RACE, RACIALIZATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

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ABSTRACT

As Canada embraces multiculturalism as a Canadian value, the salience of issues of race and racialization becomes more important as a public policy concern because of the challenge it represents to building a truly multicultural society. One way to disentangle the various, political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of the racialization processes is using the social exclusion approach, to address how marginalization and differential outcomes are reproduced and to develop comprehensive approaches to effectively address the resulting condition of social exclusion.

Approaches to Racism and Racialization

The last decade has seen the fastest growth in the size of the racialized group in Canada's history. Much of that growth has been achieved through immigration, with over 75% of new immigrants being members of racialized groups. While this development is to be celebrated as an affirmation of Canada's multicultural reality, the growth of the racialized population puts the issue of racism front and centre on the public policy agenda. The experience of racialization and the social, economic, cultural and political marginalization that it structures are a historical reality that predates these new comers to Canada, and that has defined the relationship between the aboriginal community and the white settlers society from the beginning of the Canadian nation project.

An effective way to tackle racism and racialization is to use a structural approach that locates it in a historical context as a persistent internal threat to Canadian citizenship. The social exclusion approach broadly describes both the structures and the dynamic processes of inequality among groups in society which, over time, structure access to critical resources that determine the quality of membership in society and ultimately produce and reproduce a complex of unequal outcomes. In a society committed to equal citizenship as the fulfillment of the promise of multicultural Canada, social exclusion foretells social tensions that need be understood and addressed to avert the dire consequences of social instability as seen in Paris, France, in the fall of 2005, as well as to maximize the potential benefits of immigration and diversity.

New and Recurring Forms of Racialization

Racism is now manifesting itself in a variety of ways in Canadian society. Among others, it takes on socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions. A growing body of literature analyzing the socio-economic performance and the political status of racialized groups has concluded that they are subject to structural disadvantages that confine them disproportionately to the bottom of Canada's vertical mosaic. Processes of social exclusion and the growing numerical significance of racialized groups have reinforced the structural tendencies towards maintaining and reproducing existing racial hierarchies. Many racialized new immigrants are incorporated into the Canadian mosaic with disregard to the skills and educational attainment they bring with them to this country. The emergence of race as a key constitutive feature of socio-stratification in Canada has prompted consideration of the existence of a *colour coded mosaic*.

Secondly, the term 'immigrant' has come to signify non-whites, especially Africans, Caribbeans, East Asians, Middle Easterners, South Asians and Latin Americans, regardless of whether they are immigrants or born in the particular 'host' country. Immigrant status has become racialized and the inferior status historically imposed on racialized peoples is now extended to immigrants and vice versa, so much so that the quality of their human capital is called into question, with dire consequences especially for those with international qualifications. This category slippage represents a particular form of racialization specific to this period of globalization, which has seen a reversal of traditional global population movements from North to South. This phenomenon is considered dangerous by dominant populations in the global North, especially when applied to the context of a civilizational war between the West and Islam. Some scholars have used the term *neo-racism* to explain the anti-immigrant discourses and policy actions emerging in response to the new 'Northbound' migrations. It represents a particular construction of race at the historical moment of 21st Century globalization and utilizes the social construction of racial categories to demand limits on the numbers of certain racial groups allowed

into the country and also on racial mixing. Its dominant theme is the 'insurmountability' of cultural differences and the incompatibility of traditions and lifestyles between the 'races'. Ironically, it uses the very defense of difference to justify its position.[1] These developments represent a particular challenge to the concept and practice of multiculturalism because of their tendency to reclaim the earlier processes of exclusion in defining citizenship.

Third, a number of dominant racist discourses dominate the media portrayal of racialized communities. These dominant discourses about racialized people represent a racist ideology presented in narratives, arguments and explanations that deny the existence of pervasiveness of racism while characterizing racialized people as the other, whose culture and immigrant status is to be feared and loathed. Islamophobia, understood as the expression of hostility towards those of the Muslim faith and people from what is referred to as the Islamic world, has intensified in the late 20th Century and early 21st Century, particularly in the post September 11 period. Islam is portrayed as fundamentally different and not holding values in common with other faiths, cultures, or affected by them or influenced by them. Islam is considered non-Western and inferior to the West. It is presented as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist. For many commentators, Islam is 'violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a 'clash of civilizations'.

