# OPPOSITION TO MULTI- AND INTERCULTURALISM IN QUÉBEC: A PERFECT STORM

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## ABSTRACT

Debates about the differences between interculturalism and multiculturalism in Québec are being overshadowed by currents of opinion that are converging around an opposition to the kind of accommodation for cultural reasons that both theories allow. "Neo-traditionalists" oppose policies of accommodation in the name of the prerogatives of the historical cultural majority. Republicans affirm "laïcité", and are thus opposed to claims for accommodation based on religious grounds. Feminists fear that accommodation will render women vulnerable to patriarchal communal norms. The convergence of these three intellectual and political currents are creating a political climate quite unfavorable to the view that some form of accommodation is a condition for successful integration.

Many papers in this collection address the issue of whether there is any real difference, be it in theory or in practice, between Canadian multiculturalism and the purportedly different theory of interculturalism that guides the integration of immigrants in Québec.

My own view on this issue is that the differences have been rhetorical rather than substantive. The intention of both is to find some happy middle term between an assimilationist practice that requires of immigrants that they shed their prior identities as a condition of being accepted by their host society as "full" members, and a *laissez-faire* policy that allows new arrivals to make their own cultural choices, unfettered by either incentives or constraints put forward by the state. Both view the ability of members to retain certain aspects of their patrimonial cultures as conditions of successful integration. Québec and the rest of Canada differ not in the theories that they bring to bear to the question of how best to integrate immigrants, nor in the ends that they hope to achieve through policies based in those theories. Rather, they differ in the contexts to which these theories and policies are applied.

Officials in Québec and in the rest of Canada are united in the belief that the ultimate aim of immigrants should be to integrate into the society that has received them. In English Canada, however, part of that work is done by circumstance, in virtue of the centripetal force exercised if nothing else by the English language. For reasons that probably needn't be rehearsed here at any great length, English serves as a natural point of linguistic convergence for immigrants and members of the cultural majority. Thus, part of the work of integration is done by dint of circumstance.

In Québec, however, this happy convergence does not occur spontaneously. Legislation is required in order to achieve by artifice what occurs more or less naturally in English-Canada. Achieving the same happy medium between the polar opposites of assimilation and ghettoization requires more political voluntarism in Québec. It thus looks like the two receiving societies are working from different theories, whereas they are simply applying what I take to be roughly identical theories to different raw materials.

The most significant change of the last two years in the intellectual landscape is to my mind that Québeckers – or at least their intellectual and political elites – are increasingly abandoning the policy goal which they have until now shared (despite rhetorical differences) with the rest of Canada. That is, they are giving up on the end of achieving the happy medium that I have in very crude terms identified here. There is less appetite among the chattering classes for accommodation of the differences that immigration unavoidably involves.

This sea change is the result of the "perfect storm" that has been created by the convergence of three quite distinct currents of opinion that do not share many affinities, but

that unite in their opposition to accommodation, whether the theory that accommodation is justified by is termed "interculturalism" or "multicuturalism". I want in this brief essay to describe these currents, and to provide an account of the very different roads they adopt in order to arrive at a very similar point, namely a much less generous posture than has been struck in recent decades with respect to the issue of how best to integrate immigrants.

The first current might be termed "neo-traditionalism", and it is best represented in recent writing and punditry by the sociologists Jacques Beauchemin and Matthieu Bock-Côté.[1] Their argument is essentially a majoritarian one: in recent years, in their view, the legitimate prerogative of the cultural majority in Québec has been browbeaten and cowed into submission by an unholy alliance between, on the one hand, Canadian nationalists who, following Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, have wielded multiculturalism as a policy tool with which to water down and trivialize Québec's distinct status as a nation with a distinctive set of traditions, and "post-nationalist" sovereignists such as Gérard Bouchard who, in order to attempt to make the sovereignist project more palatable, and perhaps even attractive, to immigrants, have dissociated it from its roots in the distinctive, "thick" experience of the French-speaking, historically Catholic, cultural majority. This has according to this analysis been bad both for the sovereignist cause, which has lost much of its *raison d'être* and its energy from being loosed from its national roots, and for the Québécois nation whose right to define the cultural space of Québec has been denied.

It is important to note that when compared with nativist movements in Europe, the neo-traditionalism that I have just identified is comparatively benign. That is, it does not claim that Québec ought to resist immigration outright (though many of those who propound the view believe that immigration targets for Québec ought to be lowered). [2]Rather, it claims that cultural compatibility, where that term denotes more than simply linguistic compatibility, ought to be a parameter both of immigrant recruitment and of integration.

A second current that has converged upon this less generous position might be termed "republican". According to republicans, society should be perceived by the state as made up not of individuals and groups encumbered by particular patrimonial ethnic and religious identifications, but rather by "bare" citizens. This is particularly important with respect to citizens' *religious* identities. The principle of *laïcité* requires that church and state be very strictly separated. It requires not only that religious and political authority be substantively immunized from one another, but also that two realms be maintained distinct at the level of symbols. Thus, for example, modes of dress that clearly identify an individual as a member of a specific religion should in this view not be permitted by users or by employees of public institutions.

