

Great Canadian Question: Identity Revolution

Title: O Canada! The first post modern state; Redefining social cohesion

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As the forces of globalization work to transcend 'the nation', countries are no longer distinct from each other on the basis of a homogenous race and culture. Nationalism, as a distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Bissoondath, 2002, p.217), is being challenged. The pressure of immigrants is growing stronger and dual citizenships are becoming commonplace, particularly in Canada. Canada is a model for the world, leading the way toward becoming the first post-modern state that attempts to include diversity without assimilating it; embrace differences while simultaneously providing a cohesive de-centered civil society that people can identify with. Canada's 'official multicultural' policy is a step in the right direction by creating a *multi-centered* country. However, if this policy does not continue to evolve toward a *de-centered* Canada, Canada's 'multicultural mosaic' (Madison, 2000) risks segregating the country until cohesion is no longer possible.

The articles by Naomi Klein and Neil Bissoondath are critical of Canada's current identity, or lack of identity. Naomi Klein asserts that the struggle between the French and English majority is obscuring the greater diversity in Canada, and that despite multicultural policy, immigrants are still treated as foreigners rather than citizens. Neil Bissoondath challenges the 'mosaic' image used to describe Canada's shallow multiculturalism. He argues that it reduces individuals to their ethnicity, it makes a mockery of culture, and it segregates and divides. Similarly, I am critical of Canada's current identity as a 'mosaic' and multicultural nation. My essay challenges the benefits of cultural absolutism, and espouses the advantages of adaptation rather than assimilation. Official multiculturalism is a shallow and superficial attempt to manage diversities under a façade of unity while ignoring deeper issues of diversity and inequality. Canada needs to continue to evolve towards a cohesive society grounded in a civic culture (Madison, 2002, p.57) that seeks to engage 'the other'. Canada needs to 'remove the grout, and open up the mosaic' (Bissoondath, 2002, p.239). In order to discover its true identity, Canada needs to be honest with itself and stop hiding and avoiding issues through formalities and policies.

Of course, official multiculturalism does provide valuable protection to minorities as it "challenges the compulsory assimilation of minorities, and that is a good thing. But it is also a problem because it may prevent individuals from breaking out of their ethnic shells to participate fully and equally in society" (Fleras & Elliot, 2002, 109). Bissoondath shares Laura Sabia's sentiment when she writes, "I, for one, refuse to be hyphenated. I am a Canadian, first and foremost. Don't hyphenate me" (Sabia, as cited in Bissoondath, 2000, p.240). These feelings are similar to those of a Chinese student at

Dalhousie University in Halifax. Her Chinese name is Wei, but recently she changed it to Melody; a decision that represents her desire to fully embrace Canadian culture and life. During a student conference we attended in September 2006, everyone was allowed to choose a particular workshop or session to attend for the afternoon. She was approached by a well-meaning Canadian woman who politely commented on how good her English was, and then proceeded to suggest she join the group of Chinese students who were attending a workshop that was being presented in their own language, where she might be more 'comfortable'. Melody was furious at this assumption, and for the rest of the conference she distanced herself from the other Chinese students as much as she could, frustrated with the way they segregated themselves from the other Canadians. For some it is a struggle to step beyond the safety of their cultural boundaries that the Canadian government has circumscribed for them.

Madison makes a careful distinction between "the 'cultural' rights of individuals" (Madison, 2000, p.24) being respected, and the " 'cultures' themselves [being] deserving of 'equal respect'" (Madison, 2000, p.24). Individuals should feel free to identify as adherents to certain religions or belonging to certain cultures, but it is when collective rights affirm 'cultures themselves', multiculturalism begins to divide the population. Those who argue for collective rights in light of the "Multiculturalism Act... [concerning] the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians" (Fleras & Elliot, 2002, p.66), are making several assumptions; that culture is static and that culture *should remain static*, an isolated 'thing' outside of time. Fairfield observes that cultural absolutism is really more concerned with achieving certain unrealistic outcomes rather than anything to do with the rights, freedoms, and opportunities of individuals (Fairfield, 2002, p.130). A group is made up of a variety of unique individuals, and Bissoondath refers to attempts at cultural absolutism as betraying the individual (Bissoondath, 2000, p.98). The truth is "culture is life. It is a living, breathing, multi-faceted entity in constant evolution. It alters everyday" (Bissoondath, 2000, p.75), and any attempt to preserve culture as an undiluted entity until the end of time, is unrealistic, causes harm with its arrogant ignorance, and contributes to divisive strategies at work within Canada.

