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National minorities, immigration, and responsibility: French Canada as a case study, 1840 – 1960

Abstract: In some host countries and regions where national minorities coexist, the latter's relative weight and relations to each other and to the majority may be the most decisive factors in influencing representations of and policies towards immigrants and refugees. This has been the case for French Canadians who generally perceived immigration – especially non-Catholic and non-francophone immigration – as strengthening the anglophone majority, and thus weakening the French Canadians and threatening their very cultural survival in a hostile continent. Up to 1960, French Canadians opposed immigration and categorized immigrants as those who were ideal, i.e., Franco-Catholic immigrants; those who were tolerated, i.e., non-francophone Catholic immigrants; and those who were undesirable, i.e., non-Catholic immigrants, especially Jews.

As millions of migrants and refugees transform the twenty-first-century world, it is imperative to look back into the past, not to draw lessons but to acquire a historical perspective that is often lacking but can be helpful in understanding and informing current debates about immigration and the integration of newcomers.

In some host countries and regions, the existence of national, religious, and linguistic minorities – often themselves the products of earlier migrations – complicate both interactions with immigrants and refugees and the *problématique* of responsibility. Seeing themselves as dominated and, more often than not, as persecuted by majorities, national, religious, and linguistic minorities often feel acutely threatened by the mass arrival of newcomers who do not share with them a common language, religion, and/or ethnicity. In these situations, each immigrant group is assessed according to its capacity to reinforce or weaken a given minority in its struggle for survival within a nation or a region. At the same time, members of national minorities are not isolated from larger currents of thought, notably those that marginalize or demonize other groups.

French Canada is a good example of this.¹ There, French migrants first settled in the St. Lawrence Valley (Quebec) in the seventeenth century, where they

¹ This chapter deals only with French Canada, i.e. Quebec and its diaspora. It does not take into

displaced Indigenous people and created a colonial society, which was then conquered by Britain between 1760 and 1763. From then on, largely for economic reasons, French Canadians migrated throughout the North American continent and expressed their distinctiveness through their Catholicism, which has important cultural associations, their French language, and a collective memory of struggle for cultural survival.² Given this background, my chapter's primary focus is to understand how this historical experience shaped French Canadians' relationship with later immigrants and to explore the responsibility they felt or did not feel towards them between 1840 and 1960.

I have chosen 1840 as a starting point because it was in the wake of a failed Liberal rebellion against British rule in 1837–1838 that clerical and lay Catholic elites developed a coherent vision of the group to which they belonged and began to express it with the creation and the dissemination of the name 'French Canadians'. As a bookend, 1960 is important because it marks the symbolic end of French Canada as a cultural entity and the beginning of its mental fragmentation into groups that were confined within Canada's various provincial boundaries: Québécois, Franco-Ontarians, Franco-Manitobans, etc. (Martel 1997; Juteau-Lee 1999; Laniel/Thériault, eds., 2016). In the United States, the acculturation process had been more rapid. There, as early as the first decade of the twentieth century, francophone leaders had started to refer to the group as Franco-Americans (Roby 2004, 562).

Dispersed throughout Canada and the United States, francophones were a minority in Anglo-American North America. Only in Quebec did they control state institutions. But even there the state was relatively weak and other social actors, mainly the Catholic Church, oversaw and took charge of education, health, and social services (Linteau/Durocher/Robert 1989). As this volume focusses on the role of individuals in the integration of refugees, it is appropriate to look at French Canada prior to the advent of a strong state, when immigration was largely the concern of civil society.

In the first section of the chapter, I briefly discuss some sociological characteristics of French Canadians. It is followed by a consideration of their attitudes towards immigration before and after the Second World War. It then moves on to show how different immigrant groups were perceived and treated in French Can-

account Acadia, the French-speaking area of the Maritimes, or Louisiana. Originally settled by the French, Louisiana received African slaves and two groups of political refugees in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Acadians following a massive deportation, and refugees from Saint-Domingue (Haiti). On Acadia see Griffiths 2004; and Farragher 2005. On Louisiana see Hall 1992; Brasseaux 2005; Dessens 2010; and Vidal 2013.

