Assimilationist Theory and Immigrant Minorities in the United States and Canada: Implications for Social Services Development

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This paper examines from a comparative perspective theories of cultural assimilation in the United States and Canada and speculates on the impact of these theories for developing social services, especially social services for immigrants and ethnic minorities.

For perspective, it is important to define what is meant by the term minority. In its functional sense, minority is defined as a social status which is relatively disadvantaged, since its members have been discriminated against and condemned to subordinate social status by institutional structures which have been largely disinterested in their ethnic or cultural uniqueness. In the United States, this has meant ethnic minority groups have historically been expected to shed their cultural baggage, to melt into the homogenizing melting pot, and emerge, as Hector St. John Crevecoeur wrote so long ago, as new men, as Americans. In recent years, the functional utility of the melting pot, with its assumptions about the blending together of diverse groups to produce an American product, has been questioned. Blacks and other minorities, self conscious about their function and place within the larger American society, have forced requestioning of melting pot assumptions. Some scholars have concluded that the United States is a nation in which the most favored, the rich, the well-born and the powerful, have conferred minority social standing on all those who do not match the stereotypical American ideal.

Older studies which recounted the struggles of various ethnic groups to surmount the obstacles of rising above their backgrounds, usually assumed that "making it" in the United States meant becoming something other than what they were in their land of origin. Assimilation meant rising above one's ethnic background to assume a new identity and social status. Students of immigration have often marveled at the ways in which ethnic groups promoted the need to Americanize, to be born again, as it were, as new people, as Americans. Born of the self-justifying logic and rationalizations that were perhaps needed to sustain
one's risk as he or she left the old homeland and traveled great distances to find a new life in a strange environment, the metaphor of the melting pot served a positive function in assuring immigrants that if they tried hard enough they could probably make it in their adopted homeland. Despite the harsh realities of the immigration experience—incoming immigrants were sometimes forced to have their bodies and possessions fumigated at the point of entry, an action of none too subtle symbolism—in immigrants hoped America would be a place for realizing dreams.

John Higham, an American historian of immigration, has written perceptively that it was not until 1789, in Jedidiah Morse's widely used patriotic textbook, *American Geography*, that the word immigrant was first used to identify certain newcomers to American soil. Is it mere coincidence that the work materialized, as Higham notes, simultaneously with the creation of the American national government? Before Morse, commentators on the United States, such as Crevecoeur, had referred only to "emigrants". By 1789, the people of the United States were beginning to label newcomers with the term immigrant, identifying them with the country they entered instead of the one they had left. As Higham has noted, "the term 'immigrant' presupposed the existence of a receiving society to which the alien could attach himself. The immigrant is not, then, a colonist or a settler, who creates a new society and lays down the terms of admission for others. He is rather the bearer of a foreign culture."³

In his textbook, Jedediah Morse drew distinctions between the newer "immigrants" and the original inhabitants of the United States, who were not the Indians, but the Dutch and the English "settler". Recall that the Dutch had settled into the Hudson River Valley by 1624 and that the English had control of these settlements by 1664. As late as 1776, Dutch was still spoken by large numbers of New York and New Jersey populations. Of course, by that time, people of English origin were the preponderant majority throughout the original thirteen states. And the English saw themselves as settlers, as founders, as planners and creators of new societies. In no way did they perceive themselves to be immigrants. They dominated their environment. Their language, their government, their culture with its attendant values, would determine the fate of newcomers—immigrants—in their society.⁴

If this pattern of settlement and domination is historically accurate and serves as a correct appraisal of what transpired in the 18th century, it seems clear that at the time of the American
Revolution, the United States was very much a closed society. Those who would venture to become part of it had to risk culture, homeland and values to share in the American Experience. It also is clear that many, many immigrants of diverse ethnic origin were attracted to the promises of the United States and found the process of uprooting themselves from familiar surroundings less threatening than staying put. The hope for a better life was strong enough to compel immense sacrifice and willingness to endure hardships, especially the none too subtle demands of adjusting to a new nation.

