



## The New Face of Quebec Nationalism: Reconsidering the Nationalism/Democracy Nexus

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### ABSTRACT

Although nationalism remains a significant motif of Quebec politics, it no longer has the same texture, the same purpose, or the same spirit it once had. What accounts for this change? And what should we make of it? This article proposes a critical reflection to gauge whether the nationalism/democracy nexus at the heart of much of the literature on nationalism still defines and characterizes contemporary Quebec nationalism. The article examines the reasons why today's mainstream Quebec nationalism sets itself apart from the motivations that informed its earlier expressions and unequivocal stance against the Canadian state, assesses current Quebec nationalism in light of the democratizing impetus that nationalism is usually said to embody and nurture, and offers some critical thoughts on the analytical limits of the nationalism/democracy nexus for our understanding of the historicity of Quebec nationalism.

### KEYWORDS

Quebec nationalism;  
emancipatory nationalism;  
Quebec-Canada relations;  
democracy; citizenship

“Is Quebec nationalism progressive or reactionary?” I was asked recently by a group of undergraduate students listening to a lecture I was giving on the politics of Quebec-Canada relations. Theirs was not a rhetorical question. They were genuinely puzzled by what I had painted as the positive influence of the nationalist narrative—which pervaded Quebec politics through most of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—on the democratic process, the development of modern social and political institutions, and the empowerment of French-Canadian Quebecers. They are all too young to have experienced the collective excitement of the nationalist and liberatory politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the fervor with which large segments of the Quebec population shared in the construction of a progressive and inclusive national project of social and political transformation well into the 1980s, or the creative, albeit disconcerting, constitutional and jurisdictional tension between Quebec City and Ottawa. They have grown accustomed instead to the image of a politically declining and rudderless Parti Québécois, the fabled standard-bearer of contemporary Quebec nationalism and the sovereignty option, whose fleeting leaders since the days of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry have been unconvincing and unable to fend off internal dissent. What they see is a party whose members cannot seem to agree on a strategy regarding another referendum on sovereignty or on a clear social-democratic vision, and whose spokespersons, always quick to blame Ottawa, sound

unappealingly bitter and resentful. What they see also is the return under the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government of François Legault to a more ethnicist, less broad-minded, and unambiguously provincialist and culturalist stance, reminiscent in some ways of old, pre-Quiet Revolution nationalism.

Most of my students oppose the *Charte des valeurs* and its offshoot, the Legault government's Bill 21, as anti-pluralist, discriminatory, and racist. The nationalism they see currently expressed in the public sphere has little or no resonance with them. They were perplexed by my favorable assessment of Quebec nationalism. How could my description of Quebec nationalism be so at odds with their own experience of it? And if my account was correct, why have Quebecers today moved to embrace a seemingly more conservative brand of nationalism?

I confess that I was somewhat taken aback by my students' question. There is a strong and well-established tradition of scholarship in the field of nationalism studies in which "the idea of a nation as a self-governed political unit has always been related to collective emancipation and democracy" (Goikoetxea 2013, 394). According to this view, a nation becomes a *demos*—that is, a political subject comprising individuals with a shared sense of self, intent on being recognized and willing to act as a distinctive unit—"only within a democratization process. . . . The *demos* is thus the product of a nationalism that consists of constructing political units through as much inclusion and equality as possible" (395; see also Goikoetxea 2014). As renowned historian of nationalism Liah Greenfeld put it, "nationalism was the form in which democracy appeared in the world, contained in the idea of the nation as a butterfly in a cocoon" (Greenfeld 1992, 10). How can anyone, then, wonder whether Quebec nationalism could be anything other than emancipatory and motivated by a fundamentally democratic and progressive impulse?

My students' puzzlement is not without ground. The current rise and growing appeal of authoritarian, often anti-immigrant, and narrow-minded nationalism in many parts of the liberal-democratic world (see Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Kaufmann 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019) certainly compels one to be less sanguine about the positive potential of nationalism. As far as Quebec is concerned more specifically, many of my students are familiar with and are not impervious to detractors of Quebec nationalism for whom, whatever its manifestation or justification, it is and always will be the antithesis of democracy and individual liberty (Angenot 1997; Francis 1996; Richler 1992; Trudeau 1968). The students are aware as well of the virulent critique that staunch Quebec sovereigntists are leveling at the non-emancipatory brand of nationalism that is now taking hold (Comeau 2019; Savard-Tremblay 2014) and for whom it represents "une conception diminuée du nationalisme québécois" (Comeau 2019)—a weakened conception of Quebec nationalism. Given this broader context, in which nationalism appears increasingly suspect politically and Quebec nationalism, for its part, lends itself to differing and conflicting readings and interpretations, my students' perplexity is certainly understandable. In fact, it is not at all inconsistent with a fundamental intellectual tension that pervades the field of nationalism studies between a positive image of nationalism and its opposite; that is, between those who believe it to be liberal, civic, universalistic, and open-minded and those who claim on the contrary that it is coercive, anti-individualist, parochial, and intolerant (Dieckhoff and Jaffrelot 2005, 3–4).

