

# Understanding the Interface Between Multiculturalism and Postmodernism: A Nietzschean Perspective

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## Abstract

*Postmodernism with its deconstructionist position denotes a shift of hegemonic intellectual paradigm positing the transition from one cultural context to another. Such a shift is always characterized by transformation of cultural codes and systems of values expressed in changes of cultural, religious norms, outlooks on micro and macro levels, that is, social, political, ideological as well as personal, etc. The component of the postmodern program is seen in the multicultural project, assuming the creation of a global community with a set of cultures which has the right to existence and should cause respect. Multiculturalism of the nineties draws its most important concepts from the postmodernist thought, which in turn ultimately stems from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. He cherished multiculturalism and postmodernism from the value-standpoint and primarily focused on the cultural relativism. The contention of this paper is to investigate and analyse the interface between these two ideological paradigms from a Nietzschean perspective.*

**Key Words:** Multiculturalism, Postmodernism, Culture, Pluralism, Paradigm, Identity, Value, Nietzsche

## 1. Introduction

Multiculturalism has arisen as a series of political responses to changing socio-demographics and market conditions, cultural diasporas, labour migrations, and the rise of consumer culture under post modernity, and as a consequence its political and moral project may be usefully interrogated through juxtaposition with the very cultural conditions with which it coheres, mainly the postmodern politics of irony, parody, pastiche, nostalgia, poaching, and simulacra (Gunew: 2004). At the heart of the matter lies a corpus of dubious ethnic narratives nested within discourse of multiculturalism that are imbued with apparent postmodern sensibilities.

While postmodernism has been widely dismissed as a passing cultural and intellectual trend, its eulogy misses its intellectual legacies. Postmodernism has a variety of meaning, many of which are contradictory and problematic but no less relevant to contemporary cultural politics in North America. As both an intellectual response to the traditions of the enlightenment and a cultural expression of a mass consumer economy, postmodernism was and remains central to the formation of multiculturalism and the legal logic of pluralism in the US and Canada.

Postmodernism, of course, is not a consistent framework of thought and the writings that self-identity as postmodern have numerous idiosyncratic

features and internal paradoxes. For some theorists, postmodernism is synonymous with an implosion of the real and by extension of ideology, representation, and meaning (Baudrillard: 1983). Postmodernism appears to embrace consumption, symbolic creativity, diversity, and hyper reality. In doing so, they tend to sponsor an enduring ideology of a global market place purged of class struggle, one in which signs of commodities are said to replace commodities themselves (Hardt and Negri: 2001). As a result, the liberation described by some proponents of postmodernism is in many ways problematic and overstated. The paradox is such that a postmodern celebration of diversity and hybridity once used to destabilize the Eurocentric worldview of modernity is now a driving force of late capitalism, transnational corporations, “Benetton multiculturalism” and nuanced forms of domination congruent with some ideologies of multiculturalism. As such, the apostles of postmodernism have been rightly accused of embellishing not only the emancipator potential of postmodernism but also its absolute break with modernity (Egletan: 1991).

## **2. Multiculturalism: The Concept**

It is imperative to note that multiculturalism is, cosmetically, an official federal policy in Canada, introduced in 1971 and ratified in 1985 as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Shahat and Stam: 1994), the policy was the result of a longstanding history of Anglo/ Franco tension reflected in a report presented by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1969), the preceding Official Languages Act, an influx of ethnically- diverse groups, and the political tact of then- Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. At the time of its introduction, multicultural policy was designed to “promote cultural encounters and interchange among all Canadian cultural groups in the interest of national unity” as well as “assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society” (Kallen 2004: 68). Canadian multiculturalism remains to be a policy of pluralism rooted in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and designed to recognize linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, including that of indigenous groups, in the articulation of a unified but ‘heterogeneous’ nation (Mackey: 2002).

