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“No academic who studies Quebec intensely is neutral on the questions of sovereignty and of Quebec’s place in Confederation and the political views of Quebec scholars adversely affect their analyses. Discuss.”

In order to engage with the two questions of whether scholars of Quebec are 'neutral' and whether their views 'adversely affect their analysis', it is necessary to consider what 'neutrality' means in the context of academic work on these topics, as well as with what the purpose of analysis is, and thus what it means for it to be affected adversely. While it isn't possible to find a single universally accepted answer to either of these secondary questions, the problems that emerge when we try demonstrate how the two initial questions are formulated problematically.

Academic 'neutrality'

'Neutrality' can be taken to mean either impartiality or indifference. As applied to academic analysis, the concept of neutrality must mean something other than simply remaining uncommitted on a subject. It is hardly convincing to say that only academics who take no firm view on a subject can be said to be 'neutral' about it. If that were so, the most neutral scholars would be those who do not think or write about a subject at all. More meaningfully, for an academic to 'remain neutral' they need to use some kind of fair and open-minded process to evaluate new evidence and logical arguments. 'Neutrality' therefore does not refer to the state of seeing all viewpoints as equally convincing, but rather to the practice of remaining open to the possibility that new thoughts or information will shift your viewpoint. Different scholars of Quebec uphold this ideal to differing degrees, and the degree of their openness of mind cannot be determined from the degree of confidence they express in their views or from where their views fall in the spectrum of opinions. It is entirely possible for someone to have reached a firm personal conclusion that independence for

Quebec is the most just and desirable outcome, given current circumstances, while remaining open to new information and arguments that could shift that view; similarly, it is possible to adopt an opposite or more nuanced position on sovereignty and then completely reject any information that is at odds with that view. It is similarly possible to reach very different conclusions about the degree to which Quebecois identity is meaningful in the Canadian and global context, and to be more or less open to potentially important new information on the subject. If we accept that the relevant form of neutrality for academics is openness to new information and arguments, we cannot answer the question of whether the whole set of academics who study Quebec intensively are generally 'neutral'. Instead, we can only try to answer the question of whether particular scholars have responded appropriately to the emergence of new facts and arguments in particular fields.

In addition to a defensible conception of neutrality being more about intellectual process than about beliefs, it must be recognized that in relation to contemporary questions like those surrounding Quebecois sovereignty and Quebec's place in confederation, the views of influential academics are not separate from the issue being discussed. As Jocelyn Maclure identifies: "The nation cannot be separated from its narration. It does not exist *in itself*, but is rather disclosed in the representation its members make of it." ¹ Just as influential Canadian authors shape what it means to be 'Canadian' at any given point in time, the political questions of Quebec are shaped and made relevant by those who engage with them in the public sphere. This is especially true when figures like Pierre Trudeau and Michael Ignatieff engage with Canadian politics as both academics and practitioners. Political meanings in such circumstances arise at least partly from a process of improvisation, and academics are one group that contributes to that process in an ongoing way.

This view is echoed by Luc Turgeon, who argues that: "the intellectual participates in the

¹ Maclure, Jocelyn. "Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Identity in Quebec" in Gagnon, Alain ed. *Quebec: State and Politics. 3rd Edition*. Peterborough; Broadview. 2004. p.33 (Note: translated from French to English by Edouard Vo-Quang) Italics in original.

transformation of national identities to the extent that he develops cognitive categories that permit the collectivity to imagine (or re-imagine) its identity".² Given that scholars engaging with questions of Quebecois sovereignty are actively engaged in creating the answers to their own questions, it is especially problematic to suggest that they can somehow disentangle themselves and reach a position of 'neutrality'.

