The Quest for Autonomy in Acadia

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Autonomy, Autonomization
and Heteronomization in Acadia

Acadia[1] remains one of the few North American historical minorities which has been able to survive as a distinct ethno-cultural and linguistic group. This fact is all the more striking since this people suffered a deportation and dispersion, and it does not possess its own territory, nor does it have a government of its own. For more than four centuries Acadians therefore have been able to maintain their unique identity as a minority group. This desire to avoid assimilation, and to maintain distinct communities, has throughout history raised the issue of autonomous minority existence. Whether by choice or by necessity, Acadians have continually had to face the issue of autonomy in all its varied forms.

For minorities, the quest for autonomy corresponds to that moment in their history when they hope to increase control over their lives with regard to the majority group. The central problem of this quest is that, as a general rule, efforts aimed at autonomy lead to complete or partial failure. The post-colonial independence process therefore remains, in most cases, unfinished[2].

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[1] Up until the deportation and dispersion of Acadians in 1755, Acadia was situated on the present territory of Nova Scotia (a few communities were established in nowadays New Brunswick). After that date, this book proposes to study only the Acadians situated in the province of New Brunswick. This group of the Acadian population is the only one to benefit from sufficient demo-linguistic density to justify consideration of autonomy, even at the political level. The other Acadian spheres represent situations of equal validity but different from the point of view of scientific study of the question of autonomy.

[2] Autonomist movements, notably in France, have been unable to put in place distinctive processes supported by the majority of the population. In Spain, Catalonia asserts its status of an autonomous province by concentrating on economic priorities, whereas the Basques who are making political independence their main goal are unable to escape from a cycle of violence. Elsewhere, the

In Canada two examples are particularly illuminating. In Québec, which underwent a "quiet revolution" following the 1960s, the Parti Québecois has since that time attempted to promote the sovereigntist option. Benefiting from a territory, experience in power, a viable economy and a strong artistic and cultural movement, the majority of Quebeckers nevertheless voted "No" in the two provincial referendums in 1980 and 1995, which proposed sovereignty for Québec. The other more recent example is that of the Inuit who, after more than twenty years of negotiation obtained the status of territorial autonomy over their immense ancestral land where they represent eighty-five percent of the population. After having raised great hopes, the objective situation of autonomy does not seem to have offered a positive framework of existence to the aboriginal population, which is gripped by a deep social malaise (Rasmunssen 2000; 2005).

In recent times, the question of the Acadian move towards autonomy has been shelved since the 2004 Convention of Acadian Society of New Brunswick. These "States General" of Acadia should have brought an answer to the demand by organizational and associational sectors to put in place a more significant Acadian institutional autonomy (LeBlanc 2005). Although the process appeared to be valid, its implementation failed, after more than three years, to come up with any concrete decision. The reasons for this failure lead to the conclusion that the official discourse as well as the institutional practices of Acadians were out of touch with the reality of the general population[3]. The analysis of this shortfall between official power and the subjective and informal dynamic at the heart of the population naturally draws the attention of the researcher to the causes of the ambivalences which lie at the root of this situation. Since the Acadian minority exists within a relatively limited historical context, it is possible to track key points of transformation right from the start of the establishment of the community.

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experience of creating autonomy of the proletariat by means of communism has not worked out.

[3]   The procedure of this Convention is analyzed chapter V, sections 1 and 2.

The point of departure of this complex process of gaining autonomy is the decision by the pioneer colonists at the end of the 17th century to distance themselves from the French colonizing authorities and to set up independent family farms. When Acadia became a British territory, these pioneer colonists attempted to maintain their communities by claiming the principle of "neutrality"[4]. The negotiation which they undertook within this framework for many decades was their first political act to protect their singularity. The following stage, which was subsequent to the Acadian deportation and dispersion, has for a long time been referred to as the "century of silence"[5]. The re-establishment of Acadian communities particularly in New Brunswick during that period constitutes nevertheless the indispensable condition of the arrival of the third period, that of the clerical-nationalist movement. This movement officially began at the time of the first National Acadian Convention in 1881, and marks the first attempt to organize all the Acadian communities.

The period starting in 1960 deeply altered the place of Acadian society in New Brunswick. The election of an Acadian premier for the province as well as a wave of constitutional reforms aiming to provide equality for the Francophone minority had the consequence of integrating Acadian communities into the larger society. Acadians nevertheless remained without control over their community, outside the field of education. At the same time the radical Acadian movement was unable to impose its ideas of political autonomy for Acadia. The last step, in this succession of key moments for the study of the processes of autonomization in Acadia, is the 2004 Convention of New Brunswick Acadian society which took place in the context of important changes linked to globalization.

