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Living *in the* GLOBAL VILLAGE

People from different countries are coming together more day by day as the global society approaches reality. But can it survive the prejudices of the ages? The Canadian experience says it can, given good thinking and good will...

Much — some would say more than enough — has been said and written recently about the globalization of the economy. Yet at the same time the emergence of a parallel phenomenon seems largely to have escaped the attention of the media, academia, and indeed the general public. It might be called, to coin another buzz-phrase, the globalization of society.

This second sort of globalization consists of the non-commercial coming-together of diverse human beings across borders and oceans. Thanks to accessible air travel, it is continually under way in face-to-face encounters with foreign parties by everybody from world leaders to children still in primary school.

No physical presence is required, however, to become part of the great co-mingling. International contacts are also maintained over the Internet and low-cost overseas telephone systems, which enable individuals with different backgrounds but the same interests to commune across vast distances as if they were in the same room.

While people from all walks of life mix actually and virtually with residents of foreign lands, the “global village” is taking shape in ways which the author of the term, Marshall McLuhan, could not have imagined when he coined it in the 1960s. For instance, it is a rare city on any continent these days that is not linked to satellite news networks such as the BBC, CNN and TV 5.

By illustrating the commonality of people everywhere, satellite TV has joined with the Internet to strike an historic blow for international understanding.

They ensure that national populations can no longer effectively be kept in the dark and fed propaganda promoting enmity against demonized foreign powers and the citizens thereof.

The blossoming of freedom of movement and speech is transforming the very idea of society. A society is defined as a group of persons forming a community, something that has always been delineated by kinship or location. The community of interests now spreading around the planet is unconfined by either nationality or geography.

The global village has cropped up in a tangible form in western countries that have lately experienced an influx of immigrants and refugees. While they might never have traveled abroad or owned a computer, residents of these countries stand on the testing ground of social globalization in their own towns, cities, and even neighbourhoods.

But while the dream of “One World” may be coming true in a practical sense, it lacks spirit. The task laid out by John F. Kennedy in 1963 — to “make the world safe for diversity” — remains sadly unfulfilled.

Whether McLuhan’s village will resemble one in, say, peaceful Saskatchewan or one in war-torn Kosovo depends on whether the age-old divisions that continue to plague the human race can be overcome, or whether man will persist in his inhumanity to man (and, more to the point, to woman and child).

Unfortunately, the record is not encouraging. The century just behind us ended as if, over its entire span, people had learned nothing about how to live together in amity. For all its vaunted progress, the 20th century is likely to go down in history as the century of genocide and the refugee.

The persistence of inter-group strife is one of the world’s great unsolved mysteries. Why, for instance, should members of the sects of a single religion lash out at one another like fighting cocks over differences in belief that are imperceptible to anybody but themselves?

One partial explanation for such senseless antagonism stems from a fear of what the other fellow might be up to. Psychologists say that apprehension

is behind the pre-emptive strike which usually leads to bloodshed among both the attacked and attackers. It need not necessarily be motivated by a fear of death or bodily injury. The cause is often a fear of loss — the loss of political power, territory, or a livelihood to a rival group.

Myth of superiority

When people are gripped by such fear, their first reaction is to attempt to find security by surrounding themselves with the familiar, like a child hiding under the blankets. Those who do so insist that human beings can only be safe and happy among their own kind, be they members of a social class, ethnic group, religion, clan, sect, or nationality.

In some cases it may be possible to remove the threat outsiders pose by assimilating them into a culture. As a rule, however, it is simpler to exclude them, especially if they are markedly different (in skin colour or religion, for instance) from one's own group. To prevent them from invading the group, they must be regarded with constant suspicion. In the eyes of group members, they can do no right.

It follows that if they can do no right, they must have something inherently bad about them. It is a short step from viewing some people as bad to viewing their presence as a bad thing. From this springs the doctrine of racial purity, which runs that there can be no mixing with despised groups because that would somehow spread contamination. Carried to its logical (or illogical) conclusion, it was this line of thinking that gave rise to the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis and other orgies of genocide.