2 For an introduction to the history of French Canada, see Frenette 1999, 538–586.

ada as ‘ideal’, ‘undesirable’, or tolerated according to their potential for reinforcing or weakening French-Canadian identity. The three groups highlighted here are respectively the Franco-Europeans, the Jews, and the Italians.³

1. French Canadians: between a nation and an ethnic group

According to some scholars, between 1840 and 1960 French Canadians and, to some extent, Franco-Americans were a *groupe nationalitaire* whose self-representation in history was weaker than a nation but stronger than an ethnic group (Juteau-Lee 1999; Thériault 1995). In Canada and in parts of the United States, they saw themselves as the legitimate successors of the first European inhabitants of the continent. In their view, their history was much longer and richer than that of later groups who joined the American melting pot or the Canadian mosaic. Indeed, they considered themselves to be a community of history and destiny, whose members, wherever they lived, spoke a common language, practised a common religion, and shared cultural traits that centred on family and kin. According to French Canada’s self-appointed spokespeople, such as Henri Bourassa and André Laurendeau, both of whom were politicians and journalists, Canada’s founding in 1867 was a pact between two equal nations and for many of them, the resulting biculturalism became a tool for cultural survival (Bock 2004; Lamarre 2016). Perhaps paradoxically, it was in the province of Quebec, with its French-speaking majority, that feelings of persecution and socio-economic domination by *les Anglais* were the most intense (Cook 1982; Trofimenkoff 1982).

³ Attitudes toward these three groups did not vary much in different regions of French-Canada. On the other hand, French-Canadian relations with Irish immigrants were more complex. At the time of Irish mass migration in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, French Canadians shared with Protestant North Americans negative stereotypes toward Irish immigrants, which were tempered by the Catholicism of the newcomers. With time, in Quebec, the children of the immigrants developed close relations with the French-Canadian majority, which did not perceive them as a threat. In addition, French-Canadian nationalist leaders felt great sympathy for Irish nationalist leaders who shared with them a common enemy. Outside of Quebec, in Canada as in the United States, members of the two minorities competed for jobs and for power within the Catholic Church and in the political sphere. Irish immigrants and their children had a linguistic advantage and joined Protestant anglophones in restricting the use of the French language. On these issues, see Frenette 1999; McQuillan 1999, 133–164; Jolivet, 2011; Perin/Sanfilippo 2012, 199–206; and Cardinal/Jolivet/Matte (eds.) 2014.

Despite French Canadians' high degree of geographic mobility, French Canada was perceived by French Canadians and outsiders alike as a sedentary, almost immobile society in which families stayed in the same place for generations and social change occurred at a very slow pace.⁴ This perception expressed itself in the language of rootedness, which essentially captured the migration from France to New France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the settlement of Quebec's hinterland in the nineteenth century, the urbanization that French Canadians experienced over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the migration of more than one million of them from Canada to the United States between 1840 and 1930 (Frenette 2015, 21–37).

Before I start to analyse the relationship between French Canadians and immigrants, it is important to draw attention to two points. First, prior to 1951, the term 'refugee' applies rather broadly to anyone leaving an environment where his or her human security is threatened (Epp 2017).⁵ Second, this chapter cannot be taken as an exhaustive study since I have not been able to show the full complexity of the relationship between French Canadians and immigrants. It should rather be seen as a brief overview, but one that sheds important light on how immigration can affect pre-existing minority identity. What is presented here are the dominant discourses as they were expressed by intellectuals and politicians, but we need to appreciate that more marginal voices also existed. Moreover, it is very difficult to assess the impact of these discourses surrounding immigration on the representations of the population. While they surely had an impact, what this impact actually was is not always clear.

2. French-Canadian representations of immigration, 1900–1940

The French-Canadian intelligentsia was conservative and yet was not isolated from Western currents of thought. For instance, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, it became influenced by theories borrowed from the natural sciences, including the idea that communities, societies, and nations were 'organic' and thus were living organisms in which each individual had a place, a

⁴ See, for instance, the influential monograph by member of the Chicago School of Sociology Horace Miner (1939).

