

## The Giddiness of Descending. Handing Down in Spite of Uncertainty

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### 1. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

If I have the honour of addressing you today, it is not because I am a well known expert in the field of Québec and Canadian studies. Nor am I a specialist on the question of globalization and its impacts on the cultural evolution of smaller societies and minorities. I am truly concerned about those questions but I have no special authority about these matters which would result in my being invited to this prestigious gathering. I have accepted the responsibility of talking to you, because I received a friendly request from the former Dean of the Faculty of Literature of Laval University, Jacques Desautels, who was kind enough to wish to see me among you. I think of my presence here as a way of thanking him for all he has done for me.

### 2. MOTIVATION

If friendship has been a good pretext to be here, this gives me no particular competence on the topics of

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your colloquium. Short of competence, I take the liberty of using personal experience as a basis for making some observations. As a matter of fact, the subject of this colloquium is a central preoccupation, not of my professional life as a geographer, but rather of my family life. So, instead of delivering the commentaries of a specialist, you will hear a rather personal testimony. That testimony will be largely coloured, of course, by the papers presented at this colloquium, but it remains essentially about direct influence of personal experience. I simply hope that my reflections will be interesting enough to be forgiven for having so egoistically taken on this closing speech.

### 3. POSITION

The roots of my reflection are to be found in my condition as an ordinary citizen living a life that can be called “minority.” I was born and I am living in Québec City, where, with my wife who was born in Vancouver, I am raising two small children in French and English. Put differently, living in an environment that is essentially francophone, I experiment in my daily family life with bilingualism and perhaps, as far as it exists, biculturalism, to reuse an expression that was previously used to describe the Canadian project.

I concede that this way of being a minority is somewhat paradoxical, as it permits our children to be, somehow, twice parts of a majority, whether in Québec or in Canada. My wife and I are very conscious that our linguistic choice is an asset that most of our children’s friends are deprived of. But this interpretation is challenged, as some people see a danger in raising children this way: the danger of not being sufficiently familiar with either language, the danger of “identity destabilization,” to paraphrase an expression of Serge Proulx.

This experience of bilingualism, which is a factor distinguishing us from the majority of people we know, is a constant source of questions, if not doubts. And, in our case, the bilingual handing down of culture (or the culture handing down two languages) is not an obvious thing to do: it is not a “natural” process, to use John Meisel’s wording. That was not part of my wife’s or my family’s traditions, that we would introduce an innovation whose merit we have to convince each other of. This approach to the handing down of culture requires a great deal of rationalization, and an ongoing discussion of the legitimacy and rele-

vance of our decisions about raising our children. In those exchanges, our political convictions, conscious or unconscious, are called upon; there are collations and consolations. An outsider might conclude that our family's choice sounds like an echo of certain political options. For example, some could see it as a way of militating in favour of a "strong Québec in a united Canada," to repeat a well known slogan, or as a means of associating with Trudeau's utopia of a bilingual Canada.

We try in fact to be neutral on the political question, in order to concentrate only on the good of our children. It is possible that, in so doing, we may seem naïve, and that we've succumbed to an illusion. However artificial this exercise may look, we feel it is essential. Without that fiction, how could we make full use of this new way of handing down culture where the French and English languages are on an equal footing? This approach is so important to us that we do not want to jeopardize it through unnecessary exposure to the ups and downs of the Canada-Québec political debate.

#### 4. THE GENEALOGICAL REASON

Why do we insist on educating our children in both languages?

Our decision is based on a very practical consideration. Different from what is unhappily going on in some communities in Canada — as indicated by Frits Pannekoek — we wish our children to be able to communicate as much as possible with all the members of their family, that is, of course, their father and mother, but also their grandparents, their uncles and aunts, their cousins. It seems essential to us that our children be proficient in both languages, to really be part of their *genealogy*, which is the source and foundation of human existence.

As Léon Bernier has said, there is there something both obvious and not commonplace involved: the family, whatever its form and its culture, is the main site for the handing down of conscience and the desire to be a human being. This genealogical handing down of humanity necessitates, or so it seems to me, that the receiver learns that he is part of a generational succession, where he can find a place for himself that is absolutely his own. This is the fundamental condition that will make him conscious of having a *human identity* in which he will recognize himself. How can a child take his place among other humans

if he cannot fully feel the pleasure or the astonishment he gives to those who welcome him or take pains for him? Is it not through that pleasure and those pains that the child experiences the desire that brought him into existence and that, in his turn, he will reproduce?

