Constructing “Ethnic Canadians”: The Implications for Public Policy and Inclusive Citizenship

Rejoinder to Rhoda Howard-Hassmann

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International migration is an important facet of globalization that has brought unprecedented levels of ethnocultural and racial diversity to Canadian society. The presence of an increasingly heterogeneous population raises questions about how diversity can be reconciled with Canadian nation-building goals — especially the ability to construct and reproduce a national political community of rights-bearing citizens. One answer is given by Rhoda Howard-Hassmann in a provocative article recently published in Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques, entitled “‘Canadian’ as an Ethnic Category: Implications for Multiculturalism and National Unity.”

Rhoda Howard-Hassmann argues that “among English-speaking, non-aboriginal Canadians, there is such a thing as an ethnic Canadian identity” (1999, p. 522). What ethnic Canadians have in common, in her view, are: territory (Canada, or possibly the “rest of Canada” sans Quebec although this is not entirely clear), English language, European ancestry, Christian religious heritage and/or a broader Canadian culture (ibid., p. 529). Howard-Hassmann argues that a shared ethnic identity among (English) Canadians assists in inculcating a “thick” conception of citizenship and loyalty to the Canadian nation state. As Martha Stewart would say, “it’s a good thing.” For Howard-Hassmann, what is a bad thing, and to be resisted, is a move to “illiberal multiculturalist” public policies that emphasize Canadians’ attachments to ethnic groups, ancestral languages, customs and religions at the expense of “social assimilation into Canadian ethnicity” (ibid., p. 524). By forcing (English) Canadians to focus on their ancestral ethnic heritage, she asserts that illiberal multiculturalist academics and activists have suppressed the “hidden nation” of English-Canada (ibid., p. 535).
Only two articles are extensively cited by Howard-Hassmann as exemplifying illiberal multiculturalist views — one by us published in *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques* (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis 1992) and a second by Evelyn Kallen (1990). While there are indeed significant differences between our respective positions on multiculturalism and other state policies, Canadian identity, citizenship, and the ideal future of Canadian society, they are not the ones identified by Howard-Hassmann.

In the 1992 article cited by Howard-Hassmann, we suggested that the Reform Party was instrumental in dismantling the partisan consensus that had prevailed for much of the 1970s and 1980s on the value of multiculturalism and immigration (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis 1992, p. 372). The Reform Party had marshaled an “equality” discourse to launch an attack on state policies such as multiculturalism, bilingualism, and employment equity, at the same time claiming that it was the sole political party not being influenced by ethnic groups who want a “race-oriented” immigration. Thomas Flanagan, one of the Reform Party’s former strategists, has argued, “ethnicity is a purely private concern, and the public sphere is simply Canadian, period. What your ethnic background is [should] not have any political consequences” (cited in Kirkham 1998, p. 258). This particular variant of liberalism, which puts an emphasis on individual rights, and ignores the possibility of differentiated rights, we called liberal individualism. Proponents of this view would suggest that it is problematic to treat ethnicity as anything other than a private matter — an understanding that is also at the heart of Howard-Hassmann’s position — namely that “in the final analysis, religion and ethnicity are private matters” (1999, p. 527).

Howard-Hassmann constructs a dichotomous universe of multiculturalism discourse — liberal and illiberal. Far from manifesting a fluid and processual conception of ethnicity as she professes, Howard-Hassmann’s analysis of non-English Canadian ethnicity and of non-English language appear to us to be assimilationist and anachronistic; in any case this analysis is unsupported by empirical evidence. Moreover, in bracketing the Québécois and indigenous peoples as extraneous to her analysis, she thereby excludes collectivities that are vital parts of the ongoing negotiation of Canadian nationality and citizenship. Howard-Hassmann’s argument that there is a cohesive and inclusive ethnic category called *Canadians* regardless of racial and ethnic ancestry, is readily challenged by analysis of the 1996 Canadian origin census data. To begin to address the differences between Howard-Hassmann’s argument, her interpretation of our 1992 argument and our actual position we will focus on three areas: (i) ethnicity and identity, (ii) liberalism and illiberalism, and (iii) collective action and individual choice. We follow this with a discussion of the limits of Howard-Hassmann’s proposed emphasis a “Canadian ethnicity” in light of Canadian empirical reality, and conclude with an examination of the likely public policy consequences should her view of “ethnic Canadianness” be officially promoted.

