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## SHOULD WE STILL BE TALKING ABOUT INTERCULTURALISM? THERE MAY BE NO OTHER OPTION

## DOVREMMO ANCORA PARLARE DI INTERCULTURA? FORSE NON C'È ALTRA SCELTA

Paul R. Carr\*

The world has the resources, capacity and ingenuity to (more) effectively address serious global problems (including the environment, mass migration, warfare, femicide, racism, inequalities, poverty), and there is no need to debase the “other”. No one is born racist but we can become racist, and no one is born focused on building a democracy but one can become engaged in democracy. These thoughts act as a preamble to my text, a reflection, on what interculturalism means for me at this time. I will briefly present my reading of two central themes (identity and social justice, and democracy and social change) in dialogue with interculturalism and cultural pluralism stances/perspectives, and then present a case study of interculturalism in Québec. The text seeks to, humbly, elucidate some of the complexity, the paradoxes, the political and socio-cultural nuances and implications of debates over identity in culturally diverse societies, and concludes with some thoughts on where we might be headed.

*Il mondo dispone delle risorse, delle capacità e dell'ingegno necessari per affrontare in modo (più) efficace i gravi problemi globali (tra cui l'ambiente, la migrazione di massa, la guerra, il femminicidio, il razzismo, le disuguaglianze, la povertà), senza bisogno di denigrare l'“altro”. Nessuno nasce razzista, ma possiamo diventarlo, e nessuno nasce focalizzato sulla costruzione di una democrazia, ma possiamo impegnarci nella democrazia. Questi pensieri fungono da preambolo al mio testo, una riflessione su cosa significhi per me l'interculturalismo in questo momento. Presenterò brevemente la mia lettura di due temi centrali (identità e giustizia sociale, e democrazia e cambiamento sociale) in dialogo con le posizioni/prospettive dell'interculturalismo e del pluralismo culturale, per poi presentare uno studio di caso sull'interculturalismo in Québec. Il testo cerca, umilmente, di chiarire alcune delle complessità, dei paradossi, delle sfumature politiche e socio-culturali e delle implicazioni relative ai dibattiti sull'identità nelle società culturalmente diverse. L'articolo conclude con alcune riflessioni su dove potremmo essere diretti.*

**Keywords:** Interculturalism, Identity, Social Justice, Democracy, Social Change

**Parole-chiave:** Interculturalismo, identità, giustizia sociale, democrazia, cambiamento sociale

### 1. Introduction

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A quarter century into the second millennium, on the back of the world's most bloody and murderous century<sup>1</sup>, is there still a good reason to focus on intercultural relations? On the one hand, we should never stop seeking ways to enhance, improve and cultivate humane, meaningful and decent relationships between people, groups, communities and nations. The world's infinite linguistic, cultural, ethnic, racial, religious and other identity-based markers mean that it is fundamental and, most likely, natural to the human condition to have empathy, compassion and solidarity for one's own community<sup>2</sup>. Yet, there is enormous violence, discrimination and marginalization within groups at the same time. There is no good reason to hate the "other," and, perhaps astonishingly, history is replete with warfare, conflict, slavery, colonialism, imperialism and neoliberal madness, subjugating masses of people<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, with no real, substantiated reason to create and sustain inequalities and xenophobia, should we not be more concerned with how humans can, should and must work together? The environment, mass migration, warfare, feminicide, racism, inequalities, poverty and the like are not the domain of one nation or people or community<sup>4</sup>. These material, substantive, real-life concerns are connected to interculturalism but are also viscerally intertwined with power relations, avarice, hypocrisy, and weak, thin and undemocratic democracy<sup>5</sup>.

The world has the resources, capacity and ingenuity to (more) effectively address all of the concerns mentioned above, and there is no need to debase the "other". No one is born racist but we can become racist<sup>6</sup>, and no one is born focused on building a democracy but one can become engaged in democracy<sup>7</sup>. These thoughts act as a preamble to my text, a reflection, on what interculturalism means for me at this time. I will briefly present my reading of two central themes (identity and social justice, and democracy and social change) in dialogue with interculturalism and cultural pluralism stances/perspectives, and then present a case study of interculturalism in Québec, concluding with some thoughts on where we might be headed.

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<sup>1</sup> P.R. Carr (2022), *Insurrectional and Pandoran Democracy, Military Perversion and The Quest for Environmental Peace: The Last Frontiers of Ecopedagogy Before Us*, in P. Jandrić, D.R. Ford (Eds.), *Postdigital Ecopedagogies*, Springer, Switzerland (pp. 77-92).

<sup>2</sup> P.R. Carr - G. Thésée - E. Rivas-Sanchez (eds.) (2023), *The Epicenter: Democracy, Eco\*Global Citizenship and Transformative Education/L'épicentre: Démocratie, Éco\*Citoyenneté mondiale et Éducation transformatrice/El Epicentro: Democracia, Eco\*Ciudadanía Mundial y Educación Transformadora*. DIO Press, New York.

<sup>3</sup> M. Hoehsmann - G. Thésée - P.R. Carr (eds.) (2021), *Education for Democracy 2.0: Changing Frames of Media Literacy*, Brill/Sense, Rotterdam.

<sup>4</sup> P. R. Carr - G. Thésée (2019), *"It's not education that scares me, it's the educators...": Is there still hope for democracy in education, and education for democracy?* Myers Education Press, Gorham, ME.