Throughout its history, the maintenance of Acadian communities and of the collective Acadian identity is thus related to factors other than those of conventional nationalism. Since there is no government, the preservation of a distinct Acadian existence necessarily depends on the totality of the processes of autonomization. Since these are processes which have taken place over a long period of time, they are significantly different from those resulting from a more or less ephemeral ethno-cultural survival. The central issue addressed by this

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[4]   The notion of neutrality is developed chapter I, sections 2 and 3.

[5]   This period stretches from 1760 to 1860, see Thériault, ((L.)1982).

book is therefore an inquiry into the nature of the process which has maintained the unique Acadian identity right up to the present day.

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This study differs from other multidisciplinary analyses of this community (Ali-Khodja 1994, Daigle 1993, Hautecœur 1975, Landry 2003, 2008, Thériault 1995, 2007) principally because it studies the historical continuity of the dynamic of autonomy that has evolved since the beginning of Acadia. The research for this complete chronological framework encompasses a number of intersecting disciplinary approaches at the historical, political, socio-cultural and existential levels. These differing perspectives are harmonized by their common objective of defining the process of autonomization, and the counter-process of heteronomization, which lie at the heart of each of the periods studied. The analysis of causal links between the different identified processes, from one period to the next, falls within the realm of social anthropology[6]. This research is also characterized by the anthropological approach of seeking to remain as close as possible to reality. Making use of dynamic anthropology thus complements social anthropological research[7]. The microanthropological[8] nature of this approach allows for a better assessment of the diversity of the group

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[6] Social anthropology focuses on the social organization of communities and societies. It differs from cultural anthropology since it is more abstract, even though these two areas of research are necessarily linked.

[7] The use of the terms ethnology or anthropology depend on the distinctions "[…] which can vary according to the circumstances, theoretical positions, themes, or even institutions pertaining to the researcher" (Géraud *et al.* 1998: 15). Within the North American context the term anthropology predominates. It is distinct from ethnography, which is purely descriptive, since it aims to attain a more theoretical understanding of human nature. Comparative studies contribute to this end.

[8] The study of some sub-groups who are numerically limited necessitated micrological studies which have consisted of minute documentary research, formal and semi-formal interviews conducted during numerous field work sessions within the past twenty years and research projects in common with Canadian colleagues (see bibliography). This preliminary work has subsequently permitted a critical re-evaluation of the secondary sources available.

Socio-historic approaches and political sociology (Muchielli 1967; 2004: 13) have furthermore responded to the necessity of looking more closely at the diverse reality of sub-groups at the heart of a minority. The political sociology approach here is concerned with the study of the transition from a state of informal community organization to that of a minority benefiting from official recognition.

and the complexity of its links with outside groupings. This approach goes beyond the only macrosociological reference in order to shed light on the totality of the participants at a given point in time. This dynamic anthropological approach seeks to take into account a diversity of points of view and to contribute to a broader and more accurate understanding. It also opens up dimensions which often remain in the realm of the unarticulated. According to Balandier, who was one of the founders of this branch of anthropology:

> Societies are never what they appear to be or what they pretend to be. They express themselves on at least two levels; one of them is superficial and presents "official" structures, if one can put it this way; and the other is deeper and it assures access to the most fundamental real relationships, and to the practices which illuminate the social system. From the moment when the social sciences become aware of these two levels of expression, and when they determine how they interact, they become necessarily critical (Balandier 1971: 6-7).

This approach leads to a problematic consideration of autonomy whereby the subjective dimension of the processes is taken into consideration, in conjunction with their objective characteristics.

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The situation of Acadians is exceptional because they managed to formulate and remain faithful to a desire to "live together" (Touraine 1992) without requiring conventional structures corresponding to the organization of a society. This paradoxical condition underlines the fact that the processes at play were more often those of a movement towards autonomization rather than a search for complete autonomy. All the same, the aim of this autonomization process remains at an existential level. Since their beginnings, Acadians have never demanded independence as a country. There is not a desire for secession or total rupture, they have always sought a certain degree of mutual understanding and agreement between the minority and the majority. Nevertheless, if there is an aspiration towards autonomy, it is because there is a need to outstrip certain alienations, to break tutelage, to re-appropriate certain responsibilities and sectors of control. Consequently, even if the aim is not that of total rupture, a movement of subversion has to arise in order to overthrow the alienating aspects of the existing order. The process of achieving autonomy cannot however be simply reactive; it has to be a force for change while remaining carefully thought out and retaining awareness of its own

situation and that of the other. It encompasses innovative and strategic dimensions.

