*Ronald Rudin*

# 6. Bargaining from Strength: Historical Writing and Political Autonomy in Late-Twentieth-Century Quebec[1]

## Introduction

Over the past thirty years, political discourse in Quebec has been dominated by those interested in expanding the autonomy of this Canadian province. Ever since the creation of the Canadian federation (normally referred to as Confederation) in 1867, there have been those in Quebec who have sought to maximize the autonomy allowed to the province under the terms of the constitutional arrangements of the mid-nineteenth century. However, since the 1960s the major Quebec political parties have been dedicated to securing greater autonomy, within the confines of Canada through a fundamental renegotiation of the Confederation pact if possible, or through Quebec's separation from Canada and the creation of some new relationship between two sovereign states if need be. There have been two bitterly fought referenda on the question of Quebec's sovereignty since 1980. While those in favour of Quebec remaining part of Canada won in both cases (albeit by the smallest of margins in 1995), they did so only by advocating a profound reassessment of the province's ties to Canada, thus dramatically reflecting the depth of support for autonomy, however defined, in late-twentieth-century Quebec.

Over roughly the same period, there has been an equally noticeable shift in the nature of Quebec historical writing. Prior to the 1960s, most Quebec historians concentrated on what made Quebec a distinct society in the context of North America. These historians, writing from a number of political perspectives, particularly focused upon the factors responsible for the relative powerlessness of the French-speaking majority. Although constituting roughly 80% of the population of Quebec, French-speakers traditionally wielded relatively little power in both the political and economic arenas, and Quebec historians devoted considerable energy to explaining why this should have been the case. Since the 1960s, however, historians have turned away from this emphasis upon difference to explore, instead, the ways in which Quebecers had long been much like most

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North Americans. In short, the historians were interested in showing Quebecers to have constituted a 'normal' people.[2]

On the face of it, these changes in terms of both political discourse and historical writing in Quebec would appear to have been at odds with one another. In the period since the 1960s, the emphasis upon autonomy frequently led political leaders to emphasize the exceptional nature of Quebec society due to its linguistic and cultural characteristics. This emphasis upon difference took on its most concrete form in a proposal to change the Canadian constitution in the 1980s so as to recognize Quebec as having constituted a 'distinct' society. At the same time historians were intent on placing Quebecers, as one observer remarked, 'in the mainstream of developments both in North America and across the western world. From this perspective, Quebec was as industrial, as capitalistic, as liberal, as developed, in short as modern as other societies'.[3]

This paper is designed to analyse this paradoxical situation through a closer analysis of political and social circumstances, on the one hand, and the nature of Quebec historical writing, on the other. To that end, the first part of this chapter focuses upon the nature of historical writing in the context of Quebec's social and political history from Confederation to the 1960s, when the Quebec government took unprecedented steps to promote the social and economic interests of the province's French-speaking majority. With the support of the state, the position of French-speakers was dramatically improved with the result that this period of profound change tends to be referred to as having constituted a 'Quiet Revolution'. The greater economic and political power of French-speaking Quebecers ultimately helped shape both political discourse and historical writing over the past thirty years. As we will see in the second part of the paper, the political search for autonomy by emphasizing Quebec's exceptionalism and the historians' search for 'normalcy' were really parts of a single process of late-twentieth-century social change. Since this linking of historical writing with political discourse touches directly upon the issue of objectivity in the historical profession, the concluding section of the paper will address the apparent conflict between the inherently political nature of historical writing and the pretensions to objectivity held by many historians.

## Society and Historical Writing in pre-1960 Quebec

### *The Social and Political Context*[4]

Over the course of a century, from roughly the moment at which Canada was created as a country to the start of the 1960s, Quebec shared in many of the processes that shaped much of the western world. The European colonization of


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the St-Lawrence River valley, which runs through the heart of Quebec, was begun by France in the seventeenth century. Under French rule, relatively few immigrants made the journey across the Atlantic, with the result that a relatively small French-Catholic population existed in 1763 when control of the territory passed from France to England following the Seven Years' War. This population earned its living from the land, a situation that did not greatly change until the mid-nineteenth century when changes in technology and transportation brought the industrial revolution to Quebec, at roughly the same moment that it was spreading through other parts of North America.

Industrialization left its mark on Quebec in various ways. On one level, it resulted in the slow drift of the French-speaking population from the land to the cities, most notably Montreal which emerged as a major industrial, commercial and financial centre. By the time of World War I, the majority of the residents of Quebec were living in cities, a situation which paralleled the growth of the urban population in the rest of Canada. As the twentieth century continued, so too did the urbanization of the population, with the result that 74% of the population of Quebec was living in cities by the start of the 1960s, a figure that has continued to rise over the past thirty years.

On another level, the emergence of an industrial economy had significant consequences for Quebec as it facilitated the creation of Canada as a country in 1867. Prior to Confederation, much of the territory that would become Canada was divided among a number of relatively self-governing colonies, which were collectively known as British North America. By the mid-nineteenth century, England had little strategic interest in maintaining very much control over the internal workings of the colonies. Accordingly, it was attracted by the idea of a federation of the various colonies so that they might look after themselves. At the same time, the business leaders of the colonies were interested in the considerable economic advantages that such a union might offer. In particular, the business leaders in Montreal, most of whom were English-speakers even though they resided in a largely French-speaking territory, looked forward to the creation of a large common market (there had previously been some tariff barriers between colonies) within which industrial goods might be sold and across which railways might be built. Accordingly, when the representatives of the various British North American colonies sat down to negotiate the terms of the new federation, business concerns were given a good deal of consideration.

