991 would yield a wealth of information.

On the second critique, the forced ghettoization of minorities (Bissoondath 1994), more research can be brought to bear. A literal spatial interpretation can be evaluated through research initiatives like Metropolis (http://www.metropolis.net). Within Metropolis an incredible amount of research has been conducted in Canada and around the world on whether minority communities congregate in particular areas and why this might be the case (Lithman 1997, Blom 1997, Rose 1999). There is ample evidence that minorities choosing to live in close proximity to one another may not be harmful to the much-vaunted bridging capital Robert Putnam (1994) has written about. They may, indeed, choose to live together for much the same reason as any other group of Canadians – cost of housing, quality of life, access to sites of worship, schools, employment, proximity to public transportation and so forth. More negatively, research by Valerie Preston (2000) suggests environmental racism has a role to play in determining where people choose to live.

If we look at ghettoization in a less spatial sense and expand it to include the permanent "othering" in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of Canadian society, we have a different range of research findings to consider. Small scale studies have been conducted in Canada on these topics, but future work to connect these disparate studies will be essential. Will Kymlicka cites a range of indicators in his *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* (1998) which include intermarriage, language acquisition and naturalization. Clearly others can be developed like the *Ethnic Diversity Survey* and the social capital and time use modules of cycle seventeen of the *General Social Survey*. The promised development of an inclusion/exclusion index by the multiculturalism program and Metropolis and continued work of the political participation network (http://www.canada.metropolis.net/pprn) will also continue to yield invaluable results.

POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

The political participation of ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic minorities in Canada is frequently the subject of casual conversation, but seldom the subject of academic enquiry. The easiest off the cuff criticism to make of multiculturalism is that it is a means to "buy" the "ethnic vote." Closely allied to this critique is the language of the "special interest group" increasingly adopted by political figures on the centre right. Somehow, in the Canadian context, the significant body of work done on interest groups, most notably by Paul Pross in his *Group Politics and Public Policy* (1986) has morphed into a dichotomy of valid and invalid interest groups. It would appear that the Canadian Alliance and the Liberal parties of Canada, the Business Council on National Issues, and the CEOs of major banks constitute valid interests, whereas the Croatian-Canadians in Toronto or the Blacks in Halifax are "special interest groups" and, therefore, illegitimate.

At the core of this critique is something that smells a great deal like racism and/or discrimination. How else can we understand the pejorative language used to denigrate the interests of some Canadians? It also has a rather essentialist air to it that echoes that of the division critics mentioned earlier. This critique suggests that there is such a thing as THE Black community in Halifax and that it is a homogeneous entity. Decades of research show that any so-called community is, in fact, a heterogeneous collection of people with competing, and often conflicting, interests and agendas. Much of the work done by the Political Participation Research Network also suggests that any claims or accusations of an "ethnic vote" are, at the very least, exaggerated, and, in most cases, fictitious.

Perhaps the best indicator of the salience of "ethnic votes" may be the extent to which minorities are represented in the formal political system across the country. My own work in Ottawa (1998), Carolle Simard's in Montreal (2000) and Myer Siemiatycki's in Toronto (1998) demonstrates that the majority of minority communities are chronically under-represented at ALL levels of government. A decade after the *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, we are no closer to having a representative democracy. Once again, more can, and should, be done in this area and future analysis of the *Canadian Election Study* data set and the *Ethnic Diversity Survey* will yield more information.

As in the case with the earlier critiques, there is also a political expediency critique emanating from supporters of diversity. This critique is centred on the symbolic nature of multiculturalism. Most of us are familiar with the ubiquitous, derogatory comments about multiculturalism that center on the fluffy stuff: the song, dance, and food. I believe there are a number of problems with this critique.

First, and foremost, is the power of symbolism. I have heard the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* referred to as a "legislated press release." Anyone examining legislation pertaining to multiculturalism, diversity or human rights will be familiar with the "toothless" critique that is thrown at every piece of legislation or governmental approach. For a toothless, merely symbolic policy, there is has been an incredible amount of discussion, analysis and action over the last thirty years.

