POPULAR MULTICULTURALISM AS SOCIAL CAPITAL: TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

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The impact of multiculturalism in Canada stems from the policy itself, as implemented by governments, and popular support for multiculturalism as understood by the Canadian public. Popular multiculturalism embodies certain ideals for a culturally diverse society to which its adherents are committed, the source of much of the impact of multiculturalism in Canada. Popular multiculturalism is a form of social capital, in a broad sense of that term. It constitutes a resource enabling society to achieve its collective goals of enhancing relations among cultural groups (Reitz 2014). The uses of this resource, of course, depends entirely on what Canadians believe multiculturalism is all about, and this meaning has changed over time. Understanding popular multiculturalism as social capital is essential to assessing multiculturalism's impact – past, present, and future.

Describing the popular meaning of multiculturalism requires attention to certain aspects. One is the cultural groups on which it focuses. Canadian multiculturalism policy has always emphasized immigrant groups, but the popular understanding of multiculturalism may draw inferences about its broader application to French or English linguistic communities, Indigenous peoples, or specific immigrant groups. A second aspect concerns which multicultural ideals are emphasized – cultural development, equity and equal treatment, or immigration. And a third concerns the personal imperative attached to such support, whether it includes

support for specific multiculturalism programs only or policies across departments or levels of government, and the personal commitments to multicultural ideals it may engender. Data on all these aspects are limited, so the following discussion is often speculative.

POPULAR RESPONSES TO ETHNIC CULTURE EMPHASIS (1971-1985)

Multiculturalism policy initially emphasized support for immigrant minority cultures. Multiculturalism was launched in the wake of Quebec's "Quiet Revolution," and while support for French language was being strengthened, immigrant minorities, mostly from Europe, were offered support to maintain their cultures, including languages, something many had requested.

The popular reaction outside immigrant minorities? A national survey at the time showed most people were unaware of the term "multiculturalism," but when the question was posed, they were mildly favourable. They tended to agree with the value of minority cultures both to the groups in question and society as whole. In other words, they supported the cultural emphasis in multiculturalism, despite unfamiliarity with the term. However, this support was limited. While most were fine with activities such as ethnic festivals, they did not want ethnic cultures represented in mainstream institutions such as schools, and they did not want tax money spent. There was also a linguistic divide, with francophone Canadians less favourable, seeing support for immigrant cultures as weakening their own cultural position in Canada, and preferring *interculturalisme* allowing the Quebec government to prioritize French culture.

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Social capital created by support of the emerging multicultural policy was limited to endorsement of cultural maintenance, with no broader implications or commitments, personal or otherwise. In this context, multiculturalism policy remained low-key, and public funding did not survive many rounds of budget cuts. In 1982, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was drafted to include a clause (Section 27) on preserving "multicultural heritage," following the policy emphasis on culture. The charter was supported broadly, except in Québec.

POPULAR RESPONSES TO EQUITY EMPHASIS (1985-1995)

The initial multicultural policy mentioned but did not emphasize equality; that changed in the 1980s. Racially restrictive immigration regulations had been replaced in the 1960s with selection based on employment qualifications, opening opportunities for immigrants from all areas of the world, thus creating greater Canadian diversity in culture, race, and religion. Issues of discrimination and inequality quickly emerged, and the famous parliamentary report *Equality Now!* focused on people described by the newly coined term, "visible minorities."

A flurry of policy changes ensued. A 1983 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment recommended policies to increase equity for women, native people, disabled persons, and visible minorities. Based on the Commission's report, the 1985 *Employment Equity Act* established a proactive process for removing barriers to equal employment opportunity among federally regulated employers for all four designated groups. The 1988 *Canadian Multiculturalism* Act emphasized equity, promising not only to "recognize and promote" cultural issues, but also "to promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins" in society. The *Canadian Race Relations Foundation Act* was passed in 1991, and the multiculturalism program itself added an anti-racism component.

The popularity of linking multiculturalism to equity issues was not at all clear. European-origin immigrant minorities, the initial focus of multiculturalism policy, were more concerned with culture than equity. A 1972 survey showed only Italians and Portuguese gave equity as much support as cultural issues. And while the mainstream population's sympathy with European minorities continued, a 1991 survey in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver showed relatively less acceptance of others, a finding suggestive of racism.

For some, resistance to a stronger link between multiculturalism and equity reflected the idea that openness to cultural diversity is sufficient in itself to assure equal opportunity. In fact, the Multiculturalism Minister used this argument to support a key feature of the *Employment Equity Act* which *weakened* the Abella commission's recommendations. Abella recommended equity law be enforced in a process independent of political influence. In Parliament, the Minister referred to the "goodwill inherent in Canadian society," saying a "persuasive" approach was a better way to deal with employer discrimination than the "coercive approach" used elsewhere. Abella also argued – without success – that enforcement should emphasize specific minorities most affected, such as Blacks, not the broader "visible minority" category, the preferred reference for popular Canadian thinking about discrimination. Tellingly, in Ontario, broad employment equity legislation introduced by an NDP government in 1993 prompted a powerful public backlash, leading to its swift repeal by the Conservatives in 1995. Since then, equity issues across Canada have focused on the relatively limited issue of immigrant skill utilization, which affects economic contribution to the economy, while disregarding the economic costs of discrimination to immigrants themselves.