Had the business leaders (amply represented by the two leading politicians of the time, John A. Macdonald and George-Etienne Cartier, both of whom had served as corporate lawyers) had their way, Canada would have been a country with a single, central government with the power to facilitate the development of the industrial economy that was taking shape.[5] These leaders soon realized that such extreme centralization, however desirable, was impossible in

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the face of Quebecers' insistence that they maintain control over their distinctive Catholic institutions that provided education and social services to the bulk of the population. Ever since the French regime, the Catholic church had been in charge of these services, and Quebecers were opposed to allowing such matters to fall under the control of a Canadian government, dominated by English-speaking Protestants, who would constitute the majority in the new country as a whole. Accordingly, the framers of Canada's constitution, the British North America (BNA) Act, established a two-tier system of government. The power to build a transcontinental economy was to be within the competence of the central government, while the various provinces would control such matters as education and social services. In the case of Quebec, this meant that the provincial government would allow the Catholic church to play a central role in the provision of services to the population. While other provinces were busily creating state-run ministries of education, in Quebec this was viewed as unnecessary as the Catholic church was to have the mandate to administer most of the schools.[6]

Over the first hundred years of Confederation, Quebecers expressed considerable insecurity about the political arrangement of 1867, but largely manifested this feeling in repeated demands that the central government respect the province's constitutional responsibilities. Blessed with superior resources, central governments, particularly in the period immediately following World War II, tried to exert some control over areas within Quebec's competence. In reaction, Quebec governments regularly pointed to the distinctive linguistic and cultural make-up of Quebec which required that it remain in control over the few matters left in its hands. This sense of insecurity was particularly heightened by the influx of a significant number of immigrants in the post-war period. Most of these immigrants chose to live their lives in English, the mother tongue of roughly 15% of the population of the province, thus raising the spectre that Quebecers might succumb to the force of anglicization, always a danger for a French-speaking people in the North American sea of English-speakers.

## *Writing a 'Different' Past*

Most Quebec historical writing from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s was designed to help Quebecers understand why they had long been poorer and less powerful than English-speakers in Canada. There were some significant changes over this century, primarily due to the emergence of history as a professional discipline in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, nearly all historians presented a French-speaking and Catholic population that had long been fundamentally different from the English-speakers who surrounded them in North America. Moreover, nearly all historians made little secret of the fact that they


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hoped that their writings would somehow contribute to '*la survivance*' (the survival) of their people.

This tradition began in the 1840s, with the publication of the first comprehensive history of the French-speaking population of Quebec. François-Xavier Garneau wrote his *Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu'à nos jours* (The History of Canada from its Discovery to the Present) in the late 1840s, at a time when hope for survival seemed bleak. In 1837-38 there had been a rebellion against British rule, which was followed by the imposition of a new political system designed to assimilate French-speakers into the English-speaking population that surrounded them. In this context, Garneau set out to chronicle the history of a people marked by the fact that it had been forced to make its way in the world on its own. In the final analysis, France had abandoned Quebecers, following which England threatened them with the prospect of 'suffering and humiliation'.[7] The history of Quebec, then, was one of a resilient people who had been true to their roots so as to fend off the forces of assimilation.

While Garneau presented a saga designed to stiffen the resolve of Quebecers, his work was found wanting in certain regards by Abbé Lionel Groulx, easily the most important French-language historian in Canada over the first half of the twentieth century. Groulx, who became the first professor of Quebec history at the university level in 1915, described Garneau as his model for the way in which he had used history to give his people hope. Nevertheless, Groulx, a priest, could not accept Garneau's frequent marginalization of Catholicism as a positive force in having encouraged survival. In counterpoint to Garneau's overly secular vision of Quebec's past, Groulx produced a large body of work that focused upon the spiritual values of Quebecers, a rural people who had managed to stave off assimilation by following a way of life at odds with the currents of secularization and modernization across North America. Groulx's characterization of Quebecers as a rural people was contradicted by the steady movement of the population to the cities. Nevertheless, he stressed the distinctive characteristics of Quebecers so as to give them the strength to avoid assimilation. Although Groulx flirted with the idea of Quebec's separation from Canada, he was in the mainstream of Quebec intellectual and political leaders during the first half of the twentieth century who recognized that their society was too poor to achieve any new political status. While the politicians tried to hold on to the autonomy that had been granted in 1867, intellectuals such as Groulx tried to give Quebecers the hope to survive until they were strong enough to achieve a new constitutional status.

This recognition of weakness was still evident in Quebec historical writing as a new generation, much better trained than Groulx's, came to occupy leading positions in Quebec's two French-language universities after World War II. For these young historians, however, Quebecers' weakness, particularly in the world of business, was no longer a virtue, as it had appeared in Groulx's writing, but

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was instead a problem that needed to be fixed. This changed perspective had been prompted by the spectacular growth of the North American economy after World War II. During these years, Quebecers watched the emergence of the consumer society thanks to the introduction of television, all the while remaining incapable of sharing in its fruits owing to their relative poverty. In this context, historians focused upon the causes for Quebecers' economic marginalization.

