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**Striking a Balance in Canada's Diversity Dialogue:  
The Case of the Portuguese-Canadian Community**

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The waning decades of the twentieth century were witness to a dramatic alteration in the nature of immigration to Canada. While up to the 1960's, the majority (70% to 90%) of those settling in this country still originated from European origins, by 2001 these proportions had steadily decreased, to about 16 % (Chui, Tran & Maheux, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2004). In contrast, the number of new arrivals from Asia, Africa and Latin America rose from less than 10% in the early 1960's, to about 77% in 2006 (Chui, Tran & Maheux, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2004).

This unprecedented increase in the proportions of non-European immigration to Canada has brought a profound change to our national dialogue on diversity. Up to the late 1970's, it was still common in this country to conceptualize, study and politicize our social, economic and political diversity in terms of cultural, linguistic or class differences. One example of this was our historic preoccupation with the divide between English and French; another was the widespread acclaim given to John Porter's *Vertical Mozaic*, (Porter, 1965). However, the end of the 1970's saw increasing scrutiny being paid in this country to the reality of race (as defined by phenotypical differences, like skin colour), as a determining factor to the level of participation in Canadian society. As a result, Canada's historic and national dialogue on diversity, which had previously been concerned mainly with cultural, linguistic and class considerations was soon overtaken by a debate on the effects of race.

This change in mindset has resulted in an increased attention on the part of our government communities, to issues of colour-based discrimination and exclusion. One example of this has been the gradual restructuring of the *Multiculturalism Policy (1971)* and the follow-up *Multiculturalism Act (1988)*, from a focus on linguistic and cultural preservation, to a

program whose priorities today are the promotion of integration and the combating of racism (Canadian Heritage, 2008). Another change has been the enactment of the Federal Government's *Employment Equity Act (1986, 1995)*, which targets four designated equity groups, based on phenotypical race, gender and ability (Visible-Minorities, Women, Aboriginals, and the Disabled). On the academic front, this change has been paralleled by the increasing adoption of such theoretical perspectives as anti-racism theory as a guiding paradigm for research on diversity and inequality (Dei, 1996).

This movement towards the adoption of race-based, as opposed to ethno-cultural, categorizations has also resulted – at least on the government level - in a shift away from a research and policy focus on integration that specifically addresses language and culture. For example, much of the research on minority integration that is today conducted by the agencies of the various layers of government is conducted at the level of the Federally-designated Equity groups, rather than on specific linguistic or cultural communities. Another example of this is the tendency in many publications today to write about racial and cultural difference as if they were one and the same phenomena. This is illustrated by the interchangeable use of terms like “immigrant” or “minority” with “visible-minority” or “people of colour”, as well as the habit of ignoring the cultural and linguistic differences between same-race minorities. Unfortunately, this has meant that the economic, political and social inclusion of social groupings that are based on historical, ethnic or linguistic commonalities is, in many cases, no longer targeted, or recognized as such, at the government level. This has resulted in particular communities, both white and visible-minorities, falling *through the cracks* in terms of research and policy.

### **The Portuguese-Canadian Case**

Nowhere is this gap in research and policy more evident than in the case of the Portuguese in Canada. This is a group which is often touted as having made a successful transition from a predominantly rural, under-educated and unskilled immigrant population, to an economically stable, hardworking and self-sufficient community.

Yet, despite this seeming veneer of prosperity and stability, there is evidence that the Portuguese in Canada are facing severe systemic barriers to a full integration into Canadian

society, particularly in the realm of education. In some cases, these are comparable to those that are faced by some of our non-European minority groups. In some areas, the Portuguese example also defies prevailing anti-racist theories, which explain differential and ongoing lack of access to resources, mainly as a consequence of colour differences. Due to a research gap, these barriers often go unaddressed by policy-makers and, consequently, the situation of the Portuguese remains unknown to many mainstream scholars and policy-makers.

### **Background: The Portuguese Community in Canada**

Persons of Portuguese ancestry (also known as “Luso-Canadians”) began immigrating in larger numbers to Canada in 1953 and continued to the early 1990’s (Anderson & Higgs, 1976; Marques & Medeiros, 1980). Originating disproportionately from the poorest rural regions in Portugal and the Azores, the migrant generations of this community displayed some of the lowest levels of education of any minority group (usually only 4 years or less) (Anderson & Higgs, 1976).

Moving overwhelmingly into unskilled construction, manufacturing or service occupations, the Portuguese soon managed to overcome many of the limitations of their low education levels and achieved a measure of economic success and security in their new land. For example, by the end of the 1990’s, they had achieved very high levels of home ownership (70%) (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003). They also tended to display low poverty levels and average levels of unemployment (Nunes, 1998, Ornstein, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). By the year 2000, the community comprised roughly 1.2% of Canada’s population, or 358,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2001). Sixty percent of Luso-Canadians live in Toronto and Montreal, where in each city they represent the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> largest non-British/Irish or Quebecois group (Statistics Canada, 2003). Large communities also exist in centres like Vancouver, Hamilton, Kitchener, London Ontario, Ottawa-Hull, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg.

