

## **Deferring to Difference, Cultivating the Civil Commons, Honouring Humanity: What's the Left-Universalist to Do?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

London's tube is attacked by terrorists. It is because of the excesses of multiculturalism, difference transmogrified into a lethal form of mutual indifference of the citizenry. So it is with the Netherlands. Paris is burning. It is because of the coercive assimilationism of the French idea of citizenship, legislated indifference to difference—and the catastrophic return of the repressed. But it is precisely the French idea of a unitary national identity: the idea (or is it the myth?) that propelled the banning of Muslim head scarves in schools in 2004; the idea that, two months before the riots, a visiting scholar from France approvingly contrasted with the Canadian tradition of multicultural tolerance. Certain of France's *mission civilisatrice*, Patrick Weil, the visiting scholar, applauded Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty's decision not to permit Islamic *sharia* courts and other religious tribunals, as the *Globe and Mail's* John Allemang put it, "to carry the stamp of judicial authority" (*Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2005). I wonder whether in the aftermath of the Paris riots Patrick Weil remains convinced of the superiority of the French way. In debates concerning the crisis in France and others to come, Canada's multiculturalism would be praised for forestalling such crises and lambasted for being the proverbial sleeping beauty, the complacent cause of festering turmoil and imminent disaster. Surely, something is askew when mutually

exclusive explanations are adduced for the same phenomenon.

But even before the present season of discontent spawned an intense suspicion of multiculturalism and the politics of difference, there were voices expressing grave anxieties and fears regarding the fate of a shared national identity and the continued force of rights and obligations that come with a common citizenship, to say nothing of our common humanity. Those voices—today they must in retrospect seem to some nothing less than prophetic—proclaimed their audacious freedom from the enforced silence of "political correctness." They would say the unsayable, give voice to the patriot's *cri de couer*: Who will speak for Canada? Who will speak for the nation amidst this cacophony of "special interests," this pulverizing plethora of tribal chants?

The voices of alarm and disapproval came from right, left, and centre. From Arthur Schlesinger excoriating the "disuniting of America." From Richard Rodriguez insisting that what Latinos in the US need is to celebrate the story of the Mayflower as their very own. This when Rodriguez's home state, California, was busy implementing discriminatory legislation against Latinos. From Andrew Coyne lamenting "a nation in danger of relativizing itself to death" (*Globe and Mail*, October 3, 1995). In France, Alain Finkielkraut would see it all as symptomatic of a recrudescent and toxic particularism, spread by the "philosophy of decolonization," and intent

on wreaking irreparable havoc on the legacy of the Enlightenment and its beatific vision of the only solidarity that matters—*human* solidarity. I will ignore for the moment the Freudian slip Finkielkraut repeatedly commits in his diatribe—a Freudian slip that the multiculturalist cannot fail but notice—when he calls the humanist universalism he ostensibly endorses “*French* cosmopolitanism.” The universal not as the name for our common dreams but as French property. Still further back in time and intellectual history, Isaiah Berlin, a thinker who was not entirely unsympathetic to the rhetoric of difference and variety and recognition, wondered aloud whether ideas and movements dedicated to these goals could be said to share the strictly liberal ideal of freedom. Or whether to say they do is to confuse “liberty with her sisters.” This is not the place to answer the particulars of Berlin’s quibble or the details of his powerful cautionary tale concerning the uses and abuses, in theory and practice, of the name of freedom by partisans of collective rights and what Charles Taylor would come to call “the politics of recognition.”

To what class of good things, as Socrates might typically have asked, does multiculturalism and its cognates belong? It is not my task to answer *that* question today. My task is more modest but not unimportant. Today I wish to offer a critical defense of multiculturalism, the politics of difference, and even the spurned injunction of “political correctness” that accompanies them. By “critical” I mean something like the tradition called immanent critique, namely, one that holds up a precept or a practice to its avowed claims and aims as well as its implicit and inescapable presuppositions, constraints, limits, but also its possibilities. In accordance with the critical tradition I am invoking, I will argue that the *limits* of multiculturalism, to take the keyword in the title of this symposium, are not extrinsic to its claims and aims. Rather, they are their enabling conditions, precisely what makes these claims and aims possible. My title, *Deferring to Difference, Cultivating the Civic*

