Theorising small nations in the Atlantic world: Scottish lessons for Québec?¹

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It is no exaggeration to say that distinctions such as ethnic versus civic nationalism, collectivism versus individualism or tradition versus modernity have not helped our understanding of the politics of small nations. They have led to abstract discussions in which the only question that seems to matter is where to place their nationalism on the ethnic-civic axis. This has certainly been a subject much debated in Canada, especially during the 1990s when the country almost conferred upon Québec the status of a ‘distinct’ society. There has been much opposition to such recognition, especially from English-Canadian feminist and multicultural social movements because they believed that any recognition of Québec’s distinctiveness would undermine the recognition by the courts of the rights of Québec women, immigrants, aboriginals and Anglo-Quebeckers.

Because of its unique position in North American society, Québec has been more often than not considered, by both Quebeckers themselves and by English Canadians to be something of an anomaly. As the anomalous ‘Other’, Québec is understood as having lived under a ‘Grande noirceur’ until the 1960s. This twentieth-century ‘dark age’ was reputedly a period when right-wing nationalists ruled the province and opposed the introduction of political or social modernity. Québec was almost exclusively portrayed, until recently, as a backward society governed by corrupt politicians, oppressed by the Catholic church and characterised by ethnic nationalism.

Most of the contemporary interpretations of Québec as a backward society rest on Louis Hartz’s (1964) theory of ‘fragments’, but recent debates on identity and politics in Québec have challenged this approach(Bourque, Duchastel and Beauchemin 1994; Beauchemin 1997; Létourneau 2000; Cardinal 1999). Moreover, perspectives proposing a North American history common to Québec, Canada, and the United States suggest that Québec politics also has recognised and reflected plurality and interactions with other societies and nations, processes from which it was never isolated (Cucioletta 2001).
For others, the understanding of history, identity and politics in Québec should not be detached from the exchange of ideas characteristic of both the history of England and the United States as conceptualised by John G.A. Pocock in his classic book, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Smith 1995; Greer 1994). Criticising English liberalism, Pocock has defended the view according to which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England should be considered the heir to the civic humanism of the Italian Renaissance. In this perspective, he sees continuity between England and the classical world. Civic humanism was based on the aristotelian definition of man as a political animal as well as the recognition that politics concerned virtue, citizenship and participation. Situated in its particular historical context, each political community is constantly threatened by corruption; the gains of politics are always precarious. In challenging the view of Québec as a backward society, we suggest that an alternative approach to politics should draw on the republican shift identified in Pocock’s work. This will serve as the point of departure for our discussion of the politics of small nations. Thus, the politics and identity of small nations such as Québec and Scotland are more complex than most commentators suggest.

**Nationalism, tradition and modernity in Québec**

Until recently, most students of Québec and Canada have built their interpretations on Hartz’s theory of ideological ‘fragments’ (Hartz 1964). According to Hartz, unlike the United States which he claimed is characterised by a Lockian liberal fragment, Canada is composed of two fragments, a Lockian liberal one in English Canada and a feudal one in French Canada. He also identified traces of a Tory fragment in English Canada but thought it was insufficiently important to challenge the predominance of Lockian liberalism. However, according to Gad Horowitz, Canadian political culture is defined by a strong Tory element which distinguishes it from American political culture (Horowitz [1968] 1995). This element was brought to Canada by Loyalist groups in the aftermath of the American Revolution. According to Horowitz, they carried with them an organic and communitarian conception of society which is still relevant to contemporary politics and to the understanding of Canadian identity. He sees in this element the roots of a red Toryism, defined as an explicitly and perhaps uniquely progressive Canadian conservatism. In red Toryism, he
paradoxically finds the source of an equally unique socialist politics in North America. Thus, without challenging Hartz’s theory directly, Horowitz claimed that Canada’s Loyalist tradition left an indelible imprint on Canadian political culture and identity. This argument, although more and more challenged, still informs debates in political science in Canada (Smith 1995; Mancke 1999); it serves to identify Canada’s specificity and fuels its nationalism.

