# The Varying Viewpoints Regarding National History and Social History: A Canadian Perspective

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## Abstract

Unlike many homogeneous countries, Canada is an extremely large and diverse country. Debates in Canadian academic circles often focus on the idea of what being a Canadian actually means. The fact that most Canadians lack a specific definition as to who they are is in itself part of the way Canadians define themselves. With this in mind, this paper takes an interdisciplinary approach to research and has been written with the idea of teaching non-Canadians more about the Canadian identity while simultaneously discussing the varying perspectives regarding national and social history.


While working as the chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "If you don't have some accepted history the chances are you will not gel as a community. Look at Northern Ireland or Bosnia. They have different understandings of what took place, and they use them to blow up resentments that the original events caused, or exposed" (Tutu in Romney, p. 6). Canadian national historians appear to agree with Tutu's assessment. They believe that a nationally accepted history will help unite Canadians and provide them with a vision of who they were and who they are as a people. Some social historians also agree with Tutu, but these scholars tend to criticize national historians for being too narrow in focus, and they point out that national history has traditionally concentrated on the elites while excluding a variety of Canada's citizenry. Other social historians claim that Canada will never be able to establish a hegemonic vision because it is too big and too diverse, which, according to Tutu, would mean that the chances of Canada gelling as a community are very slim. The varying perspectives have resulted in some heated debates, but one of the primary issues seems to revolve around the arguments regarding a Canadian's individual identity and how

it is actually formed. In this essay, I will use Tutu's assessment of history and relate it to the debate about national history in Canada. I will first outline the arguments presented by national and social historians, and will then focus on a neo-Marxist critique of these two perspectives, all before discussing ways in which members of opposing sides might be able to reconcile their differences.

## National History and Its Supporters

Prominent national historians in Canada would like to see Canadians teach and learn a nationally accepted history. They believe that national history will help Canada unite as a community and they argue that the fragmentation of Canadian historiography has weakened the Canadian identity. In *Who Killed Canadian History?* J.L. Granatstein writes, "Canada can never be a strong nation (or even two nations) if it does not teach its past to its people" (p. 43). He calls for "a nationally based history curriculum with its content defined for each grade" (p. 43), and he argues that Canadians will not be able to achieve any sense of unanimity "unless we teach our national history, celebrate our founders, establish new symbols, and strengthen the terms of our citizenship" (p. 148). He further argues that national history will help Canadians "think of Canada as a nation, as a whole, as a society, and not simply as a collection of races, genders, regions, and classes" (p. 77). Granatstein is an excellent writer and he uses his skills as an author to present some compelling arguments, but while calling for a more united Canada he often makes disparaging and divisive comments. After identifying how Canadians can hope to achieve unanimity for example, he writes, "We will never be able to achieve it if we continue to allow the educational theorists and the timid provincial politicians to control the agenda" (p. 149). Granatstein is also quite harsh and dismissive when criticizing social historians because he views their specialized versions of history as negative and destructive influences on Canada's national cultural consciousness. *Who Killed Canadian History?* is a bestselling text, which indicates that it does resonate with the Canadian public, but unfortunately for Granatstein, he has also been dismissed in some academic circles as a polemicist who is out of touch with current Canadian historiography.

Like Granatstein, Doug Owram and Michael Bliss are also proponents of national

history, but they are not nearly as critical of the work being done by social historians. In "Narrow Circles: The Historiography of Recent Canadian Historiography," Owram writes, "Specialization has meant that more of us know a great deal about one corner of the Canadian past, and much less about the wider world canvas upon which that past was painted" (p. 16). According to Owram, academic historians should attempt to synthesize their sub-disciplines in a manner that would help them reconstruct a national history. If, as Owram suggests, historians do manage to synthesize their micro-histories, they will be in a better position to satisfy the general public's demand and say, "at least tentatively, 'this is Canada' " (p. 5). In "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, The Sundering of Canada," Bliss also encourages historians to focus their efforts on national history, but he insists that he does not advocate a history which has so often implicitly and even explicitly excluded various minorities. He writes:

> We should renew our appreciation of the history of Canada, yes, but we must not do it at the cost of leaving out those Canadians who were excluded from the old history and whose integration into our historical and national consciousness is the finest achievement of our history-writing since the 1960s (p. 16).

