CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: DIASPORA NATIONS

ABSTRACT

Both Canada and the United States have been built by successive waves of immigration. In this essay, the author examines the construction of diaspora communities and how these communities integrate or reject contact with mainstream culture. Milton Esman argues that as earlier arrivals are gradually integrated into the mainstream, their community atrophies. However, future diasporas composed of visible minorities such as the Sikhs in Toronto or the Hispanics in Los Angeles may establish a new set of relationships with the mainstream.

Diasporas are the consequence of transnational migration.[1] The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented levels of transnational migration, facilitated by cheap and reliable transportation and communication technologies. Some migrants are escaping political or religious persecution, but most are motivated by the promise of improved economic opportunity for themselves and their children. From their outset, Canada and the United States have served as refuges for the oppressed and magnets for those seeking to improve their economic prospects. Both countries have been built by successive waves of immigrants and the process continues unabated. During the 1990s, the U.S. admitted a record number 9.1 million immigrants, plus an estimated 7 million, the majority from Mexico, who entered the country illegally.[2] Canada's average annual intake at the turn of the century was a record 238,000.

In the year 2000, 5.8 million Canadians were foreign born, comprising 18.4 percent of the population. 38 percent of the residents of Toronto and 30 percent in Vancouver were born outside Canada (for all Ontario and British Columbia the figure is 26 percent).[3] The proportion of recent immigrants from non-European countries, thus "visible" minorities in both countries, hovers at 80 percent.

Beginning with the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620, some migrants have moved as intact communities, but most have uprooted themselves and moved as individuals or families. Upon arriving in a strange country, they sense the indifference and all too often the hostility of indigenes or earlier arrivals toward persons who speak, dress and eat differently and may become economic competitors. Feeling the need for protection, mutual assistance, fellowship, and community, they cluster together in Little Italies, Chinatowns, Polish Hills, Little Saigons, and New Havanas. For most new arrivals, these diaspora communities already exist; they are taken in and helped to start their new lives. In a few cases, such as Vietnamese fleeing the victorious Viet Minh regime, arriving migrants must build their community institutions anew.

Diaspora communities provide essential services to their members. They help their members find jobs and housing, provide shops and restaurants where familiar and distinctive food is available. They provide religious services, educational opportunities including English language classes, publications in the native language, insurance programs and burial societies, sports teams, savings and loan societies. However, earlier arrivals are not above exploiting the labour, lodging, and financial needs of later arriving compatriots. Some diasporas develop specialized economic niches that provide employment and outlets for entrepreneurial energies, such as Korean produce vendors on the U.S. east coast, Italians in construction, and Jewish manufacturers and wholesalers in the fashion industry. Initially, the focus of diaspora energies is internal, helping to secure a foothold for their members, while promoting the survival of their culture and collective identity in a new country. Some members spend a lifetime in the sheltering cocoon of their own community, maintaining little or no contact with mainstream culture or economic activity.

Some diaspora communities insist on maintaining their distinctive identity and way of life, rejecting integration into the national mainstream. Amish in Pennsylvania and New York, Hutterites in Manitoba, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn cling to their traditional dress and customs and ask mainly to be left alone. Most diasporas, however, find it expedient to come to terms with the dominant mainstream. Their children watch the mass media, attend public schools, and become fluent in the mainstream language. They develop career aspirations that cannot be satisfied within the diaspora enclave. While retaining links to their community and its institutions, they begin to participate

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in the economic and cultural opportunities available in mainstream society. The second generation gradually assumes leadership in diaspora institutions, shifting the focus of its activities gradually from inward looking to outward directed goals. The latter include demands for symbolic recognition and respect for their community, a fair share of government services, political jobs, and business contracts, and government policies that take account of their needs and preferences. Examples include bilingual education in Texas, the regulation of kosher slaughter in New York, and the vigorous demands of the large and well-organized German and Irish diasporas — unsuccessfully as it turned out — that the U.S. decline to enter World Wars I and II on the side of the British. The third generation, no longer competent in the ancestral language, becomes fully involved in the mainstream economy, moves out of diaspora neighborhoods, and raises their families in mainstream communities.

As diaspora communities become more secure and more assertive, they also become more pluralistic. Some elements of pluralism are present from the outset, for example, differences among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, and Mexicans in what have been aggregated as the "Hispanic" diaspora in the United States. Their economic interests may diverge and so may their attitudes toward cultural integration with the mainstream. This fragmentation may include their orientation to foreign affairs and the overseas interests of their communities. Pluralism generates factions which then compete for control of their diaspora institutions and the right to represent their community to outsiders. Minorities may break away and establish competing institutions. Irish in the U.S. and Canada have been split between those who support the IRA and its violent tactics, and those who favor a negotiated accommodation with Protestants in Northern Ireland. The Jewish diaspora in North America has lobbied actively for U.S. support of Israel, but is divided into several factions, some supporting the militant religious settlers in the West Bank, others supporting accommodation with Palestinians, others favoring the pragmatic expansionist policies of the current Sharon government.

