



Riding the Back Of Economic Bus

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Equality of income is the final measure of integration of minorities into the mainstream Canadian society (Li, 1988). Today, racial parity can exist in every segment of Western life and society except the corporate world. Blacks and Whites can use the same public washrooms and water fountains. Walk the same streets. Eat at the same restaurants. Ride on the same buses and trains and planes and other public conveyances – in whatever seat is available, in a “first come, first serve” social world. But, Blacks and Whites do not live in the same political-economic world. The world of work is still exempt from the demands of inclusiveness and diversity in resource-sharing.

The early sociology of diversity in industrial societies never predicted this turn of events in our post-industrial society.

In the past, the relationships of super- and subordination usually extend over all social relationships and institutional realms – the political, the economy, the social sphere – and mutually reinforced each other. This pattern gave pluralist industrial societies a caste-like structure in which progress from accommodation to assimilation was difficult. Changes in any institution were resisted because they threaten to undermine the system as a whole. So, the demand for greater freedom and rights by groups excluded from the polity was more difficult to resolve in plural populations than in homogenous ones.

However, in post-industrial societies, like Canada, the relationship between dominant and sub-dominant groups does not usually extend over diverse ethno-racial relationships in a way that reinforces the institutional realms of the political economy. On the contrary, today everyday social life does not reflect a “back of the bus” segregation and hierarchy, and there are no public spaces designated for “Whites Only” or “Coloured Only.” This pattern gives contemporary pluralism a non-caste-like public image in which the society looks as though it is not resistant to change or to the social mobility of Blacks and other people of colour. Instead, visible minority progress from accommodation to assimilation into the mainstream appears to be a straightforward “first come, first serve” and “point system” proposition – a matter of individual merit and personal initiative.

So, in today's Canada, while the social and institutional realms do not usually correlate or interface with each other, there is at the same time usually no qualitative distinction drawn between them in mainstream thinking. Here, statistical inequality in workplace tends to be glossed over and treated just like statistical inequality on the bus. So, we now live in a place where the fluidity of the social realm and bus behavior tends to be unproblematically projected onto the institutional realm and employment practices. In the social realm, the racial make-up of bus passengers is not considered a significant criteria for measuring inequality because as a rule all racial groups today have the access to, and the opportunity to, avail themselves of public conveyances. These terms of reference, when they are transferred to the realm of the political

economy, act to define racial equality in employment in terms of access and opportunity, and gloss over the difference in conditions between getting a good job and getting a good seat on a bus.

Today, the subtlety of racial domination and discrimination in the workplace is glossed over and hidden by the informality of unassuming policies and practices that are woven into the framework of institutional life, and function to restrict or exclude Blacks and other people of colour from material rewards and privileges.

For instance, informal barriers can arise from the use of criteria (and some examinations) that are neither job-related nor required for the safe and efficient operation of an organization. Some employment practices are described in personnel manuals, laid out in directives or guidelines for managing human resources or prescribed in collective agreements. Others tend to be more tacit and are based on traditional practice or departmental culture that is seldom written or questioned — “That's the way it has always been done around here”. These employment barriers contribute to the lower hiring and promotional rates of Blacks and other people of colour in comparison to other employees. They also manifest themselves in the under-utilization and concentration of people of colour at the lower levels of an organization and in non-decision making positions.

As Hou and Balakrishnan (1996) note, visible minority groups generally have higher educational attainment than the average of the total population and the charter French and English groups. However, the percentage of visible minority groups working in managerial and professional occupations are generally smaller than for French and British.

This suggests that informal systemic barriers may evolve from historical practices or assumptions of convenience (for instance, staffing primarily through personal networks or favoured campuses) and invariably exclude people of colour or place them at an unreasonable disadvantage in accessing job opportunities. Many barriers may be unintentional and hidden in the way the employment system works. Many arise from the almost imperceptible and seemingly neutral practices entrenched in day to day operations; for example, things as simple as information about competitions and application forms being available only in centralized or difficult to access (visible minority-less) locations.

Examples of informal systemic barriers include:

- Unnecessary job requirements (e.g., excessive focus on experience as opposed to abilities in the statement of qualifications in selection processes as a way to narrowing the job pool and exclude new immigrants of colour).
- Non-job related (or inappropriate) screening criteria. (e.g., undue emphasis on either years of experience or over-qualifications as ways to limit job candidate-pools and exclude people of colour)
- Unequal access to organizational systems. (e.g., people of colour may be excluded from access to systems that are important for career advancement, such as acting appointments, feature assignments, high-profile special projects, etc.).
- Unequal access to training & development (e.g., differential access to job-related training as well as training that enables the learning of new skills for advancement).
- Lack of diversity knowledge among staff and managers (e.g., failing to support and prioritize a diverse workforce).
- Non-supportive work culture and environment (e.g., failing to be respectful and

inclusive of differences).

- Lack of reasonable accommodations (e.g., failing to support the entry and full participation of people of colour in the workforce).

All in all, pluralist societies like Canada are characterized today by both *social equality* and *political-economic inequality*. As a consequence, racial domination and discrimination is primarily achieved by maintaining exclusive ownership and control of the rules and measures for success and failure in the work place. This control is often glossed over and hidden in informal employment policies and practices. But it nevertheless allows the contemporary White culture to reflexively manipulate or shape rights and opportunities to material rewards and privileges for its own ends.

The upshot is, in the work world, people of colour are still at the back of the bus.