

“Small Peoples”: The Existential Uncertainty of Ethnonational Communities

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This exploratory paper attempts to extend the boundaries of research on the “smallness” of polities. It introduces the concept of “small peoples,” a term coined by Czech author Milan Kundera to denote communities that lack a “sense of an eternal past and future.” The paper posits “small peoples” as ethnic communities characterized by prolonged and deep-rooted uncertainty regarding their own existence. I argue that in modern times, “small peoples” doubt the validity of their past-based *ethnic identity* and the viability of their future-driven *national polity*. Empirically, I analyze two distinct “small peoples”—Israeli Jews and French Canadians (Québécois)—and argue that while the former have been more concerned with the future survival of their polity, the latter have been more concerned with insecurity about their identity. The paper suggests that a focus on communities and their intersubjective processes can enrich the study of states and their objective state.

Small peoples. The concept is not quantitative; it points to a condition; a fate; small peoples do not have that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future; at a given moment in their history, they all passed through the antechambers of death; in constant confrontation with the arrogant ignorance of the mighty, they see their existence as perpetually threatened or with a question mark hovering over it; for their very existence is the question.

—Milan Kundera (1993, 25)¹

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in the study of “small states.” Coined during the Cold War, the concept was revived following the Soviet Bloc’s collapse and fragmentation into numerous would-be nation-states.² The growing scholarly interest in small states corresponds to the increasing salience of these polities in contemporary global politics,³ inviting new approaches.

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¹ The translation from French is mine. I prefer “peoples” over “nations,” since “nation” is occasionally confused with “state” (Connor 1994, 89–117) and Kundera’s concern is clearly with community.

² See Ingebritsen (2006), and the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*’ 2006 issue 4.

³ Witness the numerous papers devoted to this topic at the 48th Annual ISA Convention (Chicago, February 28–March 3, 2007) and the sixth Pan-European Conference on International Relations (Turin, September 12–15, 2007). The latter introduced 34 papers (and nine sessions) devoted to the topic.

Ontologically, current research concentrates on states, sidestepping other important polities, not least, ethnic communities. Epistemologically, knowledge of small states typically derives from an objective, potentially quantifiable, assessment of a state's size and vulnerability. Early attempts to reject a definition of small states based purely on "objective or tangible criteria" (Rothstein 1968, 23), have been negated in practice by their own advocates (Keohane 1969, 293) and subsequently neglected by most fellow researchers. Methodologically, the "smallness" of states is nearly always considered as an exogenous variable, one which may answer "how small may a state be and yet survive?" (Baehr 1975, 458), but does not require elaboration (as a dependent variable) in and of itself.

This paper attempts to extend the boundaries of research on the "smallness" of polities, applying Kundera's concept of "small peoples" to ethnic communities characterized by uncertainty—individual doubt about the very existence of the collective self. My prime concern here is to expose and explore small peoples: to show that they are indeed "out there," and to examine their unique intersubjective characteristics, probing their lack of "that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future." However, the interplay between intersubjective and objective processes cannot be ignored, and will also be briefly discussed. The concluding section of each case study deals with the possible influence of polity type (e.g., ethnonational vs. bi-national state) on small peoples' existential uncertainty. The conclusion addresses the impact this perception may have on intercommunal conflicts and on a community's prospects. These exploratory discussions, I believe, can set the stage for further development of the explanatory merits of the concept of small peoples.

A side objective of the present paper is to bridge the "gap of minds": the cognitive gap between members of a small people and outsiders. The first tend to regard their existential uncertainty as self-evident, an almost invisible stalking shadow; their critics commonly regard this existential uncertainty as baseless, a pathology of the collective mind.⁴ Here I hope to "defamiliarize the mundane" for small peoples; and for outsiders (Kundera's "mighty") to provide a better understanding of an important, albeit elusive, phenomenon.

This socio-cognitive gap and the need to bridge it are vividly illustrated in the following narration by the former French ambassador to Israel, Gerard Araud.

A very respectable conference was held in Paris on the subject of the "Middle East in 2010." There were people there from the highest levels of academia in the world, Israelis as well, of course. But none of the speakers discussed Israel. It seemed obvious to me that really the problem of the Middle East in the coming years is not Israel at all. Is there any lack of dangerous places? Then suddenly an Israeli woman diplomat came up to me, whose name I will not mention, looking very angry and insulted. I asked her what happened and she said: "I know why no one has mentioned Israel," she said. "Because none of you believes that Israel will be around in 2010."

I was shocked. Who thinks something like that? That was the first time, but not the last, that I heard this fear. For us, the Europeans, it is difficult, almost impossible, to understand such deep existential fear, but I recognize it as one of the strongest factors impacting thought and decision making in Israel. Anyone taking this mood into consideration sees everything differently: the isolationism, the disengagement, the convergence, the building of a Great Wall of China between you and your neighbors. And if you add to this the weakness of the Israeli political system, which in recent years has gotten a great deal worse, and because of

⁴ Although such critics typically eschew a realist perspective (Fierke 2007, 99–120), they actually employ it in evaluating these insecurities as fabricated.

which it is hard for the government to make painful decisions - one can begin to understand the real picture.⁵

Understanding the intersubjective reality of small peoples requires the development of a sound theoretical framework as well as extensive empirical research. In the first, theoretical, section of this paper, I clarify the concept of small peoples and explore its bases: I start by discussing our understanding of “peoples” and their “smallness.” I focus on the tension between ethnic and civic interpretations of the first and objective vis-à-vis intersubjective readings of the latter. I then examine small peoples’ defining feature, their “existential uncertainty,” adapting insights from social psychology to explain ethnicity’s “secret of success.” Finally, I offer my understanding of the dual basis of small peoples in modern times: doubts about the validity of their ethnic identity, anchored in the link between now and “time immemorial,” and about the viability of their national polity, driven by the (non-)prospect of an “eternal future.”

The empirical section examines two, seemingly unmatched, cases of small peoples: Israeli Jews and French-Canadians (Québécois). Jews provide perhaps the most conspicuous historical example of a small people.⁶ Despite their longevity, Jews have always been plagued by doubts about their continued existence. Simon Rawidowicz (1986, 54) vividly portrayed Jews as “an ever-dying people,” first and foremost a self-image in which each generation in the Diaspora “considers itself the final link in Israel’s chain,” seeing “before it the abyss ready to swallow it up.”

By expanding this notion to include other cases, such as French-Canadians, I indicate the general applicability of the broader concept of small peoples. A socio-historical analysis illustrates the doubts about ethnic identity and national polity that typify both communities, rendering them small peoples and comparable as such. Discourse and content analysis, alongside public opinion polls, demonstrate the similarities and differences between the two. The focus of Israeli Jews’ existential uncertainty has been and remains the future survival of their national polity (i.e., Israel as the Jewish state). French-Canadians question the validity of their common ethnic identity. The former asks: “do we have a future?”—the latter: “do we have a past?” These questions supply the keys to the realm of small peoples.

Theory

What Peoples? How Small?

The concept of a “people” is far from clear-cut. Like “nation” it is potentially posited between ethnic and civic denotations (Kohn 1944). Kohn’s demarcation, however, is still rightly debated, mainly because of its correlation to the western/eastern divide and normative implications (Shulman 2002). Here I use the civic/ethnic dyad to mean the dynamic tension between the identities of peoples rather than the dichotomy between types of states, since most states contain people/s affiliated both geographically and genealogically.

In this respect I draw on Connor’s (1994) distinction between ethno-nationalism and civic-patriotism. Continuous debate on the origins of ethnicity notwithstanding,

⁵ Interview upon concluding his post: *Haaretz* (English Edition), September 29, 2006. Three years earlier, in a diplomatic incident just before taking up his post, Ambassador Araud described Israel as “paranoid” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, September 1, 2003).

