**Canadian multiculturalism and its progressive critics**

**Brief intro**

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In 1914, Henry Ford’s company created the Ford English School, to teach its immigrant workers, not just English, but the whole “American way of life.” In his 1922 classic, *Public opinion*, Walter Lippmann describes a July 4, 1917, graduation ceremony for the school, held at a baseball field:

In the center of the baseball park at second base stood a huge wooden and canvas pot. There were flights of steps up to the rim on two sides. After the audience had settled itself, and the band had played, a procession came through an opening at one side of the field. It was made up of men of all the foreign nationalities employed in the factories. They wore their native costumes, they were singing their national songs; they danced their folk dances, and carried the banners of all Europe. The master of ceremonies was the principal of the grade school dressed as Uncle Sam. He led them to the pot. He directed them up the steps to the rim, and inside. He called them out again on the other side. They came, dressed in derby hats, coats, pants, vest, stiff collar and polka-dot tie, undoubtedly, said my friend, each with an Eversharp pencil in his pocket, and all singing the Star-Spangled Banner. (Lippmann 2004, 47)

Just as Henry Ford captured the spirit of industrial Fordism with his declaration that “Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black” (1922, 72), the “cultural Fordism” manifest in the ballpark suggests that you can be any colour you want so long as you “act white.”[[1]](#endnote-1) And cultural Fordism, like its industrial counterpart, could be found in many countries.

*The anti-Ford vision of multiculturalism*. For many of its supporters, Canadian multiculturalism was a wager that society did not have to be like this.[[2]](#endnote-2) It was a hope that we could build a society in which people who had come from all corners of the earth could fully participate, without first erasing themselves, in which everyone could “act as full and equal citizens in political life, without having to hide or deny their ethnocultural identity” (Kymlicka 2007, 65). It was a wager that we could build a society in which people don’t assume you are from somewhere else, just because your skin is not quite the same colour as theirs, or your last name is not Smith or Gagnon (or Ryan for that matter); a society where you don’t have to change your name, or ditch your turban, your yarmulka, or your hijab, in order to participate on an equal basis in the workplace; a society where kids don’t make fun of you in the schoolyard because your lunch is different from theirs.

And it was a wager that such a society could be vibrant and unified.

Let us call this the “anti-Ford vision” of multiculturalism. Note its two-sided nature. It’s about personal integrity: not having to betray yourself, not having to deny your own history, not feeling shame of your parents and grand-parents. It’s also about making it easier for people to participate in the central aspects of Canadian life: to take part in public education, politics, the economy, without feeling that you’re intruding in an alien space that belongs to someone else.

*Conservative fears*. For many of Canadian multiculturalism’s opponents, this was a dangerous aspiration, corrosive of the unity any society needs. For Neil Bissoondath, the most influential of these critics, multiculturalism promoted an “obsessively backward gaze” (1994, 110); it would lead to “imported Old World feuds” (124), and “a slide into ethical chaos” (143). In sum, the “centre of the nation’s being” would be “challenged, even effaced” by multiculturalism (45).

This style of critique was analysed at length in my *Multicultiphobia* (2010). I argued there that conservative arguments were generally ill-formulated, blamed multiculturalism for phenomena that clearly predate it, and paid little attention to actual multicultural policies, among other shortcomings.

*Progressive critiques*. But there is a very different type of critique of the multicultural vision presented above. In this view, far from constituting a threat to “our civilization,” multiculturalism is trivial and ineffective, or worse. The vision is not sufficiently transformative: it simply leaves too much of our unjust world untouched.

Think of the questions that are not addressed in the anti-Ford vision. It is fine to say that identity does not have to be completely erased, but how much does get erased *de facto*, and how does this come about? How closely linked, for example, is a person’s identity to their mother tongue? And if that mother tongue is not one of our official languages, what supports for its survival are part of the multicultural vision? Canada has made massive investments to promote learning of our official languages. Does the multicultural vision call for equivalent support for other languages? If not, how are they to survive? Will they generally be transmitted only within the family, and through additional weekend classes in schools and church basements? What incentives will the child have to learn the language? And what incentives will they have *not* to learn it (for those pressures are quite real as well)?

And how does the anti-Ford vision address various other painful experiences of minorities? Does greater openness to “difference” somehow overcome discrimination in the workplace? Does it improve the structural location of immigrants in the economy?

And what does the live-and-let-live “recognition” expressed in the anti-Ford vision of multiculturalism do to people’s understanding of the realities around them? Could it perhaps even serve to mask power inequalities? Frantz Fanon commented that, at a certain point in the national liberation struggle, the colonists will seek to “humanize” their domination, deploying various signs of “politeness and consideration,” such as addressing the colonized as “Monsieur ou Madame” (1968, 88). Such “recognition,” of course, does not constitute liberation, it is a prophylactic against it. Is this the case for multicultural “recognition” as well?

And how might the anti-Ford vision affect the privileged elites’ understanding of reality? Might it allow them to give themselves a psychic pat on the back, imagining that the full requirements of justice have been met and that they need trouble themselves no further? Or maybe the whole contrast between multiculturalism and the *American* melting pot is just more fuel for Canadian smugness, akin to the sense of superiority we gain from observing America’s health care “system” and gun carnage.[[3]](#endnote-3)

*This work*. In *Multicultiphobia*, I touched on the progressive family of critiques only in passing. My justification was that “Because I am tracing a debate over time, I will not take up other strands of critique that are interesting in themselves, but have exercised little influence in Parliament or the media” (2010, 24). I added, however, that “To say that such critiques have had little influence in Parliament or the media is certainly no comment on their quality. When it comes to influencing public debates, the race is not to the swift” (24). If one ignores progressive critiques, then whatever conversations society has about multiculturalism are dominated by conservative critiques and responses to them. This is too one-sided. Progressive critiques can identify real limits of multiculturalism, limits of which we need to be aware, *either* to endorse them or to seek to transcend them.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This book, then, is an exercise in *critical listening* to a family of critiques of multiculturalism. *Critical*, because the fact that a critique may be progressive obviously does not entail that it is flawless or even valid. *Listening*, because this book is not motivated by a desire to defend multiculturalism or rebut its critics, but by a desire to deepen understanding, mine and the reader’s, of our multiculturalism and our society.

**Notes**

1. “White” in this instance is understood quite narrowly, to designate the dominant anglo-Protestant group of Ford’s time. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Liberal M.P. Randeep Sarai articulated this view in a 2019 Commons speech: “When I was in kindergarten in 1980, I was a child of an immigrant. I was brown, had long hair, which was tied in a bun on the top of my head, and I looked nothing like other people in my class. All I wanted to do was look like everyone else. I wanted to be Canadian. Little did I know that, under multiculturalism, being Canadian was exactly what I was and how I should be” (Commons, 7 February 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We would do well not to assume that the Ford English School ceremony was representative of American *reality*. It is probably more accurate to view it as an expression of an assimilationist *aspiration* on the part of at least some American elites.  
   In relation to the supposed contrast between the Canadian mosaic and American assimilationism, it is striking to read Hannah Arendt’s comment that “what influenced me when I came to the United States [in the 1940s] was precisely the freedom of becoming a citizen without having to pay the price of assimilation” (2003, 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It is important to note that the progressive critics of multiculturalism are not in all cases *opponents* of it. As we will see, many acknowledge multiculturalism’s emancipatory potential. Others view it more starkly as an obstacle to progressive change. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)