

Beyond History for Historical Consciousness: Students, Narrative, and Memory

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Book Review

Beyond History for Historical Consciousness: Students, Narrative, and Memory

By Stéphane Lévesque and Jean-Philippe Croteau. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 197 pp. (softcover): ISBN 978-1-4875-2453-1, ebook ISBN 978-1-4875-3479-0.

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Beyond History relates the authors' analysis of 600 students' written responses to a single question: "Please tell us the history of French Canadians in this country as you know it (p. 24)." The critical element of the question is the final qualifier, "as you know it." These four words allow Lévesque and Croteau to answer a more meaningful and complex question: how do these 600 students (chosen from different regions of Quebec and Ontario's Franco-Ontarian communities) perceive the same history? Based on their analysis, the authors draw interesting and illuminating conclusions about how students construct a narrative to explain the past.

Lévesque and Croteau appreciate the complexities of their subject, beginning with their introduction which provides a concise overview of the history teaching debates, aptly summarized by the phrase, "no one likes the way history is taught" (p. 5). History teachers are constantly told they either teach history incorrectly or don't devote enough time to specific events or groups. Known to teachers and academics as the "History Wars," Lévesque and Croteau provide a succinct summary of these battles and review the debates about the relevance of French language education in a multicultural Ontario. Regarding the former, Lévesque and Croteau reveal a vital, missing component: the lack of empirical evidence about what students take away from all the mandatory history courses they sit through (and, one hopes, enjoy).

Lévesque and Croteau break their study down into five chapters. In chapter one they provide a quick overview of French-Canadian history and examples of student responses to the abovementioned question. In chapters two, three, and four they use different variables to analyze student responses and draw conclusions. Finally, in chapter five they synthesize the conclusions of the previous chapters to argue that school history should use narrative as a metahistorical concept to help students gain a deeper understanding of history.

In chapter two they consider students' geographic location within Quebec and Ontario to highlight differences in their narratives. The authors note that French Canadian efforts to conquer adversity are consistent themes in all narratives. Quebec students, however, trace this adversity back to the Conquest. In contrast, Ontario students focus on regional events, such as the passage of Regulation 17 in Ontario or the campaign to maintain a French language hospital in eastern Ontario.

In chapter three they use students' gender and mother tongue as another mode to analyze student responses. They establish that male students privileged war and conflict in their narratives to explain their view of the past, while female students tended to focus on social and personal histories. Quebec students had a greater sense of a "francophone experience" (p. 111) in their narratives. In contrast, Ontario students were more likely to include stories of Canadian nation-building in their narratives while still highlighting adversity faced by francophones.

In chapter four they delve deeper into whether "the place where they live affected this sense of identification." (p. 29). Chapter Four provides further analysis of student responses as the authors conclude that Franco-Ontarian students have a stronger sense of Canadian identity than Quebec students, who have a greater sense of collective identification. Almost eighty years later, it seems the two solitudes are firmly entrenched.

Two issues arose as I read *Beyond History*. Dismayed, perhaps, by the students' collective inability to write effectively, not just as regards grammar but also their ability to construct a coherent narrative supported by evidence, Lévesque and Croteau argue that the cause was (and is) the displacement of historical narrative writing instruction in the curriculum by the teaching of historical thinking skills (p. 151). Writing instruction, however, is in the curriculum. The first strand of Ontario's current (2018) Grade Ten history curriculum states, "Students will...communicate their ideas, arguments, and conclusions using various formats and styles, as appropriate for the audience and purpose" (p. 111).

Similar expectations were in the 2013 curriculum. Assessment guidelines dating back to circa 2000 require Ontario's history teachers to grade students' "Communication" skills, defined as oral, visual, and written communication that uses the "conventions, vocabulary and terminology" of history. Clear writing is part of the curriculum, and history teachers struggle annually with the Sisyphean task of improving student writing.

My experience teaching the same age group Lévesque and Croteau analyzed led me to question one of their conclusions, not as a criticism but as a hope that others will follow their methodology and probe students' understanding of the past. The authors observe that few students considered Indigenous history in their responses and argue that this reflects a Eurocentric bias (p. 82). Another potential reason for this lack of representation is that teenage students interpret questions literally. From a young age, students are taught to read questions carefully and only answer what is asked. The authors asked about French Canadians, so most students talked about French Canadians to the exclusion of other groups or historical perspectives. I imagined posing the authors' question to my Grade 10 History students as a writing assessment. If I gave them a reduced grade for relaying the history of colonization poorly or ignoring it entirely, I know what their response would be: "Sir, you didn't ask about that." A follow-up study, utilizing the authors' methodology, about how students understand elements of Indigenous history is needed.

Lévesque and Croteau provide an excellent antidote to the stale history war debates by shifting the focus from content and the curriculum to what the students absorb. Their study provides a template allowing future scholars and teachers to explore and understand how students construct their understanding of the past. If history education aims to develop thoughtful individuals who appreciate the complexity of the past, Lévesque and Croteau have demonstrated a fruitful analytical approach to assess its effectiveness.