El Café Para Todos

In multietnic democracies, subtle majority privileges can be just as corrosive as minority nationalism.

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Contemporary Majority Nationalism
Alain-G. Gagnon, André Lecours and Geneviève Nootens, editors
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Canada’s May 2011 election resulted in the eclipse of the Bloc Québécois as a significant actor on the federal stage, and in the months that have followed the Parti Québécois has experienced severe internece conflict. It would be tempting to assume, as a number of commentators have been prone to do, that the fervor of Quebec sovereignty is a thing of the past and that Canada can now proceed to forge a stronger national unity than before.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In many ways, not least because of the quite diverse voting patterns in Quebec and in English-speaking Canada on May 2, Canada remains a country with multiple national identities. No Quebec government, whatever its stripe, can renge on certain core principles regarding language, provincial autonomy or the search for an evanescent model of Quebec identity. Nor are aboriginal Canadians, despite the archipelago of territories or cities that they inhabit, about to be assimilated into the Canadian mainstream.

For the contributors to Contemporary Majority Nationalism, edited by Alain-G. Gagnon, André Lecours and Geneviève Nootens, none of this would be particularly surprising. As students of nationalism with broad comparative interests and backgrounds, they take the long view, not the short, of national conflicts in countries like Canada. What makes this volume particularly interesting is that it gives a central place to a phenomenon that has received short shrift in recent decades, namely the nationalism of majorities within multinational states.

A key aspect of majority nationalism is that its adherents want to see their interests projected by the central state. As Alain Dieckhoff, a French political scientist, notes: “anglophones embrace with
one? In that case, we are better off thinking of “nested” national identities in the Canadian case, with Québécois and aboriginal nationalism coexisting with a larger, inclusive Canadian national identity. Well and good, one is tempted to say, when we think of the House of Commons resolution of 2006 recognizing the Québécois as a nation within a united Canada. But we also know how tricky any attempt to constitutionalize or routinize such a concept can prove.

If we had any doubts about the difficulties in the Canadian case, a brief reference to the Spanish one may help. The final article in the collection, by Enric Fossas, maps the complicated relationship between multinationality and regional autonomy in Spain since the restoration of democracy in the late 1970s.

The paradox of the Spanish situation is the following. The Spanish Constitution recognizes the existence of 17 autonomous regions, including a number of nationalities, within Spain. But the Basque Country and Catalonia, despite enjoying the most sustained period of autonomy in centuries, are also the regions least comfortable with the constitutional status quo. They keep pressing for greater powers from Madrid and the other Spanish regions, to no one’s great surprise, tend to want no less power than their nationalist counterparts. El café para todos, as they say in Spain, coffee for everybody. Shades of the response of a number of Canadian provincial governments to the demands for reinforced powers for Quebec back in the 1980s and ’90s.

Like many volumes made up of collected essays, this one is not without its shortcomings. The article on the American case, by Liah Greenfeld, deals with American multiculturalism. But the author is given to lofty generalizations. Is it only our modern and materialistic age, as she asserts, that has come to think of ethnicity as a culturally significant category? The term ethnos derives from the Greek, and it was Greek authors who distinguished the Hellenic sphere from the non-Greek barbarians of the ancient world. Chinese civilization in pre-modern times had a similar view of the Middle Kingdom versus the barbarians outside. The Hebrew Bible is replete with references to Jews versus Gentiles. So what is so modern about ethnicity? In an unnecessary side reference to Israel, she claims that “the majority of the Israeli population is atheist.” One would want to see hard evidence to back up such an assertion. And what is one to make of her claim in the American case, “hard as it may be to believe,” ethnic diversity “all boils down to chicken soup, minestrone, and avgolemono”? What then explains the continued strength of right-wing parties harping on the identity theme in countries as divergent as Denmark, Finland, France or Hungary today. It may also explain the anger and underlying racism one finds among supporters of the anti-immigration movement and of the Tea Party insurgency in the United States.

4) One cannot stress enough the ongoing importance of accommodation and “vivre ensemble” as an ideal between majority and minority nationalities if the larger state is to remain intact. The break-ups of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia lie within the historical memories of those of us over 40. The possible break-up of Belgium, another country where the majority Flemish and the minority Walloons and Bruxellois seldom see eye to eye, is another telling reminder of the need for comity across linguistic lines. Canadians should not draw excessive comfort from the present weakening of the sovereigntist current in Quebec. The majority nationalism of the rest of Canada will continue to have to come to terms with Quebec and aboriginal nationalism into the indefinite future.