

Mushkat Memorial Essay Prize Submission

Ana Vidovic
an884844@dal.ca
B00503833

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Beyond Tolerance – A Socio-Cultural Critique

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In the Civil Rights era in the United States, a discourse of tolerance became the defining marker between the polite racists of the North and the overt “bigots” of the South (Brown, 2006, p.1). Yet, according to Brown (2006), this form of tolerance merely reproduced white supremacy in the form of “justice projects on behalf of the excluded, subordinated, or marginalized,” replacing a discourse of freedom and equality (p.1). Today, a new discourse of tolerance allows for structural oppression to go unexamined in the workings of our institutions. UN conferences and various international human rights campaigns promote tolerance as well as freedom of speech as essential to human dignity. Tolerance is seen as the solution to conflict in racially divided neighborhoods of the United States, as a solution to gender-based violence and homophobia, as a solution to increasing rates of hate crimes in Canada and the U.S, as a solution to tensions between ethnic groups after the civil war in the Balkans (Brown, 2006). Indeed, the goal of tolerance is good relations among peoples. Tolerance as an ideology allows itself to be dressed in a variety of political clothing while simultaneously being a depoliticized language, that is, it does not incite actions that promote genuine goodwill among peoples. A prerequisite for fostering a society in which there are good relations among peoples is going beyond tolerance and addressing inequality and structural oppression. For example, Indigenous Canadians continue to live in deplorable conditions comparable to some of the least developed nations. Indeed, the colonial relationship is one based on tolerance, on non-Indigenous Canadians tolerating Indigenous Canadians as long as they conform to a dominant cultural and political framework. It follows that tolerance is not the solution to this structural, institutionalized oppression. When viewed as a solution, it is part of the problem. In moving beyond tolerance, a broader discussion on how to facilitate goodwill among peoples, in particular, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians may be facilitated.

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If the goal of tolerance is to promote good relations, that is, goodwill, among peoples and nations, then we must ask, to what extent does this depoliticized language allow us to fulfill missions with such an aim? If the kind of society we wish to create is one that not only values but also fosters good relations among peoples, then the low standards and narrow framework of tolerance discourse does not provide us with a full explanation. Indeed, to tolerate is to withstand, that is, to endure something despite one's own distaste or disapproval for that thing. Of course, one can simultaneously hate and tolerate an ethnic group. It could even be said that slave masters had to have tolerated their slaves. Hate bubbles under the surface of tolerance and once this hatred reaches a boiling point, it becomes intolerable. Tolerance has a negative connotation toward varying perspectives, that is, differing ways of viewing and being in the world. Insofar as it withstands them, it does not understand these differences, nor does it bring us together; it leaves us alone. Indeed, it is the policy of non-interference that wedges the gap between us. It leads to indifference, suspicion and isolation. To simply withstand an ethnic group means that respect, understanding and other principles that foster good relations among peoples are not met. This means that our standard for good relations has taken two approaches 1) non-interference or 2) assimilation of difference, approaches which will be critiqued later on in the context of Canadian Indigenous struggle.

In accordance with the Western liberal democratic tradition of thought, the law requires that we harm no one, except in situations to protect one's property, oneself, or another. Moreover, mild dislike or hate need not become direct or physical harm to constitute harm. Harms perpetuated by collectives over a sustained period of time can have a direct or indirect impact on the well-being of peoples. For example, the psychological toll of hate and a history of oppression, that is, its impact on the subconscious minds and identities of individuals and groups,

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can reproduce class inequality, a process complicated and made worse by the added intersections of race, gender, sex, age, ability, etc. These inequalities manifest in a difference in outcome among marginalized groups of individuals who may be overrepresented in negative spheres such as the Canadian penitentiary system or underrepresented in highly valued occupations and other positions of power, privilege and prestige. If we understand the depth of harm, we can begin to understand why tolerance is not an effective solution, that is, doing no harm may be a prerequisite of tolerance, but it is not enough to foster good relations among peoples.

A Good Standard for Good Relations

The discourse of tolerance is inseparable from an analysis of power in our society and its illegitimacy. For example, the Civil Rights Movement did not start simply because African Americans were resentful that they were not tolerated. Rather, it was fought because racialized peoples stood up to the powers of inequality and oppression that had for so long rendered them as the ‘Other’. We must ask, to what extent does the tolerance as defined in various forms in Canadian law foster good relations among peoples? If we add to this complexity an understanding of inequality and power, it is questionable to the extent that tolerance can facilitate good relations among peoples at all. What follows is an attempt to define good relations or goodwill.

