NEW FRANCE THROUGH THE LEARNING LENS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the "learning society" can be used fruitfully as a lens to conduct a reconnaissance of societies in the past. Two moments in early Canadian history are selected to illustrate how we as humans are fated to learn to make a living, live in communities and make sense of the particular world we inhabit—often in the midst of turbulent change.

CUNNING PEDAGOGICS: THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE JESUIT MISSIONARIES AND THE AMERINDIANS OF 17TH-CENTURY NEW FRANCE

France only began to take a serious interest in a permanent settlement in Canada in the late 16th and the early to middle 17th centuries. Imperialism now depended on discovery, conquest, and settlement. Unless one settled land and defended it with armaments and skillful management of indigenous populations, papal or royal proclamations meant little. In 1603, Henry IV, the Huguenot turned Catholic, appointed Pierre Gua Sieur de Monts, a prominent merchant, to procure settlers for New France. He ordered Samuel de Champlain to increase these numbers. This was to be accomplished through evangelization and assimilation of native peoples into French culture. Thus, France's fur trade interests could be protected, and the census would be able to report more French habitants than English residents. These purposes were encased within the dream of fulfilling the dictates of the papal encyclicals to bring the knowledge of God, the Catholic Church, and religion to the native peoples.

One way of telling the story of the unfolding the Canadian learning society is to begin with the tribal wilderness learning systems of indigenous peoples. Here, one would do one's best to construct the nature of the indigenous learning systems as they adapted to changing circumstances over time and then responded to the invasion of germs and foreigners. Essentially, the pedagogical encounter between the Jesuits and the Amerindians of Canada highlights the way one society's learning

system can disrupt, often in radical ways, that of the other. Traditional Amerindian world orientations had to cope with changes to their way of symbolically ordering the world and learning systems during many centuries. But Amerindian modes of subsistence and production came under relentless assault. It began inconspicuously in the late 15th century and continued inexorably into the 16th and through to the 18th century as the fur trade penetrated the St. Lawrence Valley and onward to the west. Between 1632 and 1670, approximately 100 Jesuit missionaries went to New France, made possible by the French occupation of the St. Lawrence Valley in 1632. The pioneering, cunning, resourceful Jesuits got to know their learners, tried to displace indigenous adult educational leaders (they were the new shaman) and gradually produce Euro-Catholic subjectivities in their learners. Their pedagogical techniques were imaginative and surprisingly modern—all of this used to undermine the indigenous belief and action system and replace it with Euro-Catholic subjectivities.

We can identify the different dimensions of the tribal wilderness learning. This learning system experienced severe strain as new problems and ideas were fed into it from external sources. The shaman—perhaps the most significant adult educator in Amerindian tribal society—had the role of maintaining the balance and order of the society. In unusual times of trouble or foreboding, the shaman was called upon to restore order and good times. He could teach his people what the new signs and dreams meant and allay collective anxiety. But the shaman, as guardian of the traditional lifeworld (its sources of meaning, social stability, and personal coherence), was in a precarious situation. If his techniques failed, he could be easily discredited and the traditional lifeworld as a legitimate fund of meaning would be undermined.

"Tension points" were introduced into the differing learning systems (European and Indian) that disenabled dialogue or mutual understanding. For example, the Amerindians had considerable trouble comprehending some of the basic Christian dogmas: sin, guilt, and hell. The Hurons could not grasp the idea of primordial fault. Although the Jesuits were not in New France to foster inter-religious or spiritual dialogue (to use contemporary language), they occupied common ground with Amerindian belief in the supernatural realm. Both believed in evil spirits. Both accepted the dualism of the body and soul. But the Jesuits could neither accept nor possibly even grasp, the idea that a soul could leave the living body or that a shaman could kill, or injure, a faraway enemy. The Amerindians and the Europeans also had different conceptions of the self; the former being more porous that the emergent buffered self of early moderns. In fact, doubt about the existence of God does not even become a viable option for people in the U.S. and Canada until the late 19th century.

