HISTORY TO EXPLAIN CULTURE OR WHY WE SHOULD NOT REPLACE HISTORY LESSONS WITH MATH LESSONS

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ABSTRACT

History can be seen as a discipline that promotes dialogue between first and second cultures. History, in this sense, not only transfers cultural heritage, it also allows us to interpret this heritage and put it in perspective. School history should, according to this definition, help students build bridges between first and second cultures in order to develop historical consciousness. However, if you wish to promote the teaching of history to help maintain this dialogue, it seems necessary to better understand the elements constituting the primary culture of Québec students. How do students define culture, and what is, according to them, the relationship between culture and history? To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative empirical study with 50 Secondary V students from several urban centers in Québec. Participants were asked to answer a questionnaire on Québec culture and on the impact of immigration on the latter.

In 1996, the ministère de l'Éducation, du Sport et des Loisirs (MELS) published the États généraux sur le système d'éducation québécois[1]. This document highlights that there are significant gaps in secondary education, both in program requirements and at the level of pedagogy in the classroom. The book argues, unlike the Inchauspé[2] report, for the need for cultural enhancement of the programs coupled with a return to essential disciplines and concludes that it is imperative to "reconstitute the curriculum, particularly at the secondary level, to give more space for disciplines that can serve as the basis for the cultural enrichment sought."[3] In this perspective, the history lesson is required to play an important role because history is naturally understood as a carrier of culture[4]. That is to say that history allows the student to understand a part of the evolution of society and to develop openness to the world. In this context, history becomes an essential discipline for the development of the

student's collective identity, as it is from its study that the student will develop his sense of citizenship based on his knowledge and understanding of issues, past and present, facing the society to which he belongs.

The Lacoursière report[5] on the teaching of history abounds in the same direction by emphasizing the social literacy function of history. It is to the Lacoursière report[6], then, that we must turn to really understand the origin of the educational foundations of the new history curriculum competencies. Indeed, the document reinstates[7] the need to move away from the teaching of the discipline based on a single fixed narrative that denies the evolving and changing nature of history. Instead, school history, according to the authors of the report, should aim to develop critical thinking skills necessary for informed social participation, openness to the world and for building an understanding of the present based on the past[8].

However, changes in the teaching of history are not unanimously accepted and some researchers[9] advocate a return to the teaching of a single narrative for the transmission of Québec's cultural heritage. They explain that Québec's multiethnic background and the lack of social cohesion require a return to a more traditional learning of history whose aim is not to develop critical thinking but to transmit a common cultural heritage. This view calls into question the role of history in school. Should we focus on the teaching of history whose purpose is the transmission of a Québec culture or history education which helps develop students' critical thinking? What is the role of culture in the history course? To truly answer this question, we should first examine the concept of culture among history students. How do they conceive culture? More importantly, should we make changes to their conceptions? To try and answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative empirical research with Secondary V students (n = 50) from the province of Québec. This essay presents the results of this survey. Before discussing our results, we briefly outline our conception of culture and history and our research methodology.

CONCEPTIONS OF CULTURE AND HISTORY

Before going any further, we should clarify our understanding of culture and history. Defining the term culture is a complex process since, as pointed out by Forquin, the term culture is polysemous, meaning that the definition includes a number of complementary conceptions[10]. Forquin proposes a definition of culture divided into five concepts: the perfective conception, the acceptance or positive descriptive of social sciences, heritage culture, human culture and philosophical use[11]. However, in this survey, it seems preferable to focus on a general definition of culture. To this end, we use Geertz's definition of culture which states that it is "a system of meanings embodied in symbols transmitted over time through which humans communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge of life and their attitudes about them[12]."

This definition may be up for debate, but still has the advantage of emphasizing that culture is a wealth of symbols passed on voluntarily from one generation to another. History, according to this definition can be seen as a vehicle through which today's society transmits elements of culture to the next generation. However, this understanding of history seems incomplete. Indeed, history is not only the vehicle of culture; it is also the science that allows for a critical interpretation of the past. It is based on the work of historical thinking that we can examine and put into perspective the stories conveyed by collective memory[13]. In this sense, history as science plays a role in the development of critical thinking. How, in this case, can we reconcile history as a science with the definition we have given to culture?