Those historians who came to succeed Groulx at the Université de Montréal argued that Quebecers' economic inferiority had been the result of the takeover of the French colony in the St-Lawrence valley in the mid-eighteenth century. One of these historians, Guy Frégault, argued that Quebec had constituted a 'normal' society prior to the Conquest. There had been a time when all Quebecers could hope to succeed in the world of business, but after 1763 such hope was gone and all that was left was a 'broken' people.[8] Another group of historians, this one at the Université Laval in Quebec City, also focused on the way in which Quebecers had long been different because of their economic weakness. However, in the hands of historians such as Fernand Ouellet the responsibility rested with the Quebecers themselves who had followed the dictates of Catholicism too readily to make it in a world where individual initiative was required.[9]

These contrasting views on the economic inferiority of French-speakers reflected differing perspectives upon Quebec's relationship with the rest of Canada. The Montreal historians, with their emphasis upon the tragic dimensions of the Conquest, suggested that Quebecers required a fundamental renegotiation of their place within Canada if they were to regain the power they had wielded during the French regime. As for the Laval historians, their emphasis upon the shortcomings of Quebecers seemed to call out for the revamping of Quebec's institutions, but provided little comfort for those who saw the problem as resting with the Canadian federation.[10] In spite of these differences, however, both the Montreal and Laval historians, like Garneau and Groulx before them, focused upon what had made Quebecers different. Moreover, they all accepted the role of the historian as a public figure who could provide some direction for his society. Both the nature of historical writing and its relationship to public life would change, however, following the 1960s, with the fundamental transformation of many aspects of life in Quebec thanks to the direct intervention of the Quebec state in order to respond to the long-standing weakness, both economic and political, of the province's French-speaking majority. So successful were these reforms in changing both the objective circumstances of French-speakers and the way in which they viewed themselves that the 1960s are commonly referred to in Quebec as having brought about a 'Quiet Revolution'.


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## Social Change, Political Autonomy, and the Search for a 'Normal' Past

### *Quebec Society after the Quiet Revolution*

During the first century of Canada's history as a country, Quebec had experienced urbanization, industrialization and immigration, forces that were also central to the experiences of many other societies across the western world. Nevertheless, however 'normal' Quebec's experience may have appeared, the marginalization of French-speakers from positions of power, both political and economic, led various leaders – historians included – to look for the roots for Quebecers' relative weakness in the years following World War II. Ordinary Quebecers, anxious to share in the fruits of the consumer society, were prepared to see some fundamental changes in the way their province functioned – but they had to wait until the 1960s, when the political will finally emerged to challenge the English-speaking elite of the business world and the hierarchy of the Catholic church, which had long encouraged the Quebec government to play a relatively passive role in the province's affairs.

That the Quebec state was now prepared to intervene in order to deal with the relative powerlessness of French-speakers was evident in two actions taken by the government of Jean Lesage, leader of the Quebec Liberal Party, whose rise to power in 1960 is usually viewed as marking the start of the Quiet Revolution. In 1962 the Quebec government nationalized the various hydroelectric companies, all owned by English-speakers, which had controlled the most important source of power in the province since the start of the century. By creating Hydro-Québec, the provincial government hoped to create a technologically advanced corporation where French-speakers, who had not always had easy entrée into the corporate world, would be able to get their feet in the door. Similarly, in 1964 the Lesage government created a state-run Ministry of Education to push aside the Catholic church which had been in a dominant position since the mid-nineteenth century, but whose insistence upon a classical education was now viewed as part of the cause of Quebecers' economic weakness.

The nationalization of both hydro-electricity and education reflected the determination of French-speaking Quebecers to use the one government that they could hope to control, the government of Quebec, to achieve levels of wealth and power that had long been held by English-speakers. However, these nationalizations were just the start of a programme, pursued by various governments over much of the past thirty years, to use the Quebec state as a tool to improve the status of French-speakers. On one level, Quebec governments intervened whenever they could to create new programmes within the jurisdictions that had been consigned to them as part of the Confederation arrangements of

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1867. In this regard, in 1974 the Quebec government passed legislation making French the official language of Quebec, compelling most immigrants to attend French schools, and making French the normal language of business. All of these actions were designed to enhance further the place of French-speakers in the economy, with the result that by the end of the 1970s the long-standing wage gap between French and English-speakers had been closed. The world of business, long viewed as the preserve of English-speakers, now became part of the mainstream of Québécois culture, with the result that business school enrolments boomed and support for free trade with the United States among French-speakers far exceeded that among English Canadians.

On another level, Quebec governments sought to expand the range of actions that they could initiate by seeking a fundamental renegotiation of Quebec's place within the Canadian federation so that the province's distinctive language and culture might be allowed to flourish. Within only a few years of Lesage's rise to power, he was already at the bargaining table with Lester Pearson, the Canadian prime minister at the time, seeking a new relationship between Quebec and Canada that might transfer some federal powers to the province. Since the start of the 1960s, every government of Quebec, regardless of its party affiliation, has been committed to this expansion of Quebec's autonomy. However, in spite of this constant commitment to autonomy, there has been no formal amendment to the Canadian constitution in response to Quebec's demands to be recognized as having a 'special status' or constituting a 'distinct society', to use only two of the numerous formulations that have been proposed. Against the background of this failure to achieve further autonomy, the late 1960s saw the rise of a mainstream political party, committed to Quebec's independence, albeit in conjunction with the preservation of economic links with the rest of Canada.

