MULTICULTURALISM AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE:
Contesting Modernity

BY Augie Fleras

MULTICULTURALISMS ON PARADE

OF THE CONCEPTUAL TRIP WIRES AND CULTURAL LANDMINES STREWN ACROSS THE WESTERN LANDSCAPE IN RECENT YEARS, FEW HAVE TRIGGERED AS MUCH VITRIOL OR CONTROVERSY AS HAS REFERENCE TO MULTICULTURALISM (POSSNER 1997). NOWHERE IS THIS MORE STRIKING THAN IN THE PARADOXES THAT ARE PLAYING POLITICS WITH THE MODERNIST PROJECT KNOWN AS OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM. INCEPTION OF MULTICULTURALISM AS OFFICIAL POLICY FRAMEWORK MAY HAVE MATERIALISED IN AN ERA OF OPTIMISM AND REFORM WHEN EVERYTHING SEEMED DOABLE WITH A DOLLOP OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING. BUT OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM APPEARS TO BE LOSING ITS LUSTRE BECAUSE OF MOUNTING DISCONTENT AND FISCAL RETREAT (CARDOZO AND MUSTO 1997; MAGSINO 2000). CRITICS POUNCE ON MULTICULTURALISM AS DECEPTIVELY POTENT ("A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING") OR GROSSLY OVERRATED ("A SHEEP IN WOLF'S CLOTHING"), WHILE SUPPORTERS PREFER TO SEE ITS SOCIETY-BENDING POTENTIAL. NOT SURPRISINGLY, WHAT STARTED OUT AS AN OPTIMISTIC CANADA-BUILDING QUEST HAS ECLIPSED INTO A FLASHPOINT BETWEEN MULTICULTURAL DEVOTEES AND THOSE WHO RECOIL AT THE VERY PROSPECT OF FOISTING YET MORE GOVERNMENT ON AN UNSUSPECTING PUBLIC. EVEN MORE DISMAYING ARE CREEPING LEVELS OF INDIFFERENCE TOWARD OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM – A VICTIM OF IT'S OWN SUCCESS – BECAUSE OF SHIFTING GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES AND GROWING PUBLIC COMPLACENCY (SUGUNASIRI 1999). WITH OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM EXPERIENCING AN IDENTITY CRISIS OVER "WHAT", "WHY" AND "HOW", THE TIME IS RIPE FOR RETHINKING THIS "ADVENTURE CALLED MULTICULTURALISM" IN LIGHT OF EMERGENT REALITIES AND EVOLVING ALTERNATIVES.

But Canada's monolithic multiculturalism is not the only multicultural game in town. Other multicultural discourses can be discerned that subvert as they resist, rather than control as they conflate, and this essay addresses the possibility of a critical multicultural discourse at the cutting edge for rethinking Canada (Fleras 2002). The essay exposes an official Multiculturalism for what it is: a discourse in defence of ideology. Canada's Multiculturalism originated as a practical political program to achieve pragmatic political goals in a politically acceptable manner (Peter 1978). That it continues to remain "apolitical" is to be alternatively admired yet despised. By contrast, the discursive framework of a critical multiculturalism constitutes a "subversive" discourse that challenges and resists by transforming existing patterns of privilege and power. The essay is organised around an intersectional analysis involving two mutually related yet oppositional discourses for "living together with differences". To one side, a consensus multiculturalism can be best interpreted as a hegemonic discourse; to the other, a critical multiculturalism constitutes a transformational discourse of challenge and resistance. Whereas a modernist multiculturalism secures the foundational principles of the existing constitutional order, a critical discourse proposes a "Canadian Way" so fundamentally different as to re-sculpt the very notion of what Multiculturalism is for. The interplay of these duelling discourses has yet to be fully played out; nevertheless, the process promises to be a lively one in re-contouring Canada's political landscape.

Whereas a modernist multiculturalism secures the foundational principles of the existing constitutional order, a critical discourse proposes a "Canadian Way" so fundamentally different as to re-sculpt the very notion of what Multiculturalism is for.

THE MODERNITY OF OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM: "NEUTERING DIVERSITY"

Official Multiculturalism originated in an era that was unmistakably modernist in spirit and orientation. Inspired by the principled tenets of the Enlightenment, modernism envisaged a nation-state as the pinnacle of rational and progressive human organisation. Prosperous nation-states prescribed to a modernist formula: They sought cultural uniformity, socially integrated in securing a strong sense of national unity and identity, and progressive in conferring full and equal rights for all it's members. The principles of a universal liberal pluralism prevailed: What we had in common as rights bearing and equality seeking individuals superseded membership in groups that divided or stifled. Differences were permissible, but neither as a basis for entitlement nor if they interfered with full democratic citizenship. In other words, equality was synonymous with uniformity, and vice versa.

