ARTICLE

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Political Mobilization and Policy Reform in Québec

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Abstract: Québec enacted major solidaristic family and housing policy reforms toward the end of the 1990s, precisely when other countries were moving toward more individualized policies. Against what existing theories would predict, these reforms took place at a moment when labour's power had weakened, the ruling left party had scaled back its progressive commitments, and employers opposed the proposed reforms. Why did Québec expand its social policies in a broader context of retrenchment? We argue that this resulted from a shift in the context of contention that sparked a process of institutional conversion. First, labour-allied progressive movements in the province were able, through their own cycle of mobilization, to fill the gap left by unions' retreat from direct action and mass mobilization from the 1980s onwards. Second, employers remained relatively weak and state-dependent, leading them to accept the government's agenda as long as it did not differ significantly from their priorities of deficit and tax reduction. Third, the idea of the "social economy" served as a floating signifier in the province's public policy debates of the 1990s, providing a framework within which unions, community groups, employers, and the government could operate while assigning it different definitions and aims. The ambiguity of the idea of the social economy helped to forge a disparate coalition of Québec social actors, resulting in solidaristic policy reforms. Our analysis aligns with recent literature calling for a renewed attention to the role played by contention in the development of social policies in Québec.

Keywords: welfare state; policy reform; social movements; state-society relations; housing; poverty; childcare; social reproduction; Québec

Résumé : Le Québec a mis en œuvre d'importantes réformes solidaires en matière de politique familiale et de logement vers la fin des années 1990, alors même que d'autres pays s'orientaient vers des politiques plus individualisées. Contrairement à ce que les théories existantes auraient pu laisser présager, ces réformes ont été adoptées à un moment où le pouvoir syndical s'était affaibli, où le parti de gauche au pouvoir avait revu à la baisse ses engagements progressistes et où les employeurs s'opposaient aux réformes proposées. Pourquoi le Québec a-t-il élargi ses politiques sociales dans un contexte général de restrictions budgétaires ? Nous soutenons que

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cela résulte d'un changement dans le contexte de contestation qui a déclenché un processus de conversion institutionnelle. Premièrement, les mouvements progressistes alliés aux syndicats dans la province ont pu, grâce à leur propre cycle de mobilisation, combler le vide laissé par le retrait des syndicats de l'action directe et de la mobilisation de masse à partir des années 1980. Deuxièmement, les employeurs sont restés relativement faibles et dépendants de l'État, ce qui les a amenés à accepter le programme du gouvernement tant qu'il ne s'écartait pas de manière significative de leurs priorités en matière de réduction du déficit et des impôts. Troisièmement, l'idée d'« économie sociale » a servi de signifiant flottant dans les débats sur les politiques publiques de la province dans les années 1990, fournissant un cadre dans lequel les syndicats, les groupes communautaires, les employeurs et le gouvernement pouvaient fonctionner tout en lui attribuant des définitions et des objectifs différents. L'ambiguïté de la notion d'« économie sociale » a permis de forger une coalition disparate d'acteurs sociaux québécois, qui a abouti à des réformes politiques solidaires. Notre analyse s'inscrit dans la lignée de la littérature récente qui appelle à un regain d'attention sur le rôle joué par la contestation dans l'élaboration des politiques sociales au Québec.

Mots clefs : État-Providence; réforme politique; mouvements sociaux; relations État-société; Logement; Pauvreté; éducation à la petite enfance; reproduction sociale; Québec

Québec's public programs set it apart from the rest of North America. The combination of expansive social policies, including subsidized child care and antipoverty programs, along with civil society institutions such as union-backed "solidarity funds" has reduced some measures of poverty to levels seen in Scandinavia, tempered the growth in economic inequality seen elsewhere, and allowed workers a greater voice in the management of social investment.[1]

What is surprising is that many of Québec's signature social programs were implemented in the 1990s, a moment when local and federal governments in North America were cutting back their social policies.[2] Unlike the Canadian federal government's budget cutbacks and rollbacks of social assistance in the mid-1990s, the social democratic New Democratic Party's (NDP) Social Contract in neighbouring Ontario, or Bill Clinton's "end of welfare as we know it" in the United States, the Parti Québécois (PQ) government set Québec on a sharply divergent path from its North American neighbours with its childcare and antipoverty programs.[3]

1. Louis Favreau, *Mouvement communautaire et état social: le défi de la transition sociale-écologique* (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 2017); Benoît Lévesque, "Le modèle québécois: un horizon théorique pour la recherche, une porte d'entrée pour un projet de société?," *Revue Interventions Économiques/Papers in Political Economy*, no. 29 (2002): 8–33; Axel van den Berg, Sam Faustmann, Charles Plante, and Hicham Raiq, *Combating Poverty: Quebec's Pursuit of a Distinctive Welfare State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

2. Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Peter Starke, "The Politics of Welfare State Retrenchment: A Literature Review," *Social Policy and Administration* 40, 1 (February 2006): 104–120.

3. Ronald D. Kneebone and Katherine G. White, "Fiscal Retrenchment and Social Assistance in Canada," *Canadian Public Policy* 35, 1 (2009): 21–40; Steven C. High, *The Left in Power: Bob Rae's NDP and the Working Class* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2025); Donald Swartz and

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This does not mean that Québec was completely spared by the global wave of welfare state liberalization since the 1970s.[4] As elsewhere, Québec local governments became increasingly wary of public spending in the name of fiscal discipline and economic competitiveness, and employers led a sustained offensive against organized labour.[5] Still, Québec's social policy reforms of the late 1990s stand out: between 1998 and 2003, the number of places in non-profit early childhood centres (CPEs) doubled in Québec, from 82,031 to 163,434 places; the provincial government implemented a five-dollar-a-day public childcare program; and networks of social economy enterprises were launched or consolidated in areas such as perinatal help, home assistance for the elderly and disabled, social assistance, and community housing.[6] As an example of this last element, the AccèsLogis program led to the creation of 24,602 social housing units between 1998 and 2014.[7] Additionally, a host of new programs and organizations dedicated to housing support for single mothers, the homeless in rehabilitation, former psychiatric patients, and low-revenue people living alone were created in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including Mères avec Pouvoir and Mon Chez Nous.[8]

Why did the Québec government advance such an agenda in a broader political context of retrenchment? Traditional explanations of progressive policy reform that focus on left party and labour union strength, or employers seeking competitive advantages, fall short. By the mid-1990s, Québec's labour movement was on the tail end of numerous defeats, the PQ had shed its social democratic trappings, and employers were resisting any expansion of social entitlements in the name of limiting public spending and tax increases.[9] To

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Rosemary Warskett, "Canadian Labour and the Crisis of Solidarity," in Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Rethinking the Politics of Labour in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2012), 18–32; Yvonne Zylan and Sarah A. Soule, "Ending Welfare as We Know It (Again): Welfare State Retrenchment, 1989–1995," *Social Forces* 79, 2 (2000): 623–652; Van den Berg et al., *Combating Poverty*.

4. Kathleen Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization and the New Politics of Social Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

5. Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, and Jean-Claude Robert, *Histoire du Québec contemporain: le Québec depuis 1930* (Montréal: Boréal, 1989); Carla Lipsig-Mummé, "Canadian and American Unions Respond to Economic Crisis," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 31, 2 (1989): 229–256.

6. Eve-Lyne Couturier and Philippe Hurteau, "Les services de garde au Québec: champ libre au privé," Montréal: Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques, April 2015; Benoît Lévesque, "How the Social Economy Won Recognition in Québec at the End of the Twentieth Century," in Marie J. Bouchard, ed., *Innovation and the Social Economy: The Québec Experience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 25–70.

7. Gabriel Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec: une perspective politique* (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 2018), 174.