This current of opinion, most eloquently expressed in the work of the sociologist Guy Rocher[3] and the historian Yvan Lamonde[4], rose to prominence in the debates around "reasonable accommodation" that have polarized Québec society in recent years, and to which the creation of the Bouchard-Taylor commission was a political response. Though the commission had as its mandate to examine practices of *cultural* accommodation, broadly understood, it quickly became apparent that what was really at issue was *religious* accommodation. This is due to the sociological fact that people seem more likely to claim accommodation from laws and administrative regulations for religious reasons, and for the constitutional reason that religious freedom has pride of place in the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms.* The "laïc" position as it has been expounded by Rocher, Lamonde, and others, presumably has nothing to say about multicultural accommodation that does not stem from claims made on religious grounds. But since, *de facto,* the preponderance of claims that have officially been made to the *Commission des droits de la personne et de la jeunesse* are religiously based, this has had the effect of eliding the difference between the laïc position and the position of those whose opposition to multiculturalism is more thoroughgoing.

It may seem odd to find neo-traditionalists and republicans taking the same side in this kind of debate. After all, republicans are suspicious of the political intrusion of *all* cultural identities, that of the majority included, whereas neo-traditionalists ascribe great importance to the identity of the members of the cultural majority. One might have thought that republicans would have followed neo-traditionalists in their rejection of accommodations for religious minorities, but not in their affirmation of the privileged place accorded to the majority culture. Two factors in my view converge to reduce the distance between republicans and neo-traditionalists on this point. First, as has been abundantly noted in the case of nominally republican societies such as France, *laïcité* always bears more harshly on the rites and practices of religious minorities than it does on that of the majority. The symbols, rites and practices of the majority are not always seen by members of the majority *as* posing as much of a problem from the point of view of the principle of *laïcité* as do those of minorities. They are part of the taken-for-granted cultural default, and thus tend to escape notice of the institutions that police the public sphere for infractions to *laïcité* (institutions that are most often of course staffed by members of the cultural and religious majority!).

A second way in which partisans of *laïcité* have exempted the religious symbols of the majority from its strictures is by choosing to view them not as religious, but as cultural. Minutes after the Taylor-Bouchard report was made public, many self-professed *laïcistes* in the National Assembly rose to join in the unanimous resolution to keep the crucifix hanging above the Chair of the Speaker. They were able to do so without blatant contradiction by claiming that the Cross was in fact devoid of religious meaning. On this view, the crucifix has only "patrimonial" significance. Presumably, those attempting to make the same claim on behalf of symbols of minority religion would be told that there is, after all, a moral difference between the symbols of the majority and those of the minority. And thus the republican position shades into the neo-traditionalist.

A third important political trend to have fed into the general condemnation of multi- and interculturalism has been concerned with the implications of such theories and associated practices for the cause of women's rights and the principle of the equality of the sexes. Feminist theorists, both in Québec and elsewhere note that the exemptions claimed for cultural groups often immunize the patriarchal practices of minority cultural and religious practices from the kind of official scrutiny that would be brought to bear on the patriarchal practices of the majority. Multiculturalism, it is felt, is sometimes unwittingly and at other times deliberately used to make women even more vulnerable than they would already are to the strictures that would be visited upon them by traditional religious norms.[5]

Again, the principles underpinning the feminist political agenda are quite different from that which underlies the political programs of neo-traditionalists and republicans. And one can very well imagine the goal of promoting women's equality being served not by an opposition to multi- and interculturalism, but by a critical multiculturalism that works with women in minority groups to try to change their cultures from within rather than adopting the more censorious posture that consists in prohibiting certain practices on the quite contemptuous assumption that women who take part in them must either be coerced into doing so, or be victims of false consciousness. The mainstream institutions defending women's rights in Québec have however chosen this latter route, though voices of dissidence among feminist academics and activists can also be heard.

I have only been able to provide a very rapid, thumbnail sketch, of the forces that today converge to move discourse and practice in Québec with respect to the integration of immigrants away from the ideals that at the end of the day are pursued both by multi- and by interculturalism. These forces cross the ideological spectrum, and are placing a great deal of pressure on the Liberal government to move away from the more open and tolerant attitude that has characterized Québec politics since the '70s, be it under the Liberal Party or under the Parti Québécois. Bill 94, that merely reasserts the limits that already exist in law on the granting of multicultural claims while appearing to place greater limits on the wearing of certain forms of Muslim face-coverings, shows that the Liberal governments of Jean Charest is attempting to tow an increasingly difficult line between placating the various voices that are calling for a retreat from the fairly generous regime of accommodation that, as was shown by the Taylor-Bouchard Commission report, is present in Québec's public institutions today, and maintaining the status-quo. Those of us who believe that the goal shared by multiculturalism and interculturalism is best suited to the harmonious and ethical integration of immigrants, have reason to fear that that line will soon prove politically unviable.

## NOTES

[1] Jacques Beauchemin, *La société des identités,* Montréal : Athéna, 2004; Mathieu Bock-Côté, *La dénationalisation tranquille,* Montréal : Boréal, 2007.

[2] Benoit Dubreuil et Guillaume Marois, *Le remède imaginaire. Pourquoi l'immigration ne sauvera pas le Québec.* Montréal : Boréal, 2011.

[3] His position on *laïcité* is perhaps most clearly laid out in the *Déclaration des Intellectuels pour la Laïcité,* which he co-authored with a number of other intellectuals, artists, and activists who favour a French-style form of *laïcité.* Accessed on March 3rd, at http://www.Québeclaique.org/2010/03/declaration-des-intellectuels-pour-la.html.

[4] Yvan Lamonde, *La laïcité québécoise à l'heure de l'histoire,* Montréal : Del Busso, 2011.

[5] See a recent report published under the auspices of the *Conseil du statut de la femme : Affirmer la laïcité, un pas de plus vers l'égalité réelle entre les femmes et les hommes,* available on the Conseil's website at www.csf.gouv.qc.ca.