U.S. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS BY THE NUMBERS

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ABSTRACT

The quantitative comparisons of attitudes toward history in four countries (Canada, USA, UK, France) reveal a great deal of similarity, including a great deal of respect for the importance of historical knowledge. More importantly, the data reveal significant linguistic/ethno-racial, generational, and class differences in respect to trust in history as presented in schools and other media. The most interesting finding has to do with "critical" as opposed to easily digested history: older respondents are uneasy with such history, while those recently educated, whether in secondary schools or colleges, where critical analysis of history is part of the curriculum are much more comfortable and more ready to combine a strong sense of affiliation simultaneously to nation, region, and group. The data also provide a foundation for a sophisticated qualitative follow up studies.

The survey data developed by the Association of Canadian Studies address the question of historical consciousness in Canada—with comparative information from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom—establishes a valuable knowledge base for thinking about the place of history in the lives of citizens in these four nations. That said, I am not sure that the data at hand points directly to "historical consciousness." It does, however, provide a fundamentally important knowledge-base for further inquiry, one that is able to ask different questions, some of which would need to be qualitative rather than quantitative. Equally important, the presentation made by Raphaël Gani demonstrated that some rich qualitative inquiry can be presented in quantitative form.

The project so far has produced a good deal of valuable quantitative information concerning *attitudes* about history and a platform from which to move to a more qualitative survey that can deepen the meaning of that data and bring us to an understanding of contemporary "historical consciousness" in these four nations. With this information in hand, it will be possible to inquire more deeply into the popular understanding of the *meaning* and *uses* of history, historical knowledge, and what might more generally be called historical thinking. There is a real prospect of identifying the uses of historical consciousness in vernacular thinking about quotidian and civic life.

If the present data represents only a first step, it nonetheless presents us with important findings. One is that few significant differences among the nations emerged in the survey. We often forget that documenting similarity is as important as documented difference. Indeed, the finding of similarity suggests to me that the role of history in civic life may be a settled matter in the four nations. That is an encouraging finding. There were relatively few surprises on particular questions, and that too encourages me. Even if many of the findings were largely expected, like natural scientists we ought to be encouraged with predictable results. Vague assumptions are now empirically grounded knowledge. We have a baseline for further inquiries, both new questions and deeper follow up on some of the questions that mark either similarity or difference.

There was one finding that surprised me. I would have thought that the French would consider themselves to be more knowledgeable about their own history than were the citizens of any other country. But the self-evaluations of the French respondents produced the lowest score on that question. That said, the pattern is more of convergence than it is of divergence. And why not? It reminds us of something we should not forget. The root culture of the populations of Canada and the United States are Britain in both cases and for a large part of Canada one must consider the French legacy. More broadly stated, there is a North

Atlantic historical culture shared by all four nations. Had there been comparisons with China, or the Soviet Union, or South Africa then significant differences would have been more likely. But, again, the important point is that validation of hunches is as valuable in research as is the discovery of the unexpected.

The most significant differences that emerge within nations are most often associated with ethno-religious differences. That is to say, French and English language in Canada, and white and black in the United States. These differences are important, yet in the United States—I do not have data on this issue for Canada—pride in country crosses the color line. This agreement is not so evident in the category of "very strong agreement" with the statement concerning pride in the nation. That should not be a surprise for a minority population that has historically received promises but never results commensurate with those promises. For that reason my focus is on the secondary category of agreement—"strong agreement." For this category white and black were equally positive, and the numbers of both black and white selecting this category was larger than the number of either in the "very strong agreement" category. Another consideration emerges as a follow up to national pride: commitments to regional or family histories are evidently compatible with a strong commitment to nation. This piece of good news on multiple affiliations or identifications in association with a strong commitment to nation points to the possibility of a cosmopolitan understanding of modern nationality, a point to which I will return at the close of this essay.

The most valuable findings of the surveys in the four nations concern the deep and intricate connection between knowledge of history, particularly national history, and ideas and feelings about one's nation. The association is not novel; indeed history as a professional academic discipline emerged as a cultural collaborator of the political creators of the modern nation-state. As the French historian Ernest Renan argued in 1882, when France was in the midst of its own Third Republic nation-making project, it is a common memory or history (and forgetting) that sustains national identification. But it is suggestive to see this data on the concatenation historical interests across attachments to city and region (except in France, where national sentiment overwhelms other civic attachments), and ethno-cultural identity. Perhaps historical consciousness itself in its capaciousness nourishes a capacity for association that makes possible for multiple, perhaps even unlimited, associations or identifications.

For this reason I regret that neither the Canada nor the United States survey included the distinct category of First People or Native Americans. Their cultures are rich in historical consciousness, and their identities are sustained by historical narratives. But their historical consciousness has been formed and sustained differently, with a larger role in oral culture and artifacts. And the relation of Indians to the nation in both the U.S. and Canada is significantly different from all other groups.

