

Diversity on the mean streets of Toronto

I want to suggest that even as diversity is becoming more normalized as a way of defining Canadian society, it is in crisis. I will draw on the experiences of the African-Canadian community to underscore the socioeconomic and discursive basis for the crisis, and its implications for regulating diversity and difference in Canada as a liberal democratic society.

DIVERSITY: MULTICULTURALISM'S STRATEGIC COMPROMISE

Multiculturalism as an official discourse and practice regulating diversity emerged as a strategic compromise between political class and insurgent ethnocultural and racialized populations in the 1960s, based initially in Quebec. This strategic compromise paved the way for official multiculturalism to become the dominant Canadian practice for managing intercultural and interracial relations in the 1970s and 80s, so much so that it is often referred to today as “a Canadian value.” Multiculturalism would also come to serve as a powerful integration myth, maintaining both discursive and material dimensions which deployed socially constructed categories of ethnics and “visible minorities” in order to regulate the everyday lives of immigrant communities. Its emergence served the purpose of “order maintenance” in a situation where the existing Eurocentric conformity order was in crisis because its legitimating myths had lost their salience as social consent mechanisms among indigenous and settler populations. Suddenly, the insistence on “Britishness” or “Frenchness” as the passport for Canadian identity was no longer acceptable, and for many Canadian minorities, US assimilation policies seemed more humane than Canada’s obstinate clinging to Anglo-Canadian cultural values for its identity.

From the vantage point of 2009 then, there are three key reasons for the crisis of Canadian multiculturalism.

BY GRACE-EDWARD GALABUZI

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Racializing security

Firstly, the emergence of a national security and community safety regime informed by the notion of “Clash of Civilization,” means concern over security has increasingly taken a racial turn, manifest in the contemporary discourses and practices in response to the “war on terror” and anxieties around community safety. Such responses are also inspired by anxieties about the growing numerical significance of multiracial segments of the Canadian population. The “war on terror” has generated a range of illiberal practices, including widespread

racial profiling in domestic spheres and at border control points, which target such “misdeeds” as those comically referred to as Driving While Black (DWB), or Flying While Arab (FWA). The “war on terror” is invoked to justify security certificate detentions of Muslim men; the characterization of young Muslims as homegrown terrorists; widespread deportations of failed asylum claimants and non-documented residents; coercive community safety regimes that legitimate assaults on largely racialized low-income communities to extract supposed gang members (often leaving behind traumatized families and children); unchallenged surveillance in malls, public places, and public and private housing complexes; and zero tolerance policies in the schools. Much of this regime of illiberal practices is informed by moral panic about pathologized populations of racialized and religious minorities and is justified within a framework of liberal multiculturalism.

These racializing and criminalizing practices lead to strained interactions between racialized groups and the institutions of the Canadian state. Youths in some of the communities are subjected to routine police harassment and brutality, excessive use of techniques such as strip searches, and harsh criminal justice penalties allegedly needed for the defense of the broader Canadian community.

Public opinion and reasonable accommodation

Secondly, according to a September 2007 Institute for Research in Public Policy survey, Canadians overwhelmingly support the notion of “limits to reasonable accommodation.” In the survey, only 18 percent agreed with the position that it is reasonable to accommodate religious and cultural minorities while 53 percent said these minorities

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should adapt to Canadian culture. In Quebec, only 5.4 percent agreed with the proposition that it was reasonable to accommodate minorities while 76.9 percent said immigrants should fully adapt to Quebec culture. While two-thirds of Canadians have heard of the concept of reasonable accommodation, nine in ten Quebecers have heard of it. In Quebec, 80.7 percent were fully opposed or somewhat opposed to provision of prayer space in public space (57.6 percent fully opposed) while only 12.6 percent supported it. In Canada, 58.6 percent were fully or somewhat opposed, 38.1 percent were fully opposed, while 31.4 percent supported or somewhat supported it.

Increasingly, demands for limits to tolerance and reasonable accommodation are eclipsing minorities' cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial claims, as dominant populations charge religious and racialized minorities with intolerance of dominant practices and values. Whether framed as limits to tolerance or limits to reasonable accommodation, the acceptance of this discourse of denial has reinforced doubts about multiculturalism as the appropriate framework for managing and negotiating relations between and among diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic groups within Canada. The “necessity” of the Quebec government's Bourchard/Taylor Commission suggests a heightened attention to this crisis.

The socioeconomic implications of social exclusion

Finally, research shows that there are significant and enduring racially defined differences in the socioeconomic experiences of groups in Canada, particularly in the urban centres. National and Census Metropolitan Area data now show that racialized people are two or three times more likely to be poor than other Canadians. The rates are even higher among recent immigrants and some select groups such as those youth, women, and seniors who are of Arab, Latin American, Somali, Haitian, Iranian, Tamil, East Indian, or Vietnamese origin.

While the Canadian low-income rate was 14.7 percent in 2001, low-income rates for racialized groups ranged from 16 percent to as high as 43 percent.

THE RACIALIZATION OF POVERTY

One explanation for this reality is the *racialization of poverty*, a phrase that refers to the disproportionate and persistent experience of low income among racialized groups. The racialization of poverty emerges out of structural socioeconomic features that predetermine the unequal access to opportunities for generating income that racialized groups face. Current trends indicate that economic inequality between racialized immigrant groups and their Canadian-born counterparts is becoming greater and more permanent, suggesting that multicultural Canada is not the “just society” it aspires to be.

