TEACHING QUÉBEC: WHY QUÉBEC'S HISTORY MATTERS TO ENGLISH CANADA

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ABSTRACT

In an era when university administrators are increasingly eyeing "efficiencies" (one crude measure of which might be class size), offering a course where interest has been slight in recent years can be dangerous. A cursory glance through the course calendars of Canada's universities points to a sharp decline over the past few decades of opportunities to study Québec's fascinating history. I will suggest three strategies that might reinvigorate the teaching of Québec and French Canada to students at English language universities. The first of these involves internationalizing the content of the course so that Québec – and indeed Canada – are seen as part of global historical themes. A second strategy is to consider Québec and French Canada as a foil for the examination of North American history. Incorporating such an approach into the teaching of Canadian identity might illuminate the similarities and differences in how the American context has affected Canada's and Québec's histories. Finally, to take into account the "fact" of the Canadian constitution, the construction of political and legal institutions, and interactions with Anglophone Canadians, which have all influenced developments in francophone Québec since Confederation, and indeed before.

It may seem a strange thing to do, but this summer, as happens roughly every second summer, I plan to spend a few days thinking about how to teach Québec's history to mostly unilingual, Anglophone university students. It is a task that presents obvious challenges. Perhaps the most obvious is the search for suitable, up to date readings to assign. Textbooks are not an easy solution, for there are few textbooks on Québec history both written in English and suitable for undergraduate courses. Another challenge is a palpable lack of interest among many undergraduates. In an era when university administrators are increasingly eyeing "efficiencies" (one crude measure of which might be class size), offering a course where interest has been slight in recent years can be dangerous. It wasn't always this way. In the 1970s and 1980s, university History Departments packed courses with materials to help English-speaking students understand their francophone compatriots in Québec. Issues surrounding the Conquest, the agricultural crisis, the abolition of seigneurial tenure, conscription, and the rise of separatism were issues that captured the attentions of professors and students. As an undergraduate in the 1980s, I took two separate Québec courses and at the institution where I now teach, three were on the

books. But this largesse is no more. A cursory glance through the course calendars of Canada's universities points to a sharp decline over the past few decades of opportunities to study Québec's fascinating history. Some Canadian universities offer no courses on Québec at all. My own institution now lists only one, called "Québec and French Canada," tentatively scheduled for every other year.

Of course, courses dedicated to the history of Québec are not the only way to teach the history of French Canada. Québec materials are also incorporated into broader Canadian or survey courses. At the university level, introductory Canadian History courses tend to be given in the first or second year. Typically, these courses are split into two halves: the first usually deals with Canada before Confederation; the second normally covers the period after the passing of the British North America Act in 1867. But, there is a tendency in these courses to cover French Canadian history in a certain pattern. Most will focus on the period of New France, dealing with the arrival of the explorers, trade and conflict with aboriginal peoples, the settling of the St. Lawrence Valley and the seigneurial system, as well as growing conflict with the British colonies to the south. But following the British victory at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, these courses shift focus to the arrival of English settlers, while francophone Canadians blend into the background, popping up again only when they become a problem for national unity. This is perhaps an unfair generalization born of the limited space available here, and recent editions of survey textbooks as well as individual instructors have tried to correct the problem. Nevertheless, given the nature of survey courses and their imperative to include ever more aspects of Canada's past, it is inevitable that French Canadians will fade into the background in this way, even if only by comparison.

