

Ethnic identity and multiculturalism

DEFINING THE TERM “ETHNIC”— NO EASY TASK

The concept of ethnic identity is a nebulous one in the era of multiculturalism. In the linguistic shorthand of popular parlance, people are just as likely to refer to themselves as Irish, Ukrainian, Chinese, or Tamil, as they are to call themselves Canadians, whether hyphenated or not. The Canadian government seemingly reinforced such attitudes when its multiculturalism policy was first announced. In his statement to the House of Commons on October 8, 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau expressed government support for the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism when it contended that “adherence to one’s ethnic group is influenced not so much by one’s origin or mother tongue as by one’s sense of belonging to the group, and by . . . the group’s ‘collective will to exist.’”

Meanwhile, North American scholars had been busy deconstructing the notion of ethnic identity, giving academic weight to these changing perceptions: hard “objective” markers such as language, religion, common customs, and history were made to accommodate softer “subjective” factors such as feelings of belonging and the willingness to interact with the group. In other words, to be Italian, one need not speak the language, practise the religion, or know the country’s customs and history. One simply has to feel Italian and have some contact with the broader “community.”

Behind such shifts, it is important to stress, lay a significant modification in what was being described. When the term *ethnie* gained currency at the end of the 19th century, it was meant to designate large groups bound together by common cultural attributes irrespective of political boundaries. The expression “ethnic German,” for example, encompassed not only subjects of the German Empire, but German-speaking communities scattered throughout Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Hence, the

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need was felt to establish clearly defined markers to distinguish one large group from another.

ETHNICS AND IMMIGRANTS

However, increasingly after the Second World War, US social scientists (and by extension, Canadian ones) used the term “ethnic” to refer to immigrant groups, that is, immigrants from a particular country of origin together with their progeny. But these scholars faced a conundrum: if grandchildren no longer spoke the language and ignored the ancestral traditions of their immigrant forefathers, could they still be considered part of the “ethnic group”? The problem was resolved by bringing “subjective” factors into play. What happened in the process was that a fragment (the immigrant group) had been substituted for the whole (the *ethnie*). This shift clearly underlines the urgent need to find distinct terms to designate two quite separate realities. However, the problem is even more complex than that.

Can one, in fact, refer to a common identity over the span of generations after immigration? As we know, cultures

evolve over time and, with them, identities: the Canadians of today share a different identity than did their compatriots at the beginning of the 20th century. Similarly, time has altered the culture and identity of the newcomer’s country of origin. This is so much the case that immigrants, although expecting the familiar when they return to the land of their birth after a prolonged absence, often feel discomfort before the changes that have taken place. But these truisms mask another transformation, one that happens to specific immigrant cohorts as they reproduce themselves.

THE IMMIGRANT: CHANGE, ADAPTATION, AND HYBRIDITY

In general, first-generation newcomers have a primary and immediate identity that is tied to their land of origin. At the same time, they interact with and are influenced by the culture of their country of adoption. Reflecting this adaptation are shifts in speech and eating patterns. In the first instance, immigrants incorporate into their everyday use of their original language expressions in English or French thought to be indispensable or compelling. In the second case, they integrate to a greater or lesser extent North American ingredients and fare into their foodways. These are just the most visible signs of changing habits and attitudes in response to the country of adoption that are subtle, hard to track, and therefore difficult to study. The first generation thus has an identity that, while rooted in the culture of origin, is nevertheless hybrid. The second generation too possesses a hybrid identity, one whose primary reference, however, is the receiving culture, although mediated by that of the country of origin.

In general, the connection with the ancestral culture is not as immediate in this generation. Nor is it sustained so much by daily interaction, which is the foundation stone of culture. By the third generation, this contact becomes even more remote. Grandchildren are very

often unable to name the town of origin of their immigrant forebears, and although they may understand words and expressions of the ancestral language, they are often incapable of speaking it with any fluency. If we factor exogamy into the equation, the question of ethnic identity becomes yet more complex for this and subsequent generations. Clearly, the ethnic identity of immigrants is very different indeed from that of their children and grandchildren.

There are of course exceptions to this model. Differing patterns of socialization can result in situations where members of the third generation retain large components of their ancestral culture. For example, frequent travel to the country of origin, schooling in that language and culture, exclusivist social ties including the selection of marriage partner, may perpetuate immigrant culture. However, as studies have shown, such phenomena concern only a small minority in the third generation. We are thus again confronted with individual choice, rather than group cohesion. Unless it is replenished by subsequent waves of immigration from the country of origin, the group is destined to die out.

THE SINGULAR IMPORTANCE OF THE "DIASPORA" TO IDENTITY

Recently, the argument has been made that, with the stunning advances in information technology, it is now possible for "diasporas" to live in close communion with their land of birth. In addition, political devices such as dual citizenship, the overseas vote, and the diaspora's right even to be represented in the sending country's legislative bodies, further strengthen such bonds. The fact remains, however, that most people cannot inhabit two realities at once. Jobs, families, and leisure activities limit one's ability to participate fully in two cultures, when one is at a physical remove. Ultimately, this issue too is about the individual, not the group.

What do these abstract musings have to do with public policy? Multiculturalism has promoted the image of Canada as a mosaic as opposed to the US melting

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pot. This representation implies that defined cultures, like the pieces of a mosaic, coexist side by side. I have argued instead that immigrant cultures are not fixed and discreet entities. Rather they tend to leach into the broader receiving culture, helping to transform it. In this context, is it appropriate to speak of cultural preservation, as ethnic activists and cultural bureaucrats have done? How can one preserve something that is always changing and adapting? As well, since the Second World War, the Canadian government has encouraged the formation of pan-Canadian ethnic umbrella organizations, which supposedly speak for the ethnic group.

The formation of these organizations creates the illusion that, to choose a random example, the Canadian Polish Congress represents the more than 800,000 Canadians who claimed Polish descent in the 2001 census. This figure encompasses six generations. At one end of the spectrum are the descendents of the first wave of immigrants who arrived around the time of Confederation. At the other are the children of the Poles who settled here in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Two-thirds of the total, over 550,000 people, claimed mixed ancestry in 2001 and are therefore the products of intermarriage. In all, only one-third had knowledge of Polish and less than half of these, 120,000 people, spoke it in the home. These figures starkly confirm the generational disparities in the understanding of ethnicity examined above. Clearly, those who speak Polish on a daily basis have a different appreciation of their ethnicity than those who speak it occasionally, if at all, or those who are of mixed ancestry. In light of this, who does the Canadian Polish Congress speak for:

800,000, 260,000, or 100,000 people? Is the expression "ethnic group" anything more than a fiction, considering there are such widely divergent experiences of ethnicity?

A TRUER MIRROR

I am not suggesting here that multiculturalism is wrong. In fact, the policy did get some things right. The shame that immigrants once felt because of their non-British origins is now largely a thing of the past. Newcomers have also been integrated much more into the Canadian narrative, which is no longer simply the story about the "two founding peoples." Diversity has become a hallmark of Canadian identity, characterizing its political, social, cultural, and even financial institutions. Finally, multiculturalism policy not only encouraged Canadians to learn languages other than English or French, but to value bi- and multilingualism. These are hardly trivial achievements. But multiculturalism also gave rise to the tenacious image of the mosaic, the deep-seated belief in the perpetuation of ethnicity and the widespread view of umbrella organizations as spokespeople for ethnic groups.

Canadians have made diversity a defining trait of their identity. For this conviction to remain firm, it must be rooted in right thinking and an accurate perception of reality. We need to understand better the nature and basis of this diversity in order to have a clear idea of who we are and what makes us distinct. 

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