

# Why Both the Left and the Right Are Wrong: Immigration and Multiculturalism in Canada

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## INTRODUCTION

In comparative immigration studies, Canada stands out as an outlier: it is the only country in the world in which a majority of citizens want existing (that is, high) or higher levels of immigration. A majority in every other country, including the United States, wants fewer immigrants (Reitz 2011). Canada is also an outlier in its support for state multiculturalism. Globally, state-endorsed multiculturalism has been in retreat. Trevor Phillips (the black British Labour Party member and head of the Commission for Racial Equality), David Cameron (Conservative former prime minister of Britain), and Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic chancellor of Germany) all declared it “dead” (Joppke n.d.). The Netherlands, the only country adopting anything resembling substantive multicultural policies (more on this below), has repudiated them. Even Australia, like Canada an early adopter of official multiculturalism, has quietly downgraded the policy and placed greater emphasis on somewhat ill-defined “Australian values” (see Castles and Vasta 2004). By contrast, in Canada, it is inconceivable that a senior politician outside Quebec would denounce multiculturalism.<sup>1</sup> The reasons are not difficult to discern: according to Environics polling, 85% of Canadians believe that multiculturalism is important to the country (Adams 2008).

This article seeks to explain why both immigration and multiculturalism are so popular in Canada when they are so unpopular everywhere else. As any scholar who has heard a Canadian giving a paper on immigration policy will know, Canadian academics and policy makers offer a self-flattering interpretation that comes in two parts. The first, a state-driven explanation, is historical: since Quebec has long forced the country to cope with diversity, Canadians are more tolerant of immigrants than Europeans and less insistent on assimilation than Americans (see Government of Canada 2012). The second interpretation is policy based: by allowing people to retain their cultural commitments, official multiculturalism eases the integration of immigrants into society, which in turn makes Canadians more likely to support immigration (Adams 2008; Angus 1997; Fleras and Elliott 1992; Kymlicka 1998).

In this article, I will argue that both of these views are wrong. The first is easily dispensed with. If Canada and Canadians had any particular talent for coping with diversity, then

the country’s oldest “minority”—aboriginal Canadians—would be well incorporated into Canadian society and the Canadian economy. The situation of aboriginals (“First Nations”) is in fact a disaster: the unemployment rate among aboriginals is twice the national average (2011 figures: 15% vs. 7.5%); annual income in 2005 was \$23,889 vs. \$35,872 for non-aboriginals; and high school completion rates are 62% vs. 80.6% for non-aboriginals (2011 figures) (National Aboriginal Economic Development Board 2015, 17, 26, and 33, respectively). These indicators include First Nations who live on reserves as well as those who do not; outcomes are far worse for the former. Aboriginal people in Canada occupy a worse socio-economic position than African Americans in the United States, and there is no aboriginal equivalent of a visible black middle class or of massive cultural influence, as with African Americans in the United States (Gilmore 2015).

The second claim—that multiculturalism eases migrants’ transition into Canadian society—is superficially more appealing. Yet, in the end, it too is baseless for one simple reason: Canada has never had anything other than a rhetorical multicultural policy.

Developing this point requires definitions. Much of the global debate about multiculturalism obscures the fact that the term means all things to all people. The most basic confusion is between multiculturalism as a sociological fact (that is, there are migrants from all corners of the globe living peacefully in the same country) and multiculturalism as a policy (which conceives of a particular way of incorporating migrants into a given society).<sup>2</sup> The two have nothing to do with each other. A highly diverse society can be consistent with both a robustly anti-assimilationist and a robustly assimilationist policy. That is, one can think that immigration is a “good thing,” that immigrants should come from as many parts of the world as possible, but that immigrants should fully assimilate to their new country’s culture. Or one can think that immigration is a brilliant idea, that immigrants should come from everywhere, and that their own culture should be nourished and supported regardless of the effect on the receiving country. And one can, of course, think that there should be very little immigration, or immigration from only one part of the world, and that those who come should assimilate or that they should retain their own culture. Support for or opposition to multiculturalism as a policy is thus perfectly

consistent with high or low levels of migration *and* with high or low levels of diversity.

