This paper deals with the premise that ethnic minority groups, to the extent that they retain their identity in a larger or smaller degree, present a challenge to the identity of the majority, i.e., the dominant, group in society. My consideration of this issue derives from what sociologically speaking is the nature of ethnically diverse societies: Distinct minority ethnic groups existing in a society whose institutions are determined by the culture of a different, but dominant, ethnic group. While on the one hand the dominant culture, by that fact, presents a challenge to the minority groups' cultures -- a challenge that in our society is usually approached through the process of assimilation of the minority groups -- the persistence of cultural identity of the minority groups in turn must present some kind of challenge to the majority identity.

I am not referring here to the political challenge posed by separatist ethnic minority groups or minority groups who make land claims on historical grounds. I am referring to groups who have retained a degree of identity even if otherwise their members have assimilated and the
challenge posed to the dominant ethnic group is not to its position of power, but to its identity.

Sociological literature has not dealt systematically with this issue. Most often, the persistence of the minority ethnic identity over generations had been seen as either a factor of segregation or ghettoization, a factor of negative influence on the process of societal integration, or a factor of only symbolic, but not “real” value to those maintaining it (Gans, 1979; Porter, 1975; Yinger, 1994).

This paper presents an attempt to understand the nature of this minority challenge to the majority identity. It will look at two things: First, it will look at the policy of multiculturalism in Canada as a case in point. That is, the paper will examine the reactions of the societal mainstream to the policy of multiculturalism in Canada as indicating a presence of a “challenge.” Secondly, it will develop several theoretical propositions aimed at understanding the nature of this “challenge.”

Before proceeding any further however, it is necessary to briefly review what I mean by the terms I use. It is unfortunate that the use of these terms is not standardized as yet and many researchers and others confuse them. Following the sociological tradition, the terms minority and majority are not to be seen as numerical concepts. They refer to collective possession of power or lack of it. That is, majority groups have the decisive voice in the major institutions of society and their culture
determines the character of these institutions. Furthermore, the concept of ethnic group should not be equated with the concept of minority group or with that of immigrant group. It must be always seen as a broader concept, under which the other two concepts are to be subsumed and which include also majority groups and non-immigrants.

Finally, the concept of social challenge has not been used in the sociological literature at all. The existing dictionaries of sociology do not include it. The concept was used by Arnold Toynbee (1947:60-79) in his theory of history, as part of his challenge and response thesis, but it was never picked up by sociologists for use in their own work. Toynbee’s meaning, of the concept, however, is somewhat different from the one employed here. By the concept of social challenge I mean the presence of two main social phenomena: (a) a threat, actual or potential, perceived by a social collectivity to be coming from another, distinct -- or perceived to be distinct -- social collectivity and (b) presence or emergence in the collectivity of a concern -- or an obligation -- to undertake some course of action in view of the perceived threat. This may be a feeling of obligation to either one’s own or the other collectivity, or both. The perceived threat referred to here is of a symbolic nature, i.e., a threat to the group’s symbolic structure, involving what is assumed to be the group’s basic values or norms or its cultural character and the group members’ raison d’être for having its own social psychological boundaries. A symbolic
threat, however, may have real structural consequences, since -- as in all definitions of situations -- what is defined as real may become real in its behavioral consequences.

The mainstream's reactions to the Canadian policy of multiculturalism is considered to be a good indicator of minority challenge to the majority group's identity because the policy's unique feature is that it gives official recognition to the identity of ethnic minority groups. Random sample surveys of the general Canadian opinion regarding the policy have consistently shown that the largest percentages of the population are in favor of the policy (Berry et al., 1976; Maclean’s, 1990; Reitz and Breton, 1994). Yet, the positions taken by many mainstream bodies and a number of spokespersons for the mainstream have continuously criticized the policy and have called for its abrogation. I will briefly review the nature of these criticisms.

In the 1970's and early 1980's the criticisms of the policy came mainly from diverse intellectuals. The mainstream as yet did not show a definite reaction. A number of intellectuals have claimed that the policy is a means for politicians to gain votes at election time. Leftist intellectuals have claimed that the policy has been a method used by the establishment to contain, rather than integrate, minority ethnic groups by offering alternative channels that prevent them from moving into the mainstream positions in society. Still others have looked at it as a method for "cooling
off" the "problem groups" in society and allowing the policy to be changed or abandoned once the minority groups' demands have diminished (Peter, 1981; Stasiulis, 1980; Porter, 1972; Brotz, 1980:41; Moodley, 1983; Zolf, 1980; 1982).

