

Je me souviens? Le passé du Québec dans la conscience de sa jeunesse (2014):

One Book in Four Pages

Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland once scorned what he perceived as: “The need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego”. Is there a comparable phenomenon at work when one turns to the apparently endless laments about the purportedly shallowness of historical knowledge from the young generations in Quebec, as well as an absence of consciousness about their national history? In this groundbreaking study, historian Jocelyn Létourneau provides an empirical investigation into how the young generations in Quebec represent and relate to their past. Létourneau surveyed this “historical consciousness” by asking a large number of teenagers and young adults to provide a spontaneous answer to this simple yet straightforward question: "If you had to state what Québec history was all about in one sentence, what would you write". This book analyzes the 3243 answers gathered by Létourneau’s research team in the ten years from 2003 to 2013.

The notion of historical consciousness could be defined as what falls within the active and reflexive grasp and understanding of what happened in the past. It could be described as an cognitive assimilation and appropriation (of varying degrees of coherence and complexity) that draws on primary information or immediate experiences of the past..

To assess the levels and varieties of historical consciousness, Létourneau conducted his study across the province of Quebec in a number of francophone and anglophone educational institutions. The pool of respondents was made of 9th and 10th grade high school students, as well as college and university students from various disciplines (education, health sciences, social sciences). The inquiry was anonymous and the participants were explicitly told that there were no right or wrong answers; only their synthesized version and vision of Quebec’s past mattered.

The statements gathered were divided into 5 general categories, each of which relating to different qualitative modes of appreciation of Quebec history (dramatic, mixed,

positive, neutral, and other). The research focuses precisely on the similarities and differences in the distribution of answers across those five categories according to educational stage, geographical distribution, language, and gender.

“Dramatic” accounts refer to a wide variety of appreciations that range from militant declarations (“Vive le Québec libre!”) to evocations of collective hardship and adversity (“The history of Quebec is a lot of hard work and determination”) to melancholic laments painting a negative appreciation of Quebec’s historical experience (“A series of failures”). The “mixed” statements were those that displayed a mangle of adversity and success, often epitomized by formulas such as “ups and downs,” or advocating a mix of pride and shame towards the past of their collectivity. The “positive” statements were those that presented the history of Quebec under an optimistic light or focused on progress and collective accomplishments (“Slow gradual growth of a democratic province”). The other two types of statements were the “neutral” ones, refraining from taking sides or restricting their narrative to a factual accounts, and the “other” statements, which included philosophical or ironic reflections on Quebec history, as well as students who either were not able to answer or misunderstood the question.

A first striking result of this enquiry into the forms of historical consciousness is the obvious quantitative domination of dramatic representations. A large proportion of young Quebecois (around 40% of the total of answers collected) hold to a melancholic or sad vision of Quebec history and a perspective in which the history of Quebec is depicted as a struggle. Why is this pattern of answers so recurrent? If the national history curriculum undoubtedly plays a role in fostering the internalization of this historical narrative, other factors and contingencies have to be taken into consideration, such as the influence of friends and family, the media, political discourses, or historians’ public interventions.

A second finding of the study indicates that, unsurprisingly to a certain extent, historical consciousness seems to get keener and sharper with age. However, it appears that a significant shift occurs around the ages of 16 or 17. At this age, students in Quebec have followed and passed the compulsory course on the History of Canada and Quebec, and

a certain amount of them start to construe their world in political terms precisely at this age, a situation which translates into an impetus to make the past more intelligible in order to develop articulate judgments and assessments on their national history.

The classification of representations from 9th grade students thus differ quite notably from those of 10th grade students. First, the proportion of negative accounts goes from 21.6% to 39.8%. Second, the proportion of positive accounts shrinks from 23,9% to 16,1%, and moreover, neutral statements drop significantly from 28,7% to 16,1%. In other words, at a threshold between 9th and 10th grade, historical visions become more polarized, militant declarations expressing political sentiments are more prevalent, and neutral accounts are much more sparse.

Third important findings: it appears that another shift in historical consciousness occurs between high school and college. Once again, the latter are more firm or categorical in their judgments than their younger counterparts as they produce fewer neutral or unclassifiable statements. But another significant distinction is that even though dramatic accounts are comparably (and even slightly more) prevalent in proportion, the percentage of activist or militant statements shrinks appreciably from 9 to 3, and the tone of these statements gets also much milder. This is obviously not to imply that college students would have a propensity to restrain from political activism, but it appears that their appreciation of history has become more balanced and elaborate. Their formulations are more thorough, articulate and complex. Therefore, it is possible to detect a great amount of continuity from high school to college in the use of historical referents, and the subjective orientation of narratives. Nevertheless Létourneau' study tends to show that college students share more similarities with university students (more nuanced appraisals, elaborate narratives, and complex judgments) than with high school students.

A fourth conclusion that cuts across the entire material is that a large proportion of the students surveyed appear to share of a common pool of historical references. This is substantiated in the vocabulary used, the tropes mobilized, and the events and figures enrolled in their historical narratives. The confrontation of this study of young Quebecois

with other surveys conducted with the rest of the Quebec adult population attests by and large for a strong proximity between teenagers, young adults and the rest of the population in the content of their historical consciousness. All generations seem to refer to the same repertoire of representations. In a large proportion, people of all ages maintain a dramatic (though not necessarily tragic, defeatist or miserable) outlook on the history of Quebec. They thus refer to historical events endowed with strong collective resonances, such as the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the Quiet Revolution, the 1980 referendum, the foundation of Quebec in 1608 and the Rebellions of 1837-38. Likewise, the most prevalent historical figures were Samuel de Champlain, René Lévesque, and Jacques Cartier, who all embody a particular vision of the collective history of Quebec. A hypothesis that could be derived from these observations is that a large proportion of people in Quebec tend to stick to the same historical matrixes that they develop at an early age.

The study also addresses additional issues of note, such as important differences between Anglophone and Francophone students, notable differences between Montreal and the rest of the province, the possible effects of the 2007 education reform on the youth's historical consciousness, and also the presence (or lack of) the rest of Canada and Native Americans in the accounts.

In sum, this book runs against a widespread belief massively asserted and disseminated throughout the media and the public sphere, according to which the Quebec youth displays a distressing ignorance of their national history and lack any sense of historical consciousness or collective memory. Even though if it could indeed be argued that teenagers and young adults in Quebec may exhibit knowledge deficiencies about the events and figures that punctuated their national history, a large proportion of the answers gathered nevertheless attest for the widespread sense of a strong and articulate perspective on the history of Quebec.

In conclusion, if this book does not add up to the litany of complaints about the lack of knowledge or direction of the coming generations, its author nevertheless provides a certain number of propositions for a future-oriented history in order to overcome the

pitfalls of victimization and defeatism. When facing the unsatisfactory state of historical knowledge in the young generations, Letourneau's book pleads for pragmatic solutions that would precisely take into account the visions, experiences and know-hows of the young generations so as to produce new historical metaphors – methapors of contact –, that would lead to the unfolding of new possibilities for comprehending the past and opening the future.