8. Lévesque, "How the Social Economy Won Recognition."

9. Peter Graefe, "State Restructuring and the Failure of Competitive Nationalism: Trying

understand what happened, we must figure out why progressive organizations such as labour and community groups were still able to exert pressure on government despite their weakened state, why employers went along with government proposals despite an employer-friendly economic and political climate, and why the PQ government felt compelled to implement these policies at all.

Our analysis shows that solidaristic policy reforms resulted from a shift in the context of contention that sparked a process of institutional conversion that increased the salience of a previously existing set of practices and discourses known as the "social economy."[10] This shift resulted from changes in overlapping class and national cleavages in the province. The tensions created by the changing cleavages culminated in a conference on the economic and social future of Québec in March 1996 and a summit on the economy and employment in October of the same year (hereafter referred to, together, as the summits) by Premier Lucien Bouchard's PQ government.

The context leading up to the summits was shaped by more than a decade of attacks on labour and the PQ's rightward drift. This dulled the class cleavage between workers and employers, while accentuating all parties' focus on Québécois national unity. It also left unions more open to tripartite social partnership proposals. At the same time, the legacy of intertwined class and nationalist struggles left close links between Québec labour and social movements, notably women and antipoverty groups. The latter's dynamism enabled the non-party left in Québec to keep pressuring the government, with political campaigns that highlighted issues of poverty and gender inequalities.[11] As for business, even as it reasserted its power against labour, its relatively weak international position left it dependent on provincial institutions and financial tools, leaving it willing to follow along with the summits' outcomes as long as they did not differ significantly from business' broader priorities of deficit and tax reduction.[12]

Times for Quebec Labour," in Michael Murphy, ed., *Canada: The State of the Federation 2005: Quebec and Canada in the New Century – New Dynamics, New Opportunities* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 153–176.

10. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," in Mahoney and Thelen, eds., *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–37.

11. Chantal Maillé, "L'expression de la fonction de groupe d'intérêt du mouvement des femmes au Québec," in Stéphane Paquin and Jean-Patrick Brady, eds., *Groupes d'intérêt et mouvements sociaux* (Québec: Presses de l'université Laval, 2016), 175–194.

12. Yves Bélanger, *Québec Inc.: L'entreprise Québécoise à la croisée des chemins* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1998); Alain G. Gagnon and Khayyam Z. Paltiel, "Toward 'Maîtres Chez Nous': The Ascendancy of a Balzacian Bourgeoisie in Quebec," *Queen's Quarterly* 93, 4 (1986): 731–749; Peter Graefe, "The High Value-Added, Low-Wage Model: Progressive Competitiveness in Québec from Bourassa to Bouchard," *Studies in Political Economy* 61, 1 (June 2000): 5–30; Graefe, "The Quebec Patronat: Proposing a Neo-liberal Political Economy After All," *Canadian*

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The PQ government, for its part, was looking for a way of revamping its nationalist project in light of the defeat of the 1995 Québec sovereignty referendum. It did so by pushing a reform program that could be supported by as broad a coalition of economic and social actors as possible. This program provided an opening for the labour and social movement left to advance some of its claims during the summits while keeping the government's own priorities, as well as business' interests, at the top of the agenda.[13]

The idea of a "social economy" helped to stitch together the cross-class national coalition that made the implementation of new social policies possible. The concept already had a long history in Québec society, but through a process of institutional conversion, it took on new and greater salience in the context of the summits.[14] The concept's ambiguity allowed it to act as a floating signifier under which unions, community groups, employers, and the government could operate while assigning it different definitions and aims.[15] Unions saw it as a way of democratizing the state and public services while defending employment, while community groups interpreted it as part of a broader antipoverty strategy, notably with the expansion of affordable child care and social housing. For their part, the Bouchard government and employer associations saw it as a functional replacement for the public sector that would facilitate providing social services while maintaining fiscal discipline.

While the idea of the social economy successfully forged a disparate coalition of Québec social actors in the late 1990s, it also resulted in a heterogeneous set of policy reforms, combining social policy expansion and significant cutbacks in public-sector jobs and work conditions.[16] This analysis of welfare state expansion in Québec differs from the accounts offered by the literature on the "*modèle de développement québécois*" and subnational solidarity by insisting on the role played by contention in the development of social policies, in line with power resources theory and critical readings of welfare state

Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie 41, 2 (2004): 171–193.

13. Pascale Dufour, "From Protest to Partisan Politics: When and How Collective Actors Cross the Line? Sociological Perspective on Québec Solidaire," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 34, 1 (2009): 55–82; Ghislaine Raymond, *Le "partenariat social": sommet socio-économique de 1996, syndicats et groupes populaires* (Montréal: M Éditeur, 2013).

14. Martin Petitclerc, *Nous protégeons l'infortune: les origines populaires de l'économie sociale au Québec* (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 2007); Mahoney and Thelen, "Gradual Institutional Change."

15. Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*; Jane Jenson, "Diffusing Ideas for After Neoliberalism," *Global Social Policy* 10, 1 (2010): 59–84; Bruno Palier, "Ambiguous Agreement, Cumulative Change: French Social Policy in the 1990s," in Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, eds., *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 127–144.

16. Peter Graefe, "The Contradictory Political Economy of Minority Nationalism," *Theory and Society* 34, 5/6 (2005): 519–549; Raymond, *Le "partenariat social."*

development.[17] It builds on power resources theory by highlighting the conditions under which social actors who are regularly identified as having limited mobilizing capacity, notably women and antipoverty groups, can play a role similar to that usually reserved for labour in pushing for social reforms.[18] Furthermore, this analysis builds on the literature that focuses on the role of ambiguity and polysemic concepts in forging policy coalitions, stitching together social groups with distinct constituencies and political agendas.[19]

In the remainder of the article, we first discuss the extent to which the Québec case fits existing theories of welfare state development. We then provide background on the 1996 summits, showing how their outcomes lead us to qualify existing theories. We then elaborate our own explanation for social policy reform in Québec and conclude with an assessment of what the findings suggest for studies of social mobilization and policy development more broadly. Our analysis aligns with recent literature calling for a renewed attention to the role played by contention in the development of social policies in Québec.[20]

Welfare State Development and the Québec Case

To what extent is the Québec case anomalous, and how might it challenge existing theories of welfare state development? Quantitatively, Québec social spending growth has far outpaced that of most advanced industrialized countries. In fact, as a percentage of the province's gross domestic product, social services spending in Québec grew by roughly 80 percent between 1989 and 2009 (Figure 1). This can be compared with an OECD average growth of

17. Lévesque, "Le modèle québécois"; Daniel Béland and André Lecours, "Sub-state Nationalism and the Welfare State: Québec and Canadian Federalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 12, 1 (2006): 77–96; Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme, "New Politics and Class Politics in the Context of Austerity and Globalization: Welfare State Regress in 18 Countries, 1975–95," *American Political Science Review* 97, 3 (2003): 425–446; Claus Offe, "Some Contradictions of the Modern Welfare State," *Critical Social Policy* 2, 5 (1982): 7–16.

18. Emanuel Guay and Alessandro Giuseppe Drago, "Liens sociaux, initiatives collectives et processus conflictuels: le cas des mobilisations contre la gentrification à Parc-Extension, Montréal," *Recherches Sociographiques* 64, 1 (2023): 119–141.

19. Werner Binder, "The Drama of Politics: Jeffrey Alexander's Liberal Sociology of Political Performances," *Thesis Eleven* 142, 1 (2017): 112–129.

