

## Guest Editors' Introduction: National Rights Issues in Quebec within a Global Context

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Ernest Renan argued in 1882 that "what held a nation together was a conscious decision on the part of every member of a nation to affirm his or her acceptance of that nation's collective identity and cultural and historical heritage" (Malik, 1996, p. 131). Renan applied his political (that is, civic-democratic rather than racial or ethnic) idea of nation to the nation state, a relatively recent form of territorial-political organization, which at present is perceived to be threatened by economic globalization. Despite globalization, or ironically even because of it, three major nation states recently celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries. 15 August 1997 marked the fiftieth anniversary of India's and Pakistan's independence from British rule and their inauguration as nation states; Israel was declared an independent nation state on 14 May 1948.

Both internal and external conflict surrounded the "founding" of these (and other) nations and tests their survival as entities even today. Because of centuries of internal conflict based primarily on religious differences, Lord Mountbatten found it easier to separate India into two countries, Pakistan and India, than to try to resolve the disputes (Vohra, 1997, p. 187). When the Punjab was partitioned (western districts to Pakistan; eastern districts to India), hundreds of thousands of Muslims (fleeing to Pakistan), Hindus and Sikhs (fleeing to India) were killed (Morris, 1998, p. 28; Vohra, 1997, p. 187). Clashes between India and Pakistan over Kashmir are ongoing (*The Economist*, 1997, p. 43). Within India there have been ongoing religious- and ethnic-based clashes since independence from Britain. Some of the better-known clashes and consequences include the Sikh insurgency in the Punjab in 1982, Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 (allegedly by Sikh extremists), and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 (Vohra, 1997, pp. 226, 274-75). Manifestations of internal conflict, in Pakistan for example,

include the East Pakistani overthrow of the Pakistani government in 1987 to establish Bangladesh, and a recent announcement by Nawaz Sharif, president of Pakistan, that Islamic law will become the law of the country (Stackhouse, 1998). This was done to mollify the fifteen percent of the population that is fundamentalist (Shia) Muslim.

Conflict surrounding the establishment and continued existence of the state of Israel has also made news over the past fifty years. The establishment of the Israeli state led to the stillbirth of the Palestinian state (Khaladi, 1998, p. 53), the loss of Palestinian land and property, as well as the loss of some 13,000 Palestinian and 6,000 Israeli lives. Khalidi (1998) and Lerner (1998, pp. 34–36) point out that this loss of the Palestinian state has gone unnoticed and unmourned in much of the world. In seeing the Palestinians as the cultural and political "other," the Israelis have subsequently killed, tortured and otherwise denied them their basic human rights (Lerner, 1998, p. 36). Internal strife can also be seen among the Jews themselves, where some Jews (the Sepharim from Africa and the Mizrachin from the Middle East) are treated as inferiors by the European Ashkenazi (Lerner, p. 37). Further, Shimon Peres was assassinated by Jewish extremists because he sought peace with the Palestinians.

Celebration mixed with conflict over the establishment of nation states may well call Renan's idea of nation into question, we believe, and is probably not unique to India, Pakistan, Israel or other nation states. One is reminded of current events in Bosnia, Croatia, in the republics of the former Soviet Union, on the African continent and elsewhere. Ethnic nationalisms, against the backdrop of economic globalization and capitalization, either threaten the territorial integrity of existing nation states or are emerging from the demise and disintegration of nation states. Today, central governments in many nation states fear both the balkanizing effect of ethnic nationalism, with their capacity to fractionalize their countries like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and the forces of international capital that permeate their boundaries and threaten to render central political authority irrelevant. We believe this is a process that was intensified with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (which includes the International Bill of Rights, as well as a number of international covenants) and that

continues to provide political inspiration to "peoples" engaged in struggles of decolonization and nation-building in their bid to be recognized and to join the world political and economic community as equals and significant players.

A possible parallel situation, perhaps no less complex, may exist in Canada, where Quebec is threatening to secede from Canada, and where the Inuit and the First Nations people within Quebec's current political boundaries are themselves seeking recognition as nations. Both Quebecers and Inuit/First Nations peoples residing in Quebec declare themselves "peoples" having at international law the right to self-determination. In effect, they are presenting competing nationalist claims within overlapping territorial boundaries. The Canadian state is thus situated rather precariously between rival nationalisms and competing assertions of sovereignty. Clearly, the Aboriginal/Quebec/Canada situation has to be appreciated in the global and international context, and likewise against the backdrop of the internationalization of capital. A great deal of controversy, to say the least, surrounds the impact of possible Quebec secession on the legal and political relationships between the Inuit/First Nations, a sovereign Quebec, and the Crown in right of Canada with respect to obligations to Aboriginal peoples.

This controversy continues in 1998, the fiftieth anniversary year not only of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (celebrated 10 December) but also of the inauguration and birth of several of the world's major nation-states. The context is an international one, articulated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its various proclamations and protocols that proclaim to bring to an end colonialism, racism and apartheid in all its forms. A number of United Nations resolutions and declarations have also reaffirmed the legitimacy of the struggles of all "peoples" under colonial domination and/or racist regimes, and urge support for solidarity with these "peoples" and their national liberation movements (United Nations, 1984, pp. 32-34). Our goal in organizing the session at the 1998 Congress of Learned Societies in Ottawa from which the articles in this special issue are derived (and after which this special issue of the *Native Studies Review* is titled) was simply to continue and update this crucial discussion. We believe the articles contained in this issue go significantly beyond the familiar position statements and the conventional political rhetoric.



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