Horowitz did not discuss Québec. The task was undertaken by Kenneth D. McRae, one of Hartz’s students. According to him, Québec’s main feature was its authoritarianism (McRae 1964). He understood New France as a fragment of the French ancien régime, the main features of which were absolutism and Catholicism. These characteristics are supposed to have congealed in Québec’s ‘genetic code’ and explain its nationalism, identity and politics. Moreover, his theory conveys the interpretation that Québec was a society incapable of adapting to change. Traditions were inherently conservative and reactionary. But all was not lost; according to McRae, prolonged interaction with English Canadians would eventually enable Quebeckers to learn the values of liberalism, and eventually participate in modern society. This happened, according to some, during the so-called Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. Those years have been interpreted as constituting in Québec a decisive and self-conscious break with the past. In keeping with McRae, William Coleman has explored how this came about in his study of the independence movement in Québec from 1945 to 1980. According to Coleman, only in the 1960s did Quebeckers come to accept pluralism and the values of modern life. They questioned the traditional values and culture of French Canada, i.e., ‘the community’s dedication to spiritual values, its unique classical education system, its private church-controlled and inspired social welfare institutions, and its rural, agricultural heritage’ (Coleman 1984: 17). More specifically, for Coleman, ‘[a]s consciousness of division within the community increased, there was a tendency to examine more closely institutions in English Canada and the United States as possible models for use in plural society’ (p. 18). According to Léon Dion (1987; 1993; 1998), another key analyst, with the advent of an interventionist state in Québec, Quebeckers developed a more politicised view of their society. More specifically, self-reflection led Quebeckers to address issues of social and economic inequality and international questions through the political system. Dion’s view
exemplifies Québec’s coming out of isolation after more than a hundred years of Church domination and ethnic nationalism. As he writes in La révolution déroutée 1960-1976, ‘[i]n 1960, for the first time perhaps, French Canadians finally decided to take control of their present, through a mysterious communion with their time’ (Dion 1998: 45).

Before we move on to alternative understandings of Québec’s politics and identity, it should be acknowledged that the hartzian point of view still has much currency amongst politicians, journalists, and political scientists. Michael Ignatieff is a good case in point. In his chapter on Québec nationalism in Blood and Belonging, he writes that,

“Quebec’s Quiet Revolution was meant to overcome the distinctiveness of backwardness, and it has succeeded. From having the highest birth-rate in North America, Quebec now has among the lowest. From having the worst-educated population in North America, Quebec now has among the best. From being the most devoutly religious community in North America, it is now among the least observant. From having an authoritarian political culture, it now prides itself on the freedom and openness of public debate.” (1994: 15)

Like many other commentators, Ignatieff accepts the view that Québec’s historic distinctiveness was located in backwardness, and he identifies the Quiet Revolution as the turning point. Moreover, interpreting Québec’s nationalism in the context of Eastern Europe’s ‘uncivil’ wars, Ignatieff equates nationalist demands for recognition with ethnic violence. So does Ronald Beiner in the introduction to his recent edited collection of texts on nationalism (Beiner 1999). Not only does he not question the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalisms, but his negative characterisation of Québec nationalism as ethnic is compounded by the fact that he never addresses the possibility of ethno-nationalism being a defining feature of English Canada itself. Although influenced by the same framework, Charles Taylor suggests a more positive approach (Taylor 1991; 1992; 1993). For Taylor, because of its concern for language, culture and identity, Québec experiences modernity with a certain malaise. What he calls la survivance represents the continuity with Québec’s past as a society concerned with its collective survival. In contrast, he argues, Québec’s concern for survival as a modern society manifests itself in an on-going
identity crisis which makes it vulnerable and prone to ethnic nationalism and excess. However, for Taylor, Québec’s apparent commitment to community and tradition can also reveal quite successfully the compatibility of modern life with an on-going concern for the collective. Before Taylor, George Grant, another one of Canada’s great philosophers, thought that Québec’s Catholic traditionalism was important to Canada insofar as it preserved it from being totally absorbed by the United States (Grant 1965). Unlike Ignatieff or Beiner, both Taylor and Grant are important advocates of Québec’s rights, showing that references to Québec’s traditionalism are not always negative, even though more often than not such views tend to be patronising. In short, over the years, a whole array of oppositions has been established by political commentators: authoritarian versus liberal, Catholic versus enlightened, civic versus ethnic, collectivist versus individualist. These terms have been internalised by many Quebeckers who discuss identity and politics in Québec in exactly the same fashion. Even if these distinctions complicate Hartz’s original theory of fragments, they still obscure Québec’s development as a political community where institutions such as the Catholic Church or ideologies such as nationalism were debated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The society’s imputed malaise with modernity is not as obvious as Taylor or other commentators suggest (Taylor, 1993, chap. 6, Rudin, 1997).

