

Is Canada's commitment to multiculturalism weakening?

WHITHER MULTICULTURAL CANADA?

According to a 47-nation comparative survey on global trade and immigration released two years ago by the Washington-based Pew Research Center, 62 percent of Canadians believe that immigration into Canada should be restricted and better controlled. By comparison, 66 percent of Germans, 68 percent of French, 75 percent of British, 75 percent of Americans, but only 53 percent of Swedes share the same view. The survey also revealed that 71 percent of Canadians feel that their traditional way of life is getting lost (in comparison to 73 percent of Americans, 77 percent of British, 75 percent of French, 74 percent of Germans, but, again, only 49 percent of Swedes), and that 62 percent of them believe it needs to be protected against foreign influence and intrusion. On this score, only the Americans hold the same belief in similar proportion. Roughly half of the British, French, and German citizens interviewed and less than one-third of the Swedes feel that action to protect their culture is necessary. Finally, though they are known for their humility and a tendency to understate their merits, more than half the Canadians declared their culture to be superior to others (in essentially the same proportion as their American counterparts), as opposed to barely one in three British and French, two in five Germans, and one in five Swedes.

These findings ultimately exposed Canada's multicultural narrative for what it really is: a socio-political fiction largely disconnected from the everyday lives and reality of racialized minority groups and of most immigrants who are not of European origin or descent.

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When it comes to dealing with ethnocultural otherness, Canada, it seems, fares hardly better than countries like France and Germany, whose reluctance to acknowledge and satisfy particularistic identity claims in the public sphere is well known; or than the United States, whose stance on immigration has toughened considerably since 9/11. The Pew Center findings present a picture of Canada which clashes with the perception Canadians have of themselves as quintessentially pluralistic, open to ethnocultural diversity and deeply respectful of public expressions of identity and normative difference. These findings likely came as no surprise, though, to scores of scholars and social critics who, over the past decade or so, have analyzed, deconstructed, and ultimately exposed Canada's multicultural narrative for what it really is: a socio-political fiction largely disconnected from the everyday lives and reality of racialized minority groups and of most immigrants who are not of European origin or descent.

THE VISION AND THE REALITY

On the surface of things, to be sure, Canada seems eminently multicultural.

The vision of a multicultural nation entertained by the political and intellectual elite remains as clear and as strong as ever, and continues to be a central part of the Canadian state's discourse. In a way, one might even contend that Canada has moved beyond being multicultural: after nearly 40 years of multiculturalism policy, Canadian society is now more than the juxtaposition of diverse ethnocultural groups, as the first incarnation of the policy implied; it is an increasingly hybridized entity formed by the gradual interpenetration of various cultures and ways of life—a Métis nation, as John Ralston Saul has famously argued recently. Still, for all the positive image of Canada as a mature, democratic society that this ethnocultural hybridity might project, for all that it may indicate that a mentality of acceptance of otherness pervades the Canadian social imagination, it should not automatically be understood as the sign of more egalitarian dynamics of socioeconomic relations, or a sign that the social hierarchies, real and symbolic, regulating the interface between mainstream hegemonic (essentially Euro-descendant) groups and otherized, racialized ethnocultural minorities have dissolved. Those hierarchies and the social relations of power and domination that maintain them are all too real. Working generally to the benefit of Euro-descendant Canadians, they are largely responsible for the territorial dispossession and cultural disintegration of indigenous peoples (and the general disinclination to make amends for it), the abusive use of the labour of immigrants from underprivileged countries, and the systemic exclusion of racialized groups from mainstream socioeconomic networks.

Canadians may like to think of themselves as multicultural, but they are not necessarily prepared to abide by the demanding obligations of the truly pluralistic, democratic sense of community

and citizenship that ultimately come with multiculturalism. In principle, they see otherness and ethnocultural diversity as unproblematic, but, as the Pew Center survey might suggest, only so long as accompanying expressions of difference and minority identity claims can somehow be contained within mainstream normative and cultural frameworks, so long as accommodating them does not disrupt the socioeconomic advantages and the hegemonic position Euro-descendants have gained over time. The idea of multiculturalism may make Canadians feel good about themselves, but implementing the imperatives of a fully accomplished multicultural ethos is a step that most are not quite disposed to take.

POWER AND DISTINCTION IN INTERCULTURAL CONTACTS

Norwegian anthropologist Fredrick Barth, who explored inter-ethnic and intercultural relations in a variety of social contexts over several decades, has shown how the constant movement of individuals from one side to the other of cultural borders rarely guarantees that these same borders will eventually come down. This is because the differences, distinctions, and oppositions that persist, despite continuous inter-ethnic and intercultural contacts (and despite the interdependence said to characterize the relation between the different groups), are not necessarily attributable to the absence of mobility or a lack of knowledge of the Other, but, rather, to the reproduction of processes of social exclusion and incorporation, which are anchored in history. In other words, it is in the reality of the socioeconomic relations of power and domination, shaped by the vagaries of history and preserved by institutions that reflect them, that the cause of the perennial nature of hierarchies and class differences that oppose and distinguish majorities and ethnocultural minorities can be found.

This kind of perspective is notably absent from most assessments of Canada's multiculturalism by mainstream political and intellectual elite. While they

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may agree that room should be made for improvement, indeed that more should be done to facilitate the socioeconomic inclusion of ethnocultural minority groups, promoters of Canadian multiculturalism rarely consider the matter outside a depoliticized vision of the social relations and dynamics of power to which most ethnocultural minority groups are subjected through their difference and otherness. They dwell instead on a reassuring but often vacuous rhetoric extolling the virtues of dialogue, solidarity, and exchange as the main panacea for a more resolutely multicultural Canada. Their conceptual universe is unwilling or incapable to appreciate how extant processes of exclusion, subalternization, and racialization operate to cast a shadow over social relations between the Euro-descendant majority and ethnocultural

minorities, and, in the end, account for the former's reluctance to embrace the latter's difference unreservedly. This denial of the pivotal role of power in the regulation of the Other is deeply anchored in the liberal social imagination of Euro-descendant majorities. It allows them to sidestep the question of their hegemony and avoid engaging in a deeper self-critical reflection on the terms and conditions of inclusion and citizenship they have imposed—are Canadians not, after all, deeply committed to equality of treatment and opportunity for all regardless of origin, ethnicity, religion, sex, or length of establishment in the community?

Canadians readily accept their constitutive ethnocultural diversity and are generally proud of it. That is a given. What is at issue is the quality of the place Euro-descendants are inclined to reserve for expressions of normative and cultural difference in the public sphere. Like most other Westerners, they have a problem with otherness when it questions their cultural foundations and challenges their assumed normative superiority. Unless they are genuinely prepared to acknowledge that their hegemonic position is directly connected to the creation and maintenance of the social processes of exclusion, subalternization, and racialization of ethnocultural minorities, and unless they are willing, as a result, to abandon that position and rethink the nature of their interaction with the Other, multiculturalism in Canada will likely continue to be a fiction. 🍁

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