

Nationalism and Identities In Quebec and Canada

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"If we accept the definition of modernity that makes it a multidimensional reality, Quebec is, like its neighbors, a modern society."

Perhaps it is the effect of multiple controversies, but the fact is that the last decade saw the production of literature on nationalism and identities in Quebec of considerable note. Nevertheless, regardless of the wealth and diversity of the perspectives on the national question—whether it be the socio-political nation (Michel Seymour), the expression of repressed American-ness (Gérard

Bouchard)¹ or the denunciation of "false consciousness" (Serge Cantin)—the look of the Other is always present, even obsessively so. This reference to the Other has also been at the center of a recent debate between Gérard Bouchard and John Ralston Saul about the latter's book *Reflections of a Siamese Twin. Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century*.

On the one hand, Gérard Bouchard opposes John Ralston Saul's "Canadian" nationalism with a more finely shaded vision of Quebec nationalism that would not contradict that humanitarian, Socratic "grand ideal" that the vice-governor general gives to Canadian nationalism.² On the other hand, Saul accuses Bouchard of not having read his book

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correctly, saying he is not referring to the 1867 Confederation, but to the year 1847 and the collaboration between reformist leaders Robert Baldwin and Louis H. Lafontaine.³ This alliance was to be the cornerstone of the grand Socratic ideal described by Saul. Above all, it should be underlined that this opening toward the Other symbolized by the collaboration between reformist Anglophones and reformist Francophones in the Canadian tradition is far from being an original idea. The abundant political literature of the 1990s often deals with this issue which seems to be an obsession with English Canada. However, Bouchard reproaches Saul—also the author of *Voltaire's Bastards*—his omitting important aspects of Anglo-Canadian nationalism which are not very compatible with the Socratic humanism that he appreciates so. The Durham report and the project of assimilating Franco-Canadians, Canada's racist immigration policy from the 1870s to the 1960s, Orangism,⁴ the treatment of indigenous peoples, and so many examples that show that "Canadian history" is full of episodes that contradict the theory of Socratic humanism. To this "Canadian" essentialism, Bouchard opposes a more dynamic vision of Canada and Quebec. Because of Bouchard—at least in his critique of Saul—we know that ultramontanism was defeated in Quebec around 1900 and that signs of modernity appeared before 1960.⁵ This is surprising because in his most recent work, which won him the governor general's prize, Gérard Bouchard did not seem to agree with the theses of revisionist historiography.

In effect, in another book, Bouchard affirms that French Canadian nationalism is a continuation of, and not a

break with, the French tradition of the *ancien régime* of 1840 to 1960 and in fact is the antithesis of a progressive nationalism. In this way, seemingly two important contemporary Canadian authors, both recent recipients of the governor general's prize, either omit essential elements of English Canadian history or contradict each other, as is the case of Bouchard, about the progressive or reactionary nature of Quebec before 1960 and the political reforms of the period of the Quiet Revolution between 1960 and 1996. To explain these omissions and contradictions, we must remember the key concepts used in the twentieth century to interpret Quebec.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND "FOLK SOCIETY"

It is no doubt unnecessary to refer again to prior discussions about the fundamentally reductionist and even colonialist nature of some concepts used to describe French Canada before the Quiet Revolution,⁶ concepts like "folk society," "the mentality of the *ancien régime*" and "feudal ideological stronghold." Originating in sociology (Redfield, Hughes and Miner), history (Creighton and Ouellet) and political science (Hartz and McRae), these concepts created the image of the "dark ages" and "the long winter" of Quebec, from 1760, after the British conquest, until 1960.⁷ From that point of view, the strictly Quebec identity would coincide in time with the late advent of modernity in 1960. As an example, we can say simply that today the Anglophone media and different social sciences departments use ad nauseam the categories "folk society" and the

anti-modern "dark ages" not only to allude to French Canada before 1960 but also to contemporary Quebec. In this context, only four years ago the psychological profile of First Minister Lucien Bouchard, as done by a Toronto psychiatrist at the request of Lawrence Martin, rapidly degenerated into a collective portrait of today's French-speaking Quebec, a society which then and forever would turn its back on modernity.

