LIBERALISM, NATIONALISM, PLURALISM: POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND NATION-BUILDING IN CANADA BEFORE AND AFTER THE QUÉBEC REFERENDUM

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INTRODUCTION

For thirty years Canadian politics were heavily influenced by the dynamics of national and social movements, thus forcing a greater recognition of Canada's diversity (understood in the sense of a social and cultural pluralism). It is disturbing to witness the rise of groups whose ultimate objective is to give the country a "unity" that they feel has been lost. Some examples are the Reform Party on the federal scene, the Association for the Preservation of English in Canada in Ontario, the Confederation of Regions Party in New Brunswick (although the latter's popularity seems to be waning), and, more recently, the Canada First group. Examples of this neo-conservative/neo-liberal trend also can be found in traditional political groups at both the federal and provincial levels of government, and even include some New Democrat provincial governments, notably in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Far from weakening this trend, the results of the October 1995 referendum in Québec may in fact reinforce it.

One theme of this movement is the ostensible need to homogenize and to belong to a practically unidimensional Canadian nation that is often defined in terms of an abstract conception of the individual without any reference to society as a whole. This leads to the following paradox: insofar as abstract, egalitarian and individualistic discourse conceals a conservative Anglo-Canadian nationalism, it reinforces not the homogenization of society, but rather the trend toward fragmentation. In other words, Canadian liberal discourse based on a simplistic and reductionist conception of the individual creates, *de facto*, a great deal of tension between groups, and even between different nationalisms. This type of liberalism actually serves to engender, through a negative process, a whole string of nationalisms of all kinds and dimensions, be they regional separatist tendencies like those in western Canada or the Maritimes, major national issues like those of Québec or the First Nations, or the greater tensions present within social movements, the women's movement in particular. A simplistic liberalism is therefore perfectly compatible with collectivism and nationalism, insofar as the first sustains the other two *a contrario*. That is what we will endeavour to show in this paper.

Our approach is based on the essential notion that reductionist liberalism is a key component of Anglo-American nationalism. We define Anglo-American nationalism as the deep-seated conviction that Anglo-American culture was the first, if not the only one, to reach the higher plane of a civilization based on individual rights, other cultures being defined as backwards because of their "feudal" or "communitarian" nature. If individual freedom (in the sense of an ability to make choices in a given social context) is viewed as a universal reality, then this statement of Anglo-American liberalism is eminently nationalistic, in the negative sense that it diminishes the universal scope of the principle of freedom. This is the fundamental ambiguity of Anglo-American nationalistic liberalism that some authors and politicians, including Pierre Elliott Trudeau, have reproduced without question. More recent reductionist liberalism also emphatically denies that a truly universal application of the principles of freedom involves the recognition of differences in social contexts.

We will first attempt to illustrate the many dimensions of this context of reaction to diversity, particularly the fundamental ambiguity of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which contains this conflicting yet complementary relationship between an abstract conception of individualism and the concrete demands of groups. In the second part of this paper, we examine in more detail the mechan-

isms of the relationship between reductionist liberalism and narrow nationalism. In the third part, we examine the possibility of a broader conception of liberalism, one that would allow a harmonious integration of the demands of groups of individuals, from both a community and a national perspective, without sacrificing the principle of the universality of rights.

CONTEXT

The context that gave rise to this reactionary movement in Canada against pluralism had a number of different origins: economic, political and sociological. Of special interest are its ideological roots, in particular the way in which nationalistic individualism has opposed any attempt to recognize diversity (i.e., the rights of minorities, women and aboriginal peoples), especially since the adoption of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982. The ambiguity of the *Charter*, which stems from the fact that it not only reaffirms fundamental individual rights but also recognizes the rights of various groups in one and the same document, gave rise to a debate on Canadian identity that led to a major polarization of these two dimensions, as though they were irreconcilable. The legitimacy granted to various groups by the *Charter* was denounced by both the left and the right.