Even a superficial reading of official Multiculturalism reveals its modernist

roots. Official Multiculturalism is anchored to a modernist project that (in conjunction with passage of the Official Languages Act and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms) envisages an inclusive Canada beyond the pettiness of 'cultural jealousies' and interethnic squabbles. An aversion toward "deep diversity" underpins modernity: Official Multiculturalism is not about promoting ethnicity or celebrating differences except as "pretend pluralisms". Nor is it about isolating minorities in ethnic enclaves. The objective and logic of an official Multiculturalism is fundamentally about Canada-building: That is, to create a coherent and prosperous Canada by incorporating diversity as legitimate and integral without undermining the interconnectedness of the whole or distinctiveness of the parts in the process. The focus is on absorbing minority women and men into a cohesive national framework instead of bringing about transformative change. The potential disruptiveness of diversity is de-politicised by the simple expedient of "neutering" differences and channelling what's left into harmless outlets. In building bridges rather than erecting walls – by working together rather than standing apart – Canada's monocultural Multiculturalism typifies a kind of assimilation in slow motion – albeit on integrative terms (Kymlicka 2001).

In what surely must seem counter-intuitive to many, Canada's official Multiculturalism is culture-blind in conviction and commitment (Fleras and Elliott 2002). It is culture blind insofar as it rejects the legitimacy of any official culture as grounds for living together with differences. Its colour-blindness is premised on the principle of treating everyone the same for purposes of entitlement. A colour-blind multiculturalism is geared toward creating culturally neutral public spaces to preclude messy ethnic entanglements. Under a culture-blind Multiculturalism, minority women and men have the right to *identify* with (not necessarily practice) the cultural traditions of their choice, *provided* these affiliations do not violate the laws of the land, interfere with the rights of others, or pose a threat to core values and institutions. Diversity is endorsed, to be sure, but only to the extent that all differences are equivalent in status, subject to similar treatment, and comply with the state's self-proclaimed right to define what differences count, what counts as difference. Differences are further de-politicized ("neutered") by channelling diversity into relatively harmless avenues around identity or culture. The neutering of diversity may have sullied Multiculturalism's reputation as a progressive force in the diversity sweepstakes. But this contemporary twist on the politics of divide and rule may account for its popularity in Canada and abroad.

This conflating of monocultural multiculturalism with modernist discourses is not intended as a blanket criticism. Nor do I want to get entangled in yet another puerile polemic over the prowess or toothlessness of official Multiculturalism. To the contrary, Multicultural outputs are unmistakably dialectical in process or impact. An official Multiculturalism is neither all good nor all bad but good or bad depending on the context or criteria. More importantly, multiculturalism is simultaneously both good *and* bad in spite of the context. An official Multiculturalism can be empowering yet controlling as part of the same process, liberating yet marginalizing, unifying yet divisive, inclusive yet exclusive (Vasta 1993). Multiculturalism may provide minorities with leverage in prying open opportunities – thus enabling the powerless and dispossessed to convert the very tools for controlling them into levers of resistance (Pearson 1994). Yet, paradoxically, inclusiveness along Multicultural lines may have the controlling effect of implicating minority women and men in the dominant culture; after all, measures to improve access or participation often reverberate with assimilationist consequences. Resistance itself may prove self-defeating because of the unintended yet real effects of being co-opted into the very system minorities are challenging.

The conclusion seems inescapable: An official Multiculturalism provides a blueprint for living together with differences by ensuring diversity doesn't get in the way of togethered living. The focus of an official Multiculturalism is not about diversity but about disadvantage and the removal of those discriminatory barriers that deny or exclude. To the extent that cultural differences are acknowledged and promoted, the commitment is largely cosmetic and geared toward shared exchanges and open-mindedness. In other words, multiculturalism is more concerned with redefining society along culture-blind lines than with exhorting minorities to become more multicultural. Such a culture blind multiculturalism with its nod to "pretend pluralism" may have worked in the past when diversity was synonymous with denial or exclusion. For those who want their differences to be taken seriously – and are looking for an inclusion without integration - a culture blind multiculturalism doesn't cut it. What is required instead is a critically-focused multiculturalism for constructively engaging diversity.

CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM AS POSTMODERNIST DISCOURSE: "LIVING TOGETHER SEPARATELY"

A critical multicultural discourse provides such an alternative. As a transformative discourse for challenge and resistance, a critical multicultural discourse goes beyond the dominant ideology by contesting those constitutional principles underlying a eurocentric foundational order. This critical discourse is predicated on the premise that cultural institutions are fundamentally racist in privileging eurocentric values at minority expense. Under a critical discourse, there is an interrogating of the patterns of power that once secured mainstream definitions of truth, rules of normalcy, and standards of legitimacy, but often at odds with minority lives and life-chances. A transformative discourse of resistance not only unmasks the supposed neutrality of mainstream society but also exposes it's inseparability from unequal power relations. A systemic eurocentrism is vigorously rebuked for cramming diversity into single paradigm, positing Europe as the epi-centre of evolutionary progress, and sanitising the record on western exploitation and human rights abuses. In that this eurocentric arrogance is sharply repudiated because of its penchant for flattening diversity while normalising mainstream norms as necessary and superior, a critical multicultural discourses is indeed subversive (Stam & Miller 2000).

