

MULTICULTURALISM OR TRANSCULTURALISM? VIEWS ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Abstract

The present article is a critique of multiculturalism and transculturalism in an attempt to gather different opinions about conceptualizing cultural diversity in multi-ethnic states. Multiculturalism represents the foundation on which an entire national policy was built after 1970 in Canada. The article presents the many interpretations of multiculturalism (or cultural pluralism as it has been called) which range from sociology to culture and politics. Some of the most famous debates on multiculturalism are analyzed. Can transculturalism (also known as cosmopolitanism) be the solution for harmonious cultural interaction? The article explores this possibility and discusses different theoretical standpoints.

Keywords: multiculturalism, Canada, segregation, integration, transculturalism

Motto:

*I do not want my house to be walled in on
all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I
want the cultures of all the lands to be
blown about my house as freely as possible.
But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.
Mahatma Gandhi²*

Introduction

An icon of non-violent civil disobedience, Mahatma Gandhi, the famous Father of the Indian nation uttered the words I mentioned as a motto in the context of a colonized India. He remains to this day one of the most outstanding proponents of national freedom in the world. His viewpoint on cultural diversity and intercultural communication is an appropriate starting point for my present paper. The aim of this article is to offer a critique of the different approaches to multiculturalism with a focus on the Canadian context. Another purpose I wish to achieve is to try and analyze to what extent the fairly recent concept of transculturalism could add to or replace multiculturalism. Is there the perfect solution to cultural diversity?

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Multiculturalism

When we first encounter the word “multiculturalism” we can easily grasp its meaning just by paying attention to its formation. The prefix “multi-” near the stem “cultural” gives us enough information at first glance so that we understand the term describes a concept which has to do with a number of different cultures. The fact that the word is an “ism” (i.e. it ends with the suffix “-ism”) can lead us to the conclusion that the term might represent an ideology, a doctrine, a belief system.

In fact there are different values of “multiculturalism” according to its use. Its foremost meaning was a political one. It emerged in the 1960s in the Anglophone countries to stand for the newly acknowledged situation of non-European migrants.

The term represents the grounds on which an entire national policy was built in Canada starting with the 1970s. It is here that the word “multiculturalism” acquired most of its importance and developed three other layers of meaning.

Pierre Trudeau, Canada’s Prime Minister, introduced multiculturalism as an official policy in 1970 and in 1988 the Multiculturalism Act was adopted. The latter declared multiculturalism to be a “fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity” (Trudeau qtd. in Kymlicka, 1998: 185).

From the standpoint of an official state policy, multiculturalism deals with the management of cultural diversity of all minority ethnic and racial groups. To serve this purpose multiculturalism was shaped as a number of formal initiatives at the federal, provincial and municipal levels in Canada. The main objectives of the policy when it first came into being in the 1970s were:

- *To assist cultural groups to retain and foster their identity;*
- *To assist cultural groups to overcome barriers to their full participation in Canadian society;*
- *To promote creative exchanges among all Canadian cultural groups;*
- *To assist immigrants in acquiring at least one of the official languages.”* (Dewing, 2009: 4)

According to the research of Michael Dewing, besides the political interpretation of multiculturalism there are also the descriptive, the prescriptive and the intergroup dynamics definitions (Dewing, 2009: 1).

In terms of its descriptive interpretation, multiculturalism (also known as cultural pluralism) is considered a sociological fact (Dewing, 2009: 1). In Canada multiculturalism refers to the presence of diverse racial and ethnic minorities who define themselves as different and wish to remain as such.

Prescriptively, multiculturalism is an ideology (Dewing, 2009: 1), a set of ideas and ideals supporting a celebration of cultural diversity in Canada.

The fourth interpretation of multiculturalism is the intergroup dynamics definition which sees multiculturalism as a process through which ethnic and racial minorities compete to obtain support from authorities in order to achieve certain aspirations (Dewing, 2009: 1).