Over the past two decades, Quebec nationalism has been the object of significant political and ideological shifts. The CAQ's rise to power following the 2018 general election confirmed that the dominant expression of nationalism in Quebec has now taken a more pragmatic and less aspirational turn. It is still largely preoccupied with identity issues but is seemingly less concerned with progressive social change and the emancipatory politics that have long been the hallmark of the nationalistic narrative in contemporary Quebec. The Legault government's nationalism does remain committed to the main pillars of contemporary Quebec nationalism, namely the primacy of the French language and Québécois culture in the public sphere, the economic empowerment of Quebecers, and secularism of the state (Dufour 2019; Lessard 2019). But breaking free from the larger Canadian state that engulfs the province is not part of its preoccupations, nor does it seem guided by the same democratic urges that informed the modernist and democratizing undertakings that led in the wake of the Quiet Revolution to major institutional changes and state-building.<sup>1</sup>

Nationalism remains a significant motif of Quebec politics, but it no longer has the same texture, the same purpose, or the same spirit it once had. What accounts for this change? And what should we make of it? To answer these questions, I use Montserrat Guibernau's concept of "emancipatory nationalism" as a yardstick with which to consider contemporary Quebec nationalism and appreciate the nature of the transformation it seems to be undergoing. Emancipatory nationalism implies that nationalism is premised on the actualization of democracy or, at least, on the unfolding of a progressive and irresistible sociopolitical process toward democratization and some morally superior purpose. As Guibernau explains,

Emancipatory nationalism stands as a step forward in the deepening of democracy by accepting the principle of consent. It defends the nation's right to decide upon its political future by democratic means and it includes the right to secession. It signals a key transition in the life of the nation evolving from adolescence to adulthood; this is illustrated by the nation's willingness to act and be recognized as a 'demos' able to decide upon its own political future. . . . 'Emancipatory nationalism' abides by the rule of law, respects human rights and is committed to obtaining legitimacy by the people's consent. It is instrumental in voicing dissatisfaction with the status quo and challenges it. (Guibernau 2013, 372)

Do current manifestations of Quebec nationalism fit that description? This article offers elements of reflection to gauge whether it does—that is, whether the nationalism/democracy nexus still defines and characterizes contemporary Quebec nationalism. But it also ponders whether it actually matters. This might seem like a rather odd, even dismissive question; it is, in fact, quite apposite, for it speaks to the problematic way in which Quebec nationalism tends to be understood. The course followed by nationalism is not ineluctable. The emancipatory character that informs it at a given point in time may be reversed, or at least stopped. The distinction between emancipatory nationalism and its converse (conservative or reactionary nationalism) puts the focus on form and the external appearance of nationalism, not on its internal dynamics, which in the end is the more important, more fundamental analytical challenge that needs to be addressed.

The first section of the article examines the reasons why today's mainstream Quebec nationalism sets itself apart from the motivations that informed its earlier expressions and unequivocal stance against the Canadian state. The following section assesses current Quebec nationalism in light of the democratizing impetus that nationalism is usually said

to embody and nurture. Finally, the last section proposes critical thoughts on the analytical limits of the nationalism/democracy nexus for our understanding of the historicity of Quebec nationalism.

### **The Decline of Nationalist Resentment**

Since the 1960s, whether in government or in opposition, Quebec nationalists have never ceased to question the legitimacy of the Canadian state and stood up against practically all of its actions meant to assert its legal status as the primary source of state power to which Quebecers should owe allegiance (Balthazar 2013; Gagnon and Iacovino 2007; Pelletier 2019). Their secessionist aspirations have always been guided by a strong desire to empower French-Canadian Quebecers, liberate them from the political and institutional yoke of an “external” authority (the Canadian state), and increase their capacity to control both their individual and collective destinies. As Guibernau suggests, emancipatory nationalism hinges on a profound sense of alienation whereby the nation does not feel represented by the state containing it and does not feel politically and culturally recognized as a nation in its own right by that very state and is thus prepared to challenge its dominion. Nationalism does indeed work best and is most effective when, in addition to the usual pride in one’s cultural identity and national community, it is based on a deeply felt, collective sense of grievance—that is, on the impression that injurious deeds have been purposely committed against the community’s best interests (Gellner 1983, 1). Whether the injury is real or not matters little. It only matters that large segments of the group self-identifying as a nation be convinced that they have been shoddily treated (Bonikowski 2017; Mann and Fenton 2017; Weber 1994).

For several decades, Quebec nationalism and its underlying sovereigntist and concomitant secessionist ideals have been fueled by this sense of injury. The notion that French Canadians were victims of history, that their culture and identity were unjustly threatened by external, ill-intended forces helped instill in Quebec’s majority ethnocultural group the will to neutralize the effects of the perceived injustice. In other words, for nationalism to operate as a truly mobilizing force, it needs resentment, outrage, and indignation. Such feelings have driven Quebec’s political life for several decades, more often than not in transformative and emancipatory ways, by challenging the Canadian state and pushing it to accommodate a number of Quebec’s demands. In that respect, Quebec nationalism certainly conformed with Guibernau’s emancipatory nationalism.

Today, however, these sentiments are no longer significant factors. Although nationalist politicians and governments have undeniably contributed to an enduring sense of the Quebec *demos* within the collective conscience, the resentment that in the past impelled Quebecers to mobilize and unite against the Canadian state is noticeably less potent now. The crushing electoral defeat of the Parti Québécois in the October 2018 general election stands as evidence of this waning. The party lost to rival political parties committed to keeping Quebec within the Canadian state and posted the poorest electoral score in its history, reaping only 17% of the ballots cast and securing only 10 seats (out of 125) in the National Assembly—a far cry from its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, when it won clear electoral victories with between 40 and 45% of the popular vote. To most observers, this result was hardly surprising. Successive public opinion polls had been showing for some time a marked decline in nationalist fervor. Over the two decades prior

to the 2018 rout, the Parti Québécois was not only steadily losing ground electorally, but it was also experiencing important difficulties renewing and maintaining its traditional base of support among the younger electorate (Dufresne, Tessier, and Montigny 2019; Durand 2014; Dutrisac 2015; Mahéo and Bélanger 2018; Vallée-Dubois, Dassonneville and Godbout 2020).

