WHENCE AND WHITHER?
SHARED PUBLIC CULTURE IN
QUEBEC

Gary Caldwell

When he first floated the idea of “shared public culture” in the mid-1980s, Gary Caldwell met with little enthusiasm: “The response in the public arena, which is normally quite responsive to this type of Quebec-centred introspection, was quite deafening,” he says. He was thus intrigued by the recent re-emergence of the concept in the Bouchard-Taylor report and in the new course of “ethics and religious culture,” which will be taught in all Quebec elementary and secondary schools starting in September 2008. But he finds it unfortunate that the proposed definition of public culture is based on the charters, and proposes instead that it be based on three cultural traits reflecting Quebec’s particular history and the wider civilization of which it is the inheritor. Here, he reviews the origins, the fate and the challenges raised by this concept.

Gary Caldwell a soulevé peu d’enthousiasme quand il a lancé au milieu des années 1980 l’idée de « culture publique commune ». « Généralement réceptive à cette forme d’introspection nationale, l’opinion québécoise a réagi à ma proposition par un silence assourdissant », se rappelle-t-il. D’où sa réaction intriguée devant la résurgence de cette notion dans le rapport Bouchard-Taylor et le nouveau cours culture Éthique et religieuse qui figurera dès l’automne 2008 au programme des écoles primaires et secondaires du Québec. Il n’en déplore pas moins que la définition donnée à « culture publique » repose sur les chartes et suggère plutôt de la définir en fonction de trois traits culturels issus de l’histoire du Québec et de la civilisation dont il est l’héritier.

Recently the notion of “culture publique commune” (shared public culture) in Quebec has re-emerged in two very distinct and public contexts: the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (BTC) and in the “Ethique et culture religieuse” (ethics and religious culture) course (ECR) that the Quebec Department of Education intends to make obligatory in all Quebec elementary and secondary schools in September 2008. Here we intend to explore the significance of the re-emergence of the notion of shared public culture, which was first floated by myself in 1986, relaunched in 1993 and 1994 and finally presented in book form in 2001, only to subsequently be largely neglected. To see the notion rather abruptly invoked by two state bodies is, to say the least, intriguing; indeed the BTC in its “Document de consultation” speaks of it as an “expression courante” [current expression].

Why should it suddenly be re-invoked, and why by the state as opposed to an individual? Having been the one who both argued for the pertinence of the notion in 1986 and proposed provisional content for it in La culture publique commune: les règles du jeu de la vie publique au Québec et les fondements de ces règles, published in 2001, I feel justified to raise the question and to speculate on the reason for the sudden renewed interest in it.

To establish the context, I should say a few words about where and why I introduced the notion of the existence of a shared public culture in Quebec. At the time, in the late eighties, the language of multiculturalism and interculturalism and the integration of immigrants was being institutionalized in the public sphere: a new wave of academics and public servants were flooding public discourse with it and, in a symbiotic relationship, building their careers on it.

This discourse asserted that the existing narrative — Canadian or Québécois — had to be re-invented. I argued that Quebeckers already had a shared public culture into which — even if it was constantly being renewed — immigrants and young Quebeckers needed to be integrated by a better explanation and transmission of this shared public culture. A few years later, Julien Harvey — a Jesuit priest, now deceased — and I decided to advance what the content might be in various Quebec journals such as l’Action nationale and L’Agora.

This effort solicited a surprisingly widespread reaction, which was essentially that a shared public culture was indeed necessary. For instance, the Centrale des enseignants du Québec, the Assemblée des évêques du Québec, and the Conseil des relations interculturelles (CRIQ) affirmed the
need. However, no one was prepared to go out on a limb as to what the content might be.