The Jesuits were in New France to convert the Indians to Roman Catholic Christianity. They were highly intelligent and pedagogically innovative educators who used a wide array of techniques and even tricks to undermine the indigenous lifeworld. The Christian colonizers of the 17th century used popular theatrics, visualizations, and intense campfire debates to convince their foes to embrace their imaginary Christ. They used every opportunity to discredit the shaman; in fact, one might argue that they sought to substitute themselves as Christian shamans. The Jesuits believed that their Indian pupils learned best at moments of heightened emotion and melodrama. Believing that perspective transformation required shock treatment, Jesuit educators painted frightening verbal portraits of hell, the fiery underworld. Indian catechumens were encouraged to use the see-hear-taste-touch mode of pedagogy to instruct their novice Christians. They also used pictures to instruct their adult pupils when they first landed in Acadia in 1611. Gradually, after some failures, they learned how to meet the visual preferences of their learners. Jesus had to be beardless and colourful (the Hurons' favourite was a picture of the child Jesus clutching the knees of the Virgin, regally crowned and holding a scepter in her right hand and the earth in her left.) The Indians preferred illuminated paintings to highlight the sacred mysteries. This is brilliant pedagogy. One can surmise that the Franco-Jesuits had more than a few surprises to their received wisdom.

The Jesuit encounter with the Amerindians of the St. Lawrence Valley in 17th-century New France provides us with insights into the inner learning processes of the colonial imagination. This brilliant marshaling of pedagogical energy was ultimately, however, in the service of a worldview that divided humankind into (Christian) friends and (Satanic) enemies. The Jesuits had nothing important to learn and everything important to teach. The political context of pedagogical instruction in the early Jesuit era and our own are neglected at our peril. Their gutsy and dogged determination was captured powerfully in the

dark Canadian film, *Black Robe*. For their part, First Nations peoples had to re-orient their own religious understandings as this new vision intruded and forced its way inside their symbolic ordering of the world. And they had to do so in a damaged world, which rendered them vulnerable and open to consider a new orientation to a world that was changing before their very eyes. In one sense, the Jesuits as ambassadors of a Christian Europe in its civilizing mode, sets the stage for the long contestation between the Canadian state, government authorities and missionaries to transform them into liberal and Christian subjects.

"A COUNTRY AT THE END OF THE WORLD": LIVING AND LEARNING IN NEW FRANCE, 1608-1760

What might it have been to live and learn in New France between the early 17th and late 18th centuries? It is not easy to shed our cultural clothing of the late 20th century (or put down our cell phones for a minute or two), and travel through time to the beginnings of settlement in New France. Try to imagine the ghastly eight- or ten-week creaking and groaning journey across the Atlantic. What could possibly have occupied the minds and imaginations of many of these illiterate (or scarcely literate) men and women who were coming to this "country at the edge of the world"? Hope and fear probably ran together like ink in water in their hearts. Perhaps deep faith in their Catholic God and protective amulets somehow sustained them. We may never know.

It is an exacting task to understand how men and women in New France learned to make a living, live their lives, and express themselves. It is an exacting task, first, because most of the learning processes and pedagogical procedures were either non-formal or woven into life activities, and second, because we don't always have the records necessary to help us understand the instructional processes underpinning the work of constructing a new world society in the image of the old. Thus, one must imagine one's way into another world and extrapolate key ideas from historians who are neither focusing on nor having an interest in how people actually acquire the knowledge and skills to sustain themselves in their worlds, with the host of "learning challenges" that erupt in their presence as their worlds unfold, oftentimes with acute disruptions. In contemporary society, we need only think of the fortunes of the ill-fated people who have had to flee for their lives and live precariously as refugees.

