

A historian's long view on multiculturalism: The limits of liberal pluralism in early Cold War Canada

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Canadians are familiar with the images of multiculturalism: newspaper photos of parades with colourfully costumed performers in “ethnic dress”; the collage of diverse faces in the “Canadian family tree” adorning the covers of government publications; and the displays of ethnic and fusion dishes in magazine food features. Simultaneously, the contradictory forces of globalization, increased policing of borders against Third World migrants, and the “war on terror” have prompted certain critics to denounce humanitarian refugee programs and blame “home-grown terrorism” on multiculturalism’s supposed failure to transform newcomers into “proper” Canadians. The often polarized debates between liberal defenders and critics of multiculturalism have obscured the position of anti-racist leftists who criticize the liberal myths of Canada as an egalitarian nation and call for a radical restructuring of a society that is a racialized vertical mosaic.

LIBERAL PLURALISM AND COLD WAR AGENDA

All of this suggests the need for more careful histories of pluralism. Recently, some historians have pulled back the origins of multiculturalism and focused on ethnic groups who inserted themselves into and disrupted national celebrations (such as the 1927 Diamond Jubilee festivities) meant to narrate a simple history of a white dominion’s progress. Here, I highlight the liberal pluralism of the early post-war Cold War era. As my book, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping*

Immigration Lives in Cold War Canada (Toronto 2006) documented, the early post-1945 immigrant campaigns aimed at integrating mostly white European newcomers exhibited a contradictory mix of liberal discourses of tolerance, respect, and cultural pluralism that echoed the concept of a more inclusive Canadian citizenship imbedded in the new Canadian Citizenship Act of 1947, and intrusive tactics reflecting the rise of a “national insecurity state” fighting a domestic Cold War against the various perceived threats to mainstream society and its dominant bourgeois models. I offer a few examples of these competing dynamics.

First, federal citizenship officials portrayed themselves as enlightened liberal integrationists who, unlike earlier assimilationists, would guide, not dictate, the newcomers’ adaptation to Canadian society, yet their writings also revealed an ideological agenda of a ruling elite that encouraged new groups to ‘flourish’ so long as they did not threaten the authority of the dominant groups. The booklets informing immigrants about the many freedoms enjoyed under Canadian democracy also stressed its reliance on a loyal and obedient citizenry; and both ordinary Canadians and newcomers were encouraged to spy on neighbours and help quash signs of dissent. In their efforts to integrate newcomers, citizenship officials were prepared to work with ethnic Canadian organizations - save for Communist ones - on the grounds that already Canadianized groups could ease the acculturation process by providing war-weary, frightened, and even emotionally damaged newcomers with critical support. Such efforts also helped to provide a defence against the anomie or group disorder that could endanger Canada’s social fabric and/or entail huge health costs. All this immigrant activity fit well the state’s national security agenda to contain domestic threats and ensure a contented and conformist citizenry.

CULTURAL PLURALISM OR CONTAINMENT?

Second, the “integrationists” sought to foster national unity by encouraging mutual understanding and exchange between old and new Canadians, but their acceptance of diversity was restricted to the comparatively safe cultural arena. In his many upbeat speeches, Vladimir Kaye, chief liaison officer of the Citizenship Branch, used colourful metaphors to convey the state’s role in encouraging ‘unity-in-diversity,’ comparing newcomers to the musicians of a Canadian orchestra or tasty ingredients of a Canadian salad. Along with liberal food writers who featured ethnic recipes (with the most pungent spices removed or diluted) and told Canadian mothers to “spice” up family meals with (just) a touch of the “exotic,” Kaye praised European ethnic foods for saving Canada from standardized blandness in eating regimes. But he and other reception workers also endorsed and implemented programs that sought to “modernize” immigrant women’s food customs by encouraging them to abandon the outdoor ethnic markets with their live pigeons and old world haggling for modern grocery stores with their clean aisles, well-stocked shelves, cellophane-wrapped meats, and nutritious “Canadian” items (enriched bread, milk, canola oil). Aware that a sense of belonging was necessary to inculcating patriotism, citizenship officers worked with cultural groups to organize immigrant exhibits, concerts and folk fairs that showcased the newcomers’ art, handicrafts, dance, and music for Canadian audiences. As they also well understood, such strategies for celebrating individual talents or mounting cultural performances did not challenge existing power structures or mainstream society.

