

**Multicultural citizenship and immigration in Canada:  
The individual terror of not really belonging, the authenticity of always being  
different, and the new “essence” of bad faith.**

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Dr. Cecil A Foster  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
University of Guelph, Canada

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be on this panel with such illustrious colleagues, here in the beautiful and historic city of Lisbon. I want to thank Canadian Heritage and the organizers of Metropolis for making this discussion possible. Particularly, I want to thank Canadian Heritage for engaging in this kind of self-examination of Canada, in a foreign land and before an international audience. We might be Canadians, but we are bold, and even self-confident enough to risk hanging out our laundry to dry.

And, indeed, this is where I want to begin my discussion this afternoon. For in terms of what is the lived reality in Europe, certainly, the notion of Canadian heritage seems to be a misnomer at best, if, not an outright contradiction. As we walk the cobbled streets of *Lisboa*, sit in places that over time were theatres, mosques, synagogues, churches so many centuries old, when we visit the many squares and museums, see the centuries old statues, think of the timeless mythologies and narratives of which these artefacts speak —indeed, when we talk about Canadian heritage, can it ever be on the same scale as Portuguese heritage, for example? There is even the possibility that this contradiction has escaped the newest manifestation of the Canadian government, where the previous emphasis on multiculturalism has been replaced with an onus on heritage. Canadian Heritage, eh? Well, whatever!!!

Thinking this way, I am reminded of that great passage in Plato's *Timeaus* where Solon goes to the Egyptian sages to talk about historical matters and about citizenship in the Greek state he was fashioning, and the sages could only shake their dread-locks heads and say, "O Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you." (Timaeus 21a-27b). So those of you like these sages in your own way hoary with age, memory and culture please do not shake your heads as

we the upstarts that come from this childlike place we love and call Canada to talk about something as old as citizenship and belonging. And to even offer the suggestion that there is something meaningful in the Canadian model that might be of some use in Europe and elsewhere in this century. Indeed, just imagine Solon trying to teach the sages.

Now, before anyone gets the idea that I am claiming there is no *real* heritage or history to Canada – let me say that I am talking more about *scale* rather than content itself, about perception, narratives and imagination– let me say that it is this seemingly lack of oldness, fixity, nativism and historical determination that makes Canada really free, and even innocent, and certainly, idealistic. So, let me bring home to you what is the main point of my presentation.

For well over a generation, granted not a very long time, Canada has positioned itself as a unique type of liberal democracy, where issues of belonging and entitlement can be reconciled in what is known as multicultural citizenship (Kymlicka, Foster). To this end, multicultural citizenship supposedly replaced race and racialization with a non-evaluative ethnicity as essential to knowing the authenticity of liberal citizenship. This citizenship is based on abstract rights; privileges are to be awarded on merit and equality of opportunity. That is the goal, even if Canada is still a long way from becoming truly a Just Society. At least, in its innocence, it has the desire, if not all of the political will, to become mythologically something special.

Now, recent stresses in the body politic are seriously testing this faith in multicultural citizenship. In this case, the suspicion has fallen on immigration of a particular form that is called visible minorities and on those who are always perceived as

immigrants regardless of how many generations they have been in Canada, particularly those who are still considered “essentially” not true Canadian.

To put this point differently, Canada as a country that claims not to have much of a heritage, certainly not in terms of nativism, finds itself in the position of where the devil makes work for idle hands. Or it might be the case of the God sitting in all her glory, not contented and happy with what she has had created, but has become bored and tries once again to complicate things. She wants to claim a heritage, to simply put it, to go native.

Analogously, for the rest of this presentation, think of the elites in Canada who are searching for a way to impose a specific identity, narrative and mythology on Canada, and hoping to do so in ways that would return Canada to more of a pluralist society as to be found in the U.S. or Europe, rather than the Canada of the unhinged freedom of multiculturalism. I like to think of these elites as representative of a Canada that is searching for a problem – specially that of giving themselves a questionable nativism based effectively on inherited privileges and skin colour.

