The More Things Change: Sovereignty, Québec, and The New World

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Whatever the precise relationship between the text of *Québec in a New World* and those intricate political struggles that seek to advance the cause of something called sovereignty for something called Québec, the text itself is noteworthy for its explicit attempt to legitimise the ambitions of the Parti Québécois in relation to an analysis of a changing international and global environment.

This is a narrative ploy with considerable advantages. There is no doubt that the structural conditions under which contemporary political life is played out are changing dramatically. Anyone expecting things to continue as they have betrays a profound naivety and political incompetence. Invocations of the dissolution of old orders carry considerable rhetorical conviction. Their appeal is by no means limited to Québec and Canada. But while it is possible to be strongly sympathetic to many of the specific observations and critiques that are expressed in this narrative, the conclusions advanced by this particular text fail to take these observations and critiques seriously enough. They especially do not take them seriously enough in the context of contemporary challenges to the principle, institution, and practice of state sovereignty.

The first page of the text advances three specific claims about contemporary patterns of transformation which, it is argued, sustain the conclusion that sovereignty for Québec is both a plausible and desirable option under contemporary conditions. First, "Québec is part of a new world.... A new order is rapidly emerging and making its presence felt everywhere on earth." Second, "the new environment affects both the internal organization of societies and the relationships among them." And third, "these transformations have substantially modified the nature and meaning of borders throughout the world."

In very general terms, it is difficult to quarrel with such claims, even though the third already raises questions about the distinction between the internal and external organization of states that is affirmed in the second — questions that are of considerable significance in the context of claims about state sovereignty. Matters become much more complicated and contentious once the difficulty is admitted of discerning any clear trajectory in the way our world is becoming. For it is one thing to appeal to change in the abstract. It is quite another to specify precise directions or concrete implications. The text clearly draws upon an extensive literature about transformations in the contemporary international and/or global political economy, but gives very little sense of the diversity of interpretations that animate this literature. It makes a crucial difference, for example, whether contemporary economic life is assumed to be organized internationally or globally. Some of the most difficult and profound political problems of our time can be ignored, though not avoided, by treating claims about the international and claims about the global as synonymous. They are not. What is most striking about this text, in fact, is that claims about the transformative character of contemporary politics are used to affirm the necessity for a continuity in the essential form and character of politics itself. A plausible critique of the way things are mutates into a profoundly nostalgic account of the way things should be. The more things change, it seems, the more they *must* remain the same.

This is a familiar argument. It follows a formulation that has been seen many times before as states have been reconstructed in response to the dynamic transformations of capitalist modernity. It may be that it is a formulation that is not yet entirely obsolete. There are many reasons to wish to be masters in one's own house. State sovereignty especially affirms this wish in relation to the experiences of empires and hegemonies. If the empirical claims of this text are right, however, the old struggle between sovereignty and hegemony, between the tendency for the states system to embrace the ambitions of its dominant players and the affirmation of sovereignty as the only way of keeping hegemonies under some sort of check, may not be the most useful way of framing the potential future of either what we call Canada or what we call Québec.

It is especially telling in this context that much is made of a speech given by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in May 1992, which is said to describe "the new role of nations." In this speech, Boutros Boutros-Ghali speaks of the need for "an intermediary" between the individual and the universe: "It is this set of needs that are met by nation-States, which transcend the immediate allegiances of the family, the clan and the village. A nation is a common 'will to live' which constitutes a first step towards the universal, towards the universal civilization" (at 16). Both the quotation and the source are telling because they express a thoroughly conventional account of how the old states system and state sovereignty have been understood since about the seventeenth century, and how the principles of this system have been entrenched in the Charter and institutions of the United Nations. The quoted fragment of Boutros-Ghali's speech simply offers a gloss on the principle of state sovereignty as a specifically modern resolution of all relations between unity and diversity, between "man" and "citizen."[1] Far from invoking an account of the "new role of nations," *Québec in a New World* reproduces an account of the legitimacy of the modern state that would have appealed to many of those writing about politics in early-modern Europe.