It is important to note that multiculturalism has become somewhat of an empty signifier of late, representing “a policy rubric for business, government, civil society, and education” (Melamed 2006: 15). As Goldberg warns (1994:1), “The multicultural condition, perhaps not unlike the condition of postmodernity, nevertheless cannot be reductively defined”. As a result, it is crucial to distinguish between state sponsored multiculturalism, which depoliticizes marginalized identities through a ‘deferred promise of equal representation’; corporate-sponsored multiculturalism, which translates identity- based struggles into titillating commodities; and critical multiculturalism, which have emerged in opposition to the state’s management and containment of difference (Bannerji 2000: 9). Despite the recent buzz of

multicultural rhetoric and the inherent overlaps between multicultural projects, compulsory assimilation continues to exist in the US as well as Canada, suggesting that pluralism and homogeneity are not absolute opposites. In a multicultural discourse, the terms ethnicity and culture are often used interchangeably.

Sarah Joseph in her article, 'Do Multicultural Individuals Require a Multicultural State?', emphasised that, multiculturalism, as it has been discussed in the west, is a strategy of liberal, capitalist societies. It need not be universally applicable. The western model of multiculturalism make a difference here from asian model of multiculturalism where more attention has been paid to the social and economic disadvantages of minority groups. Caste, gender or class based influences would generally constitute a dimension of an individual's cultural identity.

As an ideology, multiculturalism is guided by an understanding and celebration of difference in ways that are perhaps good-willed but often problematic. The epistemological shift away from western intellectual and artistic traditions has sometimes resulted in a sweeping conceptualization of 'otherness' as immutable ethnic difference, in the context of which the western multicultural nation appears 'heterogeneous' and benevolent. In other words, the postmodern processes under which same marginalized groups enjoy the political perks of representation are often symptomatic of late capitalist sensibilities and an identity-based logic of difference that is both empowering and disempowering. While some theorists have used elements of postmodern theory to develop a 'resistance multiculturalism' sensitive to shifting social meaning and floating racial signifiers (MacLaren 1994: 45-75), they have rarely explored the political possibilities of 'ludic postmodernism' (parody, pastiche, irony) as a critical response to multicultural ideologies. Moreover, if part of postmodernism as an intellectual movement includes self-reflexivity, self-parody, and the rejection of a foundational 'truth', for example, the various racial and ethnic categories reified under multiculturalism are perhaps open to revision and contestation (Hutcheon:1989).

### **3. The Concept of Postmodernism**

Postmodernism represents not only the historical, political, and economic antecedents of multiculturalism in North America, but also a possible foundation for its immanent critique. If critical multiculturalism, "interrogates the construction of difference and identity in relation to radical politics" the postmodern presence of parody, pastiche, irony, self-reflexivity, and fragmentation may offer important and novel tools of deconstruction within a wider antiracist pedagogy (MacLaren 1994: 53).

The postmodern narratives are preoccupied with the representational politics of diversified communities. They also rely on a postmodern aesthetic

that is ambivalent and controversial but potentially critical. It is the self-reflexivity and uncertainty of each text that in part allows for identification of immanent contradictions within multiculturalism. And the racial politics of the post-civil rights era. The narratives, in other words, may be read alongside and against one another as a series of reflections on the problems and possibilities of racial and ethnic identity formations. As such, they offer a particular response to multiculturalism that challenges the fixity of identity differences but attempts to deal with the unresolved tensions of pre-multicultural political struggles.

As a critical framework, postmodernism is an insightful but not unproblematic way of understanding and responding to multiculturalism. Although the postmodern offers a language with which to unpack a series of economic, cultural and political changes overlying the development of multiculturalism in North America, it is always one step from slipping into an unfettered celebration of diversity in the market place. Peter McLaren, identifies a 'ludic postmodernism' that reduces the world to representation by collapsing real politics into isolated moments of parody, pastiche, and fragmentation, While a second 'resistant postmodernism' (Peter MacLaren: 1994) is able to account for material inequality in relation to the totalizing structures of domination and corporate multiculturalism. Through a contextual cultural studies approach, these postmodern narratives of race and ethnicity may be channeled in meaningful way that are sensitive to the political, historical, and economic conditions in which they are embedded.

