

Reality or Mirage: Franco-American Stereotypes

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Theory and Method

Stereotypes are an intellectual shorthand—a version of "synechdochy," where a part stands for the whole. Preschool children use stereotypes to develop categories. For example, a two-year old Euro-American child will call all sea mammals "seals." Differentiation occurs as the child matures and learns that seals are only one of many types of sea mammals. In addition to helping the individual maturation of consciousness, stereotypes also assist a society in identifying important parts of its culture. This process of categorization varies from society to society.

In distinction to contemporary Euro-American society, traditional Iñupiat Eskimo culture saw each species of sea mammal as a separate and distinct entity, as opposed to one of a unified category. Such differentiation is modified by education and economy. A century ago, farmers in New England and Québec would not have generally known about the scientific Linnean classification of species and might well have considered sea mammals "fish," but their livelihood would have made them acutely aware of seasons and planting times. It is, however, in their use as tools for making social value judgments that stereotypes acquire dubious value.

Social stereotypes help develop consciousness and reinforce identity, but they are a two-way street—externally and internally imposed, serving both good and bad purposes, and influenced by education and economic prosperity. It is when they take on a life of their own, rather than as a vehicle for maturation, that stereotypes become dangerous commodities.

Stereotypes are economically adjusted. Advantageous economic potential mitigates ethnic conflict; poor economy exacerbates this conflict. In situations where people come from disparate backgrounds and there is prosperity, a sense of mutual acceptance prevails. This toleration breaks

down into wars of stereotypes when competition for jobs takes place.¹ Stereotypes often convey a sense of superiority for the projecting group. An internally generated stereotype often creates a bourgeois ideal. To properly analyze each, we have to look at the origins under which the stereotype was generated and whom it served. One such example lies in the stereotypical images of Franco-Americans in New England.

French Images

New England Yankees have an irrational fear of the French which dates back to the colonial wars of 17th and 18th century. To this day, the French are popularly associated with Native Americans. For the French, this connection is a matter of pride. For the English, the association is one with savage overtones. Nonetheless, the English fear of the French relaxed after the Seven Years War into an ill-defined dislike.

By 19th century, English Canadian association with Yankee New Englanders—with whom they shared language and religion—polluted New Englanders' impressions of the French Canadians with negative stereotypes born of the racial conflict in Canada.² This became especially true when the 1854 Free Trade Agreement, the Grand Trunk Rail Road and the National Policy had led to extended contacts between Anglo Canadian and American capitalists and managers. When several waves of French Canadians began to emigrate to Maine in the early 19th century, a more specific stereotype of French Canadians slowly began to develop.

Maine's need for construction workers made acceptance of the small first wave of French Canadian migrants relatively easy in the 1820s-40s. However, as their numbers increased and as economic problems developed

¹This occurred in California during the 1849 Gold Rush and Alaska during the 1970s oil boom. In contrast, the Panic of 1837 helped generate the social intolerance of the Know Nothing movement.

²André Siegfried, The Race Question in Canada (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1978), 102-03. The dominant style of André Siegfried's The Race Question in Canada is dialectic discourse. Siegfried presents the dilemmas of Anglo-French existence in Canada as a peculiar form of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Less a use of Marxist theory, Siegfried delighted in presenting the ironies of *double entente*.

towards mid-century, hostility developed. The Know-Nothing brutality against Catholics and immigrants passed into the blood-letting and economic prosperity of the Civil War.³

As industrialism expanded in Maine, after the Civil War, mill workers were needed. Although this need for labor should have again encouraged acceptance of French Canadians, various factors militated against such inclusive—economic downturns like the Depression of 1873, the size of the migration (almost one million émigrés), a separate language and religion, as well as their cohesiveness in urban ghettos. This separateness made them easy targets for blame.

Americans developed an image of French Canadian immigrants as dull-witted, dirty and docile workers with large families intent on returning to Canada with U.S. dollars. An 1874 article in the Calais Advertiser, referred to Québec sojourners as "incredibly ignorant and dirty." A decade later, the St. Croix Courier ran an article about the "Jumping Frenchman" of Maine.⁴ Although recent scholarship considers that this second article possibly reported on a medical disorder, it was originally written to ridicule the Acadians as "rude" and "dirty," imitative, and speaking only a "patois." It lumped the Acadians as one of the many "funny" groups which differed from the "ordinary run of mankind"—White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Many of the stereotypes of French Canadian immigrants to New England are worthy of dispute. The French Canadian immigrants were not "failed farmers." They were often marginalized *habitants* with few male children and therefore unable to run a frontier farm or laborers without employment. Their migration was more of a class rather than an occupational phenomenon. Indeed, it was a continental phenomenon, not peculiar to French Canadians. The French Canadian workers followed a diversity of jobs in New England,

³Nonetheless, even French Canadian volunteers in the Union Army in the Civil War were belittled as unintelligent. Perhaps an artifact of the individual nature of the French Canadian migration and the U.S. view of it lies in the fact that no French Canadian regiments were enlisted in the Union Army, although several regiments of Irish volunteers were mustered, including the famous "Irish Brigade."

