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In Spite of All Temptations to Belong to Other Nations: A Rebuttal

THE CENTRAL IDEA in Nielsen's article is "nation." He thinks that "nations" have the right to separation and self-government, but other groups don't. He repeats this claim several times, but doesn't give us any arguments in favour of it, though it doesn't seem to me to be obviously true. What he does try to do is to give an account of what it takes to constitute a "nation," and to convince us that largely francophone Quebeckers who would secede from Canada pass this test, but that anglophone or allophone Quebeckers who would secede from an independent Quebec do not.

Obviously Nielsen isn't using "nation" in its most ordinary sense, meaning *country*. He explains that what he means by a "nation" is:

> a group of people who recognize one another as belonging to the same political community, acknowledge special obligations to each other, and either have or aspire to political autonomy in virtue of characteristics they believe they share, such as a common history, attachment to a geographical place and to a public culture that differentiates them from their neighbours.

I suppose that "old stock" Quebeckers constitute a nation in this sense. Let's call this the Quebec nation, without begging any questions about who else is in it or out of it, or about what this implies. Nielsen allows that anglophone and allophone Quebeckers can also be members of this Quebec nation, provided that they see

themselves as such: "where they will accept, as many do, the identification." Roughly speaking, then, you're in a nation if you think you are.

But what about people who think they aren't? Suppose, instead, that the anglophones in a particular region of Quebec do not see the locus of their political community as largely francophone independent Quebec society; and that they don't feel primary obligations or cultural or historical links to other (mostly francophone) Quebeckers. They, it seems clear on Nielsen's criteria, would be a "national minority"—a group inside, but not belonging to, the Quebec nation. If there was no group with whom they felt these positive ties, then I suppose they would belong to no nation.

But suppose that they voted to secede from an independent Quebec, perhaps intending to rejoin Canada. This is, after all, the sort of situation which would make the question of their right to secession more than moot. But this vote would surely be pretty good evidence that they saw each other, or the rest of Canada, as their political community, where they also felt their primary obligations; and that they aspired either to autonomy or to reunification with their genuine nation, in virtue of their cultural and historical differences from (largely) francophone Quebec, and their similarities either to each other, or to (largely) anglophone Canada. They would then fit Nielsen's criteria for belonging either to a nation of their own, or to the Canadian nation, and it would follow, contrary to what he says, that on his criteria they'd have the right to secession from Quebec.

I have to admit that I find Nielsen's use of the concept of a "nation" a bit scary. It reminds me of concepts dreamed up by demagogues in explicitly racist societies to produce a justification of a division between insiders and outsiders, and a removal of rights (or worse) from the outsiders, for the sake of ethnic cleansing, or purification of the blood-line, or the triumph of the master race.

Nielsen is obviously not advocating this. One reassuring part of his article is his insistence on full civil rights for "national minority" residents of Quebec—i.e., those outside the Quebec nation. But I'm not *fully* reassured. The only use Nielsen gives the concept of "nation" is to provide the right to self-determination; but it would not be surprising to see it put to other uses in an independent

Quebec—for example, to determine whose culture is to be encouraged or discouraged, whose customs respected or officially denigrated, whose voice to be listened to, and who will be ignored and marginalized.

Another thing that distances his approach from flat-out racism is that it seems to allow for full membership in the Quebec nation by anglophones, allophones, immigrants, and other *impure laine* non-old-stock Quebeckers. What makes me uneasy, however, is that they can achieve full membership in the Quebec nation only by identifying themselves with the old-stock francophone culture. Why establish this culture as official, excluding the cultures of recent francophone Haitian immigrants, of the Jews who arrived much longer ago, of the British-origin anglophones who arrived still further back? These residents of Quebec might justly be offended by Nielsen's rejection of their cultures as genuinely belonging to Quebec; and they might feel more than a little uneasy if an independent Quebec defined its real members by cultural criteria which excluded them.

You can't trust a society to respect the rights of its minorities if it doesn't accord them full membership in its nation. So fear about their rights on the part of "national minorities" would not be "neurotic" if an independent Quebec used Nielsen's criteria to exclude them from membership in the Quebec nation, while at the same time denying them the right to put their region back into Canada. Social pluralism is an enormous practical and moral good. The nasty side of nationalism is an ungenerous (or worse) definition of which culture is the real one, and of who counts as real members of the nation. I'm worried that Nielsen is encouraging nasty nationalism.