Yet, the limited occupational and educational profile of the first Portuguese immigrants, coupled by high rates of school dropouts, soon led this community to experience levels of unequal participation in Canada’s economic prosperity (Li, 1988; Nunes, 1986b; Ornstein, 2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, Porter, 1965). For example, they earn significantly lower than average incomes. They also display low levels of political participation and representation,

relative to their numbers, and a tendency to turn inward towards the family; a legacy of having lived under one of Europe's longest dictatorships (the Salazar regime), which strongly repressed political and civic involvement (Anderson & Higgs, 1976; Nunes, 1986b). The marginalized economic and educational profile of the first generations of the Portuguese-Canadian community also gave rise to a negative image of this group, amongst many in Canadian society:

*“I am going to give a description of the Portuguese in the eyes of the typical Canadian: The Portuguese are dark and short. They speak a strange language that only they understand [...] The Portuguese man is a labourer. He works in construction.[...] The Portuguese woman works as a cleaning lady. The Portuguese is not very sophisticated.[...] [He] doesn't like to study. Maybe the image of the Portuguese... will change in the next generation [...] I hope so. At least the image which they now have could not be any worse. (Duckworth, 1986) (my translation).*

Today, the Portuguese community, already entering into its third Canadian-born generation, comprises, continues to be largely marginalized from many sectors of Canadian society. Luso-Canadians still display the highest percentages of any Canadian minority group, of individuals with only a primary school education (Matas & Valentine, 2000; Nunes, 1998, 2000; Ornstein, 2000, 2006a, 2006b). More significantly, they also display proportions of University and College graduates that are equal to those in the Aboriginal communities (6%). Their concentrations in unskilled and manufacturing jobs parallel those of more recent immigrant groups. They also have disproportionately low numbers of people in professional and management positions (Matas & Valentine, 2000; Nunes, 1998, 2000; Ornstein, 2000, 2006a, 2006b). As a consequence, they continue to earn significantly lower average incomes than other Canadians and have percentages of upper- income earners which, once again, are comparable only to those in the Aboriginal communities (Nunes, 1998, 2000; Ornstein 2000, 2006a, 2006b). Luso-Canadians also continue to be underrepresented within the political, economic, social and cultural sectors of our nation. In the late 1990's, the Luso-Canadian academic Edite Noivo (1997) observed:

”...after twenty-five or more years in the “land of opportunity” the overall socioeconomic conditions of Portuguese immigrants remain well below the national average...and shows minimal participation in mainstream society (p. 33).

### **The Community’s Academic Underachievement**

This community’s full inclusion into Canadian society has been most impeded by the chronic academic underachievement of its youth. Since the early 1970’s, successive generations of Luso-Canadian children – particularly in the City of Toronto - have been performing at significantly lower academic levels, have been found to be disproportionately represented in Special Education and Remedial Reading programs and were reported to be dropping out of school earlier and in greater numbers, than most other students. (Brown, 1999; Brown, Cheng, Yau, & Ziegler, 1992; Cheng, & Yau, 1999; Cheng, Tsuji, Yau, & Ziegler, 1989; Santos, 2004; Nunes, 1986, 2003; Ornstein, 2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Yau, Cheng, & Ziegler, 1993). Luso-Canadians in Toronto have also been more likely to say that they will not attend university, to lack confidence in their ability to succeed in post-secondary education, to work the longest average hours of part-time work and spend the fewest hours per week on homework (Cheng & Yau, 1999; Cheng, Yau & Ziegler, 1993; Larter, Cheng, Capps & Lee, 1982; Project Diploma, 2004). At the turn of the millennium, only approximately 6% of all Luso-Canadians over the age of 15 had achieved a university degree (Matas & Valentine, 2000).

The community’s dropout problem was highlighted in the report of the *Royal Commission on Learning* (1994) and among the newer generations by Giles, (2002) and Ornstein, (2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2000c). In the report *Ethnoracial Inequality in Toronto*, Ornstein, (2000) showed how Portuguese youth aged 20-24 had the second-highest dropout rate of any minority and described Luso-Canadians as one of the groups “of most concern” (p. 51) and as suffering “extreme [educational] disadvantage,” (pp. 124-125). In 2006, Ornstein followed with two other reports showing that this situation had not changed and that the Portuguese in Montreal and Vancouver were showing similar trends (Ornstein, 2006a, 2006b).