20. Emanuel Guay and Frédérick Guillaume Dufour, "Néolibéralisme, politiques sociales et coalitions nationalistes en quête d'un état dans la période post-1995 au Québec," *Politique et Sociétés* 39, 2 (2020): 196–201; Emanuel Guay, Jonathan Durand Folco, and Shannon Ikebe, "Régulation, innovation, économie sociale et transformations du modèle québécois: une analyse des travaux de Benoît Lévesque," *Revue Interventions Économiques/Papers in Political Economy* 67 (2022), https://doi.org/10.4000/interventionseconomiques.16520.

https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2025v96.006

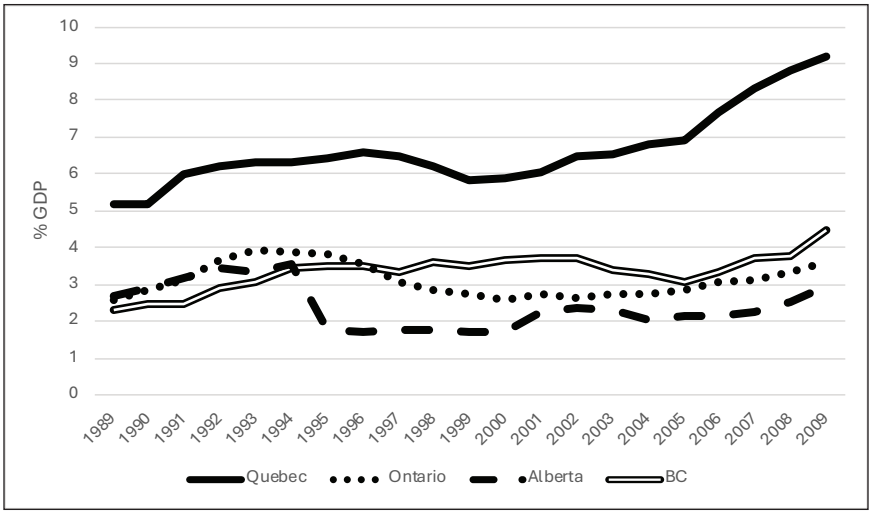

Figure 1. Social services expenditures as percentage of provincial GDP, by province. Table in Van den Berg et al., *Combating Poverty*, 33. Reproduced by permission of University of Toronto Press.

roughly 33 per cent in the same period. It also contrasts sharply to growth elsewhere in Canada, which was virtually flat.[21]

However, aggregate statistics do not capture the entire story. Modest social spending growth in recent decades masks a qualitative shift in the character of state welfare policy across the industrialized world, away from more universal, solidaristic policies toward more means-tested or "dualized" policies. This has shifted more of the costs for social risks like unemployment, health care, and retirement onto individuals.[22] Québec's move to socialize child care, housing, and antipoverty costs seems to challenge that trend.

At the same time, state policies have evolved beyond models that assume sole-male-breadwinner families to accommodate new social risks (NSRs) that have emerged with a post-industrial economy, including balancing work and family obligations, caring for children and frail relatives, and addressing part-time/insecure work and skill deficits.[23] The result has been a "social

21. Van den Berg et al., *Combating Poverty*; OECD, "Social Spending," accessed 3 May 2019, https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/social-spending.html.

22. Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau, *Who Cares? Women's Work, Childcare, and Welfare State Redesign*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Starke, "Politics of Welfare State Retrenchment"; Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization*.

23. Giuliano Bonoli, "The Politics of the New Social Policies: Providing Coverage against New Social Risks in Mature Welfare States," *Policy and Politics* 33, 3 (2005): 431–449.

investment" model of social policy that sees policy "as a productive factor, essential to economic development and to employment growth."[24]

The Québec case seems to fit the social investment model. The 1990s policy reforms emphasized improving social coverage for women, youth, the low-skilled, and the long-term unemployed, while retrenching coverage for "old risks" associated with classical labour demands, such as decommodification of labour and public-sector expansion.[25] What is peculiar is how the reforms came to pass. Theorists of the post-industrial welfare state posit that those most exposed to NSRs have limited mobilizing capacity and are thus ill-equipped to impose policies in their interest.[26] This is consistent with a classic power resources perspective, which sees policy reforms succeeding – and policy retrenchment mitigated – when left parties and unions are stronger.[27] The Québec case complicates both perspectives, as the reforms of the 1990s were implemented in a context where the ostensible left party, the PQ, was implementing an austerity agenda and unions were on the defensive. It was groups most vulnerable to NSRs, women and the poor, who mobilized for reforms.

The Québec case also creates problems for theories that focus on the role of employers in shaping policy reforms as part of a process of tripartite concertation.[28] The social summits were certainly a process of concertation, in line with the so-called Québécois model.[29] But contrary to theories that employers would agree to social investment-type policy reforms to incentivize work and increase overall workforce productivity, the majority of Québec employers proved either indifferent or reticent throughout the process.[30] The head of the Conseil du patronat du Québec (CPQ, Québec employers' federation), Ghislain

24. Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier, and Joakim Palme, "Beyond the Welfare State as We Knew It?" in Morel, Palier, and Palme, eds., *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012), 2.

25. Paul Pierson, ed., *The New Politics of the Welfare State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

26. Bonoli, "Politics of the New Social Policies."

27. Korpi and Palme, "New Politics and Class Politics."

28. Peter A. Hall and David W. Soskice, *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Cathie Jo Martin and Duane Swank, *The Political Construction of Business Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). The term "tripartite concertation" refers to a process of structured social dialogue between labour, employers, and the state, mediated through state institutions. See Marino Regini. "Tripartite Concertation and Varieties of Capitalism," *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 9, 3 (2003): 251–263, doi:10.1177/09596801030093001.

29. Lévesque, "Le modèle québécois"; Gilles L. Bourque, *Le modèle québécois de développement: de l'émergence au renouvellement* (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 2000).

30. Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*, 74–75.

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Table 1. Theories of Québec Welfare State Development, 1990s Onward

Theoretical model	Main claim	Applicability to the Québec case
Social investment and new social risks (NSRs)	The constituencies most exposed to NSRs are less likely to mobilize, and this lack of mobilization can facilitate policy retrenchment.	This model struggles to account for the fact that the mobilization for social policy expansion in Québec in the 1990s was led by non-labour organizations, particularly women and antipoverty groups.
Varieties of market economies	Social policy expansion is facilitated by employers' support, with the aim of increasing overall workforce productivity.	This model falls short, since Québec employers were mostly indifferent or hostile to the social policies implemented in the 1990s by the provincial government.
Contention and ambiguity	Social policy expansion resulted from a cycle of contention led by non-labour groups coinciding with a process of institutional conversion that increased the salience of a previously existing set of practices and discourses known as the "social economy," which acted as a floating signifier that helped stitch together a cross-class national coalition.	This model helps us understand why social policies were implemented at all in the 1990s in Québec, in a context of broad welfare retrenchment across OECD countries, while also accounting for the heterogeneous set of policy reforms that were adopted under the ambiguous concept of the "social economy."

Sources: Guay, Folco, and Ikebe, "Régulation, innovation, économie sociale"; Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*.

Dufour, complained that the summits were "an extraordinary exercise in government manipulation," while his organization continued to push for budget austerity and public-sector retrenchment.[31]

An adequate account of Québec social policy reform, then, needs to consider how groups most exposed to NSRs were able to make their voices heard, and why employers and the government felt compelled to listen to them. We aim to offer such an account, by highlighting how the interplay of contexts and cycles of contention, combined with deliberately ambiguous conceptual policy frameworks, brought parties with disparate interests together to expand the Québec welfare state.

Table 1 summarizes the pitfalls of conventional explanations for the Québec case and how our account addresses them.

31. Quoted in Graefe, "Quebec Patronat," 185.

Background on the Québec Social Summits

Before proceeding, we will briefly outline the 1996 summits for context. The two meetings were organized by the provincial government to address the question of Québec's economic and political development. They took place during a critical juncture in the province's history, in the aftermath of the razor-thin defeat of a 1995 referendum on Québec sovereignty, alongside persisting problems of poverty and unemployment, as well as cutbacks in public expenses that started in the 1980s.[32] The goal of the provincial government, led at the time by Lucien Bouchard, was to gather a broad coalition of social actors to address these various challenges while promoting its own agenda of deficit reduction.

