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# MYTHS AND MEANINGS OF IMMIGRATION AND THE METROPOLIS

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*A number of trends in recent immigration to Canada are discussed: the scale of contemporary movement; the transformation of national origins over the past generation; the diversity of entry classes and the lack of any singular immigrant condition; the remarkable contraction of immigrant destinations to a few large cities; the contribution of immigration to population growth and housing demand in these metropolitan areas; and the distinctive geography of the various entry classes, with higher-status arrivals disproportionately located in Vancouver. The remainder of the paper considers and rejects two common myths in the discussion of immigration: first, the myth of an immigrant underclass, and second, the myth of an immigrant overclass. Using research from Vancouver associated with the Metropolis Project, the first myth is challenged from an analysis of Census data that emphasizes the social context of immigrant life and upward mobility; the second myth is shaken by a qualitative methodology that reveals the unexpectedly fragile experience of a number of business immigrants.*

**Key words:** immigration, underclass, overclass, social integration, economic achievement, Metropolis Project

*Certaines tendances relatives à l'immigration récente au Canada sont examinées : l'envergure des déplacements actuels, les changements dans l'origine nationale des immigrants au cours de la dernière génération, la diversité des catégories d'immigrants admis et, par conséquent, l'absence d'une seule condition pour tous, le fait que les immigrants choisissent essentiellement de s'établir dans quelques grandes villes, la croissance de la population et la demande en logement attribuables aux immigrants dans ces régions métropolitaines, et les choix géographiques distincts des immigrants selon leur caté-*

*gorie à l'admission, comme c'est le cas de Vancouver, qui accueille un nombre disproportionné d'arrivants de statut élevé. Dans le reste de l'article, les résultats d'études effectuées dans le cadre du Projet Métropole permettent d'examiner puis de réfuter deux mythes communément associés à l'immigration au Canada : l'existence d'un sous-prolétariat et celle d'une classe dominante d'immigrants urbains. D'abord, l'existence d'un sous-prolétariat est rejetée suite à l'analyse de données tirées du recensement concernant le contexte social entourant les immigrants et la mobilité sociale ascendante de la plupart des nouveaux arrivants. Ensuite, une méthode qualitative met en lumière une découverte surprenante : la fragilité de l'expérience de la prétendue classe dominante – les immigrants qui travaillent dans le monde des affaires.*

**Mots-clés :** l'immigration, les sous-prolétariat, la classe dominante, l'intégration sociale, l'accomplissement économique, le Projet Métropole

In certain respects, this lecture is somewhat premature. My initial thought was to speak about research recently completed after the best part of a decade on the new middle class and the remaking of Canadian central cities – a topic that involves a series of home, work, political, and cultural relations around the process (and condition) of gentrification (Ley 1996). But instead, I am going to reflect on research that is at a much earlier stage: on immigration to cities and particularly to Vancouver. Not only is this more of a hot-button topic – the major daily newspapers in Vancouver identify immigration as the issue of greatest interest to their readers – but I hope you will be able to gain a sense of the research process. of

answers not yet clearly known, of emergent and often unexpected trends, of the diversity of research methods that are employed to triangulate around a research question. The result, I am sure, will be somewhat rough hewn, but perhaps the more interesting and open ended for that.

This presentation also introduces a research experiment launched by the federal government known as the Metropolis Project, an initiative that has created four Centres of Excellence across the country funded by nine Ottawa departments for a six-year period, to engage in a program of applied research in a partnership that includes three levels of government, the universities, the private sector, and immigrant settlement and advocacy organizations.<sup>1</sup> What lies behind this complex project is the recognition that Canada is a society in rapid transformation, changing faster than our ability to track it – unless a concerted research effort is made. A central motif in this transformation is the ethno-cultural remaking of major cities, changes that indicate nothing less than a substantial makeover, indeed a reinvention, of the face of this heavily urbanized nation.

In this paper, I will begin by presenting some indicators and outlining recent trends to support this statement regarding rapid transformation; then I will move on to discuss two myths concerning immigration: first, the myth of an immigrant underclass, and second, the myth of an immigrant overclass. The argument will draw heavily from research – much of it unpublished, most of it in progress – undertaken by the Vancouver Centre for Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis (RIIM).

### Canadian Immigration Trends

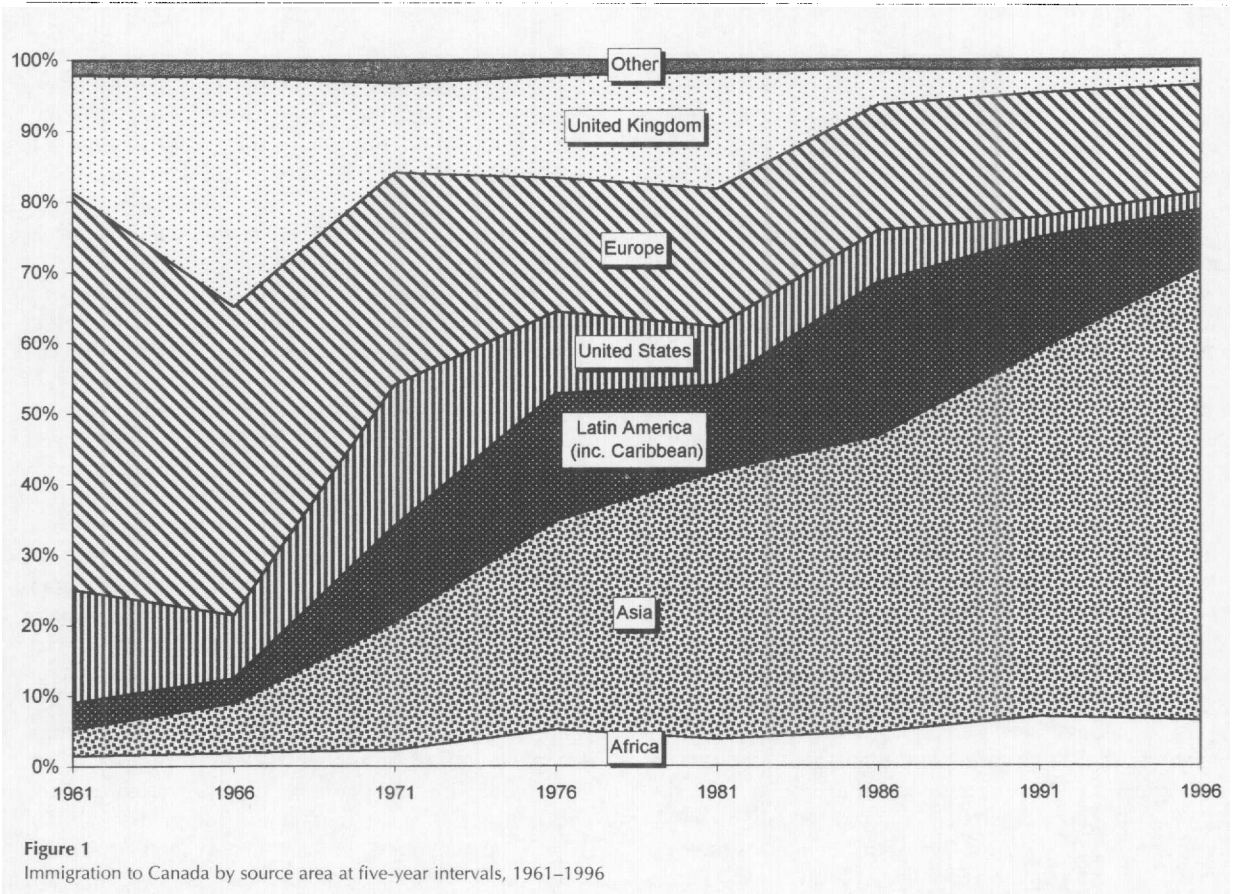
The *first* important theme is the *high level of immigration to Canada over the past decade* in particular. Annual arrivals are in the vicinity of 200 000 or more, making the 1990s the heaviest period for immigration, not only in the post-1945 period, but since the years around 1910, when Canada was engaged in a vigorous process of nation building through European settlement. In British Columbia (B.C.), the focus of much of my discussion, international arrivals exceeded 50 000 in 1996, the first time this level had been reached since 1912.

A *second* theme has been the *transformation of the composition of immigrant origins*, for which there can be few equivalents in any country in any historical period (Figure 1). In 1966, just a generation ago, between 80 and 90 percent of new arrivals to Canada originated in Europe and the United States, with the

leading national source being the United Kingdom. This was a long-established pattern that had held true every year since Confederation, aside from during wartime, when flows were truncated. This stable regime was overturned by immigration reform in 1967 that redefined the terms of entry (Green and Green 1996), and by 1986, European and American sources were contributing only 30 percent of the annual intake; by 1996, that figure had fallen again to 20 percent. As is well known, the new legislation has favoured immigration from other continents and especially from Asia, the origin of less than 10 percent of new arrivals in 1966, but the origin of 40 percent in 1986 and of nearly 65 percent in 1996. In British Columbia, part of the Pacific Rim, these trends are understandably accentuated, and in recent years, 80 percent of new immigrants to the province have originated in Asia, led by Hong Kong and Taiwan. The British contribution has now fallen to 2 percent.