Postmodernism has distrust of foundational narratives, which inevitably lead to domination, coercion and repression. The post modernists value the plurality of cultural, ethnic and religious small narratives. They aim to conceptualize a pluralistic justice which will take account of the postmodern concern for the 'other', the 'stranger', the 'different', the 'unknown', 'excluded', 'unrepresented' or 'marginalized' (Sarup: 1988). The postmodern ethno-political project constitutes a response to difference, exclusion and marginalization produced by modernity. One must not simply exclude that which deviates from it. One must honour them with the same rights as oneself. One would not insist on universalizing one's own identity in order to impose it over others. One should accept the strangers and the others, with all their peculiarities, eccentricities, oddities, differences, even incomprehensibilities. Postmodernism stands for the rights of 'other' against individual. The postmodern thinkers made normative claims: the diverse views on right and wrong (or values) should not be judged by, or relocated to, other cultures; or, a culture should not impose on other cultures its own ideas. Diversity and the respect for difference are of utmost importance in understanding rights for different peoples of different cultures and communities. If one does not draw on cultural values and communal ideas which are indigenous to cultures, alternative development will not occur; or, if it does for a time, it will not be sustainable. Postmodern argument believes that, community is more important

than the individual since the individual is derived from community and lives and fulfils his or her goals through the community. But no community is monolithic or static. Each is a whole of contradictory tendencies and forces and each is ever dynamic. A postmodernist celebrate the resistance of the marginalized and the subjugated against the dominant. Individuals are part of the community and when they resist the dominating power and discourse within the community, they must be supported.

A postmodern framework helps to explain the ambivalence with which racial and ethnic identities emerge in some of the multicultural visions of popular culture. Although identity has long been considered an essential site of political empowerment, certain postmodern narratives of race and ethnicity suggest otherwise. This is not to deny the political efficacy of the subject in it's entirety; rather, it is to acknowledge the limitations of an identity that is incomplete and determined by an exclusion of alterity (Butler: 1990, McRabbie: 1994). Above all, a postmodern critique of multiculturalism draws attention to the slippages of meaning in language and representation whilst maintaining the importance and indispensability of both.

The following features of a postmodern frame as analytic devices are highlighted and their implications explored, in the understanding of questions relating to the identity of different cultural groups (Ali Rattansi 1995: 250):

1. The postmodern condition as primarily an intellectual condition characterized by reflection on the nature and limits of western modernity.

2. Modernity as a theoretical category: the form of conceptualization adopted here focuses especially on the dualities of modernity; for example, between the formation of democratic institutions and disciplinary complexes of bureaucracy and power/knowledge; between the excitement of rapid change and the simultaneous anxiety of societies seemingly out of control; and the constant destabilization of identities and continuous reinvention of traditions.

3. The role of western modernity's others, internal and external, real and imagined, especially in the context of various imperialisms and colonialisms, as potent forces in the formation and continuous reconstruction of western identities, in particular by processes of the marginalization of others as binary opposites of supposedly western characteristics. Derridean "deconstruction" strategies are brought into play to display the artifice involved in the construction of binarities in western discourses and cultural identities, and to destabilize the way in which oppositions such as male/female, active/passive, culture/nature, rational/emotional, civilized/savage, white/black and so forth have become superimposed on each other to hold together.

4. An exploration of the profound impact of new phases of globalization, theorized as uneven processes, but as corrosive of old national

boundaries and playing a creative role in the formation of new, hybrid, syncretic transnational identities.

5. The project of 'de-centering' and 'de-essentializing' both 'subject' and the 'social': the individual is no longer conceptualized as a fully coherent, 'rational', self-knowledgeable agent capable of direct access to reality and truth, and is theorized as living within the tension of a variety of potential and actual subject positions; social formation are no longer regarded as tightly knit complexes of institutions with necessary, predetermined forms of connection or logics of development.

