

THE 2006 QUÉBEC CURRICULUM CONTROVERSY

Michèle Dagenais and Christian Laville examined the 2006 controversy¹ concerning the secondary school history curriculum reforme, wondering why the project provoked such controversy. What were the issues? Who were the participants? what were their objectives? To answer these questions they focus on the circumstances of the controversy, reviewing the relationships between history education and citizenship education, between school history and scholarly history. They want to ascertain whether or not this controversy was “academically justified and socially legitimate.”²

Inspired by the Working Group on the Teaching of History, the curriculum reform - *History and Citizenship Education* – occurred within an overall reform of educational programs in Québec. When released in April 2006, “fury” follows, prompting the Ministry of Education to modify the reform, mollifying critics but not ending the debate.³ While played out primarily in Francophone newspapers, especially in *Le Devoir*, the ten-week debate was also registered in Anglophone newspapers in Québec such as *The Gazette*, and elsewhere in Canada in *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* as well as in several academic journals, prominent among them *The Bulletin of Political History* and *Argument*.⁴

The controversy commences on April 27, when journalist Antoine Robitaille’s “Thinned-out History Courses in Secondary Grades” was published on the first page of the *Le Devoir*; he accused the new program of “erasing the past” of the Québec, thereby “stripping our children of their history.”⁵ The article sparked a firestorm, with readers and reporters wondering if the reform represented a federalist plot “to indoctrinate Québec’s students in order to produce good Canadians,” to ensure there would be no new generation of “separatists.”⁶

Reviewing the ten or so articles written during the height of the controversy, Dagenais and Laville were “shocked” by how “very superficial” the “knowledge of the new program” was, by the repetitive character of the charges (“built around silences” and the “absence of key dates”), by the intensity of the rejection of any link between history and citizenship education.⁷ It was the intensity, not the intelligence, of the debate that prompted the Ministry to revise the curriculum, including those events and dates deemed essential during the controversy.⁸ Dagenais and Laville resolved to examine this contested link between schooling and civic education, attending to the renewed interest in the controversy provoked in many historians, including “the rapport between academic history and the pedagogy of history.”⁹

If the knowledge of the curriculum revision had not been so superficial, it would have been obvious that the revision was not all that new, that it was (despite the cries that it “concocted a history without dates”) “not so different for the one that came before,” more about pedagogy than content, “close to the history program in place

since 1982.”¹⁰ In addition to the allegations of a history curriculum *sans* facts were denunciations of the emphasis upon “bringing together” diverse peoples, to “reconcile the diversity of social identities and communal membership,” including the presence of Indigenous peoples and immigrants.¹¹ Dagenais and Laville point out that “this orientation is not new,”¹² as it had been one of the “five guiding principles” in the 1982 program: “The programme wants to take into account a pluralist dimension of the Québécois past by underlining the contribution of all the groups to the collective history.”¹³ This shift in curricular emphasis from the conflicted character of Québécois identity – lacerated by Anglophone hostility and prejudice – to Indigenous peoples and other non-Francophones (immigrants and refugees) represented nothing less, it had been alleged, than an “attempt to rob us of our past,” and thereby “dissolving Québécois identity, this collective us,” the “former French Canadians.”¹⁴

Characterized by allegations without evidence, the controversy became, Dagenais and Laville charge, a “pseudo psychosis,” where “openness to diversity” meant the divorce of the “Québécois nation from its own history!”¹⁵ What nation, “which people” were being referenced, Dagenais and Laville asked, wondering if the “nation” denotes everyone, or only “old stock” Québécois, a phrase one protagonist used, assuming, they continue, “an ethnic nationalism.”¹⁶ What irritated many, it seems, is that the reform assumed “an inclusive conception of the nation,” a “form of civic nationalism ... critiqued for its openness to the diverse strands that compose Québec’s society.”¹⁷ Rather than controversy, should not praise have been the response to a reform that affirmed all social groupings, including “anonymous and marginalized people.”¹⁸

