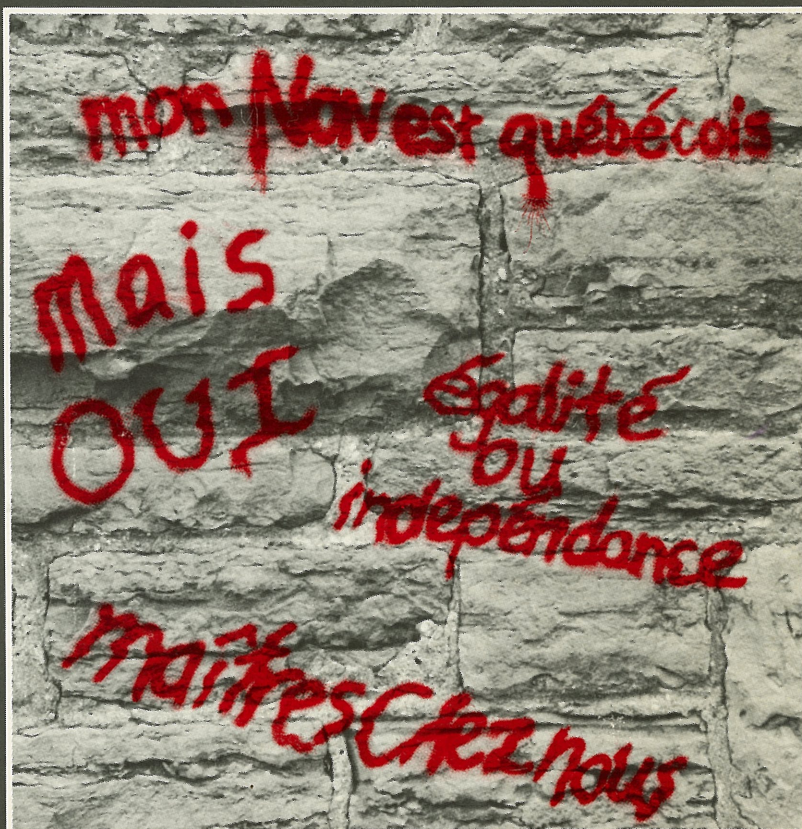


QUEBEC SINCE 1945

Selected Readings



Michael D. Behiels

NATIONALISM IN QUEBEC IN THE 1980s: AFTER FAILURE, THE CHALLENGE OF RELEVANCE†

JEAN-LOUIS ROY

Disarray, backing down from commitments, disbelief, anger: these were some of the consequences of the failure of a certain expression of nationalism in Quebec at the beginning of the 1980s. Five years later, some people have not yet accepted the way in which a society that rejects the protection of an ideology expresses its freedom.

Others celebrated the outcome of the referendum. In their opinion, this outcome rested on the prospect of a more generous, more promising alternative. It expressed, in particular, fidelity to another expression of nationalism deeply rooted in the history of Quebec.

These diverging evaluations illustrate the complexity of nationalism in Quebec. There is no such thing as *one* expression of nationalism in Quebec, univocal and all-pervasive. There are, instead, *various* expressions of nationalism in Quebec.

This pluralism is not a recent phenomenon. It has always been at the very heart of our history. What is new, is the decision, taken at the end of the 1960s, by a segment of the political class to break with a tradition that incorporated the more radical currents of nationalism into the mainstream where they exercised only a marginal influence.

The foundation of the Parti Québécois put an end to this century-old tradition. Suddenly, the most strident national aspirations moved to the foreground and became the centre of all political debates. They became, within a few short years, universal prism and attraction pole. They led to a new interpretation of history that became even more relevant after the Parti Québécois came to power in 1976. They fed a new strategy that was bound to fail, since it could not stand up to the test of history.

†“Le nationalisme québécois dans les années 80,” *Le Devoir*, 1 juin 1985. From the text of a speech given by the former publisher of *Le Devoir* to a meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, 28 May 1985. Translated by Henri Malebranche.

We have not properly sized up the scope of the changes that this break wrought. Besides, the very people who claimed responsibility for this new strategy tried to tone down its importance. They proclaimed, at every opportunity, continuity with Quebec's past and an affiliation with the Quiet Revolution. I, for one, reject this alleged continuity and this affiliation.

The fundamental objective of the PQ went completely beyond those pursued by successive governments in Quebec between 1960 and 1976, even if the governments of Lesage, Johnson, and Bourassa bent the course of events. The fundamental objective of the PQ evinced a complete change of nature, the pursuit of autonomy within confederation having given way to the will to gain sovereignty with economic association with Canada. This radical objective thus drastically changed the political expression of nationalism.

