



Secession as Revolution

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Abstract Secessions, even peaceful ones, are revolutionary events. This fact is obscured in some recent work on secession by economists, who neglect damage caused to the real economy while focussing on public finance. A converse mistake is made by other analysts when confronted with the passions and turmoil of secession. Some hold these characteristics to be beyond modelling while others build over-general models: more appropriate tools are game theory and the analysis of discourse. Finally, polarization is a phenomenon that links secessions with other kinds of revolution. Polarization involves political competition and “mutually profitable antagonism”, and deserves further work.

JEL Classification

Keywords

1. Introduction

In 1861, Abraham Lincoln led a country that had rebelled against its imperial master less than ninety years earlier. Soon he came to resist secession ferociously, in the American Civil War. It was obvious to Lincoln that secession is revolutionary.

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it. (First inaugural address, 4 March 1861.)

With schism and conflict looming, it seemed natural to conceive of revolution as involving either the overthrow of a regime or the dismemberment of a country through secession.

This is not remarked in much of the literature in economics about secession.

In recent years the phenomenon of secession has gained increasing practical importance; hence, it has driven a lot of theoretical work. This has not been restricted to political scientists, as secession has attracted the attention of jurists and philosophers, and recently of economists (or, more generally, of scholars working within a framework of rational choice). Much of this literature fails to take account of the revolutionary nature of secessions and, surprisingly, of the real economic costs these events normally entail. The first part of the paper elaborates this argument. The second part of the paper considers another error, less common, that is committed when analysts figuratively throw up their hands and walk away from behaviour that seems so irrational that it is not amenable to logical explanation, or when they salvage an explanation by building theories so broad that they approach tautology. Here, I show that simple game-theoretic models can illuminate the threat behaviour intrinsic to secessions, and that the discourse around secession can usefully be analyzed using William Riker's framework of heresthetics.

In the third part of the paper, I consider a critical dynamic in secession – polarization. This may provide the most general link between secessions and other forms of revolution, though the growing antipathy between nations or ethnic groups has substantial differences from that between classes (while being similar to that found in many anti-colonial revolutions). I attempt to show how polarization involves political competition and “mutually profitable antagonism” between political leaders, and briefly consider the factors that allow this phenomenon to escalate or to be contained. The conclusion advances the usual plea for more research.

2. The new economic literature on secession

In his entry on secession in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics and the Law*, Thomas Ulen (1998, p. 401) begins with a paragraph describing the increase in “dramatic” cases of secessionist movements – Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Quebec, southern Sudan, Italy's Northern League, the Basques, and so on. In the next paragraph, he refers to the secessionist attempts involving Staten Island, the San Fernando Valley, Jacksonville, Long Island in Maine, the Oklahoma panhandle, and others of this ilk. This juxtaposition of cases that concern nationalist and ethnic movements which generate and react to violence, repression and war beside other cases that centre around relatively mild resentment about tax levels and services is problematic when general models derived from the latter cases are applied to the former.

Models of secession have incorporated a wide range of motivating factors, including differences in policy preferences (Yarborough and Yarborough, 1998),

and, more generally, heterogeneity. Another common consideration is variation in the efficiency of redistribution and mutual insurance, and prospects for economies of scale in public-goods provision (Buchanan and Faith, 1987; Casella and Feinstein 1992). Other models have highlighted inter-regional differences in taxation enforcement effort (Brosio, Cassone, and Ricciuti 2002). In effect, in these models secession substitutes for Tiebout-style mobility (Bolton and Roland 1997).

Another set of models with very high levels of abstraction endogenize secession, making the number of countries a function of various trade-offs, mainly the public-finance benefits of large jurisdictions *versus* the costs of political heterogeneity (Bolton, Roland and Spolaore 1996; Bolton and Roland, 1997; Alesina and Spolaore 1997). One problem with these models is that the new international order, both political and economic, is often regarded as relatively benign. The post-Cold War world presents fewer security threats than in the past. Indeed, Bartkus (1999, pp. 206–15) suggests that this feature, combined with foreign aid, could stimulate secessions by constituting a moral hazard which elicits secessionist agitation. This flows, perhaps, from the traditional view that the provision of defence and security is characterized by economies of scale, which produce an incentive to remain within large states: when defence becomes less essential, the relative advantages of secession rise. In the modern world, then, as Bartkus puts it (p. 192), the size and military strength of a country have “ceased to have a close relationship to its security.”

More common are assumptions about the international economy. In the globalizing economy the importance of intra-country (or inter-regional) trade is generally declining relative to international trade, so the “home” market can be portrayed as less essential than it was. Even more relevant is the argument that access to foreign markets is secured by international trade regimes like the EU, the WTO and the NAFTA, so in the new global economic order, small seceding states are less vulnerable than in the past because larger economies cannot close off market access to them. Further, under international trade regimes, central-government support for weaker regions must decline if it takes the form of targeted subsidies, favourable procurement policies and other such discriminatory measures. Hence the capacity to bribe potentially seceding regions, which is theoretically important (LeBreton and Weber 2001), may be reduced. Some of these considerations have appeared in economic models (e.g., Wittman 1991). They certainly have been deployed in the continuing debate about Quebec sovereignty (Latouche 1992). And the economic success of sovereign Singapore serves as an exemplar to secessionists everywhere.