**Key Differences: Identity, Liberal Individualism and Collective Action**

Contrary to Howard-Hassmann’s argument, our support for multiculturalism was not for a specific variant of the policy, especially not for what she terms “illiberal multiculturalism” that advocates “strong identification of Canadians with ancestral ethnic groups” (1999, p. 523). Rather, the position we took in our 1992 work was based on the value of multiculturalism to Canada in light of the complexity of ethnicity and identity in the national context, the limitations we see in liberal individualism, and the value we see in collective action that fosters a more inclusive citizenship. Each reason will be discussed in turn.

**Ethnicity and Identity**

A key factor driving our support of multiculturalism in Canada was the sense that the alternative policy frameworks neglected to adequately include ethnic
minorities. A two-nations framework provides space for the negotiation of the distinctiveness and claims to nationhood of francophones in Quebec while confirming the hegemony of the British in the rest of Canada. A three-nations framework provides recognition of indigenous populations within Canada, while ignoring the diversity of First Nations, as well as other non-British, non-French populations. Not least, liberal individualism tends to deligitimize all projects for collective ethnic rights or the justice claims of group-based social movements (e.g., the women’s movement or movements for gay and lesbian rights, or disability rights).

Unfortunately, in her article, Howard-Hassmann misrepresents our understanding of ethnicity by assigning views to us that are non-existent in our 1992 article, and directly contradict much of our work published before and since 1992. Thus, for example, while Howard-Hassmann claims that we characterize ethnicity “as a fixed concrete entity... [which] cannot be changed; you are what your ancestors were,” (1999, p. 525) elsewhere we have addressed the dynamic, malleable and complex character of ethnicity, particularly evident in those claiming multiple origins (Stasiulis and Abu-Laban 1991). In addition, we have both written about the increasingly complex and hybrid forms of identity experienced by many Canadians, particularly evident in large urban centres (see, e.g., Abu-Laban 1998a; Stasiulis 1997, p. 160; 1999). Relatedly, although we cannot speak for Evelyn Kallen, our reading of the same article cited by Howard-Hassmann contradicts her interpretation that Kallen characterizes ethnicity as fixed, static, and concrete. Thus, it is notable that Kallen embraces “a dynamic, social science concept of ethnoculture as ever-adapting life ways of ethnic communities,” (1990, p. 175) and registers her opposition to a “cultural apartheid model” whereby groups are differentiated on the basis of supposedly immutable differences (ibid.). In short, neither we nor Evelyn Kallen “believe in the idea of fixed, primordial groups” or “ethnicity as a fixed, concrete entity” as erroneously attributed by Howard-Hassmann (1999, pp. 526, 525).

Relatedly, Howard-Hassmann suggests that we “want group identities to take precedence over individual ones” (1999, p. 533) and that we “argue for strong identification of Canadians with ancestral ethnic groups” (ibid., p. 523). Howard-Hassmann further suggests that we would “force Canadians into ethnic groups,” thus ignoring individual choice (1999, p. 533). These statements misrepresent our position because they do not differentiate between observation and prescription. There is an important distinction to be made between observing that people retain varying degrees of identification with ethnic groups, and insisting that they should do so. We do the former (observation), not the latter (prescription). In contrast, and as we will discuss further, Howard-Hassmann does advocate a particular type of ethnic identification: namely “Canadian” ethnic identity.

Liberalism and Illiberalism

A second area of difference emerges from our position that liberal individualism is limited in its capacity to adequately represent the range of group claims associated with ethnic diversity. In particular, while Howard-Hassmann does quote part of what we said in 1992 (p. 533), our complete statement was that:

the combined effect of partisan debates on issues of multiculturalism and immigration has been to challenge the state/political elite consensus on the merits of pluralism ... At best, what is left is a discourse emphasizing individual as opposed to group rights through the subsumption of the pluralist notion of multiculturalism under the individualist notion of citizenship. At worst, the doors have been opened for greater partisan representation and articulation of racist sentiment (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis 1992, p. 372).

In this regard, Howard-Hassmann is correct to point out our concern with the manner in which partisan debates on multiculturalism and immigration have eroded the basis for group or collective rights, and the legitimacy of ethnic minority collective action,
leaving what we see as an impoverished discourse of liberal individualism. And, as noted, it is the emphasis on individual rights to the exclusion of any group-based claims (what we call liberal individualism) that seems to be at the heart of Howard-Hassmann’s distinction between “liberal” and “illiberal” multiculturalism. Even here, however, there are some significant silences in Howard-Hassmann’s discussion that render the liberal-illiberal dichotomy problematic, especially insofar as this underpins her implicit advocacy of state policies bolstering (English) Canadian identity.

