

Making (Non)Sense of L’Affaire Hérouxville: Citizenship, Culture and Belonging in Québec

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The following paper sets the stage for understanding L’Affaire Hérouxville in Québec earlier this year, and will enable a more extended analysis of what is at stake concerning citizenship and identity in this allegedly “isolated incident.”

For those of us struggling to make sense of race politics and dynamics in Québec, l’Affaire Hérouxville, as it has come to be called, offered yet another baffling example of the ostensible complexity of the Québec race/culture equation, with its versioning of colonial histories, its linguistic divides, and oppressive religious legacies. Swirling around these troubling events, was the January 2007 *Journal de Montréal* survey claiming that 59% Quebecers self-identified as slightly-to-strongly racist (compared with 47% elsewhere), while the recent election campaign climate was contaminated with racist xenophobia, from Parti Québécois leader, André Boisclair’s reference to Harvard classmates with “les yeux brides” (or *slant eyes*), and the directeur general des elections du Québec, Marcel Blanchet’s accommodation, then retraction (following death threats), that muslim women wearing the *niqab* (or full-face veil), would not have to identify themselves by removing their veils at polling stations in order to vote. The terms of debate have been distorted and disorienting, and the repeated defense that these racist behaviors are simply *aberrations* is beginning to wear grossly thin. Given this climate, it appears that it is people of colour in Québec who have been stoically tolerant of the shockingly racist behavior of its fellow citizens and public figures.

On January 25, 2007, the small municipality of Hérouxville located 160 km northeast of Montréal, with a population of 1338 residents, adopted a resolution regarding “les normes de vie” (or living norms) at its municipal meeting, a document destined “aux immigrants éventuels” (eventual immigrants), and sent to six Quebec ministers, amongst them, Relations Internationales, Immigration, and Famille, Ainés et Condition Féminine, as well as federal Foreign Affairs Minister, Peter MacKay, and Secretary of State, Helena Guergis. The resolution outlined modes of behavior that were deemed “acceptable” for new immigrants by the municipal council, and was largely shaped by the counselors strange fantasies and outdated stereotypes of muslim culture. By early February, the international media was focused on this small town, and the media was then blamed within Québec for over-exaggerating and sensationalizing the issue, as if the declarative Code of Conduct was not already sensationalist and obscene in itself. “Don't stone women to death, burn them or circumcise them, immigrants wishing to live in the town of Hérouxville in Quebec, Canada, have been told,” announced the headlines for BBC News on January 29. While as far away as New Zealand, the *New Zealand Herald* declared, “You can stay in Canada as long as you don't stone your women” (Feb 1 2007). Thankfully, the French newspaper, *Libération*, brought some critical perspective, and referred to a “croisade xenophobe” (xenophobic crusade). While in Canada, national and local papers tended toward reporting so-called facts, wherein town councillor André Drouin announced that the declaration was not racist: “Bien sûr, nous avons voulu choquer en parlant de lapidation ou d'excision, mais il était temps que quelqu'un mette ses culottes et regard plus loin que le bout de son nez. Si on s'adapte à tous les nouveaux immigrants, qu'advient-il de notre culture québécoise dans 10 ou 20 ans?” (*Le Devoir*, 17 février 2007) (“Certainly, we wanted to shock people in speaking of stoning and female

circumcision, but it was time we ‘put on our pants’ and saw beyond the end of our noses. If we adapt to all new immigrants, what will become of our Québec culture in 10 or 20 years?”)

