

# The Racial Subtext in Canada's Immigration Discourse

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*The articulation of race has become subtle and elusive in democratic societies because racism conflicts with principles of equality and non-discrimination. This article examines Canada's immigration discourse and argues that a racial subtext can be discerned from the discourse by examining its vocabulary, syntax, structure, and implied rationale. The study shows that codified concepts and an implied logic are used to convey racial messages that appear not to be "race"-based. The discourse is further facilitated by opinion polls and academic studies that reify the notion of "race" and legitimize its everyday use as a harmless concept. It is the discourse itself, and not implied differences of "race," that fragments Canada. The study recommends abandoning the use of racial subtext in academic research and immigration policy development.*

*La définition de la race est devenue subtile et insaisissable dans les sociétés démocratiques parce que le racisme entre en conflit avec les principes d'égalité et de non-discrimination. Cet article examine le discours canadien en matière d'immigration et fait valoir qu'il est possible de discerner dans ce discours un thème racial sous-jacent, si l'on examine le vocabulaire, la syntaxe, la structure et le raisonnement implicite. L'étude montre que des concepts codifiés et une logique implicite servent à transmettre des messages raciaux qui semblent ne pas se fonder sur la « race ». Ce discours est en outre facilité par des sondages d'opinion et des études universitaires qui concrétisent la notion de « race » et légitiment son utilisation quotidienne comme un concept inoffensif. C'est le discours lui-même, et non pas les différences implicites concernant la race, qui fragmente le Canada. L'étude recommande d'abandonner l'utilisation d'un thème racial sous-jacent dans les recherches universitaires et dans l'élaboration d'une politique d'immigration.*

In this article, I examine the articulation of race in Canada's immigration discourse and argue that racial messages are often articulated subtly in a democratic society such that their nature, form, and effect are elusive. The use of a racial subtext, that is, the hiding of racial signification in a

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benign discourse and conveying it in coded language, represents a sophisticated way of articulating “race” in a democratic society that makes such articulation socially acceptable. The analysis also illustrates how a public policy debate can, perhaps unwittingly, contribute to divisions of socially constructed “racial” groups by giving credence to racial assumptions that are camouflaged in what appears to be neutral language of a public discourse.

Although the articulation of racism in a democratic society can be elusive, racism is essentially a social feature that recognizes the social significance of classifying people into immutable racial groups based on real or imagined congenital features. The term *racialization* is often used to highlight the social process of attributing social significance to phenotypical features of people and designating those so signified as “racial” (Li, 1998; Miles, 1989; Satzewich, 1998). One result of racialization is to provide a normative coherence for people to organize and to interpret at least some of their experiences. At the more extreme level, racialization can easily provide grounds for unequal treatment, as well as a rationale for justifying inequality.

There is an apparent contradiction between the premise of racialization and the tenet of democracy, as the former implies the signification of primordial features, whereas the latter negates it and regards all human beings as equals. To address this paradox, Henry, Tator, Mattis, and Rees (2000) coin the term *democratic racism* to highlight how racism can be justified in a democratic society in racial myths and stereotypes without requiring its followers to denounce the principles of democracy. In practice, as Li (1994) argues, the significance of race in a democratic society can be articulated in codified language that sanctifies what otherwise would be unholy racial messages and transforms them into noble concerns of citizens that become acceptable and even appealing to majority members. In other words, racist discourse assumes a gentle appearance in order to claim its legitimacy in a democratic society. More succinctly, Zong (1997) adopts the term *new racism* to highlight its oblique and covert nature from its conventional blatant manifestation.

In this article, I adopt the notion of a *discourse* to study Canada’s immigration debate. The deconstruction of the discourse reveals a hidden racial subtext. The racial messages of the subtext are articulated unambiguously, although the subtext itself tends to be opaque. Uncovering the racial subtext requires deconstructing the vocabulary, the assumptions, and the rationale of the discourse.

