TEACHING HISTORY IN ENGLISH IN QUEBEC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

How does the instruction of Quebec history effect the quality of citizenship in the young Montreal Anglophone community? This presentation is an attempt at answering that very basic question. Does a distinctly national historiography include its largest minority in a way which contributes to the students sense of belonging? More importantly does it contribute to a students social and political participation in a time where the notions of identity and citizenship are being debated and presented in the High School history classroom?

Je m'appelle John Commins et ça fait 20 ans que j'enseigne l'histoire au Québec. Je suis diplômé en histoire de l'Université Concordia. Puis j'ai fait un certificat en enseignement à l'Université de Montréal où je pense être le seul diplômé de cette université qualifié pour enseigner l'histoire uniquement en anglais. Ça c'est un accommodement raisonnable! J'ai essayé de passer l'examen de français à trois reprises et la dernière fois, quand j'ai ouvert mon Grevisse et que j'ai vu 14 pages d'exceptions expliquant comment accorder le participe passé avec l'auxiliaire avoir, j'ai abandonné. J'ai travaillé huit ans dans le Grand Nord québécois où j'ai enseigné l'histoire du Québec et du Canada aux élèves Inuits. Ça c'était un beau défi! J'ai travaillé sept ans à Royal West Academy qui, selon le Fraser Institut, est la meilleure école publique anglophone au Québec. Cette école sélectionne les élèves au moyen d'un examen et d'une entrevue. Je traiterai de cette dernière expérience avec mes élèves à Royal West, dont la majorité est destinée à faire partie de l'élite anglophone dans une dizaine d'années.

Mais d'abord, réglons la question linguistique, une question qui nous obsède depuis 250 ans. Je suis un Anglophone. C'est la désignation identitaire la plus importante qu'on m'attribue ici au Québec, et c'est la plus lourde à porter, and for that reason I will continue in English. I would also like to say upfront that I am not carrying water for any political ideology or party. One of the key objectifications of Anglophones here in Quebec is their obvious universal political and worldview and of course great wealth. It's an objectification I don't share especially the great wealth part.

The constituency that I am representing is my students and the part that history plays in their lives and how specifically Quebec history and its narrative impacts the quality of their citizenship, specifically in their relationship to the Quebec state. Which is where I will eventually head. First of all who are they?

My kids come from every single ethnic and religious background imaginable. Except one, the only cultural context they share is there collective capacity to be declared legally eligible to attend English schooling. They are the children of the pre –Bill 101 immigrant community, along with a very few members of the historic British communities. I will give an example to illustrate this.

At Royal West Academy I teach four sections of 20th century history. I always asked my students if they had grandparents who had participated in WW2. It is an assignment to bring a personal dimension to the study. Here is what came back in one section. Their grandfathers served in the RCAF, The Black Watch, Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, The Grenadier Guards, the Russian Red Army, Italian Navy and Army, Italian Communist Partisans, Polish Free Forces, Polish Partisans, The US Marines, Royal Navy, Royal Air force, Mao's Red Army, Chiang Kai-shek Nationalist Forces, and the Wehrmacht, etc. Very few of course had their grandfathers in the SS… This of course illustrates a very obvious point about the nature of the Anglophone community and the kids I teach.

These kids are as ethnically diverse as anywhere else in urban Canada. The one key generational difference is the fact that my students speak and write French. At Royal West

every course till grade 10 is given in French, our Quebec – Canada History course at the grade 10 levels is given exclusively in French. The textbook and test are exactly the same ones that Francophone students get. Practically all of my students come out of French Immersion programs. Out of 174 students that graduated in 2006 at RWA, all received bilingual certificates. To graduate in the English school system in Quebec and not know how to communicate in French means that you're a special needs student or a Francophobe.

It's an incredible paradigm shift to my experience growing up in pre-bill 101 Quebec. Where French teaching was a sorry mess and learning French wasn't seen as necessary for economic mobility. Now it is. My students could and should be an incredible asset to the Quebec community and state.

The question that's being asked here is very clear, what it is like to teach these students history in Quebec and how does Quebec history and its teaching affect the quality of my student's citizenship?

