***French-Canadians, national identity and historical consciousness:   
Learning from the views of Franco-Ontarians***

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Let me begin with a short exercise. Take a moment and write down, in your own words, the history of your country, your nation, or your homeland (*patris*) as your know it. Then, summarize your own historical account in one phrase, one tweet. (give them a few seconds to think…)

This is the task that we put before some French Canadian high school students and beginning history teachers from the province of Ontario who live in the Capital of Canada: Ottawa. Without formal notice, we dropped in their classrooms on a cold winter day with laptop computers and asked them to complete a short demographic questionnaire followed by this open task: *Please tell us the history of Ontario as you know it*. Participants could write their story in the way and structure they wished with only one rule: the duration of the task was 60 minutes.

Like many critics in Canada (e.g., Jack Granatstein, Coalition pour l’histoire), we were curious to see whether young French Canadians were largely ignorant about their collective past or whether their identity and education had shaped their historical consciousness. For the purpose of the talk I define “historical consciousness” as the mental reconstruction and appropriation of historical information and experiences that are brought into the mental household of an individual. It involves a complex process of combining the past, the present, and the envisioned future into meaningful and sense-bearing narratives. For Rüsen (2005), historical consciousness serves the reflexive and practical function of orienting life in time, thus guiding our contemporary actions and moral behaviours in reference to past actualities.

In the last 50 years, French-Canada – the historic French-speaking collectivity of Canada – has faced an acceleration of changes: fragmentation of identity along provincial/regional boundaries; migration of population from homogeneous rural towns to multiethnic urban centres, and increased immigration (largely from non-European countries). These complex and rapid changes have challenged the national ideals, collective memory and identity of French Canadians. As a community of memory tracing its origins back to French explorer Jacques Cartier and colonial New France, French Canadians have always been preoccupied with their “survival” in North America. For historian Michel Brunet, the “Conquest” of 1760 by the British during the Seven Years’ War transformed the French in Canada into a “conquered people” (*un peuple conquis*) which triggered an inward looking, defence mechanism that has endured ever since.

Today, French Canadians – living across Canada and representing roughly a quarter of Canada’s population – continue to see themselves as a “founding nation” of Canada; a country created in the 19th century as a federation now made up of 10 provinces and 3 territories. French Canadian identity predated the creation of Canada, but French Canadians have gradually developed more territorialized identity along the lines of their province of residence as a result of important social, cultural and political upheavals taking place in the 1960s - 1970s – known as the “Quiet Revolution” in Québec. This redefinition of French Canada resulted also from internal factors linked to provincial decisions to provide – after much struggle and litigations – greater services and autonomy to Francophones in their own province. In Ontario, for instance, the provincial government granted to the 600,000 strong Franco-Ontarian population with a comprehensive education system along with provincial laws guaranteeing public services in their own language. This redefinition of French Canada along regional lines have led to the emergence of a sense of belonging based upon a cultural language (French) and an identification with the provincial territory (Québec, Ontario, etc.). Yesterday’s French Canadians, as historian Marcel Martel (2007) puts it, “became Franco-Ontarians, Franco-Colombians, Franco-Manitobans, etc.” (p. 27).

Historians have also made a significant contribution to this identity-building process through research documenting the French presence in Ontario going as far back as Samuel de Champlain in the 17th century. They have mobilized the political and educational struggles of Franco-Ontarians against the English majority into narratives that are deeply engraved in the collective memory in the form of “mythistories” – one such mythistory being that Etienne Brûlé, French interpreter for explorer Samuel de Champlain in 1610-1613, would the first “Franco-Ontarian,” a 20th century concept completely foreign to him and his contemporaries. Finally, they have pushed for the recognition of traditional institutions such as schools as necessary conditions and structural elements for the survival of their societal culture and sense of autonomy vis-à-vis English-speaking Canadians. These influences have gradually found their way into the curriculum, which now gives pride of place to the concepts of “Francophone culture,” “Franco-Ontarian identity” and “French Canada.”

But, as curriculum expert Larry Cuban (1993) observes in his “Lure of curricular reform,” there are important differences between what is mandated in official curricula and what is actually learned and appropriated by students. As result, we know very little today about the tangible impact of education in general, and schooling in particular, on students’ identity and historical consciousness. As history educators, key questions arise: Is French Canada/French Ontario part of students’ historical consciousness? Does identity affect or shape their visions of French Canada/French Ontario? Are students’ narratives visions in line with their schooling experience?