Toward the end of the 1980's the multicultural policy came under new pressures (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis, 1991). This time the pressures came from a large sector of the mainstream of society. This sector challenged the raison-d'être of the policy itself. In 1991, the government of Canada issued a report of the Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future, known as the Spicer Commission Report (Canada, 1991). The report was allegedly based on interviews and received briefs from over 400,000 individuals and groups in Canada. On the basis of these, the Commission stated that Canada's use of two languages is widely seen as a fundamental and distinctive Canadian characteristic. Yet, it warned of the danger that the rising public dissatisfaction with the official languages policy would lead to its rejection and recommended an independent review of the policy with the purpose of making clear to Canadians its costs and benefits. It further asserted that all children should have the opportunity to learn both official languages in school.

In a similar way, the report asserted that Canadians accept and value Canada's cultural diversity and that the Commission enthusiastically agrees with the wish of the ethnocultural groups that their backgrounds
be respected. It stated that "citizens spoke to us often of their desire to see a definition of being Canadian which can encompass many different origins of our citizens" (Canada, 1991:128). Yet, it went on to recommend that those who wish to preserve and promote their languages and cultures should pay for it themselves and that governments have no business to entrench and fund "remembrance of ethnocultural origins".

The report recommended that federal government funding for multiculturalism activities be eliminated, save for the activities which help immigrant orientation and reduction of racial discrimination and promotion of equality. The key goal for multiculturalism should be to "welcome all Canadians to an evolving mainstream -- and thus encourage real respect for diversity" (Canada, 1991:129). But what this mainstream is, was implied in the report's discussion of the importance of, and concern over Canadian national institutions and symbols. The report pointed to the dismay that allegedly many respondents have shown over the weakening of such national institutions as VIA Rail, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, because of the permission given to the Sikh policemen to wear their traditional ethnic turbans, and the like. It recommended that Canadian national symbols of historical value be given a more evident importance so that any impression that Canadians are loosing their sense of country is dispelled and that ignoring this issue will further destabilize and weaken the
feelings of Canadian unity, "especially among the English-speaking Canadians."

The unequivocal implication was that the Canadian national symbols are the traditional Anglo symbols taken from the British colonial history and they include no room for any other ethnic symbols, save at best, for a few French ones. The other ethnic symbols threaten the stability and unity of the country.

Like in the case of bilingualism, the report suggested that ethnic heritage is something for the schools to teach rather than for the government to policy-make. It recommended that provincial education departments maintain some heritage courses, but only for elementary school immigrant children and for no more than a year, just to assist the newcomers in their transition to new culture and society.

The Spicer Report can be said to be characteristic of the negative mainstream reaction to the policy of multiculturalism after twenty years of its existence. Other conservative mainstream bodies have expressed similar positions regarding the policy, though without the subtlety of the Spicer commission. The Reform Party of Canada, formed in 1987, has its roots in the Western Canadian, primarily Anglo, populace. Almost from its beginnings it aimed its main criticism at the policies of bilingualism, immigration and multiculturalism. In 1989 it called for elimination of the multicultural policy, for the preservation of cultural backgrounds as a
matter of purely personal choice and for preservation and promotion of the "national culture" into which immigrants were to be encouraged to integrate. As an example of one aspect of the national culture, it called for preservation of the traditional RCMP dress, i.e., rejecting the idea of accommodating the Sikh officers by the introduction of turbans alongside the traditional RCMP head gear (Reform Party of Canada, 1990:23-24; Manning, 1992).

The Progressive Conservative Party of Canada echoed these resolutions by the Reform Party at its convention in 1991. The PC Party represents a much wider social base than the Reform Party. It includes in its ranks a significant proportion of the higher socioeconomic strata. Interestingly, some of the most negative resolutions regarding immigration and cultural diversity were introduced by one of the most affluent Toronto constituencies. These included such things as forced return of refugees when situation in their homeland changes, restrictions on where immigrants can live and imposing Stetsons as the only headgear for the RCMP. While these resolutions were not passed by the convention, it did pass a set of resolutions by which the policy of multiculturalism was called to be abandoned, the Department of Multiculturalism abolished and instead a national identity be fostered by which all people would be "loyal to the Canadian ideal" (Progressive Conservative Party, 1991:54).
In the 1990's the mainstream media positively commented on several books published in criticism of the multicultural policy (Bibby, 1990). Particular attention was given to a book written by N. Bissoondath (1994), a member of the "visible minority," who was also a successful novelist. In the book the author, in an amateurish manner, criticized the policy of multiculturalism as discouraging full loyalty to Canada by its emphasis on the ancestral homeland and heritage. He claimed that it transformed members of minorities into political tools and by highlighting the differences among them it encourages exoticism and divides Canadians. What is interesting about this publication is not so much what it said, but the fact that the mainstream media, after years of ignoring the policy or only critical comments about it, gave it high attention and exposure. This was congruous with all the nine articles on multiculturalism published between the end of the 1970's and 1996 in the only Canadian national newspaper The Globe and Mail, all critical of the policy (Ewins, 1996). The evidence clearly shows that the "mainstream establishment" endorsed the negative view of multiculturalism. Although written by a minority member, the book became an ideological instrument of the majority elite.

