
Book Review

Recension

Interculturalism: A View From Quebec

by Gerard Bouchard. University of Toronto Press, 2105

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Debates concerning cultural pluralism have dominated the public sphere in many North American countries for the past several years. Many conservative forces seem deeply anxious about the steady erosion of what they once considered ethnically homogenous societies, under assault by a steady stream of immigrants from without and relativistic multi-culturalists from within. One need only look at Donald Trump’s xenophobic attacks against Latin Americans and Muslims, the Harper Conservatives dog whistling proposals to adopt a “barbaric cultural practices hotline” and crack down on the niqab, or indeed the Parti Quebecois’ 2014 call for a Quebec *Charter of Values*, which promoted militant secularism, for examples of identity politics dominating the public sphere and the political headlines.

Professor Bouchard’s *Interculturalism: A View from Quebec* is an important contribution to the discourse of pluralism from an intellectual deeply committed to the future of the French language. Professor Bouchard is probably best known for his long-standing support for Quebec separatism, and his co-authorship of the 2008 report *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation* with Professor Charles Taylor (who contributes a forward to this new book). Much of Bouchard’s latest book builds on the insights of the earlier report and his experiences co-chairing its parent Commission. Nonetheless, it develops a distinct set of arguments that are somewhat more sympathetic to the interests of the majority Francophone population than the earlier report.¹ Bouchard believes that Quebec inter-culturalism has developed over decades as a viable approach to reconciling the legitimate interests of the Francophone majority in maintaining their culture within Canada, while at the same time respecting the rights, and “commensurable”² cultural practices of immigrants and various minorities.

¹ For instance, Bouchard’s account of “inclusive secularism” draws on the authors’ experiences of living through the Quiet Revolution, and the general opposition towards the dominance of the Catholic Church it generated. Despite this, Bouchard accepts and even encourages maintaining certain Christian symbols due to their “heritage value.” See Gerard Bouchard. *Interculturalism: A View From Quebec*, trans. Howard Scott. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 131-133.

² This is evident in Bouchard’s later discussion of how a pluralistic allegiance doesn’t necessarily contradict the constitutive values of Francophone history – values that are grounded in the preservation of the French language. While Bouchard is cautious, for instance, not to suggest that the values of immigration are incompatible with Francophone heritage, he nevertheless points toward the notion that “Empirical data on this subject [is] unfortunately very incomplete”. Bouchard’s intention here is quite obviously two-fold – on the one hand, he does offer a sincere defence of individual liberty as it might pertain to a collective (i.e., “minority”) difference, while on the other, the semantics of this defence appear more as part and parcel of a balancing act than an engagement with the difference between ‘emphasis’ and ‘kind’ as it concerns rights discourse.

Bouchard begins by arguing that the background for his book is the “Quebec nation” which he defines as the 8 million inhabitants who constitute a host society for immigrants. He then expands on this definition to say that the nation covers the “political, civic, cultural, and social aspects” of communal life that serve to knit individuals together.³ He then goes on to clarify that he understands the Quebec nation both as a majority within the province, and as a minority within Canada and the continent.⁴ Despite adopting a broad understanding of the Quebec nation and its demographic status, Bouchard declines to address the issue of Aboriginal peoples living within Quebec, noting that they wish to be understood as a separate nation within a pluri-national province. While this modesty is commendable, as we shall point out later, the absence of any discussion of Aboriginal peoples haunts many of Bouchard’s narratives about Francophones being a “founding people.”⁵

Bouchard believes that the Quebec nation, by virtue of its colonial history and status as a majority within the province and a minority within the state, has a right to promote and defend the “shared culture” of the founding people.⁶ This means that Quebecers have a right to accept that cultural minorities and new immigrants will “integrate” within the nation.⁷ Most notably, he emphasizes time and again that Quebecers have a right to expect immigrants to learn French, which he hopes will foster a shared sense of “belonging” and investment in the majority culture.⁸ However, he does not believe Quebecers have a right to demand that minorities and immigrants assimilate to the dominant culture. Instead, he favors mitigating the duality between the majority and various minority groups while still respecting the standard liberal rights of individuals, which can include retaining attachments to their original culture and/or religion.⁹ Achieving a balance between the rights of the majority to preserve and deepen French culture, and minorities who may wish to retain their attachments, is at the heart of the inter-cultural approach as Bouchard understands it. As he puts it in the conclusion to Chapter Two:

Interculturalism is the model that is best suited to the parameters listed...It proposes a way of living together that is in continuity with the Quebec past and is the one best suited to the challenges of the present, namely the double objective of unity and respect for differences in keeping with a broad concept of citizenship. It is aimed not only at avoiding the segmentation of Quebec society, but at strengthening it culturally and socially. It is a model that calls for democratic debate, as well as a mixture of firmness and flexibility: firmness on principles and fundamental values, and flexibility on how they are applied.¹⁰

Chapters Three and Four juxtapose inter-culturalism and multi-culturalism, while also defending the former from various critiques from nationalists and defenders of multi-culturalists. Bouchard’s defence often takes the form of listing objections by each group and debunking them one at a time. This style is admirably well-structured, clear and economical, but it does present

See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 74-75.

³ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 10

⁴ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 11

⁵ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism* 8

⁶ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 44

⁷ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 41

⁸ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 35.

⁹ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 48

¹⁰ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 56

challenges when attempting to summarize his position – specifically as Bouchard’s pluralism manages to circumvent the question of indigeneity.

Briefly, he believes that multi-culturalists are wrong to see society primarily as a collection of individuals and groups without their being one majority or national cultural. This belief leads many multi-culturalists to undervalue integration, leading to increasing social fragmentation and the gradual dissolution of a common socio-symbolic order. Bouchard argues that all of these processes are viewed with special concern in Quebec because of its collective memory of being a marginalized nation.¹¹ While he concedes that some multi-culturalists might view inter-culturalism as illiberal and insufficiently concerned for minority rights, Bouchard does not believe that such criticisms can be upheld. Firstly, he does not believe that Quebec has been any less rights-respecting than the rest of Canada.¹² Secondly, Bouchard notes that all states, even multicultural ones, take steps to ensure the continuity of their values. While an inter-cultural approach may place more emphasis on taking such steps to preserve the founding culture, this hardly justifies characterizing inter-culturalism as illiberal or intolerant.

Bouchard is also critical of Quebec Nationalists who see inter-culturalism as ceding too much power to minorities and being inadequate to protect the nation. He concedes here that many immigrants and minorities may hold values that are “not compatible with those prevalent in Quebec.”¹³ But he believes that in the long run, a tolerant inter-cultural approach will be both more rights-respecting and encourage gradual integration into the majority culture. To this effect, he is also wary of arguments from hard-core nationalists who believe in adopting assimilationist practices.¹⁴ Bouchard believes that, in the long run, this will both deepen marginalization and would show inadequate respect for the rights of citizens. Therefore, he believes assimilationism should be rejected as counter to the interests of both the majority and the minority cultures.

The last substantive Chapter of the book is taken up with an insightful reflection on the state of secularism, which notably became a hot button issue in the 2014 provincial election. As one might expect, Bouchard does defend a fairly rigid approach to dividing Church and State, albeit one that isn’t nearly as extreme as that proposed by Premier Marois and others in the Parti Quebecois. Bouchard does go out of his way to defend an “inclusive” secularism that would permit individuals, including most government employees, to express their religious beliefs openly. He also allows exceptions for many “heritage” symbols affiliated with the Quebec nation¹⁵, and implies that private religious schools should be permitted pending further research.¹⁶ Treading cautiously into the debate around Islam, he particularly defends the right of conservative Muslim women to wear the hijab and the niqab without interference. Commendably, Bouchard is quite critical of Islamophobia, characterizing many of the standard claims about Islamic takeover as “unproven,” prone to “very harmful stereotypes,” and “stigmatiz(ing).”¹⁷

¹¹ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 64-67

¹² See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 98-100 and 104-106 especially.

¹³ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 74

¹⁴ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 84-86

¹⁵ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 131-133

¹⁶ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 133-134

¹⁷ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 128-130

Bouchard's book concludes with an economical summary of his various arguments for adopting an inter-cultural approach to managing pluralism, before commenting very briefly on the 2014 election in Quebec. While he claims to be satisfied with the defeat of the Parti Québécois and their *Charter of Quebec Values*, he also cautions that debates about cultural pluralism are far from over. Bouchard's book is undoubtedly an approachable and informative guide to an important debate, and in this respect it is to be welcomed. However, his approach is not without its problems. While an extensive critique would go beyond the confines of this review, we would like to point out two intersecting points where we believe his arguments begin to waver. The first are his descriptive arguments about the status of Quebec and Francophone culture, and the second are his moral points about the virtues of the intercultural approach.

