

Phil Ryan. *Multicultiphobia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. 279 pp.; ISBN 1442641460.

The April 18th, 2011, issue of TIME Magazine, which celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War, has as its cover a photo of Abraham Lincoln shedding a very large tear. The article is entitled: “Why We’re Still Fighting the Civil War: The Endless Battle over the War’s True Cause would Make Lincoln Weep.” David Von Drehle, its author, accuses Americans—from students to the general public to, yes, even historians and politicians—of engaging in a studied effort to forget that, at its base, the Civil War was about slavery, the oppression of one race of people by a nation. In the 150 years since Fort Sumter, Von Drehle claims (rightly, if not comprehensively) that the Civil War has become, for both North and South, a celebration of a romantic “Lost Cause,” a national enactment of “leaving things unsaid in the pursuit of harmony” (48). Hence, the Jim Crow laws; hence, the Civil Rights Movement a century after the Emancipation Proclamation; hence, the divisions in American society that still persists to this day. “At its best,” Von Drehle says, “Americanism is about tearing [borders] down” (51); it’s time to achieve the true goals of the War.

What Von Drehle documents is a series of rhetorical feints that focuses public attention on the Civil War itself—which indeed was a devastating event—on its soldiers, its victims (including both plantation owners and slaves), on the self-image of the American people. While these issues are important, an exclusive focus on them succeeds in leaving out issues of liberty, equality, tolerance, society. Phil Ryan’s *Multicultiphobia*—which sensationalizes anti-Multicultural discourse from its onset (Douglas Todd of the *Vancouver Sun* describes, “Shocking yellow cover. Sensationalistic title. In-your-face graphics. The attention-grabbing design of this new book is like a blast of the exaggerated ‘yellow journalism’ it denounces”)—engages in the same sort of feints for the vast majority of the book. In the introduction, Ryan claims that “the label ‘multicultiphobia’ may seem to imply that the critics of multiculturalism are irrational, and their concerns can be dismissed. We should note, first, that not all criticism of multiculturalism is multicultiphobic. As can any policy, or ideology, or whatever it is...multiculturalism can be subject to cogent criticism. Even when a critique seems multicultiphobic, it would be counterproductive simply to dismiss it” (5). Despite this statement, however, Ryan goes on to systematically dismantle the critics of multicultiphobia. He analyzes the “four classics of multicultiphobic discourse”—Reginald Bibby’s *Mosaic Madness*, Neil Bissoondath’s *Selling Illusions*, Richard Gwyn’s *Nationalism without Walls*, and Jack Granatstein’s *Who Killed Canadian History*—and many instances of “multicultiphobia” in the media, both before and after 9/11.

Ryan’s criticism of the critics is highly logical and incredibly successful, which showcases the way in which he himself does not fall into the same traps of which he is accusing those critics. He dissects the way in which multicultiphobic discourse engages in a “primitive ontology,” which holds that “when *any* aspect of something changes, the thing has become *something different*” (44), and which also leads these critics to think that multicultural policy itself is an unchanging monolith and can be treated as “a single static phenomenon, rather than an evolving set of policies with potentially contradictory effects” (53). He also documents the way in which multicultiphobic discourse makes use of “tried-and-tested narrative strategies” of the fairy tale, setting up obvious—and irrefutable—good and evil, “once-upon-a-time narratives, powerful villains, and a clear gulf between malevolent forces and innocent victims” (61). So, whether the story is of the “native” Canadian who feels his values threatened by a relativist view

of virtue and legality, or of the immigrant who feels forced by multicultural policy to remain in a cultural bubble, forever unintegrated, it is difficult disagree with the view of multiculturalism as the big bad wolf.

