STRIKING A BALANCE IN CANADA'S DIVERSITY DIALOGUE

The Case of the Portuguese-Canadian Community

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The waning decades of the 20th century were witness to a dramatic alteration in the nature of immigration to Canada. While up to the 1960s, the majority (70% to 90%) of those settling in this country still originated from European countries, by 2001 these proportions had steadily decreased, to about 16%. In contrast, the number of new arrivals from Asia, Africa and Latin America rose from less than 10% in the early 1960s, to about 77% in 2006 (Chui, Tran and Maheux 2007, Statistics Canada 2004).

This unprecedented increase in the proportion of non-European immigration to Canada has brought a profound change to our national dialogue on diversity. Up until the late 1970s, it was still common in this country to conceptualize, study and politicize our social, economic and political diversity in terms of cultural, linguistic or class differences. One example of this was our historic preoccupation with the divide between English and French; another was the widespread acclaim given to John Porter's *Vertical Mozaic* (1965). However, the end of the 1970s saw increasing scrutiny being paid in this country to the reality of race (as defined by phenotypical differences like skin colour), as a determining factor of the level of participation in Canadian society. As a result, Canada's historic and national dialogue on diversity, which had previously been concerned mainly with cultural, linguistic and class considerations was soon overtaken by a debate on the effects of race.

This change in mindset has resulted in increased attention, on the part of our government institutions, to issues of colour-based discrimination and exclusion. One example of this has been the gradual restructuring of the Multiculturalism Policy (1971) and the follow-up *Multiculturalism Act* (1988), from a focus on linguistic and cultural preservation, to a program whose priorities today are the promotion of integration and the combating of racism (Canadian Heritage 2008). Another change has been the enactment of the federal government's *Employment Equity Act* (1986, 1995), which targets four designated equity groups, based on phenotypical race, gender and ability (visible minorities, women, Aboriginals and the disabled). On the academic front, this change has been paralleled by the increasing adoption of theoretical perspectives such as anti-racism theory as guiding paradigms for research on diversity and inequality (Dei 1996).

This movement towards the adoption of race-based – as opposed to ethnocultural – categorizations has also resulted, at least at the government level, in a shift away from a research and policy focus on integration that specifically addresses language and culture. For example, much of the current research on minority integration presently conducted by various levels of government agencies focuses on federally designated equity groups, rather than on specific linguistic or cultural communities. Another example of this is the tendency in many publications to write about racial and cultural differences as if they were one and the same phenomena. This is illustrated by the interchangeable use of terms like "immigrant" or "minority" with "visible minority" or "people of colour," as well as the habit of ignoring the cultural and linguistic differences between same-race minorities. Unfortunately, this has meant that the economic, political and social inclusion of social groupings that are based on historical, ethnic or linguistic commonalities is, in many cases, no longer targeted, or recognized as such, at the government level. This has resulted in particular communities, both white and visible minorities, falling "through the cracks" in terms of research and policy.

The Portuguese-Canadian case

Nowhere is this gap in research and policy more evident than in the case of the Portuguese in Canada, a group that is often touted as having made a successful transition from a predominantly rural, under-educated and unskilled immigrant population, to an economically stable, hardworking and self-sufficient community.

Yet, despite this veneer of prosperity and stability, there is evidence that the Portuguese in Canada are facing severe systemic barriers to a full integration into Canadian society, particularly in the realm of education. These barriers are often comparable to those that are faced by some of our non-European minority groups. In some areas, the Portuguese example also defies prevailing anti-racist theories, which explain differential and ongoing lack of access to resources, mainly as a consequence of colour differences. Due to a research gap, these barriers often go unaddressed by policy-makers and, consequently, the situation of the Portuguese remains unknown to many mainstream scholars and policy-makers.

Background: The Portuguese community in Canada

Persons of Portuguese ancestry (also known as "Luso-Canadians") began immigrating in larger numbers to Canada in 1953 and continued to do so up to the early 1990s (Anderson and Higgs 1976, Marques and Medeiros 1980). Originating disproportionately from the poorest rural regions in Portugal and the Azores, the migrant generations of this community had some of the lowest levels of education of any minority group (usually only four years or less) (Anderson and Higgs 1976).

Moving overwhelmingly into unskilled construction, manufacturing or service occupations, the Portuguese soon managed to overcome many of the limitations of their low education levels and achieved a measure of economic success and security in their new land. For example, by the end of the 1990s, they had achieved very high levels (70%) of home ownership (Murdie and Teixeira 2003). They also tended to display low poverty levels and average levels of unemployment (Nunes 1998, Ornstein 2001, 2006a, 2006b and 2006c). By the year 2000, the community comprised 358,000 people, or roughly 1.2% of Canada's population (Statistics Canada 2001). Sixty percent of Luso-Canadians live in Toronto and Montréal, where in each city they represent the 6th and 9th largest non-British/Irish or Quebecois group (Statistics Canada 2003). Large communities also exist in centres like Vancouver, Hamilton, Kitchener, London Ontario, Ottawa-Gatineau, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg.