⁶ Google’s online search engine (<http://www.google.com>) provides an illuminative, if simplistic, indication apropos recent years. A search for “existential threat” yields tens of thousands of pages; omitting Israel (“-Israel”) from the search string reduces results by about two-thirds. Though the total number of results has increased dramatically over the past 7 years, the ratio remains the same.

“the core of ethnopsychology is the sense of shared blood,” of belonging to a “fully extended family” (1994, 197, 202)—or “a fictive super-family” (Smith 1991, 12)—beginning with present generations and reaching back to time immemorial. In modern times, nationalism has imbued ethnic affiliation with the political creed of popular sovereignty and self-determination, mainly in the form of the nation-state.

A different nexus of identity and polity (more below) is heralded by civic-patriotism, which emphasizes citizen loyalty to the state. The preamble to the United States Constitution (“We the People of the United States...”) signifies a civic-patriotic community; the “Kurdish people” provide an example of an ethnic community (*ethnie*). In cases in which the *ethnie* has given rise to a state, peoplehood may often encompass a dual (and often tense) civic-ethnic connotation (e.g., the English people/British people).

This paper focuses on small peoples as ethnic communities and on their modern, national expression. Small peoples, however, are not necessarily ethnic. Civic communities may be similarly prone to what Füredi (2006) dubs “the culture of fear.” Campbell (1998, 49), for example, traces U.S. “culture of anxiety,” and the construction of its identity via “discourses of danger that more often than not employ strategies of otherness” (1998, 51), both during and after the Cold War. Thus, while the “peoples” that inhabit this paper are ethnic communities, this study invites further elaboration and possible implementation to the civic case. Furthermore, both the ethnic identity and its national polity are heterogeneous and dynamic socio-historical constructions, consistently contested by other collective identities and polities, not least of which are a civic identity and a state polity. This, we shall see, inevitably bears upon the two empirical cases.

Small peoples are also not necessarily small. As Kundera tells us, the “smallness” of people is a state of mind. Size matters, but mainly in the eyes of its beholder: the concept of small peoples “is not quantitative,” and whether or not the existence of these communities is actually in peril is less important than the fact that “they see their existence” as such. “Smallness” thus refers to the community members’ intersubjective *we*-belief about the fragility of their own collective existence.

The study of small peoples shares with constructivism its interest in intersubjectivity (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996), and the dynamic social construction of collective cognition (Percy 1958). The intersubjectivity of small peoples is poised in the twilight zone between the *noumenon* (what is thought or believed) and the *phenomenon* (what appears or is perceived by the senses). It requires careful tracing of dynamic subtleties: the *noumenon*–*phenomenon* dialectics, the reciprocal interplay between perception and its observable expression, mainly through discourse.

My approach departs from current constructivist scholarship in reframing both (in)security and (un)certainty. The study of small peoples suggests that security is not only about safety, and “the absence of threats” posed by the Other (Booth 1991, 319); security also signifies certainty about the existence of the collective Self. Similarly, the analysis of outward-uncertainty with regard to the Other’s will, intention and capabilities can be complemented by examining inward-uncertainty, the doubts about the past, present, and future (collective) Self.⁷

⁷ Rathbun (2007) provides a detailed account of the various conceptualizations of uncertainty in international relations. Divergencies notwithstanding, uncertainty is always conceived as outwardly directed. Granted, uncertainty about the Other may bear upon perceptions about the Self. However, there is no linear, direct correlation between the two; much depends on how the Other is framed (e.g., friend or foe). Furthermore, uncertainty about the Self may be relatively independent of perceptions about the Other (the doubt may, for example, result from intra-communal rift). And finally, while the traditional reading of (outward-) uncertainty focuses on the capabilities, intentions, and will (of the Other), the proposed inward-uncertainty focuses on the very existence (of the Self).

This is the gist of small peoples' security problem: not in the actual balance of power vis-à-vis friend and foe, but in the doubts of community members about their collective existence.

The emphasis on the (inter)subjective dimension does not negate the importance of the objective dimension; nor does it suggest a conceptual or practical divorce between the two. Perception is part of reality. Small peoples may indeed be on the brink of oblivion, or, conversely, over rate risks and threats. My interest here, however, is not to pass judgment, and establish, on realistic grounds, whether the community's doubts are justified or not, but to analyze them as such, to better understand the existential uncertainty of ethnic communities.

Objective criteria do come in handy in finding potential small peoples. Demographic disadvantages are likely to give rise to doubts about the community's existence, particularly in relation to the community's "significant Other." The declining demographic stand of the Maronites vis-à-vis Muslim (mainly Shi'a) factions in Lebanon is a case in point (Faour 2007). Demographic insecurities are particularly conspicuous when a community enjoys a majority status in one geopolitical setting, while being a minority in another. Sikhs constitute about 60 percent of the Punjab's population, but feel surrounded by the Hindu, just a third in the Punjab, but an overwhelming majority (80 percent) in India, giving rise to such claims as "either the Sikhs must live as equals or accept virtual extinction" (Nayar 1966, 117).

While an objective yardstick may lead us in the right direction, not all objectively small communities are intersubjectively small and not all objectively large communities are free from existential uncertainty. Consider the Malays' cry to "stand up," or else the "Malay race will disappear and sink from our land!" (cited in Horowitz 2000, 176) during the compromise language legislation in Malaysia in 1967. Yet the Malay ethnic group is 22 million strong, with a growing majority in Malaysia, and in close proximity to kindred peoples beyond.

The final call on small peoples, then, lies with the more elusive, intersubjective criteria. These can be measured along three vectors. First longevity: for how long has the community exhibited uncertainty about its own existence? Times of acute crisis may lead communities to fear extinction, but in time many recover and do not "see their existence as *perpetually* threatened."

Second is the social scope: were/are these doubts shared by the bulk of the community's members? A vocal minority may entertain such beliefs. Some may try to propagate them for their own purposes. These perceptions, however, do not necessarily transform into the community's *we*-belief and dominate public discourse.

Third is the intensity of the community's uncertainty: what is at stake? Kundera stipulates that for small peoples it is "their very existence" which is in question, indeed *is* the question. Nevertheless one wonders, as we will in the next section, for a community that perceives itself as standing on the edge of oblivion—how deep is the abyss?

The three vectors will be further explored below. I would like to stress here that these criteria do not establish clear-cut boundaries between small and big peoples, but rather suggest a continuum along which the community's existential uncertainty is evaluated. A small people ideal-type—an ethnic community experiencing the deepest of existential uncertainty all the time by all its members—cannot be found, but on the continuum between the smallest and the biggest of peoples, some are closer to the first than to the latter. Such, as the empirical analysis attempts to show, are the two case studies. However, before moving to practice, we can better understand the phenomenon of small peoples by examining its basic origins and components.

Losing Ground/Losing Face: Ethnicity's "Secret of Success" and the Identity–Polity Complex

Key to Kundera's description of small peoples is the lack of a "sense of an eternal past and future," which suggests the answer to a "simple question: Why do ethnic attachments regularly prove to be more potent than any other type of group membership? Why are so many people ready to die, or even more strikingly to kill, for their ethnic kin and so few for their trade union or golf club?" (Malešević 2002, 206).

My reading of social psychology suggests that ethnicity's "secret of success" lies in its dual capacity of furnishing man with an appropriate context not only in (cultural-social) space but also in time—allowing us to plant our feet in quasi-eternity. Ethnicity (not unlike states and religions) provides a social frame that promises both meaning and a timeless presence—a vital coping mechanism and a buffer against our innate sense of mortality.⁸ Human awareness of mortality is the sole constant in the theory of small peoples; the rest are all variables, contingent on social circumstances and historical trajectories.

