COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND FEDERALISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON BELONGING IN QUEBEC

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ABSTRACT

The salience of questions pertaining to belonging and collective identity in Quebec continues to mark Quebec's political landscape, as revealed recently with the debates over reasonable accommodations. Yet recommendations and criticism about managing this diversity are often taken in isolation, without considering the broader political-institutional context in which Quebec finds itself. This brief essay examines the debate in Quebec by assessing the recommendations of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission in light of some structural elements of Canadian federalism. It argues that appropriate recommendations for social and political integration in Quebec must be preceded by some formal recognition that Quebec is a host society in its own right, as an integral aspect of Canadian citizenship.

RÉSUMÉ

La pertinence des questions relatives à l'appartenance et à l'identité collective au Québec continue de marquer le paysage politique du Québec, comme l'ont révélé récemment les débats sur les accommodements raisonnables. Pourtant les recommandations et les critiques sur la gestion de cette diversité sont souvent prises isolément, sans tenir compte de l'ensemble du contexte politico-institutionnel dans lequel le Québec évolue. Ce court texte examine le débat au Québec, en évaluant les recommandations de la Commission Bouchard-Taylor à la lumière de certains éléments structurels du fédéralisme canadien. Il soutient que les recommandations appropriées pour l'intégration sociale et politique au Québec doivent être précédées d'une reconnaissance officielle que le Québec est une société d'accueil en soi, ce qui représente une partie intégrante de la citoyenneté canadienne.

The notion of a distinctly Québécois citizenship has seen a spectacular progression. In the space of a lifetime, the dominant identification of Quebeckers has been profoundly transformed. From Canadians, they became French-Canadians, then Franco-Québécois, and finally, Québécois [...]. These transformations cannot be interpreted as a simple evolution of a sort of sentiment of belonging to the tribe. Rather, they represent a continuing progression of Québécois identity in which its foundations have passed from non-citizenship to citizenship.[1]

The ongoing furor over 'reasonable accommodations' goes a long way to revealing the extent to which questions about collective identity in the public sphere continue to dominate the political landscape in Quebec. The common denominator beneath the 'progression' identified by Will Kymlicka above is that Quebecers interpret their place in Canada through a collective lens, one that they *ought* to be responsible for shaping through their representatives. This brings us to the link between federalism and identity. For Quebec, determining the contours of belonging implies carving out a distinct citizenship space, which flows from a conception of Canadian federalism in which its desire for national affirmation, or self-determination, is institutionally acknowledged. The *telos* of federalism in Canada is to allow for the flourishing of a distinct host society in Quebec, not as the institutional basis for the construction of a larger transcendent identity.

For other observers, however, Kymlicka's interpretations of the development of a distinct citizenship are misguided – Quebec is and always will be concerned with "the tribe". In this view, national identity should not be invoked to obfuscate ethnic sectarianism. The language of citizenship is a political position undertaken by Quebec nationalists that, in the final analysis, can only be interpreted as a threat to Canadian citizenship. Indeed, a common reaction to the fact that Quebec was having this very public and sometimes painful exercise in sociocultural introspection was that Quebec society was less amenable or open to cultural pluralism.

Most states, however, grapple with the challenge of recognizing minority cultures and religious practices without being attacked as sectarian. Liberal polities regularly engage in debates about the limits of cultural pluralism without facing accusations of undermining citizenship. This debate, however, is particular due to Quebec's ambiguous status as a host society. Under the present federal system, Quebec is not formally recognized as a constituted political community. In this brief commentary I want to explore the importance of considering the larger role of federalism in these deliberations about cultural and religious accommodation, social and political integration, and ultimately, the sources of national identity in Quebec society.

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In Canada, federalism itself is a contested concept, and the story of collective identity demonstrates that this constitutive condition is not merely academic. For some, federalism is meant to transcend differences while others see it as the expression of a normative acknowledgment of difference – unity in diversity. Yet the place of collective identity in the Canadian polity is not neatly reflected in federal institutions. Many non-territorial groups have achieved constitutional protections, Aboriginal groups have largely made claims on the basis of nationhood yet have largely been shut out of the federal architecture, and Quebec has traditionally viewed itself not as a province like the others but as a political community or 'societal culture'[2] in its own right – an internal nation[3] rather than a territorial or administrative unit of a larger nation. This has resulted in competing visions with regards to the constitutive bases of Canadian federalism. In contrast to Quebec's view, federalism in Canada is formally organized around principles of provincial equality, a Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a lynchpin of citizenship, bilingualism based on the personality principle[4] and multiculturalism. In other words, it is difficult to provide a normative framework for collective identity if the boundaries of citizenship are themselves subject to continuous contestation. Who determines the boundaries of citizenship, including questions about culture; (re)distribution and the bundle of rights and obligations?

