

The “Québécois” Separatist Movement and Ascribed Statuses: Features and Consequences

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Abstract. *In the “Québécois” separatist movement and organizations, the dominant pattern variables in the legitimation of demands refer above all to ascribed statuses, namely language and ethnic affiliation. These statuses are the very ones that figure (d) most prominently in (past) discrimination practices suffered by the “Québécois”. The paper shows that such ideological frames of reference are conducive to retreats from economic preoccupations and from broader forms of social solidarity. The paper concludes with the need for social scientists to reveal the antidemocratic aspects conveyed by such dominant pattern variables in the legitimation of demands of the “Québécois”—and similar—movements.*

Introduction

Most contemporary scholars agree that a fundamental characteristic of any modernization process is the reduced importance of categorizations based on pattern variables¹ referring to ascribed statuses, and in a same way, the increased importance of categorizations based on pattern variables referring to acquired statuses. This phenomenon has been studied extensively. Its causes are, by and large, seen as mostly economic in nature: modern economic activities require a wider range of trades and professions, greater labour-force mobility and solidarities of a more organic type; this forces individuals to transform their own status through personal activities, hence, to “acquire” their status. The phenomenon is viewed as a key to understanding the dynamism of modern societies: the greater the emphasis a society places on acquired statuses, the easier it becomes

for individuals therein to find jobs in trades and professions according to the best of their abilities, thus, the more such a society will be open to social change and capable of developing economically. These general ideas are not only widely known but are an integral part of the contemporary modernization ethos, whether modernization is examined at societal or individual levels, or again, regardless of the ideological perspectives or theoretical frameworks adopted by scholars.

However, any modernization process also entails an antithesis, particularly hard-felt for individuals. Indeed, the latter may become insecure when unable to adequately situate themselves in the social order, stressed because constantly having to adjust themselves to new—sometimes unexpected if not unforeseen—roles, and oftentimes tense when forced to repeatedly make choices in different social dimensions. This antithesis is likewise an essential part of the modernization



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1. The concept of pattern variable is borrowed from Talcott Parsons (1951).

Though the ideas presented in this article are not inspired by the latter, the pattern variable concept was deemed especially relevant because it suggests a continuum, and therefore polarities, which are useful when referring to the notions of ascribed and acquired statuses. At the onset, it should be specified that a pattern variable is a dichotomy of variables used for classifying types of social relations; it is constituted of two mutually exclusive alternatives, one of which must be chosen before embarking in social action in a specific situation. Given this, a pattern variable necessarily bears a connection to a fundamental dilemma that is faced when engaging in a social relation.

ethos, though it has generally been considered as secondary in importance, or more precisely as an unwelcome –yet benign– consequence of the modernization process. This article will focus on one of the possible consequences (and/or aspects) of this antithesis, namely that not only does the use of categorizations based on acquired-status pattern variables fail to increase in a constant manner, but at times, it even tends to retreat back into ascribed statuses; thus, occasionally, an inversion² in one of the key aspects of modernization may occur. The article intends to show that such a retreat can be observed today in the “Québécois”³ separatist movement and its offspring or parallel “nationalist” organizations. It also demonstrates that when this retreat occurs, by and large, the sector⁴ formulating demands rather than trying to impose a new ideological frame of reference instead tends to coin its dominant demand in terms of the pattern variable that traditionally figured most prominently in the social discrimination to which it was –and still can be– subjected. Three points need to be made in

order to clarify this argument. First, the social discrimination referred to here does not necessarily correspond to the socio-economic stratification system. Second, as suggested when describing the nature of the retreat, the dominant pattern variable in the legitimation of demands –i.e. the pattern variable guiding the dependent sector's ideological frame of reference and actions– refers to an ascribed status, and this, despite the existence of other possible legitimations grounded (either totally or partially) in acquired statuses. Third, by coining its main demand in terms of the very pattern variable that figured most prominently in past discrimination practices against it by the elite, the dependent sector actually adopts the latter's ideological frame of reference with the difference of seeing the opposite pole of this pattern variable as the “superior” one.⁵