6. Analyses of temporality and spatiality as constitutive features of the social, of subjectivities, and of process of identification. Neither time nor space are privileged over the other; moreover, both are seen as being in a constant state of flux, in contrast to a widespread tendency to view time as dynamic and space as static. Moreover, in conditions of 'late modernity' and its associated intensified globalization, there is an emphasis on what Harvey (1989) has called 'time-space compression', that is, the diminution of space by technologies of mass communication and travel and the increasing simultaneity of experience across the globe. There are specific postmodernist aesthetic strategies and cultural movements associated with these transformations which are crucial to a sense of the postmodern as a cultural and political formation.

7. A reconsideration of the relation between the psychic and the social which takes seriously a specifically psychoanalytic de-centering of the subject, positing it as constitutively split between a conscious self and the disruptions of unconscious desire, emotional attachments and hostilities, the operations of ambivalence, splitting, fantasy, paranoia, projection, and introjections

#### **4. Multiculturalism and Postmodernism from Nietzschean Perspective**

When we search for the philosophical roots of multiculturalism, we find that it has its origin amongst those who mix together the concepts of equality and relativity of truth. Professor Allan Bloom refers to them as the Nietzschean Left. In US, we might call them the 1960's New Left. Friedrich Nietzsche was a German philosopher of the last century who discovered the idea of value. According to Nietzsche, all values, that is what is considered important, varies from nation to nation, country to country, and culture to culture. Moreover, values are simply the projection of a people's will to power. The, which increases their strength and power is valuable and good, the, which weakens their power is bad.

It is with Nietzsche, in the 1880's that we see the emergence of historical and cultural relativism<sup>1</sup>. Nietzsche projects that values do not have any universal validity or intrinsic worth. Nietzsche was the first major thinker to confront the loss of a religious worldview in Europe. Yet, he was always an

admirer of religion, which he referred to as 'the highest form of art'. The best kind of religion for Nietzsche is concerned, not with the nature of reality, but with the ultimate existential meaning of life. At the core of the multicultural debate in Europe are questions of values and tradition, a topic Nietzsche took lead in in his famous work, "On the Genealogy of Morals". Nietzsche held a much different definition of culture than the one that shapes our debates about multiculturalism today. He saw 'kultur' as emblematic of an entire civilization, and his work sought to establish a genealogical reevaluation of the decadent values that brought Europe to a stage of existence that he deemed weak and degraded. Hence, while discussing the various notions of multiculturalism, Nietzsche emphasised on the western model focusing on integration rather than on assimilation.

It is likely that Nietzsche would be a strong critic of certain forms of multiculturalism, especially those that promote cultural relativism and political correctness. Nietzsche found liberation is destroying all foundations of cultural values and radically questioning the foundations of tradition, so far as the crisis of Islam and multiculturalism in Europe is concerned. Based on his desire to maintain a clear distinction between Islam and Europe in his own time, it is clear that Nietzsche would prefer that Muslims retain their own culture and not passively assimilate into a secular Europe.

Nietzsche is often characterized as being one of the founders and precursors to postmodernism because he used a style of analysis which focused on the way in which claims to truth became established as truth. He illustrated the context in which a concept called truth arises, what purposes it is used for, and the consequences of doing so (Teel Sadler: 1995).

The postmodernist is directly engaged in the process that Nietzsche was trying to warn us about, or rather, prepare us for. By actively engaging our values and social structures out of a desire to expose them, the postmodernist is unwittingly a servant of the larger process of rationalizing culture. The postmodern project is not radical but is another step on the ladder of nihilism because it is essentially a moral one, that is, a modern one.

The fundamental idea of postmodernism, that all meaning is contextual and identity is perspectival, is one originally put forth by Nietzsche. Nietzsche stands to postmodernism as a recognized founder or origin of some of postmodernism's primary credos (David Allisan: 1977). Of these, the idea that truth is rooted in perspective and not in reality is the primary insight. Couple this with an understanding of power as a means to express subjective conceptions of truth, and postmodernism is born.