First my students intrinsically know one one thing, history in Quebec is important. The Quebec state mandates more history teaching at the elementary and secondary level then anywhere else in Canada. Until this year you could not graduate from High School unless you passed your Grade 10 History course. You could flunk Math, Science, and Ethics and yes Gym. However you could not fail history and receive a high school leaving certificate. My students know this and sometimes have asked why?

The reason in my mind is obvious, the Quebec state since before the advent of the Quiet Revolution has sought to foster a strong sense of national identity and allegiance. This national identity has been constructed for the most part by Quebec historians so there work has had an honored place in Quebec's pedagogy and society. The Quebec state for the most part has utilized a very specific historical narrative. To the point where Jean Charest was asked this summer during the celebration of Quebec City's 400th Anniversary, what characterized the Quebec experience, he responded with one word "Survivance". Which to anyone who has studied Quebec history points very directly to one school of thought.

This narrative that developed from Garneau, to Groulx, to Seguin and finally with Gerald Bouchard has been I would argue the functioning state narrative. An embattled minority surrounded and struggling to survive. With the states prime function to protect and to promote that minority which in fact in my kids lives is a majority. In this narrative where are my students? Where do they exist?

One of the reasons I was invited to give a paper at the 6th Biennial Conference on the Teaching and Learning of History, probably the only reason, was my participation in the reform of the history programs at the grade 9 and 10 level. I asked to participate and was selected. The reason I asked to participate was reading the first summary statement of what the new history program would be and what it wouldn't be.

First a citizenship component would be added, citizenship to my mind was a statement of inclusion. A really bold statement that all who were citizens of this state would and should be included as real constituents. Secondly, what it wouldn't be. I'll read you what I read that day:

> In the Western world, historical education began to be a standard feature of the curriculum in the public schools in the context of the rise of the nation state a little over a century ago. Its introduction reflected a concern for citizenship education: historical narratives were used to instill a national identity and a belief in the validity of the existing social and political order. In the framework of the present program, the purpose of teaching history and citizenship education is RATHER to contribute to the education of citizens who are capable of well informed, open-minded social participation. In accordance with the principles of democracy.

So the notion of a deeply ethnic and national history was going to be challenged. The notion of national history was looked upon in a way I had never read in any official state educational document. I also knew that in Quebec this was going to be trouble.

There were 16 of us who were selected to work on the program, 14 of my colleagues were of French origin, there was a member of the first nations, Mike Rice and myself. We had two years in which we vetted what had been written .We

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had no editorial control and acted as a sounding board. We did however collectively have an impact on what was written. It was an incredibly enriching experience with colleagues who were thinking of their kids first. Colleagues who were for the most part nationalists and sovereignists, but who recognized that Quebec was evolving and other stories needed to be told and that citizenship could compliment existing narratives. I was really blessed to have worked with these dedicated professionals. We were led by Marius Langlois (from the ministère de l'Éducation, du loisir et du sport) who treated all our diversity and differences with respect and believe me their were differences.

This guiding spirit came to end when the journalist Antoine Robitaille of *Le Devoir* printed an article that essentially said that there was a federalist plot to water down Quebec's national history by making it less… conflictual! The glory of continuous defeat and victimization was somehow being challenged. The notion of dueling French Quebec nationalism and English reaction so comforting to the Quebec nationalist narrative was somehow being questioned as the sole historic vector. It took the liberal minister of Education about 10 minutes to realize he wouldn't fight this battle. He recognized politically he wouldn't have a chance. History and its telling was not a battle he would fight. So conflict writ large was reintroduced. Quebec contemporary politics would be served by history.

In Quebec the media echo chamber is pretty small so these mini-scandals erupt with some frequency. The intensity of this event was really quite extraordinary. So much hyperbole and half truths bandied about by committed political ideologues whose major function was to intimidate debate and sanction any non- orthodox historic thinking. The whole notion of citizenship history was attacked. It was seen as a conspiracy to somehow minimize or denigrate the contribution of the French catholic majority. It was a very sad moment for Quebec history students and I mean Francophones and Anglophones as well.

In my mind their was little doubt a chill would occur and would have an influence when publishers started writing the approved textbooks. Publishers would now fear that any inclusive non majority stories would be considered in light of this controversy.

