BEWARE "SHARED MEMORY"

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ABSTRACT

Influential pundits have lamented the lack of a shared history that might somehow bind Canadians together. But we are better off without "shared memory": a pluralism of interpretations of history keeps us from confusing any particular interpretation with History itself. We need to share, not memory, but a willingness to keep arguing about our past.

RÉSUMÉ

Des experts influents ont déploré l'absence d'une histoire partagée qui pourrait, d'une manière quelconque, rassembler les Canadiens. Mais on ne devrait pas souhaiter avoir une "mémoire partagée": une pluralité d'interprétations de l'histoire nous aide à ne pas confondre une interprétation particulière avec l'Histoire elle-même. Nous devons partager, pas la mémoire, mais la volonté de continuer à discuter de notre passé.

> "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict."
>
> – Alasdair MacIntyre,
> *After Virtue*

A stupid dog chases a car. At each instant, it aims at the current location of the vehicle. Since the car is moving, the dog's path traces out a curve, and it runs farther than necessary. Thus the stupid dog. A clever dog chases a car. It makes a rough estimate of its speed and that of the car, and runs in a straight line to where the car will be when the paths of the dog and car intersect. Thus the clever dog. And the wise dog? It calmly watches the car pass by, saying to itself "Just what would I do with a car were I to catch it?"[1]

Throughout history, many clever thinkers have laboured to develop a shared memory. And no wonder: in his famous talk on the nation, French historian Ernest Renan commented:

> "Prenez une ville comme Salonique ou Smyrne, vous y trouverez cinq ou six communautés dont chacune a ses souvenirs et qui n'ont entre elles presque rien en commun. Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses."

If Renan is right, then a people becomes a nation only when a shared memory has been constructed through a determined effort of highlighting... and erasing.

In this case, could we ever be a nation? I began my education at the École St-Joachim in Pointe-Claire, Quebec. There we learned the glorious history of New France. I still carry vivid images of Dollard blowing himself up in a heroic attempt to protect Ville-Marie from attack, of de Maisonneuve carrying a cross up Mt. Royal in thanksgiving after floodwaters receded. Given the history that my friends in English school were studying at the time, it has always struck me that Canada's chances of forging a shared memory are close to non-existent.

This has not stopped clever people from trying to develop a "shared narrative" that might bind, if not Canada, then at least the Rest of Canada, that place where history begins, rather than ends, in 1759. So let us ask the question of the wise dog: just what would we do with a shared memory were we able to invent one?

One answer is sadly obvious: there has always been an intimate link between memory and militarism. Near the beginning of Homer's *Iliad*, the Greeks discuss whether to withdraw from the siege of Troy. Agamemnon declares: "Shameful indeed that future men should hear, we fought so long here, with such weight of arms, all uselessly! We made long war for nothing" (Para. 2.119-22). A storyteller begins his story by imagining his characters thinking about the history that will be told about them: the verdict of history is a tool of discipline. An argument ever ancient and ever new: throughout the Vietnam War it was argued that the U.S. would dishonour its dead were

it to pull out. The only way properly to honour the dead, apparently, was to send more off to die.

War and memory are as closely linked today as they ever were. One writer quite conscious of this is Jack Granatstein. Consider his musings on Afghanistan and Iraq. Granatstein cites an official's claim that Canada moved its troops to the Kandahar region, a decision that has cost many Canadian lives, as atonement for our refusal to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq (2007, 92). One might think that Canada should not atone for what has clearly turned out to be a wise choice, but Granatstein feels otherwise: "Canada's economy depends on trade with the United States, and this dependence cannot be changed. We are extremely vulnerable if the administration in Washington is unhappy with us, and we are in peril if border crossings are slowed for even a few minutes more for each truck or if passports are required to cross the border. The need to keep the economy strong ought to have determined the Iraq question for us" (2007, 151).

But there is a problem: would anyone be willing to risk being killed by an IED in order that Ford Canada's shipments to Ford U.S. might spend two minutes less at the border? As G. K. Chesterton once observed, the reasons of *realpolitik* are "almost insanely unreal" for those who must die for them (1925, 158). And so: Enters history, stage right. History being a tremendously pliable thing, a new story can be built and sold, one which constructs Canada as a warrior nation, whose legacy of courage and valour will inspire young Canadians: Inspire them to "Take up our quarrel with the foe," without inquiring too closely just how this foe became a foe, or whether this is a "quarrel" that it is prudent to pursue.

We can observe various expressions of this effort to invent a new warrior history. Granatstein himself strives to destroy the "myth" of Canada as a peacekeeping nation, and ridicules Canadians for embracing that myth.[2] Canada's new citizenship guide mentions Canada's peacekeeping history just once, but gives extensive space to our military history.[3] And, of course, we have the apotheosis of Vimy Ridge, which has morphed from a generally forgotten battle to represent "the birth of a nation" (CIC 2009, 21).[4]

But not every attempt to build a shared memory is linked to the ideological demands of war. Rudyard Griffiths's *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto* emphasizes, not Vimy, but episodes such as the 1840s' reform efforts of LaFontaine and Baldwin. His highlighting of particular moments in Canadian history allows him to make such claims as: "Hard-wired into our collective memory is an awareness of the harm nineteenth-century sectarian variants caused to the country" (2009, 151).[5]

Juxtaposition of the efforts of Griffiths, Granatstein, and the Harper Conservatives, suggests a useful metaphor: their use of history is akin to the firebrand preacher's recourse to "proof texts." The prooftexter "mines" scripture (or history) in order to support a pre-established argument. This is the polar opposite of approaching a text or history with a willingness to learn something that we don't already know, something that may even unsettle us (Gadamer 1989, 269).[6] The prooftexter masquerading as a historian, then, is a ventriloquist. The 'voice' is that of the oracle History: "History proves that..." But the words are not: 'history' is not free to speak its own lines. "Pay attention to history" really means "Pay attention to the argument I wish to make."