There exists a considerable literature dealing with topics similar to the one outlined above; to mention only a few such topics randomly, there is the authoritarian personality, mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, forms of discrimination, types of corporatism/fascism/authoritarianism, “escapes from freedom”, and status compensation. Making an original contribution to this literature is not an easy task, especially when considering the breadth and general nature of our argument, as well as its unexhaustive and qualitative aspects. Nevertheless, this article hopes to make a contribution by examining the largely overlooked phenomenon of retreat outlined above, in the case of the “Québécois” separatist movement.

I. Features of the “Quebecois” Separatist Movement

The main demands of the “Québécois” separatist movement can best be summarized by its “masters in our own house” slogan.⁶ Here, “our own house” refers to the exact territory of the Province of Quebec as presently guaranteed by the Canadian State, i.e., an area of 1,540,680 km² comprising some six and a half million inhabitants, wherein well over 80 percent of its land-mass is sparsely settled mainly by Indian and Inuit populations; besides this arbitrary definition of its “Québec” trait, this “house” closes out the million or so French-speakers living in other Canadian provinces. Parallely, the subject “masters” quite explicitly excludes Quebec's indigenous populations, its important “historic” English mi-

2. The concepts of “antithesis” and “inversion” are borrowed from Robert A. Nisbet (1966) who used them in a somewhat different context.
3. In this article, the term of Quebec (without quotation marks) designates either the Province of Quebec or the entire population of this province; per contra, the term “Québécois” (with quotation marks) designates either the people in this province who are of old French stock (pure laine), or those among them who strongly prize this origin. The “Québécois” separatist movement and organizations will simply be identified as such in spite of the fact that it encompasses three political parties, diverse organizations and various ideological streams.
4. In order to clarify the argument, the singular form is used throughout this paragraph; however, regarding the terms “sector”, “pattern variable” and “elite”, both their singular and plural forms should have been used side by side. This is *de facto* applicable to the entire article, and is all the more relevant for the term “pattern variable” when the latter refers to one (or several) dominant pattern variable(s) used in the legitimation of demands by the “Québécois” separatist movement.
5. Or, at the very least, the dependent sector views “its” polarity as equal in value to the polarity the elite identifies with.
6. It must be stressed here that as recently as the 1960s, in Quebec, the working language was predominantly English and fluency in English was a necessary condition for any promotion within businesses. In a parallel fashion, the Canadian Federal Government remained officially unilingual English until 1969.

nority, and its immigrants—especially those having settled after 1945 and/or those whose mother tongue or language of adoption is English; these excluded categories roughly total one million, i.e., from 15 to 20 percent of the Province's inhabitants.

The key "masters in our own house" slogan and related demands rest on the assumptions that Quebec could—and should—gain greater autonomy, which may go as far as full-fledged independence, and that this autonomy will entail the uncontested hegemony of the "Québécois" over Quebec's entire population and territory. These assumptions reveal that the "Québécois" separatist movement legitimates its main demands in terms of dominant pattern variables of ascribed statuses, pattern variables whose polarities are the spoken languages, the ethnic origins (and, to a lesser degree, the religions) of the two "founding nations" of Canada which are the French and the English.⁷

While the above demands and their corresponding assumptions are of central importance in the "Québécois" separatist movement, they are very far from exhausting the entire spectrum of possible demands and assumptions. Among those dismissed or of little influence in the movement, the following are noteworthy: the majority of French-speaking Canadians need: a) to be spared as much as possible from some of the negative consequences of their dependence on American, "Québécois", English-Canadian—or other—capital; b) to have or maintain—without resorting to unusual pressure or threats—full access to political power at the Canadian federal level; and c) to be completely freed from discrimination, be it linguistic, ethnic or religious. Such demands rest on the assumption that, despite certain peculiarities, mostly due to a domination by "Québécois" economic interests as well as the persistence of some forms of linguistic and ethnic discrimination, the situation of the "Québécois" in matters of economics, politics and prestige is not markedly different from that of the mass of Canadians. This implies that *all* social movements, institutions and organizations throughout Canada (including Quebec) need to be freed of *all* ideological perspectives wherein ascribed statuses (such as language, ethnic origin, religion) play a dominant role. This broad assumption and its corresponding demands—which are either dismissed or of little influence in the "Québécois" separatist