My analysis is that these elites can only succeed in producing a problem for Canada if they can get everyone to act in bad faith: that is to assume that specific immigrants and ethnicities are naturally evil and inferior, and that they are incapable of adding anything meaningful to the Canadian identity and culture that is the national project. Those who see Canadian citizenship as just another aspect of the Charles Taylor’s *Malaise of Modernity*, rather than an extension of the equally Charles Taylor’s *Politics of Recognition* as a quest for freedom can only rely on an argument of bad faith and evil intention—an new mythological argument that says we know who people are by their histories and our memories of them and that we are not willing to erase old

memories and knowledge to be starting over again and to seeing every member of the team as willing and eager to pull her or his weight for the good of the team. They must rely on an argument that argues for the enslavement of multicultural citizenship as the new, but really the old, spirit of modernity.

Therefore, you might now have a better understanding of my topic, why it talks about the horrors of a new individualism, the authenticity of being positioned ironically as different in a country that supposedly values differences; and the giving to Others as determined by an exclusive elite bunch of highly indeterminate, history-less and cultureless others of an essence or nature of bad faith, whether or not the intended excluded groups want this essence. This for me is truly the malaise and horror of modernity. It is the story, for me, of those who would take away the freedoms of most Canadians so that the entire country can enter in a period of acute unhappiness as a consciousness –when we could all be as distrustful, hateful and abusive of each other, just like all those Europeans and Americans who have been taught by their history, culture, essences and authenticities to hate and racialize all others who do not have the same historical determination as them. Indeed, talking about looking for a problem to overcome your boredom, and of an unhappy consciousness.

I use that words *freedom and free* on purpose, for here I am thinking of sense of joy, spontaneity and creativity that is not so much at the heart of the dialectic of history that produces hard-and-fast identities with their essences and places of authenticity, but as being in the forefront, of being in the vanguard, and of being free to take any new determination without having to worry about the baggage of history. I am thinking of what my colleague Uzma meant when she intervened in Tuesday's plenary to say, among

other things, that when she immigrated to Canada it was in search of all those liberal rights and opportunities that are supposedly the values that make new and different individuals called Canadians. She, too, wanted to be a free human being – not something already determined by history and a process over which she might not have had any choice. She wanted to be as history-less and culture-less as any other Canadian, and it is this “nothingness” that for me is the most valuable thing about Canadian citizenship.

This nothingness is the site of the freedom of becoming, when there are no rigid boundaries or limits – but just possibilities, opportunities and potentials. In this nothingness, ironically, even the still aboriginal and First Nations people do not have social nativism. To me, this is the freedom that is offered to people from around the world to come to a new land and to create history for this place, and always for the first time—to come to a place called Canada – and to give it a new memory, culture and heritage is what I consider to be the most radical elements of that thing we call Canadian multiculturalism.

But it is a process that says that it is foolish to think that these actors do not have a history or culture to start out with. Where this brand of multiculturalism places the emphasis is not on the starting position, but on what can be achieved. So that Canadian citizenship is not incompatible with trans-nationalism or with dual or even multi-citizenship. Indeed, multicultural citizenship anticipates change, challenges and movements, but holds fast to the ideal that whereas forms of determination and expressions will change, the values and intentions that make us uniquely Canadian are the very essences and necessities that we would paradoxically want to keep.

In this case, all immigrants and refugees to Canada are no different from the many navigators that over the centuries left places like Lisbon; and even today each immigrant and refugee is still arriving in a land that perceptually is still waiting to be made into his or her own image, to receive his or her own essence, and to be transformed into its own authenticity. In this sense, I can think of no other country that perceptually offers this freedom –if only because the country is being presented not as something that has been fashioned unchangeably in the past, but as a culture and way of life that is a work in process and even progress. Ideologically, it is where all old things are always becoming new. This is a country that tries to avoid the debate of motility of people –of for example differentiating radically between citizens and mere workers—by taking the position in the Aristotelian way that if you are good enough to come to Canada to work, you are also good enough to be a full and active citizen.

Viewing Canada as a work in progress, we also see how immigrants have the ability and freedom to contribute towards some very general outcome, such as a Just Society, and to this end we only have to consider what is the true lived experience in Canada – a reality where our national counting body, Statistics Canada, indicates that almost any growth in the Canadian population is now from immigration. This is a hard brute fact that is continuing to prove prophetic the statement by the former Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, the ideological sage-cum-Solon of multicultural Canada, that Canada is a nation-state of minorities, that everyone in Canada is a minority, that Canada is *not* a place for totalization and conformity, and that the notion of an ideal Canadian boy or girl is an absurdity.