Dragging in this or that historical event as support for one's current political agenda is an immortal tactic of rhetoric, and in itself need not be too damaging.[7] But prooftexters become truly noxious when people don't realize just what they are up to: a particular reading of scripture becomes *the* "literal" truth. A particular invocation of history becomes our *true* history, the history of "the Canadian nation and people," as opposed to the history of "the grievers among us" (Granatstein 1998, xiii).

The best way not to be bamboozled in this respect is probably to sustain a pluralism of prooftexters. And that means that the thing we have most to fear is a unified "understanding" of Canadian history: under today's political conditions at least, that unity will not be forged by a patient and honest search to understand all that our history might have to teach us, but through an authoritarian imposition of a politically useful narrative. So we need diversity, not merely ethnic diversity, but political diversity as well, in our readings of history, in order to maintain our very openness to history, to sustain the awareness that it has more to tell us, that history never speaks its last word.

Thus, for example: the conservative wishing to support the war in Afghanistan declares that World War II was when "Canada joined with its democratic allies in the fight to defeat tyranny by force of arms" (CIC 2009, 23). But one who seeks to challenge Canada's close alliance with the U.S. might present the war as a time when Canada had the courage to confront a world power that had demonstrated its contempt for smaller nations and international law. And the environmental activist, observing our government's strategy of taking the climate challenge no more seriously than our neighbours, might present Canada's early declaration of war as a crucial occasion when Canada was not content timidly to follow the lead of the U.S. Other invocations of that single event are no doubt possible.

As the example suggests, the goal is simply to sustain openness to different invocations and interpretations of history, not to encourage the proliferation of parallel

histories in which anyone is free to concoct whatever "facts" suit their agenda.[8] Nor does openness to different interpretations entail a relativism that says that all interpretations are equally valid. One can make a reasonable case, for example, that Trudeau announced a policy of multiculturalism in 1971 as a means to counter Quebec nationalism, or that he sought to bolster Liberal support within various ethnic communities. The claim that he hoped that multiculturalism would convert Canada into "an advance pawn of the Third World in the Western Hemisphere" (Jonas 2006), on the other hand, cannot withstand scrutiny. Different interpretations and invocations of history should be tested against each other, not juxtaposed in untouchable cocoons.

This argument for a pluralism of invocations of history might sound like a brief for cacophony. To return to Renan's argument, am I saying that Canada should content itself with being another "Salonica or Smyrna," fractured by our private memories? On the contrary, *history shows* (see, I can do it too!) that we can be united through our pluralism. The unity we need with respect to our history is the shared understanding that we must continue to argue about our past, continue to put forward different readings of it. This is no small thing: to have a shared commitment to argument about our history really would mark us off from so many nations today that are obsessed with imposing a single reading upon their past.

So do we have the courage to be comfortable with a pluralism of historical understandings, or shall we continue, like the dog who is clever, but not wise, to chase after something we really shouldn't want to attain?

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NOTES

[1] In the language of critical theory, the clever dog displays "cognitive-instrumental" rationality: its methods are well tailored to its goal, but the goal itself is unquestioned. The wise dog displays "practical" rationality: it can question the goals themselves. See, e.g, Habermas (1984, 238).

[2] "I am Canadian, I am a peacekeeper, our citizens say, and we are the world's moral superpower with armed forces that can threaten no one. And, we add, there is no one to threaten us and, were any to try, well, the Americans would defend us " (Granatstein 2007, 54).

[3] This is in stark contrast to the previous citizenship guide. There, the header for the section "What Does Canadian Citizenship Mean?" declares: "We are proud of the fact that we are a peaceful nation. In fact, Canadians act as peacekeepers in many countries around the world" (CIC 2005, 7).

[4] I examined Globe and Mail mentions of Vimy Ridge from 1950 to 2009. From 1950-1984, slightly over three articles per year mention the battle, often just in obituaries. Interest picks up in the new century: nineteen articles annually from 2000-2004, and thirty-six per year in the subsequent five years. As the battle occurred in April, coverage often increases in that month. April 2007 alone saw forty-six articles. In contrast, I can find only two April mentions from 1950-1962: a 1952 obituary and a letter from a reader who was "amazed and discouraged" that the paper gave the battle "not one line" on its 1951 anniversary.

[5] The claim provokes a question: were the memory truly "hard-wired," why would Griffiths have to write a book to remind us of it?

[6] This openness does not require that we be free of biases, that we have attained a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1979). On the contrary, our openness can reveal our biases to us, so long as we are sensitive to the moments when we are "pulled up short" by our reading of a text or of history (Gadamer 1989, 268).

[7] This rhetorical invocation of history is not limited to any particular part of the political spectrum. In 1987, I was picking coffee with my Nicaraguan government coworkers at La Sorpresa, within the war zone. Our return to Managua was delayed by a couple of weeks, which led to much grumbling. We were then gathered together and told that our privations were as nothing compared to the "heroic resistance" of the citizens of Stalingrad during World War II, privations depicted at some length. (In case this history failed to inspire us to heights of stoic heroism, the speaker added: "Oh, and if you do try to leave, we will have to shoot you.")

[8] It surely cannot be healthy for the body politic, for example, that many Americans continue to believe that weapons of mass destruction were actually found in Iraq.