<sup>5</sup> R. Wike - L. Silver A. - Castillo (2019), *Many Across the Globe Are Dissatisfied With How Democracy Is Working*, in «Pew Research Center», 29 April. <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/>>

<sup>6</sup> D.R. Lund - P.R. Carr (eds.) (2015), *Revisiting the Great White North? Reframing Whiteness, Privilege, and Identity in Education*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

<sup>7</sup> C. West (2005), *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, Penguin, London; J. Westheimer (2015), *What Kind of Citizen? Educating Our Children for the Common Good*. Teachers College Press, New York.

## 2. Identity, social justice and interculturalism

Defining one's identity or someone else's identity is always fraught with a plethora of pitfalls, challenges and traps. If identity is socially constructed, how do we know who is who? Can we ever know? If identity is dynamic, contextual and relational, can we confidently affirm that someone is representative of, and anchored within, a specific community? What about the real-life experiences of facing discrimination based on the perceived inclusion within a particular community that may run counter to normative narratives? Every person is made up of endless and socially constructed identity-markers that change, given the context. Yet, as much as many people wish to be, or assume to be, for example, "color-blind," incapable of seeing the color of one's skin, and thus being incapable of being racist, we still have racism, historically and in contemporary times<sup>8</sup>. Thus, while (some forms of) identity are greatly cherished, and can lead to enormous pride, there is also sometimes hatred of the "other" through stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination intertwined with diverse forms of identity formation. How can we explain the literal killing and enslavement of some, all the while preaching, either through religious texts and doctrine or other notions of superiority, that one can be justified in doing so because the "other" somehow "deserves" it. More than a half-millennium later, the Catholic Church, in 2023, finally rejected the Discovery Doctrine, which sought to legitimize colonization and the destruction of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, thus exposing the corruption of Pope Alexander VI and many others.<sup>9</sup>

One is not born French-speaking or Swedish or Jewish or working-class or Black or whatever the socially-constructed configuration might be. We learn to be, and we learn this through family, community, societal and broad human contact and relations. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social reproduction help explain the transmission of values and the deployment of cultural capital, which can also demonstrate inequitable power relations.<sup>10</sup> Through immigration, one might become, for example, Canadian, Italian or Norwegian. But there may be a continual questioning if that person is truly another identity. Identities shift, and, through immigration, one might become a perceived "foreigner" in her/his homeland as well as the country of adoption. Race and religion may permanently stigmatize or corner someone, despite the generations before them who are citizens of that country. This can lead to accusations of there being less of an allegiance or more of a propensity to not be "as" committed or ingrained in a particular identity as someone else. This may seem abstract but it most likely is not for many immigrants, migrants, exile-seekers, refugees and those who do not fit the model of normative identities.

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<sup>8</sup> D.R. Lund - P.R. Carr (eds.) (2015), *Revisiting the Great White ...*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> B. Chappell (2023), *The Vatican repudiates 'Doctrine of Discovery,' which was used to justify colonialism.* *npr* (March 30). <<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/30/1167056438/vatican-doctrine-of-discovery-colonialism-indigenous>>; F.X. Murphy (2024), *Alexander VI*, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-VI>>.

<sup>10</sup> C. Costa – M. Murphy (eds.) (2015). *Bourdieu, Habitus and Social Research: The Art of Application*. Springer, London.

People within the same family may have different skin colors, and this may affect their material-based, lived experiences, determining, to a certain degree, friendships, relationships, employment and cultural engagement. One's sexual orientation, for instance, can also alter one's life and lived experience. Family structure, the cultural and religious ethos of a given society, the education system and values, political systems and movements, and the tenor and scope of human rights legislation and historical happenstance can also all affect the quality of how one exists, develops and interacts within a particular society. There are many exceptional, isolated cases, and we can never really generalize for everyone at all times. However, social science research and scholarship can give us a reasonable idea of how social interactions are cultivated within a given society. The field of sociology is but one within the overlapping multi-/inter-/trans-disciplinary domains that consider identity being ingrained in the nexus of agency, power, lived experience and survival, especially within inequitable societies. The fields of cultural, feminist, queer, antiracist, ethnic and political economy studies, among others, also help us to understand the salience of identity.

In my own case, I'm a White guy, as defined as such within a racialized society where race has great currency, even if there is a formal reluctance to admit it, and this may or may not have a significant effect on my daily and broader life-experience. Although my grandparents only arrived in Canada in 1930 from Europe, meaning my roots in the Americas are not that profound, I have never been asked where I am from, which is a common question for friends and colleagues of "color" who have much deeper roots than I do. The supposition can only be that a Canadian, for many people, must be a White person of British or French ancestry that were considered to be the "founding nations". This takes place within a context of the evisceration of First Nations' identities, the original inhabitants of the Americas, from the Far North in the Arctic to the tip of Chile and Argentina in the South. Is reconciliation truly possible when there has been a genocide against Indigenous peoples, characterized by the theft of the land, the languages, the rights, the sovereignty, the spiritual and cultural heritage and the identity in many cases, all of which was enraptured in a unrepentant "settler colonialism". This is not to say that there wasn't and isn't any resistance to the settler-colonizers but it is to say that the discrimination and xenophobia against the First Nations has left indelible and entrenched marks in Aboriginal communities today.

Thus, I ask what is the linkage between identity, culture and lived experience, especially when there is so much visible as well as invisible diversity throughout the world. Canada boasts of its multicultural legacy, policies, programs and image but is it enough to recognize "difference"? Is it considered a bouquet for ethnocultural groups within the backdrop of English-French relations and hegemony? The risk of oversimplifying the myriad power relations in society can be easily romanticized through the traditional song, dance and food tourism odyssey, which can be enjoyable but which does not lead to meaningful social change. In other words, emphasizing the superficial aspects of cultural identity can smooth over, and displace, the most pertinent, serious and meaningful concerns for people in cultural pluralistic societies. There are endless critiques of multiculturalism, that it encourages the grouping of ethnic communities within isolated enclaves, that it does not address true power differentials, that it does not engage adequately with racism

and social justice concerns, and that it is more of a philosophical pronouncement than a fully funded, integrated and operationalized approach to social relations.

