



[Examples of ostensible signs that will not be allowed for the state personnel.]

Quebec's Charter of Values: Citizenship, Patriarchy, and Paranoia

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Post

On 10 September 2013, the Quebec government led by the Parti Québécois introduced its Charter of Quebec Values, that it hopes to implement in that Canadian province. If passed, the charter would, among other things, forbid government employees from wearing “conspicuous” religious symbols in the workplace and citizens from receiving government services while wearing those symbols. The charter is currently polarizing Quebec society. What follows is an attempt to historicize the conversation over “Quebec values,” in light of the recent developments and the province’s history of marginalization. It proposes a broad overview of the various dynamics—historical, social and political—that inform the current debate over the province’s identity and examines key debates and sites of contention that are currently unfolding.

Historicizing the Charter Proposal: Recent Developments

For those not familiar with developments in Quebec, the provincial government’s project is the result of a conversation that dates back to 2006. Then, a handful of immigrants and citizens of various faiths made various requests of different public institutions. A father asked the kindergarten his son

attended to serve him halal food. Hassidic Jews asked a YMCA to tint its windows, as women who attended their yoga classes were too distracting to those attending the Hasidic synagogue across the alley. Three Muslim highschool girls said they could not take part in swimming classes because there were males in attendance as well. While a human rights tribunal rejected the kindergarten halal case, the YMCA's windows were tinted after the members of the synagogue paid for the costs, and the three Muslim girls were allowed to pass their test outside of the regular class time. Those three highly mediated incidents led to a conversation that came to be known as “accommodements raisonnables (reasonable accommodations).”

Following the conflated media coverage of these anecdotal events—stories which were now discussed on the street, in classrooms, on the bus, at family dinners, and among friends—Quebec's identity question resurfaced in full force: How can “we” maintain our Quebec identity while welcoming the “other?” How can we deal with these immigrants ‘who do not believe in the equality between men and women’? How can the government be so soft and allow all these accommodations? Where do “we” draw the line? If you allow halal food today, tomorrow we will be under Sharia rule! Why do “they” not go back to their country if they are not happy here?

Needless to say, those most affected by the crisis were members of the Muslim and Arab communities, who became the new scapegoats of the province. In many ways, the multiple events of the past decade, including 11 September 2001, the mass influx of refugees following various wars (e.g., Lebanon and Afghanistan), coupled with a media campaign playing on Francophones' fears, led to a highly Islamophobic environment. Herouxville, a small town of around 1340 people was suddenly on the map in 2007, after it released a town charter, with a category regarding women that reads:

Our Women; We consider that men and women are of the same value. Having said this, we consider that a woman can drive a car, vote, sign checks, dance, decide for herself, speak her peace, dress as she sees fit respecting of course the democratic decency, walk alone in public places, study, have a job, have her own belongings and anything else that a man can do. These are our standards and our way of life.

However, we consider that killing women in public beatings, or burning them alive are not part of our standards of life.

The charter, which was the source of many jokes in big cities such as Montreal, pointed to a discrepancy between the city and the “regions” as we euphemistically call them in Quebec. The ubiquitous questions, anxieties, and responses were debated along various other lines: the Anglophones versus the Francophones, the older generation versus the younger generation, etc.

The story of course goes beyond the “us versus them” binary. The case of of Djemila Benhabib, a Ukraine-born Canadian of half-Algerian descent, is illustrative. She capitalized on these fears by adopting a “the Islamists are coming” discourse in her two books, *Ma vie a contre-coran* (a play on words roughly translated as “My life against the Quran (current)”) and *Les soldats d'Allah à l'assaut de l'Occident* (The Soldiers of Allah: The Assault on the West). She has become the face of the “traumatized native informant” who can testify about how horrible Muslims are treating their women. Last year, she was running as a candidate for the Parti Quebecois in the city of Trois-Rivieres, and was seen by many as an opportunist tokenized by the party to advance its political project. Unsurprisingly, she is one of the proponents of the “Charter of Quebec Values.” The case of Benhabib provides a glimpse into the multiplicity of views and agendas that exist for or against the proposed charter.