Yet, the limited occupational and educational profile of the first Portuguese immigrants, coupled by high rates of school dropouts, soon led this community to experience levels of unequal participation in Canada's economic prosperity (Li 1988, Nunes 1986b, Ornstein 2000, 2006a, 2006b and 2006c, Porter 1965). For example, they earn significantly lower than average incomes. They also show low levels of political participation and representation, relative to their numbers, and a tendency to turn inward towards the family, a legacy of having lived under one of Europe's longest dictatorships (the Salazar regime), which strongly repressed political and civic involvement (Anderson and Higgs 1976, Nunes 1986b). The marginalized economic and educational profile of the first generations of the Portuguese-Canadian community also gave rise to a negative image of this group, held by many members of the Canadian society:

> [*Author's translation*]
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> I am going to give a description of the Portuguese in the eyes of the typical Canadian: The Portuguese are dark and short. They speak a strange language that only they understand….The Portuguese man is a labourer. He works in construction.…The Portuguese woman works as a cleaning lady. The Portuguese is not very sophisticated....[He] doesn't like to study. Maybe the image of the Portuguese…will change in the next generation….I hope so. At least the image they now have could not be any worse. (Duckworth 1986)

Up until the late 1970s, it was still common…to conceptualize, study and politicize our social, economic and political diversity in terms of cultural, linguistic or class differences….The end of the 1970s saw increasing scrutiny being paid in this country to the reality of race as a determining factor of the level of participation in Canadian society.

Today, the Portuguese community, already entering into its third Canadian-born generation, continues to be largely marginalized from many sectors of Canadian society. Luso-Canadians still display the highest percentages of individuals with only a primary school education, among all Canadian minority groups (Matas and Valentine 2000, Nunes 1998 and 2000, Ornstein 2000, 2006a and 2006b). More significantly, their proportion of university and college graduates are equal to those of the Aboriginal communities (6%). Their concentrations in unskilled and manufacturing jobs parallel those of more recent immigrant groups. They also have disproportionately low numbers of people in professional and management positions (Matas and Valentine 2000, Nunes and 1998 and 2000, Ornstein 2000, 2006a and 2006b). As a consequence, they continue to earn significantly lower average incomes than other Canadians and have percentages of upper-income earners that are comparable, once again, only to those in the Aboriginal communities (Nunes 1998 and 2000, Ornstein 2000, 2006a and 2006b). Luso-Canadians also continue to be underrepresented within the political, economic, social and cultural sectors of our nation. In the late 1990s, the Luso-Canadian academic Edite Noivo (1997: 33) observed:

> After 25 or more years in the "land of opportunity", the overall socioeconomic conditions of Portuguese immigrants remain well below the national average…and they show minimal participation in mainstream society.

The community's academic underachievement

The Luso-Canadian community's full inclusion into Canadian society has been most impeded by the chronic academic underachievement of its youth. Since the early 1970s, successive generations of Luso-Canadian children – particularly in the city of Toronto – have been performing at significantly lower academic levels, have been found to be disproportionately represented in special education and remedial reading programs and were reported to be dropping out of school earlier and in greater numbers than most other students. (Brown 1999, Brown et al. 1992, Cheng and Yau 1999, Cheng et al. 1989, Santos 2004, Nunes 1986 and 2003, Ornstein 2000, 2006a, 2006b and 2006c, Yau, Cheng and Ziegler 1993). Luso-Canadians in Toronto have also been more likely to plan not to attend university, to lack confidence in their ability to succeed in post-secondary education, to work the longest average hours of part-time work and spend the fewest hours per week on homework (Cheng and Yau 1999, Cheng, Yau and Ziegler 1993, Larter et al. 1982, Project Diploma 2004). At the turn of the millennium, only approximately 6% of all Luso-Canadians over the age of 15 had obtained a university degree (Matas and Valentine 2000).

The community's dropout problem was highlighted in the report of the Royal Commission on Learning (1994) and among the newer generations by Giles (2002) and Ornstein (2000, 2006a, 2006b and 2000c). In the 2000 report *Ethnoracial Inequality in Toronto*, Ornstein showed how Portuguese youth aged 20 to 24 had the second-highest dropout rate of any minority and described Luso-Canadians as one of the groups "of most concern" (p. 51) and as suffering "extreme [educational] disadvantage" (p. 124-125). In 2006, Ornstein followed with two other reports showing that this situation had not changed and that the Portuguese in Montréal and Vancouver were showing similar trends (Ornstein 2006a, 2006b).