The major transition in early-modern Europe, it may be recalled, involved the transformation from a civilization predicated on hierarchical principles — the 'great chain of being' though which 'lower' was connected, and subordinated, to 'higher' — to one predicated on the horizontal separation of individuals both from 'nature' and from each other. The principle of state sovereignty expresses a secular refusal of all transcendental authority and an insistence that all mysteries can be solved upon the horizontal terrain of the territorial state. Like most of the other crucial moves in this transition towards a modern capitalist world, it also expresses a privileging of a distinctive space in which life can be ordered and represented. Within this space, time and history can unfold, societies can progress, nations can congeal, and individuals can seek to achieve their universal humanity courtesy of the state. The crucial paradox, of course, is that this state that is supposed to mediate between individuality and universality is itself a particular space, a particularity among other particularities, a singular state among other states. And as particularities, these states are always likely to contest all claims to universality. The rise of the state as the home within which individuals might seek to become humans by virtue of being citizens is simultaneously the rise of the states system. And the states system, as the tragedians of modern political thought are apt to remind us, is always likely to induce the sort of conflict that at least demands the suspension of all humanity in time of war and at worst implies a quick end to humankind once the technologies of war 'advance' to the necessary degrees of barbarity. The discourse of state sovereignty comes in both celebratory and tragic modes, and in the late twentieth century it should not be necessary to insist that the complementarity of celebration and despair about the achievements of the modern sovereign state is symptomatic of profound problems in our capacity to reimagine and reconstruct the political under conditions of profound structural transformation.

The United Nations expresses both the conventional modern account of the sovereign state as the great secular resolution of all metaphysical and political contradictions and the hope that the appropriate forms of statecraft and interstate order can prevent the consequent contradictions inherent in this historically specific resolution of all contradictions. The hope is that it will prevent the unleashing of all of the energies and violence of those modern societies that have been built up within and between the institutions of the modern state. It is this historically specific understanding of political possibility that is invoked by *Québec in a New World* both in its citation of Boutros-Ghali and in the language of the modern nation-state that permeates the entire text. The citation from Boutros-Ghali affirms the positive reading of the modern state as

that entity which permits particular individuals, and particular nations, to realise their particularities and their differences while participating in a common system of states, and thus in a common humanity. The negative reading, of course, would point to the long narrative of interstate conflict, a narrative that traces the dangerous consequences of this specifically modern resolution of all relations of unity and diversity.

Some of the most influential versions of the more negative story place considerable emphasis on the demands generated by global changes of the kind stressed by *Québec in a New World*. The experience of Germany in the earlier part of this century remains paradigmatic of many other cases. In the context of a modernizing and globalizing system of economic relations, Germany developed a powerful statist and nationalist politics capable of sustaining its attempt to catch up with France and Britain as the leading powers in a globally organized capitalist economy. The outcome of this case has subsequently been understood as a crucial warning about the dangers of nationalism as a response to the changing dynamics of modernization and interstate competition, even though most states have deployed the nationalist card to some degree in this context ever since. The experience has been especially troubling because it adds a dynamic dimension to the problem of sovereignty, which is more usually framed as a trade-off between the benefits of peace and the dangers of war in an essentially static or geopolitical structure of territorial states. The addition of the dialectic of modernization and nationalism intensifies the tension between processes of integration and those of fragmentation that the principle of state sovereignty seeks to balance — a balance which divides particular communities within the state from those relations with other states that together constitute the community of humankind.

It is through some version of this more dynamic narrative that it is possible to reconcile the most dramatic accounts of historical and structural change with a replication of the familiar story of the self-contained political community seeking to accommodate to new circumstances. But the familiarity of this reconciliation cannot conceal its two crucial difficulties.

