

Social Inclusion of Visible Minorities and Newcomers:
The Articulation of “Race” and “Racial” Difference in Canadian Society

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Introduction

Canada has developed constitutional and legislative protection to ensure that “race”, “origin” and “colour” are illegal grounds for differential treatments, in tacit recognition that these are unscientific concepts that undermine the principles of liberty, freedom, and equality. The constitutional and legislative tools are essential to safeguard *de jure* equality for all, but these tools are insufficient to guarantee *de facto* racial equality.

Social inclusion of “racial” groups that have been historically marginalized implies rejecting the use of “race” as grounds to signify the value of people. In contrast, racial exclusion involves constructing social boundaries based on phenotypic features, by which individuals or groups are denied social opportunities, economic rewards and other privileges as a result of their “racial” designation. In short, social exclusion involves some degree of “racial” signification; social inclusion calls for deconstructing “race” and “racial” differences, and rejecting the use of phenotypic features to racialize people.

Historically, skin colour and other superficial features have been used to construct “race”, and to demarcate “racial” groups as though these groups have been naturally or genetically constituted. The scientific grounds in support of a taxonomy of “race” are untenable, but racial typing or racial marking can produce enduring social consequences in denying rights and privileges to people so marked on the grounds that they are deemed inferior. Thus, even though “races” are socially constructed, they have been used as

though they are biologically constituted “races” that are premised upon essential or primordial, and therefore unbridgeable, differences of people. In turn, alleged or constructed “racial” differences have been used to justify racial supremacy and racial inequality.

In this paper, I argue that despite the entrenchment of the Charter and legislative support of equality and non-discrimination, “race” remains a meaningful concept that mediates social relations and economic outcomes. Alleged or real “racial” differences provide simplistic and convenient grounds by which some people interpret, influence and articulate social relations. In short, despite the legal framework of liberal democracy, “race” is articulated in Canadian society in the normative construction of “racial” differences, in the public discourse of “diversity”, and in unequal life chances associated with “racial” origins. Such articulation reifies “race”, reinforces its social import, and hampers social inclusion of racialized minorities in Canadian society.

Normative Value of “Race”

Historically, Canada has institutionalized policies and practices aimed at limiting the rights and livelihood of people deemed to belong to undesirable “races”. Over time, the oppressed conditions and marginal status of racialized minorities became part of their defining features. Thus, the colonial history of the Aboriginal peoples and their present-day dependence on the state (see for example, Frideres and Gadacz, 2001; Patterson, 1972; Ponting, 1986; Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 2000) contribute to the social meaning of the term *Indians* to refer not only to a “racial” group of a remote past, but also a contemporary people that is economically burdensome, socially marginal and

political militant. In the same way, the history of Chinese in Canada illustrates how the state resorted to using the notion of a foreign “race” to manage and control a segment of the workforce deemed undesirable but useful to capitalist expansions (Li, 1998a). Over time, their marginal social and economic position and their “foreign” cultural background became defining features of Chinese. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, Asians in Canada were considered belonging to an inferior “race”, with loathsome values, foreign customs and questionable behavioural standards that would corrupt the morality and culture of Europeans (Anderson, 1991; Li, 1998a; Roy, 1989; Satzewich, 1989; Ward, 1978). The notion of Asians in general, and Chinese in particular, as “racially” distinct and culturally inferior was well articulated in the ideology and practice of Canada; as well, a normative order that upheld the desirability of European culture and “race” was well entrenched in Canadian society (Anderson, 1991; Berger, 1981; Li, 1998a). Canada’s historical treatment of “racial” minorities provided concrete substance to the concept of “race”. In turn, “race” has come to symbolize essential differences of people articulated in the normative order as well as social and economic relations.

The entrenchment of the Canadian Charter, the official multiculturalism policy and employment equity policy throughout the 1980s has contributed to *de jure* racial equality. However, “race” remains a value-laden notion that is articulated meaningfully in norms and social behaviours, in apparent contradiction to the principles of a democratic society (Henry et al., 2000; Li, 1995; Zong, 1994). As Henry, et al. (2000) point out, racism can be articulated in a democratic society in “racial” myths and stereotypes without requiring its followers to denounce the democratic principles. Li (1994, 2001a) also argues that “race” and “racial” differences can be articulated

forcefully by adopting a discourse that makes use of codified concepts and syntax to sanctify “racial” messages and make them appear not in contradiction to the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Researchers and pollsters have consistently reported that in surveys and public polls, Canadians have attributed unequal social value to people based solely on the “racial” origin of the people they are asked to rate (Driedger and Peters, 1977; Filson, 1983; Pineo, 1977; Richmond, 1974). In other words, respondents appear to have accepted the legitimacy of rank ordering the social desirability of people based on “race”, and have done so regularly in public polls.

