In terms of immigration, alterations in the character of cultural diversity, and the growth of the visible minority population, Thunder Bay has missed out on many of the changes of the last 15 to 20 years that have literally transformed the face of Canada and Ontario. In this, it is not unique. It is well known that the flow of immigrants, especially from non-European source countries, has settled in a few metropolitan centres.

Thunder Bay: Between a Rock and a Hard Place in Northwestern Ontario

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In the first years of the 20th century, the twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur (amalgamated in 1970 to form Thunder Bay) were among the most diverse communities in the country. Although both were small places, even by the standards of the time, they were growing rapidly. The increase in population was fuelled, as it was throughout the nation, by massive flows of European immigrants, many of whom were of British-origin, but with many others arriving from non-Anglophone European countries.

Thunder Bay's post-fur trade growth began in 1875 when the construction of the western portion of the Canadian Pacific railroad began in the Town Plot, now known as Westfort in Thunder Bay South. This was the beginning of a development process of railroad and grain elevator facilities for the trans-shipment of Prairie wheat and boom and bust cycles in precious mineral mining, lumbering, and pulp and paper manufacturing. These activities required large inputs of relatively unskilled labour, a demand that was filled by a heterogeneous and often transient labour force comprised, to a large extent, of immigrants from Northern, Eastern and Southern Europe. By the outbreak of World War I, approximately one-third of the total population of some 45,000 was composed of Finns, Slovaks, Italians, Ukrainians, Poles and Scandinavians (Rasporich and Tronrud 1995: 215).

A century ago, the great diversity and attractiveness of these two cities to immigrants could not be in greater contrast with the current situation. A place that once offered opportunity to large numbers of new arrivals to Canada now hosts relatively few new immigrants. According to the 2001 Census, only 1,325 residents of the Thunder Bay census metropolitan area (CMA) had immigrated between 1991 and 2001 (see Table 1). This represents slightly more than 1% of the 2001 population of 120,370, which is well below the overall provincial figures of about 9% of the population having immigrated during the decade. It also contrasts markedly with the situation in Toronto, where 17% of the population had immigrated to Canada during the same period. Although the 2006 Census figures for immigration to the city are not yet available, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) reports that a mere 489 more immigrants settled in the city between 2002 and 2005 (CIC 2006: 2).[1]

While the foreign-born population was growing nationally and provincially in the 1990s, Thunder Bay was one of a number of second- and third-tier cities where the proportion of foreign-born residents was declining. By 2001, they represented only slightly more than 11% of the population, versus a provincial average of 26.8%, down from 13.1% a decade earlier (see Table 2). This

[1] Specifically, 113 in 2002, 125 in 2003, 141 in 2004 and 110 in 2005. These figures do not indicate how many of these immigrants stayed in Thunder Bay.

TABLE 1
Place of birth and immigration date, Thunder Bay CMA and Ontario

	Thunder Bay CMA		Ontario	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
All persons	120,370		11,285,545	
Canadian-born	106,930	88.83	8,164,860	72.35
Foreign-born	13,315	11.06	3,030,075	26.84
Immigrated prior to 1991	11,995	9.97	2,007,705	17.79
Immigrated 1991-2001	1,325	1.10	1,022,370	9.06

Source: Statistics Canada, 2002b.

was an absolute and relative reduction since the overall population of the city declined by 4% between 1991 and 2001.[2]

According to the 2001 Census, 90% of Thunder Bay's foreign-born population had immigrated prior to 1991, compared to a provincial figure of 66%. Whereas only 44% of the immigrant population in Ontario was of European origin, 81% of immigrants in Thunder Bay was from Europe. Indeed, the visible minority population consisted of only 2,690 people, or just over 2% of the city's inhabitants, well below 19% for the province. The dearth of foreign newcomers can be seen in terms of cultural institutions as well. Almost 80% of residents listed as being their religious affiliation Catholic or Protestant, while another 17% listed no religious affiliation. People claiming affiliation to Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh and other eastern religions represent less than 1% of Thunder Bay's population, opposed to almost 6% in the province as a whole (Statistics Canada 2002b).

TABLE 2
Proportion of foreign-born population, Thunder Bay CMA (1991 to 2001 Censuses)

	1991	1996	2001
Thunder Bay CMA	13.1	12.2	11.1
Ontario	23.7	25.6	26.8
Canada	16.1	17.4	18.4

Source: Statistics Canada. *Proportion of foreign-born population, by census metropolitan area (1991 to 2001 Censuses)* and *Proportion of foreign-born population, by province and territories (1991 to 2001 Censuses).*

Thus, in terms of immigration, alterations in the character of cultural diversity, and the growth of the visible minority population, Thunder Bay has missed out on many of the changes of the last 15 to 20 years that have literally transformed the face of Canada and Ontario. In this, it is not unique. It is well known that the flow of immigrants, especially from non-European source countries, has settled in a few metropolitan centres, especially Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal. Thunder Bay is far from being homogeneous in terms of its ethnocultural composition. It is more diverse than Sudbury, the other city in the provincial north that also has a history of dependence on a natural resource-based economy. Of the 29 CMAs existing at the time of the 2001 Census, Thunder Bay ranked 17th in terms of its proportion of foreign-born population. In that sense, it is more heterogeneous than Regina, Saskatoon, St. John's, Halifax, Québec and Trois-Rivières, among others. Nonetheless, the fact that the proportion of the population that is Canadian-born increased to almost 89% during the last decade of the 20th century, at a time when the province as a whole was becoming much more complex in cultural terms, is disturbing for many reasons, one of which I will discuss further detail below.