A *third* current theme is the *diversity of immigrant status*, quite apart from national origin. While Canada has been known for its generous humanitarian programs, which have allowed relatively easy entry to large numbers of refugee claimants, selection policies have in fact been moving steadily toward economic immigrants. The refugee share of annual intake was 13 percent in 1997, while the economic cohort has risen steadily in recent years, from 36 percent in 1986 to 59 percent in 1997. (The remaining major category, family reunification, also declined from 43 to 28 percent over this period.) Among the economic immigrants, perhaps the most interesting are the business class, where possession of significant levels of financial and human capital expedites entry into Canada (Smart 1994; Nash 1996). These programs are relatively recent and were expanded in the 1980s, with a definite eye toward Hong Kong, where negotiations between Britain and China over the repatriation of the colony had begun in 1984, and where some footloose capital was looking for a safe haven. In relative terms, the business programs have been quite modest, but as the source of a significant cohort of millionaire immigrants, they have introduced an entirely new component to international movement.

The *fourth* theme is the remarkable *social geography of immigration*. No process occurs on the head of a pin, and the geography of immigration in the past 20 years has been quite unprecedented. Not only has movement been heavily directed toward metropolitan areas, but overwhelmingly and increasingly it has been directed to Toronto and Vancouver. In 1996, while some 17 percent of Canadians were immigrants, levels in Vancouver had reached 35 percent, and in Toronto 42 percent – far



ahead of the proportions in major American cities. Greater Vancouver, an urban region with 6 percent of the national population, has been receiving 18 to 20 percent of all newcomers to Canada in recent years. The result of this geographically uneven distribution is the remaking of the ethno-racial composition of the major cities. One demographic projection estimated that the share of visible minorities in Metro Toronto would increase from 21 percent in 1986 to 45 percent in 2001, while Vancouver's share would also more than double, from 17 to 39 percent.<sup>2</sup> The 1996 Census indicated a significant symbolic threshold had been passed in Greater Vancouver, as for the first time ever, Britain ceased to be the leading origin of the foreign-born (Table 1). The British were outnumbered in 1996 by immigrants born in Hong Kong; in 1998, British-born have almost certainly fallen to third rank behind natives of, first, Hong Kong and, second, China.

To these dimensions, a *fifth* now needs to be added.

We have seen that significant immigration flows have reached the major cities this decade: some 90 000 new Canadians a year to Greater Toronto and close to 40 000 a year to Greater Vancouver between 1991 and 1996.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, *net domestic migration to these metropolitan areas has been uneven* (Figure 2). Indeed, in some years, there has been a net loss of internal migrants.<sup>4</sup> Add to this Canada's low rate of natural increase, and one finds in both Vancouver and Toronto that the rapid population growth over the past decade has been fuelled largely by immigration. As a result, international migration has become a major factor defining trends, including price movements, in the metropolitan housing market (Tutchener 1998).

Before leaving the issue of macro trends, I want to add a final, *sixth*, point: *The variable geography of immigration applies also to entry classes*. The profile of entry classes in Vancouver, for example, is quite unlike the profile for Toronto and Montreal. British Columbia has

**Table 1**

Leading Places of Birth for All Immigrants and Recent Immigrants to Vancouver, 1996

	Total immigrants	
	Number	%
Total	633 745	100.0
1 Hong Kong	86 215	13.6
2 United Kingdom	75 415	11.9
3 People's Republic of China	72 910	11.5
4 India	53 475	8.4
5 Philippines	34 640	5.5
6 Taiwan	29 330	4.6
7 United States	22 685	3.6
8 Germany	17 785	2.8
9 Viet Nam	17 000	2.7
10 Fiji	13 885	2.2
	Recent immigrants <sup>1</sup>	
	Number	%
Total	189 660	100.0
1 Hong Kong	44 715	23.6
2 People's Republic of China	27 005	14.2
3 Taiwan	22 315	11.8
4 India	16 185	8.5
5 Philippines	13 610	7.2
6 South Korea	6 335	3.3
7 Iran	4 640	2.4
8 United Kingdom	4 040	2.1
9 Viet Nam	3 855	2.0
10 United States	3 640	1.9

## NOTE:

1 Recent immigrants are those who immigrated between 1991 and the first four months of 1996.

SOURCE: Statistics Canada 1997 '1996 Census: Immigration and citizenship' *The Daily*, 4 November, cat no 11-001E

been the preferred destination for the wealthiest classes of immigrants: those falling in the business categories. In 1996, British Columbia received 27 percent of economic-class immigrants landing nationwide, or twice its proportional share of the national population. For the wealthiest categories, however, the geographical bias was much stronger. Among the entrepreneur class, 35 percent chose B.C. as their destination; among the investor group, the share was even greater, at 54 percent.

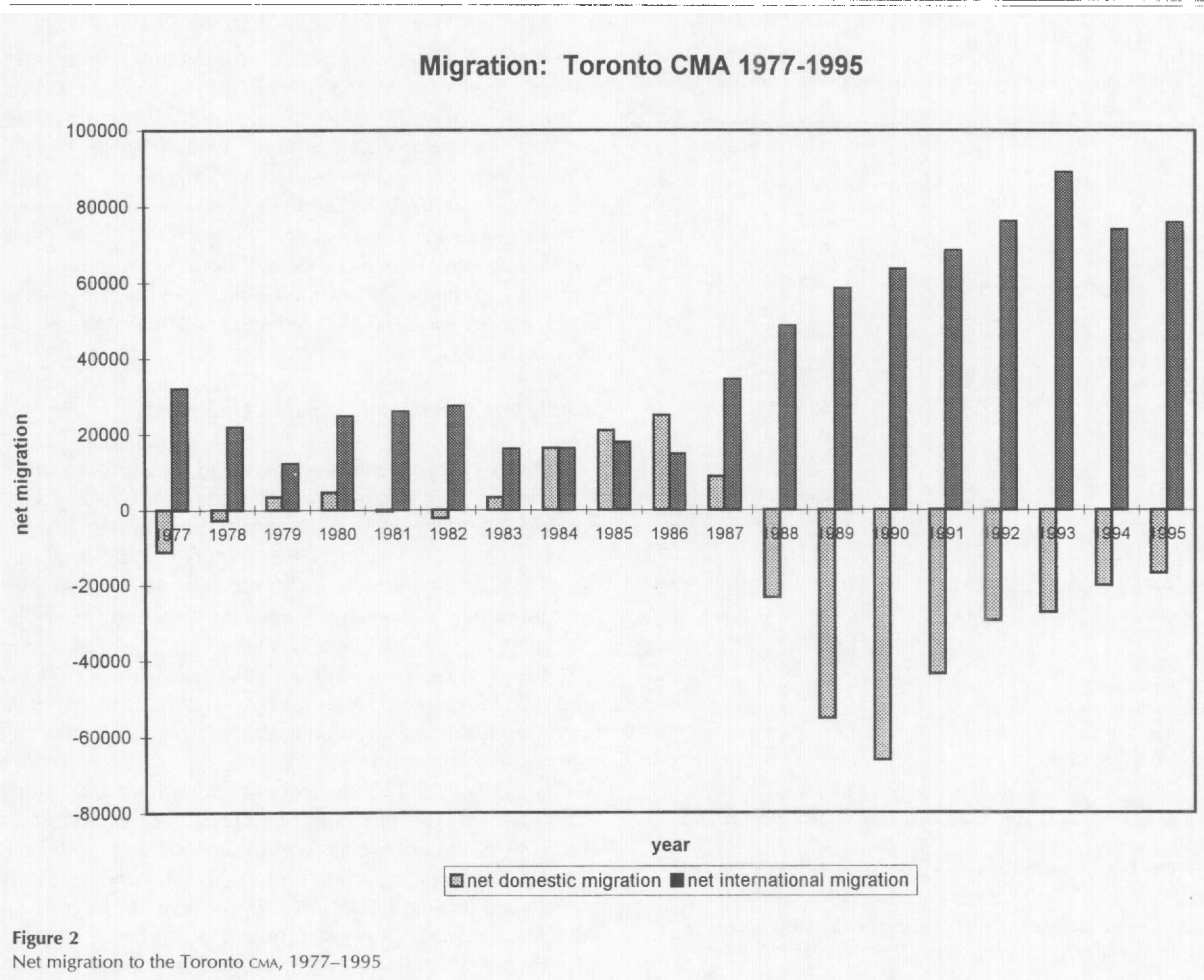
The declared wealth of these new immigrants to B.C., three-quarters of whom have originated in Hong Kong or Taiwan, is impressive; on average, entrepreneurs declared assets in 1996 of \$1.25 million, and investors, \$2.22 million (BC Stats 1997). With all but a small minority entering the province selecting Greater Vancouver as their destination, I estimate from their state-

ments of declared wealth that business immigrants represent assets of at least \$18 to \$20 billion added to the Vancouver metropolitan area between 1990 and 1996 alone. The scale of this personal wealth brings an entirely new dimension to post-1945 immigration: Although this cohort represented only 20 percent of the immigrants entering Vancouver from 1990 to 1997, its economic power makes it especially notable as consumers not only in the housing, automobile, and home-furnishings markets, but also as customers for private education and a range of leisure services.<sup>5</sup>

### Myth 1: A Canadian Immigrant Underclass

Of course, these initial trends and figures give us only the bare bones of the changes occurring in Canada's major cities. There are many more questions to ask: In what ways is this new immigration making contributions to Canadian society? Is integration or segregation the dominant social process? What is the economic well-being of new Canadians? I will try to address these questions selectively, and as I do, will frame each of them in terms of a myth that is widely held in popular culture, sustained by media stories and supported by some academic work.

