

Pluralism Forum | April 2012
Reframing Europe's "Multiculturalism" Debates

Prospects for Multicultural Citizenship

Will Kymlicka

Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy, Queen's University
Kingston, Canada

Much of my scholarly work has focused on the idea of "multicultural citizenship": what it means, why it is desirable, where and when it works, and whether it is sustainable. In this short presentation, I would like to provide an update on the prospects for multicultural citizenship, both in Canada and elsewhere. Multicultural citizenship is a compound term, and both halves of the term require some explication. First, what is multiculturalism? In part it is a set of specific public policies for addressing ethnocultural diversity. Keith Banting's presentation here at the Forum provides details on these policies, and their diffusion across the Western democracies. But these specific policies are themselves rooted in an underlying set of presuppositions about the role of ethnocultural identities and ethnocultural groups within contemporary democratic society.

I would highlight two such presuppositions. First, multiculturalism rests on the presumption that ethnicity and religion are legitimate bases for participation in public life. There is nothing either disloyal or undemocratic about participating in Canadian life as a Greek-Canadian, say, or as a Muslim-Canadian. On the contrary, one way to be a good Canadian citizen, and to enact one's Canadian citizenship in a constructive way, is to be a good Greek-Canadian, participating in Canadian culture and politics through ethnic activities and association. This legitimation of ethnicity represents an important departure from earlier assimilationist models of integration, which insisted that immigrants either renounce or at least hide their ethnic identities if they wished to be accepted as Canadians.

Second, and as a consequence of the first, multiculturalism rests on the assumption that public institutions have a duty to enable members of ethnic and religious minorities to participate in Canadian life without having to hide or renounce their identity. This duty is multifaceted. It includes the duty to remove barriers to the participation of minorities (for example, linguistic barriers), the duty to create mechanisms for representation and consultation with affected groups

(for example, encouraging groups to self-organize and giving them a seat at the table of public debates), the duty to make reasonable accommodations of ethnic and religious differences (for example, in holidays, dress codes), and the duty of public institutions to reflect the full diversity of the population they serve (for example, the experience of minorities should be visible in school curricula, the media, museums, and so on).

In my view, these two presuppositions capture the heart of multiculturalism, but they shouldn't be seen in isolation. Rather, they must be seen as part and parcel of a larger structure of democratic life, and in particular, must be seen in relation to ideals and practices of citizenship. As I have already implied, multiculturalism is a new way of being a Canadian citizen and enacting one's Canadian citizenship.

This tight link between multiculturalism and citizenship distinguishes Canada from some European experiences of multiculturalism. In some European countries, multiculturalism was first adopted for ethnic groups who were seen as temporary migrants or guest-workers, and who were therefore expected to "return home". Turkish guest-workers in Germany, for example, were provided certain services in their mother tongue. Multiculturalism in this context was not intended to facilitate the exercise of German citizenship, but rather was intended to make it easier for Turks to return to Turkey. This is sometimes called "returnist multiculturalism", premised on the expectation that migrants will return home, and so do not need to integrate or become citizens.

Multiculturalism in Canada, by contrast, has always been seen as a policy that governs relationships amongst Canadians of different ethnic origins, all of whom are assumed to be citizens. It is worth remembering that the group which most vocally demanded multiculturalism in the late 1960s was the Ukrainians, who were long-settled in Canada and who were all citizens. The Ukrainians – and all of the subsequent ethnic groups who joined the struggle for multiculturalism – did not view multiculturalism as an alternative to Canadian citizenship, but rather hoped that multiculturalism would strengthen and affirm their Canadian citizenship.

But how precisely can multiculturalism contribute to citizenship? It is important here to emphasize that "citizenship" is not just a formal legal status that one gains upon naturalization. Rather, citizenship is one of the fundamental values, and one of the defining practices, of democratic life. Promoting citizenship is not just about ensuring that everyone has a passport, but rather is about restructuring social and political relationships to reflect deep democratic values of consent and autonomy.

This is an unfinished task in Canada, as in all Western societies. Historically, many social and political relationships have been defined by relations of coercion and paternalism rather than consent and autonomy. Think of the relationship historically between European colonizers and Aboriginal peoples. The right of the former to govern the latter through coercion and paternalism is built into the very wording of the Indian Act. This is not just a feature of ethnic relations. We can see the same tendency towards coercion and paternalism historically in the relationship

between men and women, or between heterosexuals and homosexuals, or between able-bodied and people with disabilities.

In all of these cases, groups have struggled to contest these historic relationships, and fought to replace them with relationships based on consent and autonomy. These are often called “citizenship struggles”, because they embody fundamental democratic values. In most cases, the subordinated groups were already citizens in the formal legal sense: women, gays and people with disabilities were always Canadian citizens in the formal legal sense. But they were not treated according to democratic values of consent and autonomy: their relationships were not governed by the values of democratic citizenship.

In my view, the struggle for multiculturalism in Canada fits exactly into this broad category of citizenship struggles. It, too, is a struggle to renounce uncivil attitudes and practices of coercion and paternalism, and to redefine social and political relationships to better reflect civic values of consent and autonomy.¹

Moreover, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the struggle for multiculturalism has indeed contributed to the deepening and strengthening of democratic citizenship. Several studies – both national and cross-national – have uncovered evidence that the adoption of multiculturalism policies has strengthened political participation and representation, reduced prejudice and intolerance, and promoted social cohesion and equity.²

However, it is equally clear that multiculturalism has not fully achieved its goals, and in some times and places may not have worked at all. The success of multiculturalism across the Western democracies over the past forty years is variable. An urgent task, therefore, is to identify the factors or conditions that help to sustain an effective and constructive multicultural citizenship.

