

Mediations

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Acropolis, Montreal: Charles Taylor at 80

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Recognized worldwide for his contributions as a theorist of modernity and multiculturalism, Charles Taylor is Canada's foremost philosopher and political theorist. In honor of Taylor's eightieth birthday, an international conference was held in March 2012 in his hometown of Montreal. Over three days, colleagues presented papers spanning the diverse disciplines and fields "Chuck" has touched, in effect sketching a précis of his life's work.² Always just as concerned with participation as he is with contemplation, Taylor himself exercised the "right of first response" to each of the ten panels.

In the following paper I read Taylor's life through the lens of this remarkable gathering to demonstrate the crucial relevance of his thought to contemporary Canadian politics. The inseparability of thought, language, and politics has always been axiomatic for Taylor, an authority on Hegel and Wittgenstein who argues that the self is constituted in dialogue and takes on meaning against a fusion of horizons.³ While he has been a professor of philosophy and political science at McGill, Oxford, and Northwestern universities, his academic life has always been rooted in political practice. A founder at Oxford of one of the journals that would become the *New Left Review*, Taylor was a leading figure in the British New Left, as he was in Canada's social-democrat New Democratic Party (NDP), serving as its vice president under the legendary Tommy Douglas.⁴ Taylor ran for office four times for the NDP, including in 1968, when he lost the race in Montreal's Mount Royal riding to Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who would become prime minister. As a teacher and a public intellectual, Taylor has trained generations of philosophers, activists, and politicians. A former student of Chuck's, the late Jack Layton, who last spring led the NDP to official opposition status on a much-celebrated wave of support in Quebec, wrote that Taylor was instrumental in helping to elect Quebec's second-ever NDP member of parliament, Thomas Mulcair in 2007.⁵ Mulcair was elected Layton's successor to the NDP leadership a week prior to this conference. While never holding office, Taylor has nonetheless played an active role in Quebec politics. In February 2007, responding to a perceived increase in ethnic

and religious tensions across Quebec — a perception fueled by such spectacles as the town of Hérouxville’s publication of “*normes de vie*”, or behavioral norms for immigrants⁶ — Jean Charest’s provincial Liberal government enlisted the bilingual federalist Taylor along with prominent French sociologist and committed separatist Gérard Bouchard to form the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (BTC). The BTC held public hearings in order to clarify the state’s role in accommodating minority demands according to the principle of *accommodement raisonnable*.⁷ And it is this role — the engaged intellectual in dialogue throughout his milieu — that best illustrates how the various threads of Taylor’s thought and practice are woven together in a continuing project to understand the ways of being together that mediate and generate belonging.

Taylor is often labeled a liberal or a theorist of identity politics. But such labels reveal their inadequacy when applied to Taylor. Too often on the left we accept caricatures of liberals — theorists content to speak from behind Rawlsian veils of ignorance — and as such we don’t take the confluence of imaginaries that make up “liberalism,” nor those who get lumped in with them, seriously enough.⁸ Taking Taylor — a thinker who carefully avoids extremes and lauds cooperation while conscientiously denouncing any program aimed at “consensus” — as its subject and object, this conference forced its participants to discern the contours of an incredibly nuanced and even radical realm of possibility in which to consider the fundamental liberal question of the individual’s relationship to the state.

Taken on its own terms as a certain approach’s self-reflection on its conceptual wholeness, the conference explored how phenomenological structures translate into political structures of respect, mutual recognition, and tolerance. However, when it came to imagining how these structures could measure up against today’s most urgent stakes, the discussions seemed to dead-end in a philosophical speculation curiously detached from the praxis that characterizes Taylor’s life’s work. As we sat in the darkened lecture hall, red felt squares pinned to shirts and schoolbags reminded us of the fight going on outside, a fight against so-far unmatched forces of intolerance. For weeks, almost daily protests against the Charest government’s plan to significantly raise tuition rates for Quebec university students (\$1,625 CAD over five years) had been met with unblinking repression. As one day’s tear gas dissipated, a new cloud of gas would explode the next day only a few kilometers away. *The Concordian* reported that earlier that week, a group of unionized, striking Concordia University students had had their picket line crossed by members of another union of university security guards, one of whom later reportedly punched a student in the face before fleeing the scene.⁹ The student protests have been significant. An estimated 200,000 people attended a march in Montreal on March 22 — one of the largest demonstrations in the history of a province known for taking to the streets in protest of injustices; an even larger demonstration took place a month later on Earth Day (April 22), when striking students, unions, and environmentalists came together to denounce the paths taken by both provincial and federal governments on a whole array of issues.

