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Quebec at the end of the 20th century

Robin Berting *

This year there will be a referendum on Quebec independence. In an era of international economic globalization, and in one of the freest and most prosperous countries in the world, the question is why such a strong nationalist movement exists in Quebec.

Rather than guessing Quebec's future, my goal here is an understanding of the province's past, especially the last thirty years, which should help explain this movement's origins and destination.

I argue that in spite of what one might think, the Quebec nationalist movement is strong now *not* because the French language is in danger —it is doing better now than it ever has in the past— but because nationalists are winning the struggle over the identity of Quebeckers. This is largely due to actions taken by the Quebec state, which have had a direct influence in shaping the nature of the region's society, and consequently in forming the identity of its inhabitants.

From "conservation" to modern Quebec nationalism

Before the 1960s, francophone Quebec —or should we say French Canada?— was more traditional, devoutly Catholic and generally much more conservative than the Quebec society of today. Some people have compared it to traditional Latin American societies. Yet unlike Latin America there was no prosperous, dominant business class amongst French-speaking Quebecois.

Due to the English conquest of France's North American colonies, the anglophone minority —centered in the western third of Montreal and comprising 15 to 20 percent of the province's population— generally controlled business, commerce and industry.

The dominant nationalism in Quebec reflected the conservative nature of society at that time. The French language, the Catholic Church and family values were to be defended against the "corrupting" liberal influences of Anglo-Saxon North America and of the various ethnic groups that immigrated to Montreal from around the world. Still, in concrete terms, the tenets of this nationalism did little to defend francophones' interests in the face of their English-Canadian or foreign bosses. Quebec governments allowed foreign control of the most important sectors of the economy, seeing this as the only way to develop the area, since there was no French-Canadian capital, and on numerous occasions attacked the rights of workers, the vast majority of whom were francophones.

In spite of this situation, Quebec changed dramatically over the years. Industrialization, which brought urbanization with it, changed the rural nature of society, and new modernizing tendencies grew rapidly after the Second World War, culminating in the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s. The Liberal Party, led by Jean Lesage, defeated the old and reactionary *Union Nationale* which had governed since the 1930s, and replaced the latter's conservative nationalism with a much more modern view of society.

In 1962, with the nationalization of private electric companies, Hydro Québec was born. As was the case in Mexico when oil was nationalized in 1938, this action allowed the Quebec state to control the province's most important natural resource. Important reforms were also enacted in areas such as education and health.

Influenced by these political changes as well as trends from throughout the industrialized world, Quebec society underwent a major transformation during the 1960s. The standard of living increased, a new middle class —mainly comprised of employees of the expanding Quebec welfare-state bureaucracy— grew dramatically, social values changed, the birth rate declined from one of the highest to one of the lowest in the world, and the church lost virtually all its influence over society.

* Political Science Department, Université de Montréal, and Research and Study Group on Social and Economic Changes.

The modernizers split into two main factions, while "conservative nationalism" virtually disappeared. One new tendency emphasized pan-Canadian federalism, promoting bilingualism and Canadian unity through the actions of the Canadian state; its main supporters participated in the federal Liberal Party. The other modernizing tendency, the new Quebec nationalism, called for the political independence of Quebec and the establishment of French as the province's only official language; its main political outlet became the then social-democratic *Parti Québécois.*

Here we should draw a distinction between the new and old Quebec nationalism. The latter was based on ethnicity (that is, on *la nation canadienne française*, the "French-Canadian nation"), whereas the former is based on territory (i.e., the area covered by the Quebec state). The new nationalism welcomes immigrants from different horizons, as long as they accept that French is the main language of communication in Quebec, whereas the old nationalism basically rejected interaction with other ethnic groups.

In addition, the new nationalism was originally left of center, emphasizing workers rights; the Parti Québécois (PQ) received the support of the Quebec labor movement; and state intervention in the economy was considered essential for local development. In spite of many years of regional support to the Liberal Party in federal elections —in the absence of a nationalist alternative— modern Quebec nationalism has had more direct influence over local society than did the pan-Canadian federalism of the federal Liberal Party.