The first of the two myths concerning immigration in Canadian cities is the myth of an urban underclass. The concept of the underclass was developed a decade ago in the United States, to attempt to describe and account for the expansive districts of deep poverty and deprivation in some major cities, transmitted intergenerationally.<sup>6</sup> These neighbourhoods are characterized by a fundamental apartness and marginalization from the middle class, and are primarily occupied by impoverished African-Americans.<sup>7</sup> Considerable controversy has arisen about the longevity of poverty in these districts: Is their intergenerational continuity a product of economic restructuring and the loss of low-skill jobs in the centre cities, or the result of racism erecting barriers to full citizenship, or the consequence of social and cultural values adjusted to, and therefore limited by, the experience of poverty? Parts of the argument have surfaced in European and Canadian discussions of immigration (Ley and Smith 1997). Two aspects of that thesis are relevant here: To what extent are immigrants and ethno-cultural minorities in Canadian cities integrated or segregated from the rest of society, and how is this related to their economic well-being? In other words, do apartness and enduring poverty, important pieces of the underclass thesis, provide a recognizable description of immigrant experience in Canada?



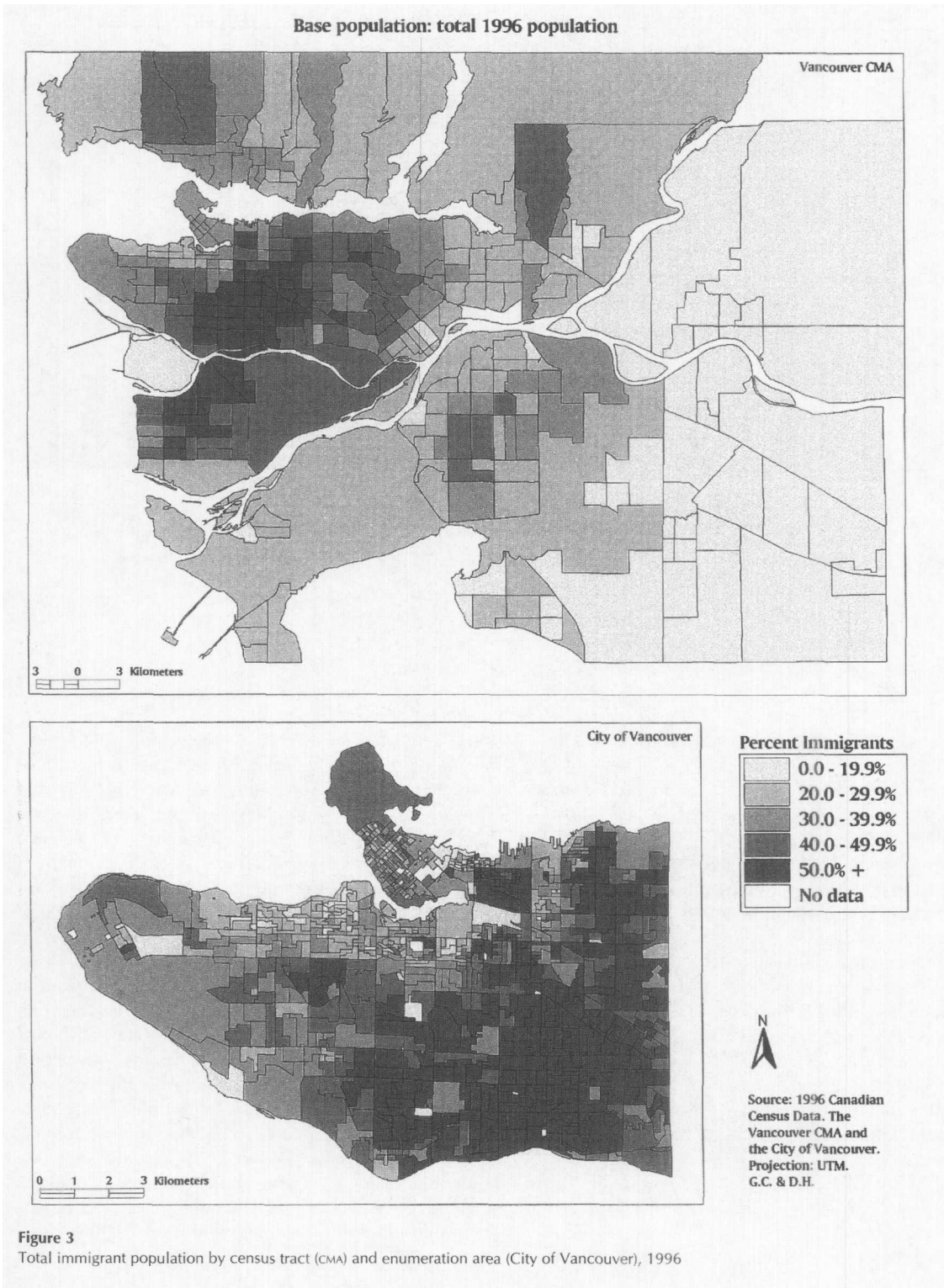
#### THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS AND MINORITIES

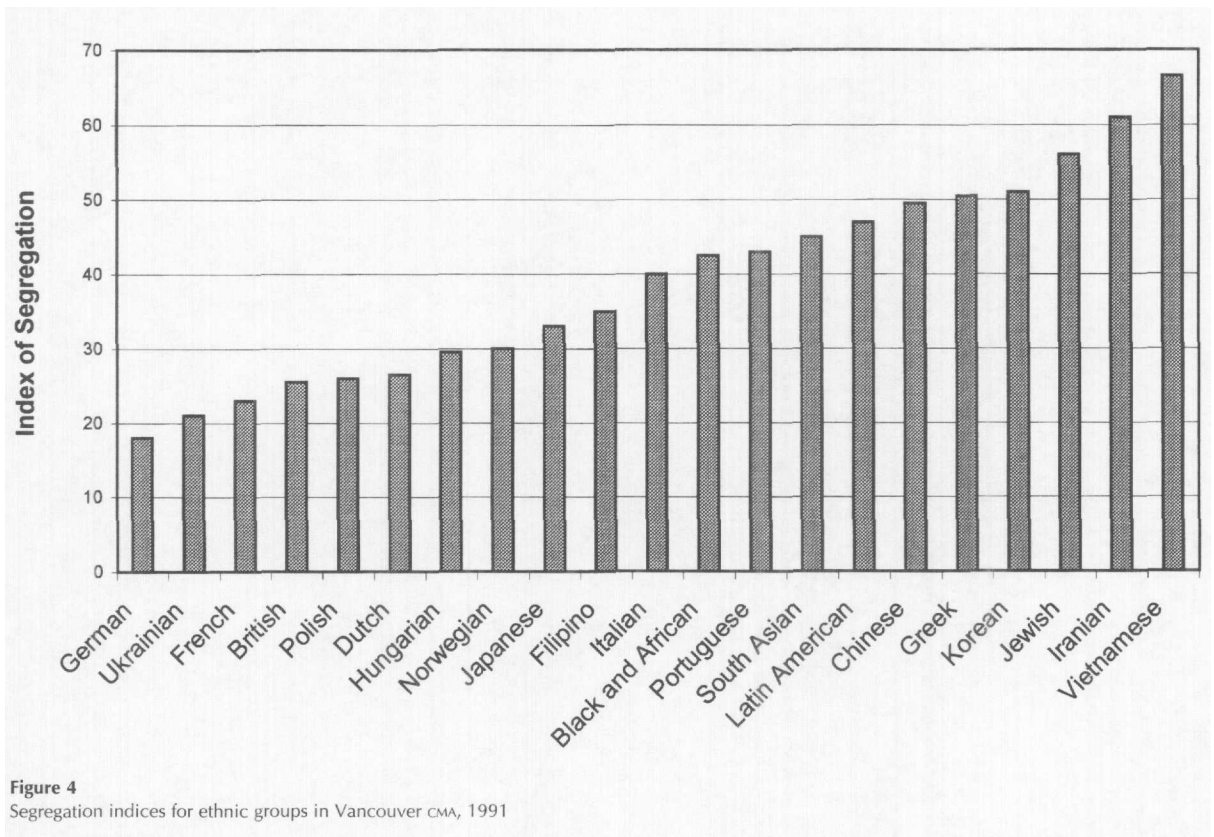
A readily accessible point of entry to questions of social integration is the map of ethnic settlement, for residential segregation is perhaps the oldest measure used to ascertain the 'separateness' of ethno-cultural groups. The social geography of immigration in Canadian cities reveals numerous cases of immigrant concentration, now in the suburbs as well as the central city. In Vancouver, close to 15 percent of the census enumeration areas in 1996 had half or more of their population born outside Canada (Figure 3). When we look at individual ethnic origins among the largest minorities in the Vancouver CMA for 1991, the level of segregation becomes evident: it is lowest for long-established European-origin groups and steadily increases for many visible minorities (Figure 4). There are, however, some interesting exceptions,

with Greeks and Jews (almost entirely of European ancestry) toward the more segregated end of the scale, while Japanese-origin and Black citizens fall near the mid-point.

