Multiculturalism: What are our discontents about?

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SOME KEY QUESTIONS

Reflecting on the theme of our conference, many preliminary questions arise. There are many uncertainties about the notion of multiculturalism. Where does it come from? Is it a public policy or a social reality? Is it a way of compensating for the fragmentation of society or a pluralist solution to diversity? Is it a political ploy to overcome the nationalist movement in Quebec and rally the other communities in the definition of a new Canadian nation, or is it the translation of a moral vision of a good and just society? I will try to answer some of these questions and others that follow from their formulation.

What is the nature of multiculturalism? Officially, multiculturalism in Canada had been a more or less formal policy until it was translated into a law in 1988. A declaration was presented in Parliament, in the fall of 1971, as a policy orientation, which gave birth to many programs in the following years. In 1982, the principle of multiculturalism was inscribed in article 27 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which stated that the Charter should be "interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians."

It was only in 1988 that the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* was assented to by Parliament. The Canadian government recognized "the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and [became] committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada."

As we will see later, Quebec had many reservations about multiculturalism, which it viewed as a way of marginalizing the importance of the French Canadian heritage. However, Quebec has developed a corresponding model, called interculturalism. This approach has never been formally stated in a specific policy document or translated into a law, but it has inspired many policies and state interventions. It seems that, at first glance, both multiculturalism and interculturalism are to be understood as policy orientations, more or less formalized and continuously redefined.

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A SHORT HISTORY LESSON

What is the origin of multiculturalism? There are two answers to that question, one political and one sociological. Politically, multiculturalism was a brilliant political strategy of Pierre Elliott Trudeau's, in his pursuit of two ends; multiculturalism was conceived as a response to the nationalist movement in Quebec. The *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* arrived at the paradoxical conclusion that both English and French must become the official languages of Canada, while the diversity of cultures, rather than the two founding cultures, was to be acknowledged. Bilingualism had the effect of redefining the French Canadian question. French Canadians would become a linguistic group rather than a founding people. The cultural and historical dimensions of French Canadian identity in the future would be confounded with all other identities.

The second answer is that multiculturalism was, in fact, the recognition of the social reality of the multiple ethnic communities that had progressively populated many parts of the country and wanted to be included and participate in its future. Pierre Elliott Trudeau succeeded both in transforming the classical view of the country as formed by two founding peoples and in attracting growing populations of other origins.

Sociologically, we have to recognize that multiculturalism was not a complete invention. It did correspond to some deep social transformations taking place at the time. Two main forces were pressing national societies. From the outside, the acceleration of globalization was under way, and from the inside, a diversification of the social tissue was intensifying. The process of globalization had started to raise questions about the scope of national sovereignty and the allegiance of citizenship. The fragmentation of society tended to expand with the increase in global flows—in particular, with the growing importance of immigration, the awakening of the Aboriginal political consciousness after the unsuccessful attempt to integrate their people in 1969, and the proliferation of a new generation of social movements (whether countercultural, environmentalist, or

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feminist). Especially in Canada, where the national identity had been problematical from the beginning, the influence of these factors favoured the emergence of a pluralistic model of integration.

The capacity of our society to remain unified under a common political project is what we need to consider.

A FLAWED DOCTRINE?

What did official multiculturalism ignore? In the Canadian logic, the concept of multiculturalism resolved the nation question. Canadian identity would rely on the notion of diversity. However, most importantly, Quebec's national question remained unresolved throughout the period, as did the status of the Aboriginal nations.

In our book *L'identité fragmentée* (1996), on Canadian identity, Gilles Bourque and I delineated different periods in Canadian history through which the definition of national identity evolved. Up to the Second World War, the Canadian identity was dual: on one side, the British Anglo-Saxon Protestant people (or "Race," as it was termed at the time) and on the other, the French Canadian Catholic people. From the end of the war to the 1970s, the Canadian national identity developed around the idea of a social citizenship in the context of an expanding welfare state. Quebec's competing identity remained culturally defined (by language and religion) during the years of Premier Maurice Duplessis, but was transformed in the 1960s into a political and civic identity, as an alternative to the one already in place in Canada. Contrary to the Canadian identity, Quebec's version was founded on the existence of an historical and cultural nation. The opposition between the two conflicting identities was interpreted in many fashions in Quebec. Being sovereignist or federalist determined the depth of the attachment to one or the other conception of identity. Most Quebecers believed in the existence of a "nation Québécoise."