It should nevertheless be emphasized that neither vision dominates Quebec society completely. In fact, a typical francophone Quebecker shares elements of both, in a rather ambiguous way, considering him or herself a nationalist and voting for the PQ, for example, while cheering when an English Canadian wins a gold medal in the Olympics; such a person might identify him or herself as a Canadian when travelling abroad.

The state as the motor of social change

In 1976, when the PQ won the provincial elections, its declared goals included making French the official language and holding a referendum on Quebec independence. In 1977, the first goal was achieved with the passing of Bill 101, the "Charter of the French Language." This law encouraged the use of French in the workplace, made it mandatory for francophone children —as well as those of immigrants— to attend francophone schools, and prohibited the use of languages other than French in commercial signs. The goal of holding a referendum was achieved in 1980, but the "no" vote won 60 percent and Quebec independence was blocked. However, the PQ won the next Quebec elections and stayed in power until 1985, when the Liberal Party returned to office.

Even though the party did not achieve Quebec independence, the PQ's eight years in office, mainly under Réné Lévesque, left their mark on the province. There was an exodus of much of the province's anglophone community —about 250,000 out of less than a million Anglos left Quebec in the late 1970s. Many important corporations moved their head offices from Montreal to Toronto or elsewhere. This exodus, along with Bill 101 and its encouragement of French as the language of business, meant that francophones could fill the void, especially by occupying the branch offices that replaced the departed company head offices. New francophone private enterprises also emerged, forming what came to be called "Quebec, Inc." In addition to already established companies like the Power Corporation and Bombardier, giants like Lavalin, Quebecor, the Banque Nationale, Laurentienne and the Desjardins Group appeared. The business elite was no longer exclusively English-speaking.

Another result of Bill 101, especially the section dealing with the education of newcomers' children, was that immigrants began to integrate into francophone society much more than before, at the expense of the English community. In the past, about 75 percent of new arrivals would integrate into the minority anglophone society and only 25 percent into the francophone majority. Now the numbers have been reversed. Demographically speaking, Quebec is more francophone than ever before. In addition, the terms of political debate have changed in Quebec, with most of the PQ's achievements recognized as permanent, as the fact that the ruling Quebec Liberal Party has not tried to undo most PQ legislation attests. Only some segments of the anglophone minority, especially through the Equality Party and Alliance Quebec, have fought vigorously against the provisions of Bill 101.

One result of these social and political changes is the new perception that Quebecois have of themselves. Of course, the process is largely related to the changes brought about in a previous period by the "Quiet Revolution," but the language laws have intensified these shifts by changing the socio-linguistic nature of Quebec. If one looks at Quebeckers' identity in historical perspective, the

1960s prove to have been crucial. When the English defeated the French at the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the inhabitants of what is now Quebec called themselves *les canadiens*.

With the conquest, this term came to represent specifically the French-speaking inhabitants of Canada, as the English speakers were considered *les anglais* (the English). As time passed and English speakers came to consider themselves as much Canadians as the French speakers did, francophones began to refer to themselves as *canadiens français*. With the coming of the Quiet Revolution and all its social implications in the 1960s, that term became associated with the old, traditional Quebec society and thus acquired pejorative connotations. The new term *québécois* was born, associated with the new modern nationalism, and is used unconditionally by Quebec nationalists today. In addition, virtually all Quebeckers, except for some elderly people, identify themselves as Quebecois and not *canadiens* or *canadiens français*. This change in identity can be attributed as much to shifts in local society encouraged by the Quebec state as to any other factors.

I do not contend that Quebeckers have neither real nor imagined insecurities regarding the survival of their language and culture, which contribute to their nationalist sentiments. Many francophones, in regions like the West Island of Montreal and the Ottawa river valley, are virtual minorities in their own communities. Moreover, the province's extremely low birth rate and declining population, in relation to the rest of Canada, are seen as highly worrisome. However, many Quebecois overestimate the dangers to their language. For example, there is still a widespread perception that immigrants tend to integrate into the anglophone community despite many studies which have proven the contrary.

What I do contend is that it is the perception that Quebeckers have of themselves that explains the nationalist movement's strength. It is interesting to note that the best-known demand of the failed Meech Lake Constitutional Accord was that Quebec be recognized as a "Distinct Society" within Canada. When public opinion in English Canada turned against the accord, many Quebecois took this very personally, as a rejection of who they were, a lack of recognition of their collective identity.