Any decline of Québec history at universities also reflects a shift away from an older, regional approach to explaining Canadian history. No longer do Canadian scholars divide history into regional components, but instead focus on particular social or cultural themes of the national past. There is no reason why Québec materials would not appear in these courses. *Poutine* might well figure in a course on food history, but to be anything more than tokenism it must be contextualized, perhaps in a unit on Québec's foodways. And this seems unlikely. Indeed, there has been an implicit "separatism" in the teaching of Canadian history that itself reflects these developments in recent scholarship. Diverging traditions of inquiry between English- and French-speaking academic communities have generated different traditions and approaches to scholarship. Poststructuralist analysis, for instance, has had little impact on French-language historians, who have instead embraced social science methodologies and in particular quantitative methods. The result is that English- and French-language historiographies simply do not speak to one another. But more strikingly, Anglophone and Francophone scholars have simply become less interested in pursuing research that crosses the linguistic line. In a recent essay dedicated to this problem, Magda Fahrni laments the paucity of Québec coverage in Canada's "national" academic journals, but more importantly points the finger at scholarly monographs produced by professional historians.[1] Indeed, many of the books published in the past twenty years proclaiming to be about Canada's history are really only about English Canada, despite their titles. This is a troubling development for a number of reasons, but in the context of this article it suggests a lack of professorial comfort with French language contexts. In the remainder of this article, I will suggest three strategies that can be aligned with these developments and that might reinvigorate the teaching of Québec and French Canada to students at English language universities.

The first of these strategies involves internationalizing the content of the course so that Québec – and indeed Canada – are seen as part of global historical themes. This is precisely the approach taken up by Michel Ducharme in his award-winning book *Le concept de liberté au Canada à l'époque des révolutions atlantiques*.[2] Ducharme takes up the challenge, laid down by Allan Greer in 1995, to find a way to bridge the "yawning chasm" between studies of Upper Canada and Lower Canada, in particular in dealing with the Rebellions of 1837. Greer challenged scholars to find the linkages between events in the two colonies in order to better grasp the "essential nature" of the crisis as a whole.[3] Ducharme argues that both rebellions ought to be seen in the context of the Atlantic Revolutions that overturned old regime political structures in Europe and the Americas. Driven by the pursuit of "liberty", (which Ducharme admits is complex and not easy to define) followers of William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis-Joseph Papineau took up arms against a colonial administration

they believed was depriving them of their inalienable rights. Seen in this context, the rebellions become the last in a line of revolutionary movements beginning in 1776 and linking together the American and French Revolutions, as well as the South American wars of independence against Spain in the first decades of the 19th century. The fact that the Canadian "revolutions" failed, Ducharme opines, makes them no less revolutionary in intent.

There is much promise in this globalizing approach. Along similar lines, the history of Catholic nationalism in the 1920s can be linked to similar movements in other Catholic states. Equally, the Quiet Revolution and the rise of separatism might be linked to postwar decolonization movements in Africa and Asia, or the revolutionary struggles in Latin America and around the globe. That at least two FLQ members are believed to have trained with the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Jordan is some evidence of the link.[4] But the Quiet Revolution is more directly connected to the American civil rights movement, as some Québec nationalists pointed out themselves. After all, Pierre Vallières, the intellectual leader of the FLQ, entitled his autobiography *White Niggers of America* in 1968.[5]

The linkage between the civil rights movement and separatist nationalism in Québec suggests another avenue for the teaching of Québec history to English Canadian students. Québec and French Canada might serve as a foil for the examination of North American history. The cultural hegemony of the United States – the dominance of its film, broadcast and print media, diet, fashions, and consumer goods – certainly contributed to Québec's Americanization. But Americanization, or more properly "Americanicity," also implies Québec be seen as another model for being American. Americanicity in this context refers to the consciousness of being a New World nation, in the same way that Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico are American nations. Perhaps the most striking statement of this Americanicity appears in Gérard Bouchard's *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde*.[6] Bouchard employs a comparative approach to understanding the development of New World or settler societies and concludes that the American milieu (its geography, climate, environment, and cultural appropriation of indigenous peoples) sets New World societies apart from those of the Old World.[7] By emphasizing the Americanicity of Québec, historians can understand its development as a new nation in the context of a settler society. In some ways, Bouchard's invocation of the dual model of rupture and continuity with the Old World harkens back to the 1950s work on settler society ideologies conducted around the American political scientist Louis Hartz. But Bouchard pushes further, using a broader comparative methodology to understand the emergence of New World national identities and cultural practices. It is an approach that resonates with the teaching of Québec history in Québec's universities and the long embrace of the idea of l'*Amérique française.* Incorporating such an approach into the teaching of Canadian identity might illuminate the similarities and differences in how the American context has affected Canada's and Québec's histories.