From this vantage point we can reassess the oversimplified divide between constructivism and primordialism in the study of ethnicity and nationalism.⁹ Key figures in the so-called primordial school, such as Shils (1957), assert that the question of whether or not an ethnic has primeval origins is much less important than its *believing* that it has them. Edmund Burke and Edward John Payne (2005, 112) evoked the idea of a nation as a permanent body anchored in the "inheritance from our forefathers," without which "men would become little better than the flies of a summer." But "the mighty" not only take pride in their ancient past, they also anticipate a timeless future. "Yes, it is quite accidental that I am born French," said Régis Debray, "but after all, France is eternal" (cited in Anderson 1991, 11–2; see also Connor 2004).

We can now better appreciate Kundera's observation. Most peoples are indeed characterized by "that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future." However, some ethnic communities struggle to lodge their formation in a quasi-timeless past and/or labor to anchor their existence in an eternal future. Kundera, then, presents us with a depiction of a Janus-faced community, doubtfully facing its past and future. But what is it that small peoples are looking at (and for) in their past and future?

I argue that in modern times it is their ethnic identity and national polity that are the foci of small peoples' doubts; while ethnic identity derives its attraction and authority from a supposedly timeless past, its national polity endows it with the promise of a timeless future. Small peoples are thus characterized by heightened and historically prolonged uncertainty about the validity of their past-based ethnic identity and the viability of their future-driven national polity.

Distinction, however, does not imply divorce. Ethnic identity and national polity are closely intertwined, constituting what I call "the identity–polity complex": the ways in which identity and polity provide for the emergence and transformation of one another.

A mundane example may help clarify identity. Consider a man a moment before he is struck dead by a car. Afterlife and reincarnations aside, he has no future. But he does have an identity; his memory of himself and others and his relations with the latter prescribe it. Consider now the same man a moment after the accident, which he survives, but with a total loss of memory. Does he still have an identity? He may establish a new one, perhaps resembling the old, but

⁸ This observation draws on: Social Identity Theory and Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Abrams and Hogg 1999), applied by Hale (2004) and Theiler (2003) to ethnicity; Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Bauman 2001); and particularly Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 2003).

⁹ For recent reflections on this ongoing debate see *Nations and Nationalism's* 2007 issue 3.

at this point in time his identity is practically void, waiting to be filled by new intersubjective context and content.

Linking the “I” to the “We,” it is in questioning the past that small peoples’ identity-insecurity takes place. The sense of imminent void can trigger such “Fiddler on the Roof” equations as: “Lose touch and we lose our identity...[If we] question the ancient custom...our sense of identity will be eroded and we will lose sight of our roots,” published in the *The Straits Times* (September 26, 2005), Singapore’s highest-selling newspaper.

Thus one’s collective identity (e.g., as a Kurd) is not contingent on the future existence of his body nor on the emergence of a certain polity (e.g., an independent Kurdistan); it is, however, conditional on the past, on the creative memory of oneself and others. Of course there is no direct, linear, line leading from past to present. As Hall (1990, 225) reminds us, identities are “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’.” Still, fundamentally, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”¹⁰

Collective identities, ethnic or otherwise, involve a spatio-temporal sense of sameness, of imaginatively forming a human cluster across historical time and geo-societal space, of drawing boundaries between those like us (Self) and those who differ (Other). It is this sense of sameness (a sense of kinship in the ethnic case) that a small people may come to doubt. These doubts signal a break in temporal continuity and a breach in spatial unity, and their extent establishes the depth of the “abyss within.” Both are salient in times of strong insecurity about ethnic identity, which may take place due to either internal and/or external processes. Temporal (historical) continuity between past and present is poised between resonance and dissonance. When identity-insecurity rises, the balance shifts toward dissonance with the past; the present no longer seems to reflect the society’s past. Spatial (geo-societal) unity is poised between inclusion and exclusion. When uncertainty rises, the community’s boundaries are redrawn to reflect its re-conceived identity.

The conceptualization of small peoples’ identity-insecurity correlates partly with the ontological security approach (Steele 2007), which relocates the individual need to preserve self-identity routines (Giddens 1991) to the state level. It argues that a state’s ontological insecurity manifests itself primarily in shame (which “states...are also capable of feeling”), which originates from “too much distance” between the state’s “discursive biographical narrative” and its “sense of self-identity” (Steele 2005, 527).

Shame is indeed an important sign of insecurity about identity. However, I take issue with the almost-explicit state personification (Wendt 2004). Shame is felt, not by the community (or state), but by its individual members. This distinction matters since state anthropomorphism leads to the conclusion that “ontological security is a basic need, and as such a constant that cannot explain variation” (Mitzen 2006, 343). But “ontological security is a basic need” of the individual, not the state. In times of normative crisis, those community members who are ashamed of events in time and/or of groups in space, may well exhibit a “variation,” reframing their collective identity, or even renouncing it in favor of other, contesting collective identities. As Bloom (1990, 40) argues, “When the sense of identity is threatened, the individual will either reinforce the already held identification or will actively seek to make new identification.” Indeed, small peoples, in losing face, may also lose their sense of a collective (ethnic) Self.

¹⁰ The idea of a future-driven identity, for which the Past constitutes the significant Other, is not without proponents. Wendt (2003), for example, argues for the inevitability of a world-state, basing its identity on this notion. Neumann (1996) too, in his analysis of dialectical vs. dialogical conceptualization of identity, implies that this was a prevalent Soviet perspective. However, the first possibility has yet to materialize, and the latter has fragmented into multiple polities driven by past-based identities.

Facing the past, the community beholds its identity; facing the future—the survival prospects of its polity. Small peoples are prone to see their polity in imminent peril, their future existence as incessantly losing ground. A variation of the example above may help here. Consider a long-established political party, trounced in elections, which then disintegrates with its members scattered among other parties. Is it still a polity? Consider now the same elections with regard to a newly-formed party, decisively winning and gaining power for years to come. The past matters, but much less than the future, for an organization to be considered a viable polity. This parallels the polities of peoples. The body is the corporeal locus of individual identity, the polity that of the collective's identity. Here, the "I-We" amalgam is embodied in the "body politic" of the community.

The "body politic" of small peoples presents the community with a shattered prospect of their future, the awaiting "abyss without." However, the depth of this physical-political abyss varies. The deepest of anxieties is the fear of collective annihilation. *Prima facie*, this is what some among Sri Lanka's Sinhalese feel. Although constituting 74 percent of the population, they feel threatened by the Tamil minority, to the extent of arguing that "If the Tamils get hold of the country, the Sinhalese will have to jump into the sea." Citing this, Roberts (1978, 367–68) accurately argues, the Sinhalese "are a majority community with the fears of a minority."

However, such proclamations can mislead, and a careful examination of public discourse may portray a different picture. A small people's questioning: "do we have a future?" begs the further questions: "as what?" and "for what?" Horowitz (2000, 188) observed that "fear of domination" by the Other drives ethnic conflicts. Wimmer (2002) develops this reasoning by focusing on states' identity-based policies of exclusion. Miller (2007) further extends the argument to regional and global politics. He argues that the "state-to-nation balance," the degree of congruence between regional divisions into territorial states and the political identifications of the region's peoples, are the underlying cause that affects the disposition of a region toward war. The study of the identity-polity complex of small peoples may well shed light on these factors, taking into account a nuanced perspective of the political translations of identities.

