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BIOGRAPHY

Jocelyn Létourneau is Canada Research Chair in Quebec's Contemporary History, Université Laval (Quebec City, Canada). A member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J., he's also fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and of the Trudeau Foundation. A regular visiting professor in foreign universities, he was the principal investigator in a SHRCC funded Community-University Research Alliance (Canadians and their Pasts). In 2010, he was a Fulbright scholar at both UC Berkeley and Stanford University, and a visiting scholar at the Institute for the Study of the Americas (University of London). Dr. Létourneau is the author or editor of many books. Among his major works are *Les Années sans guide: Le Canada à l'ère de l'économie migrante* (Boréal, 1996); *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec Today* (McGill-Queen's U. Press, 2004); *Le Québec, les Québécois: Un parcours historique* (Fides, 2004), *Le Coffre à outils du chercheur debutant. Guide d'initiation au travail intellectuel* (Boréal, 2006; transl. in Spanish and Portuguese) and *Que veulent les Québécois? Regard sur l'intention nationale au Québec (français) d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Boréal, 2006). In 2010, he published *Le Québec entre son passé et ses passages* (Fides, 2010). He is currently working on a manuscript tentatively titled *Je me souviens? Le Québec dans la conscience historique de sa jeunesse.*

ABSTRACT

In this personal, exploratory text, the author asks a delicate question: how, in narrating what has happened (which we call history), can we serve humanity without doing a disservice to science? His

basic premise is the following: There are many valid and valuable ways to recount what has happened. As such, which story of the past should we construct? The argument developed in the article consists of mapping out the historian's reflective space by acknowledging the social utility of the interpretive task: to recall that the past is above all a matter of change, which restores the power of hope over the hopes of the Powerful, and to show how, if we approach the past in the profusion of its diversity, it presents itself as a place full of passageways, rather than blockages, reminding us that human evolution is open-ended rather than closed.

LECTURE

"History and Social Hope"

McGill University

FEBRUARY 14, 2012

The question on my mind is both prosaic and complex: how, after a 30-year career as a professional historian, did I end up examining a subject as hazardous to scientific thought as the relationship between history and hope? Before I arrive at the crux of the matter, I need to take you on a little detour that will bring us back to 1997/98 at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J., where I was a fellow.

I have an indelible memory of my year at the institute, for a simple reason: it was there that I discovered the intimate connection between breaking scientific ground and reflective exploration. It could be that the intellectual environment at the institute—which really values innovative thinking—put my mind in gear. It could also be that I had decided, as I entered my 40s, to assume my true identity, which is that of a thinker rather than a researcher. I am not ascribing to some sort of false dichotomy. Of course researchers think, just as thinkers do research. It's a matter of predominance on either side. And I'd be the last to suggest that thinkers are the patricians of the learned world while researchers are the plebes. I do not see it that way. For me, knowledge progresses on several fronts simultaneously, in a complementary rather than oppositional fashion. My scientific sensibilities, which leave a lot of room for imaginative reasoning, are

just as inspired by the putatively specious sophists as by the famously boring platonists. Personally I just feel more at ease in the field of scholarly exploration than in other fields. It's as simple as that.

All the same, at the institute, I was fascinated not only by the freedom we had to foray into the realms of the supposedly unthinkable but also the scope and difficulty of the subjects everyone was exploring. At the School of Social Science, where I was holed up, Michael Walzer, for example, was investigating the issue of just and unjust wars. Clifford Geertz had delved into the immense problem of the interpretation of cultures. Albert Hirschmann was examining the moral and political confines of economics. And, using the concept of gender, Joan Scott was busy expanding both the territory of history and increasing the historical consciousness of women. The common denominator of these four pillars of contemporary social science was perfectly identifiable: none of them feared to rush into the slipperiest territories in the humanities, those places where plain facts confront creative thinking, where the scientific mind encounters political concerns, where the search for objectivity meets the assumption of subjectivity.

In these infamously uncomfortable places, I felt right at home. Basically, I became aware of a long-held penchant for ideas. But where did this veneration for ideas, including the most daring ideas, come from?

