

Multicultiphobia and “official multiculturalism”

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Politics is *in part* a battle over the meaning of words. Imagine, for example, a parallel universe where U.S. fundamentalist Pat Robertson’s definition of feminism had become dominant: “Feminism is a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” If you *don’t* remember that vivid definition, it’s because feminists have at least been successful enough to prevent the most outrageous characterizations of their dream from becoming “accepted wisdom.”

Consider, on the other hand, competing definitions of socialism. For Karl Polanyi, it represents a necessary attempt by any industrial civilization to tame the market, to put the economy at the service of a democratic society. Sarah Palin, on the other hand, defines it as... Well, I don’t quite know how she defines it. But I *do* know that when she declares that “Obama is leading America towards socialism,” it’s an accusation, not a compliment. It’s clear which understanding of socialism – democratic requirement or ominous menace – is more influential in North America today. The eclipse of socialism is both a cause and an effect of the popularity of the word’s bogeyman connotations.

Lose the political struggle, and you’ve lost the battle for meaning. Lose the battle for meaning, and political success is that much more difficult.

Which brings us to multiculturalism.

It’s a commonplace that the word multiculturalism means different things to different people. But in research for my book *Multicultiphobia*, I came across a remarkable aspect of this confusion: “official multiculturalism.”

Normally, we expect the phrase “official X” to refer to a government understanding or definition of X. Thus, “official unemployment” would naturally refer to a government definition of the concept. The “official line on Afghanistan” denotes the ongoing spin coming out of DFAIT, DND, the PMO, and so on.

Not so with “official multiculturalism.” All sorts of claims are made about it. These claims are almost never supported by reference to some official source. When, for example, a *Calgary Sun* article declares that “official multiculturalism” tells immigrants that “You’re coming to live in a country so confused and degenerate we’ve decided our culture isn’t worth preserving, defending or extending,” evidence is neither offered nor, it would seem, expected.

The roots of this strange practice? Anti-immigration activist Martin Collacott offers a

clue, when he claims that:

The nature as well as the drawbacks of official multicultural policy has been amply described by a number of well-known Canadian writers. Notable among them are Richard Gwyn in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*, Neil Bissoondath in *The Cult of Multiculturalism: The Selling of Illusions*, Jack Granatstein in *Who Killed Canadian History?* and Daniel Stoffman in *Who Gets In?*

Because these works have “amply described” the “official” policy, no first-hand study is required. That the works of Bissoondath, Granatstein & Co contain almost no direct citations of official sources does not trouble him, nor the many others who have followed their lead.

But notice something else: Collacott’s mangling of the titles of Bissoondath and Gwyn’s books. This suggests that his understanding of “official multiculturalism” is based on books that he *has not even read*. He is not alone in this: in the 1990s, many Reform Party M.P.s embraced Bissoondath’s rendering of “official multiculturalism,” citing not his book itself, but “a recent article in *Saturday Night* magazine” or “an editorial dealing with Mr. Bissoondath’s latest book.”

This practice of relying on the vision of multiculturalism concocted by Bissoondath and others continues. If you have access to a news database, plug in the phrase “official multiculturalism” and check how many times the usage actually refers to some official document or statement. Of forty-five *National Post* articles that use the phrase, for example, just two make some reference to actual government policy. For the rest, “official multiculturalism” is a versatile bogeyman that: contributed to the Air India bombing; leads to “importing prejudices and nursing antipathies”; encourages “anti-Semitic, anti-Western sentiment”; prevents Canada from thwarting terrorist plots; and on, and on.

Nearly a half-century ago, philosopher Herbert Marcuse critiqued an authoritarian language that “speaks in constructions which impose upon the recipient the slanted and abridged meaning.” True then. True now. The hypnotic power of “official multiculturalism” seems to prevent those who hear and read the phrase from asking whether the wild claims made about it are really true.

Of course the word “multiculturalism” is often used without an adjective. But the chronic misrepresentation of “official multiculturalism” spares people the effort of trying to understand what the explicit goals of the policy were, the concrete means by which those goals have been pursued, and, just as importantly, the ways in which successive governments have *failed* to pursue those goals with sufficient energy.

The misrepresentation, in other words, spares people from any serious reflection on issues connected with diversity, inclusion and justice. They can retreat into a set of simple polar opposites: minority Canadians should integrate rather than huddling together in ghettos, they should become “like us,” embrace our values, rather than

“clinging to their old traditions,” and so on.

Today, some would throw up their hands and declare the battle for the meaning of multiculturalism to be lost. “Multiculturalism should be struck from the national vocabulary,” declares the *Globe and Mail*: we will “refocus the debate” by talking about “pluralism” instead. This innocuous word will apparently lead Canadians to “take their civic role more seriously.”

This proposal has been floated by Jason Kenney since 2008. But it is profoundly unwise. First, as we have collectively failed to fix the meaning of “multiculturalism” in the national mind, why assume that “pluralism” will remain immune from conflicting interpretations? If there is anything that the sad history of Canadian multicultiphobia has taught us, it is that an ideal opposed by many media and political elites will always be vulnerable to caricature and misrepresentation.

And there is a greater cost. The Kenney-Globe proposal would declare to the country and the world that *something* has failed in Canada. Just what is that *something*? Well, we don’t know, do we, because we were unwilling or unable to clarify just what we wanted Canadian multiculturalism to become. But despite decades of opposition and vituperative ridicule, this *something* has been embraced by millions of Canadians as one of the aspects of Canada they most cherish. To bury the word “multiculturalism” will grieve many Canadians who hope for a more just and inclusive society, and perhaps embolden those with a very different, and much nastier, vision.

Politics is *in part* a battle over the meaning of words. But it is many other things as well. At its best, it can be a space in which a society consciously reflects on what it wishes to become. Issues related to multiculturalism can be a rich stimulus to such reflection, as they touch on so many of our important values and hopes. Fiddling with vocabulary, declaring “Multiculturalism is dead, long live pluralism,” will not magically solve social problem and controversies.

In the end, we have little choice: we must continue our collective reflection, however wearying and frustrating we may find it.