⁵ Although the 1951 Refugee Convention marked an international watershed, Canada refused to sign it until 1969. However, the country did participate in some international initiatives in the years after the introduction of the Convention.

function, duties, and responsibilities (Pâquet 2005). Thus, in their opinion, immigrants were ‘foreign bodies’ who had the potential to destabilize the French-Canadian social organism and threaten its very survival. In this context, some believed that it was ‘natural’ to categorize immigrants by ethnic origin. There were other categories of inclusion, including their contribution to economic prosperity, their utility and their willingness to assimilate, and exclusion, such as the desire to keep order, a perception of a threat to public health, and concerns about ethnic origin. Moreover, in the context of tensions that existed between French Canadians and English Canadians, the fear that immigrants strengthened the linguistic majority always loomed large (Harvey 1987).

In the first half of the twentieth century, almost every French-Canadian nationalist organization, every nationalist leader, and every nationalist newspaper opposed immigration. Furthermore, the great majority of French-Canadian associations denied membership to immigrants (Behiels 1991). In a bi-confessional education system, where both Catholics and Protestants had rights, the Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal (CECM) became the seat of French-Canadian culture and Catholicism. It showed little interest in the assimilation of immigrants and instead encouraged them to retain their mother tongues. After the CECM created an English-speaking sector in 1928, Catholic immigrants who realized early on the importance of learning English in Montreal, left the francophone sector with little fuss, and the leaders of the CECM were indifferent to their departure. The attitude of French-Canadian school authorities was in stark contrast to that of the Anglo-Protestant elites who, as early as 1867, had created a school system where all non-Catholics were welcomed, so long as there was no attempt to undermine their authority. Indeed Anglo-Protestant elites instrumentalised immigrants as tools for constructing a country where they would assimilate into the dominant British colonial culture. Essentially, they resented their demographic minority status in Montreal and wanted more bodies in their schools, which meant that immigrant children became an important way of boosting numbers (Croteau 2016).

French-Canadian clerics were not favourably disposed towards immigration, but they had to follow the lead of Catholic authorities in Rome who thought that Catholic migrants around the world required oversight from the point of departure from their country of origin to their point of arrival in a new one to avoid conversion to another church or apostasy. Thus, the Œuvre protectrice des immigrants catholiques was founded in 1912 and set up bureaus near the government immigration offices in the port cities of Halifax (Nova Scotia), Saint John (New Brunswick), and Quebec City (Quebec). The Œuvre provided basic information, practical materials, and ‘moral’ assistance, which was of the utmost importance to the Church. It was assisted by the Ligue des femmes catholiques, which was

present in 28 Canadian dioceses and 432 parishes. Catholic service associations, such as the Knights of Columbus and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, were also involved. The Œuvre des immigrants catholiques was constantly raising funds to cover its costs, but when the Great Depression hit in 1930 and migratory flows slowed considerably, its activities ceased (Pâquet 2002).

3. French-Canadian attitudes towards immigration and immigrants, 1940–1960

During the provincial electoral campaign of 1943–1944, the Opposition leader and populist politician Maurice Duplessis declared that he had proof of a plot fomented by the Canadian government and by Jews to bring to Quebec 10,000 Jewish refugees. Duplessis's speech, which was anti-Semitic and false, ignited a province-wide campaign to prevent European immigration. Hundreds of thousands of people signed petitions, somewhere between 300 and 400 cities and towns passed resolutions against immigration, and many unions followed suit (Rajotte 2007; Chevalier-Caron 2017).

Vicious and xenophobic, this campaign also marked the last of its kind in Quebec because the Second World War represented a turning point in French-Canadian attitudes towards immigration. Even the outspoken traditionalist intellectual François-Albert Angers had started to alter his views on immigration and immigrants and began to advocate for assimilating 'some of the more compatible ethnic groups into the French-Canadian milieu' (quoted in Behiels 1991, 11). After the war, as the pace of urbanization increased, as reports surfaced of French Canadians outside Quebec assimilating into anglophone society, and as younger nationalist leaders began to emerge, concerns grew over French Canada's demographic future. The realities shifted the discourse on immigration because it became obvious that French Canadians' past indifference or hostility towards immigration had benefitted English Canada and had impoverished French Canada. In Canada, immigration is a shared responsibility between the federal and provincial governments, and in Quebec, provincial officials came under pressure from several quarters to develop a selective and rational immigration policy (Pâquet 1997).⁶ Yet, it was not until the 1960s that the Quebec government became proactive in attempting to attract immigrants. Duplessis, who served as the province's premier between 1944 and his death in 1959, remained staunchly opposed