The quest for autonomy is thus fundamentally linked to the notion of existence at an ontological level. The process of autonomy, goes back to a certain extent to the primordial nature of humanity, that is to say the power to think and to anticipate the future, and to act on this future. Thus it is that an existential aspiration, co-existing with a desire for ethno-cultural distinctiveness, can be found in each of the historical periods under review.

In the historical and geographical context of the New World with its frontier spirit and the existence of territory that is hard to control, this fundamental aspiration to overtake the existing order with its determining factors has re-emerged. This translates into a desire to be in control of one's destiny (Touraine 1992: 267-278; 2000). Paradoxically, this emancipating movement continually finds itself restricted not only by the dominant group, but also by fear of the unknown which arises when taking responsibility again of alienated parts of one's own existence. Psychoanalysis shows us that this fear is translated into a fundamental anxiety about finality, the end point, and death (Castoriadis 1986). According to Castoriadis (1975; 1986), society has even institutionalized this function by providing itself with religion as an extra-social guarantee. Humanity can in this way cope with anxiety about the unknown, but in so doing it also abandons its fundamental responsibility to overcome obstacles to autonomy. Communal life is therefore essentially organized on the principle of heteronomy, from the starting point of external elements and influences.

Within this framework, power can only rest with representatives who transpose emancipating intentionality into a symbolic form, into images and discourse, as well as into static systems and institutions. The field of autonomization then becomes confusing. Consciousness of the possibility of establishing autonomy becomes more or less concealed, and lodged in the unconscious. Castoriadis even adds that by no longer giving oneself the means to "confront the abyss", "the movement of humanity" will only be, in Freudian terms, capable of constructing civilizations that are more and more "repressive" (Castoriadis 1986). All the same, the hope of autonomy re-emerges, to a different extent at different times. The process of establishing autonomy is thus expressed in a double action. On the one hand, there

is hope for an emancipating social process, to create autonomy, and on the other hand, there is a conservative resistance aiming at the preservation of a heteronomous society, where responsibility for a mode of existence does not rest initially with the society or the individual.

This tendency which corresponds to a fundamental human duality, which is always caught between the possibility of clarifying and improving its fate, and taking refuge in blindness and passivity[9] (Tap 1986: 11-15; Morin 2001: 73-104) can be found in the Acadian clerical-nationalist movement. On the one hand, this movement provided a unifying force for Acadian society, and on the other it deprived it of any kind of decision-making power. This deflection of a direct relationship with mastery of destiny took on new significance when Acadia began to open up to the outside world. The invasion of individual, collective and political space by the neo-liberal way of thinking, consumer society and individualism produced a general diverting of the sense of human existence (Rocher et Salée 1997; Saul 2005; Stiegler 2003; 2004). This radical change redirected the whole autonomization issue to the individual, the starting point of all alienations, but equally the most accessible starting point for a possibility of change. The strength of Castoriadis's proposition is that he defined more precisely this differential relationship between the individual and the process of becoming individual in the autonomy process. This relationship is clearly expressed in the following quotation (Castoriadis 1988: 82-83).

> […] the social-historical project […] of autonomy implies an unbreakable link between the aim of individual autonomy and the auto-creation of subjectivity as a reflexive and deliberate instance: from this the individual ceases to be the pure product of his psyche, his history and the institution that formed him. Radical liberation of the human imagination which is often mutilated by societal institutions, can constitute an authentic subjectivity, that is to say a subjectivity which is capable of playing an active role in the deployment and formation of the sense valid for the individual[10].

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[9] This duality can be found on the level of identity in the constant linked processes of identification and keeping at a distance.

[10] Most of the documentation available on Acadian history being in French, all quotations in this book are translations (with the exception of Johnston, 2005, this section).

It is particularly interesting to note that taking into account the psychological and psychoanalytic dimensions of the relationship between the individual and autonomy inevitably involves the question of politics. Individuation implies a project whereby the link between the social and the historical is considered in an innovative way. This process calls for a free and conscious reconsideration of the question of the "instituted", in an unrestricted manner. It implies above all the creation of a new relationship with the institution and the imagination (Castoriadis 1999). The connection between the creation aimed for and action to put it in place can only, from that point on, proceed as "political thinking". The superposition of the economic and socio-cultural model of globalization onto all aspects of Acadian and Canadian life nevertheless modifies the relationship to politics. In this sense the paradigm of modernity also becomes that of hyper-complexity.

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The specific difficulty of demands for autonomy in modern society relates to the fact that the structure to be questioned does not admit its nature. At a historical level, attempts to impose dogmatism have always been avowed. Neo-liberal thought, itself, acts behind a screen of publicity which promotes products for sale while at the same time promoting itself as a global system for directing experience. The impact of this regressive manipulation of existence necessarily creates a malaise that the liberal economic system once again is exploiting by continuously proposing new products and promoting the illusion of progress. The mass media, which tend to control thought and speech, orchestrates this global system and replaces politics (Bourdieu 1996; Ziegler 2002; 2005). The general population does not entirely believe in this system, nor in its finality, but it finds itself alienated by its primary impact: that of addiction to a new simplistic materialist life where all is provided and the only thing to do is to consume.

