SOCIAL INCLUSION, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND IMMIGRATION

ABSTRACT

The author points to access to the good life as a constructive way of thinking about social inclusion, then offers social capital theory as an answer to those seeking a pragmatic reason, rather than principle, to promote social inclusion, especially to those who want to come to Canada as new immigrants.

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Over the past few years, social inclusion has become a popular subject of discussion amongst policy makers, academic researchers, and civil society generally. We have seen the subject and its relatives discussed under a variety of names such as social integration, social cohesion, and the inverse, social exclusion. In this brief article, I want to suggest that we can enlarge our understanding of social inclusion through the concept of social capital and that we can encourage social inclusion through programs that take social capital seriously.

Frequently, commentators suggest that the key social inclusion issue is poverty. They argue that a society is more inclusive in inverse proportion to its poverty levels. Statistically breaking down poverty according to racial or ethnic groupings can lead us to conclude that a society might be excluding members of specific groups, thus setting up a division of "us" and "them" along ethnic or racial lines. This leads some to link social exclusion and racism; discussions of social cohesion, social inclusion and their relatives often become discussions of racism. It turns out, however, that there is much more to promoting social inclusion than trying to eliminate racism.

Poverty is an important problem. But it is not necessarily a very effective starting point for understanding social inclusion or setting policies in this regard, especially if the offered solutions take the form of simple income re-distribution programs. But what are we talking about when we speak of social inclusion? Economic power? Political power? Jobs, schools, access to social services? Equality or equity? Are we talking about cultural and everyday social life; life in our neighbourhoods? What of religion? Is social inclusion a matter of human rights? If a society guarantees equality of human rights as defined in certain pieces of legislation or United Nations conventions, does that guarantee social inclusion?

Here is a simple suggestion for organizing our thinking on social inclusion: *A society that is socially inclusive is a society that grants access to everyone to the vehicles of the good life, as it is defined by that society.*

This expresses a liberal democratic principle in the limitation that a socially inclusive society offers not the good life itself but equal access to the means to it. Offers of the good life itself, not just access to the means to the good life, can only be made in a totalitarian state, and by definition the good life cannot exist in such a state. Social inclusion is something best offered by liberal democracies.

Let's pause a moment to ask why a society should want to promote social inclusion, especially to people who come to the society as immigrants? Assume that the good life is a thing of scarcity. Why would a society want to extend access to "outsiders" to something that is scarce? Doing so would seem to be irrational, and one would expect that a rational society would restrict access to the good life to those people who are, let us call them, "insiders". Under this assumption that the good life is a scarce resource, one might think that a rational society would be inclusive only *of its members* and exclude those who were not among its members, those such as immigrants. To offer access to the good life to immigrants would simply make everyone worse off. Under this assumption, promoting social inclusion could be motivated only through a strong altruism that over-rode economic imperatives. There are people who are genuinely motivated by principles of social justice and human rights that would tolerate making everyone worse off for the sake of greater equality for all. But these people are in the minority, and we want stronger reasons for promoting social inclusion than remaining true to certain principles of social justice. We also need to be pragmatic if social inclusion is to be broadly supported by our societies. Fortunately, we can be.

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We can find the beginnings of a robust answer in social capital theory. Without going into detail, social capital is a public good that resides in the relationships between members of a society and between members of a society and the institutions of that society, institutions such as government bodies, the police, business organizations, non-governmental organizations, and political organizations. Social capital is said to be at the root of the possibility of co-operation and facilitates the development of individual human capital, smoothly functioning communities, vibrant and stable economies, and an interesting and secure cultural life. Trust forms the most fundamental basis of social capital and, given the fragility of trust, social capital, too, is said to be fragile. Many social scientists and government policy workers are taking social capital seriously these days because of concerns that it is eroding. In summary, social capital is at the basis of a society's prosperity and well-being and thereby grounds the possibility of the good life.

To go directly to the point, social inclusion generates increased social capital and social exclusion reduces social capital, reduces the levels of trust required for a vibrant economy and a well-functioning society. So although we may grant that the good life may indeed be a scarce thing, social capital theory would suggest that its quantity is variable and can be influenced by the extent to which people in a society, and this encompasses its immigrants, are included in its workings and its decision-making. The end of the story is that a society that promotes social inclusion will be a more prosperous society than one that does not. Promoting social inclusion, then, does not imply making everyone worse off for the sake of principles of social justice. Promoting social inclusion should make us better off.

