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The French-Canadian Great Darkness (Grande Noirceur) in Quebecois History and Memory
Revisiting the Dominant Interpretation
E.-Martin Meunier

This article reviews the current ideas and chronological divisions in the historiography of contemporary Quebec. E.-Martin Meunier considers the recent reinterpretation of the so-called Great Darkness, a term traditionally used to describe the decades from 1935 to 1960. This reinterpretation revisits the predominant interpretation of the French-Canadian past, by seeking to recast both the suffering of a generation and the criticism of the myth that has gradually been forged from it. In this article, the author examines the issues raised by these historiographical changes, which implicitly question the place of French Canada in the dominant national narrative.

From 1936 to 1939, and 1944 to 1959, Maurice Le Noblet Duplessis was the premier of Quebec. He was the undisputed leader of the Union Nationale, a conservative-leaning party close to the Catholic Church and a defender of rural life. He claimed to be the guarantor of autonomism, seeking to defend the autonomy of the province of Quebec by opposing even the slightest wishes of the federal government. Well-known for his authoritarianism and “bossism,” he quickly drew criticism, not only for the political corruption then rife in Quebec but also for his paternalist


management style. The term Duplessism, or clerico-nationalist ideology, is therefore used to describe this period of political misappropriation. This period is called the Great Darkness. It is a constitutive myth in the great modern Québécois narrative, depicted if not constructed out of thin air (according to its harshest critics) as much to leave the period firmly behind as to maintain the hegemony of a new class in power. It can also be seen as a way of understanding the past, seeking to take into account the so-called authoritarian legacy of a historical period that for many represents an issue that might “jeopardize the stability of the democratic process.” Whether it is told with a host of scandalous anecdotes, or whether the memory of its oppression is alleviated by recalling the solidarities of the good old days, the Great Darkness is now much more than a historical concept reserved for academics. It furnishes and resides in the collective memory, and defines its symbolic boundaries. From the man of letters to the simple worker, it molds the imagination of the citizen. The Great Darkness is the period (although periodization is problematic, as we will see) that preceded the Quiet Revolution, which unfolded in Quebec at the beginning of the 1960s. A period of supposed misery and oppression, thought to be the fault of the clergy and a corrupt political class, the Great Darkness provides a focus for the hideous face of a past to be forgotten, and even despised. While “the repudiation of the past is posed here as the prerequisite for a possible future,” and although the narrative of the Great Darkness has forged an important part of modern Quebec identity, its lack of nuance and sometimes implausible nature have not always served the understanding of contemporary Quebec history. The Great Darkness is a directive myth that acts as a matrix and gives structure to Québécois society. Its representations depict a “mythistory” that, while mimicking academic history, provides a dominant narrative that is reproduced from generation to generation.

Whoever criticizes the truth of the myth may ruin the meaning it carries. In criticizing a myth there is always an act of sacrifice, something that disturbs a state of order where the boundaries of the sacred and the profane appeared to be clear. Questioning a myth, and particularly a myth like that of the Great Darkness, “is to deny the suffering that nourishes it.” All those who have dared do so, warns historian Jocelyn Létourneau, “have been publically upbraided, whether they come from the academy or from the world of politics.”


(3) The Quiet Revolution was the period of modernization and secularization of social support institutions during the 1960s. It coincided with the Liberal Party’s accession to power after fifteen years of government by the Union Nationale party.


(6) Jocelyn Létourneau has noted the reproduction of the great historical narratives among fourteen to seventeen-year-old secondary school students in Quebec. Year after year, this historian observes little variation in the central narrative outlined by the students, despite the fact that the so-called Great Darkness period is increasingly further in the past. On the concept of mythistory, see among others Jocelyn Létourneau, “Mytho histoire de losers: introduction au roman historial des Québécois d’héritage canadien français,” Histoire Sociale/Social History 39 (2006): 157-180.