To answer these questions, we designed a computerized instrument inspired by the questionnaire of Jocelyn Létourneau who studied the historical consciousness of young French Canadians in Québec. Létourneau postulated that surveys based on memory recall offer poor indicators of students’ historical consciousness. He proposed instead to venture into the minds of learners through story-telling, by asking participants to write a historical narrative (a *story*) of their collectivity. This approach proved to be less intimidating and significantly richer as students were able to offer personal accounts of the past that could hardly be captured in standard survey questions. Also, this narrative approach allowed Létourneau to explore, beyond schooling, the power of collective memory on students’ historical visions of Québec. “The presence of a historical collective memory,” he observes, “is an important factor in shaping students’ narratives about the historical experience of Quebec” (2006, p. 80).

In order to examine empirically the possible relationship between historical narrative and collective identity, we went beyond this narrative task and asked participants some additional questions in the form of “identity mapping.” Students had to chose between different pairing circles overlapping gradually on a continuum (Me vs. Canada; Me vs. Ontario; Me vs. French Ontario). This allowed us to establish each participant’s self-reported sense of belonging to Canada, Ontario, and French Ontario.

To our astonishment, the great majority of students took our “surprise” study very seriously.[[1]](#endnote-1) Stories from participants vary considerably, notably between high school students and beginning teachers. The former produced significantly shorter historical accounts (average of 106 words per text compared to 468 words). Students also made greater historical inaccuracies (confusing dates, names, etc.) and were more likely to offer *presentist* stories (accounts with no direct connection to the collective past). In other words, high school students showed greater difficulty in generating a historical account of Ontario, sometimes confessing their helplessness with catchphrase like: “Honestly, I don’t recall anything….”

But beyond the length and limitations of the stories produced, one is struck by the similarities in “narrative orientation,” in how participants structured their story in reference to a usable past for contemporary making-making. Both groups still privileged a vision of history (48% students and 50% teachers) characterized by a militant, nationalist orientation, commonly known as *la survivance* (the “survival”). The general features of this narrative orientation include:

* An emphasis on the historic tensions between French and English Canadians (with traumatic events like the Conquest, Regulation 17, Montfort Hospital);
* A need to fight and preserve a common heritage and language for the future of the community; and
* An aspiration for *nation-building* either through self-protection or self-government (depending on the views).

As the following university participant[[2]](#endnote-2) puts it:

*I know that, to protect themselves, Francophones have developed strategies to preserve their language, their culture, and their religion with the establishment of catholic school boards. With these, the French population of Ontario is still alive as people fought tooth and nail for survival despite strong assimilation pressure. (Univ-17)*

Interestingly, few participants (10%) provided a nation-building narrative of Canada or Ontario within Canada. For some reasons, the Canadian state did not generate the same kind of personal attachment and narrative orientation among participants. Stories on Canada or Ontario within Canada were largely descriptive with focus on institutions, political leaders, responsible government, and Confederation. They look very much like the depersonalized, consensual story sanctioned in their history textbooks, as found in this narrative excerpt:

*On political ground, we can find intense political life among parties such as the Family Compact and the Liberals of Baldwin, associated with Lafontaine, his equal in Quebec. Together they will play a significant role in the creation of institutions and political regimes to come: responsible government. The province of Ontario is also a promoter of the Confederation of 1867 […]. (Uni-11)*

Perhaps more interesting, and novel in Canadian research, is the correlation between students’ historical accounts and their sense of belonging. Until now, no study demonstrated empirically the link between identity and historical consciousness as expressed in narrative form. We found in both groups *strong* relationships between their identity and the type of narrative they produced.

In fact, the more participants reported a strong sense of belonging to at least one of the communities (Ontario, French Ontario, Canada) the more their narratives presented militant orientations. In the views of participants classified with “high identifier,” the dominant narrative orientation is that of the *positive militancy,* which highlights the noble and glorious exploits of heroic figures who fought for the French Canadian cause (language, education, health care, etc.), and envisions a positive future for the survival of the community. We dubbed this narrative orientation the “just cause” – because it provides a vision of the past based on actions seen as fundamentally right and just.

*Ontario was predominantly English-speaking. Schools were for Anglophones and no service in French. People revolved and fought to get or keep services in French language – people like Gisèle Lalonde who fought for the Montfort Hospital (in the 1990s) so that we still have health services in French today. (Sec)*

Surprisingly, we found that “Franco-Ontarian” and “Canadian” identities are not mutually exclusive for our participants. Beginning teachers and high school students in particular can identify strongly with Canada and still evoke very strong, militant positions in defence of the francophone cause. This finding is astonishing when considering that French Canadian nationalism has historically been defined in opposition to Canadian nationalism. As historian Ramsey Cook (1995) points out, “by 1867 two conceptions of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ existed in Canada” (p. 214).