Another factor makes Thunder Bay's experience of ethnic diversity somewhat unique. While overall the population declined by some 4% during the 1990s, the Aboriginal population living in the city grew. Statistics Canada reports an Aboriginal population of 8,200, close to 7%, for the Thunder Bay CMA in 2001. This segment of the city's population is young. The median age is 25.6 years versus a CMA median age of 39.1 years. Thirty-three percent of the Aboriginal population was 14 years or younger in 2001 compared to 18% for the city as whole (Statistics Canada 2002a, 2002b).

[2] The figures just released from the 2006 Census indicate that the Thunder Bay CMA grew by 0.8% between 2001 and 2006. Thus, the decline has halted. Given that the provincial population grew by 6.6% during the same period, Thunder Bay is still lagging behind the rest of the province. Moreover, the population of the District of Thunder Bay continued to decline.

If Richard Florida and his followers are correct, in order for the city to make the transition from the "old economy" to the "new economy," it is going to have to work very hard at developing its attractiveness to new immigrants whose very presence in part helps to stimulate the kind of atmosphere that make cities desirable places for the "creative" class to live.

Official numbers very likely under-represent the Aboriginal presence in Thunder Bay. This is partly due to the problems involved in capturing a somewhat transient population at census time. Thunder Bay is a regional centre for health, social and educational services. At any given moment, a more or less temporary Aboriginal population in the city attends secondary or post-secondary educational institutions, utilizes the hospital, or attends a growing number of Aboriginal cultural and political activities in the city. The administrative offices of the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation, with 49 affiliated First Nations spread across Northern Ontario, are located on the Fort William First Nation, which borders Thunder Bay on the south.

Ethnic diversity and socio-economic status in Thunder Bay

The history of Thunder Bay is marked by socio-economic differences that overlapped with ethnic divisions. In the first two decades of the 20th century, the Anglo-Saxon elite and the "respectable" British-origin working class frequently looked down upon immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The latter engaged in sometime violent struggles with employers and public authorities over access to work and workplace conditions and wages. Indeed, in a way that presages modern debates over the social construction and meaning of concepts such as "White," "whiteness," or "visible minority," editorials in the local newspaper debated whether or not Southern Italians were White or Black. Northern Europeans were more readily accepted partly on the racial grounds that they shared a Nordic heritage that was closer to the Anglo-Saxon majority.[3]

Today an ethnic division of labour is no longer blatantly obvious. The idea that the Scots and English predominated in the railroads and grain elevators, the Finns were mostly loggers, and Italians and Eastern Europeans were engaged in heavy construction, is a part of the local cultural heritage that elderly people recount. Given the economic changes of the last 30 years, with a huge decline in employment in grain shipping, railways, forestry and pulp and paper, and the growth of educational, social and health services, this idealized image of the ethnic structure of the local labour market no longer holds true.[4]

Unlike some larger centres, where a highly visible, ethnic and/or racialized division of labour has come into existence, Thunder Bay's small visible minority population is not part of an obvious social and economic underclass. The issue has not been studied in a systematic and quantitative manner but anecdotal evidence and qualitative research (Dhiman 1997) suggest that many visible minority immigrants to the city come for economic rather than social or political reasons. Members of the visible minority population in Thunder Bay are prominent in postsecondary education, medical and business services. It is reasonable to assume that the trend noted by Frideres (2006: 6) – that outside the three largest cities in Canada, "immigrant incomes exceed those of the Canadian-born" – is true in Thunder Bay as well. Many in Thunder Bay take up professional positions. Thus, they fill a crucial niche in the local economy, bringing the educational capital and skills necessary to provide knowledge-intensive services to local and regional populations. Of course, this is not to claim that new immigrants to the city do not face economic problems. There are Latino refugees working as house cleaners as well as Chinese math professors. To date at least, and

[3] There is a vibrant literature on the labour history of Thunder Bay, much of which focuses on the relationship between class and ethnicity in the labour struggles at the Lakehead. See Morrison (1995) for an overview and detailed references.

[4] The decline in employment in these industries has been going on for decades. The recent slump in the pulp and paper industry has strongly shaken both the city of Thunder Bay and the region. The city has lost close to 1,500 jobs due to mill closures and/or layoffs in the last two years alone. These are well paid positions and represent a significant loss of income to the community. See the North of Superior Training Board (2006). More closures and layoffs have been announced since that report was released.