The elites who governed New France recreated feudal conditions in the New World to ensure the flow of goods into the imperial centre. New France was organized as a colonial outpost to ensure the continuing flow of the "brown gold" of the fur trade (in swing for a hundred years prior to settlement.) By 1590, the fur trade had gained such momentum that the French Crown wanted to secure its control against its chief competitor, the English. The story of Samuel Champlain occupies considerable attention in the first decades of 17th-century New France. In fact, Quebec recently celebrated the 400th anniversary of his founding of Quebec City in 1608. The conflict between the French and their First Nations allies, and that of the English and theirs, is intricate and well documented. From our vantage point, the alliance between the French and First Nations, each forced into the other's arms, created our first fraught example of cross-cultural learning in Canadian history. Yet the intercultural exchange, if one may grant it this label, was asymmetrical, framed within the French project of imperial domination. Here, we might be reminded that Jacques Cartier took Indians hostage and transported them to France as curiosities. Historians of adult education, like their counterparts working on different themes, have to work creatively with concepts such as power and hegemony. They must show how the learning process is distorted by those holding power over others and are trying to impose a particular form of rule. This latter assumption is integral to the new critical history.

What did those in the fur trade needed to know, be and do to perform their work? Some scholars have suggested that the Indians lost their moral footing as the imperial centre pressured them (and perhaps they pressured themselves, hungry for commodities) to capture more and more beaver. The *coureurs des bois* were drawn into their form of work because they couldn't sustain their families by working the land. Their work was dangerous and highly organized, demanding tough, strong bodies and disciplined minds. The work appears to have been a kin-related affair. Theirs was a pedagogy of daring and danger, learned experientially in the face of death, a world far removed from the relative safety and moral surveillance of the Catholic "garrison culture" emerging reluctantly in the Canadian wilderness.

The habitant was created by and for the feudal seigneurial system; immigrants were transformed into habitants. The famous strip farms of Quebec, now a part

of our Canadian imagination, were imposed upon the geography and landscape of New France. Those who ended up clearing and gaining a living from these lands had some leeway, but were essentially bound to a legal system that extracted surplus from their labour (this is called the *corvée*.) But the shift to agriculture away from the centrality of the fur trade—called for because of the early problems of getting settlers—only occurred in the latter 17th century. By mid-18th century, with the Indian wars ended, agriculture was the main pursuit of almost all of the inhabitants of the area. A European rural society had emerged on this corner of the New World, and it was one whose life was centred on the self-sufficient peasant household.

We can postulate that the habitant family household was the pre-eminent learning site for men and women and their children (with the Roman Catholic Church watching warily over it.) The habitants were hardly ignorant. To manage their farms, woven tightly into their lifeworld, they had to have a wide range of knowledge and skills at their disposal. Attuned to the rhythms of the seasons, the habitants had to know how to plow with a team of animals (much-loved horses, or oxen or a mixed team) They used the heavy wheeled plow; they made the beam, axle, and handle from wood, fitting them with two wheels, a chain, an iron coulter, and a small iron plowshare. In May, after plowing, they sowed grain and see, covered by the passing of a harrow, a crude device made with wooden pegs mounted in a simple frame. Women had the responsibility for the tilling and planting of the kitchen garden. With the arrival for summer, the habitants erected fences around freshly planted grain fields. They whitewashed the house and got on with other chores, like digging ditches. If they didn't learn how to sharpen their scythes, the tons of hay would lie uncut. The time of the grain harvest in the early fall was busy and bustling. After the harvest, internal fences had to be removed to allow animals to roam over the entire farm. They were hardly ignorant and backward, resistant to change and superstitious. This derogatory labeling was read back into their experience by elites who were embracing the scientific forms of agriculture in the age of improvement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

We moderns are products of the Enlightenment Era who fiercely believe that we have rights as individuals, and rights to question wrongful authority. We might, then, ask the question of just how much autonomy the peasants actually had in 18th-century New France. Resistance to authority was mainly episodic: gusts but no revolutionary storms. Even the habitants' religious expression was not entirely autonomous. They were under surveillance and had to steal their own time. A magical sacred canopy enveloped them, giving cosmological meaning to the unpredictability of their lives, even though there is evidence of disrespectful attitudes to the church amongst habitants. Human beings long for transcendence and cannot live on the horizontal plane alone.