## Racism and Racial Discourse

There is little doubt that racism involves an ideology that advocates a hierarchy of superiority premised upon what are believed to be genetically and culturally constituted "races," although academics disagree over whether social practice and structural inequality should be included in the concept (Banton, 1977; Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Henry et al., 2000; Miles, 1989; Li, 1999; Satzewich, 1998). Thus racism presupposes the signification of "race" as congenital and logical grounds for categorizing people into naturally constituted immutable groups. Because there is no scientific basis that can justify using superficial features such as skin colour to construct a defensible "racial" taxonomy, racial signification must be socially constructed (Bolaria, Singh & Li, 1988; Miles, 1989; Rex, 1983).

Racism can be articulated in an elusive and covert manner in a democratic society precisely because the construction of race is not scientifically grounded, and the absence of a scientific standard provides flexibility in racial signification. Thus it is not so much the fundamental nature of racism that has changed under liberal democracy as how racial messages are articulated and race is constructed that gives the impression that racism has taken on a new form.

The mutational appearance of racism makes it difficult to detect in a democratic society. In particular, the traditional approach to study racism as blatantly expressed individual prejudice is ill equipped to track the changing forms of racism, as old measurement tools can easily become obsolete when race is articulated covertly and subtly.<sup>2</sup>

Bonilla-Silva (1996) is critical of the idealist perspective of racism that confines racism to the realm of social psychology. In this tradition, racism is viewed as individual prejudiced attitudes that collectively reflect the level of racism in society. Standard questions like those used in the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1925, 1968) have been repeatedly adopted in opinion polls to gauge a country's level of racism, which is assumed to be static (Owen, Eisner & McFaul, 1981). Typically such measurements yield results that show racism declines over time (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). In reality the articulation of race and racism may have changed, and survey questions that at one time might have detected respondents' blatant racist dispositions may at another time fail to capture those respondents who hold such beliefs but are reluctant to express them to a pollster because of heightened awareness that explicit racial remarks are politically and socially inopportune. In short, as the political climate changes and racial discourse assumes an opaque appearance,

respondents may learn to verbalize racial tolerance and to adopt a benign language to articulate racial messages without appearing racist to themselves and to others.

Attitudinal surveys of racial prejudice may be an acceptable way to study racism if prejudice is the only form of racism and if it is unchanged over time. In reality, as Wellman (1977) describes it, racism is "a culturally sanctioned, rational response to struggles over scarce resources" (p. 35). Therefore, as the structural position of subordinate groups changes or as racial dominance softens, the racial thinking of the dominant whites also changes accordingly to accommodate the new realities. For this reason racism cannot be studied merely as enduring prejudiced ideas of individuals, but must be located in the narratives and everyday experiences of people (Essed, 1991).

It is in its ability to tackle the subtle articulation of race and racism that discourse analysis proves to be useful (Mills, 1997; Tator, Henry & Mattis, 1998). One way to conceptualize discourse is to regard it as a domain of language use in the process of knowledge construction, which involves common terminologies, accepted assumptions, and a well-versed rationale that are adopted to make sense of social practices and social phenomena (Foucault, 1972). A discourse implies abiding by what Foucault calls "the rules of some discursive policy" and applying "the rules of exclusion" (pp. 216, 224). In particular, critical discourse analysts stress unravelling unequal power relations that are embedded in language and text with a view to changing social outcomes (Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996; van Dijk, 1993; Mills, 1997). A discourse analysis of race does not imply reducing racism to only ideas engaged in a language. It is recognition of the inadequacy of studying racism as pertaining only to a formal set of beliefs that upholds a racial hierarchy premised on congenital differences of people. After all, it is precisely this explicit version of racism that most citizens of a democratic society have little hesitation in rejecting, because such a formal ideology is too blatantly contradictory to the fundamental values of democracy. Even racial supremacists, who are relatively small in number in most democratic societies, tend to adopt a more sophisticated language to cover their racist stance in order to win wider public support and to avoid legal prosecutions (Li, 1995). A racial discourse implies constructing the language, the terminology, and the rules, as well as setting the limits on how racial practices are to be represented and understood; in turn it means using the defined language and the constructed knowledge to make sense of events and to influence future outcomes.