Multiculturalism of the nineties draws its most important concepts from the postmodernist thought, which in turn ultimately stems from Nietzsche (Melzar, Arthur M., Weinberger. Jerry, and Zinman, M. Richard 1998: 3). 1)

Multiculturalism tends to accept and build upon the Nietzschean rejection of rationalism. There is no universal truth or justice. Thus, multiculturalism fights for the rights of women and minorities in a new way: by subverting the truth-claims of all who would exclude them. Multiculturalists fight indirectly, not by claiming to have the truth themselves, but by denying that anyone else does. The premise is; where there is no truth, there can be no intolerance. The denial of truth will make us free. 2) Nietzsche argued that the defining characteristic of human beings is the need not for material goods but for dignity and self-esteem. If we have our own 'way' of life, he proclaimed, we can get along with almost any 'how'. Multiculturalism largely accepts this Nietzschean premise. Therefore, the fundamental concern of the multicultural movement is no longer economics but esteem, not income but identity, and thus not western capitalism but western culture. Multiculturalism marked a shift from political economy to identity politics. 3) Multiculturalism, in the tradition of earlier nationalist thinkers including Nietzsche, tends to focus on the welfare of peoples or cultural groupings, which are seen as the source of the socially constructed identities of individuals. It emphasizes group over individual rights. Multiculturalism could in fact be called "left-wing nationalism" it seeks not indeed the unity and exaltation of the nation-state under the banner of the majority culture, but rather the loosening of the nation-state to protect the identity and self-confidence of the multiple subcultures. 4) Among multiculturalists, there is a strong tendency to view oppression as a relatively permanent feature of human life, stemming directly from a psychological drive for esteem and cultural hegemony or something like Nietzsche's "will to power". From this perspective, all claims to impartiality came to light as deceitful, all claims to objective truth as assertions of power, consequently, multiculturalists tend to be more skeptical and grim, to lack the visionary idealism and sentiment of one world, and advocate solutions that are consciously anti-utopian, involving separatism and other forms of permanently controlled conflict.

It is worth noting that the attitude of multicultural liberalism is committed to two dogmas that appear to imply each other, yet also appear to be contradictory. The first dogma asserts that, if not in such blunt terms, "Tolerance is good". Thus the phrase "value of tolerance": the multicultural liberal has a respect for and a commitment to the value of tolerance. The second dogma, demands skepticism concerning any claim to the superiority of one set of cultural beliefs, practices, or values over another. It is related to a general moral or cultural relativism that in its more robust form asserts that there is no independent standard or standpoint from which to adjudicate the relative worth of values.

The standpoint of multicultural liberalism rests strongly upon the idea of 'values'. Values discourse reflects prominent myth of the modern age, active in popular, media, and academic culture. The idea is that you have your values

and I have mine; they have their values and we have ours, like perceptions, concepts, and memories, values and among the items that make up our overall psychic inventory, and lack any further grounding or justification. Perhaps they came from culture, perhaps tradition, perhaps from personal growth; but regardless of their provenance, there is a sense in which they are immediately given, as the bedrock for any further type of judgment. We have inherited this from Nietzsche via Weber, and it has since become a central dogma of the humanities and social sciences, and trickled down to the popular and media culture, where it is ubiquitously in use.

For Nietzsche, the innovator of values discourse, the claims of reason, and the morality it supports are unmasked as arbitrarily grounded in brute value preferences, which are reflected in the attitudes and traditions of the kinds of people who passes them. Rationality has become mere rationalization in the service of a particular value scheme. Values became the final units of analysis through which it is possible to unmask the arbitrary foundations of any normative claim.

Nietzsche undertakes this unmasking using a method calls 'geneology'. For any normative claim regarding right or wrong, just or unjust, one must look past what the content of the claim is to discern who is making the claim, with an eye toward discovering the type of values in play. The idea is to discredit the content of a normative claim by tracing it back to a corrupt value standpoint. Nietzsche accepts that the value standpoint of those who are physically or psychologically weaker is going to ground a very different conception of justice than that of the stronger.