⁶ In neighbouring Ontario, some French-Canadian leaders were also starting to change their attitudes toward immigration. See Martel 1995.

to newcomers, believing that they undermined Quebec's identity: 'pour progresser, un pays a besoin d'une population saine, animée d'un même esprit, possédant les mêmes aspirations patriotiques' (quoted in Dubé 2015, 101). In this opinion, he was supported by a small number of politicians and intellectuals, such as Dominique Beaudin, who continued to denounce immigration as an 'invasion of the hordes from Northern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean' (quoted in Pâquet 1997, 7).

Calls for a change to this line of thinking were growing louder, and one of the most vociferous was from the Catholic Church because Catholics were among the multitudes of displaced persons from the Second World War and from the rise of Communism in Eastern Europe, which pushed them out of this region and towards countries like Canada.⁷ The Vatican established an Emigration Bureau in 1946, and the following year Pope Pius XII implored all Christian countries to share responsibility for the hundreds of thousands of refugees and to meet their spiritual and social needs. Concern for Catholic refugees continued to grow, and in 1951 Rome established the International Catholic Migration Commission. In response, French-Canadian archbishops and bishops created the Société catholique d'aide aux immigrants. The Diocese of Quebec also established the Société du bien-être des immigrants and the Diocese of Montreal encouraged the creation of a welcoming centre for immigrants and opened the Société d'assistance aux immigrants (Harvey 1993). Until then, with a few exceptions including the Œuvre des immigrants catholiques discussed above, finding support had been left to immigrant groups themselves and, sometimes, to foreign governments who were expected to provide support and settlement services.⁸

For editors at the influential daily *Le Devoir*, the indifference and hostility of the population towards immigration were not only deplorable in 'national' terms, but they were also morally reprehensible. For one, André Laurendeau wrote, 'Cet homme déraciné, inquiet, souvent malheureux, nous devons apprendre à l'accueillir fraternellement' (quoted in Anctil 2015, 179). The CECM also reversed its policies and began facilitating assimilation within its French-speaking sector and created the Service des Néo-Canadiens in 1948 as a response (Croteau 2016).

New attitudes and policies towards immigration were put to the test in 1956, when 37,000 Hungarian refugees settled in Canada after a failed uprising against

⁷ On the refugee crisis of the post-war years, see Gatrell 2015.

⁸ For the French case, see Linteau/Frenette/Le Jeune 2017. For Jewish charitable organisations, see Anctil 2017.

Soviet rule; a few thousand of them went to Montreal. Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger called for solidarity and founded l'Œuvre des réfugiés hongrois, which worked with the City of Montreal Immigration Service, to provide temporary shelter, clothes, and food, and to help the newcomers find jobs. In January 1958, after a request from Léger, Quebec's legislative assembly passed a law that created the Provincial Committee to Aid Hungarian Refugees. As elsewhere in the 'Free World', French Canadians showed an eagerness to help the Hungarian 'Freedom Fighters' (Patrias 1999).

4. 'Ideal immigrants': the French and the Belgians

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the "ideal immigrants" were those who shared with French Canadians their religion and their language (Pâquet 1997).⁹ These were the French and the francophone Belgians and Swiss. Not only would they become part of the French-Canadian organic community, but it was felt that they would also counterbalance the growing expansion of Anglo-Protestant Canadians, especially in the new territories of the West that became open to white settlement (Painchaud 1987). Between 1880 and 1914, the Catholic Church, as well as the Quebec and Canadian governments (the latter put under pressure by French-Canadian politicians) sent recruiters to French-speaking Europe. These agents could rely on a vast network of sympathisers who were rooted in Catholic circles. In France, they concentrated on regions that were experiencing economic problems and where Catholics felt persecuted by the Third Republic's successive governments, which were becoming increasingly anticlerical (Linteau/Frenette/Le Jeune 2017).

