FRANCOPHONE QUEBECERS' AMBIVALENT ATTACHMENT TO CANADA

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ABSTRACT

The strength of the connection between Quebecers and Canada is a matter of debate, not the least because there is no agreement on what to measure and how to do it. Opinion surveys use the terms "attachment" or "identification" to gauge the presence or absence, as well as the intensity of the sense of belonging that people may have towards their group, community, or country. Such surveys show that Quebecers are, as a whole, comparatively less attached to Canada than other Canadians and that, proportionally, more French speakers in Quebec than English speakers elsewhere in Canada tend to put their province ahead of their country. However, the differences are not as clear-cut as one would expect. Polling data, as well as voting patterns, paint an ambiguous portrait of Quebecers' dispositions, but that doesn't necessarily mean that Quebecers themselves do not have strong, yet mixed feelings about their belonging to Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

La force du lien entre les Québécois et le Canada est un sujet de débat, notamment parce qu'il n'y a pas d'accord sur ce qu'il faut mesurer et comment le faire. Les sondages d'opinion utilisent les termes « attachement » ou « identification » pour évaluer la présence ou l'absence, ainsi que l'intensité du sentiment d'appartenance que les gens peuvent avoir à l'égard de leur groupe, d'une communauté ou d'un pays. Ces enquêtes montrent que les Québécois sont, dans l'ensemble, relativement moins attachés au Canada que les autres Canadiens et que, proportionnellement, plus de francophones du Québec que d'anglophones du reste du Canada ont tendance à placer leur province avant leur pays. Toutefois, les différences ne sont pas aussi claires que l'on pourrait s'y attendre. Les données de sondage, ainsi que les modes de vote, peignent un portrait ambigu des dispositions des Québécois, mais cela ne signifie pas nécessairement que les Québécois eux-mêmes n'ont pas de sentiments forts, quoique partagés, quant à leur appartenance au Canada.

How attached are French-speaking Quebecers—and more to the point, those who identify with the Québécois nation—to Canada? This lingering question goes back to the emergence of the sovereigntist movement in the 1960s and no single response has ever proven altogether satisfactory. The strength or weakness of the connection between Quebecers and their country is a matter of debate, not the least because there is no agreement on *what* to measure and *how* to do it. Of course, the most obvious and direct approach is to ask Quebecers themselves how they feel about Canada. This has been done once and again, and the polling data, while often illuminating about collective moods and reactions to specific circumstances, have not yielded conclusive results. That is, little else can be asserted after admitting the obvious fact that Quebecers are, as a whole, comparatively less attached to Canada than other Canadians and that, proportionally, more French speakers in Quebec than English speakers elsewhere in Canada tend

to put their province ahead of their country in terms of attachment; or that "Canada" elicits more attachment than "Confederation", "Ottawa", or "the federal government", thus showing that often the feeling of alienation stems more from the perception of (unfair or ineffectual) institutional arrangements than from a inherently negative attitude towards Canada as a nation or as an idea. The figures from many polls are consistent and significant with regards to these trends, but the gaps between Quebecers and other Canadians are not as extreme as an impartial, external observer could expect given the political rhetoric that builds on Quebec's nationalist claims: 25-to-35 percentage-point spreads indeed make a difference, but the core question remains open when we see that Quebecers still show a 62% rate of attachment to Canada—certainly much lower than that of the rest of Canadians (95%)[1], but nevertheless surprisingly high for a group which supposedly rejects Canada with recurring gestures of anger or contempt.

