

Quebec Society at the Dawn of the 21st Century

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Quebec society has changed rapidly over the past few decades. It now has more assurance and even a certain audacity—for example, its massive support of the North-American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—but it is also a society which questions its future in the Canadian Federation. One might say that there is more than one Quebec; this society is not as homogeneous or as tightly knitted as it once was. In a short article one cannot consider all the facets of contemporary Quebec, the current paper is therefore limited to a few significant tendencies, a few major changes that are presently taking place.

French Canadians: Québécois or Canadians?

According to André Siegfried (1906), for over a century the French-speaking elite dreamt of a bi-national Canadian state formed by two founding nations and where two linguistic groups, each with its own culture, could co-exist. But contemporary Canada has chosen to build a new non-hyphenated national identity while the Quebec society has become more assertive about its cultural specificity. It welcomes newcomers and, with the help of linguistic policies, favours their integration into the French-speaking majority. The traditional French-Canadian identity outside Quebec is today composed of regional identities: Acadian, Franco-Ontarian, Franco-Manitoban, etc., as analyzed in other contributions in this special issue.

To complicate matters, Canada also promotes the French fact and French is one of the two official languages. Canada promotes bilingualism in all federal institutions and supports immersion programmes in schools

so that individuals living outside Quebec may learn French if they wish to do so. In 2002, more than 300,000 children are attending these programmes in English Canada.

To make some sense out of all this, let us examine some factual data. In Quebec, French—spoken by 94% of its population—is officially the common language of its citizens. The majority (56%) speak French only and 38% claim to be bilingual. Proportionately, there are three times more people who are bilingual in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada. If the number of people having French as a mother tongue has been stable over the last century—approximately 82%—English as a mother tongue has lost a lot of ground, especially in the 70s and 80s when part of the English community left the province. Today this community is 9% of the total population, but this proportion rises to more or less 18% if one takes into account linguistic transfers to English.

However, because of the language law, which imposes French on all children of immigrants, this situation is gradually changing. Far from being a defensive reflex of a society that has trouble reproducing itself, the Quebec language laws are meant to integrate newcomers so as to allow for their full participation in society.

The relative proportion of French-speaking people in Canada has decreased continually during the 20th century; and, linguistically, Canada is now a bi-polar country. There are two reasons for this. Even if French-speaking communities elsewhere than in Quebec are very dynamic—the Acadian community in particular—there is a high rate of assimilation, especially in Ontario and Western Canada. Outside of Quebec there are one million people whose mother tongue is French but only 66% speak French at home. The most important factor is without doubt the large number of Canadian immigrants who chose to settle in English-speaking areas. Since 1951, no less than 8.5 million immigrants have settled in Canada, a number equivalent to the population of a country like Austria or a bit less than that of Switzerland. It is as if a whole country had immigrated to Canada over the past 50 years. Canada's population is over 30 million, that is half of France's or Great Britain's; Quebec's population is 7.4 million, but proportionately it welcomes fewer immigrants than the rest of Canada.

Quebeckers have mixed feelings about their future in this changing Canada. Some advocate independence or a form of sovereignty which would include a special partnership with the rest of Canada. Others still dream of recognition and more autonomy for a French Quebec within the Canadian Federation. Still others support the Federation that resulted from the unilateral repatriation of the Constitution in 1982, a repatriation that went against the wishes of the Quebec government. The failure to recognize the particular situation of Quebec in Canada in the 80s leaves little room to renew the Canadian Federation which is slowly changing and has undertaken a new nation-building process. These different views give way to conflict between two national references—a concept created by the well-known sociologist, Fernand Dumont—that is, a new Canadian reference and a new Quebec reference. This conflict is in continuity with the linguistic polarization described above.

Strangers in Their Own Country

First Nations always fascinate the tourists who visit Quebec. They were erroneously called "Indians" by the European explorers of the 16th century who thought they had arrived in India after having circumnavigated the earth. The aboriginals of North America have been called "Indians" until recently. There are about 72,000 aboriginals—about 1%—in Quebec, the majority of which (71%) live in reservations. There are fewer aboriginals in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada where they count for 3.4% of the total population; in some provinces they represent 10% of the population. The number of Amerindians and Inuit is rising due to a high fertility rate and to the increasing number of people claiming to be descendants of aboriginals because, today, being a member of one of the First Nations is seen as something positive. There are approximately 10 Amerindian nations in Quebec with Mohawks (20%), Montagnais (19%), and Crees (17%) being the larger tribes. There are a total of 620 different aboriginal groups in Canada.

