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Quebec's Social Model: A Case of Europeanization Outside Europe?

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To say that Quebec represents the twenty-eighth member of the European Union (EU) would no doubt be an exaggeration and a rather fantastic notion bearing little relation to actual laws and institutions. It is more likely Quebec cannot join the EU because it is not a sovereign state, rather than because of its geographical location. As the debate surrounding the accession of Turkey shows, the EU is an “imagined community”, defined more by economic interests and policies than simply territorial space. After all, it is largely politics which has defined geographic borders.

Some facts

It is primarily in the areas of government intervention, “neocorporatist” (Montpetit, 2003) economic governance, industrial relations policies – particularly those related to the family – and relations between the State and civil society actors where Quebec is closest to European practices. Of all the Canadian provinces, it is Quebec which has the most trade with Europe. At present, the EU is Quebec’s second largest international business partner. In 2006, Quebec exported \$8 billion worth of goods to Europe or nearly 11% of its total exports. During the same time period, Quebec imports from Europe were nearly \$20 billion worth of goods or 25% of its total imports.

Quebec also distinguishes itself from the other provinces by the relative weight given to financing social services through public expenditure. For example, in 2007, public expenditure at the provincial and local levels accounted for 32% of GDP in Quebec, compared to 23% in Ontario and just 15% in Alberta. Based on an analysis of quantitative data, Bernard and Saint-Arnaud conclude that the welfare state in Quebec,

* *The views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which they are associated.*

though predominantly liberal as in other Canadian provinces, is the one that most closely resembles European social-democratic regimes (2004).

In the economic realm, the greater importance given to trade unions and the corresponding ability of employers to speak with one voice distinguishes Quebec from the rest of Canada and its American neighbours. In addition, interactions between social actors within the social economy are better organised in Quebec.

From the time of its integration into the North American Free Trade area, Quebec's economic policy has been a kind of "hybrid" between what Hall and Soskice (2001) call the pluralist and liberal model, which dominates across North America, and the model of dialogue or coordination in which relationships between employers, trade unions and other official actors are more strongly institutionalized in the governance of economic and industrial policies. As the authors of a recent study on the subject note, "Far from calling into question the fundamentals of the market economy, this model would have common characteristics with the economic models of continental Europe, such as Germany or Austria, particularly with regard to the coordinating role of the State in economic and societal relations" (Stone et al., 2008:19).

Europeanization as a political strategy for differentiation

It is less through a legal or contractual lens, but more from a sociological point of view on "Europeanization" that one can highlight the European characteristics of Quebecer governance practices. Europeanization refers to the political, cognitive and identity processes, by which the European Union has developed. Its institutions, its rules and its standards have influenced the orientation of national, regional or local policies (Olson, 2001).

Europeanization is a mainly "top-down" process arising from the obligation of the Member States to subject themselves to EU policies and directives. In our case, it is a deliberate strategy on the part of the elites to consolidate Quebec's distinct character within North American public policy planning and institutions. Therefore, it is essential not to forget that industrial relations policy, practices of governance, and the Welfare state create identity. To be a Quebecer, as being Danish or Swedish, is not simply a question of language and history. It is also a question of citizenship and membership in a society which, through its public policies, seeks to find a better balance between the values of economic growth and social justice.

Since 2000, Quebec has been Europeanizing, particularly in the areas of family policy and the fight against poverty and social exclusion. This brings to mind not only a public network of universal educational services for those in early childhood, but also a new regime of parental insurance and a reform of family benefits (Dufour, 2007; Jenson, 2002). Similarly, Law 122 on the fight against poverty and social exclusion can be compared to the Lisbon process and the "open method of coordination". Noël, writing on this topic, said that "Quebec can be distinguished from its immediate neighbours because it approaches social concerns in the manner of European countries" (Noël, 2003: 3).

The historical and privileged relationship which Quebec has with France is also a route for the Europeanization of public policy and governance in Quebec. During his recent

term as EU President, French President Nicholas Sarkozy and the government of Quebec concluded an agreement on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. This agreement results in a more direct and concrete Europeanization of Quebec, due to the increased mobility of professionals. France itself is subject to European regulation, which now also applies to Quebec. This innovative agreement is a first between Europe and the Americas. It supports the work aimed at negotiating an economic partnership between the European Union and Canada - a project largely put on the political agenda by Quebec.

Conclusion

More and more in Quebec, Europeanization seems to have become a kind of “third option” for Quebec, between a federalism impossible to renew and a sovereignty which is just as difficult to realize. In other words, for the last 20 years and more, the position of Canadian federalism vis-a-vis the claims of Quebec separatists has hardened. Economic integration in North America has progressed further and political leaders in Quebec – federalist as well as separatist – are actively inspired by European policies in an effort to affirm the distinctness and the relative autonomy of their society compared to the rest of Canada and the United States.

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