

Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship.

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Abstract

The public policy of multiculturalism, passed by the Trudeau Government in 1972, was according to the theory behind it, to establish an eventual cosmopolitan identity of Canadian citizenship. More political than social, this policy, has led to many discussions vis -a-vis the Ghetto nature that has evolved from it. The Mosaic has remained divided. The pluralistic idea of transculturalism (seeing oneself in the other), basically relying on the forces of society (not politicians), has a more interactive (for citizens) and egalitarian approach. With the break down of numerous borders (both physical and psychological), which position is the more harmonious with a true citizenship for the world?

Introduction

The difficulty of being in contact and understanding the culture of otherness "alterité" is not new. Human history and recent events in Bosnia, Rwanda, Oldham, to name just a few, are outstanding examples that human understanding and respect of the other, based on a religious, racial and cultural perspective, despite numerous legislation, still remains to this day very elusive. The persistent barriers of racism, fear, ignorance and imaginative stereotypes remain constant obstacles to fruitful human relations and need to be addressed and destroyed in order for the human experience to progress.

We have all had the experience of reading historical travel accounts that on the surface present exciting detail descriptions of exotic civilizations and cultures which inhabited our world. We now know, through fundamental historical research that these accounts were completely tainted with passages of ethnocentrism (mostly emanating from the colonial empires of history) and in many ways perpetuated and fostered paternalistic attitudes towards cultures of difference. We also know that the great explorers of the past were mere traders looking for gold, spices, and material wealth and in numerous instances practiced genocide in order to attain their materialistic end. Missionaries under the guise of "saving souls" and the advancement of Christianity really wished to unify the world under their type of religion, believing it was the one "true" religion. Other cultures and civilizations encountered were seen as objects of possession or destruction, as the encounter of the Europeans and the Native Peoples of the Americas. In many ways our modern or post-modern world still functions with this same fear and loathing of the other. In Michael Harrington's world we have replaced the clash of ideologies with the clash of civilizations¹. And as Immanuel Wallerstein would have it, culture is the ideological battleground of the *Modern World System*. Actually both of these distinguished scholars, have stated what in my humble opinion is the obvious.

Cultural clashes began when people started to be on the move, even within their own national and local territories. Throughout history the misrepresentations of cultures, the hatred of different cultures, coupled with an ignorance of cultures have always been the underlying reasons for human conflict. These unchanging realities of our modern world, coupled by the fact that *time* and *space* are no longer insurmountable barriers have fuelled an urgency, especially within the last fifty years of the 20th century, in providing a model for cultural harmonization or at the very least cultural understanding, in the process of human interaction for our new century.

Today, with accessible rapid means of transportation at our disposal, *time* and *distance* have been shortened. The electronic media (e.g. the Internet) provides us with an instantaneous contact with the *other*. However, even with these new scientific developments the question remains, has our facility for rapid physical and virtual travel really put us in contact with the *other* and fostered an understanding of the *other*?²

In reality, do we not displace ourselves (physical travel and virtual travel) in order to seek out what resembles our own image and thereby indirectly making us search for our home? Octavio Paz, in his reflections on multiple identities and a transcultural world, postulates that when we move from one place to the other, we are in reality remaining in the same place.

The recognition that modern societies are no longer monolithic, that the imaginary social space has mushroomed into a multitude of identities has propelled us into a realization that we are in an era where interculturality, transculturalism and the eventual prospect of identifying a cosmopolitan citizenship can become a reality. However we still remain circumscribed by our *Little Italies*, our *China Towns* etc., which beyond the pleasures of experiencing culinary delights, nevertheless create a self illusion that we have attained a level of cultural awareness of the *other*. One wonders, how can this be? Why countries such as Canada which are immigrant nations, have not transgressed to this day the cultural boundaries, which have separated us in the past? Has the policy of Multiculturalism³ established in 1972 succeeded in bridging or of dividing Canadian society?

