

Canadian, Eh?

ANDRÉ LIEBICH

Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, Geneva, Switzerland

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In the mid-1980s, I used to walk twice a week between my home institution, l'Université du Québec à Montréal, and Montreal's main English-language university, McGill. The distance is only a few kilometres but I never ceased to feel that I was moving from one world to another. My McGill students might have been curious about their counterparts in the overwhelmingly French-speaking Eastern part of the city. If they ever ventured in that direction, however, it was a foray into an exotic *terra incognita*. My Université du Québec students resented my suggestions that they use the McGill Library, a facility to which they were entitled by virtue of an inter-university accord. The very thought of penetrating into the Anglo citadel was intimidating.

I was reminded of these and many other Montreal experiences while reading Gary Cohen's fascinating book, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague 1867-1914*. Prague, like Montreal, was a city reclaimed by its original inhabitants. A new Czech majority retook Prague in the second half of the nineteenth century, just as Francophones reasserted their numerical and political superiority in Montreal a century later. The former and subsequent dominant groups coexisted, peacefully but uneasily. The flavour of their life together is captured in a striking vignette quoted by Cohen:

He never lit a cigar with a match from the Czech School Society (matice šokolská) nor did the Czech light his with matches from the German School Society (Deutscher Schulverein) ... even the concerts were ethnically exclusive as were the public swimming facilities, parks, playgrounds, most restaurants, cafes, and businesses. The Czechs' corso was Ferdinandová (now Národní), that of the Germans, Na příkopě (Cohen 1981: 124).

Well, Montreal is not and was not as divided as this, but then Prague was probably not quite like this either. I can swear though that the smell of tobacco (I am referring to an age, twenty years ago, when smoking in public places was still licit) was different at the Université du Québec and at McGill: Gauloises in the former case, American cigarettes in the latter. Given the weight of interethnic realities, so forcefully brought out in Cohen's book, it is not surprising that a disproportionate number of scholars of nationalism, even at a later period, should be Pragers in

origin: among those who come to mind are Hans Lemberg, Hans Kohn, Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, Miroslav Hroch.

It is probably a coincidence that Will Kymlicka is, I understand, Czech in origin. It is certainly not accidental, however, that he is Canadian. Thinking about interethnic relations from a moral perspective is something of a Canadian specialty. In 1979, long before such issues had entered the mainstream of academic debate, the Canadian Philosophical Association published a symposium entitled *Philosophers Look at Canadian Confederation*. The conventions of Canadian discourse dictate bilingualism so this book also bore the title *La confédération canadienne, qu'en pensent les philosophes?* The proportion of English-language to French-language contributions was approximately 3:1, not far from the actual distribution of English to French speakers in Canada. The keynote piece, entitled "Must Nations Become States?" was delivered by Charles Taylor, another Canadian, who is surely the world's foremost philosopher engaged with ethnic or multicultural issues. Kymlicka has both followed in Taylor's footsteps and marked out new directions on his own in this area.

Reflection on inter-ethnic issues, within a moral framework dominated by values of fairness and social responsibility, continues to absorb Canadian intellectuals. Indeed, both Francophone and Anglophone Canadian intelligentsias are shaped by the search for an identity that would define their relationship to each other and, increasingly, to other groups in the country, such as indigenous peoples and "visible minorities", i.e. non-European immigrants. *Is Quebec Nationalism Just? Perspectives from Anglophone Canada* reads the title of a recent book edited by Joseph Carens of the University of Toronto. And an even more recent symposium on *The Morality of Nationalism*, held in Illinois, drew a disproportionate number of Canadian contributors, including both Kymlicka and Taylor.

One can easily understand why the Canadian experience would serve as a reference point in the search for a liberal perspective on interethnic relations. Canadian practices approach the standards of liberal pluralism, defined by Kymlicka as the public recognition and accommodation of diversity, more closely than do those of most other countries. Canada is both a polyethnic and a multiethnic nation in Kymlicka's terms (Kymlicka 2001b: 11). It is 'polyethnic' because it contains immigrant ethnic groups, and it is 'multiethnic' because it encompasses 'national minorities', defined as pre-existing "groups that formed complete and functioning societies on their homeland prior to being incorporated into a larger state" (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 23).

In fact, Canada displays the two types of national minorities which Kymlicka differentiates: “substate nations, [which] would have liked to form their own states, but lost in the struggle for political power” (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 24; the Québécois are mentioned here specifically) and “indigenous peoples” who existed “outside [the] system of European states” (ibid.). Of course, other countries contain one or another, or even all of these types of groups. There is, however, a unique Canadian sensibility which not only acknowledges the existence of such groups but also makes their condition a continued subject of national debate and considers them constitutive of Canada’s complex and multi-layered identity.