Modern societies, it is true, are premised on the rejection of traditions, the idea of the new, of progress and the separation of State and Church, features which are purportedly relevant to Québec only after the 1960s. However, if taken at face value and considering the importance of religion in contemporary American society, this definition implies that the United States is not a modern society. Would England for that matter also qualify as a modern society? Moreover, the United States and France are also strongly concerned with language and culture, imposing the English or the French language on their populations as a means of unifying their republics (Dieckhoff, 2000). Yet France is probably the most convincing case for a model of modernity with regards to the separation of the Church and the State. Is French identity not concerned with issues of ethnicity when faced with its demographic plurality? However much modernity implies a rejection of the past, most societies have not turned against their traditions. Moreover, traditions are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted; they are not inexorably fixed in time. This is a process which characterises Québec’s
relationship to modernity as well, not in the form of malaise, but as the result of a constant process of redefinition of its identity and politics as it is challenged by its internal plurality and by its interactions with other societies.

In understanding small nations as formally backward societies, it is easy to explain manifestations of intolerance or even racism by referring to their so-called traditionalism. But it is too easy to explain nationalism by referring to cultural determinism or philosophical considerations. Nationalism reflects a process by which nations try to create a cultural core and thus become models for others. It is not a culturally determined process but a politically motivated one. Small nations also wish to make universalist claims even when their nationalism is most of the time on the defensive. The mixture of defensive attitudes with claims to universality may be an awkward position for small nations, but it better explains their politics and identity than the notions of fragment and cultural determinism implied by harzian concepts. In his discussion of nationalist politics in Québec before the 1960s, sociologist Jacques Beauchemin (2001) argues quite rightly that Québec nationalism was not the expression of a depoliticised society turned inward, but rather quite the opposite. Québec politicians used nationalism to defend the province’s autonomy vis-à-vis the rest of Canada and the federal government. Nationalism was eminently political, and it determined the ways in which Québec and English-speaking Canada interacted. This is also how Québec historians Gilles Paquet and Jean-Pierre Wallot explain nationalist politics in Québec during the early nineteenth century (Paquet and Wallot 1988). Unlike Lord Durham who believed that the 1837-1838 Patriot Rebellions were a battle between two ‘races’, for Paquet and Wallot nationalism was a democratic expression of a group of politicians defending a particular model of economic and political development. The term French Canadian or ‘canadien’ was not ethnically determined, but was rather attributed to anyone fighting the intransigence of the British Crown. As a Patriot spokesman reported to the British House of Commons: ‘all are called Canadians who are on the Canadian side, and all are called not Canadians who are against the Canadian people’ (quoted in Greer, 1993: 133). Moreover, political scientist Peter Jay Smith argues that the Rebellions anticipated the British North America Act of 1867 and the possibility of a meaningful democratic political community in Canada (Smith, 1995). The BNA Act was, to a large extent, a response to the
democratic demands of the Patriots against the continued corruption and intransigence of British rule in Canada. Thus, nationalism, democracy and, later, federalism can be understood as safeguards against the centralist, imperialist and assimilationist tendencies of nineteenth-century politics in Canada.

These interpretations suggest the need to take seriously the centrality of politics in understanding the dynamics of small nations. It is not necessary to blame ‘backward’ mentalities. Our concern should be with the history of the state and its institutional arrangements as well as the interactions and conflicts with its ‘parent’ society and partners. The identity and politics of small nations are probably best understood as the result of an on-going debate about their status and the development of a political community attuned to their own demands. Nationalism can be important, but it may also be an obstacle. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that small nations, just like their bigger counterparts, are also historical actors concerned with the continuing existence of a political community.