For example, Pineo (1977) found in a national study that English Canadians regarded “Negroes”, “Coloured”, and “Japanese” to have the lowest social standing, while French Canadians considered “Chinese”, “Negroes”, “Coloured”, and “Japanese” the lowest social ranks. Filson (1983) indicated that Canadian respondents in a 1977 national survey were most hostile towards immigrants from India and Pakistan, followed by those from West Indies; in contrast, British and American immigrants received the least hostility. In a 1991 national survey conducted by Angus Reid Group on behalf of Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, respondents gave strong support to various elements of the multiculturalism policy, but at the same time, displayed varying degrees of “comfort” towards individuals of different origins (Angus Reid Group, 1991). Respondents were given a list of ethnocultural groups and asked to indicate how comfortable they were with members from each group, ranging from “not at all comfortable” to “very comfortable”. Those of European origins received higher comfort ratings from respondents than those from non-white origins, mostly Asians and blacks.

Those of non-white origins, irrespective of whether they were immigrants or native-born, were seen as being less likely to provide high comfort level to respondents (Li, 1998b). As well, in a 2000 national survey commissioned by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and conducted by Ekos Research Associates, respondents were asked to indicate how they felt about someone from a given country moving into their neighbourhood. The results, similar to those found in a 1992 survey, show that respondents were more positive towards those from the UK and France than those from China, Jamaica, or Somalia (Ekos Research Associates, 2000). Asking respondents to indicate how much they accept members of a different “race” has long been adopted in social science as an acceptable way to measure the “social distance” between the dominant group and minority groups (see Berry and Kalin, 1995; Berry, Kalin and Taylor, 1977; Kalin and Berry, 1996).

Canadian respondents are also routinely being asked to indicate whether they think that there are too many, too few or just the right amount of visible minorities coming to Canada as immigrants. In other words, respondents are asked to place a value on immigrants based solely on their “racial” origin (Li, 2001a). Results of these surveys are used typically to gauge Canadians’ level of tolerance or acceptance of immigrants of visible minority origin (see Palmer, 1997).

These studies indicate that while Canadians endorse many elements of the multiculturalism policy, they also have no difficulty attributing unequal social value and desirability to people based on “race” and “origin”. The findings also confirm that in surveys conducted over a period of over 20 years, Canadians consistently rate Europeans more favourably than those of non-white origin. If such ratings were based on subjective

criteria in addition to superficial information of “race” and “origin”, then such subjectivity can only be said to have been internalized as social norms which provide the consistency and meaning to the notion of “race”. The very fact that both pollsters and respondents have accepted the legitimacy of ranking people based on “race” or “origin” and have asked and answered such questions routinely further suggests that the concept of “race” is socially entrenched in the normative order of Canada.

Public Discourse of “Diversity”

The significance of “race” is also articulated in Canada’s public discourse of “diversity”, usually in the context of immigration debates, in a codified language that appears benign on the surface but carries rich “racial” subtexts (Li, 2001a). Codified discourse, with its value-laden vocabulary, elegant syntax and implied rationale, provides a sophisticated means by which “racial” messages can be freely articulated in a democratic society without necessarily making direct references to “race”. Such discourse sanctifies crude “racial” messages and transformed them into palatable concerns and expectations that become acceptable and even appealing to majority members (Li, 1994, 2001a). In short, codified racist discourse assumes a gentle appearance in order to claim its legitimacy in a democratic society (Li, 2001a). Others have used terms such as “democratic racism” (Henry, et al., 2000; Henry and Tator, 2002) or “new racism” (Zong, 1997) to stress the oblique and covert nature of racism, as distinct from its conventional blatant manifestation.