René Lévesque, the founder of the Parti québécois (PQ), had been the Liberal cabinet minister responsible for the nationalization of hydro-electricity in the early 1960s. He was convinced that a new relationship had to be forged with the rest of Canada, but ultimately concluded that such change would never occur through normal negotiations. Accordingly, he left the Liberals in order to create a political party dedicated to the sovereignty of Quebec along with the forging of a new relationship with the rest of Canada. Lévesque's idea of sovereignty-association became the guiding principle for the PQ, which he took to power in 1976. Since he was advocating a reformulation of Quebec's ties to the rest of Canada, and not simply the severing of all connections, there is much that his party and the Liberals (the only other significant political party) have shared over the past thirty years. Both parties have reflected the spirit of the Quiet Revolution, which was to make Quebecers, to use a Liberal Party slogan, '*maîtres chez nous*' (masters in our own house).[11] Each has wanted to make Quebec more autonomous, in the process reflecting a profound transformation of the self-image of Quebecers,


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a change that was encouraged by the similarly dramatic transformation of Quebec historical writing.

## *Writing a 'Normal' Past*

Prior to the Quiet Revolution, historians focused largely upon what had made Quebecers somehow different from, and usually weaker than, their North American neighbours. This paradigm of difference no longer had very much appeal to historians, however, as Quebecers became central players in public life wielding significant economic and political power. Rather, historians, living in a society which appeared to be in the mainstream of developments, now looked to the past for evidence that Quebecers had long been a modern people. This perspective proved particularly attractive to the generation of historians, which came to occupy newly created positions in the rapidly expanding French-language universities of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As part of the commitment of the Quebec state to improving the status of French-speakers, government funds were invested in both the expansion of the existing universities and the creation of an entirely new one, the Université du Québec, with campuses scattered across the province. When it came to staffing the new or growing history departments, the universities mainly looked to young scholars, baby-boomers who had been born in the years after World War II, who had attended university during the heady years of the Quiet Revolution, and who were just finishing doctoral degrees as the new positions were opening up. As one of the most influential of these historians, Paul-André Linteau, has observed, 'Coming of age in a Quebec where everyone was talking about modernization, living in an urban-industrial society, it was natural that we would want to understand the roots of contemporary Quebec'. Earlier historians had looked to the French regime or the early years of British rule in order to make sense of the impact of the Conquest which had contributed to Quebec's distinctiveness. However, as Linteau put it, such 'historical writing … was not responding to our concerns. Accordingly, we set off to explore the various factors that led to the emergence of an industrial, capitalist society in Quebec by the middle of the nineteenth century'.[12]

So completely has Linteau's generation shaped Quebec historical writing over the past thirty years that there have been relatively few dissenters from a paradigm that focused upon the emergence of an urban, secular and entrepreneurial Quebec, and which insisted that there was little to distinguish Quebec from the neighbouring societies of North America. Because this generation so profoundly reshaped Quebec historical writing, I have elsewhere labelled them as revisionists.[13] Their perspective found its clearest expression in the most widely read work of history published in Quebec since the Quiet Revolution. Written by

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Linteau along with René Durocher and Jean-Claude Robert, *Histoire du Québec contemporain* was a synthesis of the various studies that their generation had been carrying out since the late 1960s.[14]

Linteau, Durocher and Robert dealt exclusively with the period since Confederation, thus setting themselves apart from Quebec historians, going back to Garneau, who had been preoccupied with an earlier period where the roots of Quebecers' inferiority might be found. These earlier historians had focused upon a rural society, in which French-speakers had been strongly influenced by Catholicism and little interested in issues pertinent to the world of business. Concentrating upon the period since 1867, Linteau, Durocher and Robert were insistent upon presenting a profoundly urban people. Accordingly, in the section of *Histoire du Québec contemporain* dealing with the period from 1867 to 1896, the authors gave considerably more space to urban issues than to rural ones, this in spite of the fact that, as they admitted, 'Quebec society was made up largely of rural inhabitants'.[15] However, they wanted to dispute the way in which 'Quebec [had] long been characterized as a society which was largely rural and relatively homogeneous, and in which the family was the central institution'.[16]

Once they established the pedigree of Quebecers as an urban people, Linteau, Durocher and Robert went on to show that they had been important players in the economy, this in contrast with the long-dominant assumption that French-speakers had been pushed aside from, or had become uninterested in, positions of economic power in the aftermath of the Conquest. Linteau and his colleagues pointed to the 'dynamism of a French-speaking bourgeoisie' by showing a francophone presence in the industrial, commercial, financial, and real-estate sectors.[17] From the revisionists' perspective, if English-speakers had long dominated the Quebec economy, it was simply a function of their superior access to capital markets controlled by fellow Anglophones. In spite of this dominance, Linteau and his colleagues insisted on the on-going role of French-speakers in positions of economic influence, albeit not at the very highest levels.

