WHEN HISTORY BECOMES A BATTLEFIELD. AN ANALYSIS OF HISTORY EXAMS IN QUEBEC (1970–2012)[1]

Dr JEAN-PHILIPPE WARREN holds a BA and an MA in sociology from Université Laval, and later received his Ph.D. in the same discipline at the Université de Montréal. Dr. Warren joined Concordia University in 2002 after holding teaching positions at Université Laval and Université de Moncton. Since 2005 he holds the Chair of Quebec studies at Concordia University. Dr. Warren is dedicated to a better understanding of Québec society by interweaving many areas (e.g., sociology, philosophy, politics, etc.) that are too often isolated. His current research, highly interdisciplinary by nature, focuses on the history of social sciences in Canada, the popular culture of Quebec, the Catholic Church in Quebec, and social movements in Quebec. The extensive work of Dr. Warren has been published in scholarly journals in history, anthropology, sociology, literature and religious studies, as well as in popular magazines and newspapers such as *Liberté*, *Argument*, *Le Devoir*, *The New York Times* and *The Globe and Mail*.

ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the knowledge on history teaching in Quebec by analyzing Secondary 4 final examination copies for the course History of Quebec and Canada (general education sector), later renamed History and Citizenship Education, and developed by the Ministère de l'éducation [du loisir et du sport] du Québec from 1970 to 2012. This analysis is instructive in more ways than one. Among other things, it allows not only to follow the evolution of the Department's expectations with regards to the teaching of Quebec history over a very long period, but also to follows closely the ideological biases, methodological perspectives and epistemological choices of the Department's examiners. To undertake the analysis of annual examinations is to get closer to the tensions that drive the relationship between facts and identities, history and memory.

As we know, collective memory is not a pure reflection of past experiences, but a construction nourished by both yesterday's events and today's expectations. So there are ongoing tensions between history and memory, tense relationships that never cease to structure discussions on the establishment of history education programs. This article aims to contribute to this debate by reviewing the Secondary 4 final exam copies of the History of Quebec and Canada course (general education sector), later renamed History and Citizenship Education, and developed by the Ministère de l'éducation [du loisir et du sport] du Québec from 1970 to 2012.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the study of Secondary 4 history exams over a 40-year period is that the evolution of the teaching of history in Quebec is marked by three major periods, which are far from homogeneous. The first (1970-1990)

corresponds to the relative dominance of a nationalist vision of the past, dependant on the idea of "nation building." The second (1991-2008) made an increasingly larger place to social history, to historical interpretations invoking demographic or economic factors. The last period (2009-2012), which opens on the implementation of the new History and Citizenship Education course, proposes a conception of history which, rather than insisting on events-based knowledge or even disciplinary expertise, focuses on acquired skills and *savoirs-être*. The conception of history specific to each of the three periods is supported by distinct proponents: nationalists, academic historians and educationalists. The roles of these three groups illustrate the deep conflicts found in the expectations maintained about the teaching of history.

THE DOMINATION OF A NATIONALIST HISTORY (1970–1990)

From 1970 to 1990, the content of the questions in the Secondary 4 examinations clearly reflected the concerns of the nationalist movement. This current represented an intellectual force without real equivalent in twentieth century Quebec, and its militants invested the field of history teaching very early on. From September 1970, it is true, the implementation of a unique history program for Francophone and Anglophone students permitted to put forward a consensual interpretation of Québec society's development. But while there were attempts to modernize the program, to break it down and free it of its most heavily apologetic features so that it could be taught by anyone (mainly Francophones, Anglophones, Catholics, Jews and Protestants), the examinations continued to be invested by a rather explicit nationalist ideology. For example, in 1979, questions 33 to 46 covered topics marked by the nationalist view as well as areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction: Henri Bourassa's opposition to Canada's participation in the Boer War, the conscription crisis, the actions of Duplessis and Mercier for provincial autonomy "so that Quebec fully exercises all its powers," the founding of the Union nationale, the asbestos strike, de Gaulle's "Vive le Québec libre!," Robert Bourassa's victory in 1973 (after, according to the exam questions, having "rejected the Victoria Charter"), the nationalization of electricity, the fact that Iron Ore in Sept-Îles and General Motors in Sainte-Thérèse are subsidiaries of U.S. companies, and the Patriot victory in Saint-Denis.