Let us then turn to how a society ought to promote social inclusion; what should we do and who should take action? Given what I have just said about social capital, I would argue that all members and institutions of a society have a place in this effort. And this includes immigrants taking their own actions. But I will emphasize governments, for governments have the key role in defining social inclusion and, to go back to our fundamentals, what counts as the good life in a given society. (I say this particularly with regard to democratic societies where governments can, at least in principle, be regarded as representing the will of the society.)

The efficacy of a democratic government in promoting social inclusion in a free and pluralistic society is always going to be limited – social engineering can be taken only so far. In Canada the federal government plays a somewhat background role of *creating conditions within which the rest of our society and its institutions can flourish.* Canada is not a full welfare state, and it leaves the management of a great many aspects of our society to individuals, to non-governmental organizations, and to the business community.

The federal policy framework here covers the selection of immigrants, settlement assistance, integration assistance, an offer of citizenship, law enforcement including against hate crimes, and finally and perhaps most importantly, legal instruments such as the *Constitution Act*, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Multiculturalism Act*, and various other anti-discrimination provision. This set of initiatives with their attendant policies, laws and regulations, comprises a framework within which immigrants enter Canada and settle. It is through this evolving framework that the federal government affects diversity in Canadian cities and the degree to which people of different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds become integrated into the life of the cities. It is a mix of measures to provide incentives, to promote certain behaviours and attitudes, and to provide the force of law where this is appropriate and necessary. This framework is the primary instrument of the Canadian government for promoting the social inclusion of the diverse peoples in our country; *to a large extent it is a framework within which the people of Canada integrate themselves.*

Governments *have* a major role in promoting social



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inclusion, and they do this by taking social capital and social inclusion seriously, recognizing the fragility of both, and enacting and implementing framework policy and legislation. In Canada, the work done on the streets of our communities tends to be done through non-governmental actors. In some other countries, especially fully developed welfare states, the government itself might carry out the work at street level, too. Canadian government programs often work by offering funding to non-governmental organizations who submit proposals for local activities to promote social inclusion, the best ideas receiving the funds. This approach transfers ownership of the social inclusion effort to the people and their communities, and this transfer of ownership creates more social capital than were the government to retain exclusive responsibility. Herein lies a major benefit of *framework* legislation. Ideas for promoting social inclusion are developed in greater number, are targeted to the particular situation of a community, and are deployed by people with a vested interest in the outcome. Frequently the government programs require that the organizations work in partnership with others, including the business community, and this very requirement will stimulate greater trust, greater social inclusion, greater social capital.

Notice, too, that the government's framework legislation provides guidance to the community actors for the types of actions to take. The government does not only offer funds. In general, the institutions of Canadian society, the schools, the non-governmental organizations, the police, the business community are well-meaning, committed, and willing to promote social inclusion. But they often require guidance from government on the objectives to be achieved and the sorts of activities that years of community-level experience tell us might be effective. So our framework legislation also provides a roadmap to promoting social inclusion as well as the legitimacy, grounded in our democratic processes, for its pursuit.

There may, of course, be reasons for a government to intervene more forcefully, to enact new legislation, to offer stronger programs, or to require changes in the ways that communities deliver programs and services. But, in general, governments should intervene more directly in the life of communities only when problems surpass their abilities to solve them with their existing resources. Therefore, it is imperative that governments watch for danger signs, signs that point to a breakdown of trust, of social capital, signs that point to a significant weakening of social inclusion. This is the role of research, such as that done through the Metropolis Project or through research teams housed within government ministries. Danger signs with respect to the social inclusion of immigrants might include the emergence of pockets of poverty among immigrant groups, significant disparities in employment, especially when they are correlated with membership in certain racial or ethnic groups, similar disparities in educational outcomes, in health status or access to health and other social services, access to affordable and adequate housing, disparities in criminal behaviour, in being a victim of crime, in having equal access to the justice system. Think too of the attitudes of the public towards immigration and to members of ethnic minorities. The point is, responsible governments will look to research for information on emerging trends that point to the exclusion of certain people from our societies, exclusion from an equal access to the good life. When the danger signs reach a certain level, a level beyond the capacity of the communities to respond well, governments must act in order to preserve the social capital that is the basis of our prosperity.

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To sum up, promoting social inclusion is warranted because doing so increases social capital. For government to do so through framework policy and legislation together with support for community and non-governmental organizations is the most effective means to take.

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