

After multiculturalism: Canada and its multiversal future

LET'S BUILD A SOCIETY ON THE COMPLEXITY OF CANADA

Despite all the criticism of multiculturalism across the decades from the left and right, “multicultural” has become the “common sense” understanding of difference in Canada. The question is, what do we do about the fact that what we call Canada is much more than simply multicultural. It is multi-racial, multi-class, multi-gendered, multi-sexual, multi-local (from rural to urban), and it is global-local (from the local and translocal to transnational). It is multi-political, multi-religious, multi-legal-status (some of us are secure in our standing, others precariously present in Canada as newcomers). It is multi-lingual, multi-professional, and multi-generational. And it is shot through with mixed/hybrid formations, from hybrid ethnicities to hybrid places such as the post-suburban.

Recognizing these multiple vectors of difference not only underscores the limits of multiculturalism as the way to frame difference in Canada, it also opens the way toward a post-multicultural framing we might label *multiversalism*. The question is, can the people living under one state, on a bounded territory with national symbols, and so on, ever be willing to recognize itself this way? It is one thing to recognize and build policies

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on the singular fact of multiple cultures, quite another to open the flood gates of difference.

NO REASON TO FEAR DIFFERENCE

To start, viewing Canada as a multiverse does not entail displacing the primacy of the state in political life. On the contrary, in the Canadian multiverse the state's centrality is more visible as *the one* set of institutions present in every sphere of life. The nature of its presence can vary: it can be the key actor in a domain such as education and health care; or it can be one among a number of forces in many civic spaces, such as a neighbourhood or the media. The fear, therefore, that immigrants might undermine the political coherence of Canada is unfounded. Difference and multiplicity are not threats to unity. Only a challenge such as the potential secession of Quebec can bring the foundations of the Canadian state into question. Multiversal difference, rather, reinforces the political robustness of Canada because it is the Canadian state that is the common element among all the multiplicities.

Similarly, the movement of people, images, and goods in and out of Canada can reinforce the functional integrity of the state as it guards its borders, territory, and regulates movement. We can go further to say that people in movement reinforce, by their very presence and movement, the distinctiveness of the Canadian political community in local, national, and international contexts: they raise the very questions of what it is that they are part of, and on what terms.

I realize that those Canadians who reject cosmopolitanism are all too likely to be uninterested in recognizing that Canadian identity rests on anything other than their self-understanding of what it is—understood in their own national, regional, and local terms. But we already have a multiverse—whether we like it or not—in places like Hérouxville, Quebec. The question is, what are the terms of a complex co-existence that includes both cosmopolitans and non-cosmopolitans?

THE LITMUS TEST OF INCLUSION

This becomes an especially important question when the many universes inside Canada come in contact with one another in physical and symbolic terms. The typical litmus test is when one group, established in the country for some time, finds the actions of newcomers objectionable or repugnant, leading to various forms of social conflict and fear. The recent debate in Quebec over reasonable accommodation is exactly this, a contest whose tensions have arisen out of overlapping universes. When some self-identified majority feels they are the predominant shaper of a space and place, they question why they should make exceptions for others. Why should you accommodate others when you are the chief constitutive power, with the

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main capacity to shape spaces not only based on majority numbers and precedent, but control of government and other institutions?

A multiversal frame suggests the possibility of moving beyond the reasonable accommodation concept that assumes a minority and a majority. Consider a city. We know that many streets in Canadian cities, from Vancouver to Ottawa, are marked by various religious, political, aesthetic, class, racial, and moral sensibilities (progressive or conservative) that overlap and interweave with one another on the same block, along with the regulatory elements of the state that guide the provision of sidewalks and crosswalks. Multiversalism suggests that these universes are splinted with all sorts of prismatic effects across generations, genders, classes, philosophies, and types of presence in Canada (length and nature of time in residence and legal status). That is, the spaces are experienced differently within and across identity groups.

One critical issue is the effects of what is taken by some to be “offensive visuality” (such as the miniskirt, the hijab, dark skin, or working-class attire). This often happens by chance, when, say, someone walks by, where options for structural separations, such as walls, are few. We know that these encounters typically happen in places of transit, where one’s very presence already assumes all forms of risk, from crime to accidents to visual offence. We know that the option to avoid that chance encounter, a key aspect of public space, is not available to many as they go to jobs, clinics, and schools.

Instead, a multiversal perspective suggests that when a person encounters someone, they are not confronting an ethnic or cultural bloc bursting with multicultural rights, but individuals sorting out their complex experiences of world-making, expression, difference, and their own episodes of encounter as well. While this recognition will not easily overcome non-cosmopolitan attitudes, it does underscore that the negotiation of transitory encounter is possible

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on an individual or small group basis rather than an ethnic bloc basis.