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How then explain the persistence of the negative attitudes on the part of the dominant majority group to the policy that gives recognition to
minority ethnic groups? I think this can be done best on the level of identity itself. In other words, the challenge of the minority ethnic groups to the majority group rather than being an economic or political threat, manifestly or latently, is an identity conflict between the majority and the minority groups. Identity here is defined as a social-psychological and cultural phenomenon. This does not mean that the economic and political factors are unimportant. But rather, identity conflict has to be first explained on the level of identity and then other levels are to be brought in as qualifying conditions. What we need is a distinct theory of minority and majority identity coexistence and conflict within the same structural context, including a theory explaining the identity challenge of the identity of minority communities to that of the majority community.

General sociological theory has not approached this issue systematically. Sociological theoreticians seem to have avoided a thorough discussion of the issue of cultural identity pluralism in relation to the question of the social order. Possibly such discussion has been precluded by the common preconception that a nation to exist as a unit must have one common language, common culture, etc. Only then solidarity for society can be generated. As a result, until today, coexistence of multiple community identities has been assumed by social theorists to be problematic. In this regard, sociological theory has not changed much since its beginnings. Max Weber (1968:1:385-98), for example, saw a close
relationship between ethnicity, consciousness of kind and political unity. He devoted to the discussion of ethnicity only a few pages and felt that when analyzed, the concept dissolves itself into the concept of nation. He pointed to examples where differences in language preclude a feeling of common nationality and to those where such differences exist, yet there is a sense of common nationhood. Still he concluded that the concept of nation ultimately links a common “pathos” with a shared common language, religion or customs. The question of minority and majority identities existing within one nation is not systematically considered by him.

Other scholars who were influential in the development of theories of the nation also have defined diversity of identity not as part of the nation’s structure but as a problem for the existence of the nation-state. In a famous report on nationalism by a Study Group of Members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (1963: 255-263) in England, published in the late 1930's and republished in the early 1960's, the authors, including such scholars as Morris Ginsberg and T. H. Marshall, define a nation as being distinguished from all other groups by certain "clear characteristics". Among these they include a common language, a common ancestral origin, a distinctive national character (including "habits of thought, ideals, temperaments, codes of social life and practice"), a common religion. The authors comment on these characteristics:
There are several reasons for thinking that such distinction is essential to the nation. Indeed, the fact of distinction by the possession of various individual qualities, which are of such a sort that powerful emotions can gather round them, does almost more than anything else to mark a group definitely as a nation. The characteristics in question, shared by the members of the group in contrast to all who are not members, act as the links which enable these members to realize that they have material interests in common, and cause them to draw together with one another when those interests are threatened. For that reason, it is quite as important that the characteristics are not shared by members of other national groups as it is that they are shared by members of the national group to which they are attached (253).

The Study Group went on to state that the presence of various national minorities within a nation-state present a grave problem for both the state and the student of nations. The Group assumed that such diversity is essentially divisive because it undermines loyalty to the state and hence makes the state ineffective in maintaining a strong position in the world or in pursuing effective social policy at home.

Perhaps the theorist who came most closely to recognizing the significance of developing a theory of ethnic pluralism was Talcott Parsons (1967:422-465). In his article on “Full Citizenship for the Negro American?” he approaches the issue of diverse ethnic communities becoming part of the societal community. Parson’s basic issue is that the societal community is the source of solidarity in society, yet the diverse ethnicities may not be included in this community to the extent that their solidarity extends primarily to their own ethnic groups. The solution to this issue Parsons finds in the process of social mobility in modern societies, particularly the United States. In this process, to the extent that
members of an ethnic group become differentiated educationally, occupationally and otherwise and to the extent they come to participate together in some institutions with the members of the mainstream elite, their distinct identity comes to be diffused through the social structure so that there remains little in common among them but their sense of origin or their religion. Parsons considered this process of identity diffusion to be the process of pluralization. Although Parsons was aware that the societal community must also undergo a process of change as part of this pluralization, the emphasis in his treatment of the issue is on change of the identity of the members of the minority ethnic communities. The question as to what happens when members of the minority ethnic communities choose to retain some form of their ethnic identity even as they assimilate is not considered. Likewise, in his general social system theory societal community remains a singular phenomenon. No room is made for a plurality of societal communities within the same social system and the possibility that the identity of ethnic minority groups may present a challenge to the identity of the majority groups is not entertained.

Following I will suggest a number of propositions which may go to make up a theory of what I call identity challenge theory of ethnic minority-majority relations. It should be understood, however, that (1) these are tentative, hypothetical propositions which will require empirical
substantiation and (2) they attempt to bridge the micro-macro gap, that is, the individual and the group levels. That is, the issue of minority-majority relations cannot be studied purely on the macro level. One has to include also the micro level. The propositions are:

1. Individuals or groups, with strong identity tend to respect other individuals or groups with strong identity. Those with strong identity tend to have little respect for those with weak identity. Those with weak identity tend to fear those with strong identity.