In the 1980s, the exam questions focused on the (by then) fixed interpretation of a collective future. At the beginning, the colony of New France appeared to have suffered from wars with Native American tribes and English armies, from the nuisances of colonial rule and supply difficulties, but it had been mainly characterized by the resilience of its people, population growth and valiant adaptation to a new environment. Then, the Conquest had plunged the French Canadians in a daily struggle for survival. The main characters and events of this period are (in bulk): Governor Craig, the 92 resolutions, the Rebellions of 1837-1838, Lord Durham, the Act of Union, the hanging of Louis Riel, Regulation XVII, both conscription crises. Finally, the 1960s ushered in a period of great revival. Abandoning the former name of French Canadians, Quebecers have shaken off the yoke of the English and Catholic Church domination and affirmed, through a regenerated state, their collective destiny. In this narrative, that which outweighed all other elements, without excluding them, was the struggle for the national affirmation of French-speaking Canadians.

Certainly, since the 1982 program, which was supposed to be more inclusive of traditionally neglected groups, reviewers gave the impression of trying to diversify the portrait of Quebec society. However, these efforts hardly bore fruit because adding isolated characters and events only served to nuance a core narrative too strong to be shaken. The exams are required to assess the core teaching of all students in Quebec, so they could not cover optional sections or variations of the program aimed at adapting it to various school audiences. Finally, these characters and events, relegated to the background of the story emerging from the questions, only informed a narrative that unfolded largely without them or, alternatively, they were immediately inserted into the national group narrative and used to consolidate the frame. By selecting which of the past should be the subject of commemorations and what should be thrown to the dustbin of history, by constructing the frame of the nation's future from disparate and often conflicting materials, the exams ended up presenting, as noted by Jocelyn Létourneau at the turn of the 1990s, a rather coherent, unitary and homogeneous development of Quebec society, despite the implementation of a program ultimately quite progressive and the circulation of schools manuals with a rather pluralistic focus.

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL HISTORY (1991–2008)

The exam questions from 1970 to 1990 not only betrayed a nationalist bias, they also showed a historical practice still highly focused on politics and events. This paradigm, however, was increasingly undermined in Quebec's history departments by the young generation of historians who blamed political history for a formal and institutional conception of the past.

It is not easy to say exactly when the exams started to tilt toward social history. The implementation of the 1982 program, which became mandatory in all schools in the middle of the decade, indeed required a transition period to allow teachers time to adjust to the new requirements. What can be said is that in the early 1990s, the transformation was finally completed. Sign of this trend, the authors cited in the 1986 review (Susan M. Trofimenkoff, Edgar McInnis, JMS Careless, Donald Creighton, Cameron Nish, who belonged more to the world of political and intellectual history) were replaced ten years later by the protagonists of social history (John A. Dickinson, Brian Young, Paul-André Linteau, Terry Copp.) Another sign, the focus on the 1760-1840 period decreased in favour of the second industrialization phase of the early twentieth century which was considered, by historians from the Annales school of history, a particularly interesting cycle from the perspective of socio-economic changes.

Since 1982, the program of the Ministry insisted that students be trained in historical practices and not only informed of the results of their research. It was about getting students to master the intellectual and technical skills related to historical methods. Having students manipulate primary source materials, just like professional historians do, met this requirement. From the 1990s on, aided by advances in printing, exams incorporated a growing number of archival documents, either quotes or iconographic material. In 2005, no less than 35 excerpts were reproduced in the examination, while in 1970 there were none and in 1985 only 13.

Another major change: the narrative emerging from these exams was not an epic. It was no longer about making history alive for students. The expertise that they sought to develop was intended to be objective and empirical. Tables, figures and statistical curves were involved in this effort of "scientization." It also emphasized the *longue durée*; the exact dates became less important than the general chronology. Finally, the socio-economic relations that deeply structured the development of Quebec society were highlighted more than ever. Political developments were interpreted, ultimately, as a series of adjustments of the superstructure to the disruptions of the infrastructure.