The Canadian template explains many of both the strengths and weaknesses of the case that Kymlicka makes in his book in favour of ‘exporting’ liberal pluralism to East and Central Europe. Before proceeding further with this argument, however, I must emit a protest at the notion of ‘exporting’ liberal pluralism. Kymlicka may put ‘exporting’ into inverted commas (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 4) and he is perhaps using the term ironically. Certainly, the thrust of his argument suggests that it is not a matter of ‘exporting’ anything but of reflecting upon the pertinence to the post-communist world of practiced or imagined modes of accommodation among ethnic groups. Both the term ‘export’ and the economic logic behind it appear to me to be thoroughly unsuitable.

Kymlicka states at the very outset that one of his objectives is to demonstrate that “conventional ways of distinguishing between ethnic relations in the West and East are unhelpful” (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 3). If by this he means only the ‘civic (Western) nationalism’ versus ‘ethnic (Eastern) nationalism’ distinction, he is beating a dead horse. To be sure, it was Kymlicka himself who helped to kill the horse, notably in a 1995 review article entitled “Misunderstanding Nationalism” (reprinted in Kymlicka 1999). Since then, however, the ‘civic’ versus ‘ethnic’ distinction has been flogged repeatedly (e.g. Yack 1999), even by those, such as Rogers Brubaker, who had once promoted it (cf. Brubaker 1999 and Brubaker 1992). In any case, there is little danger – I use the term ironically – that citizens, belonging either to the majorities or to minorities, in the post-communist countries would be tempted to see their state as an ethnically neutral civic nation founded uniquely upon universal values and upon the attachment to abstract constitutional principles. The occasional official bows in that direction, coming from such countries as Russia or, in earlier days, from Kazakhstan, just reek with

insincerity and are rightly seen as lip service to the dominant discourse of the powers that be who call themselves the international community.

Another distinction that Kymlicka repudiates appears to me, however, to be one that should be upheld. This is the distinction between ‘Old World’ and ‘New World’ or ‘Old World democracies’ and ‘New World democracies’ (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 70). In Kymlicka’s words, “there are differences between New World and Old World countries, of course, but they are often less significant than the difference between the different types of groups *within* [emphasis in original] both Old World and New World countries” (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 72). As Michael Walzer puts it in his commentary on Kymlicka, the difference between ‘nation states’ (Old States) and ‘immigrant societies’ (New States) entails a different national culture: ‘thinner’ in the latter case, ‘thicker’ in the former (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 151). The distinction between societies that take account of immigrants and those that do not is not one between East and West. In France where, as Kymlicka rightly argues, there is some movement towards acknowledging the presence of minorities, there is an absolute barrier towards extending such acknowledgement to immigrant groups. The notion of a polyethnicity which would encompass such groups is greeted derisively as yet another American *lubie* in the same category of aberrations as multiculturalism or political correctness. ‘Old World’ and ‘New World’ do not converge here.

Kymlicka may be prescient (although I have my doubts) in arguing that ‘Old States’ can redefine themselves as ‘New States’. The declining birth rate in Europe may soon make the continent dependent on large-scale immigration which can only come from outside the continent. These immigrants cannot be democratically confined to metic status, i.e. to the status of resident foreigners, but it is unlikely that they will be as fully assimilated as previous waves of immigration have been. Not only their numbers but their expectations will be unprecedented, due to the universal impact of identity politics and the new dynamics of diaspora-homeland relations. France, for instance, has succeeded in swallowing waves of Italian, Spanish, Polish and East European Jewish immigration but it may have reached the limits of its assimilationist capacity with respect to its several million strong North African population. The trend towards reliance on extra-European immigration will be extended to the post-communist countries, probably in the order in which they join the European Union. Such changes will provoke powerful pressure towards a radical shift in political culture but they will engender even stronger resistance towards

such pressure, and far more so in the ex-communist countries than in Western Europe. ‘Old’ states will not willingly metamorphose into ‘New’ states.