The larger setting of federalism thus only serves as the institutional backdrop for either the recognition of differentiated citizenship, where rights and responsibilities in Quebec are understood to be distinct, or universal citizenship, where strict equality from coast to coast prevails. The recommendations of the Commission, as I will show below, will be directly affected by this larger institutional/ideational setting. The larger environment cannot simply be set aside. Quebec identity is not and should not be conceptualized as a site for the expression of 'culture'. This trivializes what Quebec is and its role in carving out a space for itself as a host society, and furthermore, it treats Quebec as an object of cultural policy. Within the larger federal system, and particularly Quebec's position on matters relating to integration and immigration, Quebec views itself as a hub of social and political integration.

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In 2008, the Final Report of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission[5] made several recommendations that touch on the question of belonging in Quebec. Among its observations, the Commission encouraged the Quebec government strengthen its model of 'interculturalism', defined as a pluralist approach (integrative pluralism), through a law or more pronounced policy statement and to favour open secularism, a less rigid approach relative to strict secularism that allows for wide expression of religious belief in the public sphere with some qualifications. Several assumptions underscore these recommendations. First, Quebec's debates about identity markers are to be resolved through continuity rather than rupture – the Commission

noted that Quebec has been successful in its integration efforts, and dismissed many of the recent social clashes as the product of irresponsible media reporting. Second, in opting for integrative pluralism and open secularism, the Commission left itself open to criticism from Quebec nationalists on two fronts – that it trivialised Quebecers' genuine anxieties about contemporary threats to national identity and that it was a disguised re-iteration of Canada's policy of Multiculturalism. Third, the Commission was thus forced to explicitly state that interculturalism is different than multiculturalism, yet its only justification was that multiculturalism was unsuitable for Quebec, and that it was not in the mandate of the Commission to examine Quebec-Canada dynamics in this area.

I will not look very closely at the model of interculturalism[6] as it was conceptualized by the Commission, which sought to strike an appropriate balance between social cohesion and diversity, and more specifically, around the place of the francophone majority in relation to ethno-cultural minorities. I believe the model of social and political integration outlined by the Commission is well-reasoned, clearly articulated and defensible for Quebec society.

I want to take this space to examine the fact that there is no justification for Quebec's elaboration of a distinct model in the first place. The very idea of 'national models' of integration assume that a society's particular constitutive trajectory – through various nation-building initiatives – establish it as an appropriate site for the elaboration of citizenship.[7] While I argue that a model of cultural pluralism for Quebec is necessary, and appropriately debated and developed in Quebec (as a host society), the matter is nevertheless proceeding in a unique social and political context. Quebec is an internal nation in a federal structure that does not recognize differentiated citizenship based on the existence of a plurality of nations. Quebec thus cannot engage in national integration in a neutral environment – it must contend with the presence of Canadian citizenship – a competing narrative.

In exploring the boundaries of cultural practices, the Commissioners were confronted with two broad sets of concerns. The first relates to ensuring the flourishing and continuation of a sense of collective identification centred on the French language in Quebec. Within these aims we find more robust concerns about the cultural continuity of the majority francophone group in Quebec; a less demanding aim that a French-speaking community ought to be available to future generations; a project for the secession of Quebec as an independent nation; and so on. The common thread is that a particular collective identity, however defined, ought to be relevant to any model purporting to manage diversity.

The second broad area of concern is to navigate through questions of ethno-cultural diversity through the lens of certain norms, such as equality, recognition, access, participation, reciprocity, dialogue, participation, and so on. From this view, social relations are taken as a bounded reality in Quebec. While particular to the political sociology of Quebec, most liberal democracies are grappling with similar challenges. The concern here is ensuring that minority groups enjoy access to public goods; participate in democratic deliberations on the orientations of society; in other words – to feel at home. Essentially, this involves fulfilling the responsibilities of a host society.

I chose to frame the challenges confronting the Commission as such is because I want to argue that these two sets of concerns cannot be reconciled simply through the elaboration of a single model of social and political integration, regardless of how coherently it is formulated and defended. While I applaud the Commission's commitment to continuity, there was nevertheless a missed opportunity to explore the entire set of challenges at work here. Indeed, other than a constant reminder that identity in Quebec is subject to insecurities that do not exist in the broader North American context, there is barely any mention of the significance of elaborating a national model of integration from the structural position of an internal nation.