To study racial discourses involves accepting racism as an everyday phenomenon that is manifested in a benign version, often without the label of racism. This version is communicated in coded language so that on appearance it is not race or racism at stake, but in essence it carries a message about unbridgeable differences of people premised upon values, traditions, and ways of life subsumed under skin colour or other superficial features. The users of this codified language sometimes are not aware that they are engaged in a racist discourse as they themselves tend to be convinced by its rhetoric, and they truly believe that they share the democratic values and therefore cannot be branded as racists. From their vantage point, to do so amounts to using a heavy-handed label like racism to silence them, when in fact they believe they are expressing their legitimate views as citizens of a democratic society.

### **Racial Subtext in Canada's Immigration Discourse**

Canada's immigration discourse is an outgrowth of the government's interest in involving the public in major policy decisions in recent years, although there has always been sustained public interest in and media attention on immigration. However, it would be incorrect to assume that the discourse represents the government's position, although the official stance on various aspects of immigration forms a part of the discourse. Participants in the discourse include politicians, government officials, academics, community groups, and individual citizens, and their views are often articulated in public opinions, discussions, debates, prevailing viewpoints, academic writings, and media reports about issues of immigration.

The importance of public consultation to the government was underscored by Sergio Marchi, the then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, in the House of Commons in 1994: "Consultation will always be the hallmark of how this government decides its policy" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 1994a). On another occasion Marchi (1994) expanded on this point as follows:

Government in general has to do a better job of listening to the views of groups which are directly involved with specific policy areas ... In immigration, this means listening to school boards, health associations, municipalities, labour, police, community

service groups, and individual Canadians.... If immigration is truly to be about nation building, then all Canadians must have a part in shaping the future. (p. 3)

No doubt the government considers public consultation as an indispensable component in formulating a major policy like immigration. Many methods, including opinion polls, town hall meetings, conferences, and expert consultations, have been used to seek the informed consent and cooperation of citizens and interest groups, broadly referred to as stakeholders. In this atmosphere, individual citizens and interest groups have the unmistakable impression that they are exercising their democratic rights in expressing their views about the desirability or undesirability of immigration and how the policy should be framed.

Canada's immigration discourse does not necessarily imply a consensus; in fact there are many conflicting views about various topics of immigration. But the discourse has clearly adopted certain language styles, terminologies, assumptions, and indeed a rationale for articulating issues of immigration. One such issue is the question of *diversity*.

There is a prevailing view in Canada's immigration discourse that changes in immigration policy since the 1960s have produced a pattern of immigration that results in large numbers of immigrants from "non-traditional" sources of Asia and Africa to Canada, and that the sudden growth of non-white immigrants has posed a challenge for Canada to respond to diversity. Specifically, increased diversity has produced 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, and 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 views and see their lives being adversely affected, the government feels obligated to take into account citizens' concerns and their readiness to accept diversity in setting future policy.

The above viewpoint is routinely echoed in public meetings and

government discussion papers. For example, a discussion paper produced by Employment and Immigration Canada (1989) and intended to "stimulate an informed and frank debate" has this to say.

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. (pp. 8-9)

Other problems of diversity have been identified such as its adverse effects on the large urban centres, which are "experiencing adjustment strains as their social services and schools endeavour to meet the diverse needs of these concentrated numbers of new immigrants" (p. 11).

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. This line of argument is increasingly evident in government discussion papers on immigration throughout the 1990s. For example, in a discussion document circulated by CIC (1994b), it repeats under the heading of "Immigration and Diversity" the fact that large numbers of immigrants now come from Asia and concludes that "while there may be increasing concerns about the number of immigrants coming to Canada, there is evidence to suggest that these concerns are linked as much to issues of unemployment and the economy as they are to issues of diversity" (p. 10). In other words, not only is the "problem of diversity" caused by

large numbers of non-white immigrants concentrated in urban centres, but citizens' concerns over too many immigrants are really prompted by their uneasiness over non-whites as much as by issues pertaining to unemployment and the economy. Thus citizens' concerns over diversity have been elevated to the same magnitude and seriousness as concerns over the economy and jobs. Over time, as the concept of diversity is repeatedly used in immigration discourse in the above context, it becomes a coded word to designate non-white immigrants and the problems they have brought to urban Canada, as well as the grounds for citizens' concerns.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the message of citizens' concerns over diversity is unmistakable about how a sudden increase in diversity over a short period can create tensions and divisions, because 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 their large concentrated presence in Canada's cities 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. Thus it remains a yet-to-be proven claim that non-white immigrants possess such different cultural beliefs that they would undermine Canadian values, traditions, and institutions. Yet in the immigration discourse the linkage between diversity and fragmentation is unmistakable. For example, this message is reiterated in another report (CIC, 1994c) 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....*" 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. (p. 10, emphasis in original)