*Commons, Honouring Humanity*, attempts to capture the threefold extended family of ethico-political commitments to which multiculturalism as precept and practice belongs: the constitutive terms of the triad function as enabling reciprocal constraints. In so doing they check each other from the temptation of self-absolutization, the temptation of each term pretending to be the adequate and final vocabulary of moral and political judgement. Seen, then, not as the first virtue of political morality or the sufficient condition of a just national and world order, but as the middle term in a triad of principles regulating speech and action in our contemporary national and “global public sphere,” multiculturalism is not without a certain legitimacy and even appeal.

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**IN DEFENSE OF THE  
“POLITICAL CORRECTNESS”  
OF MULTICULTURALISM**

Multiculturalism is in the first place a work of political correction, yes, *the* emblematic work of political correctness, one that speaks in two tongues. A “mixed discourse” as Paul Ricoeur might have called it, it consists of an exercise in suspicion and an affirmation, sardonic scepticism and a rival truth claim, bitter complaint and joyful celebration. The complaint, hurled with especial ferocity by representatives of “people of colour” and their friends, is directed at otherworldly universalists, abstract cosmopolitans, panegyrist of the nation afflicted with a severe case of historical amnesia. Let me invoke a classic, opening statement of the complaint. It comes in the form of an indictment of what may be called the metaphysics of white supremacy:

*For three thousand years, the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen. He was a pure vision; the light from his eyes drew each thing out of the shadow of its birth; the whiteness of his skin was another look, light condensed. The white man—white*

*because he was man, white like daylight, white like truth, white like virtue—lighted up the creation like a torch and unveiled the secret white essence of beings.*

Actually the author of this brief against white mythology was not a black person, a votary of Afrocentrism, not even a person of colour. It was Jean-Paul Sartre (1948), firstling of public intellectuals, writing over half a century ago. The left-universalist friend of multiculturalism can only nod in thankful assent to these celebrated lines from *Black Orpheus*. Once upon a time it was fine and fitting to say man and mean man, woman, and humanity. Also fine and fitting to call the white man's works and habits, his desires and dreams human things, the only human things. Such was the natural way of the world, unquestioned for millennia, "like a prison made intimate and even dear," to echo Harold Laski's simile for our habituation to all enduring and venerable institutions. In the belief that our ways of talking and our ways of seeing are twin, a movement arose intent on rectifying this "monstrous impersonation" (Isaiah Berlin's (1969) description of other acts of fraudulent representation). What is it that this revolution in ways of seeing and speaking proclaimed? Not, as the counter-revolution's caricature would have it, that to each her own incommensurable and incommunicable idiom of the true, the good and the beautiful—thereby replacing a narcissistic and counterfeit universalization with a shameless and radical relativism. Rather, the movement proclaimed that the true, the good, and the beautiful are human universals achieved and made manifest in variegated shapes and forms. Lo and behold, the correction is now such an object of opprobrium that even its proponents seek preemptive absolution whenever they invoke it! But the left-universalist friend of multiculturalism says: Better politically correct than morally obtuse.

The multiculturalist complaint reminds us of some of the ghastly facts of the modern nation's founding acts: acts of usurpation, slavery, exclu-

sion, forcible incorporation, and inequality before the law and in conditions of existence. It reminds us again that the book of common civic virtues that patriotic communitarians invite all citizens without exception to honour is a partial and truncated book, one composed by a fraction of the founding citizenry in the service of its particular interests. And that is not all. It is not simply that some peoples and communities were denied participation in writing the national narrative. More profoundly and sinisterly, it was against certain peoples and communities that that narrative was composed, the "dark presence" as Toni Morrison calls the American version, which served as the contrastive frame for the image of national identity. National communitarians are asking those whose spurned otherness provided the violent crucible for the formation of the nation's identity to worship with unquestioning piety at the public shrines.