Far from engaging in any meaningful dialogue, in line with the Charest government, university and CEGEP¹⁰ administrations have taken legal actions against students, repeatedly banning picket lines and turning political protests *a priori* into matters of “law and order.”¹¹

This depoliticization-through-criminalization is of course not confined to the provincial level. The very fact of my attendance at the conference was due to the federal government’s continuing intolerance toward labor action of any kind.¹² A week earlier, my flight to Montreal had been saved thanks to pre-emptive back-to-work legislation against Air Canada pilots, the first in a string of injunctions which memorably climaxed when a disgruntled passenger spit in the face of a baggage handler during an “illegal” (although the distinction seems somewhat redundant) strike, an episode we might see as a supremely effective case of the privatization of union busting, or at least the neoliberal downloading of official hostility into the sphere of civil society.¹³

While it might seem difficult to reconcile the subject matter of the conference with such gross intolerance, each can nevertheless be understood in Taylorian terms. Clearly, the structures which give and guarantee meaningful belonging are increasingly closed off to those who would demand accommodation. In the face of such depoliticization, we’re left not only with the problem of how to deal with being shut out of the polis, but also with the problem of how to avoid diverting antagonism down unproductively atavistic channels. These two threats emerged in the press on the second day, when the French-language daily *Le Devoir* fumed that the conference, sponsored in part by the provincial government, was being held in English.¹⁴ It is true that aside from a very well-attended public panel on Taylor as a public intellectual, there was only one paper delivered in French. The implied excuse, that it was an international conference and therefore had to be staged in the international language, was just more grist for the mill. But in electing not to rehearse the familiar debate, one may glimpse the radical subject Taylor is figuring, an identity simultaneously decentered and rooted in language, and which he discussed in both official languages. Taylor told us that on the Bouchard-Taylor Commission he often heard that English is a mere instrument while French is the expression of a whole culture. “As one who reads Herder,” he said, “I realized the French were right!” However, he has grave concerns that the hermeneutic background of this Herderian culture is formed by old narratives maladapted to our current moment, which at their worst “point to a dangerous problem of the lack of fit in Quebec.” The question of alterity is indeed worth posing as student protestors eagerly redeploy overdetermined and not-unproblematic symbols from Quebec’s nationalist patrimony.¹⁵ But the re-emergence of old social contradictions in response to new ones also points to the valuable lessons we can learn from Taylor. This circulation of the old and production of the new is after all the collective production of new forms of subjectivity, a production which negates the very possibility of a stable, Lockean, liberal identity, of an individual separable from

the community. As Taylor put it in one of his bilingual responses: “*Le grand récit de Canada et multiculturalisme* is full of abstractions of identity that posit themselves as normative, [yet] we’re all on the same footing *Canadien*.”

We can best apprehend this footing when we consider Taylor himself as *Lebensform*: a shared form of life and embodied practices — and an example moreover of the engaged subjectivity that can navigate and move beyond this moment of depoliticization by resituating the polis outside of official structures. The theme that emerged as the collective thesis of the conference was that Taylor is a living expression of the good life, the Socrates in Montreal’s acropolis, and as such he embodies an alternative that is written into the milieu from which he organically emerged, a milieu with home-grown gadflies. Anglophone as well as Francophone, deeply religious and profoundly secular, progressive while cherishing the particular cultural riches which give life meaning — in Montreal, as in Taylor’s life, conflicts and antagonisms generate forms of subjectivity, ways of being together that cannot be contained.

A friend for fifty years, philosopher Richard Bernstein summarized Chuck’s life’s work in relation to the acropolis: “Taylor’s thinking is grounded in his experience. [...] He is an example of the Rooted Cosmopolitan — his roots are in Montreal.” “*Taylor is a Quebecer*,” Bernstein emphasized, “with fierce loyalty to his French and English heritage!” In Bernstein’s view, “Charles Taylor is primarily an eighteenth-century moral philosopher.” There’s no easy way to fuse horizons, but working together is a task, a Kantian *Aufgabe*. In dialogue, “antitheses come together and tend to mellow out.” Sociologist José Casanova would later say Taylor’s greatest contribution has been to show that “social processes are mediated phenomenologically.” For Bernstein, Taylor’s life and work have articulated the expressive vocabulary of this mediation. In response to these points by Bernstein, Taylor likewise located his theory and practice in his bilingual family. As political antagonisms in Quebec are channeled through language politics, each public crisis was felt deeply in his domestic sphere. He therefore became “an anti-liberal of a certain kind” — against any procedural or distributive liberalism. Dismissing John Rawls, Taylor says, “It’s not about individuals but how we relate to each other. *Égalité est un relation*.” And democracy is the means of figuring this relation: “On the [Bouchard-Taylor] Commission, you’re trying to do this way of working out. It’s one of the great issues of our day — how to get along and work together as equal citizens. You find your humanity in this work — it’s very Hegelian!”