No matter its meaning and function, multiculturalism has been both acclaimed and criticized by sociologists, cultural critics, politicians, literary critics and so on. If there is one thing we can't deny it is that multiculturalism has become a buzzword all over the world and it has acquired mostly a positive connotation. Nevertheless, there are voices that point out the drawbacks of this policy. In the following part of the paper I will attempt to illustrate how proponents and opponents of multiculturalism motivate their stances and I will try to draw some conclusions. The final part of the article will be concerned with comparing the ideals of multiculturalism with the ones of transculturalism, a concept that may be seen as an alternative to the much debated multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism: The Pros and Cons

The multicultural approach of ethnic and racial diversity in Canada appeared from a need to regulate the relationship established on the one hand between the growing number of immigrants and the Canadian state and on the other hand between immigrant groups and the larger Canadian society. Since immigrants were facing issues like discrimination on the job market, in schools or in public areas, there was a substantial amount of public pressure from minority groups demanding to be formally considered as Canadians. The multicultural policy is seen as a response to this pressure that actually forced the official bodies to reconsider the definition of Canadian identity as bicultural.

In time, the multicultural policy has attracted both positive and negative assessments. Although multiculturalism arose from a desire of minority groups to be seen as active participants to the life of Canadian community, writers and critics belonging to ethnic groups have blamed the policy to be emphasizing a segregated view of minorities.

Both the pros and the cons are strongly supported by arguments and I shall try to summarize in the following part some of the most heated debates.

India Integration or Segregation?

The very concept of “integration” has been recently challenged. There is concern over the offense it might bring to minorities. The word is charged with actually standing for assimilation by the host country’s national culture.

In his article *International Migration and Liberal Democracies-The Challenges of Integration*, Rainer Bauböck enumerates different uses of the term “integration”:

[It] can be understood in three different ways: as inclusion of outsiders or newcomers into an already established society, but also as cohesion, as the internal integration of that society itself that makes it a stable and bounded social entity. Finally, as in ‘European integration’, the concept can refer to a process of federation, the forming of a larger union from various societies. (Bauböck, 2001: 43)

The critic goes on to highlight the inevitable confusion which arises when using this term without providing an explanation of the exact context in which the word is used. He also mentions that recently there have been attempts to completely replace “integration” with terms like “inclusion”, “incorporation” or “settlement” in order to avoid the misapprehension of the word (Bauböck, 2001: 43).

I use here the term “integration” to stand for the first meaning mentioned by Bauböck, namely the inclusion of immigrants in the host society which can also be replaced, for the sake of political correctness, with the concept of “settlement”.

Among the commentators of multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka has proven one of its greatest proponents. In his book, *Politics in the Vernacular. Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship*, he speaks of the impressive achievement of multiculturalism in Canada. He views this policy as greatly contributing to the transformation of Canada in an enriched society. “Immigrants”, he points out, “have integrated into the existing political system, just as they have integrated economically and socially, and have contributed enormously to the economic, political and cultural life of the larger society” (Kymlicka, 2001:159). He mentions a mutual process of change taking place between various minority groups and the larger Canadian society. In his opinion we cannot talk of assimilation anymore since we can notice a constant exchange of cultural values between members of both parties.

He proposes the concept of “pluralistic integration” which “does not involve the preservation of distinct cultures (since ethnic identities weaken and incorporate aspects of the larger culture) but nor is it assimilation (since ethnic groups change the larger society as they integrate)” (Kymlicka, 2001: 169).

Will Kymlicka does not go into details as to what those changes of the larger society would be when in constant contact with minority groups. But in his description of the benefits of integration he pursues the Us-Them divide which is attacked by critics such as Neil Bissoondath and Amita Handa.

Author Neil Bissoondath is one of the harshest opponents of the Canadian multiculturalism policy. The Trinidad-born novelist claims in his book, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, that the promotion of cultural diversity through the Multiculturalism Act is actually stressing the divide between the mainstream culture and the different ethnic cultures. He speaks of a “psychology of separation” which immigrants are encouraged to adopt and which in the end determines ethnic groups to form enclaves within the Canadian society. Bissoondath argues that the official recognition of ethnic groups leads to their isolation and deepens the gap between them and the larger Canadian society. By emphasizing the importance of maintaining ethnic identity as different from Canadian identity, multiculturalism enforces division and not integration (Bissoondath, 1994: 218).

