Remembering Our Past: An Examination of the Historical Memory of Young Québécois

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It is usually thought that young people, for different reasons, know very little about history. Bodies like the Dominion Institute of Canada, for instance, have commissioned multiple polls over time to show that, when questioned about features of the past, young people, mostly students, would be unable to answer correctly more than two or three times out of ten.\(^1\) In Quebec as well, we find numerous studies showing the lack of empirical knowledge among young people about the history of the province or of the nation — whatever you choose to call it. Summing up this catastrophic state of affairs, one publication was even titled *Trou de mémoire.*\(^2\)

My feeling is that we must be careful about polls that try to measure the level of empirical knowledge possessed by students. In that game, even professional historians may lose their shirts, their skirts, or, worse, their reputation. Personally, I’d be afraid to be tested in a poll. I’m sure I would perform badly! Does this mean I’m without knowledge or even impressions of the past? Not at all. It is the same with young people. When, instead of testing them about specific details of the past, you ask such putative ‘green minds’ to account for the history of Quebec, you find that they know quite a lot of things. You also find that they can account for the history of Quebec in a pretty coherent manner. This account may be not as sophisticated as yours and mine, but still, we are far from a *trou de mémoire,* and far also from a confused or senseless account of the past.

In this chapter I will present the preliminary results of research I did on young people aged fifteen to twenty-five, research that dealt with their general knowledge and sense of the representation of the historical experience of Quebec.\(^3\) My concern was to get into the historical memory of young people in Quebec, memory that I consider to be a kind of engine of their historical consciousness.

Although this chapter is focused on the case of Quebec, I think research such as mine could be replicated anywhere in the country, and I hope such research will be done in the near future.\(^4\) The significance of such research is multifaceted and profound. Indeed, a number of central theoretical as well as practical educational issues can be raised or addressed from the perspective of such research. The acquisition of historical knowledge in children and adolescents is certainly one such issue. We know that children and adolescents are not unaware of representations of the past, that they know many things about life in different times. We also know that they get most of their knowledge outside the classroom. How are representations of the past being created in children’s minds? How do children come to get trapped in these meta-representations, or general frameworks, that will act for them as sorts of intellectual crutches that help them understand the world in its past and present, and to anticipate its future as well? How does information of different types mix in a person’s mind to produce ways of seeing that, over time, will consolidate in ‘mythistories’ that may undermine his or her capacity to see the world another way?

In Canada, though it is true all over the planet, we know that the existence of such mythistories looms over the future of the country. Indeed, because of those mythistories, Québécois see English Canadians in a certain and peculiar way, while Québécois are seen by English Canadians in another way, which is just as peculiar. It is the same with francophones and anglophones, Easterners and Westerners, people living in big cities and those living outside those pockets, the Northerners and Southerners, and so on. To understand the way mythistories shape the historical mind of children — children who become adults who do not revise most, or at least some, of their basic references — is certainly a challenge in today’s research.

Another topic of prime importance raised by research such as mine relates to the consequences of education. Indeed, if we consider mythistories as a constraint on seeing things in different ways, if not actually preventing a fresh future from unfolding, how is it possible to get away from these mythistories? Is education the best possible way to achieve such a goal? If so, then, how should we proceed in order to deconstruct mythistories? Just by giving young people more information so they become concerned people? I have serious doubts about that. Education, yes. But how can we really open children to new stories
that will make them see the world, and other cultures as well, from a
different point of view? We haven't yet come to a consensus about these
issues. More research needs to be done. Mine is a modest contribution
in that direction.

This chapter will be divided into three parts. First, I provide the
results of my research. Basically, I will explore what young Québécois
know about the historical experience of Quebec and how they account
for that experience. That narrative, as you will see, is indeed interesting
in its structure and content. When accounting for the historical experi­
ence of Quebec, practically all students I tested, from Grade 11 to the
university level, used a narrative that is, in a way, traditional. It refers to
the timeless quest of Québécois, poor alienated people, for emancipa­
tion from their oppressors.

