MULTICULTURALISMS IN TENSION

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ABSTRACT

In her introduction to this special volume of *Canadian Issues,* Ratna Ghosh highlighted a theme that is picked up and developed–in interestingly diverse ways–by many of the contributing authors. "Multicultural education is not a static concept," she writes. "It is changing in interesting ways." As the essays in this volume attest, the interesting ways in which the concepts of multiculturalism and multicultural education may be mined for new insights and reconstructed and reinterpreted to shed new light on old insights is far from being exhausted. My primary purpose in this concluding essay is to reflect on some of the lessons that might be gleaned from the various contributions to this volume as we look to the challenges facing diverse societies beyond the 40th anniversary of Canada's Multicultural Policy. In particular, drawing mainly on the essays that comprise this volume, I aim to trace some of the ways in which we might fruitfully view multicultural education as that which liberates.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF MULTICULTURALISM: SEGREGATION OR INTEGRATION?

The essays that comprise this special volume of *Canadian Issues* explore the promise and potential of multiculturalism as a basis for liberatory education. Several of them also examine the problems of multiculturalism as itself a potential force of oppression. In doing so, the contributors bring an impressive assortment of theoretical perspectives to bear on a wide range of practical educational and social problems. The range of views, issues, perspectives and attitudes towards multiculturalism and multicultural education is complex and multi-faceted. Nevertheless, one way of making sense of the contributions is to note that, taken collectively, they simultaneously reflect and address a broad crisis that afflicts public education in just about all multicultural, nominally liberal and educational societies around the world.

The crisis can be described in terms of conflicting views of the educational role of the contemporary democratic state. In contemporary democratic societies, the legitimacy of public education has traditionally depended on a broadly shared faith in the school's role as the institution for developing a sense of civic loyalty and solidarity, thereby providing the social glue that holds together diverse religious and cultural groups that comprised the nation state. For contemporary educators who continue to share this faith the state, through its instrument the public school, is a force of liberty and enlightenment; indeed, its influence can and should be extended to emancipate enslaved and oppressed people around the world. Nevertheless, as several contributors to this volume correctly note (see, in particular, Adeela Arshad's essay), faith in the nation state, under pressure from centrifugal forces of both increasing pluralism and global neoliberal economic forces, can no longer be assumed as a source of legitimacy for the ideals of multicultural education in liberal-democratic societies. This is to say the least. Accordingly, absent the material conditions that once enlivened the nation-state as a potential site of collective prosperity, mutual service and individual freedom, those who would defend the public school as an instrument of democratic progress lack a secure foundation upon which to construct an inspiring and coherent defense of this ideal. The resulting crisis of confidence in what David Blacker refers to as democracy's need for "moral roots" represents one side of the conflict I have in mind.[1]

The other side is represented by those who regard the public school, and the nominally liberal-democratic state that sponsors it, as an object of mistrust. Far from being an agent of emancipation, the modern democratic state is regarded as an agent of colonization, entrenched racism, and rampant consumerism. From this perspective, the educational institutions sponsored by the democratic state are agents of oppression, designed to erase indigenous, immigrant, and racial identities and affiliations by manufacturing students' emotional commitment to the nation.

Ayaz Naseem's contribution to this volume provides a helpful conceptual map, which provides a finer grained image of the deeper political and ideological sources of the ideological tension that underwrites this contemporary crisis of public education. Naseem distinguishes six conceptual perspectives of multicultural education that derive from different and often competing political stances. His discussion emphasizes the ideological and educational differences between these perspectives. Nevertheless, in light of the conflict described above, each of the six views appears to fall on a different side of a single major faultline. On one side, there are the liberal and left-liberal perspectives. Liberal multiculturalists are said to "place immense trust in the workings of the liberal democratic state," including courts and (presumably, though Naseem does not explicitly say so) public schools, to equalize social, economic and political opportunities for individual members of all cultural groups. On the other side of the divide, critical, anti-racist and anti-oppressive multiculturalists[2] provide a series of "counter discourses" to liberal multiculturalism.