To this call some multiculturalists respond with scornful incredulity. What purports to be a culture of shared commonalities, they say, is a total sham. What pretends to be a commonwealth of human universals is founded on a fraudulent contract extorted by conquest, special interests, and irredeemably partial visions. From the West's seizure of native soil and soul was forged an image of man crafted to suit and serve the West. Out of such inauspicious origins no idea of citizenship unmodified can ever be wrested; still less a "new humanism" as Frantz Fanon called it. All talk of an authentic universalism is but idle and foolish talk. I hope to argue that the radical particularism elicited from history and enacted by this version of multiculturalism is incoherent and inefficacious. What we left-universalist friends of multiculturalism hear the movement as saying is that the complaint entails a demand. It is a demand for truer and truly enlarged versions of human commonalities *and* differences in the national society and the world at large, the "global public sphere," as Susan Buck-Morrs (2003) calls it. At its heart, then, multiculturalism is not just a

reactive exercise in resentment fuelled by the desire to avenge ancestral and contemporary exclusions. It is a quest for truer accounts of the human condition in history, new and improved versions of human possibilities, higher, more exacting but also more exhilarating ideals of the moral life. Far from this demand issuing in some untenable relativism, it expresses the hope that with the voices and visions of the dispossessed and disenfranchised restored, a higher truth will be ours. Listen to Nietzsche (1956), putative godfather of difference: “The more different eyes we can put on in order to view a given spectacle, the more complete will be our conception of it, the greater our “objectivity”” (Third Essay #xii).

And while we are at it, let’s drop the red hering. Multiculturalism does not mean declaring Plato, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Bach dead. It is not either Mozart or Marley, Tolstoy or Zulu epic poetry—Saul Bellow’s notorious idea of aesthetic alternatives, which Charles Taylor (1994) takes up in *The Politics of Recognition*. Nor is it an invitation to institute a voluntary apartheid of racial or ethnocultural enclosures. It is a call for what Nancy Frazer (1997) has described as “multicultural literacy”: becoming more civilized in our reordered public sphere. It might even mean accompanying the Goldberg Variations on the Ghanaian drum. That is to say, “multicultural literacy” as a prelude to transcultural understanding and appreciation of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

In a sense the corrective work undertaken by multiculturalist practitioners of political correctness is hardly a revolutionary one. Multiculturalism is already a description of a state of affairs not a bitter prescription to be foisted upon a body politic blessed with a seamless and inviolate wholeness. (To deny such a seamless and inviolate wholeness, I hasten to add, is not to subscribe to the trendy “essentialist anti-essentialist” dogma of hybridity, which Nikolas Kompridis (2005) has recently criticized.) It would be tempting to say that the existence of multiculturalism is its own justification. But

that would be an evasion of our obligation to assume responsibility for it. In a way the *advocacy* of multiculturalism is a call to give formal and substantive ethical recognition to an existential reality of our contemporary national and global condition; a call to give it recognition in the teeth of voices too obtuse to acknowledge the reality or utterly repelled by it and sworn to arrest its consequences. It is also the occasion for the self-clarification of multiculturalism’s supporters with respect to the implications of its justification. For in the very language of justification—be it explicit or implicit—is disclosed the limits of multiculturalism.

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#### THE INNER LIMITS OF MULTICULTURALISM

In the aftermath of atrocious genocidal nationalisms of recent times, a lovely chimera inspired by the Stoics, Kant (1963), and John Lennon has captured the imagination of some notable thinkers. It goes by the name of cosmopolitanism and it counts among its votaries formidable philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum (1996) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005, 2006), although Appiah is careful to give his version a modifier—“rooted” or “partial” cosmopolitanism. But it is not just nationalism that has lately become an object of opprobrium “from a cosmopolitan point of view,” to echo part of the title of Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay. The nationstate as such has been pronounced obsolete and undesirable. This is not the place to argue for the persistent validity of the nationstate as a general form of political existence. Nor will I explore here the potential usefulness of the nationstate, appropriated as an embodiment of popular sovereignty, for resisting the cosmopolitan avarice and rights-busting practices of multinational capital. Some fervent praise-singers of the cosmopolitan idea such as the *Globe and Mail*’s Doug Saunders would “rather pledge allegiance to a notion, not a nation” (*Globe and Mail*, February 18, 2006). He would rather swear fealty to a notion of rights, freedoms and dem-