The ridiculous thing about racial purity is that it is mainly confined to people like members of primitive tribes who would definitely be viewed as inferior by its advocates, especially white-skinned advocates. For the most part racial purity is not present among Caucasians, who have thousands of years of mixing blood behind them. "Europe is a continent of energetic mongrels," as British historian H.A.L. Fisher wrote.

In any case, the myth of superiority of one group over another has long since been exploded. For example, the American Anthropological Association has recorded that its members have found "no scientific basis for discrimination against any people on the ground of racial inferiority, religious affiliation, or linguistic heritage."

In that case, why does discrimination still exist? Perhaps because there is method to its madness. People held in a position of social inferiority are ripe for economic exploitation. The history of immigration to Canada tells an interesting story in this regard.

The exploitation here was originally based on class, the division of a single society into superior and inferior stations in life according to blood lines. European settlement on these shores began with the importation of peasants to till the soil on behalf of aristocratic land-owners. Later, working-class immigrants were recruited in the British Isles, Europe and China to labour in construction, logging, mining, and manufacturing.

When the great wave of immigration washed over Canada at around the turn of the century (the one before last), it was driven by cold-blooded economics. Farmers were needed to open up the Canadian West, and the Canadian government sought them in Eastern and Central Europe. European and Asian immigrants also poured into Canadian cities, where they were put to work in gruelling low-paid jobs.

A better life

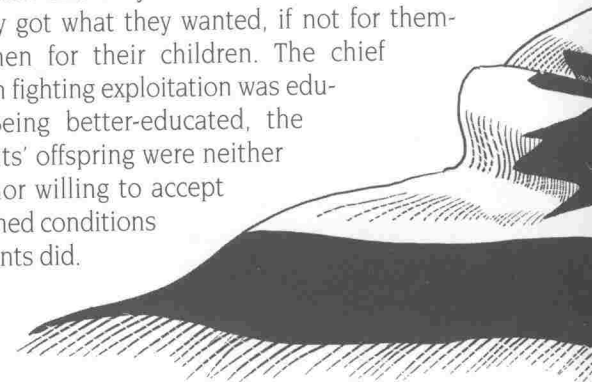
The immigration question pitted exclusionists against business interests. The rapid growth of agriculture on the prairies, attained largely through the back-breaking efforts of the European newcomers, provided rich new markets for manufactured products and the railways. The railways, along with the forestry and mining industries, also used immigration as a source of cheap manual labour, mostly in remote and inhospitable areas. In the cities, sweatshop owners thrived on low-cost immigrant toil.

When economic times were good, most native-born white Canadians joined the businessmen in regarding immigration as a necessary evil — necessary for the development of the country when there were shortages of labour. In bad times, "foreigners" were blamed for taking jobs away from Canadians. Some were deported. The rest were left to fend for themselves among a majority population whose first priority was taking care of its own.

But though immigrants to Canada were badly used throughout most of the 20th century, they persevered in pursuing what they had come here to find: a better life than the one they had left behind them. Most eventually got what they wanted, if not for themselves, then for their children. The chief weapon in fighting exploitation was education. Being better-educated, the immigrants' offspring were neither obliged nor willing to accept the wretched conditions their parents did.

'Prejudices... are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education; they grow there, firm as weeds among rocks.'

Charlotte Bronte



I have a dream...

Canadians proceeded to make a virtue of the necessity of populating the country to provide markets for a growing economy. The emphasis switched from efforts to assimilate ethnic groups to celebrating their heritage — but only after it became clear that many of them had no intention of joining in an American-style melting pot.

Prime Minister Trudeau was one of the most important and eloquent voices for this brave new way of thinking. He believed that the Canada we were building represented a human landscape that would eventually appear worldwide. Here's Trudeau in an address to the Canadian Press in 1970: "Canada has often been called a mosaic, but I prefer the image of a tapestry, with its many threads and colours, its beautiful shapes, its intricate subtlety."