Another basic distinction is between “thick” and “thin” multicultural policy. Thick multiculturalism implies that migrants integrate, if at all, through their own culture and that they privilege that culture over national laws, customs, and traditions. This conception of multiculturalism is the *bête*

as the examples of Pakistan, and above all, Iran make abundantly clear.

#### THICK OR THIN?

Canadian multiculturalism is decidedly thin. This is partly a question of policy, partly of money. Starting with the latter, a fact that always surprises foreign observers, is the small

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*noire* of multicultural critics in Europe, and they have something of a point (Phillips quoted in Adams 2008, 134–5; Young 2001). Until commentators pointed to widely available data showing terrible outcomes in employment, education, and (something that matters least) neighborhood segregation, the Netherlands pursued a thick multicultural policy that subsidized foreign languages, separate faith schools, foreign radio and television programs, and so on (on this, see Koopmans 2003, 163–68). Celebrated by academics around the world, multiculturalism in the Netherlands contributed to, or at least failed to prevent, lower educational achievement, higher unemployment, and worse earnings than those found among the same groups in neighboring Germany, a country that had itself long been the *bête noire* of the left-leaning academic activists dominating immigration studies (e.g., Mushaben 2008).

Thin multiculturalism implies a right to one’s culture insofar as the expression of it harms no one and is consistent with national laws and human-rights culture. Although it may shock some Torontonians, who think that they invented multiculturalism sometime after the Beatles, you can find thin multicultural policy everywhere. French citizens of African descent wear dazzling, colorful dresses in Paris; Muslims attend mosques in Berlin; Italians operate restaurants in London; and Ukrainians tired of Edmonton’s weather may organize dances and performances in Los Angeles. Thin multiculturalism exists everywhere because it is basic to liberal democracy and a respect for human rights. There are small differences in how liberal states approach such matters as religious dress in state institutions (which France largely bans but Germany and the UK do not), but these differences rest at the margins (Banting and Kymlicka 2012; Multiculturalism Policy Index 2012). No liberal democracy attacks freedom of religion or association in principle; there are, rather, differences of opinion on what these freedoms mean. Non-democracies, by contrast, are culturally homogenizing and constitutionally hostile even to thin multiculturalism. One of the most consistently persecuted groups in the world is Christians in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, there is no greater threat to religious minorities than the establishment of a theocracy,

amount of money devoted to the multiculturalism budget: \$12,100,261 in 2016 (Government of Canada 2016)—that is, as a French politician once said to me, “zero.” It was this small, if not trivial, amount of money that supported the policies—funding for Ukrainian dances, a few foreign-language classes on Saturday afternoons—that attracted so much criticism. This was in fact harmless stuff and likely without much effect (as anyone who has struggled to convince a child of the merits of speaking a foreign language will know). But even this tokenism is now gone: Ukrainian dances are no longer funded, and multicultural programs have a distinctly integrationist accent. Ninety-five percent of program spending provide grants for projects “that seek to support the Multiculturalism Program’s objective of building an integrated, socially cohesive society through enhanced intercultural/interfaith understanding, civic memory and pride, respect for core democratic values, and participation in society and the economy” (ibid.). With this budget and these aims, the program is as radical, transformative, or threatening as milk toast. It is a mark of the success of the Canadian government’s propaganda efforts, and the naivety of sections of the Canadian professoriate and Canadian press, that so much causal effect is attributed to such a small program.

Where the federal government does spend a considerable amount of money—some \$1.7 billion per year—is on settlement. The funds go to language training, labor-credential recognition and training, and loans and grants to help refugees adjust to Canadian life (ibid.). In other words, the funds are spent on the integration of immigrants.