Of course, not all Americans underwent the immigrant experience. By 1790, nearly 19 percent of the United States population consisted of slaves. Blacks were meant to be a permanent, subordinate, powerless caste. They were not expected to share in the immigrant experience. Dominated physically and psychologically by the Anglo-Saxon majority, Blacks were not expected to assimilate themselves into the mainstream of American society nor were they afforded the kinds of supportive institutional services that would smooth their entrance into the larger society. While newly arrived immigrants to the United States might find aid and comfort from immigrant protective groups, church organizations or informally from already established immigrants from their homelands, no such comforting services existed for American Blacks. Recent historical research indicates that even the anti-slavery societies which so loudly decried slavery before the American Civil War, gave little economic assistance to ease the transition of Blacks from slavery to freedom.5

Immigrant protective associations formed to ease the transitions from Europe to the United States for most immigrants were based on a self-help philosophy that assistance, both material and psychological was guaranteed while the newly arrived immigrant found ways to make it on his/her own.6 Down to the twentieth century, the model for American social services clearly demonstrates its kinship with the self-help services primarily created to speed the assimilation of immigrants into American society. The course of American philanthropy, as Robert Bremner has shown, is the story of voluntary efforts to "help people become independent and prepared to work out their own destinies."7 Furthermore, such agencies as social settlement houses, Y's, boys' clubs and other character-building organizations used by immigrants, socialized users into dominant cultural mores.8

The "self-help" philosophy of social service was compatible
with the American ethos of success based on individualistic effort. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ideal of the self-made man, exemplified by the Horatio Alger ethic, was an important construct influencing the behavior of countless American males. One need only cite the adulation and even adoration heaped on such self-made Americans as Andrew Carnegie for evidence of the strength of the self-help success ethos in shaping the American psyche.9

The concept of public responsibility for social welfare services ran contrary to societal values and never gained much headway in the United States. When such public social welfare institutions as almshouses and workhouses were created, they functioned to deter further use. Their purpose, as implicitly suggested by Coll and Mencher, was to regulate the poor.10 They were not created out of totally altruistic philanthropic impulses. They were meant to enforce the canons of the self-help success ethos by offering relief only in the harshest of circumstances and surroundings. In a society which worshipped individual effort and conversely disdained those who for whatever reason opted not to play by the rules of the system, there was only one correct way to make it. That was by hard work, thrift and sober living. Certainly, the history of America's evangelistic religions with their characteristic emphasis on the necessity for individualistic effort presents additional evidence of the strengths of self-help values in American society.11

Self-help was good and even necessary for survival in the United States. The sad record of rhetorical if not physical attacks on those who dissented from these values and opted to live collectively, serves as an important indicator of the strength of the relationship between majority power, class interests and values and the possibilities for happiness in American society.12

In the decades between the 1880's and the restrictive legislation against certain immigrant groups in the 1920's, the melting pot assumed new contours. The door to the United States was gradually closed to many immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. In the minds of the dominant American majority, they were suspect because of supposed cultural and religious decadence, biological inferiority and in some instances, because of their beliefs in a collectivist life style which was perceived as a form of radicalism. America grew impatient with those who did not fit into the racial and cultural universe of white, Anglo-Saxonism. Nativist sentiments ran high, as historian John Higham has written, after the Haymarket Square incident of 1886. The bombings that
were part of the affair, the subsequent trial and execution of its perpetrators indicated that many Americans equated labor unrest with the influx of the newer immigrants. The infamous American Protective Association, formed in 1887, could claim over 500,000 members by the late 1890's. Nativism, expressed in the tracts and activities of such groups as the D.A.R., harkened back to pre-Civil War attacks on Catholics and other supposed dissidents who did not seem to fit the contours of the American dream. The Red Scare after World War I, climaxed by the Palmer "Red Raids," resulting in the mass deportation of countless supposedly radical New Immigrants, such as Emma Goldman, were part of a general mass hysteria against "un-American" behavior. More than seventy alien-sedition acts were passed by state legislatures during this period, giving further evidence of the depth of the American fear of those others who were seen as so threatening to the American social structure and its WASPish controllers.

Public social welfare services down to 1929 functioned to bolster the dominant Anglo-Saxon value consensus. Local and state governments could thus use public welfare services as means to implicitly enforce the status quo. With few public welfare guarantees, minorities, especially those seen as potential threats to the dominant majority, were left to fend for themselves.