The persistence of such a narrative in young people's minds is indeed
amazing, for it fits poorly with what professional historians have been
saying for the past twenty-five years. The persistence of that narrative
is also amazing because it is at odds with the current situation of
Quebec, at least from an economic point of view. So this question: Why
is this narrative, instead of any other narrative, being used, adopted,
recounted by the students? An exploration of this question constitutes
the second part of this chapter.

Finally, I will focus on the following question: If we find the students'
narrative unsatisfactory for scientific and political reasons, then how
can we take the students away from it and offer them an alternative
narrative that would meet the requirements of historians' practice and
would also be challenging for the future of Canada-Quebec? In other
words, can we get away from a narrative that is at the heart of a
collective identity? And, if so, how can we do it?

What Do Young People Know about Quebec's Past?

Before going any further with my initial question - 'What do young
people know about Quebec's past?' - I must point out two things
related to the methodology of my research. I mentioned earlier that I
was dissatisfied with polls that give us a lot of quantitative data but
very few insight into historical memory. To avoid the limits and the
deficiencies of polls, I decided to use a more qualitative process. I asked
young people to write short essays of about two or three pages. The
initial stimulus I gave them to start writing took the form of a question –
in French: Présentez ou racontez, comme vous la percevez, la savez ou vous
vous en souvenez, l'histoire du Québec depuis le début; in English: Please
account for the history of Quebec since the beginning, the way you see
it, remember it, or understand it.

After giving the students about forty-five minutes to write down
their response, I collected all the essays in the classrooms. Students
were not notified in advance they would be tested in this way, so they
could not prepare for it. They were told that the test was being carried out
for academic research. They were asked not to identify themselves on the
sheets of paper, so I have reason to think that much of the stress they
might have felt during the event was eliminated. The students were of
course told there were no good nor bad answers, but I also asked them to
think about addressing the question as seriously as possible.

Overall, 403 students fulfilled the task. Out of that number, 237
essays came from university students, 53 from Grade 11 students, 51
from students in the final year of secondary schools, and 104 from
students attending CEGEPS – Quebec's junior colleges. Although this
number may not be large, it is enough to support my conclusions, given
the repetitive character of the narrative I found in the essays.

The second point I want to stress before going on with the question
of the young people's narrative of the past is the following. The
research was undertaken in the Quebec City region. As is well known,
most people living in this area are from a French-Canadian cultural
background. As a matter of fact, more than 98 per cent of the students
we tested were from that cultural background, even those who at­
tended an anglophone CEGEP. For that reason, we cannot pretend
that the results of the research can be extended in the same way to all
young Québécois. For example, Québécois with English-Canadian
backgrounds would probably account for the historical experience of
Quebec in a different manner than that found in this study. I have no
idea whatsoever how Québécois from other cultural backgrounds, or
newcomers to the province, would account for its historical experi­
ence. That is a fantastic field of research into which I will venture in
the near future. Yet, my feeling is that people who have been social­
ized in a cultural milieu, within the parameters of a culture with a
strong institutional coherence, will share a set of references, including
an account of the past. My guess is that, if I had done my research in
the Montreal area, a region characterized by more cultural diversity,
young Québécois with a French-Canadian background would probably
have accounted for the historical experience of Quebec in the
same manner as those in the Quebec City area.
Now let's get to the first question: How do young Québécois with a French-Canadian historical background account for the history of Quebec? First, their narrative is highly linear. Progression, regression, digression, continuity, and rupture, more than paradox, dissonance, ambiguity, or ambivalence, are the basic narrative structures of their story. Students' accounts of the history of Quebec also revolve around a set of characters and events that inhabits a great canon of historical actions. Those characters and actions are bound together in a general plot that intersects with the classical nationalist narrative of Quebec's historical experience.

This is not the place to go into the intricate details of that narrative. I will provide only the general features of the story.

1. Mostly, students' accounts begin with the coming of the French into the St Lawrence valley. Aboriginal people are around, but the course of events is being driven by the Europeans.

