THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, NATIONALISM: REFLECTIONS ON THE QUÉBEC CHARTER OF VALUES IN THE POST-NATIONAL ERA

Celine Cooper is a PhD Candidate in the department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. She is a weekly Opinion columnist with the Montreal Gazette and a regular contributing writer for Policy Magazine.

The goal of this article is to offer some reflection and social/political context for the current debate over Bill 60, the Charter of Québec Values. The author's starting point is that nations and the discourses constructed to validate them are "historically situated constructs that have helped legitimate particular relations between the state and capitalism" (Heller, 2011, p. 191). Hence, this Charter debate can tell us something meaningful about the tensions underlying nationalism, language, culture and identity in Québec and the broader Canadian context as they are influenced by processes of post-nationalism currently unfolding in the early 21st century. This contribution should be considered a tentative first step to situate this Charter debate into an emerging field of thought in sociolinguistics and related social science disciplines in which scholars engage with globalization.

The modest goal of this article is to offer some reflection and social/political context for the current debate over the Charter of Québec Values (Bill 60: *Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests*).

I begin this discussion from the starting point that nations and the discourses constructed to validate them are "historically situated constructs that have helped legitimate particular relations between the state and capitalism" (Heller, 2011, p. 191). These processes require actors who must necessarily shift and adapt their strategies to the social, political and economic conditions of any given historical period. I argue that the arrival of this Charter debate can tell us something meaningful about the tensions underlying nationalism, language, culture and identity in Québec and the broader Canadian context as they are influenced by processes of post-nationalism currently unfolding in the early 21st century.

The following question serves as a plumb line for my reflections here: why a Québec Charter of Values and why now? Two additional considerations flow from this: First, who are the architects of this Charter and why are they defining "Québec values" in a particular way? Second, what purpose do fixed ideas about "Québec values" and what it means to be a Québecer serve?

Suffice it to say that sustained theoretical and political interrogations of this Charter — it's *raison d'être*, what it means (or not), to whom and why — involve more elaboration than is possible to enter into here. As such, this contribution should be considered a tentative first step to try and situate this debate into an emerging field of thought in sociolinguistics and related disciplines in which scholars engage with globalization (see Blommaert, 2010, p. 2).

LANGUAGE AND POST-NATIONALISM

I hasten to add that discussing the world in post-national terms does not negate the continued relevance and power of nations, nationalism and nation-states. That being said, modernist approaches to nations and nation-states — particularly those with significant and continued institutional investments in the *one language/one culture/one nation paradigm* (see, for example, Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Bauman and Briggs, 2003; Heller, 2011) as the Parti Québécois' approach to Québec still does — are being challenged in this new global era. We live in a time where the scale, scope and intensity of international human migration and interaction has increased dramatically; where rapidly evolving information technologies, the internet and social media have flattened state borders and — in some cases — rendered their linguistic, cultural or information laws moot; and public spaces (workplaces, media, schools, streets) are becoming increasingly globalized and thus more and more culturally diverse and multilingual.

Joan Pujolar writes that "[p]ost-national processes and discourses are those that question in specific ways the fundamental ideological architecture of nation-states" (Pujolar 2007, 73). The processes described above are making it progressively difficult for nation-states to ensure monolingual or monocultural public spaces. When this diversity brings with it corresponding demands for recognition or accommodation by minority groups, it is often interpreted as a threat to the integrity or even the survival of the nation as it has been imagined into being by actors who have labored over time and space to produce and reproduce it as something fixed or timeless. These are the kinds of tensions we are seeing in Québec right now.

Why does any of this matter to the Charter debate?

First of all, it matters because the issue of language is so inextricably bound up in constructions of Canadian state-formation and nationalisms, and because language has become "the site for articulating exclusions which can no longer be stated in terms of race and ethnicity" (Haque, 2012 p. 4). Second, it matters because the very idea of pinning a "people" and their "values" — necessarily imagined as culturally homogenous and linguistically uniform — to a territory hemmed in by man-made boundaries is becoming more and more challenging at this point in history. Third, it matters because Bill 60 includes an amendment to the preamble of the Québec charter of rights and freedoms giving gender equality, the French language, secularism, state neutrality primacy over other rights, including religious freedom. And finally it really matters because, as we are already seeing, there has been a palpable rise in social intolerance, violence and hostility against minorities — Muslim women in particular — since the charter was introduced in September[1].

WHY A QUÉBEC CHARTER OF VALUES AND WHY NOW?

It is worth taking a moment to pull the frame back and think about the conditions under which the current Parti Québécois government (who has introduced Bill 60) came to power.

The 2012 Québec provincial election was born of one of the most fractious and dynamic social revolutions seen in Québec since the Quiet Revolution. The writ was dropped in August over the clamor of *cacerolazos* ("casseroles") and public spaces - streets, subways, parks, bridges, schools, particularly in Montreal — surging with protestors wearing the now iconic *carré rouge* (meant to symbolize student debt — i.e., squarely in the red). With the adoption of Bill 78: *An act to enable students to receive instruction from the postsecondary institutions they attend*, what had begun as a small-scale student strike (or boycott, depending on your viewpoint) against plans by the Québec Liberal government to hike tuition evolved into a commanding intergenerational movement. The uprising tapped into the momentum of the Arab Spring (the reason the movement in Québec is referred to as the *Printemps érable* or Maple Spring) and the global Occupy movement with their deeper struggles against corruption, authoritarian government, the rise of neoliberalism, corporatization of education, poverty, unemployment and uneven wealth distribution (see Cooper, 2012).