While not forgotten, Francophones were no longer the preferred reference group. The poor and the workers were covered by more exam questions. In 2004, the images reproduced for the period after the Rebellion illustrated, in order, a load of wood hewn from Quebec to Great Britain, the public works program for the unemployed, the role of hydropower in industrial development in Shawinigan, female workers examining cannon shells during the Second World War, a direct aid coupon, the front page of *Le Devoir* announcing the Crash of 1929, a public dormitory, the gathering of the Front commun at Paul Sauvé arena in Montreal, factory work, the workers' strike at the Port of Montreal and the interior of a working class home. The impression looming behind this string of iconographic documents is that of a people more defined by social status than by language or culture, even if elements such as the adoption of Bill 101 or the conscription crisis were mentioned in passing. It is also the power relations that pitted primarily the poor against the rich. We perceive that the writers are implicitly trying to show students that, far from being united and homogeneous as one might think, Quebec society was once divided by deep conflicts of interest.

One would think that this fragmented presentation of the past would mark the end of a global interpretation of Quebec. Such is not the case. Despite constant calls from the Ministry to diversify the national narrative transmitted in the history course, the implicit frame that emerges when reading the exams remained very ethnocentric and focused around the tribulations of the Franco-Quebecois group. The Amerindians were hardly the subjects of direct questions, Anglophones and immigrants remained mainly defined as enemies or threats, and the feminist movement, if it was even the subject of questions (in which were recalled, for example, the actions of Claire Kirkland-Casgrain and Idola Saint-Jean, the suffragettes, the right to vote in provincial elections and the law on pay equity), seemed too often added as an aside for reasons of political correctness. Basically, it was understood that the popular class described by social history was French and that behind the struggles of the unionized or the downtrodden, the protests of Franco-Québécois stood out above all.

THE TRIUMPH OF A NEW INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH (2009–2012)

Recognizing the increasing influence of researchers in the faculties of education on the issue of teaching Quebec history, the introduction of the new History and Citizenship Education course revolutionized the writing of Secondary 4 history examinations. These changes were much easier to implement than those from 2009 to 2011 and, therefore, the Ministry could use them as "laboratories" to test some innovative approaches. In turn, this also means that these exams have exceptional value and we have to be careful about generalizations that can be drawn from this period which is, moreover, very short.

Let us note at the outset that in 2008, on the eve of the replacement of the History of Quebec and Canada course by the History and Citizenship Education course, the examination had already undergone profound changes since it has been implemented twenty years earlier. Already in 1991, seven essay questions had been inserted in what was previously an exam that consisted only of thirty multiple choice questions. In 2004, a comprehensive section was added, tasking the student to demonstrate, with the help of historical documents, the ability to perform a synthesis by establishing coherent links between the main elements of a historical reality. One can note that an effort was made to ensure that the exam required students to do a real work of understanding, reasoning and mapping, instead of simply gauging his/her ability to store information. The reform introduced in the year-end exam in 2009, however, went much further.

Since at least the 1980s, there had been attempts to bring the study of the past closer to the interests of high school students. This intention was reflected in the greater proportion of the total number of questions focusing on the recent period and an effort to link the issues of the past with contemporary issues. The 2009 reform intended to build on this momentum and worked harder to make the connection between the study of the past and the present, using yesterday's events first and foremost to understand today's society. The fact that we had decided to present the historical content as a chronology in Secondary 3 and a thematic form in Secondary 4 is no stranger to this intention expressed in reports and departmental directives.

The study of examinations from 2009 to 2012 confirms a partial erasure of temporal and narrative dimensions. First, the exams from 2009 to 2012 required a much less energetic diachronic effort than before. For many, it was for the students to know or establish the precedence or posteriority of facts. The questions were not presented in chronological order from New France to the present day, but in accordance with the Ministry's program, in sections which were called "Population and Settlement," "Culture and thought movements," "Power and Powers" and "Economy and Development." Sometimes we could go, in a leap, from New France to the late nineteenth century and then the 1980s, before returning to New France in the same section, which was not the case in the previous period's exams. The chronology was necessarily blurred.