However, as nineteenth-century Québec is being reinterpreted as a ‘normal’ society, for many scholars this does not explain why the Church was able to maintain so much power at least until the so-called Quiet Revolution. To this, we would contend that the 1960s have less to do with Québec’s awakening to modern life than with the fact that faced with the baby-boom the society was forced to enter a new phase of structural democratisation. The Church had to let go of its power because it was incapable of competing with the development of welfare state politics and the modernisation of the state’s bureaucracy in order to address the needs of the baby-boom generation. But much more needs to be written on this subject in order to unpack once and for all the politics of the Church in Québec. It is not sufficient to say that before the 1960s, Québec’s population was firmly under the control of the Church. Political scientists and sociologists such as Gilles Bourque, Jules Duchastel and Jacques Beauchemin (1994) reject the argument that the Church was all powerful; it had to accept the predominance of the state in Québec’s affairs and accept that its sphere of influence was determined by the latter.

Nonetheless, the Church was powerful in certain areas such as in education, family matters and social services. Because of this, Québec women were often considered to be more oppressed than anywhere else in Canada. They were subservient and fulfilled their obligation to have
children every year. In 1940, they were among the last groups of women to win the right to vote in provincial politics, followed by First Nations women (and men) twenty years later. Here as well, recent debates in the area provide alternative interpretations. Certainly, not all Québec women had big families. Moreover, it is rarely acknowledged that an important number of Québec women were nuns. Between 1850 and 1965, the numbers of women religious increased from 650 to 43,274 (Dumont 1995: 46). Historian Micheline Dumont explains that taking orders was a form of individual emancipation. The Church had power which some women were able to use for their own advancement; it allowed them to have access to a life which was denied to them in the secular world.

But what about Québec women’s late adoption of feminism? For Dumont, women who would normally have been attracted to feminism were already involved in meaningful activities such as teaching, nursing and traveling. They had greater opportunities than did secular women. When the Québec government took over institutions formerly managed by the Church, such as schools and hospitals, it is not surprising that feminism should become so important in the province. Nuns had lost power, and secular women had not yet seized it. Thus, the fact that the Church’s influence over Québec society had weakened was not in itself enough to guarantee women’s liberation. Cultural determinism is not a good explanation to explain why Québec women were latecomers to feminism. They came to feminism because secular society was incapable of answering their call for a better life.

So, where do we go from here? How should we theorise Québec politics and identity if it is not going to be with Hartz? If we do not accept the whole array of oppositions which have been used to understand the politics of small nations, where should we find our inspiration? The comparison to Scotland is instructive. We must turn to an examination of how other small nations developed as autonomous entities, a development of which nationalism, collectivism and traditionalism may be expressions but not the source. We have argued for an understanding which accepts the centrality of politics instead of cultural determinism. We also need to discuss how we are going to write about the centrality of politics in our project of a broader understanding of the politics and identity of small nations. It is relevant to turn to Pocock’s conceptualisation of republicanism and his concern for the writing of British history for insights. In fact, such an enterprise cannot be
undertaken, especially for nations such as Québec, without an understanding of the politics of the Atlantic world

*The Atlantic world: Theorising the politics and identity of small nations*

Scholars such as Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood and John Pocock in history and Michael Sandel in political philosophy have challenged the hartzian paradigm as it pertains to the history of the United States. They build on the tradition of civic republicanism, suggesting that it is more accurate to interpret the development of American culture in terms of virtue, citizenship and participation. With the growing emphasis on both sides of the Atlantic on the legitimacy of civic republicanism as a valid tradition of thought, Pocock and others have made it possible to challenge the liberalism informing so much history and politics and the whiggish view that comes with it. According to Joyce Appleby, with the work of Pocock there has been a revolution in the writing of American history which has led to a new understanding of the Atlantic world. Appleby criticises this approach, arguing that liberalism cannot be dismissed, and it should be at least contextualised. According to her, Pocock has primarily described ‘an English ruling class in a crisis of self-perception, divided against itself, in its Machiavellian moment of historical consciousness.’ She adds in the same breath, that ‘there was simultaneously a struggle being waged against this form of historical consciousness by those outside the political nation. Because the originators of liberal ideas began with a critical stance toward government regulation of the economy, they ended up with propositions subversive to traditional authority both at court and in the country. An exploration of eighteenth century Anglo-American thought limited to the classical paradigm is in danger of missing the other, more radical intellectual response to English capitalism and thereby, mistaking its beginning…’ (1992: 139).