This is a Canada where Canadian heritage is authentically multiculturalism – a seeming contradiction of a body that is always a composite, as never having an essence or specific authenticity or genuineness. Yet, in a maddening and post-modern way, it is a body that has a strong sense of belonging – a spirit of belonging that is grounded in the present and its hopes for the future and not in the prisons of contingencies or those accidents of birth—of homelands, languages, sexualities, ethnicities, races, etc. – of those things given to us by nature. As an act in idealism, multicultural Canada is not just a plural state—it is more than that: it is perceptually a social construction around a presumed essence of social equality as social justice, and it is idealism that says that at the end of the day every Canadian is first and foremost an individual. A Canadian is a universal when he or she wants to be, and he or she can be a particular kind of human when she or he also chooses.

Let me give three brief examples of where the “problem of difference” is manifesting itself dialectically for the elite groups in Canada. The examples all have to do in some way with notions of the security of the state, the fight against terrorism and the idea that threats against the state and culture are just as likely to come from within the state as from without. But for the attacks to come from within, there must be already positioned what in the older literature was presented as “fifth columns” – those wolves in sheep clothing, those inauthentic citizens acting in bad faith and masquerading as good and well-intentioned citizens. This is an argument that still has to rely on history, memory and culture—on knowing people not because of their works but on what are their so-called natural group and cultural attributes.



The first so-called problem flows out of the arrest of 17 Canadians this summer for allegedly planning terrorist acts against the Canadian state. This was the Canadian version of “home-grown” terrorists that would subvert the state. The individuals all had several identities, but it quickly emerged in the public discourse that the only identity that mattered was that they were Muslim. Immediately, the discussion turned to whether or not Muslims as a group can be trusted and what tactics should be used against Muslims to make sure that they do not become radicalized in Canada. Well, they might become radicalized in this discourse, but they were no longer individualized. Seemingly a generation of multicultural citizenship was wiped out when the Canadian elites returned to a racialized discussion based on presumed group traits to deal with an issue that they considered as a threat to “their” nation-state and not as a threat to an entity that is home for all ethnicities and religious groups. Muslims, especially those women who choose to wear burkas, suddenly shining examples of those who were genuinely non-Canadian.

The second example is of a growing discussion on whether Canadian citizenship should be the identity of universal that is also a particular. This is the argument that suggests Canada should no longer recognize dual citizenship. In deed, the argument seems to be ill-conceived because should it not be a question of the recognition of multi-citizenship? In cities like Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal it is possible to find people with any given number of citizenships, none of them giving serious thought to how fractured they might appear to others. For example, think of the Black/Caribbean/African community of which I am a member. What happens when our second and third-generation immigrant children marry, when the parents of the bride and groom can come from four different nations, each one giving the bride and groom its own

citizenship? Then, think of the children of the new arrangement, think of all the citizenships the children will inherit along with their privileged Canadian identity. Some would have us recognize only the Canadian inheritance. But should that not be an issue of choice for the individual and how could we force any free citizen not to think and feel an affinity with others of another nation-state?

The third problem is one that arose and was quickly suppressed. However, I do not think it has gone away completely. It arose as a result of a recent shooting at the Dawson College in Montreal where a man described as Indo-Canadian shot up the institution. One journalist for a major newspaper suggested that this act of violence had its foundation in Canadian culture itself—in the alienation that some immigrants and visible minorities feel from the mainstream Canadian cultures. In this case, the journalist identified the alienation as stemming from the nativism in French culture. This argument was quickly shot down and the newspaper eventually apologized for raising the issues. Journalistic ethics aside, my feeling is that the issue was shot down so quickly because of its clear implications – that the violence was an act of Canadian citizenship and not something brought into the country. Its argument is that Canadian culture, itself, this extended bogus nativism, as a live reality, is already a site of inauthenticity.

I raise these issues to show that there are challenges in the Canadian model of citizenship. But I also do so to indicate that the model has anticipated these challenges, for in the end multicultural citizenship is not so much about nation-state building, formation or preservation. As I indicated in my book *Where Race Does Not Matter: The New Spirit of Modernity*, multicultural citizenship is about people as individuals first and foremost learning and trying to get along. Multicultural citizenship is the

quintessential liberal project. It is about building a future that is free of the problems of the past, of replacing what has been called the slums of despair for immigrants and others with a home of hope. It is living out contradictions by acting in good faith. And it is a message that equally we Canadians still need to hear, for we do not yet have a history and culture of an idealistic Just Society.

Thank you.