Perhaps we are here at the very core of transmitting. Before handing down a given culture as a heritage, the purpose of transmittal is reproduction, from one generation to the next, of conscience and the desire of becoming human. If disconnected from the *genealogical* reason, the handing down of culture is in danger of becoming a technical gimmick the State and industry can easily lay their hands on.

## 5. THE REGISTERS OF CULTURE

Genealogical transmission and the handing down of culture are two different things, but it seems difficult to separate them. That is why I am surprised to see how discreet our colloquium has been on the subject of genealogy, particularly at a time when the traditional family model is being questioned, and “intercultural” families continue to multiply.

The speakers have concentrated on the question of cultural institutions and the shocks they withstand in smaller societies, under the threat of globalization and industrialization of culture. Those matters are, of course, crucial, but in my opinion, they have to be considered in the larger perspective of a broader notion of culture, a definition which establishes a distinction and a hierarchy among the authorities where culture takes shape.

The distinction Fernand Harvey makes about the registries of culture can be highly useful. When distinguishing between identitary culture, institutionalized culture and mass culture, Harvey helps us structure our reflections, taking into account not only the manifestations of culture, but their foundations. This leads me to two observations.

## 6. CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY

The first is about the debate on the roles of globalization, politics and industry in the homogenization or diversity of cultures. We see a sort of world culture now emerging. In infancy since the Enlightenment, this culture asserts itself in a way that resembles a real revolution. That is so because the sociological material would no longer comprise the community, but rather the individuals who, when added together, become a mass.

There would then be a displacement of where cultural authenticity is to be found. Previously, traditional cultures gave shape to great collective narratives which gave meaning to the behaviour and discourse of individuals. These days, the community seems less and less the source of an authentic culture which can be handed down, through tradition, from one generation to the next.

Tradition has not necessarily vanished, but it is no longer the main source of culture. It is just one source among those presented to one's conscience or to individual consumption. This is why a tradition, in these circumstances, can find a new vigour if it is wise enough to — please excuse the wording — “capture a segment of the market.” It is then only a *memory* incorporated or amalgamated in with other cultural traits. But the importance of tradition is declining; the privileged source is no longer the community but the individual.

Given these conditions, one can hope that individuals will really be the beneficiaries of a new cultural authenticity. Each individual, in that perspective, is condemned to innovation, otherwise he is left alone or nearly alone, to mass alienation. If globalization is to result in a new and authentic cultural diversity, the individual must be able to tackle the multiplicity of cultural expressions. He must be in a position to *negotiate* his own *cultural identity*, taking into account:

- the great collective narratives which, willy nilly, perpetuate themselves;
- institutional culture, which is still resisting the assaults of privatization; and
- mass culture, where it is often hard to distinguish profit from value.

If this personal choice of culture is implemented fully, it is essential to accept the individual's basic right to be what he is; the right to build his hopes into a heritage, as Donna Cardinal would say. This is why

Michael Ignatieff is totally correct in arguing that individual rights, to their fullest extent, are an essential attribute of cultural globalization. Without the privilege of freedom that the rights provide, the individual can only express his cultural authenticity with great difficulty.

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But are individual rights more efficient than the influence of the producers of mass culture? Even if governments are sensitive to cultural diversity and to individual rights, what about the cultural industries, and especially the huge monopolies in that sector?

Until recently — and perhaps even today — the producers of mass culture targeting the world market had to take into account not just national protectionism but more especially the great collective narratives that have links with politics and territories. Those great narratives, to which mass culture had to conform, dictated a political negotiation whose task was the local acculturation of the cultural products or models coming from outside. But won't the trend toward free trade, which is a companion to the present movement of globalization, squeeze the communities, bit by bit, of the right of political negotiation, if clear limits are not drawn up?