The reasonable accommodations debate eventually lead to the Bouchard-Taylor commission, led by sociologist Gerard Bouchard and philosopher Charles Taylor. Between 2007 and 2008, they visited various communities across the province, to hold public hearings for citizens to express themselves on the question of reasonable accommodations. More often than not, these hearings were counterproductive and led to an entertaining (read depressing) group therapy for citizens who had never interacted with immigrants. In light of those findings, in 2008, Bouchard and Taylor submitted a 93-page report entitled “Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation,” with five major recommendations. The report also outlined the importance of promoting “open secularism,” which they contrast to the French’s “restrictive legislation governing the wearing of religious signs in public schools.” Interestingly, the proposed “Charter of Quebec Values” runs counter to the recommendations made by the commission under the previous Liberal government, which cost the taxpayers an estimated 3.7 million dollars.

Historicizing the Charter Proposal: Quebec's Trauma with the Catholic Church

Though the PQ has moved counter to the Bouchard-Taylor commission findings and proposed changes similar to those in France, the story is inherently a Quebec one. On a much deeper level, the identity question is symptomatic of the inferiority complex of a historically marginalized minority with a traumatic relationship with religious authority. School books in French-speaking highschool tell the story of an oppressed population of Francophones that slowly emerged out of the Great Darkness in the 1960s, the years of the so-called Revolution Tranquille (Quiet Revolution). This revolution, under Quebec Prime Minister Jean Lesage, led to the secularization of government institutions in education and healthcare, which had until then been in the hands of the Catholic Church. In addition, prior to this, Prime Minister Maurice Duplessis invested heavily in rural areas and poorly in social services, what had left many Francophone Quebecois on farms, poor and uneducated. Slowly, they managed to leave the countryside, migrate to the city, and achieve upward mobility.

This “dark history,” which created a trauma in the collective imaginary of many, still informs the writings of many French-speaking commentators and the opinions of a segment of Quebec society. Indeed, the proponents of the charter often claim to be fighting for the survival of the secularization won by the older generations against the Catholic Church and Duplessis’ conservative policies. The Parti Quebecois’ proposal itself offers an informative timeline that starts with the 1964 creation of the Ministry of Education. Finally, many misinformed yet widely-read right-leaning journalists such as Richard Martineau fuel an Islamophobic debate. They too play on those historical fears and project the collective religious trauma onto others and their seemingly threatening beliefs and practices.

Useless to say, this nationalistic narrative enforced in school books and in the media is dismissive of many other realities and groups that have shaped Quebec in the past fifty years, dismissive of its Anglophone population, of the immigrant populations, and of aboriginals, whose presence were depicted as being in the way of the province’s consolidation of nationalism.

The Quebec Street

The official announcement of the charter plan by minister Bernard Drainville on 10 September 2013 created much controversy and debate. The tension is informed by more than a decade of conversation about Quebec identity in the face of ongoing demographic developments, as well as a deep history of national consolidation.

In political and academic circles, many have opposed the project. MP Maria Mourani was expelled from the Federal Party of the Bloc Quebecois for opposing the charter, the only woman and only member representing a “cultural community” in the party. McGill University issued a statement opposing the charter and saying it would seek special permission if the legislation were to pass, so that the religious symbols ban would not apply in its institution.

Unsurprisingly, though the overall support for the charter has been declining following its announcement, the current debate remains highly divided along linguistic lines. A majority of English-speaking citizens in Quebec oppose the charter proposal (seventy-two percent), while forty-nine percent of Francophones favor it. The notable difference speaks to various dynamics, including that many immigrants might have participated to the English poll. Also, Anglophones in Quebec do not culturally and socially identify with the Francophone and their experience.