When it makes contact with consumer society, the renewal of a collective project aiming at autonomy runs into particular difficulties. The reconstruction of distinct spaces, collective dynamics and constructive relations with the other depend, primarily, on the abilities of each individual to become conscious of the incoherence of current trends, and to take the necessary steps to reject old determinisms as well as new ones. In the light of this process, each individual can once again make contact with the fundamental movement where an

increased awareness of his situation allows him to take on new responsibilities and stimulate creative adjustments which transform the relationship to the self and to the world[11]. This process which engages people at individual, collective and existential levels requires understanding the psycho-sociological aspects of the phenomenon of change. The psycho-sociological approach of the feeling of identity (Muchielli 1999)[12] will be used to specify relationships between these different dimensions of being.

The search for a new way of "living together" implies, furthermore, the definition of an alternative orientation principle, which would aim at unifying individual efforts as well as soliciting them in representing the extra-social guarantee which makes it possible to invest in the irrational dimension of social life (Castoriadis 1986). This statement, in the present context of the disappearance of values, brings up once again the question of ethics and, more precisely, how to put them into practise. The question of autonomy thus corresponds to complex primordial processes, which remain very difficult to master. In these

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[11] The problem of transcending determinism is analyzed from a psychological perspective by different theorists of change in the post-68 period. For example, there is the notion of "radical and instituting imagination" from Castoriadis (1975); that of "creative adjustment" in Gestalt theory by Perls (*et al.* 2001: 219-244) or "creative adaptation" by Goodman (in Vincent 2003: 170-178).

[12] According to Muchielli, A., (1999), the sentiment of identity is made up of different sentiments which operate in a correlative fashion. The sentiment of belonging is more specifically linked to the sentiment of value and that of confidence. These three sentiments play an essential role in the determination of the sense of self-worth which, itself, decides the level of aspiration and the degree of intentionality on which the sentiment of existence depends for the individual, the group and society. The sentiment of unity and coherence and that of continuity in time assures the final coherence of the individual. The sentiment of difference, which is a corollary of the sentiment of uniqueness, is essential for consciousness of identity. The sentiment of autonomy, central to this study, allows distance to be made between the sentiment of belonging to a group and the possibility of exercising individual potential. A group begins to exist as an autonomous collectivity once it is able to organise itself and put its decisions into practice.

These sentiments together form a system to which are attached all the evolutions of identity. The better the conditions permitting the constituent sentiments of identity, the greater the sentiment of existence. Identity which has attained a state of maturity can overcome the problems of history and abandon defensive behaviour. "It finds direction by its ability to integrate new experiences and create continuously from this a new identity, which is always in a state of becoming" (p. 99).

transformative situations, the identity of the group, its singularity and its existence are at issue.

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This study employs a diachronic approach to the dynamic of autonomy in Acadia. This diachronic perspective is based on the chronological study of key socio-cultural, political and existential processes. These processes change according to the following historical periods: that of the New World, of the clerical-nationalist movement, or that of the framework of officially bilingual Canada which is overlayed by globalization. Each of these periods corresponds to a re-positioning of this minority, whose purpose was to maintain its uniqueness in the face of the change taking place in the outside world. Strategies of defense and processes of acculturation result from the changes in the structural order and potential alienations. Social and cultural dynamics, power relationships and general intentions which give the group its orientation are at stake in the process[13].

The diachronic perspective permits focusing on the step-by-step process of the assertion of autonomy. It also contributes to clarifying the lines of causality and continuity, that take place when identity is altered, at the heart of an unconventional Acadian minority. Giving attention to this evolving weft and woof finally makes it possible to relate the situation under study to a process which is rarely noted, namely the question of otherness in parallel with that of identity. It also allows for critical analyses of the relationship between the functioning of identity, institutions and processes of attaining autonomy.

The perspective of dynamic anthropology, in a diachronic approach, operates in particular at the neglected area between official history, with which the subject can only partially identify, and the reference point of tradition, which is cut off from present-day realities. It allows a re-opening of the debate around the meaning of a unique minority existence, such as that of Acadians, at a time when "anonymous powers manipulate history just as easily as they manage to persuade us that it does not make any sense" (Dumont 1995: 73). The entirety of these approaches allows openings between group identity dynamics, the framework of social history and the fundamental aspirations of the group.

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[13]   See the definition of the feeling of existence by Muchielli, A., this section.