The single most important occurrence of the early 1980s was to force Quebecers to choose between these two schools of nationalism, between these irreconcilable expressions, and to push the struggle between them to the extreme. It says a lot about the importance of nationalism in the 1980s to acknowledge its presence at the head of our commitments and desires to master the course of our history. However, from focus and pole of attraction, nationalism became a divisive and polarizing factor that led to the weakening of Quebec.

A Nationalism in Transition

Both the referendum campaign and its outcome illustrated the rejection by the majority of a certain school of Québécois nationalism. But it would be grossly mistaken to conclude that nationalism is dead and to write, as some people did, elegant obituaries.

From a historical perspective, the first phase of the PQ adventure represents a rather limited episode. Québécois nationalism was not born with René Lévesque's uprising. Québécois nationalism was not the child of the PQ. It corresponds to wider and more permanent realities.

Without claiming an absolute singularity — which would give an absurdly Albanian vision to our destiny — the Francophones in Quebec are still bound to a certain conception of their destiny that makes up Quebec's special character within the Canadian fabric and on the North American continent. They are bound to feel and react in a similar manner whenever certain topics are brought up that relate to their history, their territory, and their continued survival as Francophones. They know that this special character must be incorporated within the framework of Canadian and Quebec policies and they will keep on struggling to maintain this special character.

The failure of the PQ's strategy and policy, and its eventual rejection by the electorate, do not mean that no one has stood up, or will not rise in the future, to defend the interests of Quebec and secure a political status that takes its very special character into consideration.

Besides, the PQ itself has been forced to revise its analysis of the aspirations of the people of Quebec and its interpretation of history. The words of René Lévesque summarize better than any long-winded commentary the motive of this revision. "Along the road," he wrote on 20 November 1984,

We did not succeed, and less and less so with the passing of time, to draw a lesson from what was happening to us. . . . However, for some time already, I, like others, have been forced to start "thinking better of it." And to realize that it could not go on like that any longer.

Even if they are still far apart, Quebec's political parties seem to be headed for a kind of rapprochement on their views, which yesterday were still contradictory, on how to perceive and defend Quebec's interests. Of course, this rapprochement will not lead to a complete agreement. The recent introduction of a "projet d'accord constitutionnel" by the Lévesque government and the Liberal program "Maîtriser l'avenir," outline very clearly the room in which the political parties of Quebec will manoeuvre over the next few years.

The various schools of Québécois nationalism must redefine how they perceive themselves and the future, unless they dismiss the referendum defeat, the patriation of the constitution, Trudeau's departure, and the election of a Conservative government as unimportant.

These are the first motives, political ones, that bring me to talk about a nationalism in transition.

The Need for a New Synthesis

But there are other, possibly more compelling motives resulting essentially from new international realities, conditions in Canada, and major changes that have permeated Quebec society.

Nationalism, in its broadest sense, is nothing more than a synthesis of the aspirations, the needs, and the interests that are either dormant or at work in a given society, some of which are more permanent in character while others are a response to certain events. Any other definition would be a misrepresentation. Citizens who cannot relate to this definition will say so if given the chance. In any event, they will pull away if the synthesis cannot be verified by facts and the experience of their daily lives.

Quebec in the 1980s is called upon to look for a new coherence, to remake the image it has of itself. This necessity is already at work in our society. It is not a matter of liking or disliking what we are becoming. What matters is to understand this process, to measure its full impact and, while keeping a certain critical distance, not to deny it. It matters more than ever to make it fully ours and, if necessary, to build counterweights to it.

Nationalism is not a category in itself. It is bound to change also. Its permanence is indissociable from its relevance. Hence, its relation to the currents that transform society and alter it at the same time.

I would like to end by identifying some of the changes confronting us, changes that nationalism will have to assimilate lest it condemn itself to insignificance, marginality, and the severe censure of events.

International Factors

It is more than ever impossible to think of Quebec all by itself. Some decisive international factors have thrown a monetary order, which is a thing of the past,

out of gear, intensified international competition among new and old industrialized countries and also called for massive technological adjustments and major changes in attitudes and ways of thinking.

Considering its main characteristics, our nationalism was fashioned by and large during that bygone period of real and constant economic growth. This rhythm is now broken and along with it a certain way of visualizing and planning changes.