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Emphasis on equity may have made multiculturalism policy politically vulnerable. In the wake of controversy over Canadian novelist Neil Bissoondath's 1994 book *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, which blamed multiculturalism for limiting his career by stereotyping him in ethnic terms, the federal government seriously considered abandoning multiculturalism altogether.

POPULAR RESPONSE TO EXPANSIONIST IMMIGRATION EMPHASIS (1995-2021)

In the mid-1990s, immigration policy entered an era of expansion. Numbers of immigrants admitted annually jumped from an average of 140,000 during 1971-1990 to nearly 250,000 during 1991-2019, an increase of 75%. Surprising to many, the popularity of immigration also increased. Polling data showed continued support for immigration, and acceptance of refugees increased. Efforts by some politicians to exploit public opposition to immigration failed. The current government plans further increases to immigration. Canadian popular support stands in marked contrast to surging anti-immigrant sentiment in other countries, including the US, the UK, and France.

What accounts for this "Canadian exceptionalism"? Some credit multiculturalism, saying this Canadian ideal has promoted immigration and bolstered Canadian openness to diversity. Certainly, multiculturalism is a salient feature of Canadian identity, and the link between multiculturalism and immigration remains strong in the public mind.

Two important caveats apply here. First, while support for immigration is strong, with roots in popular multiculturalism, it does not follow that greater strength of Canadian support for immigration is necessarily explained by any greater openness to diversity. Attitudes to immigration in a country are strongly related to the specific immigrants it receives. And unlike elsewhere, Canada's immigrants normally arrive with an invitation from government in hand. Immigrant selection emphasizes education and other assets to ensure employability and economic contribution. Accordingly, more than others, Canadians view immigration as an economic benefit (Reitz 2012).

Canada's geography and history also play a role. Canada does not have a border with poorer countries, and as a former colony itself, Canada does not have obligations to former colonial territories. The harsh response to the arrival on Vancouver Island of a few hundred undocumented "boat people" of Chinese origin suggests Canadians would not welcome a massive flow of undocumented immigrants such as the US has experienced at its Mexican border.

Canadians' openness to diversity compared to other countries is best measured using survey data avoiding terms with country-specific meanings, like "multiculturalism" and "immigration". Suddenly, Canada does not look so exceptional. International surveys show Canadians and Americans are equally likely to express support for ethnic groups to maintain their customs rather than blend into society (only a minority favoured this option in either country). They were equally likely to agree that distinct minority communities can become full members of the national society. Evidently, multicultural values are not restricted to countries with an official multicultural policy or countries where immigration is popular.

The second caveat: support for Canada's immigration and its policy of multiculturalism does not mean its earlier reluctance to address disadvantage has been overcome. Public support for multiculturalism may have increased, but persuasive and well-publicized evidence from a 2011 study by economist Phil Oreopoulos showing continued anti-Asian racism in hiring processes by employers

prompted no increased public appetite to address it. Moreover, economic disparities of immigrants of specific origins are as great in Canada as in comparable immigration countries. Studies of Black immigrants in the US and Canada show about equal disadvantage, relative to qualifications. The same is true for Chinese, South Asian, and other minorities.

My own recently published research shows that even in societies as different in their approaches to immigration as France and Canada, after taking account of personal characteristics of immigrants, such as their race, religion and level of education, and the respective labour market and social welfare regimes, comparable groups of immigrants as frequently report discrimination, and show comparable degrees of social well-being and employment success relative to qualifications (Reitz et al. 2017; Reitz et al. forthcoming).

The social capital represented in strong support for multiculturalism during a period of expanding immigration gives politicians considerable flexibility in immigration and refugee policy, very different from the US and Europe. This does not mean that Canadians are less likely to discriminate against minorities, or more likely to favour anti-discrimination policies.

CONCLUSION

While social capital arising from support for multiculturalism in Canada has increased, its content has emphasized support for cultural diversity and expansive immigration, not equity. Will this change? There has been a surge in attention to anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in Canada, reinforced by media storms on two major stories: the resonance in Canada of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, and the disturbing revelations about the abuse of Indigenous children forced to attend residential schools. A recent national survey on race relations (Environics Institute, 2019) identified Blacks and Indigenous peoples as by far the most affected by racism and discrimination.

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Such evidence of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism has punctured Canadian pride in celebrating diversity. But does the social capital inherent in the support for multiculturalism encourage greater public interest in *actually addressing* this racism? I think not. Multiculturalism has not provided the social capital useful as a political resource to address discrimination and disadvantage in general, and has not emphasized any obligations to groups experiencing the most virulent racism, Indigenous peoples and Blacks. Even today, while acknowledging problems facing Blacks and Indigenous peoples, most Canadians describe race relations and the treatment of racial minorities as positive overall. If this does not change, multiculturalism risks becoming irrelevant to addressing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in Canada.

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