These counter-discourses are intended first of all to highlight the many ways in which apparently benign and culturally "neutral" political principles, institutions, identity constructions, and valued forms of knowledge in fact reflect hegemonic, white, bourgeois, unequally gendered, and otherwise oppressive social and cultural formations of a privileged, dominant, politically, culturally and economically powerful, liberal majority. While such politically radical forms of multiculturalism sometimes carry their own positive (as well as critical) educational agendas, the liberatory potential of these agendas, as Naseem acknowledges, tends to be viewed as severely truncated under existing liberal institutional structures. Since prospects for radical institutional and structural appear remote at best, the limited liberatory educational potential of various radical multiculturalisms appears to be a regrettable fact of life for the foreseeable future.

This rather bleak diagnosis is reflected in Diane Gérin-Lajoie's judgment in her contribution to this volume, that multicultural education today "appears to have lost its critical side" (p. 25). Echoing Naseem and other contributors to this volume, Gerin-Lajoie suggests that contemporary multicultural education is dominated by a liberal approach that emphasizes folklore and the fatuous celebration of superficial cultural differences while neglecting deeper issues of equity, power relations and social justice. But according to critical, anti-racist and anti-oppressive multiculturalists, this is precisely the outcome we should expect when multicultural education is conducted under the auspices of liberal values and institutions. It is perhaps tempting, in our darker moments, to conclude from this that such sentiments present a strong challenge to the very possibility of a genuinely liberatory multicultural education.

Nevertheless, insofar as this grim conclusion reflects a loss of faith in multiculturalism as a liberatory educational ideal, proponents of all the various perspectives of multicultural education have, as Naseem notes, powerful reasons to rethink their approaches and to engage in meaningful "conversations on pluralism and multiculturalism… [in order to] redefine the landscape by posing questions and challenging the normative set of assumptions and prescriptions that other perspectives advocate" (p. 12). Engaging merely in separate and distinct "research programs" is effectively to surrender multicultural education as an ideal.

Ayaz Naseem gestures in the direction of this point near the end of his essay when he wisely notes that for multiculturalists of various ideological and theoretical stripes, "the space is open to conversations and contestations" and it is here that multicultural education retains the potential to advance the cause of a peaceful and just "settlement" of cultural tensions.

When read in this light, numerous contributions to this volume illuminate pathways by which educational theorists might contribute critically and productively to opening spaces of educational liberation that traverse ideological and theoretical boundaries. Consider, for example, how Meira Levinson's suggestion in her essay for combating racism in American schools might "engage" with anti-racist critiques of multiculturalism such as that passionately advanced by George J. Sefa Dei in his chapter.

Dei explicitly adopts critical, anti-racist and anti-oppressive conceptual resources to propose a radical reinterpretation of official multiculturalism policy and practice. Although Dei frames his argument as a defense of "official multiculturalism", his essay puts a great deal of emphasis on the deficiencies of existing multicultural policy: "official multiculturalism has been ineffective in addressing broader questions of structural racism, social oppression, domination and marginalization of peoples in society. The policy has failed to address profound issues of power… and its implications for knowledge construction" (p. 16). Thus, at least at some points in his argument, Dei is at pains to stress the view that multiculturalism, "in tacit ways, comes to appropriate and obscure important discussions about privilege, systemic power and about the way in which particular bodies come to be identified within these moments" (p. 16). Yet, although Dei admits

he is "not a big fan of multiculturalism," he is also inclined to rally critical, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive scholars to its "spirited defense," since without an official recognition of the value of diverse "cultures, histories, and identities, and experiences" diversity will wither and an ascendant conservative and sometimes xenophobic assimilationism may win the day.