Although these efforts did not give the hoped-for results, about 50,000 French and an undetermined number of francophone Belgians and Swiss migrated to Canada before the First World War. In the case of the French, half of them stayed and their relationship with the French Canadians was complex. In Montreal and in Ottawa, members of the two groups were neighbours, and in Western Canada, they shared the same churches and schools. In that part of the country, though, they were at a significant geographic distance from Quebec, and a number of immigrant leaders born in France emerged and defended vigorously the religious and linguistic rights of francophone minorities.¹⁰ Furthermore, French

⁹ See also Pâquet 1999.

¹⁰ For an example, see Champagne 2003.

journalists founded newspapers and played key editorial roles, and in the 1940s and 1950s French Canadians, French, and Franco-Belgian immigrants campaigned together for the creation of francophone radio stations in Western Canada (Linteau/Frenette/Le Jeune 2017).

Even if Franco-Europeans were ‘ideal immigrants’, their relations with French Canadians were not always amicable. For instance, members of the two groups rarely intermarried, and those who did often had to fight their parents. It was only with the coming of age of the second and third generations that intermarriages became more common. In religious congregations, which were composed of French-Canadian and French members, mutual hostility prevailed due to constant power struggles between the two groups and because the French Canadians were frustrated by perceived notions of linguistic and cultural superiority on the part of the French. Indeed the language question was a central feature of the French/French-Canadian relationship as French immigrants were generally more desirous than French Canadians of acquiring English and of integrating into the anglophone mainstream. In France, they had learned to resist attacks on their religious freedom, but fighting for their language was new to them. In addition, like other immigrants, they realized that their future and the future of their children was linked to the acquisition of the English language (Linteau/Frenette/Le Jeune 2017).

Immigration from France to Canada declined in the 1920s and almost stopped completely during the Great Depression and the Second World War. But at the end of the conflict, it reached new peaks. In the 1950s the number of France-born individuals living in Canada increased by 131 per cent, reaching 36,000. The numbers would have been much greater if the Canadian Embassy in Paris and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had been able to manage the flow of applications more effectively. France was trying to reconstruct following the damage sustained during the war and in 1948 the Canadian government finally recognized the French as preferred immigrants, which put them on the same footing as British and American immigrants, though in reality, British immigrants were still favoured (Linteau 2008; Frenette 2012).

Post-war French immigrants tended to settle in Quebec and this inspired historian Paul-André Linteau to cast this as a love story between the French and the province (Linteau 2008, 179). French immigrants mostly lived in Montreal where, as in other Canadian cities, they did not form an ethnic neighbourhood on their own. While they had close contacts with the French-Canadian population, their integration was hampered by the negative perceptions that many of them had of the French-Canadian ‘dialect’ and culture. For their part, French Canadians de-

veloped the stereotype of the ‘maudit Français’ who felt superior and who constantly complained about Quebec and Canada (Frenette 2012).¹¹

5. ‘Undesirable’ immigrants: the Jews

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Franco-European immigrants were those declared to be ‘undesirable’ and according to historian Pierre Anctil, the Jews represented the ‘total others’.¹² The fact that they were not Christian, let alone Catholic, was a major issue for many French Canadians. Coming mostly from Eastern Europe, they also spoke an unfamiliar language, Yiddish, and some of them were members of revolutionary groups. By being concentrated in Montreal, they embodied both an urbanity and a modernity that contrasted sharply with Quebec conservatives’ world view and because of all of these factors, it was felt that they could never assimilate.¹³

Yet, Jews had been part of the landscape of French Canada since the seventeenth century and had built a synagogue in Montreal as early as 1768. Numbering a mere 409 in this city in 1871, their numbers grew steadily in the following decades: from 2,473 in 1891 to 28,540 in 1911 and then to 57,772 in 1931. By then, Jewish immigrants had built Montreal’s largest non-French and non-British community. Their numerical importance, their residential concentration, and their community’s institutional completeness allowed them to minimise their daily encounters with people from outside of the community, including the city’s French-Canadian majority. The situation was different in Quebec’s small towns and in the countryside, where about 12,000 Jewish immigrants lived. There, Jewish peddlers and merchants were, by the nature of their work, in close contact with the local population. In these parts of the province, and as service providers, who were so few in number, they needed to learn at least some French. Importantly, in these more rural areas, they did not seem to be considered a threat to the survival of the French-Canadian community.