This is another interesting paradox of contemporary Canada, but there does not seem to be a fundamental difference between this age-old simplistic view of French Canada and today's Quebec held by certain federalists and the equally reductionist view of French Canada defended by certain separatists. Perhaps the only difference between the two is simply the place they occupy on the scale of colonialism. So, using as a basis the same reductionist perception, two projects, one federalist and the other separatist, face each other down and are tempered by a reductionist vision of French Canada and Quebec.

THE OTHER LOOK

In effect, some see Quebec as a positive element in the modern Canadian political tradition, while, for others, Quebec, in as much as it is a "founding people," is nothing less than a dominant colonizer. Some works published in the 1990s illustrate perfectly these two positions which, though different, have not reduced the Quebec of before the Quiet Revolution to absolute reductionism and have contributed elements for understanding the Quebec of 1760 to 1960 that were not

included by Bouchard and Saul in their general analysis of Quebec.

Political scientist Ken McRoberts has definitely used the idea that the current impasse in the Canada-Quebec relationship dates from the 1960s when Pierre Elliot Trudeau imposed the vision of Canada that broke with the traditional dualist image of the country. McRoberts underlines that since the period of New France and after the conquest, Canadian identity was very strong among America's Francophones. That identity alludes to a North American society which contrasted greatly with the metropolis. Canadians of

berts, however, the idea of duality was preserved at least for a time, particularly by Canada's prime minister in the 1960s, Lester B. Pearson. Years later, Trudeau confronted this principle of Canadian duality by imposing procedural liberalism⁸ based on strict protection of individuals, which aggravated political unease between formerly British Canada and formerly Canadian Quebec.⁹

Obviously, McRoberts' positions could make for long debates. Stéphane Kelly, for example, maintains that Trudeau's political thinking is deeply rooted in the past. It has also

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British origin, on the contrary, maintained links with the British Empire and therefore with a vast complex that transcended Canada's geographical and political borders.

The duality described by McRoberts was essentially Franco-Canadian and British, which causes a certain confusion. While Franco-Canadians, particularly after 1867, thought they were contributing to the building of a dual nation, many British Canadians understood it strictly as promoting the British Empire. Even after imperialist ardor quieted down a bit after 1919, the symbols of British identity continued to have considerable influence in British Canada, at least until 1940. Beginning in the 1950s, British identity has gradually given way to "Canadian" nationalism. According to McRo-

been shown that Trudeau's prejudices and theoretical suppositions in his view of French Canada were one of the main ambiguities of his political institutions. However, what should be remembered is the image of a French Canada that actively participates in its political destiny. On the other hand, the issue of an unequal duality in which Franco-Canadians nevertheless do not play a passive role appears in the work of many current Anglophone writers, particularly that of John Conway, Daniel Francis, Ray Conlogue, Charles Taylor and James Tully. The work of relatively lesser known authors from Francophone Quebec like Ian Angus and Samuel LaSelva should be added to this list.

In *The Moral Foundation of Canadian Federalism*, Samuel LaSelva de-

fends the idea that the recognition of a difference in the Constitution of 1867 was imposed by the then-leader of Franco-Canadians and right hand of John A. Macdonald,¹⁰ George-Étienne Cartier. According to LaSelva, the tendency to form a homogeneous society, understood as British and Protestant, was stifled by this defense of difference carried out in French Canada. This would put the roots of the Canadian federalist tradition in the moral conception of a nation constituted by many identities and loyalties that can co-exist in a common political space. LaSelva goes even further by defending the idea that the initial dualism might be the origin of other fundamental conceptions of the Canadian federal tradition like justice, fraternity and democracy. Obviously, this thesis, like that of McRoberts, can be countered by many examples in Canadian history that eloquently show how the very idea of duality was constantly reduced by pressure from harmonizing tendencies of a society under British domination. According to LaSelva, all of this speaks to the importance given to Cartier showing to what point certain Anglo-Canadian authors seem to be fascinated by the Francophone French Canada/Quebec at the moment in which they define their own difference (that of English Canada) and of exorcising their own colonialist, conservative demons.