There are other qualifiers to add as well: some of the visible minorities are recent arrivals as well as being relatively small groups, both characteristics that would lead us to expect higher segregation scores. The levels of segregation are in general modest, with only Iranians and Vietnamese exceeding a segregation index of 60 – which is usually regarded as the threshold of high segregation levels. At the same time, the data are for ethnic origins, not immigrants alone. If limited to immigrants, indices in general point to higher levels of residential apartness.

Residential segregation is an important aspect of ethnic isolation, but it does not exhaust the whole of every-

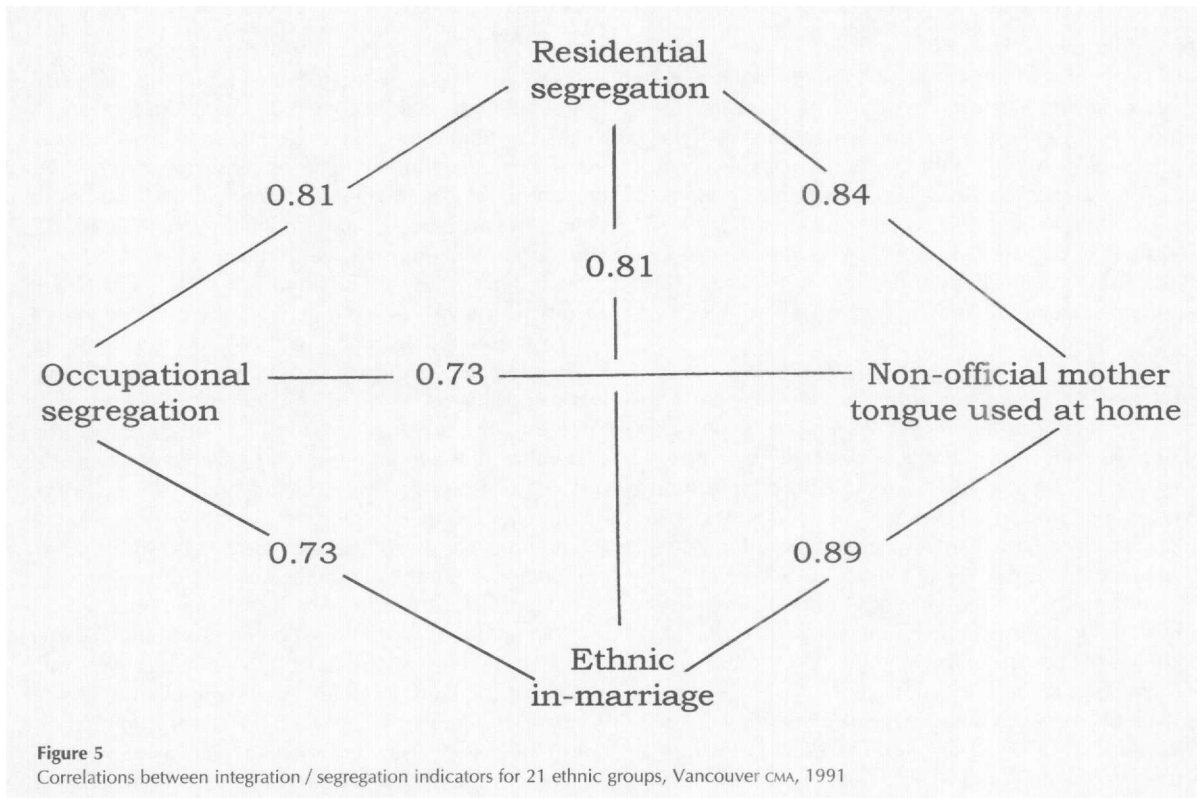




day experience. We should consider integration or isolation also in terms of employment and social life, and in these fields, much less research has been carried out. Customized cross-tabulations of census data do, however, permit us to gain a sense of how concentrated ethnic minorities are in specific parts of the labour market. There is, in fact, a well-defined set of ethnic niches in the Vancouver labour market, including, for example, South Asian men who have followed Italians into the construction industry (Walton-Roberts and Hiebert 1997), Chinese-origin women who are localized in the textile sector, Jews who are located in certain professions, and Filipinas who are concentrated in domestic service (Pratt 1997).<sup>8</sup> The interesting relationship to notice here is that the profile of occupational segregation is highly correlated with the pattern of residential segregation. Among the 21 largest minorities, the rank correlation between residential concentration and labour-market concentration was 0.81 in 1991, telling us that residentially isolated groups are also likely to be isolated in distinctive economic niches.

Working through the multiple dimensions of integra-

tion or segregation in everyday life, we come after housing and work to social life. Because social interaction is related to residential proximity, we know already that highly segregated minorities are more likely to draw friends and their support network from within their own group. An independent measure of social isolation is inability to speak either English or French (the two official languages) – a situation that inevitably restricts comfortable social life to the immigrant community. The Canadian Census includes several variables measuring linguistic ability, and of these, the language spoken at home is an indicator that satisfactorily defines the zone of linguistic comfort in social life. In this analysis, I have excluded British- and French-origin groups, who represent the official languages, and other minorities where it is not possible easily to match ethnic identifier with a single mother tongue.<sup>9</sup> Among the remaining 16 minorities, there is a strong relationship ( $r_s = 0.84$ ) between residential segregation and home use of a nonofficial language.<sup>10</sup> Aside from a few anomalies, the Asian-origin minorities, in particular, who show high levels of occupational and residential segregation, are also more



likely to experience social isolation on the basis of linguistic comfort.

A final measure of social integration is ethnic inter-marriage, indicating a decisive stage in the broadening of cultural life. A rough measure of intermarriage is the ratio of those individuals who declared a single ethnic origin (meaning that both parents were members of the same national group) to those who declared a multiple origin, indicating more than one ethnic identity.<sup>11</sup> The ratio of single to multiple origins within each ethno-cultural group, then, is an indicator of ethnic in-marriage compared with out-marriage. In general, European-origin groups showed high levels of out-marriage, whereas levels were much smaller, and sometimes tiny, for other nationalities. Repeating the correlation with the 21 minority groups showed, once again, a robust relationship with other measures of segregation; the rank correlation between in-marriage and residential segregation, for example, was 0.81.

So what have we learned (Figure 5)? Each of these four variables assessing aspects of integration / segregation also correlates highly with the other. What this analysis

shows, then, is a tight bundle of separateness from Canadian society for particular ethno-cultural groups. The most geographically segregated also tend to be the most isolated in the labour market, and they are also more likely to be marginalized socially, through inmarriage and preference not to speak an official language. Since this analysis is for ethnic groups not immigrants, we also need to know to what degree the proportion of *immigrants* in an ethnic community contributes to this multifaceted lack of social integration. In fact, there is a high correlation, ranging from 0.67 to 0.77 between the immigrant share of each minority group and the four measures of isolation. There is another key point here. Members of visible minorities are twice as likely to be immigrants as members of European-origin groups, contributing to their consistently higher levels of marginalization and weaker social integration. So we may conclude that there is a consistent ranking of segregation, or a lack of integration, among ethnic groups on a series of measures – an apartness that is more marked the greater the share of immigrants in a group, and more pronounced also for groups whose members are visible minorities.

The question now becomes: how serious is this relative lack of integration? A negative judgment would emphasize the consistency between this sense of separation and inwardness and one of the key arguments of the underclass thesis. On the other hand, perhaps levels of apartness are not a bad thing in a society that upholds multiculturalism as a guiding policy (cf. Peach 1996). How do we adjudicate between these two views? One way forward is to consider the relations between social integration / segregation and economic well-being.