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Racialization and its Material Implications – Its Costs to Individuals and Society

The material implications of social exclusion have intensified in economic, political and social terms, as differential access to society's resources translates into differential health care status, higher levels of exposure to poverty, and disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system, to name but a few of the manifestations of these processes of racialization. A combination of the exodus of newcomers and unequal articulations has created concentrations of low income communities of racialized people in Canada's urban centres – capturing two emerging phenomenon – the racialization of poverty and the racialization of neighborhoods.[2]

Labour market attachment is critical to the livelihood and identity formation of individuals and groups, but also their ability to claim a sense of belonging and full citizenship. This is especially true of historically socially excluded groups such as racialized groups. Economic restructuring that has imposed precarious forms of work on the economy which, along with employment discrimination and the barriers to access to professions and trades, have intensified the vulnerability of racialized groups and recent immigrants in the Canadian labour market. The experience is defined by a double-digit racialized income gap, which is chronically higher than average levels of unemployment and segmented labour market participation. This represents an inefficient way to allocate scarce human resources and imposes an economic cost both to racialized groups and the Canadian economy as a whole.

Racialization, Political Participation and Progress Making

Racialized peoples are grossly under-represented at every level of government, whether as elected representatives, in public policy-making positions, or on agencies' boards and commissions and judicial appointments. Racialized groups are confronted with unequal access to opportunity and participation in the political and social institutions of Canadian society, largely due to historical structures of racial discrimination, poverty, institutional resistance and low levels of community development. Despite the existence of the federal *Employment Equity Act* for the last 20 years, the federal government, which should be a leader in addressing racial discrimination in employment, has been slow in realizing its goals of a representative workforce. Federal public service participation is 8.1% compared to 10.4% availability (a measure that already provides a lower reading of the available qualified racialized pool because it disregards permanent residents). According to the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency, in 2004-2005, only 5.1% of federal public service executives were racialized. This differential access to opportunities for racialized group members robs the economy of a valuable resource in a competitive global environment and undermines the competitiveness of Canadian business at home and abroad. For those whose talents and skills are improperly deployed, their skills degrade with time, along with their self-esteem. Many of these victims of discrimination descend into lives of poverty along with increases in health risks and adverse impacts on their social wellbeing, resulting in increases in national and provincial budgetary costs for dealing with such social conditions as poverty.

What this suggests is that Canadian society is making slow progress on addressing issues of racalization and their implications for social exclusion among racialized groups. Indeed in some cases, we may even be losing ground as poverty among racialized groups and recent immigrants has grown so much so that, in some urban centres, racialized groups are three times as likely to be poor than other Canadians. The youth among them are three times as likely to be unemployed, many experiencing recurring bouts of unemployment and poverty that are becoming chronic.

Multiculturalism and Racialization

Multiculturalism defines Canada's approach to ethnic and racial diversity as embedded in a broad policy and legislative framework, represented by the official multicultural policy. It has popularized the concept of multiculturalism as a Canadian value and a key defining character of the society. Multiculturalism has brought us new ways

of thinking about the challenges that face us as a society of diverse peoples. But while the multicultural public policy acknowledged the demands of a more inclusive society and the reality of cultural difference, it did not fully break the mono-cultural nature of the society. The contradictions and the limits inherent in the multiculturalism policy simply overwhelmed it. Even as officialdom seemed to be acknowledging racial difference by designating racialized groups as 'visible minorities', the hyper visibility implied masked not just the experience of racism, but the fact that the mosaic was becoming more racialized. The victims were more marginalized and 'race' was losing its critical edge in popular discourse. Multiculturalism, presented as a neutral concept in a manner that leveled all ethnic experiences and emphasized cultural celebration as a positive expression of difference, obscured the key markers of oppression, exploitation and exclusion. The symbolic celebration of cultural difference tended to displace the claims and contestations of exclusion by racialized populations and reinforced historical racial hierarchies. In effect, multiculturalism reinforced social closure in certain areas of Canadian life by 'rearranging questions of social justice'. Colin Mooers has appropriately remarked that, even as racialized group members were being accorded the moniker of visible minorities, their experiences became 'hidden in plain sight'.

Finally, to address the contradictions of official multiculturalism and the socio-economic condition outlined above, we need to begin by acknowledging the existence of a process of racialization and its production of social exclusion in Canadian society. Drawing on an anti-racism analysis of our institutions and practices, we need an action-focused and outcome oriented approach to the problems of racialization, with measurable goals, using key specific indicators. We need multi-sector, state-society partnerships (business, labour, faith communities, civil society) to take a comprehensive approach to the complex problems identified, complete with short, medium and long term dimensions, so as to balance urgent need for relief with sustainability. In some areas, we need a community-based focus on those who are socially excluded along with the comprehensive efforts that aim to build capacity for the socially excluded. Finally, to ensure sustainability and structural change, we need to eliminate deep-rooted barriers to economic and political empowerment through facilitating processes of power sharing within socio-economic and political institutions.

Notes

[1] Balibar, E. (1991). Is there a Neo-Racism? In E. Balibar & I. Wallerstein (eds.), *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*. London: Verso.

[2] Halli, S. and A. Kazemipur. (2000). *The new poverty in Canada: Ethnic groups and ghetto neighbourhoods*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing Inc.