An important contribution to this line of argument is an influential paper by Alesina, Spolaore and Wacziarg (2000), who attempt to show that under “free trade and global markets even relatively small cultural, linguistic or ethnic

groups can benefit from forming small, homogeneous political jurisdictions” (p. 1276 [abstract]: see also Alesina and Spolaore 1997). Their core idea is very simple, and very similar to the line of Bartkus, above, about security: “with free trade the size of countries is irrelevant for the size of markets, so the *size* of a country is unrelated to its productivity” (p. 1277, italics in original). After presenting an entirely unconvincing bivariate correlation between the number of countries and the growth of international trade, these authors develop a sophisticated model relating production, trade, growth, and the number and size of countries. This model incorporates a variable for the “costs of heterogeneity”, which are a function of country size, and this factor is an important driver in the model. We should note that like several such models, this one makes the fundamental assumption that small units are more homogeneous than large ones, or, more precisely, that the type of public goods to be produced and also their distribution more closely matches preferences in a geographically small unit. This is a contestable assumption.¹ In any case, the authors proceed to some sophisticated econometrics in order to show that smaller countries have benefited more from being open to trade than larger ones.

All of this provides no argument whatsoever for secession. Indeed, the authors supply several explicit warnings about drawing this conclusion. First, they do not model the dynamic case, which is intractable because “it should involve an explicit modeling of adjustment costs and potentially complex transitional dynamics” (p. 1283), which they cannot handle. Second, their model assumes that seceding countries will enjoy the same degree of trade openness that they did as part of the predecessor state; that is, the *world* trading system is constant and accessible (p. 1284). This assumes a seamless transition to existing trade regimes and also ignores the possibility that trade disciplines may well impact a sovereign state more than the former region. Third, the authors acknowledge that borders matter – “being part of a political unit may facilitate trade, even in a world without tariffs” (p. 1285) – but do not model how secession would change this. Finally, the model assumes smooth and frictionless adjustment as its several parameters change, yet this is admitted to be unrealistic: “in practice, border changes and secessions or unifications are costly and lengthy processes” (p. 1285). Despite all of these caveats, the basic message drawn from the paper is that secession is safe and maybe beneficial when global trading regimes assure market access. As Berkowitz and DeJong have interpreted this model, for instance, it suggests that “trade liberalization can pose a threat to political integration by

¹ There is not space here for a full discussion of this matter, but it is obvious that smaller units can be more difficult to manage politically than large ones, especially when the intensity of preferences is taken into account. Canada is a very large ethnically divided society, but it has often been less fractious than the ethnically divided city of Moncton.

making regions within a political union less reliant on fellow members as trading partners, and also as sources of financing for public goods and institutions” (2003, p. 543). Alesina, Spolaore and Wacziarg do not state this proposition so baldly at the end of the paper as they do in the abstract, but the practical impact of their paper will be to fuel secessionists’ ardour and help bring about the paper’s final prediction.

An implication of this paper is that as the process of economic “globalization” will progress, political separatism will continue to be alive and well. The concept of relatively large and centralized nation-states is and will be more and more threatened by regional separatism from below, and the growth of supranational institutions from above, in a world of “global markets.” (p. 1294)²

All of this is overstated. Consider first the security issue. Here, apart from an obvious weakening in recent years of the international respect for state sovereignty, Spolaore and Alesina in another paper (2002) provide a useful corrective. In this model, when there is a reduction in the threat of major conflict, as between the USA and the USSR, there is an incentive for secession; however, when the number of states increases, so does the potential for small-scale conflicts (which, of course, can be quite devastating for the regional participants).

The economic incentives for secession are also over-stated. It is clear in practice that larger states have more bargaining power than others in setting the regimes that govern the international economic system. This makes smaller states vulnerable, in the long run. It also reminds us that in negotiations large states can, if they so choose, advance the interests of particular sub-national regions, so amplifying the bargaining power of minority interests beyond what could be exercised by the same community as a small sovereign state. As well, states may now be more constrained by systemic forces on the macro-policy front and by international agreements restricting some targeted policies, but central governments can still provide mutual insurance to depressed regions, and they can still spend, hire, and provide cultural protection to minorities. Finally, to the extent that all states are policy-constrained, so are seceding states. Hence, if policy autonomy was an incentive for secession, its motivating power has been reduced.

Alesina, Spolaore and Wacziarg neglect the costs of secession, but they do model the real economy. Many other analysts do not. One is struck by how seldom secessionist actors are assumed to be motivated by expected changes in the economy. Political choices are influenced by economic considerations in these

² Such statements do have an impact. See, for example, Venne (2003, p. 51): the economist Gary Becker “has shown that, in today’s world, being a small state is in no way a handicap on the economic front. On the contrary, since 1950, per capita gross domestic product has increased faster in small countries than in large ones” [translation by the author]. Michel Venne is a frequent contributor to the influential Quebec newspaper, *Le Devoir*.

other frameworks, but the economic incentives commonly modelled tend to lie in the realm of public finance rather than investment, trade, and so on.

In real secessions, actors may consider the prospect of future economic growth. This consideration can be significant for citizens of both the seceding state and the other (“predecessor”) state. On the one hand, members of an economically stronger unit may be persuaded that separation will increase their growth prospects. This was certainly true in the Czech-Slovak case, where Vaclav Klaus and his Czech followers feared that continued constitutional uncertainty would hobble post-Communist economic restructuring, as would a loose confederal system of the sort advocated by the Slovaks under Vladimir Meciar. The conviction grew in the Czech lands that in the absence of a “functional federation” where the central government could make hard economic decisions, the future of the Czechs would be best secured by transforming their republic into a sovereign state (Young 1994a, pp. 24–37; Pithart and Spencer 1998). Similarly, the negotiations about the reunification of Cyprus that recommenced early in 2002 and collapsed in 2003 were overhung by the drive of the much more prosperous Greeks in the south to enter the European Union. Despite the immense psychological obstacles to giving up on the north (which dictate that no southern political party can advocate finally cutting free of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), the prospects of powerful economic growth may lead the Republic of Cyprus to enter the EU even though it cements a *de facto* separation.