Despite the need for a rigorous assessment of the relationship or opposition between liberalism and republicanism, from the perspective of small nations, Pocock’s conceptualisation certainly implies a break with cultural determinism. Moreover, in his view, Hartz’s approach has proved unsatisfactory ‘as soon as we try to define the components of each “fragment” and state how they got broken off from the original monolith.’ He regards Hartz’s whole enterprise as having been ‘misconceived’ and
‘miscarried’; societies cannot be satisfactorily understood by ‘setting them in that relation to each other.’ Hartz’s end result is bad history. In contrast, Pocock suggests that we have to look at societies by ‘placing them in a context of inherent diversity, replacing the image of a monolithic “parent society” with that of an expanding zone of cultural conflict and creation’ (1975b: 620). From this perspective, the relationship between ‘new’ and ‘old’ societies is better understood as the result of conflicts leading to the development of autonomous, but not necessarily independent, polities. For Pocock, this is a history concerned with con jonctures and ruptures, ‘of interacting and expanding structures of jurisdiction and state power, creating polities and nationalities as they grow and change… [It] deals in the conflicts within productive and distributive structures’ (1982: 335-6).

Pocock’s point of view suggests that an understanding of the politics of small nations involves examining the multiple interactions between societies, nations or cultures. He calls for the writing of a ‘British history’ which would help understand the plurality of cultures ‘situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier and marked by an increasing English political and cultural domination’ (1975b: 605; 1982: 320). British history is concerned more specifically with ‘the problematic and uncompleted experiment in the creation and interaction of several nations’ (1982: 318). It is not merely about adding nationalist histories to ‘English’ history. Nor is it concerned with the nation-state because the Atlantic world was not fully unified and federated. For Pocock, Britain is a ‘stateless society’, composed of ‘societies lacking a “state tradition”’. However, there is ‘an effective sovereignty by which a crown in parliament legislates for a “Britain” larger than “England”’ (Ibid.: 320). But unity is not possible in the Atlantic archipelago. For Pocock, ‘[t]he assimilation of peoples to one another, the provision of forms within which conflicts are fought out, remains a theme of archipelagic history’ (Ibid.: 335). In short, ‘British history is a verità effettuale: a reality that determines the present and renders a past intelligible’ (Ibid.: 314). It extends to North America, but the United States parted from it. For Pocock, revolutionary America left the Atlantic archipelago in a political sense. America created a ‘distinctive political culture and embarked upon a continental and global history that demands to be treated in its own terms’ (1975b: 627).

Pocock’s call for a British history has been answered by Linda Colley’s Britons (1992), Hugh Kearney’s The British Isles: a history of four nations...
(1989) as well as by Irish revisionist historians (Pittock 1999: 95). Kearney looked at the multiplicity of identities and cultures which constituted Britain with the aim of writing about their commonality. He is not concerned with their development as nations because this involves a process of separation. He insists on finding what they share, that is, a common experience of interaction as cultures of the British Isles (Kearney 1989: 6). As for Colley, she not only acknowledges the multiple identities of the British peoples, but also explains how there were united by Protestantism. She argues that British unity was premised on the coming together of cultures which shared the same religion. Their common attachment to Protestantism helped them bridge their differences and define an ‘Other’, the Catholic, against whom they would assert their superiority.