Let's then look at other ways of gauging Quebecers' attitude towards Canada. If the most direct approach is to simply put the question to individual Quebecers, as pollsters do in order to aggregate opinions into a collective portrait, the other reasonably straightforward approach is to examine voting patterns. Voting is actually an aggregation procedure through which a vast number of separate, private actions establish a single collective, public outcome. For almost two decades, the common assumption was that Quebecers, and particularly French-speaking ones, expressed their disconnect with Canada by massively turning to the Bloc Québécois in federal elections. This political party, born as dissident movement among various representatives from Quebec in the federal parliament, captured a large constituency through six national elections between 1993 and 2008, winning each time a majority of seats (in average, almost two thirds of the 75 seats from the province). The Bloc Québécois thus became the preeminent voice of Quebecers in Ottawa—and hard-core nationalistic at that too. Without getting into the debate on its actual political worth (how to assess the performance or usefulness of a party whose main goal is to "sit out" the political process or, as detractors would argue, to "destroy the country"?), we can briefly examine some of the numbers behind the phenomenon: since its creation and until 2008, this party attracted, in average, 42,6% of the popular vote, peaking in 2004 at almost 49% (in the aftermath of the "Sponsorship Scandal" that left many Quebecers repelled by the federal government's dubious or outright illicit use of public funds to counteract the nationalist movement), and then declining in 2006 (42,1%, 51 seats) and 2008 (38,1%, 49 seats), eventually crashing with the 2011 debacle (23,4% of the provincial vote, only 4 seats won).

Contrary to the widely held assumption that a cohesive majority of Francophone Quebecers would steadily support the Bloc during its period of political dominance in Quebec, this was never actually the case. Even in 2004, when the *Bloquiste* tide seemed unbeatable, it failed to muster a majority of French-speaking voters in as many as 17 electoral districts outside the main cities. Regarding the apparent split between Quebec's urban and rural areas, election expert Pierre Drouilly wrote in the 2005 edition of *L'Annuaire du Québec*, that "the Francophone *Bloquiste* vote is rather an urban vote, and mainly a Montreal vote". Moreover, in a 2008 piece published in *L'Action nationale*, Pierre Serré, also an expert on voting trends, argued that "since its arrival, the Bloc Québécois explicitly expresses the Québécois' malaise within the Canadian federation". The key word in Serré's quote is "malaise". This rather tepid, general sense of discomfort hardly conveys the acute and active disgruntlement that "separatists" are supposed to collectively hold against Canada. Should we lay this apparently undecided, uncommitted disposition on the usual cliché of Quebec's proverbial "ambiguity"? If evidence seems to show that, as humourist Yvon Deschamps famously declared, "Quebecers want an independent Quebec in a strong and united Canada", painting them as fence-sitters (or worse, "wanting the cake and eating it too"), we should also consider the possibility that "ambiguity" doesn't mean the same thing as "ambivalence". In other words, Francophone Quebecers may express, as a community, ambiguous—as in "equivocal", "unresolved"—claims, resulting from the aggregation of attitudes and preferences, but this reality could stem from strongly felt but mutually conflicting personal dispositions—which is the precise meaning of ambivalence.

ATTACHMENT, AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE

What does "attachment" or, for that matter, "identification" mean? Naturally these are the terms that pollsters will utilize to survey the presence or absence, and the intensity of the sense of belonging that people have towards their group, community, or country. I'm not suggesting that these are not the right words to employ, mostly because no one seems to offer any better alternative. However, it might prove useful to explore the underlying psychosocial configuration of what opinion surveys are struggling to observe. To this end, drawing from the sociology of knowledge and social psychology, it is possible to conceptualize the phenomenon of belonging through the words that we use to describe it. We—both as ordinary speakers and as experts—resort to a vocabulary over which we have little control, because language, like any objective system, has already embedded crucial but subtle distinctions between similar units. It's important to stress this aspect: the crucial element is in the distinctions, not in the units themselves.

Let's address this in a much more concrete manner. What's the meaning differential between "attachment" and "identification" when referring to belonging? Both words share the idea of a sense of connection to an identity, or more specifically to a collective that embodies that identity. "I'm attached to Canada", "I identify with Canada". Both phrases convey a fundamentally similar message, and both are apt to be qualified by degrees or intensity, and also to be negated. "I am not very attached to Canada", "I do not identify with Canada", etc. That's why they work in opinion polls. But, as I suggested, language as a system needs to be scrutinized through the internal differences that finely but effectively separate its units – its words. It goes without saying that not all speakers (or experts) use words in this self-conscious way, but that's not really a problem for my argument. I examine language to understand basic meanings that are rooted in it, not the words themselves.