In weaker regions, one common economic argument is that the unit is poorer precisely because of past or present exploitation by the wealthier region. An echo of this was heard in Slovakia where the post-Communist adjustment problems were going to be larger because of the disproportionate reliance of its economy on very large Soviet-era factories. More common is the position that sovereignty can accelerate growth because the truncated society will be more homogeneous and will benefit from policies better suited to its economic conditions. These arguments have been heard in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe (Keating 1996), and sovereigntists in Quebec took the optimistic view that a cohesive, flexible Quebec society, with a loyal business class and state policies tailored to its needs, would fare better as a sovereign state than it did when inserted within the Canadian federation, where adjustment is slow, government is inefficient and conflict-ridden, and policies – because they necessarily reflect an inter-regional compromise – are never exactly suited to its requirements (Fortin 1991). But again, these works concern homogeneity and public policies, not the direct economic effects of secession.

There are some works where such real economic costs and benefits are taken into account. Rota-Graziosi (2002), for example, incorporates into an analysis of Buchanan and Faith (1987) the possibility that a secession will disrupt trade flows. And Dudley (1991) explores the inter-relationships between military tech-

nologies, the cost of tax collection, and the economic value of acquiring and holding onto territory. But models focussing on the real economy are uncommon.

In the long run, the issue is whether a regional economy, organized as a sovereign state, can achieve a higher growth trajectory than it currently occupies. Obviously the answer will depend on many factors – how much economic integration continues between the secessor and the predecessor state, how well the newly sovereign country is accommodated within international regimes, how confident are foreign investors, and so on. But there is a prior consideration – how costly will be the transition to sovereignty? Most concrete analyses of possible secessions have been at least as concerned with transition costs as with the long run. One reason is that transition costs are more proximate in time, and therefore easier to assess (though still highly contestable). Another is that they can outweigh the long term benefits of secession.

Consider a seceding country. Assume that it could achieve within three years a growth rate superior by one per cent to its current rate. Even if it lost eight per cent of potential GDP over the three transition years, all the loss would be recovered in 12 years and real gains would be made subsequently. At normal discount rates, the choice of secession would be rational. But if the transition were long (say six years) and difficult (so that 20 per cent of GDP growth was sacrificed during this period) then lost ground would not be recovered for about 27 years. The secessionists would have to value future income, or some non-economic values, very highly indeed to maintain their course. Messy transitions can be crippling (Schroeder 1992).

There are several components of transition costs. The first is transaction costs. These include the resources devoted to negotiating new constitutional arrangements and settling substantive matters like the division of the debt and assets, trade relations, defence arrangements, citizenship issues, and so on.³ They also include the costs of transferring programs, revenue sources, and public servants and of re-organizing administrations, as well as the very substantial but hidden costs to firms and citizens of learning about the new arrangements and accommodating their behaviour to them. But this sort of transaction cost is tiny compared to those that are incurred when the secession is not peaceful. And in fact,

³ Many of the matters to be settled in secessions are economic, but they are not treated here in detail. Even in the disentanglement of advanced industrial states, the list of items is surprisingly small. The contentious ones vary substantially: in Norway-Sweden, for example, the hardest to resolve concerned fortresses along the frontier; in Czechoslovakia, very difficult items were cultural properties and secret-police files. On the substantive issues in the hypothetical case of Quebec and Canada, see Young, 1995, pp. 208-44. On Scotland, see Jo Eric Murkens, 2002, pp. 75-102. In general see Bookman, 1993, pp. 117-44.

contested secessions are far more numerous than peaceful ones. Of the 37 secessionist movements examined by Bookman, most of which emerged after the Second World War, only 12 were peaceful: these include six in the USSR (where the central state was collapsing), three in Europe (Catalonia, Lombardy and Scotland), and Tibet, Puerto Rico and Quebec (1993, pp. 31–4). The other movements were violent or full-scale civil war broke out. The most profound decision taken by the predecessor state, then, once the secessor unit has declared its intent to withdraw from the union, is to accept in principle that secession will occur. This bitter and difficult decision marks the fundamental difference between peaceful secessions and those where violence creates enormous ‘transaction costs’ (Young 1994c).

Other transition costs may include fiscal costs. When an economically weak region is seceding, it will have to increase taxes to pay for public services that were formerly subsidized and also to cover interest charges on its portion of the national debt. The extent of subsidization is difficult to calculate, and so fiscal costs are contestable; in Canada, this debate about the size of government expenditures in Quebec, and the regional distribution of other benefits conferred through other policy instruments, is known as “the battle of the balance-sheets”.

More substantial is the final category of transition costs, one that is always present both before and during secessions – uncertainty costs. These arise simply because economic actors have less confidence in their expectations about future conditions. Uncertainty costs occur throughout an economy, involving individuals deciding where to live, firms making choices about investment and purchases, creditors contemplating loans, and so on. In Canada, a noteworthy study by the Economic Council (1991) focused on financial markets and argued that borrowers would pay extra during any transition to Quebec sovereignty because lenders would be concerned about (1) political risk, or uncertainty over the impact of political and institutional change on public policies, (2) default risk, because of uncertainty about the creditworthiness of the emerging states, and (3) currency risk, arising from uncertainty about future exchange rates. Other analyses highlighted the damage to be caused by decreases in investment, the potential for capital flight and emigration, likely trade disruptions, and the subsequent impacts on unemployment and government revenues of a general “confidence-induced output loss” (Grady 1991). Of course uncertainty cost estimates depend on many assumptions. As some Royal Bank economists argued (1992, p. 23), “the things that cannot be measured accurately in the current debate are the things that will have the most important influence on the economic consequences of disunity”.

