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## Against Multiculturalism

By Philip Carl Salzman

Like “disciplined anarchy,” “monogamy with multiple spouses,” and “promiscuous chastity,” “multiculturalism” is an incoherent and self-contradictory idea. So too is Canada’s “multiculturalism in a bilingual society.”

Here is why: “Culture” is the way of life of a people. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century “culture” was the central concept of anthropology, a tool to guide the study and understanding of peoples and their diverse societies. Edward Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1870), referred to a quality possessed by all people in all social groups; he defined “culture” as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

The great lesson of modern anthropology, learned through first hand ethnographic fieldwork among peoples all around the world, is that the various parts of social life and culture are interrelated and largely compatible with one another. The great lesson of comparative anthropology is that the many peoples around the world have social arrangements and belief systems highly divergent from one another, based on totally different principles and played out in totally different ways. This was known by Aristotle and Herodotus, and well documented by anthropologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Ruth Benedict’s 1934 *Patterns of Culture* and Margaret Mead’s 1928 *Coming of Age in Samoa* offer striking comparisons of remarkably distinct cultures. Here is Benedict (p. 17):

In culture too we must imagine a great arc on which are ranged the possible interests provided either by the human age-cycle or by the environment or by man’s various activities.... Its identity as a culture depends upon the selection of some segments of this arc. Every human society everywhere has made such selection in its cultural institutions. Each from the point of view of another ignores fundamentals and exploits irrelevancies. One culture hardly recognizes monetary values; another has made them fundamental in every field of behaviour. In one society technology is unbelievably slighted even in those aspects of life which seem necessary to insure survival; in another, equally simple, technological achievements are complex and fitted with admirably nicety to the situation. One builds an enormous cultural superstructure upon adolescence, one upon death, one upon after-life.

The three peoples I lived with and studied, although selected for the common feature of pastoralism, raising livestock on natural pasture, were markedly different: The Yarahmadzai Baluch of Iranian Balochistan were a tribal people; egalitarian and decentralized, they organized through kin groups large and small, each balanced in opposition to its neighbour. The Reika of Rajasthan, India, were clean caste members of the hierarchical caste system, in a society traditionally ruled by maharajas. The fragmented families of shepherds of highland Sardinia were peasants by virtue of being encapsulated by the Italian state, although as individuals they exhibited “self-help” in vendettas, and resistance to various state institutions and policies.

How is all of this relevant to multiculturalism? If culture is a particular way of doing things, and another culture is a different way of doing things, and a third culture is yet a different way from the other two of doing things, then in bringing these three (or however many) cultures together, we are attempting to combine contrasting, conflicting, and incompatible cultural features that cannot fit together:

Let us begin with a simplistic example: for all that British and Canadian cultures share, they still drive on different sides of the road. How exactly could these two traffic cultures be combined? Only with a lot of smashed metal, shattered glass, and broken bones. Traffic has to go on one side alone. It has got to be one or the other: left or right.

If I brought together my friends from Baluchistan, Rajasthan, and Sardinia, how could we communicate with the Baluch speaking Baluchi or Farsi, the Reika speaking Marwari Hindi, and the Sardinians speaking Sardu or Italian? To live together, people need a common language, or common languages. Language is also more than a means of communication; it includes concepts and categories that are critical to a specific culture.

Canadians take pride in the principle of equality before the law; South Asian law is applied according to caste. Canadians have a constitution and British common law and French civil legal systems; some other cultures respect only religious law, and some countries have instituted religious law.

Although coming late in our history, gender equality is a major value of contemporary Canadians; in some other cultures, all women by law must obey their male guardians. For example, women must marry the person chosen by the guardian.

In sum, different cultures are incompatible because the elements of each contradict those of the other culture. A society cannot be at the same time egalitarian and hierarchical, decentralized and centralized, kin-oriented and law-oriented, secular and religious.

A large majority of Canadians think that multiculturalism is a good thing, but, at the same time, a large majority wishes that minorities would try harder to adapt to the Canadian mainstream. I would interpret this as indicating that Canadians like the toleration of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, but they want that society to be Canada, and not an amalgam of miscellaneous customs and practices from around the world.

It should not come as a shock that Canadian culture rests on the foundational heritage of Great Britain and France, as Canadian official languages, political institutions, and laws all stem directly from those countries. So too with religion, literature, and art. Canada is firmly within the tradition of Western Civilization.

What harm can befall Canada from the official policy of “multiculturalism”? Multiculturalism implies that all cultures are equally valid and good, and that there is no basis to criticize, reject, or ban any customs or practices from any culture. This cultural and moral relativism undermines not only our morality and ethics, but our institutions and law. Multiculturalism, as a national policy, is an incoherent concept, proposing the marriage of opposing principles, values, institutions, and practices.

Why require people to respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms if their caste law or sharia law or communist law is equally worthy? Why object to female genital mutilation, or child marriage, or honour killings when these are well established cultural practices? Why demand that people learn English and French, when Chinese and Hindi and Arabic are equally effective languages?

The answer is that Canadians have a right to decide what is acceptable within their culture and what is not acceptable. Furthermore, language, customs, and practices that conflict with Canadian custom, institutions, and law cannot be carried out without bringing chaos and anarchy to Canada. Furthermore, cultural minorities cannot succeed in Canada without adapting to the Canadian culture. That is why for generations immigrants to Canada and to the United States strove and succeeded to assimilate to Canadian and American culture. Canada’s and the U.S.’s success is partly a result of the effective integration of cultural minorities and of the contributions of those new Canadians and Americans.

Wait, is this argument for assimilation driven by nativism and racism? Let us dispense with “racism” immediately: culture is not race and race is not culture. Do not let anyone tell you that criticism of a culture is “racist.” As for “nativism,” I happen to be a member of a minority myself, one that I strongly identify with. Furthermore, my children are both visible minorities, of other racial backgrounds than myself.

The basis of my argument is threefold: first, every society must have a culture that is to some substantial degree coherent, or else chaos will ensue; second, Western civilization is our heritage and is valuable and worth defending; and, third, democracy requires that majorities, cultural and electoral, must be respected. For these reasons, it is the duty of immigrants and minorities to adapt to the heritage and mainstream culture.

#### About the Author



Philip Carl Salzman B.A. (Antioch), M.A., Ph.D. (Chicago) is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, appointed in 1968. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years he has also served as Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney. Extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) provided the foundation many articles in academic journals, and for book publications such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitir–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and *Areo Magazine*.