This issue of difference is also dealt with by Ian Angus, who sees in the work of Harold Innis and George Grant elements of a critique of harmonization and therefore a logic of recognizing difference inside the Anglo-Canadian identity itself. Thus, the idea of an identity based on the relationships established within the nation —according

to Innis—and the critique of technology—according to Grant—implied a project of society in which “what was plural” was recognized and valued. Angus strongly criticizes the recovery of Innis’s thesis and the attacks on French Canada made by historian Donald Creighton. In the same fashion, he remembers the ferocious criticisms leveled by Grant at the stereotype of French Canada presented by Trudeau. All this leads Angus to recognize Quebec’s unrestricted right to independence, a position defended at the end of the book that deserves to be reread in today’s context.

Nevertheless, if this literature shows true respect for Quebec in the Anglophone Canada of the 1990s, on the left there was a real overflow of this same “literature of duality,” an overflow that was simultaneously feminist, post-colonial and postmodern. In a text widely read in Anglo-Canadian universities, Daiva Stasilius and Rhada Jhappan, articulating the notions of sexual gender, race-ethnicity and social classes, passionately rejected the idea that Quebec had been colonized. As a “founding people,” Quebec participated like the Canada of British origin in excluding the first nations and immigrants, particularly women immigrants. Also, despite its feelings of relative inferiority with regard to the dominant British world, this interpretation grants Quebec moral legitimacy. It is a racist white society, a product of European colonialism. Now, given that in British Canada the British are today a minority, we would be making a mistake if we ignored this literature. Increasingly, Quebec is seen as the weaker of the two colonial ancestors and therefore inspires little sympathy.

WHICH OTHER?

In brief, for French Canada and for Quebec, today like yesterday, that Other, close and obsession-inspiring, has been Canada—until recently British—and, to a small degree, the United States.

Now, until recently, British Canada had been included in the project of the British Empire, that is, in a vast worldwide system of both exploitation and marginalization of groups defined as outside “progress” and science, groups linked to “tradition.” We must remember that the British Empire

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was also a system of ethnic segregation inside the British Isles themselves and an intense slave trade that, while abolished in 1834, was replaced immediately by other forms of exploitation, particularly in China (suffice it to remember that the Opium War began in 1839) and India.

Whether it be the U.S. or British case, we should not forget certain characteristics of the contexts in which the discourse on French Canada and Quebec was generated. This discourse was conceived in a context of colonial rivalry and not even the progressive literature about French Canada and Quebec has spoken sufficiently about the topic. The “false consciousness” of contemporary Quebec can also be interpreted as a refusal to recognize the complexity of a society and its past; in

the case in question, the complexity of French Canada before 1960. Therefore, rejecting the image of the “water boy” can lead to a deconstruction of the image and the discourse of the Other that has frequently created it.¹¹ Rejecting this “water boy” image can also mean questioning once again a discourse that closely associates the French-Canadian identity with the “dark ages” and the Quebec identity with the benefits—passing though they may be—of the Quiet Revolution. Rejecting the “water boy” status may also mean situating the analysis of the discourse precisely in the terrain of the Other.

QUEBEC IN SUSPENSE

Unfortunately, Quebec does not seem to be moving along this road. In 1998, during the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the non-conformist manifesto of young Quebec artists, the *Refus global* (Overall Refusal), the Quebec media once again sang the praises of Quebec’s entry into modernity—needless to say, a tardy entrance. The *Refus global* had shaken up a whole society and had been the prelude to that transition from tradition to modernity that was the Quiet Revolution. Thus, 20 years of “revisionist” historiography had not achieved any kind of break-up of the increasingly canon-like interpretation of the Quiet Revolution. While some still perceive Quebec as a backward, colonized pro-

vince because it does not have the status of a politically recognized nation, the Other—which has changed quite a bit in the last 20 years— increasingly perceives it as a dominant colonizer. The fragility of this situation is striking.

