Democratic Culture and the Culture of Fear

David Waddington

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ON S'EN CÂLISSE

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF "CASSEROLES"
textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge

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Democratic Culture and the Culture of Fear

David Waddington, Concordia University, Education

Sound the alarm and head for the underground shelters: a grave new threat to civil society has arisen in Québec. Fred Pellerin (see terror-inspiring mug shot at right), whose main activities up until now have consisted of singing folksongs and telling touching stories about his home village, is now wearing the red square. Québec's Minister of Culture, Christine St. Pierre, is concerned:

> He has the right to wear the red square, we have free speech here, but we know what the red square means—it means intimidation and violence, and it also signifies preventing others from studying. That's what it means for a big, big proportion of Québeckers…that's what it means (Nadeau, 2012, para. 2).

Yet it is not Pellerin's decision to support the students that we should remark on, but rather the comments of Minister St. Pierre. It is, in fact, both apt and ironic that our Minister of Culture should be commenting, because at the moment, there are two cultures that are struggling for dominance in Québec: a resurgent democratic culture and a culture of fearful, sullen silence. With her comments on Pellerin, the Minister and her government are attempting to promote the latter—the culture of fear—and they are doing so by highlighting the image of the dangerous, threatening protester, against whom the use of force is justified to return order to society.

Minister St. Pierre has not created this image alone; conservative columnists like the Journal de Montreal's Richard Martineau have contributed as well. In a recent column, Martineau informs us that a "very well-known actress" recently told him "some of the worst things that he has heard about the student leaders," but that she "made him promise not to reveal her name," presumably for fear of reprisals from the students (Martineau, 2012b, para. 3). In another column, he remarks, "We may well live in comfort, love culture, and defend humanist values, but all you have to do is scratch the surface and our savage nature comes to the surface" (Martineau, 2012a, para. 3). For Martineau (who, incidentally, has become rather famous in France

recently for his tirade against some bridge-blocking protesters who committed the unpardonable sin of making him wait in traffic), the total dissolution of society seems to be just around the corner: "We're on a very slippery slope," he intones apocalyptically, "Watch out, because once we fall, who knows how far we'll tumble?" (Martineau, 2012a, para. 4)

A more surprising recent convert to the culture of fear is Formula 1 driver Jacques Villeneuve, who, after suggesting that the student protesters were a bunch of lazy, spoiled children, offered the following penetrating observation: "If [the protesters] block [the subway station] leading to the Grand Prix, it will be a terrorist act" (Béland, 2012, para. 5). Putting aside the broad definition of terrorism that this suggestion implies, it is rather strange to hear such anxiety from a man who makes a living driving a car at 360 km/h.

Perhaps we should not look for intelligent and insightful social commentary from a member of one of the world's most decadent milieux (i.e. Formula 1), but some of Villeneuve's other comments nonetheless provide us with a window into a popular way of thinking about democracy. In the midst of his initial tirade against the protesters, he remarked "You vote for people, and if you're not satisfied, you vote for someone else next time. This is what democracy is" (La Presse Canadienne, 2012, para. 11). The interesting thing here is that Villeneuve's conception of democracy is the corollary of the culture of fear that is being promoted by St. Pierre and Martineau. According to this view, democracy is defined by a set of procedures (e.g. voting) that one enacts periodically, and this set of procedures implies the tranquil acceptance of injustice until the next time an election comes around. To claim otherwise is to be an agent of chaos within the social system—the kind of person who needs to be shut down through harsh but necessary measures like Bill 78.

Clearly, many of us feel that we are in need of a notion of democracy that is more vigorous than Villeneuve's merely procedural conception, and the writings of American philosopher John Dewey can provide us with a useful foothold in this regard. In 1939, Dewey wrote *Freedom and Culture*, in which he concerned himself with the threat that totalitarian political systems posed to American democracy. The procedural conception of democracy, he noted, seemed to be too weak to resist the pull of totalitarianism. Elsewhere in the world, democratic institutions had been quickly swept away by a wave of totalitarian enthusiasm. This commitment to totalitarianism, moreover, often came through the ballot box itself.