2. On the individual level, strong or weak identity is related to the degree of positive self-evaluation and self-confidence. On the group level, strong or weak identity is related to the degree of commitment of the group members to the group. The latter is related to the degree of sharing the same group patterns, particularly the group’s values and the degree of benefits derived from group membership and participation.

3. People whose identity defines the dominant, mainstream institutions in society will tend to perceive those with different community identities as a potential threat to their group identity when they interact with them in the context of the same social institutions. The word "threat to identity" has to be defined. The threat may be perceived in political, economic, cultural or moral terms. It may involve a range of perceived potential consequences: fear that the mainstream institutions may lose their dominance, fear of loss of positions of power, fear that those in the
positions of power or the majority community itself may have to change or modify even some of their patterns of behavior in order to accommodate those with other identities. This last includes the idea of obligation to do something to fulfill the needs of minorities.

4. A condition in which a threat to one's group identity comes to be perceived occurs when those with whom one interacts make one conscious of own cultural identity as one of many possible such identities. To explain, one's group identity is defined by a community culture. Culture is an encoding of a community's historical experiences. This encoding, in the form of tradition, functions as a validation and legitimization of these experiences. Consciousness of alternative cultural identities at least implicitly places the validity or legitimacy of these experiences into question. Hence a feeling of potential threat and a source of dislike of ethnic minorities by ethnic majorities.

5. Reduction of this perceived threat by the majority community may take three basic directions: (1) decrease of the strength of the minority groups' identity, (2) exclusion of those with different identities from participation in the same social structures, (3) a modification of majority identity to include minority identities. The first process usually takes place through assimilation and the concomitant ethnic identity loss. The second process involves discrimination, or modification of the social structure in such a way as to reduce direct interrelationships with the
minority groups. This may mean regional or residential segregation, institutional parallelism and the like. The third process will be discussed further below.

6. People or groups with strong identity who have positions of power may tend to emphasize the exclusion approach whereas people or groups with weak identity who have positions of power may tend to emphasize the identity reduction approach. The latter may range from policies of indirect assimilation to forced assimilation, to physical annihilation of a minority group. Many historical cases can substantiate these hypotheses either in North America or in other European societies. In Western Europe, the historical method by which diverse identities were accommodated had been territorial regional or national segregation. The examples are the emergence of independent states and the de jure territorial segregation within the state, as in Switzerland, Belgium, United Kingdom and other. The territorial approach works as long as the different ethnicities are relatively contained in separate structures. To the extent that participation in a common structure takes place, the territorial principle looses its effectiveness as a method of reducing identity threat. This seems to be increasingly the case in Europe.

In accord with this theory, we can say that the attacks on the policy of multiculturalism by the elite of the Canadian mainstream in the eighties and nineties reflect a weakening of the Canadian mainstream identity. A
number of factors that have conditioned this process can be singled out. One such factor is the persistence of the political threat of Quebec’s separation as manifested in the emergence of a federal party dedicated to bringing it about, in repeated referenda on the issue, preoccupation with the unity question among the politicians in spite of the attempts to put it aside in order to concentrate on the economy issue. The slow growth of the economy since the mid nineteen eighties, particularly a persistently high unemployment rate is another contributing factor. Related to this is globalization of the economy that has shifted the economic attention away from Canada. Finally, the new type of immigrants arriving in Canada in the 1980’s and the 1990’s has made the mainstream more conscious of its racial background and has placed into question its dominant validity. Multiculturalism thus has come to appear to the mainstream as a way of sanctioning divisiveness at the time when all these other developments already act to undermine “Canadian” identity and the validity of what has been historically defined as the “Canadian experience.”

An alternative course of action --the third discussed here -- through which identity threat can be reduced, is redefinition of the majority identity itself as one that includes rather than excludes what is up to now defined as minority identities. This has been a goal of the multiculturalism policy to the extent that it has attempted to give recognition to diverse ethnic minority groups. In this regard, the policy had moved to make
some impact since its installation in 1971. This impact, however, was rather limited and in the face of the criticism coming from the mainstream sector, the policy experienced goal confusion and a reduction of its ability to make any further impact on the mainstream society.

Unlike the first two approaches, assimilation and exclusion, the establishment of the multiculturalism program can be seen as having been defined in terms of the majority group’s feelings of obligation toward the minority groups. This raises the question as to how feelings of obligation toward other social collectivities and toward one’s own collectivity vary in relation to strong and weak identities and in relation to specific historical developments in society. The discussion of this however, goes beyond the scope of this paper.
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