(7) Bouchard, “Pour une sociologie des mythes sociaux,” 73.

preceding the Quiet Revolution, but rather to describe the genesis of the sociohistorical construction of the rupture with the 1960s and the more recent deconstruction of this narrative, which is littered with mythologies. However, before considering the diverse sociohistorical functions of a myth such as the Great Darkness, and thus better understanding both its criticism and its persistence in scholarly and popular discourse, we must first empirically describe its scope and content. Without examining all of the symptoms leading to the diagnosis of a Great Darkness, I nevertheless feel it is necessary to illustrate its key components and to analyze the new arguments that have led to a systematic reinterpretation of this historical period. Debates between historians and sociologists regarding the nature and interpretations of this period continue, hence why the arguments put forward by both sides must first be outlined. My contribution thus aims to reflect on the way this transitional period is remembered, and on the eminently political impact of social change. The great modernization of the 1960s, under the guise of criticizing Duplessism and clericalism, did not in fact simply criticize a regime, but reinterpreted, reformatted, and disseminated the memory of an entire period across the population as a whole, which was encouraged to espouse these new views or be sidelined by the modern culture of contemporary Quebec. French Canada had to be forgotten, while paradoxically what it had represented had to be criticized without cease.

**A Portrait of Collective Suffering**

Although it is difficult to trace its origin, the term Great Darkness was used to describe the political, religious, and economic aspects of French Canada as a whole in the years 1950 to 1960. The Second World War had led to the injection of huge sums into the Canadian economy, and enabled the emergence of new middle classes. The collective enrichment caused by the post-war boom progressively transformed the population’s expectations.\(^1\) However, the division of riches seemed to have benefited anglophone Canada, and even anglophone Quebec, more. In several studies, it was thus compared with the other Canadian provinces, and the idea of catch-up was considered. French Canadians seemed primarily to have fallen behind economically. Although over half of those living in Quebec and Ontario lived in urban areas in 1921, less than half of French Canadians lived in a town of a thousand inhabitants, compared to two-thirds of people living in Ontario and in the rest of Canada.\(^2\) “In 1950, the level of industrialization in Quebec [...] in the manufacturing sector was, compared to that of Ontario, considerably lower. In fact, the volume of manufacturing production in Quebec barely reached half (55 percent) that in Ontario.”\(^3\) After six years of work, the Laurendeau-Dunton commission on bilingualism and biculturalism,\(^4\) which had a mandate to study English- and French-Canadian societies and how they might be brought closer together in order to maintain Canadian unity, came to this conclusion: “there is inequality in

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\(^1\) This is the hypothesis set out by sociologist Hubert Guindon in his book *Tradition, Modernité et Aspiration Nationale de la Société Québécoise* (Montreal: Les Éditions Saint-Martin, 1990).


\(^4\) Named after its two chairmen, André Laurendeau, Maurice Duplessis’s opponent and former editor-in-chief of the *journal Le Devoir*, and Davidson Dunton, president of Carleton University and the first radio and television network director of CBC/Radio-Canada from 1945 to 1958. The Commission was active from 1963 to 1969 and produced numerous studies on all aspects of Canadian bilingualism and biculturalism. On this important commission, see the reference work by Marcel Martel and Martin Pâquet, *Langue et Politique au Canada et au Québec* (Montreal, Éditions Boréal, 2010).
the partnership between Canadians of French origin and those of British origin.”1 A paucity of positions of influence, difficulties accessing property, a smaller share of business property, lower salaries, and generally lower levels of schooling: this was the lot of French Canadians, “[who at the time were classed as] considerably lower on the socio-economic scale”2 than many other ethnic groups.

The Montreal of the 1950s did not, however, look like an underdeveloped city. Cars had been introduced long before, and most households had radio and later television. People went out dancing in the evenings, and there was a real nightlife into the small hours, as demonstrated by the number of brothels and licensed establishments.3 Their Montreal was also a multiethnic city, where Jewish merchants, new Chinese arrivals, French-Canadian and Irish workers, and the British business managers, among others, mixed on a daily basis. The vast majority of signs, advertisements, and printed publicity was written in the English language, even though more than half the population was of French-Canadian origin. Two cities effectively lived in parallel, and the francophone zone of influence did not seem at all governed in the same way as that of the anglophones. Montreal looked like an American city, but was culturally bound by the Catholic Church and politically controlled by the government of Maurice Duplessis. From the 1950s onward, the growing aspirations of a new generation of French Canadians living in an increasingly modern society (at least technologically so), came into conflict with a society said to be frozen, or at least precarious, because “it began to put pressure on minds to follow social practices.”4