ocratic values instead of a particular country. Yet the national public sphere, with its specific regime of rights, freedoms, and obligations, is the determinate space, the enabling theatre of difference. In that public sphere multicultural constituencies seek not only freedom of self-expression but also the protection and even promotion of that self-expression with the material and moral resources of the larger political community. I have borrowed John McMurtry's (1998) name for the family of goods to which these resources belong—the “civil commons”: “The civil commons is the organized, unified, and community-funded capacity of universally accessible resources of society to protect and to enable the lives of its members as an end in itself” (*Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System* p. 376). They are the resources of the civil commons, perhaps not in their given condition, but most certainly in their potential forms.

In place of Doug Saunders's rhetorical apartheid of notion versus nation, let us call the principle that makes these resources available the notion of the nation, the nation's constitutional and credal promise. Now, if by this locution I may have “outed” myself as an African left-Hegelian, so be it. In any case the idea of freedom that informs the claims of constituencies of difference—including their claims on the civil commons—cannot be simply the idea of negative liberty as opposed to positive liberty, to invoke a canonical but contested distinction in political philosophy. Multiculturalism is an invitation to the civic republic of tolerance to witness, even to share in, the spectacle of difference. That invitation entails *positive* obligations. It includes the obligation on the part of the political, legal, and cultural institutions of the nation to protect a particular community and its legitimate needs and practices. Here I agree at least in part with Sheldon Wolin (1993). Wolin writes that “the politics of difference and the ideology of multiculturalism” have contributed to a political impasse “by rendering suspect the language and possibilities of collectivity, com-

mon action, and shared purposes.” “And yet,” Wolin adds

*the politics of difference is compelled to appeal, either tacitly or implicitly, to presupposition of community: to judges who equitably enforce the laws; to teachers who will sympathetically portray cultures other than their own; to social workers who continue to assist the poor, the people of color, the addicted and the abused; and to politicians who work to reform deep-seated structural injustices. Those appeals presuppose some culture of commonality, democratic in practice, capable of respecting differences and responding to their grievances and needs, and, above all, a notion of membership that is centered without monopolizing loyalties.*

There is nothing incongruous, then, about constituencies of difference seeking and drawing on the resources of the civil commons to protect and promote their distinct needs. Just as there is nothing incongruous in the claim to reproductive choice *and* access to the means of exercising that choice. Since T.H. Green we have learned that only a truncated view of rights and freedom as mere absence of interference, as negative liberty, would see this as a contradiction. In the case of multiculturalism this carries with it the obligation on the part of the constituency of difference to respect the shared and enabling egalitarian principles of the national political culture, to the extent that they are indeed egalitarian. And it carries with it the corresponding obligation on the part of national jurisdictions not indeed to tyrannically police the practices of these constituencies, but to ensure their consonance with the rights of intra-group members, to say nothing of the rights of all citizens. The defining paradox of multiculturalism and the politics of difference is that it is the distinct and the special made manifest, even possible, in virtue of the common and the shared. It would be an egregious instance of performative contradiction if their representatives were to claim an absolute right of non-interference with their practices. You

cannot make deference to difference an affair of the civil commons and then assert total independence from their normative and legal principles seen in their best, that is to say, egalitarian democratic, light. No, I am not endorsing calls increasingly heard from some quarters in Germany, Britain, and Canada's Fraser Institute for loyalty and allegiance oaths, especially when these calls target particular communities, say, Muslim immigrants. Now *that* is in reality nationalism predicated on invidious difference, a curious, perverse form of multiculturalism masquerading as constitutional and value patriotism. But yes, multiculturalism entails a commitment to commonality as the necessary condition of the very pluralism it embodies. As a matter of the logic of political discourse and action in the national context alone—to say nothing of its status as a general philosophical proposition—that pluralism, then, cannot, on pain of self-contradiction, be infinite, a “radical pluralism” (Jeff Noonan, 2003). For it is in the name of national normative and political principles—the force of national commonality—that the very legitimacy of the needs, claims, and practices of a special group is vindicated, respect for their particularity fostered. The notion of the nation is the matrix of equal *and* special concern.