So, what's the subtle difference between "attachment" and "identification", and how that may help us better understand the issue of belonging? At first, and this is certainly obvious to any of us: "attachment" seems to imply some emotional connection. An attachment is a bond, implicitly natural, spontaneous, even involuntary. We think immediately to our attachment to a particularly person, to our roots, or to our homeland. Conversely, although identification may suggest a similar sort of link, the term clearly veers towards a more rational experience. Two particular aspects of this become evident here: choice and conceptualization. Choice, of course, derives from rationality, which itself is entrenched on freedom. That is, one needs to be free from external influence and determinations to be rational to make a choice.

The other aspect is conceptualization, by which I refer to the process of extracting abstract qualities from an empirical entity. Identification, particularly in a psychological perspective, involves the assimilation by one's self of an attribute from another person or from an object. I may have an emotional attachment to my father (that is I love the whole concrete person with all his flaws), and I can identify with my father (that is I admire his virtues and try to live up to them). This little exercise in basic semiotics leads us directly to the well-known theoretical framework that opposes, among other things, ethnic and civic nationalism, or the organic idea of collective identity to the one grounded on the social contract. Now, how does this affect our discussions in general, or in particular to Quebec vis-à-vis Canada? For one very practical matter, it may affect what we are trying to measure and compare. Let me mention an example of this problem. When I took part in the design of a similar survey in Argentina, we had to translate the same questions into Spanish. This posed a momentous problem: the word "attached" (or "attaché", in French) does not really work in Spanish, as there is no corresponding term. A direct equivalent word was considered: "enganchado", but it can only be used in the mechanical, physical sense of attachment (i.e. a wing is attached to the plane), or else within the Argentinean slang as "being hooked on" (someone or something). Eventually, after careful consideration, we had to settle on "sentirse identificado", that is, "to feel identified with" (which, though ill-sounding in English, works in Spanish as an approximate mix of the two meanings).

While this discussion might sound rather technical (e.g. a methodological issue regarding polling), one can nevertheless wonder about the effect of choosing one or the other expressions (attachment or identification) when surveying about Canadian identity among Quebecers. If attachment to Canada is relatively low, that may be explained by heightened emotional links to Quebec (to its history, to ancestry, to the mother tongue, etc.) and to the negative feelings towards federalism that are a staple of the sovereignist narrative. However, we could speculate that identification with Canada could rate a little stronger, particularly if that's framed in terms of values (e.g. what Canada stands for, for example as opposed to the United States).

But I would like to dig a little deeper in the ways in which a sense of belonging is felt, expressed, and eventually measured. I'll resort now to a central tenet of political science: self-interest as a source of action. People's identities are important to them, obviously, but they're also important to others because identity can be the source of action. Not every identity, even if strongly felt by an individual, causes or explains behaviour. But we know that, when identity motivates people's behaviour, it can be a very powerful phenomenon. Attachment to one's group explains much of the ethnic and religious conflict that we see all over the world. People may fight for their community, for their motherland, for their race or blood. Also, group identification can be a source of action, as many would be ready to fight for a just cause or to uphold democracy and fundamental freedoms. In less dramatic contexts—for instance an election—citizens' behaviour is to a large extent explained by emotional attachment and rational identification (as in the following question: What part of emotional attachment and what part of rational identification underlie a Quebecer's vote for the Bloc Québécois?).

Both in the emotional attachment to a collective and in the rational identification with a collective, self-interest is a key factor, albeit generally concealed, even to the individuals themselves. This reality creates a fascinating dynamic by which attachment as a source of action is considered the purest form of disinterested motive. This

is of course rooted in the Western culture's notion that affections are strictly not a matter of choice, and constitute ends in themselves, never a means to achieve another goal. "I love my country", "I love my mother", nothing else is required to explain an action caused by that emotional "fact". This observation is relevant when dealing with public opinion and political attitudes and behaviour. In the name of social cohesion (Canada's national unity facing the challenge posed by Quebec; Quebec's survival as a French-speaking society facing the challenge posed by immigrants and minorities), emotional attachment is at the same time the answer (implying that the problems would be solved if Quebecers developed an emotional attachment to Canada, and if immigrants developed an emotional attachment to Quebec), and *the very single thing that cannot be imposed*. The command "Love me!" (or "be emotionally attached to me!") is the psychological counterpart of the logically impossible "I order you to be free!" How could we force Quebecers to become attached to Canada or immigrants to become attached to Quebec, and even if we could by means of some sort of enticement, what would be the value of that attachment—given that we culturally frown upon "interested" affection?

