What is Multiculturalism?: A "Cognitive" Introduction

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I f it is true that within the past two decades we have experienced what Thomas Kuhn would call a "paradigm shift," then multiculturalism is probably the best umbrella term for the kind of re-conceptualizing that has occurred. Certainly, multiculturalism seems to be the index term that appears most frequently in various forms of discourse and which most recommends/demands that a respective study be given a hearing.

Yet it could also be said that what makes multiculturalism such a fasci-nating topic is the extent to which it is still a nebulous concept—virtually, an idea in the making. As much as multiculturalism seems to have shaped the questions that we ask in our various pursuits, so does it also seem to pose the question of its own nature: what is multiculturalism, and how should it be conceptualized? In this sense, then, before becoming the appropriate subject for political studies or cultural studies, and even prior to lending itself to colonialist/imperialist psychologizing, multiculturalism would seem to call for the kind of basic or preliminary mode of inquiry that is associated with epistemology, and especially the recent "cognitive" branch concerned with the mechanisms of definition.

By way of providing a general context for the specific discussions of multicultural issues that follow, therefore, I would like to begin by looking briefly at some of the ways in which multiculturalism has been conceptual-ized. In particular, I want to focus on the analogies—the implicit as well as the explicit, the assumed as well as the challenged—that tend to recur in multicultural discourse. Attending to these metaphors, and especially the categories of experience on which they draw and the implications these entail, should serve not only to explain the title of this collection but also encourage speculation about an issue that is fundamental to the multicultural project: that is, to what degree do various individuals or groups conceptual-ize differently and to what extent should this be a factor in planning a

multicultural society? A related question—particularly crucial in the light of current strictures against binarisms and my own frequent violation of this taboo—is whether such "dualistic" thinking is peculiar to a particular mindset or whether the diversity element of multiculturalism makes binary thinking unavoidable: is it at all possible to conceive of "otherness" without establishing contrasts? Another related question—again foregrounded by my own departure from current dictates—is whether addressing a topic like multiculturalism invariably involves generalizing: is it possible to speak seriously about collective issues without assuming that one is presenting more than a personal or idiosyncratic point of view?

Let me begin, then, by looking at what could be called the formative binary involved in the conceptualization of multiculturalism: "mosaic" and "melting pot." Initially introduced as a way of distinguishing between Canadian and American attitudes toward immigration and national image, such metaphors are usually introduced as "throw-aways"—as being too simplistic about *"real politik."* While this response is undoubtedly correct about differences between Canada and the United States, the two metaphors—and especially their entailments—still have heuristic value and remain provocative guides to possible ways of conceptualizing multiculturalism.

Consider first the most elementary net of associations which each of these terms evokes: we usually think of a mosaic as an art form, and for North Americans it tends to connote something exotic and iconic; a "melting pot," in contrast, is a utensil and has connotations of the domestic and mundane. The former metaphor thus allies multiculturalism with esthetic values, while the latter associates acculturation with practical needs. In turn, the two metaphors raise the question of whether multiculturalism is a project for the arts or for the sciences, whether it should be allied with speculative "theorizing" or with concrete application. Accordingly, it is into the "mosaic" metaphor that we are tapping when we emphasize the "creative" contribution of different ethnic groups or when we associate multiculturalism with literature and canon reformation. Similarly, it is into the "melting pot" metaphor that we are tapping when we emphasize the role played by economic necessity and immigration policy in precipitating multiculturalism.

To the extent that, as an artifact, a mosaic is a product and in this sense static, whereas melting is a process and dynamic, these two metaphors also introduce the question of where to place multiculturalism in terms of the basic space and time coordinates. That is, should multiculturalism be envisioned in geographical terms or should it be envisioned in terms of history? And here, significantly, the initial use of the binary to distinguish between Canada and the United States re-emerges with other connotations. By outsiders

at least, Canada is conventionally regarded as the "place" where multiculturalism "exists," and the implementation of official multiculturalism is regarded as a public endorsement of this situation. In the United States, in contrast, acculturation seems more allied with the time coordinate; it is conceptualized less as a "site" and more as a process that occurs "within" an environment. In the same way, whereas the American practice of hyphenation is frequently thought to signify a "becoming," the Canadian practice is thought to betoken a juncture or meeting ground.

This alignment of multiculturalism with spatial coordinates can also be seen in the way that such discourse emphasizes the need to "position" oneself vis-á-vis the subject/object that one is viewing, an expression which seems to imply that it is only in terms of distance and hence space that one can "gaze on" or respect "otherness." Indeed, the very concept of "multi" is impossible to envision in temporal terms, so that despite—or even inherent in—arguments for the need to "historicize" multiculturalism, the underlying configuration has an atemporal or spatial orientation. A particularly instructive example may be found in the association of multiculturalism with the idea of "threshold"; for as much as this term might signify "becoming," so much does it also invoke an architectural—i.e., spatial—model.