2. The central event in the history of Quebec is the Conquest of New France by the British in 1759. From then on, the historical experience of Quebec is, according to students, nothing but the expression of a conflict between archetypal francophones and anglophones.

3. Among the events mentioned most frequently by students, we find the Quebec Act of 1774, the Rebellions of 1837-8, Confederation, the First and Second World Wars, October 1970, and the two referendums in 1980 and 1995.

4. Characters such as Papineau and Durham (a figure much detested by young Québécois) are cast the frame of the enduring conflict between the French and the English.

5. Among the most frequently mentioned and most appreciated figures in students' story, we find Jacques Cartier, Samuel de Champlain, and René Lévesque.

6. Pierre Trudeau, a central icon in anglophone Canada, especially in Ontario, does not attract a great deal of interest from these young people, even though this research was done a short time after he passed away.

7. Last but not least, women, Aboriginal people, and immigrants are secondary characters in young people's story of Quebec.

Overall, the students' narrative follows a framework that is very coherent, logical, and strong, and that develops in this way:

- Chapter 1, New France: This period is a time of goodness, an age of innocence. It is possible to live in French. There are some problems, of course, but the problem of fighting for cultural and linguistic survival does not occur. (If I may introduce a side idea here, it is clear that, saying this, students are making an anachronistic statement, for there is no struggle for linguistic survival at this time. We must remember that they are looking at the past from the other end of the telescope, the present being in a direct relation with the past.)
- Chapter 2, The Conquest: This event marks the great fall of the French in North America. It is a dramatic rupture that opens the door for a decline, a regression of the French. The historical experience of Quebec afterward is a continuous struggle for power between the English and the French, the will of the former being to dominate, through varying levels of coercion, the latter.
- Chapter 3, The Quiet Revolution: This event, which occurs in the 1960s, marks the beginning of a new era, a reversal of the previous situation. It is a time of great awakening for the French, who reject many features of their traditional identity, namely agriculturalism, messianism, and anti-democratism. The Quiet Revolution is a moment of historical liberation. René Lévesque, more than Jean Lesage, is the leader of this renaissance.
- Chapter 4, Today: Unfortunately, the momentum of the Quiet Revolution seems to be lost in the present time. Since the last referendum (1995), Quebec has entered a period of indecision, not to say of stalling. It is with this nostalgic and melancholic observation that the students' account of the historical experience of Quebec comes to its conclusion.

Some of you may find this narrative disappointing and, depending on your political point of view, call it too simple, too biased, or too focused. Such a reaction may be expected, but it is useless. The task is not to blame the students for excessive simplicity or to look for a scapegoat, but to understand why the students accounted for the historical experience of Quebec in that way rather than in any other way.

Why That Narrative?

Many hypotheses come to mind to explain the formation of the narrative.
The Curriculum and Textbooks

The first and probably the easiest hypothesis is that the students' narrative, influenced by the compulsory 'Quebec and Canada' history course they take in Grade 11, is an over-simplification of the narrative found in textbooks used in the classroom, textbooks that reflect the orientation of the program of history implemented by Quebec's Ministry of Education about twenty years ago.6

This hypothesis has been put forward by different scholars. Although we find some truth in it, I think it is not the most accurate hypothesis to explain the students' beliefs, for the content of the textbooks is not a digest of the nationalist view of Quebec's historical experience. In the mid-nineties I personally made a review of the textbooks accepted by the Ministry of Education and used in class.7 It is an exaggeration to say that the point of view expressed in those textbooks is narrowly nationalist. The francophones are not represented merely as the passive victims of the anglophones. Nor are they considered as perennial losers. Their patriotism is oriented not only towards Quebec but also towards Canada (or towards a certain idea of Canada). Most important, perhaps, the general representation of the historical experience of Quebec presented in these textbooks is more optimistic than pessimistic. The material condition of Quebeckers is certainly not reduced to the archetypal Poor, the Insignificant, and the Victim. The ideas of a priest-ridden society and a surviving nation are not basic representations upon which the textbooks' narrative is built. Rather, they depict Quebec society as an open place, absorbing innovations at a fast rate and developing quickly as a market-oriented society. In other words, Quebec is equated with the changes in the continental and Atlantic worlds. Textbooks, in other words, are very far from what students insisted upon in their accounts.