A major conceptual problem concerns the fact that Howard-Hassmann does not define “illiberal.” She quotes only Appiah on illiberal multicultural education, which “wants to force children to live within separate spheres defined by the common culture of their race, religion, or ethnicity” (p. 526). In this example, to be “illiberal” appears synonymous with being coercive. Yet, there are more alternatives to being liberal than simply illiberal. For instance, one could be social democratic, socialist, radical democratic, or simply non-liberal. A dichotomous treatment of the multiculturalism debate in terms of a liberal/illiberal divide cannot account for some of the most interesting, bold, and innovative forms of multiculturalism including radical, critical, insurgent, and polycentric multiculturalism, all of which are neither liberal nor illiberal (see Henry and Tator 1999, pp. 98-99; Shohat and Stam 1994). A hallmark of these types of multiculturalism discourse is a concern with the empowerment of marginalized groups and transformation of social, cultural, and economic institutions (Henry and Tator 1999, p. 98).

A related set of omissions concerns Howard-Hassmann’s treatment of liberalism as equivalent with only one strand, namely possessive individualism (Macpherson 1962). Howard-Hassmann’s treatment of non-Canadian ethnicities as synonymous to Weber’s “small differences” enacted only in the private sphere is animated by liberal individualism, whereby ethnicity, language, identity, and racism are all purely individual phenomena (1999, pp. 528-30). She therefore warns about public policies that would “ignore the fundamental individualism of Canadians’ cultural choices” (ibid., p. 533). Liberal individualists typically support a minimal state, defend as a matter of principle the divide between the public sphere of government and the private sphere of civil society, and guard individual rights while rejecting state recognition of group rights. Liberal individualists conceptualize non-dominant ethnicity purely in terms of individual phenomena such as voluntary ethnic tastes, rituals, and identities: conscious choices made within a supermarket of possible options. For liberal individualists, ethnic communities do not really exist; they are pre-modern and temporary constructs, or are the result of the manipulations of self-promoting ethnic entrepreneurs. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, “market-based choice models grounded in individualism argue that freedom exists via the absence of constraints of all sorts, including those of mandatory group membership” (1997, p. 375).

Our discomfort with liberal individualism is that it imports a double standard in its consideration of ethnic culture and language for minority and dominant ethnic groups respectively, thereby ignoring the power relations inscribed in societal institutions which privilege the ethnic culture, values, and language of the dominant ethnic groups. According to Howard-Hassmann, “[r]eligion, ethnic or cultural affiliation, indeed choice of language used in private, are matters of official public indifference ... It is not the business of the government to ensure the preservation or influence of such private groups” (1999, p. 527). This view downplays the fact that Canadian governments have always acted to ensure the preservation and influence of so-called private groups. In fact, the Canadian state has enforced specific ethnic cultures and languages, as evidenced in the constitutional recognition of English and French as the two official languages, and the right to denominational (read Protestant and Catholic) schools in the British North America Act (1867) and the Constitution Act, 1982.
In treating ethnicity as a purely individual phenomenon of identity and tastes, Howard-Hassmann’s arguments minimize the ways in which ethnicity and race have been woven into the fabric of Canadian social structure in such a manner as to foster group or collective forms of inequality, grievances, and social movements. More generally, advocates of liberal individualism are in danger of obscuring the racism and Eurocentrism that historically inscribed liberal thought and the political processes of all liberal democracies (see Goldberg 1993).

Yet liberal individualism is not the only form of liberalism. In part because of “liberalism’s almost chameleon-like ability to absorb opposition” (Meyer 1998, p. 58) various liberals, including Will Kymlicka (1995, 1998), Joseph Carens (1995), and Charles Taylor (1994) have argued the compatibility of liberalism with pluralism, and specifically the recognition of group rights pertaining to national and/or ethnic minorities. Thus, Will Kymlicka in his book *Multicultural Citizenship* posits that the extension of differentiated rights to minorities is in keeping with one major strand of liberal thought historically and today (1995, pp. 49-50). It should be noted that neither this work nor Kymlicka’s subsequent book providing a liberal defence of collective provisions within Canadian multiculturalism policy (Kymlicka 1998) are cited by Howard-Hassmann, despite her emphasis on the dichotomy between “liberal” and “illiberal” forms of multiculturalism. Indeed, incorporating a wider range of theoretical works may have led her to moderate her suggestion that “the individual takes precedence over the group in liberal multiculturalism; in illiberal multiculturalism, the group takes precedence” (1999, p. 526).