#### THE ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE OF IMMIGRANTS

The economic achievement of immigrants provides an important indicator of the success of immigration policy. Economic success means a lack of dependency among newcomers to Canada, and a vindication of selection and settlement policies; economic underachievement means a costly relationship of dependency upon the state and a perception of social difference held by immigrants and natives alike. Poverty underscores the otherness and visibility of immigrant groups; potentially, it might stimulate alienation among newcomers and resentment among the Canadian-born.

As we look at the relations between social integration and economic well-being, we find that each of the four measures of integration is correlated negatively with personal income. Among the 21 largest ethno-cultural groups in Vancouver, there were high negative associations in 1991 between personal income and, in descending order, the practice of speaking a nonofficial language at home ( $r_s = -0.72$ ), the in-marriage index ( $-0.67$ ), occupational segregation ( $-0.64$ ), and the map of residential segregation, where the correlation ( $-0.60$ ) was diminished by the anomalous outlier of the Jewish community, whose high level of segregation was countered by strong economic performance. The income differentials between ethnic groups are marked; in 1991, a high school graduate of British or German origin was receiving an average personal income almost twice as high as that received by a graduate of Vietnamese origin. Overall, the European-origin population enjoyed considerable higher incomes than other Canadians.

But stronger still was the association between personal income and the immigrant share of an ethnic population ( $r_s = -0.88$ ). Our analysis repeats the conclusions of a number of other studies showing that recent immigrants experience a considerable income penalty (Pendakur and Pendakur 1996). Compared with an average Vancouver income of \$26,213 in 1991, immigrants of less than ten years' standing made only \$18,208, while 42 percent fell below the low-income cutoff, al-

most triple the rate for the rest of the population. These average conditions worsened for immigrants who had less than high school education who did not speak English at home, who were women, and who were of non-European ethnicity. The poverty rate reached 52 percent among immigrants of less than ten years' residence, of non-European origin, with less than Grade 12 education, who did not speak English at home.

So not only do recent immigrants as a whole fall below the income level of the rest of the population, but within the immigrant cohorts, those who are least socially integrated are also those who have the most severe income problems. In this alarming combination of separateness and poverty are fertile conditions for the underclass thesis to take root and for a generally negative scenario to be disseminated about the status of immigrants in Canada's cities. But I want now to counter this argument as one of the damaging myths surrounding contemporary immigration discourse.

The negative scenario sees immigrants either as victims of conditions beyond their control (the critical view) or else as in some way deficient (the conservative view) – some of the literature refers to a declining 'quality' of immigrants. An alternative perspective sees immigrants not in this passive role, but more actively as individuals and households who energetically take hold of their circumstances and through time effect significant improvements. One of the striking properties of the negative scenario is its tendency to regard immigrants as individuals. It is a measure of *personal* income that dominates statistical discussion, while the underclass thesis has a prevalent storyline of failed social relations, with its emphasis on broken families and disorganized communities.

But this is to overlook much more positive characteristics of the social life of immigrant communities – particularly those who are marked by relative segregation in residential and linguistic enclaves. During a recent walk through an Italian neighbourhood of inner Boston, I noticed a street sign appealing for information about a child who had gone missing in a town in Italy. Not only was the transnational connection with the homeland stated in this sad appeal; also evident was the existence of a local, ethnic community of concern, where information and resources were shared. A consideration of the *social* basis of immigrant life leads to more positive conclusions, significant enough that they even show up in other statistical measures.<sup>12</sup> In-migrant communities are commonly locales of dense social bonds, of family and friends, of networks that are embedded and extended institutionally in self-help voluntary organiza-

Table 2

Personal and Household Income for Immigrants and Nonimmigrants, by Origin, Vancouver CMA, 1991

	Immigrants				Nonimmigrants	
	1981-91		Pre-1981		Personal income	Household income
	Personal income	Household income	Personal income	Household income		
European origin	\$23,621	\$44,227	\$28,774	\$51,788	\$28,267	\$51,219
Non-European	\$16,886	\$38,412	\$25,078	\$58,072	\$23,209	\$58,528
European as % of Non-European	140%	115%	115%	89%	122%	88%

SOURCE: Custom cross-tabulation, 1991 Census of Canada

tions and ethnic churches and other places of worship.<sup>13</sup> The ethnic economy provides opportunities and occupational niches where lack of an official language and Canadian experience need not be disadvantages (cf. Waldinger 1996).

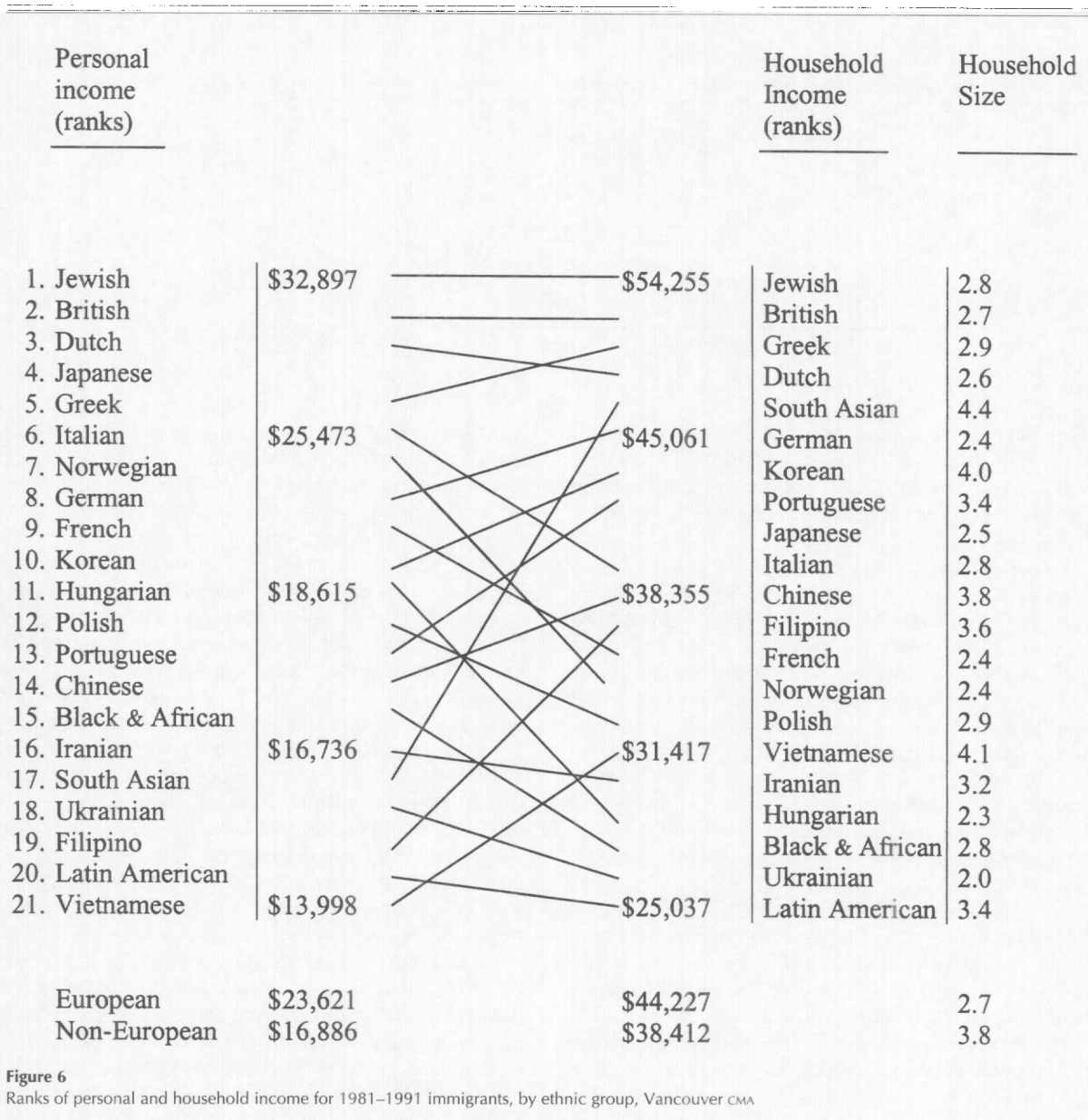
But what I want to draw attention to here is a more immediate context in social life, the role of the immigrant *household* in mitigating the tendency toward low incomes. It is important to stress the distinctiveness of the household and its adaptive nature for the early years of settlement. Seven percent of immigrants with fewer than ten years' residence in Vancouver in 1991 were members of a large, multifamily household, compared to 1 percent of nonimmigrants. Among visible minority households, this ratio stretches out to 9 percent, against 1 percent for the rest of the population. Minority households are also more likely to be households with children; in Vancouver, 51 percent of visible minority households contained children in 1991, while among Caucasian households, the figure was 28 percent. Pointing in the same direction, 50 percent of the households of recent immigrants included children, while among nonimmigrants, the figure was again 28 percent.