Groups representing different social actors were invited to draft proposals, which diverged significantly. Employers' associations called for a leaner state that would both reduce its involvement in the economy and favour market-based policies to ensure the province's economic vitality. Unions centred their demands around job protection and creation, while community groups and civil society associations pleaded for a renewed welfare state through the extension of the social economy.[33] The government laid out its views in a document shared with the participants on the eve of the March 1996 conference, "Pour un Québec économiquement solide et socialement solidaire" (For an economically stable and socially solidaristic Québec), which argued that the province needed to adopt fiscal discipline in the face of economic stagnation, rising public debt, and a tax burden that impeded growth.[34] The Groupe de travail sur l'économie sociale (Task force on the social economy), the task force created during the summits to discuss the issue of social economy, produced a document titled *Osons la solidarité!* (Dare to build solidarity!), which insisted on the social economy's capacity to conciliate economic prosperity with social justice.[35] The hope was that this mix of economic efficiency and social solidarity would fit the government's agenda.

A more precise account of the negotiations between the various groups during the summits is difficult, as they largely happened behind closed doors

32. Yvan Comeau, Daniel Turcotte, André Beaudoin, Julie Chartrand-Beauregard, Marie-Ève Harvey, Daniel Maltais, Claudie Saint-Hilaire, and Pierre Simard, "L'économie sociale et le sommet socioéconomique de 1996: le bilan des acteurs sur le terrain," *Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales* 15, 2 (2002): 187–188.

33. Graefe, "Contradictory Political Economy."

34. Secrétariat des conférences socio-économiques, "Pour Un Québec economiquement solide et socialement solidaire," Document de réflexion, gouvernement du Québec, 1996.

35. Groupe de travail sur l'économie sociale, "Osons la solidarité! Rapport du Groupe de travail sur l'économie sociale," Sommet sur l'économie et l'emploi, Montréal, October 1996, https://chantier.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/rapport-osonslasolidarite_1996.pdf.

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– a policy that both unions and employers demanded.[36] As such, the outcomes of the summits' discussions were made accessible to the public, but not the discussions themselves. Nevertheless, it is clear that advocacy by community and women's groups, with the support of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN, Confederation of national trade unions), proved successful; the summits led to the creation of the Chantier de l'économie sociale (Social economy task force), an autonomous and permanent organization with the aim of coordinating social movements and community groups in drafting policies to promote co-operative and non-profit enterprises.[37] More broadly, the summits led to the creation of the policy framework that placed Québec on its divergent path. That framework included a Fonds de lutte contre la pauvreté (antipoverty fund), a social economy office within the provincial government, and initiatives to extend subsidized child carechildcare, community housing (through the AccèsLogis program), and non-medical home care services for the elderly.[38]

At the same time, these policies were implemented alongside a "zero deficit" agenda that revolved around fiscal rectitude, supply-side economics, and public-sector retrenchment.[39] In the years following the summits, the provincial government effectively imposed a 6 per cent wage reduction in the public sector, amounting to $100 million worth of concessions, while making cuts in health and education that would lead to tens of thousands of layoffs.[40] The outcomes of the 1996 summits were, then, characterized by a contradictory mix of welfare state expansion and austerity, combining subsidized childcare, social housing, the expansion of social economy enterprises, and the creation of an antipoverty fund, alongside significant cuts to health care ($320 million), health insurance ($350 million), and education (budget cuts between 5 per cent and 6.1 per cent at all levels), as well as a reduction of 50,000 public-sector jobs between 1996 and 1999.[41]

36. Ghislaine Raymond, "Le 'partenariat social' et le sommet socio-économique de 1996," MA thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2011, 44.

37. Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*, 66; Yves Vaillancourt and Benoît Lévesque, "Économie sociale et reconfiguration de l'état-providence," *Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales* 9, 1 (1996): 1–13.

38. Yves Vaillancourt, "Six enjeux concernant l'économie sociale au Québec et au Canada," *The Philanthropist* 23, 1 (2010): 44–51.

39. Jean-Marc Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat: interventions critiques sur le syndicalisme québécois* (Québec: Éditions Nota bene, 1998).

40. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social,"* 141–151.

41. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social"*; Graefe, "Quebec Patronat."

Cleavages, Conversion, and the Context of Contention

Explaining 1990s Québec policy reforms generally, and the mobilizing capacity of NSR groups particularly, requires examining a shift in the context of contention surrounding welfare state policy. This was partially the result of shifting class and national cleavages that allowed labour and its NSR group allies to exert leverage in the summits' negotiations, despite their weakened state, while also making employers more amenable to social policy expansion. For labour, decades of attacks had weakened its ability to articulate sharp, class-based demands and left it open to tripartite partnership solutions based on a cross-class national project. At the same time, the legacy of the class-based left nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s meant that labour maintained closer links with other progressive movements in the province. In the face of labour's weakness, these movements mobilized to exert pressure from the left on the summits' negotiations, winning certain reforms. For capital, its relative weakness compared with US and English-Canadian capital left it more reliant on state support and more amenable to a cross-class national policy project, despite its anti-union stance and commitment to budget austerity.[42]

It was a process of institutional conversion, however, that created a context for state actors to propose and implement policy reforms. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen define it as a process whereby "rules remain formally the same but are interpreted and enacted in new ways." Crucially, it is the result of "actors who actively exploit the inherent ambiguities of the institutions…. [to convert them] to new goals, functions, or purposes."[43] In this case, the negotiating parties drew on the institutions and traditions of the social economy to create a framework for the new policy reforms. The ambiguity of this concept offered a means of reconciling contradictory policy goals by uniting labour and capital together under an umbrella term to which they accorded different meanings, leading to the heterogenous mix of policies implemented in the wake of the 1996 summits.[44]

Labour's alternate base of power

By the mid-1990s, Québec labour still had clout. Indeed, the Bouchard government announced the summits following the CSN's demand for a public discussion about employment, public services, and the national debt.[45] But decades of employer and government attacks had taken their toll. Whereas mass

42. Bourque, *Le modèle québécois de développement*; Louis Gill, "Partenariat social et actionnariat ouvrier: du rachat d'entreprises aux 'Fonds de solidarité,'" *Interventions économiques pour une alternative sociale*, no. 14–15 (1985): 261–272; Graefe, "High Value-Added, Low-Wage Model."

43. Mahoney and Thelen, "Gradual Institutional Change," 17, 17–18.

44. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social,"* 33–36; Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*, 27–30.

45. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social,"* 33.

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labour mobilizations in the 1970s had won major reforms that transformed Québec society and built the modern Québec welfare state, the labour federations that gathered for the 1996 summits were in a defensive crouch.[46]

How, then, were labour organizations and their allies able to win progressive reforms? First, state and employer attacks on labour had weakened the class cleavage between Québec labour and capital in favour of a national unity project based on social partnership. Concretely, this resulted from a shift in the balance of power within labour from the more militant CSN to the more conciliatory Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ, Québec Federation of Labour). The FTQ was more amenable to the types of social partnership reforms on offer at the summits and thus a more willing negotiating partner. Second, in the absence of strong labour mobilization, allied feminist and antipoverty groups filled the vacuum. Relations between the labour federations and these groups were often strained but remained close due to ties forged in the 1970s, when class and national struggles were tightly intertwined. Their collaboration empowered a progressive coalition that won key reforms – including childcare, social housing, and antipoverty programs – in the wake of the 1996 summits.