The most important characteristic of transition costs in a secession is that they are variable, for the most part. Certainly, there is some floor level of ‘fixed’ transition costs – to negotiate, restructure states, build confidence in currencies,

and so on – and in any secession there will be some degree of uncertainty, even when negotiations go smoothly. But the bulk of the costs are ‘variable.’ Transaction costs would swell were there no cooperation in transferring jurisdictions, programs, and especially information. Similarly, uncertainty, with all its associated costs, is a function of the level of conflict between the states, the gravity of the issues left unresolved, and the time that passes without a settlement. So, overall, transition costs depend on the politics of the secession. This means that the costs of secession will depend on the interaction between the two sides; hence game theory may provide a useful framework for analyzing the secession process. It also means that where citizens have the luxury of contemplating future economic costs, rather than running for their lives or grabbing their weapons, they will have to estimate probabilities with highly incomplete information. Finally, leaders on both sides will strategically deploy arguments about both short term and long term costs and benefits, in order to advance their causes. These matters will be addressed below, but the bottom line here is that the dynamics of the transition – which can be tumultuous – should find their way into economic models of secession.

3. Alternative approaches

Returning to Thomas Ulen’s essay on secession in the *New Palgrave*, we find a curious contradiction. On the one hand, as discussed, he lumps together at the outset cases of secession as different as southern Sudan and Neptune Beach, Florida. I have argued that such a conflation marks some very general theories of secession; in particular, concerns about public-good provision and homogeneity animate the models more than the real economic effects that secession might entail, though it is the latter that are more important when states split. But secessions can also be violent, and Ulen makes a not uncommon move: he argues that reason is of no use in such circumstances. In these cases, he argues,

“Secession arises as an immediate, often dramatic, political demand. Those seeking secession frequently invoke the most fundamental human passions and make their case for separation not in a deliberative manner but in emotive and often violent terms. In these instances, deliberation and appeal to reasoned principles are not possible. The success or failure of secession in these instances is a matter of political will and military might. There is little in this essay that can throw light on how best to resolve those matters.” (p. 401)

Despite the claim that he wants to outline a “comprehensive theory of secession,” he concludes the essay by observing that “secession’s advisability almost invariably arises in highly-particularized and emotionally-charged circumstances in which the foundational agreement or other controlling law is silent on the le-

gality of secession.” Hence, while economic principles may be “helpful” in contemplating choices, “ultimately it will be political and moral, not economic, considerations that control the resolution of those volatile situations.” (pp. 404–5)

This is something of a correction to the frictionlessness of Alesina-Spolaore type models, but it goes too far. There are alternatives to abjuring analysis of secessions that are emotive and violent – indeed revolutionary.

Clearly, many secessions and attempted secessions are not driven, either proximately or ultimately, by economic factors. On the contrary, the causes of political action in these instances normally are nationalism, ethnic hatred, revenge, fear of death and so on. One way to maintain an analytic grip on these phenomena is not to take them as exogenous, but instead to contemplate how these emotions are fanned and unleashed, both individually and socially. This is attempted below. But another way, which joins some of the very abstract approaches discussed above, is to construe these sentiments and violent practices as economic in the broadest sense, as concerning gains and losses of utility. So, one might gain utility from participating with others in secessionist agitation, for example, or from slaughtering members of some other ethnic group. In my view, this expands the notions of “costs” and “benefits” so dramatically from their normal material connotation as to eviscerate their explanatory power, as it implies that “economic” factors are always and universally determining of action in secessions and all other political events.

An example of this approach is found in a recent monograph, *The Dynamic of Secession*, where Bartkus adopts a framework in which secession is to be revealed as a rational course of action, contrary to common views. To “the observer”, she writes, “secession often appears irrational as it entails the ostensible sacrifice of economic opportunities and the endurance of social upheaval” (1999, p. 3). In her own framework the changing costs and benefits of continued membership are constantly weighed by the “distinct community” against the costs and benefits of secession. But the meaning of costs and benefits turns out to be very elastic.

At its most fundamental level, “costs” are abstracted from their normal usage implying financial loss and revolve around the notion of a penalty, such as the loss of life or the loss of livelihood. The costs envisaged here can manifest themselves in terms of the sacrifice, seizure, or dispossession of economic opportunities, political rights, autonomy, or cultural heritage, and can escalate into political repression and systematic violence. (p. 24)

So, costs include dispossession and murder (p. 79) and “feelings of loss when one cannot participate fully in one’s heritage.” (p. 88) Similarly, in calculating benefits, individuals often take into account the interest of the whole community (p. 27), are motivated by the attractions of habit, tradition and sheer inertia (p.

26), respond to feelings of shared values and culture” (p. 94), and can support secession so as to fulfil “dreams inspired by the principle of national self-determination.” (p. 96) All this may be true, but it transforms the notion of economic explanation into an exercise in isolating motivating forces *ex post facto* and labelling them as costs and benefits.

In reality, narrower economic calculations of costs and benefits are irrelevant in many secessions and marginal in most. Here, Bookman (1993, p. 39) is more realistic in marrying economic factors with considerations of fairness and justice.

Perceptions of economic injustice influence the reevaluation of the relative costs and benefits of belonging to a national union, and when costs outweigh benefits, economic factors are then mingled with ethnic, religious, or cultural factors, to form a set of demands that sometimes take the form of “we want out.”

Economic injustice has helped to fuel secessionist movements in the relatively poorer regions of ethnically divided societies in the cases of Sri Lanka, East Timor, Quebec, Scotland, Corsica and Bangladesh, among others. But even this misses the reality of most secessions. As is apparent in Bartkus’s survey of many cases of secession, both attempted and achieved, economic factors really only count in peaceful secessions, especially in advanced industrial societies like Quebec and Catalonia. All the rest of her secession crises involve gross repression, cultural or physical. If we want to call efforts to escape this ‘rational’, fine, but this is not a novel or economic explanation.