“All freedom under Duplessis,” recalls Pierre Vallières in Nègres Blancs d’Amérique, “was a rare commodity”5 and hard won. This period, particularly that of the latter part of Duplessis’s rule, when Cardinal Léger6 had succeeded, in his own words, in “bringing Quebec to its knees,”7 seemed to many to be interminable and a time of suffering, as if the incessant repetition of the myths of an agriculturalist, anti-statist, and messianic French Canada8 had thrown French Canadians into a cultural fatigue, in the evocative term used by Hubert Aquin.9 Unflagging recourse to this myth became a leitmotif for Maurice Duplessis himself. At a time when Quebec was more urban than ever before, he stated: “Without farmers, no progress is possible. Without farmers, we lack that extraordinary, exceptional, and unsurpassable stronghold that is represented by the

(2) Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Report, 61.
(3) See Mathieu Lapointe, “Le Comité de moralité publique, l’enquête Caron et les campagnes de moralité publique à Montréal, 1940-1954” (PhD diss., York University, 2010).
(5) Pierre Vallières, Nègres Blancs d’Amérique (Montreal: Éditions Parti Pris, 1968), 215. An autobiographical narrative, Nègres Blancs d’Amérique provides its own take on the theory of decolonization, by presenting French Canada as the “nègre” [nigger] of North America, exploited both economically and politically. Its author, Pierre Vallières, is notable in having crossed boundaries between a Quebec strongly marked by Christian personalism during the 1950s and 1960s (he belonged to the movement himself) and the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ, Quebec Liberation Front) in the 1960s and 1970s, of which he became one of the main architects. See in particular E.-Martin Meunier, “De Mounier à Marx, l’éninigmatique transition: quelques hypothèses issues du parcours intellectuel de Pierre Vallières,” in Une Pensée Libérale, Critique ou Conservatrice? Actualité de Hannah Arendt, d’Emmanuel Mounier et de George Grant pour le Québec d’Aujourd’hui, edited by Lucille Beaudry and Marc Chervier (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2007), 93-106.
(6) Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger, archbishop of Montreal from 1950 to 1967, was nicknamed the Prince to highlight his personality and hard won. This period, particularly that of the latter part of Duplessis’s rule, when Cardinal Léger had succeeded, in his own words, in “bringing Quebec to its knees,” seemed to many to be interminable and a time of suffering, as if the incessant repetition of the myths of an agriculturalist, anti-statist, and messianic French Canada had thrown French Canadians into a cultural fatigue, in the evocative term used by Hubert Aquin. Unflagging recourse to this myth became a leitmotif for Maurice Duplessis himself. At a time when Quebec was more urban than ever before, he stated: “Without farmers, no progress is possible. Without farmers, we lack that extraordinary, exceptional, and unsurpassable stronghold that is represented by the

common sense, stability, and patriotism of the agricultural class.”¹ During the 1956 elections, in response to journalists who remarked that “in some polling places turnout appears to have been over 100 percent,” Duplessis nonchalantly replied, “that’s just the enthusiasm of the people!”² With historical distance, this has the air of a farce: as if in a bad dream, French Canada seemed to have become a caricature of itself. In view of the hideous faces displayed in the mirror of numerous religious, cultural, and political representations, there were, according to some pessimistic commentators of the period, few ways out between self-contempt and exile.

While Paul-Émile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Fernand Leduc, Marcelle Ferron, Marcella Maltais, and Alfred Pelland decided to leave,³ many of those who remained seemed to have lived in a sad world, steeped in gloom and the fear of sin. “The feeling of guilt would be with me until the end of my adolescence,” confessed Denise Bombardier in her novel Une Enfance à l’Eau Bénite.⁴ This guilt was of course accompanied by immense solitude: “I am the only one who is so bad; I have committed a sacrilege that grows as the false confessions and communions add up.” Judging by many testimonials, this jumbled feeling of anguish and self-deprecation seems to have been the daily lot of many French Canadians. Here, as in many other elements of the Catholicism of the period, we see the clamping down of the Catholic ethical view that had barely evolved since the Counter-Reformation. Prior to 1960, three elements characterized the theology of the majority of French-Canadian clergy and its pastoral and social approach. First, a marked emphasis on the sinful condition of human beings, and consequently on their guilt, fall, and redemption through good works and piety. Secondly, a repeated affirmation of the existence of a natural, immutable, objective order; a temporal portion of the eternal order created by God. Finally, a monopolistic attitude on the part of the clergy over all matters concerning the spiritual sphere as well as the prescriptions and moral codes that should regulate people’s lives.⁵

The origin of the Quiet Revolution was a revolt born of a feeling of appropriation: taking on the virtues of democracy and the truths of Christianity. And yet, the standard practices of parliamentary politics and the diversion of religion from its core values were appropriated to such an extent that confidence in the traditional elites of French Canada was undermined. The regime in power, which would later be termed clerico-Duplessist, had enlisted a certain traditionalist Catholicism in order to establish its temporal power on a spiritual foundation.⁶ Yet this stranglehold over society came at a cost, most often that of closure and withdrawal.

