Book Review


Reviewed by Anne Trépanier, School of Canadian Studies, Carleton University

An original, relevant and well-conceived textbook in English about Québec has finally arrived.

Québec Questions, edited by three prominent scholars in Québec Studies, Stéphan Gervais (Coordinator of Québec Studies at McGill University) Christopher Kirkey (Director of the Center for the Study of Canada and the Institute on Québec Studies at SUNY at Plattsburgh) and Jarrett Rudy (Director of the Québec Studies Program at McGill University), is a most welcome attempt from North American academia to address the gap in the tools for teaching about Québec in English. It should therefore be well received by a community of professors and teachers busy building course packs made from translated material of uneven quality. The project was first initiated after a colloquium led by the Institute on Québec Studies in 2006 called The Future of Québec Studies in the United States: Enriching a vibrant community at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. It developed further in a Montréal conference in 2008 sponsored by Ministère des Relations internationales du Québec, the Government of Canada, the Association internationale d’études québécoises, Dean of the Arts Development Fund at McGill University and the Programme de soutien à la recherche en matière d’affaires intergouvernementale et d’identité québécoise, showing the vast array of supporters for such an endeavour. The contributors were asked to write “spirited surveys” of current research in their field. Hence, this collection of papers is a comprehensive illustration of the various approaches to Québec as an object of study in many disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

The interdisciplinary collection of essays poses questions for the 21st century connects Québec, its people and its history to the contemporary Anglophone world. The textbook is divided into six sections with much overlap. With its 29 chapters, it appears to be designed specifically for a year-long course in Québec Studies that targets both the Canadian and the American undergraduate audiences. The textbook is organized through themes: memories, identities, language, citizenship, Québec models, and Québec international. The choice of contributors is excellent for rounding up an interdisciplinary approach to Québec. Ranging from well-established scholars (Yvan Lamonde, Alain G. Gagnon) to young professors (Rafaelle Iacovino, Maryse Potvin) and promising MA candidates (François Côté-Vaillancourt), the textbook covers a lot in terms of angles, experience and geography. For each article, the authors were carefully chosen. For example, the choice of Donald Fyson, an Anglophone teaching Québec History at Laval University, for discussing the Conquest is clever in terms of cultural, teaching, and research experience in the “culture of the other” in the post-Bill 101 and, more globally, post-9/11 eras. Nevertheless, given the high profile they gave to Québec questions in the past 15 years, readers and users of this textbook might have expected, or benefited from, reading first-account views from Gérard Bouchard and Jocelyn Létourneau.
The textbook is not offering upfront a historically based or a chronological approach. This suits the cultural studies trends within Quebec Studies, which are moving away from literature in a historical context for addressing most current topics. With a motto like “Je me souviens” and numerous commemorations of past events, history is never very far from sight in Quebec. Memories, the first section, explicitly deals with New France, the Conquest, the Rebellions, and questions of “Quebec accommodation” discussing Federalism and Nationalism. Those focusing on historical events will be served as well as teachers using current issues to address history. The second section, Identities, looks at the evolution of French Canada, Quebec’s Americanité, Quebec Literature, Aboriginal peoples, and Quebec in terms of nationalisms, Politics and Religion. It ends with an insightful survey by Jocelyn Maclure of the competing conceptions of Quebec identity. The third section, Language, introduces the sociolinguistic history of French in Quebec as well as two articles on the politics of language and language policies. Popular music in Quebec is also addressed. Again, the readers will be enlightened with the experts’ words on these questions. The fourth section, Citizenship, opens with an article featuring Denise Baillargeon’s survey of women’s history. It then deals extensively with Quebec domestic tensions on race and identities in terms of diversity, immigration and the “Quebec model” of immigration and inclusion. The fifth section, Quebec Models, inquires on social organisation in Quebec and its unique aspects, including the paradoxes of Quebec feminism, health care, hydroelectricity, economic development, and regional economic dynamics. Quebec International, the last section, is a preview for the afterword’s topic. Quebec international relations, la Francophonie, Quebec’s diplomatic and economic presence in the United States and Quebec theatre are discussed, with a focus on the international scene. The afterword, written by Alain G. Gagnon, offers an informed opinion on the trends and tendencies when studying Quebec in the “rest of Canada” and the United States.

The editors introduce each section. This creates a strong narrative linking Quebec Studies’ relevancy in the North American context, carrying meaning and insights for the chapters to be developed. Each chapter also includes a short timeline related to the issue in the form of a chronology with an uncontroversial choice of dates, as they are “official” or “canonical” political events related to the topic of the chapter. This adds a useful tool for bringing some historical context. A portrait of an influential character is offered as well as a “snapshot” of one event. For pedagogical purposes, a series of debate questions is also included at the end of each chapter along with a short list of suggested and relatively recent books for qualitative research and a list of relevant websites meant to support both quantitative and qualitative research. The index facilitates research within the textbook. Photos and art also provide richness to the document. Basically, this textbook targets students with a limited knowledge of Quebec and provides both teachers and students with a well chosen interesting set of material to further develop in class.

As Quebec grows into Canada in a continuing distinct manner, Quebec Questions will ensure that students from Canada and the United States continue examining Quebec through a well-informed collection.