CRIQ even argued that it should not be inspired by “le patrimoine culturel ou les références culturelles véhiculées par les individus composant la société québécoise” [the cultural heritage conveyed by individual members of Quebec society], which would presumably not be inclusive enough. I had argued precisely the opposite: the inspiration should be found in the existing cultural heritage. Hence, they chose to speak of a “cadre civique commun” [shared civic background] without, however, giving it a content except in terms of abstract universalistic values (respect, tolerance and equality). Two years later, Jean-Pierre Proulx, in his state-mandated report on the place of religious teaching in Quebec schools, spoke of the need for an “espace civique commun” [shared civic space], again without providing anything specific as to content.

Thus there was a recognition of the need for a more explicit shared public culture, but indifference toward the content Harvey and I had tentatively advanced. In the meantime, to fill the value vacuum — “viedes valeurs” as recognized by the États généraux sur l’éducation (1995-96) — “chartism” was beginning to dribble in by default: the Quebec 1979 Charter and the Canadian 1982 Charter became references. In 2001, taking notice of this decade-long indifference, I decided to venture a formulation as to the content in my book La culture publique commune. The book was proposed as an exploration of shared public culture in Quebec; a point of departure for debate on the question, proposed by someone who is, by conviction, reluctant to codify such important matters, a believer in the “living constitution.”

The response in the public arena, which is normally quite responsive to this type of Quebec-centred introspection, was quite deafening. While people seemed to recognize the need to elaborate on the shared public culture, no one engaged the debate as to its nature and content.

In the late eighties, the language of multiculturalism and interculturalism and the integration of immigrants was being institutionalized in the public sphere. This discourse asserted that the existing narrative — Canadian or Québécois — had to be re-invented. I argued that Quebecers already had a shared public culture into which — even if it was constantly being renewed — immigrants and young Quebecers needed to be integrated by a better explanation and transmission of this shared public culture.

One explanation is that critics who were generally favourably disposed to me owing to other pieces I had published, although they disagreed with me on the content of this book, declined to attack me; in other words, through their silence, they were being considerate to me: another manifestation of the inherent civility of Quebec society. Another take is that it was not sufficiently Quebec-oriented and failed to tap into the “solidarity” of Quebec society. My hypothesis is that political correctness did not allow for my insistence on the centrality of the Greco-Judeo-Christian heritage, i.e., the heritage of Western civilization.

As it happens, the BTC report makes several references to the notion of a common public culture early on in the summary. Later in recognizing the paternity of the notion, and in signalling the shortcoming of the notion (and its proposed content). Interestingly enough, the notion is judged as both being “trop statique” [too static], “artificielle” [artificial] and, later in the report, as “définie principalement sinon exclusivement en termes de droits et de valeurs universelles” [defined principally, if not exclusively, in terms of universal rights and values]! Consequently, the authors decide in favour of a two-headed notion: a combination of a shared civic background and “valeurs publiques communes” [shared public values], terms that appear throughout the report, but that are explicitly advanced in the introduction to chapter 5: “Les normes de la vie collective” [the norms of collective life]. As to the content of these two notions, it is essentially based on the charters, including the French language Charter, and series of founding documents published over the last 30 years by the Quebec government and its advisory boards.

It is striking that, apart from a vague reference to the historical experience of Quebec as a welcoming and very egalitarian society, all the documents are of state origin, the Quebec state as it happens. It is in this corpus of “balises et repères” [markers and indicators] that one finds the constitutive elements of the Quebec identity. It is also striking that the responsibility of making this corpus better known and of up-dating it is assigned to the state and its agents. Interestingly enough, school teachers are explicitly designated as “agents of the state.”

Effectively, Bouchard and Taylor (and their phalanx of academic advisors) could not bring themselves to affirm that it is Western civilization, which is the outcome of the Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition adapted to Quebec’s historical context, that new-comers — immigrants and newborn
Quebecers alike — should adapt to. As for the conceptualizers of ECR, their position is clear. The very purpose of the course is to displace the Western tradition from its central position in our public sphere. This was not at all clear to me until the course became public and its state-mandated authors came onto the public stage to support their relativistic normative pluralism ideology.

