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Eight years ago, I published a book called *Éloge de la richesse* (*In Praise of Riches*), which set out to make it plain that economically Québec lagged seriously behind its partners, that it was less prosperous than we thought, that our standard of living was lower, and that wealth-creation had to become a priority, not out of greed, but because prosperity is essential to reaching the objectives of a society that believes in social progress.

It garnered considerable attention, due in part to its title—almost blasphemous at the time—which caught the popular imagination, but primarily because it was part of a newly emerging pattern of thought embodied in the manifesto *Pour un Québec lucide* (*Clear Heads for Québec*)—written by an informal group of *éminences grises*, including Lucien Bouchard, André Pratte and Denise Robert. Some agreed that we were headed for an impasse and needed a serious change of direction. This too had a definite impact. Suddenly, everyone was talking about *wealth*.

One might almost have thought major change was at hand, but no, the revolution never happened, and the window slammed shut. The pendulum swung back before ever reaching the end of its arc. Québec preferred to sit tight and wait it out.

What most symbolized this resistance to change was the public debate over university fees. It may well be dubbed the “Maple Revolution,” but it definitely was not about springtime: it recycled old ideas and reflexes recalling the dark and chilly days of autumn.

To consider the students’ victory in convincing the new Parti Québécois government to cancel increases for the Fall 2013 semester as simply a matter of the left beating out the right was a paradigm I refused to adopt. I refused because of my profound belief that economic success is essential to the reforms needed for social progress. What won out was

not the ideology of the left so much as a certain fixation on identity and historic conformism. So a virtual freeze was put on education fees, because, well, that is pretty much what we have been doing for the past forty years.

It appeared to me that the student opposition to a reasonable bump-up in fees, with the widespread support they enjoyed, was less ideological than identity-based. This sizeable activist movement was founded on a conception of Québec, a perception of its successes, needs and problems. Why, for instance, would one agree to make sacrifices dictated by budgetary constraints when one refuses to believe that the province is undergoing a financial crisis? Why agree to a fee-rise if the universities seem to be doing all right financially? Why tamper with the values of an education system which lies at the very heart of the Quiet Revolution?

Thus it becomes important to take a close look at this mental construct of Québec that we made for ourselves. We need to stack it up against the facts, so we can get an accurate read on our economic situation, our social accomplishments and our successes in general.

When I broached my intentions with those around me, many feared it would become an exercise in denigrating Québec, or that it might appear that way, in a climate where it is often hard to take a serious and critical look at ourselves without accusations of being anti-Québécois. Yet, as you will see, it is much more a matter of adjustment and deconstruction, because many aspects of the way Québécois see themselves are, in fact, relatively accurate. It so happens that we are even overly self-critical at times.

The goal is therefore not to criticize for the sake of it, but to be as lucid as possible. Collective myths often have a perverse effect. On occasion, they can indeed galvanize us and give us a sense of pride, but they can also create false reassurance from a feeling of success. America's mythology, based on its industrial superiority, can blind its citizens to the fact that their economic structure is crumbling; in France, the triumph of the French model has led our "cousins" to the edge of a precipice. In Québec, a false sense of security might lull us into not reacting when gains made in the past are actually under threat.

In our case, such false illusions leave us open to three particular

dangers. When we are too self-satisfied, we see no reason to bother with improvements. If we are blinded by success, we may fail to see oncoming problems before it is too late. When we are not up-to-date, we make poor choices.

The purpose of this book is to describe Québec and the Québécois family as faithfully, clearly and subtly as we can. This we can do by chasing down our myths and deconstructing them as broadly as possible to include the economy, the environment, our culture and quality of life. We will again be asking those same questions for which we think we already have answers: Are we generous? Are we up-to-date? Do we work hard? Our answers must come from measuring our self-image against the facts as rigorously as possible . . . and having a little fun along the way. The object is not particularly academic, and although there are a number of statistics, we will also come up against glimpses of Québec that are oddly funny and captivating.

To help me in this, I have called on the Centre interuniversitaire de recherche en analyse des organisations (CIRANO—the Center for Inter-university Research and Analysis of Organizations), of which I have the honour to be a Guest Fellow. I thank its President and Director General, Claude Montmarquette, as well as its founder, Robert Lacroix, for their valuable advice. The conclusions are, of course, my own responsibility.



For the most part, the opinions, points of view and ideas Québécois have on their own society are, in fact, quite correct, but at times coloured by their experiences and values, as well as a natural tendency to exaggerate. There are also instances of myth-making, where facts are not allowed to interfere with a good idea, leaving it to the realm of imagination.

It is by putting perceptions face-to-face with facts that we will see how clear-sighted, complacent or wrong they may be.