In Québec (and this is also the case in Europe, in general), there is a preference for interculturalism, and the emphasis on the “host” culture can affect/shape/enhance/diminish the objective “living well together” (“vivre ensemble” in French or “buen vivir juntos” in Spanish)<sup>11</sup>. Géarld Bouchard, one of the key figures of the multiculturalism versus interculturalism debate in Québec and Canada, provides the following key distinctions, favoring interculturalism for Québec<sup>12</sup>:

integration is a global process affecting all the citizens and constituents in a society, and not simply the assimilation of immigrants; interculturalism is not a disguised form of multiculturalism; integration is based on a principle of reciprocity; pluralism and the principle of recognition do not in any way lead to fragmentation; pluralism is a general option with many possible applications corresponding to as many different models, including multiculturalism; the kind of pluralism advocated by interculturalism can be described as integratory; accommodations are not privileges, they are not designed solely for immigrants, and they do not give free rein to values, beliefs, and practices that are contrary to the basic norms of society; interculturalism concerns itself as much with the interests of the cultural majority as with the interests of minorities and immigrants; except in extreme cases, radical solutions rarely meet the needs of the problems posed by ethnocultural diversity.

Bouchard argues in favor of dialogue and also in fully engaging with Québec’s unique historical and linguistic-cultural place positioning in North America, emphasizing the minority context of francophone Québécois. These are not small points or small issues, and there are many overlapping dimensions to understanding cultural development and survival.

Should the objective be assimilation, integration and/or something else that is formed organically within the tapestry that underpins societies? Is there a real, meaningful difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism, in the lived experience for those facing discrimination, racism and gender-based violence and the like? We are compelled and forced to create meaningful spaces, opportunities and institutions that favor development, growth and compassion. Or is this simply a dream? Whether it is multiculturalism or interculturalism or antiracism or global citizenship or some other way of bringing people together, I believe that identity must be addressed and fully incorporated into any debate in and around the discussion related to cultural pluralism. Invoking “colour-blindness” does not negate, for example, the real-life experience of racism.

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<sup>11</sup> C. Jacquet (2010), *Reconnaître le pluralisme religieux en démocratie libérale : le cas du Québec*, in «Diversité urbaine», 2010, 10(1), pp. 9-26; F. Rocher (2017), *L'idéal interculturel à l'aune des politiques publiques à l'échelle municipale au Québec : Montréal en perspective comparée*, in «Anthropologie et Sociétés», 2017, 41(3), pp. 181-211.

<sup>12</sup> G. Bouchard (2011), *Qu'est ce que l'interculturalisme?/What is Interculturalism?* in «McGill Law Journal / Revue de droit de McGill», 2011, 56(2), pp. 395-468.

### 3. Democracy, social change and interculturalism

The difference between the rhetoric and reality of meaningful and purposeful actions, policies, laws, programs, legal frameworks, educational systems and the like related to identity is not insignificant<sup>13</sup>. There is *de facto* interculturalism, multiculturalism and cultural pluralism, whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, whether it is formally cultivated or not. There are thousands of ethno-cultural groups, languages, ways of being, spiritual perspectives and other tangible markers that can influence, sustain and support the broad diversity of humanity. People migrate now, as they always have. There is no pure racial identity (a DNA test can validate this point), and genealogical analysis can lead one all over the place. The history of serfdom, subjugation, slavery and forced labour also have a substantial impact on the systems, regimes and institutions that we create and develop<sup>14</sup>. Ultimately, the reality, belief and/or fallacy of democracy is, I believe, enmeshed in this problematic. Who has the power to recognize the “other,” what we know, what we study, how we allocate rights, resources and positions of authority, and what values we seemingly uphold that flow from the supposedly democratic systems we uphold.

The world appears to have been disproportionately tilted toward a democratic model developed in contemporary times by the United States. This model of what I call normative democracy is predicated on elections, generally speaking two predominant political parties, a legal system that may or may not have public support, an adherence to neoliberalism and the “free market,” tacit, if not, explicit support for dictatorships and unsavory regimes, and support for the military-industrial complex<sup>15</sup>. Why so much emphasis on conflict and war if democracy is meant to liberate people? Similarly, this “representative” model has traditionally had a relatively controlled mainstream media, which has shifted at present with the advent of social media, opening up spaces for alternative news, citizen journalists and broad opportunities for engagement between people across borders and languages<sup>16</sup>. “Fake news” was not born with social media; propaganda, misinformation and misrepresentation were a reality well before this present period, as evidenced by the “School of the Americas” and the numerous spy agencies in the US as well as elsewhere. Notions of democracy are also clouded by the surveillance, algorithms and applications generated by the hi-tech industry, and, additionally, artificial intelligence has significant potential to contort, shape and influence action, activity and agency.

Although, for instance, the US is considered to have created a “melting pot” and Canada a “cultural mosaic,” and France a country of “Republican values” these countries and others have vast numbers of immigrants, historical linkages with the world (notably the former colonies), and similar demographic trends. Regardless of the nomenclature of their

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<sup>13</sup> P. R. Carr – G. Thésée (2019), “*It’s not education that scares me ...*”, cit.