Fourth, 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 judgement 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 that they created were expressed in the 1970s even before the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from non-traditional source countries.<sup>4</sup> 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. In general, the discourse uses public concerns of immigration as pretexts to justify policy changes. Because the public concerns arise from reactions to immigration trends, and because such trends indicate a surge of non-white immigrants to Canada, the concerns are by implication attributable to non-white immigrants and their differences. For example, a report (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1989) 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" (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” (p. 9). A CIC (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 (pp. 11-12).<sup>5</sup> Taken together, the coded messages tend to attribute Canadians’ increased concerns over immigration to the social problems “caused” by recent immigrants and their differences. Thus the solution to these social problems—from weakening national values to overburdening the health care system—lies in better control of the immigration system and of the composition of immigrants.

### **The “Race” Question in Public Polls and Media Reports**

The racial message of the immigration discourse is further formalized and legitimized in opinion polls about immigration and in media reporting of these results. Government departments frequently use public opinions to obtain citizens’ views regarding social issues and policy support.<sup>6</sup> In discussions and consultations about immigration, the government is interested in finding out from Canadians the level of immigration and the type of immigrants that are acceptable to them. The media and polling companies also support public opinion surveys about immigration because the topic is sensational, controversial, and newsworthy.

It is in seeking Canadians’ views on diversity in opinion polls that the racial subtext of the immigration discourse becomes most apparent. Certain standard questions have been routinely used in such polls as means to gauge what is often referred to as the tolerance level of Canadians towards diversity. For example, in a national immigration survey conducted in January 2000 by Ekos Research Associates for the federal government, the following question was asked: “Forgetting about the overall number of immigrants coming to Canada, of those who come would you say there are too many, too few or the right amount who are members of visible minorities?” (p. 6). The same question was also used in polls conducted in December 1999, July 1999, December 1998, April 1998, November 1997, November 1996, November 1995, November 1994, and February 1994. A news report on the survey written by reporter Nahlah Ayed and released by Canadian Press on March 10, 2000 was widely printed in several major newspapers (e.g., *Globe and Mail*, March

11, 2000; *Vancouver Sun*, March 11, 2000). The report revealed that 27% of the respondents in the 2000 survey indicated that there were "too many" visible minority immigrants, compared with 25% who said so in 1999 and 22% in 1998. The *Vancouver Sun* used the headline "Survey finds less tolerance for immigrants" to highlight the story. It becomes clear that the view of a numeric minority on visible minority immigrants being too numerous is elevated to the level of Canadians' tolerance of diversity, and the minute change of percentage of this segment over time (from 25% to 27%) is given the scientific stature of revealing "Canadians becoming less tolerant."

A clear racial message can be ascertained in how the survey question is framed and interpreted, even though the words *race* or *non-white* are not used. First, the wording of the question indicates that pollsters and interest groups funding the survey can legitimately ask the general public to consider race as a factor in immigration and to assess the social worth of non-whites in terms of whether there are too many or too few of them, provided a term like *race* or *colour* is avoided. The term *visible minorities* replaces a racially charged term such as *coloured people*, but the people framing the question as well as the respondents answering it are clear about what the term *visible minorities* means. Another phrase that has been used in polls to substitute for *coloured people* is "people who are different from most Canadians." Pollsters sometimes use this codified phrase to ask respondents to indicate whether they think such people should be kept out of Canada (*Globe and Mail*, September 14, 1992). The attractiveness of a term like visible minorities is that its softer appearance and its being used in the Employment Act (Statutes of Canada, 1986, c. 31) make it a convenient label that can be innocently adopted to discuss the social worthiness of race and non-whites without running the risk of being branded racist. Most Canadians would probably find it objectionable if asked to express an opinion about whether there are too many or too few non-whites in a situation in which they are a participant such as a school, a corporation, or a social occasion, in part because this is too blatantly racist, and in part because the principle of racial equality is clearly defined in the Charter and Canadian tradition.<sup>7</sup> Yet when the question about visible minorities is asked in a public poll, it appears to be much more acceptable, and indeed neutral, as a tool to find out how far Canadians are prepared to accept non-whites or "coloured races." In short, opinion polls sanctify the racial phenomenon that Canadians should find it meaningful to evaluate the "coloured" segment of the population as too many or too few purely on the basis of