What exactly are these perceptions? Since I am both judge and advocate, this will be the most delicate part of the operation: defining the myths, then checking to see if they have a legitimate basis. It would be easy to drift into caricature, to concoct false ideas as straw men, the better to demolish them, or break down doors that were never locked.

In addition, there is no Facebook page, no Wikipedia article to tell us how Québécois think of themselves and their territory, so this will be done in segments, using both intuition and deduction, in order to define them as carefully as we can. Certain propositions are, of course, factual: for instance, “Québec is a paradise of natural resources,” or “Québec is a society where the usual language is French.” Others are more subjective: such as saying that Québec is “unique,” or that Québécois are “hospitable.” Still others can be classified as unspoken, like the profound conviction of many that we are less “backward” than the electorate that favoured a Harper government.

## **A GROUP SELFIE**

Some notions we hold about Québec have been abundantly documented, such as the pivotal position held in our recent history by the Quiet Revolution, as well as the cleavage between historical fact and interpretation. It would be relatively easy to show that this fundamental undertaking gave birth to a myth which is far from fact and closer to being sacred.



One might also refer to official documents designed to describe Québec overseas, notably to investors, immigrants and tourists. These inevitably would be complacent, destined as they are to present Québec in a positive light verging on exaggeration. Still, the manner in which they do this is revealing in itself.

One can also find inspiration in the public declarations of politicians and other personalities whose characterization of Québec reflects collective images, perhaps colouring them somewhat.

While I was researching this book, the Deputy Premier, François Gendron, hailed the election of Pope Francis before the National Assembly as “giving a particular flavour to his papacy that resembles Québec values.” He was referring to his reputation as “the Pope of the poor,” who sought to “help the less fortunate come into a better world.” This raised two questions: do we really help the poor, and if so, is it more of a priority for us than for Danes or Italians?

The matter of “Québec values” has been under intense debate recently, and is a fruitful source of ways to clarify our own self-image. Calling something a “Québec value” is certainly a way of defining Québec and underscoring its attributes, but also of emphasizing the fact that it particularly prizes certain concerns and marks itself off by respecting them.

One can consult any number of opinion polls in which Québécois define/compare themselves, or assign characteristics to Québec. There are enough of them to give us quite a good idea. In 2006, for instance, when Lucien Bouchard declared that Québécois should be harder-working, a survey showed us that his belief was far from meeting with unanimous approval: 46% agreed, and 45% disagreed, maintaining that they worked quite hard enough, thank you. Dipping into these resources, it becomes possible to establish a composite image of Québec as we Québécois see it, a sort of collective self-portrait.

## FIVE MECHANISMS AT WORK

This allows us to sort out some general tendencies, mental processes—ways of seeing and reacting, which structure or colour how we look at things. Next, we can elaborate specific propositions and identify affirmations that seem to strike a common chord.

The first device to help us build our collective self-portrait is imagery

from the Quiet Revolution itself. Although it is now over fifty years old, it still influences our perceptions of modern Québec. It is omnipresent and surfaces in a multitude of different domains.

The principles enunciated by Jean Lesage are part of the discussion upon which the Caisse de dépôt and placement du Québec (the Québec Deposit and Investment Fund, in which pension money is kept and used as a public source of strategic investment) is founded. We fought an increase in electricity rates by Hydro-Québec with the promises of René Lévesque in mind. The report written by Monsignor Alphonse-Marie Parent, when the parents of today's university students were still in diapers, inspired us to repudiate the unfreezing of post-secondary fees. The Quiet Revolution's secular ideal led many to support the Charter of Québec Values (on "reasonable accommodation" with immigrants and the wearing of religious or culturally exclusive garb in the public service).

The second element is the feeling that Québec is fundamentally different: "Unique! This is how Québec defines itself" is the revealing sentence that introduces the portrait of Québec on the government's official website.

That Québec is unique is, of course, true. History and sociology have laid out a very distinct path for us: a French population among the very first European arrivals in North America, who have kept their language and specificity throughout the tribulations of history, notably the conquest of New France by the British.

It is likewise obvious that Québécois make up the sole francophone community in North America, including a significant English-speaking minority, as well as native peoples and new arrivals—all of them constituting a nation with its own government, institutions and territory.

Just saying a nation is unique, however, does not clarify a great deal. All nations have specific characteristics, and even groupings which cannot claim to be nations still can be considered unique. Acadians and Texans are proud of their flags, their cuisine, their music and their lifestyles.

Fundamentally though, we all know that we stress our difference from the rest of Canada and North America. True, but hardly astonishing, and once we agree that Québec is a nation, the rest, that particular set of differences, that uniqueness, is a given.