

# Whose Values? On Nationalism in English Canada and in Québec

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Since the details of the PQ's proposed Charter of Québec Values were first leaked to the media a few weeks ago, there has been a firestorm of condemnation across the Rest of Canada (ROC). The corporate media's universal denunciations on the matter are matched only by the many petitions circulating on social media calling for an end to this display of racism in Québec. It's an auspicious moment indeed when stories in the *National Post* and the *Globe & Mail* sound very much like the ones penned by activists on social media.

Many of the stories about racism in Québec are coming from people who would never dare use such language in any other context (except, perhaps, for the spurious and illogical notion of "reverse" racism). Some of the same people who dare not speak of the changes to immigration, refugee, and migrant worker policies in Canada as what they are – xenophobic and racist displays of Canadian nationalism fuelled by a logic of multiculturalism that severely limits our ability to speak about and see racism – have gleefully used the unspeakable "r" word and its corollaries en masse since the announcement.

Let us forget the massive restructuring of the federal prison system or the gluttonous expansion of the Tar Sands as examples par excellence of contemporary forms of racism and colonialism in Canada. No, we can rest assured in the ROC that racism exists primarily in Québec, that place where everything seems a bit strange, if not slightly romantic.

It is no coincidence that the *Globe and Post* discover a penchant for the art of anti-racist critique when it comes to Québec, but the institutional left and a bunch of my friends and colleagues in the ROC who never publicly speak out about the deeply embedded racism in Canada are suddenly flush with concern for government policy in La Belle Province. I'm reminded in this moment that the ROC has a deep and generalized disdain for Québec, especially when it comes to anything to do with the PQ.

Notwithstanding my concerns above, there's no doubt that a long history of white supremacy and colonialism are at work in the proposed Charter. The complicated intersections of nationalism, racism, and colonialism, and the ways they've coalesced in Québec since the 1960s, make something like the current proposal likely and predictable.

The post-1960s France-Québec rapprochement, amply documented by former diplomats and technocrats, is a good place to begin an examination into the Charter.

In France, this rapprochement was brought on in part by colonial nostalgia for the French mission civilisatrice, especially with the loss of Algeria in 1962. At a time when decolonization challenged French notions of exceptionalism, Québec offered a great opportunity to point to a successful former colony, one populated largely by people of European descent.

On this side of the Atlantic, Québec found legitimacy for its national project in a rediscovery of its European civilizational heritage. It could stand on its own – an island of French in an ocean of Anglo

dominance – with the explicit Gaullist support of their French brethren. But given the overtly religious and conservative nature of Québécois society at the onset of this process of rediscovery and the existing mistrust between the two francophone societies going back at least to the Conquest, forging a bond would take some time.

As an example, there's no way that the PQ could've ever proposed a policy such as the Charter in the late 80s and 90s when France first had its "affaire de foulard," because the institutional and ideological basis for it didn't exist in Québec. It has taken several decades for the Québécois intellectual and political elite, with a healthy dose of French support, to recast Québec as a republican society, in the sense derived from the French Revolution, and especially, the Fifth Republic.

So, now we have people across the political spectrum, whether dedicated sovereigntists, soft nationalists, so-called federalists (read my journal article for more on Charest's introduction of the Québec values language), and even many Québécois who could care less about the fate of Québec, claiming that it has always shared a republican heritage with France.

This is part of a national re-membering that casts itself outside of Anglo-American (read UK, US, Canada, Australia) dominance, while at the same time asserting its own place at the lead table as bearers of Euro-civilizational norms (secularism, gender equality, democracy, etc). Both France and Québec are hard at work constructing this alternative sphere of influence (through, for instance, La Francophonie, designed in part by De Gaulle to give Québec a legitimate international voice), one that many will recognize as more of the same, and rightly so.

If you know a bit about French-Canadian history, you know the claim that Québec has always been republican is absurd – Québec was where many of the anti-republican clergy found refuge during the Revolution, it was deeply hostile to republicanism in the decades leading up to the Rebellions in 1837-38, and then again for nearly a century.

Interculturalism in Québec, which I trust we'll be hearing much more about, is based precisely on the revisionism that Québec has always been republican and therefore has its own (anti-Anglo-American) approach to questions of racial diversity (ethnocultural diversity in Quebec, we dare not speak the "r" word in a French republican tradition – check out French president François Hollande's recent erasure of the word "race" from the French constitution).

What we're witnessing is an attempt to further situate Québec within the French republican sphere and outside Anglo-Saxon dominance. If we understand it for what it is – an orchestrated strategy to turn to Europe and its unique genius when it comes to questions of race and empire, then it becomes much easier to see what's happening in Québec as the flip side of what is currently going on in Canada, with the turn to the monarchy and symbols of past British military "victories" paving the way for widespread support for the exclusion of (certain targeted) racialized migrants on the grounds that they represent threats to the nation and its values.

It's too easy for many in the ROC to turn to Québec as an outlet for its outrage, when policies in Canada lead to the violent deportation and suffocating criminalization of tens of thousands every year, most of whom are among the most vulnerable in our society, yet continue to resist our dehumanizing ways.

Let's push ourselves to be consistent in how we call out the workings of racism and colonialism in our communities. Otherwise we risk turning away from the problems that are right before us.

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**P.S.**

\* New Socialist. New Socialist Webzine - Canada:

<http://www.newsocialist.org/721-whose-values-on-nationalism-in-english-canada-and-in-quebec>

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