45. Québec and La Francophonie

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Since the beginning of the 1950s, thanks, firstly, to individuals and institutions, and then, as of the 1960s, to public organizations and the government itself, French-speaking Canada and Québec in particular were choice regions for the notion of Francophonie, even before the term was coined.

Thus, from the very start, Québec was a particularly active player in building the Francophone community. It deserved no credit for this, however, as it was in its own deepest and most direct interests to do so, on the one hand, to ensure its very survival and, on the other, because of its fundamental need to break out of its isolation. Québécois often played a decisive role in the creation and development of the first non-governmental international organizations of La Francophonie, grouping individuals by profession or associations of institutions. Such was the case with the Association internationale des journalistes de langue française (1952), which became the Union internationale de la presse et des journalistes de langue française (in which French-Canadian journalists played a founding role), and, more importantly, the Association des universités entièrement ou partiellement de langue française, for a long time known under its acronym AUPELF, and then the AUPELF-UREF (for Université des réseaux d’expression française) and which today has become the Agence universitaire de la francophonie and ranks second in importance and influence among the major organizations of this international...
community. Established at the Université de Montréal in 1961, the Agence universitaire still has its headquarters there. Likewise, Québec and the Québécois greatly contributed to the creation and development of the first international Francophone organization, the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique, in which, it should be added, Québec succeeded, thanks to France’s support, in carving out a place for itself, albeit with the relatively ambiguous status of “participating government,” a status that was in fact created especially for it.

La Francophonie is the only international governmental forum to which Québec has direct access, including access to its highest level, the periodic conferences of heads of state and governments (the Summits) where it occupies a unique position. It exerts discrete yet real influence, establishes relations, carries out useful exchanges at various levels and acquires valuable experience regardless of what its political status is to be in the future. This is an issue that transcends ordinary cleavages between political parties. It can be noted, indeed, that successive governments of Québec over the past forty years or so were anxious to keep and when possible strengthen Québec’s position and assets in La Francophonie (this has been the community’s official name since the seventh Summit in Hanoi in November 1997).

For almost twenty years, it was associations, non-governmental organizations, which carried the message and illustrated the validity of the Francophone project. In fact, it was in this first version of a “Francophonie of peoples” that the Québécois, individuals and organizations, played a key role. Québec’s contribution was no less influential in the official stage, which saw the arrival of governments on the scene. It only need be recalled that the second general
conference of the ACCT and the second Summit were both held in Québec City and that Québec has given two of its secretary generals to the Agence.

Moreover, it can be noted that it would have been impossible, or in any case extremely difficult, for Québec to establish the rich and diverse ties and contacts it has had with the countries of the South over the past twenty years without the existence of the Francophone community.

If Québec sees an obvious interest in participating in the community of Francophone countries, in its various organizations and associations, it also makes an original contribution and a special quality. For Francophones, it provides significant input in three aspects: as a unique socio-cultural phenomenon, as a French version of North-American modernity and as an original historic adventure.

Today, La Francophonie includes some fifty countries with a total population that corresponds to around 7 per cent of the world population but this brief figure does not mean much if it is not nuanced, that is to say put into relation with other data. Of these fifty countries, several are only Francophone to a small extent and are more so because they want to be than they are in reality, and, because of their size, some will never have more than a relatively minor influence in world affairs. In terms of population, it is the countries of the South that have the strongest battalions, with almost four fifths of the total. 10 Yet over half the Francophone
population, that is to say 72 million out of some 150, are currently in the North. “Francophone” refers here to an individual who masters the French language and for whom French is the mother tongue or language of usage, or again the primary language of usage after the mother tongue.

It is important to distinguish between the actual La Francophonie institutions and the international non-governmental organizations or associations essentially devoted to language, the role of the latter, in regard to essential matters, being no less important than the actions of the former.

Thus the main goal of the Agence de la Francophonie (formerly the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique) and the AUPELF-UREF, now the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie, is not to defend and promote French but make known different cultures, economic and social progress, the solidarity of its member countries or universities, their cooperation, all this thanks to a shared language, French. It can be summarized in a phrase simply by saying that these organizations do not work primarily for the French language, they work through it. Having said this, they can not be indifferent to language which is the basis of their enterprise and without which they could not exist. This explains the numerous initiatives that happily have been taken on the use, respect and diffusion of the language. In this way, among other things, the Agence intervenes to ensure respect of French in international organizations and greatly assists the French-language press and radio in countries in the South. In this way, the Agence universitaire creates and supports university networks in French in countries that are not or are little
Francophone and has set up a valuable publishing and distribution system for scientific
information in French using new communications technologies etc.

Between the organizations devoted to developing cooperation in French and those who
are directly concerned with defending and promoting the shared language, there is naturally a
relationship of collaboration but it can be reckoned that it could be considerably strengthened.

In the same manner as French-speaking Québec itself, forced to be forever vigilant, La
Francophonie remains fragile and vulnerable to the multiple attacks of standardization – under
the guise of globalization – and it must therefore not lower its guard. All Francophones:
governments, organizations and citizens have a double and demanding duty to be lucid and
uncompromising. Defending French and the building of a strong Francophone community can be
seen as promoting universalism because they contribute to the preservation of world cultural
diversity, a guarantee for the freedom of nations and individuals.

Few countries have as much a vital interest as Québec in the international promotion of
the French language and thus in the great Francophone project. The Québec people is directly
involved because, from its beginning, it has drawn the best part of its identity from its language,
and its very survival depends in large part on the vigour of the position of French in the world
and on its creativity.