It is based on these kinds of considerations that Nietzsche wishes to expose the futility and retrograde character of normative discourse. Only relative equals with the same kinds of values can productively engage one another. Discourse between groups with fundamentally different value standpoints can only reduce to a strategic jockeying for power, what Habermas calls 'strategic actions'. It was worth rehearsing here Nietzsche's radical views not only because he is the progenitor of 'value discourse', but also because his view brings into stark relief what is at stake in the move to ground normative discourse in value discourse: values discourse has a kind of built-in power to erode normative debate. The good faith assumption underlying normative debate is that it can proceed along rational lines, which better or worse reasons can be given for normative claims. It is the traditional assumption of rationality that mediation is possible, that dialogue between potentially hostile groups is possible. However, from a Nietzschean standpoint the 'game' of giving and asking for reasons itself becomes just one more value to be arbitrarily possessed or discarded.

Nietzsche self-consciously reverses the philosophical power and priority of reason first articulated in antiquity by Plato and Aristotle. Reason on

this sort of conception constitutes a comprehensive, organic normative framework where values are organized and ranked. For example, justice on Plato's conception is not merely one value amongst many. It is rather the highest virtue, embodied by those whose psyches are ruled by a relational principle. The genealogy of the value of justice for a thinker like Nietzsche, one of the few to have thought through the consequences of making values the principle of the human psyche, comes from a variety of natural, psychological, and historical sources, none of which include a primordial human responsiveness to reason. The value of justice rather hails from the ways in which the stronger have controlled the weaker in order to keep the destructive forces of resentment at bay; or considered from a different value standpoint, the way the weaker, who require norms of justice for their brute survival, have duped the stronger into entering perverse contracts to limit their natural power. The normative basis for talking about virtue and vice is eliminated in favor of a kind of survival of the fittest picture of stronger values knocking off weaker ones. Justice is merely a value, one among many, and like reason it, simply takes a slat among every other arbitrary value, no better nor worse than any other in any rationally defensible sense.

The so-called value of tolerance too is reduced to an unjustifiable, arbitrary attitude if it is held from the standpoint of a multicultural liberalism conceived in the terms of a values discourse rather than in those of a discourse of reason. It is the standpoint that is at issue, rather than tolerance itself; tolerance, like the historically evolved conception of justice, is arguably rational to the core. Its conceptual heritage lies in the work of Locke and Kant, and forms part of the rational basis of modern democracies as advocated by these thinkers, tolerance is not merely a value, but a rational value, what Aristotle and Plato called virtue. From rational basis, tolerance is a condition for dialogue. The capacity to allow for beliefs or proposals that may run against the grain of one's expectations or preferences in a *sine qua non* for coming to any kind of agreement or understanding. Therefore, if rationality has a normative and social significance, the virtue of tolerance must play an important role in its realization.

Further, to speak of virtue in general indicates that genuine moral commitments can receive a defense within an implicitly or explicitly shared normative framework, which now in the modern world in principle extends to all of humanity. To speak of the virtue of tolerance in particular therefore implies that one can defend with reasons.

But now speak of the value of tolerance, not the virtue of tolerance. This is not to split hairs; it rather reveals our fundamental attitude toward our own presumably highest moral commitments. From the vantage of a multicultural liberalism that deploys a discourse of value, our moral commitments are just that, ours, and so as multicultural liberals we must

allow ample space for alternative values that are no more and no less defensible than our own. This is how the first dogma of multicultural liberalism, that 'tolerance is good' gives way to the, second, 'I may not judge the attitudes, practices, and values of others'. The true logic of tolerance implies, and indeed demands, a condemnation of intolerance; it is not logically related to a terminal suspension of judgment concerning the practices of others. This latter hails from a different source altogether: a commitment to values discourse. It is the dual commitment to tolerance and to values discourse that renders this variety of multicultural liberalism incoherent, not any defect in the concept of tolerance itself.

But the perspective of Nietzsche has been criticised on various grounds. Scholars rejected his limit of tolerance that the extreme celebration of multiple values and cultures can create conflict in the existing society.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the spirit of postmodernism and the internal contradictions of signification, there can be no conclusive remark that is not always already deferred by another. Such open-endedness and indeterminacy is the source of postmodernism's transgressive potential and its limitations. Whereas a postmodern critique of multiculturalism may offer an alternative way of contesting ideologies of fixed ethnic difference and the static racial body, it cannot help but reiterate in some ways the logic of essentialism.

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