

A Critical Survey of Multicultural Discourses In New Zealand and the United States

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The modern world with its relative ease of travel and communication has brought together peoples and their representative ethnicities to an extent never seen before. Colonialism and its aftermath, the search for religious freedom, war and famine have all played historical roles in motivating the movement of large populations over vast territories. More recently, as suggested by Levinson and Ember, these migrations are increasing in the wake of political turmoil and economic changes of a “post-industrial post-cold war world” (1996: 808). They point out that “virtually all modern states are multicultural and many are becoming more so” (1996: 808). Once not so long ago, we were constantly reminded of “what a small world” it was. Now though, a walk down any of the thoroughfares of a large city anywhere in the world reveals a telling variety of skin tones, languages, clothing and foods which reify the sense that this small world is getting even smaller. The newer oft-heard catchphrase “global village” embodies the atmosphere of many cosmopolitan cities, as exotic names on grade school maps become the birthplace of new neighbors, coworkers or classmates. Thus this growing sense of shrinking geography is ironical in that it encourages the broadening of our awareness and our social interactions.

Any discussion of multiculturalism requires an understanding of the word that goes beyond its rather vague commonsensical gist. The social

historian Immanuel Wallerstein summarizes culture as “the collection of traits ... behaviors ... values ... beliefs ... which are neither universal nor idiosyncratic” (Featherstone 1990: 31). The Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology defines multiculturalism as “many or multiple cultures, usually in reference to ethnic pluralism” (Levinson and Ember 1996: 808). Multiculturalism and cultural pluralism are often used interchangeably but anthropologist Philip E. Leis reveals a slightly different approach to the terms. He indicates that multiculturalism’s “emphasis on the normative nuance found in pluralism has made it less a concept in search of describable behavior than a social policy for promoting and celebrating difference” (Leis 1996: 941). This reveals how the concept includes socio-political policies, or discourses. There is then the concern of how these discourses can be manipulated to both reveal and hide what can be known. In this paper I will discuss how multicultural discourses in New Zealand and the United States have been constructed to either include or exclude minority groups within their borders.

New Zealand’s approach to multiculturalism appears to have been anything but a gradual evolution. It can be more accurately described as a historical trend interspersed with stops and starts. The Treaty of Waitangi has served as the symbolic cornerstone of relations between Maori and New Zealanders of European descent (or *Pakeha*). Since 1840 it has been touted as an exemplary model of peaceful and balanced social relations (Bell 1996: 9). Interestingly the land wars that plagued the country through the late 1800’s have been left out of popular versions of history (Bell 1996: 9). Of course until recently there simply were no Maori writers of academic history (King 1999). The origins and persistence of the myth of a harmonious society reveal the way in which history can be constructed to serve the needs of those who write it.

Through the early half of the 20th century New Zealand pursued a

policy of assimilation in its immigration policies and with respect to Maori. Cracks in this monoculture based on European values began to show during the manufacturing boom of the 1950's (Spoonley 1993: 111; Bell1996: 7). The 1960's and 70's gave birth to a sudden broad-spectrum rise in political activism. Maori unity and nationalism found a new confidence, which paralleled African American activism in the United States (Poata-Smith 1996: 8). The government responded with a shift in rhetoric during the 1970's to an emphasis on biculturalism. For the most part this was simply recognition of the failure of earlier policies of integration and assimilation of Maori (Spoonley 1993: 92). Finally the 1980s witnessed a rise in official government spheres of multicultural discourses aimed at assuaging the growing cries of exclusion from other ethnic groups such as Pacific Islanders, Indians and Chinese. The government speak which came out of the State Services Commission in 1983 stresses "fairness ... equality ... respect ..." as the goals of a new multiculturalism (Spoonley 1993: 92). What follows is a critical survey of the effectiveness of these discourses.

"To be Pakeha in Aotearoa in 1986 means to begin taking seriously the possibility of sharing power and inevitably giving up power, and looking to a future which must involve a more equitable use of power" (Spoonley 1993: 60). This quote makes clear exactly what multicultural discourses pertain to: power. The *Pakeha* have it. Maori want it. Out of these negotiations for power some seemingly positive effects have emerged. State policies in the 1980's both reflected and encouraged a new degree of autonomy in Maori communities (Spoonley 1993: 109). The fourth Labour government came to power in 1984 and quickly granted new status to the Treaty of Waitangi through a Tribunal, which would hear land right grievances (Poata-Smith 1996: 108). However it was soon apparent that the Tribunal could only make recommendations