The political translations of ethnic identity range from subordination to domination, whether in a homeland or in the diasporas. In modern times, the ethnic has given rise to the national creed, which calls for a polity that derives its *raison d'être* from the will of the (ethnic) people. This is the form of polity on which this paper focuses. National polity, however, is but one political possibility, contested, like ethnic identity, from within and without. To start, the community might be subjugated, possibly—but not necessarily—because of its unique ethnic. It might also enjoy equality, on either a civic individual or an ethnonational collective basis, utilizing a power-sharing mechanism (e.g., in a bi-national state or a consociational democracy). Finally, the ethnonational creed may materialize in varying degrees of self-government, autonomy, or sovereignty.

A small people, as this ethno-political continuum suggests, may perceive the abyss before it as entailing variant degrees of physical-political mishaps. The perceived abyss may be as deep as the complete annihilation of the community; or so shallow as to merely suggest the peaceful replacement of one type of ethnonational polity with another (e.g., from an ethnic to a consociational democracy). It is important to differentiate between these two extremes and to track the possibilities in-between, but it is crucial to understand that in the eyes of small peoples there is often a linkage between their physical and political existence, as well as between the various expressions of the latter.

A community may, for example, regard the possibility of politicide, of losing its sovereignty (or not being able to form it in the first place) as a prelude to the extinction of the community either by external force (genocide) or by internal forces, amounting to what some dub "national suicide." Again, this is far from a

fixed position. The Afrikaners, for example, have portrayed their “ethnic sovereignty” as constantly endangered, first by the English, then by non-Whites. Up until the late 1970s a prevalent argument, contemplating racial equality, was that “no white community in South Africa would be willing to commit suicide by pursuing a policy that will lead to their political... and ultimate virtual extinction, either by force or by assimilation” (Rhoadie and Venter 1960, 27). In time, however, the belief that the preservation of “Afrikanerdom” is a prerequisite to the physical survival of the community gradually eroded (Manzo and McGowan 1992).

The distinction between uncertainty about identity and uncertainty about polity is not always easy to decipher. Identities exist in the feelings and thoughts of people; polities in their actions. An ethnic’s members might argue in the name of their “endangered identity,” while actually referring to their preferred form of polity. “My Pashtun identity is in danger,” only to the extent that I perceive a growing dissonance between myself, here and now, and other members of the Pashtun people, around me and before me. A closer look at public discourse may reveal that the perceived danger actually lurks in the future, in doubts about the survival prospects of the community’s “body politic.” Thus Estonian discourse during the 1990s depicted “Estonian identity...as an identity under a constant existential threat” (Feldman 2001, 11). However, this discourse was informed mainly by the need to preserve Estonian sovereignty facing both Russia and Estonia’s Russian minority.

Identity and polity are interdependent. Deprived of identity, a community is hollow; without polity, identity is a dead letter. These gloomy collective self-conceptions—the lack of a “sense of an eternal past and future”—are the two basic features of small peoples. By constituting an exception to the rule, they serve to illustrate it. “Living on the edge,” they can be seen to be teetering on the gaping abyss of cultural, political, and, at times, physical ruin. Both the abyss within (about the collective identity) and the abyss without (about the collective’s polity) are the hallmarks of every small people. It is the existential questions: “do we have a past?” and “do we have a future?” that set small peoples apart, not the attempt to provide them with answers.

Empirical Analysis

(Israeli) Jews as a “Small People”

We can now establish the “smallness” of the Jewish people, and examine whether they are more prone to existential insecurity about their identity or polity. Rawidowicz’s (1986, 54) image of the “ever-dying people,” describes uncertainty about future survival rather than identity. Although each generation might indeed “consider itself the final link in Israel’s chain,” it does not doubt its present role in continuing the past-based Jewish identity.

I argue that Rawidowicz’s words, written in 1948 about the Diaspora, continue to be true of the modern Jewish community in Israel/Palestine, albeit with some qualification. There is ample discursive evidence of the insecurity felt by Israeli Jews about the polity’s survival prospects. Until recently, this polity has been generally conceived along ethnonational lines: Israel as the embodiment of the right to national self-determination of the Jewish people, defined as an ethnic, not a land-based, community. Accordingly, the perceived depth of the “abyss without,” the potential consequences of losing the polity, oscillates: Israel’s destruction has been variously depicted as (1) a threat to Jewish sovereignty, for example, its replacement by a bi-national state; (2) a physical-political threat to its Jews, for example, conquered and destroyed; or (3) a threat to Jews everywhere, that is, Israel as a shield and shelter for Jews worldwide—if the first is lost, the latter are

doomed. Space permits only a glimpse of the dynamic, diverse complexities of this perception.

“We must never forget,” wrote Israeli PM Ben-Gurion (1964, 237), “that Israel faces security problems unlike those of any other country. This is not a question of borders, sovereignty—but a matter of physical existence per se.” And indeed it seems that Israeli Jews “never forget.”¹¹ “The Israeli self (and the Jewish one before it) is an existential hypochondriac,” writes Israeli poet David Avidan in *Yedioth Aharonoth* (September 5, 1986), “It requires, as part of this hypochondria, double and triple safety belts, both physical and psychological, to ensure that the Holocaust will not recur.”

Clearly the Holocaust continues to plague the community’s collective memory, discourse, and behavior (Segev 2000). Former PM Menachem Begin, for example, at a Cabinet meeting (June 5, 1982) justified the invasion of Lebanon by claiming this was the only way to avoid “the alternative, which is—Auschwitz; our resolution is clear—there will be no other Auschwitz.” Twenty years later, from the opposite end of Israel’s political spectrum, the haunting “alternative” echoes in the words of author David Grossman: “What most frightens me is that I am no longer confident of Israel’s existence. That doubt was always there. I think that everyone who lives here also lives the alternative that maybe Israel will cease to be” (*Haaretz*, January 7, 2003). Two years later, journalist Benny Zipper asks in *Haaretz*, “Can Israel cease to exist?...It might not happen in my lifetime, but it can certainly happen in one or two generations” (January 13, 2005).¹²

The past 8 years, marked by the Second Intifada, have seen new peaks in Israeli-Jewish existential uncertainty.¹³ It is commonly assumed that the Israeli public perceives the military-physical situation as the single, most important threat.¹⁴ Public opinion polls, however, show otherwise.¹⁵ Indeed, a scrutiny of Israel’s media on any given day suggests that almost any important issue on the country’s agenda may be perceived as existential. Thus, on one uneventful day during the Second Intifada (November 14, 2003), *Haaretz*’s Op-Ed page featured three columnists describing what they consider the real existential threat: Yoel Marcus termed the bankruptcy of law enforcement in Israel an “existential danger from within;” David Landau depicted the Diaspora’s silence in the face of radical right-wing activities as shirking historical Jewish responsibility for the “future of the country and its survival prospects” de facto accepting the imminent possibility of the destruction of the current Jewish commonwealth; Elia Leibovitch presented the immanent assaults on Israel’s academic institutions as endangering “the most vital foundation for our survival as a Jewish state in the Middle East.” Half a century later, Ben-Gurion’s words continue to inform the outlook of most Jewish Israelis.

Figure 1 reflects the trends in the framing of threats and dangers as “existential” over the last 14 years in *Haaretz*, Israel’s oldest and most influential daily

¹¹ According to numerous surveys conducted during 1986–2003, most Israeli Jews (at times, as high as ¾ of respondents), believe that Arabs aspire to either destroy Israel and massacre its Jewish population or—at least—to conquer the whole State of Israel (Arian 2003, 23–4).

¹² Unless stated otherwise, references to Israeli newspapers (*Haaretz*, *Maariv*/*NRG*, *Yedioth Ahronot*/*Ynet*) pertain to their Hebrew version and are translated by me.

¹³ Opinion polls consistently indicate that most Israelis believe that Israel’s existence is acutely threatened. See, for example, *Maariv*, September 14, 2001; *Haaretz*, September 15, 2004.