It was notable, then, that the PQ campaign strategy during the election did not focus on the economy, corruption or education. Instead, it focused on a series of flagship policy priorities centered around language, culture, identity, and sovereignty. They promised to introduce a charter of secularism and legislation strengthening language laws. In the end, it won them the election, but by a razor thin margin. When the ballots were tallied on election-day[2] the PQ had secured a minority government — only the third in Québec's history[3]. The result was an indication that the population of Québec had not handed the PQ a mandate for a third referendum on sovereignty, or — arguably — anything else in their catalogue of proposed language and identity legislation.

Nevertheless, the PQ followed through on their campaign promises. Bill 14, *An Act to amend the Charter of the French language, the Charter of human rights and freedoms and other legislative provisions* was introduced in December of 2012. After months of tense public hearings and political wrangling with the opposition Liberals and the Coalition Avenir Québec in the National Assembly, the bill died on the order paper in November of 2013.

On September 10th 2013, Democratic Institutions Minister Bernard Drainville held a press conference in Québec City to officially introduce his government's proposed Charter of Québec Values. The legislation, as has been widely discussed, would ban provincial employees in public institutions (inclu-

ding daycare and health care workers, police officers, judges, teachers and employees at the provincially run liquor board, for example) from wearing "ostentatious" religious symbols. Drainville's announcement was accompanied by an illustrated pictogram depicting images of heads and hands adorned with the items that would be allowed and banned under the proposed Bill: Muslim veils and hijabs, Jewish kippahs, Sikh turbans and large Christian crucifixes worn around the neck — clearly ostentatious and therefore prohibited; Necklaces featuring small crucifixes, small earrings with the Islamic crescent moon and Star of David rings — non-ostentatious and therefore acceptable. On November 7th, the PQ officially tabled the legislation in the National Assembly.

REPRODUCING THE NATION – THE CONTINUITY OF CRISIS

The PQ's strategy for securing a majority government and create winning conditions for a referendum on sovereignty appears to revolve around positioning themselves as the guardians of cultural survival for the francophone majority. Not insignificantly, this was the role of the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Quiet Revolution when French Canadian nationalism took a statist turn.

It is worth repeating that prior to the 1960s French Canadian identity was not defined by Québec's borders but along ideological lines. French Canadians were encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church to coalesce around three social tenets — faith, race and language — which would ensure their collective survival in the face of perceived external dangers: Anglicization, Protestantism, and later, feminism, urbanization, modernization, and industrialization.

When secularization began to take root during Québec's Quiet Revolution, race and religion were no longer seen as appropriate categories of identity in the new civic (and not ethnic) approach to nationalism. Race and religion were discursively absorbed into language as the main marker of identity and guarantee of collective existence, and the key symbol of national legitimacy (see Cooper 2011, 2012).

Bill 60 has sparked the latest public "crisis" of identity and nationalism, with all their attendant implications for social organization, equality and belonging in this place we call Québec. Yet despite the rhetoric, no one seems to be under any illusions that we're having a debate about secularism, least of all the PQ government itself. There is a good reason it rebranded its original Charter of Secularism as a Charter of Québec Values. If there really were a crisis about separation of church and state requiring urgent government action, it seems that the first step would have been simple. Remove the crucifix that hangs above the Speakers chair in the Québec National Assembly. But this is not about secularism, or gender equality. As Eva Mackey reminds us, it is "the reproduction of crisis [that] allows the nation to be a site of a constantly regulated politics of identity" (Mackey, 2002, see also Hage 1996).

CONCLUSION

Allow me the indulgence of returning to that now-iconic pictogram introduced during Minister Drainville's press conference on the 10th of September. Those faceless, disembodied heads depicting which religious symbols would and would not be permitted by the government under the Charter struck me at the time as more bizarre than offensive or instructive. Apparently I wasn't the only one. Columnist and former PQ strategist Josée Légault writing in l'actualité said it was "Kafka meets Monty Python" (Légault, 2013). In a piece for the Canadian (English-language) newspaper the Globe and Mail, La Presse newspaper columnist Patrick Lagacé (who usually writes in French) wrote that it was like "Mr. Rogers meets modernity" (Lagacé, 2013). Perhaps, in a funny way, it is that pictogram and the reactions to it that best capture the challenges, continuities and contradictions of nation-building in the post-national era.

NOTES

[1] In early September a mosque in the Saguenay region was vandalized with what was said to be pig's blood. In late September, the Centres des femmes du Québec reported a rise in intolerance, violence and racist incidents toward women who wear the veil. Videos of hijab-clad women in Montreal being harassed on buses and in the streets have made their rounds on YouTube. In late November, two female daycare workers were photographed by a stranger as they walked six young children through the streets of Verdun on their way to a local park. Their picture was taken without their knowledge or approval and then posted online. Suddenly, the image was showing up on the pages of newspapers and social media. Many hateful comments were posted under the picture on Facebook: "2 bullets: it's hunting season, let's go!" and "Let's burn these women and have them raped by pigs first!"

In a radio interview on CBC Daybreak, one of the daycare workers (speaking under the pseudonym of Julie) said everything had changed for her and her colleagues since the photo was taken and circulated in the media. She said they can no longer bring the children outside at all, for fear of being taunted and photographed. "We're zoo animals," she said. (Cooper, 2013)

[2] September 4, 2012

[3] The Parti Québecois won 54 out of 125 seats in the National Assembly. Four seats separate the PQ from the opposition Liberals, who won 50 (Premier Jean Charest himself lost his seat). In the popular vote, the PQ won 31.9 percent to the Liberals' 31.2 percent, while the upstart Coalition Avenir Québec led by François Légault received 19 seats and 27 percent of the vote.

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