

Official multiculturalism and the promise of equality

In 1971, the government of Pierre Trudeau implemented Canada's first policy on multiculturalism. With its elimination of overt racial classifications in immigration policy during the 1960s and 1970s, the Canadian nation-state seemed as if it were at the cutting edge of promoting racial and ethnic tolerance. For over 45 years, the policy of multiculturalism has remained a defining characteristic of Canadian national identity and a source of national pride for many citizens. Yet, given the ongoing material inequalities between racialized communities and their white counterparts, it is important to re-examine the effects, as well as the intentions, of multiculturalism, which came with the promise of greater inclusion and equality (Trudeau, 1971).

MULTICULTURALISM TO THE RESCUE

The policy of multiculturalism was meant to underscore the rights of all Canadians to develop culturally, to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in society, and to promote unity among the population (Gupta, 1999). Instead, the policy not only has failed to address issues of racism and racial inequality in Canadian society, but has operated as an instrument of racial oppression through its evasion of the issues of racism, gender exploitation, colonialism, and class. It is important to move past the mirage and appreciate the ways in which, as an official state policy, multiculturalism was never intended as a progressive development in terms of race relations, but was instead premised on a "rescue of whiteness" (Thobani, 2007). The policy of multiculturalism furthered the legitimacy of this racist-settler colonial state in a period of rising Québécois national-

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ism (Gupta, 1999), greater demands for Aboriginal sovereignty, and a changing post-war world in which discredited notions of biological racism and a globalized capitalism forced Western nations into novel relations with newly independent states.

In an era when the justification for white supremacy was being profoundly eroded, multiculturalism effectively masked the continuity of white privilege by recasting whiteness in its distinct and new version as "culturally tolerant," respectful of difference, and open to diversity (Thobani, 2007). In opposition to this, non-white people were instead constructed as monocultural (if not overly cultural), exotic, tied to archaic traditions, and in need of being taught the virtues of tolerance and cosmopolitanism under white supervision. Seen as void of the respect for diversity that characterized the state and its white nationals, people of colour were further excluded from the nation as "cultural outsiders." The everyday workings of their lives were defined by their cultural backgrounds, which were and are constructed by the state as neatly bounded and separate, as if existing within a vacuum. All other aspects of the lives of people of colour, such as gender, class, and sexuality, were seen as secondary if not irrelevant to the supreme cultural makeup that defined their lives (Banerji, 2000).

DERAILING ANTI-RACISM

In its emphasis on culture, multiculturalism suppressed public discussion of

racism, both systemic and personal, which barred the full participation of people of colour within society. Incidences of racism in society no longer included a discussion of power but were seen as anomalous individual acts that ran counter to the tolerance of the Canadian state and its nationals. Inequalities experienced by people of colour were then explained in terms of cultural inadequacies and a lack of social and linguistic skills (Thobani, 2007). With its tendency to culturally compartmentalize people of colour, the policy of multiculturalism also worked to split cross-racial alliances into individualized and distinct cultural communities—what Neil Bissoondath (1994) has termed the "ghettoization" of racialized communities.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

One could argue that multiculturalism has been successful as a system of control, a means of "rescuing whiteness," as well as a way of legitimating racial domination. But has it been successful in its commonsense guise—that is, as a means creating a space of greater equality and affirming the value and dignity of all people, regardless of their race or ethnicity? Further difficulties arise in critically deconstructing multiculturalism in the face of an increasing right-wing xenophobia that characterizes multiculturalism as the source of all evils; a policy that gives too much away and threatens an "authentic" Canadian way of life. Underlying these difficulties is something that was at the core of multiculturalism all along. Multiculturalism has always been premised on the *relative* inclusion of "strangers" within the nation (Ahmed, 2000). The stranger who *appears* different adds cachet to


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the celebrated diversity of the nation, but is expected to conform. Multicultural and exotic “others” are accepted so long as they maintain a strict adherence to an overarching Europeaness/whiteness that remains at the core of Canadian identity (Bannerji, 2000, p. 110). This Europeaness/whiteness remains central to the project of multiculturalism and provides the criteria for defining “Canadian culture”—a core and point of departure from which the “multicultures” are defined.

STRATEGIES FROM HERE

At a time when multiculturalism is under increasing attack in the face of blatant racism and xenophobia, anti-racist organizers and activists are forced to grapple with the question of where to go from here, and of how to engage with the discourse of multiculturalism to fur-

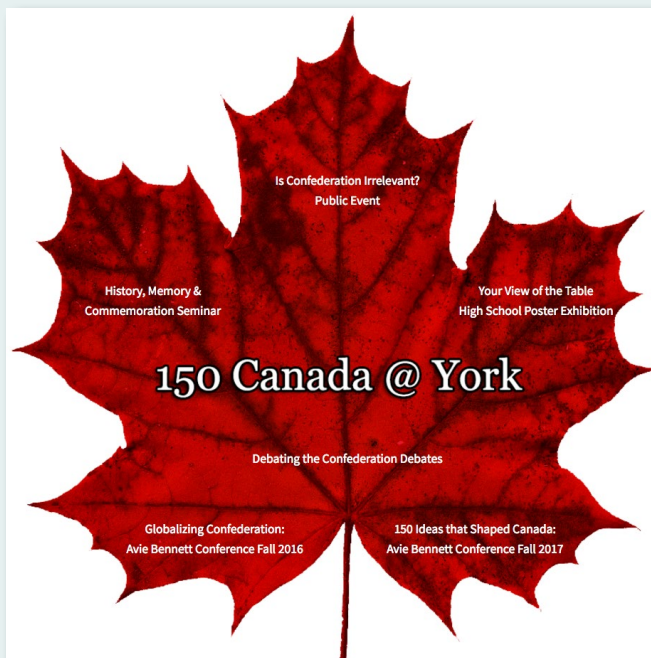
ther the agendas of racialized groups. What are the limits of organizing through the language of culture? Can spaces be created within such a cultural discourse for other dimensions of our lives, imbricated with class, gender, and sexuality? These are some of the questions that will require a rekindling of the imagination and a creative engagement in order to reclaim the struggle of racialized groups and to make concrete the demands of equality. 

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