Amita Handa, in her book *Of Silk Saris and Mini Skirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture*, explores the life of second-generation South-Asian women in Toronto, caught, as the author states, “not between two cultures, but between omissions, between fragments of themselves” (Handa, 2003: 3). Handa accuses the multicultural policy to have constructed a fragmented identity for Canada in which minority groups are envisaged as outsiders in need of legitimation.

She forwards the idea that the concept of “cultural tolerance” promoted by the Multiculturalism Act hides a racist approach to ethnic groups. “Tolerance” means respecting the beliefs of others but also allowing freedom of choice and behavior. I believe that Handa perceives this attitude as offensive from the standpoint of the position of power it implies on the part of the government officials. She says that “part of the invisibility of white as norm has to do with a discourse of multiculturalism that emphasizes tolerance” (Handa, 2003: 91). She goes even further to justify her opinion by quoting Christopher Husbands who in a study published in 1994 spoke of an anxiety concerning national identity visible in the UK, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Netherlands. Amita Handa paraphrases Husbands: “Lurking beneath white anxieties about immigrants is the fear of being outnumbered demographically by “foreigners”, as well as a perceived threat of cultural dilution.” (Handa, 2003: 101).

In the Canadian case the very purpose of the Multiculturalism Act was to avoid such perceptions of immigrants hence its stress on their full participation in Canada’s society.

In his effort to support the purposes of multiculturalism Kymlicka argues that one should not ignore the fact that this policy is just a part of a greater picture. Multiculturalism, he writes, is “a relatively minor policy in the overall scheme of things. The primary pillars of government-sponsored integration are the policies on naturalization, education, and employment and all of these pillars of integration remain fully in place” (Kymlicka, 2001: 171).

One explanation of the reason why multiculturalism gave rise to such conflicting opinions is offered by Anne Phillips in her work *Multiculturalism without Culture*. She believes that problems appeared because of the representation of culture as a “falsely homogenizing reification”. She goes on and states that “ multiculturalism appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straightjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves” (Phillips, 2007: 14). Ironically, while trying to promote cultural diversity, the multicultural project “has encouraged us to view peoples and cultures as more systematically different than they are” (Phillips, 2007: 25).

The issue here is again defining terms. Phillips builds her argument taking into consideration the fact that any given culture cannot be considered a static entity. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identities have roots, have histories, but they “undergo constant transformation” (Hall, 1995: 435). From this point of view, a multicultural policy which emphasizes group cultural authenticity may be understood as “contributing to forms of cultural stereotyping” (Phillips, 2007: 25).

Transculturalism: The Salad or the Melting Pot?

Recently, there have been new developments concerning the issue of fostering different cultural identities within the borders of multi-ethnic states. The concept of transculturalism, also known as cosmopolitanism, is becoming more and more appealing to critics. In his *Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah defines a cosmopolitan as “someone who thinks that the world is, so to speak, our shared hometown, reproducing something very like the self-conscious oxymoron of the ‘global village’” (Appiah, 2005: 217). If we compare transculturalism to multiculturalism the essential difference between them stems from the way we perceive their outcomes. Cultural diversity is seen either as a melting of cultural markers (transculturalism) or as a gathering of multiple and distinct contributions to the mainstream culture (multiculturalism).

Trying to accommodate different cultural identities in the multi-ethnic states is a complicated endeavor. As we have seen, the multiculturalist project was intensely criticized, although nobody can neglect its role for the acknowledgement of cultural diversity issues.

Donald Cuccioletta, in his article “Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship”, supports cosmopolitanism as the solution to the drawbacks of the multicultural project. He starts by acknowledging the importance of multiculturalism as a social and political policy mentioning both its merits and its flaws. Then he goes on to state that multiculturalism is actually “the first level, the first rung in the socio-cultural ladder” (Cuccioletta, 2002: 8) towards building a cosmopolitan citizenship. According to him, a “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, neighbourhood, street etc” (Cuccioletta, 2002: 4). He draws his theory from an early study of Fernando Ortiz who in 1965 defined transculturalism as a

synthesis of two phases occurring simultaneously, one being a de-culturalization of the past with a métissage with the present. This new reinventing of the 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 (Ortiz qtd. in Cuccioletta, 2002: 8).