To answer this question, we decided to expand our definition of culture to include the ideas of primary and secondary cultures proposed by Dumont[14]. Primary culture, according to Dumont is: "[...] a given. Men move within it in the familiarity of meanings, models and ideals agreed upon: patterns of action, customs, a network through which we spontaneously recognize ourselves in the world and at home." [15] Secondary culture, in turn, refers to a shift away from "a primary sense of the world disseminated in my own praxis of my group context and a secondary community where my historical community tries to give itself a consistent meaning of itself." [16] It is through dialogue between primary and secondary cultures that we can reconcile the roles attributed to history. The interpretive function of history "implies a distancing from the collective memory through the mediation of knowledge of secondary culture, to better understand and grasp its origins." [17]

Thus history can be seen as a discipline that promotes dialogue between primary and secondary cultures. History, in this sense, not only transfers cultural heritage, it also allows to interpret this legacy and puts it into perspective. School history should, according to this definition, help students build bridges between primary and secondary cultures to develop what Dumont calls historical consciousness.[18] However, if we wish to promote the teaching of history to help maintain this dialogue, it seems necessary to better understand the elements constituting the primary culture of Québec's students. How do the students see culture and, according to them, what is the relationship between culture and history?

METHODOLOGY

To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative empirical study with 50 Secondary V students from several urban centers in Québec (Montréal, Québec, Sherbrooke, and Nicolet to name a few). Participants were asked to answer a questionnaire on Québec's culture and on the impact of immigration on the latter. The questionnaire provided the following scenario:

> *"In 1995, during the last referendum on Québec sovereignty, the "no" side won a narrow victory with only 50.6% of the vote against 49.4% for the "yes" side. After the results were announced, Jacques Parizeau, the Premier of Québec at the time and head of the "yes" camp, said: "We were beaten, basically by what? By money and ethnic votes, essentially."*
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> *This statement shocked the public, but for many Jacques Parizeau had simply dared saying what everyone thought quietly, that immigrants, regardless of the time they spend in Québec, will never become "real" Québecers. They can never be fully integrated into the Québec culture and will always cause tensions. Instead, they risk making us lose our values and traditions."*

Once the statement was read, students were asked two questions: the first was to take position in the debate and the second, which was more historical in nature, asked them to explain the causes and consequences of immigration on culture in Québec. We preferred placing the student in a situation that led him/her naturally to deal with culture rather than to ask directly the question: "What is Québec culture?" Indeed, our previous experiments[19] indicate that students have difficulty explaining their conception of culture. These are often just an enumeration of specifically regional culinary specialties. To avoid this problem, the questionnaire's scenario led students to compare their own culture with the culture of the Other[20]. This comparison had the advantage of allowing the emergence of a richer conception of Québec culture and its relationship with immigrant cultures. It is based on the analysis of this report that we can attempt to answer our research questions.

The collected data was analyzed using the NVivo 8 program. For the analysis, we proceeded by emerging categorization[21]. The data was grouped by theme first, and then these themes became the categories of meaning used throughout the analysis. This first step served to determine the conception of culture of the students in our sample. Then, in a second step, we were interested in the relation to the Other and the student's conception of the culture of the Other. The results of this analysis will be presented in sections 4 and 5 of this essay.

PATRIMONIAL CULTURE AND CIVIC CULTURE

The first part of our analysis was to clarify the concept of culture of Québec students. In this analysis, two incompatible conceptions of culture have emerged from reading the research data. Indeed, students in our sample offered either a patrimonial conception of culture or a civic sense of culture.

PATRIMONIAL CULTURE

For 80% of our participants, to call oneself a Québecer is to define oneself, to borrow Forquin's expression[22], through patrimonial culture. According to them, Québecers share a common culture inherited from the past that must be transmitted to future generations. Québec culture has two main characteristics: the French language and the Catholic religion: "Québec's culture is based on freedom, Christianity and family. This culture has always been very open." Colq005[23]. The French language is also the characteristic most

frequently mentioned when participants attempt to define Québec's culture (25% of respondents). It is, for some, the central pillar of Québecois culture: "As long as our language remains stable, I do not see a big change for our culture." Colq022. In this regard, 13% of students emphasize that it is essential for immigrants to learn French: "The only problem is that I dislike the idea of losing my French language. I think immigrants should at least learn to speak our French language, it's about respect for us." Colq014. In this sense, being a Québecer is first and foremost to speak French, hence the emphasis on the transmission of the French language to future generations as well as to newcomers to ensure their integration into Québec culture.