I argue that good-will in a relationship among peoples requires principles of a) equal, just, fair and reciprocal relations, that is, void of asymmetrical power structures that disadvantage one group and benefit another b) political, social and economic inclusion leading to favorable attitudes free of prejudice and discrimination c) trust between parties d) mutual respect. Indeed, to foster equal, reciprocal relations or good relations between peoples and these subsequent

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principles, a state must address the past harms perpetuated on a marginalized segment of the population and its lasting effects. It will be demonstrated how these four principles were betrayed in the context of Canadian colonialism and how a discourse of tolerance does little, if anything, to remedy the situation and promote better relations between the Settler state, composed of non-Indigenous Canadians, and Indigenous Canadians.

Obstacles to ‘Good Relations’

Tolerance in a liberal democracy can be paralleled to the political ideal of formal, legal equality; that is, they are one on the same spectrum, both recognizing negative liberties, yet failing to go beyond. Indeed, the Canadian ideal of formal equality means that we value giving citizens the legal *opportunity* to achieve equal political, social and economic participation. Nevertheless, in the context of structural, institutionalized oppression, legal equality is exposed as a discourse that does not address disproportionate *outcomes* among peoples. It is the discourse of indifference, and as a mode to facilitate good-relations, it becomes complicated by existing inequalities in the context of Canadian colonialism. Moreover, it does not call one to recognize one’s own privilege as a beneficiary of the Settler state and therefore fails to provide us with substantial answers to structural problems affecting marginalized groups.

Tolerance, by itself, does not resolve anger and resentment experienced by the oppressed, feelings which can manifest in violence and tension between a minority or ethnic group and the dominant power or Settler state. Moreover, it does not lead to a solution to the prejudicial attitudes of dominant groups toward the marginalized. Indeed, crime rates are an indicator of inequality in a society; they are an indicator of exclusion from participation in social, economic and political spheres. This exclusion can result in marginalized peoples attempting to reclaim

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some of their lost power and agency, often in the form of criminal behaviour (Liska, 1992, p. 85). Tolerance allows the root cause of this resistance to dominant cultural authority and its laws to go unexamined, and perhaps there is no greater evidence of its ineffectiveness in Canada than in the penitentiary system. Indeed, the overrepresentation of Indigenous Canadians and other marginalized groups in the criminal justice system is an indication that our society has failed in providing an equality of opportunity to achieve political, economic and social inclusion (Weatherburn et al, 2003).

Formal, legal equality is tainted by what authors such as Anthony Stewart (2009) and Anne Lawton (2000) call a ‘mythical meritocracy’. This myth falls in line with the neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility, that is, it is the false belief that merit is the primary indicator in an equality of outcomes among peoples. It posits that if one simply works hard enough, barriers to political, economic and social inclusion will be irrelevant in one’s struggle to achieve greater prosperity. Yet, this rhetoric ignores the ongoing effects of structural inequality. Tolerance allows the government to acquiesce on behalf of the marginalized, failing to take responsibility for their plight. It allows the government to absolve its own responsibility to deal with structural change that may truly foster good relations among peoples, that is, just and reciprocal relations, in the hopes that simple tolerance can be enough to promote peace and goodwill.

It is believed if multiculturalism is promoted in Canadian society, if we gather together once a year to enjoy diverse foods and rituals of various cultures, we can call ourselves a multicultural nation. The reality behind the Canadian myth of multiculturalism is that the majority of new immigrants to this country face prejudice and discrimination as well exclusion from mainstream society and its spheres of influence. The liberal democratic notion of tolerance

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is a depoliticized language that allows for the enjoyment of our once-a year multiculturalism events and benefits reaped from this national image, while simultaneously avoiding actions that address structural constraints placed on individual members of marginalized and/or ethnic groups.

Tainted mainly by ideology, tolerance is non-neutral in its asymmetrical power relationship between parties; that is, between the ‘tolerator’ and the ‘tolerated’, the latter being assumed to be the problem. Indeed, we must as Paulette Regan (2010) argues in the context of Indigenous struggle, move beyond the ‘Indian problem’ and address the ‘Settler problem’. This shift in perspectives coincides with a shift in discourse from tolerance to something tangible—to a discourse of collective responsibility. It means that we must question the very legitimacy of the Settler state to begin with, address Settler privilege and deconstruct our power to ‘tolerate’ while recognizing that Indigenous peoples may have many more reasons to be intolerant of non-Indigenous Canadians.