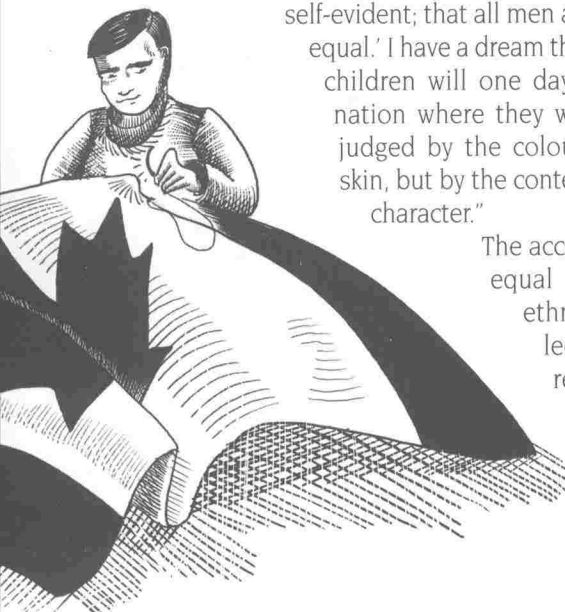
And so we have ended up with the Canadian tapestry. But its template was already in place thanks to French-speaking Canadians who stoutly resisted being subsumed in the dominant English-speaking majority. Attempts to make the aboriginal population abandon their heritage also faltered. Thus did Canada come around to accommodating diversity.

Most of the initiatives towards accommodation have been made in relatively recent years. They were spurred on by developments elsewhere, particularly the civil rights movement in the United States, which helped to improve attitudes towards minorities here as well.

In the U.S., there was the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. This persuasive and powerful civil rights leader had this to say in a memorable speech to Americans participating in the Civil Rights March on Washington, August 28, 1963: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its

creed: 'We must hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character."

The acceptance of equal rights for ethnic groups led to a recognition



of the rights of others who had been discriminated against, such as disabled persons, gays and lesbians, and — by far the largest group — women. Aboriginal people proved a special and particularly painful case, and the struggle for their rights is still being played out.

All this was done on the official level; in the meantime, ordinary old-stock Canadians were making their own private accommodations. It was hard to maintain inter-group prejudice in isolated places where the help of a "foreign" neighbour could spell the difference between life and death. The Catholic and Protestant Irish learned this on pioneer farms many years ago. An interdependent neighbourliness put an end to sectarian quarrels carried over from their ancestral land.

Farmers of English and Scottish origin on the prairies discovered they could not only live with their Slavic or Teutonic neighbours, but share in their customs and, lo and behold, even enjoy the differences between them. City-dwellers found that the presence of newcomers enhanced their culture rather than detracted from it. The moving force behind the "rapprochement" was simple good will — which, however, is not really all that simple. It is not, as is generally assumed, merely an amorphous warm feeling. It is a very specific thing.

Good will

That deepest of philosophers, Immanuel Kant, believed that a person's will governed all of his or her attitudes and actions. He wrote: "No doubt it is a good and desirable thing to have intelligence, sagacity, judgment, and other intellectual gifts... but all these gifts of nature may be in the highest degree pernicious and hurtful if the will that directs them...is not in itself good." W.E. Hock elaborated on the theme: "There is no moral right to property, to liberty, to life itself, in the absence of good will. The dilemma of the state is that this condition, as a moral condition, cannot be legally administrated." In other words, this essential element in good relations among groups must come from the mass of the people. It cannot effectively be legislated, or effectively policed if it were.

Good will is the first line of defence against the irritants that arise when persons brought up with different customs, values and habits find themselves living beside each other. As long as good will is present, there is always a chance of working problems out.

But good will cannot coexist with bad thinking, which has its roots in what Canadian-born communications savant S.I. Hayakawa called everyone's "areas of infantilism." These consist of prejudices inherited "when each human being was too young and dependent to defend himself by using his intelligence."

'For here, I want the granite to remain the granite, the oak to remain the oak, the marble to remain the marble. Out of these elements I would build a nation great among the nations of the world.'