In any case, it will prove difficult to be both an ‘Old State’ and a ‘New State’ at the same time. There is, however, one country that manages to combine both types of state. English Canada has become an immigrant society *par excellence* whereas Quebec has evolved into a nation state. To be sure, the features of an immigrant society have rubbed off on Quebec as well, more so than the features of a nation state have affected English Canada. This is perhaps because English Canada’s identity rests precisely on the idea of not being a nation state but part of a bilingual, multicultural society.¹ Kymlicka is, if course, keenly aware of these specificities. He is correct in saying that the “Québécois in Canada have far more in common with the Catalans in Spain ... than they do with recent immigrants to Canada” (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 72). Still, the prolonged and hitherto successful coexistence of a nation state and an immigrant society within one political framework in Canada encourages Kymlicka in the belief that these divergent models are compatible in the post-communist context as well.

Similarly, Kymlicka is not apprehensive about the simultaneous existence of two or more nation building projects within the same polity. He recognizes, realistically, that every state undertakes a nation building process, though the further this process lies in the past the more successful it is likely to have been.² Kymlicka sees no reason why state nation building and sub-state nation building should not go on at the same time. This, after all, is the case in Canada where a conscious nation building project, proudly labelled as such in Quebec, has accompanied a much more diffuse national policy in English Canada. In the light of this experience why should it be impossible to have two or even more simultaneous nation building projects within a post-communist state?

Canada’s generally positive experience of interethnic coexistence thus colours Kymlicka’s outlook on the post-communist world and, occasionally, skewers his judgement. It is significant that Kymlicka compares the Québécois not only (correctly) to Catalans in Spain but also

¹ If Walzer (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 152) is correct that the thicker the ‘national’ culture, the more likely large groups of immigrants will have to be accommodated as national minorities rather than as hyphenated nationals, one may conclude that the future of ‘cultural communities’, i.e. immigrant groups, in Quebec lies in the direction of national minority status. No Quebec government, of any political complexion, would accept this conclusion.

² Kymlicka (Kymlicka and Opalski: 86 note 13) cites David Laitin who argues that “the linguistic assimilation of national minorities is unlikely to occur after the start of mass literacy”.

(incorrectly) to Hungarians in Romania (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 72). If anything, the Hungarians of Romania are comparable to the Anglos of Quebec: a formerly dominant people, still enjoying a considerable amount of prestige and withholding full-fledged allegiance to the immediate political authorities who govern them. In this respect, Kymlicka is wrong too in asserting that post-communist minorities are unique in living with kin states across the borders. Anglo-Québécois have their kin state in English Canada; the fact that Ottawa may not be unconditionally committed to this minority because the federal government itself reflects the composite identity of Canada as a whole is compensated by the fact that Ottawa has authority over Quebec in a way that Budapest does not have authority over Transylvania.

In fact, Kymlicka underestimates the deep incommensurability between various nation-building projects. This misjudgement too may be dictated by a particularly benign perspective on the Quebec experience. It is a simplification to say, “immigrants in Quebec typically choose integration into the francophone societal culture” (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 51). Immigrants typically did not choose integration into French-speaking rather than English-speaking Quebec until school and language laws compelled them to do so. Even today, immigrants or ‘allophones’ as they are known in Quebec are more likely to be bilingual, English and French (or trilingual, counting their mother tongue) than ethnic Québécois. The latter are still designated by the colourful and significant term of ‘*Québécois pure laine*’, i.e. ‘pure wool Québécois’. It is true that there are no colour or ethnic barriers to becoming a Québécois. One can even overcome the barrier posed by speaking a non-Québécois variant of French. There is, however, a loyalty barrier. Neo-Québécois will not be considered Québécois *tout court* unless their primary and overt loyalty is to Quebec. This implies they renounce not only loyalty to their country of origin (which is natural enough) but also primary loyalty to Canada.

Kymlicka accepts that any nation-building project entails a certain amount of coercion and he recognizes that it is extremely difficult for minorities who are being oppressed to prove their capacity for liberal governance. However, with Canadian optimism, he does not seem willing to fully integrate this knowledge into his vision of the post-communist world. This comes out most clearly in his incisive but unfair critique of the emphasis that the OSCE’s High Commissioner on National Minorities puts on the security factor over considerations of justice (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 372-386). Kymlicka is correct that, in Central and Eastern Europe, the fears of minorities, and of majorities too, concerning their own survival represent an acute existential

paranoia. Moreover, security concerns are blown up artificially to conveniently avoid the sort of liberal policies that Kymlicka is advocating. Even paranoids, however, face real dangers.