From militancy to conciliation. The high point of labour militancy in Québec was the early 1970s. At that time, the three main provincial labour federations – the CSN, FTQ, and Corporation des enseignants du Québec (CEQ, Québec teachers' corporation) – called for labour unity and the extension of social rights in negotiations with the provincial government. This paved the way for the Front commun structure of bargaining, which has served as the framework for public- and para-public-sector negotiations since 1972. Joint bargaining has allowed the federations to negotiate wages and working conditions at the sectoral level, avoiding competition between federations.[47]

During this early period, momentum within labour favoured the CSN, lending it its radical character, due to the waves of massive public-sector strikes it waged between 1972 and 1979.[48] This combative strategy won a minimum weekly wage of $100 for 35 hours of work in the public and para-public sectors by 1974, which itself led to a general minimum wage increase throughout the province.[49] Other significant victories included 17 weeks of parental leave

46. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat.*

47. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*, 80; Jean Boivin, "La négociation collective dans le secteur public québécois: une évaluation des trois premières rondes (1964–1972)," *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* 27, 4 (1972): 679–717.

48. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*; Guillaume Tremblay-Boily, "Front commun contre le gouvernement: Portrait des relations entre le Parti libéral du Québec, le Parti Québécois et les syndicats du secteur public lors des négociations de 1972 à 1983," Fondation Jean-Charles-Bonenfant, Québec, 2011.

49. Gérard Hébert, "Les relations du travail au Québec: Bilan des années 1970," *Relations*

for teachers, with 15 weeks covered by unemployment insurance, as well as a prohibition on replacement workers ("scabs") during strikes and the adoption of progressive labour standards legislation (*normes du travail*) following the election of the PQ in 1976.[50]

However, as the decade ended and the economic turmoil of the 1980s began, the CSN lost its momentum. Like most advanced capitalist economies around the world, Québec was hit by a major recession in the early 1980s. Countless factories closed or relocated, the unemployment rate rose to 14 per cent in 1982, public deficits rose, and growth declined steeply.[51] This put unions on the defensive, as their members' jobs became less secure and employers and the provincial government led an offensive aimed at clawing back union-negotiated benefits.[52] The second René Lévesque government fired the opening salvo of this offensive in the public-sector collective bargaining round of 1982; government negotiators demanded a 20 per cent pay cut for public- and para-public-sector workers, as well as other concessions totalling $500 million out of a total budget of $14.6 billion. The government forced these measures on public-sector workers using a special law that essentially forbade public-sector strikes.[53]

The government offensive in 1982 dealt a major blow to Québec's combative, class-based unionism. It also paved the way for a series of major labour defeats, including another aggressive special bill, imposed by the second Robert Bourassa government during the 1986 round of collective bargaining.[54] As defeats piled up, momentum shifted within the Québec labour movement from the majority public-sector CSN to the majority private-sector FTQ. In response to the government's calls for a less confrontational mode of labour relations, combined with the hardships imposed by the economic slowdowns of the 1980s, the FTQ took the lead in promoting peak-level concertation between business, government, and labour in multi-stakeholder forums, a move that the CSN and CEQ resisted because of their militant, oppositional stance.[55]

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industrielles/Industrial Relations 36, 4 (1981): 715–747.

50. Linteau, Durocher, and Robert, *Histoire du Québec contemporain*, 576; Esther Deom, "La négociation collective chez les fonctionnaires et les enseignants québécois: 1975–1976," *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* 37, 1 (1982): 141–163.

51. Linteau, Durocher, and Robert, *Histoire du Québec contemporain*, 729–730.

52. Jacques Rouillard, *Le syndicalisme québécois: deux siècles d'histoire* (Montréal: Boréal, 2004), 215–216.

53. Martin Robert and Martin Petitclerc, "La répression du droit de grève, ou comment nos gouvernements ont appris à ne plus s'en faire et à aimer la législation atomique," in Diane Lamoureux and Francis Dupuis-Déri, eds., *Au nom de la sécurité! Criminalisation de la contestation et pathologisation des marges* (Montréal: M Éditeur, 2017), 55–59.

54. Rouillard, *Le syndicalisme québécois*, 249–250.

55. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*, 189–191.

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This transition signalled a turn toward "competitive nationalism" within unions, whereby unions sought to retain job security, as well as decent wages and working conditions, by focusing on keeping Québec firms afloat in the face of international competition.[56] Union federations backed away from more radical demands for worker control and nationalization in favour of a neo-corporatist compromise with employers and the state, with the goal of saving local jobs through "partnership" at both the plant and national levels.[57] This tendency continued into the 1990s, as labour federations promoted the creation of tripartite partnership institutions to encourage job creation and policy development, rather than mobilizing their rank and file around workplace issues and broader political goals.[58] The result was a labour movement amenable to the vision of social partnership at the heart of the 1996 summits.

Social movements as alternate power base. Labour's turn from confrontation to co-operation was widespread in North America in the 1980s and '90s.[59] What set Québec's labour movement apart was its continued strong links with other progressive social movements, which maintained their commitment to militant mobilizational strategies. With labour on the defensive, these organic links meant that these movements could serve as an alternate power base, shoring up labour's bargaining position at the summits. While they came up short on several demands, their mobilization around issues like child care and social housing was essential to getting these issues on the agenda of both summits and passed into policy.

Québec labour's distinctive alliance with antipoverty coalitions, women's groups, and other community organizations was a function of the overlapping radicalization of the class and national struggles in Québec in the 1970s.[60] Within labour itself, this was articulated by the CSN's "second front" strategy, which called for combining workplace organizing with broader political and community struggles.[61] Within community organizations, it manifested in a militant movement that pushed for self-management (*autogestion*) of community resources.[62] Unusual for North American social movements, these groups were able to win state funding for their activities while retaining independent

56. Graefe, "State Restructuring," 157.

57. Rouillard, *Le syndicalisme québécois*; Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*.

58. Graefe, "State Restructuring."

59. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*; Lipsig-Mummé, "Canadian and American Unions Respond."

60. Barry Eidlin, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

61. Marcel Pepin, *Le deuxième front* (Montréal: CSN, 1968).

62. Henri Lamoureux, Jocelyne Lavoie, Robert Mayer, and Jean Panet-Raymond, *La Pratique de l'action communautaire*, (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 2002).

control over their organizations – an arrangement that lasted well beyond the radical 1970s. This gave them an exceptional degree of political autonomy and financial stability compared with groups elsewhere in North America.[63]

While relations between the federations and social movement organizations were fraught at times due to power and resource imbalances, labour was nevertheless able to work closely with its progressive allies on key social justice campaigns, such as Solidarité Populaire Québec (SPQ, People's solidarity Québec) and the Coalition pour la survie des programmes sociaux (Coalition for the survival of social programs). This collaboration extended into the 1990s through the Forum de la solidarité (Solidarity forum), which took place in 1994 and explicitly sought to find alternatives to the government's neoliberal agenda.[64] In keeping with their mutual commitment to the left nationalist project in Québec, both labour and community groups were involved on the "yes" side of the two sovereignty referendums, in 1980 and 1995, and viewed their struggles for progressive social policy as part of a push for an independent Québec.[65] While labour's turn toward a less confrontational strategy accentuated tensions between unions and their community allies – as became apparent during the 1996 summits themselves – the two groups nevertheless maintained close ties.[66]

In the run-up to the summits, labour itself did not engage in much mobilizational or disruptive activity, with union leadership favouring close collaboration with employers and the government via tripartite negotiations.[67] Instead, it fell to women's and community movements to mobilize to raise demands and seek to shape the summits' agendas. In particular, the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ, Québec federation of women) played a central role in mobilizing constituencies and articulating demands in the lead-up to the summits.

The FFQ spearheaded the 1995 Bread and Roses March, a mass mobilization of women's organizations that advanced the double aim of "respond[ing] to the unmet needs of the poor, while at the same time providing recognition and remuneration for women's socially useful but unpaid work."[68] Most

63. Deena White, "L'institutionnalisation de la résistance: La politique québécoise de reconnaissance et de soutien de l'action communautaire," *Cahiers de recherche sociologique* 53 (2012): 89–120.

64. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social."*

65. Alain-Gustave Gagnon and Mary Beth Montcalm, *Québec: Au-delà de la révolution tranquille* (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 1992); Dufour, "From Protest to Partisan Politics."

66. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social"*; Alain Noël, "Québec: The Ambivalent Politics of Social Solidarity," in Daniel Béland and Pierre-Marc Daigneault, eds., *Welfare Reform in Canada: Provincial Social Assistance in Comparative Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 127–142; Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*.

67. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social."*

68. Peter Graefe, "Whose Social Economy? Debating New State Practices in Québec," *Critical*

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notably, the federation proposed doing this by expanding the province's social economy. Following the march, the provincial government invited the FFQ to serve as a representative of civil society during the two summits, alongside union federations and employers' associations. While it was responding to movement pressure, the government also saw this appeal to women's groups and antipoverty associations as part of its strategy of assembling the broadest possible coalition at the summits to create a "major social consensus" around its goal of eliminating the provincial budget deficit by the year 2000.[69]

The 1995 Bread and Roses March and subsequent lobbying and mobilizing put issues of child care and poverty relief front and centre in the public debates of the time.[70] As a result, the bulk of the reforms that were adopted during the 1990s wave of social policy expansion were linked to the mobilization of community groups and feminist organizations, supporting an explicitly solidaristic reading of the social economy based on the decentralization and democratization of the welfare state. Meanwhile, union demands around job creation and protection were discarded.[71]

In sum, shifting class and national cleavages shaped how and to what extent labour could influence the summits' agendas. Decades of government and employer attacks had blunted unions' radicalism, shifting momentum within labour away from the CSN's more radical approach and toward the FTQ's more collaborative approach. This led to labour being more open to the tripartite partnership proposed at the summits, even though it came to the table with a weak hand. In the absence of labour mobilization, community groups used public disruption and mass mobilization to push progressive policies onto the political agenda. Although relations between labour and community groups were strained at times, they retained an organic link forged in the 1970s, when class and national struggles overlapped. This link allowed community groups to serve as an alternate left power base, transmitting outside pressure for social policy expansion to the bargaining tables inside the summits. This collaborative relationship between unions and community groups, despite numerous challenges, continues to this day.[72]

Social Policy 21, 1 (2001): 42.

69. Dufour, "From Protest to Partisan Politics," 66.

70. Alain Noël, "Une loi contre la pauvreté: La nouvelle approche québécoise de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale," *Lien social et Politiques* 48 (2002): 103–114; Graefe, "State Restructuring."

71. Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*; Graefe, "Contradictory Political Economy."

72. Noël, "Québec"; Graefe, "Whose Social Economy?"; Rodney Haddow, "Power Resources and the Canadian Welfare State: Unions, Partisanship and Interprovincial Differences in Inequality and Poverty Reduction," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 47, 4 (2014): 717–739; Jane Jenson, "Rolling Out or Backtracking on Quebec's Child Care System? Ideology Matters," in Marjorie Griffin Cohen and Jane Pulkingham, eds., *Public Policy for Women: The State, Income Security, and Labour Market Issues* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 49–70;

Capital's relative weakness

If community group mobilization pushed social policy expansion onto the summits' agendas, why did employer groups in Québec go along with the plan? Across the industrialized world, capital was on the offensive in the mid-1990s, attacking labour and weakening social benefits. Next door in Ontario, the NDP government's reform agenda of the early 1990s faced ferocious business opposition, to the point where it capitulated to fiscal orthodoxy with its Social Contract. Rather than expanding social policies, this initiative focused on budget cutting and public-sector clawbacks.[73] South of the border, so-called bond vigilantes sparked inflation fears to discipline government spending during the Clinton administration, depriving the government of any significant leeway to implement social policies.[74] Why didn't Québec employers follow this same pattern?

Again, the configuration of class and national cleavages in Québec created an employer class that was comparatively weaker than its North American counterparts, more dependent on the state, and thus less able to block the expansion of social policies. Québec francophone employers' dependence on the state dated back to the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, when they allied with the government around a nationalist development strategy to supplant the dominant anglophone business elite.[75]

Beyond general state dependence owing to the national project, Québec employers had been chastened in the early 1990s by the collapse of the 1980s economic boom. Employers had backed Liberal Party leader Robert Bourassa's election in 1985. They benefitted from his program of privatization and deregulation, taking advantage to mount an offensive on unions. But the economic collapse in the 1990s left Québec firms burdened with debt while exposing weak fundamentals in the province's economy, which remained too dependent on resource extraction and had not done enough to develop value-added production. This left an opening for the Québec government to propose a new, more state-directed industrial policy.[76] Meanwhile, on the political front, the

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Alain Savard, "Quebec's Wave of Resistance: From the Maple Spring to the General Strike," *International Socialist Review* 101 (July 2016): 20–35.

73. Swartz and Warskett, "Canadian Labour," 28–29.

74. Timothy J. Sinclair, "Passing Judgement: Credit Rating Processes as Regulatory Mechanisms of Governance in the Emerging World Order," *Review of International Political Economy* 1, 1 (1994): 133–159.

75. Thomas J. Courchene, "Market Nationalism," *Policy Options* 7, 8 (1986): 7–12; Gill, "Partenariat social et actionnariat ouvrier"; Gill, *Les limites du partenariat: Les expériences social-democrates de gestion économique en Suède, en Allemagne, en Autriche, et en Norvège* (Montréal: Boréal, 1989); Peter Graefe, "Whither the Quebec Model? Boom, Bust and Quebec Labour," in John Peters, ed., *Boom, Bust and Crisis: Labour, Corporate Power and Politics in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2012), 127.

76. Graefe, "High Value-Added, Low-Wage Model"; Gagnon and Montcalm, *Québec*.

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failure of the Meech Lake Accord raised, once again, the issue of preparing Québec for possible independence. The combined economic and political crises strengthened employers' incentives to collaborate with the provincial government to ensure Québec's competitiveness and prosperity.[77]

Furthermore, Québec employers were relatively willing to engage in the tripartite negotiations that Bouchard's PQ government proposed because they did not see them as a threat to their hegemony. To the contrary, they saw such negotiations as a means of taming worker demands while maintaining an appearance of collaborative goodwill.[78] This meshed well with labour's turn away from advocating for workers' control of the economy in favour of an idea of shared national prosperity for Québec. In this context, employers saw multi-stakeholder forums as a convenient way of establishing a social consensus around their economic and political priorities – particularly deficit reduction and tax relief, in the case of the 1996 summits.[79]

The conversion of the social economy

If Québec labour, capital, and the state each had incentives to come to the bargaining table in the mid-1990s, the question remains as to how they collectively struck a bargain that resulted in solidaristic social policy reform. Here we must focus on the concept of the social economy, which provided an organizing framework for the summits. In the context of the 1996 negotiations, its conceptual ambiguity allowed it to serve as a floating signifier that could unite the different parties while taking on different meanings.[80] Scholars have identified such polysemic "quasi-concepts" as important cognitive mechanisms for forging new policy coalitions. Jane Jenson, for instance, notes that such concepts "can draw together numerous positions and sustain a moderate to high level of ambiguity."[81] It is precisely their ambiguity that gives these quasi-concepts their power, as this is what allows them to "aggregate different – and even contradictory – interests."[82]

The concept of the social economy has a long history in Québec, dating back to the 19th century. It originated with the development of benefit societies managed by the working classes to deal with unemployment, sickness,

77. Ralph Heintzman, "Political Space and Economic Space: Quebec and the Empire of the St. Lawrence," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29, 2 (1994): 19–63.

78. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*, 198–200.

79. Raymond, *Le "partenariat social"*; Graefe, "Contradictory Political Economy"; Graefe, "Quebec Patronat."

80. Mahoney and Thelen, "Gradual Institutional Change"; Claus Offe, "Governance: An 'Empty Signifier'?," *Constellations* 16, 4 (2009): 550–562.