<sup>14</sup> P.R. Carr - G. Thésée – E. Rivas-Sanchez (eds.) (2023), *The Epicenter: Democracy, Eco\*Global ...*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> P.R. Carr (2020), *Shooting yourself first in the foot, then in the head: Normative democracy is suffocating, and then the Coronavirus came to light*, in «*Postdigital Science and Education*», 2020, 2(3), pp. 722-740.

<sup>16</sup> P.R. Carr – S. Cuervo – M. Daros (2019), *Citizen engagement in the contemporary era of fake news: Hegemonic distraction or control of the social media context?* in «*Postdigital Science and Education*», 2019, 2(1), pp. 39-60; P.R. Carr – M. Daros – S. Cuervo – G. Thésée (2020), *Social media and the quest for democracy: Faking the re-awakening?* in P. P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research in Cultural Studies and Education*, Springer, New York (pp. 1-24).

formal policies, the “Western” world is replete with extreme right-wing parties and movements that contest intercultural and multicultural diversity. The incessant migratory flow from the Global South northward translates into pressures, tensions and political maneuvers that play out in elections, political parties, legislative assemblies and governments.

The migration ‘northward’, despite there being pockets of wealth, power and elites in the Global South, happens, in part, because of colonialism and the absence or weakness of decolonialization, environmental catastrophe fueled by unrepentant economic ventures, savage extractivism (the literal mining of scarce but valuable resources that ultimately renders vulnerable populations even more vulnerable) often led by Northern enterprises, the decimation of land, cultures and sovereignty, rampant insecurity, corruption, social inequalities and, notably conflict<sup>17</sup>. In every case, the Global North, the recipient nations of the migrants, plays a significant role in the turbulence, chaos and politico-economic realities of the Global South. This is not to say that there isn’t enough blame to go around, nor that countries in the Global South do not bare some of the responsibility. Rather, the legacy of colonialism, imperialism and the incessant invasion of countries in the Global South, inundated with arms, armies and geo-political machinations, serves to cultivate the conditions and necessity to flee<sup>18</sup>.

The global history of racism endures, and immigration preference for the Global North has always been extremely racialized. Increasingly, it is also stratified by social class, and represents a “brain-drain,” a perhaps out-dated concept from the 1980s, that illustrates the great benefit or advantage of the recipient countries to receive the most educated workers, professionals and citizens from other countries. However, the lived experience of those coming from other countries is variable, sometimes representing a comfortable, engaged and meaningful new life, even for several generations, or sometimes a struggle for opportunity, acceptance and flourishing relationships.

The struggle for “intercultural” relations/relationships cannot be imposed but many factors can coalesce to create the conditions for solidarity, notably education<sup>19</sup>. Within the racialization template, for example, significant engagement by Whites is desirable in order create an antiracist society, and all peoples with the First Nations to generate the impetus of meaningful reconciliation, and men to cultivate the conditions to end violence toward women. And what of the linkages between the social classes, between the rich and poor? It is difficult to think of a truly culturally-developed society without the infinite meeting-places, spaces, dialogues, ventures and real-life experiences throughout, whether in relation to the police and authority, to economic prosperity or political authority or in relation to education. Social change comes about through myriad processes and events, and concientization, solidarity and critical engagement cannot be underestimated. To be clear,

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<sup>17</sup> J. Bellamy Foster (2020), *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology*, Monthly Review Press, New York; H. Giroux - O. Filippakou (2021), *Militarization in the Age of the Pandemic Crisis*, in «E-International Relations», 22 April. <<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/22/militarization-in-the-age-of-the-pandemic-crisis/>>; M. Lallanilla (2020), *The Effects of War on the Environment*, in «Treehugger», 30 December. <<https://www.treehugger.com/the-effects-of-war-on-environment-1708787>>.

<sup>18</sup> P.R. Carr (2022), *Insurrectional and Pandoran Democracy...*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> P. R. Carr – G. Thésée (2019), “*It’s not education that scares me...*”, cit.

waiting for White people, for men and for others to become conscious, in solidarity and critically engaged is not an option but these are components of the problematic that cannot be ignored.

Thus, the notion of democracy can be crucial in forging the capacity to bring people together, in diffusing problems and conflicts, and also in developing frameworks and opportunities to be together. Humans are not predisposed to destroy one another, whether it be through bullying, harassment, discrimination, violence or, even the ultimate end-point, through murder, femicide, terrorism and military conflict. Similarly, the diverse human-made problems that plague the planet are not, I believe, predetermined or innate to the human condition.

#### 4. A case study of (forms of) interculturalism in action

Since the term and concept of interculturalism is widely used and accepted in Québec, a predominantly French-speaking province (roughly 9 million people) in Canada (a population of 40 million), and much less so in the rest of Canada and the United States as well as in many/most jurisdictions, I would like to introduce some of the contours, highlights and issues that have developed over roughly two decades connected to cultural pluralism. Three key moments or points (a commission on interculturalism in 2007-2008, a proposed Values Charter in 2013, and a law related to laicity [secularism] in 2019) will help illustrate the tensions, cleavages, dynamics and complications of negotiating interculturalism.

These formal, public debates may not necessarily characterize the true nature, fiber and extent of meaningful intercultural relations that actually take place and are manifested throughout daily interactions as well as larger community and societal projects. Nonetheless, the vastness and intensity of the plethora of formal and public communications, including traditional, alternative and social media as well as many groups, communities and organizations taking and presenting positions, is a significant filter to understand (a portion of) the pulse of Québec society. There was also a large number of public protests and manifestations, with many artists and well-known figures stating their positions as well as their engagement, over the past two decades in relation to interculturalism in one form or another<sup>20</sup>.