¹⁴ The emphasis on military physical threats dominates research on Israel’s survival, from both objective and subjective perspectives (Arian 1995; Yaniv 1993). Some scholars stress Israel’s “Gevalt Syndrome,” the unwarranted tendency to view the situation as bleaker than it really is (Dowty 1998; Merom and Jervis 1999).

¹⁵ In the year preceding and the year following the outbreak of the second Intifada the level of perceived danger to Israel’s existence remained the same (about 70 percent of the respondents). The change was in the proportional salience of the various threats: before the Intifada, intra-Jewish religious-secular strife was salient; afterwards, it was the Arab-Jewish conflict (*Maariv*, September 14, 2001). See also polls in *Haaretz*, September 15, 2004; *Yedioth Ahronot*, September 7, 2007; Arian (2003); Sagiv-Shifter and Shamir (2002).

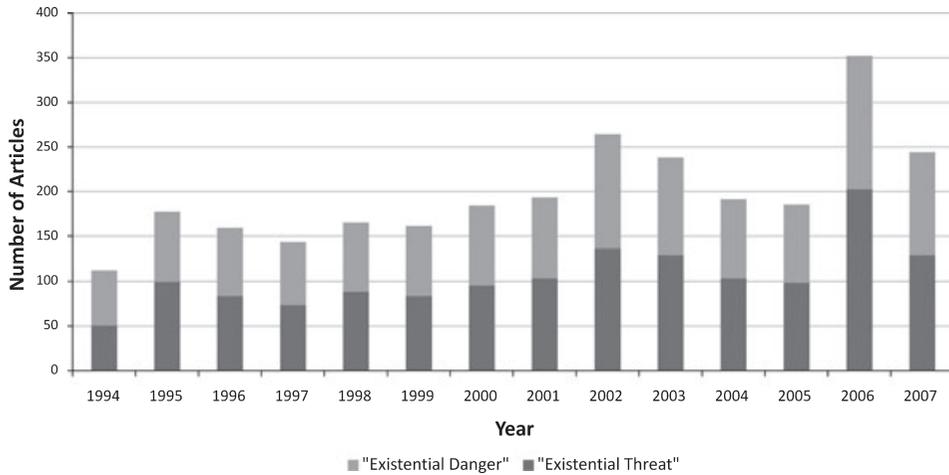


FIG. 1. "Existential Discourse" in *Haaretz* Daily

newspaper. It quantitatively illustrates the salience of the discourse of existential uncertainty in Israeli Jewish society. Note the rises at the height of the peace process and the assassination of PM Rabin (1995), as well as a year after the outbreak of the Second Intifada (2002), the drop following "Operation Defensive Shield" in the West Bank (2003–2005), and the peak during and in the aftermath of the July–August 2006 Lebanese war, due also to the growing perception of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear project.¹⁶

Evidently sensitive to changing circumstances, the existential uncertainty of Israeli Jews—considered along the three vectors of small peoples (longevity, social scope, and intensity)—appears to span the *longue durée* of the Zionist project and is shared by the bulk of the community. However, is it all-encompassing, so intense as to envision not only a deep "abyss without" (insecurity regarding physical-political survival) but also a gaping "abyss within," heightened insecurity about past-based identity?

Admittedly, the longevity of the Jewish people provides a sound basis for the perseverance of its sociocultural identity. To some extent, this enduring past-based identity helps Jews withstand anxieties about the future. Security about identity has compensated for insecurity about polity. Nevertheless, this age-old community seems unable to completely avoid the former.

Events of the past decade illuminate the identity–polity complex. Since the 1970s, identity dissonance has been expressed in the ongoing tension between Jewishness—ethnically belonging to an extended Jewish "family"—and Israeli-ness (Liebman and Don-Yihya 1983). Until the 1990s, "Israel" almost always denoted the Jewish state, an ethnonational polity. The resulting tension was therefore mainly with Judaism (a secular-religious strife), not with ethnic Jewishness. Recently, however, "Israel" has become a publicly contested concept.

Since the 1990s, a gradual shift has challenged the traditional concept. Promoted by an influential minority, the new interpretation demarcates Israeli identity as a civic land-based identity, in opposition to the Jewish-Zionist ethnonational creed (Kimmerling 2001). The traditional conceptualization considered the (national) polity an offspring of (ethnic) identity, the new calls for a new

¹⁶ In a 1997 survey, a third of the respondents stated that Iran is "Israel's most dangerous enemy"; a third believed it was the Palestinians. In fall 2006, 54 percent defined Iran in these terms, and only 8 percent said the Palestinians (*Maariv*, October 1, 2006). A few weeks later, another poll indicated that 79 percent were certain that Iran would obtain nuclear weapons, while 66 percent believed that it would use them to annihilate Israel. One out of four said he/she would consider leaving Israel if Iran becomes nuclear (*Maariv*, November 24, 2006).

(civic) identity based on the now-established (state) polity. The rank and role assigned by Israeli Jews to these identities varies. Some perceive themselves more Jewish than Israeli, or vice versa; many disagree about the values these identities embody. Yet as long as the two are perceived as compatible, a balance can be maintained: one can be ethnically Jewish and an Israeli patriot.

However, the past decade has seen the two identities becoming almost inimical. The turning point was discernible in the 1996 elections, following Rabin's assassination. Netanyahu's winning campaign slogan was "Netanyahu is good for the Jews." The Left countered with "Israel is strong with Peres." In a follow-up interview after his defeat (June 1996), Peres stated that the "Jews" had overpowered the "Israelis" (Ben-Simon 1997, 13). Two years later, PM Netanyahu was caught on tape whispering to a populist Cabbalist Rabbi, "The Left, Rabbi, has forgotten what it is to be Jews" (*Haaretz*, October 22, 1997).

This exchange seems to have been a prelude to the more recent, vehement discourse on Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (August–September 2005), when the use of Holocaust symbols and referents by anti-disengagement activists became widespread. Echoing the infamous montage of Rabin in SS uniform was the depiction of the Israeli government as a reincarnation of the pro-Nazi Vichy government and IDF soldiers as its messengers of doom (see, e.g., *Haaretz*, November 4, 2004; *Ynet*, February 9, 2005). An apocalyptic overtone pervaded the public discourse as each side accused the other of jeopardizing the fate and faith of the Jewish state.¹⁷

Identity and polity were conceived and presented as inherently and profoundly entangled. This was demonstrated by the anti-disengagement slogan, "A Jew does not Expel a Jew." Quickly catching on, it implied that by obeying the decision of the government, one was no longer a Jew, in effect expelled from one's Jewishness (by self-proclaimed Jews). In the aftermath, a Jewish settler from Hebron stated, "We are two different peoples...We are the Jewish people and you are the Israelis. We have nothing in common, and eventually we will win...We will defeat you with the wombs of our wives" (*Haaretz*, October 21, 2005).

Despite its peaking public salience, however, insecurity about identity still lags behind insecurity about polity. Many Israeli Jews are evincing a growing sense of collective shame. Some attempt to refrain from identifying as Jews or Israelis, or seek to strip others of these identities. Others labor to reframe them. But for the overwhelming majority of the Israeli Jews, the sense of ethnic sameness, of belonging to a worldwide Jewish people, though more fragile, remains intact (Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz 2002).

The predominant insecurity about Israeli Jews' "body politic" reached a new zenith after the Lebanese war of July 2006.¹⁸ The image of an insubstantial "cobweb state," Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah's depiction of Israel after the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 (Zisser 2006, 94), had haunted both the Israeli public and Israeli leaders before the war. It was invoked by the IDF Chief of Staff as the driving rationale behind Arafat's policy in the Second Intifada (*Haaretz*, August 30, 2002), and it explicitly led to the 2006 military operation at Bint Jbeil, where Nasrallah had delivered that speech. The operation was called "Steel Web" (*Haaretz*, July 28, 2006).