Critics from within the Quebec sovereignty movement have argued that the Parti Québécois progressively diluted its initial *raison d'être* and accepted a place within the Canadian political framework rather than unambiguously breaking away from it (Bastien 2019; Savard-Tremblay 2014). That may well be, but in reality Quebec nationalists are, paradoxically, victims of their own success. The idea of Quebec sovereignty appeared in the political landscape in the late 1950s and garnered support throughout the 1960s and beyond as a force contesting the socioeconomic exclusion and oppression in which many felt French Canadians were trapped. Full political independence from Canada was hailed by the more outspoken and influential elements among the emerging professional middle class and anticlerical elite as the only means by which to secure French-Canadian culture and language and reverse the social relations of power and domination that had worked for so long to the detriment of the French-Canadian population. The Quiet Revolution initiated by this new cast of social and political leaders triggered a process of social and institutional transformation that disturbed the prevailing dynamics of power and gave French-Canadian Quebecers the necessary wherewithal to gain control of significant means of economic power, impose their collective will and vision of citizenship, and finally become, as the famous 1960s political slogan enjoined, "*maîtres chez nous*"—masters in their own home. The rise of the Quebec state, the emergence of an ambitious, influential, and homegrown economic elite, laws passed to assert the dominance of the French language and francophone culture in the public sphere, as well as the massive development of natural resources for the primary benefit of French Canadians placed them at the helm of Quebec society (Coleman 1984; Gagnon and Montcalm 1990; McRoberts 1999; Polèse 2021; Simard 1979). By century's end, French-Canadian Quebecers had largely caught up with Canada's English-Canadian population in terms of key social, economic, and standard-of-living indicators (Fortin 2011; Guay 2017, 21). Even though many bones of contention between Quebec and Canada's central government persisted, the fundamental concerns, which had motivated the Quiet Revolution and prompted the emergence in the political landscape of strong and deep-reaching nationalist sentiments, were largely addressed and sorted out—without Quebec having to secede from Canada.

The Quebec state and, through it, French-Canadian Quebecers have made within the Canadian political system significant institutional and administrative gains that have afforded them over time a considerable measure of autonomy and independence in several fields of public policy (Béland and Lecours 2006; Changfoot and Cullen 2011; Guay 2017; Maclure 2014). Though most federal governments since the 1960s have strongly resisted and actively sought to impede Quebec's repeated bids for more administrative and political independence (Chevrier 1996; Rocher 2014), Quebec has ultimately come to exercise appreciable control in virtually every field of policymaking assigned to the provinces by the Canadian Constitution. In a number of areas of shared jurisdiction, notably the management of social benefits and immigration, it has also markedly increased its institutional and decision-making capacity (Blad and Couton 2009;



Iacovino 2014; Noël 2012; Paquet 2019, 36–70). Quebecers enjoy self-government through the National Assembly, and the Quebec state, despite its provincial status, has comported itself for several decades now like a quasi-independent political entity, developing and imposing its own citizenship regime (Papillon and Turgeon 2003)—all within the institutional (and once allegedly restrictive) confines of the Canadian state.

By the turn of the new century, much of what French-Canadian Quebecers had set out to achieve three or four decades earlier had materialized. The need for a strong, assertive sense of nationhood, and hence the need for a fully sovereign country, seemed to many less pressing, even superfluous, particularly as the Canadian state did not prove to be as wicked as sovereigntists had painted it to be. Canadian federalism is far from perfect, and the Canadian state remains driven by a natural centralizing inclination, which is regularly set into motion in attempts to stifle Quebec's ability to exercise fully its capacity for self-determination.<sup>2</sup> Still, Quebecers have made the best of it. Some argue that they have even thrived by it (Béland and Lecours 2014; Robson 2012). Although Quebec is still not an officially recognized, fully sovereign state, the degree of self-determination French-Canadian Quebecers enjoy is such that they can hardly be called an oppressed people. Feeling oppressed, excluded, and belittled is the necessary fuel of nationalism and nationalist mobilizations. Without it, it is difficult to generate the impetus, let alone maintain the momentum that will sustain a wide-ranging and deep nationalistic spirit. Cultivating resentment and bitterness toward a political system that one can still benefit from seems hardly justifiable. The success that several of Quebec's particular claims has achieved within Canada's federal framework has made the Canadian state appear more democratic, more accommodating, and less detestable. That success ultimately watered down the nationalist ardor that propelled Quebecers in the wake of the Quiet Revolution.

The adherence of sovereigntists to globalization and its neoliberal dictates is another factor that has played a part in the dilution of the nationalist and emancipatory fervor that characterized Quebec's and Canada's political landscape in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 1980s, Quebec sovereigntists felt that free trade with the United States could only be a good thing for their political project. Greater and easier access to the American market, they reckoned, would strengthen the Quebec economy, increase the province's autonomy, and consolidate the case for sovereignty (Holland 1994; Martin 1995). Contrary to almost all progressive social and political actors at the time, they favored the integration of Quebec into the larger continental economy and embraced economic globalization more generally. (So have all Quebec governments, sovereigntist or not, since then.) Inasmuch as the sovereignty option is concerned, though, this policy orientation was not without political cost: Quebec's endorsement of globalization gradually displaced the national question from the center of attention in public discourse. By the mid-1990s, as the imperatives of economic globalization increasingly defined the public policy agenda and their adverse social effects became a significant point of contention for progressive forces in Quebec, emancipatory politics focused increasingly and with intensifying urgency on issues related to social justice, the redistribution of wealth, and the need for radical sociopolitical transformation. The *Fédération des femmes du Québec's* 1995 march against poverty (dubbed *Marche du pain et des roses*) and its 2000 *Marche mondiale des femmes*, the organized protests against the third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 and the spring 2012 unprecedented, multiple student and mass demonstrations, dubbed the *Printemps*

*érable* bear witness to this shift. As the century drew to a close, the national question and calls for sovereignty lost the purchase they once had in Quebec and Canadian politics. It was “no longer a ‘hot’ subject, even for groups who were very engaged in the debate in 1995,” collective action and social movements scholar Pascale Dufour has noted. “The development of globalization as political space in Quebec,” she argues, “has influenced the reappearance of the division between left and right and the delegitimation (at least partially) of the federalist/sovereigntist debate” (Dufour 2007, 145; see also Salée 2002).