Moreover, this emphasis upon the entrepreneurial talents of Quebecers served to contradict the emphasis in earlier historical writing upon the role of Catholicism in blocking the involvement of Quebecers in the world of business. More generally, Linteau and his colleagues pushed to one side the impact of the Catholic Church which was depicted as only one institution among many vying for control over the Quebec people. Even if the Church sought 'to assert a leading role in society', it was unable to overcome the 'social and ideological changes linked to the development of capitalism'.[18] Moreover, the church was shown as having been incapable of blocking the growth of the role of the state in Quebec, this in spite of the failure to create a state-run Ministry of Education until the 1960s. Nevertheless, in the context of the Quiet Revolution, the revisionists were eager to show that, even in the field of education, Quebecers had been in


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the mainstream of efforts in most western societies to employ the state as an agent of development. Accordingly, Linteau, Durocher and Robert observed that Quebec governments going back to the 1920s had been involved in the 'modernization of the educational system'.[19]

Here, then, was a Quebec in the mainstream of various developments such as urbanization, industrialization and secularization that had been central to the history of most western nations. Moreover, the revisionist historians constructed a narrative of normalcy by concentrating their attention resolutely upon the territory of Quebec, in contrast with earlier historians such as Lionel Groulx, who entitled his own synthesis of his people's past, *Histoire du Canada français*.[20] In employing the term 'Canada français' (French Canada), Groulx dealt primarily with the French-speaking population of Quebec, as would Linteau, Durocher and Robert thirty years later. At the same time, however, he also took into account the experiences of the relatively weak French-speaking minorities in the other Canadian provinces, with the result that he, and other pre-Quiet Revolution historians, tended to focus upon the sad plight of a linguistic minority.

By the late 1960s, however, in the midst of the Quiet Revolution, when institutions such as Hydro-Québec or the Quebec Ministry of Education were being constructed to serve the population residing in the province, historians began to give their studies a more territorial orientation. In order to emphasize the distance between their conception and that of earlier historians such as Groulx, Linteau and his colleagues began their volume with a lengthy statement of purpose that, to a large extent, defined revisionist historical writing: 'The Quebec that we are studying here is defined in territorial, rather than ethnic, terms. We are interested in phenomena, which were experienced by the men, and women who inhabited this territory. We have consistently used the word "Québécois" in a very precise sense. It pertains to all residents of Quebec, including those whose ancestors came from the northwest thousands of years ago, those who came from France in the time of Jean Talon, those who came from Scotland in the late eighteenth century or from Ireland during the Great Famine, those Jews seeking refuge from the pogroms of Eastern Europe, and those emigrating from a southern Italy which had little to offer them'.[21] This formulation served not only to emphasize the territorial dimensions of the revisionists' conception, but also to place Quebec in the context of the process of immigration, which had been central to the experience of other parts of North America.

While Groulx had written about French Canadians, the revisionists now dealt with Québécois, a term which was coined during the Quiet Revolution. This term, however, was not without its ambiguity. On the one hand, it had a territorial definition that brought all residents of Quebec into the picture. At the same time, the revisionists' preoccupation with establishing the modern credentials of 80% of the population of that territory led them to focus upon the members of a

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particular ethnic group. This unresolved tension in the writings of the revisionists was similarly evident in the use of the term 'Québécois' by the Parti québécois. On the one hand, this party, from its founding in 1968, has claimed to be interested in representing the interests of all the residents of the territory of Quebec; on the other hand, its policies in such areas as the promotion of the French language have been attractive almost exclusively to members of the French-speaking majority. Very few non-francophones support the Parti québécois, with the result that the party's occasional appeals to a civic form of nationalism tend to be overpowered by the ethnic basis of its political support. In the end, the term 'Québécois' applies most convincingly to the French-speaking population as it came to view itself following the Quiet Revolution. As Jocelyn Létourneau has put it, the French Canadian, 'conquered, humiliated, and demoralized', was replaced in the historical record by the Québécois, 'successful, entrepreneurial and ambitious'.[22]

## Revisionism, Objectivity and Autonomy

In addition to the substantive differences between the revisionists and their predecessors, there was also a significant shift in style. Prior to the Quiet Revolution, most Quebec historians, in addition to explaining the past, were prepared to be explicit about the political implications of their work. Both Garneau and Groulx wrote about the past in order to steel the resolve of their people to survive culturally. As for the historians writing after World War II, they were interested in providing lessons about the direction that Quebecers should follow in light of the rise of the consumer society. By contrast, the revisionists went out of their way to avoid giving the impression that they were for one political option or another for Quebec, no mean feat in a society whose French-speaking population is fairly evenly divided over whether to remain part of Canada.

In explaining the intellectual forces that shaped the revisionists, Linteau recognized a particular debt to the American historians of the 1960s and 1970s who were interested in using the techniques of the social sciences to deal, in a rational, scientific manner, with such 'modern' phenomena as urbanization and class conflict.[23] There was something fitting about this American identification since, as we have seen, much revisionist writing was designed to depict Quebecers as a normal North American people. More significantly, however, Linteau and his colleagues were attracted by the seemingly value-free nature of the Americans' approach, which seemed to provide them with the opportunity to distance themselves even further from their predecessors who had worn their political views on their sleeves. Serge Courville, Jean-Claude Robert and Normand Séguin, three leading revisionists, distinguished themselves from previous Que-


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bec historians whose work had been deformed by 'preconceived notions and value judgements'.[24] For his part, Yves Gingras argued that Quebec historians since the 1960s had turned from polemical writing to scientific research so as to avoid 'being overly influenced by current social or economic concerns'.[25]

This self-image of the Quebec historian as objective observer has endured remarkably well into the late twentieth century, in spite of the trend throughout the wider profession to question the pretensions to objectivity of any historical writing. Over the past twenty years, under pressure both from various groups interested in explicitly using history as a tool to advance political agendas and from post-modernists prepared to see works of history as scarcely distinguishable from those of fiction, there has been much debate about the nature of historical writing. As Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob have remarked, the only thing that is certain about the historical profession in the 1990s is that 'it rarely has been such a subject of controversy'.[26]