Both Owram and Bliss do recognize the important advances in social history, but they also point out that these developments have "replaced older Canadian historians' concern for explaining the nature of the country" (Bliss, p. 5). According to Bliss, this lack of concern about Canada's national history has resulted in Canadian identity issues and has contributed to Canada's "current political and constitutional malaise" (p. 5). These beliefs resemble Tutu's comments about a community not being able to gel without some sort of an accepted history.

In *Getting it Wrong: How Canadians Forgot Their Past and Imperilled Confederation*, Paul Romney also appears to agree with Tutu's assessment and he uses it to put forward his main thesis, which revolves around the idea that "Quebec nationalism and Canadian nationalism rest on mutually incompatible histories of Canada" (p. 6). According to Romney, Canada will never be able to "gel as a community" unless French- and English-speakers manage to reconcile their different interpretations of Canadian history and then

collectively start to acknowledge a similar "accepted history." This is a common pluralist argument, and the tensions between English- and French-speaking Canadians are arguably the biggest threat to Canada's national unity. However, even if these two distinct cultures do manage to resolve their differences, and even if they start to accept and teach the same history, the Canadian identity issues will not just disappear. Romney does identify Quebec as a distinct society living in Canada, and he does state that many English Canadians need to learn a history that acknowledges this fact, but his assessment of Canadian unity appears to overlook First Nations members, regional identities and different minority groups. Social historians argue that this kind of historical perspective is exclusionary and too narrow in focus. They believe that it leaves too many Canadian citizens out of Canada's history, and for some of these historians, this is just not acceptable.

## Social Historians: Developing a Sense of Self Before Discovering a Canadian Identity

In "Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches," A.B. McKillop adamantly disagrees with Granatstein's proposals for a national history. He argues that Granatstein's version of history primarily concentrates on Canada's national accomplishments and its elites while it excludes minority groups and overlooks some of our historical failures. McKillop does support "the cultivation of national pride in a citizenry through the intelligent study of its collective history" (p. 272), but he also believes "that in order for Canadians to take the full measure of what it means to be Canadian, they must be made conscious of all aspects of their shared past" (p. 297). He also credits the advances made in social history for providing individuals, specifically members of minority groups, with an opportunity to learn about themselves within the contexts of the larger Canadian community. In "Class in English-Canadian Historical Writing: Neither Privatizing, Nor Sundering," Gregory Kealey appears to agree with McKillop when he writes:

> When one thinks of how much more we now know about native peoples, about demography, about production and reproduction, about gender, about class development and class conflict, about migration and immigrant communities, about nativism, racism, and sexism, about urban and regional development, about regional

> variations and disparities, about social institutions and the welfare state, I find it almost unimaginable that this bountiful harvest can be regarded as a destructive flood (p. 127).

According to McKillop, before individual Canadians can fully commit to being part of the larger national community "the social dimensions of a sense of personal self must first exist-and these are rooted in matters such as family, language, ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation" (p. 272). His assessment raises one of the fundamental questions in the debate about identity and national history. Does being a member of Canada's national community play a prominent role in the shaping of an individual's identity, or does one need to acquire a sense of self before she truly feels like she belongs and can contribute to the nation as a whole? In *Who Killed Canadian History?* Granatstein writes:

> History is important because it helps people know themselves. It tells them who they were and who they are; it is the collective memory of humanity that situates them in their time and place; and it provides newcomers with some understanding of the society in which they have chosen to live (p. 5).