The inevitable result is that immigrant households are considerably larger, on average 30 percent bigger, than comparable nonimmigrant households. In fact, among our 21 ethnic groups in Vancouver, there is a correlation of 0.78 between the rankings of household size and the immigrant share of each group. Moreover, there is a systematic fault line within the immigrant cohort itself. European-origin households are consistently smaller, even when time of arrival to Canada is held constant. Among the 1981-1990 immigrant cohort, those landing from Europe had an average household size of 2.7 persons, much smaller than the typical household of 3.8 persons for new Canadians from other origins. Larger households offer a survival route for marginalized immigrants. They

provide a support network that includes different resources from different members that may be pooled to benefit all. As we will now see, these benefits show up in *household* income data that contain some significant variations from the *personal* income we were considering earlier.<sup>14</sup>

There is too ready a tendency to see those who arrive in Canada poor and with limited human capital as passive and dependent. The truth may well be the opposite, for the many hands in a family seek, and in most cases find, employment of virtually any sort. The result is that while personal earnings may be low, overall household income may be surprisingly higher (Table 2). A comparison of the *personal incomes* of immigrants arriving in the 1980s with a European place of birth and those from non-European origins reveals a premium of 40 percent for the former, a finding that has been reached by other researchers. This income gap is much deeper for men than for women, and it remains after various controls have been introduced (Pendakur and Pendakur 1996). While the gap narrows for immigrants who have spent more than ten years in Canada, it does not disappear. However, the differential for *household* income is quite different, with an initial premium of only 15 percent favouring recent arrivals from Europe. Moreover, once immigrants have been in residence for over a decade, the relationship shifts, so that European households face an income *penalty* of 11 percent compared with non-Europeans, who are principally visible minorities. Among nonimmigrants, this divide is sustained, with non-European minorities continuing to report a household income premium, of 12 percent.

For example, immigrant households arriving from South Asia during the 1980s had an average size of 4.4 persons, the largest among all 21 ethnic groups (Figure 6). While they ranked 17th in terms of personal income, they soared to fifth rank in household income. Other Asian-origin groups with above average-size households



also improved their position: Vietnamese moved up five ranks, Korean and Chinese moved up three, and Filipinos moved up seven ranks. European groups with smaller households fell several ranks, including French, Norwegian, and Hungarian; in contrast, Portuguese, with larger households, moved up five ranks. This scarcely recognized reshuffling of fortunes at the household level is true both of high-school graduates and of those who did not complete high school, and puts a quite different spin

on the often pessimistic story of economic underachievement by immigrants, particularly visible minorities. It also suggests the wisdom of a family reunification program that enhances the number of wage earners in an immigrant household. It does not, of course, address the possible rejoinder that various forms of welfare payments supplement the family wage. This challenge cannot be directly answered from the data at hand, though in general in 1990, immigrants continued to utilize un-

employment insurance and social assistance at a lower level than did other Canadians (Baker and Benjamin 1995). This was true even for the most recent cohort of 1980s arrivals.

So the first reason for a more optimistic reading of immigrant success comes from thinking of the immigrant not as an individual but as having a social identity, as being a member of a distinct community that provides significant social and material assets. A second reason for the optimistic scenario is the irrevocable hand of time. There is scarcely any evidence that immigrants to Canada are facing the deep and generationally reproduced deprivation of an American underclass (Ley and Smith 1997). Increasingly, the Afro-American ghetto seems to be an aberration in Western societies, for the generational model for virtually all other groups, including visible minorities, is one of upward mobility and suburban movement.<sup>15</sup> We have just noted the steady economic improvement of immigrant cohorts through time, so that after ten years in Canada, visible minority households are actually outperforming others. Income tax records of over a million immigrants provide some informative national data on individual performance and encourage the same conclusion (Canada 1997). These data reveal that, on average, it took economic-class immigrants only six years to reach the average annual earnings of all Canadians. The family class and refugees had a longer march to equality, but there is an encouraging upward trajectory in their earnings, and after 15 years' residence in Canada, they are very close to the national average.

There is an interesting corollary to upward economic mobility over time, and that is a growing level of social integration as language skills improve, residential segregation declines, and occupational mobility occurs. It is as if, to use a crude metaphor, the ethnic cocoon has completed its task and is shed (at least in part), to permit fuller economic and social integration. This conclusion, of course, is a generalization, for unacceptable barriers persist, including housing and job discrimination. In addition, failure to recognize some foreign professional credentials results in a scandalous waste of human capital; our interviews have already located many examples of underemployment, including Indian engineers who drive taxis and a Serbian judge who repairs arcade video games. Clearly, progress is not even, pockets of disadvantage remain, cases of blocked opportunity exist, and tendencies to ethnic congregation persist (especially for visible minorities), but overall, the outcome is squarely at odds with the negative scenario – the myth of an urban underclass.<sup>16</sup>

## Myth 2: The Myth of an Immigrant Overclass

Our analysis so far has proceeded along the path of quantitative social science. We have accepted without question the integrity of census categories and the completeness of official data. We have divided people into homogeneous ethno-cultural groups and sought to reveal numerical relationships between those groups. The value of this kind of analysis should not be debunked, but as we approach the second myth, I do want to emphasize the need to use official statistics with care, to treat all statistics as social artifacts that conceal the process of their own selection and collection and that by their very nature suggest a certitude rarely evident in the everyday world. For the second myth – the myth of an urban overclass in immigrant communities – I therefore want to use a quite different tack, and become as it were a storyteller, recounting events and interviews that show how incomplete and uncertain our knowledge of the immigrant experience frequently is. More subversively, I want to show how misleading official statistics can sometimes be. I want also to adopt a fundamentally different position in relation to immigrants themselves, a position that introduces their voices to the interpretation. In this research, I will challenge a convention about which we might expect there to be no ambiguity at all: What does it mean to be rich, or more precisely, what does it mean to be a rich immigrant?

Canada is known internationally for what some critics have perhaps unfairly called its designer immigration program. By that, they mean the growing tendency to select immigrants on the basis of their human capital: their job experience, education and language skills, and business acumen. Business immigrants qualify for entry to Canada on the basis of entrepreneurial skills and financial capital, and in recent years, they have cited assets well in excess of a million dollars. They have comprised 20 percent of immigrants to Greater Vancouver in recent years, far above the national average. But their economic success in Canada is very uneven, partly due, no doubt, to their language problems; fewer than half of all business immigrants who landed in 1996 spoke either English or French (Immigration Legislative Review 1997, Annex 5). The social and psychological cost of this relatively modest level of performance is considerable; for some, the so-called astronaut families, it includes the disruption of family separation as a result of trans-Pacific job migration; for others, it includes the trauma of underachievement in Canada for immigrants who were successful businesspeople in their home countries.

I will begin this narrative with an informative *cause*

*célèbre* in Vancouver, the tragic and unsolved murder of a business immigrant who had entered Canada as an entrepreneur. He drove a Mercedes, had bought an expensive house in a wealthy neighbourhood, but was murdered in his driveway early one morning before dawn on his way to work at one of the city's Chinese-language newspapers, where he was employed as a *newspaper delivery man*. These were the bare-bone facts of the case, but facts are never innocent: they are sorted, selected, and compiled as representations in a fully social process. The social construction of immigration news is one that frequently displays dichotomy.

The English-language press strongly implied that this mismatch of job status and economic status had sinister linkages to criminal activity; the man, after all, was rich, he was a business immigrant, and he had bought into a wealthy neighbourhood, with the consumer emblems of wealth. This posture as a delivery man must surely have been a cover for something else (Pemberton 1997; Farrow 1997). In a vigorous response on the radio and in the press, the Chinese media declared that it is not at all unusual for successful businesspeople in Asia to have major adjustment difficulties in Canada, to face huge problems in achieving satisfactory employment, and to seek menial positions as a means of developing friendships and making a contribution, however small. In light of all this, the imputations of the English-language media were at best in poor taste, at worst, despicable (Ming Pao 1997; Sing Tao 1997).

Among the several informative lessons in this episode, I will leave aside further discussion of the important question of media representation and focus upon just two linked themes: a successful entrepreneur in Asia is not necessarily an entrepreneur at all in Canada; an immigrant whose entry depends on his wealth may be asset rich, but earnings poor.<sup>17</sup> Income data from the census may thereby offer a poor guide to the stock of household assets, a point noted in housing studies that have observed the inconsistency, in Vancouver, between the residential value of housing owned by new immigrants and their declared incomes (Lapointe Consulting and Murdie 1996). There is, of course, a further complication to this equation: to what extent are off-shore assets and incomes declared to the census enumerator (or Revenue Canada) in full? At this stage, we may see how shaky those dumb numbers in official statistics might be – how lacking in certitude, though eloquent of social process.