Of course the problem here, at least in terms of the existing public culture, is that first, the state has no business using schools for this purpose; and second, the state is simply not capable of generating a real shared public culture, for reasons that are readily apparent to those of us who are grounded in the existing public culture.

This instance of social engineering by the Quebec government raises another issue, which is the difficulty of finding the absolute or fixed reference point of a shared public culture: the absolute or transcending high moral ground to which one can appeal to provide certainty, or a semblance of collective consensus on "truth" for a given society.

In the ECR program as published, when the crunch comes as to what this transcending reference is, it is — predictably — our charters. Once we have effectively forsaken our ethical truths and find ourselves on the thin ice of moral pluralism, the only societal (in this case Quebec or Canada) consensus that presents itself is the charters. The charters have for some time been well on the way to becoming part of Quebec’s civic religion.

The main problem with the charters as the final ethical reference in a societal shared public culture is that they are not a transcendent reference, a reference that transcends the contemporary context. By this I mean that the state (in its federal and provincial manifestations) created the charters, and it created them to be catalogues of human rights, not to be the fountain of truth or an ultimate moral reference. This has two serious implications.

First, if the state creates the charters, the state can change them, which is precisely what the government of Quebec has already done and proposes to do again. Witness the following sequence of events. In 1998, Quebec — without any public consultation or debate — asked the federal government to abrogate article 93 (denominational school rights) of the BNA Act. But since the special school rights of Roman Catholics and Protestants were reaffirmed by article 29 of the 1982 charter, the abrogation of section 93 would also call for change to the Charter. Ottawa complied and, bingo, it disappeared from both the 1867 Constitution and the 1982 Charter. Later, in 2007, Quebec also changed article 41 of the Quebec Charter, which guaranteed parental rights to religious instruction in public schools. This again was done without even a nominal vote in the National Assembly. Two changes in a decade: this does not bode well for the stability and transcendence of the absolute moral reference of our civic religion. What the state gives, it has already proved itself ready to take away. But it can also add: currently the provincial government is proposing to add a clause on gender equality in the Quebec Charter of Rights.

The other difficulty is that our charters are not in fact republican instruments — that is, founding documents born of a revolutionary break with a pre-revolutionary culture. They are, despite the semi-entrenched status of the federal Charter, creatures that can be changed by those legislative bodies (here I distin-
guish between parliament and state).

In Quebec’s case, the Charter is, as we have seen, not entrenched at all: a simple amendment in an ordinary statute (law 95, 2005, amending the Loi de l’instruction publique) eviscerated an article of the Charter. How could it be then that a legal instrument treated so lightly by the state itself could become the ultimate moral reference in a shared public culture? We are a long way from the American Bill of Rights or the French Declaration of Human Rights. We are still functioning within the logic of a parliamentary political culture, and the content of a vivre ensemble or a véritable culture publique commune has to reflect this if it is going to be politically feasible, given the existing and as yet to be displaced shared public culture.

As to the nature and content of the existing shared public culture, allow me to briefly describe what I deemed it to be in 2001: the dynamic behind it and its actual content.

A society’s shared public culture is the product of a particular history — in Quebec’s case, 400 years — and of the wider civilization of which the society is the inheritor. In the case of an immigrant or, as Louis Hartz put it, “fragment” society, it also reflects the degree of isolation from the mother society or societies. Let me begin, by way of illustration, with three cultural traits that are, in my opinion, defining characteristics of Quebec’s public culture.

Quebec has long been known for its civility and its social egalitarianism. Since I cannot comment here adequately on the genesis of these societal traits, suffice it to say that the former is no doubt a legacy of French and British manners and norms, inspired in both cases by a Christian social ethic. As for the second (social egalitarianism), there are no doubt many factors at work: the common rural (“habitant”) past; the de-capitation (by repatriation to France) of the elite at the time of the British conquest; the lack of a grande bourgeoisie and an indigenous
landed aristocracy; the very real “circulation of elites” afforded by the classical colleges, which recruited extensively in the farming and working-class communities; and finally, an administrative elite (clergy, religious teachers, nurses, etc.) that was not self-perpetuating and constrained to continually recruit from the wider population.

