Canada Watch

Assessing the future of multiculturalism

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For Mark Twain, dispelling the rumours of his demise was relatively simple; in the case of multiculturalism, the matter is somewhat more complex. That multiculturalism is suffering an ongoing crisis of legitimation seems incontestable. Depending upon the specifics of national context and historical time period, examples abound of the supposed failings of, and pessimistic prognoses regarding, multiculturalism—from Angela Merkel's 2010 pronouncement that *Multikulti ist tot* ("multiculturalism is dead") to a string of recent electoral victories for parties and politicians that place the putative goals of multiculturalism in conflict with the majoritarian cultures of nation-states. The contestation is not limited to the right wing of the political spectrum. While rarely supported by broad-based electoral majorities, left-wing and progressive critics of multiculturalism have succeeded in advancing concepts and movements—separatism, decolonization, diversity, anti-racism, Indigenization, etc.—that offer alternative approaches to cultural recognition that are frequently valued precisely because they are not state-led. As an example: in Canada, a recent Environics Institute poll indicated that 58 percent of Canadians believe that Canada currently accepts too many immigrants (Neuman, 2024). Although this is not a direct critique of multiculturalism, it suggests a softening of one of the key achievements of multiculturalism—the positive perception of immigrants.

Despite these and many other indicators suggesting that we are "beyond" multiculturalism (Alibhai-Brown, 2004) or that multiculturalism is in "retreat" (Joppke, 2004) or in "crisis" (Chin, 2017), there are reasons to believe that, as with Twain, the rumours of multiculturalism's death remain an exaggeration.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTICULTURALISM FOR INTERNATIONAL CANADIAN STUDIES

One indication of the abiding interest in multiculturalism in Canada emerges from recent research conducted by Jean Michel Montsion and Dominik Formanowicz in the context of *(Re)Searching for Canadian Studies*, or CanSearch, a SSHRC-funded project that seeks to document how the field of Canadian Studies has evolved internationally since 2012. Based on surveys of international scholars of the discipline, Montsion, Formanowicz, and their team of national and international Canadianists have gathered a range of information regarding the practice of Canadian Studies abroad. Among the findings to emerge from the study is the relatively high ranking of multiculturalism as a topic of both research and instruction. Among both English- and French-language Canadianists, multiculturalism ranks third along with other such topics as Indigenous peoples, arts and literature, and the environment. While it is still too early in the project to clarify the precise nature of the interest in, or approach to, Canadian multiculturalism, the prominent ranking of the topic among international scholars of Canada invites speculation.

THE POLYSEMANTIC CHARACTER OF MULTICULTURALISM

For all its putative failings as a policy within distinct national contexts, multiculturalism retains its validity as a coherent—if sometimes inadequate—response to one of the defining issues of social life across the globe: how to assure equal access to the liberal rights of citizenship in national polities that are increasingly pluricultural. It seems likely that the continued viability of multiculturalism will rest in its capacity to respond to this issue. But before we can adjudicate the likely success or sustainability of multiculturalism in addressing this issue of citizenship rights within particular national contexts, it is perhaps useful to re-evaluate the multiple uses of a term that Rita Chin (2017) has described as "slippery" (p. 8). Part of the "slipperiness" of multiculturalism is undoubtedly due to its polysemantic character. Multiculturalism seems to share terrain in three overlapping domains: first, in reference to the sociological reality of most of the globe's nation-states as pluricultural polities composed of majoritarian national cultures, substate national minorities, and immigrants and migrants; second, as a field of inquiry dedicated to the study of the multiple social and political implications of pluricultural polities; and third, as particular policies—not always explicitly identified as multicultural—enacted by governments (for example, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988) to address the social, political, and cultural ramifications of diversity.

Each of these domains is worthy of attention when the future of multiculturalism is considered. Regarding the first domain, for a multitude of reasons ranging from economic transnationalism to the demographic disruptions occasioned by geopolitical conflict, even those nation-states that may once have been relatively homogeneous are certain to experience increasing diversity as a result of escalating mobility. Concerning the second domain, interest in multiculturalism as a field of inquiry is unlikely to wane given the increasing pressures posed by augmenting rates of social diversity and the need to conceptualize adequate theoretical and policy responses. Finally, with regard to the third domain, most governments—especially those that identify as liberal democracies—will be compelled to develop policies that address the issue of assuring appropriate political rights for all members of the national polity.

MULTICULTURALISM AND ADAPTATIONS

Whether appropriate political rights are assured for all through policies of multiculturalism or other related policy responses (such as interculturalism), the multiculturalist model will retain value in terms either of emulation or of modification and improvement according to the particularities of differing national contexts. Of course, depending upon the contingencies of differing socio-political contexts, the relevance of these three dimensions of multiculturalism will be felt differently. For instance, in the case of Canada, Will Kymlicka (2010) has pointed out that despite a felt desire to re-evaluate and perhaps recalibrate multiculturalist understandings of the citizenship rights and responsibilities of immigrants, the country is not significantly altering its multiculturalist positions with regard to the two other broad categories of Canadian social diversity—Indigenous peoples and substate national minorities (pp. 136–137).

From this perspective, the interest in Canadian multiculturalism evinced by the international scholars of Canadian Studies surveyed by Montsion, Formanowicz, and their research team is neither surprising nor likely to abate. In all three of the domains discussed above, Canada has a wealth of experience that will continue to provoke inquiry. Likewise, the socio-cultural reality of diversifying polities—as in Canada—will continue to demand a policy response that addresses the political and societal issues (still incompletely) responded to by multiculturalism. ■

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