. The question that arises in turn is how much "space" does multiculturalism require, and the answer to that question depends greatly upon whether multiculturalism is perceived in terms of co-existence or in terms of close inter-relationships. Phrasing both the question and answer conceptually, one might consider whether multiculturalism is best envisioned in terms of an urban or rural "landscape," and the extent to which the latter seems to be the preferred concept may be seen in the popular perception of Canada—i.e., as a vast country of many isolated groups consisting in turn of friendly but private persons. That is, if an emphasis upon the need for communication is a basic tenet of multiculturalism, then perhaps the thing that occasions the need—distance—is as important as the connection itself. In this context, one might consider and reconsider the resistance to closure/conclusion in multiculturalism discourse and the emphasis upon "openness."

In this context, too, we might also rethink and reverse the directional accent in the concept of the "global village" and consider whether its attractiveness might have more to do with the notion of quick access "across" space afforded by technology than with a sense of immediate physical proximity. Equally, we can begin to see why multiculturalism might seem more attractive when it takes the form of cosmopolitanism rather than living next door, when the "other" is perceived more as a neighbor than as a bedpartner. Perhaps herein also lies the reason why multiculturalism is more frequently envisioned as a "meeting" or "mingling" of diverse ethnicities

than as a "mixture" of them—and also the deeper reason for the preference of "multi-racial" over "hybrid."

What also starts to come into focus is the concern with transportation in multiculturalist planning and a different way of seeing the ambivalence about immigration in such discourse. Perhaps what causes uneasiness is the paradox which the underlying root term entails: i.e., immigration causes overcrowding or a limitation of the space available for travelling. In this sense, it is not so much a matter of the "settled" versus the "newly arrived," but of the way that freedom to be different is contingent upon mobility. Perhaps, too, the kind of fears and hatreds evidenced by opponents of multiculturalism should be designated less strictly as ethno- or heterophobia and more as claustrophobia.

Entailed in the association of multiculturalism with spatial coordinates is also its association with a horizontal rather than a vertical axis, and it is within this context that we can return momentarily to the question of binarism. Clearly the objection derives from the sense that one cannot have the horizontal axis (the contrasting pairs) without the vertical axis (privileging one over the other). Up to a certain point, multicultural discourse would seem to confirm this argument, for the way that the horizontal axis of multiculturalism frequently evidences itself is ironically—i.e., in the recurrent recourse to terms like "marginal" to describe a group's distance from the hierarchical "center." Even more indicative is the way that Canada's failure to adhere to the multicultural ideal has been registered as a complaint about the existence of a "vertical mosaic." At the same time, however, the underlying assumption in such critiques does seem to be that binaries without hierarchies are possible and that the horizontalism of multiculturalism should provide an instance of this new possibility.

Further light can be shed on this matter if we turn to another issue that the horizontal/vertical axis entails: that is, if verticality is allied with arbitrary power structures—i.e., something "artificial"—does this then mean that the horizontal axis of multiculturalism allies it with the "natural"? Where, in other words, should multiculturalism be located in the nature/nurture binary: does multiculturalism reflect a way of life that is innate to the human species or should it be regarded as an aspect of the civilizing process and as something that must be taught. Here again it is instructive to return to the two original metaphors: to the extent that we envision multiculturalism as a mosaic, as an artwork that is constructed and which is in many ways at odds with "realistic" representation, then the balance would seem to be on the side of civilization; the "melting pot" metaphor, in contrast, seems to posit multiculturalism as the initial "natural" state which is refined in the process of constructing a society.

The postmodernist way out of this bind, of course, is to dismiss the binary on the grounds that everything—including "nature" and especially culture—is constructed, and such thinking seems to be reflected in multicultural discourse which downplays ethnicity in favor of other "non-biological" ways of defining the groupings that make up the cultural mix. The binary can also be collapsed in the other direction, however, by invoking the idea of the "natural aristocrat," and this strain of thinking seems to be reflected in the emphasis on the need of ethnic groups to preserve their "roots." What accordingly causes problems for both orientations is the question of what to do with "indigenous" peoples, a term that complicates matters because of the way it turns the issue of "residency" into a matter of person/place bonding and makes ecology the criterion for admission into the multiculturalist "state."

What also seems to bring both sides together—and on the side of nature—is the feeling that multiculturalism is something that cannot be forced, a position which ironically sometimes takes the form of arguing that enforcing is a way of trying to "naturalize" difference and otherness, or conversely that "nationalizing" is a way of "denaturalizing" the situation. A common "natural" bias can also be seen in the way that orality and "lived" experience tend to be regarded as the most reliable modes of access to multicultural realities.

Significantly, it is also in terms of the perceived naturalness of multiculturalism that the notion of time reenters the picture, but without really displacing the spatial/static emphasis. That is, instead of being envisioned as a gradual "aging" or maturing process, the favored metaphor seems to be a generational one, wherein the spatial aspect is evident in the way that the assimilation "phase" tends to be occluded: first generation (grandparents) and third generation (grandchildren) constitute the typical cast of characters in the multicultural scenario—a situation which also seems to inform the jump from "First" to "Third World" nations. This kind of spatialization of time also seems to inform arguments against essentializing multiculturalism, for as much as these arguments tend to posit the need to attend to the development factor, so much do they also seem to be based on the idea that different cultures have different tempos or rates of evolution. Similarly, there seems to be something "seasonal" about the way that revolution is envisioned in multicultural discourse, wherein a rhythm of status reversal functions as the dynamic which transforms verticality back into horizontality.

