THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND SUBJECTIVE INTEGRATION FACTORS AMONG IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA: THE CASE OF QUEBEC'S LATIN AMERICANS

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The study of Quebec's Latin American immigrants reveals that this population shows self-reported high levels of integration and life satisfaction, even if its average economic performance significantly lags behind other groups in that province. Also, Latin American immigrants show strong ties to their countries of origin and also an emerging sense of belonging to a diasporic community. This article is based on a research project that examines the gaps between the objective conditions of these immigrants (e.g. employment, income) and their subjective perceptions (e.g. well-being, attachment to the host society). Using the case of Latin Americans, this research also focuses on the processes by which diasporic identities coalesce and mutate, particularly among co-ethnic immigrants with different national origins and multiple cross-border connections.

El estudio de los inmigrantes latinoamericanos en Quebec, revela que la autoevaluación de esta población muestra altos niveles de integración y satisfacción con la vida, incluso si su desempeño económico promedio está muy por debajo del de otros grupos en dicha provincia. También, los inmigrantes latinoamericanos muestran fuertes vínculos con sus países de origen, así como un sentido emergente de pertenencia a una comunidad diaspórica. Este artículo se fundamenta en un proyecto de investigación que examina las brechas entre las condiciones objetivas de estos inmigrantes (por ejemplo, empleo, ingreso) y sus percepciones subjetivas (por ejemplo, bienestar, apego a la sociedad de acogida). Al utilizar el caso de los latinoamericanos, este estudio también se centra en los procesos mediante los que las identidades diaspóricas se fusionan y mutan, en particular entre inmigrantes co-étnicos de diferentes orígenes nacionales y múltiples conexiones a través de las fronteras.

L'étude des immigrants d'Amérique latine au Québec révèle que cette population affiche des niveaux autodéclarés élevés d'intégration et de satisfaction de la vie, même si sa performance économique moyenne est nettement inférieure à celle d'autres groupes de cette province. Les immigrants d'Amérique latine conservent également des liens solides avec leur pays d'origine et un nouveau sentiment d'appartenance à une communauté diasporique. Cet article est basé sur un projet de recherche qui examine les écarts entre les conditions objectives de ces immigrants (p. ex. emploi, revenu) et leurs perceptions subjectives (p. ex. bien-être, attachement à la société d'accueil).

Dans le cas des Latino-Américains, cette recherche se concentre également sur les processus par lesquels les identités diasporiques se fondent et se transforment, en particulier parmi les immigrants coethniques d'origines nationales différentes et ayant de multiples connexions transfrontalières.

The study of Latin American immigrants residing in the province of Quebec reveals two apparently counterintuitive findings: on the one hand, this population shows self-reported high levels of integration and life satisfaction, even if its average economic performance significantly lags behind other groups in that province; on the other hand, Quebec's Latin American immigrants show persistently strong ties to their countries of origin and also an emerging sense of belonging to a diasporic community while simultaneously exhibiting, as a whole, what seems to be robust social and cultural patterns of incorporation. Of course, such trends are not necessarily contradictory, as abundant research has already shown, for example, that immigrants can concurrently develop local and transnational networks, and that the latter do not always hinder the former (Pantoja 2005). However, these intriguing results raise interesting, more general theoretical and empirical questions such as: How to explain the gaps between the objective conditions of immigrants (e.g. employment, income) and their subjective perceptions (e.g. well-being, attachment to the host society)? How to analyze collective identities that coalesce and mutate, particularly among co-ethnic immigrants with different national origins and multiple cross-border connections?

These questions require that we discard altogether the view of a linear mobility from a "sending country" to a "country of destination." To put it simply, a Colombian immigrant who settles in Quebec is exactly that (i.e. a national from a given country who integrates into one of Canada's provinces), but also much more: she may become a member (self-identified or identified by others) of Quebec's Latin American growing community, which is proportionally larger and linguistically distinct from English Canada's, while also maintaining family—and even professional, political, or financial—ties with Colombia and, at the same time, within the Colombian diaspora in North America and elsewhere. Her experience will be shaped and affected, not only by what it means to be an immigrant in French-language, more assimilationist Quebec, itself standing in tension with multicultural Canada, but also by what it means to be Colombian and Latin American (or Latina/o or Hispanic) in the United States – because of the massive weight of that reality (Armony 2014). Thus, for example, Latin Americans will be positively seen as culturally close by the francophone Quebecois – even as allies in the protection of language diversity in Anglo North America – but they will also experience the negative effects of U.S.-originated stereotypes spreading through public discourse and the media.