Neither is the Quebec Ministry of Education curriculum for the history of Canada-Quebec oriented towards narrowly nationalist goals. Indeed, if one accepts that the general aim of this course is to give students the means to know more about the historical experience of Quebec within its multiple contexts, then we have to say that the curriculum is quite acceptable. Yet, it is important to insist on two points. First, the program implemented by the ministry,8 and which is currently under revision, includes different targets ('objectifs terminaux') among which we find: 1) the understanding of the Conquest, its causes and its effects; 2) the description of the events of 1837–8 and the establishment of the Union of the two Canadas; 3) the analysis of the Duplessis era from the point of view of an opposition between traditionalism and modernization; and, 4) the characterization of the Quiet Revolution and its aftermath. Clearly, there are possible interminglings between certain objectives of the program and the themes in the students' narratives. In other words, students' accounts are structured partly according to the orientation of the program. But I must be clear on this: we cannot pretend that the program, which is comprehensive rather than politically oriented, and which is after all based on brute facts of the past (no one can deny 1759 or 1837–8), explicitly or in a direct way nourishes students' narrative.

Second, the content of the textbooks is more subtle than narrowly focused. That said, it is possible to find in their content brute facts that will sustain a nationalist narrative of the historical experience of Quebec. Yet, this content does not by itself lead a student to view the historical experience of Quebec as something that is dramatic and whose central dynamic is the tribulations of a kind of unrealized historical Subject, or sujet manqué – the Québécois.

To sum up, both the ministry's program and textbooks can sustain many accounts of the historical experience of Quebec. Their aims and content are largely reasonable and acceptable. It is certainly possible to improve them, and the Working Committee on the teaching of history, chaired by Jacques Lacoursière ten years ago, has made several recommendations to do so.9 But basically, it is untrue to say that the ministry's program and textbooks belong to some sort of patriotic enterprise designed to shape the student's mind in a narrow way. We ought to explore another hypothesis to understand why, among all possible narratives, students kept using one in particular.

The 'System of the Classroom'

I'd now like to turn to an examination of the 'system of the classroom.' My feeling, and this has been documented by some studies, is that teachers, who hold a prominent place in the system of the classroom, are very much responsible for the structuring and maintenance of the specific account students have of the historical experience of Quebec.10 Why is this so? There are many reasons. One lies in the fact that many history teachers were trained a long time ago – that is, at a time when the historiographical paradigm set out by Séguin, Brunet, and Frégault was dominant. Although contested by research done in the 1980s and
1990s, that paradigm, which insists on the victimization of francophones in Canada, remains strong in the mind of many teachers. As everyone knows, it is not easy to abandon a paradigm and to opt for another.

A second reason is linked to the limited training many teachers have received. Some of them, as is widely known, do not have specialized training in history. Their knowledge of history consists of a more or less superficial vision of that which has been. Most of the time, that vision is articulated around the major political events in the history of Canada and Quebec. Of course, those teachers want to give their students the best information possible. To compensate for their lack of information, they rely on textbooks. What they find in textbooks, however, is in accordance with their own basic knowledge of the history of the country. They may certainly read the whole text, but what remains after the reading is that information and data that reinforce their basic understanding of the history of Canada-Quebec. This is possible because, as I noted above, one can find in these textbooks content that will support a nationalist history of Quebec. And one has to admit that the historical experience of Canada-Quebec can sustain such an account of that which has been. That such an account is, or is not, the most accurate or appropriate account of the history of Canada-Quebec is another question—a question that many teachers cannot even raise because they are not in a position to think of another possible narrative to explain the historical experience of Quebec.

A third reason why we can hold the teachers largely responsible for the presence of the narrative I found in students’ essays is that teachers may find it is easiest to transmit this ‘traditional’ account of the history of Quebec as the best general representation of Quebec’s historical experience.