So it is that in the very issue of the *Globe and Mail* in which Doug Saunders (2006) professes his allegiance to a notion rather than a nation, we read an eloquent refutation of this noble but all too simple dualism. In the aftermath of the publication of offensive cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Europe and by one or two obtuse Canadians, some prominent Canadian Muslim leaders, so the *Globe and Mail's* Michael Valpy reported, issued a statement from Parliament Hill praising “the values that we share as one nation—values that bind us together in citizenship and common humanity.” That commonality—some peculiar virtue of *this* political culture—the Muslim leaders implied, is precisely what made the Canadian media as a whole respect Muslims’ particular

view of what constitutes desecration and thus refrain from publishing the material. Respect for difference as a consequence of common values and obligations. It is the same “normative paradox,” to borrow Benjamin Barber’s phrase, that informed the Supreme Court’s recent decision overturning a Quebec Court of Appeal ruling that upheld the banning of the Sikh ceremonial dagger, the kirpan, in Quebec schools. In the words of Madam Justice Louise Charron (I quote from an article by Richard Blackwell in the *Toronto Star*, March 3, 2006) “Religious tolerance is a very important value of Canadian society . . . A total prohibition against wearing a kirpan to school undermines the value of this religious symbol and sends students the message that some religious practices do not merit the same protection as others” (Charron quoted by Blackwell, 2006). Whether the decision is right or wrong is open to debate. Is this a (ceremonial) dagger or a (lethal) weapon I see before me? That too is open to debate. I wish only to call attention to this “normative paradox” that frames the court’s reasoning, a paradox characteristic of multiculturalism as political ethic; a paradox that its beneficiaries cannot in one breath avail themselves of and in the next breath forswear. Forswear by taking the guarantee and protection of difference and forgetting the irreducible commonality that enables that protection.

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**WHERE DO YOU DRAW  
THE LINE? GENDER, CLASS,  
AND THE CRITERION OF  
UNFORCED CONSENT**

But doesn’t even a multiculturalism conscious of its irreducible debt and allegiance to the civil commons set us on a slippery slope towards the abyss of sequestered racial and ethnocultural communities? Communities that in the name of special and desperate needs demand separate schools, separate applications of the criminal law, even separate courts and forms of arbitration. Communities that, having won the right

to special concern, then proclaim the immunity of their practices from the critical eye and judgment of the larger society. Black-focussed schools, separate justice systems, *sharia* courts in Ontario, the healing circle: are these and other manifestly separatist proposals not the inexorable consequences of the pitfalls of multiculturalist consciousness? How far are you prepared to go? Asks the unitarian civic republican. Who will gainsay the force of the plea of necessity, even justice, which impels such proposals? Answers the left-universalist friend of multiculturalism: While we wait with baited breath for the perfection of the civil commons, for the consummation of their egalitarian promise, there are these necessities, these separate and unequal conditions of existence to attend to. Cecil Foster's (2005) recent book, *Where Race Does Not Matter*, is unimpeachable as utopia. But just as realism without dream is supine, so utopia without knowledge of this bitter earth is barren. Young black men, thanks to the sequestration of life and the segregation of hope, are killing one another in a familiar if exacerbated case of the tradition of victims turned internecine predators. Also young black students, or rather students indiscriminately named black, are failing in school. The proffered solution? Why, sequestered life and segregated hope freely chosen, made choice-worthy. Separate schools as the womb of self-respect. The toxic regimen transfigured by the alchemy of Afrocentrism into the healing balm. An intriguing counsel of homeopathy, this. Education as a preparation for a common citizenship must be deferred, must defer to race work: the restitution of pride in the worth and the "special message" (Du Bois) of the race.

And what is wrong with experimenting with alternative and parallel justice systems, less adversarial and retributive forms of dispute resolution indigenous to certain religious and ethnocultural communities? What is wrong with the direction issued by the Canadian Parliament in 1996 that criminal sentencing should pay "particular attention to the special

circumstances of aboriginal offenders." Or with the ruling by the Ontario Court of Appeal in 2003 that "sentences for black offenders can be reduced or tailored to reflect systemic racism that has plagued their community?"

