BEAUTIFUL LOSERS[1]

JOCELYN LÉTOURNEAU

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A prolific author, Jocelyn Létourneau, alone or jointly, has written or directed several works on his preferred topics: the production of a common sense of identity within complex societies, the uses of history in public interlocution, the historical consciousness of young people in a globalization context, the identity status of Quebeckers, etc. Among his publications, what specifically comes to mind is *Passer à l'avenir : Histoire, mémoire, identité dans le Québec d'aujourd'hui* (2000), which earned him the prix Spirale de l'essai in 2001, and *Le Québec, les Québécois : un parcours historique* (2004), a small book dedicated to the public that accompanies the permanent exhibition entitled *Le temps des Québécois* at the Museum of Civilization in Quebec. Recently, he published *Que veulent vraiment les Québécois? Regard sur l'intention nationale au Québec (français), d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Boréal, 2006).

1 Borrowed from Leonard Cohen.

Having received his education at the Laval University and the University of Toronto, Professor Létourneau is currently in charge of a university/community research alliance, which will enable him to collect data on the ways that Canadians interact with the past and build a historical identity for themselves. Jocelyn Létourneau frequently gets involved in public debates, particularly on sensitive and controversial issues affecting the relationships linking history, memory and identity in the (re)construction of the City.

The question at stake is not to tell who "we" are as people, but what kind of country we have built. The "we" at issue is the sum total of all those who, from yesterday to today, as individuals, members of any community, Indigenous people, Francophones, Anglophones or Allophones, long-established or recent arrivals, visible minorities or not, and who else, have participated, from different ambitions and positions, in the building of what has long been called Canada – a name that could be spelled with a K to emphasize the initializing presence of the First Peoples in the collective experience that was to follow.

So, what kind of country have we built? There's no point, except to reconcile everyone around a warm maple wood fire, in denying the tensions, conflicts, hostilities, discrimination or rejection that have marked Canada's history from the outset. Canadians may well, for some time and for the most part, especially outside Quebec and outside native reserves and "inner ghettos", define their country as a haven of peace, tolerance, openness, and inclusion, but to stick to these nice attributes, they're no better than anyone else.

Or are they? If so, we should ask why Canada has become what it is, a country whose "historicity deficit"[2] is not lamentable, though it has been and remains deplorable in many respects.

There's a fundamental reason why Canada has become what it is – a country attractive to its inhabitants and a magnet for immigrants. This is because, historically, no single constituent group of Canada has succeeded in imposing, either totally or finally, its design on the destiny of the country. In essence, Canada is the product of unfinished conquest, ambiguous domination, and incomplete subjugation by its external and internal colonizers[3]. It is a project that developed as a consequence of the fact that all those who sought to shape it according to their univocal or unilateral agenda have failed. At heart, Canada is a country of "beautiful losers".

I like this expression, which in my mind refers not to a miserable status, but to an honorable condition. I use it, not to suggest that Canadians, whatever their main culture of belonging, allegiance, or conformity (Anglophone, Francophone, or Indigenous),

2 "Historicity deficit" conceptualizes the gap between what Canada actually is, and what it could have been had it developed ideally. What ideality are we talking about here? Let's imagine a state close to paradise...

3 Peter H. Russell, *Canada's Odyssey. A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests*, Toronto, UTP, 2017. I don't pretend to follow the author's arguments to the letter; however, his general idea seems right to me.

are a bunch of docile defeated or downtrodden mediocrities – as opposed to Americans, for example, who are reputed to be superb winners according to their national canon. I say beautiful losers in the sense that, as a result of the unexpectedness of history and the limited capacities of the power groups who articulated the Canadian experience, and also because of the moderantist ideas of some of its leaders, it has not been possible in this country for any group or culture whatsoever to completely dominate, fully dispose of or control the national deal for good, despite the unequal, but not completely flawed, nature of the reciprocal relationship between the various parties making up Canada. In fact, the Canadian historical experience has crowned no single or final winner. Within this historical experience, the so-called "victors" often found themselves cuckolded by the passage of time, while the "vanquished", on their knees, humiliated or obedient, ended up acting from the interstices unoccupied, ignored, or neglected by the dominant powers, only to stand up again[4].

As a result, Canada remains – unfortunately for many who would prefer the country to have finally arrived at its destination and bolted to eternal time with sturdy spikes – a work in progress. Canada is a State of tension and friction. While its stability is underpinned by important pieces of legislation, revived in 1982 following a convoluted political operation that produced neither a total winner nor a complete loser, but many frustrated parties, in keeping with the Canadian tradition of beautiful losers, the country's evolution remains the product of small empirical dynamics rather than the fruit of a grand theoretical Idea. The discord, divisions and antagonisms that mark the country are settled around tables and through words, not in the streets and with swords, with the annoyances and weariness that result from such a way of condensing problems.