Even at the actual level of Canadian public policy, the liberal-illiberal dichotomy is problematic. Howard-Hassmann attempts to prove that Canadian multiculturalism policy is predicated on purely individual cultural choices, and the privatization of immigrant ethnic identities, cultures, and languages (1999, pp. 520, 526, 527, 532-33). Her discussion minimizes the extent to which Canadian multiculturalism evolved to acknowledge and address certain issues of collective disadvantage of marginalized groups, communal development, intergroup relations, and cultural and linguistic pluralism — this is clear in section 1 of the 1988 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (see Statutes 1988).

**Collective Action and Individual Choice**

A third area of difference stems from the value we see in collective action as a vehicle for progressive social change. Our focus on the legitimacy provided by official multiculturalism for collective action on the part of minority ethnic groups is not synonymous with stressing a “strong identification of Canadians with ancestral ethnic groups” that Howard-Hassmann attributes to us. The boundaries of membership in collectivities, communities or social movements that engage in collective action are rarely or never equivalent to perceived boundaries of ancestral ethnic groups. Rather, they are more likely to be influenced by the commonality of experiences and perspectives that emerge from smaller or larger groups located within given hierarchical material and discursive relations. They are therefore more likely to reflect and reproduce emergent and novel forms of ethnic culture and identity within the Canadian context.

Of course, ethnicity and race are not the only social relations implicated in the power structure or the construction of alterity within Canada, or indeed, any other society. Ethnicity and race intersect in complex ways with class, gender, and sexuality, among other axes of exclusion and subordination, to construct historically specific matrices of power (Stasiulis 1999). Currently, the subordinate labour-market position and political marginality of such groups as foreign domestic workers, garment workers, agricultural seasonal workers, and refugees, who have much in common with oppressed Third World peoples, have spawned more activist and global forms of “ethnic politics.” The activism of such
groups manifests a form of what Holloway Sparks (1997) calls “dissident citizenship” in that they are contesting their marginalization through oppositional democratic practices even in the face of risk, uncertainty and fear (including for some, the very real fear of deportation). Contrary to Howard-Hassmann’s contention that those of us who “adhere to the social movement of the politics of identity ... would reduce Canadians’ sense of citizenship and nationhood” (1999, p. 534), we would argue that it is precisely such social movements that seek to enlarge and enrich Canadian citizenship in the sense of broadening the sense of social justice and equality for all.

We would also add that diasporic politics have been important levers in influencing governments and the international community to respond to national oppressions elsewhere. Such diasporic politics are a growing reality in the context of the complex patterns of globalization of peoples and politics, and where migrants, many of whom hold dual citizenships, have greater capacity than ever before to maintain close links with their homelands. Moreover, many of these struggles against global injustices have caught the imagination and enlisted the activism of Canadians of other ethnic origins, and in this way contribute to building a more cosmopolitan and “thicker” sense of citizenship that promotes cross-national responsibility for the enhancement of human rights and greater global equity (see Thompson 1998).

From our perspective, an English-Canadian national project based on privileging individual identity and action over group identity and action is a narrow one. In any case, the exercise of democratic citizenship engaged in by individual citizens (voting, holding office, etc.) is not the same as collective action among ethnic groups. In combination with individual action, we see the latter as an especially vital element of true democratic participation and democratic citizenship within ethnically pluralist societies.

“CONSTRUCTING CANADIANS” VERSUS THE CANADIAN REALITY

Howard-Hassmann’s advocacy of public policies to promote Canadianness based on English-Canadian ethnic identity (1999, p. 534) raises questions about where Quebecers, Aboriginal peoples, and those who hold other forms of identity other than simply “Canadian” fit. We hold that the political project of constructing ethnic Canadians will inevitably run a collision course with the diverse ways that the Canadian population actually identifies. In this regard, we focus on what we see as problems in this agenda when it comes to contemporary Canadian empirical reality.