Levinson proposes that schools should teach white and black students to understand themselves from both minority and majority perspectives–what she refers to as a "kind of Duboisian 'double consciousness." In contrast to Dei's critical, anti-racist, anti-oppressive semi-defense of official multiculturalism, Levinson's proposal is eminently liberal in its optimistic commitment to eradicating or reducing racial inequality and injustice through liberal educational institutions–public schools. Nevertheless, can we not detect a strong acknowledgement of critical anti-racist insights in her proposal as well? Levinson proposes that liberal teaching include a serious commitment to acknowledging and critically evaluating students' "racialized identities" through a consideration of how these identities are formed and reformed through an analysis of social and political power structures. These themes must resonate at least to some significant extent with Dei's critical anti-racism, which emphasizes "the meanings and implications of race and racial constructs… [along with] learning about the experiences of living with racialized identities and understanding how students' lived experiences in and out of school are implicated in youth engagement and disengagement from school" (p. 17). Nevertheless, educational theorists and practitioners must plug their ears to such resonances if they insist on too strict ideological divisions along the lines of liberal/critical or liberal/anti-racist, etc.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that by looking for convergent themes in the contributions of scholars who appear to begin from radically different theoretical starting points, we can begin to see how scholarly debates about multiculturalism and multicultural education might engage more productively across disciplinary, ideological, and theoretical borders. My claim here is not at all that such engagement will ultimately reveal these differences to be trivial and superficial. Nor is my suggestion that ideological differences should be glossed over. Clearly there are and probably should continue to be profound differences for a variety of good reasons. But surely attention should also be paid to those points at which theorists from radically different perspectives appear to converge. In this respect, it seems to me that a close consideration of essays like Levinson's and Dei's might reveal how liberal and critical multiculturalists might engage productively over shared concerns.

Levinson, like Dei, is deeply concerned that "political power and ethnoracial, cultural, and/or religious identities often interact such that clear patterns of political empowerment and exclusion emerge along demographic lines" (p. 82). As a result, both seek to identify educational measures that might address such injustices. Where might productive engagement occur?

I have suggested, through a brief examination of two contributions to this volume, that the essays in this special issue of *Canadian Issues* can be seen as not solely involving the separate research endeavors of scholars from different and isolated scholarly traditions and "paradigms". I would suggest that reading the various essays in this volume in this light illuminates numerous illustrations of the ways in which liberal and radical perspectives on multiculturalism converge in acknowledging and resisting the dangers of those versions of multiculturalism that lack sufficient attention to issues of racism, oppression and social justice more generally.

EDUCATION, INTERCULTURALISM AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION IN QUEBEC

Section II of this special issue contains a number of contributions that focus on issues of multiculturalism as they arise specifically in the Quebec context. Here the focus is on the concept of interculturalism–Quebec's version of multiculturalism–and the concept of "reasonable accommodation" as outlined in the Bouchard-Taylor Report. Many of the essays in this section attend closely to issues of educational policy and practice that have emerged from recent reforms to the Quebec Education Program (QEP). In line with international trends, the goals of the QEP are spelled out in terms of student and teacher "competencies." Ronald Morris's essay provides a thoughtful and clear overview of the content and aims of the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) component of the QEP. He also provides a lucid response to some of the grievous misunderstandings that have underwritten much of the controversy surrounding the ERC since its formal adoption as a compulsory course in all Quebec schools, public and private, in 2008. Notably, the orientation of the ERC strongly converges with prominent themes in multicultural education. The ERC is structured around two overarching objectives–promoting 1) mutual recognition and 2) the pursuit of the common good. Taken together, these objectives are meant to "take into account diversity,

and contribute to further enhancing community life and to encouraging the construction of a truly common public culture, that is, to sharing the underlying principles on which community life in Québec is based." In line with international trends, these goals are spelled out in the form of three basic "competencies"—ethical reflection, knowledge of religious culture, and the capacity for dialogue. Ultimately, the ERC amounts to a course in what can aptly be labeled "intercultural civic education." [2]

Essays by Marilyn Steinbach and Denise Lussier address concerns about student and teacher competencies in intercultural societies. Lussier develops a conception of language education as a vehicle for what she terms students' emerging "intercultural communicative competence." Steinbach argues that if intercultural education policies are to succeed in Quebec, then teachers require more than simply knowledge and awareness of cultural diversity; they require the development of "intercultural competencies", which involve shaping teachers attitudes and behavior patterns to reflect intercultural values and norms. For those interested in better understanding how debates about multiculturalism are being addressed in Quebec's school system, these essays offer clear and accessible primers to some of the key issues.