In addressing these structural problems as a means to promote equal, reciprocal relations between peoples and foster political, social and economic inclusion, the dominant authority recognizes its position as a past and current oppressor and seeks to remedy it through structural and economic policies. It follows that in remedying the situation, ‘the Other’ may be enabled to feel that meaningful change is occurring. Through a promotion of substantive equality, that is, equality that focuses on an equality of outcome rather than opportunity, marginalized peoples may feel less resentment against dominant groups, leading to better relations among peoples. In addition, through early education of dominant groups and changing societal mores to reflect the necessity of addressing structural problems, Canadians citizens of the dominant cultural hegemony may feel less threatened by the presence of difference.

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Tolerance as non-interference of Indigenous Canadians.

How can we expect, in the context of overwhelming cultural hegemony of the privileged Settler state, that good relations can be forged based on a) equal, just, fair and reciprocal relations among peoples void of asymmetrical power relations that disadvantage one group and benefit another b) political, social and economic inclusion leading to favorable attitudes among groups free of prejudice and discrimination c) trust between parties d) mutual respect?

Good relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians in the context of colonialism and the formation of the Settler state may have been ‘good’, however, insofar as they disadvantaged Indigenous Canadians, it is important to ask the question ‘good for whom?’ Indigenous peoples in Canada certainly did not benefit in the long-term as a result of the colonial relationship. For example, according to Turner (2006), Indigenous communities today face poverty, inadequate housing, social inequality, unemployment, poor health, low life-expectancy, low birth-rate, to list a few problems. Moreover, the plight of Indigenous Canadians on reserves such as the Attawapiskat First Nation of North-Eastern Ontario shows us that living conditions have been deplorable. It is an example of the government’s policy of non-interference toward Indigenous Canadians, a policy that treats these peoples as ‘out of sight’ and consequently, ‘out of mind’. The rhetoric of tolerance is in fact the policy of non-interference toward non-Indigenous Canadians. Indeed, it is the opposite of state, collective responsibility and political mobilization against the forces of oppression.

Attawapiskat First Nation and its 1,600 members have been experiencing a severe housing crisis related to the poverty in the community caused by chronic government underfunding (Mackrael, 2011). Yet, despite structural causes to the housing crisis, Prime Minister Stephen Harper accused the First Nation of fiscal mismanagement. Indeed, the

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community answered to repeated accusations as the relationship between the government and Indigenous Canadians continues to be a tense conflict regarding the question of appropriate funding. The Kelowna Accord under the former liberal government was a difficult consensus to obtain between First Nation's leaders to allow for increased government funding of Indigenous reserves (Martin, 2011). When Harper took office, he scrapped the Accord in place of greater auditing, despite claims from auditor-general Shiela Frasier that auditing by the private sector, municipalities, the provinces, as well as Ottawa was already heavy (Martin, 2011). Indeed, Harper's suspicion of the First Nation reflects a broader public suspicion and prejudice of Indigenous Canadians as 'lazy', 'incompetent' and responsible for their own plight. Calls for increased auditing of First Nation's communities also says a lot about the state's inability to accept responsibility for the social inequality facing Indigenous communities. Indeed, in this way, the state's actions were ones of non-interference, a manifestation of the State's position of tolerance toward the oppression experienced in Attawapiskat. While eventually the government had to help fund the housing crisis in the wake of international scrutiny, their initial actions did not lead to 'good-relations' between Indigenous Canadians and the State or its citizens. Rather, these actions of 'tolerance' promoted prejudicial discrimination and tension.

Assimilationist policy and its abuse of trust and mutual respect.

We rationalize actions through philosophical frameworks, piece by piece dissecting a mode of reasoning that ultimately justifies a certain end, a kind of society that is desirable, but rarely do we ask 'desirable for whom'. Underpinning these rationalizations are dominant ideologies, discourses, and myths that when unquestioned, promote ignorance. Canadians study the history of our nation through a dominant cultural framework, a singular history written by the benefitters of the Settler state. Often void in their recounts of history are the asymmetrical power

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relations between those who get to tell it within mainstream society and its institutions and those who are on the receiving end of cultural genocide, land dispossession, a history of exploitation, and psychological abuse.