The object of this text, on the one hand, will be to attempt to bring certain clarifications and to induce a certain reflection on the idea of a how Transculturalism or Multiculturalism should lead to the establishment of a cosmopolitan citizenship. On the other hand, the paper will also present a critical appraisal of the policy of Multiculturalism as it pertains to the understanding and acceptance of the different cultures that inhabit contemporary Canada.

Culture, Multi-culture or Trans-culture.

If culture, is defined by anthropologists and cultural historians as an evolutionary process, how can we still ask if in our contemporary societies, is there such a thing as a pure or unique culture. As Guy Scarpetta, wrote in *L'impureté*⁴, "Impurity is the order of the day. The *we* and *you*, include also the *he* and the *she* of all linguistic groups, of all nationalities, of all the sexes. We are of all the cultures. Each person is a mosaic."⁵

In the social phenomenon of immigration, the movement of individuals or groups is a process of dialogue, a *métissage*, and sometimes confrontation. Has the policy of multiculturalism as applied in Canada since 1972, helped

or hindered this process of dialogue, *métissage* and the recognition of oneself in the *other*. Seen from the outside, multiculturalism as adopted by the Trudeau government of 1972 does in essence seem an enlightened political policy. Who would question an idea of bringing people together, of promoting their cultural heritage so that we could all enrich ourselves? The idea conveys an atmosphere of utopianism, and human progress we cannot reject.

There are of course traditionalists and social conservatives who would prefer a process of integration into one or the other of the two founding cultures (English and French), based on the historical context “of the two founding nations and peoples of Canada”. Following this line of logic, shouldn’t we have all by now integrated into the First Nations of Canada? Were they not the first ones to inhabit this geographical space?

However the question remains has the political policy of multiculturalism lived up to the expectations of creating a cosmopolitan citizenship. Has the policy brought forward by the Liberal Government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau brought us closer to this goal or has it distanced us from it. It must be understood what I mean by cosmopolitan citizenship, is a citizenship that recognizes that each person of that nation-state processes multiple identities that not only link him or her to their own cultural heritage, but also to the culture of the host country, continent, neighborhood, street etc...

We must remember that beyond and long before the policy of multiculturalism there existed multiculturalism as a social phenomenon, one predicated upon immigration coming to Canada from all over the world. In other words before 1971, was Canada objectively multicultural? Of course it was. Multiculturalism is an objective fact produced by immigration, people moving and settling around the world, for whatever reason. Multiculturalism as a social phenomenon, directly linked to worldwide immigration, it did not suddenly exist because a government (in this case the Canadian Government) decreed it so.

Any personal experience, such as my own, of any Canadian growing up especially after World War 2 and attending high school (but equally experienced since the first massive immigrations to Canada of Jews and Italians in 1900) in the major metropolitan cities of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver would attest to the multicultural world that was Canada.

Surrounded by the Budnick’s (Polish), the Spyro’s (Greek), the Charles’ (African-Canadian), the Stessik’s (Ukrainian) etc.. revealed to all who were opened minded that we were living in an immigrant, multicultural and multilingual society. Did these immigrant groups have their own cultural groups? Of course they did. The Polish had their *Dom Polski* halls and their *Saint-Mary’s Church* with the Black Virgin of Cracow. The Italians had their Casa d’Italia’s and every Saturday morning my Ukrainian friends Bob and Walter Weikerchuck would go to *Saint-Michael’s Church* to learn the Ukrainian language and dance. What the policy of multiculturalism of 1971 did was to recognize what was already there.

Multiculturalism: a political policy gone awry?

In recent years many eminent scholars and noted novelists such as Kenneth McRoberts and Neil Bissondath have written about and directed criticisms toward the idea that multiculturalism, as a political policy remains the only

avenue towards a cosmopolitan harmony in Canada. McRoberts in his most recent book⁶, returns to the debate surrounding the policy of multiculturalism and traces the objections on the one hand of Quebec and on the other of prominent left leaning scholars. For Quebec, as reported by McRoberts, the policy of multiculturalism has always been seen as a political ploy to disenfranchise the idea that Quebec is a nation and one of the two founding nations of Canada. McRoberts cites Philip Resnick a prominent Canadian and leftwing scholar as one of the critics as he writes: “English Canada is not some tabula rasa or blank sheet to be recast every time new cultural communities come along”.⁷