Multiculturalism as critical discourse resonates with the language of postmodernism (Goldberg 1994). Postmodernism

espouses a mind-dependent world: There is no centre or authority, only different viewpoints in which everything is relative and valid because nothing is absolutely knowable in a world where everything/everyone is located in time and space. Postmodernism rejects those discourses that posit reality as coherent, objective, and amenable to rational analysis – on the grounds there is no such thing as reality, only discourses about realities. A similar line of reasoning applies to postmodernist perspectives on society. A fixed and objective way of thinking about society as a "grand narrative" is rejected, as is the principle of organising (or "essentialising") society around a monolithic core of symbols that secure a common identity and national unity. Endorsed instead is a loosely connected social system composed of intersecting affiliations and hybridic forms that coalesce into a common vision for living together.

To date, critical multiculturalisms have generated more interest and publicity in the United States where challenging the "dominant silencing of diversity" (Eisenstein 1996) draws its energy from a postmodern turn in society (Goldberg 1994). Unlike its official counterpart in Canada, critical multiculturalisms are free to roam, unhampered as they are by the compromising demands of political engineering, policy constraints, or electoral pandering. Not surprisingly, the postmodernist discourses that animate America's critical multiculturalism subvert as they resist, in contrast with Canada´s consensus multiculturalism that controls as it integrates. A consensus multiculturalism connotes a pluralism that is devoid of historical context and specificities of power relations. By contrast, a critical multiculturalism signifies a site of struggle in which eurocentric universalisms are exposed for self-serving discourses that they are.

Critical multicultural discourses are making their mark in Canada. Not in the carping sense of multiculturalism as divisive, counterproductive, illusory, and hegemonic (Fleras 2002). Nor in the critiquing of multiculturalism as a trumped-up ideology involving national myths that papers over the cleavages related to power and privilege while normalising the interests of the ruling class as natural, universal, or superior (Povinelli 1998; Kobayashi 1999; Bannerji 2000). A critical multiculturalism goes beyond criticism by invoking an insurgent discourse that challenges authority, resists conformity, and transforms power relations. Critical discourses are aimed at unmasking those foundational principles that continue to govern Canada´s staunchly colonial constitutional order. Differences are taken seriously as basis for identity under a critical discourse, in direct opposition to those liberal principles that universalise and homogenise. Those expressions of pretend pluralism that simply tolerate a hierarchy of minority cultures are ruthlessly exposed as hegemony (Bharucha 2000). Difference are also taken into account in defining entitlements with respect to who gets what. Principles of institutional inclusiveness are proposed in establishing culturally safe workplaces and services that do not pose risks to culturally diverse recipients (Fleras and Spoonley 1999).

DUELLING DISCOURSES: "THIS ADVENTURE CALLED CANADA"

Many have said that Canadians and Americans often use the same words but speak a different language. This "fractured howler" is especially applicable when applied to divergent multicultural discourses both in Canada and the United States. Consider the polarities at play: One set of multicultural discourses is rooted in the modernist zeal for unity, certainty, and universality; the other embraces a postmodernist zest for hybridity, provisionality, and fragmentation. One is about society-building; the other is society-transforming. One multiculturalism is directed at modifying the mainstream without shredding the social fabric; the other is driven to empowering minorities by eroding the monocultural firmament that privileges some, disempowers other. One transforms cultural differences into a discourse about social inequality; the other reformulates social inequalities into a discursive framework of an inclusive public culture. One is about a pretend pluralism that "neuters" diversity of its political sting; the other is about taking differences seriously and into account. One preaches the goals of working together by building bridges; the other contemplates the possibilities of belonging together by standing apart.

A 'playful' inversion is called for in capturing the underlying logic of these duelling discourses: To one side is a consensus multicultural discourse whose society-building mandate is to make Canada safe *from* diversity, safe *for* diversity. To the other side is a critical multiculturalism discourse whose animating logic is to make DIVERSITY safe *from Canada* as well as safe *for Canada*. Time will tell if Canadians can combine the complexities of a critical multiculturalism with the commitments of an official Multiculturalism in making Canada safe from itself.

Canada´s future as a pacesetter in the multicultural sweepstakes will entail a mixed package of bold advances alongside carefully calibrated compromises. Fostering a "multicultural imagination" will be critical in sorting out this challenge: On the one hand, a high threshold for ambiguity and uncertainty; on the other a willingness to accommodate different ways of accommodating diversity in a deeply divided and multi-layered Canada (Fleras 2002). Political frameworks will have to expand beyond the standardised one-size-fits-all model to incorporate an inclusive yet customised pattern of democratic citizenship. And policy structures will need to contemplate the possibility of doing the impossible: The challenge of living together is perplexing enough when everyone abides by the multicultural principle of agreeing to disagreeing. Co-existence can get a lot more nasty when living together also involves those who disagree with the principle of agreeing to disagree (see Fish 1997).

Construction of a post-national Canadian Way is the new ideal. But post-nationalising demands are astonishingly complex, even contradictory to the point of paralysis, and any resolution will require a deft touch. The challenge may well lie not in choosing either consensus or critical multicultural discourses, but in playing off one against the other without ignoring either. In that a living together with differences may entail a "living together separately", this adventure called Canada has only begun.

Augie Fleras is a sociologist at the University of Waterloo, specialising in race, ethnic and aboriginal relations, including comparative work between Canada and New Zealand