race.<sup>8</sup> The way the colour question is camouflaged in opinion polls reifies the notion of race by legitimizing the right of Canadians to pass judgements on newcomers based on their superficial features. Furthermore, Canadians' opinions on immigrants' race are not seen as a social problem that has to be addressed; rather, it is presented as a democratic choice of citizens regarding how many diverse elements in Canadian society they are prepared to tolerate.

There is further evidence to suggest that pollsters and interest groups actively pursue the question about opinions regarding immigrants' race in opinion surveys, and then present such opinions as citizens' intolerance of diversity or their "cultural insecurity" that should be taken into account in policy formulation. For example, in an immigration consulting meeting organized by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in Montebello, Quebec on March 6-7, 1994, results of a public opinion survey conducted by Ekos Research Associates were presented, and it was reported 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)<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after this, an article in *The Globe and Mail* on March 28 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." It is clear from the prevailing interpretation that respondents' opinions on race are not considered racist in the immigration consultation circle, but rather are regarded as Canadians' 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 concerned only about too many non-white immigrants and not immigrants per se.<sup>10</sup> Thus the racial message in the immigration discourse is covered up 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.

The fact that the racial message in the immigration discourse is typically regarded as the legitimate concerns of citizens also implies that polling results have a substantial influence on the outcomes of the immigration debate. Lucienne Robillard, the then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, made this point clear when she announced in 1996 the government's intention not to increase the immigration level because "the Canadian population is divided, according the last poll we had" (*Globe and Mail*, October 30, 1996). Often Canadians' reservations over admitting more immigrants and their opinions regarding too many non-white immigrants are treated by the media as an indication of a public backlash and not a problem of Canadian society that has to be addressed (*Globe and Mail*, October 30, 1996).<sup>11</sup> The term *backlash* implies a public disapproval of a policy direction that produces a widely perceived undesirable social change.

### The Reification of Race in Academic Research

The construction of the racial subtext in the immigration discourse has been facilitated by a long academic tradition that studies how respondents in opinion surveys place different values on people of different race or origin. In this tradition, prejudiced attitudes of individuals are treated as if they are free-floating ideas without a material base (Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Wellman, 1977), and the scientific inquiry is further reduced to the empirical question of explaining why some individuals are prejudiced and others are not. Academics have developed various concepts to describe prejudiced attitudes, and in so doing often make them appear natural and legitimate, and therefore less offensive. For example, the notion of "social distance" is widely adopted in attitudinal surveys to capture the degree to which respondents are prepared to accept members of a different race as a close kin, fellow club members, neighbours, co-workers, or citizens (Bogardus, 1925, 1968; Owen et al., 1981). This notion and similar constructs have been used in several major attitudinal surveys in Canada (Berry & Kalin, 1995; Berry, Kalin & Taylor, 1977; Kalin & Berry, 1996).

A question on social distance was used in the 2000 survey conducted by Ekos Research Associates and commissioned by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate how they felt about someone from a given country moving into their neighbourhood. The results, presented as a measurement of social distance, show that respondents were more positive toward those from

the UK and France than those from China, Jamaica, or Somalia; furthermore, the results were compared with similar findings in a 1992 survey (Ekos Research Associates, 2000). A national survey conducted by the Angus Reid Group (1991) and commissioned by Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada also included a similar question that presented respondents with a list of selected ethnocultural groups and asked them to indicate how comfortable they were with members of each group, ranging from "not at all comfortable with " to "very comfortable."<sup>12</sup> The results, described as "comfort levels," show that those of European origin had a higher comfort rating than those of non-white origin—Chinese, Black, Muslim, Arab, Indo-Pakistani, and Sikh (p. 51).