Racialized community members and Aboriginal peoples are twice as likely to be poor as other Canadians because of the intensified economic and social exploitation these communities face. Members of these communities have had to endure historical racial and gender inequalities, accentuated by the restructuring of the Canadian economy and various forms of racial profiling. The resulting experiences of exclusion have led to powerlessness, socioeconomic marginalization, and loss of voice, which have compounded these groups' inability to put issues of social inequality on the political agenda.

The experience of poverty is also evident in the breakdown in social institutions and increased service-delivery deficits, social vulnerability, insecurity, and increased health risks. The connec-

tion between the socioeconomic crisis and violence is widely documented. Studies on murder in Canada document that young offenders (and not only the perpetrators of violent crime but their victims, too) tend to be the products of single-parent families, poor parenting, poverty, and dysfunctional families. Violence in the popular culture and mainstream media are other contributing factors.

Other research suggests that community violence represents a form of nihilism that arises out of the social alienation that emerges in conditions of despair and powerlessness. Young people are more likely to be the victims of violence, and this is particularly true of racialized youth in low-income areas. These youth are also more likely to be criminalized through the targeted policing, over-policing, and racial profiling in these areas, leading to higher levels of incarceration. The prison population from major urban centres is disproportionately Aboriginal and racialized.

TORONTO'S AFRICAN-CANADIAN COMMUNITY

It is worth considering how the African-Canadian population in Toronto has experienced Canada's iconic program. Toronto's African-Canadian community relations with the city's dominant society and institutions are often mediated through stereotypical notions of the “proclivity of its members to criminality” and their experience with the criminal justice system. Key institutions such as the mainstream media also reproduce narratives and images that reinforce historically constructed stigmas and pathologies, especially about black youth, thus helping to generate moral panic that demands securitized responses and criminalization. These developments in turn reproduce unequal access to employment, neighbourhood segregation, higher risks, diminished life chances and something less than full citizenship.

For instance, while Canada's and Toronto's murder rates were stable for

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much of the 1990s, at about 2.5 per 100,000 for Canada and 2.4 per 100,000 for Toronto, the rates among blacks in Toronto, and particularly black youths, have skyrocketed. According to academic experts, the murder rate for blacks is four times that of the general population, at 10.1 per 100,000. While the black community represents just under 10 percent of the city's population, it accounted for approximately 30 percent of the murder victims annually between 1996 and 2004. This suggests that while the rates have been stable for other segments of the population, Toronto has become "more dangerous" for blacks and black youth. Since 1998, the percentage of homicide victims under the age 25 has grown to 40 percent from 25 percent in the 1970s, and a majority of these victims have been black youth.

The official response to the spate of gun killings that have engulfed Toronto in the first decade of the 21st century has been an aggressive law and order and containment incursion into racialized low-income communities. Political leaders have caved in to every resource demand from the police, with the Toronto Police Service setting up a Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) that operates on the principles of high visibility used in military war zone operations: large vans and scout cars patrolling continuously in the identified communities; quick reaction forces; and intelligence-gathering operations that engage community members, as a way of cultivating informers.

These aggressive and illiberal responses can be rationalized because in Canadian society, young black men have historically been constructed as aggressive, violent, and dangerous. As Carl James has remarked, "when they are chilling, they are layabouts, up to no good, and generally engaged in what society considers inappropriate behaviour." The distance from these accounts of inoffensive but "inappropriate" black youth to a perception of young black men as criminalized is almost non-existent.


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Racial profiling quickly becomes an indispensable tool of law enforcement under these circumstances, in response to moral panic about black criminality.

Young blacks have often described their encounters with police as being characterized by the officers' contempt, confrontational and harassing attitudes, mistakes about identity, and harshness. They often result in harassment, harsh penalties, brutality, and criminalization. Recall that these are young people whose access to other public spaces is always being challenged by police or, in the case of malls, security guards. The street then becomes a site for turf wars, which in most cases are resolved through police harassment and brutality. Young blacks are in this way the disproportionate targets of criminalization by security institutions. The marginalization of blacks and other racialized communi-

ties has the effect of denying them equal treatment and the right to full participation in Canadian society. It also raises questions about whether liberal democratic citizenship is not determined by race, gender, class or immigrant status, and it undermines popular claims about Canada as an equitable and multicultural society.

STEPS AHEAD

The promise of multiculturalism remains unfulfilled. And yet it represents the vision of a society open to difference and cultural pluralism. That aspect of the discursive framework is clearly worth holding on to and building upon. However, we must transcend the phase in which we focus on symbolic multiculturalism and embrace a process that concretizes cultural pluralism as a horizontal reality. This means conceding the narratives of Canada as an English and French country which makes some space for Aboriginal people and ethnora- cial cultural minorities. The project of nation building is a dynamic one that allows us to claim our history without being trapped in it. A bold multicultural future will mean that multiculturalism is not a hierarchical edifice with racialized groups at the bottom but a complex matrix of peoples old and new to the land. One that insists on justly resolving the colonial relationship between the settler population and the Aboriginal population. 

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over the coming months and years aims to map out and try to explain these discursive phenomena across the Canadian and Australian experiences, in both official reconciliation processes and conversations in the public forums outside of those processes.

The challenge in this, for social and cultural policy, is acute. Both countries have made quantum steps toward honest

and clear appraisals of the past, but conspicuously shy away from honesty and clarity about the options they face for the future. That reflects a fear of losing the consensus, to be sure, but also a fear that honest language will expose the lack of clear thinking—the absence of compelling policy. Bridging that gap will take more work than either country is ready to acknowledge. 