The lure of globalization for sovereigntists and the nationalist economic elite also had consequences they did not anticipate. Being urged to accept globalization as an unavoidable reality and as a significant dimension of any public policy conversation about Quebec’s socioeconomic development, many Quebecers have internalized the internationalist outlook that inevitably comes with globalization and that has transcended the parochialism of previous generations. The global exposure and success of Quebec artists such as Céline Dion, Cirque du Soleil and Robert Lepage, and the notable compulsion of many other cultural producers to sing and write in English or seek international venues to make their art known are cases in point. They reflect both a definite desire to be part of the world and an absence of concern that such transnational insertions beyond Quebec’s boundaries might compromise one’s initial identity. In other words, the prompting by political and economic elites for Quebecers to get on the bandwagon of globalization has allowed a new mind-set, one more focused on global issues and objectives, to take hold and influence the national social imaginary.

For Quebecers born around the time of the 1995 referendum and after, that mind-set is their main reference point. It defines and determines their way of relating to the public policy challenges of the day. The anxieties of previous generations over the preservation of Quebec culture and language and their struggles over constitutional and jurisdictional boundaries have much less resonance, if any at all, with Quebecers imbued with and shaped by the tenets of globalization. According to a recent poll conducted jointly by several survey and research outfits<sup>3</sup> (Breton, Gagnon, and Parkins 2020), barely half of Quebecers aged 18–34 feel that the French language is vulnerable, compared to 69% in the 35–54 age group and 75% among those 55 and older. Similarly, younger Quebecers are much less likely to mention language and the province of Quebec as significant markers of their identity. Less than one third of Quebecers aged 18–39 identify with the Quebec state, as opposed to 50% for the 40–54 age group and 65% for Quebecers aged 55 and older. They do not necessarily feel better represented by the federal government (60% of them indicate no attachment to either the provincial or federal government or have no opinion on the matter), but the fact that there are so few who feel attached to the Quebec state, which has been the mainstay of nationalist struggles and the principal instrument of political empowerment for French-speaking Quebecers, is quite telling: what moved previous generations leaves younger Quebecers relatively indifferent. As they are unlikely to share the resentment that pre-1995 sovereigntists felt toward the Canadian state or their anxieties over the possible annihilation of the Quebec culture and language, the indispensable fuel of emancipatory nationalist politics is running out. They may not feel any particular bond with Canada but seceding from it is not a matter of urgency either.

The strong sovereigntist and anti-Canadian state stirrings that largely informed Quebec nationalism throughout the three decades preceding the 1995 referendum on sovereignty certainly possessed that will to break free from the Canadian state that Guibernau's understanding of emancipatory nationalism evokes. But on the whole, the end result of Quebec's contemporary political and institutional trajectory within the Canadian state invites caution insofar as applying the qualifier "emancipatory" to Quebec nationalism is concerned. Over the past two decades, Quebecers have elected provincial governments that have unequivocally chosen to abide by the status quo and resolved to stay and work within the confines of the Canadian state. A considerable portion of the Quebec population has thus signified that it is reconciled with that future. Most Quebecers do not necessarily feel that their sense of nationhood is hampered by the dictates of that "external" power. The need Quebecers might have felt at some point to "emancipate" from the Canadian state is not at this juncture a central motif of Quebec politics and has not been for some time now.

### **The Question of Democracy**

Compliance with the fundamental principles of democratic rule is the other main requisite of Guibernau's emancipatory nationalism. On the face of it, Quebec nationalism certainly seems to fulfil that criterion. Quebec nationalists/sovereigntists have held power for more than 40% of the time since 1976, in conformity with the existing, duly accredited, and rigorously implemented electoral process and in full observance of recognized norms of parliamentary engagement. The two referenda on sovereignty, in 1980 and 1995, satisfied the fundamental requirements of democratic public consultation. They contributed in significant ways to instill a healthy dose of democracy in Quebec's political mores. They remained by and large quite respectful of minority groups and the minority normative and cultural visions that comprise Quebec's ideological sphere, to the point of abiding, particularly after the 1980 referendum, by a broader, more civic, and more inclusive conception of the Quebec nation.

Guibernau's emancipatory nationalism sets a baseline of democratic engagement that hardly goes beyond abiding by pre-established, conventional, majoritarian institutional norms and customs and the mere adherence to the rule of law. Democracy, however, can be and is indeed much more when considered within a fundamentally and intensely pluralistic perspective. The works of authors such as William E. Connolly (1995, 2002, 2005), Chantal Mouffe (2000) and Wendy Brown (2006, 2019) inspire a broader, fuller, and more vigorous conception of democracy, one that suggests that for nationalism to qualify as democratic it should entail more than conformity with the will of the majority. Following their theoretical lead, commitment to genuine democracy implies:

- acknowledging first and foremost that the liberal ethos that informs our current democracy is inadequate when it comes to ensuring equality, dignity, fairness, social justice, cultural safety, and protection from bodily and psychological harm for all;
- recognizing that neoliberal policies exacerbate social exclusion and inequality and maintain dynamics of power that are significantly disadvantageous to vulnerable segments of society and all those who are "otherized" by the dominant norm;



- recognizing that the dominant norm obtains from the imposition of the will of society's hegemonic group(s) through gestures of both symbolic and actual violence on its (their) part;
- being willing to reject any aspiration to oneness and universalism and to accept unconditionally the irreducibility of plurality and difference;
- making meaningful room in the public sphere for the expression of social, cultural, political, and even gendered visions of society that do not fit the dominant set of norms by which society is run and populations are managed;
- admitting that any attempt at enforcing a dominant norm—which is designed to play primarily to the exclusive advantage of the hegemonic group—without at least a modicum of inclusive deliberation involving all parties concerned is an unacceptable act of excessive power.