In what way, Dagenais and Laville continue, does “the project to diversify the history content in schools threaten the acquisition of historical knowledge?”¹⁹ Protagonists claimed that prioritizing social history over political history in Québec ... leads to relativism,” but is this “not a false problem?”²⁰ But because politics are nowhere absent in the reform, the “accusation appears specious,”²¹ even suspicious, as what is being smuggled in, under the guise of “political history,” is a teleological conception of Québec’s history, one accented by what protagonists pronounce as “foundational moments” in “an unfinished historical path.”²² Dagenais and Laville ask: “But towards which conclusion?”²³

So “grounded,” such a teleological curriculum would undermine students’ capacity to “interrogate the complexity of social reality past and present,” to ascribe meaning to those “foundational moments, a “risk ... too great”²⁴ even for those committed to separatist interpretations of Québec’s history. Must not history be taught for its own sake, not as a means to an end?²⁵ The “dissociation of history ... [from] a certain national narrative” would seem to be “the true target of those opposed to the new program.”²⁶ What was at stake, protagonists seemed to say, is the very “survival of a French society in America,” reasserting an “old ideology of survival,” requiring, protagonists were saying, a curricular emphasis upon a narrative of “struggles and

setbacks.”²⁷ Dagenais and Laville conclude: “The controversy was mostly sustained by the fear of the nationalists ... attached to an ethnic vision of the nation,” as any other “proposition could only be suspect – meaning federalist – in their eyes.”²⁸

What Québec historiography affirms, Dagenais and Laville assert, is “survival.”²⁹ “It is, they continue, a “comforting historical writing aiming to erase and ease defeat and justify the present.”³⁰ Nothing else matters: if industry and commerce are underdeveloped, “it doesn’t matter,” as the historiographic mission is not an economic but instead a “spiritual mission.”³¹ Moreover, this mission has extended, from its “earliest days,” to the Québec public schools, where the history curriculum’s commitment to creating “citizens is clear and conscious.”³² By 1905, the Québec teacher was required to accept as “one of [one’s] most pressing duties to cultivate in students’ patriotism, love of their native land, attachment to traditions and national institutions, respect for our beautiful language and for our religious faith.”³³

While phrased in the terms of the time, Dagenais and Laville note, this conception of citizenship education remains,³⁴ if now encoded in efforts to recast history as the study of “historical thinking.”³⁵ “Such an attitude, we must admit, does not resonate well with the tradition of the singular and finite narrative,” but Dagenais and Laville point out that: “History education based on the method of historical thinking does not exclude the acquisition of knowledge,”³⁶ although they also assert that teachers “lack the competence” to provide the details (e.g. the knowledge), the guidelines do not specify,³⁷ adding: “That being said, no one accused the historiographic choices of the new program to be scientifically incorrect, rather that they are not confined to the nationalist perspective underlined earlier in this text.”³⁸ That perspective, Dagenais and Laville assert, represents a “serious misunderstanding [regarding] the function of history education in a modern democratic society,” namely that of enabling “all citizens” to “live together in the present and the future.”³⁹

That said, Dagenais and Laville sagely suggest “that the idea of governing people’s consciousness through the contents in history education could be an illusion,”⁴⁰ a conclusion that could contest their own characterization of the “function” of history education. They, however, associate this “illusion” with adversaries of the curriculum reform only, apparently endorsing – over “chronological lists” of “so many events and dates” – the curriculum reform’s reconceptualization of history as “learning historical and critical thinking.”⁴¹ They continue:

It is sad that the fight to maintain a determinist historical narrative provoked a missed opportunity to modernize historical and citizenship education in Québec. Ultimately, fighting to maintain determinist historical narratives -no matter what side- risks producing only losers, whether on the side of identities or that of democratic life.⁴²

Why such modernizing of the history curriculum – given the pervasive critiques of modernity, including by historians - is desirable is left unremarked. And why the

promotion of “historical and critical thinking” does not also rest upon such “determinism” instrumental rationality assumes is also left unaddressed.