Marie Mc Andrew's paper on "reasonable accommodation" brings the significance of conceptual tensions and theoretical faultlines discussed earlier back into sharp relief. The issue of reasonable accommodation emerged as a crisis in Quebec in March 2006, when Canada's Supreme Court overturned a Quebec Court of Appeal ruling that a local school board was justified in banning a Sikh student from wearing his ceremonial "kirpan" to school. A series of other high profile cases—for example, a decision to exclude men from a pre-natal class on the basis that some Muslim women in the class felt uncomfortable—added fuel to the fire of public anxiety. In February 2007, a public commission on reasonable accommodation, headed by philosopher Charles Taylor and sociologist Gerard Bouchard, was formed to officially address the issue of reasonable accommodation. The Bouchard-Taylor Report makes worthwhile reading on a number of accounts, including its careful and very accessible coverage of current accommodation practices in Québec institutions.

Nevertheless, Mc Andrew's essay draws an a variety of sources besides the Bouchard-Taylor Report to explain and evaluate the usefulness of reasonable accommodation as a means of promoting more inclusive, diverse and equitable schools. These sources include an examination of a series of legal judgments following the adoption in 1982 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (which the province of Quebec has not signed) and scholarly debates about reasonable accommodation in schools. In the course of her discussion, Mc Andrew addresses critiques of reasonable accommodation from politically radical multiculturalists who have charged that reasonable accommodation is a tool of soft assimilationism and critiques by conservative "civic integrationists" who are alarmed at what they consider to be tendencies towards communitarian self-segregation and social fragmentation. Ultimately, however, Mc Andrew's analysis tends to reinforce the point that a variety or combination of theoretical perspectives is needed to make sense of the complexities of concrete examples of reasonable accommodation, just as they are in the case of multicultural education.

Of particular interest is Mc Andrew's notion of reasonable accommodation as a process of "reciprocal adaptation". In this sense, reasonable accommodation in extra-legal contexts like schools requires "dominant society members" (such as school authorities and teachers) to adapt their practices in ways that welcome and genuinely include newcomers; at the same time, newcomers are expected to gradually moderate their identities, where necessary, in order to better reflect the values and cultural expectations of the host society. One important element of this notion of reciprocal adaptation that Mc Andrew does not explicitly address is its inherently asymmetrical nature. Sociologically speaking, the power relationships that govern the process of reciprocal adaptation are likely in most cases to be more or less heavily oriented toward the demands of the dominant host culture. At this point, as Mc Andrew recognizes, concerns of critical, anti-racist and anti-oppressive multiculturalists are especially illuminating. When sociological asymmetry is unchecked by countervailing forces in multicultural societies, the process of social integration favors patterns of identity formation that are distorted in favor of the racialized, gendered and class based assumptions and expectations of the dominant culture.

Nevertheless, such distortions need not always obviously be oppressive even when sociological asymmetry exists, as it always does. As Mc Andrew points out, reasonable accommodation reflects a commitment to three distinct goals—respect for diversity, genuine equity, and the promotion of social cohesion. The need for a degree of social cohesion in diverse societies means that processes of social integration or "reciprocal adaptation" can never be completely equal. Sociological realities favorable to certain patterns of cultural, identity and community formation, and less favorable to others, are inevitable. But so long as the goals of respect for diversity and individual rights, and

genuine equity, are upheld then the realities of moderate sociological asymmetry needed to secure social cohesion need not be a source of injustice or cause for moral regret on the part of members of the dominant society. Liberal multiculturalists emphasize the crucial normative importance of principles of justice—mutual respect, individual autonomy and political equality—as important checks and constraints on the assimilationist tendencies of policies of social cohesion. Importantly, though, radical multiculturalists provide necessary theoretical and political tools for ensuring that these checks are robustly enforced in practice. Ultimately, Mc Andrew's account of reasonable accommodation provides a useful example of how liberal and radical insights might be combined to better understand and evaluate policies that democratic societies employ in the pursuit of a more socially just multiculturalism.