Against this robust conception of democracy, the democratic nature of Quebec nationalism appears less compelling. Current nationalist politics in Quebec simply do not measure up to these more exacting, but essential standards. Over the past decade or so, Quebec, like many other liberal democracies, has been retreating from the pluralistic attitude that had characterized its stance vis-à-vis ethnocultural diversity until the early 2000s (Salée 2016). Nationalists, mostly linked to, but not necessarily all from the Parti Québécois, have played an important part in this process. Leading public and intellectual figures associated with the Quebec nationalist movement have been raising concerns with increasing frequency over what they perceive as the reluctance of immigrants to integrate properly into Quebec society (Bock-Côté 2018). They repeatedly express alarm over the greater visibility of non-Christian religious manifestations and non-western cultural and normative markers in the public sphere (Baril and Lamonde 2013). And they worry that the future of the French language and Québécois culture is uncertain in the long run (Houle 2019).

Although a number of Quebec nationalists remain committed to a pluralistic and reasonably democratic vision of the Quebec nation,<sup>4</sup> the fact is they are often overshadowed in public debates by vocal and media-savvy proponents of a narrowly defined and exclusionary conception of the Quebec nation. The emergence on the political scene of groups advocating unequivocally radical, right-wing, and white nationalist ideologies (akin, for example, to France's *Front national*, the USA's Tea Party, the Netherlands's Freedom Party or Italy's *Lega Nord*) (Tanner and Campana 2014) indicates that Quebec nationalism is not immune to a mind-set clearly at odds with the emancipatory and democratic stance that characterized it for many years. While such groups remain marginal, what is changing is the fact that far-right radicals and white nationalists are now coming out of the shadows. They are more visible and more vocal. In recent years, they have organized a number of well-publicized political demonstrations and social and cultural events with the explicit intention, among other things, of openly denouncing Islam, calling for an end to immigration and the admission of refugees, and celebrating Quebec's "white nation" (Montpetit 2017). Despite their still-limited appeal within the general public, their views are now part of the public conversation about nationhood and the conditions of inclusion in Quebec society. They percolate through the mainstream where legitimate public intellectuals and academics distill them and make them more palatable to a society that had long shunned political extremes. An increasingly

outspoken cohort of white, mostly male, francophone Québécois intellectuals active in universities, think tanks, and the media, have taken it upon themselves to decry the liberal, pluralistic, and inclusive nationalism advanced by civic nationalists. They see the multiculturalism policy propounded by the Canadian state as a strategy aimed deliberately at curtailing the social and political influence of French-speaking Quebecers (and French Canadians more generally) within Canada. They question minority claims, the politics of difference and recognition, and any demand for greater respect of ethnocultural diversity in the public sphere. They exalt instead the historical identity of Quebec's francophone majority and maintain that it must have primacy in any collective decision involving the future of Quebec society.<sup>5</sup> Their particular *weltanschauung* has become an integral part of mainstream political talk.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, when the short-lived sovereigntist Parti Québécois government introduced its historic Bill 60, *Charter affirming the values of state secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests* (otherwise known as the Charter of Quebec values) it was in fact echoing this emerging ideological ecosystem.<sup>7</sup>

Officially, the legislation was designed, first, to “specify, in the [Quebec] Charter of human rights and freedoms, that the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed by that Charter are to be exercised in a manner consistent with the values of equality between women and men and the primacy of the French language as well as the separation of religion and State” and reaffirm “the religious neutrality and secular nature of the State, while making allowance for the emblematic elements of Québec’s cultural heritage that testify to its history” (which implies permitting the official display and use of symbols related to Quebec’s Judeo-Christian past, and therefore affirming the cultural and normative superiority of Judeo-Christian values and traditions). In addition, the bill obliged all state personnel (including state-funded education and health-care workers) to “remain neutral in religious matters and reflect the secular nature of the State” and to “exercise reserve” in such matters by, “among other things, complying with the restriction on wearing religious objects that overtly indicate a religious affiliation” and by performing their functions “with their face uncovered.” The obligation to have one’s face uncovered also extended to all persons receiving state services. Finally, the bill provided an administrative framework to handle “accommodation requests” (from groups or individuals wishing to be exempt from the law) “submitted to public bodies on religious grounds” and granted the National Assembly “the power to regulate the wearing of religious symbols by Members and to approve the presence of a religious symbol in the premises of the Assembly” (Charter 2013).<sup>8</sup>

The Charter of Quebec values was in reality a compendium of preconceived ideas and concerns harbored by the general public since the time of the “reasonable accommodations” debate about those *other* religions and cultures whose increased visibility in the public sphere and conspicuous difference from the normative mainstream make them suspect and therefore problematic and worrisome in the collective mind (Heinrich and Dufour 2008; Leroux 2010; Sharify-Funk 2010). The Charter’s emphasis on the prohibition of face covers, for example, and its concomitant reaffirmation of the equality of men and women as a fundamental social value of Quebec society were particularly targeted at Islam, whose guiding principles are seen throughout the Judeo-Christian West as antithetical to western civilization and thus highly questionable (Bakali 2015; Bakht 2012; Benhadjoudja 2017).