movement—are essentially structured according to pattern variables such as capital/labour, ruling class/proletariat, elite/masses, etc., i.e., pattern variables based on acquired statuses.⁸ Thus, what transpires from examining this case is the contrast between the dominant pattern variables selected by the "Québécois" separatist movement for the legitimation of its demands, and the other pattern variables that either are dismissed or carry little weight in this legitimation; the former basically refer to ascribed statuses, whereas the latter mostly refer to acquired ones.

Although recognizing that there are certain limits to the mutually exclusive character of categorizations based on ascribed statuses, the fact remains that such categorizations are more polarized than those based on acquired statuses; this results from both the nature of these two types of

7. Thus, the two "founding nations" determine the polarities of these dominant pattern variables; besides, especially in the case of the "French as a founding nation" polarities, spoken language, ethnic origin and religion tend to converge due to the characteristics of the "foundation" and the historical evolution of this "nation".

8. These comments concerning the "Québécois" separatist movement are quite general. As mentioned in note 3, there actually exists within this movement a wide range of ideological streams and organizations, spearheaded by its three political parties.

statuses and the contexts wherein they are called to play a role. This idea is fairly well known; thus, it will simply be recalled here without further explanation. For instance, categorizations based on race, religion or gender, by and large, allow for less flexibility than those based on acquired statuses such as education, occupational experience or value systems. Accordingly, acquired statuses remain more loosely defined than ascribed ones, and this is mostly attributable to their greater multidimensionality. In other words, acquired statuses more easily allow for equivalencies and parallels in their definitions, whereas ascribed statuses do so only with great difficulty—if they do so at all—hence their potential for social and political exclusion. This difference between both types of statuses is very important in grounding the argument presented in this article.

II. Consequences

The preceding chapter has discussed some of the features of the “Québécois” separatist movement outlined in the “Introduction”, namely that a) the dominant pattern variable underlying the demands of this movement refers to an ascribed status; and b) when building its ideological frame of reference, the movement's dependent sector borrows its dominant ascribed-status pattern variable from the sector that traditionally discriminated against it, but adopts the opposite polarity as its own. This chapter will further comment on the case by exploring major consequences of such features. These consequences revolve around the idea that, linked to the retreat back into ascribed statuses, the “Québécois” separatist movement illustrates two other retreats, one from economic concerns and, the other, from broader social solidarity.

1. The Retreat from Economic Concerns

There is no doubt that we are witnessing today a worldwide weakening influence of the ideals

of “the left”, and a fading of alternative models to Western developed societies—models that mainly “the left” had provided over the last century. Because such ideals and models stressed the key relevance of the economic dimension, it seems as if many contemporary social movements and organizations have ruled out any ideological overt opposition to the ideas of an open economy, capitalism and the “Western model”. This is so not only as far as the most obvious structural aspects of the capitalist economy are concerned, but (1) it also extends to the political and cultural aspects associated with a market economy, and especially with entrepreneurship, and (2) often, it even encompasses the economic dimension *per se*, which is to a large extent paradoxical when viewed in relation to the previous point. However, both these points may help to explain the retreat into ascribed statuses. Indeed, the political and cultural aspects associated with a market economy are ideologically—and often academically—emphasized, and although they frequently offer rather satisfying rationalizations and explanations at the collective level, they may be threatening at the micro and individual levels, particularly in terms of identity. Such insecurity, in turn, would account for the “escape”⁹ from the economic dimension and its, by and large, nakedly achieved status component. Albeit this may be so, it is obvious that it constitutes at best only a partial explanation given the broadness and complexity of the phenomenon. Therefore, no causal link will be established here and it will simply be observed that, simultaneously to the weakening influence of the ideals of “the left”, there occurs a retreat into ascribed statuses.¹⁰ This brings the discussion back to the problem of dependent sectors adopting as dominant pattern variable for legitimizing their demands, the same pattern variable that traditionally constituted the most visible aspect of the discrimination to which they were subjected. And since the pattern variable legitimizing discrimination against the “Québécois” has traditionally been de facto an ascribed one, the dominant pattern variable used in legitimizing demands of this dependent sector also remains ascribed.