The Amerindian figure today haunts the Quebec and Canadian identities, in the same way as a repressed past surfaces. Rémi Savard has probably best defined the aboriginal identity by qualifying them as "strangers in their own country," even if they are the first inhabitants of

Canada. The expression refers to two components of the process of nation building: filiation and the reference to a Significant Other. Having been cut off from the Canadian and Quebec society until recently and without real political power, the aboriginals are still under Canadian tutelage. They have recently acquired the necessary resources to negotiate both at the federal and provincial levels. These new possibilities have radically changed how they collectively see themselves.

Nowadays, aboriginals have more self-esteem and are proud of their identity. However, non-aboriginals still see in them the stereotyped Amerindian figure. The relation between so-called Whites and Amerindians probably constitutes a typical example of an opposed social representation of one's identity. According to the historian-sociologist Denys Delâge,

Whites and Indians agree that they are reversed images of each other. Yesterday, to the faithless barbarian with neither hearth nor home nor King was opposed the sedentary, civilized Christian, subject of a King. Today one can oppose a decadent, go-getter, selfish, materialistic, with no respect for nature White man to a generous, authentic, religious Indian environmentalist. (165)

Aboriginal communities are facing two major related problems. Firstly, their standard of living is much lower than that of the general population, especially on distant reservations where the communities still live in a traditional manner. According to certain indicators, the situation is better in Quebec than in the rest of Canada probably because most communities live near urban areas. Half of the aboriginal population is under 25 years of age which is a major concern for nations that are scattered over a large territory. Young adults will not be able to find work on the reservations and, if they migrate to the city, like many Quebeckers who live in rural areas have done, they either risk losing their culture and their identity or have difficulty adapting to their new urban life. Secondly, there is the problem of their political status. In addition to the present three levels of government—federal, provincial, and municipal—aboriginal leaders are calling for a new level of government and more political autonomy. How can one settle the territorial demands? How can one be sure that the economy will allow for the further development of their communities? What will be the judicial status of the territories under aboriginal control? Will non-

aboriginal residents have the right to vote? If not, how can one justify ethnic voting?

Quebec Inc.: a Changing Model

Quebec has become a highly urbanized society—rural population has decreased while cities have become much larger—with an economy that has been deeply transformed. Raw materials are still an important part of the economy, but today's industries use the most advanced technologies to exploit these traditional resources. Many leading companies—such as Alcan or Bombardier, two multinationals that are each leaders in their own field—are well established and many other examples of technological success could be given: the most popular antiretroviral (anti-HIV) agent in the world, 3TC, was developed in Montréal by Biochem, Bell Canada was the first to set up an avant-garde electronic device which recognizes the human voice, and the multimedia industry is in full expansion with companies such as Softimage who created the first computer generated dinosaurs for Steven Spielberg.

The expression Québec Inc. is related to the French-speaking business world that emerged, with the help of the provincial government, in the wake of the Quiet Revolution. The number of businessmen and women grew extremely rapidly in the 70s and 80s. The setting-up of Hydro Québec, which produces and distributes electricity, was the turning point for French-speaking citizens as they began to take control of their economy. Many others followed: the *Caisse de dépôts et de placements* which manages the public pension plan of all salaried workers in Québec and has become, over the past 30 years, the most important institution of its kind in Canada, and the *Société générale de financement* whose goal is to set up various business partnerships. Besides these two major state-run institutions, many other French-Canadian or Québec companies have become very important: Bombardier (trains, planes, vehicles), CGI (managing and computing), Domtar and Cascades (pulp and paper), Vidéotron (cable), Québecor (newspapers and printer), Power Corporation (finance and insurance), SNC (engineering), Alcan (aluminum), etc. However, firms which occupy the middle ground still continue to dominate Québec's economy.