In his book, *Celtic Identity and the British Image*, Pittock walks in the footsteps of Colley and Kearney but moves the debate one step further by engaging with postcolonial theory and its capacity to address the complexities of identity in the British Isles. Postcolonialism acknowledges the persistence of colonialism as a system of ideas. A case in point is the assumption which regards ‘Britain as a leading European example of the stable nation-state, one that has remained free from nationalism’ (1995: 95). Pittock is also concerned with assessing the place of Celtism in the ‘postcolonial spectrum.’ While maintaining a critical stance towards colonialism, he adopts a revisionist approach in his analysis of Britishness in Ireland, England and Scotland. He questions nationalist interpretations of the 1707 Treaty of Union between Scotland and England. For him, the Treaty ‘enabled a certain section of Scottish society (Presbyterian Unionist gentry mostly) to enjoy partnership in Britain at a relatively early date.’ However, he recognises that this partnership was challenged ‘by the increasing appointment of non-Scottish candidates with little knowledge of the country to positions of authority in arts, culture, education and the public sector.’ According to Pittock, ‘many in the Scottish middle class [turned] away from Britishness. As perhaps was the case in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, the more British Scottish society became… the more irritated it became with Britishness’ (Ibid.: 114). In the end Pittock wishes to demonstrate the Scots participated in a Britishness ‘held by many (and not just in England) to be organic’ (Ibid.: 115).

Pittock’s point of view echoes Lindsay Paterson’s discussion of the autonomy of modern Scotland. For Paterson, ‘Scotland has been
autonomous for most of the three centuries since the Union – not a fully independent state, of course, but far more than a mere province.’ He argues that Scotland ‘has been at least as autonomous as other small European nations, for which the reality of politics has always been the negotiation of partial independence amid the rivalry of great powers.’ However, he recognises that the forms of Scottish autonomy have changed, warning us that ‘what one generation might regard as autonomy might be felt by successors to be dependency; we must be wary of that Whig aberration of judging the past by the standards of the present’ (1994: 4). Moreover, for Paterson, ‘[n]o settlement can last for ever, because none can be satisfactorily attuned to all conflicting territorial interests that are governed by a state or by a group of states’ (Ibid.: 20-1). Critical of the recent nationalist views on devolution, he argues that ‘[t]he constitutional debate in Scotland since the 1960s is merely Scotland’s most recent instance of this. It is not the nation waking up after about 300 years of abject slumber; it is the latest phase in a recurrent process of national mobilisation to readjust the bargain that emerged from the previous phase.’ For him, ‘what we can imagine for the future is shaped by the outcomes of the centuries of constitutional conflict and settlement’ (Ibid.: 164). Paterson insists that the development of Scotland’s modern political structure should be understood as an on-going process of mobilisation and compromise. It is a history premised on the idea of conflict and creativity (to use Pocock’s vocabulary) (1975b: 621). Demands for autonomy are also addressed in relation to the past and in continuity with it. It would be an illusion to think that one can break with it. These considerations suggest that, for the study of identity and the politics of small nations, reference to the Atlantic world implies a sense of continuity with a history characterised by processes of interactions, conflict and creation of autonomous entities. At least from the eighteenth century, it is impossible to consider the different cultures of the Atlantic archipelago as isolated from each other and there is no reason despite two centuries of history to think that it is different today. Small nations of the Atlantic world are more than ever engaged in debates on their identity and sovereignty. For Michael Keating, small nations call for a redefinition of the nation-state as the end of politics as well as the possibility of a post-sovereign and plurinational order (2001). Moreover, the commitment of small nations to the European union also reveals how they extend their politics into more than one sphere of influence and interactions.
Nonetheless, the call for a new history of Québec (and Canada for that matter) within the Atlantic world has yet to be answered. While Pocock does engage with ‘l’histoire québécoise’, as he calls it, his concern is with ‘English Canada, more specifically with the settlement of a British society which contained the pluralism of the archipelago’ (1982: 319). He argues that because of the Loyalists, ‘English-speaking Canada inaugurated a new society whose relationship with England was to be fraught with ambivalences.’ ‘[A] “British history” of the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic would therefore include among its emphases one on the foundation of Canada as a characteristic feature of the whole process’ (1975b: 627). The development of nations in the Atlantic archipelago may well rest altogether on a process fraught with ambivalences towards Britishness. Recent interpretations of the relationship between Québec and Canada also emphasise the ambiguous relationship between the two nations (Létourneau 2000). However, while some want to make it a distinctive feature of Québec society, with Pocock, it is perhaps more accurate, given the history of the Atlantic world, to imagine ambivalence as a distinctive characteristic of all nations of the Atlantic archipelago. Canada is still characterised by much ambivalence. It has moved away a self-perception as a ‘British’ country, yet it has not severed its links to the monarchy. It experiences attitudes of ambivalence towards the United States, despite the fact that cultural differences between the two countries are less and less important.