McKillop would probably agree with this assessment, if he believed that Granatstein was in fact talking about social history, and not about "a national history that excludes the peoples of Canada" (McKillop, p. 297). And here is where the differences remain, Granatstein wants Canada's national history to help shape an individual's identity because he believes this will help unite Canada, while McKillop believes that an individual must first be able to understand who she is as a person before being able to see herself as part of a larger community.

In "'Limited Identities' Revisited: Regionalism and Nationalism in Canadian History," P.A. Buckner appears to support McKillop with regard to the social dimensions involved in forming a sense of self. Like McKillop, he believes that an individual's geographic location, gender, ethnicity, class, age and sexual orientation help in shaping one's identity (p. 12). According to Buckner, the interrelationship between all of these different variables combine to create a regional identity, which means historians should try to avoid talking about a particular "region as if it had a single, monolithic culture" (p. 12). Buckner then uses this

course of thought when discussing Canada as a whole, and states "there is more than one way of imagining the nation, just as there is more than one way of imagining a region or a locality" (p. 14). He then rebukes Granatstein for presenting "a myopic vision which excludes the possibility of other definitions of national identity and equates disagreement with something bordering on disloyalty" (p. 14). However, despite his condemnations, Buckner actually sounds a lot like Granatstein when he urges people from different regions of Canada to focus on their "inter-connectedness" instead of segmenting into isolated regions. In *Who Killed Canadian History?*, Granatstein states that Canada "will have to forge a national spirit that can unite its increasingly diverse peoples" (p. 148), which prompts one to wonder how forging a national spirit actually differs from focussing on our inter-connectedness. To my mind, it appears that a national historian and a social historian are once again calling for the same final result, a united Canada. They only seem to differ on which particular methodology will work the best; a "from the top down" approach or a "from the bottom up" approach. Of course, the fact that both historians are ultimately calling for the same final result could mean that the two sides are probably not as far apart as their respective rhetoric might indicate.

## Canada as an Imagined State: Industrialization and a neo-Marxist Perspective

While discussing his ideas about Canadian history, Buckner also raises an intriguing point when he writes, "Canadian history is about immigration and pluralism, about the way in which individuals from diverse ethnic origins and with diverse backgrounds came together to form an imagined community" (p. 14). In "The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian," R.B. Fleming appears to agree with Buckner when he writes, "We live in a country that is more a state of mind than a nation state, a land so vast that it can be grasped only by an educated imagination. Perhaps for that reason, our loyalties are both local, regional and national" (p. 134). Both of these statements resemble the theories outlined by Benedict Anderson *in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. In this text, Anderson explains that the idea of a nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

communion" (p. 6). He also writes, "Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (p. 7).

In *National Dreams: Myth Memory and Canadian History,* Daniel Francis subscribes to Anderson's theories and attempts to apply them directly to Canada. He argues that Canadian corporate and government elites have managed to establish a master narrative consisting of core myths, which Canadians have been taught to believe in. He then explains that many of these core myths "are usually the property of the elites, who use them to reinforce the status quo and to further their claims to privilege" (p. 12). In a similar manner, prominent Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm discusses Anderson's theories and insists that "the history of nationalism is embedded in the history of industrialization and capitalism" (Kramer, p. 527). However, while Anderson's ideas seem to be firmly rooted in Marxist theories, he himself writes, "nationalism has proved an uncomfortable anomaly for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted" (Anderson, p. 3). These comments help explain why Canadian neo-Marxists like Bryan Palmer appear to deride the ideas presented by national historians like Bliss and Granatstein while they lament the fact that social historians are not focussed enough on national history.