Second, there is scant evidence to suggest that the expenditure of billions of dollars of public funds on the whole range of issues under the rubric of multiculturalism has achieved nothing. If we examine the two stock-taking reports prepared for the Canadian Secretariat for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Jedwab et. al. 2001, Davis and Brant Castellano 2001) we discover the depth of enquiry into diversity issues that has taken place over the last twenty years. If we expand further and examine the breadth of research, as represented by the

inventory of graduate research compiled by Mulholland (2001), we see a clear commitment, on the part of Canadians and their governments, to know more about multiculturalism in Canada and to effect change for the better. The planned index of inclusion/exclusion will also provide concrete examples of change that can be tracked longitudinally.

Third, not all human beings are profit maximizers. To decry any activity that is not economically-focused is to omit an incredible portion of the lives of Canadians. In addition, in a perfect world, the social, cultural, economic and political arenas would be equally occupied by men and women. We do not live in a perfect world. Women are still disproportionately responsible for the social and cultural aspects of our lives and seniors are largely outside of the formal economic arena. To eliminate any serious consideration of cultural and social elements of our lives leads to the systemic underestimation and belittlement of the role of many women and seniors in Canadian society. The question posed by *Toronto Star* emeritus editor, Haroon Siddiqui at the Fifth National Metropolis Conference in October 2001, still rings in my ears: "How do we value a grandmother?" She may not earn dollars, but she contributes extensively to the quality of life of her extended family, and she enables the parents of the grandchildren to participate in the economy or to pursue educational goals. Census questions on unpaid work could certainly be brought to bear on this interesting question. Issues of voluntarism also need to be explored further.

THREAT TO THE STATUS QUO

The third major critique of multiculturalism that litters the discourse, is the threat diversity poses to the status quo. Critics are well represented here by Richard Gwynn's *Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (1995) in which he decries the end of the "tram lines of Canadian history." Chapters by Gairdner (1990) "The Silent Destruction of English Canada: Multiculturalism, Bilingualism and Immigration" and Bissoondath (1994) "Losing the Centre" are just variations on a theme. This critique plays itself out in two large ways, one through the lament for "national" history, and the other through the evolution of "national" symbols.

The history debate is most apparent around Canada Day when the Dominion Institute surveys on knowledge of select Canadians and Canadian events have become de rigeur in all major newspapers. It also reached a boil with Jack Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* (1998). In a link back to the first critique Granatstein wrote, "Now it may only be a coincidence that the turn away from national and political history took place at the same time that Canada began to fragment. Did the historians' shift to victimization and blame-seeking on the fringes, to a peoples' history, and to abstract, abstruse language lead Canada's plunge toward dissolution, or did it merely reflect what was happening in the body politic? . . . Tragically, at a time when it was critical that Canadians understand their political and constitutional history, historians wanted to talk tiny, trivial subjects of little or no general interest" (1998: 77). His doomsday scenario fits well with the social cohesion perspective which suggests that diversity represents "faultlines" which threaten the Canadian social fabric. A whole body of literature counters Granatstein's claim and suggests that a "national" history lost credibility because it omitted the stories of many Canadians and their communities. Timothy Stanley's "Why I Killed Canadian History: Conditions for an Anti-Racist History" (2000) rebuts Granatstein's view and argues that a meta-narrative is necessarily exclusionary and we would be better served by many small histories. His point is hammered home by work of historians like Jim Walker (1999), Constance Backhouse (1999), and Olive Dickason (1997) who unearth many elements of the Canadian experience overlooked by the "national" histories advocated by Granatstein.