Most political communities grappling with the challenges of diversity can safely deliberate without a lingering existential angst. In entering this game, Quebec is in effect engaging in a political act of circumscribing a community of reference. Undertaking the task and committing resources to formulating a model of integration is an act of national affirmation, yet there is no recognition of this fact from the wider society, thus nation-building becomes a zero-sum game, with national integration resembling a competition of sorts.[8] In other words, formal citizenship makes no substantive claims on citizens to be engaged with Quebec society as a democratic space involving a distinct set of rights and responsibilities. Unlike other states in a similar position of articulating the boundaries of citizenship in conditions of socio-cultural diversity, Quebec is constantly forced to justify its involvement in this exercise on top of its substantive positions on the limits of cultural pluralism.

What are some of these initiatives in 'national affirmation'? Here we can include the many statements of introspection about markers of belonging, including the activities of the Commission itself, the evolution of interculturalism as defined by a series of policy statements over the past 25 years or so, the Quebec state's prominent role in the area of immigration (including selection and integration), the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms

and the Charter of the French language – in other words, the organic citizenship activities specific to Quebec society that are endowed with an inherent 'identity-forging' character.

The success of Quebec's efforts in this area, or the extent to which this affirmation is allowed to result in effective integration policies, depends almost entirely on the recognition that the affirmation activities of Quebec are legitimate. This is particular to a multination state.[9] Indeed, it was well within the mandate of the Commission to make recommendations about how Quebec's attempts to carve out a citizenship space ought to be strengthened, recognized, and at least negotiated prior to delving into the specifics of a conceptual framework for the management of diversity. In this context, citizenship becomes matter of political interpretation and, ultimately, contestation. As such, the reciprocity and dialogue required to negotiate the recognition of national pluralism at the larger federal level must precede any elaborate model for the management of ethno-cultural relations in Quebec. I believe the Commissioners were mistaken in assuming that they could navigate through these issues while claiming that Quebec's place in Canada is of little concern in their deliberations.[10]

In advocating interculturalism and open secularism, the Commission privileged a conception of integration based on cultural synthesis rather than cultural convergence.[11] If we return to the twin phenomena of affirmation and recognition, however, we can point to a paradox. Whether we speak of cultural convergence, common public culture, civic pact, Quebec citizenship, or integrative pluralism, they are all manifestations of Quebec's project of national affirmation. Because of this inherent attribute of multination states, the act of explicitly defining a community of reference rather than simply managing its social components must be built into the model. An emphasis on a pure 'synthesis' model fails to achieve this. Quebec simply cannot subscribe to an unqualified model of cultural pluralism in the same way that Canada can.

As such, the idea of cultural convergence cannot merely be dismissed as a sectarian affront to Canadian multiculturalism – it must inevitably enter the picture because of the twin requirements of affirmation and recognition confronting an internal nation. Whether cultural convergence ought to be directed 'towards' the francophone majority culture as the primary point of reference, in a robust sense, is a matter of hotly contested debate in Quebec. However, at a minimum, citizens require some recognition that their loyalties, contestations, demands, participation, collective goals, individual goals, etc., are directed at a political community deemed to legitimately exist. Their energies must converge towards some defined reference. This political dilemma limits the extent to which a 'pure' model of cultural pluralism, devoid of contingencies and qualifications, can be applied in Quebec. In short, recognition itself assumes the role of a founding moment for the elaboration of a point of convergence – it establishes that a distinct host society actually exists and in a sense provides a 'normal' outlet for these debates about national identity to proceed. What the Commissioners refer to as a 'creative tension' between the majority francophone culture and minority cultural groups is not negotiated on neutral ground, as might be the case in most other contexts.

In the end, whether there exists a true 'Quebec identity' that it is threatened misses the crux of the challenge. National identity only takes shape to the extent that the state in Quebec is responsible for a bundle of formative projects related to social, political and cultural integration. With regards to the actual markers of Quebec identity, I believe that the Commission rightly points out that cultural interaction will cause this to evolve. We tend to confuse the affirmation of a majority group in Quebec that seeks to perpetuate certain collective traits with the existence of something called Quebec culture – two very different concepts with regards to the development of a model of social and political integration. No integration policy can deal uniquely with the latter – it is a much larger historical question that needs to be constantly revisited through day-to-day interactions.