This preoccupation with business is certainly at the origin of the full support that Quebeckers gave to the free trade agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico in 1989. Without their support, NAFTA would not exist. Quebeckers gave the Mulroney Government 40% of their members of parliament in the 1988 election even if they are only 24% of the population. Ever since there has been a certain rift between Quebec and the rest of Canada, especially between the liberals and the left wing which is traditionally opposed to free trade because it perceives it as threatening Canadian identity and culture. According to John Saul, who strongly opposed free trade with the United States, Quebeckers delude themselves about the advantages of a greater integration of the North American economy because, in the long run, it will menace their very existence just as it will menace Canada's.

In certain cases it seems they have been right. The 90s saw a great many takeovers of businesses owned by French-speaking Quebeckers by companies whose main offices are elsewhere in Canada or sometimes in the United States. As they become larger, many companies are merged with larger entities, which allows them to grow, but in a merger, the smaller partner generally loses control, and that can have negative consequences.

Presently, free trade has had negative and positive aspects to it. The negative aspect is that Quebec trades more and more with the United States becoming, therefore, more dependant with all the risks that such a situation creates. The positive aspect is that it allows access to the world's most important market. The furniture industry is a typical example. This industry had been declining for several years, but today it thrives, exporting goods to all parts of North America.

Labour unions are not what they used to be in the 70s when they did not hesitate to take on major labour conflicts. Today, the larger unions even risk their own capital and invest large sums in various industries. These funds come from the citizens themselves and part of their investment is tax deductible. The *Fonds de solidarité* of the *Fédération des travailleurs du Québec*, created in 1983, is the largest fund and has assets worth close to 3 billion (Canadian) dollars. The very existence of this type of fund has greatly changed the ideological orientation of labour unions. They defend the interests of the workers—and some leaders still

favour a conflictual approach—but today they recognize that a strong financial situation is essential to negotiate good working conditions.

Is Quebec Inc., a one of a kind model for economic growth and corporate management of wealth, difficult to maintain in a pluralistic society of today's North American context? For the moment, this question remains problematic and is more and more often discussed openly.

Questioning Social Democracy

Towards the end of the 90s the federal and provincial governments' main objective became the elimination of deficits. A special law was even voted by the Quebec government making all deficits, due to recurrent expenses, illegal. In this context, must one now speak of the end of the welfare state, an expression dear to all left wingers? Not quite, because the Quebec government is still very much present in the economy and everyday life. Income tax rates are higher in Quebec than anywhere else in Canada—whose own taxes are higher than those of the United States where each citizen must see to their own medical expenses—and its generous social programmes redistribute revenue so as to favour low income families.

A look at an example that illustrates well the continuing presence of the welfare state appears to be quite valid in the current context. The Gini coefficient—a classic way to measure inequality in the distribution of revenues among families—drops markedly when one compares market income to income after public transfers and to net disposable income, which is not the case in the United States, for example. The State's intervention is quite effective and, according to public opinion, it is widely accepted. There exists however a major difference today, the State now only manages to neutralize the growing inequalities in the work place or those resulting from a changing life style. The tendency toward eliminating inequalities that prevailed in the 60s and 70s is now at a standstill. Some of the most destitute fall through the cracks which explains today's greater visibility of poverty.

One of the main disagreements in the Canadian Federation is about the sharing of responsibilities in matters concerning education, health, and the general well-being of citizens. According to the Constitution; these matters are under provincial jurisdiction and the Federal Government is expected to transfer funds—the amounts of which have

been reduced over the past few years so as to eliminate the federal deficit as quickly as possible—to each province which defines and manages its own programme. The fiscal imbalance between the federal and provincial governments is at the heart of the present discussions on the sharing of responsibilities. The central government wants to harmonize and make available the same programmes throughout the country so that each citizen, no matter where he lives, will have equal access to services. Because the welfare state is at the centre of the shaping of identities in contemporary societies, it is therefore not surprising, considering its present nation-building process that the central government wants to intervene in these fields. This situation makes the constitutional debate even more complex.

A North American Consumer Society...

Quebec became a consumer society during the Second World War, 20 years sooner than France, but 30 years after the United States. According to international indicators, Quebec society is wealthy, but it is worried about the future. This anxiety is now shared by the middle class and more precisely by young couples who have trouble maintaining a level of consumption comparable with that of the preceding generations at the same point in life.