The alternative answer to the challenges of social cohesion when attachment is weak or absent is to turn to identification. Because identification is considered a matter of choice, and inherently rational, people can be exposed to the virtues with which to identify, and be asked to voluntary adhere to them. That's the basis of the Parti Québécois' 2008 bill on national identity, which included a pledge of allegiance, and also the Liberal government's Declaration of values that all immigrants must sign in Quebec since 2009. This Declaration commits the prospective immigrant to "agreeing to respect the common values of Quebec society" and to "declare that I wish to live in Québec within the framework of and abiding by its common values, and that I want to learn French, if I do not speak it already". The idea that identification can be stimulated through allegiance, in a kind of "moral contract", which in turn will eventually generate attachment constitute the underlying rationale of similar formal declaration of loyalty and adhesion to common values being now discussed or adopted in countries such as France and Israel.

SELF-INTEREST AND IDENTIFICATION

Let's go back to our dilemma as societies seeking cohesion, particularly when a sizable group does not seem to hold a strong bond with the rest of society. We'd like to elicit a sincere attachment, which we consider to be defined by the lack of ulterior motives (i.e. we deeply believe that true emotions cannot be a means to an end), but because of the very nature of attachment, it cannot be a matter of choice. Like faith or love, it appears that either "you have it or you don't". Much collective frustration stems from this reality: you could say that Quebecers don't waste affection on Canada, just like many immigrants and members of minorities don't waste affection on Quebec. But if there's one thing that aggravates even more the majorities, it's when the lack of attachment by some is combined with unabashed self-interest. As I said, attachment is seen as inherently disinterested, never instrumental to an end other than attachment itself. Even though this notion does not hold water against any serious sociological analysis—identity is indeed a form of self-interest—the reaction to interest-based claims by groups or individuals perceived as not bound by emotion to the rest of society—thus seen as disloyal, ungrateful, uncooperative, etc.—is generally extremely negative. This is the case in Canada regarding Quebec nationalism, and particularly the Bloc Québécois representation in Parliament, as well as Quebec regarding the reasonable accommodation controversy in 2007-2008.

In conclusion, one could argue that the most rational way of addressing the relative lack of attachment among some groups would be to openly discuss interests: What is gained by both groups from maintaining the bond that holds them together? Francophone Quebecers don't seem collectively ready to separate from Canada, but they certainly feel rather unattached to it. Many immigrants and minorities come and stay in Quebec, but they don't feel Québécois. In many respects, self-interest more than identity explains those difficult relations. But we have a deeply ingrained conception of identity and belonging that excludes self-interest, because we feel that identity should be an end in itself. What about identification? As I said, there is a clear trend towards dressing lists of common values, norms, or elements of a culture heritage that are somewhat detached from the collective in order to set seemingly abstract attributes with which one could identify. Some think that this might do the trick: it's rational, the result of a free choice by individuals, completely disinterested (we embrace democracy or gender equality as an end in itself regardless of the benefits we may derive from them). Thus we elude the dead-end of trying to impose an emotional attachment, then expecting it to be sincere and intense, and also we avoid dealing openly with interests when addressing the issue of identities. However, self-interest remains a key unspoken issue, as well as the paradox that adhering to principles (through signing a pledge or a declaration) by choice presupposes freedom from any constraint, which the required "contract" undoubtedly is, and sincerity ("good faith", in legal terms), which cannot be ascertained or enforced by the state. But, as we do in polite society, we ignore inconvenient facts and we act as if we don't expect any gain from doing what is right.

NOTES

[1] Jack Jedwab, "Love U Anyways: To What Degree Do Federal-Provincial Grievances Affect the National Bond?", paper presented at the "Governance, Attachment and Identities in Federal States: Comparing Canada, the United States, Germany and Spain" Conference, Ottawa, April 6th 2011.