What are the constants that have marked Canada to this day, giving the country a certain continuity and steadfastness through its oscillations and disruptions? The disdain for violence, the rejection of radicalism, the primacy of politics and the search for complex arrangements are four important pillars on which the country has been built. Canada's guiding principle is moderation. As we know, there have been many deviations and distortions in this approach. It is the historian's duty to recall them. But these appear as occasional digressions, a sort of recurring hiccup, in relation to what fundamentally characterizes the country: compulsory restraint, which stems from the nature of the constraint interdependencies that have engraved, but not burdened, Canada's destiny.

Considered a pale condition by many idealists, the "Canadian middle ground" is not essence or quintessence. It has nothing to do with some *bon-ententiste* principle. Rather, it has emerged in the wake of unsuccessful or traumatic experiences of

4 It's been a long and arduous journey to restore the First Peoples to the status of collective subjects who are listened to and respected. It remains to be seen how far it will go beyond good intentions. On the Francophone side, I'm not sure that Gabrielle Roy's famous phrase ("When did I first realize that I was, in my country, a species to be treated as inferior?" - we're in the 1910s), could be uttered today. Inferior no longer makes sense. That doesn't mean the situation is enviable. What word should be used to describe the French condition in Canada outside Quebec, including that of the Acadians in New Brunswick? Ignored? Neglected? Underestimated? Snubbed? Sacrificed? All good answers? Canadian Anglo-conformity struggles to come to terms with Francophone discordance, knowing it has no choice but to live with it.

immoderation, experiences that have brought in their wake an awareness – often slow, sluggish, and tortuous – of the harmful repercussions of excess, and the consequent development of a political culture of balance, which the vast majority of Canadians want to preserve, *nolens volens*.

Again, this is not to deny that the Canadian historical experience has been punctuated by abuses and outrages. In Canada, after the French had given up on conquering the Indigenous peoples, who were also quarrelling against each other, the British, and later their Canadian heirs, attempted to impose a global project of domination on a territory to be colonized and nationalized, in other words, to be uniformized. While the pernicious effects of this project cannot be minimized, it has failed more than it has succeeded. When we look at the Canadian situation from the vantage point of our contemporaneity, we have to admit that the history of Canada is that of the (aborted) reduction of First Peoples and Métis, the (failed) provincialization of Francophones, the (missed) reduction of non-whites[5] and the (unsuccessful) nationalization of the country, to which we could add that of the (ineffective) relegation of women.

In the 1970s, the policy of multiculturalism was introduced as a framework for the country's "diversity", in order to bring Canada together as a Whole, despite its disunity. In truth, multiculturalism is yet another manifestation of the reality of the beautiful losers. It is an admission of defeat by the pretending powers in the face of the resilience, resistance and persistence of enduring communities that have never yielded to the ambitions, dictates, and exactions of the powerful. In a sense, Canadian multiculturalism, associated as it should be (as is often forgotten…) with the concepts of federalism, bilingualism, provincialism, regionalism, democratic individualism and even nationalism, all expressions of Canada's dazzling complexity and irreducibility, expresses the recognition that there is no way to fit or melt the country into a matrix where the whole would swallow or dissolve its parts entirely or ultimately.

To unify and fortify Canada, the Constitution Act of 1867 was updated in 1982 to include a Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. Pierre Elliott Trudeau's aim was to anchor Canadian identity in a forward-looking political project, purged of what he saw as Canada's unfortunate demons (tribalism, ethnicism, nationalism, provincialism, separatism, regionalism, and identitarianism), all sectarianism inherited from the past. While Trudeau's actions have stabilized the Canadian situation, which was particularly tense in the 1960s and 1970s, he has lost the bet to rebuild the country beyond its historicity. Not only did he fail to eliminate the structural vectors of national disunity that still fuel the Canadian dynamics, albeit within a tighter regulatory framework, but he also paved the way for the amplification of the diversity phenomenon in Canada, which was not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, several minorities have been able to integrate into the agora and become recognized components of the body politic. The number of

5 There are still hypocritical, systemic forms of racism in Canadian society, which amount to the abject. However, the Black revival is an undeniable phenomenon, unlike in the U.S., where the idea that the social contract is based on an insidious racial contract has, since 2018, been fiercely rejected by large segments of the right.

"beautiful losers" has only increased, apparently undermining the consolidation of Canada as a State. In fact, the reproduction of Canada as a country has not been altered. We need to understand why. Canada's possibility, if not the source of its viability and vitality, lies in the ability of its leaders to allow the country's disunities to express themselves in the political arena, by offering them acceptable – that is, inevitably equivocal and baroque – modes of conjugation. Whatever may be said, this is what has happened over the past half-century, once the decision-makers, gathering behind the scenes and out of the spots, were condemned to run a country that has often been described as "impossible".

The challenge for Justin Trudeau, Canada's current helmsman, is not to jettison the country's complicated heritage. It's a question of making do with Canadian discordance, which is beautifully incompressible, and of associating it with original political forms, while not allowing himself to be distracted by all those who, tired of negotiating kanadianity, seek to transform it into mere diversity, a sophism of avoidance rather than a canvas of acquiescence to the country's constituent disunities, or to sublimate it into a great Canadian unanimity and uniformity, a devious scenario rather than a forward-looking estimate for Kanada.