By and large, however, such debates have not made much of a dent in Quebec. Accordingly, Jocelyn Létourneau observed, 'One can count on the fingers of one hand the number of historians in Quebec who seem interested in understanding the assumptions underlying the conceptual model that they [the revisionists] have constructed'.[27] In general, Quebec historians have been comfortable with the way in which they have provided an appropriately modern view of their people's past and have not overly troubled themselves about the implications or the limitations of the revisionist approach. Normand Séguin, a revisionist referred to above, had no difficulty in remarking in 1991, long after the scientific pretensions of the discipline had been thrown into doubt, that history constituted 'a scientific exercise' designed 'to correct mistaken impressions and to fill the gaps in our knowledge'.[28] Séguin's statement, on its own, was not very exceptional. There are numerous historians across the profession at century's end who would be prepared to support his article of faith, but in most contexts such a statement would have been greeted with considerable cynicism. In Quebec, however, Séguin's faith in the scientific mission of historians met with little opposition, as it expressed the conviction, shared by most revisionists, that they were engaged in an exercise relatively free of distortion through value judgements.

This objective stance can be understood both as a reaction to the self-consciously political nature of their predecessors' writings and as a reflection of the manner in which the highly-trained 'expert' became a much respected figure in Quebec in the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution. Accordingly, there was a rapid rise to prominence of individuals who seemed to have the tools to resolve problems in a rational way, 'free of passion and value judgements'.[29] Business people became persons worthy of respect precisely because they projected the image of the modern Quebecer who was capable of succeeding on the international stage.

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Similarly, in the public sector, highly-trained technocrats were hailed as the successors to the various representatives of the Catholic Church who had for so long managed the province's educational and social service systems. These civil servants contributed to the new image of the Quebecer by helping to provide the trappings of the modern interventionist state. In this context, the revisionist historians had every reason to see themselves as experts easily distinguishable from predecessors such as Groulx, whose works had been explicitly polemical, and thus deemed insufficiently scientific. The revisionists both looked for a modern past and marketed themselves as thoroughly modern in their own right.

When the revisionists' approach to the past is viewed in this manner, their work becomes less objective than they would claim it to have been. However, this remark is not meant as one of criticism since, as Peter Novick has argued in a penetrating study of the role of objectivity in the American historical profession, historical writing cannot help but be, to some degree, subjective. As Novick observed, 'I think [the idea of historical objectivity] promotes an unreal and misleading invidious distinction between, on the one hand, historical accounts "distorted" by ideological assumptions and purposes; on the other, history free of these taints. It seems to me that to say of a work of history that it is or isn't objective is to make an *empty* observation; to say something neither interesting nor useful'.[30] One might conclude from this disclaimer that Novick was prepared to accept any historical account as legitimate because objectivity was unattainable. In fact, however, he responded to those who would consign history to the ranks of fiction by noting that the pursuit, if not the attainment, of historical objectivity was a form of '*salutary nonsense*'; it was indefinable and unachievable, but just the same it provided some direction for historians.[31] As several commentators have observed, Novick indicated his own faith in the value of trying to get close to some well-documented, reasoned truth by producing a 650-page monograph grounded in years of painstaking research.[32]

Viewed from Novick's perspective, revisionist writing constituted a body of work based upon considerable, conscientious research, but which still reflected, in terms of both its style and substance, certain aspects of Quebec society in the late twentieth century. Accordingly, the revisionists' emphasis upon the normality of the Quebec past has been paralleled by what François Ricard has called 'the "normalization" of Quebec literature'. Ricard observed that since the 1970s there has been 'a weakening of the distinctive characteristics of Quebec literature and a growing tendency for it to resemble the literature of other industrial nations'.[33] Moreover, the revisionist approach to the past has been compatible with the general emphasis upon autonomy in Quebec political discourse since the Quiet Revolution. As we have seen, Quebec's political leaders over the past thirty years have emphasized the ways in which Quebec society is somehow different, usually in linguistic or cultural terms, from other societies in North America in order


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to provide support for the province's increased autonomy, either within the Canadian federation or outside of it as a sovereign state.

In the Quebec provincial election of 1998, the two major political parties played upon this sense of difference to advance their respective programmes. The Quebec Liberal Party, interested in the re-negotiation of the terms of federation so as to provide Quebec with additional powers, referred repeatedly to the 'unique character' of the province. As for the Parti québécois, which continues to support the sovereignty of Quebec in conjunction with a new relationship with the rest of Canada, its advertising proclaimed: 'Yes, we are different…. We are distinguishable from the rest of North America, not by our weaknesses, but by our strengths'.[34] While earlier Quebec historians such as Lionel Groulx had emphasized the distinctiveness of Quebecers in order to show their vulnerability, the leaders of both the Parti québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party now point to markers of difference in order to convey a sense of pride and even strength.