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³ Most of these artists went into forced exile, which had become a necessity following multiple prohibitions, dismissals, and bans for, among other things, having been closely or peripherally part of the creation, dissemination, or spirit of the Refus Global (1948). The first manifesto to condemn the isolation and withdrawal of French-Canadian society, the Refus Global was as artistic as it was political. Signed by twelve artists and writers, claiming to be automatic writing, the sargeon of surrealism, it was the first dark cloud in the serene sky of French Canada following the Second World War. On the ideological sources of this movement, see in particular Jean-Philippe Warren, L’Art Vivant: Autour de Paul-Émile Borduas (Montreal: Éditions Boréal, 2011).
⁴ See Denise Bombardier, Une enfance à l’eau bénite.
⁶ Historian Lucia Ferretti also suggests that Maurice Duplessis’s greatest contribution, beyond the misappropriation that can be attributed to his time in power, was to have consolidated, along with the Catholic Church, a true nationalist sentiment that she believes was at the origin of the neo-nationalism of the 1960s. See in particular Lucia Ferretti, “La ‘Grande Noirceur,’ mère de la Révolution tranquille,” in La Révolution Tranquille en Héritage, edited by Guy Berthiaume and Claude Corbo (Montreal, Éditions Boréal, 2011), 27-46.
“Nervous and monolithic authority, which believes it cannot concede on any point without risking total collapse. [...] A nervous authority means a people that has lost meaning, and even the taste of liberty,” declared Frère Untel [Brother Anonymous] in the name of all for all.1 With publication of Le Frère Untel [The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous], the time for obvious revolt had “now” begun.2 Clerical French Canada was sprouting another country, and it was above all from inside the church itself that this social transformation would take shape.

While the signatories of the manifesto Refus Global [Total Refusal] (1948) had in a way initiated French Canadians into the act of revolt itself, it would be several years before the protest would bring about a formal project for political and religious reform. Against the authoritarian and paternalist drift of Duplessist politics, the opponents of the clerico-Duplessist regime proposed ethical democracy centered on social justice, the participation of citizens in the different institutions of the province, and the construction of a strong representative state. Against the clericalist drift of the Catholic religion, they opposed a religion supposedly adapted to the aspirations of the modern world, founded on the concept of engagement and the integrity of the individual, a Christianity sensitive to communities and their development by and for themselves. Liberal economic policy was abandoned in favor of a welfare state. The Catholic ethic created by the Counter-Reformation, which had a long-term impact on the relationship of French Canadians to religion, was strongly criticized. Various priests and lay people found new theoretical sources of inspiration: the Nouvelle Théologie [New Theology] (which would influence the transformations prompted by the Second Vatican Council), the precepts of personalism, and the realist, engaged pedagogy of the Catholic Action movements.3 They called for a return to the “true Christian tradition,” to an ethical view of Incarnation, where faith is lived at the heart of earthly, combative, and fraternal realities.4

The period was thus bubbling with religious and political effervescence, as demonstrated by numerous publications and position statements: from the progressive attitude of the Laval school,3 the repeated criticisms from the young journal Cité Libre,5 the powerful editorials of the founders of the journal Le Devoir, and from works such as The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous and Le Chrétien et les Élections6 by the