Examining private social services, there is evidence that many continued to support unpopular immigrant groups. The New York City social settlement houses, for example, continued to provide programs and services for neighborhood residents from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds, oftentimes in the face of overt hostility to their efforts. In 1919 the Lusk Committee, established by the New York Legislature to investigate radicalism, attacked the social settlements as being hotbeds of subversion. Much to their credit, the settlements, acting through their city-wide federation, The United Neighborhood Houses, took a hard stand against their detractors and continued their efforts to aid their many non-English speaking neighbors.

The many fraternal organizations established by various immigrant groups to provide solace and even material assistance were important sources of social welfare assistance for ethnic minorities. There were numberous benevolent and fraternal societies set up by the Slavs, for example, which appealed to ethnic sentiments and fostered a spirit of self-help among their members so
that the entire ethnic group might compete with other national
groups. Italian immigrants were told by the immigrant newspaper,
Bolletino della Sera, "We must organize our forces as the Jews
do, persist in exhausting that which constitutes gain for our
race over the Anglo-Saxon race."16

While it is relatively easy to search through immigrant news-
papers and find similar statements, such rhetoric should not lead
the unwary researcher to the conclusion that there was any sort
of concerted effort among immigrant groups to challenge the un-
deniable, admitted supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon majority. In
fact, if one looks closely at the records of various ethnic
groups, there is considerable evidence pointing to much internal
strife among them. For example, there was much squabbling among
Slavic immigrants, as attested to by Edward Steiner, an early
analyst of the New Immigrants. He wrote:

Unfortunately they have (imported) into this
country their racial prejudices which are
keenest towards their closest kin, and each mining
camp becomes the battleground on which ancient
wrongs are made new issues by repeated quarrels
and fights which become bloody at times...In a
large number of these cases these unfortunate
divisions are intermingled with religious dif-
ferences, although the Slovak and the Pole do
not speak well of one another even if they be-
long to the same Church.17

Other students of immigration have pointed out that common
acceptance of one religion, for example, of Catholicism, did not
promote brotherhood among Poles and Lithuanians nor did it foster
friendship between French-Canadians and Irish.18 The variable
controlling ethnic group relationships seems to have been how
they perceived each other as competitors in the labor market.
Economics were apparently far stronger than a common religion in
determining ethnic voting patterns and patterns of social inter-
action.19 And, of course, intergroup competition prevented
coordinated assaults on social institutions perpetuating unequal
treatment of ethnic minorities.

The special problems of the twentieth century--Americaniza-
tion, family breakdown, juvenile delinquency as well as public
health problems, required new forms of treatment. A sign of the
strength of dominant American mores is the fact that welfare re-
lied was frowned upon by nearly all ethnic charitable organiza-
tions. Since their main focus was to provide aid for their own
and since they would never deliberately stigmatize recipients of such aid as unworthy unless it was "abused" voluntary assistance was meant to be temporary or "residual". \(^{20}\) It was meant to provide support while the recipient found his or her bearings and assumed his or her place in the mainstream of American society.

A clue to the function of ethnic self-help organizations is exemplified by debates within the Jewish community about the function of Jewish social agencies. They were seen as agencies of "adjustment and interpretation" for immigrants; they were meant to soften the transition of the immigrant from one culture to another. Hence, by definition, assistance given had to be temporary. \(^{21}\) Harry Lurie, an important spokesman for Jewish social welfare efforts in the 1930's, analyzing the many fraternal organizations and social clubs that were part of local Jewish communities throughout the United States, found that for the most part, those services which conformed to the ideals of self-help continued to be most favored when it came time to distribute voluntarily contributed funds. Within the Jewish social welfare community, the Depression created a new sense of urgency to create structures to make available economic and employment opportunities to the entire local Jewish population. The problems for American Jews, as summarized by Lurie, was whether or not to completely assimilate as Americans, with or without retaining religious and cultural differences. Lurie's comments on future prospects for the Jewish community have broad relevance for understanding the problems confronting other ethnic groups as they pondered their American future. He wrote: "Jewish life and Jewish group organization are conditioned by large political and economic forces. There are tendencies toward dispersion and disintegration of group interest, as well as toward centralization and cooperation. At present, outside pressures (The Great Depression) are influencing intergroup counseling and cooperation; but no true solidarity or unity has been achieved... We must not overlook the existence of powerful forces, political, economic, and cultural that negate all attempts to try to find a common program for Jewish group activity..." \(^{22}\)

It was those "powerful forces"—political, economic and cultural—those institutions and norms supported by the dominant Anglo-Saxon elite, that influenced the Jewish experience as well as that of other ethnic minorities.