What transculturalism offers is a breaking down of cultural boundaries, not their re-enforcement (as in the case of multiculturalism). We no longer speak of integration of a minority culture into the mainstream, but of an interweaving of all cultural identities present in a nation-state. Embracing some of the cultural specifics of different ethnicities, fostering the Other and “recognizing oneself in the other” (Cuccioletta, 2002: 9, emphasis in original) is, in Donald Cuccioletta’s opinion the recipe to building a cosmopolitan citizenship.

Roy L. Brooks also talks about transculturalism or cosmopolitanism. In his view, this concept represents a “convergence” of cultures, “each social group” contributing “something of value to a new, blended mainstream culture” (Brooks, 2012: 24-25). Contrary to Cuccioletta, Brooks denies transculturalism the merit of being the solution for harmonious cultural dialogue. He favours the multicultural approach which he calls cultural pluralism. In his opinion

Transculturalism creates a dilemma for groups thrown into the mix. These groups cannot escape cultural hegemony, as each group contributing to the new melting pot will have to surrender some (perhaps most) of its own identity as it assumes a new identity in the mainstream. (Brooks, 2012: 25)

This loss of cultural markers which Roy L. Brooks sees as part and parcel of transculturalism represents for the critic an undeserving sacrifice. As mentioned earlier, he brings arguments to support the multicultural (cultural pluralist) agenda.

His simile describing the cultural interactions from a multicultural perspective is quite interesting:

[...] cultural pluralism ordains cultural identity. Each group maintains racial and ethnic distinctions. [...] There simply is no mainstream; there are only mainstreams. There is no single cultural canon; there are instead many canons. The groups mix like a salad— lettuce, carrots, cucumbers, and other vegetables are readily identifiable. Except as indicated in a moment, each group thrown into the mix is given equal respect and cultural legitimacy within its respective realm or ambit of influence.
(Brooks, 2012: 27; emphasis mine)

The “salad” imagery aptly represents the critic’s perspective on cultural interactions from a multicultural viewpoint. Maintaining ethnic variations is for him the ideal scenario for an effective cultural exchange. Nevertheless, Roy Brooks’s approach (as Kymlicka’s for that matter) does not offer details as to how could these different “mainstreams” coexist in the multi-ethnic state.

For other critics, such as Ann Brooks, transculturalism is no longer a purely theoretical concept, but a practice which has had an impact on perceptions of individual cultural identities. Here is Ann Brooks’s view:

Transculturalism and transnationalism have produced new conceptions of subjecthood, subjectivity and identity as new cultural and ethnic boundaries have emerged. These new cultural and ethnic identities carry with them the need for new conceptions of subjectivity and require the opening-up of new subject positions and new spaces and places from which to speak. This emphasis requires a transdisciplinary approach to the analysis of representation and identity. (Brooks, 2007: 184)

Ann Brooks recognizes that the field of cultural studies has become a “global interdisciplinary forum” (Brooks, 2007: 185) which has had a vital role for the expansion of the transcultural conceptualizations. Yet, even if cosmopolitanism has not acquired so many negative connotations through critical debates, it does not succeed in offering the best solution to nowadays multiplicity of cultural identities present within the borders of nation-states.

Conclusions

At the end of this short overview of different discussions of multiculturalism and its impact as both a social and a political practice, and having in mind the fairly recent theories concerning transculturalism, I believe that the issue of ethnic (cultural) interactions within nation-states is far from being solved. Although

Cuccioletta's approach seems the most appealing, attaining the goals of transculturalism appears quite distant. Fear, stereotypes, ignorance still impede people from developing a non-judgmental attitude towards foreignness, forgetting that the globalizing trend has already managed to bring us closer and make us borrow alien behaviours and customs. I believe that accepting difference, not tolerating it, embracing and practising diversity are the possible keys towards understanding the plurality of cultures that inhabit nowadays multi-ethnic states.

Whether these principles are promoted via political channels or simply through education and exposure to difference, the future will be hopefully one fostering transcultural attitudes and harmonious cultural interactions.

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