As McRoberts states the policy of multiculturalism did meet with support⁸ in the Canadians of British decent community, who saw this policy as a way of differentiating Canada from the United States. Yet thirty years after the installation of this policy McRoberts states: “If multiculturalism policy did help some Canadians feel better integrated into Canadian society and provided a clearer basis of Canadian identity, then it served the cause of national unity. However it is far from clear that this has happened; in fact, cogent arguments have been made to the effect that, multiculturalism has, on the contrary, undermined national unity. With time this arguments seem to have gathered force.”⁹ McRoberts continues, “It has been argued that the policy of multiculturalism has impeded rather than facilitated the integration of immigrants into Canadian society. In effect, there is an inevitable contradiction between the first two goals of the multiculturalism policy, namely preserving cultures and eliminating barriers to mobility. This criticism has even come from the Canadians who ostensibly benefit from the policy.”¹⁰

Actually the harshest critic is the Trinidadian, and Governor General Award winner, novelist Neil Bissonndath. Bissonndath in *Selling Illusions*¹¹, who argues at length that the celebration of cultural diversity (as defined by the policy of multiculturalism) has sustained divisions among Canadians and prevented its supposed beneficiaries from being fully accepted into the mainstream of Canadian life. He states: “Multiculturalism, with all of its festivals and its celebrations, has done- and can do- nothing to foster a factual and clear-minded vision of our neighbors. Depending on stereotype, ensuring that ethnic groups will preserve their distinctiveness in a gentle way, it has done little more than lead an already divided country down the path to further social divisiveness.”¹²

Emmanuel Castells¹³ in his monumental work: “The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture:” writes that with the break down of the 18th century concept of the nation-state, due to rapid globalization, the idea of a primary culture as the sole identity of an individual or a group has reemerged because of a sense of marginalisation. What we must understand by Castells findings is that in a world that is more interconnected (Internet, television, travel) and the advent of the “Global Village” enunciated by Marshall McLuhan in 1954, has produced the opposite effect of distancing cultures and created a return to the concept of national identity. In countries, such as Canada even where the object of the policy of multiculturalism was intended to get away from the primitive concept of a single identity, and foster the concept of interculturalism of multiple identities, this has not happened.

A case in point in recent Canadian history was the Serbian-Canadians who joined in many numbers the Bosnian-Serb militias fighting against the Bosnians in Sarajevo. When the Canadian government accepted, under the protection of the United Nations, to house the temporary stay in Canada of Bosnians coming from the refugee camps, the same Serbian-Canadian community through its leaders denounced and opposed the Canadian government policy as counter productive to Canadian society. Canada who has always opened its gates to immigration and has a deservedly world reputation as the foremost country in the area of peace keeping and peace making, was taken to task by some of its own citizens who felt more local to the reactionary forces killing Bosnians than to the openness of the Canadian soil. How, in this case, did the policy of multiculturalism foster the recognition of the *other*?

Allan Touraine, also states that “very often a political policy of multiculturalism creates and imposes a judicial approach to social interaction and destroys the democratic representative institutions”. Similarly Gilles Bourque and Jules Duchastel in: “Multiculturalisme, Pluralisme et Communauté Politique: Le Canada et le Québec”, conclude that the policy of multiculturalism has led to the atomization of the political process. A policy that at the outset had wished to bring all Canadians together has on the contrary, forgotten the principles on which this nation had originally been founded. No where do we recognize the Québécois as a people (we are not even talking about a nation here) or the Acadian people or even the First Nations. They believe that the policy was inherently political and in many ways has even contributed to today’s impasse with regards to the constitutional issue of Québec.