This type of research is sometimes justified on the grounds that the normative hierarchy of racial groups unravelled in attitudinal surveys actually reflects the status hierarchy of racial groups in society, and that documenting racist attitudes is one necessary step toward eliminating them. In reality, this type of research accepts the premise that race is a valid scientific construct and supports its continuous usage as a meaningful concept by systematically asking respondents to place value judgments on people based on colour. In his critique of research that reifies race, Miles (1982) argues that such research gives primacy to race as if it were an active agent in and of itself, when in fact race is a consequence of social construction. At the very least, social scientists have been insensitive in systematically encouraging the articulation of racial differences by conditioning respondents to choose preferences based on race, origin, or skin colour, and then by attributing a pseudo-scientific label such as comfort level or social distance to beautify and legitimize such choices. Over time, as these questions on racial preferences are repeatedly asked by academics in studies, the legitimacy of asking such questions is engraved in the minds of people in that their frequent recurrence in survey questionnaires becomes *ipso facto* a justification of their social merit and scientific validity. When these academic tools are increasingly popularized in opinion polls and in the immigration discourse, the public articulation of racial preferences itself and the means by which such preferences are articulated also become entrenched and institutionalized.

## Conclusion

A democratic society like Canada has a legal framework to uphold the democratic principles of equality and non-discrimination. This is evident

in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Multiculturalism Act, and the Employment Equity Act. At the same time, Canadian society has also recognized the social significance of race in its everyday life. In short, although a society like Canada has formally censured the blatant form of racism and racial discrimination, it tolerates and at times promotes a softer version that maintains racial distinctions as natural and as immutable differences of people. Thus a codified version of racist discourse is being propagated, and people accept this type of discourse as legitimate and not racist. Ironically, it is the readiness of most people to reject the more extreme position of racism that makes the softer version so much more palatable and natural.

This article suggests that there is a racial subtext in Canada's immigration discourse. The discourse develops a vocabulary, adopts certain assumptions, and endorses a rationale to advance a framework of understanding the "diversity problem" in immigration. In such a framework, codified concepts such as *diversity* are used to substitute for *non-white immigrants*, especially those from Asia or Africa. The notion of diversity has become a meaningful concept in the immigration discourse. It provides a simplistic but convenient explanation as to why some Canadians oppose a higher level of immigration. The dominant and widely accepted explanation is that Canadians are afraid of losing their traditions and values when they are confronted with too much diversity within too short a time. Hence Canadians' opposition to more immigrants, especially visible minority immigrants, is not premised upon racism, but based on concerns about national unity and social cohesion. In short, typical Canadians are seen as under siege by too much diversity, and they are worried that Canada's heritage and cultural cohesion are being washed away by too many immigrants who are too different from them. Thus in the immigration discourse the discussion of race or skin colour is central but codified, and the discourse often reiterates Canada's support of tolerance and opposition to racism in order to justify how citizens' concerns over diversity are noble and not racist.

An aspect of Canada's immigration discourse involves constructing the problem of diversity in opinion polls and media reports. In such a construction, Canadians are systematically asked to indicate whether they think that there are too many visible minority immigrants, and in doing so are in fact placing a social value on race. Thus a coded language is used to cover up a blatant discussion of skin colour. The discourse reifies race by recognizing the legitimacy of evaluating superficial physical

differences of people, and by casting non-white immigrants and Canadians as opposites based on socially constructed immutable differences. Over time the discourse makes it socially acceptable to consider immigrants on racial grounds; in turn, physical and cultural characteristics of non-white immigrants become socially significant, because they represent convenient markers by which they can be distinguished and problematized.

In the immigration discourse, racial messages expressed in opinion polls are sanctified in that they are seen as citizens' democratic choices and legitimate concerns. The discourse provides a rationale to justify such views. As these views are repeatedly sought in opinion polls, they assume a legitimate and indeed a respectable position in the immigration discourse. In time the discourse mitigates racial messages and makes them respectable.