Profound insecurity about the prospects of Israel's survival persisted through the 2006 war, escalating in its aftermath. Israel's public discourse became charged with existential doubt and fears affecting nearly all shades of the political spectrum. The war was depicted as: a war of survival (*Ynet*, July 23, 2006;

¹⁷ See *Haaretz*, January 26, 2005; *Haaretz*, April 10, 2005; *Maariv*, July 20, 2005; *Haaretz*, August 16, 2005. In a public opinion poll about half of Israelis regarded a rift among the people as imminent (*NRG*, April 20, 2005).

¹⁸ In surveys, more than half of the respondents expressed deep concern for Israel's survival (*Maariv*, October 1, 2006; *Yedioth Ahronot*, November 24, 2006).

Haaretz, July 27, 2006), a war of no-choice (*Maariv*, August 8, 2006), a fight for hearth and home (*Haaretz*, July 23, 2006), and a continuation of the War of Independence (*Ynet*, July 26, 2006; *Haaretz*, July 30, 2006). The alternative was portrayed as a prelude to extinction (*Haaretz*, August 8, 11, September 3, 2006). The war's unclear resolution deepened doubts about the polity's viability as public confidence in the IDF diminished (*Ynet*, November 15, 2006). "This war made me understand that Israel's existence can no longer be taken for granted," one general confessed, "and if we don't [rebuild the IDF] quickly, we shall live well for a few more years and then we'll be gone; we will most probably cease to be" (*Haaretz*, October 20, 2006). A military correspondent reported on "talk of doom" among senior military ranks, "complete hysteria...discussion of the destruction of the Third Temple" (*Ynet*, October 5, 2006).

The analysis of Israeli Jews as a small people raises a tough question: what type of polity better mitigates existential uncertainty? Prima facie, ethnic sovereignty, the fullest form of political domination, should increase a community's sense of security about its future existence. The Israeli Jewish case suggests otherwise. For some, the creation of a Jewish state, far from eliminating doubts about the survival prospects of the people and their polity, has actually exacerbated them. "I am for the Jews and Israel is no longer in the Jewish interest," writes Philip Roth (1993, 41), "Israel has become the gravest threat to Jewish survival since the end of World War Two."

Even without going to such extremes (and most Israeli Jews do not), the Zionist ethnonational project, conceived out of increasing concern about the survival prospects of the Jewish people, has all but preserved the "ever-dying people" outlook. The antagonistic potential of ethno-nationalism, from both within and without, harbors many dangers for the polity, possibly augmenting the perception of its fragility. Such is the Israeli Jewish case.

Many observers, however, fail to note that though Zionism has not completely remedied the uncertainty about physical survival and polity, it has underpinned a sense of security about ethnic (Jewish) identity (Ben Rafael, Gorni, and Ro'i 2003). Herzl's ([1896] 1988, 76) proclamation at the outset of *The Jewish State*, "We are a people—one people [ein Volk]," still resonates.

The resultant observation is somewhat counter-intuitive: although the search for physical and political security often drives an ethnonational project, its realization may very well hinder polity-security, while at the same time advance identity-security. Obviously, verification of this correlation and causality falls beyond the scope and exploratory nature of this paper. The task requires further research, entailing an examination of many more case studies, one of which is discussed below.

The Israeli Jewish context, however, warrants a final note about the link between polity and uncertainty: for many Israelis the solution to insecurity about polity lies not in the existing Jewish state, but in the creation of another one. A brief, recent exemplar is PM Olmert's ominous declaration: "If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses...the State of Israel is finished" (*Haaretz*, February 26, 2008).

Québécois as a "Small People"

Prima facie, Israeli Jews and Québécois have very little in common. Continents apart, their origins and historical evolution seem to defy comparative analysis. Arnold Toynbee (1948, 161), describing Jews as a "fossilized people," argued that "whatever the future of mankind in North America, I feel pretty confident that these French-speaking Canadians, at any rate, will be there at the end of the story." However, his confidence in the existential prospects of the French-Canadians was not always shared by the community's own members.

Their uncertainty defines them as a small people, comparable to the Jews in general and Israeli Jews in particular.

French-Canadians also exhibit the cognitive duality of existential uncertainty about both identity and polity. There is evidence of pervasive doubts as to the community's viability and validity since the early 18th century, leading Marcel Rioux (1978, 3, 8) to wonder: "Over 400 years have passed since Jacques Cartier discovered Canada (1534), and it is almost four centuries ago that Champlain founded Québec (1608)...Why then is there, today more than ever, a 'Québec question'?...We need to explain, why a group of New World Frenchmen are still asking, in 1969, the question 'To be or not to be?'" The answer still seems to elude the community.

A discursive scrutiny of the identity-polity complex delineates three distinct phases in the community's development, clearly illustrating the interaction between identity and polity. In each phase, the community's perception of its physical-political prospects and its definition of identity altered considerably.

The first phase begins with the French colonization of *la Nouvelle-France* in the early sixteenth century, continued with the British takeover (1759–62), and ends with the failure of the 1837/8 revolts and the "Union Act" (1840). This phase saw the descendents of French immigrants gradually drift away from the old continent's *French* identity to form a distinct ethnic identity—*la nation Canadienne* or simply *Canadiens* (Elliott 1888). Herein lies one root cause of their uncertain sense of identity. Unlike the Jews, the *Canadiens* could not anchor their identity in time immemorial, as Fernand Dumont (1993, 331) concluded: "There are peoples that can refer in their past to some great action founder: a revolution, a declaration of independence, a bright turn which maintains their certainty. In the genesis of the Québécois society, there is nothing similar. Only one long resistance" (see also Maclure 2003, 37–45).

But the *Canadien* phase saw no physical-political threat. At the outset of British rule, *Canadiens* enjoyed absolute demographic hegemony, reaching a total of 55,000 inhabitants by 1754 and Britain's "Québec Act" (1774) offered official recognition of French culture, civic law, and the Catholic religion. "The *Canadiens* knew that they constituted an immense majority of the population, and everything seemed to indicate that this would always be the case... [they] did not doubt that sooner or later they would regain political and economic control of the country...belonging to them by right" (Brunet [1954] 1969, 285).

The flight of British loyalists from victorious American rebels (1775–1783) caused some anxiety, but the Constitutional Act of 1791 was reassuring.¹⁹ The colony was divided into Upper Canada (the western part, now Ontario) and Lower Canada (the eastern part, mainly Québec), where *Canadiens* maintained a clear majority. The 1830s, however, saw the influx of some 220,000 immigrants, diminishing the French majority and exacerbating the already tense relations between the *Canadiens* and the British. The evolving strife finally erupted in the 1837/1838 Rebellion in Lower Canada. Led by Louis-Joseph Papineau, the rebel *Patriotes* represented the first national expression of the emerging *Canadien* ethnicity, and they attempted to forge it into a liberal-democratic creed (Ouellet [1962] 1969; Rioux 1978, 43–52). It was short-lived.

The crushing of the Rebellion in Lower Canada marks the beginning of the second phase of the community's identity-polity complex. Militarily subdued and demographically diminished, the community's survival prospects took a turn for the worse (Bonenfant and Falardeau [1946] 1969, 23). Targeted for gradual assimilation by Durham's Report (1840), the community leaders, most of whom

¹⁹ Concomitantly, the French Revolution set the stage for a deepening of the rift between the *Canadiens* and Europe's French (Rioux [1959] 1964, 170–76; Bourassa [1902] 1985, 178).

came from the ranks of the increasingly strong Catholic Church, called for a defensive strategy aptly named *la survivance*—survival (Turgeon 2004, 53). In his magnum opus François-Xavier Garneau (1852) set out to unfold the heroic story of *un petit peuple* struggling for survival in face of man and nature. The *la survivance* ethos had thus gradually become the hallmark of the society and its discourse: a collective mission, an all-encompassing ideology (Cook 1995, 98–109).