In the first place, while Howard-Hassmann imports Weberian and even postmodern conceptions of the malleable, processual properties of ethnicity, the view that emerges when Howard-Hassmann describes “ethnic Canadians” appears assimilationist. One is either the ethnicity of one’s ancestors or one is socialized/assimilated into something called (English)-Canadian ethnicity. This formulation does not capture the complex and hybrid ethnicities, and multiple subjectivities formed out of processes of the globalization of communications, information technology and migration, and intermarriage: particularly in Canada’s large metropolitan cities. Many Canadians, including those of second and further generations, have developed a hybrid sense of identity. While they are of Canadian nationality, their complex ethnicity is not simply that of being of English-Canadian ethnic identity.

A second problem emerges from the fact that while Howard-Hassmann argues that ethnicity is fluid and socially constructed, the view of Canadian ethnicity that emerges may be seen to reflect Canada as imagined by Lord Durham (i.e., as a colony of the British Empire with minimal accommodation of the French). Thus Howard-Hassmann speaks of the characteristics defining Canadians as including the territory of Canada (or possibly Canada without Quebec), the English language, the Christian
Constructing “Ethnic Canadians” 483

This conception does not accord with the presence of French-speaking Canadians and Aboriginal peoples in all parts of Canada, as well as the increasingly multi-religious and multicultural character of Canada’s population. It also ignores the multiplicity of linguistic practices that are in reality evident in the public sphere.

Indeed, the static character and museum status of non-Canadian ethnicities, supposedly confined to the private sphere or simply absent in the second generation is particularly evident in Howard-Hassmann’s discussion of language, which presents a third problem. Howard-Hassmann posits English as the “vibrant, dynamic language of technical change, modern slang, and the arts” (1999, p. 529). All other languages are confined to “the private non-English maternal language of the home that some Canadians speak [and] may well be dated and outmoded, not having a living public world with which to keep up” (ibid.). This linguistic observation is contradicted by the Official Languages Act of 1969, which created official bilingualism at the federal (public) level. It also does not accord with the rights granted to francophones outside Quebec and anglophones inside Quebec in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the area of (public) education.

In addition, Howard-Hassmann’s description of Canadian language practices is further challenged by current linguistic demography. Some demographers are now predicting that the family of Chinese languages will soon surpass French as the country’s most common second language outside Quebec (Singer 1999, p. A2). The description of a monolingual public sphere offered by Howard-Hassmann is also unlikely to register with the everyday experience of almost everyone who lives in a medium to large Canadian city. Ethnic linguistic markers map out public spaces such as commercial and residential districts, religious institutions, community centres, cemeteries, parades, and other celebrations.

Howard-Hassmann defines English-Canadians as “Canadians, other than indigenous peoples, who normally speak English, rather than French, in the public realm” (1999, p. 524). The exclusions apparent in this definition include Quebecers who live in Montreal and frequently speak English as well as French in the public realm, and Aboriginal Canadians who speak English primarily (or combinations of English, French, and indigenous languages) in the public realm. What would Howard-Hassmann do with francophones living outside Quebec, whose French-language rights are protected, but who often or primarily speak English in the public domain? According to her own definition, they would be English-Canadian, an ethnic identity that many such French-Canadians would vehemently reject. The difficulties in maintaining the linguistic definition of English-Canadian ethnicity abound when one considers a Vancouverite of Chinese ancestry who speaks Mandarin in Chinatown and in her home, and English in many other public places.

A fourth problem which suggests the limitations of liberal individualism is Howard-Hassmann’s discussion of the Christian religion as “[a]nother common shared characteristic of Canadians” (1999, p. 529). She asserts that “many Canadians whose ancestors lived in parts of the world outside Europe are also Christian: there are Christians in Canada of Indian, Korean, Chinese, and African ancestry. This is because in a liberal country such as Canada, religion — like culture in general — is not merely a matter of ancestral identity, it is a matter of choice” (1999, p. 529, italics added). While individuals may choose religious conversion, the distribution of world religions in Canada, as elsewhere, is accounted for by more complex socio-historical processes of cultural and religious transmission (such as colonialism, migration, trade, and religious wars) which undermine the notion of a cultural supermarket in which one simply chooses one’s religion and culture.

A fifth problem exists in Howard-Hassmann’s discussion of the shared consumption patterns of
Canadians of different ethnic backgrounds. She states that “Canadians of all ancestral backgrounds favour one-family houses, and purchase cars and labour-saving household appliances” as evidence that English-Canadians “share many … customs, desires and ambitions with people of dissimilar ethnic or even racial ancestry” (1999, p. 531). But are such shared consumption patterns or similarities in occupational behaviour of all Canadians regardless of ethnic ancestry really about shared ethnicity, and especially a shared (English)-Canadian ethnic identity? These observed similarities in consumer (and occupational) cultures are more readily seen as the result of the globalization of capitalism which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between Canadians and Americans or indeed citizens of other postindustrial capitalist countries, or some parts of the developing world.