This is a vast topic, on which much more research is needed. But I would start with two factors that I believe are central to multicultural citizenship. Multiculturalism rests on two assumptions about the link between identities and politics, assumptions that some people may view as optimistic, and perhaps even naive:

First, multicultural citizenship rests on the presupposition that identities are not zero-sum, but rather can be mutually complementary. Older ideologies of assimilation rested on the assumption that identities are zero-sum: in order to become a proud and loyal Canadian, one had to renounce or at least diminish one’s attachment to one’s ethnic origins. Multiculturalism, by contrast, rests on the assumption that identities can be additive and complementary: one can come to be a proud Canadian while maintaining pride in one’s Greek or Vietnamese heritage.

Second, multicultural citizenship rests on the presupposition that liberal-democratic institutions exercise a “gravitational pull” that helps to bring newcomers into the mainstream of democratic life. Newcomers may not have much experience of liberal-democratic politics in their country of origin, but the best way to ensure their integration into a liberal-democratic consensus is precisely to encourage and facilitate their participation in democratic life. Older ideologies operated on the assumption that we must keep immigrants out of politics unless or until they

prove that they have fully internalized liberal-democratic values: participation, on this view, is a reward for successful integration. Multiculturalism, by contrast, operates on the premise that integration can only be achieved through participation. This means that we invite immigrants to participate even before we are sure of their political values, because we are confident of the gravitational pull of liberal democratic institutions.

As I said, these two assumptions may seem optimistic and even naïve. In fact, there is overwhelming evidence from many fields of research – social psychology, history, and political science – to support these assumptions. Detailed studies have shown that identities in Canada are complementary not zero-sum: the people who are most proud of Canada are typically those who are also most proud of their origins. We also have detailed studies of the gravitational pull of liberal-democratic institutions, and how it has facilitated the integration of earlier waves of immigrants.

Yet it seems clear that many people today, particularly in Europe, have no faith in these two assumptions. This is particularly true in relation to Muslim immigrants in Europe. Much of the anti-multiculturalist backlash is fuelled by a belief that in relation to Muslims, identities are zero-sum: Muslims can only become good French or German citizens if they diminish the salience of Islam in their lives. Moreover, some commentators have expressed doubt about the gravitational pull of liberal-democratic institutions in relation to Muslims. The tenets of Islam are said to somehow insulate Muslims from the gravitational pull of liberal-democracy, preventing or preempting its socializing effects. Inviting Muslims to participate in liberal-democratic life – without having first established their liberal-democratic *bona fides* – is therefore more likely to lead to the corrosion of liberal-democratic institutions than to the integration of Muslims.

Having lost confidence in these two assumptions, we see a growing climate of fear and insecurity regarding immigrants. And this has led to a rhetorical backlash against a supposedly naïve multiculturalism, and the adoption of harsh new “civic integration” policies. Relationships with immigrants are being restructured in ways that undercut the scope for consent and autonomy, and that revert to older practices of coercion and paternalism.

And yet it is premature to declare the death of multicultural citizenship. Underneath the vehement anti-multiculturalist rhetoric, we can find grounds for cautious optimism that the multiculturalist citizenship struggle remains alive. As discussed in Banting’s presentation, the statistical evidence makes clear that the rhetorical retreat from multiculturalism is not matched by any comparable retreat at the level of actual policies. Public institutions continue to enact policies that provide reasonable accommodations, facilitate participation and representation, and reflect diversity, even if they no longer use the word “multiculturalism” to describe or justify these policies.³

Moreover, not all of the new civic integration policies are equally coercive and paternalistic. On the contrary, these policies differ enormously from country to country, and in some cases take a form that is much more consistent with core democratic values of consent and autonomy. Sara Goodman has distinguished “prohibitive” from “enabling” versions of civic integration. Like

multiculturalism, enabling forms of civic integration accept the twin assumptions that identities can be mutually complementary, and that liberal-democratic institutions exercise a powerful gravitational pull, and hence disavow the need for coercive or paternalistic assimilation.⁴

I would argue that enabling forms of civic integration are potentially consistent with a commitment to multicultural citizenship.⁵ Indeed, we can see this combination of enabling civic integration and robust multiculturalism policies in practice in several countries, including Canada. Enabling civic integration policies have been layered on top of, rather than taken the place of, multiculturalist policies.

Nor should this surprise us. There are powerful cultural and legal forces at work in the Western democracies which support and sustain citizenship struggles, and which constrain attempts to revert to coercion and paternalism. Citizenship struggles – like the struggles for multicultural citizenship – are precisely struggles, and hence will always be subject to contestation and setbacks. The new politics of fear and insecurity, and the resulting rhetorical backlash against multiculturalism, is clearly a major setback. And yet underneath the surface, we can find a persisting commitment to multiculturalism policies, and to the values of consent and autonomy that underpin the struggle for multicultural citizenship.

Endnotes

¹ For a more extended defense of this “citizenization” interpretation of multiculturalism, see my [Multicultural Odysseys](#) (Oxford University Press, 2007).

² For a review of this evidence, see my “Testing the Liberal Multiculturalist Hypothesis: Normative Theories and Social Science Evidence”, [Canadian Journal of Political Science](#) Vol. 43/2 (2010) pp. 257-71.

³ For the evidence, see our Multicultural Policy Index, available online at www.queensu.ca/mcp

⁴ See Sara Goodman, “Integration Requirements for Integration’s Sake? Identifying, Categorizing and Comparing Civic Integration Policies”. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36/5 (2010): 753–72.

⁵ For further discussion of how civic integration and multiculturalism policies can fit together, see my *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012.