Some of the literature on secession has a Panglossian quality. If efficient outcomes require new institutions then they will emerge; or, in our context, if the costs of cohabitation come to outweigh the anticipated costs of secession, then secession will take place (Friedman 1977; Wittman 1991). Such treatments ignore lags observed in the real world, and also the *ex ante* perceptions of actors. In contrast, game-theoretic analyses focus on the strategies involved in secession, aim to clarify actors’ preferences, stress the interaction between secessionists and their opponents, incorporate the high degree of uncertainty about the future that is intrinsic to secessions, and, ideally, illuminate particular choices made over the course of the process.

There have not been many applications of game theory to secession, and yet there is not space here for an extended treatment of them (see Imbeau 1991; Brams 1994, pp. 159–63; Young 1994b; Grossman 2002; and especially Bordignon and Brusco 2001). Still, one example may be of some use. The setup was inspired by the debate in Quebec and the Rest of Canada (ROC) about the likelihood of cooperation in the event that Quebecers voted for secession. Non-cooperation obviously would raise the costs, both transitional and long term, of seceding from Canada, and so the issue was a central one for a long time. In the run-up to the 1995 Quebec referendum campaign and during the campaign itself, in the autumn of 1995, many studies were published indicating that the

transition would be difficult, and that long term cooperation would fall well below what was required to maintain current levels of economic integration. Some statements along these lines were made by a few politicians: the provincial premiers, for example, declared that interprovincial trade agreements should not be taken for granted, post-secession. The sovereigntists, on the other hand, argued that cooperation was inevitable, simply because it would be in ROC's self-interest. Threats of non-cooperation were not credible, and transparently so. The sovereigntists maintained that the leaders of ROC wanted to avoid the costs which Quebec sovereignty would impose, and so of course they would emphasize the difficulties of the transition and the costly absence of long-term economic integration, in order to discourage Quebecers from voting Yes. But as soon as Quebecers voted for sovereignty, then a ROC aiming to minimize its own losses would immediately change course, and opt for cooperation, issuing joint assurances to diminish uncertainty, especially among foreign investors, striving to tranquilly manage the transition, and eventually negotiating an economic association with Quebec that would avoid the costs to itself of fragmenting the common economic space.

Game theory can illuminate the general situation. Importantly, this framework can include armed conflict and threats thereof (all under the rubric of 'non-cooperation'.) Secessionist situations can be modelled in many ways, depending on the preference orderings attributed to the two parties, but two common and sensible games are Chicken and Prisoners' Dilemma. To generalize, assume the two players are Autonomy, the seceding entity, and Unity, the predecessor state. The payoffs can be specified as:

- C a compromise on a new set of mutually satisfactory constitutional arrangements,
- SA sovereignty-association, where Autonomy achieves sovereignty while maintaining a high level of economic integration with Unity,
- SQ the status quo, and
- RR a rupture of relations after Autonomy declares sovereignty, possibly entailing military conflict but certainly entailing high costs because of non-cooperation during the transition and beyond.

Now assume that the preference orderings are:

Autonomy $SA > C > RR > SQ$
 Unity $SQ > C > RR > SA$

This is a Prisoners' Dilemma setup, in which the Autonomists really do find

the status quo unbearable, preferring the rupture of relations to it. Similarly the Unionists – rather like Vaclav Klaus – cannot contemplate some vague form of sovereignty-association that would hamstring them and cause more damage than a clean split. Figure 1 presents the game (with Autonomy’s values on the right within the brackets).

		Autonomy	
		CO	DEF
Unity	CO	C (3, 3)	SA (1, 4)
	DEF	SQ (4, 1)	RR (2, 2)

Figure 1

As is well known, there are two stable results to this game, RR and C. If each actor pursues its first preference by adopting a non-cooperative attitude, RR is the result, and this is an equilibrium because neither side has an incentive to shift from there towards cooperation. On the other hand, the Compromise result is possible if each player can credibly renounce the pursuit of its best alternative. But each also has to demonstrate its readiness to accept RR should the other defect; that is, to make a credible deterrent threat. For example, if Autonomy is conciliatory but Unity remains intransigent, the result would be SQ. Hence, Autonomy would threaten to choose RR unless Unity shifts to cooperate. This is a credible threat because with this preference ordering Autonomy would get a better result at RR than at SQ. Anticipating this train of events, the two sides can reach a Compromise.

This simple example speaks to the prospects for cooperation during the transition to sovereignty and over the long term, and therefore to the cost-benefit calculation about secession. It shows that in order to achieve their objectives both the predecessor state and the seceding unit must be prepared to endure a situation where relations rupture. A further consideration has to do with whether secession involves “one-shot” or “repeated” games. In the Prisoners’ Dilemma game (and in Chicken too), a credible threat is essential to avoid being left with the sucker’s payoff, and ultimately to achieve Compromise. Sovereignists typically argue that threats issuing from their adversaries about non-cooperation are not credible. But the surest way to have threats be credible is to have made similar ones in the past and to have executed them. If games are to be repeated, therefore, a rational player may accept the short-term losses caused by carrying out a threat in order to establish credibility in a future game where the stakes are greater. Moreover, the best way to ensure cooperation over the long

run is to play the meta-game of “tit-for-tat”; that is, being cooperative but threatening non-cooperation should the other player defect, and carrying out that threat when defection occurs (Axelrod, 1984). And in fact, cases of secession always involve repeat play, for geography renders it inevitable that games between the two actors will continue, whatever the constitutional framework. But this does not mean, as secessionists might insist, that cooperation is inevitable. On the contrary, simple game theory shows that retaliatory non-cooperation may well be the best strategy to produce mutually beneficial compromises over the long run.

