

THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE PARENT REPORT FOR CURRICULUM IN QUÉBEC

Yves Lenoir focuses on the Parent Report (1963-1965), finding that its consequence was the replacement of the educational model derived from France (centred on classical humanities, driven by Neo-Thomism) by one adapted to those economic emphases associated with neoliberalism. The Royal Commission of Inquiry on Teaching in the Province of Québec (Québec Government, 1963-1965) – named after its president, Bishop Alphonse-Marie Parent – led to the integration of the Québec school system into the vocationalism of North-American Anglophone logic, a logic privileging “socializing” and “psycho-pedagogical” elements of education over acquiring knowledge.¹

The Commission had commenced its work in 1961, following the election victory of the Liberal Party, with its campaign message² of “catching-up,” displacing Québec’s historic emphasis upon “conservation,” an educational orientation “turned towards the past.”³ Abandoning the past and emphasizing the present (and the near future) would (presumably) allow Québec to affirm its own culture⁴ while integrating it within neoliberalism, increasingly characterized by a techno-capitalism. Also displaced was the dominance of agrarian interests, as Montreal – already multiethnic and industrialized by Anglophones – represented itself as the future of the province.⁵ School reform, Lenoir continues, was a major facet of the “Quiet Revolution,”⁶ in which modernization⁷ meant the establishment of the Ministry of Education (1964), an event accenting the transfer of power from the Catholic Church to secular society, a process complicated by the Church’s presence throughout the Québec government.⁸ “Only recently,” Lenoir writes in 2005, have Québec school boards become secular, focused on linguistic rather than religious matters.⁹

Central to curriculum reform, Lenoir suggests, were concepts of (1) cultural pluralism, (2) the centrality of the child, (3) the curriculum as providing portals to the world, (4) the democratization of schooling, (5) an “active” and “communal pedagogy,” (5) schooling “less focused on books and more based on observation,” (6) all in service to a “contemporary humanism.”¹⁰ Complaining that the curriculum had been “exclusively literary,” dominated by Latin and literature, plagued by philosophy that was out of date, and one that disadvantaged especially non-elite students,¹¹ the Parent Commission endorsed “science and technology” in service to “new social, moral, economic requirements,” namely “cultural pluralism, materialism, individual and democratic values, scientific rationality and secularism.”¹² These “requirements” had been made more urgent by demographic developments, igniting “an explosion of culture,” the latter term¹³ now comprised of the “humanities, modern science, techniques, popular culture.”¹⁴ This represented an ideological triumph of the new elites: technicians, engineers, administrators, high officials, and university professors

whose conception of a new Québec was founded on “efficiency.”¹⁵ There were critics who worried the curriculum would become the “slave of economic interests.”¹⁶ Reflecting on this point some twenty-five years after the Parent Report, Lenoir concurs: the field of education has indeed been taken over by neoliberal thinking.¹⁷

Indeed: after 50 years of reforms the consequence has been the implantation of a “neoliberal model,” one recasting students as “consumers” considered “human capital,” made “ready to function” thanks to a “pedagogy of services.”¹⁸ Lenoir notes that “human, social and cultural dimensions” of education have been deemphasized; no longer is education “for and by the human being,” a commitment sacrificed for the inculcation of “business values” emphasizing “socialization” (as “harmonious insertion”) into the economic system.¹⁹ This accomplishment represents (he implies) a colonization of Québec by the United States, as Lenoir notes that this long-term trend toward economism has been “progressively implemented” there from the 1880s, replacing “humanism” with “professionalism” (e.g. “vocationalism”).²⁰

In contrast, Québécois have imagined for themselves a “transhistorical cultural identity that would straddle and even unify the past, present and future.”²¹ Correcting his earlier (overly simplified) chronological conception of American education (as leading from humanism to progressivism to neoliberalism), Lenoir suggests that Québec conceptions of education (as “organic”) were “greatly influenced by American trends promoting non-directive approaches,” so-called “humanist pedagogy,”²² an idea recurring in “numerous official documents,” as a “*leitmotiv*,” implying “quality.”²³ Humanism functioned, then, as the “link with the Québécois, Francophone, Catholic cultural past,” an affirmation of what is “unique and exemplary” about Québec, despite intensification of “instrumental, secular, neoliberal” rhetoric.²⁴

This “transhistorical” humanism - which “can vary profoundly” – affirms the “unicity of each human being” as it proclaims “cultural continuity,” thereby (and “most of all,” Lenoir emphasizes) “Québécois specificity.”²⁵ Lenoir quotes a 1981 Council of Education document that associates Québec’s society with a “traditional humanism that takes form in a culture centered on man and his inner life,” affirming “reflection/pondering and the study of reasons to live in society,” a culture that “remembers the past.”²⁶ This “cultural” emphasis could be said to compensate for curriculum concepts derived from the United States, an emphasis evident especially in teacher education.²⁷

The Parent Report represented an “irreversible rupture” with the “French model” – with its “pretention to be founded on the quest for meaning,” emphasizing instead the “transmission of received knowledge based on scientific disciplines and on culture conveyed by the humanities” – invoking, despite its obsession with functionality, the “same quest for meaning.”²⁸ The French model, Lenoir points out, “rested ... on the conviction that knowledge liberates [children] from the slavery in which the royal, religious and aristocratic powers kept the people,” while the “North-American anglophone” model rests on the conviction that “freedom derives from the

development of know-how,” not directly linked to “knowledge but to the capacity to act on and in the world.”²⁹ That means, Lenoir concludes, that “to educate now becomes to instrumentalize in a double sense: that of practice and that of human and social relationships.”³⁰

