COMBINING LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Immigration and Cultural Diversity in the Identity Discourse of Nationalisms of Protest in Quebec, Acadia and Wallonia

ABSTRACT

Nationalism expressed by local movements that are seeking the recognition of a particular distinction is often viewed as basically being at odds with the idea of recognizing cultural diversity within the society where the identity discussion occurs. The Quebec, Walloon and Acadian nationalist movements, however, run counter to this view because they often find themselves at the forefront of diversity recognition. In short, it is a matter of combining distinct society and cultural diversity, primarily through the definition of an original (and local) approach to citizenship that mobilizes the entire imagined community around specific political and social objectives.

In recent months, the issue of immigration and that of diversity recognition have been of particular concern in Quebec current affairs, to the extent that the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on “reasonable accommodations,” created by the Quebec government to gather public opinion on the subject in the province, has at times been characterized by the Quebec press as group therapy. It is true that the work of this Commission, numerous debates of which have been broadcast on live television by Radio-Canada, largely echoed issues that had been widely discussed in the past in politics and in media news features on the issue of cultural diversity and the immigrant’s place in Quebec society.

In such a context, it is often believed that the nationalism expressed by identity movements is essentially opposed to the idea of recognizing cultural diversity within the small society whose movement is claiming recognition. These identity movements, however, are much less opposed to diversity recognition than might at first be believed. Because the question that emerges when faced with these nationalist movements – that have made State protest their trademark – is as follows: in a context of political pluralism, can they do without the consideration of diversity within the very society that they consider distinct? Is the recognition of diversity exclusive to the State, which is the sole entity that is in a position to practice any form of institutional management from the principle of unity, but allowing for diversity; or does it also concern the nationalist movements that locally seek to “make society” (Thériault 2007)? The Walloon, Quebec and Acadian cases, on which we will focus here, run counter to this belief in the existence of a frontal opposition between claiming local identity distinction and recognition of cultural diversity.

The comparison of three local nationalist discourses (Quebec sovereignty, Walloon regionalism, Acadian nationalism), to which we devoted part of our recent research, has shown us how, within nationalist identity movements, a combination rather than an opposition can be achieved between, on the one hand, the political process of building a local identity in which language and the past still play a central role and, on the other, the phenomenon – at times old, at times new – of highly multicultural immigration, but also often Francophone immigration, which needs to be integrated within meditations on identity.

Nationalism, protest and cultural diversity

Minority nationalist movements, as political actors, are often in competition when it comes to identity offers. And as good collective identity entrepreneurs, they ask for mobilization in favour of their own identity product, which needs to be properly adapted to local demand, based on local needs. This economic rhetoric, borrowed from “resource mobilization” literature devoted to social movements and to the explanation of collective action, might seem unusual. In fact, it serves here to emphasize the central role of collective, state or social actors in the slow process of identity building. Nationalist-type collective identity can be approached in two ways. The first involves attempting to
focus on its essence, or at least considering that as such, identity can be defined or objectively evaluated: the past, the history, the territory and the language thus participate in defining a somewhat "authentic" identity, marking each individual "member" of the community. The second involves not considering collective identity as a given, but as a political and social issue that aims at making collective actions possible in order to achieve common goals. To summarize, identity would provide social actors with reference frameworks that are essential to identifying the causes that bring them together.

In situations of competitive identity, such as in Canada or in Belgium, the State, as identity entrepreneur, finds itself in conflict with the nationalist movements in mobilizing the resources and support necessary to maintain identity vitality.

Two nationalisms and two very different approaches to the concept of nation are therefore at odds: State preservation nationalism, which aims to preserve the established order; and protest nationalism of social movements question this "identity order." These state or social actors each create a concept of identity, an identity doctrine developed according to their own range of actions and political objectives. What the state wants is to confirm its role and attest its structure. This corresponds to a coherent national community that is united and voluntary. It is the concept of order that is used. The nationalist protest movements seek, however, to demonstrate the artificial nature of this structure and to impose another structure that better reflects social, cultural, linguistic or historic "realities." For these movements, it is no longer a matter of confirming an existing identity, but challenging it.

