

The French Enigma

*Survival and Development in Canada's
Francophone Societies*

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Foreword
The Changing Canadian Francophonie

Robert Stebbins offers in this book an ambitious and original synthesis of the francophone fact in Canada, the result of many years of field observation. The author has often stayed in Québec and has visited Canada from coast to coast, stopping off in a good number of francophone communities. Here, then, is a synthetic work built on secondary analysis of previously conducted studies, but especially on first-hand observations by an experienced sociologist and specialist in qualitative methods, which he has used earlier in other notable studies.

The originality of the present book – *The French Enigma: Survival and Development of Canada's Francophone Societies* – is to bring a new perspective on the social organization of the Canadian *francophonie* in its broadest sense, an aspect less well analyzed and understood than the demographic and political situation of the francophone communities. Robert Stebbins has studied the organizational life, the routine social relations, the structure of the small isolated francophone communities, the educational system, and the visibility and public face of French. The francophone societies are examined comparatively, which helps him bring out the originality of the situations studied. Finally, it is necessary to highlight the originality of this book's organization: to determine first the characteristic traits of each society, then identify the existing issues within it.

In addition to these empirical observations, the author brings an important theoretical contribution to the study of the French fact in Canada. This he does by questioning the relevance of the concept of ethnicity. If the concept of ethnicity seems appropriate for the study of diverse minorities, it is not for one of the two great founding groups of the country (to which the native peoples should be added, of course, as they have been rediscovered in the present). Stebbins uses Raymond Breton's concept of institutional completeness and that of *l'espace francophone*, advanced by geographers who have studied the francophone diaspora across North America. To these two ideas, Stebbins adds another: parity societies. This last concept relates to the bilingual communities; they have in the minority lan-

guage a rather complete institutional network, critical mass of speakers of both languages, and access to some public services (in stores, government, health, and voluntary associations). There is no doubt that this will be an outstanding contribution to the sociology and history of French Canada.

What stands out in the proposed analysis?

The author does not hide the difficulties faced by the French fact in Canada. He is aware that assimilation – despite problems in measuring it – is very real, and he reminds us of the role that exogamous marriage is known to play in this process. Robert Stebbins, for several reasons, remains optimistic nevertheless about the future of the French presence in Canada. First of all, the institutional and ideological context have changed considerably. The French fact is now well accepted, notwithstanding opposition from fringe groups like the Association for the Preservation of English in Canada. Immersion courses in French are popular (a trend that is still little understood and should be the object of several field studies), not to mention the constitutional protection which the French language now enjoys, protection that has given francophone communities outside Québec better control of their educational institutions. Stebbins embraces the thesis of Michael O'Keefe, who underscores the vitality of the francophone communities outside Québec, not just the difficulties they encounter.¹ Stebbins does not share the pessimism of many demographers and analysts, and he has painted the present and future of Canada's francophone societies "in the rosy colors of optimism," to use his own words. "Today it is evident that these francophone societies will not only survive but also develop, even if the kind and amount of development will vary significantly between them" (p. 159).

Stebbins also justifies his optimism by situating the Canadian *francophonie* in global perspective. Here is an external aspect that has not often been noted, since the majority of studies concentrate on the internal problems of French Canada. For him four new factors militate in favor of affirming the French fact: internationalization of francophone identity, internationalization of economic ties, increasing involvement in international francophone culture, and increasing involvement with francophone immigrants and refugees (chap. 11). This chapter, it should be noted, contains an original contribution: the study of the future of the Canadian *francophonie*.

Permit me here to signal a disagreement with the author – authors of forewords are not always in accord with all elements of

the books they introduce – who states that globalization may undermine to some extent, perhaps eventually even to a considerable extent, both the Québec nationalist and French-Canadian foundations of their identities (p. 88). Stebbins argues that internationally-oriented francophones will come to value their linguistic identity more than their national identity. I think, on the contrary, that the opening up of the world is going to reinforce the break that has marked French Canada and that it is going to give a second wind to the affirmation of a distinct Québec identity. The historical break of French Canada is, without doubt, here to stay.