The framework for interculturalism in Québec, although not funded substantively, contains a number of rhetorical statements, some policies, notably in education, and research within the academic and community sectors. Similar to multiculturalism in Canada, this is more about, at least in the 1970s-1990s period, “integrating” immigrants more than creating a truly culturally-diverse society. Increasingly, the debate includes human rights, a diverse representation of under-represented groups in employment sectors,

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<sup>20</sup> S. Dalpé – D. Koussens (2016), *Les discours sur la laïcité pendant le débat sur la «Charte des valeurs de la laïcité»*. Une analyse lexicométrique de la presse francophone québécoise, in «Recherches sociographiques», 2016, 57(2-3), pp. 455-474; D. Koussens (2009), *Comment les partis politiques québécois se représentent-ils la laïcité?* in «Diversité urbaine», 2009, 9(1), pp. 27-44; Women’s Legal Education - Action Fund (LEAF) (undated), *The Québec Charter of Values Detracts from the Fight for Women’s Equality*. <<https://www.leaf.ca/fr/news/the-quebec-charter-of-values-detracts-from-the-fight-for-womens-equality/>>

a more appropriate curriculum, pedagogy and experience in and through education, and laws and policies intended to address discrimination. The rapidly changing demography, increased immigration, cultural nationalism, the concern over linguistic and cultural assimilation, and the broad rejection of the formal role and place of religion, especially the Catholic church, characterize the political and socio-cultural context in Québec<sup>21</sup>. Clearly, the centrality of the French language in Québec cannot be under-estimated, and a real (as well as the perceived) risk of losing the predominance of French throughout Québécois society underpins debates on interculturalism<sup>22</sup>. To this end, a *Parti Québécois* government introduced the *Charter of the French Language (Charte de la langue française)*, known as Bill 101, in 1977, which, effectively, required all immigrants to educate their children in French. I believe that there is a very broad consensus around the importance of and support for this law, and it has made Québec more French at every level.

In the early 2000s, the mainstream media started to present and, often, mock diverse cultural demands, practices and situations. These situations led to a cantankerous debate around “reasonable accommodation” and the creation of a massive public commission to study the issue<sup>23</sup>. The *Quebec Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences*, more commonly known as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, was established in 2007, and undertook a robust and lengthy consultation-period with the population. The cleavage between francophones and anglophones, on the one hand, and between nationalist and progressive groups on the other, as well as between religious and secular communities, framed the outpouring of denunciation against particular religious communities by some of the population<sup>24</sup>.

The Commission was a long, arduous, contentious and, at times, confrontational drama. Many Québécois citizens argued that there had to be explicit respect for the “host” culture, that immigrants needed to learn French and integrate, and that recognition of Québécois values should be central to all discussions. Many minority, ethno-cultural, racialized and immigrant groups, on the hand, argued that there needed to be tangible respect of and for human rights, that the problem was discrimination, not integration, and that learning and using the French language was not a significant problem. Many

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<sup>21</sup> S. Le Gallo (2018), *Imaginaire national et laïcité. Penser l'identité avec le projet de Charte des valeurs*, in «Communiquer», 2018, (24), pp. 17–35; S. Lemire (2022), *Le projet de loi 96: le reflet de l'évolution du nationalisme linguistique québécois*, in «Recherches sociographiques», 2022, 63(1-2), pp. 109-129; A. Mancilla (2009), *La religion dans l'espace public : une enquête préliminaire sur les perceptions de quelques leaders juifs et musulmans en milieu montréalais*, in «Diversité urbaine», 2009, 9(2), pp. 27-50; F. Mégret (2020), *Lost in Translation? Bill 21, International Human Rights, and the Margin of Appreciation*, in «McGill LJ», 66(1). <<https://lawjournal.mcgill.ca/article/lost-in-translation-bill-21-international-human-rights-and-the-margin-of-appreciation/>>.

<sup>22</sup> B.G. Barbeau (2018), *40 ans après, qu'en est-il de la loi 101? Représentations et discours conflictuels dans la presse québécoise*, in «Circula», 2018, (7), pp. 52–69.

<sup>23</sup> Bibliothèque du Parlement - Service d'information et de recherche parlementaires (Canada) (2021), *L'obligation d'accommodement dans le contexte des droits de la personne au Canada*, Bibliothèque du Parlement, Ottawa.

<sup>24</sup> C. P. Courtois (2010), *La nation québécoise et la crise des accommodements raisonnables: bilan et perspectives*, in «International Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue internationale d'études canadiennes», 2010. (42), pp. 283-306; A. Le Moing (2016), *La crise des accommodements raisonnables au Québec: quel impact sur l'identité collective ?* in «Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain», <<http://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/2458>>.

nationalists insisted that linguistic and cultural assimilation into English and non-Québécois culture was central to the problem/problematic<sup>25</sup>. The issue of “culture,” which one, who belongs to what, who has the power to shape and influence, the meaning, salience and other related questions were all part of this debate<sup>26</sup>.

One thing for sure is that there was no common vision, despite the supposed consensus presented by the Government, and clear lines and frontiers were articulated. Indigenous peoples also questioned their place as the First Nations, and how formal power structures and institutions did not respect their treaty rights and their quest for sovereignty. Racialized communities also emphasized that racism was a neglected issue, stressing that the problem or quest for integration is not a one-way street where “others” need to assimilate into a stable, defined culture. This Whiteness—White power and privilege—should be considered pivotal to how culture is developed within society.

