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# Canadians in Search of Identity

*No one knows my country, neither the stranger nor its own sons.*

Bruce Hutchison

*Prompted by the perception of societies of highly-developed countries as societies where multiculturalism has solved intercultural (and interethnic) problems by peaceful means, the author attempts to fathom the way in which the concept of multiculturalism is manifested in the Canadian society. Multiculturalism as lifestyle is even in Canada still a process rather than the true everyday life of all social structures.*

Key words: national identity, multiculturalism, social structure, Canada

## Introduction

In the last decade, the term multiculturalism in the region of south-eastern Europe crossed over from the glossary of social and cultural sciences to the political vocabulary, thus becoming one of the terms that marked the second half of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, it is mainly used wherever there are problems in relationships between carriers of different cultures and has been offered as the magic word used by the civilized world to solve its disputes. Our recent history has taught us that multiculturalism does not refer only to the treasures of a region, but is very often an alibi for tragic events, and that the frequent use of the term itself and the promotion of its positive characteristics cannot solve all problems. Through our lack of feeling for the actual content of this term, we have gotten ourselves into the situation where we are **forced** to learn from the Western world of developed democracy, "which has mastered this lesson long ago" (!?).

When an inquisitive individual equipped with such attitudes (prejudices) from a region that has failed to realize the idea of *multiculturalism* without war and foreign help arrives in a developed western country, he expects to find a society organized into an ideal multicultural form. Only then does he realize how great the gap is between understanding the content of the term, the general social consensus about its acceptance, and its realization.

The Canadian society is multicultural *par excellence* and as such is an interesting example for comparison.

I stayed in Canada from the 10<sup>th</sup> of August to the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1999, where, among other things, I tried to find out who the Canadians are. The term "Canadians" made me think of the Croatian immigrants in Canada. Even when a "real Canadian" (i.e. "a non-Croatian Canadian") was mentioned in conversations with the Canadian part of my family, it was usually followed by an explanation "He/she is Scottish, English, Polish..." I realized very soon that it is not easy to get such an answer, that it is not clear even to many Canadians. In normal conversation with a foreigner, a "real Canadian" is considered to be someone who has stayed in Canada for a long time, especially if he or she had immigrated while still young. In conversations between the Canadians themselves, this will be disputed by the ones born in Canada, especially the second or third generation descendants of immigrants. In any case, we encounter on the one hand the perplexity of Canadians about their own cultural identity and on the other hand the stereotypes typical for outsiders, which are not completely but to a great extent also valid for a stranger from Croatia. Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell formulated this stereotype of the perception of *Canada as a land of snow, hockey, Mounties, wildlife, untamed spaces, maple trees, peacekeepers, Tim Horton's doughnut shops<sup>1</sup>, universal health care, Quebec separatism, and congenial, reserved people* (Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell: 2). In that sense, a typical Canadian seems to be more easily defined by artists than by sociologists, anthropologists or ethnologists. This is how the Canadian publicist and publisher John Robert Colombo describes the Canadians:

### **A Canadian Is Somebody Who**

*Thinks he knows how to make love in a canoe,*

*Bets on Toronto Maple Leafs*

*Enjoys Air Canada dinners, desserts and all*

*Distinguishes between Wayne and Schuster*

*Attends the concerts of Anne Murray and Liona Boyd*

*Boasts Donald Sutherland was born in New Brunswick*

*Possesses "a sound sense of the possible"*

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<sup>1</sup> A chain of highway outlets offering refreshment (coffee, soft drinks, simple meals and the north American type of doughnuts)

*Is sesquilingual (speaks one and half languages)*

*Has become North American without becoming*

*Either American or Mexican*

*Knows what the references in this poem are all about*<sup>2</sup>

John Robert Colombo

The issue of "Canadianship" manifests itself not only as the ultimate question of the Canadian cultural identity, but it also has a strong racial component, complicated not only by interrelations between European, Black and Asian immigrants, but especially by relations between the state and the *aborigine* population.

The formation of the Canadian cultural identity is additionally burdened with the proximity of an economically strong and culturally aggressive neighbour, with the global Americanization trend being particularly evident in Canadian society. In reaction to the interest of Canadians in this topic, the CBC television network had a series of broadcasts titled: *What Border? The Americanization of Canada!* The then Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau expressed in 1969 in Washington his discomfort at such cultural aggressiveness on the one hand and good political relations on the other hand, stating: "*Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant; no matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.*" (Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell: 13).

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 1999, the Canadian federal unit *Northwest Territories* was divided in two parts to form the new territory *Numavut* ("*Our country*" in Inuktitut, the language of Inuit<sup>3</sup>) (*Aboriginal Links: Canada & U.S.*). The Indians had earlier transformed their reserves into profitable business areas based on considerable benefits they managed to secure (such as tax exemptions and the exclusive right to hold gambling establishments on their reserves).

However, to enforce their claims to be regarded as the "only real Canadians", there have been increasingly investing efforts (often also considerable funds) to preserve and present the remains of their cultural heritage. As their culture was by nature dominated by nomad and hunting traditions, there are relatively scarce material artefacts, which is why they resort to reconstructions, the production of replicas and even to what might be termed "the invention of tradition". This refers primarily to the costumes they wear in their folklore performances for tourists.

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<sup>2</sup>John Robert Colombo, 1984. (Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell: 10; published with the permission of the author). Wayne and Shuster were TV stars of CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) in the 1960s. Anne Murray and Liona Boyd are popular singers of the 1970s, related to many scandals.

Toronto Maple Leafs is a hockey team, the traditional rival of Montreal Canadiens.