This brings us to the *solidarité* invoked by Jean-Jacques Simard and others. Quebecers are exceptionally *solidaires*, socially, even if this translates into a massive shift in norms or political alignment. A major re-alignment in this respect can take place quite quickly: in the space of a single generation, in fact!

Obviously such solidarity is, in part, the consequence of a minority society constantly under siege, and of a micro-societal experience whereby three generations co-habited in very limited physical quarters, as Léon Gérin documented in *L’Habitant de St-Justin* (1956). This last historical experience produced (socio-economic determinism at work) what the sociologist Colette Moreux called “la sociabilité de consensus” [the sociability of consensus]. Of course, macro and micro societal conditions have changed greatly in the last half century, but the “cordes sensibles” (Jacques Bouchard) and the “raisons communes” (Fernant Dumont) reflect such a shared historical experience. And, in fact, contemporary Quebec is a liberal-pluralistic society in waiting, the solidarity feature still being very much a reality. And finally another defining characteristic of Quebec’s shared public culture – as opposed to Canada’s — is the fact of French as the common public language.

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This having been said regarding the historical socio-economic dynamic that resulted in the particularity of the present shared public culture, there is nonetheless a cultural content that originates in the wider historical experience of Western society, and its manifestations in French and English societies. Even at that, much of this historical content, by a process of cultural sedimentation and distillation, has undergone significant modulation in Quebec. As to what this “content” is, I attempt a preliminary synthesis in my book *La culture publique commune*; I will simply highlight a few elements here.

There are, of course, our fundamental liberties (of speech, of conscience, of movement, of association, of integrity of the person, equality — of all, including between men and women — democracy, and due process). These fundamental liberties manifest themselves concretely in our judicial, political, social and economic rights, which can take quite different forms from one historically distinct society to another within the Western world. Just three examples, which vary from society to society: the presumption of innocence, the right to bear arms and political systems. In the case of Quebec, English common law and the French civil code both played a part in shaping the content of Quebec’s shared public culture.

These liberties and rights have a more explicit origin and justification in well-developed basic principles, such as the separation of powers — be it that of Church and State or that of the executive, the legislative and the judiciary — the rule of law, or the covenant linking generations.

These principles are, in turn, the incarnation of essential beliefs such as the intrinsic value of every human being, the existence of free will, the recognition of individual responsibility, the possibility of a more just society, the triumph of good over evil, the existence of the common good, the capacity of humans for courage and generosity, etc. This rich and complex constellation of liberties, rights, basic principles and essential beliefs gives rise to an understanding of what our civic duties are and what constitutes civic virtues. The duty to come to the aid of those in distress is an example of a civic duty, and the refusal to be intimidated is an example of a civic virtue.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that such a shared public culture, created in the nexus of Western civilization and particular historical societal experience and socio-economic conditions, is a dynamic, evolving cultural phenomenon. For instance, the right to a renewable environment and the duty to respect the environment were not to be found in the explicit formulations of social values as late as 50 years ago. And owing precisely to this evolving “living” value of the shared public culture, codification is always inadequate. Catalogues of rights and responsibilities, like human rights charters, suffer from this inadequacy: there is absolutely not a word concerning the environment in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

My 2001 effort at explanation was motivated by a concern that the content normally transmitted by imbibing the historical record of one’s civilization and society, through reading of the literary canon and studying philosophy and history, was becoming tenuous, and that consequently there was a need to provoke debate on what the content actually is. Such a concern derives from awareness that no society can function well enough to survive if there is not a recognizable shared public culture.

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