At a time when "critical thinking" is the mantra of educational reform in the United States, the question about sensitivity to criticism of national history is very timely. Certainly that is one of my major objectives as a history teacher. Of course, some people worry that a critical attitude national history implies a negative presentation that will weaken national affiliation. Such a logic misunderstands the purpose. If history is to be of any personal and social use, it must be committed to the complexity that critical reasoning brings into focus. Without that understanding of the ways society works, history is rendered useless as a tool for understanding one's individual and collective situation and devising ways of improving it. Moreover, the dishonesty of feel-good history, readily exposed, de-legitimates its institutional sponsor. Hence the power and wide sales of James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995).

On the basis of the survey findings for the United States it seems that the older the respondent the more he or she was uneasy with criticism of the nation's past. On a personal level, this is probably understandable as a natural development. There seems to be a human universal that the old worry about changes away from what was their youthful normal or develop skepticism about later generations. Moreover, the longer one lives in a place—whether a neighborhood, a nation, or a city, the more it becomes a part of the person. Hence criticism of the place could seem to touch one's own sense of self. But the way history was taught in the schools and even the colleges 40, 50 or 60 years ago may be a more important part of the explanation. Then history was taught in a didactic fashion and it was a very Whiggish story—beginning perfect and improving all the time. That does not prepare one for a constructive conversation about darker episodes brushed under the rug in the textbooks. Those who learned their history 50 or 60 years ago were taught in way that was utterly uncritical at the K-12 level. A more analytical presentation, a critical presentation, would be alien to their understanding of history. The younger respondents have been taught history in a way that encourages critical thinking, and differing views, even negative ones, are more likely to be a subject for serious discussion rather than for dismissal.

It is significant that the more educated the respondent, the less worried they were about criticism; college graduates were hardly worried at all. Equally interesting, those respondents in the youngest category were also less

worried about the critical spirit, precisely because they were taught history under the recent critical approach. A critical method in addressing the available evidence is likely to form a different historical consciousness and a different (and, I would say, healthier) relation to one's national history. A critical understanding of a national history (as with any history, whether of the history of science or another national history) is what one seeks as a teacher. In fact, the evidence associated with the youngest cohort suggests that a critical history may well sustain a stronger national identification than a propagandistic history.

I think it is also important to note that older respondents were uneasy with the notion that different ethno-religious groups may have a different understanding of the national history, while the substantial majority and especially the younger cohort had greater comfort with such pluralism. This openness may be as much the result of out of school cultural developments that make young people in the United States more open to various life-style and cultural differences. This may contribute to the enrichment of historical studies in high school as much as the high school history curriculum opens their eyes. I think for the young critical and multicultural understandings are the product of a mutual play of school and a tolerant youth culture.

One's personal or group circumstance partly and unavoidably influences one's interpretation of history. What people, young or old, bring to a civic or school conversation about the nation depends on what in jargon is called their "subject position." A clearer statement comes from the philosopher Thomas Nagel: there is no "view from nowhere," and whatever our location in relation to the subject in question it will be partially affected by that circumstance.

We see this in the variables in the data presented for United States history. It is not just age and race that count. Wealth and education, along with race, are the most important variables. In general more wealth and more education (two closely associated variables) translate into reponses that are more positive about and more satisfied with the nation's past and their relation to it. The third, race, shows an important division. This division is not one of hostility but one of perspective. It is shaped by historical experience that has been distinctive, and it reflects the experiences of a collective partial exclusion from the promise of American life.

The wealthy are the winners or the children of earlier winners. They have every reason to feel the national history is positive and to embrace it. They can afford to be tolerant of alternative histories because they feel secure. Those with superior education are also winners. More broadly the data suggest a pattern of openness to cultural and political pluralism and critical thinking among the highly educated. These qualities may be sustained by certain qualities of privilege, but they are the values of higher education and are learned values that underwrite a self-conscious commitment to their particular understanding of the civic life and national history.

The black and white divide is a product of history. And one product of that history in the United States is an inverse correlation between wealth and being black. That probably heightens some of the differences and affects some of the respondent's answers. Blacks are more skeptical in general about the nation and about national history, hence their greater interest in alternative histories for ethno-religious groups. But whites and blacks have similar scores on the question of their comfort level about their criticism. Perhaps that is evidence of a common pride in country.

One of the most encouraging findings is the degree to which all groups, but especially the most highly educated (and thus exposed to the most critical thinking about history), have an extremely high trust in teachers and professors, books, and museums. That museums stand at the top of the measure of trust is of particular interest to me. Why should that be the case? In fact, I have no grounded answer, but I suspect that it is because in a museum exhibit the label, with the analysis, is next to the actual evidence. If that is so, it is a possible measure of commitment to a critical, evidence-based history.

In conclusion, I am struck by two findings. The respondents in the United States, United Kingdom, and France all see their nations in historical decline, while Canadians distinctly reject a national narrative of decline. I am surprised, if not astonished, that the respondents from the United States self-evaluate themselves as having a very sound knowledge of their own history and that of other countries. This surely should astonish anyone familiar with references to history and other cultures in the current political discussions in the United States. But then it may be a lesson in the problem of self-grading!