11 Unfortunately, we know far less about Belgian and Swiss immigrants. For instance, it is almost impossible to determine the numbers and the percentages of francophones among them. On the Belgians see Jaenen 1991; Jaumain 1999; Ghislain 2015. On Swiss immigrants see Khalid 2009.

12 As Larochelle (2018) has recently shown, Arabs, Asians, Blacks, and Indigenous people also acted as ‘total others’ for French Canadians. But as few members of these groups were present on the streets of Montreal, they were not considered an immigrant threat.

13 This section relies heavily on the work of Anctil: 1988a; 1988b; 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2017.

In Montreal, Jewish people like other non-Catholic immigrants could not send their children to CECM's schools, but they were welcome in the schools that were under the jurisdiction of the Protestant School Board. This arrangement suited them because their social mobility was linked to the acquisition of the English language and not the French. In 1903, the provincial Education Act formalized their presence in Protestant schools, but it precluded them, as non-Christians, from holding seats on the Protestant School Board. Two decades later, when members of the Jewish community agitated for the creation of a Jewish School Board, the Catholic hierarchy opposed it, arguing that it would set a dangerous precedent (Croteau 2016, 249-250).

Anti-Semitic discourse was present and at times thriving in French Canada, largely among the intelligentsia. This discourse was rooted in a centuries-old Catholic tradition, and as the size of the Jewish community expanded, many priests launched verbal and written attacks against it. Their superiors issued no reprimand beyond a warning to them that they be prudent (Dumas 2015). On the other hand, in the 1930s the Church condemned the Nazi-inspired violent anti-Semitism of the journalist-politician Adrien Arcand, who, in spite of his bluster, was never able to gather more than a few followers. At a fundamental level, the Church was deeply opposed to Judaism, but it did not believe that its adherents should be persecuted and physically threatened.¹⁴

In the first half of the twentieth century, there were four outbursts of violent anti-Semitism in French Canada. The first occurred in 1910 in Quebec City after real estate lawyer Jacques-Édouard Plamondon gave a vitriolic speech against Judaism and called for a boycott of Jewish businesses. Members of the city's tiny Jewish community were assaulted and their synagogue vandalized (Normand 2005). Some twenty-five years later, Université de Montréal's students broke shop windows in the heart of the city's Jewish neighbourhood. Their actions were condemned by *Le Devoir* and by the Catholic Church hierarchy. In the same period, medical interns at the Notre-Dame Hospital, the most important Catholic hospital in Montreal, went on strike to protest the appointment of a Jewish colleague. They were joined by interns from other Catholic hospitals and altogether about seventy-five medics participated in the protest movement. The strikers had the support of all the French-Canadian associations which were involved in an 'achat chez nous' campaign targeting Jewish stores.¹⁵ The last violent public anti-Semitic episode took place during the Second World War. On the eve of its inauguration in 1944, the Beth Israël Ohev Sholom in the bourgeois

¹⁴ On Arcand and the fascist movement, see Nadeau 2010; Théorêt 2012.

¹⁵ On the Notre-Dame Hospital interns' strike, see Robinson 2015.

upper town of Quebec City was set on fire. It was an act of terror that corresponded with the anti-Jewish immigration campaign that had been raging for months.

Yet, there were dissenting voices, and in the 1930s, liberal newspapers condemned the anti-Semitic campaigns and some Catholic clerics engaged in dialogue with rabbis. But it was not until after the Second World War that the situation truly improved as the horrors of the Shoah became widely known and the state of Israel was established. In 1958, *Le Devoir's* director, Gérard Filion, went to Israel and lauded its citizens, declaring them a model: 'La solidarité des Juifs doit nous servir de leçon [...]. Il n'y a pas de peuple plus divisé en surface que les Israéliens, et cependant ils savent poser les gestes qui assurent leur statut collectif [...]. Il faudrait que plus de Canadiens français aillent en Israël' (quoted in Anctil 2017, 318). Ten years earlier, the Canadian Jewish Congress had launched the Cercle juif de langue française to facilitate relations between Jews and French Canadians. The Cercle really took off in 1954 after the involvement of Naïm Kattan, a young Jewish man from Baghdad, who had learned French and who had sojourned in Paris. Kattan organized a series of activities, where members of the two groups met for a lecture or a round table, held in the French language. The *rapprochement* would take time and would be painful but it had started.