The fears of "social reproduction"

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of community organizations and activists brought this problem to the attention of the media and government. They blamed the school system for failing to act on systemic discriminatory barriers, such as academic streaming, biased I.Q. testing and low teacher expectations (Dos Santos, Perestrelo and Coelho 1985, Duffy 1995, Ward 1985). The Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education, an ad-hoc group made up of more than 40 community associations and activists, also set up ongoing working groups with both school boards, looking into ways of reversing these trends. These groups echoed the concern of their community regarding the wholesale "social reproduction" and subsequent marginalization of entire generations of Portuguese youth. Participants in a 1998 national study of Luso-Canadians expressed these fears (Nunes 1998: 7):

> If our children do not complete high-school...do not go to university, we are going to continue to have a Portuguese community that is the mirror image of...the first generation….I think that if we do not pay attention [this will turn into] a great calamity for the Portuguese community."

This sentiment was also echoed in a separate study undertaken in Montréal (Noivo 1997: 95):

> First, a great number of third generation members are neither pursuing an education nor acquiring marketable skills….Many appear fervently determined "to enjoy life" instead of just working hard and saving. I found it appalling that no one…seems to realize the seriousness of the situation, or seems troubled by the uncertain…future of the third generation.

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A point of urgency on this matter is the fact that this community's under-24 youth component is proportionately larger and has a faster growth rate than the overall population, or similar ethnocultural groups (e.g., Italians, Greeks) (Nunes 1998, Ornstein 2006b and 2006c, Tepper 2002). Thus, the successful integration of this community is more intimately tied than most to the development of the "social capital" of its youth (Policy Research Initiative 2005).

The community's fears regarding the lack of educational progress of its youth are borne out by research that shows that Portuguese-Canadian children of immigrants are, indeed, not progressing beyond their parents' limited socioeconomic roles. A 2005 report on the intergenerational mobility amongst the children of immigrants indicated that while Portuguese-Canadian youth had nearly doubled the education levels of their fathers, their incomes had failed to improve compared to those of their elders (Aydemir, Chen and Corak 2005). In fact, first generation males were actually shown to be

earning slightly less than their fathers, with females earning exceedingly less. The report also demonstrated that the income levels of the Canadian-born children of the Portuguese are similar to those of more recent visible minority immigrant groups, who also have similarly low education levels, (e.g., Central Americans, South Americans, Guyanese, Jamaicans, Grenadians, Ecuadorians, etc.).

The need for an ethno-specific research focus

A frequent call by many Luso-Canadian organizations and activists, voiced during meetings with various Ontario Ministers of Education and the Royal Commission on Learning, has been for increased research on this problem, including more research into ethnicity-referenced data (Ferreira 1998, Januario 1997 and 1998, Levy 1995, Pedro 2004, Ponte 1995, Royal Commission on Learning 1994: 95-96, Tavares 2004).

Despite these calls and the indications that the Portuguese community faces significant barriers to integration, the situation has yet to be effectively examined by the research community or, in particular, by the government. Being a predominantly White, European minority, the Portuguese are most often not identified as a separate target group in many government research and policy documents. Consequently, in such reports, data on this community is often amalgamated under the rubric of "European," "Southern European" or "White." In this fashion, the community's issues are not highlighted, discussed, nor brought to the attention of policy-makers.

Concomitantly, this group also does not attract much attention from the wider academic research community. For example, in a 2001 annotated bibliography of Master's and Ph.D. theses written between 1980 and 2001 on the topic of diversity, it was noted that out of 1,500 dissertations, only 16 had been conducted specifically on the Portuguese (Mulholland 2001). In comparison, in this same time period, 160 theses were conducted on Chinese-Canadians, 80 on South Asians, 81 on Blacks, 50 on Italians and 20 on Greeks.

At the policy level, this lack of attention is reflected in the lack of inclusion of the Portuguese community in equity initiatives that are designed to counter systemic barriers. For example, some Portuguese youth question why their community is not counted among the designated federal government equity groups, despite suffering severe structural barriers to education (Nunes 1998). They lament the fact that a number of communities whose graduation patterns show no underachievement are included, while they are not. Others have also decried the common practice of using region of origin to determine who is member of a visible minority for equity purposes (e.g., job applications that specifically state that those born in Portugal are not to self-identify as visible minority). One youth pointed out the ironic situation that a Brazilian-born child of Portuguese immigrants, who had moved to Canada from Latin America, would be eligible to claim visible-minority status in an employment application, while the child's cousins, or brothers, who were born in Canada, or in Portugal, would not.

This great lack of research and policy attention points to a current gap in our "diversity dialogue." The absence of an ethnocultural focus in much of the government research affects not only the Portuguese, but also other visible minority groups that are often amalgamated under the rubric of wider racial categories (e.g., Haitians, Vietnamese, Afghans, etc.). Like the Portuguese, a certain number of these groups are also facing severe barriers to integration, yet their unique situations are rarely being addressed separately in research and policy from those of other visible minority communities.

In summary, by casting a wider net in order to include considerations of race, the diversity dialogue has addressed a reality that had long been ignored in previous decades. However, grouping different and often culturally or linguistically unique groups into broad racial categorizations has also often served to obscure significant differences between very different ethnocultural populations of similar race. These communities should be profiled, in their own right, and their needs should be addressed in policy. It is hoped that Canada's diversity dialogue can find the right balance between the need to address both ethnicity and race.

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