<sup>3</sup>This term for the language has been taken over from the web site of the National Library of Canada; however, the term "Inuktitut" is used both for the people as well as for their language.

Talking about the history and culture of Canada, the descendants of English and French settlers have diverging views on the issue of loyalty to Canada, its culture and the connection to its pre-settlement history. The French resent the English for their indiscriminate adoption of cultural traits from the United States. Their reproaches go to the length of accusing the English even for flirting with the ideas of a political union with the USA. Due to scarce information, it is hard to tell to what extent these (extreme) accusations are justified, but it is a fact that I have not heard an explicit denial of these accusations in Anglo-Saxon circles, while in British Columbia (admittedly, in Croatian immigrant circles) I was assured that they really would have nothing against a union with the USA. Besides the claims that only the Canadian French culture can be regarded as the authentic Canadian culture because the Anglo-Saxon one was assimilated under USA influences, an outsider can get the (perhaps wrong) impression that the French corroborate their original Canadian identity also by their conviction that they are the only bridge between the pre-settlement and post-settlement Canada by the mere existence of the culture developed by the Métis. The Métis, cross-breeds between the settlers and the Indians (i.e. white settlers and Indian women), are mostly regarded as the mixed-blood offspring of French men and Indian women, even though they speak of themselves as a **nation and culture** emerged from the inter-breeding of various European settlers besides the French.<sup>4</sup> In view of the current political constellation, the French Canadians consider their ethnicity (and cultural identity) to be the only authentically Canadian ethnicity<sup>5</sup>, as opposed to the English who are rather well-disposed toward Americanization.

The Anglo-Saxons acknowledge to a certain degree the francophone arguments regarding their cultural specifics, since the awareness of their ethnicity (and even cultural identity) has been replaced by political domination for a long time. The French, on the other hand, are resented for their separatist ambitions.

The most obvious element in the elaboration of this problem are the three different levels of its manifestation. While the state is evidently investing huge efforts to secure existence on equal footing to all ethnic groups through education, propaganda and funding, the effect on the average Canadian seems not to be commensurate. The third level in this context is the level of social sciences, which tracks all processes from the early formation of the Canadian society to the present day.

The intention of this paper is to systematise my own impressions, formulate a personal conclusion on this topic and communicate it to whoever may be interested. The paper is based on my own ("field") notes, information from good-quality web sites and literature. The notes are a record of my own observations, as well as my conversations with ordinary people and colleagues, primarily with Pauline Greenhill, professor of *Women's Studies at the University of Winnipeg*, and Carmelle Bégin, department head and curator of the *Canadian Museum of Civilisation* in Hull.

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<sup>4</sup> In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the biggest Canadian Métis settlement on Red River housed 5720 francophone Métis and 4080 anglophone Métis. (*Métis Nation History*:4)

<sup>5</sup> Meaning the contemporary Canadian state.

The first impulse for this subject was triggered by comment of Peter, a Canadian of English origin, who felt sorry that Canadian immigrant ethnic groups try to preserve their language and keep their traditions. "How will we then become Canadians?" he says<sup>6</sup>. The persistent nostalgic keeping of traditions does slow down the formation of the Canadian cultural amalgam, but it can in no way prevent it. It would be impossible to say that the young generations completely neglect their own cultural traditions, but their members are in any case quite willing to assume foreign values, which are reflected in everyday life, vocabulary, cuisine, clothing, jewellery and even rituals. Regardless of the presence of interethnic and interracial antagonisms<sup>7</sup>, everyday life is full of countless examples of taken-over cultural elements. It could be said, for instance, that the average Canadian cuisine consists predominantly of the dishes typical for the national cuisine of the cook, and then of Chinese, Italian, Polish and other specialties to varying proportions. This is also contributed to by the industry of ready and semi-ready food which people buy without knowing to which cuisine it originally belongs. Not only ready meals are used in this way, but also their recipes and original (often anglicized) names. A typical example of the penetration of native culture elements into the everyday life of the average Canadian is the making of "friendship jewellery". This jewellery is made of tiny beads threaded to form abstract or animal shapes. Parents make them for their children or encourage their children to make them for relatives or friends. Another example is *Inukshuk*, stones arranged to form various shapes. I first saw the *Inukshuk* anthropomorphic forms in the *Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature* in Winnipeg, where I learned that they had been erected in various forms and sizes and have served as landmarks along roads and reminders of important events for the individual or the community. Later I noticed such larger or smaller forms along roads and paths in nature parks, but also along highways, where visitors and travellers in transit erected them to form arches, columns with transversal beams or other completely abstract forms.

In that sense, I believe that the assimilation of the cultures of ethnic groups that have settled in Canada is only a question of time. A much bigger problem will be obviously the overcoming of antagonisms between the eminently Canadian ethnic groups (native, English and French) who tend - because of a strong political component - to the consolidation and precise definition of their own cultural tradition. This refers primarily to the growing awareness of Indians, Eskimos and Métis, who try to resist the English domination by revitalizing (and often also reconstructing) their own tradition.

It is a paradox though that the English ethnicity, from the professional point of view, has been given prominence only recently, since the term "English" has been overshadowed by the symbolism of the **power** it has evoked so far (Greenhill, 1994: 4).

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<sup>6</sup> I met Peter at the christening of his daughter Alexia. It is perhaps illustrative for this topic that Peter is a second-generation Canadian, his wife Heidi is a first-generation Canadian of Croatian origin. One of the central events at the christening celebration was an Irish violinist playing an occasional Irish national tune for little Alexia.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Blacks are considered as dirty, the "Chinese" (i.e. all Asian immigrants) as the worst and most dangerous drivers, the Indians as over-privileged, drunk and lazy, the Polish as dumb...