Besides the French language, Québec is also distinguished by the Catholic religion (13% of participants). The recurrence of religion in our data is surprising, especially when considering the small percentage of Québecers who say they are practicing[24]. However, our data was collected in Fall 2008 and Winter 2009, at the moment debates surrounding the new course on ethics and religious culture were taking place. Perhaps this controversy has had an impact on the importance of religion as part of culture. In fact, many students associate the possibility of losing Québec's culture to the disappearance of the Catholic religion. They say: "It (the culture) is lost because immigrants bring new beliefs, then Christianity is left aside and we do not know too many who believe" Colq005. In our data, the Catholic religion is an integral part of the cultural heritage that must be protected and transmitted.

In general, students who seem to understand the notion "Québec culture" from a patrimonial sense of culture see it as an amalgam of values, traditions and customs. Culture is patrimonial, as its components are rooted in the past. Indeed, French language and Catholic religion refer to a conception of Québecers as descendants of French settlers. Associated with this patrimonial sense of culture is the importance of transmitting this heritage to future generations in order to ensure their integration into society. History, in this sense, becomes for these students an efficient way to transmit the cultural heritage of Québec.

CIVIC CULTURE

The patrimonial sense of culture is not shared by all of our participants. In contrast, 20% of them associate Québec culture to Québec citizenship. In other words, the term 'real' Québecer is not addressed by the participants in a patrimonial sense, but in a civic sense. Thus, culture refers to a civic belonging: "No, I think that an immigrant can be a true Québecer from the moment he has his citizenship" Colq008. Obtaining Canadian (or Québec) citizenship is accompanied, according to these students, with social participation: "In accepting them in our society, as citizens, we accept that they have their opinions on our discussions, otherwise we should stop accepting immigrants." Colm072. History loses its function of transmitting a common heritage. Indeed, the discipline serves rather to form a critical citizen capable of thoughtful participation in public debates: "Yes, I agree, because if you vote without knowing the background of the story, yours is a vote of ignorance." Colb127. In short, to be a Québecer, according to these participants, is to share a set of rights and responsibilities related to citizenship.

A SUPERFICIAL UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

Forquin[25] and Goyer[26] highlight the polysemy of the term culture and identify at least five major senses whose complementarity enables us to understand the complexity and richness of the term. There is the perfective sense, the anthropological sense, the patrimonial sense, human culture sense and the philosophical sense. In our sample, the patrimonial and citizenship senses[27] are the only two meanings found. In addition, students who prefer a patrimonial sense tend to reject the meaning of citizenship and vice versa. These results suggest that high school students have a superficial understanding of culture, because students do not address all the meanings of culture and because they stick to the elements from their primary culture.

Indeed, students identify the elements of culture that are familiar to them without questioning their meaning. For example, the participants stressed the importance of French in Québec culture but without

wondering about it. Why is French so important in Québec? How is this importance reflected in society? This kind of thinking is completely absent from our data. This leads us to believe that our participants may have difficulty maintaining the dialogue between their primary and secondary cultures. Because they do not interpret their primary culture, students only present a conception of culture borrowed from society. Thus, the concept of culture found at home, at school and in the media would be accepted en bloc by the student without him/her wondering about its value. This situation weakens culture, in our opinion, because students do not have the tools to take a step back from the culture of the moment. The MELS wishes to form critical citizens capable of thoughtful participation in social debates[28]. However, how can the future citizens participate in social debates if they have not learned to question their primary culture? More importantly, how can schools help students overcome their culture of the moment?