A just multicultural society must provide real and substantive measures by which cultural and racial minorities, immigrants, the disabled and others can both exert genuinely transformative influence on the cultural patterns that shape the shared public culture of multicultural societies and where they can, within legal limits, avoid such patterns if they wish. McAndrew explicitly acknowledges the latter point when she notes that reasonable accommodation allows for "ethno-specific institutions" and for people who wish to live their lives "largely at the margins of the dominant society." However, her analysis is less forthcoming when it comes to measures that might be taken to provide a stronger voice for newcomers and minorities in the process of "reciprocal" (but asymmetrical) social adaptation and integration. Nevertheless, a suggestion near the end of her paper may provide a useful lead regarding one way in which such issues of voice and influence might be promoted. According to Mc Andrew, "public authorities should give greater support to NGOs who help in the establishment and integration of newcomers, or who represent religious minorities, so that while NGOs inform their clientele or members of their rights, such organizations may also help newcomers to develop a sense of *identity moderation"* (p. 49).

One reason I find this suggestion promising, especially if the NGOs in question are staffed and run by members of racial and cultural minorities, women of color, and people with successful experience integrating into Quebec culture, is that the process of identity moderation may avoid both the danger of "identity essentialism" that Naseem associates with liberal and left-liberal multiculturalism, and also the danger of identity assimilation or exclusion that occurs when soft and hard versions of conservative culturalism gain prominence in the official institutions of the dominant society. In this respect, perhaps providing greater support and influence to NGOs has the potential to foster a more genuinely reciprocal adapation for minorities and newcomers than is otherwise possible. Additionally, to the extent that such potential exists, NGOs might provide a buffer that insulates educational and other modes of social integration from at least many forms of power inequality that critical, anti-racist and anti-oppressive multiculturalist theorists rightly demand we attend to.

CONCLUSION

My comments in this essay have concentrated on the theme of finding productive ways to integrate multicultural perspectives of different ideological stripes without denying their differences. The papers that make up the third and final section of the volume, which focuses on applications of multicultural theory to particular issues of educational policy and practice, provide several rich and concrete illustrations of this theme. Adeela Arshad's paper outlines a proposal for revising multicultural education programs in ways that adjust for globalizing realities and cosmopolitan ideals. Her proposal usefully examines the need for such revisions due to the shifting and, she argues, radically diminished political, economic and educational significance of the nation state. Dianne Gereluk provides a compelling challenge to Bill 44, the recent amendment to the Alberta Human Rights Act establishing a parental opt-out clause that applies when schools address subject matter related to religion, human sexuality and sexual orientation. The contribution from Michael S. Merry & Sjoerd Karsten outlines numerous challenges and obstacles to social integration and equality raised by the Dutch system of generously funding a wide variety of religious and non-religious "private" schools from which parents can choose. Kamran Shaikh, Amna Zuberi, and co-authors introduce a Deweyan account of technological transparency that evaluates particular technologies according to a scale from "open" to "closed". Interested readers will find that these essays provide ample illustration of the creative tension that is possible when theorists are willing to cross theoretical boundaries.

As a whole, the fine essays that make special volume of *Canadian Issues,* including those I have not been able to discuss here, show how liberal and critical multicultural perspectives can be brought to bear to critically evaluate, enrich and revise existing policies by insisting that they align themselves with principles of social justice in diverse societies. Ultimately, this is the fundamental value of an integrated perspective on multiculturalism and multicultural education.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] For present purposes, I leave aside a sixth category identified in Naseem's essay — conservative multiculturalists. I do so not because this perspective is unimportant or lacking in influence. Far from it. Rather, my reasons for ignoring it here have to do with the fact that the overarching commitment to assimilationism of conservatives, in the sense Naseem intends, leaves the impression that they are not aptly described as proponents of multiculturalism at all. This impression is reinforced, for example, by recent high profile events in which conservatives like German Chancellor Angela Merkel have explicitly rejected the very notion of multiculturalism in favor of an aggressively nationalist and particularist, though historically suspect, form of assimilationism. See the essay by Claudia Ruitenberg in this volume for an interesting discussion of the Merkel case.

[2] The conception of intercultural civic education is elaborated in a paper I have co-authored with David Waddington, Bruce Maxwell, Marina Schwimmer, and Andree-Anne Cormier (Waddington, et al., forthcoming).