Dewey contended that despite America's professed attachment to the Constitution and to democratic institutions and procedures, the important thing was not these democratic structures, but rather the nature of the underlying culture. Without a substantial, everyday commitment to democratic practices at the level of the citizen, democratic institutions would be easily undermined by media manipulation and

emotional, populist promises. Democratic institutions, Dewey maintained, are the fruit, not the root, of a democratic culture, and without the sustaining power of that underlying culture, the institutions would rot from the inside. Dewey had a vision of democracy that emphasized the development of the cooperative, outspoken citizen with an analytic disposition; the citizen who had a well-informed understanding of the challenges her society faced, and who was willing to work cooperatively with other citizens, was the foundation of democracy. Democracy was, at its core, a cultural and educational challenge. He commented:

> The conflict…is *within* our own institutions and attitudes. It can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods, methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, cooperative intelligence, in the task of making our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, a servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas. (Dewey, 1939, p. 133)

Thus, for Dewey, education for democracy was not simply a matter of instilling respect for procedures but a matter of developing a particular set of habits of mind that would form the basis of a just, vigorous, and thoughtful society.

Within *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey (1939) also remarked on how governments tended to respond to popular movements:

> As the activities increase of the groups which are radical from the standpoint of the possessing class, and especially as they fail to effect a fundamental remedy of the situation, the activities of the favored economic class increase. When disorders appear on any considerable scale, the adherence of the middle class to the side of "law and order" is won. Ironically enough, the desire for security which proceeds from the two groups of very different economic status combines to increase readiness to surrender democratic forms of action. (p. 116)

This analysis applies nicely to Bill 78, which, as many others have pointed out, is an attack on the conditions necessary for the practice of healthy democratic culture—in other words, on the freedoms that democratic citizens most need when it comes time to dissent. Charest and his Liberal government are currently attempting to enlist the middle class on their side through the promulgation of the culture of fear.

Unfortunately, these efforts to instill fear have been at least moderately successful, particularly outside of Québec, where negative coverage in *Macleans* and *The Globe and Mail* has had a significant impact. When I travelled to Ontario recently, people questioned me about the “violent protests” in Québec and wondered how I could possibly manage to live in downtown Montreal. Even within Concordia, my own

university, I have been surprised by the fearful and angry reactions of some faculty members to the student protests, which have been fairly small-scale within our institution.

The good news, however, is that many Québeckers are resisting the appeal to fear. Instead of withdrawing into sullen resignation, people are taking to the streets. And they are doing more than just protesting--they are writing editorials, commenting on blogs, posting on social media, holding meetings, banging pots and pans in their backyards, and wearing political symbols in public. This outpouring of citizen energy may not quite be the genteel and rational type of democratic practice that Dewey envisioned, but it is, at least, a *substantial* democratic practice, by which I mean that it is a shift that affects the *substance* of the culture itself. These protests have been a chaotic but inspiring outpouring of democratic culture that have put a number of issues (e.g. threats to freedom of speech, rising costs of education) on the front burner that are largely dead elsewhere in North America. Outside of Québec, students are starting to wonder whether they, too, should start raising questions about rising education costs. Within Québec, students and non-students alike are agitating strongly for their fundamental freedoms and are starting to think more critically about a government that has a poor record of transparency and accountability. In Deweyan terms, these protests have initiated a change in some citizens' underlying habits of mind.

Embracing this new wave of substantial democratic practices will seldom be easy. Although supporting this new movement does not imply condoning violence, it does imply accepting a certain amount of social disruption. There will be large, noisy protests and rallies, strident editorials, angry Facebook posts, and animated conversations around the dinner table and at the office. We may even, God forbid, get stuck in traffic. Yet despite our strong penchant in English Canada for peace, order and good government, these minor difficulties are nothing to be afraid of; they are, rather, a sign of the health of our democracy. Rather than fearing the student protests, we should be wary of the government's emphasis on the "silent majority" of Québeckers, the appeals to the culture of fear and the erosion of the civil liberties that make vigorous, substantial democracy possible. These, and not Fred Pellerin's red square, are what is truly injurious to the welfare of the democratic state.

Note: All of the quotes in this article from Francophone newspapers have been translated by the author.

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