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2 (2) Le Frère Untel [Brother Anonymous], real name Jean-Paul Desbiens, was a Marist monk (1927–2006) who, in late 1950, decided to publish several articles criticizing the dead ends of French-Canadian culture. Nothing was spared: the language, religious withdrawal, traditionalism, lack of ideals, and criticism of clericalism. André Laurendeau, then editor-in-chief of Le Devoir, inquired about publishing them in a series. “It was to conquer that fear, to counter the narrowness of French-Canadian clerical culture, that Le Devoir published in letter form the celebrated Impertinences of Brother Anonymous. Compiled and collected in one volume, they would sell in a short time over 175,000 copies. His letters aimed to testify to the fearfulness of French Canada.” (E.-Martin Meunier and Jean-Philippe Warren, Sortir de la “Grande noirceur.”: l’Horizon Personnaliste de la Révolution Tranquille (Sillery: Éditions du Septentrion, 2002), 70 and 137.)
4 (4) E.-Martin. Meunier and Jean-Philippe Warren, Sortir de la “Grande noirceur.”
5 (5) I am thinking here of the creation of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Université Laval by the Dominican George-Henri Lévesque.
6 (6) The journal Cité Libre was one of the leading lights of the Quiet Revolution period. Founded in 1950 by former members of the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne (the Catholic Action student movement) who sought to carry their secular apostolate into adulthood, the journal quickly gained traction among progressive Catholics. Highly influenced by the journal Esprit, the creators of Cité Libre brought together a large number of the intellectuals critical of Duplessism and clericalism. For further details, see in particular E.-Martin Meunier and Jean-Philippe Warren, “De la question sociale à la question nationale: le cas de la revue Cité libre,” Recherches Sociographiques 39 (1998): 291-316.
priests Gérard Dion and Louis O'Neill, to the critical appeal of canon Jacques Grand’Maison in *Crise de Prophétisme*, the debates of the Catholic Action movements, and the reformist work of the Institut Canadien des Affaires Publiques (ICAP, Canadian Institute of Public Affairs) and the Institut Canadien de l’Éducation des Adultes (ICEA, Canadian Institute of Adult Education), a whole new generation was coming out in favor of large-scale transformation of the major social norms and values of French Canada. All of these groups, journals, and books produced by French Canada at the end of the 1950s sprang from church circles. French-Canadian Catholicism, so hegemonic in the period, was in fact by no means plain and one-dimensional, but divided among traditionalists and progressives. The latter, although a minority in the 1950s, developed in their own way a criticism of the clericalism and Bossism in the society in the name of a renewed religious tradition adapted to the needs of the contemporary world. For several reformist intellectuals of the late 1950s, it was not, however, a question of secularizing everything, even if this was necessary in public institutions, but to “convert Christian thought” itself, in the words of sociologist Fernand Dumont, hoping that through such renewal, Quebec would religiously depart from the intolerable clerico-Duplessist regime and fully enter into modernity in an entirely original manner.

In these new spaces of discourse, the ongoing ideological battle required strong images with the ability not only to illustrate the object of criticism, but also to leave an indelible mark on people’s minds in order to defeat the opponent. While collective memory easily recalls political slogans, the qualifiers used to define the criticized situation and to provide an overall diagnosis capable of gradually imposing itself as the quasi-indisputable truth are equally important, although their work is more hidden. This is part of what Michal Kopeček (referring to the very different reality of post-communism) calls the rejection of the old political order and its incorporation into a new version that defines both its heritage and its use.

Therefore, when Université Laval political scientist Léon Dion used the term “ancien régime” in 1961 to describe the Duplessist period, he was conjuring up an image full of meaning. The qualifier makes use of various historical and moral implications connected to the aristocratic world, a jumble of excess, lack of compassion, privilege, and inability to compromise with modern reality. In addition, the expression suggests particular solutions: as France had done, French Canada would have to lead its own revolution, divorcing itself from the world of nobles, lords, clergy, and monarchy. Thus changing the period and the regime required caricaturing the past in order to bring about the shift. Such references to France “are never innocent,” but form “an interdiscourse that profoundly structures intellectual arguments.” This in fact incorporates “the gaze

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(2) For an insight into this new generation of activist Catholic intellectuals, see Stéphanie Angers and Gérard Fabre, *Échanges Intellectuels Entre la France et le Québec, 1930-2000: les Réseaux de la Revue Esprit Avec La Relève, Cité Libre, Parti pris et Possibles* (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2004). It includes revealing portraits of many of the other actors involved in the Quiet Revolution.


of the other” French people on the Canadian situation, and brings a kind of judgment to bear on traditionalism and clericalism. Several of the “quiet reformers” had also been educated in France, and some of them discussed the Canadian situation with major figures of the Catholic, Thomist, or personalist revival.1) Added to the visits of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, and fathers Lebret, Congar, and Chenu, among many others, all of this contributed to initiating a transfer in numerous analytical categories among young French Canadians. They thus borrowed not only some of the rhetoric of French progressive Catholics, but often also the judgment that they brought to bear on the aporia of their Quebecois society. Several French-Canadian intellectuals thus began to integrate perceptions and representations from elsewhere into their own frameworks, such as the “obscurantism”2) that Jacques Maritain had touched on during a visit to French Canada, the “atmosphere of autonomous intellectual life […] that does not yet exist”3) that Father Chenu had discovered upon his arrival at the francophone Dominican convent in Ottawa during the 1930s, or indeed this “little people […] peasants and priests (not all boors)”4) with which Henri-Irénée Marrou became acquainted during his first trip to French Canada.