Then, the old narrative-based nationalism (more obvious in the case of political history, more subtle and veiled in the case of social history) disappeared without really being replaced, as some have said using other indicators, by the grand narrative of Quebec parliamentarism. The nationalist movement was mentioned, certainly, but it was right next to a series of other currents that relativized its scope, such as imperialism, liberalism, feminism, secularism, Americanism and Aboriginalism. Not located in a general narrative framework, the questions ended up floating in space and taking a rather abstract character. The exams covered very loosely the impact of immigration and birthrates on the demographic and social composition of the population in the first half of the nineteenth century, the occupation of northeast America by the three Aboriginal language groups in the sixteenth century, prosperity and mass consumption in the post-war period, the role of agroforestry in the colonization movements, currents of thought in the transformation of Quebec society starting in 1960, the influence of liberal ideas on political institutions and the formation of public opinion until 1848, etc. All these events or phenomena were flattened, unable to find their thickness in the richness of an overall story, as was the case when the nationalist narrative (which lasted until the end of the second period) ensured the implicit consistency of the questions and their order of presentation in the exam.

In the exam copies from 2009 to 2012, information related to indigenous peoples, women and immigrants are more frequent. However, one would be hard pressed to find in these matters any ideological bias, apart from a simple concern for political correctness and a quite natural will to adapt exams to a collective discourse having become less ethnic and more inclusive. What emerges most from looking at these exams is how the

narrative increasingly represented a material used for something other than teaching history. It was used much like the wording of "Mary eats four of her six apples" in math workbooks. This procedural perspective is highlighted not only by the marginalization of historical knowledge (which was hardly evaluated on its own, although it was required in order to pass the exam), but also in the very elaboration of the exams. From 2009, the reference documents were included in a separate booklet. Students were to use these documents to make intellectual operations for which said documents became somewhat of a pretext. The important thing was to be able to determine the explanatory factors and consequences, to establish causality or to relate the facts. We witness the development of exams that resembled, in some respects, an internet web, with students whose task was to draw connections from scattered sources.

It is commendable that the authors of the exams wanted, by adopting a new approach, to allow for full ownership of history. Students should be able to read the issues and position themselves in relation to them. That is why the answers to the questions were not only multiple choice, but included short and direct answers. Another point that many observers considered positive: for the first time, Quebec's representation conveyed by the examinations was diversified and really complexified. Amerindians were described as a group that was self-sufficient, without linking them immediately with the interests of the settlers of New France.

However, overall, it is difficult to see how students could actually get to build their own historical reference from the knowledge and skills mobilized by history exams. It seems that, for them, the choice still arose between the acceptance of the arbitrary nature past events, torn between contingent forces and interests, and the recapture of education in a more familiar grid. Leaving the field open to the instrumentalization of a past left somehow available to everyone, the Ministry exams from 2009 to 2012 contributed in having history play a simpler role of accompaniment.

CONCLUSION

The preparation of these exams is subject to three forces that are more often than not in opposition. Indeed, ideological groups as well as researchers in history departments and those in the faculties of education have all, to one degree or another, interest in offering their vision of what should be the teaching of history in Quebec. However, it is rare that their proposals converge, which condemns them to eternal dissatisfaction. As this article confirms, and as many other studies, the teaching of history itself has a history, and this history is the precipitous continual wrangling between (among others) historians, educationalists and ideologues. The result of these tensions can be found in the Quebec history exams which illustrate, quite eloquently, the often tense exchanges between the political, historiographical and educational fields. For if, in the presentation we chose to adopt, the nationalists, the historians in history departments and the educationalists in faculties of education successively occupy a privileged position in the field of education at the secondary level, it goes without saying that this authority is never complete or exclusive. It is normal to find that unanimity, in these matters, is impracticable and that the debates caused by multiple reformulations and reorganization of the history curriculum in high school for over 40 years are far from over.

NOTES

[1] This article is based on a summary of the analyses presented in Jean-Philippe Warren, "Enseignement, mémoire, histoire: Les examens d'histoire de 4ème secondaire du secteur de la formation générale au Québec (1970-2012)," *Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*, 25(1), Spring 2013: 31-53.