Even without having to alter its nature, nationalism simply cannot disregard these realities.

A number of other international factors press heavily on the concerns of our fellow citizens. Nationalism ought to take them into consideration also. What we are talking about here is the impossibility of defining, exclusively from within, the whole range of concerns and priorities. Issues such as nuclear energy, the environment, new technological challenges, the tremendous cultural diversity we have begun to experience and that is yet to come, give a wider dimension to the already complex "cohabitation" process.

The Canadian Factor

The nationalism that has been predominant among us over the last years had managed, until a few months ago, to ignore the Canadian context. So many works of all kinds, from inaugural speeches to reports of commissions of inquiry took their inspiration in a vision, a geography, an economy of a truncated world from which Canada was absent. In theory, this magic trick removed a lot of constraints. It made it possible to plan without those tiresome irritants and bothersome juxtapositions that are the lot of all nations in the world. This way of seeing things has died a natural death.

A responsible Quebec nationalism must constantly keep in mind the ties that bind us to our immediate neighbours, to deem as essential Quebec's capacity for initiative within a whole that we wish might have been different but whose very existence we cannot deny. Historically and constitutively, the Canadian factor rests in the very heart of Quebec and the Quebec factor rests in the very heart of Canada.

A Society in Transformation

In many respects, Quebec society is very different from what it was fifteen or even ten years ago. Hence, the need to revise our teaching and representations.

"Le déclin du Québec est-il inévitable?" The subtitle of Georges Mathews's book [*Le choc démographique* (Boréal Express, 1984)], which deals with the demographic crisis, aptly summarizes the enormous challenge confronting Quebec society on account of its demographic condition. In 1950, Quebec still had the highest birth rate in the Western world. Within thirty years, following an unprecedented drop of 62 percent, it had fallen to next to last.

If the current trend were to continue, the decline in Quebec's demographic importance would become quite pronounced by the year 2006. All regions in Canada would, by then, register a substantial population increase: 12.4 percent

in the Maritimes, 19.3 percent in Ontario, 32.5 percent in the West. Quebec's population would have increased by only 7.7 percent.

The change in the birth rate presents us with disturbing problems concerning social organization and civilization. It is certain that Quebec will have to resort to massive immigration simply to maintain its population at the present level. It is reckoned that the annual number of immigrants would have to treble just to ensure the replacement of the generations. Is this a practicable solution? And what would be the consequences on Quebec's ethnic composition, on the so-called national aspirations of the Quebecers?

There is on this situation food for thought for the various expression of nationalism in Quebec, even some arguments in favour of a specific Quebec policy on this issue, given Canada's indifference in the matter. Quebec's sense of belonging will be diversified. The concept of otherness will become central. The major challenges that the Francophone majority would have to face on account of this unexplored path, which they will have to follow to ensure their very renewal, are still unknown and unclear.

And while we are on the topic of decline, the reduction, inevitable in this case, of the role of the state will present the various schools of Québécois nationalism with a formidable challenge. As far as symbols and realities are concerned, it is the action of the state that has most effectively set the parameters of the nationalist debate in Quebec over the last quarter century. Without falling into the currently fashionable notion that wants the state to be the cause of all nightmares, one has to recognize that the prevailing trend in all industrialized societies, aimed at stopping the growth of the public sector and cutting its size, is also at work in Quebec.

Quebec would have to think up its own way to stop the growth of the state with prudence and vigilance insofar as the development functions of the state are to a considerable degree directed towards maintaining this distinct society that we constitute.

Quebec nationalism will have to incorporate in its quest this reversal in the political realities.

The rapid emergence of a class of Francophone entrepreneurs in Quebec and the emphasis on private initiative are further new elements in the national and social fabric of the province. For some, it is a change that portends the decline of nationalism. Quite frankly, there is nothing to prove the accuracy of such a thesis.

I, for one, believe that the die has not yet been cast. This emergence and this emphasis are both too recent for us to grasp their full signification. Admittedly, we have here a new alliance and power bloc, a new force that will demand to play a role in charting and shaping Quebec's future. If we do not stint them on this role, these new entrepreneurs could well be in a position to converge their business logic with the interests of Quebec, and this they could achieve better than we think, although through means that are not always obvious. And they will do so all the more convincingly insofar as they are truly partners and their needs and concerns will have been incorporated into those of the society at large.

Lastly, the expressions of nationalism cannot remain indifferent to two essential priorities for a nation such as ours. By this we mean the defence of the internal territory — education and culture. I will not say anything more about

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