### ***The Fears of “Social Reproduction”***

In the 1980's and 90's, a number of community organizations and activists brought this problem to the attention of the media and government. They blamed the school system for failing to act on systemic discriminatory barriers, such as academic streaming, biased I.Q. testing and low teacher expectations (Dos Santos, Perestrelo & Coelho, 1985; Duffy, 1995; Ward, 1985). The *Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education*, an ad-hoc group of over 40 community associations and activists, also set up ongoing working groups with both School Boards, looking into ways of reversing these trends. These groups echoed the concern of their community regarding the wholesale “social reproduction” and subsequent marginalization of entire generations of Portuguese youth. Participants in a 1998 national study of Luso-Canadians related these fears:

*If our children do not complete high-school... do not go to University, we are going to continue to have a Portuguese community that is the mirror image of ...the first generation... I think that, if we do not pay attention [this will turn into] a great calamity for the Portuguese community” (Nunes, 1998, p. 7).*

This sentiment was also echoed, in a separate study in Montreal:

*“first, a great number of third-generation members are neither pursuing an education nor acquiring marketable skills....Many appear fervently determined “to enjoy life instead of just working hard and saving. I found it appalling that no one [...] seems to realize the seriousness of the situation, or seems troubled by the uncertain [...] future of the third generation (Noivo, 1997, p. 95).*

A point of urgency on this matter is the fact that, this community's under 24 youth component is proportionately larger and also has a faster growth rate than the overall population, or similar ethnocultural groups (ex. Italians, Greeks) (Nunes, 1998; Ornstein, 2006b, 2006c; Tepper, 2002). Thus, the successful integration of this community is more intimately tied than most to the development of the *social capital* of its youth (Policy Research Initiative, 2005).

The community's fears regarding the lack of educational progress of its youth are borne out by research which shows that Portuguese-Canadian children of immigrants are, indeed, not progressing beyond their parents' limited socio-economic roles. A 2005 report on the

intergenerational mobility amongst the children of immigrants indicated that, while Portuguese-Canadian youth had nearly doubled their education levels from those of their fathers, their incomes had failed to improve from those of their predecessors (Aydemir, Chen, & Corak, 2005). In fact, first-generation males were shown to actually be earning slightly less than their fathers, with females earning exceedingly less. The report also illustrated that, the income levels for Canadian-born children of the Portuguese are similar to those of more recent visible-minority immigrant groups, who also have similarly low education levels, (ex. Central Americans, South Americans, Guyanese, Jamaicans, Grenadians and Ecuadorians, etc.).

### **The Need for An Ethno-Specific Research Focus**

A frequent call of many Luso-Canadian organizations and activists, in meetings with various Ontario Ministers of Education and the *Royal Commission on Learning*, has been for more research on this problem, including more research into ethnicity-referenced data (Ferreira, 1998; Januario, 1997, 1998; Levy, 1995; Pedro, 2004; Ponte, 1995; Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, pp. 95-96; Tavares, Sept. 29, 2004).

Despite these calls and the indications that this group faces significant barriers to integration, the case of the Portuguese has yet to be effectively examined by the research community, particularly by government. Being a predominantly white, European minority, the Portuguese are most often not identified as a separate target group, in many government research and policy documents. Consequently, data on this community in such reports is often amalgamated under the rubric of “European”, “Southern European” or “white.” In this fashion, the community’s issues are not highlighted, discussed, nor brought to the attention of policy-makers.

Concomitantly, this group also does not attract much attention from the wider academic research community. For example, in a 2001 annotated bibliography of Master’s and PhD theses, which were conducted from 1980 to 2001 on the topic of diversity, it was noted that, out of 1500 dissertations, only 16 had been conducted specifically on the Portuguese (Mulholland, 2001). In comparison, in this time period 160 theses were conducted on Chinese-Canadians, 80 each on South-Asians and Blacks, 50 on Italians and 20 on Greeks.

This lack of attention is reflected at the policy level, in a lack of inclusion of the Portuguese in equity initiatives that are designed to counter systemic barriers. For example, some of the youth in this community question why the Portuguese are not counted amongst the designated Federal Government Equity Groups, despite suffering severe structural barriers to education (Nunes, 1998). These youth lament the fact that a number of communities whose graduation patterns show no underachievement are included, while they are not. Other youth have also decried the common practice of using region of origin to identify who is a visible minority, for equity purposes (for example, job applications which specifically state that those born in Portugal are not to self-identify as visible minority). One youth pointed out the ironic situation that a Brazilian-born child of Portuguese immigrants, who had moved to Canada from Latin America, would be eligible to claim visible-minority status in an employment application, while the child's cousins, or brothers, who were born in Canada, or in Portugal, would not.

This great lack of research and policy attention points to a current gap in our Diversity Dialogue. The lack of an ethno-cultural focus to much of the research that is conducted at the level of government affects not only the Portuguese, but even other, visible-minority groups, which are often amalgamated under the rubric of wider racial categories (ex. Haitians, Vietnamese, Afghans, etc.). Like the Portuguese, some of these groups are facing similarly severe barriers to integration, yet their unique situations are rarely being addressed separately in research and policy from those of other visible-minority communities.

In summary, in casting a wider net, to include considerations of race, the Diversity Dialogue has addressed a reality which, in previous decades, had been long ignored. However, grouping different and often culturally or linguistically unique groups into broad racial categorizations has also often served to obscure significant differences between very different ethno-cultural populations of similar race. These are communities should be profiled, in their own right, and their needs addressed in policy. It is hoped that Canada's Diversity Dialogue can find the right balance between the need to address both ethnicity and race.



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