Elementary game theory can provide such useful insights into the calculations around secession. But there are limits. It may be best suited to dyadic cases such as Czechoslovakia and Norway-Sweden, and less applicable to those where the seceding unit is one of many, perhaps one with substantial representation within the central government, so that the Other (or “Unity”) is actually the locus of negotiations. As well, secessions are marked by irreversibilities – the creation of a new currency, for example, or a unilateral declaration of independence or the “first shot” as at Fort Sumter. Therefore it may be impossible to cycle through some outcomes, as it was not feasible to cycle through the (1,1) result in Chicken during the Cuban Missile Crisis because this result was nuclear war (Brams 1994, pp. 130–8). As well, the depiction of where is the status quo in the game setup is unclear. Did the Czech Republic defect, for example, by pressing market reforms that disproportionately disrupted the Slovak economy? Or did the Slovaks defect by questioning the constitution? The answer depends on how the issue is framed by the two sides. Similarly, and finally, games are carried on by political leaders. Leaders are constrained by domestic public opinion, but they can also shape it (along with opinion in the other unit). In modern secessions, public opinion is crucial, not only in establishing preference orderings but also in fostering the political solidarity that underpins determined action, and existing game-theoretic models are too simple to capture the interplay between mass publics and leaders. One needs to study the framing of secession in the discourse of political leaders as well.

It is evident that the economic calculus in secessions is characterized by much uncertainty, and that clarifying costs and benefits is done through interactions with the other side and through interactions between leaders and followers. The calculus occurs in a context like a game, with discourse framing the game and helping to define preference rankings, by filling in the substantive content of future states such as “sovereignty-association” or “rupture of relations”. But the situation is even more complex because the economic calculus is not alone in debates about secession. Instead it is related to other dimensions of the discourse in a process that is competitive, both within units where secession is contemplated and between the seceding units.

The most rational approach to discourse analysis is that of William Riker, who was interested in the relationships between the various dimensions that structure political debates (1986). In debates about complex matters like secessions, players choose to emphasize the dimensions that favour them and likewise to choose favourable positions upon the various dimensions. The package must be attractive to a majority, constantly repeated and logically coherent, and it must be chosen in anticipation of what the opponent will choose. Riker coined the term “heresthetics” to refer to the art of structuring the dimensionality of debate, and he applied it famously (1986, pp. 1–9) to Abraham Lincoln’s splitting of the Democratic coalition through his debates with Stephen Douglas. More generally, the aim in heresthetics is to “structure the decision-making situation to the speaker’s advantage and the respondent’s disadvantage” (1986, p. 8). Barry Weingast (1998, pp. 159–69) has built on Riker’s analysis, again in a study of the attempted secession of the American South, and other scholars have done some simple spatial modelling of heresthetics in normal election campaigns (Hammond and Humes 1995).⁴ Riker’s insights were also applied to the debates during the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty (Young 2000). A brief summary of this may be useful.

There were four dimensions to the debate. On the first, national identification, the Yes and No sides basically fought to a standoff, with each side deploying highly emotive language. The second dimension was the constitution: the sovereigntists argued it was a straightjacket, unreformable because of opinion in the rest of Canada, while the federalists insisted that it was flexible and accommodating, and that large-scale constitutional change was unnecessary. On the economy, the arguments about costs and benefits were inserted into the game-theoretic context described above, where the magnitude of the costs in the transition and beyond depended on whether cooperation would exist between Quebec and ROC. But a fourth dimension was opened up by the sovereigntists, and it was the crucial one. This was democracy; that is, whether a Yes vote in a referendum would be accepted as determining that secession would occur. The federalist side never explicitly said that a majority for sovereignty would be accepted. Instead, the federalist No side’s leaders denounced the referendum question as ambiguous and declared the whole issue of what would follow a Yes to be hypothetical. Three days before the vote, Prime Minister Chrétien was asked whether he would accept a 51 per cent Yes vote: “Non, je n’ai pas reconnu rien. Vous ne savez pas le résultat et moi non plus. Les gens auront exprimé leur point

⁴ In elections, as these authors put it, “the campaign takes place not by candidates moving their actual positions to optimal spatial locations, which is the essence of the traditional Downsian model, but by using campaign rhetoric and emphasizing issues in such a way that each candidate’s spatial location is perceived by the voters to be closer to theirs than the other candidate’s” (1995, p. 142).

de vue. Les mécanismes, après, c'est très nébuleux.”⁵ There are many reasons for the No side's failure to take a position on the democracy dimension (including the probability that the leadership simply could not contemplate a Canada without Quebec), but this left a crucial opening.⁶ It allowed the sovereigntists to gain along the economic dimension with their argument about the inevitability of cooperation and the minimal costs of the transition to independence.⁷ The federalists could not counter predictions of economic cooperation without accepting that a Yes meant secession. This they did not do, and the Yes side's economic arguments almost carried the day: it was along this dimension that they made their gains throughout 1995 (Young 1999, pp. 39–43).

The conclusion here is simple: the economic calculus is made within a context of a debate in which other dimensions are also important. As an example, we have explored the heresthetics of the Quebec-Canada case, which are instructive, but of course each instance is different. The basic conclusion here, though, is that the economic costs and benefits of secession depend greatly on the politics of the transition, and that these are shaped in turn by political argument. Capturing this may seem a stretch for economic modelling, but the task is not impossible.

4. Polarization

There is an aptly famous dictum about revolutions that speaks to their progress over time.

The scrupulous and the just, the noble, humane, and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement – but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims.

— Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*

This progressive radicalization – perhaps brutalization – is also characteristic of secessions. The difference in secessions is that they are marked by polarization between communities, so that the radicalization is mutual, and indeed reciprocal.

