

Unit 10: Video 1 Transcript

Q9: What was the French-Canadian colonization movement?

A: The French-Canadian colonization movement takes me back to my PhD thesis and my first book or two. Again, 1840s, 1840s is such a pivotal decade. But what happens? I don't think it's so much because of the rebellion in this case, as by the 1840s there was very little land left in the St. Lawrence Valley, the Richelieu and Chaudière Valleys, which are the seigneurial heartland of Quebec. And French-Canadians start migrating across the border, primarily to the United States, not to Upper Canada or, of course, not points west because the Canadian west wasn't open yet. And then when the Civil War breaks out, there is a big demand for labour and New England textile mills start expanding very rapidly. And many of the—much of the workforce in the New England, southern New England mills, Lowell and many other places, is French-Canadian. It's coming directly from Lower Canada or Quebec.

This creates an incredible crisis in the minds of the French-Canadian nationalists because they think of their province as bleeding. And these people are—and particularly between 1840 and 1867, Upper and Lower Canada are united. Upper Canada is growing much more quickly than Lower Canada. And there's a lot of pressures by the 1850s for representation by population in what was called the Province of Canada in the House of Assembly. So for that reason alone, it's important to keep your numbers up. And then with Confederation, when you're only one province in four originally, and then one in ten finally. If much of your surplus population is leaving the province, that creates a whole danger, not only for those leaving to become Protestantized and assimilated as Anglophones, but for Quebec itself to become dominated increasingly by English-Canada.

So what is the solution? Well, people would say today the solution is urbanization and industrialization, which is what eventually happened in the 20th century to stop the exodus. But, of course, the state in the 1840s, 50s, 60s or whatever, you didn't have state-run industries, right? They subsidize railways, but they don't subsidize industries. They don't have the wherewithal, and it's a liberal ethos, not just in Lower Canada or Quebec, but everywhere. Liberalism is the dominant ethos. So the state does not involve itself in the economy directly.

So what can the state do? Well, one thing they can do is encourage people to move outside all seigneurial zones into other parts of the province, which, after all, is very large and mostly uninhabited. The problem, of course, is most of that land is not decent land. I mean beyond the St. Lawrence Valley. In the north it's the Laurentian Shield or whatever you want to—part of the Canadian Shield, the Laurentian Mountains. On the south, Appalachian, the old Appalachian area, part of that was settled by Americans but much of it was not very arable land. And both of those areas are kind of cut off because you don't have good transportation networks and so on.

But the Catholic Church—and once you get responsible government in 1848, the Crown land is controlled by the Assembly and, therefore, the government can start building “colonization roads” as they’re called. And this is very much pushed by the Catholic Church who provide religious services and so on because the priest is seen as central to any new parish, any new settlement. You don’t want people going there and becoming godless. That would defeat the purpose. In fact, the Catholic Church creates colonization societies and raises money. And so you have an expansion.

And most of the novels written in the 19th century are what we call “roman de la terre,” novels of the soil, *Jean Rivard* and *Maria Chapdelaine*. *Jean Rivard* in the 1840s or 50s, I guess. *Maria Chapdelaine* in 1900, and others in between. All propagating colonization, the need to stay on the land, and more than that to move into Lac Saint-Jean or into the Eastern Townships or into the Laurentians as a kind of a patriotic duty. And so this colonization movement was a very important part of the whole French-Canadian world after 1840s. And it’s a largely a reaction—people used to say it was a reaction to industrialization and urbanization because the Catholic Church feared that people would become godless in the cities. But I don’t agree with that. I mean the Catholic priests would actually—and there’s been research shown, would encourage industry in places like Lac-Mégantic or wherever. They were some of the first industrialists themselves, building sawmills and such, anything to keep people in Quebec. If they preached against cities and the evils of cities—what they had in mind was the New England cities, because that’s where people were going to urban life in the cities. And, of course, even *30 Acres* in the 1930s, the *Trente Arpents* novel, famous by Ringuet. Again, part of it takes place, an older French-Canadian farmer moves to a New England city and is completely alienated and unhappy there. So it’s not so much, then, a reaction against industrialization, I argue, as it’s a reaction against an exodus of a population. But eventually, you might see because there’s preaching the evils of industrialization, or not industrialization so much as urbanization, that you get this agrarian mindset.

And one could argue, I’m not sure I buy it, but that was one of the reasons why until the 1960s, French-Canadians tended not to move into industry or business so much as Anglos. And, of course, you have this Anglo-Protestant domination in many respects of the Quebec economy until the Quiet Revolution in 1960s. If you follow Fernand Ouellet’s kind of reasoning that this domination is largely the fault of the French-Canadians themselves, or at least of the Catholic Church and of the kind of traditional value system, then you could say that was a factor. It’s difficult to say for sure, but I would argue that the colonization movement was a very important part of the whole church-state kind of ethos. Newspapers were all pushing the land and the virtues of the soil.