Perhaps the strongest rationale for re-emphasizing the history of Québec, or of French Canada more broadly, in the teaching of Canadian history emerges from a rebuttal to Bouchard's argument. In 2001 Damien-Claude Bélanger used Bouchard's *Genèse des nations* as a springboard for a broader critique of what he saw as a fundamental weakness in Québécois historiography.[8] Like many historians in Québec, Bélanger argued, Bouchard denied the "Canadianicity" of Québec while celebrating its Americanicity. As Bélanger suggested, Canadianicity captures two fundamental elements of Québec's historical development: its constitutional link to Canada through Confederation, and the embedding of francophone Québec in a cultural community that spills over its borders into "French Canada." The "fact" of the Canadian constitution, the construction of political and legal institutions, and interactions with Anglophone Canadians have all influenced developments in francophone Québec since Confederation, and indeed before. Moreover, French culture in northern North America is not restricted to the territory within the present boundaries of Québec. And there has been a historic connection between francophone Québécois and French and Catholic minorities elsewhere in the Dominion of Canada. This is a principle I explain to students as "double minority." Historical interactions between English and French-speaking Canada reflect a strained acknowledgement that Francophones are a minority in Canada, but Anglophones are also a minority in Québec.

But if the history of Québec must include its Canadianicity, surely the inverse is also true. The

symbiotic connection between the histories of English- and French-speaking Canada suggests that Canada's history must recognize its own "Québec-icity." Inserting Québec or French Canada more directly into the teaching of Canadian history in this way need not be a political act. It need not imply a return to the language of "two solitudes." It is, rather, an act of the recovery of knowledge. Simply put, Canada's Québec-icity recognizes that the processes by which many of this country's unique features developed were shaped by compromises intended to accommodate the values of two majority communities. And this recognition need not be invoked only in discussions of national unity. It explains the persistence of publicly-funded separate school systems for Catholic minorities, a policy secured by the support of Québec's politicians for their coreligionists in Ontario in the 1860s. Québec-icity also explains the rise of modern values, such as multiculturalism, which emerged from volume four of the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. Canada's political, cultural, and social institutions are run through with what an earlier generation of scholars, using a dated terminology, dubbed Canadian "duality." The entrenchment of principles of cultural difference in Canadian federalism, termed by Samuel LaSelva its "moral foundation," emerged from political compromises in central Canada in the 1840s and 1850s and extended outwards after Confederation.[9] Certainly historians can debate the implications and essential meanings of those compromises, but their existence suggests the importance of teaching today's students about Canada's Québec-icity. And Canada's history might well be richer and more distinct because of it.

NOTES

1 Magda Fahrni, "Reflections on the Place of Québec in Historical Writing on Canada," in Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson (eds) *Contesting Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009): 10-12.

2 Michel Ducharme, *Le concept de liberté au Canada à l'époque des révolutions atlantiques* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

3 Allan Greer, "1837-38: Rebellion Reconsidered," *Canadian Historical Review* 76(1) (March 1995): 11.

4 David Charters, "The Amateur Revolutionaries: A Reassessment of the FLQ," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9(1) (Spring 1997): 137.

5 Pierre Vallières, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique: autobiographie précoce d'un "terroriste" Québécois* (Montréal: Éditions Parti Pris, 1968) translated as *White Niggers of America* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).

6 Gérard Bouchard, *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde: essai d'histoire comparée* (Montréal : Boréal, 2001).

7 Bouchard includes South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand in this category, much as John Weaver does in his fascinating comparative study of the same terrain and time, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

8 Damien-Claude Bélanger, "Les historiens révisionnistes et le rejet de la "Canadianité" du Québec: Réflexions en marge de la *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde* de Gérard Bouchard," *Mens* 2(1) (Automne 2001): 105-12.

9 Samuel V. LaSelva, *Moral Foundations of Canadian Federalism: Paradoxes, Achievements, and Tragedies of Nationhood* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).