“I am Canadian”: The Rise of Canadian Identity in Canada's Censuses, 1981-2006

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The “I am Canadian” commercial for Molson's *Canadian* beer, first aired in 2000, became an overnight phenomenon in Canada. In “The Rant,” as it was known, an actor listed stereotypical characteristics of Canadians and ended with the emphatic declaration “I am Canadian.” It was interpreted by many observers as an expression of national pride and an emblem of Canadian patriotism (MacGregor, 2003) and its success quickly led to numerous spin-offs and spoofs ... and increased beer sales for Molson’s Beer Company. The campaign was perfectly timed: it occurred after two decades of change in how Canadians identified themselves. In 1981, less than 1% of the Canadian population identified their origins on the federal census as “Canadian” or “Canadien". By 2001, the number describing their origins as at least partly Canadian or Canadien had grown to 40%.

The rapid growth of the numbers and percentages of people in Canada identifying themselves as Canadian in response to the census questions on race and ethnic “origins” between 1981 and 2006 is the result of several different sets of processes. The first set consists of demographic processes: immigration, racial and ethnic intermarriage, and generational aging. Immigrant origins such as “Ukrainian” or “Italian” fade in salience by the third and later generations. As intermarriage between origin or ancestry groups increases, the complexity of origins of the next generation increases and the salience of any one ancestral thread decreases.

A second set of processes consists of methodological issues that helped shape the conversation between the premier data-gathering organization of the country, Statistics Canada, and the nation's population. Details of the operationalization and design of the questions and the responses for racial and ethnic “origins” in the censuses, first discouraged, then allowed, then reacted to, and finally encouraged people to declare that their racial or ethnic origins were “Canadian” or “Canadien” or included a Canadian component. In this regard, Statistics Canada and respondents to the censuses worked in concert to produce an upswing in the numbers of people declaring themselves, at least in part, as Canadian.

A third set of issues concern the ambiguity and complexity of the concepts–nationality, race, ethnicity–that underlay ancestral origins and the phenomena that shape people's choice of a particular discourse describing their origins. Because these concepts are complex and overlapping, contemporaneous and extraneous phenomena such as advertising campaigns for beer or a clothing chain can bring a specific discourse to the forefront at a time when respondents must confront the need to choose a particular answer on a federal form.

Scholars have argued that the tenor of Canadian nationalism changed in the mid-1980s. During the 1980s and 1990s, several commercial enterprises became important actors in

the expression of Canadian patriotism. These included Roots, a Canadian clothing store, Tim Horton's chain of coffee and donut shops, as well as Molson's beer company. The proclivity of Canadians to drape themselves in clothing branded with beavers, canoes and maple leaves, and to drink coffee in shops associated with a hockey player, blossomed during these two decades. Carstairs (2006) argues that these consumer purchases allowed Canadians the ability to be "proudly Canadian" while imagining an idealized life of wilderness parks and successful athletes. The success of Molson's nationalistic and forceful "I am Canadian" campaign, which was particularly evident at the very beginning of the 21st century, may well have helped produced the crest in the numbers of individuals who chose to opt for the response most evocative of a nationalistic stance in the 2001 census, fielded only a year after the beginning of the campaign. It is also possible that the Canadian Government's extensive advertisements for the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan (Rose, 2003) fueled nationalistic responses on the 2001 census.

Five years later, in 2006, the year of the next census, the percentage of respondents declaring themselves as Canadian/Canadien dropped back slightly to 35%. But by then the novelty and prominence of Molson's very forceful campaign had faded and so the other options, discourses centered on race or ethnic origins, may have moved back into the forefront for some individuals as they confronted the need to choose one or two words to describe their origins on the federal census form.

References

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