Beyond the unease with otherness and normative difference that the Charter of Quebec values indubitably embodied, it was, above all, designed as a purposeful reminder directed at all bearers of otherness declaring who is in charge in Quebec. Under the pretense of upholding the neutrality and secular nature of the state, the Charter was conceived to make it abundantly clear that there is in the Quebec territory a white settler nation, the Québécois of French-Canadian heritage, which has deep historical roots, deeper than anyone else's. That nation has a language, a culture, and traditions, all of which all derive from the superior moral and societal outcomes of the western civilizational process, and that its members are certainly not prepared to be sidestepped by any other group with presumably problematic ideological, normative, and cultural viewpoints. The Charter of Quebec Values implicitly impugned bearers of otherness and warned them that in order to be welcome in Quebec they had better unquestioningly take notice of and internalize the values that inform and define Quebec society. It was a decidedly bold gesture of normative violence meant to assert unequivocally the social and political supremacy of the Québécois nation and confirm its hegemonic position within Quebec society.

The Parti Québécois was defeated in the 2014 general election and thus did not see Bill 60 pass into law. But the spirit of its legislation did not die. Once back in power, the Liberal Party passed in 2017 a law of its own, Bill 62, which bears striking similarity to the Charter of Quebec Values (several sections have the same wording) and reiterates the obligation for civil servants and recipients of government services to interact without face covers. The implementation of that aspect of the law was suspended by the courts, but in the spring of 2019, the newly elected government of François Legault swiftly enacted Bill 21, *An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State*. The new law largely replicates Bill 60 and Bill 62, but this time it also brings into play the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, thus allowing the government (if needed) to override its Charter obligation to respect freedom of expression and equality rights. Though vigorously contested and criticized, both inside and outside Quebec, the new law enjoys the support of nearly two-thirds of Quebec's population (Bélair-Cirino 2019) and has successfully withstood legal challenges (Feith 2019).

The Charter of Quebec Values was more than a sociopolitical incongruity or the passing fancy of some inconsiderate government. It and its offshoots (Bill 62 and Bill 21) represent a deliberate break with the more conciliatory, inclusive, civic, and pluralistic vision of the Quebec nation that nationalists had favored in previous decades, an unequivocal move away from their democratic engagement with ethnocultural minorities. The whole episode signals the reversion of mainstream Quebec society and Quebec nationalism back to a parochial definition of the Quebec nation, one much less embracing of diversity. Although Quebec nationalists had often felt the need in the past to foster the sociopolitical ascendancy of their ethnonational group through a variety of policies and measures, Bill 21 represents the first time in the history of contemporary Quebec nationalism that the will to underscore Québécois preeminence is expressed so unambiguously and with such intensity. In 1977, for example, while the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101) was conceived and enacted by the Parti Québécois admittedly to ensure the social, political, and administrative predominance of Quebec's francophone majority, it was also committed, as the law's preamble makes it clear, "to pursue this objective in a spirit of fairness and open-mindedness, respectful of the institutions of the English-

speaking community of Québec, and respectful of the ethnic minorities, whose valuable contribution to the development of Québec it readily acknowledges.” Such concerns and solicitude for ethnocultural minorities are absent in Bill 21, which insists rather on the “Québec nation” with its “own characteristics, . . . civil law tradition, distinct social values and a specific history” and rests on a narrower, much less inclusive sense of the nation (Pelletier 2019).

Public opinion polls indicate that Quebecers are, more than ever before, disinclined to consider immigrants and ethnocultural minorities positively (Pouliot and Julien 2017). Results underscore the pervasiveness in Québec’s collective mind of a conception of the nation that hinges on more restrictive conditions for social and political inclusion, a nation defined mainly in exclusive reference to the historically central French-Canadian majority. The philosophical ground upon which Québec nationalism has long rested is shifting. It is no longer primarily made up of the liberal-democratic clay that used to be prevalent.

### **Recasting Our Understanding of Québec Nationalism**

The foregoing review of Québec nationalism’s recent evolution suggests that its emancipatory and democratic quality is no longer undeniable or clear. (One can see why my students doubted me). As I asked in the introduction, does it matter? Detractors of Québec nationalism will probably find this an absurd question. For them, nationalism, whatever its form, is a dangerous ideology that never ought to be considered emancipatory or democratic. Wondering whether it is so in the first place makes no sense to them. That was Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s position, which defined his politics vis-à-vis Québec and largely informed the “No” forces in both the 1980 and 1995 referenda on Québec sovereignty. The point, though, is not so much about whether Québec nationalism, in its current or previous embodiment, is emancipatory and democratic, or whether it is returning to conservative and ethnicist narratives. The point rather is that the almost automatic association of nationalism and democracy often found in the scholarly literature on nationalism hinges on a preconceived, somewhat mechanistic notion of nationalism that ignores the reality of its actual dynamics and prevents a clearer understanding of its internal logic from emerging. Pointing out that Québec nationalism is no longer as emancipatory, democratic, or forward-looking as it once was is not saying much ultimately, even if that is true. It is analytically wanting; it distorts reality by clinging to a one-sided vision of what may be considered emancipatory, and it avoids addressing the crux of the matter.