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Here, I must admit something about myself: I am more of an optimist than a pessimist. I have faith in imagination. I believe that there are solutions to problems. Perhaps because I have children, I am not inhabited by the fear of the end of the world or the end of things. I believe, on the contrary, that the world and things will continue to evolve and change. Of course, I do not know whether the world is moving in a positive or negative direction—probably both at once, in an infinite bedlam of decay and regeneration. In any case, that question is not central to my concerns. What matters to me is to

know and above all to *assume* that change is an axial principle of the human condition, if not of life in general and the "inert" world—because even rocks have a life of sorts, an endless cycle that plays out in the torpor of its infinitesimal mutations.

Change carries within it the possibility of transformation. And transformation is at the heart of the human condition. It is up to humans to take advantage—gladly, one would hope—of the vital essence of change to make the world into something other than it is, if it's so rotten, and it most assuredly is. But that's not all that it is. Far from it. We humans can intervene in the world—and in ourselves, it goes without saying—thanks to our power of intelligence, which is an abundant resource the limits of which have yet to be established, now and in the future. That is why we can say that every living person, like every child yet to be born, has the potential to become a greater or lesser saviour.

Intelligence is the power to know and understand that occurs and plays out in and through the production of ideas and, for hundreds of thousands of years, in and through the production of symbols gathered together in the form of spoken or written sentences in different types of language. The confluence of ideas and symbols in the form of ideas expressed in symbols—which we could also call an enunciative regime—has historically proven itself a revolution for humankind. Every enunciative regime has its effect, whether small or large. Through ideas and words, worlds have been opened or closed, possibilities have bloomed or withered, "continents of knowledge"—to borrow Althusser's phrase—have emerged or remained unknown. Ideas and words transform the world.

Another point about intelligence: we tend to associate it exclusively with reason. As such, we oppose it to the orders of intuition, sensation, and fiction. To my way of thinking, separating the forms of knowledge is unsuited to the prehension of things.[1] What relates

1. Alberto Manguel, *The City of Words,* Massey Lectures Series collection (Toronto: Anansi, 2007).

to intelligence cannot be reduced to a simple Cartesian activity of knowledge production. Intelligence is the capacity to imagine, to find and create, by means of ideas expressed in symbols and without ruling out any mode of exploration, a passageway through anything that appears to be a blockage or limit.

The human capacity for ideas and language is therefore fundamental. From my point of view, this capacity is the source and resource of our freedom. Obviously we cannot deny the existence of determinisms affecting the condition of people living in our world. But inevitability has a rather spongy end, and destiny is an unpredictable destination. Believing or arguing that humans are prisoners of world order—or of some supernatural sequence of events—robs them of all possibility of transformative action. It denies their nature, which is to be able to change in order to raise themselves beyond what they are at a given moment.

The subjugation of humankind is a prospect I abhor. Humankind's emancipation is what attracts me. So how can I embody this personal premise, with its political overtones, while practising the profession of historian from a scientific standpoint?

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As a historian, my field of study is the past. In this vast domain, what interests me chiefly is the way the mediator of history shapes the relationship between humans and the past. Let us define the past as *what was*, in its dual actantial and representational dimensions, with both valencies tightly interwoven. History is related to the representational dimension of things. It establishes the meaning of *what was*, usually in the form of a narrative or argumentative account. Of course, we cannot recount everything that was, because the past, like the universe, is literally without end and without borders. Likewise, the reconstitution of the past, immediately afterward or much later, is never either perfect or completely true. It is illusory to believe that we can faithfully reproduce *what was*. Historian Carlos Ginzburg once said very accurately and with admirable modesty

that as a scientific process, history can never be anything other than an indirect, evocative and conjectural knowledge of the past.[2]

The difficulty of grasping the past in its entirety forces us into a second act of humility. We can describe this as follows: there is no single valid point of entry into the complexity of *what was*, any more than there is a single valid point of exit from the complication of *what has been*. In other words, we cannot arrive at an exclusive, unequivocal, and transcendent interpretation of the past. In theory, this position does not usually pose any problem for historians. In practice, it's another matter. The thesis that history consists—or should consist—of an unaltered representation of the past is still, in effect, the basic postulate and the ultimate aim of the discipline. It is often on the basis of this positivist idealism: render the past as it was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), so we can evaluate the respective merit of the various interpretations available on the academic market. Many learned critics rely fundamentally on the idea that there cannot be two different—that is, opposing—versions of a single reality, both of which are acceptable. It is fairly rare for a historian to recognize as valid a thesis that contradicts his or her own. If it were valid, the historian would adopt that opinion, or integrate it, in whole or in part. Most often, people entrench in their positions and turn a deaf ear to discussion.[3] The learned universe is marked more deeply by misunderstanding than by dialogue.