81. Jenson, "Diffusing Ideas," 71.

82. Palier, "Ambiguous Agreement," 138.

accidents, disability, or aging.[83] Over time, it came to be understood as the range of economic activities that belong neither to the market nor to the state, forming instead a "third sector" that includes co-operatives, community groups, union-backed solidarity funds, and mutual aid associations.[84]

While these various organizations (aside from the union-backed solidarity funds, which were created in the 1980s and 1990s) existed in the province for more than a century, the social mobilization of the 1960s and 1970s led to a significant upsurge in both their numerical importance and their organizational power. The number of co-operative associations in Québec – in domains as diverse as health clinics, food banks, daycare centres, housing units, and community-based media, among others – grew from 5,302 in 1956 to 23,330 in 1976, a more than fourfold increase in two decades.[85] The 1970s also saw community organizations gain a firmer financial footing, through state programs such as the Programme de soutien aux organismes communautaires (PSCOC, Community organization support program) created in 1973.[86] Not only were community groups more financially secure than in other provinces, but they were also invited to the summits that the PQ organized in the 1980s to discuss issues such as the decentralization of state services and sectoral policies in employment, justice, and adult education.[87]

However, the dynamism of co-operatives and community groups in Québec, which were framed as constituting the social economy during the 1996 summits, cannot by itself explain their crucial role in the province's policy reforms. As Gabriel Arsenault notes, the co-operative sector in Saskatchewan was much more developed than in Québec in terms of number of co-ops per capita, their percentage of provincial GDP, and the percentage of people who were co-op members.[88] The mere presence of a robust "third sector" is not a sufficient condition for the kinds of social policies implemented in Québec in the late 1990s. We must account for how social movements framed the social economy as a vector to promote their claims, and how both the state and employers reacted and put forward their own reading of this polysemic concept.

83. Petitclerc, *Nous protégeons l'infortune*.

84. Ash Amin, Angus Cameron, and Ray Hudson, *Placing the Social Economy* (London: Routledge, 2002); Louis Favreau and Benoît Lévesque, eds., *Développement économique communautaire* (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 1996).

85. Lévesque, "How the Social Economy Won Recognition," 29.

86. Christian Jetté, *Les organismes communautaires et la transformation de l'État-providence* (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 2008).

87. Paul R. Bélanger and Benoît Lévesque, "Le mouvement populaire et communautaire: de la revendication au partenariat," in Gérard Daigle and Guy Rocher, eds., *Le Québec en jeu: Comprendre les grands défis* (Montréal: Les presses de l'université de Montréal, 1992), 713–747.

88. Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*, 54–55.

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In the context of the 1996 summits, the public debate over the social economy involved two broad visions: one centred on socializing economic activity through participatory democracy and local empowerment, and another centred on increasing social cohesion without resorting to state-managed redistribution.[89] If the first vision was associated with women and antipoverty groups – particularly the FFQ – and the second vision to business circles and the Bouchard administration, union federations were awkwardly stuck between the two, approving of business and government proposals for market-based strategies to create jobs and increase national competitiveness, while remaining sensitive to their progressive allies' demands around democratizing the economy and combating poverty and social exclusion.[90] As a result, the definition of "social economy" that ended up prevailing during the 1996 summits was ambiguous – neither a cut-rate welfare state, which would have antagonized progressive and antipoverty groups, nor a genuine alternative to the private sector, which business leaders would have opposed. Instead, the parties could use the concept to finesse their differences, coming to broad consensus on a policy framework while leaving the exact content of the resulting policies as something to be fought over later.

Labour, capital, and social economy at the 1996 summits

How, then, did these shifting national and class cleavages come together to expand the Québec welfare state in a broader context of retrenchment? At the March 1996 conference, all parties quickly agreed on the Bouchard government's priority of deficit reduction. Employers' associations had been promoting it ahead of the summits, and union federations rallied behind it on the condition that it did not impede job creation or community development, despite resistance to Bouchard's agenda by labour's allies.[91] Following this agreement between labour and capital on the goal of deficit reduction without tax increases, the CSN, FTQ, and CPQ signed a "joint declaration on new forms of work re-organization." Showing the FTQ's influence, this agreement replaced the oppositional stance toward employers that had been associated with the CSN with a vision of labour-management partnership. It focused on ensuring Québec-based firms' competitiveness and profitability as the primary means of maintaining quality jobs.[92] The union federations equated Québec's national prosperity with the political priorities of employers and the government, as articulated in the position papers they issued before the summits, which presented deregulation as "the main motor of private

89. Graefe, "Whose Social Economy?," 41–44.

90. Graefe, "State Restructuring," 166.

91. Peter Graefe, "Québec Labour: Days of Glory or the Same Old Story," in Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Rethinking the Politics of Labour in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2012), 68–69; Graefe, "State Restructuring," 166–167.

92. Graefe, "Contradictory Political Economy," 535.

sector job creation." This implied that fiscal discipline and retrenchment were the primary ways of ensuring Québec's competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy.[93]

Weakened by nearly two decades of employer and government attacks, Québec labour federations did not push a distinct political agenda during the summits. Facing a government determined to reduce public expenditures, and employers' associations that could frame their concerns as imperatives for Québec's economic success and national prosperity, labour went along with a vision of labour-management partnership focused on fiscal austerity and ensuring corporate profitability. This could have led to a set of proposals for a social economy that would amount to a cut-rate welfare state and a second-tier job market for marginalized workers.[94]

It fell to women and antipoverty groups, under the leadership of the FFQ and the Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU, Popular action front for urban redevelopment), to fight for an expanded vision of the social economy. Through their sustained mobilization, these groups imposed a modest, albeit real, expansion of social provision through the notion of "social infrastructures," first introduced during the 1995 Bread and Roses March. In the case of the most ambitious progressive policy adopted during the summits, namely subsidized child care, grassroots mobilization was decisive. Unions supported the policy, although they did little to push for it directly. For its part, the Bouchard government was willing to grant the policy concession as a means of keeping the coalition of social actors at the summits together. Meanwhile, employers offered little resistance to the proposal. Partly, this was because the public debate around the summits linked childcare policy to employer-backed goals of balancing work and family responsibilities, along with facilitating women's entry into the labour force. Additionally, a relatively broad political consensus around expanding childcare policy limited the ability of employers to mobilize against it. While difficult to measure, the FFQ-led mobilizations leading up to the summits have been identified as significant in shaping that consensus.[95]

Given the broader political context of the 1990s, and the major retrenchment most Canadian provinces enacted, the gains that Québec labour's allies won from the 1996 summits were a significant victory, even if they fell short of the stated goals of those groups.[96] Labour's allies leveraged a combination of popular pressure and Québec employers' ties to the state as part of a national

93. Graefe, "State Restructuring," 163.

94. Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*, 252–253; see also Raymond, *Le "partenariat social."*

95. Jane Jenson, "Against the Current: Child Care and Family Policy in Quebec," in Sonya Michel and Rianne Mahon, eds., *Child Care Policy at the Crossroads: Gender and Welfare State Restructuring* (London: Routledge, 2002), 309–332; Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec,* 98–100.

96. Van den Berg et al., *Combating Poverty*; Panitch and Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion.*

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economic project to fight for an expanded vision of the social economy that shaped the government's agenda.[97] While employers were unhappy with some of the resulting social policies, the political consensus around the few progressive policies adopted during the summits, along with the real victories they could claim around their own agenda of deficit reduction, gave them little room to resist the expansion of progressive policies.[98]

The policy goals set out for the summits concealed competing social concerns. Ideas about protecting jobs, modernizing the state, and creating social and economic policies for the 21st century could imply different policy solutions, which could have shrunk or expanded social policies. It fell to the social actors involved in the summits to shape how policy goals would translate into concrete policies. All parties seized on the traditional concept of the social economy, giving it a new, albeit ambiguous, salience in the post-summit context. Labour promoted the social economy as a way of creating jobs while encouraging community economic development and responsiveness to local needs. Similarly, women's and community groups insisted on the role of the social economy in job creation and protection but also framed it as a way of decentralizing and democratizing the welfare state. Meanwhile, the Bouchard government and business leaders viewed the social economy as a second-tier public sector that would offer services to citizens without increasing public debt or requiring tax increases.[99]

The summits of 1996, then, were characterized by a profound political ambiguity, as the dialogue between various perspectives on social economy led to a heterogeneous set of policies. Social policy expanded not only thanks to the political dynamism of labour's allies, and the relative weakness of Québec's capital due to its strong reliance on the government, but also as a result of the social economy serving as a polysemic floating signifier that progressive groups could mobilize to their own ends.

