THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE LUCKY: IMMIGRATION AND THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

MORTON WEINFELD

Professor Weinfeld holds the Chair in Canadian Ethnic Studies at McGill Univesity, and directs the minor program in Canadian Ethnic Studies. He is the winner of the 2013 Marshall Sklare Prize for outstanding career contributions to the field by the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry.

For the purpose of this brief essay, we note that the immigration referred to here is that other than the initial waves of British and French colonists, and the prior migration of First Nations.

Analyzing the "contributions" of immigration to a new world country like Canada, where 40 per cent of the population are either immigrants or children of immigrants (and even more are grandchildren of immigrants), poses conceptual problems. It is like asking about the contribution of humans in general, or water, or air.

For, in fact, these immigrants have been, and are, the people of Canada. Indeed they are the essence of Canada. Think hockey — names like Gretzky and Mikita and Esposito denote so-called immigrant roots, do they not? And at present, there are about 30 black professionals playing in the NHL, which at roughly five per cent of players, is well above the black population proportion in Canada of two per cent.

There should be no doubt that the rest of the planet — unlike, say, the majority of Canadian social scientists studying immigration and diversity — think the Canadian record is laudable. Canadian scholars tend to focus, understandably, on shortcomings. Yet I recall meeting some city officials in Moscow in 1990, as non-Russian ethnic minorities were flooding into the city. Inter-group tensions were rising. They thought that somehow Canadian expertise could help them deal with this new phenomenon.

Years ago, I met a member of a delegation of Japanese social scientists who were sent to study multiculturalism in Canada. Why? Because Japan was experiencing an influx of non-Japanese Asians, pushing the country under the 99-per-cent

ethnic Japanese marker, and wanted to be prepared for successful integration. So in the Japanese government's view, what better than to study the Canadian experience? So this is our international brand.

Among actual immigrant masses, perhaps the Canadian myth never seized imaginations the wayAmerican symbols did: the Statue of Liberty welcoming poor and tired "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," or the fantasies of streets paved with gold. But if Canada was indeed a destination of second choice, it was still seen as highly desirable. The storehouse of provisions at Auschwitz was given the nickname of "kanada."

As for the actual record? The brutal wartime Japanese internment reflects the worst and best of the immigrant experience. Anti-Japanese racism was intense. On the one hand, the internment took place despite the fact that not one Japanese Canadian was ever charged, let alone convicted, of any act of sabotage or espionage. On the other hand, the internment camps were not prisons and no Japanese Canadian was killed. Decades later, Japanese Canadians enjoy incomes well above the Canadian average and have experienced extremely high intermarriage rates, which reflect the decline of that wartime anti-Japanese sentiment.

As of this writing, in early 2017, it seems that Canada is a kind of world outlier, in the sense of still accepting official multiculturalism, embracing diversity, and having a generous immigration and refugee policy. The xenophobic current, movements, and parties so roundly present in Western Europe and the United States are not (yet?) found in Canada. Or at least they have been muted, save for so-far unsuccessful efforts in Québec to impose a Charter of Values.

To be sure, the Canadian historical record regarding immigrants and non-white minorities (to say nothing of First Nations) is very far from perfect. And similarly for the present. Visible minority immigrants and their descendants face systemic barriers and discrimination ranging from profiling to micro-aggressions. But still. The lows have arguably not been and are not now as severe as those experienced in the United States and the European continent.

So how to explain this relative historic and persisting openness to immigration and diversity in Canada, and relative success at integration? In large part, luck.

Yes, luck. Consider:

1. The peculiar historical process of dual English and French colonization of the country, and then the dualistic nature of Confederation itself, played an important role. In fact, this early Canadian dualism likely served to create political and socio-cultural space for the legitimation of other immigrant/minority groups. Officially, Canada was never an ethno-culturally unitary state;

2. The accidents of Canadian geography and climate were such to make plantation economies impractical. Hence, no need for a slave economy, followed by Jim Crow, lynchings, urban ghettos, etc. Of course, there were slaves in Canada's past. But their numbers were minimal. The Black population in Can-

ada is largely one of post-war origins. And as late as 1981, the average educational attainment of Black Canadians was above the Canadian average;

3. Canada has been well situated geographically to prevent a large influx of illegal immigrants. The United States in the south, two oceans and the Arctic have been major buffers. Had Canada had a comparable border with Mexico, and a resulting number of millions of undocumented workers, or been relatively close to many refugee-producing countries, the welcome would be far less warm;

4. The roster of immigrants who have come to Canada differs from those in the United States and Western Europe. The vast majority of visible minority immigrants in Canada in recent decades are East Asian and South Asian. This broad group has tended to do relatively well in terms of educational attainment and subsequent economic achievement. The points system tilts towards human capital advantages. The relatively few Latin American immigrants have come from a variety of source countries, almost all via regular immigration processes. The Muslim population in Canada is about three per cent, which is less than in Western Europe. And the Canadian Muslim population, for a variety of reasons, has tended to have relatively higher human capital endowments than Muslim migrants elsewhere in Europe. So the securitization imperative and related Islamophobia have been less pronounced in Canada, the recent tragedy at a Québec City mosque notwithstanding.

Kymlicka (2005) has noted the importance of points 3 and 4 in sustaining support for multiculturalism. Indeed, all four of these points have had an impact. And all four are certainly found in Canada. So, the relatively successful story of immigrants in Canada continues. While some studies note declines in economic returns to recent visible minority migrants relative to native-born citizens, the fact is that achievement levels remain high. Readers of this article who are familiar with the Canadian campus scene and walk through the STEM corridors of their local university, or research institutes, will be struck by the large proportion of immigrant or second-generation students, often of visible minority background. This is similarly true for programs in professions such as accounting, business administration, medicine, nursing — and also for employment in high-tech or research-based private sector enterprises.

The post 9-11 world is one in which there is a renewed focus on racialization, on profiling, on securitization, and various forms of discrimination. Legal cases which are both intellectually challenging and sensationalized, like those of niqabi women seeking to vote or having to testify, are magnified though mainstream and social media to create an illusion of some new or massive failure of Canadian integration. Not true. Again, visits to our colleges and universities bear this out.

But the point made here is that this generally positive Canadian set of outcomes, with its stream of ups and downs — more ups than downs — owes itself at root to lucky accidents. It is not a result of any innate goodness of Canadian hearts, or Canadian elites and leaders, or altruistic generosity of policy. Indeed, Canadian immigration policy has

tended to favour the best and the brightest — skilled or employable migrants — among the pool of general immigrants, and even among refugees.

Nor is it due to the mantra and policies associated with multiculturalism. While multiculturalism has been dominant in Canadian discourse for about 40 years, the lucky geographic, demographic and historic foundations of the relatively positive Canadian immigrant and minority experience antedate that by generations.

As to the future? Let us hope that Canada's luck will not run out. As of this writing, racist fallout from the Québec City shooting, and issues emerging in the Conservative leadership race, may well pose a challenge...

REFERENCES

KYMLICKA, WILL, 2005. "The uncertain Futures of Multiculturalism," *Canadian Diversity* 4: 1, PP. 82-85.