The White Paper of 1969 as examined by Turner (2006) in *White Paper Liberalism*, was in line with a philosophical and legal framework based in the Eurocentric, liberal democratic tradition of thought. Designed as a solution to the ‘Indian Problem’, rather than the ‘Settler Problem’, White Paper Liberalism used the sly rhetoric of equality, freedom and citizenship to justify cultural assimilation and land dispossession and proposed individual rights as the solution. Indeed, it was promoted that if ‘natives were given rights’, that is, if Indigenous Canadians were given formal, legal equality of opportunity, that they would no longer require ‘Special Status’. However, this bundle of individual rights was in stark contrast to Indigenous ways of owning and belonging in the world. The treaty relationship was such that purchases of ‘Indian lands’ by the Crown required the consent of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, many of the lands were never actually sold and yet later Indigenous conceptions of collective owning were reduced to a Western legal discourse of private property (Turner, 2006). Ironically, the Indian Act, while detrimental in many ways in its control of reserve life and its theft of Indigenous women and children’s native status, acted to prevent the theft of Indigenous lands.

Aiming at destroying the ‘Special’, unique, sui generis collective rights of Indigenous peoples by extinguishing their Indian status and the fiduciary trust treaty relationship, White Paper Liberalism sought to absolve state responsibility to Indigenous peoples (Turner, 2006). It is clear that the relationship between the Settler state and Indigenous peoples, through the White Paper, was not one that could have ever fostered good relations among peoples. Indeed, trust is a principle that fosters good-will among peoples. Through its colonial legacy and the policy of the

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White Paper, the state broke the trust Indigenous Canadians had toward non-Indigenous Canadians in the context of the treaty relationship. Indeed, trust was forgotten by the Settler state in whose political interest it was not to honor agreements made in the past. Rather, in order to legitimize itself, the Settler state attempted to reconcile Indigenous worldviews with its own attempts to assert sovereignty and nationhood.

By destroying the notion of collective, group rights in place of a discourse of individualism, the legitimacy of the Colonial Settler state was taken for granted, an ideology ingrained in the minds of most non-Indigenous Canadians today. Indeed, Indigenous peoples have been forced to assimilate their ways of viewing and being in the world into a dominant legal and judicial framework that has not been impartial or neutral, but rather serves the interests of the Settler State. For example, Indigenous conceptions of owning are not present in Western legal conceptions of property rights. In accordance with this view, Turner says, “the fact that our ways of understanding the world are not worthy of equal participation in a dialogue over the meaning and content of our rights is itself a form of inequality” (Turner, 2006, p. 26). To address historical, systemic, settler-induced problems, as tax-payers, we must accept our collective responsibility to Indigenous Canadians, participants and beneficiaries of a system that has marginalized them.

Unfortunately, the end goal of our dominant political and philosophical discourse has not changed a whole lot since 1969. Governments are continuously absolving their state responsibility to deal with structural issues by appealing to new rhetoric. In place of White Paper Liberalism and with a similar function as the ideology of ‘tolerance’ is the ‘peace-keeper myth,’ as examined by Paulette Regan (2010) in *Unsettling the Settler Within*. Canadians take pride in a ‘peace-keeper’ national identity. However, this identity is a myth; it ignores the bloody wars

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fought to ‘civilize’ the ‘native savages’ and dispossess their land. Indeed, it ignores the historical reality in place of a glorified past, a past written from the perspective of the privileged. Indeed, the neutral language used by many early childhood educators in history and Canadian studies to describe the settlement of the Americas functions to support the ‘peace-keeper myth’. It is firmly believed that if history were exposed in its entirety, Canadian legitimacy as a sovereign nation would be compromised. Rather, it should be mandatory to study the multiple histories of this nation, so that critical engagement of privilege and oppression can occur.

Regan (2010) also argues that residential schools were part of a process of nation-building, a process designed to distinguish and marginalize the ‘Other’ in order to ingrain in the subconscious mind of Indigenous peoples the racist myth of European superiority. By embedding this into the fabric of the social mind through punishment, ridicule, and dehumanization of Indigenous children and their families, the Canadian state reaffirmed its legitimacy and acted as an arbiter of power and control over Indigenous lives. Residential schools were a classic example of cultural genocide, the case of transforming the ‘savage’ into the ‘civilized’ in order to rule and exploit. Regan says “our real identity is not ‘peace-keeper’, but perpetrator” (Regan, 2010, p. 106).

It is no wonder in the context of state inaction and oppressive ideologies that trust and respect among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are still hard to create. Indeed, how did tolerance respond in the wake of the violent Oka crisis of 1990, when the town of Oka, Quebec announced to the Mohawk First Nation of Kanasatake (Oka Crisis, 2011) its plans to build a golf course on their traditional land? After all, tolerance begs, ‘can’t we all just get along?’ The answer to this question in the wake of overwhelming inequality and structural oppression has always been a firm no. A prerequisite to good relations are the four principles of good-will that

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have been abandoned and abused time and time again throughout our colonial legacy. Indeed, in the following section and in accordance with Indigenous frameworks as starting points, Indigenous pathways to collective responsibility will be addressed in place of a discourse of tolerance.