Canada’s immigration discourse provides a good example to illustrate how racial subtexts are articulated. One of the key immigration issues has to do with the question of

“diversity” (Li, 2001a). There is a prevailing view in Canada’s immigration discourse that changes in immigration policy since the 1960s have resulted in large numbers of immigrants from “non-traditional” source countries of Asia and Africa coming to Canada, and as a result, Canada is forced to respond to the challenge and problem of “diversity”. Specifically, increased “diversity” is believed to have increased tensions in major cities where immigrants tend to concentrate, based on both real and alleged differences between long-time residents of Canada and immigrants from different cultural backgrounds. Typical examples cited include the undue demands placed on the school system as a result of large numbers of immigrant children not speaking the official languages, the social segregation and urban congestion created by the development of ethno-specific immigrant malls and concentrated ethnic businesses, as well as the confrontations in established neighbourhoods where the heritage and traditional values of Canada are deemed to have been undermined by new immigrants’ disregard of architectural preservation and environmental protection. It does not matter whether some or all of these problems are caused by “diversity”, but as long as some citizens hold such strong views and see their lives being adversely affected, their articulate voice exerts political pressure on the government, forcing it to take into account the political cost of “diversity” in framing future policy.

The above viewpoint is routinely echoed in public meetings and government discussion papers. For example, a 1989 discussion paper produced by Employment and Immigration Canada described the problem of diversity as follows:

“More and more in public discussions of immigration issues people are drawing attention to the fact that Canada’s immigration is coming increasingly

from ‘non-traditional’ parts of the world. Thirty years ago, more than 80 per cent of Canada’s immigrants came from Europe or countries of European heritage, whereas 70 per cent now come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with 43 per cent coming from Asia alone.... As a result, many Canadians are concerned that the country is in danger of losing a sense of national identity.... Unfortunately, some of the opposition to immigration which has been expressed in Canada is rooted in racism and we must vigilantly ensure that this destructive force does not spread. People’s fears must be confronted and misinformation must be dispelled.... Yet it would be wrong to dismiss most Canadians’ concerns on these grounds. Many Canadians, who have always been proud of Canada’s humanitarian and tolerant traditions, are also feeling uneasy....” (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1989, pp. 8-9).

The above viewpoint, its language, and its logic are rather revealing. First, terms such as “diverse” or “diversity” have been used as surrogates to refer to “non-white” immigrants. Second, the “problem of diversity” has been presented as being triggered by large numbers of immigrants from non-traditional source countries, mainly those from Asia and Africa, and citizens’ concerns are really prompted by their uneasiness over too many “non-whites” (see also Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1994a). Over time, as the concept of “diversity” is widely and repeatedly used in the immigration discourse, it becomes a coded word to designate “non-white immigrants” and their problems they have brought to urban Canada, as well as the reasonable grounds for citizens’ concerns. Third, the message of citizens’ concerns over “diversity” is unmistakable about how a

sudden increase in “diversity” over a short period of time can create tensions and divisions, since “diversity” is cast as different from, if not opposed to, Canadian values and traditions. More specifically, the concerns are premised upon the presumed truism that, unlike native-born Canadians or European immigrants who came earlier, the recent third-world type of “non-white” immigrants bring with them different values and behaviours that are incompatible with those in traditional Canada, and that their large concentrated presence in Canada’s cities, in apparent cultural isolation, undermines Canada’s unity. In reality, the view about “diversity” causing divisiveness is not based on solid scientific findings, but premised on the mere fact that “non-white” immigrants have a different skin colour and look different from European Canadians, and on the rhetoric that immigrants must respect core Canadian values. Yet in the immigration discourse, the linkage between “diversity” and fragmentation is unmistakable. For example, this message is reiterated in another 1994 report as follows:

“A number of Canadians expressed concerns about the impact which immigration and citizenship policies are having upon the values and traditions that form the foundation of Canadian society. This is not to say that Canadians are becoming intolerant. In fact, when describing the most cherished characteristics of their society, Canadians usually mentioned tolerance among the first. Many people agreed with the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration which reported that ‘*Diversity is one of Canada’s great strengths...*’. (emphasis original) But they are also worried that their country is becoming fragmented, that it is becoming a loose collection of parts each pursuing its own agenda, rather than a cohesive entity

striving for the collective good of Canada.” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1994b, p. 10).

Finally, the message on “the problem of diversity” is always presented as legitimate concerns of Canadians who support the “humanitarian and tolerant traditions” and are proud of Canada’s diversity, but who nevertheless worry about Canada losing its national identity because of too many immigrants from different cultures and origins. In short, the message makes it clear that racism is unacceptable to Canada, and Canadians remain tolerant and are not being racists when they voice their concerns over too much “diversity”. This is accomplished by reiterating Canada’s long standing position of tolerance and anti-racism, every time Canadians pass judgment on the social worth of immigrants’ “race” or “colour”.