The inseparability of humanity and work in this form of life was again the topic of Friday’s public panel, “*Charles Taylor, intellectuel engagé*.” Here, political scientist Guy Laforest invoked Jan Patočka’s measure of the true philosopher, recounting Taylor’s service “*sur la ligne de front*,” and concluding, “Our debt to Charles Taylor is he’s helped us toward understanding our *propre vie*.” Conference organizer Daniel Weinstock then explained that by resisting becoming a party mouthpiece or a dogmatic militant, Taylor is a model for how public life is essential to political philosophy. Eminent

Montreal lawyer and constitutional rights activist Julius Grey gave concrete examples, explaining that as vice president of the NDP during the Quiet Revolution, Chuck helped usher in “a huge change” in Quebec politics by bringing labor into a more urban, less Catholic brand of socialism. Grey stressed that everything Chuck had campaigned for in those early years has since come true, and the victories continue. By successfully managing the demographic shift away from labor into new political forms, today’s NDP has become “the party for Everyone and the Other — the party of Tolerance.” Grey proclaimed, “*Charles Taylor is our guide to social democracy as it should be!*” (to which Weinstock shouted “Mount Royal 2015, Chuck — it’s ripe!”).

But the climax of this rousing retrospective came on Saturday as political philosopher James Tully synthesized Taylor’s *oeuvre*. Taylor has taught Canadians a “language of self-understanding for living in a deep-diverse federation, a language of lived experience” expressed in four main concepts. The first, “deep diversity,” is a concept for Canadian cooperation. A phenomenological supplement to the legal language of rights, this is a first-person vision for consciously recognizing different structures of experience. Through deep diversity, we see that “what counts as Canadian changes across Canada.” This vision opens onto a stance of “mutual recognition.” Against the idea that politics can be mediated by grand theories or super-constitutions, Tully says, Taylor argued that “recognition is mutual. Partners have to do it from a first-person perspective.” Descrying the outlines of conceptions of the common and of exodus that I believe are integral to Taylor’s thought, Tully insists that mutual recognition saved us from more “distrust-generating top-down negotiations of monoculture.” Thanks to Taylor, we as citizens can now “do it ourselves,” talk to each other in a language that is respectful and bring prejudices and misrecognitions into a public “space of questions” in a dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding. Unlike standard dialogue, which progresses from particular differences toward a transcendent norm, in mutual understanding “we go the other way” in order to understand the past in our present. And while this approach is not a formula for action, that’s not the point: “*the dialogue you’ve gone through changes both partners and demands*. That’s why it has to be mutual.” Such mutually-expressive-and-determining dialogue articulates and creates the terms at work in social relations: it’s neither hegemonic nor subaltern, but rather a totally local language “within which we can reconcile differences over time, which permeates the public sphere from the ground up. Reconciliation is an ongoing process: every generation gets brought in, and it changes over time.” “This,” Tully says, “is civic ethics. The greatest gift Taylor has given us.” In this model of mutual dependency — Tully calls it a “Federal, ontic or ontological ‘being with’” — we realize “*we can’t fully be Canadian without all our Others*”; we transcend instrumentality and open up to care “not just within your group but with all others. *This can only be autogenerated by passing through this civic ethics*.” For dialogues to work, “you have to manifest the mode of mutual recognition you want. You embody the change you want within dialogue.” As dialogues prefigure

a better mode of being together, the means of making change are also the ends. One is exemplary, exemplarity builds trust, and therefore the exercise is both normative and utopian. With tears in his eyes, Tully concluded: “*Charles Taylor embodies this Civic Ethic; in the Bouchard-Taylor Commission he did it; he’s a teacher in the class and in public life.*”

By the end of Tully’s moving peroration, Taylor — the teacher, the man who lived history by forming and articulating the present he was mapping — was practically a Gramscian organic intellectual and the transubstantiated embodiment of the Socratic method wrapped up in a World Historical Individual: he was the unity of thought and practice! Finally, Chuck assumed this pan-Hegelian image as he responded: “I sound so coherent! In the ’80s and ’90s I was stumbling around writing papers, and I see now the sense they made.”

