MELTING MOSAIC:

Changing Realities in Cultural Diversity in Canada and the United States

BY Jack Jedwab

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE SEPTEMBER 11TH TRAGEDY IN NEW YORK CITY, CANADIANS HAVE BEEN REEXAMINING THEIR TIES WITH THE UNITED STATES. SOME HAVE GONE AS FAR AS TO QUESTION THE NEED FOR CONTINUED BORDERS BETWEEN OUR TWO COUNTRIES. IN SEVERAL AREAS, THERE IS PRESENTLY A DESIRE FOR GREATER COOPERATION WITH OUR NEIGHBOURS TO THE SOUTH. WHILE THERE ARE NO DOUBT IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES IN THE POPULATION BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES, A VAST MAJORITY OF CANADIANS ACKNOWLEDGE A HIGH DEGREE OF SHARED VALUES WITH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. THINGS THAT WE BELIEVE DISTINGUISH OUR COUNTRY FROM THE UNITED STATES MAY INDEED BE GROWING LESS OBVIOUS. WHILE BOTH COUNTRIES DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS NATIONS OF IMMIGRANTS, ONE TRADITIONAL DICHOTOMY HAS CANADA REFER TO ITSELF AS A MOSAIC THAT FAVORS INTEGRATION IN ITS APPROACH TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY WHILE IT REGARDS THE UNITED STATES AS A MELTING POT THAT ENCOURAGES IMMIGRANT ASSIMILATION. BUT THERE MAY BE A CONVERGENCE IN ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES IN THE TWO COUNTRIES WITH REGARD TO INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION. IN EFFECT THE MOSAIC IDEA IS BECOMING MORE APPEALING TO A GREATER NUMBER OF AMERICANS, WHILE THE NEED FOR A BIT MORE CULTURAL MELTDOWN SEEMS TO ATTRACT AN IMPORTANT NUMBER OF CANADIANS.

Underlying the idea of Canada as a mosaic and the United States as a melting pot are important differences in the demographic evolution of the two countries as well as continued divergence in the principal source countries of immigration. From a demographic standpoint, Canada's population is very much dominated by persons of European and Asian descent, the United States has a much greater share of persons of African and Latin American descent. Whereas ethnicity and language were the principal markers of identity in Canada (hence the policies on linguistic duality and multiculturalism), in the United States, racial identities and interracial conflict more profoundly defined that country's national identity.

Recent immigration in the two countries points to an ever-growing presence of persons of Asian descent in Canada and the heightening of the Latin American presence in the United States.

Of the approximately 30 million immigrants in the United States more than half were born in Latin America and notably in Mexico. Over one quarter were born in Asia, some one out six in Europe, 2.8% in Africa and 2.6% in Canada. By contrast in Canada, nearly one half of all immigrants were born in Europe, over one quarter were born in Asia and one out of ten in Latin America. Persons born in Africa represent just below 5% of all immigrants in Canada and those born in the United States are just over 5%.

These dominant immigration trends will imply a significantly enhanced presence of persons of Hispanic origin in the United States whereas in Canada the greater increases will be in the share of persons of Asian descent. It is worth noting that Mexican immigration is much weaker economically on average than are Asian migrants. As such the receiving countries are confronted with a different set of challenges in regards to immigrant integration.

TOP TEN COUNTRIES OF BIRTH OF IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA - 1998

U.S. Immigration		Canadian Immigration	
Top Ten Countries of birth		*Top Ten Countries of birth*	
All countries	660,447	All countries	174,100
Mexico	131,575	China	19,749
China	36,884	India	15,327
India	36,482	Philippines	8,172
Philippines	34,466	Hong Kong	8,083
Dominican Republic	20,387	Pakistan	8,081
Vietnam	17,649	Taiwan	7,164
Cuba	17,375	Iran	6,772
Jamaica	15,146	Korea	4,410
Ukraine	11,529	United States	4,764
Russia	7,448	Russia	4,299

Sources: Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Services of the United States, 1998 and Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1998

ATTITUDES

From an attitudinal standpoint, recent public opinion surveys point to few differences in the views amongst Canadians and Americans around such issues as the cultural make-up of the country and the extent to which promoting diversity is favored over assimilation. When in May 2000 pollster Angus Reid asked whether the cultural make-up of your country was a positive characteristic, some 84% of Americans agreed (46% strongly and 38% moderately), while 83% of Canadians agreed (42% strongly and 41% moderately).

