Abstract

Muddled as an idea and flawed as a public policy, multiculturalism in Canada advocates conformity to a unitary culture in the public place and tolerance of diverse cultures in the private place. This tolerance of cultural heterogeneity in the sphere of the intimate is often upheld as a defining characteristic of Canadian society. Yet multiculturalism is not without its criticisms. For one, multiculturalism is at odds with the desire of the children and grandchildren of the Chinese immigrants in Canada to adapt themselves to their host society, thus transforming themselves as well as the larger society. A multicultural policy that continues to hark back to the past turns a blind eye to the fierce generation and gender politics within the Chinese family. Neither does the multicultural policy squares well with a more progressive social theory of self, identity, and culture that is cognizant of the duality of the psychological make-up of human beings: that one looks backward and forward, committed to preserving roots of the past and exploring routs to the future. As such, the Canadian multicultural policy suffers in a two-fold way: empirical and theoretical. A possible way out is to pursue a Hegelian dialectics that sees culture as an aftermath of a collision of dissimilar cultures, a kind of forced entanglement of things different. We need a new urban social theory that sees integration, fusion, and hybridization – not assimilation, not cultural pluralism – as possible and desirable outcomes. This is a completely different vision of society altogether, a kind of utopia. We need a public policy that sees a distinct promise of the city in designing institutions and public spaces that promote hybridity in the mind, an inner deliberation, a mental turmoil – which is not afraid of confronting modern life's many moments of contradictions, ironies and paradoxes.