ON THE ABSENCE OF HISTORY

One objective of this survey was to better understand the concept of culture of history students in the course of history. In this sense, we wanted to investigate the influence of historical thinking on the students' understanding of culture. Following the data analysis, it is clear that history is frequently absent from students' responses. The majority of responses collected focus more often than not on recent events or events which took place only a few years ago at most. Few students make connections between the events of the past and those of the present. For example, participants seem to forget the many waves of immigration that have punctuated the province's history. Some students refer to the arrival of the first French settlers, but these remain marginal elements in our sample (less than 4% of participants). In general, immigration is not considered as a historical phenomenon. Culture, when understood in its patrimonial sense, has a special relationship with history. For students who support a conception of patrimonial culture, there does not appear to be a distance between the past and the present. Culture, in this sense, is frozen in time. Participants who offer a conception of culture as heritage in transition tend to use history to emphasize the cultural changes that occurred over the years. However, this use of history seems to steer away from the discipline's main function, that of interpreting the past to identify elements of continuity and change in order to better understand the present. Our analysis suggests that very few students are able to truly understand the role of history. How, then, can we help them develop their understanding of history and its relationship to culture?

HISTORY AND THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY CULTURE

At the beginning of this study, we asked about the role of history as a school subject. We formulated the following question: should school history promote a legacy of heritage or the development of critical thinking? The results of this study lead us to believe that these two functions are in fact inseparable since they work together to ensure that learning history is meaningful for the student. Indeed, the traditional role of a legacy of heritage responds to the student's need to form a collective identity. However, we must not make the mistake of simply passing on this legacy; we must engage students in questioning it. That is why it is important to examine the heritage stories[29] from a critical historical thinking perspective and develop students' historical consciousness. It is from this awareness that students, liberated from a thought processes confined to the present, can enter into dialogue with the culture of the Other because "now, to read in the history of humanity's traditions is to promote as much as to accept them." [30]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we propose to answer our original question: should we change the students' conception of culture? Following our investigation, it seems important to help students deepen their understanding of culture for two reasons: first, to meet the demands of the education program and, second, to help them develop a sense of openess to the world and to the idea of difference. The education program by competencies seeks the cultural development of youths and hopes to see them become interpreters of culture[31]. One of the tasks of the school is, therefore, to help students establish a dialogue between their primary and secondary cultures[32]. However, to meet these expectations, it is necessary to promote, in class,

a less compartmentalized culture. That is to say that we must get students to understand that culture is not limited to its patrimonial or civic sense but rather is composed of several meanings that allow them to understand the complexity of the world in which they live[33]. We are not saying that young people should reject their patrimonial or civic sense of culture but that they should add to their model other aspects of culture. History is an excellent way to help them do so because the discipline encourages students to examine their conceptions of culture based on the study of society. In this sense, the study of history allows the student to become a true interpreter of culture.

Québec society is increasingly multiethnic. Faced with this reality, the school should teach students to be open to difference and to relativize their own culture. To achieve this, it is important that students understand their respective cultures and that they open themselves to the knowledge of differences[34]. According to our data, there are serious shortcomings in this area since students seem to know little about their culture and have difficulty opening to the culture of the Other. Again, the teaching of history appears as a possible solution to this problem. Indeed, as shown in Segal, the study of history helps in the development of tolerance as "the historical attention reveals the genesis of societies, it explains the outcomes in manners, attitudes, institutions, and conditions for change"[35]. Thus, history provides students with both a better understanding of their own culture and an openness to the culture of the Other. However, despite the benefits associated with the teaching of history, the latter is often challenged in school curricula. Recently, the French government expressed its willingness to withdraw history classes from high schools scientific programs, thereby leaving more room for mathematics and other scientific disciplines[36]. This decision would, we believe, deprive students of a discipline that is the spokesman of culture in the sense that history can expand the dialogue between primary and secondary cultures provide a better understanding of their own culture and promote openness to the Other and to difference. Because of this, we should not replace history with mathematics.

NOTES

1 The elementary cycle is not taken into account in the États généraux de 1996; Gouvernement du Québec (1996). Les États généraux sur l'éducation 1995-1996. Rénover notre système d'éducation : dix chantiers prioritaires. Québec : Ministère de l'Éducation.

2 Rapport Inchauspé, (1996), [online] http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/REFORME/curricu/ecole.htm visited on 03/03/13.