The history of New France contains an unusual and remarkable number of women. Jeanne Mance, for example, is named as co-founder of Montreal in 1642. The redoubtable duo, Marie de l'Incarnation and Marguerite Bourgeoys established Canada's first reasonably accessible education system. These amazing women were working in an environment scarcely hospitable to women. But the nuns came and established hospitals and other institutions. No matter what their status, high or low, the situation of women in the colony was insecure. The famed *les filles du rois* are an amazing story in themselves. Between 1663 and 1673, 770 women, average age of 24, left farms and orphanages to sail for an unknown country. It is hard to imagine the learning and spiritual challenges they faced. If the men they met and married in the new country turned out to be brutes, that was bad enough; they also faced disease, childbirth, backbreaking work, and war. But learn they did, and the life of Louise, born around 1645, provides a window on to the life of the peasant woman, one of the legendary *filles du roi*.

She had been placed in a poorhouse in France, where she learned the basics of religion, housekeeping, and knitting. That was her lifeworld curriculum. At age 13, she was sent out to do domestic service. She returned to the Hospital at age 24, and a government agent arrived with an offer to pay her fare for New France. She arrived in Quebec City, where she stayed at a boarding house supervised by the sisters. There she met numerous suitors that came calling. She chose one, and after travelling to Trois-Rivieres she and her husband built a small cabin near the riverbank. Louise used her dowry to purchase a cow and some chickens. From her neighbours, Louise learned how to turn suet into candles and bake bread in an outdoor over. After the arrival of the first baby, her work grew more arduous. Like so many other pioneering women, she had to haul water, beat the wash, stoke the fires, turn the roast deer, mend clothes, tend to the cow, and care for the baby. After Louise lost her husband, she was entitled to run the family farm. The daunting work of

managing the lifeworld inscribed itself on the bodies of these habitants, *filles du roi*. They wore out in the service of peopling the land of New France to establish France's imperial dominance in this land. The household space, the grounding of the lifeworld, needs to be taken seriously as a crucial learning site.

The craftsmen and their associations: how did they learn their work as shoemakers and stonemasons and carpenters and coopers? One cannot understand the social organization of crafts learning apart from understanding how the apprenticeship system in New France worked. Many fathers passed their craft skills on to their sons. It was not easy for any craftsperson to move out of his (or her) class location. The craft guilds were important learning sites for workers to learn about the wider meanings of their work and how it related to other sectors of life in New France (and beyond, too.) Their "collective voice" was restricted; the first strike in the colony is dated at 1741). Clearly, the instincts of the colonial administration were repressive and colonial workers were less likely than Europeans to act collectively. Each of the crafts had their own patron saints and rituals. They were often rowdy affairs, prompting the priests to move in as their guides.

The idea of the public sphere has gained considerable prominence in contemporary philosophy and political and social science. The public sphere emerges gradually in European historical development as a conversational space between the state and the economy. Using this concept as lens, we can scan the social and political landscape of New France for evidence of spaces where people could reason together about the basic rules governing the spheres of labour and commodity exchange as well as forms of governance (and, one might add, their general conditions of well-being.) The historical evidence suggests that the New France ruling elites did not tolerate an "open space" between state and the people. New France in the 17th and 18th centuries was constituted as an aristocratic, patriarchal, agricultural, and Roman Catholic community. Unauthorized assemblies and public protest were perceived as serious offences. Nonetheless, one detects the presence of occasional consultative assemblies. But Frontenac ended any form of popular representation as early as 1677. All of the institutions and legal formulations of New France were harnessed toward the end of creating a submissive, hard-working, dutiful, pious subject. Ritual and law, and not doctrine, bound the people together into an exclusive community.

But this authoritarian control over the people's minds didn't last for too long. Dictatorial systems are leaky, though they can survive for a time on terror and coercion. The liberal and radical currents of Enlightenment thought made their way into a post-conquest Quebec. The printers and newspapermen introduced perhaps the first "critical spirit" into an intellectually conservative culture. They challenged court decisions, railed against the abuses of the clergy, attacked the backwardness of the colleges, and advocated for a legislative assembly. This small, courageous "republic of letters" had a difficult time establishing a beachhead. One could say that the backrooms of their print shops were the first critical learning sites in Quebec history. The now forgotten and silent names of two of those radical printers, Fleury Mesplat (who founded the *Quebec Gazette* in 1764) and the gallant Valentin Jautard, who edited *The Gazette of Montreal* in 1778, should be retrieved from history's dustbins.

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