As they state, “This legalization of social interaction, puts in peril the existence of a political community as the vital cornerstone of democracy, and at the same time erodes the capacity of parliaments to produce democratic rules that encompass the organization of society. It is within this context (of legalization of social interaction) that we find the possible negative side of multiculturalism and the hyphenated citizen”.¹⁴ They go on by quoting Touraine, “On peut, en effet, craindre l’affirmation d’une sorte de pluritribalisme. Cette pluritribalisme est en même temps susceptible d’imposer un rapport fondamentalement clientéliste à l’État dorénavant conçu comme un espace juridique d’inscription des droits que comme un espace public. Comme au 19^{ème} siècle les libéraux ont protégé le marché en s’appuyant sur le droit de propriété, maintenant avec le multiculturalisme il s’agira d’utiliser le droit pour fixer et pour figer les identités et les particularités des identités.”¹⁵

The policy of multiculturalism in Canada has now forced the judiciary and the right of law to define culture, identities, thus making identities a political issue and no longer a societal issue, decided and debated in the public space.

Transculturalism, towards a cosmopolitan citizenship

Of course when one directs any form of criticism, which is the basis of any public and democratic society, towards the policy of multiculturalism in Canada, the response that it engenders is usually dogmatic (an “us” versus “them” attitude). A case in point is this quote from Richard Moore in his

book: *Justice and Political Stability in the Multicultural State*, he states: “Echoing some American critics of multiculturalism, Canadian writers like Richard Gwyn (1995) and Neil Bissoondath (1994) have argued that official multiculturalism is leading to ghettoization, where immigrants are encouraged to form self-contained ghettos alienated from the mainstream.”¹⁶ We can agree or disagree with the characterization of the arguments of Gwyn and Bissoondath, but this is not the question here. Notice the reference to “American”, in other words to criticize official multiculturalism, you must surely be close to the Americans, maybe even a closet American.

In other words for a Canadian nationalist the worst insult for any Canadian who dares criticize or detract from the political mainstream of Canadian society, in this case the policy of multiculturalism, is to be called or lumped together with the Americans. Precisely because multiculturalism has become a political policy and not left to its social prerogatives, it has become in the public space “untouchable” and therefore any possibility of voicing a different position is frowned upon.

To be fair we must recognize in the policy of multiculturalism that it has contributed to the exercise of establishing the different cultural communities of Canada. It has affirmed and established through governmental public policy the concrete reality of contemporary Canada. It has not objectively, built the necessary bridges to do away with racism and bigotry. This is done in a very effectual fashion by Canada’s and Quebec’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms

It has created a basis from which to build on. It has kept alive the different cultures that inhabit Canada, from which a cosmopolitan citizenship can be envisaged. It is precisely this that must be put in perspective.

Multiculturalism is only the first level, the first rung in the socio-cultural ladder and not the ultimate goal of society. In the Canadian case it has recognized as I have stated earlier, the obvious, that Canada being an immigrant nation is multicultural.

The next step, in my humble opinion, is transculturalism. The South American scholar Fernando Ortiz originally defined Transculturalism in 1940. His thinking which was based on the celebrated article of José Martí published in 1891 entitled, “Nuestra America” put forward the idea that intercultural mixed peoples (*métissage*) was the key in legitimizing the American, meaning hemispheric, identity. Martí referred to the process of *métissage* (*métizos* in Latino) as a distinctive trait of a culture that is founded on the Native population, and all the different immigrant groups who had come and are still coming to the Americas. In Martí’s thinking, the inhabitants of the Americas were biologically and culturally *métis* and therefore always part of the dialectic with the *other*.

Ortiz, following Martí’s lead, defined transculturalism, in its earliest stage as a synthesis of two phases occurring simultaneously, one being a deculturalization of the past with a *métissage* with the present. This reinventing of new common culture is therefore based on the meeting and the intermingling of the different peoples and cultures. In other words one’s identity is not strictly one dimensional (the self) but is now defined and more importantly recognized in rapport with the *other*. In other words one’s identity is not singular but multiple. As Scarpetta stated earlier “Each

person is a mosaic”

Lamberto Tassinari (director of the transcultural magazine in Montreal, called *Vice Versa*), suggests that we can imagine and envision transculturalism as a new form of humanism, based on the idea of relinquishing the strong traditional identities and cultures which in many cases were products of imperialistic empires, interspersed with dogmatic religious values. Contrary to multiculturalism, which most experiences have shown re-enforces boundaries based on past cultural heritages, transculturalism is based on the breaking down of boundaries. In many ways transculturalism, by proposing a new humanism of the recognition of the *other*, based on a culture of *métissage*, is in opposition to the singular traditional cultures that have evolved from the nation-state.

