

Need to struggle makes Quebec culture stronger

By VICTOR TEBOUL
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Now that both governments have spent their millions to promote Canadian and Québécois culture, it might be worth considering closely, with the festivities still fresh in our minds, the political significance of culture.

Culture, at least in Canada, seems to manifest itself as an opening force.

Canadian nationalism has for some time thrived by opposing American control of what was considered to be specifically Canadian. It turned out our intellectuals were especially concerned with the excessive number of American professors in our universities.

By the same token, our Canada Day holiday has expanded into an expensive Canada Week Festival as a reaction to the Saint-Jean Baptiste festivities, particularly since the Parti Québécois' election. Culture, here in Canada thrives as long as it has some force to oppose, and nowhere else is this defence mechanism so effectively expressed as in Quebec.

This is all the more true in that Quebec's mythology seems to derive directly from its political situation in Canada. The situation has structurally conditioned Quebecers to feel and act as a minority and as such has obliged them to be constantly on the defensive.

This legitimate attitude has led French Canadians and particularly their nationally inclined elite, especially writers, to be opposers: they opposed conscription during the two world wars, they opposed immigration, Jewish schools, non-Catholic unions, industrialization, even the screening of supposedly corrupting U.S. movies.

Inevitably this defence mechanism has impregnated culture, where resistance

and revolt run as a tradition.

This resistance has permeated Quebec's culture so proudly that it has become an integral part of the Québécois identity. It can even be discovered in non-separatist authors such as Gabrielle Roy and Yves Thériault, who belong to a category of writers usually considered politically inactive.

Songs of chansonniers

But nowhere is this reaction so massively propagated as in the songs of chansonniers where the connotations associated with the term Québécois are equated with the idea of oppression. For the mythological image of the Québécois that most often dominates in the collective psyche - and which is not all fiction - is that of an underdog, oppressed and dominated throughout Canada's history - usually commencing with the defeat of the French, an event which, of all ironies, is called "la Conquête."

Such an idea comes through clearly, although at times implicitly, not only from songs but also from novels, plays, poems, even films and it gives legitimacy to aspirations for freedom.

People in the media are usually sensitive to this image if it is not overdone. Critics seem in general favorably inclined towards artistic forms containing such a perception. Quebec's movie critics association has recently awarded their annual prize to Gilles Groulx's 24 Heures Ou Plus a film withheld for five years by former National Film Board Commissioner Sidney Newman who considered it subversive.

Struggle and resistance are then deeply entrenched in Quebec's culture. Among Quebec's singers, those most



RENE SIMARD
The bilingual

popular amid all age groups, whether Pauline Julien or Félix Leclerc, are also, at least culturally, its chief standard-bearers embodying through their songs a struggle of two centuries.

Contrary to the American anti-war songs, now part of history, the protest song is alive and well in Quebec, and will be until Quebec is not regarded a minority as in the present political structure.

It is of no surprise that since the PQ's election, the Saint-Jean Baptiste festivities have had no more need of the chansonniers to boost the collective ego and to voice this resistance. Both have been institutionalized with the independentists' arrival in power.

Conversely, one can understand why the super-shows of Canada Week can only round up French Canadian enter-

tainers (as opposed to chansonniers) who in addition to being able to sing in English, can (one is tempted to add) also appeal indistinctly to vast audiences of various ethnic backgrounds.

So we were offered bilingual singers such as René Simard and Nanette Workman whose hips beat to the ephemeral disco sound; singers straight out of the 1960s as Michel Louvain and Pierre Lalonde and even Elvis imitator Johnny Farago.

Atonal culture?

These shows seem typical of the desire to project at all costs the image of a bilingual Canada, but in fact succeed in confirming in the minds of most Québécois the atonality of Canadian culture. For what is distinctly Canadian in the disco beat?

Contrary to this type of plastic culture where the lyrics of the songs have no profound significance, that of the resisting Québécois counter-culture remains strongly influenced by literature and poetry in particular. This is what makes its force.

Gilles Vigneault is essentially a poet as is Fernand Dumont, sociologist and mastermind of the white paper on culture. Poetry everywhere has been subversive: this is in a way its nature. From Michèle Lalonde, now an important functionary in the cultural affairs department, to the legendary Gaston Miron, the same struggle is conveyed. Quebec's "protest" song seems then the natural extension of poetry, the latter offering to the former its intellectual background.

It is that same revolt which explains the popularity in Quebec of cajun singer Zachary Richard, whose blue jeans, old accordion and plaintive melodies echo a theme very popular



ZACHARY RICHARD
The uprooted

among the Québécois, that of the uprooted, the exploited, the oppressed.

But the appeal of lyrics or the art of using words has long been part of French Canadian culture as Quebec's leaders were quick to discover from Henri Bourassa to Maurice Duplessis and, closer to us, Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque. They all share one common characteristic: effective rhetoric.

It is this literary tradition that characterizes to this day Quebec's elite. And although French Canadian publishers constantly growl at the foreign control - particularly French - of their sector, few nations of five or six million inhabitants produce such an incredible number of books monthly which specifically deal with one same topic: themselves.

Such a tremendous amount of energy coming of all groups from a predominant and brilliant part of the elite will inevitably tint if not stain Quebec's collective subconscious if Quebecers do not achieve equal status with the rest of English Canada.

Major flaw

Quebec's intelligentsia, its most creative people, constitute a powerful driving force behind the nationalist movement, a force most often ignored by analysts who generally minimize the importance of culture and literature and who do not perceive the essential role writers and poets have played in Quebec in arousing and keeping alive French Canadian identity.

In this perspective, fighting the PQ in a referendum is equivalent to fighting French Canadian mythology. That is precisely the major flaw in the current debate: Quebec's present situation is treated as a purely political issue.

Although such issues may entail long term consequences, they are tied to immediate factors - unemployment, inflation and so on - and are centered on political figures whose constitutional views may well prevail for a few years. On the other hand, Quebec's mythology is probably here to stay permanently and so is this defensive-minority complex as long as Quebec's minority status is not modified.

A negative result to the coming referendum will only perpetuate the resistance mythology even if the PQ is no longer on the scene, for the real issue is a question neither of politics nor economics. The real issue is deeply rooted in Quebec's collective conscience.

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