For example, the thrust of one of the best-known criticisms of the *Charter* was that the demands groups would make in the wake of their new legitimacy would lead to an increasing fragmentation of Canadian society (Cairns, 1993; Taylor, 1992, 1994). Social movements could use the state and the law in a way that would lead to government by the judiciary and, consequently, to the judicialization of politics, as well as the Americanization of Canadian society. Thus, social movements were perceived as precluding the possibility of national development of a national consciousness, preventing any social cohesion in the country.

As a further example, consider the criticism levied by Québec neo-nationalists who stressed the individualistic basis of the *Charter* in an attempt to show how it constituted a tool that would create a homogeneous Canadian identity and, consequently, make it impossible to recognize Québec as a distinct society (Laforest, 1993). Thus, according to the Québec neo-nationalists, the essentially individualistic basis of the *Charter* is incompatible with the idea that society is made up of various groups. English Canada

takes this criticism for granted, to the detriment of its collective dimensions. Even though Québec neo-nationalist criticism acknowledges such a collective reality, albeit timidly (Laforest, 1993; Bourque, 1990), it continues to foster an ideological discourse that favours eliminating differences, with a view to justifying its own nationalism. From English Canada's standpoint, any affirmation of collective rights on Québec's part leads to the suspicion of a return to archaic forms of communitarianism that would oppose individual rights. There appears to us to be a fundamental link between the failure of the Meech and Charlottetown agreements and this paradox: in the name of collective rights, nationalist Québec is bolstering simplistic individualism. In addition, the absence of any dialogue between nationalist Quebecers and social movements to limit the impact of reductionist individualistic ideology will reinforce this paradox.

The debate concerning the effect of the *Charter* on Canadian society cannot be reduced solely to the Reform Party proposal to abolish the *Constitution Act, 1982* in the name of individual equality. This principle in fact conceals a conception of Canada that is at once nationalistic and conservative. By polarizing the debate between individual rights and collective rights, as was done in both anglophone and francophone *milieux*, the entire intellectual and political class of Canada and Québec failed to grasp the potential for growth and development of the groups covered by the *Charter*. The possibility of an extension of this potential to other groups or other issues, such as the relationship between Québec and English Canada, went unrecognized. Instead the intelligentsia chose to fall back on a reductionist liberal view of the relationships between individuals and groups, or on a communitarian view based on a notion of the public good that is paradoxically incapable of comprehending plurality in anything but a negative sense, as an absence of unity or cohesion. Thus the intellectual and political classes of Canada and Québec helped to create the conditions for a significant drive by groups seeking to use the *Charter* to promote their development. The inability of either to conceive of the individual or the group by means of any model other than the nationalistic liberal model already present, albeit less obviously within Canadian political culture, set the stage for the emergence of this new neo-liberal/neo-conservative trend and the present political impasse in Canada.

Moreover, it is important to point out that studies dealing with the effect of the *Charter* on Canadian

society reveal the existence of a more complex reality than that implied by the adherents of either individualistic or collectivistic monolithism. It has not yet been satisfactorily demonstrated that the *Charter* has in fact contributed to a fragmentation of Canadian society, or to its judicialization or depoliticization. Recent works show that groups have always had recourse to the law and that there is no qualitative difference between the pre-*Charter* and the post-*Charter* situations (Seidle, 1993). Neither has it yet been demonstrated that the *Charter* has led to a depoliticization of conflicts in Canada (Russell, 1994). Judgments in the *Morgentaler* and *Ford* cases or in regard to the constitutionality of legislation affecting tobacco advertising have in no way hampered the debate. On the contrary, they probably contribute more to its politicization than to the judicialization of politics. These few examples of the *Charter*'s real impact on Canadian society serve to highlight the ideological boundaries created by the current debates concerning the fragmentation of society on the one hand, and its homogenization on the other.