In a nation sustained by belief in the efficacy of rugged individualism, social welfare services, whether public or private, most often functioned to support the national ethos of self-help
at least down to the era of the Great Depression. Thus, the history of social services in the United States must be viewed within a framework of sustaining values which, for the most part, reflect majority class beliefs in self-help—especially self-help for minority groups so they would not be guaranteed social equality by institutional fiat. The creed of self-help demanded that social services function residually so that the powerless would perceive the need to struggle to survive and thus accept the competitive ethos of the emerging social order. Thus, societal values and institutions functioned to support the social arrangements of the status quo and ethnic and/or minority groups were expected "to go along to get along".

The Canadian Experience

Throughout Canadian history there appears to be a clear relationship between ethnicity, social class and the development of social services. The popular notion of Canadian society as cultural mosaic would seem to allow diverse cultural and ethnic groups to coexist in at least some form of tolerable harmony. However, the studies of John Porter, which have done so much to demonstrate the relationship between class and ethnicity in Canada, as well as the more recent essays of Jean Leonard Elliott, demonstrate that the concept of Canadian society as pluralistic kaleidoscope may be a gross distortion. Canada, like the United States, has its dominant or majority groups as well as its subordinate groups. As Jean Elliott has written: "All Canadians at birth belong to either a majority or a minority groups. Membership in the majority group is heavily dependent upon such physical and social attributes as white skin, English speaking parents, and Christian ancestors who emigrated to Canada from a Western European industrial nation. All other Canadians belong to a variety of minority groups because they occupy a relatively disadvantaged power position in the Canadian social structure." Using Elliott's typology, a majority group need not be a numerically preponderant. Its status is derivative of its ability to influence decision making within society. As the dominant social force, the majority uses its powers to define the contours of Canadian culture. Its goals, values and norms become those of all subordinate minority groups. Nowhere does Elliott's thesis seem more accurate than in the case of Canada's Blacks. Robin Winks' recent monumental history, The Blacks in Canada, lays to rest the myth that racial discrimination never existed in Canada.
Despite popular opinion to the contrary, Winks reveals that even the hated institution of slavery existed in Canada and that the reasons for its relatively small scale (compared to the United States) probably had little to do with the strength of humanitarian impulses in Canada. Slavery foundered in Canada because it was impracticable as an economic institution. Furthermore, neither French nor English Canadians needed a permanent subordinate slave caste to affirm their own sense of superiority. They knew who and what they were. After slavery as an institution had proven its unfeasibility during late seventeenth century, Blacks began to compete in the labor market with other minority groups. Most often, they were accepted in communities where they were used as unskilled laborers as was true in the Western Ontario community of Amherstburg in the 1820's and 1830's, when tobacco farmers saw Blacks as valuable field hands. When Irish labor began to compete for jobs with Blacks in the same locale in the 1840's, casual patterns of racial discrimination began to appear. Some churches, Winks relates, constructed "Nigger Heavens" to separate white and Black members of their congregations. By 1850, both in what is now Ontario and in Nova Scotia, the major centers of Black settlement, separate, segregated schools had been established, thereby erecting highly visible and effective barriers to Black assimilation into the mainstream of Canadian culture. While Winks' analysis is oftentimes flawed, his history is an important addition to the small number of studies dealing with the history of specific ethnic and racial groups in Canada.

It appears that Canadians far more than their Southern neighbors were willing to admit the existence of a dominant social group, a majority, and to acknowledge that membership in that powerful group is often defined by class and racial identity. Unlike the United States, Canada has generally refrained from boasting that it is any sort of vast social melting pot. Ethnic cultural diversity within the confines of tightly drawn class lines has been promoted even though some ethnic groups have accused the federal government of deliberate attempts at cooperation when the government, through the Secretary of State's office, has attempted to fund ethnic studies or efforts to forge new ethnic awareness.