As to the question of assimilation, some 52% of Americans believed that it was more important to encourage minority groups to change to be more like most Americans than to accept minority groups and their customs/languages, something that 43% of American respondents felt should be prioritized (5% did not know). For their part, some 50% favored encouraging minority groups to be more like Canadians while 46% preferred acceptance of minority groups customs/languages (4% did not know).

In both countries age was an important factor in attitudes towards diversity and assimilation. About one-third of those between the ages of 18 and 34 in Canada and the United States were less inclined to support the assimilationist approach whereas in the two countries approximately two thirds of respondents over the age of 55 were favorable to greater assimilation.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Another area where the evolving demographic trends are likely to have an impact is on the linguistic realities. Canada sees itself as a country that is more supportive of bilingualism and the United States more averse to this phenomenon. The increasing influx of Latin Americans in the United States has resulted in a tremendous rise in the number of Spanish speakers south of our border. In the year 1990 some 7.5% or over 17 million Americans reported that they spoke Spanish in their homes. In ten years the figure has risen to over 26.7 million, representing over one-tenth of the American population. By the 2010 census of the United States the number of Spanish home speakers in America may well exceed the entire population of Canada! But if the United States is concerned with generalized acquisition of the English language, there appears to be a growing openness to bilingualism. This is illustrated in public campaigns endorsing second language learning such as the popular PBS ad affirming that 'learning a language opens the mind.'

MAKING SENSE OF OUR CENSUS

Over the past thirty years Canada's multicultural reality has endured a number of tests. Perhaps the most important challenge over the past few years involved the continued need to collect information on ethnic identification in a debate over whether Statistics Canada should retain the census question on ethnic origins. In the late 1980's a group of Torontonians spearheaded a campaign calling for the population to reply 'Canadian' when the 1991 census asked the population about ethnic origins. They were concerned that the population focused too much on that which makes us different and naively believed that if we would all just call ourselves 'Canadian' divisions would magically be eliminated. In 1991 some 3% of the population responded to their call. But as 'Canadian' become a more prominent feature in the examples for replying to the ethnicity question, a greater number of census respondents gave that answer. It is estimated that when the results are out for 2001, over 30% of respondents will respond Canadian to the census question on ethnic origin. Ironically, in the 1990 census of the United States, some 5% responded 'American' to the question on ancestry and ethnic origin and in the 2000 census the figure rose to 7.5%. If one were to use this debate as an example, it would be hard to distinguish the melting pot from the mosaic.

If the issue of ethnicity has been the object of much debate in the Canadian census, it is the questions on race and Hispanic origin in the United States' census that have elicited the most controversy. In her book, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*, Melissa Nobles argues that the results of census questions on race have in the past resulted in discriminatory behavior and may further incite such actions.

Visible minority status is destined to become an increasingly important dimension of Canadian identity as nearly three out of four immigrants to the country define themselves as such. For the year 2016 it is estimated that the ethnic Chinese population will be largest visible minority group in Canada with close to two million persons, followed by Blacks and South Asians who will each constitute around 1.2 million persons. In the case of Latin Americans it is projected that they will exceed 400,000 in Canada in that year. If one were to combine the Asian and Pacific Islander population of Canada, their approximate total for the year 2016 will be nearly five million, or just under fifteen percent of the estimated Canadian population. Whereas in 1991 nearly one out ten Canadians identified with a visible minority, in the year 2016 it is estimated that some one out of five persons will identify themselves in that manner. This will have significant ramifications for multiculturalism policy as the avoidance of interracial conflict becomes the central priority.

Canada's multicultural policy has evolved considerably since it was first introduced some thirty years ago. Whereas one of its initial principal objectives was support for the ethnocultural heritage of Canadians, today the policy is primarily focused on combating racism and promoting social justice. Such goals and values are by no means incompatible with those held by most Americans where the issue of diversity is concerned. Nor is it clear that Canada invests much more in these areas than its neighbor to the South. Increasingly one hears that Canada is a country where prevailing conditions favor the maintenance of one's heritage and that there is less of a need to invest in ethnocultural promotion. There remain differences in the origins of the demographically dominant ethno-racial groups in the two countries and the discourse of Canadian and American policy-makers. What were however real divergences between Canada and the United States in their respective approach to cultural diversity in the 1970's and the 1980's have given way to attitudes and practices by state and society that are increasingly similar.

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