LIBERALISM AND NATIONALISM

We believe that a significant relationship exists between homogenizing liberalism and narrow nationalism in Canada. Because of this strange phenomenon, those who have most passionately opposed French-Canadian/Québec nationalism since Confederation have very often contributed to its advancement. There is no reason to believe that this situation will have changed by the end of the century. On the contrary, the results of the Québec referendum and, in particular, the numerous hesitations and contradictions within the federal Liberal Party, not to mention the emergence of an increasingly intransigent English-Canadian nationalism, will probably generate greater support for the sovereignty movement. Underlying the federal Liberals' contradictions and their inability to conceive of the Canadian nation in the plural is this simplistic reduction of the relationship between the individual and the group, between individual rights and collective rights. We believe it is important to take an analysis of the relationship between reductionist liberalism and narrow nationalism a step further, by focusing on its operative principle, that important tenet of Anglo-American culture: only the Anglo-American political tradition can guarantee that individual rights will be protected and the principle of freedom respected. If Canada is uncomfortable with pluralism, the reason may be that it is unable to find a way to reconcile the individual and the group within

a vision that balances individual rights and collective rights. The Anglo-American tradition indeed implies a definition of individual rights and collective rights that does not always take differences in social and cultural contexts into account.

It is perhaps within the realm of political science over the past thirty years that we find one of the most eloquent expressions of what we describe as nationalistic liberalism in the Anglo-American tradition. Greatly inspired by Louis Hartz's work (1955), which analyzes the development of North-American societies in terms of the postulate of the superiority of the Anglo-American model, Canadian political scientists have adopted this premise and immediately presume that English Canada constitutes a modern liberal fragment in comparison with Québec, which is seen as a feudal, communitarian fragment. Expanding on Hartz's ideas, Gad Horowitz (1978) has, however, attempted to show the importance of a link between conservatism and socialism in Canada that he claims distinguishes Canada from the United States. But according to H.D. Forbes (1987), Horowitz did not succeed in breaking away completely from the Anglo-American individualistic postulate (Forbes, 1987). In fact, Forbes shows that Canadian socialism/Toryism has been unable to form a conception of the relationship between individual rights and collective rights in the case of French Canada. Forbes has also shown that Québec is not a feudal society, but rather Catholic and democratic at the same time (Couture, 1991; Paquet & Wallot, 1982).

In Québec, however, the uncritical recognition of Anglo-American superiority leads the majority of Québec's political scientists to adhere to the notion that Québec was a feudal, traditional and monolithic society closed to the democratic spirit (Trudeau, 1965). Convinced Québec is lagging behind English Canada, Québec political scientists have applied themselves to imagining a situation where the former is catching up to the latter, an event they place at the time of the Quiet Revolution. Others have endeavoured to show the fundamentally reductionist nature of the "catching-up" discourse, and that the reality of Québec since the British victory on the Plains of Abraham is much more complex. Paradoxically, it is this same Anglo-American nationalistic liberalism that Québec neo-nationalists attempt to reconcile with the sovereignty project when they explicitly recognize the backwardness of Québec society, and the need to break with that past. Thus the intellectual and political class in Québec

prefers to bury itself still deeper in colonialism, although it attempts to do so in the name of an indispensable sovereignty.

The study of social movements, particularly the women's movement, and of multiculturalism discourse also reveals the difficulty of breaking free of the Anglo-American prejudice. Acting in the name of freedom and the fight against oppression, the women's movement is paradoxically unable to conceive of political representation for women in any way other than by assuming the superiority of individual rights in the Anglo-American tradition, thus giving rise to significant tensions between groups. The tensions between women's groups, between black women and white women, Québec women and women from English Canada, with some stressing context and plurality, and the others unity, inclusion and sisterhood in spite of diversity, illustrate the significance of this same basic movement that seeks to affirm the superiority of Anglo-American nationalistic liberalism. Consider the conflict between feminists from English Canada and Québec women in 1989, during discussions on recognizing Québec as a distinct society in the Meech Lake Accord. The former believed that the idea of granting Québec "distinct society" status posed a threat to women's rights, by subordinating them to the collective rights of Quebecers. They could not accept the possibility that Québec women could adhere to the principle of recognition of the distinct nature of Québec without betraying the women's cause (Roberts, 1989; Dumont, 1993).