The final, and most thorny problem emerges from Howard-Hassmann’s view that ethnic ancestry, place of birth, and skin colour are basically irrelevant among those who identify as English-Canadian, even though she also suggests that the common characteristics of “ethnic” Canadians include territory and European ancestry. She states that, “The ethnic English-Canadian is not necessarily a possessor of English or even British ancestry” (ibid., p. 528) and “[a]n English-Canadian may be of any ethnic or racial background; he may have Ukrainian or Ghanaian rather than British-Protestant ancestry” (ibid., p. 531). This characterization of those who have identified as having Canadian origins does not reflect patterns of ethnic identification found within the census data to which Howard-Hassmann makes reference.

It is notable that between the national Censuses of 1991 and 1996 there was a dramatic increase in the number of people reporting “Canadian” as an ethnic origin from less than 3 percent of respondents to 19 percent (Canada. Statistics Canada 1997, pp. 1-2). A comparison of reporting patterns in the 1991 and the most recent 1996 census show that those most likely to identify with the category “Canadian” were people who previously provided English or French only origins, and whose families likely have been in Canada several generations (ibid., pp. 2-3; see also Kalbach and Kalbach 1999).

The growth in the number of people reporting Canadian as their single ethnic origin in the Census is important and worthy of further research. But the increase in self-identification as “Canadian” in the census should be treated with caution and careful analysis. A fact that is significant to any discussion of Canadian identity is the large number of Quebecers in the 1996 census who identified with being Canadian. It is important to underscore that Canadien carries a distinct meaning in French. Howard-Hassmann’s insistence that ethnicity represents an individual identity “choice” is also unmindful of the likelihood that reporting of “Canadian” origin in the 1996 census — may not merely be about choice. Those reporting “Canadian” may do so in part because of lost memories of where their ancestors came from (Kalbach and Kalbach 1999, p. 15), as a result of factors like intermarriage, or even adoption. Indeed, as we have argued, complex social processes and common positioning within social structures shape ethnicity and ethnic identity. Howard-Hassmann’s upholding of the “Canadian” category as basically “difference blind” does not accord with the findings of other studies which suggest that ethnic and racialized minorities generally tend not to report Canadian as an ethnic origin (see Pendakur and Mata 1998).

Not least, it is relevant to consider why those who claimed “Canadian” ethnicity did so in relatively large numbers in 1996 compared with other census years. Monica Boyd’s (1999) careful and insightful analysis of the ever-increasing numbers of people reporting “Canadian” between the 1986, 1991, and 1996 censuses suggests that the cumulative factors that account for the increase include a backlash against immigration, the rise of the Reform Party, and questionnaire design changes in the census. Boyd also highlights the “Count-Me-Canadian” campaign mounted prior to the 1991 census date.
through the print media. Combined, these factors highlight that far from being a “natural” evolution, the increase in numbers reporting “Canadian” on the census results from a form of the “politics of identity” — in principle rejected by Howard-Hassmann.

In the final analysis the reality is that over 80 percent of respondents in the 1996 census did not see themselves as only or simply “Canadian” (ibid., p. 3). This suggests that a stress on “Canadian as an ethnic category” will simply fail to capture the everyday lives and complicated ways with which the vast majority of people in Canada self-identify, including as hybrids with multiple origins.

While Howard-Hassmann’s discussion of the emerging Canadian ethnicity may be debated and critiqued, her central thesis — that there is a cohesive ethnic category called “Canadians” — is likely to have popular purchase in some quarters (e.g., the Canadian Alliance). The popular appeal of this position therefore carries potential consequences for the future of a wide range of public policies in Canada, including the nature of origin questions asked on future censuses, and the future of multiculturalism. It is to these public policy concerns that we turn to conclude our remarks.