Nationalists who are steered by conservative, chauvinistic, xenophobic, or exclusionary sentiments are no doubt moved by their sincere impulse to unfetter their folk from whatever might trouble their full access to the enjoyment of self-determination and self-government. Mathieu Bock-Côté and other conservative nationalists do not hesitate to couch their perspective in terms of resistance against dominant, ill-advised, and arrogant liberal multiculturalists whom they see as the source of the current woes of the nation. They view their actions as a struggle for the liberation of white francophone Quebecers, as a move to protect their culture and identity. From their standpoint, their discourse is necessarily progressive and readily fits the bill of emancipatory nationalism. After all, their stance is also inspired by anti-oppression and liberatory aspirations and a commitment to the rule of the people.

Nationalists do not normally think of themselves as doing wrong. Nationalists of all stripes are guided by a keen sense of the *demos* and of the (ethno)national group whose interests they claim to defend. From their perspective, it matters not that their understanding of the *demos* may be skewed or that they may be advocating a univocal or irrational vision of what is good for the nation. Regardless of how they might appear to outsiders, they certainly feel that they are well intended. They believe their cause is just, and therefore they feel justified in whatever course of action they might choose. There is no good or bad nationalist.

Regardless of the tag we pin on nationalism—emancipatory or reactionary, liberal or conservative, democratic or not—it proceeds roughly from the same impulse: defining, constructing, and defending the nation. Unpacking that impulse and grasping its inner logic are essential tasks that may help to advance scholars' understanding of Quebec nationalism. The progressive and optimistic image projected by the nationalism/democracy nexus draws the analytical attention away from a basic fact: nationalism is first and foremost the ideological manifestation of a political project primarily conceived to impose on society a very specific view of the world, one that inevitably reflects the particular interests of a given national group. That group, in turn, will most likely take the necessary means to ensure that those interests are appropriately fostered, defended, and enforced, coercively and repressively if need be. Nationalism defines the actual and symbolic boundaries of the society in which the nation deploys itself. It determines the criteria and conditions of inclusion and belonging (and by the same token the reasons for exclusion). It dictates the norms of social behavior and interaction through the public exaltation and enactment of a specific national culture and identity with which members of the nation readily associate and through which they establish bonds of solidarity.

Nationalism, then, is above all the manifestation of an act of power. It expresses itself as an ideological justification constantly reminding members of the nation that they constitute a cohesive unit—an "us"—against which others or outsiders—a "them"—represents a potential threat (to its values, culture, way of life, territory, economic interests) that must be kept at bay, controlled, or reined in at all times. As with any act of power, it makes winners and losers: it secures access to valuable and scarce resources (both symbolic and physical) for the winners—accredited and recognized members of the nation—and restricts or prohibits access to said resources for the losers—peripheral and probationary members of the nation, individuals and groups who have been socially constructed as others or outsiders, and strangers. As an act of power, nationalism is therefore a deliberate gesture of exclusion. If nationalism can easily seem emancipatory or democratic at first glance, that is only because it is considered from a narrow vantage point, as self-proclaimed *dispositif* meant to empower, bolster, and protect a specific *demos*. Even if the rules by which the *demos* is to exist and function are promulgated in accordance with the best deliberative and consultative process possible, and even if the contents of the normative set by which the *demos* regulates itself are agreed upon by a majority of its members, decisions and choices about the conditions of inclusion and the criteria by which social life is to unfold will still have been made in the end by members of the group whose priorities, interests, and *weltanschauung* primarily determine the sense and contents of nationhood. They are bound to exclude or not take into consideration the worldviews, interests, and priorities of other segments of the *demos*. The Charter of Quebec Values and its offshoots are a telling illustration of this. Nationalism inevitably

entails subjective pronouncements about whom to include and exclude, and about the norms by which members of the *demos* must abide. As such, nationalism is founded on arbitrariness and (varying degrees of) violence.

Saying this is not to suggest that nationalism is incapable of any democratic impulse. But that should not let us overlook either the fact that the ultimate objective of nationalism is to procure and safeguard a state formation of some kind (usually, a fully independent and sovereign nation-state)—a state formation, that is, whose *raison d'être* is to allow the ethnonational group that readily associates with it to deploy its collective sense of self and exist freely in accordance with the norms and culture that resonate with the vast majority of its members. Nationalism, in other words, also articulates a citizenship project. It defines a community, the terms and conditions for belonging to that community, as well as an appropriate institutional apparatus capable of ensuring its smooth functioning. The will of sovereigntist nationalists to provide *la nation québécoise* with an independent state is intimately tied to the idea of a distinct Quebec citizenship. So long as Quebec remains within Canada, legal state citizenship can only be delivered by the Canadian state (and not by a provincial jurisdiction). Even so, for years sovereigntists have debated and pushed the notion that Quebec citizenship should exist in its own right, regardless of the province's sub-state status. In 2000, for example, the Parti Québécois, in power at the time, launched a national forum on citizenship and integration with the distinct purpose of defining the conditions of citizenship and belonging in Quebec. In 2007, the Parti Québécois, by then no longer in power, presented two bills to the National Assembly, Bill 195, *Québec Identity Act* and Bill 196, *Québec Constitution*, both designed to assert and give official status to Quebec citizenship. Although such initiatives did not pan out as they did not receive the support of other political parties and civil society organizations, the notion of a distinct Quebec citizenship remains at the heart of Quebec sovereigntists' political aspirations.<sup>9</sup>

Seeing nationalism as a citizenship project allows for a clearer grasp of its fundamental nature as a dynamic of power. As American social theorist Amy L. Brandzel reminds us,

[c]itizenship is, inherently, a normativizing project—a project that regulates and disciplines the social body in order to produce model identities and hegemonic knowledge claims. Moreover, it is a violent exclusionary operation, one that relies upon and reproduces a multipronged gatekeeping apparatus that works to create, retain and imbue citizenship with meaning at the direct expense of the noncitizen. Citizenship will always claim to be aspirational—to include the excluded eventually, once they are marked as deserving or human enough. But this is nothing less than an illusion, because according to citizenship, there will always be, *there must be*, (an)Other who experiences the full force of the exclusionary technologies of citizenship. . . . [W]hen we strive to include more types of people under its reign, we inevitably reify the violence of citizenship against nonnormative others. (Brandzel 2016, 5-6. Italics in the original)

