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## **Canadian cultural identity: the importance of heritage**

I believe that collective public memory is something very common, and that it is not a new phenomenon, in Canada or elsewhere. Looking to the past in order to celebrate a nation is something that occurs in all societies. Therefore, there is no reason why it should not have a place in the societies of today. The goal of this process is to use history to preserve national character. And this preservation is predicated upon the teaching of history in our schools. Nevertheless, we need to exercise a certain rigour with regards to the narrative of Canadian history, as well as to the attributes that we use to construct the Canadian identity.

According to Granatstein, national history remains a vector of civics, intrinsically linked to rational political choices. Indeed, following his point of view, the electorate must be familiar with values acquired through the creation of democracy, as well as with the great men who authored this very democracy in Canada. Similarly, he states that history taught in schools represents a good social integration tool for immigrants to Canada, who recognize in our history the reasons that motivated them to come to Canada. He also remarks that history's objective is to provide lessons, which allow us not to repeat past errors.

Granatstein, however, seems to rely heavily upon an institutionalized teaching of history. Indeed, he seems to think that history has a purely political end, and that it should cultivate in the people values developed by our past. These values are certainly present today, but we could never go so far as to say that they have always been respected, and in fact we paid a high price for them. Therefore, it is not quite right to present Canada as a

democratic nation without taking into consideration aspects of its history that were not completely democratic.

Ignatieff's point of view calls into question this method of teaching history. Firstly, he characterizes as myth the idea of a 'great national story'. It is in fact an exclusive story, in the sense that it neglects important aspects of Canadian history, such as the story of minorities within Canada. It also largely omits discord and divisions. Ignatieff seems to believe that discord is at the heart of our history and should not as such be disregarded. It is true that forgetting conflicts between Francophones and Anglophones, or omitting to mention the racism that Canadians have sometimes exhibited, takes rectitude to the point that the end-result narrative could no longer be called history.

These two authors differ in their conception of history because one anchors it in politics and the other sees it rather as a 'lesson in truth'. Outside of the interpretation of history's goals and ends, we also have to decide upon which story we are going to base ourselves. The answer to that question is a complicated one, because Canada is a fragmented nation, within which different provinces and different minorities all have different, sometimes conflicting, stories. Indeed, Ignatieff observes that: 'the national history I took for granted was essentially regional.' This implies a need to reconcile the different stories.

History should be constructed through a fusion of national and regional elements, in the same way that Canada is a nation combining federal and provincial powers, powers which are sometimes in conflict. In order to truly realize Ignatieff's 'lesson in truth', history should present a complete story. This makes teaching of history all the more

complicated. Indeed, there is no one narrative, no one story for the Canadian past. Each and every student should be able to make his or her own conclusions. This sort of critical reading is out of reach if we restrict ourselves to the narrative of the great men who brought democracy to Canada. A strictly regional conception would also be egregious: even if the great national story is far from representing the History of Canada, it nevertheless remains an essential background upon which the various regional stories play themselves out, even if they enter into conflict with this very background. Similarly, we must not marginalize the relationships between the different minorities present in Canada, whether they be Aboriginals, Francophones, or immigrant groups of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Canadian history has its share of polemics that should not be understated in favour of a 'politically correct' narrative.

We have noted that knowledge of the Canadian story is an element of collective public memory. Another aspect of this memory is its Canadian character. Indeed, it is not enough to simply know or understand the country's history; we also need to feel like we are taking an active role in this very history. Canada's fragmentary nature once again poses a problem in the sense that Canada has witnessed and continues to witness different and sometimes contradictory currents of nationalism, each with its own story. Western nationalism butts heads with Ontarian and Québécois nationalisms, and vice-versa. In such a situation, how then do we identify a truly Canadian character, a rallying point for the collective public memory?

I believe that this rallying point is the same for all societies, that is to say a sense of anxiety regarding cultural identity. In Canada, this is expressed as a worry about how

Canadian we are, whether it be predicated on fear of Americanization or on resistance to large-scale immigration. These phenomena are not new to Canada's history: fear that America would break the 1853 Reciprocity Treaty brought about a Britanno-centric nationalism and was a force behind Confederation in 1867, as a push towards preserving British territory in Canada. This fear thus has a historical precedent, just like the fear of newcomers, which is often expressed or interpreted as racism, most notably towards Chinese immigrants at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The power of collective public memory does however entail many challenges and dangers for Canadians. Nationalism is both dangerous challenging in the sense that it gives substance to our Canadianness, all the while carrying a latent risk: the emphasis on our national past, and specifically on commemoration, can lead to an exacerbated nationalism, and even racism. Construction of a cultural identity should correspond to the realities of our era and include all of the members of our nation, old and new. Canada should not deny its foundations nor its heritage, especially the very fact that, from a rather racist and discriminatory nation, we have become a nation of rights and tolerance, thanks to leaders like Trudeau.

Therefore, an openness to other cultures is an essential element of the Canadian identity, as is the need for adaptation. Sooner or later, every culture must undergo mutations in respect. We need to let go of the idea of having an impermeable culture, because that contradicts our liberal heritage. Pluralism of values is an aspect of our societies, a hard-won heritage that we owe it to ourselves to respect, to avoid the risk of 'not learning a single lesson from our past.' Canada's adaptation to new arrivals is just as important as the new arrivals' adaptation to Canada. Moreover, immigrants don't arrive

here and see a nation in the midst of its own creation: they see a Canada who knows its own identity, that is to say a society in which tolerance and acceptance play a primary role.

These observations beg the question: does a culture really need history in order to exist? Ignatieff states that common cultural capital, that is to say '[...] a set of understandings, widely shared by Canadians about how the country came to be, what its basic rules are, and what it stands for,' does not require history for its existence. In fact, it consists of principles that were developed in the past but which have become such intrinsic elements of our culture that they no longer need to be reinforced by history. Thus, principles are assimilated by the simple act of living in our society and adapting to it. History is a 'marginal addition to the common cultural capital,' in the words of Ignatieff.

In sum, what is affirmed here is that collective public memory, in its historical dimension, is not an indispensable part of the Canadian identity. History plays an important role in giving us information on who we are and who we were. It is important that history be presented as it truly is, without ignoring or minimizing any part of the story. History should not serve a wholly political purpose, because it would risk losing its credibility as such, and it would distance itself from its true essence, which is the opportunity and the means to perform a critical analysis of who we are and who we were. History must therefore be inclusive and encompassing, as should our very identity.