Multiculturalism policy, the folkloric nature of which is the target of regular criticism, serves as another example. Indeed, instead of pursuing a true convergence of the groups contributing to Canada's plurality, this policy constitutes a veritable breeding ground for petty nationalisms based on ethnicity and race. Furthermore, the repeated denunciations of multiculturalism in Canada also prompted the Reform Party to respond by adding to its platform a promise that, if elected, it would abolish Canada's multiculturalism policy.

While the multicultural reality of Canadian society cannot be denied, social movements are having no success transforming the fundamentally folkloric nature of such a policy into a true lever for dialogue between groups, openness to the Other, and cross-cultural exchange. Québec nationalist criticism of multiculturalism also reaches an impasse in this regard, because of its inability to see beyond the Anglo-American model.

In short, despite efforts by conservatism, nationalism, socialism, feminism or multiculturalism to transcend simplistic individualistic liberalism, the political and intellectual culture of English Canada and Québec has fully incorporated the Anglo-American prejudice into its self-image. This prejudice constitutes the operative principle of the relationship between reductionist liberalism and narrow nationalism. It structures political representation in Canada and in Québec, while intruding on social movements and preventing the achievement of pluralism. Granted, over the past thirty years this Anglo-American nationalistic liberalism had adapted to a conflictual, yet complementary and relatively harmonious relationship with the voices of plurality. In the present situation, however, where neo-liberal/conservative currents are increasingly predominant, it appears that the pluralism of recent decades was based on the fundamental ambiguity evident in the principle of "individual rights" when such rights were defined without reference to context. Consequently, it is not surprising that the "progressive" *milieux* now seem incapable of resisting neo-conservative pressure.

LIBERALISM, NATIONALISM AND PLURALISM: REINVENTING THE NATION

Following this analysis of the relationship between liberalism and nationalism, it is important to take a serious look at the alternative interpretations and forms of political compromise that will free pluralism from the spurious debate in which it has been mired. For not only does the antagonism between liberalism and nationalism limit the possibility of pluralism, it also threatens its very existence, while at the same time casting doubt on democratic debate and diminishing even the possibility of such debate.

One of the alternative interpretations is that proposed by Charles Taylor (Taylor, 1992 & 1994), who attempted to pave the way for an analysis of diversity that would be compatible with individual rights. In our view, however, it is possible that Taylor reproduces the fundamental ambiguity of the relationship between individualism and nationalism that we detected as a major characteristic of the Anglo-American political culture. It is true that

Taylor recognizes the possibility of a communitarian liberalism in Québec, compared with an individualistic liberalism in English Canada. He is even prepared to recognize the existence of the Québec nation within Canada because of a deep-seated diversity that he believes characterizes the country. However, despite the generosity of his communitarian liberalism where Québec is concerned, he finds it difficult to reconcile his appeal for recognition with his criticism of the tendency of social movements to cause fragmentation in society (Taylor, 1992). He also seems to have little enthusiasm for the fact that groups use the law as a tool to achieve social change and thus oppose the will of the majority, insofar as such a practice runs counter to Canadian traditions of democratic participation (Taylor, 1994). Consequently, Taylor stresses the need for groups to come together on the basis of shared values in response to the fragmentation of society. He seems to suggest an overly abstract analysis of pluralism, one detached from the concrete struggles of social movements and devoid of any reference to their context. Despite the generosity of his vision, Taylor is perhaps too ready to subordinate the question of diversity to the nationalistic liberal/communitarian paradigm. In particular, he subscribes to a very conventional view of history, especially in the case of French-Canada/Québec, which he continues to describe from the *survivance* perspective.