As a matter of political positioning, nearly all Quebec leaders since the Quiet Revolution have emphasized the 'difference' of Quebecers in order to explain, particularly to potential bargaining partners in the rest of Canada, that there was cause for revamping the way in which Canada was structured. Given the successes of Quebecers over the past thirty years, this emphasis upon Quebec's linguistic or cultural distinctiveness has not been a plea for protection by a weak people, but rather a demand for respect by a different, yet vibrant society. For their part, the revisionist historians, free of practical political concerns, presented Quebecers as a 'normal' people who, within the confines of the territory of Quebec, had long been in the mainstream of developments in the western world. Such a characterization freed Quebecers from being perceived as somehow inferior to their counterparts in English Canada, a perspective that could easily have been absorbed from most Quebec historical writing produced before the Quiet Revolution. English Canadians had little reason to bargain seriously with a people made up of 'poor farmers, who were devout Catholics, with little interest in the modern world'.[35] Rather, the revisionists presented a population that warranted serious consideration at the bargaining table because it had long been 'successful, entrepreneurial and ambitious'.[36]

The transformation of the Quebecer in the historical record from an object of oppression to an agent of success parallels, in certain regards, the treatment of women (as well as other groups which had traditionally held relatively little power) at the hands of historians over the past thirty years. With the expansion of universities across the western world, a process that had also occurred in Quebec in the context of the Quiet Revolution, women assumed a significant presence in history departments for the first time. Many of these new professors were interested in studying the history of women, at first in order to show the ways in which women had been oppressed throughout history. However, they soon shift-

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ed their attention from 'subordination and victimization to [an emphasis upon women's] agency and autonomy'.[37] By moving beyond the depiction of women as victims, women's historians – like the revisionists in Quebec – were showing their subjects to have been central players in history, and by connection individuals worthy of consideration in the organization of society. As Joan Scott has put it, 'Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies'.[38] Here was the intersection of history and politics as 'feminists demand[ed] the right to know and understand the experience of women, and to have it analysed, taken into account, recorded and valued, equally with the experience of men'.[39]

While women's historians came to their depiction of women fully aware of its political implications, the revisionist historians, in reaction against their politically involved predecessors, did not think in such terms. These historians did not necessarily calculate that their presentation of Quebecers as a modern people would serve the interests of political leaders trying to expand the province's autonomy. More likely, given the value-free pretensions of the revisionists, few probably gave much thought to the political implications of their approach to the past. Committed as they were to the possibility of understanding the past 'as it was', untainted by the agendas of previous Quebec historians, most revisionists could not imagine that their work might have contained a political message. In any event, their inability to appreciate the subjective aspects of their studies does not free them from the subjectivity shared by all historians. Moreover, the value judgements that they communicated, however implicitly, have allowed Quebecers to go to the bargaining table from a position of strength in their demand for recognition of the province's linguistic and cultural differences.

Lucien Bouchard, the former leader of the Parti québécois and former prime minister of Quebec, once observed that the distinctive identity of Quebecers could only be secured through sovereignty that might give his people 'the normal tool box of a normal state'.[40] In Bouchard's conceptualization, there was no contradiction between his goal for Quebecers to accede to a 'normal' status and the reasons for seeking that goal, namely the preservation of a set of distinctive linguistic and cultural attributes. In a similar manner, there has been no contradiction between the discourse of Quebec's political leaders and the writings of its historians. Both the politicians and the historians have been shaped by the altered contours of Quebec society since the Quiet Revolution, and both, in their own ways and within the limits of their chosen professions, have sought to advance the interests of a people who have been self-conscious about the changes their society has undergone over the past thirty years.


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## Notes

[1] An earlier version of some of the ideas in this paper can be found in my *Making History in Twentieth Century Quebec*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support of my research on Quebec historical writing.

[2] Throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted, I have used the term Quebecer to refer to the French-speaking population of Quebec. Although roughly 20% of the population, this author included, are residents of Quebec who do not have French as their mother tongue, the term 'Quebecer' and its more recent French version 'Québécois' (discussed below) are usually applied to the French-speaking majority. Moreover, when referring to Quebec historical writing, I have taken into account only the works of French-speaking historians. This is not to deny the role of non-francophones, such as this author, who have written about Quebec's past. However, since this essay deals with the way in which historical writing reflected social change within the French-speaking population, I chose to focus upon historians who formed part of that linguistic community. This choice should not lead the reader to conclude that there is little interchange between French- and English-speakers interested in Quebec. On the other hand, there is relatively little contact between historians (nearly all of whom are English-speaking) who are interested in English Canada and those (the vast majority of whom are French-speakers) who study Quebec.

[3] Gérard Bouchard, 'Sur les mutations de l'historiographie québécoise: les chemins de la maturité', in Fernand Dumont (ed.), *La société québécoise après 30 ans de changements*, Québec, Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1990, p. 262. This and all subsequent quotations originally in French have been translated by the author.

[4] The reader who wants to know more about the Quebec context might consult Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher and Jean-Claude Robert, *Quebec: A History, 1867-1929*, Toronto, Lorimer, 1983, and *Quebec Since 1930*, Toronto, Lorimer, 1991. These volumes are translations of the first edition of *Histoire du Québec contemporain*, a work which is discussed at length below.

[5] Macdonald and Cartier, as the two leading architects of the Canadian federation, represented not only the leading business interests of the day, but also the two linguistic groups within Canada. Macdonald was an English-speaking Protestant from what would become Ontario, the largest English-speaking province after 1867, while Cartier was a Quebecer, who had taken part in a rebellion by French-speakers against English rule in 1837.

[6] There was also a parallel structure to administer schools for the Protestant population. This denominational structure was called into question when Jews, who fit into neither camp, began arriving in Quebec in large numbers at the turn of the century.

[7] François-Xavier Garneau, *Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu'à nos jours*, Montreal, Beauchemin & Valois, 1882 (4th ed.), II, p. 396.