In a broad sense I was wrong and to the publishers credit their were more stories and a broader narrative, but this seemed to be centered in the new cultural communities and first nations. The reform of programs did contribute to a broader narrative but the Anglophone community in my eyes remained static.

When Ronald Rudin wrote *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980* (IQRC, 1985), it was translated as *L'histoire du Québec anglophone, 1759-1980* (IQRC, 1986). The forgotten part was a given and herein lies a key problem.

The objectification of the Anglophone community as either a planter community a la Ulster- Loyalists or as the remnants of the Golden Mile is still a very seductive one and unfortunately an omnipresent one. Not in any way shape or form as it once was but it's still there and what compromises my students learning is that it is such a caricature of the Anglophone community. When my kids would open a pre reform history text and read it and remember they would read it French. At the end of the year they would be confronted by this question. Is that us? Is that me? Redcoat, Wolfe, Merchants , Montreal Party, McGill , Molson, Hang Patriots, Golden Mile, Van Horne, Holt, Italians throwing chairs in St. Leonard… That's it! That us!

I will provide concrete examples of some missing pages that would help challenge common objectifications of the Anglophone community and in the next reform should be incorporated. I will probably be dead but it would go far to breaking stereotypes and I'd die happy.

First the vast majority of Anglophones who started arriving in urban Quebec at the dawn of the 19th century were poor and they were Quebec's first urban proletariat. They were concentrated in Quebec City and Montreal to such an extent that by mid –century Anglophones were for a period a majority in Quebec's two largest cities.

These Anglophones spearheaded the first attempts at organizing the industrial class with as many as 20 being mowed down by soldiers and cavalry in June of 1842 at Beauhornois Canal. MacInness, Gormley, and O'Doyle left there blood in the canals and roads and bridges of Quebec's largest cities. They helped build Montreal and Quebec City. Montreal's civic flag is emblematic of this fact. They contributed mightily to building Quebec and more often then not in solidarity with Francophone working men and women.

When Dickie Moore and Doug Harvey and Bill Durnham and Donnie Marshall and Scotty Bowman helped lead the Montreal Canadians to Stanley Cups their dads were workingmen from the blue collar neighborhoods in Montreal. The closest their Dads got to the Golden Mile was to take out the trash. Francophone students rarely if ever get these missing pages and it hurts them and our collective.

Secondly a black hole in Quebec secondary histography that needs to be addressed in the next reform is World War 2 . This War was a clash of Civilizations of the most desperate kind yet in Quebec 120,000 volunteers who fought and died in that conflict live in historic limbo, the majority of them Francophones. Their stories rarely if ever told. The biggest and bloodiest conflict of our civilization is reduced to Conscription and women went to work.

In my neighborhood in Montreal our local High School, West Hill, lost 45 killed by late 1944. Everyone

knows that many elites in Quebec were against Canada's participation but the time is long overdue to introduce Quebec's students not only to Michel Chartrand but his brother Gabriel Chartrand who volunteered to be dropped into Belgium to get downed air man home, with the sure knowledge that he would face immediate torture and execution if captured. Why not his story too? Imagine the teaching opportunities around the choices of these two brothers. In marginalizing WW II Anglophones are again seen as living outside the collective.

Finalement, le dernier point. Mes élèves sont bilingues, brillants et créatifs. Quand j'enseigne l'histoire du Québec, je pense souvent à Gérald Bouchard et à ses propositions pour enseigner l'histoire nationale. Pour lui, c'est une question d'appartenance et de cohésion sociale. Partant, il conçoit le cercle de la citoyenneté de manière élargie. Or, mes élèves ne se voient pas comme pleinement partenaires dans l'État québécois. Ils ne se voient pas dans la fonction publique, dans le secteur para-public, ou dans l'appareil gouvernemental. Pourriez-vous imaginer enseigner la citoyenneté et la participation politique quand vos élèves et vous savez qu'ils ne pourront jamais devenir premier ministre du Québec ?

Moi, j'ai souvent dit à mes élèves : « Vous êtes chez vous ! Défoncez ces portes ! » À mes frères et sœurs d'origine française, je dis : « j'ai besoin de votre aide ! »