In "Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granatstein's Meaning," Palmer is equally critical of the opposing viewpoints presented by national and social historians. Despite the fact that historians like McKillop and Granatstein vehemently oppose one another's ideas, Palmer argues that they both still reinforce a capitalist ideology. He believes Granatstein advocates a nationalist history, which promotes the success of our government and corporate elites while excluding the working class and labour organizations. He then points out that McKillop's critique of Granatstein masquerades as a form of radicalism while in reality it is just another historiography that reinforces the same hegemony. Palmer calls McKillop's version of history a liberal pluralist historiography, which is "rationalized as the kind of politics of identity that make for a more enlightened 'national community,' one that might be expected to be better, but one that is in no need of being overthrown and transformed" (Palmer, p. 685). According to Palmer, McKillop's liberal pluralism has

essentially displaced historical materialism and Marxism, because it is now seen as the left-wing response to the traditionally conservative ideas presented by national historians like Granatstein.

Despite Palmer's disdain for Granatstein's perspective, he does support the arguments for a national history and agrees that Canadian historians should teach individuals about significant historical events like Vimy Ridge. However, while Granatstein believes that the battle at Vimy Ridge should be seen as a source of Canadian pride and a time when Canada "came of age," Palmer questions this approach when he writes:

> Could not this foundation of nationhood be discussed not in terms of universalizing pride, but as a predictably routine class tragedy in which the working class of Canada and other countries was characteristically sacrificed on the bloody alter of imperialism's usual aims (p. 679)?

As this comment indicates, Palmer appears to agree with Desmond Tutu's assessment of history, but instead of Granatstein's "nationalist" history, he would like Canadians to subscribe to a national narrative that is told from a neo-Marxist's perspective.

## National Historians and Social Historians: The Search for Some Common Ground

In the Athabasca University text entitled *An Introduction to Canadian Studies: Course Guide,* Gregory Johnson writes, "One very important question is whether there can be any common ground upon which national history and social history can meet, or whether they will always be at cross-purposes" (p. 25)? Thus far we don't have an answer to this question, but there are a variety of Canadian scholars who are making attempts to find the common ground that Johnson is asking about. In *Painting the Maple: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Construction of Canada,* Veronica Stong-Boag et al. have produced a text, which calls for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the modern Canadian identity. Despite championing their ideas however, the authors point out that universities organize knowledge according to discipline-specific departments, and this does not facilitate interdisciplinary teaching or research (p. 6). Like Owram, their call for more collaboration does sound like a reasonable and viable option, but, as Stephen Turner points out, "students

without disciplinary PhDs are at an enormous disadvantage when looking for jobs in disciplinary programs" (Turner, p. 59). In "Describing the Bricolage: Conceptualizing a New Rigor in Qualitative Research," Joe Kincheloe appears to agree with Turner when he writes, "I listened to several colleagues maintain that if one is focussed on getting tenure he or she should eschew interdisciplinarity; if one is interested in only doing good research, she or he should embrace it" (p. 680). And thus, before some of Canada's greatest minds can come together and share ideas about a Canadian history or identity, perhaps our universities will have to get better at encouraging interdisciplinary research.

One author who has made an ambitious attempt to find a common ground between national historians and social historians is Gerald Friesen. In his book, *Citizen's and Nation: And Essay on History, Communication*, and Canada, Friesen attempts to write "ordinary citizens" into Canada's national history. He suggests that the history of northern North America has "experienced four constructions of the dimensions of time and space" (p. 5), which correlate to the construction of four dominant communication systems. He calls these constructions of time and space, the "oral-traditional," "textual-settler," "print-capitalism," and "screen-capitalism." A detailed explanation of Friesen's theories goes beyond the scope of this essay but he is worth mentioning because he does in fact attempt to make the connection between focussing on "ordinary" people, while placing them in the contexts of a Canadian national history. A text like this, combined with a greater desire for interdisciplinary research within Canadian universities, might just help national and social historians find new and improved ways to work together and integrate their ideas.