Courtesy Department of Canadian Heritage

The second major threat to the status quo surrounds the evolution of "national" symbols. This critique is best exemplified by the millinery issues which have exploded in the Canadian media over the last decade: the hijab in Quebec schools, and the turban in legion halls or as part of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's dress uniform. If we consider the latter the illusion underpinning the critique is clear. The RCMP are a symbol of Canadian nationhood that harks back to pre-Confederation and to an era when

Canadian society was overwhelmingly composed of people of British or French origin. However, as *Ottawa Citizen* journalist Tom Spears noted, "for a uniform that everybody recognizes, mountie garb has undergone an incredible number of changes over the years" (Spears 1998: A6). The key point to consider is that symbols emerge and evolve over time. This is always the case and a causal link to multiculturalism is dubious at best. Further research into the evolution of symbols would further enhance our knowledge in this area. Daniel Francis goes further and skewers many of our "long-standing" symbols in his enlightening *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (1997). Tellingly, he observes that, "It turns out that many of our cherished myths were invented by government agencies or private corporations for quite specific, usually self-serving purposes. Canadians as a whole then embraced them because they seemed to express something that we wanted to believe about ourselves" (9). The question is what did we want to believe?

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CULTURAL RELATIVISM OR THERE ARE NO LIMITS

The last of the major critiques is the argument put forward by Reginald Bibby in his *Mosaic Madness: The Poverty and Potential of Life in Canada* (1990), and by Bissoondath (1994) in a chapter entitled "The Limits of Diversity". The essence of this critique is that if all cultures and all cultural practices are equally valid, then society will cease to function because we will be unable distinguish between the good and the bad. The most well known example in this area is female genital operations/mutilation or female circumcision.

To me, at least, this appears to be the most specious of the critiques covered here. Alissa Levine (1999) also questions the Canadian approach on this issue. Even a superficial reading of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Criminal Code of Canada*, not to mention an entire body of legislation and judicial decisions, argue that this is not the case. Neil Bissoondath (1994) and Naomi Lakritz (1998) cite a number of examples of judges who overstepped the mark in decisions that can only be considered outliers as proof that multiculturalism knows no bounds.

From where I sit, there are boundaries. Yes, they are flexible and subject to change from legislation and judicial decisions, but how many legal parameters in Canada are not subject to change? It is my contention Canadians and their governments continually negotiate the limits on what is acceptable. What multiculturalism assures is that all Canadians will have a say in the rules by which we choose to collectively live. Far from a violation of democratic principles, I believe this kind of inclusion is fundamental to democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly there is work to be done. As a basic starting point the discourse surrounding multiculturalism needs to be informed. Critics and proponents need to bring research that substantiates their points of view to the discussion. It is easy to disparage critics who neglect to document any sources in their work, but it is equally important to hold proponents of multiculturalism to account for the generalities that they can spout with regularity.

Longitudinal research frameworks, which can form the spine of the endeavours in this field, must be developed and implemented. Initiatives like Metropolis, which bring key policy figures (federal, provincial and municipal), researchers from across the country (centres of excellence already exist in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal, and an Atlantic Centre is expected to start April 1, 2003), and practitioners together are a start. Data sources from Statistics Canada like *The Ethnic Diversity Survey* will yield more valuable information. The inclusion of ethnicity in survey design for government-wide data gathering instruments and on public opinion polling would both meet the requirements of the *Act* and provide knowledge to guide public discourse.

The much maligned Annual Report on the Operation of the Multiculturalism Act could be redesigned to enhance its efficacy. I believe that Bohdan Kordan (1997) has it wrong when he writes of the report, it "is unquestionably an inadequate instrument." By creating an index of inclusion/exclusion, which is presented and tested at the annual Metropolis and Policy Research Initiative Conferences, and is highlighted as the first chapter of the annual report, continuity could be established and priorities for enquiry in the coming year could be flagged. Equally, the connection to cross-government initiatives, be they skills and innovations or social cohesion, could be highlighted in the report each year. As the key source document on multiculturalism as official policy, the Annual Report is frequently referenced in research and policy design. It should, therefore, be part of an integrated longitudinal design to report on where we collectively find ourselves on a range of issues arising from diversity.

Finally, at the outset of official multiculturalism, regular conferences were designed to bring the key players from across the country together. A return to this format would enable key research findings, policy considerations and past practices to be shared broadly. If each conference focused on a particular issue (say, institutional development in health care), past practices and research could be used to design future work that would assist us all in dismantling the barriers which continue to persist in the social, economic, cultural and political realms of Canadian society. These conferences would also go a long way to ensuring that the heated discourse around multiculturalism is based on knowledge and not ignorance.

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