And this brings me to one of the major points of my argument. It is my assumption that when students get to Grade 11—that is, at the time when they are being taught their first systematic course of Canada-Quebec history—they are not empty vessels. They already have a sort of vision of the historical experience of Quebec. That historical vision is certainly, in most cases, very simplistic. It has formed over time, nourished by many sources. It is articulated around basic narrative structures among which we find the binary notions of Canada and Quebec, anglophones and francophones, federalism and nationalism. I’m not saying that students have a deep knowledge of, or can rightly contextualize, these notions to which they refer. The contrary is probably true in most of the cases. What I want to stress is that those basic narrative structures, and the binary notions that are at their core, act as a sort of basic matrix of understanding, a simple way of comprehending the complexity of the past (and the present as well).

In other words, by the time they get to Grade 11, students are already in a position to understand the past in a specific way and not in all possible ways. They are already caught up in the canonical categories of understanding that make a culture a culture. Students are already trapped, most of the time unconsciously, within the limits of a thinkable history of Quebec. And of course, when we speak of a thinkable history of Quebec, we ought to speak, as well, of an unthinkable history of Quebec.

Before going any further, I must add that these observations about students in Quebec with a French-Canadian cultural heritage are also applicable elsewhere in Canada, to people of other cultural backgrounds. In a remarkable book, Daniel Francis has convincingly demonstrated that English Canada, as an imagined community, was very much dependent on some basic mythstories that strengthened the historical consciousness of a particular community of communication and reference.11 Things have not changed much. It is clear that, even today, most anglophone Canadians are trapped in a canon that makes them see Canada—and Quebec, of course—through a series of references or canonical figures that sometimes narrowly coincides with what Canada or Quebec was or actually is. To take on the title of an article I once published in the Globe and Mail, we are all trapped by mistaken identities.12

To return to my previous point about the thinkable/unthinkable history of Quebec, let’s imagine a situation in which a teacher, with little training in history, faces a class composed of students who have only a very basic idea of the historical experience of Quebec. The chances are great that the teacher and students will implicitly agree about a representation of the past because they belong to the same culture. The same will, of course, happen when the teacher does have training in the history of Quebec but thinks that the unfortunate and unhappy history of Quebec is the best possible account of the historical experience of this collectivity, a situation that is not at all uncommon.

What if a teacher and a group of students do not belong to the same culture? I don’t have data to support a hypothesis about that question. My guess is that confusion may arise in students’ minds. It is also possible that students might lose interest in their history class because the account that is being taught to them is useless, incomprehensible, or meaningless. In any case, I think that a historical account being taught...
in class will matter in students' minds if it is reinforced by other accounts outside the class. As we know, the history class is not the only source of historical information students get. Television, movies, museums, family discussions, non-fiction books and novels, newspapers and magazines are probably more important in the shaping of their historical minds. If the teacher says something that is not reinforced by other information outside the class, or something that does not belong to a dominant common way of seeing, then it might well be cast aside. It is not easy to go against the public discourse around which a community of communication structures its identity.

Collective Memory

The last point leads me to a third hypothesis I formulated to understand the particular narrative I found in students' essays. That hypothesis holds that the presence of a historical collective memory is an important factor in shaping students' narratives about the historical experience of Quebec. This hypothesis is not really original. Yet, very few studies have been done to understand the process by which a historical collective memory circulating in a society would be grasped by people living in that society. I'll come back to this point later.

For now, I would like to point out that the existence of a historical collective memory specific to the Franco-Québécois with a French-Canadian background is something that is well known and has been documented at length. Historical collective memory may be defined as a set of references including, among others, teleological schemes, clichés, stereotypes, ideas, representations of all sorts, reified characters, fragments of énoncés—all items through which the past, the present, and the future are not only decoded and constructed, but also anticipated. A historical collective memory is (probably) inevitably founded on myth histories. Rather than bemoaning this circumstance, the challenge is to try to find the means to deconstruct historical collective memory, so a space can be created in which new references can come and grow. In the end, another historical collective memory, hopefully more sensitive to the complexity of the past, may emerge.