Without explicitly considering in their own way the concept of the Great Darkness, numerous French-Canadian sociologists and historians in the 1950s and 1960s sought to understand the transformation of the period that they were witnessing by proposing several explanatory concepts. “The social sciences began by insisting on [the idea] of rupture. Cultural revolution, fundamental political transformation, [or] access to modernity”5) punctuated their discourse. At various times, some of them went as far as “rebelling against the French-Canadian national memory in a common desire to participate in the enterprise of destroying its substance,” according to Sébastien Parent.6) All of these forms in fact played with the paradigm of the passage from tradition to modernity. This passage was mobilized through various typological oppositions. Thus the pairing of folk society and urban society was frequently used by sociologists and anthropologists of French Canada,7) and translated as the dichotomy between traditional society and technological society discussed by the sociologists of the Université Laval, particularly in the work of Fernand Dumont.8) During the 1940s and 1950s, Horace Miner9) and Everett Hughes,10)


(3) Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Letter from P. Chenu to P. Féret,” October 2, 1931, cited in Florian Michel, La Pensée Catholique, 149.


(7) See Gilles Bourque, Jules Duchastel and Jacques Beauchemin, La Société Libérale Duplessiste (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1994), 19. From Hubert Guindon to Marcel Rioux via Jean-Charles Falardeau, many French-Canadian sociologists and anthropologists have been influenced by a theoretical view that is notably found in the work of Robert Redfield and several followers of the Chicago School. See Robert Redfield, “The Folk Society,” The American Journal of Sociology 52 (1947): 293-308.


both members of the Chicago School, also came to study French Canada as a folk society. Their works, teaching, and writing used a developmentalist conception, grounded in the sociography of the difficulties of moving from tradition to modernity. They had a major influence on the burgeoning Québécois social sciences, and implicitly strengthened a critical view of French-Canadian traditionalism.

All these ideas and works fed into the criticism of clerical French Canada, in which they saw “nothing but ponderousness, backwardness, and hold-ups.” Without calling unanimously for the expulsion of the past, its institutions, and its traditions as a whole, several intellectuals of the 1960s who had tried to understand the nature of social change or set out a philosophy of Québécois history thus contributed, sometimes unintentionally, to establishing, disseminating, and legitimating part of the Great Darkness myth. Common sense and, a fortiori, the leading ideologues could find material in these works that could be used to radicalize still further the symbolic significance of the nascent narrative and the increasingly untouchable myth.

A Great Darkness Questioned

In her book *La Mémoire Heureuse: Lumières Personnelles sur la Grande Noirceur*, author Monique Boucher-Matte recalls her childhood memories of a quiet prerevolutionary Québec where life was good, characterized by common sense, and a thousand and one daily joys. She notes in particular the gulf between the myth as it now circulates and her own lived past: “Come on, now! I think we saw things fairly clearly back home!” In fact, from the Éditions de l’Hexagone (1953) and the Éditions de l’Homme (1958) publishing houses to the Rideau Vert (1948) theater and Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (1951), many beacons of Québec cultural life were born during the Great Darkness. Nostalgia for a world full of meaning, or debt to a scorned past? Far from a work of revisionism, Boucher-Matte’s narrative aims rather to recall the plain and the simple, to be a homage to the warmth of French Canada’s popular culture and its many institutions. Reading her book raises the question: might the general portrait painted of French-Canadian society have been overly bleak?