The rate at which a diaspora integrates into the national cultural, economic, and political mainstream depends on the inclinations of its members, juxtaposed against the receptivity of mainstream society, the latter directly influenced by government policy. The possibilities are reflected in the following matrix:

Figure 1 – Diasporas and the Mainstream

Attitudes of Host Society	Disapora Preferences	
	Receptive	Resistant
Receptive	U.S. and Canada post 1960s.*	Amish
Resistant	U.S. and Canada toward Asians prior to 1960s.*	Nation of Islam (Black Separatists)

* From the mid 1920s, immigration law and practice in both countries excluded Asians and discriminated against Europeans from southern and eastern Europe. In the 1960s, preferences and discrimination based on national origins were eliminated in both countries.

There are two stages of integration: cultural and social. As individuals become educated and fluent in the mainstream language, they adopt its way of life, including occupational choices, leisure time activities, styles, and food tastes that are inspired by mainstream models. They become acculturated to the mainstream and the mainstream, in turn, accepts elements of their culture in food, speech, and musical tastes. Pizza, tacos and bagels have been incorporated into North America's mainstream culinary culture. Second and especially third generation individuals, the latter no longer proficient in the ancestral language, move away from diaspora centers, while maintaining nominal and nostalgic affiliation with its institutions, often for the sake of their parents. But their interests and way of life conform increasingly to mainstream patterns. Social integration occurs as members of successive generations of the diaspora participate in mainstream social institutions — churches, clubs, schools — and marry outsiders, abandoning their remaining linkages and those of their children with their ethnic community.

As this process occurs, the diaspora shrinks in numbers, the average age of its participants rises, its institutions can no longer be sustained, and it gradually withers. This process can be extended in time for ethnic communities that also comprise a distinctive religious faith, such as Greeks, Jews, Armenians, and Hindus. But for most ethnic diasporas in the U.S. and Canada — Italians, Poles, Irish, Germans, Japanese, Swedes — the generational passage from cultural to social integration is relentless, diaspora communities eroding at their margins and finally losing their constituents, unless they are reinforced by fresh arrivals such as Dominicans in New York and Chinese in British Columbia. More than 50 percent of the marriages of third generation American Japanese and Jews are to partners outside their ethnic community.

The diaspora phenomenon in countries such as the U.S. and Canada is part of the dynamic demography of these immigrant friendly polities. The U.S. is believed to favor the assimilationist-melting pot approach, encouraging immigrants to acculturate rapidly, become Americanized, and join the mainstream. In practice, however, diaspora communities are free to function, to build and maintain their institutions and to serve their members, without interference or support by government. They lobby government at all levels, local, state, and federal, on behalf of their collective interests, as defined by their leadership. The Armenian diaspora, for example, demands that the U.S. government refuse to sell arms to its Turkish ally until Turkey acknowledges and apologizes for the genocide of Armenians during and after the First World War. In practice, ethnic diasporas in the United States behave and are treated as interest groups, exchanging benefits and influence for financial contributions and votes in the group interest pattern of American democracy.

Canadians are proud of their ethnic "mosaic" and of their multicultural policy, in presumed contrast to the melting pot strategy of their southern neighbor. In addition to subsidizing the educational and cultural institutions of official language minorities — Anglophones in Quebec, Francophones elsewhere — the Government of Canada provides funding to support the literary, educational, linguistic, mass media, and artistic activities of diaspora communities, helping them maintain and invigorate

their inherited cultures. Yet, despite these multicultural efforts, members of these diaspora communities appear to be integrating to the cultural and social mainstream at about the same rate as counterparts across the border. A similar North American dynamic describes and explains the evolution of diaspora communities in both countries. Both belong in the upper left quadrant of Figure 1.

Transnational activities of diasporas may occur without reference to their host government. Tamils in Canada and the United States have provided substantial financial aid to the Sri Lankan Tamil's armed rebellion in pursuit of an independent Tamil Eelam. They have, however, insisted that the "Tigers" put a stop to the practice of recruiting children as cannon fodder. Initiatives frequently come from the country of origin. On a recent official visit to the United States, the Prime Minister of Vietnam announced that "it is our government's consistent policy to consider the community living abroad as an important and integral part of our nation and our resources".[4] Yet, the million strong Vietnamese diaspora in the United States remains bitterly opposed to the current Communist Party government of their native country and defiantly flies the flag of the defunct South Vietnamese regime. Foreign governments tend to regard their North American diasporas as "resources" because of their potential to influence Canadian and U.S. foreign policy, and because of the funds they remit to families in the old country.