Ryan's dissection of the logical and rhetorical problems inherent in multicultiophobic discourse is highly effective in dismantling the discourse; what it cannot seem to do, however, is to move out of the cycle of criticism and counter criticism. Even when he begins, in part three of the book, to ask, "What do we need to talk about?" the answer does not ever veer too far away from a criticism of the critics of multiculturalism. He spends a chapter dismantling the accusation that multiculturalism causes legal relativism, which he concludes either does not exist or arises from sources other than multiculturalism; yet the conclusion that one form of relativism "probably arises from a confused rejection of a problematic claim, that of cultural superiority" is quickly dismissed by the fact that "the complexity of cultures and civilizations rule out summary claims of either superiority or equality" (153), which avoids the fact that, despite the truth in the "incommensurable" nature of cultures, feelings of superiority and prejudice, of a "we" and a "they," are still in existence and wide-spread.

This is one reason why, as Ryan himself documents, there is a reluctance to ask the question, "Just *who are we?*" (158). What seems more important than a definition of multiculturalism, or even of culture itself (which he delineates quite thoroughly in his introduction), is a definition of *Canadian*, of the line where an immigrant becomes a citizen, an *other* becomes *one of us*. This line, as Ryan points out, is much harder to draw in Canada than in the United States, where dual citizenship is often not allowed and welfare benefits not extended. Yet, even as he points out the existence of this line, and of the need (however questionable) to define who is and who is not a legitimate part of Canadian society, he lets the issue drop: he calls out the critics of multiculturalism as unable to define Canadian identity and suggests "equality, democracy, and the rule of law" (159) as an instance of commonalities Canadians might hold essential.

This is an easy way, I think, to skip over the question of *culture*, which has thus far been integral to the discussion. It may be right to found a society on equality, democracy, and the rule of law, but it is certainly not an accurate depiction of a society that believes in a Canadian culture—and the culture of immigrants—that is apart from these idealistic notions, that comes down to the nitty-gritty, to what one wears and eats, where one works and shops. In countering the notion that multiculturalism creates pockets of insular culture, Ryan notes how governmental funding of cultural activities would "over time erode the hold of particular traditions upon the integrated individual" (52) and cites reports of "a pattern of loosening contact with one's former country, consistent with gradual integration into the new society" (176). In these moments, he presents integration unproblematically as the ultimate goal of immigrants, but this is clearly—from the countless narratives extant of the cultural war between first-generation and second-generation immigrants—not the case.

Ryan hits the nail on the head—sadly only three pages from the end—when he declares that "multiculturalism should *not* be a state of affairs in which some groups of citizens enjoy the psychic certainty that Canada is *theirs* in some special way, that they constitute the 'mainstream,' that those without the 'ideal Canadian face,' or who speak with a different accent, or who practise a different religion, are part of some different 'stream' that moves alongside the mainstream" (215). He then says that the notion that immigrants are merely "house guests" in Canada is again *not* what multiculturalism should be (216). These notions are *crucial*, but what I want to ask at this juncture is, *what should multiculturalism be?* How can multiculturalism,

whether in policy or in a more general notion, be fashioned so that there is an erosion of the idea of the other who is somehow less qualified to be a citizen? For it is not too far of a leap from calling someone “less a citizen” to calling someone “less a person,” the latter issue we in the United States have clearly not yet worked out. What we need, as Ryan points out again and again, is dialogue: but this dialogue must be a constructive one, for “the dismissal of one’s opponents as corrupt or slightly mad is hardly a promising start” (64). This same criticism that he lobbs at “multicultiphobic” critics is one that haunts the pages of *Multicultiphobia*: one wonders how much more progress he might have made towards solving the problem of multiculturalism if fewer pages had been spent on detailing the logical failures of multicultiphobia and more on what multiculturalism could and should be. The dialogue, moreover, needs to extend beyond this book, in which Ryan has nevertheless achieved his purpose—to move us to discussion—to extend even beyond a single discipline; what I miss from the social scientific text is a discussion of first-person immigrant narratives, of the psychological underpinnings of inclusion and exclusion, of a historical figuration of post-colonial North America. This burden must rest not on the shoulders of *Multicultiphobia*, or even of Ryan, but on all of us; if we expect multiculturalism to work, we must enact multi-disciplinarity.

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