⁵La Presse, 27 October 1995 (“No, I haven't recognized anything. You don't know the result and neither do I. People would have expressed their point of view. After that, the mechanics are very nebulous.”)

⁶This silence about the future could be seen as a case of a refusal to have a 'secession clause', under asymmetric information (Bordignon and Brusco 2001: p.1813, pp. 1822-28). If so, the strategy backfired.

⁷As the Premier of Quebec, the leader of the Yes forces, put it, “For heaven's sake, it's perfectly understandable that before the 30th all of these guys in Ottawa will say no, no, no, no. Well, after the 30th, they might say Yes to a few things”. (Montreal Gazette, 21 October 1995.)

All secessions are marked, more or less, by polarization. This is a process of growing mutual hostility between two communities, accompanied by a strengthening sense among members of each that their interests, broadly construed, are distinct and can only be met through separation. The dynamic of polarization has been usefully sketched by Jonathan Glover, who refers to it as “the tribal trap” (1999, pp. 123–52). In the Yugoslav case, Glover shows how the Communist leader, Slobodan Milosevic, shifted to expressing very strong nationalist sentiments, notably in speeches in the symbolic province of Kosovo. This had several effects, but one was to arouse fear in Croatia, where political support shifted towards Franjo Tudjman, who won the presidency on a strongly nationalist platform. The Croatian constitution that was subsequently produced had no recognition of the Serb minority, some of whom were mistreated. These developments, in turn, fuelled more radical Serb nationalism, as well as secessionism in the Croatian-Serb region of Krajina, which was assisted by Serbia. The struggle in Croatia helped consolidate Milosevic’s power in Serbia. As Glover puts it:

Tribal conflicts rarely just ‘break out’. Hostility is engendered by the nationalist rhetoric of politicians. Other groups then feel threatened and react with their own defensive nationalism. People are pushed into the trap by politicians. Then, in psychologically deeper ways, the rival groups become mutually trapped by their responses to each other. This is how Yugoslavia fell apart. (1999, p. 123)

And yet the phenomenon is somewhat more complex than this. There is political competition *within* each of the communities. Polarization does not involve a simple, collective movement by community members towards more extreme positions. Instead, it involves interactions between leaders of each side and also between leaders and citizens of both communities. It is driven by leaders who are competing with others within their own political entity, and who perceive a chance for increasing their own support by moving towards the extreme. Wintrobe, notably, has argued that leaders like Milosevic or Ian Paisley “inflamed and magnified the separation between groups, rather than acting as a broker to mediate between them.” (2002, p. 33)

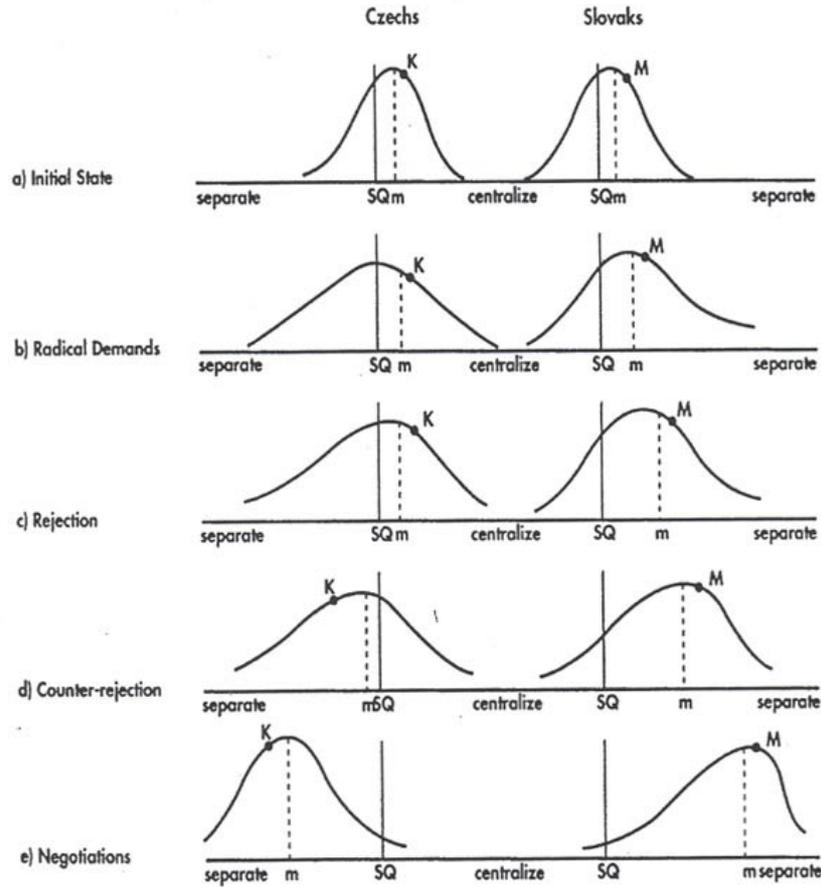
This phenomenon was particularly marked in the case of Czechoslovakia, where public opinion shifted rapidly between 1990 and 1992 towards favouring separation (Young 1994a). The process is depicted in Figure 2 below. At the outset, the median public opinion in the Czech lands was in favour of slightly more centralization than the constitutional status quo, while Vaclav Klaus’s party was slightly more centralist than that. In Slovakia, Vladimir Meciar and his party were rather more decentralist than the median public opinion. But the Slovak Nationalist Party was much more decentralist; indeed, much of the time just after the Velvet Revolution it presented itself as secessionist. In polarization, one leader, Meciar, moves towards a more radical position, spurred by the need to

compete with the extremists. But this is widely perceived in the other community as insulting or unrealistic: the Czechs reject it. This rejection insults the other side, and legitimizes more extreme constitutional positions by leaders in Slovakia. These quite unrealistic and costly proposals then push median opinion among Czechs away from centralization and towards separation, which provides an incentive (presented as an imperative), for Klaus to reject compromise and to ready his party and his people for independence. This is a process of “mutually beneficial antagonism”, through which leaders in both entities consolidate their support by moving towards the extremes, as moderate, centrist forces weaken. In essence, the opponent increases a leader’s domestic demand for extremism by being provocative and aggressive.