In “conservative” ideological terms, ascribed statuses are generally considered as having minimal impacts in the economic and political

9. The concept of “escape” used here borrows the meaning given to it by Fromm (1941) in his *Escape from Freedom*.

10. There exists an impressive number of theories relevant to this theme; two are noteworthy in the light of the argument developed here, namely status compensation (Dollard, 1937) and the culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1978).

spheres, and considerable ones in the cultural sphere; while the opposite is considered true for acquired statuses. In reality, however, either type of statuses can have major impacts in any of these spheres. Here, I will only underline the important impacts that ascribed statuses can have in the economic sphere. This being said, what makes the originality of the social movement described here is, on the one hand, the importance it gives to ascribed statuses, and on the other, its *apparent*—and in reality quite contradictory—neglect of the economic dimension (in terms of advocating greater social equity, for instance). These two features lead the movement to solely defend the interests of the dependent sector which it sees itself as specifically representing—a sector defined in ascribed-status terms, i.e., in a very narrow way—and lead it as well to avoid solidarity of a broader scope, an issue that will be discussed below.

2. The Retreat from Broader Forms of Social Solidarity

This retreat is observable not only in the ideological frame of reference and actions of the "Québécois" separatist movement, but also in the type of solidarity existing within it.

Regarding the ideological frame of reference of the movement, the key observation is that the dominant pattern variable in legitimating demands is essentially concerned with the "Québécois" and neglects the other social sectors involved, such as French Canadians living outside Quebec (Acadians, Franco-Ontarians, etc.), the Quebec residents who are not of French stock, and the mass of Canadians living outside Quebec. In other words, the demands of central importance focus on interests that are either individualistic and/or those of a narrowly defined social sector. Undoubtedly, this is linked to the fact that the dominant pattern variable is based on an ascribed status, but also—and in a more general way—to the fact that modernization inevitably causes some damage at the individual level: feelings of insecurity, a necessity to adapt oneself to ever changing roles, etc. This helps explain the appeal of taking "refuge" in categorizations based on ascribed statuses, a phenomenon that brings to mind the vast literature on authoritarianism and mechanisms of exclusion in modern societies.



Regarding the type of solidarity existing in the movement, the key observation is that the dominant pattern variables used for legitimizing its demands are based on ascribed statuses, thus, on statuses having a contrasted and precise definition. Consequently, the resulting solidarity is—or tends to be—of a more mechanical than organic type. This is why such a social movement has a "lonely crowd"¹¹ aspect. Let me first comment upon the "crowd" aspect: the (potential) alienation found in such a movement will be high given that, outside of the narrowly defined ascribed statuses, individuals have few—if any—common experiences. Therefore, the objective reasons why the "Québécois" would insist on "being master in their own house" are necessarily wide-ranging since the Quebec society is modern, hence highly differentiated and stratified.

