



## **Can Multiculturalism Counter the Issues that Affect Social Progress and International Security**

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The United Nations Human Development Report for 2004 recently acknowledged that one of the most urgent issues affecting international stability and social progress in the 21st century is the claims for recognition by diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Today, there are more than 5000 different ethno-racial groups and sub-groups living in 189 nation states. In two countries out of three, there is at least one substantial minority group, representing 10% of the population or more. In 150 of the 189 nation states there are at least four different ethno-racial groups within their borders. At the same time, there are approximately 900 million people around the world who face some aggravated form of discrimination because of their minority status and identity.

Worldwide population dynamics and growth is arousing an “identity politics” on a global scale. Culture is becoming the key variable in influencing people's lives and explaining differences and similarities from one context to another. From indigenous people in Latin America to ethnic groups in Africa and immigrants in Western Europe, people all around the world are now mobilizing along racial and ethnic lines for the purposes of political activism and the assertion of social rights. Here, the mobilization of cultural identity is the gathering place for the redress of grievances and/or responding to exclusion from the larger society.

According to the UN Human Development Programme, modern identity politics can be polarizing and threaten peace and development in nations and in the world. But, this is at least partly due to the fact that the dynamics of ethno-racial diversity today is not widely understood, and there are several long-standing myths that need to be debunked.

The first myth is that people's ethnic identities compete with their allegiance to the state. The report's overview of world population development indicates that countries do not have to choose between national unity and cultural diversity. Unity and diversity are not mutually exclusive realities. Indeed, inclusive societies (those that make a place for differences) can avoid the worst aspects of identity politics. And it is as important an issue for governments in the rich world as in the poor.

Another myth is that ethnic groups are prone to violent conflict with each other in clashes over values and there is a trade-off between respecting diversity and keeping the peace. The report argues that cultural differences and clashes over values are rarely the root cause of violent conflict.

Another myth is that cultural freedom means defending all traditional practices and this may retard progress and development. The report recognizes that culture is not a frozen set of values and practices and it cannot be a pretext for denying human rights and equality of opportunity – such as women having equal right to education.

Another myth is that multi-ethnic countries do not progress as fast as homogenized ones. The report maintains that there is no credible evidence that cultural diversity slows development. Indeed, to the contrary, a “diversity-centric” society that hones and maximize a multicultural workforce, and sales force, can have a strategic developmental and economic advantage in the global marketplace.

But the biggest myth of all – and the one most commonly propagated in Canada and elsewhere – is that a multiculturalist discourse on diversity involves a theoretical and ideological retreat from the problem of domination within capitalism. This myth hinges on the idea that people's relative access to the material necessities of life are fundamentally class based. Therefore, multicultural theory (in itself) is thought to mistake identity politics with power politics. In other words, like a band-aid on a cancerous wound, it addresses the symptoms of an illness rather than the cause.

Many critics, for instance, have argued from the beginning that multiculturalist discourse does not question or challenge the root of inequality, but instead focuses on the ethnic and racial and even gender inequalities that derive from a capitalist economy. So, as the criticism goes, the very idea of multiculturalism depoliticizes class antagonism (which actually structure society) by emphasizing the discussion of its derivative issues (race, ethnicity and gender). In this respect, as the world's first multiculturalist experiment, Canada is not considered a bold and forward-looking work-in-progress, rather the critics continue to denounced the Canadian mosaic as a gross distortion and conceptual trap.

Now, however, with the United Nations Development Report for 2004, for all intents and purposes the dispute over multiculturalism is finally over.

As an authoritative international body, the UNDR has finally delivered a landmark decision that has come down decisively on the side of the multiculturalists, and against their critics, which recognizes that class analysis has grown increasingly inadequate in recent decades as traditional hierarchies have declined and new social differences have emerged. The cumulative impact of these changes is fundamentally altering the nature of social stratification – placing past theories in need of substantial modification.

Yet, in the end, there may be a more concrete confirmation in all of this for Canadian citizens.

As the caretakers of the first multicultural experiment, it is incumbent upon all of us to question things for ourselves and to be careful with the out-of-touch and out-of-date myths that continue to undermine any forward-looking thinking.

The next step in the Canadian experiment is to show the world how to stop fretting about regressive myths kept alive by dogmatic nay-sayers, and get on with the business of multicultural nation-building, tile by tile.

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