Indigenous Pathways to ‘Good Relations’ – From Tolerance to Collective Responsibility

This paper has demonstrated the limitations of a framework of tolerance to understanding how to improve the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship in Canada. Referring back to a suggestion made earlier, it is plausible to reject tolerance as an effective means to structural change in place of a notion of collective responsibility. Problematically, as leading Indigenous scholar Taiaike Alfred (2005) suggests in *Wasase – Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, the legitimacy of the Settler state, and with it, the attitude that produced colonialism, has rarely been questioned. Alfred asks us how it is possible to blame people in Settler society “who tacitly support the colonial regime by inheriting their rights and wrongs and who continue to live lives in ignorance of the colonial state” (Alfred, 2005, p. 102). Alfred suggests that individual liability, that is, the blame model, is unfruitful in deciphering the Settler state’s responsibility to Indigenous Canadians. After all he asks Indigenous Canadians, “what good does it do to hate everyone?” (Alfred, 2005, p. 103). It follows that true good relations between peoples must address the “colonial stains on our existence” (Alfred, 2005, p. 101), that is, the implicit, ingrained, racist, prejudicial values and unjust socio-economic system that leaves a lasting impact on Indigenous Canadians’ ability to have equal outcomes and transcend the intersections of racist, classist, ableist, sexist, homophobic and ageist oppression.

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Although implicitly, Alfred (2005) suggests that blameworthiness of individual actors, if it is to exist, must realize the asymmetrical power relations between the marginalized and the ones who have benefitted most from colonialism and the formation of the Settler state, that is, those who have the most bargaining power to set the conditions of life and perhaps even influence the mentalities of the majority and minority. In this way, while Alfred avoids the word ‘system’, he blames a collective mentality –the values of the dominant culture. Alfred says, “On a theoretical level, the enemy of our struggle is a noxious mix of monotheistic religiosity, liberal political theory, neoliberal capitalist economics and their supportive theories of racial superiority and the false assumption of Euro-American cultural superiority” (Alfred, 2005, p. 103). Obstacles to Indigenous struggles to reclaim lost land and cultural dispossession are ingrained and institutionalized by virtue of a long-standing history of oppression as “patterns of behavior” (Alfred, 2005, p. 102), and are embedded within the collective arrogant consciousness and values of the privileged benefitters of the Settler state. The Settler state has power to influence our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, a worldview that entirely excludes Indigenous ways of being and viewing.

In addition to economic and social policies that favour Indigenous Canadians, collective responsibility must take the form of early childhood education to enable a greater understanding of difference from a perspective that is not ethno-centric or Euro-centric. Indeed, changing societal values and prejudicial consciousness will be a slow, but necessary process of change. It means that we must address our own racist beliefs in order to reject the depoliticized tolerance framework in place of a discourse of collective responsibility to Indigenous Canadians, a discourse that enables action to address institutionalized oppression.

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Restoring Indigenous cultural heritage and starting off with multiple, rather than singular, ways of viewing the world is the first step toward a truly socially, politically and economically inclusive nation. It follows that a policy of inclusion, rather than assimilation, is necessary to establish ‘good-will’ among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. As has been demonstrated, this policy is the opposite of the non-interference advocated by tolerance. Indeed, tolerance becomes meaningless in the wake of a search for real answers, answers to structural problems that lay embedded underneath a long-standing struggle against marginalization. Tolerance on its own may lead to ‘civil’ relations of non-interference among peoples, that is, no laws may be broken, no one may be hurt, but it does not lead to understanding, trust, respect, just relations, structural change or political action. It follows that rather than tolerance, the four principles discussed in this paper lead to ‘good-will’ among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Indeed, resigning ourselves to tolerance stands in the way of structural change and has betrayed these four principles in the past. The rhetoric of tolerance is tainted by ideologies supported by the Western liberal democratic tradition of thought and a notion of formal equality of opportunity. A highly problematic term, it coincides with the mythology of multiculturalism in Canada. Indeed, tolerance discourse is not neutral. Rather, it emphasizes the asymmetrical power relations among peoples, the ‘tolerators’ and ‘tolerated’. For these reasons, it is clear that collectively as beneficiaries of the Settler state, we must move beyond tolerance and accept responsibility if we are to call ourselves a multi-cultural nation.

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