In creating social services, Canada, like the United States, generally adopted the philosophy that it was the responsibility of local jurisdictions to aid the poor. When Upper Canada (Ontario) was founded on the bedrock of British law in 1791, a deliberate disclaimer in the First Statute of Upper Canada in 1792 held that
"nothing in this Act...shall...introduce any of the laws of England respecting the maintenance of the poor." Richard Splane, writing on the history of social welfare in Ontario, found antipathy towards increased taxation was the reason for failure to incorporate English poor law measures which could have become a tax burden on the citizenry. Economic self-interest, rather than humanitarianism, seems to have influenced the course and direction of social service growth throughout English-speaking Canada.

Until confederation in 1867, Upper Canada adopted piecemeal measures for relief of the poor. As in the United States, there was a pervasive belief that individuals were responsible for their lives and that if welfare or charity was necessary, it should be given voluntarily and temporarily. In addition, there was a rich tradition of church supported welfare services in Lower Canada (Quebec) and these continued to operate alongside the haphazard social welfare system of English-speaking Canada.

Voluntary private charity tied to the principle of local control was the major characteristic of public social services in Canada down through the era of the Great Depression. As in the United States, immigrant groups formed fraternal and benevolent associations which offered informal assistance to those deemed worthy of aid. Generally, the view of Canada as pluralistic mosaic militated against strong, centralized efforts by the federal government to initiate social welfare services. Then too, confederation meant the provinces would have ultimate authority in social welfare matters, leaving the fate of social welfare services in the hands of provincial decision makers, thus allowing for provincial variations in the creation of social services.

Students of Canadian social welfare history stress the importance of rather spectacular individuals in creating social services. Usually, these "reformers" were white Anglo-Saxon males, such as J.J. Kelso, a turn of the century Toronto newspaperman who founded children's aid societies in Ontario, and Goldwin D. Smith, an Englishman transplanted to Canada and an influential proponent of a public welfare system to service Toronto. The federal government, bound by constitutional and historical precedent, made few thrusts into social services, but schemes for mothers' allowances and a pension program were created in 1929, followed in 1940 by a far-reaching Unemployment Insurance Act. Compared to that of the United States, the Canadian federal government, at least until the advent of Prime Minister Trudeau's "Just Society" programs, was very reluctant to move toward massive intervention.
in social welfare programming, leaving the Provinces much freedom to experiment with schemes to benefit their constituents.

In Canada as in the United States, social welfare services were products of a value consensus which upheld the virtue of self-help. But Canada, unlike the United States, has moved more quickly to adopt "institutional" social services at least at the provincial level. Provincial medicare schemes are the chief example.

The Canadian emphasis on localism, as exemplified by the strength of provincial government over social welfare matters, indicates how ethnic groups within provinces have theoretically been able to influence government to create social services of particular benefit to their needs. The case of Quebec, and possibly of Manitoba, illustrate that provinces with strong minority and ethnic groups have sometimes been able to establish services compatible with minority group interests. Canadian pluralism, unlike American melting pot homogeneity, has fostered a wide variety of social services delivery systems, theoretically responsive to ethnic and minority needs as long as those services do not conflict with majority group interests. This has not always been the case in the United States where, historically, ethnicity has not been fostered.

**Conclusion**

Similarities and differences exist in the emerging patterns of social services in the United States and Canada. In both countries majority power seems closely related to class composition which strongly influences behavioral norms. And in both countries, assimilationist models, the melting pot in the United States and the social mosaic in Canada, have influenced the focus of social service development. Comparisons between the two societies show that particular assimilationist models notwithstanding, social services have generally fostered creation of residual social services which are in accord with majority class beliefs in the values of individual self-help. One pragmatic suggestion may be drawn from this paper: social service planners in both nations should carefully assess racial, ethnic and class power structures in order to develop social service programs that go beyond continuation of the status quo and move towards guarantees of social equality.


Footnotes


12. The history of American society's intolerance for collectivistic religious efforts is exemplified by nineteenth century attacks against Mormons and twentieth century assaults on Hutterites in several mid-western states.


Footnotes


29. The author's experience as a faculty social work field supervisor at the Secretary of State's office in London, Ontario, during 1972-1973, taught him the humbling lesson that Canadian ethnic groups are often highly suspicious of federal government "offers" of assistance.


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