As caught up as I was in this celebration of a *Lebensform* who worked to ensure equality and tolerance within liberal society, when I noticed the *carré rouge* on the moderator’s jacket, I had to wonder if Taylor, who had just been so struck by the coherence of his life’s thought, wasn’t now playing the owl of Minerva. Was his 900-page *A Secular Age* an epic, articulating and preserving the relations of his time at the very moment they dissolved into history? When one panelist had said, “Let’s wish the students luck in their struggle!” there had been an awkward smattering of applause. Surely most in the room were sympathetic; but while everyone no doubt felt that the conference proceedings were urgently connected to events outside, it was not an easily intelligible relation. How, after all, are the lessons we might learn from a critique of liberalism — and its attendant problems of inclusion and tolerance — to be applied in an age of neoliberal intolerance of dissent, when the question no longer concerns a group’s alterity or accommodation within the greater polis, and instead concerns the systematic shutting down of political spaces?

The day I started writing this, seventy student protestors were arrested in Montreal in clashes with police. On the day I finished, the form of civic dialogue had again been filled with the ringing, stinging content of police tear gas and concussion grenades in Montreal; 150 had been arrested in Gatineau; and Premier Charest was suggesting that Quebec in 2012 doesn’t negotiate with violent terrorists. This is a good time to remember that this is the government that convened the BTC in a cynical maneuver to depoliticize the debate over minority/majority relations by deferring it into a pseudo-public sphere better described as a public/private zone of indeterminacy; this is the government that stoked a popular intolerance that was mostly a spectacular media creation¹⁶ to the province’s great embarrassment by providing a forum for racist xenophobia, which some saw as an effective public shaming to neutralize the threat of the right-wing, anti-accommodationist Action démocratique du Québec party.¹⁷ As Taylor reminded us, on the day the BTC report was released, Charest immediately rejected the commission’s first suggestion — to remove the imposing crucifix hanging over the president’s chair in the provincial parliament — by arguing that “we cannot

erase our history,” thereby echoing Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois, whom Taylor quoted as saying “[Ici,] *c’est pas la religion, c’est la patrimoine!*” It would seem that whether in the indelible patrimonial “history” or in “2012,” the Charest government has little interest in negotiation.¹⁸

Against this horizon, we see Charest coloring in the often-traced lines Marx sketched in “On the Jewish Question.” Affirming religious freedom-as-right, the state frees itself from having to deal in religious matters, thereby making public matters into private ones. When rights are private property, all the state has to do is ensure the conditions by which this legal property can be maintained. Most importantly, the BTC gave Charest’s Liberals an opportunity to appear to be managing cultural antagonisms while defending religion, seemingly partaking of two important liberal narratives, while cynically exploiting many others. But again, even if his participation has been severed from any effective relationship to policy, as an exemplar of a *Lebensform* Taylor diagnoses these contemporary problems by urging, “How can we rectify our narratives?” When depoliticization is *l’ordre du jour*, we can draw on the phenomenology of accommodation to redefine political space. Reading the Wittgensteinian understanding of rule-following through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Taylor brings epistemology into social theory to show that human agency is contingent on a social space that is open and accommodating of judgments.¹⁹ When political battles are ruled on in courts before they begin, decided on before they’re even made fact, it would seem there’s no space for agreement. But of course any agreement takes place in the common space of language. Taylor’s thought gives us the expressive vocabulary to engage an already-privatized civil society, to sidestep government action or inaction and, as Tully suggested, to do it ourselves. This is another version of Hardt and Negri’s or Paolo Virno’s figures of exodus: a communally generated form of life that is written into the fundamental ontological resource, the source of the self, which is held in common. And while this resource can, has, and will be controlled and manipulated, it’s also impossible to dominate entirely.

Taylor’s life forms part of the horizon of his milieu, Montreal — an acropolis awash in contradictions generating new forms of life that actualize the promise of democracy. On Saturday, Taylor had said, “Like everyone, I’m so connected to this society. But like everyone, I misunderstand it.” The next day, having responded to the final panel, he uttered the last word, a slogan for this acropolis — not a program of corruptible content, but a political form, a *Lebensform*: “A philosopher is someone who doesn’t know anything.”