GENDER AND FAMILY IDEOLOGIES

Third, familiar class and gender dynamics emerged as middle-class professionals encouraged newcomers to aspire to the bourgeois nuclear family model according to which breadwinner fathers, homemaker mothers, and well-adjusted children lived within ‘proper’ single-family households and performed appropriate gender roles. The Citizenship Branch’s promotional materials celebrated individual entrepreneurial, professional or artistic achievements, while its teaching tools for women, including NFB films, featured consumer images of the ideal homemaker and the many modern conveniences – fridges, stoves, model kitchens – that defined the Canadian way of life. The huge gap between these images and the over-crowded (and often kitchen-less) flats or multiple-family houses in which many newcomers initially lived reflected the working-class realities of men and women who came from the Displaced Persons (DP) camps or peripheral European regions.

Fourth, the adoption of pluralist approaches did not eliminate entirely older assimilationist expectations that the newcomer undergo a profound change in cultural values and social behaviour nor displace the experts’ presumption that they were authorized to intervene into the lives of newcomers who seriously transgressed Canadian norms. Often ignoring the patriarchal character of Canadian families, family and child experts invoked stereotypes of domineering European fathers and submissive mothers as explanations for ill-adjusted children and delinquency. Liberal programs like inner-city school lunch programs or settlement house nursery schools and mothers’ clubs, also sought to reduce immigrant parents’ Old World influences over their children. Public health workers introducing immigrant mothers to social services to help them deal with sick or disabled children frequently dismissed women’s customary healing rituals as dangerously backward and suspicion towards them as a manifestation of outmoded values that

had to be broken down. Settlement house workers tried to Canadianize immigrant children and youth through organized recreation programs - such as summer camps, boys' sports leagues, girls' crafts classes, and teen dances) that also contained youthful energy and sexuality while simultaneously instilling principles of participatory democracy. These programs reproduced gender stereotypes and hierarchies, as in crafts and charm school for immigrant girls, sports for boys, though some girls joined competitive sports. In an era marked by alarmist declarations of escalating immorality, including a supposed epidemic in female promiscuity, it is not surprising that such programs were often accompanied by a heightened concern to protect the sexual virtues of immigrant girls. This societal concern with girls' vulnerability to sexual deviance also reflected racial-ethnic hierarchies that, at a time before the post-1967 waves of newer immigrant women of colour from the Caribbean and elsewhere, considered certain 'non-preferred' newcomers, such as southern Europeans like the 'well-developed' Italian girls chastised for 'hanging out with boys,' or east European refugee victims of war-time rape viewed as 'damaged goods,' to be more susceptible to promiscuity than Canadian girls.

MULTICULTURALISM FOR EUROPEANS

The Europeans were not simply passive pawns in the processes described, however. And or all of the heavy-handedness and hypocrisy involved in these campaigns, white European newcomers were not subjected to the ruthless assimilation policies applied to Aboriginals. Many found ways to resist or, more commonly, modify external pressures to adopt Canadian ways. Many exercised some choice and agency over the pace and degree of acculturation, and this process of adaptation led to various hybrid patterns, whether in parenting styles, children's play, or family relations. In the long term, the postwar Europeans helped change Canadian society and later,

multiculturalism, even as their own customs were being modified. While differing in their capacity to re-establish themselves - we should not discount significant class distinctions - European immigrants rebuild meaningful lives, families and communities that also made a mark on the Canadian landscape. Ethnic foodways helped transform the culinary landscapes of cities like Toronto and Montreal. Similarly, the newcomers' anti-Communism helped shape a pro-capitalist democratic discourse and helped the Canadian state to meet its long-standing objective of destroying the left-wing ethnic press, though international events also mattered. A more decidedly multicultural but still largely white and still in-egalitarian society emerged out of the many interactions, conflicts, and accommodations just described. In short, early post-war liberal pluralism contained the complex, sometimes contradictory, and racially exclusionary elements that would inform official multiculturalism of the 1970s.