Quebec's demographic context is in itself quite distinct within the continent. On the one hand, it shows some parallels with the United States: out of a population of 8,066,555 inhabitants, 79.1% declare French as their mother tongue (comparable to the percentage of U.S. inhabitants who have English as their mother tongue: 79.3%), and 15.1% are foreign born (proportionally somewhat more than in the U.S.: 13.5% – but significantly less than in the rest of Canada: 26.5%). On the other hand, regarding the relative size and composition of its population with a Latin American background, Quebec stands out in comparison to both English Canada and the United States: Quebec has proportionally (among those foreign-born) more than twice as many Latin American immigrants as the rest of Canada, and proportionally as many South American immigrants as the United States. This is explained by the fact that almost two thirds of U.S. Hispanics declare a Mexican origin and that overall 77.3% of U.S. Hispanics stem from only three nationalities, none from South America (the other two being Puerto Rican and Cuban). Conversely, Latin Americans in English Canada have more diverse national origins, including a much larger percentage of South Americans (Colombian, Chilean, and Peruvian among the top five nationalities). But it is in Quebec that we will find the highest proportion of South Americans and the larger diversity among Latin Americans, with no nationalities decidedly predominating over the others.

All these figures tell us, firstly, that the Latin American presence is now much more salient in Quebec than in the rest of Canada (a higher share within a smaller immigrant population) and, secondly, that the Latin American population is much more nationally pluralistic than in the United States. Of course, these are not the only contrasts. Almost nine out of ten Latin Americans living in Canada are immigrants (foreign-born), while only one third of Hispanics are immigrants in the U.S. Because a large proportion of Latin Americans currently settled in Canada have gained residency through the selection process for qualified workers, which is in part based on academic credentials, they predictably show higher levels of education compared to their U.S. counterparts: more than half of U.S. Hispanics have no post-secondary degrees, compared to only 31% of Canada's Latin Americans. Unsurprisingly, Latin Americans in Canada earn more than U.S. Hispanics: their income represents 80% of their country's non-minority (white) population income (measured in median annual wages), while that figure is 60% for Hispanics in the U.S (to put it another way, the Latino/white income gap is 20% in Canada and 40% in the United States). So, in brief, a more educated, better payed, mostly skilled migrant population should exhibit rather favorable patterns of integration in Canada, in general, and in Quebec, in particular. As we will see, this seems to be generally the case, but not to the extent that one would expect.

Latin Americans arriving in Canada do not face the challenge of navigating a complex system of racial relations and historically-shaped (and politically charged) Hispanic social identities (Chicano, Mexican, Porto Rican, Cuban). This may be the underlying reason why, ironically, more U.S. Hispanics define themselves as racially "white" (53%) than do Latin Americans in Canada (34%). The multicultural approach, as well as the arguable less taxing notion of "visible minority" (rather than "race", the term used in the U.S. census), may offer Latin Americans an incentive – or a smaller deterrent – to see themselves as a separate group from the majority of European descent. Such context may also explain the fact that, according to a survey carried out in 2017, not only immigrants from Latin America maintain strong personal ties with their country of origin (family and friendship ties, interest in events, travel, sense of belonging), while developing an attachment to the host society, but also that they shift, over time, towards a pan-ethnic identification with a Latin American diaspora.[1] For example, with lengthier residence, relations with other immigrants of the same nationality decrease, but relations with other Latin American immigrants seem to remain present. Older Latin Americans mention more often the country of adoption to describe their identity, and comparatively less their country of origin, but they also tend to mention more non-national-specific forms of attachment (Latin America, language, region, ancestry, and religion) than younger ones.