In Quebec, at the present time, the historical collective memory that remains dominant in the ideological world of the Franco-Québécois, and that I found in students' accounts, displeases many people for different reasons. Some of them find this historical collective memory inaccurate with regard to the need to build up new common ground, a consensus in Quebec, so all the Québécois can re-create their identity as a nation québécoise. Those people, among whom we find some of the finest intellectuals in today's Quebec, are claiming a new memory and a new history for the Québécois. As far as I'm concerned, I welcome such a project of remaking a collective memory and history: I made a plea for it in one of my last books.

The difficulty I have with the way the project has been conducted so far is that it is driven by a specific political agenda, that of the building of a new Quebec nation. Personally, I'd rather get into the business of revising the collective memory and history with the aim of restoring the idea of canadianté, which refers to the acceptance of dissonance as being at the core of the historical experience of the country. I consider canadianté to be quite different from canadienneré, which is nothing but the central concept supporting and legitimizing Canada's nation-rebuilding process, a process that may be criticized as much as that of Quebec. I wonder sometimes if the concept of nation, which is like a siren's song for people governing in both Quebec City and Ottawa, has not become a constraint rather than a force to open up a future for the country.

I return here to my main argument, that students' narratives reflect a historical collective memory, that of the Franco-Québécois of French-Canadian heritage. While this can be easily demonstrated, it is more challenging, especially in regard to the task of the historical education we should give to young people, to understand how a historical collective memory becomes the vision of young people. In other words, how does the historical collective memory penetrate the individual mind?

I see this process of articulation that way. (Please note that my argument is appropriate with regard to the students I tested. I don't pretend here to elaborate any general theory on the making of historical consciousness regardless of space, time, and culture.)

First, let me make a point we often forget: children are intelligent and wise, and their minds are very much open to information. They learn and absorb a lot of information, even though we may think they don't. On this basis, I assume that, during their childhood, including the time they were in primary school, the students I tested were given—and got for themselves—a lot of information about the history of Canada, of Quebec, and of the world. This information was of different types and was more or less reliable. It came from several sources: family, movies, television series, school, friends, politicians, cartoons, and so on. This information nourished, in the children's minds, an elementary, very rudimentary vision of that which has been in regard to Canada, Que-
bec, and the world. I also assume that this information was quickly organized into metaphorical structures. It is at this stage that the very general idea of the good Franco and the bad Anglo, for instance, probably took form. I'm not saying that this particular idea was being conveyed to the children in such a direct or narrow way. But such an idea, which circulates around, especially in the discourse of politicians and in the press, and which, for young minds, is a simple and efficient means to understand the complexity of the world, becomes an important tool for understanding the dynamics of the country.

Second, what we should understand is that this first, and often highly simplistic, vision becomes the nexus around which orbits a lot of information in students' minds. Through this process, a basic matrix of understanding is rapidly structured. Such a matrix acts more or less like a large planet that absorbs everything that comes into its gravitational field. In such a scheme, in-coming information is either absorbed or rejected. Information that is not compatible with this system of understanding is deflected or turned away. In that regard, we may say that this basic matrix of understanding opens the way for the making of the thinkable and the unthinkable. By unthinkable, I don't mean something that does not exist. I mean something that is not – or cannot be – conceptualized in a system of understanding.