In many ways, of course, the nature/culture issue is evocative of the classic Hobbes/Rousseau theories about the origin, nature and function of society, and these theories in turn point to the question of whether the diversity which is synonymous with multiculturalism should be seen as a

condition that makes for conflict or for harmony—whether the "field" of multiculturalism should be envisioned as a battleground or a playground. Clearly the founding metaphor of "mosaic" emphasizes the Rousseauistic aspect, just as the play aspect is evident in both the theorizing component of multicultural discourse and the emphasis on the conditional or subjunctive. Similarly, dialogue and tolerance seem to be the required etiquette in multicultural critical discourse—with militancy being reserved for instances that fall short of the ideal.

It is, however, also at this very point that the Hobbesian voice makes itself heard: not merely in the way that "pressure pot" terms like power struggle and oppression tend to recur but also in the very questioning of whether multiculturalism is indeed a dream if not an illusion, the questioning of whether it is in fact a "toy" with which children amuse themselves and a "recreational" topic for academics, rather than constituting any grown-up way of thinking or achievable reality.

Yet while such a pessimistic observation might seem to explain both the title and subtitle of this issue—suggesting after the fashion of both Francis Bacon and Nietzsche, that "Otherness" is an "idol" and that rhetoric is the currency which ensures its worship—this is neither an adequate overall reflection of the essays in this collection nor the full import of what is intended by the title. For what still needs to be addressed is the question of what "need" does the multicultural ideal satisfy and why this ideal should manifest itself at this particular point in time. In this way, instead of history and economics being the factual contingencies that expose the fallacies of multicultural discourse, they become precisely the most instructive *agents provocateurs*.

Significantly, it is also to the original metaphors that one might return for essential clues, and particularly to the way that "mosaic" is historically associated with the Byzantine Empire and by extension with a type of religious art and the iconic depiction of spiritual truths or Platonic ideals. In this sense, then, multiculturalism has had affinities with the "cultish" from its very beginnings, and it is perhaps this kind of legacy—rather than any orientalist carnivalization—that is reflected in the association of multiculturalism with ethnic rituals and festivals.

If one considers in turn that the essence of religion is the positing of something "Other" which by definition cannot be defined, and if one considers that a feature of the recent paradigm shift has been the disappearance of the "transcendental," then the way that multiculturalism has become the new "idol of otherness" is not surprising: in keeping with the rubric that "nature abhors a vacuum," iconoclasm in one area usually results in iconophilia in another.

What is equally not surprising is that religion or morality are topics rarely or overtly addressed in multicultural discourse at the same time that an "ethical" concern is everywhere evident—especially perhaps in the recurrent taboo against appropriating or representing an "Other." One might also suggest that the self-consciousness associated with self-reflexiveness is not too remote from "conscience," and that terms like "authenticity," "transgression," "honesty" and "guilt" are part of a "confessional" mindset. Nor should one overlook the religious resonance of terms like "purity" and "impurity" in discussions of ethnicity, and especially when they are accompanied by a moralistic ridicule.   .

Yet maybe it is not only to the past but also to the future that one should look for the reason that multiculturalism has acquired the status of a new credo and crusade. Our future seems to be extremely uncertain, but at the same time there seems to be a clear and irrevocable "end" in sight. That end is the year 2000, and while such a date is totally arbitrary, mathematical and culturally specific, this does not prevent it from exercising a certain magic—an effect that can be seen not only in the tone of urgency which frequently informs multicultural discourse but also in the apocalyptic imagery which pervades it.

Given this sense of imminence, in conjunction with the way our mindset retains so many of its earlier modes of perceptualizing, one might wonder indeed whether a paradigm shift has in fact occurred or whether we are still in the "crisis" phase. If so, then multiculturalism could be likened to the "anomalous" fact that refuses definition—i.e., the traditional way of describing the deity, as well as the precise condition of the newly-arrived immigrant or the liminal figure in a society. Considered in this light, multicultural discourse could itself be seen as a kind of displaced theology in which the concern with immigration, ethnicity and marginality becomes a form of philosophical meta-theorizing about "other" things.

In a general sense, what encourages one to "read" multicultural discourse in this way is the current view that all narratives are ideological and all theorizing is allegorical. Accordingly, a final way of conceptualizing multiculturalism is as a "text," whereby a theory of multiculturalism could be seen as a theory of reading and a major question would be what form the multicultural text should take. In fact, these are the issues with which each of the contributors to this collection are invariably concerned, and the perspectives they collectively provide go far toward suggesting how the rhetoric and reality of multiculturalism might come together. In doing so, these essays also suggest that if all discussion of such matters must be provisional the attempt is nevertheless necessary and that "what is multiculturalism?" is not a question to be answered by any "jesting Pilate."