I am not supporting assimilation, but adaptation. There is an expectation, perhaps even an obligation as a Canadian citizen, to go beyond the rigid 'mosaic' to both give (contribute) and receive (absorb and adapt), and involve oneself in an exchange. This exchange is what will hold together the new civic community. Richard Gwyn clearly expresses the oversight of Canada's multiculturalism:

The real reason for multiculturalism's obsolescence is that it assumes that our future is to be multicultural, multiracial, multicoloured. Instead, our future is likely to be – and should be – cross-cultural, cross-racial, cross-coloured... by treating differences of race, ethnicity, colour, as integral to identity rather than as manifestations of heritage, official multiculturalism encourages apartheid, or, to be a bit less harsh, ghettoism. (Gwyn, 1995, p.274)

What is so frightening about a cultural hybrid? For those that relish the safety of their clearly defined segregated groups, the cultural hybrid is a challenge to the narrow identity they cling to. Bissoondath envisions “a nation of cultural hybrids... where every individual is unique, every individual distinct. And every individual is Canadian, undiluted and undivided” (Bissoondath, 2000, p.241). In this diverse and globalizing country, it is only a post modern state of cultural hybrids that will be able to create peaceful cohesion and a sense of belonging.

We need to move beyond the tolerance that official multiculturalism espouses, beyond mere ethnic festivals of song and dance, beyond “culture Disneyfied” (Bissoondath, 2000, p.77), in order to come to a deep understanding and an acceptance. Canadians need to learn how to engage ‘the other’. Bissoondath compares tolerance with understanding: “tolerance...it is a shrug of indifference that entails more than a hint of condescension... [it] requires no effort... understanding, in contrast, requires effort... but may lead to acceptance and, for the new, a *sense of belonging*” (Bissoondath, 2000, p.193). It is this new sense of belonging, grounded in the willingness to understand and engage the other that will hopefully provide the social cohesion and common identity Canada needs. Canadians need to dismiss the effortless belonging and the easy tolerance that both nationalism and official multiculturalism offer. It will not be easy establishing a cohesive post modern state that demands that people refuse to withdraw into segregated groups, and insists that people actively seek out ‘the other’ to engage them in order to *understand* ‘the other’ and *accept* ‘the other’. However, the benefits of this new form of social cohesion, built on the willingness to engage the other, holds incredible possibilities that will be well worth the effort.

It is unrealistic and naïve to think that Canadian hockey, the Canadian maple leaf, and CBC will hold our ‘multi-centered’ Canada together. Canada needs to continue evolving toward becoming a decentralized post modern state. The walls “between the shards of the mosaic” (Bissoondath, 2000, p.239) need to come down, even if this initially disturbs people’s sense of belonging and identity. A new metaphor is necessary, a metaphor that is neither a ‘melting pot’, nor a ‘mosaic’. As we leave official multiculturalism by the wayside and begin to dismantle the mosaic; “as individuals make their way through territory previously unknown, distinctiveness will blur in the [mosaic] shards but take shape in the whole” (Bissoondath, 2000, p.239). Perhaps a metaphor of a ‘water color painting’ is an appropriate replacement for the mosaic. A water color painting is a mixture of many colors. It does not attempt to maintain the purity of each color, and yet it tries to avoid creating a picture where all the colors merge into a single color. Instead, the colors are allowed to bleed and blend in to each other, blurring the edges of distinction and creating a fluid and imaginative picture. When using water color paints there is always the risk that using too much water, or too much paint, will cause colors to assimilate other colors; to mix and produce a uniform, dull brownish color. However, with faith in humanity’s creativity and diversity, ‘painting with water colors’ is worth the risk because of the possibility of discovering exciting *new* colors; the possibilities inherent in a Canadian cultural hybrid.

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