**Public Policy Consequences of Constructing Canadians**

Howard-Hassmann’s advocacy of “English-Canadian” as an ethnic category has numerous implications for public policy, including multiculturalism. A multiculturalism that recognizes non-Canadian ethnicity solely in the private sphere cannot sustain programs that aim at ameliorating disadvantage and facilitating the integration of immigrants. This is because a two-way process of integration by which immigrants and Canadian institutions continually adjust requires recognizing cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. Indeed, the integration of immigrants in urban centres is a major policy emphasis in the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien (Abu-Laban 1998b). Although Howard-Hassmann states her support for a “liberal” multiculturalism policy, such a policy, as she defines it, seems more likely to encourage assimilation and the cultural hegemony of dominant ethnic groups than to encourage integration.

In addition, there is already a passionate debate about the future of the Canadian census and the ethnic origin questions because of the rise in the number of people reporting “Canadian” in the 1996 census (see Boyd 1999). Howard-Hassmann endorses Weinfeld’s sentiment that “the image of Canada as an ethnic mosaic is facilitated when census data reify arbitrarily assigned census categories” (Weinfeld, quoted in Howard-Hassmann 1999, pp. 525-26). This position feeds into support for the idea that ethnic origin questions should be abolished. This is symbolically problematic, because the census is a major state instrument that carries considerable weight in terms of establishing “who we are.” As the noted French historian Gérard Noiriel has observed of France (where an ethnic origin question is absent from the census) the net result is to have the immigrant disappear from history, making room for the inaccurate and exclusionary argument that France is not a country of immigrants (Noiriel 1992). Thus, in advocating for an inclusive sense of citizenship that encourages a sense of belonging among immigrants, Howard-Hassmann’s position — that we are or should all be “just Canadians” — carries the potential of erasing the significance of diverse ethnic origins and countries of birth for Canadian public policy and public discourse.

This approach is also problematic from the perspective of the public administration of equity concerns. Public policies such as employment equity are dependent on statistical data that identify numbers of different “target groups” in Canada (i.e., Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, women and visible minorities). This is also true for a host of other programs aimed at providing services to a diverse population (e.g., culturally and linguistically sensitive health care or programs for victims of
spousal abuse). The information necessary to sustain these kinds of initiatives is dependent upon retaining questions that identify race and ethnicity. While Howard-Hassmann does not mention employment equity, or related policies, a probable consequence of the absence of public and policy recognition of (non-Canadian) ethnicity is the impossibility of sustaining such programs.

Not least, Howard-Hassmann’s approach raises some serious issues relating to how “Canadians” are to interface with other collectivities — the First Nations, French speakers, Quebecers, allophones, and those who do not self-identify ethnically as “Canadian.” An emphasis on Canadian ethnicity, especially if it is based on European heritage and the Christian religion, embodies cultural and racialized particulars. Is this really what Canadian public policy should be in the business of “acknowledging and strengthening” (Howard-Hassmann 1999, p. 535), precisely at a time when the majority of immigrants arriving in Canada since the early 1980s were born in countries outside Europe, and when many of them practise religions other than Christianity? By emphasizing cultural attributes such as English language, European heritage, and Christian religion, Howard-Hassmann risks promoting a form of Canadianness where some Canadians (English-speaking, Christian, European) may be viewed as more Canadian than others. Is this really a form of identity that fosters a stronger national identity, or alternatively, does it foster and reinforce ethnic and linguistic divisions and religious intolerances, and a racialized, linguistic, and religious hierarchy of Canadian citizenship?

In the end, Howard-Hassmann herself fails to elaborate on what public policies the Canadian government should develop to “promote” her version of “ethnic” Canadianness. Arguably, any public money allocated to such an enterprise would likely provoke the ire of many: witness the outrage of Canadians to the short-lived federal proposal to give millions of dollars to retain professional hockey teams in Canada based on the Liberal government’s reasoning that hockey is a symbol of Canadian national culture. We would suggest that the restoration and expansion of the social welfare net — particularly to repair the damage done by de-funding health care and education — would do more to restore a sense of pride in Canada among all Canadian citizens.

While the policy ramifications of an emphasis on “Canadian ethnicity” are manifold, such a strategy ultimately ignores the hard questions of negotiating relations among the full complex of ethnic/racial/national identities that must be accounted for within contemporary Canadian models of nation-building and citizenship. Downplaying the diverse ways people in Canada identify (in ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, and other terms) will ignite and deepen collective grievances and feelings of exclusion. Indeed, fostering inclusive forms of citizenship aimed at creating a sense of belonging, justice and equity is premised first and foremost on recognition and respect for diversity, and a critical understanding of how such diversity is intimately linked with structural relations of power both globally and in Canadian society.

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Constructing “Ethnic Canadians” 487