OUR MANY CONNECTS AND RECONNECTS

Issues of encounter and complex co-existence raise the questions of who is encountered, why are they encountered, and on what basis do those encountered have claims and rights to be of and in a particular multiverse? Lying at the heart of the backlash associated with reasonable accommodation is the simple query: why are they here in my world? But what do they or we mean by “world”? Is it a specific neighbourhood, enclave, town, province, or national territory? In national terms, there is little opportunity in contemporary modern life to live in anything other than a multiverse. Even if one lives in a small town, the overlaps are many because of travel or spillover at the edges as suburbs reach rural towns and labour needs bring in new residents.

There is, of course, no shortage of arguments in Western democracies against the most visible and charged source of multiversity, new immigrants. These arguments can be seen as a last gasp of desperation to save a set of tradi-

tions generated by various forms of nostalgia such as the nostalgia for an imagined vanishing local world of the everyday in towns and neighbourhoods. I would argue that we stop taking at face value claims such as those that arose recently in Quebec about the threat of immigrants. A more accurate way to read them is as endeavours to find a secure place in a sea of multiversity operating within, across, and beyond local, provincial, and national boundaries. These efforts at preservation can, therefore, be understood as reflecting an unintended recognition of multiversity even if it is a negative form of recognition.

CITIZENSHIP ACROSS BOUNDARIES

If contemporary life is multiversal, then what does it mean to have an obligation to ensure fairness and justice to everyone who is part of it and to think through the terms in which those new to a country become a part of it? In many ways, each newcomer forces us to undergo a social re-calibration. We might start by repeating that multiversity is in part about the multiplicity of geographical scales from local to global that constitute, and intersect throughout, Canada. People understand and relate to Canada through a diversity of these scales. Some, at face value, are anchored mostly in the local and provincial—even so, it is likely that such locality is actually translocal, as people frequently move across the border of the United States (for vacations, shopping, or visits to relatives). Others have links to places in France, the Caribbean, South Asia, and elsewhere. They remain connected, and thought of as part of a diaspora. If, in a multiverse, an individual can have various types of ties and relations across, within, and beyond the border, and those ties can be considered good for Canada, then we should facilitate multiple forms of presence in and connection to Canada; and certainly multiple forms are already enabled, from tourist to citizen.

However, exclusive, single-nation citizenship remains the frame against

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which all other forms of status are understood as exceptions, including dual or multiple citizenship. In addition, many of these other forms have profound insecurities associated with them. Many newcomers to Canada are here under various forms of “precarious status,” whether they are or had been students, temporary workers, or refugee claimants. The implication, therefore, is that there is opportunity for stronger support for the global-local—and for the multiversal approach to status, more generally—in Canada.

I believe that a simple way to move toward this support is for Canada explicitly to treat and support what can be termed multiversal citizenship as the primary frame against which all other forms of status are understood. A multiversal citizen has citizenship in one or more territorial states and secure status in any state they are resident in. From my definition, you can see that a core dimension of multiversal citizenship is dual or multiple citizenship. Fortunately, in recent decades the Canadian government clearly has been liberal toward multiple citizenship. But this liberalism toward multiple citizenship created public controversy when Lebanese Canadians were aided in their effort to flee an Israeli invasion in 2006. Additionally, the Canadian state has strengthened the residency requirement—making the attainment of a second, Canadian, citizenship more difficult. In addition, in the post-9/11 security context many multiple citizens from the Middle East and South and Central Asia have found out that they not only may not receive protections as Canadians, but they can be treated as dangerous suspects who can be more easily deported than Canada-only citizens (they in effect become stateless if expelled from Canada).

Rather than treat the risks associated with multiple citizenship in the current environment as a reason to avoid it, we might consider strengthening the protections associated with having it: this is

what multiversal citizenship adds. Why would Canadians support this? The easiest answers are that stronger support for multiversal citizenship can enrich the Canadian multiverse by making global-local lives easier, and, second, that single citizenship, in a multiverse, is but one type of status among many, even if it is predominant on a national basis. If you think about my definition above of multiversal citizenship, single-state citizens are multiversal citizens.

A BETTER ENVIRONMENT FOR NEW CITIZENSHIP

There are other notable reasons to support multiversal citizenship. One is that any single citizen, or anyone in that person’s family, is a potential multiple citizen. So, creating an environment where multiple citizenship is taken to be the norm strengthens the possibility of that option for those with single citizenship, particularly for individuals who other-

wise might fear losing their own or their children’s Canadian citizenship if they are living in the US.

Another reason is that strong support for multiple citizenship and multiversity can expand the meaning of Canada that is consistent with its historic identification as a country that originally advanced multiculturalism and has allowed high levels of immigration. Normalizing multiversal citizenship could also open the way to a more secure status for those individuals with precarious status in Canada. The idea is that everyone in Canada, regardless of their status, can be thought of as multiversal citizens—in that they already have citizenship from somewhere else and are potential citizens of Canada.

Multiversalism is consistent with the Canadian history of political and social innovation: the time for serious recognition of our Canadian global-local—not just multicultural—lives has come. 🍁

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