The purpose of analysis

In trying to answer the question of whether political views are adversely affecting the analysis of scholars, it is inevitable that we must consider what purpose analysis serves. If the objective is to try to access some sort of universal and eternal version of truth – on the assumption that such a thing exists to be uncovered – then perhaps a personal and emotional involvement with the questions under consideration detracts from a scholar's odds of 'finding the answer'. That being said, it is especially questionable whether truths of this kind can ever be found for questions like the nature of Quebecois sovereignty or Quebec's place in confederation. In recognition of the intersubjectivity of questions like Quebec sovereignty as discussed by Canadian intellectuals and interested non-Canadians, it may be more plausible to say that the purpose of analysis is to refine, evaluate, and advance normative political projects. This perspective reduces the difficulty associated with trying to find a single universally-convincing truth, but in so doing raises the prospect that agreement may never be reached. Consider the extremely vague description of "Canada's purpose" offered by Alain Gagnon: "eventually constituting itself based on principles that are unique and

² Turgeon, Luc. "Interpreting Quebec's Historical Trajectories: Between *La Societe Globale* and the Regional Space" in Gagnon, Alain ed. *Quebec: State and Politics*. 3rd Edition. Peterborough; Broadview. 2004. p.51 (Note: translated from French to English by Sarah Lyons)

authentic to its history, its society, and its national and cultural diversity".³ It seems quite dubious to suggest that Canadians will ever agree on whether the country has constituted itself on these principles, or even what these principles are.

On questions like sovereignty, there are also issues of non-comparability to be considered. How are we to respond to the disagreement between theorists who stress the importance of national self-determination and others who criticize the very practice of nationalism, for instance on the basis of how it can encourage the xenophobic treatment of outsiders as non-human or not worthy of moral consideration? One group asserts that the primary political lesson of the 20th century is the importance of peoples gaining control of their own affairs, following a legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Others quite convincingly assert that the overriding lesson is about the dangerousness of nationalism and the importance of developing post-national cosmopolitan global ethics not rooted in ethnicity or where people live. One manifestation of this disagreement is in the narrative and counter-narrative of "melancholic nationalism" (associated with Fernand Dumont and others) and "antinationalism and cosmopolitanism" (embodied in the thinking of Pierre Trudeau) discussed by Maclure.⁴ If the aim of analysis is to advance one or another such project, then good analysis is that which is convincing to elites and to the general public and thus moves the political project forward. If the aim of analysis is to determine the relative desirability of such projects, then neutrality in the form of openness to new information and arguments is important.

None of this is to say that all possible arguments about nationalism generally or Quebec specifically are equally defensible. It is quite possible for arguments to be objectively wrong, either because of their internal logical contradictions or because they clash in an irreconcilable way with historical evidence. That being said, it is quite possible that more than one plausible explanation can

³ Gagnon, Alain and Raffaele Iacovino. *Federalism, Citizenship and Quebec: Debating Multiculturalism*. Toronto; University of Toronto Press. 2007. p.3

⁴ Maclure. p.34-43

be constructed and that each can be logically sound and possible to reconcile with the historical record. If so, it may never be possible to employ any form of analysis that adjudicates between the competing explanations in a way that is convincing to everyone who is engaging with the discussion in a serious and good faith way, much less those who are determined to defend their existing position without granting fair consideration to competing arguments and evidence that seems contradictory.

Conclusions

In the end, not only are the two initial questions about neutrality and analysis unanswerable, but they are also formulated in a way that suggests an unrealistic conception of the degree of objectivity that is possible when discussing issues of Quebecois sovereignty and Quebec's place in confederation. These are questions on which we cannot agree both because there are no clear answers and because the process of trying to answer the questions itself generates the intersubjective hypotheses that form the closest thing to an answer scholars and historians are able to achieve. While some of these hypotheses can be rejected on the basis of logical incoherence or factual error, there are likely to be several explanations that do not clearly fall victim to these grounds for rejection and which cannot be objectively compared with one another. That being said, questions about how the Canadian and Quebecois political relationship should be structured do connect to broader questions like the desirability of nationalism as an organizing factor for political life. Richard Simeon, for instance, considers what lessons the Canadian experience might hold for other parts of the world where secessionist movements exist.⁵ Simeon's emphasis of the relative civility of the Canadian discourse about secession suggests that perhaps Canadian scholars – and

⁵ Simeon, Richard. "Debating Secession Peacefully and Democratically: The Case of Canada" in Alfred Stepan ed. *Democracies in Danger*. Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press. 2009.

others engaged in the debate – have actually done a reasonable job of maintaining neutrality in the sense of openness to new arguments and ideas. The Canadian experience does provide evidence that can be used in answering broader global questions about the appropriate composition of states and treatment of cultural groups, though it should be recognized that these larger questions can also only be answered to a limited degree, constrained by intersubjectivity, uncertainty, and the inevitability of disagreement.