Transculturalism, places the concept of culture at the center of a redefinition of the nation-state or even the disappearance of the nationstate. This process of recognizing oneself in the *other* leads inevitably to a cosmopolitan citizenship. This citizenship, independent of political structures and institutions, develops each individual in the understanding that one’s culture is multiple, *métis* and that each human experience and existence is due to the contact with *other*, who in reality is like, oneself. Transculturalism is not a total objective reality, there has to be a conscious subjective component which must express itself in the public space, in a democratic fashion without political interference.

With the integration of Europe and the Americas, have lead many researchers to question the validity of globalization on a human and cultural scale. To integrate markets by breaking down protective tariff barriers have been done with the stroke of a pen. Yet the globalization of cultures, the integration of peoples, the *métissage* with the *other* and the eventual recognition in the *other*, is totally another matter. What is lacking in this globalization discourse is a cultural concept of the world. We have an economic concept, a political concept, yet, the one that remains the most important in our Global Village, the question of multiple identities without barriers, based on the movement and flow of peoples and of society is absent.

In conclusion therefore, a journey from multiculturalism to transculturalism, which would open the horizons and eventually lead to a cosmopolitan citizenship, forces us to envision the world through a cultural prism. Culture, therefore becomes the eyeglasses through which we analyze, project and solution our problems. Culture therefore becomes all encompassing, recognizing the interaction without barriers among peoples as the basis of a world outlook. The policy of multiculturalism on the contrary has created borders and boundaries, while social multiculturalism or transculturalism left to a conscious ebb and flow of interculturality, emanating from the grass roots and not imposed and defined by government, projects this vision.

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Endnotes

- 1 Please see, Michael Harrington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998.
- 2 In this paper reference to the *other*, means the cultures, the races and the languages that differ from the subject "I". The world therefore is a cornucopia of *otherness*, and it is this reality that forms the basis, contrary to the struggle for material wealth, of the human experience and for human progress.
- 3 It is import here to distinguish between the policy of multiculturalism and social multiculturalism. Unfortunately when people refer to multiculturalism they are referring to the political policy established by the government of Pierre Trudeau as their sole reference to the concept of multiculturalism. Canada being a nation of immigrants has always been a nation of multiculturalism, of social multiculturalism. This distinction is important in order to dispel the falsehood that before 1972, multiculturalism did not exist and nothing was done to create a "raprochement" between the different cultures making up Canada of the 20th century.
- 4 Please see, Guy Scarpetta, *L'impurité*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.
- 5 Ibid.,p26
- 6 Please see Kenneth McRoberts, *Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity*, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- 7 Ibid, p.133.
- 8 The major defender and proponent for a government policy of multiculturalism was the Ukrainian community out of Winnipeg, who felt that with the rise of Quebecois nationalism of the sixties, they were being left out with meager government support for their cultural activities. Lack of funding, basically a budgetary problem actually fuelled the debate. The support grew among other cultural community leaders who wanted also to be heard also fearing of being left out. Throughout the years, there have be people such as Will Kymlicka, noted

philosopher who has developed a more ideological position, please see Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Clarendon Press, 1995, and has become the primary and constant defender of the government policy.

9 Kenneth McRoberts., op.cit., p.131.

10 Ibid., p.131.

11 Please see Neil Bissondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, Penguin, 1994.

12 Ibid., p.63.

13 Please see, Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: The Rise of the Network Society* V.1, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

14 Gilles Bourque and Jules Duchastel, *Multiculturalisme, pluralisme et communauté politique; le Canada et le Québec*, Presses Université Laval, 1997. P.46.

15 Ibid., p.54

16 Please see Richard Moore, *Justice and Political Stability in the Multicultural State*, Toronto, p.55,