The construction of a racial subtext in the immigration discourse has also been facilitated by the academic tradition that develops many of the tools and concepts that enable the race question to be asked subtly in opinion polls without making it appear offensive. In effect, such academic research reifies race by encouraging the public to evaluate the desirability of people based on skin colour and by covering up such race-based evaluations with pseudo-scientific constructs.<sup>13</sup>

The stakeholders of the immigration discourse—academics, journalists, pollsters, policy-makers, and individual citizens—participate in the construction of a racial subtext that ultimately transforms the racial messages into “valid concerns” and “scientific findings,” and transforms what would otherwise be unacceptable racially based opinions into acceptable voices in a legitimate public debate. Over time a vicious circle is formed: as the race problem is constructed, racial differences become self-evident grounds of “social fragmentation” and “racial tension,” and the concern over race assumes a valid voice that is taken seriously and righteously in policy consideration. In the final analysis, it is the discourse itself, and not superficial racial differences of immigrants and Canadians, that fragments Canada and its people.

The above analysis has policy implications. First, it suggests that it is unnecessary, and indeed divisive, to justify immigration policy changes with immigrant-induced social problems that are generalized to non-white immigrants. Changes so premised are defensive at best. In addition to casting immigrants and native-born Canadians in opposition, they inevitably lead to tighter control and more regulation as natural solutions



to the "immigration problem." Second, social policy development and academic research must respect the principles of racial equality and non-discrimination guaranteed in the Canadian Charter by abandoning the use of racial subtext in the construction of knowledge and policy perspective. Third, immigration policy development can contribute to developing a harmonious society based on respect of differences by dispelling racial stereotypes and cultural myths.

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#### Notes

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at a plenary session of the Fifth International Metropolis Conference, November 13-17, 2000, Vancouver.
- 2 Wellman (1977) makes the same point about the changing manifestation of racism in the US and its elusive appearance as follows: "It has become increasingly obvious in recent years that many American attitudes about racist issues are not expressed in obvious ways, do not reflect hostility, and are not always misjudgments of the problems. These kinds of attitudes, however, cannot be detected or adequately interpreted as long as racial feelings are conceptualized as prejudice" (p. 6).
- 3 In June and July 1994, the Democracy Education Network (1994) organized 58 study circles in six Canadian cities as a part of the federal government's consultation on the immigration policy. Its summary report states that one of the four concerns expressed by participants has to do with "integration and settlement" and "the dilemmas of diversity". (p. 2)
- 4 A case in point can be found in Toronto's experience in the late 1970s when the city witnessed several incidents of non-whites being pushed off subway platforms and hit by incoming trains. These events were so racially charged that the provincial government appointed the Ontario Task Force on Human Relations to investigate. In its report, the Task Force wrote:
 

With what appeared to some as unseemly haste, large numbers of black, brown and yellow skinned people suddenly appeared on the streets, the buses, and in public places. Some English-speaking residents who had not perceived the extent to which Toronto had become a multicultural entity, now discovered that they lived in a multi-racial community, and indeed, were now members of a minority themselves. Needless to say, they had difficulty adjusting to the cultural shock ... These factors, and many less discernable [sic] have created an atmosphere in which overt violence is perceived to be less unacceptable by the hoodlum element which perpetrates the crimes against the visible minority. (Pitman, 1977, p. 38)

At that time the number of visible minorities in Canada was relatively small, as they made up only 6.3% of Canada's population in 1986 and 11.2% in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 1998). The Toronto case illustrates how the notion of excessively large numbers of non-white immigrants in the immigration debate is often normatively constructed.
- 5 For further evidence of the immigration discourse and the messages delivered, see Citizenship

- and Immigration Canada, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d; Employment and Immigration Canada, 1989, 1990.
- 6 Government-funded opinion polls are routinely conducted, but the results are not always released publicly. For example, in an internal report written for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the author states that the report is based on surveys collected by Ekos in November 1996, Environics in December 1996, and Angus Reid in February 1997, which include "questions asked specifically on behalf of CIC (Citizenship and Immigration)" (Palmer, 1997, p. 1). In a news story reported by the *Toronto Star* on August 19, 1996, the paper said it had to use the Access to Information Act in order to obtain results of a public opinion poll on immigration commissioned by the federal government.
  - 7 Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states:
 