⁴Calais Advertiser, "The True Story of Acadie: The Annual Canadian Invasion—Some Truth Which Kills Some Poetry—How It Was Found Out," 15 July 1874. St. Croix Courier, "The Jumping Frenchman: Something More About a Peculiar People of Maine," 25 March 1885.

not just as mill work. They valued education, but that education was often secondary to family survival and often followed pathways such as schooling after work by undocumented teachers. They were property owners and did become naturalized citizens. Their family sizes were in line with the norm of the day.

These stereotypes reflect more on the ones creating the categories than on the immigrants themselves. The New England Yankees had a hidden agenda and seized on impressions to justify their bias. The U.S. élites insisted that French Canadians had to settle and be naturalized, but they then had to conform to the White Anglo Saxon Protestant establishment. The first step was often voiced, but the second step was more often only implied. The crux of this conflict lay in the issue of whether the United States should be a culturally plural or monolithic society. By the late 19th century, the U.S. élites had decided on a monolithic society of "Anglo-conformity."

The Franco-Americans, for their part, saw their French culture as valuable, saw no contradiction between their culture and citizenship in the United States and saw the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants as one oppressive group. They generated an image of themselves as residents of *petits Canadas* in New England industrial towns, who spoke French, worshipped in the Roman Catholic faith and generally did not assimilate into Yankee society. The separateness of these two societies was in part exacerbated by the hidden economic agendas of Franco and Anglo élites.

Pierre Anctil has described an internalized *petit Canada* for Woonsocket, Rhode Island. He analyzes how this sub-community supported local clerics, professionals and business people. These professionals encouraged a separate society which, because of its marginalization from the larger Yankee society, supported its bourgeoisie.⁵ This process was further exacerbated by French élites who began to collaborate with the Anglo élites, as class replaced ethnicity in the restratification of industrial society in the late 19th and early 20th century.

⁵Pierre Anctil, Aspects of Class Ideology in a New England Ethnic Minority: The Franco-Americans of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 1865-1929 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1981), 18-19.

These overt stereotypes and hidden agendas set the stage for new alliances in the late 19th century. Industrialization and the rise of "scientific" management developed a new class of "experts." These specialists became the professionals who were reputed to be more knowledgeable about everything from time management to racial superiority. Their opinions were widely accepted as the last word in credibility. This word was turned against the Franco-Americans.⁶

Professional Stereotypes

The entry of professionals such as journalists, clerics, poets, statisticians, civil servants, academics and others into late 19th century racism was facilitated by the spread of "scientific" theory and the philosophy of "social darwinism." This philosophy saw survival of the fittest to mean rule by White Anglo Saxon Protestants. However, this theory met with a problem. The ancestors of the French Canadians were thought to be from Normandy, which made them Aryan cousins of the U.S. ruling class.

The Anglo élite got around this conundrum by claiming the French Canadians to have been biologically debased by miscegenation and to be merely the relicts of failed societies. Francis Parkman aided this overextension of "logic" in his 19th century writings about the colonial French and English struggle in North America, histories which Francis Jennings says should more properly be called novels.⁷ The Anglo élites saw the French Canadians—like the Germans and Irish—as potentially worthy of assimilation, but an assimilation in the form of "pan-Saxonism" rather than as a new society created from the merger of many cultures.

The two newspaper articles mentioned in the previous section illustrate the 19th century exploitation of French Canadians by professional journalists and writers. In the Calais Advertiser, a Maine Yankee minister and

⁶Stephen Gould, The Mismeasurement of Man.

⁷Francis Jennings, Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies & Tribes in the Seven Years War in America (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 171.

politician was said to have a more knowledge of the Acadians than did their immigrant descendants. This reinforced the racist theory of a noble people debased and subjugated by a superior culture. This was all in the context of the romantic and profitable imagery of another Yankee, William Wadsworth Longfellow, who had published his version of the Acadian dispersal in a long narrative poem called Evangeline.⁸ It has become a tradition with members of a dominant social group romanticize and profit by people whom they despise, a form of intellectual imperialism that was not confined to the humanities. The scientific approach to industry had spawned professionals who mustered statistics to their cause.