to a government already under intense pressure to restore profitability to a slumping economy (Poata-Smith 1996: 108). As the volume of claims mounted the government became aware of the potentially huge cost of returning land and the way in which it would interfere with a larger overarching economic policy of privatization and devolution of the welfare state (Spoonley 1993: xii; Poata-Smith 1996: 109). Obviously Labour's real agenda in cutting back on social service delivery was driven by backroom bean counting. The fact that said beans came sugar coated in the emotive jingoism of mana, status and autonomy for Maori communities shouldn't distract from the essential fact that governing elites in particular, and Pakeha members of the dominant white status quo have simply too much to lose in a truly bicultural arena. Interestingly, neither Spoonley nor Smith questions the timing of Labour's piecemeal acquiescence to Maori demands and the way in which contradictory trends were played off against each other. The long-term shift toward a more liberal privatized economy meant that the state would be washing its hands of the very properties that would be argued over before the Waitangi Tribunal, absolving it of the two things all governments fear most: embarrassment and responsibility.

Other seemingly progressive examples of concrete change due to multicultural policies can be seen in a similar vein. Beginning in the 1980s an official policy of inclusion was selectively offered to Maori. The incorporation of leading figures into the structure of government has effectively co-opted some of the more radical and influential activists with offerings of wealth and prestigious positions (Poata-Smith 1996: 108). The acceptance by key players of the "illusion of partnership" led to their becoming "increasingly removed from the concerns and vitality of the flax roots Maori struggle" (Poata-Smith 1996: 109). For the government however, these few became the unelected

representatives of all Maori in general. Their middle-class, business-oriented opinions contributed to the call for privatization--an atmosphere in which their own businesses might prosper. Also, their voices were lent to conservative elements who ushered in a significant reduction of welfare services perpetrated under the rubric of weaning Maori of their dependence (Poata-Smith 1996: 109). Dwindling fiscal commitment to social support programs proved to be functionally divisive in that it created divisions within working-class communities. Pacific Islanders and Maori who once exhibited unity in the face of radical oppression and class exploitation--like the Polynesian Panthers of the 1970s (Poata-Smith 1996)--soon found themselves competing for state resources and arguing over who was the more destitute and therefore more deserving of welfare dollars. These examples illuminate strategies employed by the state to include potentially troublesome threats to the status quo, while continuing to operate along the same old lines of exclusion.

The most fertile ground for multicultural discourses has been, and continues to be, in the United States. A complex web of official ideology and social myth making has led to a projected image of egalitarianism and pluralism. It would be more accurate to categorize much of US history as the active pursuit and attempted legitimization of Eurocentric values through assimilative policies toward marginalized minorities.

From the earliest days of the country capitalist power structures have been employed to exploit and suppress various groups. Native Americans experienced this in its worst extreme as the choice between assimilation or genocide (Levinson and Ember 1996: 810). The exploitation of millions of enslaved Africans was one of the primary features that contributed to American economic successes. It was the ways and means for what bell hooks scathingly labels "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (1995: 190). Indentured servitude,

exploited Chinese railroad workers, Irish coal miners, migrant Mexican farm laborers ... the list goes on and on. As sociologist Claudia Bell sees it “the commercial potential of each in relation to national identification is calculated by those with the most to gain” (1996: 186). The decision to include (i.e. citizenship and concomitant access to government resources, voting, legal rights, education, etc.) is based on a continuum that assesses the potential threat to the state against the potential benefit. Thus the polite facade and banter of multiculturalism can be seen as hiding a selective immigration and naturalization process necessary for access to new consumers and a cheap labor surplus.

Throughout this history one of the key elements of socializing dogma was found in the Protestant work ethic. Its emphasis on hard work as the means to success socializes workers to believe that anyone who plays by the economic rules and commits themselves to life-long labor is assured the chance to grasp that oft-hinted at, but rarely seen, brass ring; colloquially known as the “American dream.” This echoes Immanuel Wallerstein’s universal “Everyman” with its connotations of social mobility through immersion in the exploitative realm of capitalism (Featherstone 1990: 46).

Within this blanketing cultural structure, the identities and values of marginalized subcultures undergo a transformation. Anthropologist Vilsoni Hereniko points out that such groups “display a degree of uniformity in their accommodation to the imposition’s of the dominant group by resistance to infusing the new values with their own traditional ones” (1994: 411). Thus the overlying blanket becomes a patchwork quilt rather than the proverbial melting pot.