This question warrants further explanation, for it is central to the analysis of the Canadian *francophonie*. French Canada has changed considerably since its origin in the middle of the 19th century (it should be noted, in passing, that Anglo-British Canada of the 19th century has also changed considerably). French Canada has defined itself as a nation, a nation having its own history, ideologies, vision of the world, and literature. “*Ton histoire est une épopée*” (your history is an epic), proclaims the French version of Canada’s national anthem. It had its own network of institutions – parishes, schools, colleges, hospitals – which frame the francophone diaspora. During the 1930s, did the Lieutenant-Governor of Québec not give school prizes to francophone students in Manitoba? (Thus Gabrielle Roy, a young franco-Manitoban student, received several medals from Québec of which she was most proud.) To counteract the misfortunes that struck Ontario and Manitoba at the turn of the last century and to mark clearly the contribution of francophones to the symbolic foundation of Canada, the French Canadian elites invented the Utopian idea of the pact of the two nations, an idea the rest of English Canada preferred not to share and certain historians even fiercely challenged.²

Fernand Dumont analyzed the rise and decline of this nation in the sociological sense, and in a fine synthetic work, Yves Frenette has recalled its tortuous history.³ Over the years, French Canadians have had to kiss their imaginary country goodby, to invoke the title of a book by Marcel Martel, and they have in a way become “*orphelins d’une nation*” (orphans of a nation) according to the poignant expression of Joseph-Yvon Thériault.⁴

An important question thus arises at the beginning of the year 2000: what is and what will be the normative unity of this new Canadian *francophonie*, the social organization of which Stebbins describes so well? This question, as such, has not been tackled in this

book, although the author is most aware of the difficulties it poses. He stresses that "the linguistic identity of contemporary Canadian francophones is now more complicated than ever" (p. 31). The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne (FCFA), by its very title, stresses its division into scattered communities and poses the French language as a common identity reference. French Canada, real and imagined (in the sense given this term by Anderson) has lost its Utopian and national character, and has been replaced by linguistic communities, Acadia and Québec. The francophone linguistic communities do not define themselves as "*communautés hors Québec*" (communities outside Québec), but rather as a Canadian *francophonie*, which even goes so far as to include anglophones who speak French. There is here a new effort in identity construction, which is underway at the dawn of a new century. Stebbins shares this vision of things, which at the time of writing these lines raises, however, many questions within the Canadian *francophonie*, for it marks the passage from a national French Canadian identity to a linguistic identity, but a very different linguistic identity marked by plurality and diversity. The Canadian *francophonie* welcomes new speakers who do not identify themselves as French Canadians in the traditional sense of the term, even if this francophone demographic contribution is still marginal outside Québec. The statistics on the *francophonie* of Toronto cited by Stebbins speak for themselves on this point.

For its part, Québec is asserting its own new national identity, illustrated by the present debate over the Québec nation, which is current at the beginning of the 21st century: a nation open to integrating immigrants and cognizant within itself of a national anglophone minority as well as of some communities of native peoples.⁵ This new nationalist affirmation of Quebecers, it should be noted in passing, is not without some analogies to the nation building underway in Canada. If this vision of things is accurate, we are presently undergoing a major change, passing from a national linguistic duality (French and English Canada of the 19th century), to a new Canadian societal duality. This is the new multicultural Canada shaped by immigration and a new post-Quiet Revolution Québec, itself also more and more multicultural; two societies in the process of redefining themselves, each having within a linguistic minority belonging to the other language group.⁶ Therefore, not only has the Canadian *francophonie* become more complex since 1982, Canada has also undergone a similar transformation.

Robert Stebbins's book constitutes an important contribution to the analysis of the social organization of francophone Canada. In the coming years, the actors themselves will be able to tell which new definition harmonizes with the contours of this new social organization that is emerging and changing rapidly.

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Endnotes

¹O'Keefe, Michael. 1998. *Francophone Minorities: Assimilation and Community Vitality*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada, Canadian Heritage.

²See the work of Stéphan Paquin. *L'invention d'un mythe*. Montréal, QC: VLB éditeur, 1999.

³Fernand Dumont. Essor et déclin du Canada français. *Recherches sociographiques*, 38 (1997), 419-467; Yves Frenette. *Brève histoire du Canada français* (in collaboration with Martin Pâquet). Montréal, QC: Boréal, 1998.

⁴Marcel Martel. *Le deuil d'un pays imaginé. Rêves, luttes et déroute du Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa (Amérique française series), 1999; Joseph Yvon Thériault (Ed.). *Francophonies minoritaires au Canada. L'état des lieux*. Moncton, NB: Éditions d'Acadie, 1999.

⁵See, among others, Gérard Bouchard. *La nation québécoise au future et au passé*. Montréal, QC: VLB éditeur, 1999 or Michel Seymour. *La nation en question*. Montréal, QC: l'Hexagone, 1999.

⁶We developed this hypothesis earlier in Simon Langlois. Le choc de deux sociétés globales. In Louis Balthazar, Guy Laforest, and Vincent Liemieux (Eds.), *Le Québec et la restructuration du Canada 1980-1992* (pp. 95-108). Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 1991.