This being the case, within these identity struggles, what place is reserved for the newcomer? In spite of all their differences, nationalist movements and states agree on at least one objective: mobilize all-out support and prove to be the larger mobilizing identity. As the new citizen, the immigrant represents an essential client for these identity entrepreneurs, especially in the societies of immigration that Canada and Belgium have become. It is a matter of convincing newcomers to embrace the identity project and integrating them in this renewed and adapted societal entity.

**Building bridges: Rhetoric for accepting the "other"**

Whether it is embedded within in the identity discourse of Quebec sovereignty or Walloon or Acadian movements, this concern for providing for diversity is evident in the construction of a local reference identity discourse.

The Quebec nation is, indirectly, the product of the referendum strategy adopted by a sovereignist movement that gradually grew from community and linguistic nationalism first to civic and territorialized nationalism foremost. The question then became how to mobilize a large sovereignty movement, and thus how to integrate all Quebeckers into the imagined national community, to which it would eventually become necessary to address the matter of sovereignty. The Francophone majority is then no longer the only one concerned. It then became necessary to convince Quebec's cultural and linguistic minorities, whose members are also called upon to vote in referendums and elections. The sovereignty movement must offer this majority and these minorities a unifying project and an open approach to the nation. For the Parti Québécois (2005: 19), identity is a modern issue that the party will determinedly take on through citizenship, for the sake of integrating Quebeckers of all backgrounds.

The Quebec identity discourse therefore developed an entire arsenal of rhetoric around this objective, particularly around the issue of language and the importance given to French in Quebec. Consider again: the issue is no longer to present language as a prerequisite for belonging to the community, but as the common heritage of a Quebec society recognized as intercultural. For Quebec immigrants, mastering French becomes less a duty than a right that engages Quebec society [Ibid.: 19].

*Translation*

The Parti Québécois... reiterates its commitment to protect and promote the French language, while guaranteeing that individuals belonging to minority linguistic groups feel respected and cared for. This commitment requires concerted action, particularly with regard to welcoming and integrating Quebec immigrants. [Our emphasis]

In Wallonia and in Acadia, despite very different situations (no local government or representative institution for Acadia; very recent institutions for Wallonia, in spite of a Walloon movement that appeared at the end of the 19th century), the process of incorporating the theme of diversity into nationalist identity positions is similar.

The creation of new Walloon institutions in the 1980s and 1990s has in fact restored vigour to a regionalist discourse developed by the Walloon movement over a century ago and reworked particularly by the Walloon "identity laboratories" represented by the Jules Destrieu Institute and the Fondation Walonne, organizations founded by Walloon activists for the purposes of research and planning on Wallonia, its future and identity. In the projects developed by these organizations, which now support the new regional institutions by elaborating for them a reflection on Walloon identity and regionalism, the Walloon society's distinctiveness may paradoxically be
contributing to making the refusal of nationalism and the respect for diversity a near characteristic trait of Walloon society. This approach brings to mind that of the manifesto for Walloon culture published by various Walloon activists, including writers, artists and intellectuals, which solemnly stated in 1983 that all those who live and work in Wallonia are unreservedly part of Wallonia and that all humanitarian thoughts and beliefs are part of Wallonia (Collectif 1998: 312).

Like the sovereignty movement, the Walloon movement seeks, at a territorial level, to combine its old struggles, marked on the one hand by its conflict and resistance to Flemish nationalism known for its exclusiveness, and on the other by its autonomist and federalist claims against the state. This approach to identity is particularly expressed through a specific claim: that of granting the right to vote in Walloon elections to non-Belgians established in Wallonia. Identity-related reflections generated by Walloon organizations therefore suggest a somewhat counter-nationalist regionalism and an increasing open-mindedness to diversity (Courtois and Pirotte 1994).