Some people assert that interpretive pluralism is the order of our age. In truth, pluralism is assailed by all the monisms of our time—left, right, and centre. And pluralism itself can become a monism, especially when it takes the form of radical relativism and trumpets one of the maxims of our century: to each his own history and every history is right!

2. Carlo Ginzburg, "Signes, traces, pistes. Racines d'un paradigme de l'indice," *Le Débat*, no. 6 (November 1980), 3-44.

3. Marc Angenot, *Dialogues de sourds. Traité de rhétorique antilogique* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2008).

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If it is true that we cannot recount the past in its entirety, if history is an exercise in constructing meaning and there can never be a single, complete interpretation of *what was*, then clearly the historian's journey is rife with choice. There is the choice to recount this or that. There is the choice to construct one meaning or another. There is the choice of advocating one interpretation or another. The problem is not admitting the plurality of paths that the history of the past can take. To even debate that thesis would be foolish. The question is to determine which history to build. In other words, of the abundance of possible histories of the past, which history should be put forward?

On a larger scale, such as that of a society, this question is somewhat meaningless. Interpretive pluralism is by far the most beneficial formula for allowing the members of a society to seek the historical meaning they need to live as members of a whole. By interpretive pluralism I don't mean the juxtaposition of histories that are fixed in their singular reasoning. In that case, we would be back to the perspective of radical relativism, which reinforces social anomie and political fragmentation and so justifiably frightens the editorialists of our day. By interpretive pluralism, I picture several histories dialoguing from the subjective position of interpreters gathered in an intellectual exchange, creating, by and through a conversation that follows the rules of deliberative ethics, a position of objectivity. We tend to oppose subjectivity and objectivity, but it would be better to view objectivity as the outcome of dissonant intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is the route most likely to lead to what we could call a fair history, a difficult and delicate notion I will come back to.

On the individual scale, such as that of the historian, the question of historial choice makes more sense than it does for society as a whole. In fact, it is inescapable. To grasp a perceived reality, we cannot expect an author to develop several equivalent and entangled theses in stereo. The argument would be cacophonic, and yet the

exercise of understanding demands a certain level of harmony, that is, a certain structure and organization. Because of the limits of understanding, a historian has no choice but to reduce the infinite complexity and scope of the past to the order of a story with a clear direction. This is why, in the past, we often imposed straight, specific, and logical forms even though the form of the past is anything but exact, rectilinear, and geometric.

The matter of the form of the past is highly interesting. We agree that binary, regular, or univalent outlines are too restrictive to represent the past, and we have no problem affirming that the past is a complex business. But how can we envisage that complexity? Having admitted the presence of complexity in *what is*, is science obliged to simplify things to enable understanding and explanation? Or can we espouse the complexity of the past and render it in its true form—that of convolution—thereby admitting that the past deals less with *what was* than with what slips past us, is more a matter of what inevitably escapes us, than what we can effectively grasp? The greater challenge of history, as an exercise in the narrative reconstitution of the past, may be to imagine the historial shapes that support the complexity of the past without losing sight of the overall horizon.

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Here, I would like to relate two personal experiences that brought home to me the critical importance of the historial forms of the past. The first experience took place in Washington, DC. I happened to be at the National Gallery of Art during a retrospective of the works of Alexander Calder, the designer of mobile sculptures.[4] In the foyer hung a gigantic mobile comprising several components swinging in and out of time, in an irregular and asymmetrical but nevertheless perceptible, functional, and almost graceful harmony.