#### EXPLAINING MIGRANT SUCCESS IN CANADA?

Multiculturalism—strictly understood as the small range of programs supported by Canada’s \$12-million-per-year budget—plays almost no role in the country’s relative success with immigration. If multiculturalism is not doing the work, what explains the relative economic success of immigrants to Canada? Here the sociological evidence is clear. The most important factor in determining migrants’ success, and therefore the success of the immigration policy under which they enter, is education. Among the factors explaining “variations in immigrant economic success, both cross-nationally and

among urban areas,” sociologist Jeffrey Reitz concludes, “the most important is education” (Reitz 2007, 36). The great success of Canada’s immigration policy has nothing to do with multiculturalism and everything to do with admitting large numbers of highly skilled and highly educated immigrants.<sup>4</sup> Multicultural policies, strictly understood, do not and cannot have the profound impact attributed to them by their enthusiasts. This should come as no surprise. It would be a public policy miracle worth patenting if \$12.1 million per year led to outstanding school achievement, job placement, and higher earnings.<sup>5</sup>

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The way in which enthusiasm for the “project of Canadian multiculturalism”—as one of my colleagues called it in a breathtaking disavowal of critical academic distance—has refracted academic judgment can be seen in the exuberant reaction to a book by a Canadian expatriate at the University of California, Berkeley. In *Becoming a Citizen*, Irene Bloemraad compares broadly similar migrant communities—Portuguese and Vietnamese—in Boston and Toronto and concludes that, on the whole, Canadian settlement policies encourage more political participation. The excitement was palpable. Academic cheerleaders for official multiculturalism—and there is no shortage of them—cite the book generously at conferences on the topic. Will Kymlicka, the doyen of Canadian multiculturalism, introduces Bloemraad at some length in a government report that endorses—unremarkably—official multiculturalism (Kymlicka 2010). Her study is the central anchor of his conclusion that “multiculturalism in Canada promotes integration and citizenship, both through its effect on attitudes, self-understanding and identity at the individual level and through its effect on institutions at the social level” (ibid.).

Bloemraad’s study is a fine one, and it does show that these and other communities in Canada naturalize and participate in politics more in this country than in the United States. But is this the result of policies that anyone from Europe would recognize as multicultural? It is not. As she trenchantly argues,

Canadians underestimate contemporary Americans’ tolerance for cultural diversity and overestimate their own support for substantive multiculturalism. In some ways the integrationist thrust of government-sponsored multiculturalism means that Canadians embrace more of a “melting pot” approach to ethno-racial diversity than Americans. Canadian multicultural policy legitimizes and promotes symbolic ethnicity while also pushing for immigrants’ incorporation into the social, economic, and political fabric of Canadian society. *This project has more similarities with old-fashioned assimilation than many Canadians*

*might be ready to admit* (Bloemraad 2006, 141 [emphasis mine]; see also Harles 2004).<sup>6</sup>

#### EXPLAINING MULTICULTURALISM’S POPULARITY

If multiculturalism is not responsible for the success of immigrants to Canada, why does it remain so popular? The answer, in fact, has very little to do with immigration and very much to do with nationalism. Along with a few other countries with permanent identity crises—Germany because of the Holocaust, Britain because of post-imperial decline—Canadians have for decades been obsessed with discovering the essence

of who they are. Various candidates have been suggested, and they have all proved inadequate. The supposedly particularly Canadian cultural characteristics—being nice, polite, and reserved—are simply milder versions of English ones, shorn of the capacity for wit, irony, and private character assassination. Social programs, which university professors told Canadian students in the 1980s were the basis of their identity, do not work because (a) the country can no longer afford them, and (b) even at their peak, they were terribly ungenerous compared with those in northern continental Europe.

Multiculturalism is a third effort, and it is particularly appealing because it seems to provide a resolution to what otherwise might be the eternal Canadian quandary: not being American. Successive governments have told Canadians that what makes them different from the United States is multiculturalism: America is the melting pot, Canada is the mosaic. Canadians have, somewhat unremarkably, responded positively. Put another way, when Canadians affirm multiculturalism, they affirm themselves. This fact explains in part why Canadian nationalists, who hail almost exclusively from the Left (a fact that mystifies German and Italian observers of this country), so consistently endorse multiculturalism. But it also explains why the concept attracts such warm support from across the country: multiculturalism, and by association immigration, are the core of Canadian nationalism (On this, see Citrin, Johnston and Wright 2012). Canadians are, in fact, giving themselves a pat on the back.