Notes

1. I would like to thank Imre Szeman for his generous assistance with this project. Thanks also to Brent Bellamy, Dan Harvey, Michael O'Brien, and Katie Lewandowski for valuable suggestions.
2. The impressive roster of presenters is too extensive to detail here. See <https://secureweb.mcgill.ca/rgcs/sites/mcgill.ca/rgcs/files/ctprog.pdf>.
3. It's often noted that Taylor's doctoral supervisor was Isaiah Berlin, but he was co-supervised as well by G.E.M. Anscombe.
4. Taylor helped found *Universities and Left Review*, which in 1960 merged with *The New Reasoner* to form *New Left Review*.
5. Jack Layton, "Foreword" in Robert Maynell, *Canadian Idealism and the Philosophy of Freedom: C.B. Macpherson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2011) iv-xv.
6. The document can be found on the town's website: <http://municipalite.herouville.qc.ca/normes.pdf>. Also see Sourayan Mookerjee's "Hérouville's Afghanistan, or, Accumulated Violence." *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31 (2009): 177-200.
7. The complex of antagonisms at play in the so-called "reasonable accommodation" debate — philosophical discussions of pluralism, the incongruence of translations between the English "secularism" and the French *laïcité*, policy incongruence between France's Republican conception of *laïcité*, Canadian multiculturalism, and Québécois conceptions of interculturalism and *accommodement*, etc. — is far too complicated to gloss here. See the BTC report: *Fonder l'avenir: le temps de la conciliation. Rapport de la Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliée aux différences culturelles* (Montréal: Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliée aux différences culturelles); *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation* (Québec: Gouvernement de Québec, 2008). Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor's *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011) is also very informative.
8. For example, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's simplistic — not to mention simply *wrong* — gloss of Taylor as exemplar of liberal "identity politics" in *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009) 330. Those who consign Taylor to the "liberal" camp tend not to address the fact that in Canada's version of liberal democracy Locke and Mill have always had to make room for Hegel. For a short, fascinating summary of the Hegelian tradition in Canada, I recommend David MacGregor, "Canada's Hegel" (<http://publish.uwo.ca/~mcgregor/published/hegel1.html>). For a deeper treatment, see Meynell. Barry Cooper offers a Canadian Kojévian thesis that anticipates Fukuyama in *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984). An update on this end of history from the semi-periphery thesis can be found in Robert C. Sibley, *Northern Spirits: John Watson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor: Appropriations of Hegelian Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2008). And for an in-depth discussion of Taylor's complicated relationship to Marxism, see Ian Fraser's *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor* (London: Imprint, 2007).
9. "Campus Security Clashes with Students." *The Concordian* (27 Mar. 2012): 3.
10. CEGEP (*Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel*): Quebec's system of public colleges founded in order to make post-secondary education universally accessible and to serve as an intermediary step between secondary school and either university, or the job market.
11. "Quebec Student Wins Injunction, Returns to Class." *CBC News* (3 Apr. 2012). <http://www.cbc.ca/news/>

- canada/montreal/story/2012/04/03/injunction-against-student-picket-lines-at-laval-university.html.
12. Kazi Stastna, "Government's Recent Labour Interventions Highly Unusual, Experts Say." *CBC News* (13 Oct. 2011). <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/10/12/f-air-canada-strike-analysis.html>
 13. "Air Canada Strike Effects Felt into the Weekend." *CBC News* (23 Mar. 2012). <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/03/23/air-canada-wildcat.html>. See also, "Air Canada's Recent History of Strife," *CBC News* (23 Mar. 2012). <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/03/23/f-air-canada.html>.
 14. Robert Dutrisac, "Un colloque en anglais sur Charles Taylor." *Le Devoir* (30 Mar. 2012). <http://www.ledevoir.com/societe/actualites-en-societe/346368/un-colloque-en-anglais-sur-charles-taylor>.
 15. See Anthony Morgan, "La grève et les minorités," *The Huffington Post* (28 Mar. 2012), http://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/anthony-morgan/greve-etudiante-minorites_b_1383521.html, and Celine Cooper, "These Symbols Come with Baggage," *The Montreal Gazette* (20 Apr. 2012), <http://www.montrealgazette.com/opinion/These+symbols+come+with+baggage/6494042/story.html>. See also Sean Mills, *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2010). Taylor and Bouchard are scrupulously attentive to the legacy of Quebec nationalism throughout the BTC report, an attention that is quickly summarized in Howard Adelman, "Monoculturalism versus Interculturalism in a Multicultural World" in Howard Adelman and Pierre Anctil, eds., *Religion, Culture, and the State: Reflections on the Bouchard-Taylor Commission* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2011) 37-57.
 16. Pierre Anctil, "Introduction" in Adelman and Anctil 3-15.
 17. Anctil 13.
 18. Quoted in Adelman 49.
 19. See Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) 165-80, and "Social Theory as Practice," *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 91-115.