TABLE 3
Median income and earnings and unemployment rate, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Thunder Bay 2001 Census

	Aboriginal	Thunder Bay CMA
Median earnings	22,537	31,498
Median income	14,187	23,607
Unemployment Rate	22.9%	8.8%

Source: Statistics Canada 2002a, 2002b.

perhaps because there has been relatively little visible-minority settlement in the city, there is no readily apparent division of labour based on ethnoracial lines.

The socio-economic situation of the Aboriginal population is not as buoyant, although a growing number of Aboriginal professionals working in education and social services and others, in more typical working-class jobs, are putting the lie to longstanding stereotypes that link urban Aboriginals with unemployment and welfare. This does not, however, mean that significant progress does not need to be made before Aboriginal people achieve economic parity with the non-Aboriginal population. On average, as shown in Table 3, Aboriginal people earn less, have less total income, and suffer much higher rates of unemployment than their non-Aboriginal fellow citizens.

Thus Thunder Bay exhibits a pattern of ethnocultural diversity largely rooted in the older non-Anglophone European cultures from waves of immigration prior to World War I (although those who remain of this generation are rapidly passing) and continued through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The significance of these European ethnic identities is now primarily symbolic (Stymeist 1975). Ethnic affiliation is no longer the principal determinant of residential, marriage, or employment patterns. Where diversity is growing, it is in regard to the enhanced presence and visibility of Aboriginal people and culture in the city. This is not without its tensions. A study conducted in 2001 by Diversity Thunder Bay found that 56% of Aboriginal respondents had experienced discrimination during the year (Diversity Thunder Bay 2002: 2). Indeed, one can argue that the division between "Whites" and "Natives" is one of the underlying issues in the community and in the region (Dunk 2003). Frequently voiced concerns over vandalism, loitering and panhandling, which are prominent in the endless debates about how to reverse the decline of the downtown cores of the former cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, are coded expressions of an ageing white population's discomfort with the presence of a growing, young Aboriginal population in these parts of the city. Visible minority respondents were less likely to perceive racism as a problem in the community, but still experienced it (Diversity Thunder Bay 2002). Dhiman's (1997) qualitative analysis of South Asian women living in Thunder Bay, many of whom were spouses or daughters of professionals, also highlights their sense of exclusion from the community.

Consequences for urban and regional development

The City of Thunder Bay, and indeed the region of which it is part is no stranger to economic ups and downs. The last 20 years have seen many more negatives than positives and this is reflected in the overall population figures. While the population of the nation and province has grown quite significantly, Thunder Bay has stagnated. Issues such as youth out-migration, the loss of major industrial employers, and the stagnation of the real-estate market are serious concerns for local residents and political representatives. Unfortunately, if the currently popular urban development theories are correct, the City of Thunder Bay is in a very real conundrum. If Thunder Bay is going to make the transition from a working-class community based on transportation and pulp and paper production to the knowledge economy, it needs to attract people with the appropriate skills. One of the most important factors in this is the encouragement of the kinds of diversity environments that attract those who possess the education and cultural capital that fuels the knowledge economy (Gertler et al. 2002). During the 1990s, information and communication technologies boomed while the number of people working in that sector grew by 73% nationally; in Thunder Bay this part of the labour market shrank from 600 to 500 jobs. The number of paid workers in the science-based sector remained unchanged during the decade. In the year 2000, Thunder Bay was last in both of these categories among the nation's CMAs (Beckstead et al. 2003: 26, Tables 5a and 5b). It is far too early to judge the success of very recent collaborative efforts made by the City of Thunder Bay, Lakehead University and private

investors to turn Thunder Bay into a biotechnology research centre. It is noteworthy that visible-minority immigrants are among some of the key players in this initiative. If Richard Florida and his followers are correct, in order for the city to make the transition from the "old economy" to the "new economy," it is going to have to work very hard at developing its attractiveness to new immigrants whose very presence in part helps to stimulate the kind of atmosphere that make cities desirable places for the "creative" class to live.

This is very difficult when local political energies are often exhausted on concerns dear to the hearts and minds of an ageing population overwhelmingly born in Canada or Europe. Not surprisingly, the primary issues for them are taxation, fees for city-owned golf courses, skating rinks and swimming pools, access to hospitals, and the maintenance of quality long-term care facilities for seniors. The report by Diversity Thunder Bay shows that diversity is valued by a significant number of Thunder Bay residents. So far, however, attracting new immigrants, many of who will be visible minorities, and the promotion of diversity have taken back seats to the concerns mentioned above. In the 1990s, Thunder Bay was among a handful of Ontario cities where the city council of the day declared it an English-only community in symbolic opposition to official bilingualism.[5] The City is stuck on the horns of a dilemma: it is not diverse enough for such things as being a welcoming community to immigrants and the growing Aboriginal population to be considered a high priority issue among local community leaders and residents, and yet if the community does not engage with these concerns its own future is imperiled.

About the author

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[5] While some 15% of the population declared some French ethnic origin, only 2,775 people (2.5%) claimed French only as their language, and only 340 claimed English and French as their language (Statistics Canada, Population by Selected Ethnic Origins, Thunder Bay CMA, 2001 Census and Statistics Canada 2002b).

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