Local cultures can, of course, appropriate, as Serge Proulx says, foreign techniques and use them to their own advantage, to eventually penetrate the world market. But what about the political stake? I would say that, in those circumstances, the political task would be less to protect national — or ethnic — identities than to defend the right of the individual to a collective life that is as democratic as possible and as meaningful as can be hoped for. Among those rights, could we not emphasize the right to participate, whatever the level of government, in the shaping of how to live as a community? If so, it is still possible to think that a given community can give itself the political instruments to pursue or safeguard, in one's own milieu, what are seen as cultural singularities. It is essential that the collective rights created for that purpose:

- are the result of a real democratic process;
- are not in conflict with individual rights; and
- are respectful of the rights of other groups.

Under those conditions, it seems possible to think that a cultural policy can be a factor of social cohesion, while favouring the development of a cultural plurality.

## 7. THE CASE OF CANADA AND QUÉBEC

My second observation concerns the Canada and Québec question, which I do not usually talk about without some wariness. My position could be to hide myself behind the general principles I have just enunciated. But this would be a gross mistake as, in this case as in any other, the principles must be used to take into account the circumstances and motivations of different peoples and their perceptions of one another. This does not imply that reason should give ground to whim, atavism and preconception. But it is always advantageous to be aware of these matters, if we want to avoid unproductive clashes and put on the table the conditions of a miscarriage. So, what about the question of the handing down of culture in Canada? Can we hope that authentic cultures can blossom over there? Are there particular conditions which are obstacles to that?

The question is highly complex and I am conscious of not having grasped all its components. But I would like to say that I am very sensitive to Michael Dorland's analysis of the incompleteness of the great Canadian narrative. Canada has not yet completed its great narrative, as it is still missing what Dorland calls a *lawful speaker*, a great speaker who would unify the public sphere *a mari usque ad mare*. There is of course a pro-Canadian rhetoric which, since the first days of Confederation, has tried to legitimize Canadian nationalism and federal institutions. This exercise has not been without success — after all Canada is still here — but there is also, as Michel de la Durantaye suggested, the fact that pro-Canadian rhetoric appears constantly as a counterpoint and a counterweight to opposed rhetorics. This creates an impossible unison, a flavour of unachievement. To repeat John Meisel, this is how Canada and Québec constitute another true America; another America, less certain of itself, which would be a counterweight to the confidence of the United States, which is often seen as the essence of its soul.

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The great Canadian narrative has found its unachievement, at least in part, thanks to another great narrative, that of French Canada and Québec. This narrative is in its turn unachieved as Canadian sovereignty and the attachment of residents of Québec to that sovereignty have prevented Québec from completing its own political and territorial agenda. Two unachieved great narratives have been competing with one another for a long time, at a time when, like many others, they are shaken by globalization. They then feel doubly threatened, as a new danger is added to an old frustration. And this is without taking into account that, in this stream, also asserting themselves, are communities which put forward great narratives and, on that basis, claim political and territorial rights: the First Nations, the Francophones living outside the borders of Québec, the Acadians, the Anglophones of Québec, and perhaps others. The new circumstances could give birth, it seems to me, to mutual resentment and a game of dupes. Resentment diverting into irony or indifference is not new. It is the consequence of unachievement and the competition between great narratives of Canada and Québec. Today, this is exacerbated by two factors. First, as already mentioned, there are other great narratives, each a competitor, that one hears more and more. Second, as elsewhere, the legitimacy of those great narratives is compromised simultaneously by the internal forces of individual rights and by the external forces of free trade. As a result, there is a danger of reinforcing the prejudices that haunt the perceptions of communities living within the Canadian territory. A game of dupes is the situation of possibly invading the front scene, if everyone is focusing on his own self image and, in that of the other, those that flatter resentment. Paradoxically, at the same time that Canada moves resolutely toward cultural diversity, it is in danger of sinking into fictions where everyone's culture descends to simplistic and pejorative stereotypes. I think there is a major difficulty for the handing down of culture in Canada. Those two paths are not compatible; it is important to avoid the latter, without necessarily thinking that any criticism is to be condemned. Criticism, on the contrary, is essential, but it must not be confused with anything else. Developing an authentic culture, which respects legitimate individual and collective rights, cannot accept phantasms where the self is an overblown and petty figure, and where the other is reified and provides only an opportunity for psychological release. It is of course hard to believe that this option is now the choice of the majority. But, when reading certain newspapers, in French or English, I fear that these ways of seeing the other still reach large audiences. This is why it is so important that we should all be vigilant, so that the phantasms do not gain ground. I hope my children will be part of this vigilance.

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