Kymlicka is impatient with paranoia. After all, Quebec suffers such fears too and this has not prevented it from developing as a liberal society.³ One cannot seriously talk of minorities in Quebec as being disenfranchised or oppressed. But then Quebec has not experienced the wrenching changes of borders that every post-communist state has known within living memory. Nor has it been a victim of state failure, which, as George Schöpflin reminds us in his contribution to this volume, has been the fate of every European state in the last century, with the exception of Switzerland (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 117). Notwithstanding such benign circumstances, a non-nationalist Quebec government felt it necessary to decree official unilingualism and successive governments have worked hard to banish public displays of any language other than French. Clearly, even liberal societies are readily driven to illiberal positions.

Kymlicka's single-mindedness regarding the liberal pluralist model also prompts him to promote the formula of territorial autonomy and to belittle the prospect that territorial autonomy might lead to secession or state disintegration. He patiently rebuts objections – such as the argument that territorial autonomy would empower illiberal minorities as majorities in new territorial units or that it would not help dispersed minorities – to argue that territorial autonomy has worked well in the West and deserves a hearing in the East (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 362). But then Kymlicka is not terribly concerned about secession. He believes that in all the Western cases he cites – Quebec, Scotland, Catalonia, Puerto Rico – secession would still leave the rump states as “viable and prosperous democracies” (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001a: 392). The problem in the East, as Kymlicka sees it, is to convince these timorous countries that they too would be just as well off after secession as before.

Canadians under the age of fifty have lived with the real prospect of secession all of their adult lives. Discussion of the ‘National Question’ or the ‘Quebec Problem’ in the press, at conferences, in barroom conversations, or at family dinner tables has been a national pastime, in both

³ The following reflection by a Quebec intellectual of moderately nationalist views has a very East European ring to it. In fact, it echoes the thought of the Hungarian philosopher, István Bibó, whom Kymlicka quotes. The former rector of the Université du Québec à Montréal writes: “... je suis chaque jour davantage touché par la modestie numérique de la société québécoise à l'échelle du monde. Les petites nations vivent dangereusement, quelle que soit leur forme constitutionnelle”. He comforts himself with the thought that “la petite taille présente pourtant des avantages: elle prive des moyens de nuire aux autres ... elle invite chacun de ses membres à un effort accru d'ingéniosité, de créativité, de dépassement”. And finally, he adds “nous avons le bonheur de parler une grande langue” (Corbo 1992: 47). This is a ‘bonheur’ that Central and East Europeans, with the exception of Russians, cannot claim.

languages. One can hardly imagine what Canadians would seriously talk about if they did not have this subject. The result is that the prospect of secession has been routinized and trivialized. To some extent, this has been a conscious policy. Québécois nationalists have taken care not to dissipate the belief of a majority of Québécois that after Quebec's independence they would be able to hold on to their Canadian passports (as they could indeed, if Canada still authorized dual nationality) and that they could continue to elect members of the federal Parliament in Ottawa (a more doubtful proposition). Some parts of English Canadian opinion have convinced themselves that they would be better off without Quebec and the further West one goes in Canada the stronger this opinion. The Canadian consensus, shared by Kymlicka, is that secession would be 'no big deal'.

There was, however, a revealing moment when this admirable Canadian placidity was briefly shattered. On the eve of Quebec's second referendum on independence in 1995 ("if at first you don't secede, try, try again," said the wags) polls showed that the independence option would probably win. The result was an emotional outpouring, comparable in intensity, if I may be allowed the analogy, to British reaction upon the death of Diana. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians demonstrated, with maple leaf flags in their hands. Thousands converged on Montreal, from all parts of the country, to plead for 'national unity'. Emotion ran just as high on the other side when the independence option was defeated by 1.6 per cent of the vote. Quebec's prime minister, a man of liberal outlook and demeanour – a graduate of the London School of Economics no less – publicly blamed "money and the ethnic vote" for the defeat. Kymlicka would be hard put to deny that at that moment the division in Quebec between 'us', the pristine nation, and 'them', the scheming outsiders and disloyal minorities, was as profound as anything one might encounter in Central and Eastern Europe.

Much of public opinion in Quebec, to its credit, was embarrassed by the prime minister's outburst and English Canada returned to its imperturbable ways. However, these few days in Canadian history underscored the extreme fragility of liberal pluralism even where it is most profoundly anchored. As Kymlicka wrote a few years ago in a commentary on Charles Taylor, "I suspect that the extent to which a nationalist movement is liberal will largely depend on whether or not it arises within a country with long-established liberal institutions" (McKim and McMahan 1997: 64). This is perfectly true but the limits of liberalism are readily attained. When applied to Central and Eastern Europe, where liberal institutions have not thrived in the past and are weak at

present, 'exporting' liberal pluralism requires more forbearance and patience than Kymlicka would allow.

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