6. Italian immigrants

Between the two extremes of the 'ideal' Franco-European immigrants and the 'undesirable' Jews, were the non-francophone and non-anglophone Catholic immigrants. Although not encouraged to immigrate by French-Canadian elites, they were tolerated, and one group of particular interest is the Italians, the fourth largest linguistic group in Montreal.¹⁶ Before the end of the nineteenth century, a few dozen Italians resided in Montreal. Coming mostly from northern Italy, they were musicians, artisans, and small business owners who integrated rapidly into French-Canadian society, especially through bonds of marriage. But from the 1890s, the level of Italian immigration took new proportions: in 1901, the Italian community numbered 2,000 people, by 1914 it was 10,000, and on the eve of the Second World War, it has doubled to 20,000. At the same time, the geographic origin of Italian immigrants and their occupational profile shifted, with the majority being unskilled workers from the south, notably the Molise region. Most of

¹⁶ The best introduction to Italian immigrants is Ramirez 1989. On Montreal's Italians, see Bois-sevain 1970; Ramirez and Del Balso 1980; Ramirez 1984; Painchaud and Poulin 1988.

them settled around two ‘national’ parishes served by Italian priests but located in the midst of working-class French-Canadian Montreal. Their children attended French-language Catholic schools.

This pattern began to change during the 1930s and 1940s, a consequence of the Great Depression, which saw a dramatic rise in ethnic conflict as people struggled for work. During these years, destitute Italian families learned about the reality of the severe financial limitations of the Catholic Church’s charitable institutions. Consequently, many families were forced to turn to Protestant social welfare agencies to survive, but getting access to these services required them to enrol their children in Anglo-Protestant schools. More importantly, though, was the fact that a growing number of Italian families began to feel that their children needed to learn English in a city where economic power was concentrated in the hands of Anglo-Protestants. Acquiring English was impossible in the French-language sector of the CECM, where the teaching of English only started in grade five. Moreover, Quebec did not have a fully developed public French-language high school system, and many Italians transferred their children to the English-language sector of the CECM. This meant that by 1945, half of the school board’s Italian students were enrolled in the English sector; that percentage increased to 75 per cent by 1957. In the following decade, Québécois nationalists began to denounce vehemently this situation, and as a result tensions between them and the Italian community exploded.

7. Conclusion

The historian’s job is not to make policy or to teach lessons about today based on what has been learned from the past because no two situations in time and place are alike. What the historian can do, however, is shed light on contemporary events and phenomena based on what has happened in the past. Regarding immigration, the historian can point to factors that have eased or hindered immigrants’ acceptance and integration. And in those countries or territories where there are pre-existing national minorities, such as in Canada and Quebec, these minorities’ relative weight and relations to each other and to the majority may be the most decisive factors in influencing how immigrants and refugees are perceived and the kinds of policies that are adopted to manage their integration.

Quebec is an example of this. Although cultural and religious diversity and the federal policy of multiculturalism¹⁷ are debated everywhere in Canada, it is

17 A brief introduction to Canadian multiculturalism is provided by Troper (1999). The concept

in Quebec that the most acrimonious discussions are taking place in the public sphere. Exploring this example from the perspective of a historian helps understand why this is so. Francophone Quebecers have resisted assimilation into the anglophone mainstream for more than 250 years. Many of them, likely a majority, are sceptical of the very notion of diversity since it has the potential to undermine their language and culture. Although few Québécois actually think that there is a plot to assimilate them through immigration, many of them continue to see immigrants as people who will weaken their nation (Quebec).

However, and somewhat paradoxically, francophone immigrants may also be seen as linguistic instruments in the survival and the promotion of both French Quebec and francophone minorities throughout Canada.¹⁸ But at the time of writing, this perspective is not at the forefront of public debate. What is being discussed at the moment is the notion that Quebec is receiving too many immigrants and refugees who cannot integrate into the francophone mainstream. It would seem that Muslims are the focus of current attention and seem to be perceived as the new ‘undesirable’ immigrant group.

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and the policy of multiculturalism have had many critics. Quebec public intellectual Gérard Bouchard has proposed instead the notion of interculturalism: see Bouchard 2015.

18 On this perspective see Frenette 2016.

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