Conclusion

Québec's expansion of social policies in the 1990s appears anomalous, happening at a historical moment when most governments in North America were scaling back social programs. Existing explanations for social policy expansion cannot fully account for the Québec case. While unions certainly played a role, they were not leading the charge; indeed, they had been weakened by years of government and employer attacks. Unlike traditional left parties,

97. Graefe, "Quebec Patronat"; Graefe, "Social Economy Policies as Flanking for Neoliberalism: Transnational Policy Solutions, Emergent Contradictions, Local Alternatives," *Policy and Society* 25, 3 (2006): 69–86; Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*.

98. Arsenault, *L'économie sociale au Québec*; Raymond, *Le "partenariat social"*; Piotte, *Du combat au partenariat*.

99. Graefe, "Quebec Patronat."

the Bouchard PQ government was more concerned with fiscal discipline than policy expansion. As for employers, their feelings toward social policy expansion were lukewarm at best.

Explaining Québec social policy expansion in the 1990s requires an understanding of how the context of contention shifted. Overlapping class and national cleavages provided a weakened labour movement with an alternate base of support among left social movements while also weakening capital and making it more state-reliant. In this context, a rightward-drifting PQ government was able to reconcile its goal of fiscal discipline with pressure for social policy expansion through converting the concept of the social economy, taking advantage of its ambiguity, to forge a policy reform coalition.

The theoretical implications of this article are threefold. First, the case illustrates the conditions under which non-labour social movements can offer a limited substitute for class-based organization. Ties between labour and social movements, forged in the 1970s out of a common commitment to a left national project, allowed for gains at the 1996 summits. Still, these gains were limited. Community and women's groups ran into trouble in the years following the summits, plagued by internal divisions around how the provincial government was implementing social economy policies, as well as a lack of stable and autonomous funding sources. As such, these groups had difficulty holding the PQ government accountable in the years following the summits.[100] If labour-linked social movements can provide an alternate power base and win concessions under certain circumstances, a closer collaboration between these movements and labour organizations may be one of the main ways the left in Québec could go beyond its current defensive stance.[101]

The case also identifies conditions under which employers will acquiesce to reforms they may disagree with, even when the economic and political circumstances are in their favour. If the previous literature has shown how employers' political strategies react to business cycles and the evolution of profit rates, the Québec case suggests that even in periods of meagre growth and rampant unemployment, labour and social movements have some sway if they employ an adequate strategy.[102]

Finally, the case shows the role of polysemic rhetoric, particularly ambiguous "floating signifiers," in reconciling seemingly opposed material interests and creating discursive space that movements can take advantage of. Such signifiers, which abound in political and academic realms, can be a key to shaping

100. Dufour, "From Protest to Partisan Politics."

101. Philippe Crevier, Hubert Forcier, and Samuel Trépanier, "Pour un Syndicalisme de Transformation Sociale," *Relations* 783 (2016): 36–38.

102. Robert Brenner, "The Political Economy of the Rank-and-File Rebellion," in Robert Brenner, Aaron Brenner, and Cal Winslow, eds., *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below during the Long 1970s* (New York: Verso, 2010), 37–74; David Coates, ed., *Varieties of Capitalism, Varieties of Approaches* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

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policy outcomes.[103] For example, a situation analogous to the idea of the social economy in Québec would be the huge appeal, within American academic and policy circles in the early 1990s, of the notion of "social capital," which can be interpreted both as an analytical shorthand for the positive consequences of social connections and as a more insidious infringement of the market on social relations.[104]

With growing concern about increasing economic inequality across the industrialized world, there is also a growing recognition that the state budget contractions of the 1990s are at least partly to blame.[105] Given that Québec resisted this trend to some extent and moved its social policies in a more solidaristic direction in the 1990s, an understanding of why those reforms happened there can provide clues for reversing the broader trend. While the nature of the overlapping class and national cleavages we identified is specific to Québec, the case suggests that a greater focus on the role of parties, unions, and movements in shaping social cleavages and coalitions could yield important insights. This is in line with an emerging literature within political sociology that focuses on the "political articulation" of social cleavages to explain political and policy outcomes.[106] This reading also aligns with recent literature pushing for a more thorough acknowledgement of the role played by cycles of contention in the development of social policies in Québec, as both a complement and a challenge to accounts that insist on the importance of *partenariat* (partnership) in Québec's distinct welfare trajectory.[107] As major proponents of the partenariat approach, including Benoît Lévesque, have acknowledged, the partnership model in Québec has been significantly weakened since 2003, with successive governments – from the Liberal Party of Québec and Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) – reducing or eliminating consultation with the organized players of civil society, notably through the ousting of organized civil society (unions, community, and women's groups) from regional development councils (CDRS), local development centres (CLDS),

103. Lévesque, "How the Social Economy Won Recognition"; Vaillancourt and Lévesque, "Économie sociale."

104. Alejandro Portes, "Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, 1 (1998): 1–24; Margaret R. Somers, "Let Them Eat Social Capital: Socializing the Market versus Marketizing the Social," *Thesis Eleven* 81, 1 (2005): 5–19.

105. Florence Jaumotte and Carolina Osorio-Buitron, "Inequality and Labor Market Institutions," IMF Staff Discussion Note No. 15/14, 17 July 2015, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2678639; Armin Schäfer and Wolfgang Streeck, eds., *Politics in the Age of Austerity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

106. Cedric DeLeon, Manali Desai, and Cihan Tuğal, eds., *Building Blocs: How Parties Organize Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

107. Guay, Folco, and Ikebe, "Régulation, innovation, économie sociale"; Lévesque, "Le modèle québécois"; Noël, "Une loi contre la pauvreté."

and other regional and local bodies.[108] This situation calls for renewed attention to the role of contention in establishing a partnership model in the first place, as opposed to a top-down model between the government and organized civil society, identified by some actors as a "*pater-nariat*" or paternalistic governance.[109] Most notably we see this happening through a reinvigorated collaboration between the labour movement and community groups.[110] As well, strategic use of floating signifiers such as "social economy" and "community development" could push a progressive agenda while building broad political coalitions.[111]

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108. Marie J. Bouchard, *L'innovation et l'économie sociale au cœur du modèle québécois: entretiens avec Benoît Lévesque* (Québec: Presses de l'université du Québec, 2021), 289–291.

109. Jean Panet-Raymond, "Les nouveaux rapports entre l'état et les organismes communautaires à l'ombre de la loi 120," *Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales* 7, 1 (1994): 86.

110. Thomas Collombat, "Le syndicalisme: institution ébranlée, mouvement social essentiel," in Pascale Dufour, Laurence Bherer, and Geneviève Pagé, eds., *Le Québec en mouvements: Continuité et renouvellement des pratiques militantes* (Montréal: Presses de l'université de Montréal, 2023), 267–284; Jean-Vincent Bergeron-Gaudin, "Les luttes relatives au logement au Québec: Un portrait historique," in Stéphane Paquin and Jean-Patrick Brady, eds., *Groupes d'intérêt et mouvements sociaux* (Québec: Presses de l'université Laval, 2017), 219–240.

111. Yann Fournis, "Le mouvement communautaire québécois: Plus on est de flou…," *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research* 14, 1 (2023): 56–68.

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