## Keeping the Debate Civil

The debate about national history in Canada can get quite heated, and at times it has disintegrated into verbal sparring sessions and personal attacks. As an individual who has examined this issue from outside of Canada for almost twenty years, I have come to believe that the arguments presented by national historians and social historians are quite fluid and often interrelated. Prominent national historian W.L. Morton, for example, has made comments that reflect the perspectives of both sides of the debate. In "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History" he sounds a lot like Buckner and Fleming

when he writes, "The Canadian state cannot be devoted to absolute nationalism, the focus of a homogenous popular will. The two nationalities and the four sections of Canada forbid it" (p. 49). However, years later, in "The Relevance of Canadian History", Morton sounds more like Granatstein when he writes, "There are not two histories, but one history, as there are not two Canadas, or any great number, but one only" (p. 89). One could make the argument that Morton's comments appear to contradict one another, or, one could see these comments as an indication that the debate about national history is fluid, and opinions tend to change or evolve over time. When discussing the debate over multiculturalism in Canada, Will Kymlicka writes:

> We should assume (until shown otherwise) that participants in the debate, on both sides, are reasonable. We should assume that Canadians share basic commitments to social integration and liberal democratic values, and we should interpret any demands or questions they raise about multiculturalism in this light (Kymlicka, p. 122).

Understandably, neo-Marxists won't necessarily assume we should all share liberal democratic values, but in general, Canadians can apply Kymlicka's comments to the debate about national history as well. In 2016, a time of media sound bites, individuals are far too often reduced to one or two particular opinions and this is unfortunate, because humans are far too complex for such generalizations. Yes, Granatstein's texts can be abrasive and sometimes condescending, but, if a social historian has truly managed to develop a strong sense of self, he or she should be able to engage Granatstein in debate, instead of just dismissing him as an out of touch polemicist. And, if Canadian scholars manage to take the debate about national history into the public arena in a civilized and constructive manner, the debate itself might just teach Canadians on the whole more about who they actually are.

## Recognizing the "Other" While Developing a Sense of Common Citizenship

In "Impediments to a Canadian Future" Charles Taylor discusses his ideas regarding the politics of recognition and writes, "In spite of the continuing importance of real discrimination, a lot of the battle in Canada's present constitutional imbroglio is really

over recognition" (p. 193). He then argues that Canadians "somehow manage to obscure the fact that recognition matters to us, even while we make demands (such as the 'distinct society' clause) which aim at precisely this" (p. 196). According to Taylor, recognition denied may in fact be responsible for contributing to the fragmentation of the country. These are astute observations and indicate that Taylor supports social historians and their efforts to focus on a history that is more inclusive, or one that "recognizes" minorities. However, Taylor also believes that a democratic society needs a sense of common citizenship, or a common understanding of what it is to be a member of that particular society (p. 197). In other words, he believes that Canadians are also in need of some sort of national history that helps them connect with one another. He then identifies a possible compromise between these two different needs when he states, "Suppose that we lived in a country where the common understanding was that there was more than one formula for citizenship and where we could live with the fact that different people related to different formulae" (p. 199). Taylor does admit that this solution might not be ideal, but it just might be a product of compromise that will actually satisfy Canadians just enough to help them stay together or "gel as a community."

## Conclusion

In the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, Desmond Tutu refers to the historical violence seen in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, which Canada, despite its heterogeneous makeup, has managed to avoid. The heated debates about our national history have not even come close to the violence that has been witnessed in these two countries, and this is definitely commendable. In 2016 the debate continues, but, as neo-Marxists point out, national historians and social historians are not as far apart as their rhetoric might indicate. National historians want history to teach Canadians what it means to be a Canadian, but social historians want history to teach people who they are as Canadians. As long as these historians keep the debate civil, and as long as they keep searching for some common ground, the idea of Canada might just last for a lot longer than some might think. I tend to agree with Pico Iyer in *Imagining Canada: An Outsider's Hope for a Global Future* when he writes, "the very fact that Canadians so often criticize

Canada for being too racist or too stuffy or too something is a source of hope: the country is holding itself to high standards, and asking questions of itself with a searchingness I don't see in Liverpool or Atlanta" (p. 51). As an individual who has travelled extensively throughout close to thirty countries, I will argue, with the possible exception of New Zealand, that I have not seen this same "searchingness" anywhere around the globe.

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