4. "Alexander Calder, 1898–1976," exhibit (March 29–July 12, 1998), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. A catalogue of the exhibit, with the same title, was produced under the direction of Alexander S.C. Rower and published by Yale University Press in March 1998.

I won't theorize on the movement of the mobile. Suffice it to say that this movement, driven by the tension of the fixed components with and against each other, created a form in continual reconfiguration, and that moving form, in perpetual transition and permanent incompletion, appeared to me to be a particularly apt depiction of the complexity of things and the world, both then and now. Actually, the image of that mobile, with the essence it expressed in movement, flow, instability, tension, inexactitude, multivalency, and so on, supports the narrative weft I used to produce my account of the historical experience of Quebec, published under the title *Le Québec, les Québécois: un parcours historique*.[5] The following quotation, which I take from the opening lines, demonstrates this:

> There are several ways to portray Quebec's trajectory from yesterday to today. The narrative I propose outlines a collective journey influenced by endogenous and exogenous factors, inspired by complementary and contradictory utopias, swept along by the complexity of the world and of itself. Rather than advocate an interpretive stance in which everything advances neatly toward the best or the worst, I have chosen to shed light on the tangled and ambivalent, dissonant and divergent, unique and universal processes by which society and the Québécois collectivity have taken shape and grown over time, in a kind of laudable indecision that means that, yesterday and today, the future of the Québécois has been and remains open to the multifaceted plans of Quebec's inhabitants.

It was in Sydney, Australia, that the importance of form became clear for me for the second time. I was quite simply overwhelmed by the external architecture of the Opera House. I won't speculate on the meaning that can be attributed to the building's structure. I will simply say that you have to see the Opera House to understand the extent to which form can push back the limits of what we conceive to exist and offer itself as a bridge to the unthinkable and the

5. Jocelyn Létourneau, *Le Québec, les Québécois: un parcours historique* (Montreal: Fides, 2004), 5. Translation.

impossible. Imagined by the late Jørn Utzon, the form of the Sydney Opera House, which took three years of rumination to develop, is the proof that unusual geometry is not discordant, that it can even create possibilities and lay waste to constraints.

This view of things—that the form we give to *what is* or *what might be* is of capital importance—clearly fuels reflections on the operation of history. Michel Foucault, who wrote the famous *The Order of Things*,[6] was not mistaken. Far be it for me to claim that form—and therefore, for the historian, the composition of a text, or history—can be independent from content, in this case, the past. Let me say, for once and for all: what happened and is known to have happened has a veto over anything that might be said about what happened. But the past never surrenders itself in its entirety. If it did, it would crush everything, including the present, by its sheer weight. A historian is both obliged to fill in the holes in the past, because otherwise there is no practical way to conceive of things, and to reduce the fullness of the past, because otherwise there is no possible way to understand things. The space carved out by the insufficiencies of the past, on one hand, and its overabundance, on the other, is the historian's territory. That territory can be envisaged as a site of relative immobility, since the historian is paralyzed either by the lack of sources or by their profusion. It can also be seen as a site of relative activity, because the operation of history, even founded on a method that is teetering on the brink of methodolatry, cannot free itself from either the humanity or the subjectivity of the historian. And this is the question that interests me the most: if I actually want to make the place I inhabit as a historian a place of activity and not allow myself to be paralyzed by its constraints, how shall I approach the possible actions that are open to me?

6. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*, trans. A.M.S. Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970).

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Now we arrive at the heart of the matter, a lair peopled by all the demons of science—political, subjective, interpretive, speculative, fictional, moral, and many more besides.

Let us first agree on one point: scientific rigour, which entails a desire for truth and fairness (that is, balanced truth, not moulded truth), is a cardinal component of the scientific enterprise and a non-negotiable requirement in the operation of history. But the idea of rigour does not obliterate the historian's space of action. It simply sets limits to that space, which remains fairly wide. The question remains: how should the historian's "operactional" space be conceived? In other words, in the light of what principles should historians occupy the reflective space that is objectively granted to them by the irreducible complexity of their subject, which is the past?