Since the 1960s, Lenoir concludes, educational reform has meant the deemphasis of the humanities and the elevation of science and technology in pedagogy as well as in curriculum, moving Québec’s “educational system in line with the ‘vocationalist’ and neoliberal logic that prevails in the United States.”³¹ “[Y]et the reform cannot be understood as solely based on economic foundations,” Lenoir explains, as it was also based on “opposition to the socio-cultural grasp of the Church,” adding that this rejection of the Church also meant the “eradication of the solid traditional and distinctive pillars of Québécois society,” leaving only the French language as the marker of Québec’s distinctiveness, leaving reformers with a “huge problem.”³² The solution, the Parent Report implied, would be the juxtaposition of economism with a “trans-historic humanism,” ensuring (presumably) continuity with the past while affirming a “cultural pluralism centered on intercultural relations.”³³

COMMENTARY

The Consequence of the Parent Report for Curriculum in Québec, Yves Lenoir concludes, was the replacement of the educational model derived from France (and centred on classical humanities) by neoliberal economism. This led to the annexation of the Québec school system by North-American Anglophone logic, a logic prioritizing “socializing” and “psycho-pedagogical” elements of education. The knowledge that is of most worth, the Parent Commission concluded, is science and technology, subjects securing secularism and economic progress. Not only ideological but also demographic, reform was animated by immigration and conceptions of pluralism that accompanied it. There were critics who worried the curriculum would come to serve only economic interests. Reflecting on this point some twenty-five years after the Parent Report, Lenoir concurs: the field of education has indeed been taken over by neoliberal thinking. In the aftermath of this catastrophe, we remnants of the past seek to reactivate that moment when secularism seemed the only alternative to ecclesiastical dogmatism, when economism seemed in the service of democracy, when freedom from seemed sufficient: in reactivating that moment we seek to formulate what freedom is *for*.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Lenoir 2005, 639. English translation by Marie-France Bérard, modified by Pinar.
- ² "Catching Up" seems similar to John F. Kennedy's 1960 U.S. presidential campaign promise to "get America moving again" (see Pinar 2019a, 55); see also <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/allentown-pa-19601028> accessed March 23, 2020.
- ³ Lenoir 2005, 641.
- ⁴ Lenoir (2005, 642) provides a succinct summary of Québec identity, noting that during the French Regime (1608-1760) North-American-born settlers named themselves as "Canadiens" (in contrast to those identified with France), but during the British Regime that followed, when Anglophone settlers were beginning to call themselves "Canadians," Francophones named themselves "French-Canadians" and then "Canayens." In the early 20th century, Francophones in Québec were still using the designation "Canadiens" to differentiate themselves from "Canadians"; in the 1920-1930s the term "French Canadians" re-emerged, replaced by "Québécois" by those born in the 1950 and 1960s (2005, 642).
- ⁵ Lenoir 2005, 641-642.
- ⁶ Lenoir 2005, 643.

⁷ Lenoir cites the Corbo and Couture (2000) anthology documenting the many positions debated during the postwar era.

⁸ Lenoir 2005, 643-644.

⁹ Lenoir 2005, 644.

¹⁰ Lenoir 2005, 644-645. The humanism the contemporary version would replace was that humanism “grounded in Greco-Roman humanities ... closely associated ... with religious ideology” (Lenoir 2005, 645-646).

¹¹ Lenoir 2005, 646.

¹² Lenoir 2005, 648.

¹³ Recall that “culture” was the central curriculum concept Inchauspé and his colleagues endorsed thirty years later: see research brief #23.

¹⁴ Lenoir 2005, 648. Lenoir notes that popular culture would be replaced by the arts in the fourth version of the Parent Report, but the arts were not a “major preoccupation” of the Commission; science and technology were (Ibid.)

¹⁵ Lenoir 2005, 649.

¹⁶ Lenoir 2005, 651.

¹⁷ Lenoir 2005, 652.

¹⁸ Lenoir 2005, 652.

¹⁹ Lenoir 2005, 652.

²⁰ Lenoir 2005, 653. That is quite the generalization but not entirely mistaken. Progressivism included social efficiency as well as child-centeredness and social reconstruction – see Cremin 1961; Ravitch 2000 – and these once differentiated positions have now been incorporated into technologization (Pinar 2019a). Punctuating these were moments of humanism (itself defined variously), as Lenoir also acknowledges.

²¹ Lenoir 2005, 653.

²² Lenoir 2005, 653. Lenoir cites Maslow (1968) as a source, but he notes its sources are multiple, having not “much in common but their repulsion towards behaviorism and Skinner’s (1954) educational thinking” (Ibid.).

²³ Lenoir 2005, 654.

²⁴ Lenoir 2005, 654.

²⁵ Lenoir 2005, 654.

²⁶ Lenoir 2005, 654. Recall that *Je me souviens* appears on Québec license plates.

²⁷ Lenoir 2005, 654.

²⁸ Lenoir 2005, 656.

²⁹ Lenoir 2005, 656.

³⁰ Lenoir 2005, 656.

³¹ Lenoir 2005, 657-658.

³² Lenoir 2005, 658. George Grant shared the same view : without the Church Québec’s distinctiveness was in peril: see Pinar 2019b, 6.

³³ Lenoir 2005, 660.