COMMENTARY

Examining the 2006 controversy⁴³ concerning the secondary school history curriculum reforme, Michèle Dagenais and Christian Laville wonder whether or not the controversy was “academically justified and socially legitimate.” They decide it was neither. Critics, they judge, were uninformed, superficial, and apparently mesmerized by the repetitive character of the charges (“built around silences” and the “absence of key dates”), denying any link between the study of history and the formation of citizens. Skeptical of causative curriculum arguments –at one point Dagenais and Laville suggest “that the idea of governing people’s consciousness through the contents in history education could be an illusion” – I doubt that the curriculum reform Dagenais and Laville appear to endorse will produce the social inclusion of immigrants and Aboriginal peoples. Including these peoples in the curriculum is an ethical obligation, not an instrumentalist opportunity.

REFERENCES

Dagenais, Michèle and Laville, Christian. 2007. Le Naufrage du Projet de Programme D’histoire « Nationale » : Retour sur une Occasion Manquée Accompagné de Considérations sur L’éducation Historique. *Revue d’Histoire de l’Amérique Française*, 60(4), 517-550. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/haf/2007-v60-n4-haf1778/016529ar/>

ENDNOTES

¹ See research brief #21.

² Dagenais and Laville 2007, 517.

³ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 518.

⁴ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 518.

⁵ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 519.

⁶ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 519.

⁷ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 519-520.

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- ⁸ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 519-520.
- ⁹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 520.
- ¹⁰ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 520-521.
- ¹¹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 521-522.
- ¹² Dagenais and Laville 2007, 521-522.
- ¹³ Quoted in Dagenais and Laville 2007, 521-522.
- ¹⁴ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 522.
- ¹⁵ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 522.
- ¹⁶ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 522-523.
- ¹⁷ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 522-523.
- ¹⁸ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 523-524.
- ¹⁹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 523-524.
- ²⁰ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 523-524.
- ²¹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 523-524.
- ²² Dagenais and Laville 2007, 525.
- ²³ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 525.
- ²⁴ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 526.
- ²⁵ This is a question I ask of those who insist that history be taught in terms of historical thinking (or any objective that reduces history to a means to an ends).
- ²⁶ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 526.
- ²⁷ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 526.
- ²⁸ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 527. Dagenais and Laville (2007, 532) note that the critics – including those historians who participated in the controversy - are a bit late to linking nationalism with history, as the Ontario Minister of Education George William Ross wrote :: “I have perused with great care the various histories in use in all the provinces of the Dominion, and I have found them merely to be provincial histories, without reference to our common country... Can’t we agree upon certain broad features common to the whole of this Dominion with which we can indoctrinate our pupils?” » Quoted from Geneviève Laloux-Jain, *Les manuels d’histoire du Canada au Québec et en Ontario (de 1867 à 1914)* (Québec, Les Presses de l’Université Laval (1974), 82.
- ²⁹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 534. On this point they are in accord with Margaret Atwood (2012 [1972]).
- ³⁰ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 534.
- ³¹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 534.
- ³² Dagenais and Laville 2007, 535.
- ³³ Quoted in Dagenais and Laville 2007, 535.
- ³⁴ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 535. Again they note the nationalism of the Ontario curriculum, specifically the course on Canadian and World Studies see Dagenais and Laville 2007, 538. They also note (Dagenais and Laville 2007, 539) the Québec curriculum controversy of 2006 Inchauspé (2014) describes; see research brief #.....

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- ³⁵ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 540. See <https://historicalthinking.ca/>. Accessed 2020-03-09.
- ³⁶ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 542.
- ³⁷ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 542-543.
- ³⁸ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 544.
- ³⁹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 546.
- ⁴⁰ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 549.
- ⁴¹ Dagenais and Laville 2007, 549.
- ⁴² Dagenais and Laville 2007, 549.
- ⁴³ See research brief #21.