One of the better responses to this question is to say that the intention of science is to find solutions to the problems of the world and of humankind in order to make the world a better place and people more accomplished beings. From this point of view, science is subject to the purpose of life. Its descriptive capacity is put at the service of the aim of elevation. Science is a resource that humankind has given itself, the primordial basis of which is not an idealistic search for truth but the pragmatic desire to establish an optimal link between truth and utility.[7]

This thesis, which stipulates that there is no contradiction between rigour and value, but rather a logical continuation from one to the other, is appealing and applies well to most natural and social sciences, and even to philosophy. But what about history? Can we assign history a utility in the pragmatic sense of the term? I say yes—with the proviso that we must be reasonable in the service we demand of Clio.

7. Richard Rorty explores this idea. His short volume titled *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 2000) offers a brief but interesting introduction to his thoughts.

We cannot, for example, study the past to draw lessons that, used in the present, become solutions for today's problems. What we call the specificity of historical contexts slams the brakes on this use of the past. The past does not repeat itself, and historical development obeys no law, so it is hard to find universal teachings in the past. The past is not a pharmacy where we can shop at leisure for remedies to cure the present day of its ills. If, as David Lowenthal wrote, the past is a foreign country to the present,[8] the inverse is also true: the present is a foreign country to the past. Although Terence's dictum "I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me" (*Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*) makes a lot of sense, it has its limits.

Of course, the study of the past allows us to clarify and even understand certain contemporary movements or situations. So the past is never completely outmoded. And yet the past is not prescriptive. In the end, it is the choices and dynamics of the present, not those of our ancestors and the past, that orient the future. It is the action of our contemporaries, not their dead and buried predecessors, that allows us to clear out the bottlenecks of the present. In the equation of human destiny, the variable of the past does not and cannot assume an absolute and overdetermining position over the variables of the present or the future.

But while the past does not have the objective importance we ascribe to it, because it contains no timeless lessons and has no right to pre-empt the present, it is nevertheless there, visible in its material traces and carried along by the memories and histories that survive it. The past is *also* present. We cannot simply get rid of it at our own whim. So how can we use it in the service of life without doing a disservice to knowledge?

8. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Based on everything I've said so far, I will permit myself to advance an idea: given its inherent complexity, the past can support several histories. Following the principle that "form is formative," to borrow Leibniz's expression, these histories, in their composition, can be a resource for the future. Depending on the words used, the interpretations built, the meanings constructed from the past, it is possible to loosen certain entanglements of the present. Of course, in the history we make of the past, this is not a matter of triturating *what was* in order to purge *what is* of its afflictions. It is easy to abuse the past, as historians have endlessly reminded us.[9] The interpreter's challenge is something altogether different. It goes like this: how, without re-orienting the past to crudely align it with the aims of the present, can we make the study of *what was* useful?[10] My solution is this: by positioning the past as a matter of social passage.

There is at heart only one precept to be drawn from the past: that things change all the time and there is no status quo, that societies follow no normal evolutionary path, that the world's trajectory is subject to chance, that the panoply of conditioning and determination that weighs on humankind is neither opaque nor complete. This means that human destiny is so undefined as to be unpredictable. And yet, in the objective possibility of change, which the powerful have never stopped wanting to suppress or submit to their subjective interests, lies a germ of hope. The past is objectively hopeful because it is a place where there was change, its boisterous or muted presence creating breaches in the palisade of *what is*. Luckily, the dynamics of change persist in the present. In fact, change is the sole constant over time, carrying with it—even more luckily—the

9. One of the recent reminders of the sort comes from Margaret MacMillan in *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Viking, 2008).

10. Gianni Vattimo, *Éthique de l'interprétation* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); David Carr, Thomas R. Flynn, and Rudolf A. Makkreel, eds., *The Ethics of History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004); Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney, eds., *Historians and Social Values* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000).

perpetuity of hope. We cannot deny that it is beneficial and precious to maintain the experience and the memory of change against the powers that want to erase its every trace, recollection, and effect.