If the quilt is a multicultural nation, what then is the stitching that holds it all together? Theories of political economy would pursue a line similar to that above emphasizing exploitation, class struggle and the

contradictions within capitalism itself. American anthropologist Scott Michelsen summarizes the humanist/idealist approach, which concentrates on the shared humanity and the common goals of “morality, equity and justice” (1999: 16). These value-laden terms are vague however and open to endless interpretations. In fact the monoculture that would result from the imposition of these values would lead to ever stronger identity politics since “the affirmation of values ... always produces and multiplies competing cultures rather than mediates them” (Michaelsen 1999: 19). Understanding this we are left with the paralyzing impotence of post-modernism. There is then the need for discourses based on negotiation (Hereniko 1994: 19) rather than the imposition of a dominant hegemonic ethnocentrism.

Negotiation of common principles can stitch the seams of America’s somewhat tattered multicultural quilt. Michelsen relies on his colleague David Theo Goldberg for an understanding of a critical multiculturalism which can address those needs. Goldberg presents three proposals with which to revitalize negotiations over unequal access to resources in the US. First, there is the need to understand that there is an undeniable variety of cultures. Second, is the necessity of not passing judgement on cultural differences. Finally, negotiators must realize and affirm that cultures interact and transform each other (cited in Michelsen 1999: 9). If agreement can be reached on these fundamental principles the possibility of deeper negotiations can be based upon more specific commonalities. Michelsen presents a “set of minimal commitments” that would include “rules of inference, healthy emotional responses to pain and tragedy, a desire to draw together the implications of knowledge formation” (1999: 12-13). It is refreshing to see concrete proposals for the reworking of ineffective discourses. These commitments start from a very basic level and yet reveal the possibility of actual progress against

the impasses of current American multicultural contexts.

Opinions of current discourses are nearly always critical. Many call for far-reaching change and a relinquishing of outdated monolithic modes of thinking, stereotypes and superficial treatment of symptoms of racial and ethnic inequalities rather than prevention. For example bell hooks remonstrates against policies like affirmative action and its integrative aims as a “new strategy ... to maintain and perpetuate white supremacy” with its “underlying structures of domination” (1995: 108-109). Such programs have always provoked cries of reverse racism and favored treatment of one minority over another. The flip side of integration has usually been renewed essentialist positions by all those involved. These are dubiously based on historical and political stereotypes clothed in neo-traditionalism with its concomitant “projection of selected images and symbols that highlight cultural differences (Hereniko 1994: 417). These facets of culture are defended as “untranslatable” (Michelsen 1999: 13). A common catch phrase printed on t-shirts and bumper stickers during the culture wars of the 1990’s went “It’s a black thing. You wouldn’t understand”. This sort of epistemological resistance shackles negotiated dialogue, nullifies any sustained strategies for political activism and exacerbates entrenchment.

This survey reveals the degree to which multiculturalism has been reduced to a gloss over of persistent inequalities and intractability. In a sense, multiculturalism can be viewed as the result or earlier “procedures, policies and laws that discouraged retention of cultural differences while at the same time sanctioning discrimination that interfered with or prohibited assimilation” (Levinson and Ember 1996: 810). Facing institutional racism that “has evolved and become less obvious” (Spoonley 1993: xii) and the patronizing attitude of a pervasive hegemony based on both race and class (Poata-Smith 1996; Bell 1996), desperation sometimes builds to

explosive levels. Usually the pressure can be bled off through structural safety valves. By resorting to palliatives of token recompense, co-optation, erosion of credibility in the media, through radicalization or finally through the ever present option of monopolized force the powerful segments of society maintain and perpetuate their dominance.

Many of the arguments presented in this paper in regards to New Zealand and the United States would hold true in most countries of the world. More and more people view contemporary society as a “multiplicity of competing cultures and ideologies” (Hereniko 1994: 417). The evidence for the lack of progress in redistribution of resources and in institutional racism whether against Maori, American Indians or African Americans is a fact that members of those communities live with daily. Lower standards of living, lack of political representation and misguided, belittling social institutions continue to marginalize these groups. I have argued that only a very basic and fundamental restructuring of power distribution can lead to any real change aside from the standard liberal rhetoric of inclusion. Negotiations based on respect and fairness like Goldberg’s can and should begin on all societal levels; from the interpersonal to the international. As long as marginalized minorities remain disenfranchised and inter-generationally traumatized by racism and exclusion any progress would be the exception rather than the norm. Only in a new atmosphere of trust building and sharing can the challenges of multiculturalism in New Zealand and the US move forward.

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