3 Les États généraux de l'éducation, [online] http://www.uQuébec.ca/menu/chap3.htm#QUESTION visited on 03/03/2013.

4 *Ibid.,* visited on 03/03/2013.

5 Lacoursière, Québec, Rapport du groupe de travail sur l'enseignement de l'histoire. (1996). *Se souvenir et devenir*, Québec, Ministère de l'éducation, 80p.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Requests for reconciliation between school history and what may be called 'scientific' history are not specific to the competencies program. Instead, this request has been repeated since the introduction of the framework programs in 1967.

8 Lacoursière, 1996, *op. cit*: 1-6.

9 Comeau, R. and J. Rouillard, (2007). « La réforme de l'enseignement de l'histoire et la marginalisation de l'histoire politique dans les universités francophones », *Bulletin d'histoire politique*, 15(3), printemps : 173-180.

10 Forquin, J.-C. (1989). *École et culture. Le point de vue des sociologues britanniques.* Bruxelles : De Boeck. This idea is also considered by Goyer in: Goyer, C. (2002). « La polyphonie des registres culturels, une question de rapports à la culture. L'enseignant comme passeur, médiateur, lieur » *Revue des sciences de l'éducation*. 28(1) : 216.

11 Forquin, *Ibid.*

12 Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures – selected essays –* New York, Basic Books, 417p.

13 Collective memory will be included in the text as a collection of more or less mythical stories common to a particular society. For example, the story of the British conquest is part of the collective memory of Québecers.

14 Dumont, F. (1968). *Le lieu de l'homme. La culture comme distance et mémoire.* Montréal, HMH.

15 *Ibid.*: 51

16 *Ibid.*: 41

17 Duquette C. et H. Côté. (2007). « Comment penser l'initiation culturelle des élèves dans les classes d'histoire au secondaire ? L'approche culturelle dans l'enseignement de l'histoire ». *Le cartable de Clio* (7) : 217.

[18] Dumont F. (1995). *L'avenir de la mémoire*, Nuit blanche éditeur, Montréal : 79.

[19] This experiment is based on a study conducted by 38 students in education in the course « Approches culturelles en classe d'histoire (INT-200) » given in the Winter 2009 semester at Université de Sherbrooke. The students were interviewing high school students on their understanding of culture.

[20] In this text, the term "Other" refers to the groups and individuals who are not part of the student's socio-cultural group.

[21] Paillé, P and A. Muchielli, 2003, *L'analyse qualitative en sciences humaines et sociales*, Paris, Colin, 211p.

[22] Forquin, 1989, *op. cit.*: 9

[23] This is the code used to identify participants.

[24] In 2005, according to Statistics Canada, only 15.7% of people aged between 25 and 44 years old go to Mass once a week while 36.0% said they never attend. [online] http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-630-x/2008001/c-g/10650/5201030-fra.htm last accessed on 01/03/2013.

[25] Forquin, 1989, *op. cit.*: 9

[26] Goyer, 2002, *loc. cit.*: 216

[27] Note that the Forquin's meanings of culture are not exclusive and that the author mentions only the most common. That is why we take the liberty to add a citizenship sense to culture to this definition.

[28] Ministère de l'éducation, du sport et des loisirs du Québec (MELS), (2004) *L'école, tout un programme, programme de formation au premier cycle du secondaire* (7) : 337.

[29] The term heritage narrative refers to accounts on which a society bases its identity in time.

[30] Dumont, 1995, *op.cit.*: 80

[31] MELS, 2004, *op. cit.*: 7

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Duquette and Côté, *loc. cit.*: 216-217

[34] Martineau, 2005, *loc. cit.*: 228

[35] Ségal, A. 2005. « L'histoire, la culture et le civisme à l'école » in Simard and Mellouki, *L'enseignement, Profession intellectuelle*, Québec, PUL : 145.

[36] Piedalet, P. 2009, « Supprimer l'histoire en terminale scientifique, un choix politique », *Le Monde.fr* article available online [online] http://www.lemonde.fr/opinions/chronique/2009/12/09/supprimer-l-histoire-en-terminal-scientifique-un-choix-politique_1277800_3232.html last accessed on 01/03/13.

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