Competition for new industrial jobs by immigrants led to a savage attack by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics and Labor in 1881, which called the French Canadian mill workers the "Chinese of the Eastern States."⁹ While this report was generated from impressionistic data, it had an image of being "scientific." Although elite Franco-American criticism and refutation of the Bureau's allegations led to a partial retraction, the damage had been done. The report had international circulation and the French were labeled as strike-breakers and a "low" and "sordid" people. Four years later, the New York Times considered likewise reported on the French Canadian immigrants as a possible "danger," compared them to Chinese immigrants and saw them as potentially "hostile to the general interests of the community." The "threat" was seen as inversely proportional to the group's assimilation to the standards of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant hierarchy.

The ironic thing is that both the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Times article represented a "liberal" view, but one in which the French Canadian immigrants were seen as undermining hidden agendas.¹⁰ For example, the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics was seeking passage for the 10-hour work day and saw the French Canadians as a stumbling block due to their willingness to work long hours. This bias was

⁸Ironically, the controversy generated by Longfellow's Evangeline led to the development of Nova Scotia's Archives and spawned a long tourist industry from Acadia to Louisiana to the present day. Longfellow also exploited Native American tradition in his narrative poem Hiawatha.

⁹Robert Chodos and Eric Hamovitch, *Quebec and the American Dream* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), 94-9.

¹⁰New York Times, "The French Canadians," 5 July 1889.

incorporated into academic hierarchy with the Chicago School's view of French Canadian entrepreneurship as deficient and then extended to all the French of North America.

Closer to home, the University of Maine mirrors the dichotomy of Anglo-French opposition in the Canadian-American Center and the Franco-American Center. The Canadian-American Center is a top-down, well funded organization which has set itself up as the umbrella for Canadian Studies, yet presents a significant bias for English Canada. The Franco-American Center is a bottom-up organization, which has advocated minority causes and received only token funding and recognition.

The Canadian-American Center has academically exploited French research. It has funded and accepts the study of Anglo Canadian migration to New England and the West, but rejects the study of Franco-Americans as the "proper" domain of American Studies. The Center has taken credit for research about Franco-North Americans even while rejecting it as outside their "proper" domain and even after researchers have left the Canadian-American Center. It expropriates Franco-North American work, to which they give only token assistance, in order to enhance the Canadian American Center's reputation and to obtain further funding. Such an implied racism seems "logical" when defined by "authorities."

In part, the prejudice against Franco-Americans has been assisted by communication technology. The recent "Frenchie" controversy in Maine illustrates how xenophobia can become internalized. The issue surrounded a regional rock and roll station, which broadcast a weekly spot of "French" humor for seven years. The "Frenchie" character was a put-down of himself and his culture, especially pernicious in Maine where 40% of the state is of French heritage. Some within the Franco community thought the program was "harmless" and "cute." National Public Radio reportage was an odd situation where progressive people, who would never think of saying "Nigger" or "girl," had no problem poking tongue-in-cheek fun at Franco-Americans about which they were ignorant. Such internalized racism is not

inoffensive as many have said, it harms the larger, collective group.¹¹ In the whole affair, the problem was presented as a French problem, not as a problem of an Anglo broadcaster exploiting a minority.

Summary

While rights under the U.S. Constitution protect individuals, collective rights of minorities receive little protection. It is an unspoken presumption that there is "one" American identity to which everyone must adhere. This adherence is enforced by law in some of the least defensible areas, as English language only laws in California. Pluralism is rejected by the White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant élites. It is peculiar that similar bias has been maintained against the scattered groups of French in North America—the Maritimes, Québec, New England and New York, Louisiana, the Mississippi valley, Manitoba. The bias has continued through time, despite evolution of regional French culture and a generalized prejudice has superseded localized bigotry through the agency of "science" and modern communication.

Ironically, the French Canadian image of themselves has been merged by the Yankees into their already existing negative images of the Franco society. Even after the post-World War II transformation of the most conservative *petit Canadas* and after the Quiet Revolution had dramatically transformed Québec, this reinforced stereotype has persisted. Francos have maintained the clerical Nationalist definition of themselves. Successful Francos who either completely or partially participated in the larger Yankee society and underwent a degree of assimilation were criticized or rejected by their own people as "true" Francos. This rejection has, in turn, forced the reinforcement of the stereotypes by rejecting a wider range of social and

¹¹This was not the "Bert and I" humor of Yankees or the "Pat and Mike" stories of the Irish. In those traditions of ethnic humor, the Yankees and the Irish are presented as crafty individuals who outwit their oppressors. In one sequence, the "joke" revolved around the fact that Frenchie could not count records at the radio station. Eric E. Peterson, "Decoding National Public Radio on "Frenchie," unpublished article, 1-7; "Steps to an Ecology of Communication Diversity," Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association Convention in New Haven, Connecticut, 30 April 1993, 1-13.

individual possibilities. It has been a two way exclusion and one which new scholarship can help to rectify.

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