Over time, the tension over “reasonable accommodation” diminished without there being a meaningful consensus on interculturalism. In reality, all societies must negotiate endless ethical, philosophical, value-laden and cultural issues all of the time. For example, attitudes, laws and policies toward the LGBTQ+ community have evolved greatly over the past thirty years, and this is not only the result of legislation but also, importantly, education, cultural shifts and social activism.

In 2013, the *Parti Québécois*, a sovereigntist party, introduced the *Charter of Quebec Values* (*Charte de la laïcité* or *Charte des valeurs québécoises*), known as Bill 60<sup>27</sup>. An election in 2014 ended the prospects of this Bill becoming a law, and its being central to the campaign. It was judged to be extreme, unnecessary, divisive and unconstitutional by many as it would effectively eliminate access to a broad range of public sector employment to those wearing religious symbols<sup>28</sup>. However, there was also a significant base of support from those arguing that religion had no place within State, nor in Government, and that the notion of “laicity” meant that women, in particular, should not be allowed to wear religious symbols, notably and almost exclusively the Muslim veil, in public positions<sup>29</sup>. The vast diversity and cultural manifestations and representations of Muslim youth, for example, cannot be captured within a singular frame, as exemplified by Herrera and Bayat, and should be considered when seeking to cultivate laicity:

...[for] many common social, political, and economic misfortunes, they [Muslim youth] exhibit remarkably diverse responses to their situations. Whereas groups of them have been drawn into radical Islam, others have embraced their

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<sup>25</sup> D. Stout – C. Charpentier – M. Chiasson (2021), *Secularism, intercultural openness, and reasonable accommodation: the perspectives of francophones and anglophones living in south-eastern Quebec*, in «British Journal of Canadian Studies», 2021, 33(1), pp. 47-76.

<sup>26</sup> A. Benessaïeh (2019), *Dix ans après Bouchard-Taylor: l'interculturalisme en question*, in «Recherches sociographiques», 2019, 60(1), pp. 11-34.

<sup>27</sup> M. Dagenais (2017), *La Charte des valeurs québécoises*, in *L'encyclopédie canadienne*, <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/fr/article/la-charte-des-valeurs-quebecoises>>.

<sup>28</sup> Foreign Worker (undated), *Charter of Values: Quebec in Controversy, Again*, <<https://www.canadianimmigration.net/blog/charter-of-values-quebec-in-controversy-again/>>.

<sup>29</sup> L. Jobin – P. Cloutier (2013), *Charte des valeurs dites «québécoises»: le MLQ appuie l'intention politique du gouvernement du Québec de se doter d'une loi inscrivant dans la charte québécoise le caractère laïque de l'État*, in «Éthique publique», 2013, <<http://journals.openedition.org/ethiquepublique/1275>>.

religion more as an identity marker. While some take Islam as a normative frame and then subvert it to express and reclaim their youthfulness, their counterparts assert themselves and express discontent through a music of rage. Through such mediations, Muslim youth remain in constant negotiation between being Muslim, modern, and young. Thus, far from being “exceptional,” young Muslims in reality have as much in common with their non-Muslim global counterparts as they share among themselves. And as they migrate, forge networks, make and change culture, and assert themselves in a multitude of ways, it is clear that Muslim youths have emerged with a consciousness that they are simultaneously major objects, agents and victims on a world stage. This may very well be a moment of historical significance for Muslim youth.<sup>30</sup>

The economy is also a key part of the “laicity” debate, with some arguing that Québec cannot afford to restrict, limit and exclude diverse immigrants, students, workers and entrepreneurs, thus underscoring the partisan nature of the ways that the diverse positions were presented<sup>31</sup>.

The debates and manifestation for and against detracted, I believe, from the notion of laicity and the concern over human rights became clearer throughout<sup>32</sup>. As the *Charter of Quebec Values* was largely criticized outside of Quebec, it, thus, became a question of autonomy and sovereignty, even if it was out of step with North American trends while reflecting more of the French (from France) approach. Interestingly, the architect of the *Charter*, Bernard Drainville, who changed parties to become the Minister of Education in the *Coalition Avenir Québec* (CAQ) government in 2023, maintained his support for the Bill a decade later<sup>33</sup>, despite palpable scar tissue left within the society as well as the perceived assault on interculturalism. I do want to clarify that I am not opposing the notion of “laicity” here, nor the historical context in which the Catholic Church played a central role in the subjugation of Québécois society, in addition to the well-publicized sex crimes committed by the Church. My concern is with the way the laicity has been defined.

In 2019, the CAQ government introduced an *Act respecting the laicity of the State* (*Loi sur la laïcité de l'État*) known as Bill 21. The Bill, which became a law, continued the debate instigated through the Bill 60 period, and was equally divisive, contentious and far-reaching, although it did tone down the reach of the legislation from the previous iteration<sup>34</sup>. Perhaps astonishingly, the Premier pushed forward, stating that there was a

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<sup>30</sup> L. Herrera – A. Bayat (eds.) (2010), *Being young and Muslim: New cultural politics in the Global South and North*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>31</sup> P. Côté – F. Mathieu (2016), *Laïcité et valeurs dans l'économie du projet de loi n° 60 Charte des valeurs*, in «Recherches sociographiques», 2016, 57(2-3), pp. 379-425.