Somewhere in that statement lies, perhaps, the value of Clio, if not her virtue, which I would sum up as follows: it is in the space between hope and power that history finds its true place. On one side, hope is what dawns but never succeeds because, on the other side, are the powers that constrict what emerges or redirect it toward designated ends. Researchers have amply shown that life as it plays out over time is an inexhaustible battle between lifeworlds and structures, the slender energies forever resisting the established powers that never tire of tyrannizing them. Approaching history as if it were hope does not mean writing a history of what did not happen or what we wish had happened. It means putting the variables of change and non-determination, the variables of openness and aspiration, back into the field of history. Approaching the history of the past from the point of view of non-determination means reopening the past to the idea that things didn't just naturally happen this way or that way. It means remembering that things can and do change because change is the very heart of destiny. Approaching history this way delivers the past from the stranglehold of the powerful, for whom the past is no more than the prerequisite of their advent or the logical sequence after their surge to power.

Stifling the change that is inherent to passing time so as to reduce the possibility of a passageway into the future: that is the objective of the powerful who scrutinize the past in order to appropriate it for themselves. Restoring the dynamic of change to time so as to throw open the potential passageways into the future: this is the objective of the historian who explores and respects the past. From this argumentative principle ensues an assertion: the primary function of the historian is to be for hope and against power.

Can we go further in our quest to make history useful? Can we, for example, draw on history as a link and a binder between the past

and the future? This would mean frankly asking, "Which history of the past for which future to build?"

Once again I would answer yes, we can, but on the condition that we do not overemphasize or neglect the parts of the past that suit the needs of the present or the future. From my point of view, the historical framework that is most likely to enable a society's passage to the future is the one that insists on the abundance of the past, without leaving it in a state of swarming unintelligibility. It cannot be repeated too often: the past is an untended lot that the historian cannot abandon to the creeping underbrush of facts. While the historian ought not impose an artificial order, the past should nevertheless be approached with the intention of shedding light on it, if not completely illuminating it.

Teeming life is interesting to examine because it is full of factual resources for the future. It holds narrative threads and historial forms capable of opening pathways to the future, even when the historical situations to be described are rigid, tragic, or absurd. In the mist of the past and its swamps, there are types of experience and places of action that carry change and therefore hope. But we need to acquire the means to see them and incorporate their dynamism into our interpretation of things, without subordinating the overall portrait of a situation to one of the single images that comprise it. We would never create a tender or rose-coloured history of the genocides that have punctuated human development. But at the very time of the worst atrocities, acts of humanity were also performed, even if only in the testimony of the survivors and the echoes of the dead, which all constitute bridges and precursors to regeneration. As Friedrich Hölderlin famously said, "Where danger is, deliverance also grows", meaning that within tragedy remain zones of humanism—Didier Fassin would add humanitarianism[11]—that resist the

11. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

incursion of destructive powers. These need to be unearthed and presented. Of course, revealing them does not mean denying what is camouflaging them. Noting the presence of a flower in a sea of asphalt and including it in the description of the landscape does not change the panorama: blacktop still presides. But the flower in the dismal scene calls to mind an important, almost seditious reality in relation to the noxious power drawn in the portrait: tar is porous. Mentioning that porousness, which attests to the multiformity, imperfection, and incompletion of *what is*, raises the possibility of a historial passageway that gathers hope and the future in its wake. The historical narrative cannot be viewed as an end. It must be seen as a bridge. Or rather, it must *also* be conceived as a bridge.

Assuming that the question of a history of the future—or a history for the future—is allowable as a scholarly project because it is rooted in the attentive study of the luxuriant stream of the past, what form would a history of the future of Quebec take?

It would definitely be a history with nothing to hide, neither the conflicts that occurred nor the battles that took place, neither the discriminations that were cultivated nor the oppressions that were exerted, neither the powers that were deployed nor anything related to the miseries of human action, on either the collective or the individual scale. We do, however, have to ask ourselves whether a history based on such a constellation of facts provides a fair image of the historical experience of Quebec. It definitely provides an image. But is it the most accurate image? Can we produce a history of Quebec that, without omitting any fundamental part of that entity's past, carries the future for Quebec and its inhabitants?