Based in part on a peculiar survey undertaken in mid-December 2006, in the region of Mékinac, in which 196 residents responded to 19 questions (ranging from “Would you define yourself as a racist person? And “Can a woman walk alone in a public place? To “Do you think we should reserve a space for prayer in schools?”), the declarative resolutions, when combined with the gendered expression uttered by Drouin, “mettre ses culottes,” or putting on one’s pants in order to take a strong (manly) stance, reveal the interlocking discourses of racism, paternalism, and sexism that are at work in these events. Hérouxville’s website offers downloads of most of the documents pertaining to the resolution, as well as its coat of arms, a recent issue of the magazine, *Les immigrants de la capitale* (the voice of immigrants in Québec), a letter from Grand-mère Chayer entitled, *Je me souviens*, reflecting on the oppressiveness of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly regarding gender equality, as well as a template letter to Premier Jean Charest, requesting amendments to the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms regarding “reasonable accommodations.”

Human rights and immigration lawyer, Pearl Eliadis, speaking on CBC Radio’s *Cross-Country Check-up* on the subject of “How do you avoid cultural conflicts in a multicultural society?” (February 25, 2007), clearly summarized the peculiarity of “reasonable accommodation” as a term for debate on this issue. She stated that what is Canadian human rights law, in the Canadian Charter of Human Rights (wherein section

15.1 declares, “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability”), has morphed from pure legal rule, to a social discourse in Québec. Characterising the debates of the preceding 3 months in Quebec, Eliadis said:

“I think the debate in Quebec has become a strange social phenomena of what is actually a very well-known legal concept in Canada. The concept of ‘reasonable accommodation’ has existed in every single province, including Quebec, for decades. What it means, is that if there is someone who runs up against an established rule and they are trying to exercise their religion, or get into a building because they have a disability, that the person on the other side of that request is obliged, under Canadian human rights laws, to respond to that reasonably. What has happened in Quebec, is that has appeared, like a social virus, and jumped, from a pure legal rule, to a social discourse about expressing preferences. The general comments I want to make, is that we live in a liberal society, where we need to start with, ‘You get to do what you want to do, you get to live the way you want to live, you get to express the preferences that you want to express, without needing permission first.’ That is what our culture and society is built on. The strange thing that has happened in Quebec—and I’m thinking of the Hérouxville example, which is a small municipality which has done a code of conduct in rural Québec—is that this has now become a debate about how you are going to live, and almost needing permission if you are going to engage in a kind of conduct that is different from the majority. And that is behaving like a social virus that has leapt over the wall from a legal rule that has been around for a long time, to almost needing permission if you are an immigrant to live the way you want to live, and I think that is the wrong way to go about it.”

Meanwhile, the Muslim Council of Montreal, continues to issue conciliatory press releases and do damage control. And in early February, nine women from the Canadian Islamic Congress bravely visited Hérouxville for a two-hour meeting with town residents, to dispel myths of the Islamic faith and to confirm and affirm their equal status as Québécois.

But equally distressing to the Hérouxville events themselves, perhaps, is the now recognizable mantra in Quebec, that these expressions of racism are simply isolated incidents. In these particular debates, polarizations and distanciations have also been made between *les régions*, or the rural municipalities, and the cosmopolitan, multicultural urban centres of Montréal and Québec City. Six surrounding municipalities in Mékinac have

declared their solidarity with Hérouxville, as other regions attempt to distinguish themselves (in often equally racist, if slightly different terms), while Charest continues to tout these as ‘isolated’ and aberrant positions. In doing so, one downplays and dismisses such racist behavior and expressions. It also marginalizes the need to responsibly address and analyze the violence of such gestures and the hostile social climate it creates. Premier Jean Charest’s response? That Quebec is a tolerant province, followed by the formation of a Study Commission to investigate reasonable accommodation, headed by philosopher Charles Taylor, and historian, Gerard Bouchard, due in March 2008.

This paper was originally published in the RACE Newsletter in May 2007.

All translations are my own.

Hérouxville: <http://municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/>

Muslim Council of Montréal: <http://www.muslimcouncil.org/en/archives.html>

CBC Cross-Country Check-up: <http://www.cbc.ca/checkup/archives.html>

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/Charter/index.html#garantie>

Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms:

<http://www.cdpedj.qc.ca/en/commun/docs/charter.pdf>