If we accept the notion that pluralism also constitutes the ethos of democracy, as Chantal Mouffe assumes (Mouffe, 1993), why could not social movements contribute to social cohesion at the same time as they provide debate and conflict? According to Albert O. Hirschman (Hirschman, 1995), this is precisely the way to ensure social cohesion within the democratic order: "the miracle happens in the course of the democratic process, as individuals and social groups go through the motions of out-and-out confrontation and end up building in this odd manner a cohesive democratic order." Thus, according to Hirschman, to invoke shared values is "essentially an admission that concrete ways of dealing with the respective problems have not yet been discovered — community spirit is called upon as some *deus ex machina*." In invoking shared values, moreover, Taylor may be quite content to regard fundamental rights as values without taking into account the demands of social movements. He also disregards the importance of political initiative in relation to the question of pluralism.

Some alternative interpretations of pluralism seem inadequate because of a narrow conception of liberalism or a metaphysical conception of diversity. It would therefore be advisable to redefine liberalism in such a way that it could integrate groups without sacrificing the principle of the universality of rights. First, there is a need to break away from the idea that the universal is spontaneously embodied by a particular group, specifically white, Protestant, Anglo-American males. The universal should, instead, be derived from the ability of the individual to distance him/herself from the group and at the same time, to think the application of the principle of freedom to his/her group. Second, there is also a need to recognize that the application of freedom in terms of a particular context is conditioned by the law. The law structures society, and even the State. It is in and through the law that the conditions affecting choice and action can be introduced; moreover, the law is always formulated on the basis of a community, the democratic community.

At present in Canada, for a number of reasons, including the many historical compromises in fields such as education, only legal tradition seems to serve as an antidote to the erosion of a social and political diversity. This was obvious in the *Morgentaler* case, where the judgment rendered by Justice Wilson revealed a considerable effort to reconcile the individual rights of women with the social context. While that which is regularly condemned as the judicialization of politics does in fact compel us to note that there has been a significant failure of politics to manage diversity in recent years, this is insufficient justification to consider the law an end in itself or a means leading to the Americanization of society. The law is a lever for more democratic action. However, as long as each advance in the area of minority rights, women's rights, and so on angers those who hold an abstract view of individual rights, any possibility of conceiving of citizenship in terms other than the individual will, bring the discourse of lost unity back with a vengeance in Canada, the effect of which would be to jeopardize opportunities for democratic action.

CONCLUSION

The critical distance we have tried to maintain in this paper with respect to liberalism forces us to note that liberalism still appears today as an inevitable ideological current, the full scope of which must be grasped before any suggestion can be made to transcend it. Within liberalism there exists a progressive

moment, C.B. Macpherson would say, that we believe is evident in the principle of universalism (Macpherson, 1985). The latter constitutes a form of sociological apperception, insofar as one accepts that freedom is achieved only on the basis of particular contexts structured by the law. Thus, liberalism would not be incompatible with a certain social questioning. Is this not, moreover, what the author of both *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* believed?

In other words, the questions that derive from our paper are the following: can one conceive of the subject without reductionist liberalism and narrow nationalism? Can one transcend Anglo-American liberalism while still recognizing its potential universalism? Following the Québec referendum, we believe that the Canadian political class should try to answer these questions before finding superficial solutions to the problem of Québec nationalism and demands made by social movements since 1982. Liberalism can adapt to pluralism and can be multidimensional, insofar as one accepts that it cannot be reduced to the application of a principle of freedom based on the concept of an abstract individual considered apart from any context. The law contributes to this possibility of a non-reductionist liberalism that is conducive to a freedom defined according to a contextualist approach. It should be possible to be liberal in a different way in North America, or in other words, to be able to conceive of the group, or even the nation, outside of the narrow nationalist discourse or an individualistic vision completely removed from any concrete social context; to imagine the existence of different forms of modernity and of relationships peculiar to that modernity.

It seems to us that a less metaphysical approach to the unity question and the need for social cohesion would make it possible to conceive of the development of Canadian society and political representation in a different way, before we end up at the turn of the century with a confrontation between two intransigent forms of nationalism, English-Canadian nationalism and Québec nationalism, both paradoxically sustained by the fundamental ambiguity of institutions from the Trudeau era.☐

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