What mechanisms increase the chances of polarization? Glover points to control of the media by extremists, the spread of misinformation, and the “Hobbesian fear” that forces people to rely for security on their ethnic community when the fighting starts (1999, pp. 131–2). In cases of violent conflict, this allows individuals to lose their respect for the dignity of members of the other side, to lose their sympathy for them, and to lose their own standard of moral identity, generally by degrees (1999, pp. 22–30). In highly polarized conflicts, this allows members of each community to engage in the most brutal behaviour.

But not all secessions involve this violence. Checks on polarization generally include measures that enshrine rights and institutionalize respect (Glover 1999, pp. 133–46). In particular cases there are conjunctural and structural features that limit the political gains to be made from moving towards the extremes and provoking full polarization. These include a long constitutional history (as opposed to the Eastern European and post-USSR transitional states), a stable economy, governments with secure mandates, a popular commitment to democratic institutions, a free and pluralistic press, risk-averse leadership, and exposure to and dependence on foreign lenders (Young 1995, pp. 267–83).

Polarization seems to be driven mainly by symbolic actions rather than economic ones. In the Canadian case, support for sovereignty in Quebec spiked very sharply after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, a constitutional reform package that was decentralizing and also recognized Quebec’s distinctiveness (Dion 1995). In Czechoslovakia, polarization was driven by events like the publication by some intellectuals of a Declaration of Sovereignty of Slovakia, the Czechs’ rejection of confederalism and the equality it symbolized, the celebration of the fascist Tiso regime by Slovak extremists, and the blocking by Slovak deputies of Vaclav Havel’s re-election as President. This powerful symbolic element means that models of the secession process – where polarization is always present – must incorporate some factor such as ‘respect’.



Key: SQ = constitutional status quo; K = Klaus's position; M = Merciar's position; m = median position.

Figure 2 Polarization of Constitutional Opinion in Czechoslovakia

Despite its symbolic roots, polarization has real economic consequences. It makes the attainment of future cooperation more difficult and therefore raises the cost of the secession. As Watts (1971, p. 69) delicately put it: "Whenever secession has occurred, it has inevitably been accompanied by sharp political controversies which are not easily forgotten...the resentments aroused by the circumstances occurring at the time of separation have tended to persist and to discourage the subsequent creation of a looser form of association between the

territories concerned.” A second effect is that polarization decreases the relative importance of the economic calculus in the overall choice about secession. Rising nationalism, ethnic primordialism, fear and hate all mean that rational calculation of economic consequences diminishes in weight. At the extreme, when fighting and atrocities begin and attract retaliation, material self-interest pales. It does not take many bodies in the street to achieve this effect.

Polarization involves growing estrangement between two communities, and an increase in solidarity within each one. Theoretical work focusing on these processes is scarce, and has concentrated mainly on class cleavages (Esteban and Ray, 1994). But there certainly is scope for applying to polarization and secession some game-theoretic and other models derived from the study of class conflict and labour relations (Alesina and Drazen 1991). This effort could greatly increase our understanding of secession, because polarization is the process which overcomes the bias towards the status quo that purely economic calculations produce.

5. Conclusion: the rejection of revolution

This analysis may help explain why secessionist movements have not been successful in industrialized welfare states. This result has been noted by Hechter (1992), who shows how difficult to attain are the structural preconditions for secession. Similarly, Dion (1996) argues that secessionist movements in advanced democracies must mobilize around both fear of economic loss and confidence in a sovereign economic future: these conditions are contradictory enough that they are unlikely to be strongly present simultaneously. As well, there are asymmetries between gains and losses. Unless the benefit/cost ratio of exit is very large (as in the case of the Baltic states for example) then secession will bring some certain losses, while the gains are longer run and only potential. This suggests that it will be easier to mobilize anti-sovereignty forces than citizens who are pro-secession. Second, there is always the danger of irreversibilities, which can create very large losses. The best example, probably, is the introduction of a new currency. There is also the fact that great powers will impart a message in favour of the status quo, since continued stability benefits them (except perhaps in situations of duopolistic competition, such as during the Cold War). Finally, there is the strong probability that seceding entities will encounter non-cooperation from the predecessor state during the transition and beyond. Depending on the relative power of the units and the degree of integration of their economies, this could entail very large transition costs. In the absence of repression and polarization, the prospect of a rupture of economic relations will tilt the economic calculus towards the status quo. The citizens of modern welfare states are aware enough

of the discomfort caused by mild recessions. The prospect of a five per cent or a ten per cent drop in GDP induces great caution among potential secessionists. At the same time, and for similar reasons, among citizens of the predecessor state the prospect of secessionist movements fracturing their economies induces a willingness to compromise. The result, and the norm, is constitutional flexibility and incremental constitutional accommodation. This is what economic models of secessionism should predict.

Revolutionary secessions are marked by polarization. Here is where more work remains to be done. I have suggested that the non-economic aspects of this phenomenon can be captured by analyzing the threats made in the course of secession games. The “rupture of relations” outcome can include not only material effects like tariffs but also repression of seceding regions by a central state and inter-communal violence. Second, the discourse around secession can be analyzed to show how members of two communities find themselves led into mutual disrespect, antagonism, and conflict. But the polarization process also needs to be modelled, using general variables about both mutual perceptions and the benefits of all kinds of cohabitation. This is where revolutionary work on secession should go.

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