As far as the "lonely" aspect found within the movement is concerned, it seems to stem mostly from the component of affirming personal identities, a component that constantly

11. The expression is obviously taken from Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*.

This "lonely crowd" aspect is markedly different from the solidarity and militancy of reformist or revolutionary movements, a case in point being the labour parties and unions throughout the late nineteenth century up until the Second World War.

transpires in its demands. Thus, the ideological stances of the "Québécois" separatist move-

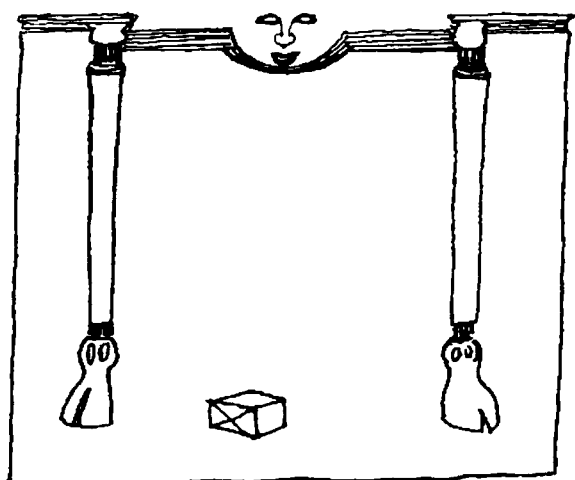
12. To this effect, what needs to be underlined is the persistent anti-indigenous prejudice found within the ranks of the Parti Québécois, which is the most powerful separatist organization and clearly oriented towards the goal of complete independence of the province. There exists many –and far reaching– illustrations of this prejudice. The present note will detail only one of them and afterwards briefly mention a couple of others. In early August 1991, Jacques Parizeau, the then leader of this party, violently opposed the long-standing separatist claims of the Cree Nation of northern Quebec. These Crees who are commonly known as "from James Bay", a bay undergoing the construction of a huge hydro-electric project, were at the time threatening to separate from the rest of Quebec in the advent the latter ever became independent. The territory they are claiming corresponds to the vast district of Ungava that amounts to roughly two thirds of the province's territory. Jacques Parizeau took a Cree anti-separatist stand and did so by using a legalistic argument founded on the Canadian constitution. He stated that "We cannot parcel out pieces of Quebec... This kind of demand is humbug, it does not hold water" and that "Until Quebec's sovereignty is proclaimed, the Canadian constitution guarantees that the borders of a province can only be changed with the approval of Quebec; however, once the province is sovereign, it will decide in its best interest what is acceptable in this matter" (*The Globe and Mail*, August 3, 1991, p. A3). In other words, the Parti Québécois leader declared on the one hand, that a "Québécois" ruling on the matter had to be accepted, and on the other hand, that his party could legitimately claim at least two double standards: 1) Canada can be partitioned, but not Quebec; 2) some Canadian citizens (the "Québécois") have the right to self-determination, whereas others (the Crees) do not. Since August 1991, especially since the Parti Québécois' return to power in the province in 1994, the question of the self-determination of the Crees – and other indigenous "bands" –has been at the forefront of Quebec's political debates: each time, the Parti Québécois and specifically its leaders (Parizeau and, since 1996, Lucien Bouchard) have reacted in a similar way. In the days before the referendum of October 1995 (a Quebec referendum on sovereignty, that the separatists narrowly lost and whose fairness in both content and process has been hotly debated), Bouchard strongly alluded to the fact that "Quebecers" are a "white race" producing too few babies (*Maclean's*, November 13, 1995, p. 19-20), a claim that he later repeatedly refused to retract and that did not hurt either the separatist referendum vote or this leader's popularity, on the contrary. Finally, on the evening of this same referendum, Parizeau squarely blamed the separatist defeat on the "ethnic vote" (and on "money"; *Maclean's*, November 6, 1995, p. 14) a blame that –besides its openly discriminatory connotation– implies an obvious demographic distortion. All these political stands are typical of social movements where the dominant pattern variables in the legitimization of demands refer to ascribed statuses.

ment are conducive to the "Québécois" reacting to their self-perception of being discriminated against, by asserting that their individual identities and traits are quite distinct from those of other Canadian *individuals*, including both the mass of English Canadians and non-"Québécois" residents of the province.¹² What is noteworthy here is that these proclaimed individual differences are not limited to psychological or cultural dimensions, but that (all too often and easily) they spill over in the political –and even economic– dimensions. Obviously, such proclaimed individual differences and the resulting spilling-over are incompatible with broad forms of social solidarity.