The cognitive shift from a secure future as a majority nation to the insecurity of a minority coincided with yet another renaming of the community. The Canadiens could no longer dismiss the British as foreigners, *Bostonians*, or *Londoners*. Lafontaine, a one-time supporter of the *Patriotes*, called on his fellow men “to give up the idea that only they could be called Canadians” (Brunet [1954] 1969, 287). In discussing the British North America Act (1867), a proposal was made to call the new country “Borealia” (“of the north”—just as “Australia” meant “of the south”). Had it been accepted, the Canadiens could have retained the name for their ethnic identity, while relating (positively or negatively) to a civic-patriotic Borealian identity. The importance of such terminological clarity cannot be dismissed (Jenson 1993). Without a unique designation for their ethnicity, the community resorted to a hyphenated identity: French-Canadians.

While Israeli-Jewish discourse abounds with references to the survival of the ethnic community and of its political institutions, French-Canadians placed a different emphasis on survival. For Jews, survival has never been the cornerstone of collective belief. It was a reason for action, not a *raison d'être*. Since the late 19th century, several ideologies diagnosed modern Jewish existence as perilous and proposed remedies. The discourse revolved around the type of strategy, not around the need for one (Shimoni 1995). That survival was crucial and endangered was perceived as a given, not, as in the French-Canadian case, an issue to rally around. The latter's immersion in the survivalist ethos clearly echoes in Olivar Asselin ([1928] 1969, 187): “After 175 years of gradual and sometimes imperceptible slipping back into an inferior position...we should now be able to show the world that there is at least one thing we have acquired that we so sadly lacked in the past: the instinct of preservation.”

The community's emphasis on survival as the *raison d'être* seems to correlate with the above-mentioned lack of historical longevity. Lacking a secure ethnic identity founded on a long-distant past, French-Canadians justify their survival ethos by concomitantly inventing their own identity, their own history. Explicitly asking “do we have a future?” they implicitly wonder: “do we have past?” The nexus between the two is apparent in the following by Lionel Groulx ([1919] 1969, 192), a leading intellectual of the 1920s and 1930s: “An imprudent break with history and the past, the influence of those who wish to uproot our entire nation...these are the causes for the almost complete annihilation of national feeling in our people...at times it almost seems as if our nation has lost its instinct for preservation...what is there still lacking for us to feel attached to this land and to determine to stay here at home?” Groulx's frustration clarifies the complex connection between identity and polity: without a past there will be no need for a future, and thus there will be none: “We have to be French through and through, intransigently, energetically, audaciously—otherwise we shall cease to be” (cited in Chennells 2001, 168).

The existential “to be or not to be” continues to characterize the community in its third phase. The secular “Quiet Revolution” of the early 1960s marks the beginning of the end for French Canadians as an ethnic community. While the first phase laid the socio-historical foundation for the community's construction, and the second struggled to forge an ethnic collective memory, the third phase has seen a growing breach in the community's ethnic sense of sameness, in both time and socio-geographical space. The most conspicuous sign of this is again a

change of name: *Canadiens* turned *French-Canadians* have now become *Québécois* (Johnson 2004, 251).

In geo-societal space, this shift excludes French-Canadians living outside of Québec. Temporally, it manifests a growing sense of collective shame. Early on in the Quiet Revolution, this shame was directed at the present, particularly at the community's socio-economic subordination to the English, and was leveraged to facilitate the need to become "Masters in our own home." However, as initial enthusiasm waned, collective shame was gradually redirected at the community's past, in the belief that "the past will have to be denounced in the name of the future" (Vadeboncœur 1962, 56). Ethnicity itself was denounced, changing the meaning of *Québécois*: until the 1980s the term was limited to Quebecers of French-Canadian descent; thereafter it applied increasingly to all residents of the province (Bouchard 2000, 169–71).

Many Québécois intellectuals lament the process. "Despite the Quiet Revolution," asserts Dumont, "we are still characterized by flight from the past" (Cited in Maclure 2003, 43). This "oblivion represents a collective memory crisis in which both the identity and the future of the nation are at stake," writes Serge Cantin (2000), and wonders: "what is hidden behind this epistemological rupture whose consequences fill the shelves of our libraries? Shame of being ourselves? Shame of our past?" According to Dion (1995, 469), "[T]he French Canadians, especially among the upcoming generations, experience modernity (or postmodernity) in the uncertainty of a poorly anchored identity, an uncertainty just as sterile as and even more pathetic than in the past." And Vadeboncœur (1980), titling his book *To Be or Not to Be*, subtitles it: "a people that does not assert itself will perish."

Alluding to the same process, other thinkers regard collective shame and omission as a blessing, evidence of pioneering cultural pluralism: "A primary characteristic of the Québécois identity has become its refusal to resolve the contradictions inherent in overlapping identities and nationalities. This is how most Quebecers see themselves, this has become a national characteristic of Québec and most Quebecers are comfortable with these overlapping identities" (Mendelsohn 2002, 90).

The dynamic identity process that turned French-Canadians into Québécois was perceived as a means of redemption, of liberating the community from the claws of *la survivance* by substituting socio-economic revival for ethnic survival, which was now seen as a barrier against progress. During a brief period in the 1960s, it seemed to be working. "*Vive le Québec libre!*" cried Charles de Gaulle on July 24, 1967 (the centenary of Canadian confederation), before a cheering crowd of 50,000 at Montreal's city hall. Many believed it was not only possible but inevitable. Surveys conducted among youth at the time revealed a high level of confidence that "Québec will one day be independent" (Rioux 1978, 6). Demography played a crucial role. "Francophone Quebecers tend to oscillate between the self-perception of a minority and that of a majority" (Karmis 1997, 8). By reframing their identity's spatial dimension to focus solely on Québec, the community regained the majority status it had lost more than a century earlier, potentially securing future physical-political survival.

But the identity-polity complex dictates otherwise. Those who had difficulty with the new identity ambivalence found themselves more lost than ever before. "The destiny of the Québécois collectivity," writes Vallières (1971, 198), "had often seemed to me to be that of a people doomed to slow death or to prolonged mediocrity. Of course I did not really dare believe that, but unconsciously this vision of destiny of Québec was preying on my mind" (see also Maclure 2003, 34–7). For others, the emerging co-dependency between the new identity and the vision of an independent polity portrayed a gloomy future: "Faced with the possibility of national collapse and our disappearance as a people,

independence will either be attained or it will not be. It will not happen easily, and the odds are against success. People are anxious, questioning, in doubt. Some would like to go into exile; some do it" (Vadeboncœur [1976] 1985, 428).

Moreover, the Québécois' newfound secularism prescribed lower birth rates. Demographic forecasts, noted Lise Bissonnette in *The Globe and Mail* (July 25, 1987), "now spread doom and gloom, in a debate that looks increasingly like the next 'national question', the real 'to be or not to be' of the Québécois." Coinciding from the late 1980s with new waves of immigrants, demographics once again looked highly uncertain, fostering an attempt to reframe Québécois identity as civic rather than ethnic (Breton 1988). Today, more than a decade after the last failure of Québec's sovereignty movement (in the 1995 referendum), we see an extensive erosion of the community's sense of shared kinship, almost rendering the Québécois no longer a people (small or otherwise), at least in the ethnic sense.

