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Robert C.H. Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?: Montreal, 1819–1849*: A Round Table Commentary

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Résumé de l'article

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Robert C.H. Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?*: A Round Table Commentary

MAGDA FAHRNI

Abstract

Readers of Robert C.H. Sweeny's Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal, 1819–1849 will find old questions, interrogated with classic quantitative methods, and new questions, methods, and ways of writing history. This book is of interest for those historians who wish to understand the debate around the process of industrialization, or the impact of the arrival of industrial capitalism on a city. What is more, Sweeny's book constitutes proof that the craft of history is an exercise in life-long learning, allowing the reader to find something new in each reading.

Résumé

Les lecteurs de Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849, de Robert C.H. Sweeny y retrouveront d'anciens problèmes, abordés au moyen de méthodes quantitatives classiques, et y découvriront de nouvelles questions, méthodes et façons d'écrire l'histoire. Cet ouvrage est d'un grand intérêt pour les historiens cherchant à comprendre le débat autour du processus d'industrialisation, ou l'impact de l'arrivée du capitalisme industriel dans une ville. En outre, l'ouvrage de Sweeny constitue la preuve que l'art de l'historien est un exercice d'apprentissage de toute une vie, ce qui permet au lecteur de découvrir quelque chose de nouveau à chaque lecture.

I was pleased to have been invited to participate in this round table on Robert Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?* Although I am not a historian of the first half of the nineteenth century, I am a historian of Montréal, interested in understanding the impact of industrial capitalism on the city and on the men, women, and children who lived in this city. I am also interested in this book as someone who teaches Québec history, and

particularly as someone who has taught at the Université du Québec à Montréal for the past fifteen years; as those who have read *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?* will know, UQAM crops up regularly in this book, especially in the earlier sections, as the setting for parts of the story. Finally, as the co-editor, with Jarrett Rudy, of the McGill-Queen's University Press series "Studies on the History of Quebec," in which this book was published, I have been fortunate to be able to observe the arrival of this book and its initial reception within Québec university circles.

Readers of Sweeny's book will find in it both something old and something new. By old, I mean old questions, combined with quantitative methods that are in some ways "classic," in use for the past half-century. By new, I mean new answers to these questions; new combinations of methods involving new digital technologies (notably historical geographic information systems); and, above all, perhaps, a new form: what Robert calls "a historian's journal of discovery" or what French-speakers call a "journal de bord," only narrated retrospectively. The chronological structure of the book is that of the author's own life-course, his professional path. The success of this book leads me to think that it satisfies a thirst, on the part of many historians, for explicit and extensive discussions of method and epistemology, for it is this, especially, that distinguishes it from many of its peers.

Ian, Bettina, and Kate have told you much about the content of the book and about its arguments. Much of this content is thought-provoking, even boldly provocative: Robert's argument that craft production, rather than the staple trades, was the key to Montréal's nineteenth-century economic development; his contention that town-country relations were "roughly equitable" in the nineteenth-century St Lawrence Valley; his observation that social differentiation existed within the Lower-Canadian peasantry; his insistence that in order to understand large structural changes it is essential to focus on the local — always, of course, in relationship with the global. Without neglecting these arguments or this content, I wish to focus on the book's *form*, and on the possible *uses* to which this book might be put.

I will begin with its potential uses. This book is of evident interest for those historians who wish to understand the debate around the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism, the process of industrialization, or the impact on the city of the arrival of industrial capitalism. It could be used, then, in classes on the Industrial Revolution, on the nineteenth century, or on the history of Montréal, which was, Robert claims, “the first colonial town in the world to industrialize” (pp. 29, 286). It is a book that would also be highly stimulating to teach in the context of a graduate course on historiography or on methods. I have already seen some of my graduate students dipping into it — intimidated by the boldness of its scope and the forcefulness of its argument, but intrigued by the treatment of particular sources and topics. This is a book that would help students to understand the evolution of the historiography, in Québec and elsewhere, over the past half-century: the importance of what Sweeny calls the “engaged social history” of the 1970s and 1980s; the influence of the linguistic, or cultural, turn in the 1990s; the importance of quantitative analysis among many French-speaking social historians in Québec for decades; the role played by the national question in the writing of Québec history. It would help us to remind students that, to borrow Robert’s term, “our present is [always] present” when we write history (p. 30).

In the context of a graduate methods course, this book would provide examples of ways of treating sources: Sweeny’s argument is that each source must be understood as the result of unequal power relations, as the product of the dialectic of agency and constraint, and as a way of *bringing into being* (and not just reflecting) a particular “order of things,” to borrow a term from my late colleague Jean-Marie Fecteau.¹⁵ Each surviving source is thus “an eloquent witness to past inequalities” (p. 7). As Robert notes, historians of Montréal are incredibly fortunate to have at their disposal the abundance of sources created by the civil law regime, especially notarial archives, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of entries of baptisms, marriages, and funerals in the parish registers meticulously kept by Catholic congregations since the seventeenth century.¹⁶