Basic equipment for daily living is seen in most homes: clothes washer and dryer, telephone, radio, and colour television are found in every household, including low income ones. Today this seems natural, but things were not so 20 years ago. New equipment and durable goods continue to enter homes. Microwave ovens are now essential as are various kinds of telephones with multiple services. Families acquired many household necessities in the 60s and 70s, but during the 80s they acquired more and more equipment related to leisure. Half of the homes have two colour television sets, VCRs are present in 80% of them, half have a compact disk (CD) player and the cable is found in 65% of all homes and in nearly all urban homes. Finally, personal computers are found in one household out of every three and the proportion is rising rapidly as communication technology expands and the monthly cost for a server remains minimal.

...and a Postmodern Culture

In the past, Quebec was perceived as a traditional society, catholic, rural, under-schooled, small-town, and looking to the past. For English Canada, the Quebec of the 50s was a "priest-ridden province" and undemocratic. For some Canadian historians, the battle of the Plains of Abraham liberated a backward society living under French rule and gave them the British liberties, such as a parliamentary system in 1791—making Quebec one of the oldest parliamentary democracies in the world—and printing houses, forbidden under French rule. Abroad, Quebec was often seen through the eyes of Louis Hémon who wrote *Maria Chapdelaine*, one of the most translated novels of French literature in the world.

Quebec became a secular society in less than thirty years. A new judicial culture, based on the respect of human rights, is now the norm and, inevitably, moral standards have changed drastically. Four main features can best describe the emerging norms and values in Quebec: family and marriage, homosexuality, women's issues, and human rights.

The vanishing institution of marriage

Fewer and fewer couples are officially getting married today. In absolute numbers, there are 50% less marriages than in 1970 even if the population has risen. One in four Quebec couples is in common-law relationships and this proportion is over one in two for young couples. This situation is more common in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada. The proportion of births out of wedlock has continued to rise, it is now over one out of every two births and the proportion is around two out of every three for first-borns.

From Corpus Christi to gay pride

Every year, in August, gays and lesbians take to the streets of Montréal. Their parade, with floats, bands and colourful costumes, is a popular event. Like in other large cities the world over, they very openly exhibit their sexual orientation. Gay pride festivities attract not only homosexuals but also heterosexuals of all ages as well as the city's mayor and even his political opponents. The popularity of this event is probably the best indication of a change of outlooks and the coming of a greater pluralism in values.

It also reveals another major change which is the secularization of the society. In the 50s, the main summer event was the Corpus Christi procession, a public manifestation of Catholic religious belief. Nowadays, many urban parishes in Montréal or Québec City have no pastor and a dwindling congregation. Authorities are wondering what to do with so many empty churches. Montréal was once known as the city of a hundred steeples, today, many have been demolished and others will certainly follow in the years to come.

The power of women

One of the most significant social changes in the past decades is undoubtedly the radical change in the status of women. Feminism has influenced Quebec society in all areas. The gap between the salaries of men and women working full-time has narrowed significantly over the years and a new law now makes it compulsory to evaluate wage scales so as to achieve pay equity. Women have slowly progressed in the political field, and only recently have they made real gains. There are more women than men attending university, but few choose to study science or engineering.

In Quebec, women are also pressuring the Catholic Church. During the last synod, the proposal recommending ordination of women was almost carried. This issue is gaining more and more support and it is one that is publicly debated by feminist nuns. One can plainly feel the discomfort of bishops as they speak of equality of men and women and the importance of women in the Church whilst adhering to the official position of the Vatican.

On Human Rights

A new judicial culture grew out the adoption of the Charter of Human Rights. There are in fact two charters of rights, the one adopted by Quebec's National Assembly in 1976, the *Chartre des droits et libertés de la personne du Québec*, and the other, *The Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*, inserted in the Canadian Constitution in 1982. Citizens can now oppose the laws of the country in court instead of lobbying or voting down a government. Courts of law are being more and more frequently called upon to settle conflicts between citizens and the state;

conflicts that otherwise would have eventually have found a solution through—a sometimes bitter—negotiation. There are several cases to illustrate the fact that judicial venues are now a way of managing public affairs in the same way that parliaments do. Courts have decriminalized abortion, forcing Parliament to repeal the law. By bringing her case to the Supreme Court and because of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, a divorcee from Trois-Rivières nullified Revenue Canada's taxation of alimony paid to her for the care of her ex-husband's children. Aborigines have often turned to the Courts to validate their demands when negotiations with federal and provincial governments did not give any results.