There are two important exceptions to the American pattern of gradual acculturation and eventual incorporation into the national mainstream. The first is the oldest diaspora, African-Americans, who were transported to the Americas in chains. After emancipation and the success of the civil rights movement a century later, and long after their acculturation to the English language and Christian religion, persistent racism has delayed their integration into the social mainstream. The integrationist majority of African-Americans fits into the lower left quadrant of Figure 1, a minority separatist faction into the lower right.

The current wave of unimpeded Hispanic immigration into the U.S. from the Caribbean basin and especially from Mexico may constitute a second exception. Between Mexicans, Salvadorians, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans there are historical and social differences, but what they have in common is the Spanish language which, in the U.S. context, has bundled them into a common "Hispanic" identity. By virtue of sheer numbers, exceeding 40 million in 2005, (projected to grow to 72 million, 20 percent of the US total by 2030), mostly young and with a high birth rate, this unskilled and under-educated labor migration constitutes a fresh reality in many areas of the United States, especially in the southwest bordering Mexico and in Florida. 75 percent of the third generation speak mainly English and a third marry outside their ethnic community, thereby integrating into the social mainstream. Several have achieved high positions in corporate America, one is the U.S. Attorney General, two now serve in the U.S. Senate, and many hold high offices in state and local government. Yet, the dropout rate of young Hispanics from high school approaches 50 percent and many of the graduates are unprepared for college.[5] Lacking the skills needed for upward mobility in the labor force, they are condemned to unskilled, low wage employment.

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Because of their numbers, their limited education, the proximity of their homelands, and the continuing arrival of fresh recruits, many remain tied to their diaspora communities. The insatiable demand of employers for docile, low cost labor accounts for government toleration of the unlimited supply of illegal immigrants, overwhelming the complaints of those who insist on the regulation of immigration and the policy of English only. To accommodate this reality, both government and private firms have found it expedient to provide services and communicate with members of the diaspora in the Spanish language. With no diminution in the rate of Hispanic immigration, several regions of the United States are becoming de facto bi-national, bi-cultural, and bi-lingual areas. The Mexican government provides a network of services to its diaspora in the United States, facilitates the remittance of funds, and encourages its members to vote in Mexico's elections. This effective process of bi-nationalization is occurring without legal recognition and with minimal policy response by the government in Washington. It remains to be seen whether the massive and expanding Hispanic diaspora will gradually integrate into the American mainstream, as many of its members already have, or whether certain regions of the U.S. will evolve into bi-national societies that will eventually be recognized as such in U.S. law and public policy.

Reverting to our opening theme: immigration creates diasporas. As long as the U.S. and Canada continue to welcome large annual cohorts of new arrivals, existing diaspora communities will be refreshed and new ones will be built. These diaspora communities will help to meet the economic and cultural needs of new arrivals and serve as interest groups for their ethnic constituents. Many of their members, whose parents participated in and benefited from the institutions of their diaspora, will choose to acculturate and be drawn into the national mainstream. But some, perhaps a majority,

of permanent residents in expanding Hispanic communities, may find that their needs are fulfilled within the institutions of their diaspora. Unequipped to integrate culturally or socially into the American mainstream, they are likely to remain attached to their diaspora communities and to their roots in nearby homelands.

Every diaspora creates its distinctive history that is interpreted, often celebrated, sometimes demeaned in a robust literature. Yet, there has been a common pattern. In the life cycle of North American diasporas, as immigration fails to replenish their communities while the progeny of earlier arrivals gradually integrate into the mainstream, the community atrophies. Its shrinking institutions are maintained by a corporal's guard, clinging to their ethnic identity largely for nostalgic reasons. This has been the fate of European diasporas in North America. In the future, the more active and influential diasporas will be composed of "visible" minorities — Sikhs in Toronto, Hispanics in Los Angeles — who provide the bulk of immigration. Will they conform to the European pattern, or will they establish new sets of relationships with the mainstream?

Notes

[1] For a more extended treatment of diaspora politics, see Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Politics.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1994. 176-215.

[2] "Undocumented" persons in the US currently estimated at 10.4 million. Data from the Pew Hispanic Center reported in the *New York Times,* July 20, 2005, page C4.

[3] Data from the US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2002.* Washington: Government Printing Office. 2003. page 10; and US Immigration and Naturalization Service, *World Migration Report* 2005, from the internet. Also, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census report on immigration.

[4] Associated Press dispatch printed in the *Ithaca Journal,* Monday June 20, 2005. page 2

[5] 53.2 percent of Hispanics who enroll in high schools manage to graduate (the US average is 68 percent, the Asian figure is 76.8). Source: Gary Orfield, ed, *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis.* Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Press. 2004. 23-4. 10 percent of Hispanics in the US have earned university degrees.