This book also provides an example of how an author might explicitly insert him or herself into the history that he or she writes. The use of pronouns in this book is striking: a generous use of “I”, but also of “we,” and even of “you” (pp. 8, 59, 208, 326) — the “you” employed, I imagine, as a way of engaging, or perhaps implicating, the reader in this story. Reviewers have focused on the use of the word “choose” in the title of the book, on the insistence upon agency and, more precisely, the dialectic between agency and constraint, on Robert’s argument that “thought preceded action” (p. 4) and that “beliefs” and “relationships” had an impact upon the *decision* to industrialize. Yet it is the use of the “we” that strikes me as more unusual here and, perhaps, more problematic. Who is the “we” who “chose” to industrialize? All those who lived in Montréal (see p. 5), or in the colony of Lower Canada, in the first half of the nineteenth century? This would fit with Sweeny’s insistence upon internal factors and the importance of craft production, with his downplaying of the importance of staples in Montréal’s industrialization. However, as he also insists, influenced by post-colonial perspectives, colonial society was cosmopolitan; peasant society was differentiated; and not all of these people appear to have made the same choices. Is this “we” appropriate, or meaningful, even? What does it imply when historians, a century or two removed from their object of study, use the “we” (p. 311)? How does the national question play into the construction of this “we”?¹⁷

In some ways, this book reflects a recent turn to autobiography among historians. In Québec and Canada, examples of what French-speakers call “égo-histoire” include the *CHR* feature “A Life in History,” launched in 2011,¹⁸ or the series of talks that took place at Université Laval between 2014 and 2016 entitled “Les historien(ne)s, par eux-mêmes.”¹⁹ Some of these autobiographical musings, particularly those of members of the generation that obtained academic posts in the 1970s and early 1980s — often men — echo themes that we find in recent historiographical assessments, focusing on a trajectory from Marxism to an explanation of change that is multi-pronged, less linear.²⁰

Robert goes further than many and now advocates the adoption of what he calls a “cubist interpretation” of history: the triangulation of multiple sources, examined in order to understand the logic of their own creation; multiple vantage points; the recognition that each story told is only partial and that, taken together, these stories do not necessarily make a coherent or a linear whole; a scepticism regarding narratives that appear coherent; a willingness to tolerate, even embrace, contradictions. The cubist interpretation of history includes an insistence upon the importance of understanding the historical logic of each source, why it was created, to what end and with what aims, and why it has survived; it underlines the distinction between “phenomenal” and “epiphenomenal” evidence. All of this is presented, in Sweeny’s book, as an alternative to a superficial categorization of these sources as “routinely generated nominal series” (p. 157). The autobiographical logic of this book’s structure also makes space for the Newfoundland “interlude” (p. 122) in Chapter 5, where Robert examines the Newfoundland inshore cod fishery with an eye to understanding the role played by the informal economy. The book’s last chapter on the early 1880s constitutes a leap ahead in time. Montréal was, Robert argues, “a dramatically less free society” in the 1880s than it had been in the 1820s. Robert sees a new significance for religion, ethnicity, and gender within the geography of this industrialized city; regarding the industrial city of 1880, for example, he “argue[s] that fundamental changes in gender and ethnic relations were necessary to support this new social order, which was itself ecologically unsustainable” (p. 8). The city centre, he contends, had been re-gendered masculine. The conclusions of this final chapter correspond to Robert’s own realization, a process described in the book, that the entire explanation for historical change does not reside with the social.

Many readers of this book might find it to be an insider history. I did occasionally wonder whether this was a history interesting and penetrable uniquely for those already initiated into the world of Québec historiography. This is a book that names names — and not always approvingly. Robert names big names

(Louise Dechêne, E.P. Thompson, George Rudé²¹), but also lesser-known names; in what sometimes amounts to a critique of the structures of academic labour, he takes care to note the work done by research assistants and graduate students, work that was often central to books that have become pillars of the Québec historiography. It's a book that names names, but also *places*, and *moments*, such as the locations of the various Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française (IHAF) congresses over the years: a Sainte-Foy motel in 1991 (p. 109), or the Mount Orford Convention Centre in 1996 (p. 112). I do wonder whether this book — and these names, places, and moments — will mean quite as much to people *outside* the world of Québec history.

This book constitutes proof, for students, that the craft of history is an exercise in life-long learning. Robert admits to having made mistakes, and describes the moments and encounters that led him to rethink his choices, methods, and conclusions. He describes going back to particular sources and archives, years and even decades after first examining these sources, and seeing them differently, in the light of the intervening debates and knowledge acquired. The book contains self-critiques — it adopts what Robert calls a “self-reflective critical stance” (p. 183) — but it also details accounts of critiques of Sweeney's work delivered — sometimes fiercely — by other historians.

At a round-table on Robert's book that took place at the Congress of the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française held at McGill in 2015 (and here I adopt Robert's own narrative device!), the historical geographer Sherry Olson stood up to say that every time she went back to Robert's book (she had already read it several times, a scant few months after its publication), she found something new.²² I would argue that it is in large part the *form* of this book that allows us to find something new in it at each reading. This Cubist portrait, all sharp corners and angles, juxtaposing layered and incompatible narratives, makes space for discoveries and hard reflection, in a way that a book constructed as a smoother narrative (“lisse,” as French-speakers say pejoratively), could never do.

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