One level of government can also use the Courts to contest a law voted by another level of government. As Quebec is part of a Federal regime, there are many conflicts of jurisdiction. A Supreme Court decision forced the Quebec's National Assembly to modify its *Charter of the French Language* because it violated certain clauses of the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*. The Supreme Court has also recently defined certain restrictions that will frame an eventual—and still hypothetical—referendum on Quebec's sovereignty as well as the eventual negotiations between the Federal Government and the Government of Quebec if ever there was a positive vote for sovereignty.

According to Justice Dickson of the Supreme Court, using the judges to validate one's opinion has become an important characteristic of what he called constitutional democracy. Many observers claim that one of the main consequences of the adoption of the Charters is that an individualistic culture has replaced common civic culture.

Conclusion

Quebec is a pluralist society with, as we have seen, its strengths and weaknesses, its own certainties and uncertainties. It resembles any other society of equal size. Demography, economy, culture, beliefs, gender or generational issues, and life styles have the same challenges as elsewhere in developed countries. The one original feature of the Quebec society is its civil and democratic character of public debate in the search for solutions to run-of-the-mill problems. The two referendums on sovereignty prove this fact which surprises most observers.

Quebec is a divided society. Part of the population favours an independent nation-state status for Quebec. Another part of the population prefers a Quebec as an imagined society (in the sense used by Arnold Anderson) inside Canada, a situation that is in line with the bi-national country such as dreamt by the French-Canadian elite at the turn of the last century. Several national references co-exist in Quebec and feelings are different in Quebec and Canada. How will they live together in the future? Only time will tell.

Quebec Statistics (2002)¹

Population

Quebec: 7 450 000 h. (23.8% of Canada)
Montréal area: 3 415 000 h.
Québec City area: 800 200 h.
Immigration: 30 000 annually
Aboriginals: 72 000 h. (1% of the total population)
Aboriginals living on reservations: 51 120 (71%)
Population over 65 years of age: 13%
Population under 24 years of age: 33.3%

Languages (1996 Census)

Mother tongue

French: 82.2%
English: 8.5%
Other: 9.3%

Languages spoken

French: 94%
English and French: 38%
French only: 56%
English only: 5%

Couples and Families

Common law relationships: 25% of couples
Children born out of wedlock: 65%
Fertility rate: 1.51
Birth per year: 73 500

Voluntary abortions per year: 27 200

Life expectancy

Men: 75.3 years

Women: 81.5 years

Economic indicators

Percentage of male working: 70%

Percentage of female working: 54%

Unemployment rate (November 1998): 9.8%

Employee's income ratio F/W (full-time workers): 76%

GINI coefficient (net family income): 0.290

Percentage of people receiving welfare (in proportion to the 0-64 years old): 10.8%

Consumer goods

Households owning their own home: 56%

Households receiving cable services: 66%

Percentage of households with the following equipment:

Personal computer: 38%

Micro-wave oven: 85%

VCR: 81%

Dish washer: 52%

Prepared by Simon Langlois, September 2002

Statistics of French Canada

Total population of Canada: 30 000 000 h. (2002)

Mother tongue

	Total Canada	Canada without Quebec	New Brunswick
French	23.7%	4.5%	33.1%
English	60.2%	77.2%	65.5%
Other	16.1%	18.3%	1.4%

Language spoken

	Total Canada	Canada without Quebec
English only	67.1%	87.4%
French only	14.3%	0.6%
French and English	17%	10.1%
Other only	1.6%	1.9%

Location of French speakers (Mother tongue)

Quebec 85.2%

Ontario 7.7%

New Brunswick 3.6%

Other provinces 3.5%

Source: Simon Langlois, "Aspects démolinguistiques: les grandes tendances," in Roch Côté (ed.), *Québec 2002*, Montréal, Fides, 2001, 147-153.

Notes

¹For more information see: Roch Côté (ed.), *Québec 2003*; Montréal, Fides, 2002 (published annually) and <www.tendances.ulaval.ca>

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