These polls are useful, but do not account for the full story. Since the charter was announced, a group of Francophone academics released a manifesto for a “Quebec Inclusif” (Inclusive Quebec) opposing the PQ’s project. The English translation took some time to appear on the collective’s page, attesting to the lapse between two insulated conversations and communities. Nonetheless, the

manifesto has gained traction in Quebec, and has now been signed by more than twenty-one thousand people in the span of a week.

A translated excerpt reads:

Explosive and populist headlines, sweeping and judgmental commentaries and superficial analyses have marked Quebec's media landscape since the emergence of the public debate on religious accommodation. Tabloids and television news networks have oversimplified the debate, continuously portraying Montreal as besieged, inundated by unreasonable requests for accommodation from intransigent immigrants. Over the years, they have instilled a genuine fear for the survival of the Quebecois identity in many of our fellow citizens. It is with regret that we observe that our government seeks to exploit this fear for electoral purposes.

Thousands of people across the Quebec political spectrum, including supporters of the Parti Quebecois signed the document on the collective's website. Prominent artists, political figures, and ordinary citizens explained their opposition to the Parti Quebecois's project and some also echoed the idea that the party was exploiting Quebecers' fears for electoral purposes. Indeed, many claimed that the charter project was a way for the minority-government to test the waters for a possible fall election. So far, the supporters of the manifesto are leading an asymmetric battle against the PQ and the 2 million dollar campaign it launched to promote the charter.

The political calculation goes beyond provincial politics. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has already announced his plans to intervene were the charter proposal to pass in Quebec's National Assembly. Quebec, as a province of Canada, has to abide by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which protects the Quebecers in the face of the proposed Charter of Values. In Anglophone media, especially those outside Quebec, the PQ's latest move is depicted as a desperate attempt to bring back the separatist agenda on the table.

Beyond political calculation, Quebec remains highly misunderstood by the rest of Canada [1], and an easy target for mockery. In Ontario, an ad that reads "we don't care what's on your head," inviting Muslim women in the health sector to move to Quebec's neighboring province for government jobs. Beyond its opportunistic nature, this ad raises an important point that has so far remained silenced in the conversation regarding the charter. A government census shows that "university degrees are more common among all immigrant groups than among the Canadian-born. In particular, very recent immigrants boast a high proportion of university graduates." This argument is pertinent though not central to the conversation. After all, we rarely boil down "pure wool" Quebecois to commodities of capital consumption. This in-country migration might however turn into reality in the face of the outburst of Islamophobia since the announcement of the charter. In the span of one week, many

cases have signaled dangerous developments. A mosque in Quebec's Saguenay was splattered with pig blood, while a woman in Montreal was harassed on the bus, another in Quebec City was arbitrarily fired from her work because of her hijab, and another was harassed by two women at a shopping mall and as one of them spat on her son.

In light of the Islamophobic incidents that occurred since the announcement of the charter, what counts as "conspicuous" is far from arbitrary. It primarily targets women or "other" citizens and dictates what they should and should not wear to be recognized as fully Quebecois. But what does it mean to be Quebecois? For a segment of Quebec society, often Francophone often older, often living in the "regions," this belief is referring to their experience with or exposure to Quebec's recent history of darkness under the religious clergy, followed by a period of secular national consolidation. This history contributed to the paranoia that fueled the "reasonable accommodations" debate for the past decade. Today, the charter proposal seems to have empowered some citizens to act on this paranoia and harass their fellow citizens.

In the case of women, it is about removing her hijab for "her own sake" and matters of "equality." As anthropologist Suad Joseph argues, "women have been crucial in establishing and maintaining the boundaries of nations and are often made into the symbolic markers of the nation itself." In this case, the paternal state is leading a battle against brown men, assumed to be obstacles for the national survival. Amidst this fight for "secularism" and "female equality" paradoxically, women's choice and agency over their bodies are religiously trespassed.

Footnotes:

[1] Not unlike the more popular "Why Do They Hate Us" piece by Mona Eltahawy

[2] Dr. Gerald Bouchard has expressed his opposition to the charter project here.