In Canadian Francophone minority communities, claims are primarily concerned with community and linguistic vitality. Simply (or more seriously), how is it possible to guarantee the linguistic survival of these small disseminated communities? How can linguistic transfers be curbed?

The arrival of immigrants to the Atlantic provinces is not a large-scale phenomenon. Yet the fact remains that the Acadian movement views this presence largely as an opportunity to revitalize a Francophone minority community. This "instrumental" approach to immigration demands a transformation of its identity references to transform this Francophone immigration into an opportunity for Acadian Francophone. It is a matter of combining Acadian identity with Francophone diversity (see Trasen and Violette, forthcoming). Thus, for the Société des Acadiens et des Acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick (SAAoN 2007):

[Translation]
New Brunswick's Acadia is a Francophone society that is making constant progress and subject to profound transformations. Consequently, for our community, which asks only to be open to other cultures, immigration appears as a real opportunity to meet the numerous challenges awaiting it.

This opportunity resides in expectations that immigrant integration will be guided towards the local Francophone community, which is marked by its Acadianism. This hope has particularly materialized in Moncton through the recent creation in 2006 of the Centre d'accueil et d'intégration des immigrants du Moncton Métropolitain (CAIMM), whose aim is to put Francophone immigrants in contact with Acadians through the implementation of common projects. A question arises, however. How can the old identity references to the French roots of Acadia (French origin, Acadian families, the Acadian, historic Acadian, New Acadia), present in tales and debates, be reconciled with the need for a vibrant Francophone linguistic community that makes it essential to welcome these new Francophones? This is the question that has been raised at the Table de concertation provinciale sur l'immigration francophone, set up by the SAAoN.

Like the sovereignty and Walloon movements, the Acadian movement has pursued the double objective of being open to the world and of adopting a "differentialism" (Belkhodja 2005) position with regards to identity — apparently, this objective isn't contradictory (to these movements, anyhow) — while attempting to combine identity particularism with opening and diversity. The Acadian movement therefore seems to be shifting its discourse on Acadian identity, making it more urban and less rural, more civic and less filial, more based on memory and less traumatic. New themes have appeared (urbanism, regional development, local democracy). Furthermore, there has been a renewal of the people who have become committed for one reason or another, in a more diffuse manner, to the defence and promotion of a contemporary, and even sometimes very post-modern, Acadia.

**Local citizenship seeking authenticity and diversity recognition**

The status quo has therefore not resisted the need for a distinct approach to diversity. Contemporary nationalists therefore seek to transform the identity monolith of the past into a melting pot wherein what "us" distinguishes, or more clearly, what differentiates "us" from "them," is perpetually being negotiated and renegotiated.

In this work of rebuilding local identity references, the theme of citizenship represents an area of choice for protest nationalism, because of its simultaneously universal and distinct dimensions (for although rights to citizenship are universal, how they are applied is left to local state institutions). Free from the restricting and exclusive shackles of a quest for authenticity and in order to establish a distinct community, nationalists are now attempting to present an adaptable and flexible identity position through citizenship. This is not about forsaking authenticity, but about rethinking the past within the framework of the social and political characteristics of the community of citizens of the here and now.

In Quebec, the theme of citizenship has marked the sovereignty debate on national assertion for several years now, particularly further to the projects spearheaded by Jean-Pierre Charbonneau, who was then speaker of the National Assembly, then within the framework of the Larose Commission, and finally within the Parti Québécois itself through the "Saison des idées," which led to an overhaul of the Parti Québécois' program. The more current thinking on Quebec identity, though it attempts to respond to criticism of a shifting conception of identity, has not been anything less affected by these ten years of reflection on a so-called Quebec citizenship without which it becomes quite difficult to think about the "Quebec nation." Cultural diversity in Quebec is increasingly considered within the framework of a very distinct "Quebec intercultural project." According to Gagnon and Jacovino (2003: 421):
Quebec has adopted the official position of discussing interculturallism to respond to its multi-ethnic elements. This statement implies that the incorporation of immigrants or cultural minorities within a larger political community represents a mutual commitment, a sort of moral contract between the welcoming society and the cultural group in question, for the purpose of establishing a forum that provides citizens with new powers, in short a "common public culture."