First, there is the difficulty of ensuring that the state within which the self-contained political community is situated is indeed capable of effecting a proper mediation between the individual and the universe. In fact, almost all modern societies are quite messy in this respect. Very few states are also nation states. Most sustain a plurality of cultural and other allegiances. The problem of democratic representation and participation is certainly more complex everywhere than the simple codes of nationalism would allow. The possibility of constructing a singular community, a nation that can subsume all other identities in order to construct a singular state that can then mediate with the universal in the corridors of the United Nations, is increasingly remote everywhere. If mediation between individual and universe is still to be the ultimate function of states, which also is increasingly doubtful, it will have to be effected on the basis of democratic complexities, not of a predefined and highly selective account of the already constituted nation. The recent eruption of nationalist politics in so many places says very little about the capacity of nationalism to effect a statist reconciliation between universal and particular promised in the name of nation states. On the contrary, in Québec as elsewhere, the dynamics of contemporary cultural allegiances and identity politics suggest a future that will be resistant to monolithic jurisdictions of any kind.

Second, there is the difficulty of ensuring that it is indeed possible to sustain the sharp line between life within the territorial state and relations between such states. This line is crucial to any understanding of what it means to be sovereign. The modern state, like the modern individual, has been framed as a phenomenon with a clear inside and a clear outside: here and there; community and anarchy; politics and relations; us and them. Without this distinction, whether marked on maps or patrolled in uniforms, political life always threatens to shift into hierarchical arrangements of some kind, whether in the name of empire, colonialism, hegemony, federalism, subsidiarity or some other challenge to the abstract horizontal spaces of the sovereign state. In this context, the desire for sovereignty is quite understandable.

For all its invocation of novelty, *Québec in a New World* does indeed pretend that a sharp line between inside and outside can be sustained, just as it pretends that all differences inside can be reconciled through the voice of the nation. It is this pretence that ultimately undermines its credibility as an analysis of what it could mean to affirm the place of something called Québec in a rapidly changing political landscape.

There is no doubt that those who wish to articulate a form of politics appropriate to changing

structural conditions face great difficulties. The bankruptcy of contemporary political vision is deeply disturbing. But these difficulties cannot excuse a relapse into categories which simply reproduce a world of little boxes, not least because, for better or for worse, little boxes offer less and less scope for responding to a world more characterized by networks and connections, by flows and leakages, than by clear territorial demarcations. Like many nationalists in other parts of Canada, *Québec in a New World* tends to dismiss too many inconvenient accounts of contemporary structural transformations as mere neoconservative ideology. The prevalence of neoconservative accounts of contemporary global transformations does not render the retreat to nationalism any more persuasive.

If the primary rhetorical move of *Québec in a New World* involves a narrative about transformation and globalization that leads to the necessity for a statist and nationalist politics as usual, its secondary move is the constant repetition of the possessive case. Our culture, a shared language, a shared history and heritage, shared values and institutions, a genuine *projet de société*, an authentic Québec social plan, full decision-making powers and control over the levers of development: this is the language of a laudable self-possession. From here it is a simple matter to extrapololate from a claim to self possession to a "clear and coherent plan" for sovereignty. In this case, sovereignty for Québec is taken to encompass a monopoly on tax collection, the enactment of legislation, and the negotiation and ratification of treaties — the three areas that are claimed to "encompass all government activity internally and internationally" (at 43).

This is surely a truncated account of what governments do anywhere. And the reduction of the problem of sovereignty, and of politics in general, to the activities of government is certainly one way to avoid worrying too much about that old and consistently awkward question of whether sovereignty lies with the state or with the people. This text certainly knows who it speaks for. The initial assumption that there is indeed a convergence between a shared culture, language, and so on and the institutions of governance renders the whole question of sovereignty unproblematic. The presence of anglophones, allophones, new Québecers and aboriginal peoples, for example, can then be rendered as a straightforward story about a pluralist society. Again as in so many other places, however, it is not at all clear that nationalisms and pluralisms can be reconciled quite so easily.

Québec in a New World frames the problem of sovereignty in three distinctive ways. For most of the first part of the text, it is presented as if everyone knows what it is and what it does. It is able to draw upon the specifically modern account of statist politics that has sedimented into popular consciousness and remains understandably attractive to governments everywhere. Where governments remain attached to the nostalgic ideals of early modern Europe, however, claims about the transformative character of modern politics and the globalization of capital are now more usually articulated in terms of profound challenges to those ideals. Sovereignty may now appear to be a straightforward affair, but it took a fair amount of effort, and bloodshed, to affirm its way of carving up the world as elegant, rational, and necessary. Though there may be no straight lines in nature, sovereignty affirms that they can be carved amidst the vagaries of contemporary economic, technological, social, cultural, and political relations.