In this article, I do not seek to defend one historiographical position over another, or deny the suffering of one group in favor of the claims of another. I want primarily to show the co-existence of two antinomic discourses surrounding the Great Darkness, and to outline their main arguments. While for some individuals this period was marked by collective suffering, for others it was a rather normal historical moment, by which I mean comparable to what was occurring elsewhere at the time. French Canada was going through a slow but effective modernization of its economic structures, mores, national identity, and collective imagination. This in any case is the theory supported by a generation of historians and sociologists who, inspired by the precepts of Marxist thinking, have sought to establish “the primacy of economics over politics,” thus marking “a fundamental epistemological difference” from their forebears. This theory

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understands Quebec not as an exceptional territory, bundled up in tradition because it is invested despite itself in “a religious and civilizing mission,” in the words of Monseigneur Pâquet, but as a participant in the broader world, movements, and processes at work in the rest of the West. In other words, they felt it was necessary to break with the French-Canadian view that, since the historians Lionel Groulx and Maurice Séguin, had studied Quebec as “a society whose historical development was not normal.” This new history was termed “revisionist” by Ronald Rudin, a historian at Concordia University in Montreal, who borrowed the label from Irish historiography. In Rudin’s view, this quest for a normal society became one of the key themes of historical studies in the 1980s and 1990s, absorbed as they were in showing how Quebec might have experienced a socioeconomic development essentially similar to that of the other provinces. “The Quebec revisionists,” states Ronald Rudin, “appear afraid of accepting the singular aspects of Quebec’s history, for fear that this contradicts the new image of a modern, dynamic, and pluralist society.”

Such an objective has great historiographical impact: these works seriously called into question various indicators underpinning the overall Great Darkness diagnosis, and thus even questioned further the true significance of a revolutionary rupture. The revisionist criticism of contemporary Quebec history is essentially founded on the existence of liberalism and a local middle class, the primacy of the economic over the ethnic, the emphasis on the process of urbanization, the diminishing importance of the church and its ideologies, the comparison of provincial state funding with that of the other tiers of government and other provinces, the emphasis placed on the normality of the social structure and ideologies compared to other countries, the study of the move from a liberal to a welfare state, and the analysis of the aporia of the modern democratic political system here and elsewhere. Working within a framework that excludes the exceptionalist view of Quebec, the so-called revisionist historians have provided often surprising data that have gradually come to undermine the foundations of each of the constitutive elements of the dominant narrative of Quebec’s past.

One of the tropes of traditional historiography is of course that of the strongly rural nature of Duplessist Quebec in comparison to the other societies around it. And yet several studies from the revisionist wing have questioned this supposed particularity of Quebec. According to Jacques Rouillard, in 1941, there was only a 6.3% difference between the urban populations of Quebec and Ontario, and in 1951, Quebec’s was 4.4% above the Canadian average. As of 1941, the percentage of the Quebec population living in towns of more than 10,000 inhabitants was comparable to that of the United States (-2.2%) and higher than in France (+6.6%). Also in 1941, 32.5% of


(3) Michel Brunet, “Trois dominantes,” 114 (my emphasis).


(5) See in particular some of the work of Gérard Bouchard from the 1980s to the 2000s, as well as the synthesis provided by René Durocher, Paul-André Linteau, and Jean-Claude Robert in their celebrated two-volume *Histoire du Québec Contemporain*. I would also add to the above the works of Gilles Bourque, Jules Duchastel, and Jacques Beauchemin on liberal economics in the Duplessist period.
the francophone population of Quebec lived in towns of less than 30,000 inhabitants, slightly more than the Canadian average (31%).¹ From 1935 to 1955, Quebec experienced one of the most prosperous periods in its entire history, as shown by the work of Jean-Luc Migué: “growth rate of industrial production at 10.2% per year, higher than those of Canada and Ontario, which were themselves particularly strong at 10.0% and 9.6% respectively.”² Historian Jacques Rouillard, reviewing a study by André Raynauld,³ notes that Quebec “was nothing like an underdeveloped country, as in 1953 it had the second highest revenue per capita in the world after the United States (excluding the rest of Canada).” Furthermore, “the production growth rate,” notes Gilles Paquet, “in Quebec and Ontario [was] around the same,” but for an even longer period, “from 1870 [to] the end of the 1950s.”⁴ “Between 1939 and 1950, manufacturing investment tripled, and production doubled. Growth in industry jobs [the very same area supposedly stagnant due to agriculture under Duplessis] equaled that of the hundred years previous.” In five years, “from 1939 to 1943, the total payroll went from 157 to 305 million,” due in particular to the war effort.⁵ According to Rouillard, “the wishful interpretation that the Franco-Quebecois were slow to move into cities and that they were reluctant to take industrial jobs does not match up with the reality when we compare the relevant indicators with those of the rest of North America and the other industrialized countries.”⁶ While these studies provide only an incomplete and thus debatable view of the overall situation,⁷ each of them nevertheless tempers the thesis that political rupture, and particularly the death of Maurice Duplessis, was responsible for all the changes in Quebec that led to its collective enrichment and modernity.⁸