<sup>32</sup> J. Johnson-Lafleur – C. Rousseau - G. Papazian-Zohrabian - C. Boulanger – H. Boubnan – A. Lynch – A.M. Richard (2016), *L'espace québécois du vivre-ensemble mis à l'épreuve par le débat sur la Charte des valeurs: expériences et perceptions d'intervenants du domaine de la santé et des services sociaux oeuvrant en contexte de pluriethnicité*, in «Nouvelles pratiques sociales», 2016, 28(1), pp. 175-194.

<sup>33</sup> G. Lajoie (2023), *10 ans de la Charte des valeurs québécoises: Drainville n'a aucun regret*, in «Le journal du Québec», 9 septembre <<https://www.journaldequebec.com/2023/09/09/10-ans-de-la-charte-des-valeurs-quebecoises-drainville-na-aucun-regret>>.

<sup>34</sup> T. Souissi – C. Ma (2023), *Loi 21 (Loi sur la laïcité de l'État)*, in *L'encyclopédie canadienne* <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/fr/article/loi-21>>.

“majority consensus,” and forced the law through the legislature. The outrage in several sectors and communities was palpable, especially in relation to racial and religious minorities, human rights organizations, the minority anglophone community and parts of the business community, which saw the law as unnecessarily provocative<sup>35</sup>. The image of the legislation outside of Québec also faced significant problems, causing controversy, confusion and, even, resentment<sup>36</sup>.

Bill 21 essentially targeted, more so than any other group, Muslim women who wear religious garb, and, thus, who are prevented from certain public certain employment. This is particularly germane in relation to the teaching profession, and this specific aspect served as a lightning-rod of controversy, mobilizing large manifestations against Bill 21. Some Muslim women teachers left the province to work and live in Ontario, where there are no such restrictions on religious symbols. Some argued that this was against human rights and would stimulate discrimination and xenophobia against Muslim minorities. The new law targeted visible symbols that could be connected to religion but did not address the invisible, the attitudes, behaviors, compartments, values and what we cannot see. Teachers, police officers, prison guards and judges, who may be racist, for example, but who do not wear religious symbols, would not be affected by this form of laicity.

Within an intercultural (and multicultural) society, the question of how to address racism, sexism and marginalization should be central. At the same time, a majority of the political class and citizens, especially outside of Montreal, supported the notion of laicity that has had a disproportionate effect on one specific group. This is not to say that feminist groups and others militating for gender equality are not for discrimination but, rather, that the historic relationship with the Catholic Church has most likely had a preponderant effect on the debate.

The confusion between diverse immigrants immigrating to Canada, and then having different laws within Québec, should also be considered. One extremely important point in the entire debate was that little to no research was presented on the demography, the influence in education of having women teachers who wear a veil, the issue of gender equity related to prohibiting religious symbols, and the potential impact on citizens of all groups in relation to the implementation of the law. Additionally, although the law prohibits religious symbols for teachers, police officers, prison guards, lawyers and judges, it would appear that Muslim women who wear a veil are the most affected, and that the decision to exclude hospitals and universities, diverging from the even more far-reaching *Charter of Quebec Values*, a few years earlier, made it much more focused on Muslim women than, say, Jewish or Sikh men, who may wear religious symbols in the form of a kippah or a turban and who are more predominantly represented in those sectors.

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<sup>35</sup> G. Otis – D. Robitaille (2017), *L'inapplicabilité de la Charte québécoise des droits aux entreprises fédérales: mythe ou réalité?* in «Revue générale de droit», 2017, 47(1), pp. 77-117; S. Rukavina (2022), *New research shows Bill 21 having 'devastating' impact on religious minorities in Quebec*, in «CBC News» (August 4). <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/bill-21-impact-religious-minorities-survey-1.6541241>>.

<sup>36</sup> F. Demers – S. Rocheleau - V. Hébert (2021), *La loi 21 sur la laïcité du gouvernement québécois en contexte de communication mondialisée*, in «Les Enjeux de l'information et de la communication», 2021, 22(2), pp. 119-130.

The debates, dialogues, deliberations, manifestations, political responses and engagements over the past two decades in relation to interculturalism have played out publicly and in less formal arenas. This has been a messy, confrontational, divisive and alienating process for many, especially many immigrants, religious, racial and ethnic minorities, and others who believe that the focus on a narrow interpretation of “laicity” was misguided and extremely limited/limiting. At the same time, the message of constraining public participation and employment for some groups, notably Muslim women who wear a veil, received strong support from a large percentage of the population. Was the process “democratic”? Should the majority decide all human rights issues? Are the medium- and long-term implications for society considered as important as the immediate desired change? Is this a case of political populism and political manipulation or progressive interculturalism? How could a noble and progressive philosophy of “laicity” be so massively contested, misinterpreted and problematic, especially in light of the fact that there is a general consensus that the State must be completely separate from religious influence?

The entire debate is enraptured within legal maneuvers in which the Québec government employed the “notwithstanding clause” to exempt it from the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This is extremely significant and serious because it essentially suspends constitutionally-protected rights and freedoms within Canada, notably in relation to religion. This has led to numerous legal battles, enormous costs, social tensions, uncertainty and entrenched struggles between communities, jurisdictions and institutions. Bird and Ross<sup>37</sup> make the case as follows:

A free and democratic society depends on the full and equal participation of its citizenry in public life. The government cannot deny this basic right to its citizens, solely on the basis of their religious or irreligious identity. The bottom line is that the duty of neutrality forbids any government in Canada from enacting laws that, to quote *Saguenay*, “create a preferential public space that favours certain religious groups and is hostile to others.” In other words, this duty disempowers legislatures from enacting laws of this sort and should operate prior to the question of *Charter* rights and freedoms. Bill 21 is unambiguously a law of this sort. It violates the doctrine of neutrality and is therefore unconstitutional.