In a recent text, I advanced the idea that three facets of Quebec's past, given their steadiness over time, have acquired the status of constants in the Québécois historical experience.[12] In my view, a

12. "Quelle histoire d'avenir?" in Jocelyn Létourneau, *Le Québec entre son passé et ses passages* (Montreal: Fides, 2010): chap. 8.

constant is neither transcending nor eternal. It is a historical value. Furthermore, the constants I identified are not independent of the other variables that make up the Quebec equation, but rather are related to them. Likewise, they are not always and unfailingly the determining values of the Quebec equation. These constants have quite simply been there, continuously and for a long time (although not forever), as the product of the interaction between the many variables that make up the Quebec equation, a sort of precipitate of its historical development, and that we could consider, since these constants are worthwhile, to be a heritage to preserve and pass on.

These constants are the following: the questioning of physical violence, the primacy of politics, and the quest for complex arrangements among diverse interests. Of course, these constants may not be unique to the Quebec experience. That matters little here. The question to resolve is whether they are a fair way to portray the Quebec experience. In other words, do these constants give us access to a truthful and nuanced version—that is, a version that is both established and balanced—of Quebec's past *in terms of what fundamentally was?*

Some would say no. For them, Quebec's experience consists mainly of the quest for emancipation of a people downtrodden by the Other and prevented from achieving their destiny. In its soft and hard versions, the thesis of national oppression, no matter what they say, has done the most to nourish Quebec's historiography, especially when the interpreters offer an overview of the Quebec experience. I would be the last to say that this thesis has no basis in reality. On the contrary. But if we enter into the complexity of Quebec's past, we discover that the concept of oppression skips over as much historical matter as it takes up. Before and beyond that oppression—which is patent and indisputable—there is in fact a many-sided and sometimes ambiguous reality that is cold comfort to the cut-and-dried, black-and-white visions that some have of *what was*. From my point of view, this many-sided reality is the principal location of

the Québécois historical experience, for two reasons: because that is where much of the past of Quebec society unfolded, and because that many-sided place is the magma from which the political culture and values of Quebec have sprung forth.

Quebec is, indeed, a supple, flexible, peaceable society that has developed within a general framework where excess, including interdiction, is renounced and moderation, including concession, is embraced. Radicalism and dogmatism, of the left-wing or right-wing variety, are two philosophies or practices that have never taken hold in Quebec. Quebecers have always reserved their enthusiasm for and given their support to liberal pragmatism, conservative progressivism, and quiet reformism. This paradoxical political order, which some people wrongly suggest is the product of choices that are forced rather than freely made and is therefore the outcome of alienating rather than consenting processes,[13] has positively embodied that which, in the long run, constitutes the essential Québécois historical experience: the questioning of physical violence, the primacy of politics, and the search for complex arrangements among diverse interests.

In Quebec's case, there is no need to coerce the past to establish a history for the future. This society has historically built itself around issues that form powerful and exhilarating vectors for posterity, even for its recent members. Narrating the Quebec experience with the

13. It is in the interpretation of this particular political order—the result of the domination and alienation of the Self by the Other, for Lamonde, and the outcome of a dynamic of forced interdependence with the Other and the Self's desire for cooperation/opposition with and against the Other, for me—that I differ from my McGill University colleague in our reading of the trajectory of Quebec history. See Yvan Lamonde, *Allégeances et dépendances: histoire d'une ambivalence identitaire* (Quebec City: Nota Bene, 2011); Jocelyn Létourneau, *Que veulent vraiment les Québécois? Regards sur l'intention nationale au Québec (français) d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Montreal: Boréal, 2006); and Lamonde's commentary on my work: "Ce que veulent les Québécois… Vraiment?," *Le Devoir*, December 14, 2006.

requisite accuracy means offering, to those who live in this society today, a depiction of the self that allows them to move forward into the future without having to deny anything that happened over time to create them. This is why, in Quebec's case, history can walk hand in hand with hope without the horizon of happiness usurping the obligation for scientific rigour. It establishes an interesting interpretive situation in which the truth of the past nourishes a useful history that, in return, gives the facts the chance to reveal their true measure. It closes the virtuous circle in which the historian, serving as thinker and *passeur*, builds on the meaning drawn from the detail and extent of *what was* to advance understanding and emancipation.