Concerns over “the problem of diversity” are often justified on the grounds that long-time Canadians are experiencing too rapid social changes within too short a time that are caused by too many “non-traditional” immigrants. Obviously, what constitutes “too many”, “too rapid” and “too short” requires a normative assessment. There is no doubt that the immigration patterns of the 1980s and 1990s have changed the racial composition of immigrants. However, similar concerns over “too many” non-white immigrants and the atmosphere of unease which they created were expressed in the 1970s even before the large arrival of immigrants from non-traditional source countries (Li, 2001a). It would appear that it is the constructed image of hordes of immigrants of a different race or colour that has been seen as challenging the cultural complacency of Canada and its implied cohesiveness.

There are also other coded messages in the immigration discourse that are directed towards non-white immigrants. For example, a 1989 report indicates that some Canadians “are uneasy or unsure about immigration’s impact” and that “close to one fifth of Canadians are quite opposed to many aspects of Canada’s immigration program and an even greater number just do not know how many, or what kinds of immigrants, Canada should encourage in the next decade” (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1989, p. 8). Typical concerns of a more specific nature have to do with Canadians “losing a sense of national identity”, Canadian society “changing too fast”, and the need to preserve Canada’s “core national values” (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1989, p. 9). A 1994 report follows a similar approach to cite Canadians’ worries about personal safety and about fiscal burdens due to some immigrant sponsors failing to honour their financial obligations (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1994b: 11-12). Taken together, the coded messages tend to attribute Canadians’ increased concerns over immigration to the social problems “caused” by recent immigrants, mostly non-Europeans, and their differences.

In short, in the public discourse of immigration and diversity, it is widely accepted that Canadians have a right to be concerned about immigrants’ “race”, especially when it is couched in a language that articulates the problems caused by “racial” diversity. For example, in an immigration consulting meeting organized by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in Montebello, Quebec in March 6-7, 1994, polling results were presented by Ekos Research Associates to show that “growing intolerance appears to have a racial dimension (since) 87% of respondents who believe that too many immigrants are drawn from visible minorities also believe that immigration levels are too

high..., (and that) Canadians are concerned about a ‘slipping away of our values’ and a loss of Canadian identity” (Public Policy Forum, 1994). Shortly after, in an article in *The Globe and Mail* on March 28, it referred to the finding in the Ekos survey that showed “most Canadians believe there are too many immigrants, especially from visible minorities”, and used it to explain how “‘cultural insecurity’ amid change fuels resentment among a majority of Canadians towards Asian, African and Arab migrants” (*Globe and Mail*, March 28, 1994). It is clear from the prevailing interpretation that Canadians’ opinions on “race” are not considered “racist” in the immigration consultation circle, but rather, they are regarded as genuine expression of “growing intolerance” or “cultural insecurity” based on a legitimate concern that too many “non-whites” would render Canadian values “slipping away”. Furthermore, the message is clear that Canadians’ reservations over too many immigrants is misunderstood when in fact they are only concerned about too many “non-white” immigrants and not immigrants per se. In this way, the racial message in the immigration discourse is sanctified as non-racist, and indeed elevated to the level of noble concerns by citizens who only want to protect Canada’s ideological tradition and the national unity.

Life Chances of Racialized Groups

Substantial evidence is also available to suggest that racialized minorities’ life chances have been adversely affected because of their “racial” origin (see Abella, 1984; Li, 1988; Reitz and Breton, 1994). Despite disagreements over John Porter’s vertical mosaic thesis (Porter, 1965) about the precise influence of ethnic origin on socio-economic performance (see Brym with Fox, 1989; Darroch, 1979), findings are

consistent regarding the disadvantage of non-whites in occupational status and earnings (Lautard and Loree, 1984; Lautard and Guppy, 1999; Li, 1988; Geschwender, 1994).

Analyses based on Canadian censuses and survey data clearly indicate that Canadians of European origins had an income advantage over visible minorities, and a substantial earnings disparity remains after controlling for variations in human capital, demographic features and other job related factors (Beach and Worswick, 1993; Boyd, 1984, 1992; Li, 1992, 2000; Pendakur and Pendakur, 1998). Using the 1991 census data to reassess the vertical mosaic thesis, Lian and Matthews (1998: 475-6) concluded that “similar educational qualifications carried different economic values in the Canadian labour market for individuals of different ‘racial’ origins” and that a “coloured mosaic” now exists, in which “educational achievement at any level fails to protect persons of visible minority background from being disadvantaged in terms of income they receive.”