What is the left-universalist to do faced with such particularizing programmes and proposals invoking in their defense urgent necessities, distinct constraints bequeathed by history, tried and tested usages, and ultimately, an enlarged understanding of justice beyond the standard liberal view of equal concern for all persons and citizens as *individuals*?

The left-universalist is no impartialist. Mindful of the hierarchies of class, race, and gender that stand in the way of a truly shared citizenship and a human commonality, the universalism of the left universalist is at once critical, partisan, and visionary. With the young Marx he belongs to "the *party* of humanity." With the young Gramsci she is a "citizen and partisan." He takes the side of the subjugated and the silenced in the world, in the city, and in the house of difference. Ever alive to the ubiquitous, transcultural partialities of gender and class in all human communities, the *left-universalist* attends to what the Senegalese writer Miriam Ba called the "internal ordering of our society with its absurd divisions." We must bring to bear on our attitudes to ethnocultural claims and demands, precepts and practices, the duality of suspicion and affirmation that insurgent multiculturalism directs at the propositions and promises of the national narrative. To the ethnocultural constituency's narrative of togetherness, of shared necessities and pain and pride—a narrative almost invariably authored, canonized and rhapsodized by male chieftains and their griots—the *left-universalist* friend of multiculturalism listens with concerned respect and educated scepticism. In the house of difference are there no unpleasant family secrets, no discordant voices, those of women in particular? Can it be that we do not see and hear in the panoply and carnival of ethnic pride the stifled cry of these subjugated members of society? If

the summary suspicion, encouraged by Susan Moller Okin (1999) and others, that multiculturalism as such is bad for women and untenable, we still need a discriminating criterion, a test, of the legitimacy of certain ethnocultural practices that demand to be respected and protected. And the principal criterion is that such a practice has the unforced assent of members of the cultural community, particularly women. Are we certain that the practice or artifact in question is not the sign of an imposed and invidious status masquerading as a shared identity? Could it be that the distinction that Will Kymlicka (1996), in his generous and tireless solicitude for minority rights, draws between “external protections” and “internal restrictions” is all too often moot? (pp. 35-44) Could it be that the plea of external protection of a practice from outside encroachment is all too often invoked to justify internal restrictions that outlaw dissent? The left-universalist would want to inquire into the power relations subtending the practice, the occasions of its invocation, the justice of its consequences. Ask First Nations women concerning the continued efficacy and ethics of the healing circle as the geometry of restorative justice. Ask Emma La Rocque (1997) about the uses and abuses of “culturally appropriate models in criminal justice applications.” What do we make of some Native Women’s organizations preferring national universals, the civil commons of Charter protections, to identitarian loyalty to the idea of aboriginal self-government?

In our global public sphere, the left-universalist faces similar challenges. Armed with the same criterion of unforced assent to a religious or an ethnocultural practice, but cognizant of power relations that vitiate the possibility and ascertainment of such an assent, left universalists have our work cut out for us. Concerned respect need not trump educated scepticism and disable the left-universalist from subjecting a practice to critical scrutiny for fear of becoming a reprehensible agent of cultural imperialism. That critical daring, universalist and anti-imperialist at one and the same time, is not

exercised by heeding Margaret Wentze’s rant against Western left feminists for allegedly failing to speak out against a host of anti-women abuses in the Third World, and by following her call to go spread “Western values and institutions” in these benighted places (*Globe and Mail*, March 7, 2006). It may surprise Wentze to learn that that critical scrutiny of and resistance to coercive and dehumanizing practices has been underway in these places for some time now, employing, as an alternative to Wentze’s missionary position, what human rights theorists call “locally persuasive” resources. AIDS activists and women’s rights advocates in South Africa may be forgiven their impertinence in not waiting for missionary instructions and taking to the streets earlier in March to demonstrate in support of a woman who has brought rape charges against former deputy president Jacob Zuma. The left-universalist from the South or the North works in solidarity with such local critics, works to acquire multicultural literacy in “locally persuasive” procedures of critical practice.

