

QUEBEC MANIFESTOS

As a form of political and cultural expression, the manifesto has long been supplanted by the memos, reports, working papers, application forms, and news releases of administered politics. But the intersection of political crisis and a tradition within which artists and intellectuals continue to aspire to be more than functionaries or marketing experts may now and again call back this archaic, early democratic genre of communication. The manifesto thus becomes once again an expressive, emotive vehicle of mobilization and resistance which seeks to articulate the desperations and hopes of a group, a movement in the process of gestation. Here we see the constitution of subjectivity in process, mocking with rage the objective constraints of existing structures, anticipating possibilities while denouncing that which is. Here we see the primordial force of ideology critique and utopian restoration congealed in a particular place and time, a handful of individuals speaking for those who would otherwise not speak or be heard.

The documents at hand manifest two very different moods, two contrasting modes of expression. In the one, the *Black Rock Manifesto*, art speaks over politics, but speaks for life through politics. It evokes the forgotten ghettos of anglophone and allophone poverty and cultural degradation as a world more real and more human than the wealth and cultural pretensions of Westmount; it speaks for those who would stay in Québec, accepting the responsibility and the challenge of creating and transforming their world, rather than succumb to the temptation to flee westward or retreat inwardly to the south; it voices the creative potential and frustrations of non-francophones whose needs and aspirations have been suppressed by isolation on the cultural islands of Montreal, subdued within francophone and American hegemony and clinging desperately to the shreds of a political claim to be Canadian.

In the second document, we see a political manifesto in the classic mould. The work of a committee, it lacks the stylistic verve and steady dramatic rhythms of the masterpieces of the genre. Content dominates over rhetoric and form in an attempt to hammer out a consensual basis around which to organize a new movement for socialism and independence for all Quebecers. The primary political significance of this document is that it seeks to gather together a movement from two directions, filling an emerging gap on the left. On its left, it signifies an appeal to those who have been previously drawn to sectarian groupuscules, to those who remained suspicious of independence and a national project, those who remained ambivalent about "popular" movements as opposed to working-class organizations. On its right, the timing of its publication is linked to the long-anticipated split between the socialist left and the troubled

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social democracy of the Parti Québécois. So the primary thrust of the manifesto is to lure away those disillusioned with the "étapisme" of sovereignty-association and the seeming abandonment of the social project with budget cuts, efforts to prop up the indigenous bourgeoisie, and circumspection toward Canadian and international capital. This appeal is reflected above all in the reiteration of the promise of true independence, democratic forms of organization built from the base upwards, non-bureaucratic forms of planning, independence from unions, new forms of work organization, and a multi-class front which respects civil rights, minorities, native Indians, and women.

As a somber reminder of the underbody of economic woe carried by the large minority which bears the brunt of economic adjustments in advanced capitalism, and as a formal declaration of a series of values to be privileged and goals to be realized, this document deserves respect and attention. It gives testimony to an important maturation of certain types of radical socialist thinking, a conscientious response to some painfully learned lessons, and an honest commitment to the formation of a movement which seeks to break the deadlock within which a form of nationalist social democracy is being crushed between the imperatives of accumulation and legitimation.

But the silences remain disturbing. As a document of compromise, reconciling those in flight from the disappointments of social democracy and the tyranny of authoritarian militancy, it suppresses its internal contradictions. Its lamentation of poverty and injustice forgets that the majority of the population, despite increasing securities and anxieties, lives more than adequately and is more concerned about protecting those gains than radical change. Moreover, its productivist vision of progress would have us believe that economic growth, abolition of the capitalist mode of production, and independence would cure all the evils of politics, work, and life. There is more than a hint here of a rhetorical something for everyone, a latter-day call for "land, peace and bread."

Even more important, its conception of transition remains ambiguous. Though there are echoes of Mitterand-style socialism, there is no direct acknowledgment of the very different situation in France where the state effectively controls an economy dominated by indigenous entrepreneurs and financial markets, and the planning apparatus is already one of the most developed in the capitalist world. This difference is implicit, however, in the call for economic autarky, withdrawal from the North American economy, come what may. But how is this credible? How can this strategy be reconciled with all the other demands and promises of the manifesto: respect for democracy, minorities, civil rights, and most decisively, making good the economic promises on which everything else depends?

These silences also suggest why the Parti Québécois has been the most threatening force in contemporary Canadian politics: it became a credible alternative. Despite its compromises and gradualist strategy, the PQ developed a programme which could realistically propose a re-organization of the federal system, a redirection of economic development, a preservation of a cultural heritage, and an encouragement of parallel movements more radical than itself

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in preparation for longer term initiatives. To break the federal monopoly of innovation could have turned the tide of modern Canadian politics, not only because of Quebec autonomy but as a consequence of breaking the hold of the Liberal Party and providing an inspirational model for the rest of Canada.

The hidden agenda of this manifesto is that it fails to acknowledge the fragility of its point of departure: the assumption that the failure of the PQ would eventually rebound to create a quasi-revolutionary crisis by unveiling the flaws of gradualism and pushing the working and popular classes toward a truly socialist independence movement. But is this plausible? No, the lessons of the past are clear: the result would be the fragmentation of interest groups, the disintegration of the national movement, and a surge for the return of economic stability and security with the division of spoils even more than before a function of the respective power of the groups in conflict.

As for the rest of Canada, such a scenario would be greeted with a sigh of relief. The failure of the PQ could be celebrated as a sign of the victory of federalism and the restoration of Canadian unity. The residues of militancy, confrontations, strikes, agitation, and individual acts of degradation, violence and terrorism associated with the rump of a socialist-independent left could be taken as final proof that Trudeau was right after all, and that behind the veneer of the PQ was the FLQ lurking, waiting for its day of reckoning. And if all this were to come to pass, it would prove that a man had single-handedly, along with the help of a few francophone allies changed the direction of Canadian federalism and Canadian history. This defeat of the PQ would be comparable to "la Conquête" relived, non-violently, in slow-motion, on T.V. To be sure, the French fact would remain and literary culture flourish, but the resulting anger, bitterness, cynicism and loss of self-respect would make a joke of Canadian unity and check new possibilities in midstream. It would, in short, preserve that two-century long compact between the anglophone and francophone elites which first stabilized Canada in the interest of the Commonwealth Empire and now does so for the American.

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