French-Canadian identity-insecurity casts further light on the link between polity and existential uncertainty. In theory, avoiding the antagonistic potential of ethnic sovereignty and utilizing the sub-sovereign capacity of the province, federalism (in either a civic-patriotic or a multi-national form) may free an ethnic community of both identity- and polity-insecurity. Striding the middle ground of equality, between domination and subordination, the Québécois should have had it both ways. They have not. While unable to project a self-image of secure survival (possibly by attaining an independent polity), the French-Canadians (unlike Israeli Jews) have also experienced a heightened and persistent sense of identity-insecurity.

As noted before, a complete analysis of this complex issue merits a separate discussion. However, one possible root cause for ethno-nationalism's edge over federalism in promoting identity-security may be the dynamics of self-determination. This is not merely about the right of the (collective) Self to determine its polity; it is also about the right (and need) to determine the identity of that political Self in the first place. Lacking a valid collective Self, a clear sign of identity-insecurity, undermines the task of constructing a viable polity, which is all the more important for underpinning the troubled identity.

The French-Canadian attempt to square the ethical-political circle, to shy away from ethno-nationalism while not completely embracing civic-patriotism, has thus far failed, resulting in their inability to re-align collective identity with the collective's (desired) polity. In short, while French-Canadian identity-insecurity (the lack of a valid ethnic) contributed to the gradual dissolution of the ethnonational project, the latter (the lack of a viable national polity) has in turn intensified the Québécois identity crisis.

Conclusions

This exploratory paper attempts to broaden the scholarship on the "smallness" of polities. It focuses on small peoples, not on small states. As such, it probes the intersubjective doubts of ethnic communities about their own collective existence; it does not examine the objective vulnerability and viability of states or their impact on global and regional stability. I have argued that small peoples are ethnic communities characterized by prolonged uncertainty regarding their own existence, and that in modern times this sense has a dual basis: insecurity about ethnic identity and insecurity about national polity.

The case studies show Israeli Jews and French-Canadians (Québécois) to be small peoples. On the continuum between the "smallest" and the "biggest" of peoples, along the three vectors of longevity, scope and intensity, both communities exhibit an abiding, pervasive sense of uncertainty about their collective existence. They share the cognitive duality of existential uncertainty about ethnic

identity and national polity, losing both ground and face at different historical conjunctures. But while both exhibit high levels of insecurity about physical-political survival, the substance of their perceptions is substantially different. For Israeli Jews the “abyss without” has often been deep enough to suggest the community’s annihilation; in the eyes of many French-Canadians the daunting prospect was a “gentle genocide” (Vadeboncœur [1976] 1985).

More importantly, the two communities differ in the level of insecurity about their ethnic identity. Whereas Jews experience existential uncertainty about identity only marginally and lately, the Canadiens/French-Canadians/Québécois face(d) continuous difficulty in forging and maintaining a viable ethnic identity. Further development of this comparison yields four key factors that affect the properties and prospects of small peoples.

First, the existential doubts of ethnonational communities are contingent on both time and space: they are subject to “identity-tension” vis-à-vis non-ethnic collective identities, as well as to “polity-tension” vis-à-vis non-national political alternatives. While nearly all Israeli Jews (and most of the Diaspora) have remained attached to their ethnic, many Québécois prefer to eschew their ethnic in favor of other collective identities (or none at all). Moreover, while most Israeli Jews perceive their national sovereignty as vital to both physical and political survival, Québécois remain divided on the question (Beauchemin 2004).

Second, ethnonational existential uncertainty is heavily influenced by the Self’s perceptions of the Other’s intentions and capabilities. Both communities tend to ascribe malevolence to their “significant Other,” but whereas most Israeli Jews believe that Arab and Muslim intentions and capabilities violently threaten their physical and national survival, most Québécois believe that English Canadians are seeking to peaceably deprive them of their right of self-determination by confining them to their (now discredited) ethnic, much to the dismay of the Québécois themselves (Winter 2007).

Third are the perceived shifts in geo-demographic balances. Both communities retain a collective memory of political, geo-demographic dominance: the ancient Jewish kingdoms and the French-Canadians prior to the British conquest. Today, both communities are (and perceive themselves as) a majority in one, confined, geopolitical space (Israel and Québec) but a diminishing minority in the entire country (mandatory Palestine and Canada) and region (the Middle East and North America).

Fourth is the normative dimension. The rise and fall of small peoples occur not only through blood and fire, but also through oblivion and shame. The French-Canadian community joined modernity too late for its own preservation. By the time the secular Quiet Revolution triumphed, the negation of ethnonationalism had already begun to strike roots in the West (Brown 1999). Conversely, by the late 19th century the Jews had already reframed their collectivity as an ethnic community with a right of self-determination. However, contemporary Israel still struggles to meet its own vision of a just society and polity, faced with growing criticism from both within and without.

This investigation does not exhaust the topic of small peoples. Elaboration of these case studies (with reference, e.g., to their diasporas) would be beneficial. Analysis of other ethnic communities (and possibly other polities) spanning the existential uncertainty spectrum will enhance our understanding of this important socio-historical phenomenon. Intersubjective analysis, moreover, tells only one side of the ethnic story. Equally significant is the way in which ethnicity relates to more objective, socio-historical processes. Above I have briefly addressed the potential influence of polity type on existential uncertainty. Another important question relates to the impact this perception has on the prospects of small peoples. Describing “Octavia” in his *Invisible Cities*, Italian author Italo Calvino (1972, 81; my translation) suggests that although

“suspended over the abyss, the lives of Octavia’s inhabitants are safer than those of other cities; they know the net will only last so long.” Is this true of small peoples? The above comparison suggests otherwise, but further research is needed to establish the nature of the relationship between the intersubjective sense of insecurity of small peoples and their objective chances of survival.

Further research may also unravel a possible link between small peoples and “big conflicts.” It is hardly surprising that many small peoples are engaged in conflicts. Most cut across state borders. Eluding the traditional categories of either interstate or intra-state strifes, these conflicts are better depicted as intractable intercommunal conflicts, in which at least one party is a small people. As Ambassador Araud intimated, deciphering small peoples’ matrix of fears can provide useful insights into the community’s behavior. We may well gain from expounding the independent variable in Horowitz’s argument regarding fear-fueled conflicts. Much remains to be done in locating and assessing the causal relations between the two. To what extent does the depth of the abyss influence conflict behavior? Does fear of extinction trigger a more extreme, and possibly violent, reaction than, say, fear of losing (ethnically based) sovereignty in favor of equality? Or might it induce the community to accept subjugation as the “lesser evil”?

A new set of questions arises when addressing potential remedies for such conflicts. If fear fuels and is fueled by the conflict, locating the components of existential uncertainty, which do not result directly from the conflict, may point to a way out. A small people, deeply concerned about the preservation of its language, might benefit from an appropriate language-policy. Inward “confidence-building measures” (CBMs), designed to mitigate that uncertainty, could alleviate suspicion of the Other.

Such inward-CBMs can be further advanced by pointing to the identity–polity complex at the heart of small peoples. This typology suggests the distinction between symmetrical and a-symmetrical dyads of small peoples. In the former, the rivals basically entertain the same type of existential uncertainty. Both sides, for example, are concerned about losing their equal status in a currently bi-national state. In the latter, one party is more concerned about the survival prospects of its “body politic,” the other about the validity of its ethnic identity. This may fit the Palestinian-Jewish conflict. This paper presented Israeli Jews as a small people, but what about the Palestinians? If they fit the category, might their existential uncertainty be more about collective identity than the collective’s polity? If it is a secure identity that Palestinians seek, then understanding the emergence, modes, and meaning of this identity, alongside the Israeli Jewish need for a secure polity, might provide a key to peace.

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