Conclusion

Today, few scholars would view in a negative fashion the renewed importance given to grassroots development strategies, appropriate technology, local communities, indigenous knowledge, informal sector microenterprises –particularly those of women– and other related trends. Such an evolution is propitious, especially when taking into account the current climate of economic stagnation and crisis of the State; however, their implications and possible consequences are not necessarily all desirable. One such undesirable consequence will be considered below, which is these trends' potential for reinforcing categorizations based on ascribed statuses.

It is well known that the more a social movement or organization is of a micro type, the greater the likelihood for ascribed statuses to play a dominant role therein. Consequently, when dependent sectors start social movements or found organizations, there is a strong possibility that their ideological frames of reference and ensuing actions revolve around such statuses; and this is all the more probable when the discrimination to which they were subjected is based (totally or partially) on ascribed statuses. Such movements and organizations generally have strategies of social accommodation. However, beyond a certain threshold of growth and "empowerment", it is imperative that they gradually rely on acquired statuses in order to be able to surpass their accommodation strategies and move toward strategies of



social integration. Yet, for varied reasons,¹³ some social movements and organizations do not make this transition; thus, they remain confined into activities of social accommodation. The persistence of such activities, even if they are of large scope and sophisticated, will eventually generate high levels of alienation in all social actors involved (whether included or not) given the inherent limits of social accommodation strategies. This can lead to a hardening of attitudes and, more specifically, to deeper "retreats" into multiple categorizations based on ascribed statuses, with the resulting danger of reinforcing anti-democratic tendencies. When applying this argument to the "Québécois" separatist movement, the latter could be seen as an instance of a social movement that has reached—or wishes to reach—limit of the potential of its social accommodation strategy, and therefore, as a social movement that cannot carry out—or is not aiming at—strategy of actual social integration.

Given this feature of the "Québécois" separatist movement, it is important to focus on the relation between, on the one hand, the evolution of several of its initiatives directed at the micro-level and, on the other hand, the potential of these initiatives to reinforce categorizations based on ascribed statuses. It is important because the movement could be viewed as being in transition, i.e., although born at the micro level and still bearing many of its characteristics, it is now endowed with powerful organizations and has won important "victories" (various quota systems, diverse "collective" rights, policies effectively targeting specific so-

cial sectors, etc.) all in the name of the "original" ascribed statuses legitimizing its central demands.¹⁴

Given the "Québécois" separatist movement's transition feature and its "victories", social scientists are facing an important task that can be summarized in three points: 1) to reveal the antidemocratic potential conveyed in the reinforcement of ascribed-status categorizations and to link this potential to the dominant pattern variable in the legitimation of the demands of various (historical and contemporary) social movements and organizations; 2) to point to alternative legitimations based on pattern variables referring to acquired statuses; and 3) to show that the legitimation process of the explicit demands of such movements and organizations is not necessarily linked to the objective (economic, political, social, etc.) problems facing their members. ♦

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13. A wide range of reasons can come to play here, such as organizational features, political capacity, make-up of leadership, ideological frameworks, short or long-term economic interests, or external constraints.
14. The "Québécois" separatist movement mainly stems from - and identifies itself closely with micro-level "home-grown" organizations and groups (typical, are the "parish halls" and the caisses populaires). Yet, it is presently fitted with large-scale organizations that are not only political and social but also economic and financial, such as the Provincial Government (when the Parti Québécois is in office, i.e., in 1976-84 and again since 1994 to the present), influential political parties, various unions endorsing the separatist cause, as well as banking and credit organizations ranking among the largest in Canada.