



Louis Balthazar. *French-Canadian Civilization*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996. 50 pp. \$7.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87013-395-4.

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## A Distinct Society

This brief but remarkably informative study of Quebec politics is part of a series of papers designed by The Association for Canadian Studies in the United States to introduce American undergraduates to various aspects of Canadian society. Louis Balthazar's contribution to this series deals with the political, cultural, and economic developments which have transformed Quebec into a politically conscious society determined to preserve its Francophone identity. After a concise account of the historical circumstances which led French Canadians to "consider themselves ... as forming, particularly in the province of Quebec, a *distinct society*" (p. 1), Balthazar explores four political issues which, he argues, confirm this claim to a unique cultural identity.

He begins with a discussion of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the period when the Liberal regime (1960-1966) of Quebec's Premier, Jean Lesage, presided over the modernization of Quebec's provincial government. This process of modernization turned the institutions of the Quebec State into instruments of cultural, economic, and social reform. Prior to World War Two, to be French Canadian meant to be Roman Catholic. Almost all the social and cultural institutions of Quebec were denominational. The entire school system, as well as the social service system, were administered by the Church. Even economic organizations such as the cooperative movement, trade unions, and credit unions were identified as Catholic. The Lesage government, seeking greater pluralism in public institutions, turned the major responsibility for education and social welfare over to the provincial government. Trade unions became increasingly non-

denominational, and religious communities relinquished control of hospitals. By the early 1970s, religion had lost its place at the center of French-Canadian culture. This transformation was remarkably peaceful, a fact Balthazar attributes to a liberal movement in the Church under Pope John the XXIII, and the congenial relationships between the "liberal elites and many members of the clergy."

The reforms introduced by the Lesage government were economic as well as social and cultural. Quebec's economy had long been dominated by English-Canadian capital, a situation the state sought to remedy by encouraging greater Francophone participation in industrial development. Private power companies were purchased by the government to form the giant Hydro-Quebec, a corporation controlled by French-speaking managers, and Quebec gained control over its own social security system, the Quebec Deposit and Investment Fund (*La Caisse*) which became a source of funds for investing in Francophone ventures.

The programs which defined the Quiet Revolution had been conceived during the 1940s and 1950s, and the industrialization which fueled it had been an ongoing process throughout the twentieth century, but it was not until the 1960s that cultural, political, and economic conditions combined to create a new national spirit among French Canadians. Until mid-century, it was assumed by the governing elites that national identity was best preserved by resisting the intellectual and economic forces of modernism. *La survivance* depended upon avoiding assimilation, equating "their identity with

Roman Catholic religious allegiance” (p. 5), and remaining an agrarian economy. The Quiet Revolution raised new questions concerning the relationship between Quebec and the Canadian Commonwealth by instilling the national identity with a new political and economic consciousness. Leaders like Lesage began to refer to Quebec as a state rather than a province and advocated a “special status” designed to preserve its Francophone culture.

Balthazar then surveys the constitutional debate which resulted from this quest. He begins with the Royal Commission of Inquiry’s conclusion, in 1967, that Canada has two “distinct societies.” He then traces the increasing hostility during the 1970s between the advocates of Canadian unity led by Canadian Prime Minister Liberal Pierre Elliott Trudeau and the separatist position of the *Parti Québécois* under the leadership of Quebec Premier René Lévesque, recounts the failure of the separatists to win the 1978 referendum on independence, and concludes with the collapse of the Meech Lake Agreement in 1990.

To preserve “a truly French-speaking civilization,” Balthazar concludes, Quebec must become “the political expression of French Canada” (p. 33). He shows that Francophone communities outside Quebec (with the exception of those along the Quebec borders in New Brunswick and Ontario) are being steadily assimilated into the Anglophone culture, and defends the laws passed in Quebec restricting admission to English-speaking schools and making French the official language of the province. Only a strong French Quebec will be able to sustain the Francophone institutions necessary for the survival of French-Canadian culture in North America.

Because an understanding of modern Quebec depends so much on an understanding of the historical consequences of the Quiet Revolution, the author has chosen to emphasize recent Quebec politics. This decision might pose a problem for American readers unfamiliar with the combination of historical and cultural forces which shaped the “distinct society” known as French Canada. For example, the liberalizing influence of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council does not adequately explain the relative ease with which Quebec secularized its educational and social welfare institutions. During the same period, the dramatic decline in church attendance and the virtual disappearance of religion as an important political issue suggest an influence of legacy of secular nationalism that might be traced back to the abortive na-

tionalist uprisings of the 1830s.

In this sense, the recent claims to a national identity made by French Canadians are significantly different from other nationalist movements which have appeared throughout the world. In the recently published *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington describes the process of social modernization enhances a culture’s political and economic power which, in turn, encourages a people to become more self-confident and culturally self-assertive. At the same time, he continues, modernization leads to crises of identity among individuals who find solace in fundamentalist religious movements. While the first part of Huntington’s model certainly applies to French Canada, the religious element seems conspicuously absent and suggests an aspect of the “distinct society” which deserves consideration.

For a fuller understanding of contemporary Quebec, *French-Canadian Civilization* could be supplemented with the opening chapters of *Contemporary Quebec & the United States 1960-1985*, co-authored by Louis Balthazar and Alfred Oliver Hero, Jr. or of Kenneth Mc Roberts’ *Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis*. As an introduction to the politics of French-Canadian nationalism, however, Balthazar’s monograph is an excellent place to begin, for it not only outlines the major events of the past thirty years, but it also provides a sympathetic understanding of the dilemmas which Francophone nationalism has posed for the Canadian Commonwealth. If, at present, there seems to be no solution to that dilemma, one can at least hope that the debate will continue to be conducted by nationalists like Louis Balthazar.

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