To the first point: at the outset of his book, Bouchard notes that he will not be discussing the status of Aboriginal peoples within the province because he believes the issue to be overly complex, therefore requiring adjudication on a nation-to-nation basis.¹⁸ On the surface, this appears to be an admirable mark of humility, as an appropriate discussion of the complexity of First Nations sovereignty, even in just Quebec, demands separate cover. However, deeper into the text, one starts to view this absence with suspicion. Bouchard consistently engages American-style hagiography when describing the "founding majority" that make up the province, which was colonized by an "arrogant power convinced of its own superiority" that later relegated Quebeckers to minority status within the Confederation of Canada.¹⁹ We find it intriguing that a book concerned (and rightfully so) with the preservation of language rights would seem to flounder with the profundity of language – specifically insofar as statements that constitute Quebeckers as the *sole* founding majority necessitate an active forgetting of Canada's colonial history.

While it is undeniably true that French Canadians have suffered as a consequence of British conquest, it is strange that Bouchard would be so apathetic about French Quebec's own violent colonial past (and present). Such rose-tinted historical sentiments undermine his claims that Francophones, because of their history as a colonized people, will likely be sympathetic to minorities within the province. Indeed, regarding Quebec's specific treatment of Aboriginal peoples, there seems little historical evidence that the province has done significantly better than the rest of Canada. Indeed, the history of disputes over Aboriginal land, and the distribution of funds generated by hydro-electricity, are just a few examples of where the "colonized" majority showed little sympathy to the needs of their own colonized subjects. It also bears on his moral points about the virtue of the inter-cultural approach.

Bouchard believes that the majority Francophone culture is morally significant, and therefore worthy of protection, because it provides a set of symbols and referents which gives meaning to the lives of individuals. This point is perhaps no more evident than in Bouchard's earlier discussion of Law 101, and his discussion of the possibility for the French language to open itself to free individual investment, regardless of religious or cultural affiliation. While he accepts various post-modern and post-colonial arguments that identity is often a fickle concept, he believes that in practice it means a great deal to many individuals. However, this is but one step to acknowledge the value of a given culture to its adherents. It is another to suggest, as he does, that it can provide similar meaning to all minorities within the province. One individual's rich cultural tradition might well be another's hegemonic ideology.

¹⁸ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 8

¹⁹ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 100

This tension becomes clear in Bouchard's suggestion that the symbols, language, and history of the Francophone majority should be emphasized (even though he acknowledges many young people are increasingly disinterested in identity politics and attracted to American cultural products).²⁰ Bouchard's own authentic attachment to his community is unquestionable. But whether others should feel compelled to feel the same way, by under-emphasizing the contribution of non-francophone minorities to province's history, strikes us as rather illiberal. Cultures are not valuable in themselves. They have value because individuals choose to reconstitute them in the course of their lifetimes, and they should be permitted to do so in as uncoercive a manner as possible. This might include contributing cultural products that juxtapose against and even disrupt the values of the majority culture. The alternative is the calcification of anachronisms, protected in the name of a past that stands sovereign over the future. This might strike Bouchard as over-individualistic, but frankly it seems hard to adopt any other position without ascribing culture a quasi-metaphysical status that transcends the individuals who make up a community. Given that Bouchard is committed to a "realistic vision of liberal philosophy," he seems unlikely to want to take this step.²¹

All of this is especially pertinent since, for the foreseeable future, the Francophone majority will likely retain control of the legislative agenda and most institutions within the province. Bouchard is right to emphasize that the Francophone Quebecers have long been marginalized within the Confederation of Canada, and are rightly suspicious of attempts to infringe upon their sovereignty. But a province is not just a vessel for the expression of a national culture as determined by dialogue between the majority and minorities – and whether or not interculturalism would provide a practical framework for achieving this is still open to debate. It is a significant set of state institutions that wields formidable powers on behalf of the majority. While it is true that Bouchard acknowledges and even commends the legal instruments that exist that check these powers, we feel that he is insufficiently concerned about majoritarian take over. To give just one example, his consistent praise the French Language Laws washes over the persistent controversies that have engulfed it since the beginning. One questions whether many minority linguistic groups would share Bouchard's romantic belief that imposing the French language will bring individuals together.

All that said, Bouchard's book is undeniably an important and timely one. While we disagree with many of his substantive points and the values that underpin them, there is no doubt that the book's more partisan dimensions make it more engaging and stimulating. Bouchard is also very right to conclude that these debates will not be going away anytime soon. So long as issues of cultural pluralism continue to dominate public discourse, texts like *Interculturalism* should be welcomed as crucial contributions.

²⁰ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 104

²¹ See Bouchard, *Interculturalism*, 109