Probably because multiculturalism has transformed the notion of nation itself, it has induced a natural resistance, in Canada, towards any kind of a multiple national recognition, with the exception perhaps of the inclusion of the rights to self-government for the Aboriginal peoples. The conception of an historical and cultural nation has always been problematical in Canada as a whole and has not really existed since the time of the opposition between Anglo-Saxons and French Canadians. Canada preferred, from the 1940s on, the conception of a civic nation. This is not to say that Quebec has relied solely on the cultural and historical dimensions of national identity. It has also developed a political and civic conception of the nation, but it has claimed its own linguistic, historical, and cultural background. Multiculturalism, per se, has a tendency to underestimate the historical origin of the Canadian nation. As the word suggests, multiculturalism aims at the recognition of all cultures on the same level.

We could have conceived of Canada as a multinational state (a real confederation) that did not deny the contribution of multiple cultures; but this would have been a very complicated task after the adoption of the policy of multiculturalism. The problem lies in the model of integration favoured by multiculturalism. We normally speak of integration in connection with immigrants. However, the problem of integration is a social necessity for every one. If society still has meaning as a concept, by what means do people have to identify with their country?

THREE KINDS OF INTEGRATION

We can distinguish three models of integration. The first is assimilation, well represented by republicanism. It aims at the full integration of all individuals, not taking into account any differences. This model corresponds to the ideal nation-state formation of the 19th century and is most appropriate for centralized countries. The model is ill-equipped, however, to address actual problems caused by the diversification of societies.

The second model is one of coexistence. It corresponds to the way some critics describe the Canadian multicultural approach: a profusion of group interests coexisting in a public space, litigating their conflicts in the courts. This second model is criticized most often for depoliticizing institutions in favour of the judicial system and as jeopardizing the definition of a common good.

A third model is more or less utopian. Rather than a mere coexistence of different interest groups, it is possible to imagine a constant interplay between groups, with each enriching its own culture in the process. A certain idea of a decentred democracy would favour a non-hierarchical system of interactions between the many ethnic, racial, cultural, or historical groups. This model fits with the ideal representation of good multiculturalism and is coherent, up to a point, with the intercultural model proposed by Quebec's government.

QUEBEC'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

A remaining question can be formulated in the following way: is the interplay between cultures sufficient to establish a national bond between citizens? This question has been asked of the policy of interculturalism in Quebec. The model suggests that interplay between cultures should be the aim of any integration policy, but at the same time, it proclaims that there should be more than a collec-

tive interchange of cultures. Integration should be accomplished within a certain linguistic, historical, and cultural context, which is specific to the Quebec society. This aspect of interculturalism is increasingly present in multiculturalism in Canada. The once open-ended policy of diversity is more often redefined around the necessity of common Canadian values. As for the English language, it does not need any help from the Parliament to attract the majority.

SOME UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

Now, if we look at the reality of multiculturalism, it becomes clear that the normative model as it is presented cannot be automatically translated into equality and non-discrimination between groups or communities. The existence of democracy and human rights has not yet resulted in the obliteration of relations of domination and power. In that sense, multiculturalism, as a reality, will lead inevitably to discontents. We still live in a class society, with great obstacles for visible minorities and marginal groups.

The liberal view will situate the debate at the more general level of human rights and tolerance. Judiciary procedures are considered the remedy for the flaws of the system concerning inclusion and non-discrimination. However, this view does not question the type of vertical organization of society that favours elites and the dominant culture. In contrast, a post-colonial view will question the regime of inequalities at every level and propose a horizontal organization of society, which places every culture and group on the same level.

In both cases, the question of the political community, or, in other words, the question of social unity, is bypassed. The importance attached to human rights and their judicialization by liberals is diminishing the importance of collective identities and of the political will of the people as a community. The actual movement towards a denationalization of present-day societies might lead to such a setback for representative democracy. The insistence of post-colonial critics on destructuring the political institutionalization of society goes way beyond the liberal proponents of human rights in the abolition of any general conception of a political community.

Discontents will then vary along with the standpoints of the observer. Still, we might conclude by saying that multiculturalism or interculturalism is inevitable today. The capacity of our society to remain unified under a common political project is what we need to consider. Even if the reassertion of the importance of rights and freedoms and the recognition of the exclusion and marginalization of particular groups are important, the issues remain of defining what holds us together and of finding the best ways to favour integration of diverse individuals, of groups, and—why not—of national communities in Canada.

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