Unfortunately, there is not time here for further commentary on the social construction of official statistics, but it is surely a key issue in light of the heavy depend-

ence upon such data in immigration research and policy making. Instead, I need to return to my central question, the assumed existence of an urban overclass. How can this possibly be reconciled with the experience of an entrepreneur employed as a delivery man? I am citing this episode because, though sensational in its outcome, I do not believe its basic attributes to be exceptional – although it is a mighty contradiction of both the public perception and the mainstream media depiction of the status of Asian-origin business immigrants. It also counters the hopeful fictions I am increasingly seeing that pose as official statistics of job creation and investment achievement through the business immigration program.<sup>18</sup>

These are strong inferences for a research process that is at present incomplete. They should be treated as tendencies rather than conclusions, but tendencies that already have some persuasive support. I have completed a focus group with members of a dozen families – primarily business immigrants – and more detailed, semistructured interviews with another 15 or so unconnected households, all of them recent immigrants living in Vancouver's middle- and upper-middle-class westside neighbourhoods. The modest sample scarcely offers the basis for any finality in conclusion. But what I am finding is quite remarkable in the consistency of the picture that is taking shape. Moreover, the people interviewed all state that their experience is not unique, but shared much more broadly within the community of economic immigrants they know. Consider, first of all, the focus group, completed in early 1997 with business immigrants, principally from Taiwan, qualifying through the investor program. They were unanimous about the difficulty of doing business in Canada. A leader of the Taiwanese business community is speaking: 'I think business is so hard for us to do. That is so surprising, the first time we lose our invested money. All gone! That's why we are surprised and disappointed. The people there, they are like, I like to use the word, they "cheat" me. My investment money, all gone. ... We still have money but we are afraid, afraid to invest.' Another man chips in: 'But what I mean is the first experience to us about business is loss of money. We are afraid of ... . There are, we have \$150,000. I mean most of us lost this kind of money, 80 percent. That's our first experience.'

The difficulties of doing business were mentioned in every subsequent household interview with supposedly wealthy economic immigrants. Mr. Chu sold his business assets and moved to Vancouver in his forties. He has not pursued business ventures since, other than some property ownership. What special advice, I asked, would he give a friend like himself, who was thinking of

moving to Vancouver? 'I would just tell them that, be prepared not to be too optimistic regarding finding a job or making money or building new business ventures or enterprises. They should not be too optimistic and be prepared that it will eat up your capital. I think that's pretty serious.'

Mr. Leung is living in a house that cost him one million dollars. He entered Canada with his wife and two sons as an investor and lost much of his money, but plans to stay. He and his wife have worked hard learning English, four to six hours a day. In four years, this former owner of a small business in Hong Kong has not had a job or started a business of his own. He is clear about the advice he would give potential immigrants:

We have a lot of experience. Not only my experience. We always speak with the other immigrants from Hong Kong or Taiwan ... . We have a lot of experience also from them ... . I would like to give my two cents' worth. For women, it is much better, for here. For ladies, 95 percent female immigrants like here very much. Ninety-five percent of male immigrants, 95 percent feel upset, feel embarrassed, feel very bad here. Middle aged around 35 to 50 men, they are in this age, also feel upset here because they lost their self-confidence, their job, lost their respect because when they are in their home, Hong Kong or Taiwan, maybe they are in a higher position in a company or very very high-level position. But after moving here, they live with the family. Wife and children go to school, the husbands stay home, nothing to do, no work to do. It's very hard to look for a job same as they are in Hong Kong. If they can have a job, it's a very low-class job, very very low class – you know what I mean ... . They need to downgrade, so people feel upset. If they want to ... open up a business here, they have to consider it very carefully because it is very hard to get a successful business here.

As if to exemplify the gender specificity of Mr. Leung's remarks, a now-divorced woman in her forties chose to stay in Vancouver when her husband's business failed and he returned to Hong Kong. Return, of course, is always an option, especially for a mobile transnational community like the overseas Chinese (Skeldon 1994). One of my respondents went back home across the Pacific a few weeks after our interview. While she had a modestly paying professional position, and left reluctantly, her husband's failure to find a business opportunity after three years led them both to return to the family business in Hong Kong. Most of my other respondents had friends or family members who had recently left Canada.

What do people do? Entrepreneur immigrants, of

course, are obliged to open a business. Mrs. Yee opened a shop in Montreal. It failed. 'So we started the business, we thought it was easy like Hong Kong. [There] we had a retail shop. If you start a business, people will come, and we will have business. But, no, it's completely different. So we had the same experience, we lost quite a big sum. From that [time] on, we are very cautious, very careful, with what we have left. We dare not venture into another business. We try to keep our savings as much as possible.' Now Mrs. Yee and her daughter are living in Vancouver from the income of her husband, a well-paid health professional in Hong Kong, whose qualifications are not transferable to Canada.

But the astronaut option has very severe family implications: women are isolated and highly stressed, affairs occur, children become disoriented and develop behaviour problems – 40 percent of them in the (probably exaggerated) opinion of one respondent. As a result the astronaut strategy is entered into reluctantly by most families, and it is given up for family, not business reasons. The Yuens moved from Hong Kong to Los Angeles in the 1980s and on to Vancouver in the nineties, worried about the social climate, especially crime, in southern California. To effect the move, Mr. Yuen had to arrange a transfer back to head office in Hong Kong, which made him an astronaut in Vancouver. The lifestyle was intolerable for his family in Vancouver, and he left his position. For the past three years, Mr. Yuen, an economic immigrant to Vancouver, living in a \$650,000 home, has been unemployed. In a busy week, he says, he spends maybe three hours managing his property portfolio on his home computer.

The Chens recently made the same decision. Mr. Chen has withdrawn from the business partnership he had in Taipei, to join his wife and two young children. His English is poor. He is listless, and time weighs heavy on his hands. He has not looked for work or considered starting a local business until his English improves. His family has savings that will last another three years. Both the Yuens and the Chens are distraught, or more accurately, torn. Both families are worried about the geopolitics of China's expansion in the eastern Pacific. They see a better life for their children in Canada, but their budget clock is ticking. The men are home most of the day. What effects does this have? We fight a lot more, says Mrs. Yuen.

Some asset-rich immigrants pursue another option: early retirement. Ms. Lee, the divorcee in her forties, lives from investments and has no job. Mr. and Mrs. Liang have no children; they moved briefly to Toronto in the early 1990s, when he was a representative of a Hong

Kong company. She speaks no English, but his is good. After returning to Hong Kong, the couple attended a dinner party; of the dozen Chinese at the table, ten held Canadian passports, and the couple were persuaded to come back to Canada. In 1996, at the age of 52, the Liangs moved to Vancouver to retire. They entered as investors, placing \$250,000 in a Quebec fund that seems secure. He estimates his savings and investments will support him and his wife for 25 years. They have a busy social life in Vancouver with friends they had known before in Hong Kong, and they spend three months a year back in Hong Kong, where they have an apartment. Life is good; adjustment has been easy; his most difficult experience has been to learn to drive in the infrequent winter snow. His advice to others like himself?

I will tell them frankly, you can't earn any money here. If you have enough money you can come. Just stay here and relax ... . You cannot expect to have a comfortable [life], or to earn good money here because the tax here is so high. So you must have earned enough to come. And then if they come, they must expect their life will be totally different, especially when they have to work. ... When they come, they might not be able to find a job. If they find a job, the salary will be one-third or less what they have in Hong Kong ... .

- Q. Do you know people who have come here to start businesses?
- A. Actually, one of my friends they came, and they said, 'Ah, there is some kind of business you can do. It's breeding pigeons.' I would never think of doing business here. Actually, most of my friends, they retire, because they are all my similar age. All my good friends are retired, I mean those who come recently, we are all retired people ... .
- Q. So are you saying you know only one person who has come here to try to start a business?
- A. Only one. [But] they are not trying to start. They just say this kind of business is feasible.

How representative are these allusions to economic inactivity? Recently available information from the Immigration Data Base throws additional light upon the ethnographic interviews. The IMDB is a unique data set, consisting of a blended series of files, including a set of immigrant characteristics at the time of landing in Canada, beginning in 1980, and linked to annual tax returns in subsequent years. Due to confidentiality concerns, data are available in aggregated form, but nonetheless show some important group characteristics, including cross-tabulations by immigrating class, a characteristic that is not otherwise available. Taxation data show that, whereas

skilled workers who qualify on the points system rapidly succeed in the job market and after a year in Canada report incomes in excess of the national average, business immigrants take eight years to reach this threshold of only average achievement (Canada 1997). Currently, the file has been updated as far as the 1995 tax year, so that one may trace the income of any cohort for each year since landing up to 1995. Alternatively, for any tax year, the income of cohorts landing in different years may be compared. The data of interest here are drawn from the British Columbia tables consisting of taxfiler returns of almost 230 000 immigrants who had landed in British Columbia since 1980 and were resident in the province in 1995.<sup>19</sup> Of these, 13 115 were the households of business immigrants, representing a population of about 50 000.<sup>20</sup> Taxfiler information is provided for the Principal Applicants (PAs) for immigrant status in each business class household.