Indeed, if the Canadian experience has revealed anything it is that culture is often treated as a target of central policy-making decisions and not the basis for structuring citizenship relations. In this context, how can we have a fruitful debate on the contours of the *projet de société* if the society in question does not really exist in the eyes of many citizens whose allegiance is actively sought through the cultural policies established in Ottawa. From this vantage point, it is not surprising that sociocultural relations in Quebec are strained regardless of the actions of the Quebec state – the anxieties and subsequent debates seem to be taking place among francophone Quebecers, and it is seen as a problem related to its place in the universe, not a real debate about how to accommodate cultural minorities. As long as this situation persists, some citizens will view Quebec's deliberations about belonging as a sectarian movement that seeks actively to strip them of the gains they made in attaining recognition for cultural pluralism at the pan-Canadian level – again, a zero-sum game.

The real question here thus concerns sovereignty – it involves the actual capacity and legitimacy to manage cultural relations in the first place. Whatever the term

employed: context of choice, host society, nation, distinct society, societal culture, etc., the idea of integration in Quebec cannot be tackled without the involvement of the larger Canadian multination, and this is where the Commission fails to address the totality of the problem as it relates to cultural relations in Quebec.

To conclude, cultural pluralism and a minority nation are in a tenuous relationship precisely because of the tendency to equate a minority nation with a sectarian culture that is less inclined to embrace diversity. As such, the Commission's recommendations alienate those that view Quebec's role in this area as exorbitant – as a wrecker of Canadian citizenship, because there is no apparent reason why Quebec has to determine these boundaries when they already exist in the formal citizenship structures of the country. On a second front, the model alienates Quebec nationalists that believe Quebec is not well served by a policy that completely disregards the prominent role of Francophone culture in the overall terms of integration – those that want to see either a more substantive cultural pole of allegiance or those that want a civic or republican conception of the terms of membership in Quebec. A constitutive question ought to be treated as such – it is not a debate about cultural relations per se, but about participation, rights, access, belonging, and so on – it is about citizenship. The Commission does not go far enough in exploring the consequences of this distinction.

NOTES

[1] Will Kymlicka, *Théories récentes sur la citoyenneté*, (Ottawa: Multiculturalisme et Citoyenneté Canada, 1992): 45. (My translation).

[2] This concept is attributed to Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] Other terms often employed include sub-state nation, or minority nation.

[4] See Kenneth McRoberts, "Struggling Against Territory: Language Policy in Canada," in Tony Judt and Denis Lacorne (eds) *Language, Nation, and State: Identity Politics in a Multilingual Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004): 133-160; and Linda Cardinal, "Language Planning and Policy Making in Quebec and in Canada", in S. Gervais, C. Kirkey and J. Rudy, (eds.), *Quebec Questions*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2010): 184-201.

[5] Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*, Final report of the Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles (CCPARDC), (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2008).

[6] The Commission's defines the model of interculturalism as follows:
a) institutes French as the common language of intercultural relations;
b) cultivates a pluralistic orientation that is concerned with the protection of rights;
c) preserves the necessary creative tension between diversity, on the one hand, and the continuity of the French-speaking core and the social link, on the other hand;
d) places special emphasis on integration and participation; and
e) advocates interaction.

[7] The idea that citizenship policies reflect a sense of national self-understanding was brilliantly brought to the fore in a now classic work by Rogers Brubaker, who highlighted the contextual importance of national identity. In other words, nations have different ideas about citizenship despite shared understanding of liberal or democratic justificatory schemes. The idea of distinct 'national models' is thus particular salient for our purposes because of the particular political sociology of the multination state. See *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[8] See Micheline LaBelle and Francois Roçher, "Immigration, Integration and Citizenship Policies in Canada and Quebec: Tug of War Between Competing Societal Projects", in R. Zapata-Barrero, (ed.), *Immigration and Self-Government of Minority Nations*, (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009).

[9] For more on this point, see Chapter 4 of Alain-G. Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino, *Federalism, Citizenship and Quebec: Debating Multinationalism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

[10] For more on Quebec's role in the articulation of citizenship with its standing as a minority nation and/or the constitutive principles of Canadian federalism, see Gagnon and Iacovino, *Op. Cit.* [2007] and Guy Laforest, *Pour la liberté d'une société distincte: Parcours d'un intellectuel engage*, (Ste.-Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004).

[11] See Raffaele Iacovino and Charles-Antoine Sévigny, "Models of Managing Diversity", in C. Kirkey, S. Gervais and J. Rudy (eds.), Québec Questions: *Québec Studies for the 21st Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Briefly, a common public culture will result from intercultural exchange, in a fusion of horizons, while convergence stresses the importance of the majority francophone culture as a pole of allegiance.