Here's another example of this perception: on June 24 every year, St. Jean Le Baptiste Day —Quebec's national holiday (*fête nationale*)— hundreds of thousands parade in the streets of Montreal with Quebecois flags; a week later, July 1 (Canada day) about twenty thousand people march with Canadian flags, and they're mainly anglophones.

I should emphasize that this transformation of identity has not been complete, and many ambiguities still exist. An anecdote emphasizes this point: in June 1993 I went to see Leonard Cohen give a concert at the Montreal Forum. The night before, in the same place, the city's hockey team, named *Le Canadien de Montréal*, had won the Stanley Cup. After the victory, two or three hundred thousand fans celebrated in the streets. Unfortunately, a minority of two or three thousand committed acts of vandalism and looting. Because there were so many innocent people present, the police couldn't do anything; from about 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. millions of dollars worth of goods and property were stolen or damaged, and it was all televised live and shown on the news around the world. Montreal's reputation was tarnished and most Montrealers were thoroughly ashamed of the incident.

The next day at the concert, Cohen —an anglophone Montrealer who speaks French well, sings in English, and is adored by francophones and anglophones alike— made no verbal references to the hockey game or its aftermath. Near the end of the concert, however, he put on a *Canadiens* jersey. The crowd, a mix of francophones and anglophones —mostly intellectual types in their thirties or forties— went absolutely wild applauding Cohen. In spite of the shame that the aftermath of the game meant for Montrealers, they were all extremely proud of their hockey team, which has a long tradition of winning the Stanley Cup, going back to the beginning of the century.

One might say that the team represents all Montrealers, and it does, but I would argue that the symbolic representation of the team is different in each linguistic community. Since *Le Canadien* was founded at the beginning of the century, for francophones, declared nationalists or not, the name and the team itself, as a cultural institution, represent francophone Quebecois. Its nickname is *Les Habitants* (the inhabitants), the old word used to describe French-Canadian peasants. It is the only team in which a majority have usually been francophone Quebeckers; and back in the 1920s and 1930s the city's English-speaking community had its own team, the Montreal Maroons.

On the other hand, from the perspective of English-speaking Montrealers and thousands of English Canadians across the country, the team is a Canadian institution —in the bilingual sense— as much as it is a

francophone Quebec institution: it is called the Canadiens and its uniform is mainly red, the color of the Canadian flag. In fact, the team has thousands of fanatic supporters all across the country, in places like Winnipeg and Vancouver, who cheer it on even when it plays against their own home teams.

The challenge of economic globalization

The changes in Quebec society provide elements making it possible to reconcile nationalism and globalization. Due to the growth of a francophone business class, many Quebec nationalists have no problem with economic globalization. In fact, resistance to the Free Trade Agreement in the 1988 federal election was much stronger in English Canada than in Quebec, which registered a massive vote for the pro-free trade Conservative Party in an election that was basically a referendum on the commercial treaty with the United States.

In spite of a certain degree of linguistic paranoia vis à vis the rest of Canada, Quebeckers are —rightly or wrongly— much less fearful than English Canadians of the danger of being swallowed up by the United States. Regarding free trade with Mexico, Quebeckers are also more sanguine than English Canadians, largely because they share a number of cultural traits with Latin Americans.

I don't know whether it's true, but advertisements put out by the Alliance Française here in Mexico City say 60 percent of Canadian trade with Mexico is through Québécois companies. In addition, Quebec nationalists contend that there is no contradiction between political independence and economic integration. Small states can prosper in an increasingly global economy. They often cite the European Community as an example of an ideal relationship which Quebec and the rest of Canada should try to achieve.

While I personally doubt that independence will be achieved this year —as too many Quebeckers are still afraid of the negative economic results it might bring about, and there still exist many institutional and even emotional ties with the rest of Canada— there is no doubt that Quebec is steadily becoming more *québécois* and less Canadian VM

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Julián Castro Rea, Coordinator, Canadian Studies Section
Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte
Torre II de Humanidades, piso 11, Ciudad Universitaria, D.F. 04510, México
Telephone (525) 623-0300 and 623-0307 / Fax (525) 550-0379 / E-mail jcrea @ servidor.unam.mx