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (Statutes of Canada, 1982, c. 11)
  - 8 It is sometimes pointed out that Canada has a right to choose its immigrants, and that Canadians have a say in exercising this right. Advocates of immigration restriction also point out that Canadians do experience problems caused by immigrants coming from a different background; an often cited problem has to do with public schools being overwhelmed by immigrant children who do not speak the official languages, which results in non-immigrant parents worrying about declining educational quality (*Globe and Mail*, February 4, 1994). My argument is not about whether Canada has a right to choose its immigrants or whether there are problems of adjustment for immigrants and Canadian society. The simple fact remains that the Charter guarantees the equality of rights and non-discrimination for all, and the choice of preferred immigrants cannot be based on race or colour in violation of the Charter, just as immigrant selection cannot be based on gender. In asking respondents to indicate their "racial preference" of immigrants and in giving a "racial preference" as the answer, Canadians are in fact using race or colour as a criterion in choosing their preferred immigrants.
  - 9 Michael Valpy, a well-known columnist, was sympathetic to the dominant interpretation of cultural insecurity in the immigration discourse. He wrote:
 

Ekos found that opposition to high immigration levels does not rest primarily on economic insecurity—the traditional blue-collar fears of immigrants-are-taking-our-jobs. Rather it rests most of all on cultural insecurity. The cultural fear is a product of resurging anxieties—particularly anglophone anxieties—about eroding Canadian identity. It is about the lack of sufficient Canadian homogeneous tribalness to form national consensus on public policy direction. (*Globe and Mail*, March 11, 1994, p. A2)

Some readers expressed different views, but these opposition voices were ineffective in influencing the dominant perspective in the immigration discourse. For example, a reader wrote:

I expected Canadians to regard freedom, honesty, hard work, personal accountability and tolerance as their most cherished values. I am not aware of any immigrant group not subscribing to these ideals. However, I am definitely aware of the millions who cheat on taxes, engage in UT and welfare fraud, expect 42 weeks government handout after 10 weeks employment, indulge in cross-border shopping with false customs declarations.... and intolerant to and unwilling to respect the culture of aboriginals (the 'true' Canadians), and these millions are mostly members of Mr. Valpy's "old Canada." (*Globe and Mail*, March 22, 1994)

Such opposition voices are largely ignored in the immigration discourse.
  - 10 The corollary of this argument is that some Canadians are concerned over too many non-white immigrants and that they would probably not have said that there were too many

- immigrants if these immigrants were white.
- 11 Alan Li, President of the Chinese-Canadian National Council, argued for the need to regard negative public opinions on immigration as a social problem in itself: "Unless the government takes a more proactive stance on immigration, public perceptions will not change. These are misconceptions that the government hasn't taken steps to correct" (*Globe and Mail*, October 30, 1996, p. A6).
  - 12 The wording of the question is as follows: "I would like you to think of recent immigrants to Canada. These are persons who were born and raised outside of Canada. How comfortable would you feel being around individuals from the following groups of immigrants.... How about ..." (Angus Reid Group, 1991).
  - 13 Some may argue that the academic tradition of studying individual racist attitudes using tools such as the social-distance scale is necessary in order to understand and to combat racism. In reality, findings of such research are seldom used to combat racism; rather, they are often represented by pseudo-scientific labels such as "social distance" or "discomfort levels" to camouflage the racist nature and indeed to justify racial concerns. These survey tools are also so overused that they have conditioned respondents to accept the legitimacy of passing judgements on others based on race or colour. The point is not to condemn survey tools in studying racism or racist behaviours. However, academics must take a more objective stance by calling racist behaviours racist and not use some other fancy terms. As well, they must conduct research with a clear view that racist behaviours are constitutionally and morally unacceptable and with the objective of exposing and disallowing racist practices. A good example of such a critical approach is the work of Henry (1989) and Henry and Ginsberg (1985).

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