Third, by the time young people enter Grade 11, they possess, in a more or less sophisticated form, a basic matrix of understanding with which they decode and encode the world around them and the information that comes to them or that they get by themselves. Surely, young people may be open to a more complex process of understanding. Most of the time, however, this process involves a simple expansion of the existing matrix of understanding and not a change to its fundamental structure. To get away from that basic matrix of understanding would demand nothing short of a massive intervention that would break the primitive nexus around which it is structured. So even though young people are being taught information that could lead to the formation of, let's say, a new representation of the historical experience of Quebec, it is unlikely that this will happen. They would rather stick with the basic matrix of understanding they already possess. They can easily defend their interpretation because they can find, in teachers' lectures, a lot of information that is compatible with that matrix. They can also find, in Quebec's past, a confirmation of their understanding of the historical experience of Quebec. Although seeing the history of Quebec through the prism of the conflict between the good Franco and the bad Anglo is as simple as picturing the French Quebecois as the black sheep of Canada, one cannot deny the existence, over a long period of time, of asymmetrical relations of power between the two solitudes in this country. Nor can one deny that the way Quebecois act within Confederation may displease many Canadians. This is stuff that consolidates the basic matrix of understanding and mythstories that structure the way young people – and others – see the past, understand the present, and anticipate the future. This is, in other words, how they build their historical consciousness.

Fourth, after Grade 11, as we know, very few Quebecois take any further courses in history. One can conclude that the great majority of young Quebecois will stick to their basic matrix of understanding, which will expand or wrinkle but not change in fundamentals. This conclusion is documented by my data, which show no structural modification in the accounts made by university students from those by students in Grade 11. Although this fact may be unfortunate, it reflects how difficult it is to modify a structure of understanding that is so dominant and pervasive.

Can We Abandon or Replace a Historical Narrative?

Does this conclusion mean there is no hope of changing the situation, that it is impossible to modify a structure of understanding? Does it mean that, as educators, we have no room to act and that our fine research is, in the end, unable to transform anything? I answer no to these questions, but we have to face the situation realistically. When thinking about modifying the historical account of Quebec's past being proposed by the Franco-Quebecois with a French-Canadian background, it is hopeless to think of change in the short run. I have discussed above the extent to which the system within the classroom, on the one hand, and the existence of a collective historical memory, on the other, together reinforce a vision of the past that is at the core of a collective identity. To unbuild a historical system of representation – whether in Quebec, Canada, or elsewhere in the world – is not a simple task. In these matters, patience is of prime importance. That doesn't mean we should not initiate remedies. What can we do?

First, we should stop considering young people as empty vessels. By themselves, outside the classroom and in their social lives, they acquire a vision of the past that may be simple and simplistic but that is coherent and strong. Perhaps teachers should start by recognizing the
vision that students already have. Instead of immediately transmitting information, teachers could try, first, to enter the students’ basic matrix of understanding in order to explore its limitations. Teachers could then try to give students the means to construct a different pattern of understanding that would be a more reliable reflection of the complexity of the past. Such a pattern of understanding would also give the students the feeling that the past is an open process of evolution, a process free of teleology, a process that does not obey any simple logic, a process that cannot be reduced to the struggle between good and evil. This approach may inspire in students a sense of historical empathy as well as a sense of history—two qualities needed to help young people develop into responsible, reflective persons and critical citizens.

I also think—although I acknowledge that this is a personal utopia—that we should try to consider and to structure the historical experience of Canada-Quebec within a new general metaphor. To repeat, in my mind, only a new metaphor can replace an old one. If we consider that metaphors like the one of the good Francos and the bad Anglos, or the one that says Canada has, from the beginning, developed as the best country in the world, or the one that considers the country as forming one nation from coast to coast—if we consider that metaphors like these and many others are unsatisfactory, then we have to look for something else. What are the metaphors that would allow us to rethink the whole experience of the country in a way that is accurate from an evidence-based and a political point of view? I think that the metaphor of dissonance, embedded in the concept of canadianté, has some interest in that regard. This metaphor avoids the limits and the deficiencies of the ‘all-Canadian’ thesis and the ‘limited identities’ thesis. Of course, the metaphor of dissonance does not fit well within the symbolic process of nation building into which Canada and Quebec have entered, on a sort of competitive basis, over the last thirty years. Personally, I’m not disturbed by such incompatibility. I propose to reread the historical and the actual course of the country. I have a crystal clear representation of who I am: I practise evidence-based history; I do not adhere to partisan politics!

