Federalism, Citizenship and Quebec: Debating Multinationalism


This book looks both backwards and ahead. It rehearses the traditional Quebec positions and understandings about Canada that have marked our common political history, but it does so within the framework of a contemporary idiom, the vocabulary of the multinational state.

The authors are seeking to address two questions – one theoretical and the other a matter of the real world. The theoretical question asks how you understand and theorize the multinational state. The more practical or applied question asks how you build on Quebeckers’ perceptions of themselves to think through Canada as a multinational state – in other words, a state in which multinationalism is not a problem to be solved but a constitutive reality to be accommodated. On page 28, Gagnon and Iacovino clearly state their conceptualization of the Canadian community, declaring that “Canadians do not constitute a sovereign people, they are a plurality of sovereign peoples.”

You can read the book in two ways. One way is to see it as a study of the notion of multinational democracies, looking specifically at Canada and Quebec. There has been a good deal of thought, much of it done by Canadians, devoted to the fashioning of a new and more satisfactory understanding of the existential reality of many modern states, which, it can be plausibly argued, contain not one nation but two or several. This book can be read as an attempt to make a contribution to this enterprise. That’s one way of looking at the book.

Alternatively, one can regard the book as a deeply conventional argument of the sort we have heard many times, but clothed this time in somewhat unfamiliar language: Quebec and most Quebeckers have always regarded Canada as a country founded on the principle of dualism, whereas citizens in the rest of the country see it as a federation of ten provinces and three territories, or as a majoritarian democracy. Dualism has been articulated by Quebeckers in many different ways over the years – two nations, two founding peoples, special status, distinct society. Now it is being advanced in the idiom of multinationalism.

I think the book is more about this second alternative than about the first – more, that is, about updating a traditional Quebec argument than about thinking through what the idea of the multinational state might entail for Canada. The nation the authors talk about almost all of the time is Quebec, which is in some sense the easy case. They do not talk of aboriginal peoples and not very much about that other non-national or imperfectly national community that lies outside of Quebec, English-speaking Canada. Each of these raises important conceptual and practical challenges, and one would expect that a book on Canada as a multinational state would spend a good deal of time sorting through the non-Quebec puzzles. For puzzles there assuredly are, once you move beyond Quebec.

Aboriginal people speak about “First Nations,” not an aboriginal nation; aboriginal peoples are united by a more or less common experience of oppression, but they
are divided by language, culture, geography, and much else that divides the country at large. And few people, except for dualist Francophones, think that the rest of Canada is a nation. Many Quebeckers suspect that the refusal of Anglophones to acknowledge their own nationhood is a clever stratagem that allows “English Canada” to decline to recognize the existence of a Francophone national community in Canada and to address its needs on the basis of equal partnership. A simpler account is, I think, the more accurate one: namely, that that is not how people in “the ROC” (which is how the authors speak of the rest of the country) see themselves. A book whose central purpose was to think through Canada as a multinational democracy would not be allowed to get away with examining only the easy case and ignoring the tough ones.

I would agree with Gagnon and Iacovino that Quebec’s refusal to consent to the constitutional arrangements by which Quebeckers are ruled is a serious and worrisome deficiency in our political arrangements, although I am also conscious of the fact that trying to fix the problem has made it worse. In the latter part of their book, they offer some thoughts about how Quebeckers’ confidence in the country’s institutions might be restored. Grounding their approach in the Secession Reference of the Supreme Court of Canada, they construct a roadmap based on the following assumptions (pp. 170–71):

- that “Canada will have to be restructured along the normative principles of multinational democracy or it will eventually cease to exist”;
- that there will be no initiative emanating from Ottawa for the foreseeable future;
- that “Quebec’s legitimate right to self-determination is established, a principle that the Supreme Court of Canada legitimated but did not invent,” and that “a referendum on its political and constitutional future will allow for nation-to-nation negotiations, as equal partners”;
- and that “the Canadian conversation about the limits of diversity and unity, in itself, is not a sufficient normative foundation upon which to define the country.”

Their proposed plan fits in with current reflection in Quebec concerning the development of a formal Quebec constitution. The plan would proceed as follows. Quebec would engage in broad and deep internal discussions that would lead to the adoption of a formal constitution, specifying the boundaries of Quebec citizenship and Quebec’s view of the terms of its integration, entitlements and obligations as a member state in the federation. It would be “a vision for a multinational democracy spearheaded by the internal nation itself” (p. 171). This would not be a tactic with which to achieve secession but “a genuine overture to reconstruct the federation according to just principles that respect self-government for nations that have a right to self-determination” (p. 172).

This process of internal discussion within the Quebec national community might involve a constituent assembly and could lead to a referendum on the final outcome of the codified text of Quebec’s constitution. At that point, “Quebec would extend an overture to Canada that asks representatives, acting as a negotiating partner, to ratify it” (p. 173, italics in the original), at once serving notice to the rest of the country that Quebec is serious about self-determination and at the same time communicating that
it has the desire to be an active and committed member of the federation. The initiative would be presented as something of an olive branch, demonstrating Quebec’s commitment to continued association with the rest of Canada and its desire to restore a sense of trust that is currently absent. It would not be a take-it-or-leave-it proposition but an invitation to discussion. The hope is that “the ROC” would respond creatively and begin to treat Quebec on a partnership basis, befitting the status of an “internal nation.”

Alain-G. Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino are not naïve. They are perfectly aware of the arguments against such a course of action and the cynicism and doubts that would almost certainly surround it. But they advance their plan as a way through which Quebec could take the initiative in defining its own future and status within the Canadian federation and could invite the rest of the country to a table of good-faith discussion and negotiation, rather than a political arena of ultimatums and recriminations. Were this strategy to be successful, Quebec would have, at last, through an open process of negotiation, reconstituted the country in its own image.

Federalism, Citizenship and Quebec is a thoughtful book that will give the reader a good sense of some of the ideas circulating in Quebec these days. As to the plausibility of the plan the authors advance in the final pages, I will leave that to the dear reader to judge.

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