On this point, analyst Daniel Jacques said, “Reconsidering the *Refus global*, we could have understood that there are different ways to be modern besides radical individualism.” This idea of a pluralistic modernity opens up new and interesting avenues, as long as—it seems to me—the debate is increasingly situated in the terrain of the Other. Perhaps remaining static and continuing to reflect on the perceptions of the Other that refer us to the nineteenth century is another form of “false consciousness.” It is possible that these perceptions that belong more properly to the imperialist Belle Époque are still duplicitously encouraged, but for this to come out into the light, we have to become aware that there are new perceptions.

CONCLUSION

If we accept the definition of modernity that makes it a multidimensional reality, a complex time-space characterized by the constant renovation of strategies developed by individuals who react to new contexts, sometimes using values considered old-fashioned, Quebec, even before 1960 (or 1948), is, like its neighbors, a modern society. Neither Quebec, as of 1960, nor French Canada since before 1960, are simple “essences”, one modern and the other traditional. They are, on the contrary, complex scenarios of struggles and the definition of strategies. This prin-

ciple holds true for English Canada also, and it is exactly what bothers the reader about John Ralston Saul’s book: the impression of an essentially progressive—albeit sophisticated—nationalism.

This having been said, the reductionist representations of one and the other are increasingly ill-fated since they may be tying Quebec to a colonized image of itself just when, paradoxically, it is being perceived—rightly or wrongly—as an ancient colonial power. The timing is not good and Jocelyn Létourneau is definitely right when she wants to restore the complexity to Quebecois ambiguity. Nevertheless, this ambiguity consists of having been and continuing to be a society that is simultaneously colonial and colonized. The different points of view summarized in this article, despite their contradictions, refer us fundamentally to this ambiguity. **MM**

NOTES

All the Editor’s Notes for this article were written by Julián Castro Rea, CISAN researcher and current guest professor at the University of Alberta.

¹ For a long time, Quebec tried to build its identity with reference to its French, European roots, underestimating or negating its belonging to this hemisphere. This is known as *américanité refoulée*, or repressed Americanness. [Editor’s Note.]

² This is an ironic observation by the author since John R. Saul is the husband of the real governor general. [Editor’s Note.]

³ According to Saul, Baldwin and Lafontaine created the “Siamese twins” syndrome in Canada because in 1847 they made the first alliance between French and English Canadians to govern jointly. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ Orangism is named after a fraternity formed in 1795 in Ireland to commemorate the con-

solidation of British domination in 1690 at the hands of the Protestant King William of Orange. The fraternity fought for the imposition of the English language and the Anglican religion and loyalty to the British Crown and was organized similarly to the Masonic lodges. Established in Canada in 1830, the movement supported the Conservative (Tory) Party and was a source of intolerance to ethnic and linguistic diversity, particularly during the nineteenth century. [Editor’s Note.]

⁵ Ultramontanism was a movement created during the French Revolution to defend the supremacy of Catholicism over civil society and the belief in the infallibility of the Pope and to reject any compromise with modern thought. Established in Quebec during the 1820s, it exerted enormous influence on French Canadians’ social thought and organization until the advent of the Quiet Revolution in 1960. [Editor’s Note.]

⁶ The Quiet Revolution refers to the swift process of economic, social and institutional modernization of Quebec from 1960 to 1967. [Editor’s Note.]

⁷ The *grande noirceur*, or “dark ages,” was a period in which official Quebec ideology was built upon traditionalist reference points (religion, the glorification of rural existence, traditional social and gender roles, submission to authority, etc.). [Editor’s Note.]

⁸ This ideology considers that formal competition among interest groups is sufficient to guarantee democracy, even if the final result is totally skewed by disparities in the different groups’ power and resources. [Editor’s Note.]

⁹ The irony is that the first people to use the term “Canadian” were the Quebecois; Anglophones simply considered themselves British-born or Britishers living in Canada. [Editor’s Note.]

¹⁰ John A. Macdonald (1815-1891), leader of the Conservative Party and promotor of the union of the British provinces for the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, is generally considered “the father of the Canadian Confederation.” He was the first prime minister of modern Canada. [Editor’s Note.]

¹¹ The “water boy” refers to the image of the unskilled laborer, the stereotype of French-speaking Quebecois, typically believed to be fit for no other work. [Editor’s Note.]