Other research has also shown that non-white immigrants tend to be particularly disadvantaged because their foreign credentials are devaluated in conjunction with their “racial” features, immigrant status and linguistic characteristics (Basavarajappa and Verma, 1985; Li, 2001b; Rajagopal, 1990; Reitz, 2001; Trovato and Grindstaff, 1986;). In other words, non-white immigrants’ “racial”, linguistic and gender features become social markers that are evaluated or devaluated along with their educational credentials (Li, 2001b).

The disadvantage of visible minorities affects not only the foreign born, but also those born in Canada. A systematic analysis of earnings gaps between native-born visible minorities and white workers using data from multiple censuses indicates that there was a mild improvement in relative earnings of visible minorities between 1971 and

1981, but their relative earnings, for both visible minority men and women, fell further below that of male and female white workers between 1991 and 1996 (Pendakur and Pendakur, 2002). However, the authors cautioned that the broad category of “visible minorities” aggregated specific groups that differed in terms of the degree to which they were disadvantaged. Pendakur and Pendakur (2002: 510) concluded that despite measures of employment equity adopted over a decade ago, “racial” inequity has been on the rise, and that the labour market cannot be said to be “colour blind” nor “moving towards employment equity”.

Conclusion

Social inclusion of visible minorities and new immigrants of “non-white” origin necessitates rejecting using “race” and “racial” features to signify the value of people and to reward or penalize people accordingly. Social signification based on “race” facilitates social exclusion and hinders social inclusion. This paper argues that despite Canada’s constitutional and legislative commitment to the principles of equality and non-discrimination, “race” and “racial differences” are meaningfully articulated in the normative order, public discourse and economic relations.

The literature indicates that Canadians have consistently attached unequal social value to people of different “racial” origin, and have accepted the legitimacy of doing so in opinion polls. Over twenty years of research on the topic suggests that Canadians have attributed a higher value, in terms of social comfort level and social desirability, to people of European origin than those of visible minority origin. The very fact that the findings are consistent and that both pollsters and respondents have accepted the legitimacy of

rating people by “race” indicates that “race” and “racial” differences continue to be powerful normative constructs in Canadian society.

In public discourse of immigration, it is also apparent that “racial” issues have been articulated liberally using a codified language that clearly conveys “racial” subtexts, without resorting to blatant “racial” references. Thus, value-laden terms such as “diversity” and “problems of diversity” become codified concepts used to articulate the concerns and reservations over “non-white” immigrants and over the social problems which such immigrants have supposedly brought to Canada. In short, “racial” discourse reifies the significance of “race” in its subtle vocabulary, implied logic and careful syntax, and legitimizes “racial” significance by transforming blatant “racial” references to reasonable citizens’ concerns.

Studies of inequality in labour market outcomes also consistently indicate that Canadians of visible minority origin do not enjoy the same life chances as others. Many studies have confirmed that visible minorities are penalized in the labour market in earnings and occupation status, and that such penalty tends to persist after variations in human capital and other factors have been taken into account. In particular, the life chances of “non-white” immigrants tend to be particularly disadvantaged because of their “race”, and also because of problems of credential devaluation and market discrimination of “racial” markers as reflected in origin, birthplace, and linguistic characteristics. Recent research indicates that “race” also adversely affects the life chances of visible minorities born in Canada, and that the income gap of visible minorities, relative to white workers, in fact widens at a time when measures of employment equity have been in place.

It has long been recognized that there is no scientific basis in using skin colour and other phenotypic features to racialize people, and that the social significance of “race” can only be socially constructed (see Li, 1999; Satzewich, 1998). It appears that the social significance of “race” and “racial” differences has been continuously reified in Canadian society. The paper shows how the articulation of “race” is well entrenched and accepted in Canada’s normative order, public discourse and economic relations. These are by no means the only domains in which the articulation of “race” is evident; other research has shown that the discourse of “race” is pervasive and robust in the arts as well as in the media (Henry and Tator, 2002; Tator, Henry, and Mattis, 1998). The complexity and subtlety in which “race” is articulated in Canadian society suggest that convention approaches to studying blatant “racial” discrimination are inadequate, and that confronting the problem of “racial” signification remains a daunting challenge in the social inclusion of visible minorities and racialized immigrants.

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