Subjective indicators appear to corroborate a successful path to integration: immigrants from Latin America perceive far better standards of fairness and social cohesion in their host society. They are civically involved (mostly through naturalization and voting) and generally express high levels of life satisfaction (higher regarding family and home/local community, a key determinant of subjective well-being among immigrants, even if somewhat lower regarding work and health). There is also a strong sense among them that merit and effort are rightly rewarded in their country of settlement. They tend to judge equally positively the public image of immigrants in general and of Latin Americans in particular. This portrait is, of course, very encouraging. However, the same survey also reveals some troubling trends: life satisfaction levels and feelings of attachment to the host society are closely correlated to the degree of incorporation into the job market, as well as to the experience of having been a victim or a witness of discrimination. This finding is consistent with research in this area, and with common sense too: those who feel mistreated become alienated (Herrero et al. 2012; Hochman, Stein, Lewin-Epstein and Wöhler 2018; Kim and Noh 2015). But this begs the question of why we are seeing a segment of the Latin American population in Quebec encounter such obstacles, given the advantageous conditions they seem to enjoy, all the more so when compared to their U.S. counterparts.

The latest census data confirm that Latin Americans typically (in terms of median income) earn less than other minority groups in Quebec, and this gap is wider among women (Armony 2014). Latin Americans living in Quebec also display higher levels of poverty (23%, compared to 14.6% among the non-white population) and unemployment (10.3%, compared to 7.2%). There may be several factors at play in this situation, as minorities are themselves internally heterogeneous—and the term "minority" actually designates a wide array of realities. Many Latin Americans have integrated extremely well, and there is no obvious barrier dressed against this particular population. But the problem remains: how do we account for the evidence of a struggling experience for a significant number of them? One possible answer is that Latin American immigrants, in spite of the apparent ease with which the host society welcomes them (as "non-problematic" newcomers, even cultural "allies"), suffer the effects of implicit biases linked to Latino stereotypes, mostly coined in the United States. In other words, they may be negatively affected by a social and political dynamic that is rooted in a different national context. The survey results tell us that more than a third of Quebec's Latin Americans have personally experienced discrimination on the basis of language, and many of them feel that their chances in the job market (or at school, in their dealings with government agencies, etc.) have been unfairly diminished because of prejudice associated with the Latino identity. Their non-native French accent can trigger adverse reactions in others: comments or assumptions about their intellectual abilities, work ethic, legal status, sexual behavior, etc. (de Sousa et al. 2016; Gluszek and Dovidio 2010). Even if other common stereotypes are supposedly "benign" (Latinos as "friendly", "fun-loving", "easy going", etc.), the overall image is ultimately demeaning.[2]

About 150,000 individuals with a Latin American background reside in the province of Quebec, most of them in the Montreal area. They do not constitute necessarily a "community," not even a single statistical category, as they come from a dozen different countries, self-identify with various ancestries (a person can, of course, be Latin American and also Black, indigenous, etc.), and do not always consider their Latin American origin as relevant or even real at all – nothing more than a geographical designation. Even counting them proves challenging: Should we use mother tongue, place of birth or declared ethnicity to include them in the "Latin American" group? And, is Brazil part of Latin America?

1 The survey was conducted by UQAM's Interdisciplinary Latin American Studies Lab in March and April 2017. An on-line questionnaire was administered to 1,014 adult individuals who self-identified as having a Latin American background and residing in the province of Quebec.

2 These findings were corroborated by witness accounts collected by UQAM's Interdisciplinary Latin American Studies Lab for the Coalition pour l'Intégration Latino-Québécoise during a public consultation on discrimination carried out in the fall of 2017. See the report: www.midi.gouv.qc.ca/publications/fr/dossiers/valoriser-diversite/rapports/RAP_CAFLA%20.pdf.

Mexico? The Caribbean nations? But before we dismiss the very idea of a Latin American diaspora, we have to take into account the clear existence of a common cultural heritage, even if disputed, hybrid, and fluid. Many Latin Americans in Canada share a sense of belonging—even if often more tacit than explicit—and a number of them participate in pan-ethnic associations and networks. Such forms of attachment may be reinforced by a social label that is increasingly ascribed to them by others. At the same time that native Quebecers become more aware of a rapidly growing Latin American immigrant population in their midst, there is a dramatic rise in negative discourses about the Latina/o immigrant in the United States. As words and images travel easily across borders, it should not be unexpected that Latin Americans in Quebec may start encountering more prejudices and stereotypes in their own host society. This will lead them to reevaluate their own identity, and in some cases to appropriate and mobilize it more than ever.

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