Even though the metaphor of dissonance would not be considered useful by those who teach the history of Canada-Quebec in the classroom, I think that we must avoid leaving young people in a sort of vacuum regarding the representation of the country. To deconstruct visions or metaphors we find unsatisfactory is only half the duty of teaching. We must also offer an alternative view of things—a view that is coherent and strong. If we are fair enough to say that this alternative representation is not a definitive one, in no way must we tell students that all representations are equally valuable. We know that there are representations that are more accurate than others. Certainly, it might be the duty of the teacher to introduce students to different representations of the past. But the teacher must not leave students in a babel of interpretation and competitive stories that confuses young people rather than liberating them from a former limited way of thinking. Deliberation, we ought to remember, is at the beginning and at the end of the historical endeavour.

Overall, and this is going to be my last point, the teacher is at the heart of any qualitative transformation in the collective historical consciousness of students. For that reason, as the Lacoursière Committee has stated, we should not spare efforts to improve the training of those who will bring young people into one of their most systematic and lasting adventures in the past of Canada-Quebec. Nevertheless, we must not expect this transformation to emerge because of the quality of the teaching alone. This transformation will occur when a new, original synthesis of the historical experience of Quebec is produced, a synthesis that has broad influence all through the society. Such a synthesis might take the form of a movie, a television program, a book, or a symposium. Many possibilities and combinations are open here. The transformation I’m looking for may occur when all of Quebec society looks again at its past in a way that makes it possible to get away from a repertoire of stories.

In that regard, things are very interesting in Quebec at the present time. Passages to the future are being opened everywhere. I wouldn’t be surprised if, ten years from now, the vision of the past that is being presented to students has begun to change. A new generation of thinkers has entered the debate to reconsider and reformulate the question of Quebec-Canada—and many others. It is my expectation that the consequences of such a generational turnover will be visible in the not-too-distant future.

Is a similar trend at work in the rest of Canada? I’m not in a position to answer that question, although I hope it is. I keep thinking that the country will have a future when it recognizes, rather than rejects, its historical specificity and updates its central metaphors accordingly. In that process of reimagining a country in a sort of balance between its past and its future, its possibilities and its utopias, historians and teachers can play a very important role, clearing intellectual spaces and
providing guidance through them. What we need most in present times are people who are not trapped in obsolete narratives, mistaken identities, and univocal representations of the complexity of our country, not to say the world.

NOTES

This chapter is based on a paper titled ‘Mémoire et récit de l’aventure historique du Québec chez les jeunes Québécois d’héritage canadien-français: Coup de sonde, amorce d’analyse des résultats, questionnements,’ Canadian Historical Review 85, 2 (2004): 325–56.

1 See the Memory Project, www.dominion.ca.
3 This research has been conducted with Sabrina Moisan. Data upon which this paper is based are to be found at length in Moisan, ‘Mémoire historique de l’aventure québécoise chez les jeunes franco-québécois d’héritage canadien-français: coup de sonde et analyse des résultats’ (MA thesis, Université Laval, 2002). Although discussed with her, the argument presented here is mine.
4 Since writing this piece, working with colleagues from across the country I have received a generous grant to undertake research on Canadians and their pasts. See http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca/en/communitys/canadian_pasts/index.php.
5 I have recently begun this research on students of non-French backgrounds.
6 A new and controversial program, ‘History and Citizenship Education,’ will be implemented in September 2007. We will have to see if it will bring a new representation of the past – and, consequently, historical consciousness – to students’ minds.
8 Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l’Éducation, Direction générale du développement pédagogique, Programme d’études: Histoire du Québec et du Canada, 4e secondaire, formation générale et professionnelle (Quebec, April 1982), 18.
10 It seems the situation is replicated in English Canada. See, for example, current research done by Ruth Sandwell.
13 See Gérard Bouchard, La Nation au futur et au passé (Montreal: VLB, 1999).
15 For a lengthy discussion on this, see my ‘Pour une nouvelle métaphore de l’expérience historique canadienne,’ Canadian Issues, October 2001, 8–11.