There is nothing innocent or benevolent about citizenship—nothing innocent or benevolent behind the notions of community or shared experience or *vivre ensemble* that many claim to build in its name and, by extension, in the name of the nation. “Citizenship is the glue that holds the nation-state together in a seemingly natural community authorized to exclude Others” (Baines and Sharma 2002, 86, quoted in Brandzel 2016, 10). This is an essential, incontrovertible reality scholars must keep in mind when assessing nationalism or any nation-building project. Citizenship and the sense of nation that it incorporates are



thought out and implemented for the chief benefit of a hegemonic group or class that has won, at least for a while, the social struggle. It has, as a result, arrogated the right to wield its influence and shape society in conformity with its specific interests and view of the world.

Quebecers' history may be marked by rebuffs, exclusion, and marginalization, but as a society composed largely of white settlers, they have come to exist largely thanks to the colonization of Indigenous peoples, the plundering of their land, the subordination of racialized immigrants from the colonized South, and the privileges and hegemonic social positioning that result from being white settlers. Quebecers may not be standing at the center of the Empire or have much influence over the way it is run, but they certainly do enjoy the benefits of being close to it and of partaking of the socio-economic logic it has imposed upon the world. Their nationalism, whether emancipatory or reactionary, will always be, by definition, about protecting the hegemonic stature they enjoy (Cornellier 2016, 2017). Nationalism cannot be fully emancipatory or democratic unless it is prepared to acknowledge that the constraints and restrictions it imposes on the non-normative—the bearers of otherness—are antithetical to a process of genuine democratization. As recent developments in Quebec suggest, Quebec nationalists are not prepared at this juncture to contemplate such a challenge.

## Notes

1. The public health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged the Legault government to seek more discretionary powers and avoid having to submit to regular mechanisms of accountability. In spring 2020, it introduced a legislative proposal, Bill 61, which, on account of the emergency situation created by the pandemic and the need to strengthen the economy, was to give the Premier the possibility to govern by decree, obviate the obligation to call for tenders in public infrastructure projects, and shield cabinet members from legal liability and from being sued. The bill was vehemently contested by opposition parties and civil society organizations who were particularly concerned with the erosion of democratic accountability that the bill represented. The government introduced an amended version of it in fall 2020 (Bill 66), which, though stripped of the sections that were deemed problematic in Bill 61, nevertheless raised concerns among environmentalists and Indigenous peoples who fear the government still has too much discretion with respect to the implementation of infrastructure projects affecting the environment. Although the Legault government remains popular within the electorate, many commentators have noted its authoritarian and paternalistic inclination (Collectif 2020).
2. A recent example of this is Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's reaction to the apparent inability of provincial governments to control the tragically high levels of COVID-19 casualties among the elderly and his ensuing commitment to a national long-term care program, which is a primarily provincial policy field and jurisdiction. The Legault government was quick to dismiss it as a federal infringement.
3. Led by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in collaboration with the Canada West Foundation, the Centre d'analyse politique—Constitution et fédéralisme, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government.
4. They are found mostly within the ranks of the progressive (but electorally marginal) Québec solidaire party, the social-democratic wing of the Parti Québécois, as well as in some labor unions, community groups, and academia.
5. Essayist Mathieu Bock-Côté is perhaps the most prominent among these intellectuals. A prolific blog writer for Quebecor, Quebec's leading mainstream francophone media concern, a regular public affairs analyst on electronic media in both Quebec and France, he burst onto Quebec's

political and intellectual scenes a dozen years ago with hard-hitting, polemical essays and public interventions whose sectarian spirit and staunch, French-Canadian ethnic nationalism resonate with growing segments of Quebec society. His work laments the emasculation of the sovereigntist project by previous nationalist leaders and intellectuals (Bock-Côté 2007), deplors what he sees as the divisive and deleterious consequences of multiculturalism (Bock-Côté 2016) and blames current social anxieties on the politics of difference and recognition (Bock-Côté 2012). Others, like sociologist Jacques Beauchemin and historians Éric Bédard and Frédéric Bastien (who ran unsuccessfully for the leadership of the Parti Québécois in 2020), have also received significant, positive exposure among nationalists and the general public, advocating views that are close to Bock-Côté's and that situate them within the same ideological orbit. For detailed and critical analyses of this school of thought, see Belkhodja (2008), Belkhodja and Traisnel (2012), Dupuis-Déri and Ethier (2016), Fortier (2019), and Piotte and Couture (2012).

6. Premier François Legault is on record as endorsing Mathieu Bock-Côté (2019) book *L'empire du politiquement correct* (the empire of political correctness), which excoriates what he sees as the left's militant and intransigent defense of minority claims, difference, and diversity. See Montpetit (2019).
7. The Marois government (2012–2014) recruited Université du Québec à Montréal sociologist Jacques Beauchemin as a key advisor to assist in the formulation of the bill. Beauchemin was Mathieu Bock-Côté's doctoral thesis supervisor and mentor. He is the author of several books, which clearly stand in defense of an ethnicist (French-Canadian) view of Quebec nationalism.
8. The quoted material in this paragraph is from the explanatory notes introducing the full official text of Bill 60. See Charter (2013).
9. Daniel Turp, Université de Montréal law professor and former Bloc Québécois MP and Parti Québécois MNA, has been spearheading the movement in favor of the formal recognition of Québec citizenship. See Turp (nd).

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