At first sight, our young participants do not seem to have such clear-cut patriotic views of the nation as they freely report belonging strongly to two communities. But one possible explanation for their “dual allegiance” has to do with how they construe their sense of belonging to Canada. Unlike the dominant English Canadian identity centred on nation-building progress from coast to coast, our participants seem to have expressed a distinctive sense of belonging, *à la canadienne-française*.

Indeed, few participants with a strong sense of belonging to Canada produced historical accounts along the framework of the “Great” master-narrative of Canada. On the contrary, those who chose to write a narrative of Canadian nation-building are surprisingly “low identifier” who typically displayed a weaker sense of belonging to the country. Their stories were rarely passionate and often highlighted the gradual (at times contradictory) development of the country.

*The Fathers of Confederation created Canada as independent from England but not with separation.*

*Ontario was a colony. It started with Quebec as Lower and Upper Canada. After the agreement to transform Canada into a single country, the region was renamed Ontario. The capital of Canada is Ottawa and the capital of Ontario is Toronto. (Sec.)*

This is to say, then, that far from narrating a nation-building story of the country, our Francophone participants prefer to tell stories along the narrative orientation of the historic duality of French/English Canadians despite their regional sense of belonging (to Ontario, Québec, etc.). This vision of the past finds its origin in the understanding of Canada as a compact between two “founding nations”: the French and the English. For many generations of French Canadians, this view has represented the foundational ideal of the Canadian federation and the heart of their political cause as a country made up of two nations, *d’égal à égal* (equal to equal), as expressed by the following participant:

It goes without saying that Canada is not a country without rupture. Indeed, from colonization, there was a clear separation between French Canadians and English Canadians. It is a constant war between France and England to take over and colonize the land. The English are stronger. While the dominant presence of Anglophones can be explained by the arrival of Loyalists from the U.S.A., it is clear that the two linguistic groups occupy separate spaces. (Uni-02)

Far from being historically disconnected, our participants showed much greater relationship with the collective past than decried publicly. They displayed a sense of chronological time and were able to structure into historical accounts particular visions of the past that they use to orient their own conceptions and distinctive sense of belonging to Canada. Far from being “dead,” the memory of French Canada is very much alive in their visions of the collective past. To paraphrase political theorist Anthony Smith (1981), the narrative of the nation offers an attempt to preserve the past and to transform it into something new, relevant for orienting individuals and fellows in the course of time.

Saying this is not to say, however, that our young participants have *complex* visions of the past. Many high school students displayed a traditional and fragile form of historical consciousness. Their accounts were remarkably short, permeable, and informed by a single interpretative framework, that of “la survivance.” This trend became obvious to us when analyzing the intra-narrative coding (the phrases of the text) which reveals a poor use of multiple interpretative lenses to structure their stories. Beginning teachers, in contrast, were more likely to offer historical accounts that were traversed by various historiographical streams of thought such as “social history,” “modernity,” “multiculturalism” and “anti-racism.” Of course, beginning teachers have more extensive life experiences and scholastic knowledge acquired through their post-secondary education.

But for students, “la survivance” remains a readily-available framework still dominant in the collective memory that has become part of students’ “cultural curriculum” of real-life experiences and of a simplified but meaningful historical vision. Roland Barthes once characterized narrative as being “without noise” because all the extraneous elements have been taken out. Students (and adults) are thus more likely to remember and internalize stories which conform to and support a simplified structure of historical meaning-making.

As educators, we consider that the critical challenge right now in Canadian education is that students have no pedagogically-structured opportunity to confront their personal learning from the real-life curriculum with the formal curriculum of school history. For the last decade, students in the province of Ontario learn in school to develop a variety of skills and competences, including “historical thinking;” a disciplinary approach to the past that my colleague Peter Seixas, and myself, have studied and proposed to teachers.

But I believe this is not enough. The notions of “narrative thinking” and “historical consciousness,” so fundamental to identity and meaning-making, are still largely absent from students’ formal learning experience – despite curricular policies and objectives inviting teachers to consider students’ prior knowledge. This troubling state-of-affairs remind us of the crucial difference between “education” and “schooling,” between learner’s social and real-life meaningful learning experiences and the structured and formalized learning processes taking place in school. If school history is to play a significant role in shaping the education of young Canadians, it must find new ways to *engage* and *complexify* their narrative visions of the past. Failing to do so leaves students highly vulnerable to political manipulation and abuses from collective memory fashioners.

1. A total of 58 high school students, from two Francophone public schools, and 18 beginning history teachers completed the questionnaire in 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. All narrative were produced in French language but translated for the purpose of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)