

## Compte rendu

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Courville, Serge (2000) *Le Québec. Genèse et mutations du territoire*. Sainte-Foy, Les Presses de l'Université Laval / Les éditions De l'IQRC (Coll. « Géographie historique »), 508 p. (ISBN 2-7637-7710-4)

par Cole Harris

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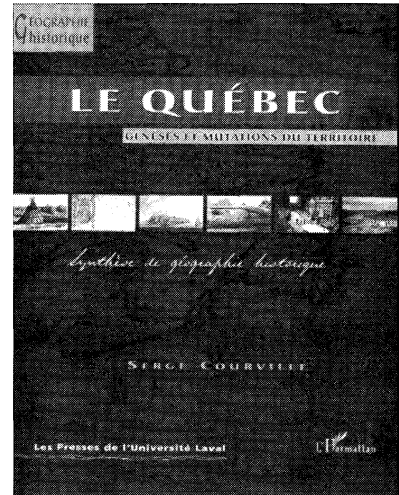
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l'espace » (p. 63). Heureux étudiants des cycles supérieurs qui peuvent apprendre leur géographie dans un manuel aussi bien rédigé, aussi actuel dans les problématiques examinées et aussi stimulant sur le plan intellectuel!

S'il lui manque, selon nous, une carte synthétique de la région, l'ouvrage renferme, par contre, quantité de croquis et de tableaux des plus instructifs. Des encarts, judicieusement conçus, attirent l'attention sur des questions propres à susciter la réflexion : le pain en Égypte, les croisières, par exemple. L'index serait plus utile s'il était plus complet et détaillé. Ainsi, Venise, pourtant bien traitée entre les pages 21 et 25, n'est même pas signalée dans l'index des villes. La bibliographie, enfin, ne cite pratiquement que des titres d'ouvrages français : on comprend mal que des étudiants d'un niveau aussi avancé ne soient pas incités à lire et à s'instruire en italien, en espagnol, en portugais et en anglais aussi bien qu'en français. Le sujet se prêtait pourtant exceptionnellement bien à un certain œcuménisme biblio-géographique!

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COURVILLE, Serge (2000) *Le Québec. Genèses et mutations du territoire*. Sainte-Foy, Les Presses de l'Université Laval/Les éditions de l'IQRC (Coll. « Géographie historique »), 508 p. (ISBN 2-7637-7710-4)



This is a long, complex book, the product of a scholarly career devoted to a study of the relations between people and territory in the lower St. Lawrence valley and its surrounding spaces. It begins with the early Aboriginal settlement of the area, and ends with a critique of the forces that, as Professor Courville sees it, are creating an atomized and market driven society that is losing its sensitivity to personal and environmental relationships and struggling to locate

Québec within the pressures of postmodernity. The strongest parts of the book, as might be expected, are his discussions of the rural seigneurial lands in the early-mid 19th century, and of the rhetoric surrounding the colonization a little later of the fringe of the Canadian Shield. But the analysis ranges far more widely to encompass, for example, that structures put in place during the years of the Company of New France (1628-1663) and those that dominated Quebec in the 1960s and 1970s during the height of the quiet revolution. A simpler book closer to the core of Professor Courville's own research would have dealt with the evolving Quebec countryside. But his intentions have been otherwise. He has sought to follow the main structural relationships, as they have evolved through the centuries, between people and territory in what is now Québec. In so doing, he has sought to show the connections

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between these evolving structures and the dilemma, as he sees it, of contemporary Québec. The result is this long and remarkable book.

It is, in many ways, a *tour de force*. Nowhere else in Canada – in North America for that matter – is there a comparable regional study. Much of it relies, as it must, on the literature, but large parts of it too reflect the major research contributions that Professor Courville himself has made over the years. It can be used as a text, read for general interest, or argued about by experts.

Inevitably, such a work has its vulnerabilities. Bold as his intentions have been, I think that Professor Courville probably has taken on both too much and, in a sense, too little. I am not sure that most of the Amerindian section is needed, or most of the discussion of an almost contemporary Québec. As a historical geographer of rural Quebec, these are not his strengths. Perhaps, indeed, he might have pursued a more focused analysis of the evolving character and shape of the countryside. Had he done so, the chronological disjunctions that, in my reading, often complicate the organization of the book might have been avoided, and parts of his analysis might have been filled in.

The gap that bothers me most is the virtual absence of a local scale. Professor Courville holds that there were essentially two geographical projects along the lower St. Lawrence during the French regime, one organized by the state and creating the general framework within which the colony developed, and the other organized by local habitant society, and creating the colony's own distinctive lifeways. This is a fundamental insight, but Professor Courville analyses habitant originality only in terms of the generational migration of sons and daughters away from the family farm to new farms of their own. Important as such migrations were, they can have been only a part of the creativity that Professor Courville assigns to habitant society. He does not deal with house types, or field systems, or tools, or folklore, or kin relationships within the côtes. He does not, in short, quite come to terms with the large-scale, local geography of habitant life – which is where habitant creativity was to be found. This local scale is missing virtually throughout the book. The village emerges as an economic and social reality, but not really as a lived geographical space. Farms and farm landscapes on the fringe of the Canadian shield do not quite come into focus. English-speaking settlers enter Québec, but their settlements are not described. Professor Courville's cartography tends to be at the scale of Québec. He apparently decided that the local was too diverse to be represented in such a wide-ranging book, but perhaps he has cut himself off from much of the originality of rural Québec.

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He is at his best when describing the proliferation of villages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the economic vitality underlying them, and draws a powerful contrast between their bustle and progress and the view of an elite (preoccupied with the migration of the young to the United States) that in semi-subsistent family farming lay the future of Québec. But there is also a disjunction between Professor Courville's analysis of economic vitality in the old seigneurial lowlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and his discussion, centered on the 1950s, of the relative economic inferiority of French Canadians. More than a generation ago, the historian Fernand Ouellet explained the imbalance in the 1950s with reference to mentalities that, he thought, were deeply ingrained in the countryside. Professor Courville's analysis of rural Québec in the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows the opposite: that an energetic, market-oriented population was well in place. Assuming he is right, then how is the situation in the 1950s accounted for? Professor Courville offers some explanations drawn from the literature, but the power of his own analysis of the village economy invites his own more thorough investigation of the matter. Perhaps the transition from water to steam power, and from sailing vessels and wagons to steamships and railways, is the key. Perhaps, in the particular 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century conjuncture of culture and power in Québec, the initiatives of French-speakers were competitive in a world of small but not of large enterprises? This warrants more analysis than Professor Courville has given it.

All of this is relevant to Professor Courville's exceedingly pessimistic view of the current state of affairs in Québec. He is dismayed by an excessive bureaucracy, an excessive market economy, and a postmodern suspension of judgment. He thinks that bonds between people are weakening, that individualism is rampant, and that society is adrift. It is a common critique that, couched within the particular challenges of language, culture, and politics in Quebec, acquires a heightened poignancy. But, as it stands, it is somewhat detached from the long analysis that precedes it. This is because, by avoiding the local, Professor Courville has not quite explored the originality of the countryside; and by not quite focusing on the countryside's eventual loss of momentum, has hardly explained the adjustments of its people to the urban, corporatized, and increasingly globalized world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A more focused book would have addressed some of these matters, but, as I say, that was not quite Professor Courville's intention. As it is, he has surveyed a vast panorama with intelligence and sensitivity. The result is a book that marks a generation of historical geography in Québec, and that will not see its successor until another generation of Québec geographers has wrestled with the fascinating, changing relationships of society and land in and around the St. Lawrence lowland.

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