But what about Québec’s relationship to the Atlantic world? The Conquest of 1759-60 brought Quebeckers into the realm of British history. The 1774 Quebec Act and then, in 1791, the adoption of a first constitution for the province of Québec contributed to the enlargement of the British world to include another Catholic society and issues of language and culture which were going to be dealt with differently than in the British Isles. Philip Lawson’s work on the relationship between eighteenth-century Québec and Imperial Britain shows how the Quebec Act gave rise to a debate on freedom and tolerance that continues to this day in Canada. Historian Pierre Tousignant (1973) analysed the 1791 Constitution as a compromise between the British aristocracy and French Canadians both of whom strove to avoid giving political power to the new liberal class of English businessmen concentrated in Montreal. For Wallot (1973), since the creation of Lower and Upper Canada with the 1791 Constitution Act, French Canadians always believed that the new political institutions
belonged to them. The French-Canadian elite was convinced of the superiority of British institutions, especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and was proud to be associated with them (Wallot 1989). With their British-Canadian Reformist counterparts in Upper Canada, they helped to bring about Canada’s major contribution to democratic theory, the theory of responsible government. As they became more radical, during the 1837-38 Rebellions, French-Canadian politicians with their English, Scottish and Irish allies also led a movement for the independence of Lower Canada. Even though the Rebellions were crushed, Canada later adopted in 1848, and Britain accepted, the principle of responsible government. Thus, Québec’s history can be seen from a different angle, one of continuity with British history but also through concern with its distinct status and development as a political community. Its participation in the creation of a dominion with other segments of the Atlantic archipelago should not be overlooked. Its call for a bilingual and bi-national Canada should remind us of the principles of freedom and tolerance on which its new relationship with British history was inaugurated. This relationship is characterised in its own way by ambivalence, but it also raises the possibility of a common North American history which would include Québec. Québec’s autonomy and identity are determined by its relationship with these different segments of the Atlantic world, past and present.

Conclusion

Unlike Scots’ relationship with people elsewhere in the United Kingdom, Quebeckers are caught in a conflict with the rest of Canada in which their nationhood is rarely acknowledged. But like Scots, they are involved in an historical movement for which issues of identity and autonomy are to be understood in political terms as suggested by Pocock. More generally, for Quebeckers and Scots, the existence of a political community in which they can participate on their own terms, is crucial to them. Québec society did not ‘wake up’ only in the 1960s. It is an illusion to think that Québec has broken with the past. Paterson’s argument about Scotland can easily be extended to include Québec: ‘what we can imagine for the future is shaped by the outcomes of the centuries of constitutional conflict and settlement’ (1994: 164). Likewise, it is also bad theory to imagine Québec’s identity as an anomaly in the contemporary Atlantic world and that its distinctiveness
explains its so-called ethnic nationalism. These are shaky foundations for the understanding of politics and identity not only in Québec, but in small nations more generally.

In suggesting that we need to turn to Pocock for insights on how to write about the centrality of politics, we do not intend to suggest that a national history of Québec is no longer possible. However, we should be wary of both nationalist and anti-nationalist interpretations. To understand Québec’s politics and identity, the approach should be multinational and pluricultural. We should always keep in mind that small nations are not isolated and that they are constantly interacting with other nations and cultures. They take part in a common experience as part of the Atlantic world. There is much more to be learned from the way in which discussions on the history, identity and politics of the Atlantic archipelago are conducted in the British Isles. We have yet to see a similar debate in Québec and Canada.
Notes

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2. In some ways, McRae’s perspective recalls Lord Durham’s proposition to assimilate French Canadians.


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