With regard to the criterion of unforced consent, there will be hard cases to be faced, uncomfortable discriminations to be made, say, between demonstrably reasoned and free assent on the one hand and compliance bred of trained habituation on the other. If the presumption of an unvarying covert patriarchal coercion or false consciousness as explanation for consent is the height of impertinence, there is no evading having to discriminate between young Muslim women freely choosing to wear the *hijab* and some Sierra Leonean women advocating genital mutilation, a practice condemned by the World Health Organization. There is no dearth of credible native informers with whom the left-universalist can enter into a morally legitimate dialogue in order to examine the claim of a certain practice to being a universalizable good. Ask victims of *trocosi*—a practice in parts of Eastern Ghana, which drives young girls into bondage as atonement for a crime committed by an ancestor—ask them if this practice is a proud emblem of African religious freedom, as

some born-again Ghanaian Afrocentrists claim, or an odious violation of human rights. Speak with Zainah Anwar, a founder of the Malaysian organization Sisters in Islam, opponent, in the name of Islamic “principles of justice, equality, freedom and dignity,” of amendments to family law that would have made it easier for men to practice polygamy and divorce (*New York Times*, February 19, 2006). Ask *Baobab*, the Nigerian women’s rights organization, about the adequacy of due process in the administration of *sharia* in Northern Nigeria, to say nothing of the very practice of appealing to the internal norms of Islamic jurisprudence in seeking redress for cases of cruel punishment. Ask the wives in a polygamous marriage if it is, by some delicious irony or cunning of reason, a crucible of women’s autonomy and solidarity.

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#### HONOURING HUMANITY

These questions finally bring us to an explicit vindication of the overarching term in the triad of commitments that, as I say, regulates speech and action in our national and global public sphere. Explicit because that vindication has in fact been haunting us from the beginning. Arguments for and against the practices and positions I have rehearsed—practices and positions that feature prominently in debates on multiculturalism at home and abroad—invariably appeal to some universal principle. It is in the name of a universal, religious freedom, that the Supreme Court overturned a lower court’s banning of the kirpan in Quebec schools. It is in the name of religious freedom that a certain Ahmed Sani, then governor of Zamfara state of Northern Nigeria, willfully turned a deaf ear to critics of the draconian application of *sharia* in the case of Bariya Magazu, sentenced to receive ninety lashes for the crime of *zina*. This is the anti-Kant appealing to a good, freedom of religion, to which all human beings are entitled! It is in the name of the restitution of *human* self-respect that some black educators, with questionable discernment I’d say, are propos-

ing the establishment of black-focussed schools. It is in the name of a more capacious theory and practice of justice that some advocate and others oppose alternative justice systems. Sooner or later the justification for embracing or opposing this value or that program cannot help but invoke some idea or ideal of human requirements, possibilities, even essences. Sooner or later the most truculent of cultural separatists in the world of multiculturalism will evidence an unwitting dependence upon universalism as the silent premise and inescapable consequence of his argument for a position or a practice. Call this a transcendental version of the more historicist argument for “the necessity of universalism” advanced by Neil Lazarus and his collaborators in a 1995 paper of that title. I recently heard Richard Day approvingly cite, I suppose as an emblematic rhetoric of incommensurable difference, a First Nations saying that pledges to leave the white man alone with his vessel as long he leaves me alone with my canoe. Motto for a new, non-invasive form of interracial cohabitation? Peaceful coexistence in indifference? Voluntary apartheid? Hard to say. What is certain is that, as Jeff Noonan (2003) has cogently argued in *Radical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*, this robust anti-imperialist defense of difference is predicated on a non-particularist notion of human self-determination as a good and a possibility. That idea of humanity will come into play the moment the chief leaves the scene of strategic separatism and returns home, there to be called upon to answer to intra-group, *human*, demands for justice. You can’t “do” cultural and moral relativism *ad infinitum*. At home and abroad the invocation of “cultural sovereignty”—the last refuge of vulgar multiculturalism—is not only duplicitous, as Ann Bayefski (1996) has forcefully shown; it is also self-defeating.