In Wallonia also, the theme of citizenship now encompasses thoughts on Walloon identity and shapes its definition. "Citizen governance" needs to be defined. This theme is found again in the Walloon government's *Contrat d'avenir pour la Wallonie* and the conferences organized within the framework of *Wallonie au futur* by the Jules Destrée Institute. These documents seek to present Wallonia through the definition of common belonging to the Walloon region. What the Walloon movement would like is to start a "civic approach" (Walloon Gouvernement 2002: 2):

The General Assembly of the [Jules Destrée] Institute reasserted its aspiration to see all Walloons, Belgian or non-Belgian, settled in Wallonia for a long time, see their Walloon citizenship fully recognized in order to be given the right to vote and to be eligible for regional elections (Institut Jules Destrée 1998).

In 2003, on the occasion of the Wallonia celebrations, Jean-Claude Van Cauwenbergh (2003) repeated the terms of the 1983 *Manifesto for Walloon Culture* to specify the government's position. This is now a matter of asserting true Walloon citizenship:

It is in the name of this notion of citizen identity that since 1997, our Parliament has increased the number of motions in favour of granting the right to vote in local elections to non-European foreigners settled among us. Our intention is to work toward defining a common, active and responsible citizenship. Our goal is to allow each individual to live his or her identity within a Walloon society with shared rights and responsibilities.

The Acadian movement obviously does not have the same political opportunities as the Quebec sovereignty or Walloon regionalist movements. With no community government, it is quite difficult to consider any form of public recognition of "Acadian citizenship." However, protest movements such as projects to create Acadian leadership, i.e. a formal representation of New Brunswick Francophones, are leaning toward what Jenson (1998) calls a "distinct citizenship regime": New Brunswick Francophones should indeed be given the ability to live their Canadian citizenship differently, particularly through the definition of rights, a form of political participation, and an ongoing reflection on membership in a distinctive Acadian and Francophone community. The issue of power in Acadia has been discussed for many years (Thériault 1982). And the Acadian movement is always searching for a satisfactory political representation for the Francophone community, through the creation of a form of political representation that would guarantee control over the tools that are essential to maintaining their community's vitality. This issue surfaced at the seminar organized by the Société d'Acadie du Nouveau Brunswick (2005), attended by 600 people in 2004 at the Université de Moncton. A popular consultation process was launched on the opportunity of creating an elected community assembly (Commission consultative 2006). A report was produced by the advisory board set up for the occasion, but this has not yet produced any repercussion.

References


Notes

1 Each year, 700 to 800 new immigrants settle in New Brunswick, including approximately 100 who call themselves Francophones (Rioux 2005: 247).

2 In Acadia, the increasingly significant movement supporting young Acadian artists is centred at the Aberdeen Cultural Centre in Moncton and in Acadie urbane (www.acadieurbane.net/).

3 The Wallonie au futur conferences organized by the Jules Destree Institute sought to bring together various experts, intellectual and ordinary citizens for a collective reflection on Wallonia, its institutions, public policies and future (www.wallonie-en-ligne.net/Wallonie-Futur-5_2003/index.htm). The Contrat d’avenir pour la Wallonie is a Walloon government initiative that seeks to define the Walloon region’s public policies by stimulating collective and concerted thinking with principal Walloon society members (social and university partners and decision-makers, etc.) (contratdavenirwallonie.be/apps/spip/article.php 35d_article =1).

Immigration and Families

Special issue of Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens

Metropolis has continued its successful partnership with the Association for Canadian Studies to produce special issues of the magazine Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens on immigration and diversity topics. This issue (spring 2006) focuses on immigration and the family. It features an introduction by Madine VanderPlaat of Saint Mary’s University, an interview with then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Monte Solberg, and 20 articles by knowledgeable policy-makers, researchers and non-governmental organizations. Like earlier issues, it has been assigned as course readings in many disciplines at several universities.

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