By the time the three areas supposedly encompassing all areas of government activity internally and internationally are specified, the text has begun to admit that it is not easy to say what sovereignty is exactly. The brief section of the text (at 43-4) that claims to offer a consensual definition of sovereignty in terms of "taxes, legislation and treaties" is convincing only as further evidence that sovereignty is indeed difficult to define, especially if, as here, it is treated as an objective condition, a clear-cut destination, as a simple principle that can be applied almost at will. But while sovereignty may be elegant it is by no means simple, and while it may be a principle, it is also an historical, and historically contingent, institution and a complex set of practices. States deploy considerable resources in order to legitimise their claim to sovereignty despite their obvious failure to monopolize authority within spatially-defined boundaries. It is thus not surprising that the final section of the "clear and coherent plan" reveals a greater complexity and contingency. Indeed, the emphasis on "interdependence" and "integration" in this final section might well be read as a claim that sovereignty for Québec would involve very little change at all. Push demands for autonomy in relation to some specific political arenas, remove these specific arenas from Canadian jurisdiction, and sovereignty will apparently appear as if by magic.

But while the appeal to sovereignty may be a powerful rallying cry in the attempt to attain greater autonomy in specific arenas, greater autonomy in specific arenas does not necessarily lead to a condition of sovereignty. In the context of the patterns of interdependence and integration invoked towards the end of this text, it is not at all clear what sovereignty *could* mean in general terms. In fact it would probably be more useful if references to the term sovereignty were to be dropped entirely, and attention focused on why autonomy is being sought in relation to specific political arenas and governmental capacities, and who is most likely to be the beneficiary.

Québec in a New World is, of course, a popular text rather than a technical legal treatise, and it is difficult to pursue the precise implications of its general formulations very far. What is striking, however, is the extent to which the simple invocation of sovereignty serves to smother almost all the interesting questions that follow from the claim that the status quo will not hold. The rhetorical flourish that ends the text — "We must keep our appointment with destiny" — is emblematic of a more general willingness to forgo a sustained analysis of the extent to which the relations of inside/outside, self/other, universality/particularity and space/time are being transformed in ways that cannot sustain a world of tidy nationalist jurisdictions.

Freed from the tired debate between statism and statism, between federalism and nationalism, it might be possible to envisage a politics that takes its questions seriously rather than insists that the entrenched answers must be reached no matter what questions are now asked. If we ask about the kind of political life, about the communities, identities, and obligations that are possible under contemporary conditions, it is not obvious that a world of nationalist inclusions and exclusions, of straight lines permitting the sovereign demarcation of inside and outside, would become the most persuasive answer. It is curious that for so many people, in the rest of Canada as much as in Québec, it is assumed to be the only possible answer. It is unfortunate that *Québec in a New World* simply feeds the fantasy that endures on both sides of the current debate.

The text ends with a rhetorical flourish of nationalist aspiration, but it is prefaced by Jacques Parizeau's lament for the thwarted hopes of a rising class of "ambitious and innovative entrepreneurs." It is perhaps even more unfortunate that the precise relationship between this rising class and the construction of the nation/state that is supposed to sustain its ambitions and innovations is not spelled out in the rest of the text. Once again, the claim to state sovereignty as the appropriate mediation between the particularities of individuals and citizens with the universality of humanity offers a way of forgetting about how particular individuals and citizens come to represent the supposedly sovereign people in general. *Québec in a New World* is right to insist that things must change. For things to change for the better, however, it will be necessary to pay much greater attention to who the 'we' is that gets to be written in the possessive case. The preconstituted nation acting on behalf of rising class interests offers an inadequate answer to this question. But this is certainly not a problem for Québec alone.❑

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Endnotes

1. Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1982); R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).