AN UNEXPECTED CANADA

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In a now classic article published in 1936, Robert K. Merton laid the foundation for a sociological study of the unintended consequences of social action.[1] The difficulty of such a study, however, was to trace with a minimum of assurance the thread that linked causes to their effects in time; human actions are indeed rarely sufficiently univocal to be explained by a simple action-reaction game. But Merton's article aimed precisely at underlining how unpredictable the social trajectories of individuals and groups are, because the intentions of the actors do not always meet their objectives through the meanders of social determinisms.

It is tempting to see the Canadian experience as a particularly striking illustration of Merton's theory. Canada has become what it is, among other things because the will of its leaders not only was unrealized, but actually took the opposite direction. In other words, Canada is a fine illustration of the proverb that suggests we should be wary of what we want. The perverse effects and unintended events that pepper its history are remarkable in their having been recycled into contemporary national rhetoric and now an integral part of the great Canadian narrative. We celebrate in 2017 a Canada that should never have been!

In this too brief article I chose to focus on four examples: the Conquest of 1760, the Act of Union of 1840, Bill 101 of 1977 and the persistence of an ethnic nationalist current after the 1995 referendum. In each case, as we shall see, what the event or action in question was supposed to provoke turned out to be short-lived, and what it meant to prevent actually happened. This analytical effort, I should

1 MERTON, ROBERT K. "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1936, pp. 894–904.

like to emphasize at the outset, should not serve to feed the reactionary ideology which denounces the perverse effects, the futility and the dangers of projects seeking to transform the social order,[2] to allow us to better understand how history, far from being a rectilinear and perfectly planned march, follows unpredictable curves and bumps.

FOUR BETRAYALS OF HISTORY

The Conquest of 1760 was to end once and for all the "French and Indians wars" and to ensure the constitution of a hegemonic area for the British Empire of North America outside Mexico. The problem is that the elimination of the French threat, far from giving the Empire a firmer control over the continent, fostered the desire for independence of the thirteen American colonies which had hitherto depended on England for their protection. Americans began to complain of the taxes levied to reimburse the considerable expenses incurred by the Seven Years' War. Barely sixteen years later, the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America was adopted by the delegates meeting in Philadelphia.

The Act of Union of 1840 adopted one of the principal recommendations of Lord Durham, who had suggested uniting the two "English" and "French" groups in the same political entity in order to facilitate and accelerate the assimilation of the latter. The demographic imbalance, however, was to the advantage of French-speaking Canadians and it was therefore decided that each of the two former colonies, Lower Canada and Upper Canada, would receive an equal number of seats in the United Canada House of Representatives. The explosive population growth of Upper Canada almost immediately reversed the balance of power, and it was therefore the French-speaking Canadians who were ultimately protected by the new political structure. Twenty-five years later, during the constitutional discussions leading up to the BNAA, George Brown could not be more surprised at the impetus the Act of Union gave to the political dynamics of the colony :

The scene presented by this chamber at this moment, I venture to affirm, has few parallels in history. […] here sit to-day the descendants of the victors and the vanquished in the fight of 1759, with all the differences of language, religion, civil law and social habit, nearly as distinctly marked as they were a century ago. Here we sit to-day seeking amicably to find a remedy for constitutional evils and injustice complained of—by the vanquished? No, but complained of by the conquerors! Here sit the representatives of the British population claiming justice—only justice; and here sit the representatives of the French population, discussing in the French tongue whether we shall have it.

The Act of Union was supposed to crush French-speaking Canadians; it gave them instead the advantage of an incredible power relationship.

For its creators, Bill 101 was not only meant to give its French character back to Québec, and Montréal in particular, but also to give pride back to the people of Québec. In the eyes of the Minister of Cultural and Psychiatric Development, Camille Laurin, it was meant to allow for a collective psychotherapy session. "Time has come," Laurin used to say, "to stop thinking of our future in terms of timid sur-

2 ALFRED HIRSCHMAN, *Deux siècles de rhétorique réactionnaire*, Paris, Fayard, 1991.

vival and to regain the sense of our true greatness: that of participating fully in one of the great linguistic and cultural expressions of this vast world of which, from Québec, we are the citizens."[3] It was therefore a preliminary step in the long struggle for liberation undertaken by Québec Francophones and was to inject a necessary dose of self-confidence to achieve Québec independence. The French-language Charter, according to Laurin, reversed "the course of our history" and made the Québec people "feel at last fully at home". "In a Québec now and forever French," he continued, "it makes sense to foresee more recoveries, other appropriations, and other leaps forward," among which, of course, was the "sovereignty policy". Yet it must be concluded that Bill 101 rather blunted the linguistic fears of Francophones and facilitated their acceptance of a federal legislative framework that did not prevent them from flourishing in their language. This is why Stéphane Dion was able to talk about Bill 101 as "a great Canadian law".

After the 1995 referendum, Québec Francophone nationalists continued to instill a certain amount of ethnicity into sovereignty. Against the multicultural policies of the federal government, no more or less assimilated to a war machine set in motion to destroy Québec nationalism by extirpating its memory roots, we sought to place Québec's future on a horizon of collective meaning that would go beyond legal frameworks. Jacques Beauchemin was one of the main voices who supported the need for a people not to break the thread that connects it to what he did not hesitate to call a "destiny." "What is diminishing," he wrote, "is a representation of the political community in which the status of the Franco-Quebecer majority has asserted itself without detour."[4] The irony of the story is that these positions helped solidify the support for multiculturalism, seen by many as a response to the identity tensions of conservative nationalists. "What happened in Canada in the 1990s is best described as a conditionally inclusive form of socioethnic leveraging leading to pluralist group formation/formation of a multicultural national identity. By framing all French Canadians as Québécois nationalists, and by portraying this nationalism as outdated and ethnically oppressive, in dominant (media) discourses the image of 'Québec' is used as an undesirable contrast to a modern, cosmopolitan Canada where individuals of all ethnic and religious backgrounds can trade their talents for membership in the multicultural nation."[5] While the ideology of multiculturalism was declining everywhere else (Germany, United States, United Kingdom), the presence of strong ethnic nationalism in Québec paradoxically guaranteed a high level of popularity for multiculturalism in Canada.

CONCLUSION

I could give many more examples of unexpected consequences in Canadian history. The point to be made here is that Canada as we know it and celebrate it in 2017 is not only the result of enlightened and finely calculated decisions. Its development

3 CAMILLE LAURIN, quoted in Graham Fraser, Le Parti québécois, Montréal, *Libre Expression*, 1984, p. 124-125. Translation.

4 JACQUES BEAUCHEMIN, *La souveraineté en héritage*, Montréal, Boréal, 2015, p. 38. Translation.

5 ELKE WINTER, "Rethinking Multiculturalism After its 'Retreat': Lessons From Canada", A*merican Behavioral Scientist* 59(6), p. 651.

has undergone a multitude of unforeseen detours, the scope of which it would be wrong to underestimate. What one would like to celebrate as the fulfillment of its founders' dreams is in fact partly the result of chance and luck, as it is true that what was achieved has sometimes little to do with what was originally imagined. With a play on words, we could say that Canada is a country... unexpected!