The modest economic achievement of business-class immigrants in the 1995 tax year is striking. Among none of the annual cohorts landing between 1980 and 1995 did more than 50 percent of the Principal Applicants in the business class report any employment earnings whatever in 1995, the lowest proportion of all immigration classes. Moreover, in every year but one since 1987, PAs with no employment earnings have exceeded 60 percent of the total. The median income (by landing year) in 1995 for Principal Applicants who reported employment earnings was only \$20,300. In contrast, and to be expected among a group of entrepreneurs, the business class reported the highest dependence on self-employment earnings, reaching a maximum annual level of 37 percent of all PAs who landed in 1981. This figure typically exceeded one-third of all households from 1980 to 1984 but has been steadily falling since, to a level of under one-quarter since 1988. However, the level of self-employment earnings is meagre indeed, reaching a maximum of \$14,700 for the 1981 cohort, but generally much less, and as low as \$1900 for the 1993 cohort. A significant deterioration in economic achievement occurred after 1986; in this recent period *at least one-third* of PAs in business-class households have reported no earnings at all from either employment or self-employment.<sup>21</sup>

Together with the interviews, this statistical profile raises some serious theoretical, policy, and human questions. What does it mean to be wealthy for middle-aged immigrant households who have limited or no earnings? What business skills is Canada purchasing if they are not then deployed in this country? What are Canada's obligations in terms of the human and economic costs some members of this population face, and that have made

some of them angry at what they see as misrepresentation and deceit? What does citizenship mean in a transnational era? At the very least, one can say that there is a fragility connected with this migration cohort that contradicts the widespread public impression, the myth, of deep wealth and vigorous entrepreneurialism, of an all-commanding economic overclass.

## Conclusion

By its nature, this is a paper without a conclusion, for it reflects work in progress on several fronts and tentative results that require further confirmation. But if nothing else, I hope I have shown something of the range of questions to be asked in immigration research, the diversity of the research methods, the importance of the research problems for public policy, and the surprises we are finding that challenge some stubborn popular myths. If so, then I have demonstrated the possibilities of this intriguing experiment called the Metropolis Project, its importance for applied research and policy development ... and also for human geography.

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## Notes

- 1 Metropolis is seen as a prototype of a new type of research venture, where the federal government brings the universities much more fully into partnership, to supplement its research capacity in matters of national significance. Thus in Ottawa there is talk of the 'Metropolis experiment'. It is clearly very much in the self-interest of human geographers and other social scientists to follow this development closely, for it does provide a number of opportunities, as well as administrative challenges. The opportunities include interdisciplinary liaison (there are 15 separate disciplines represented among the 55 faculty associated with the Vancouver Centre), work with community partners, access to government databases, and secure funding for several years; in the summer of 1997, for example, ten research assistants were supported in the Geography Department of UBC. For an introduction to the Metropolis Project and the work of

the Vancouver Centre, consult the web site: <http://www.riim.metropolis.globalx.net>

- 2 Lowrie (1992). While these high levels are unlikely to be reached this quickly, Census data show that 31 percent of the population in the Toronto and Vancouver metropolitan areas identified themselves as visible minorities in 1996.
- 3 Between 1991 and April 30, 1996, 441 000 immigrants settled in Toronto and 190 000 settled in Vancouver. The scale of this movement is suggested by comparison with flows into New York, which was receiving 80 000 immigrants a year through the second half of the 1980s, a *per capita* level far below Toronto and Vancouver (Waldinger 1996).
- 4 This divergence of domestic and international migration trends is reminiscent of Frey's analysis in American cities, a disjuncture strong enough that he daringly refers to it as demographic balkanization (Frey 1995, 1998; but also see the criticism of Ellis and Wright 1998). In addition, preliminary analysis by Larry Bourne (personal communication) indicates that this divergence is not yet widespread in Canadian cities; Frey might respond that this is because few of them are presently major immigrant destinations.
- 5 Consumption tastes in housing among this population have led to some informative differences with longer-established Anglo-Canadian sensibilities in the residential landscape, culminating in the furor over the 'monster house' (Ley 1995).
- 6 For a review of this large literature, oriented to Canadian concerns, see Ley and Smith (1997).
- 7 Hence the title of Massey and Denton's (1993) important book, *American Apartheid*.
- 8 For a much fuller discussion of the ethnically segmented labour market in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, see Hiebert (1997).
- 9 The excluded minorities are Latin Americans and Jews, as well as the ill-defined groups, 'Black,' Black and African, and Caribbean.
- 10 A lower, but still positive, correlation of 0.24 indicates a positive association also exists between occupational segregation and predilection for the mother tongue.
- 11 A variant of this measure was used in the classic study of Duncan and Lieberson (1959), who provided the tallest set of indicators of ethnic integration. For a commentary, and improvement upon the measure, see Peach (1980).
- 12 This literature repeats the earlier emphasis on individualism and social disorganization that is a persistent refrain in the Chicago school of human ecology and was challenged in the 1940s by theorists who located social organization in the inner city, including Whyte (1943) and Firey (1945). This led to its celebration in the exuberant vignettes offered in Jacobs (1961) and the melancholy of community destroyed in Gans (1962). The fact that all four of these classics draw upon research in Boston (all but Jacobs exclusively so) might raise some additional questions.
- 13 One of the projects at the Vancouver Metropolis Centre consists of examining the role of ethnic churches in the provision of settlement services of all kinds. For the first study, on German churches, see Beattie (1998). Ongoing work is extending this study to Chinese and Korean churches. For a contemporary example of the role of voluntary organizations in immigrant adjustment, see Owusu's (1998) examination of the Ghanaian community in suburban Toronto.
- 14 Rose and Villeneuve (1998, 128) report several ethnographic studies in Montreal that 'have documented immigrants' strategies of dual (or multiple) earnings ... especially among families of Southern European or Asian origin.'
- 15 For Britain, see the analysis of Peach (1996). Whether this optimistic scenario applies equally to Aboriginal groups in Canada is much less certain.

- 16 Frances Henry's (1995) study of the Caribbean communities in Toronto introduces a significant caveat, for she explicitly identifies parts of this group as an underclass.
- 17 In fact, the murder victim was operating a ginseng export business as a condition of his entrepreneur entry status, but it occupied far less than his full-time attention.
- 18 Nash (1996) cites the earnest statistics pointing to the achievements of the business program in investments and job creation. Most subsequent studies seem to have accepted these statistics uncritically, even though many of them are based on immigrant *intentions* at landing, rather than verified accomplishments. Few seem to have involved field research, though for a thoughtful exception, see Smart (1994).  
Another field-based study, including interviews with business immigrants, was conducted by Froschauer (1998). His data show a large discrepancy between planned and actual start-up of manufacturing firms by entrepreneurs, the desired policy objective. Over half his sample took over existing businesses, rather than starting their own. He also cites a federal survey that was unable to locate over a quarter of the manufacturing firms owned by business entrepreneurs. Woo's (1998) interviews with a small sample of business immigrants in Vancouver, though circumspect, reached similar conclusions to my own. All names in the text that follows are pseudonyms.
- 19 More precisely, the data include immigrants who were B.C. resident taxfilers in 1995 and who had declared British Columbia as their province of destination when they landed in Canada. Omitted are secondary migrants to B.C. from other provinces, who had stated a province of destination other than B.C. when they landed. The data are abstracted from a CD-ROM with accompanying text (Canada 1998).
- 20 Of these, 9330 households landed in Canada between 1991 and 1995. Overall, the proportion of business immigrants to all immigrants to B.C. is lower than other estimates based on entry statistics would suggest. Plausible is an attrition of business-class immigrants as a result of return migration to Asia (cf. Skeldon 1994), an interpretation supported by the significant bulge of business-class immigrants who entered in 1992 or later and were still residents. Those who entered prior to 1992 would by 1995 have completed their three-year residency period and been eligible for citizenship, after which return migration would be much more attractive.
- 21 The figure is certainly larger than one-third, for it is arrived at by adding independently and from separate tables the numbers reporting employment and self-employment income, and undoubtedly a number of returns identify both sources. Unfortunately, the IMDB tables do not permit recognition of this overlap.

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# CHINESE COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY IN THE TORONTO CMA: NEW DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS AND IMPACTS

*This study, which examines recent development patterns of Chinese commercial activity in the Toronto CMA, yielded three major discoveries. First, new development in the past 15 years brought about not only a proliferation of ethnic Chinese businesses, but also considerable changes in business structure: the traditionally predominant restaurants and grocery stores declined substan-*

*tially in proportion, but businesses that provide various types of consumer services expanded greatly. This indicates that the Chinese community has been steadily building a more complete and more self-sufficient ethnic economy. Second, while Toronto's three central-city Chinatowns have remained, most new developments occurred in the suburbs. Consequently, the spatial or-*