For the truth is that the work of justifying multicultural claims and practices can never come to rest in a radical particularism. Neither can the work of justifying the norms and practices that the notion of the nation calls for. That

work of justification does not conclude with the appeal, as Richard Rorty would have it, to “the way we do things here” as the “final vocabulary” of moral and political judgment. Not even with a vision of the best way we can do things here, with ideal possibilities if we set our sights on “achieving *our* country,” as Rorty’s (1998) revised communitarianism proclaims. Recall the Muslim leaders’ paean on Parliament Hill. What is it that they found praiseworthy about the Canadian response to the (for Muslims) sacrilegious photographs? That it was a testimony to what binds Canadians in difference to a shared citizenship *and* a common humanity. Whether this fulsome praise-song to Canada is deserved is open to debate. I merely wish to remark this implied view that the national particular is not a self-sufficient and final territory of our moral obligations. It is no more and no less than an elementary school of consciousness of our shared human condition, no more and no less than an intimation, in the words of Emmanuel Eze’s (2001) critical parody of Rorty, of “achieving our humanity.”

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**CONCLUSION: ECCENTRIC AFFINITIES**

Our new Governor General Mich elle Jean is reported to have told the Ottawa Press Club that the real reason Paul Martin chose her for the vice-regal office was not because she is black but because she is hot! I will take the high road, avert my mind’s eye from Her Excellency’s body, permit my black skin to don the white Cartesian mask, and with studied concentration focus solely at those parts of her attributes and antecedents—intellectual parts—that make her a perfect embodiment of the threefold commitments I am invoking. I will also ignore the whole question of the monarchy and so on and so forth. We know the controversy surrounding the documentary that her husband made about Martinique and the bard, Aim  C saire (1983), one of the founding figures of the cultural movement called Negritude, the emblematic

statement of the poetics and politics of difference in the African world and its diaspora. It was as a putative protagonist of the indigenous particular that, in a poem of the 1950s, C saire would rebuke the Governor General’s uncle Ren  Depestre, then Soviet-inspired internationalist, in the following words: “Courageous tomtom rider/ is it true that you mistrust the native forest...?” That would make C saire your classic nativist and Negritude a species of Afrocentric particularism, wouldn’t it? But earlier, in a climactic utterance of his most celebrated work, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the poet makes Ms. Jean’s country of origin, Haiti, and the Haitian revolution the explosive birthplace of Negritude: Negritude, so to speak, “untimely ripped from its mother’s womb,” as that other bard might have said. However C saire doesn’t embalm Haiti and Negritude in the narcissistic enclosure of black pride and incommensurable difference—“it’s a *black* thing, you know what I’m saying.” Listen to the line: “Haiti where Negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity.” The line does not say, tautologically, Haiti where Negritude first stood up and said it believed in itself but rather that it believed in its humanity.

Say, then, that Depestre’s Soviet internationalism, in truth an enforced, extorted, and fraudulent internationalism, is chastened, reminded of a universalism that honours humanity in the very act of keeping faith with the native and the particular. But a middle term is required to complete the circle. And that is the idea of cultivating the civil commons of a specific political space. I have absolutely no illusions that the promised land is here. The idea of cultivation says precisely that. It refers to arduous work to be done. And that work includes the very definition of the civil commons, the difficult prospects of their enlargement in the face of powerful voices calling for their severe contraction, if not comprehensive extinction. But that idea testifies to the necessity of determinate principles, institutions, resources, and actions of the nation that promise to protect and foster

the free and just enjoyment of difference and at the same time give reality to the demands of our common humanity. That inescapable recognition of an irreducible idea of humanity may indeed come in unsavoury shapes. It may come from the hard advocate of difference who is constrained to defend even self-segregation as a human need. It may come from the abject misogynist in my Ghanaian immigrant community who states that treating men and women unequally is mandated not just by the way we do things back home but by the human condition. It may come from odious adherents to a repugnant version of value pluralism who appeal to a universal—freedom of religion—to justify as *their* right a system of penal cruelty worthy of plantation slavery. Cold comfort for the left-universalist. And yet the fact that even these strange friends of the universal, with whom all multiculturalists are sometimes confused, find the appeal to the name of humanity and human universals formally inescapable is telling. We are not asking them to believe there is no difference. We are not asking them to imagine there is no country. All we are saying is that we examine the extent of their adherence to the principle of universalizability, the degree to which *they* can endure and enjoy their version of human necessities and essences.

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