[8] Guy Frégault, *Canada: the War of the Conquest*, trans., Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 342-343.

[9] This was made abundantly clear in Fernand Ouellet, *Economic and Social History of Quebec*, Toronto, Gage Publishing Limited, 1980.

[10] The political implications of these interpretations are explained in Michael Behiels, *Prelude to Quebec's Quiet Revolution*, Montreal/Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985.

[11] This slogan was used initially by the Liberals in the 1962 Quebec election which served as an informal referendum on the government's planned nationalization of hydro-electricity.

[12] Linteau, 'La nouvelle histoire', *Liberté*, No. 147, 1983, pp. 44-45.

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[13] Ronald Rudin, 'Revisionism and the Search for a Normal Society: A Critique of Recent Quebec Historical Writing', *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 73, 1992, pp. 30-61.

[14] Linteau, Durocher and Robert, *Histoire du Québec contemporain: de la Confédération à la crise*, Montreal, 1979; Linteau, Durocher, Robert and Ricard, *Histoire du Québec contemporain: le Québec depuis 1930*, Montreal, 1986; a new and revised edition of the two volumes was published by Boréal in 1989. All references here are to the second edition of the work. I have translated the quotes taken from this updated version, but there is an English translation of the original edition on the market which was cited in footnote 4.

[15] *Histoire du Québec contemporain* (hereafter *HQC*), I, p. 197. In the chapter outlining 'the social structure' during this period, only five out of twenty pages focused upon rural life.

[16] *HQC*, I, p. 181

[17] *Ibid*., I, pp. 191-192.

[18] *Ibid*., I, p. 267

[19] *Ibid*., I, p. 407.

[20] Lionel Groulx, *Histoire du Canada français depuis la découverte*, 4th ed., 2 vols, Montreal, Fides, 1960.

[21] *HQC*, I, p. 7

[22] Jocelyn Létourneau, 'La production historienne courante portant sur le Québec et ses rapports avec la construction des figures identitaires d'une communauté communicationnelle', *Recherches sociographiques*, 1995, 36, p. 12.

[23] Linteau, 'La nouvelle histoire', *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[24] Serge Courville, Jean-Claude Robert and Normand Séguin, *Atlas historique du Québec: le pays laurentien au 19e siècle, les morphologies de base*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 1995, p. 2.

[25] Yves Gingras, 'Une sociologie spontanée de la connaissance historique', *Bulletin d'histoire politique*, Vol. 4, 1995, p. 41.

[26] Joyce O. Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, New York, Norton, 1994, p. 4.

[27] Létourneau, 'La production historienne', *op. cit*., p. 1.

[28] Normand Séguin, 'Faire de l'histoire au Québec', *Présentations à la Société royale du Canada*, 1990-91, p. 100.

[29] Jean-Jacques Simard, *La longue marche des technocrates*, Montreal, Editions coopératives Albert Saint-Martin, 1979, p. 25.

[30] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 6 (his emphasis). The question of objectivity is a complex and highly contentious issue that cannot be addressed at length in this brief essay. The various ways in which objectivity can be conceptualized are discussed by Allen Megill in his introduction to *Rethinking Objectivity*, Durham, N.C./London, Duke University Press, 1994. Megill defines the form of objectivity most relevant to historians as 'disciplinary objectivity', by which the practitioners of a particular discipline recognize that their explanations of particular phenomena may differ from those presented by researchers in other fields. Nevertheless, those within a discipline such as history would, if adepts of disciplinary objectivity, be prepared to recognize the existence of 'a court of appeal that will support objectivity claims; not an absolute court of appeal, but one that will serve within a particular community at a particular time' (p. 7). While claims to the establishment of some eternal truth in this regard were less pretentious than those of individuals who believed in 'absolute objectivity', there was still the idea that certain shared standards might distinguish 'objective' research from work that was somehow tainted. I would join Novick in being uneasy about setting up such a distinction.


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[31] Novick, *op. cit.*, p. 7. One is reminded here of Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill, but never quite getting to the top.

[32] See, for instance, Thomas Haskell, 'Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric and Practice in Peter Novick's "*That Noble Dream*"', *History and Theory*, Vol. 29, 1990, pp. 129-157; James T. Kloppenberg, 'Review Article: Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 94, 1989, pp. 1011-1030.

[33] Ricard, 'Remarques sur la normalisation d'une littérature', *Ecriture*, Vol. 31, 1988, p. 12.

[34] The French version has an even more assertive ring than my English translation: 'Oui, nous sommes différents … Ce qui nous distingue du reste de l'Amérique, ce ne sont pas nos faiblesses, ce sont nos forces'. *Le Devoir*, 24 October 1998.

[35] Serge Courville, Jean-Claude Robert et Normand Séguin, 'Un nouvel regard sur le XIXe siècle québécois: l'axe laurentien comme l'espace central', *Interface*, Vol. 14, 1993, p. 23.

[36] Létourneau, 'La production historienne', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[37] Novick, p. 500. Needless to say, the issues and debates regarding the writing and politics of women's history (not to mention such fields as working-class or native-American history) are much more complicated than I can communicate in this relatively short essay. Suffice it to say that the impulse, evident in such fields as women's history, to present a previously marginalized group as capable of wielding power was also relevant to revisionist writing about Quebec's past.

[38] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 27.

[39] Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice, 'Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History', *Atlantis*, Vol. 7, 1982, p. 38.

[40] *Montreal Gazette*, 22 October 1994.

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