## 5. Conclusion

This text has sought to offer some reflections on the need, the existence, the problematic and inevitability of culturally diverse societies. The question is not whether we have diversity but how it will be valued, signified, supported, framed and developed. Culture develops in many ways, influenced by formal and informal, explicit and implicit, direct and indirect and myriad other forces and ways. This text is in English. Would it have been different, had I written it in French or Spanish? I think so. The reference-points, the

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<sup>37</sup> B. Bird - D. Ross (2022), *Bill 21 offends the constitutional doctrine of neutrality to religion*, in «Policy Options», November 21. <<https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/november-2022/bill-21-religious-neutrality/>>.

concepts, the historical traditions, the key figures, the cultural landmarks, the movements and contributions all indicate that people can be, and are, shaped by distinct, albeit fluid and nuanced, cultural influences. They also cultivate and create culture through their very existence, their inter-mingling, developing institutions and participating together, and deciding how communities will function together. Education is undoubtedly a key component to this equation<sup>38</sup>.

Within the sociological lens, can we clearly determine the singular Moroccan, Russian, Indonesian, Columbian, Chinese or Spanish culture? There are so many minorities— ethnic, cultural, linguistic, racial and others—that there is always the risk of the hegemonic vision taking precedence over all others. Yet, this is where the fundamental space and place for authentic, meaningful dialogue cultivated through democratic institutions, processes, movements and elsewhere can be fundamental and highly beneficial<sup>39</sup>.

Indeed, there are many problems, concerns and issues, and I have sought to illustrate some of them above. However, it is important to stress that we have also made significant progress at many levels, never as much as is required but there have been important shifts in laws, in cultural patterns, in education, in socio-cultural matters and elsewhere. A lot of the struggles and sweat and toil have brought us to this point. There are untold inter-, mixed-, cross-cultural/racial/ethnic/religious relationships around the world, and many of the children in our schools (in the large cities in Canada and elsewhere), therefore, cannot be easily folded into a seemingly homogeneous culture, devoid of intersectional identity-markers. Yet, when we engage together and live together, are we really different, some from others? This is the enormous paradox we're faced with; are we hyphenated citizens because of phenotypical traits, socially constructed identities, and perceptions about difference? Hegemony is central to dividing people, and the role of democracy can underpin this power imbalance.

As the title of this text states, *Should we still be talking about interculturalism?*, there may be no other option if we want to develop social justice, human rights and a meaningful "vivre ensemble". But we should also slant the discussion/dialogue toward individual and collective responsibility as well as the large macro measures that seem distant, inaccessible and disconnected from us. Yet, these larger debates involve us and affect us directly, even if they can exclude us. The wars, the environment, the migration, the social inequalities, the wealthy who do not pay taxes by placing their enormous fortunes off-shore while they enjoy the benefits of those scrapping by, and the politico-economic decisions that can further entrench people, communities and others in permanent vulnerability all lay the ground-work for social conflict and instability. Through exploitation, through the commons that is publicly funded, through politico-economic structures, institutions and laws/policies that support the political/economic elites, there can be a tendency to operationalize, manipulate and trivialize the extent of interculturalism in our societies; the denigration of "wokes" and the trivialization of "transgendered" persons are recent examples.

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<sup>38</sup> P. R. Carr – G. Thésée (2019), *It's not education that scares me...*, cit.

<sup>39</sup> P.R. Carr - G. Thésée – E. Rivas-Sanchez (eds.) (2023), *The Epicenter: Democracy, Eco\*Global ...*, cit.; M. Hoehsmann - G. Thésée – P.R. Carr (eds.) (2021), *Education for Democracy 2.0...*, cit.

Is the glass half-full? It should be because these are human-made problems. Why has there been so much conflict, why has natural human diversity not always been embraced, why has killing often been a preferred solution...? At the same time, there has been an almost endless list of enormous and far-reaching acts of solidarity. The hot-cold, in-and-out, back-and-forth dialectical relationship, often with love, often with hate, often predicated on believing that immigration, for example, is a new phenomenon and is dangerous or, rather, a constant and brilliant offering to the human condition, is everywhere at all times. Extreme right-wing movements and parties are sweeping through Europe and the Americas, making it difficult and even problematic to advance social justice issues connected with identity and culture. How we live together touches on everything.

The problem is not the different languages, ethnicities, races, religions and everything else that mixes together to form culture(s). Humans are capable of learning languages, accepting, engaging and loving one another, and in working together. Are there human values that transcend cultures? Most certainly, it would be difficult to argue that some cultures instinctively hate their children or must be violent. Yet, there are different postures, interpretations and changes that take place over time, through deliberation and within dialogic processes. The challenge of understanding and embracing heterogeneous societies, imbued with multiple perspectives, lived experiences and perceptions, constantly being negotiated and reshaped, is at cross-roads. Some no longer want to consider these nuanced cultural identities and vantage-points while others want to accentuate them to such an extent that there are calls to close borders, expulse those perceived to not be “integratable” and to more strictly define national identities, for example, along stricter homogenous characteristics.

I remain hopeful, optimistic and inspired by many of those who ardently strive to build more socially-just and inclusive societies, including tackling the big issues that can make the daily interactions and realities for all of us, paradoxically, more distressing or more livable. Connecting the debate around interculturalism to building a critically-engaged and functioning democracy, well outside of elections, I believe, is critical to creating the next generation of scholarship, engagement, policy development and societal participation in and on a meaningfully transformative form of interculturalism.

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