#### CONCLUSION

Although anyone reading the insufferably self-congratulatory press might have the opposite impression (see anything written in the *Toronto Star*), there is nothing particularly Canadian about not asking immigrants to abandon their religion, languages (at home), or culture. Such extreme demands are not assimilation as most people understand it; they are *forced* assimilation, or what some excitable individuals would call cultural genocide. No liberal democracy has ever pursued such a policy against immigrants,<sup>7</sup> a point often ignored by political theorists of multiculturalism who, in matters of history, travel light.

Much of the multicultural critique of old-style assimilation is based on the claim that the pre-1960s period was particularly hostile to group rights and that only a post-liberal, multicultural paradigm can sustain them. It became accepted only in the 1970s, Kymlicka writes, “that immigrants should be free to maintain some of their old customs regarding food, dress, religion, and recreation, and to associate with each other to maintain these practices. This is no longer seen as unpatriotic, ‘un-American,’ or ‘un-Australian’” (Kymlicka 1996, 14). This historical reading is clearly wrong. A German-American in New York in the 1890s could have lived in “Little Germany” (today’s Alphabet City), joined a German band, drank German

these events. But that is another matter. The point is that the defenders and critics of multiculturalism share more in common than they realize: they are both wrong. ■

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beer, and sent his or her children to a German school. One could have taken books out of the *Freie Bibliothek und Lesehalle* (Free Library and Reading Room) on Second Avenue; upon entering the German-American shooting club, one would have passed under an inscription—still there—reading *Einigkeit macht stark* (“Strength through Unity”). Irish Americans lived similarly in Hell’s Kitchen. In the 1920s, during the height of the Americanization movement, Italians operated restaurants, worshipped in Catholic churches, and played bocce. The examples are endless.

Indeed, the one thing that German, Irish, and other immigrants enjoyed was cultural expression; their economic, social, and political position was fragile. They crowded, at least in the early years after their arrival, into poor neighborhoods, were shut out of jobs (“no dogs or Irish”), and found themselves beholden for patronage to Tammany Hall. Many of these conditions obviously apply to an even greater extent for African Americans, who have suffered severe and institutionalized forms of exclusion. The most salient change since the 1960s has not been, *pace* Kymlicka, the adding of a new right to old cultural practices but, rather, the extension of liberal, individual rights (to equal treatment under the law, to the vote, to competition for jobs on a meritocratic basis) that had been denied to vast swathes of the population.

Does this mean that the debate between the supporters and opponents of multiculturalism, outlined above, has been for naught? Not quite so. The failure of either side to marshal much evidence in favor of its case is itself informative. The many critics who view multiculturalism as divisive and likely to lead to segregation, political radicalism, minority illiberalism, and even anti-migrant prejudice have found precious little evidence to support their case. At the same time, migrants’ demonstrable success in Canada has nothing to do with multiculturalism and everything to do with selection and education. Since migrants themselves are doing most of the metaphorical and literal work that contributes to their success, Canada’s benign experience does not justify the “Hallelujah Chorus” sung on the international conference circuit by the mostly white, mostly male social scientists attending

#### NOTES

1. Support for immigration and multiculturalism vary by region, and the latter in particular is less popular in Quebec. A 2014 CBC news poll found that only 56% of respondents in Quebec “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they were proud of the country’s cultural mosaic, vs. 72% in British Columbia. CBC News (2014).
2. A conversation with Christian Joppke of the University of Berne some years ago clarified this distinction.
3. “Open Doors” monitors Christian persecution worldwide.

4. For a discussion of streams and the predominance of economic migrants, see Hiebert (2016).
5. I owe this insight to Jeffrey Reitz.
6. Canadians, indeed, display highly assimilationist attitudes. A 2006 survey showed that 70% of respondents agreed that “we should be encouraging immigrants to integrate and become part of Canadian culture (Soroko and Robertson 2010, 9).”
7. Both Canada and the United States pursued such a policy, in different ways and with varying degrees of brutality, against North American Indians.

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