Sir Wilfred
Laurier

People who are capable of perfectly good thinking in other matters can be wildly illogical when it comes to inter-group relations. Some, for instance, will recognize that change occurs in everything, yet assume that people of a certain group can never change. Anyone who believes that must also believe that the traditional opponents of their group will forever remain opponents; that someone whose great-great grandfather was an enemy of your great-great grandfather is your enemy too.

Diversity is as Canadian as maple syrup

Another example of bad thinking is jumping to conclusions. In the present context, the conclusion jumped to is that someone of a certain group is bound to do you wrong. Anyone who aspires to think well should further be on guard against generalizations. The most common generalization in inter-group relations is that members of a certain ethnic group are all alike — that is, bad in a variety of ways.

Fortunately, education here again has come to the rescue. By encouraging children to think for themselves, it has helped to eliminate much of the knee-jerk prejudice of the past. Youngsters of different ethnic backgrounds have been put in the position of associating with one another in and out of the classroom. By mixing with "others," younger Canadians have learned to think of those others as distinct individuals and not as stereotypes.

It would be wishful thinking, however, to believe that the acceptance of diversity is universal in Canada. The same old arguments are still being heard from those who claim that Canada's liberal immigration and refugee policies are destroying the character of the country. The answer to that, of course, is that immigration is what gave the country its uniquely cosmopolitan character in the first place. It is a country, remember, in which no single national-origin group is in the majority. The real majority is a multicultural one, and it has learned to embrace diversity as central to its existence.

Diversity is as Canadian as maple syrup. It is embedded in the soil of an immense nation with landscapes as different from each other as Southern Ontario and Nunavut, as the rocky coast of Newfoundland and the plains of Manitoba. The pronounced differences in the regions and in the lifestyles of the people who inhabit them have conditioned Canadians to accept the idea that differences are an intrinsic part of life.

This leads directly to the idea that people need not be of the same racial stock to live contentedly together. That was the core idea of Confederation — that people of French and British origin could build a nation in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The vision of the Fathers of Confederation is especially impressive considering that they originated from two nations which had been warring with each other for centuries. In any case, recognition of two official languages and two dominant cultural groups gave Canada a ready-made foundation for the building of a national society drawn from every corner of the earth.

Here's President Nelson Mandela: "South Africa will always be indebted to the people of Canada and for their solidarity with us in the long, dark years of our struggle for freedom. We hold in the highest esteem Canada's lasting tradition of human rights. And we thank you for the valuable lessons we have learned from you in the forging of human rights as a weapon in our crusade to eradicate the last vestiges of racial and gender discrimination in our country."

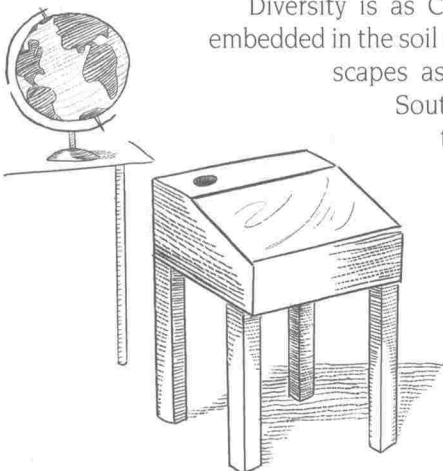
The brotherhood of man

It can be validly argued that Canadians had no choice but to put aside their differences for their own good, but the motives count for less than the outcome. The outcome has been that Canada has emerged as a model for the world as it struggles against the stubborn obstacles in the way of a viable global society.

Canadians should not be smug about it, but they can say that they have come to terms with diversity in a world in which diversity is bound to become more common. Anyone who despairs of the chances of achieving "the brotherhood of man" when confronted with news stories about ethnic cleansing may take heart in the fact that Canadians have pretty well conquered most of their intolerant characteristics. And in the process, they have made their country one of the most agreeable places in the world.

"The new electronic interdependence creates the world in the image of a global village."

Marshall
McLuhan



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