In this comparative inventory, there remain several undeniable economic differences between Quebec and its Canadian neighbors, such as the percentage of personal income per capita in comparison to Ontario which, “from 1926 to 1958, […] was only 72.49%.”⁹ However, this inequality lasted into 1974, well after the Quiet Revolution, and it was not until the 1980s that the difference was reduced. In other words, the economic sphere did not experience the same rupture as the politics of the 1960s. Even the provincial debt of Quebec, notes Jean-Jacques Simard, grew from the 1930s onward, during the very period that Quebec was in the grip of Maurice Duplessis.¹⁰ These statistics even call into question the interventionism of the 1960s, which was thought to be typical of the post–Quiet-Revolution Quebec model. In proportional terms, spending by the Canadian and the Quebec governments increased at a

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² I could of course outline various other statistics that paint the period more bleakly and in doing so fail to normalize Quebec in relation to its neighbors. See, among others, René Durocher and Paul-André Linteau, Le Retard du Québec et l’Inferiorité Économique des Canadiens Français (Montreal: Éditions Boréal, 1971).
⁴ Jean-Jacques Simard, “Ce siècle où le Québec est venu au monde,” 18.
similar rate over the course of the century.\(^1\)
Even in the area of education, where we might expect the greatest lack of progress, some figures come as a surprise. Political scientist Léon Dion notes that "from 1944 to 1959, public spending in [this area] went from 4.6 to 181 million dollars, resulting in 4,000 new schools [around 267 schools per year], 135 colleges, and the number of students going from 22,630 to 93,800."\(^2\) According to Benoît Tessier, the children of the baby boom generation do not appear to have waited for Duplessis's death before making their way to school, and many more of them enrolled in higher education institutions than the myth would lead us to believe: this number grew from 23,997 in 1955-56, to 75,070 in 1966-67. In Ontario, there were 1,300 fewer students in 1955-56, and 6,481 fewer ten years later. The demographic factor seems to matter in considerations of an ideological nature.\(^3\) As a whole, these results add to the general diagnosis formulated by historian Jacques Rouillard: "The Quiet Revolution does not therefore represent the end of the 'Great Darkness' and Quebec's entrance into modernity. [...] Quebec was industrializing and urbanizing at the same rate as other North American societies from the start of the twentieth century. In addition, francophone society comprises a diverse social structure and is marked by a strong liberal current. It has thus long been sensitive to the forces resulting from the industrial process and has integrated North American influences into its development."

**Relevance and Social Function of the Great Darkness**

So why hold onto a narrative that too often resembles a caricature? The Great Darkness sets up a particular structure of periodization for Quebec, putting forward, in the very heart of the collective imagination, dual representations founded on a rift between a hard, cold, and dark "yesterday" and a "today" finally liberated from the yoke of the past. While such a rift comes up in recurrent fashion, this periodization operates in various ways, like a periodization defined in multiple ways. Within the literature, we first find a Great Darkness identified in the latter years of the Union Nationale government, from 1952 to 1959, then 1956 to 1959. This dominant periodization corresponds to the time when the clerico-Duplessist regime was under fire from all sides by the progressive intellectuals of the post-war generation, including Pierre Elliott Trudeau,\(^5\) Jean Marchand,\(^6\) and, later, minister for regional development.

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\(^{1}\) Jean-Jacques Simard, "Ce siècle où le Québec est venu au monde," 24.
\(^{3}\) Benoît Tessier, in a thesis supervised by Linda Cardinal, has analyzed the various indicators of development. His study includes primary and secondary education, the percentage of the workforce by ethnicity, the immigration rate, the rural and urban composition, higher education, the growth of higher education institutions than the myth would lead us to believe: this number grew from 23,997 in 1955-56, to 75,070 in 1966-67. In Ontario, there were 1,300 fewer students in 1955-56, and 6,481 fewer ten years later. The demographic factor seems to matter in considerations of an ideological nature. As a whole, these results add to the general diagnosis formulated by historian Jacques Rouillard: "The Quiet Revolution does not therefore represent the end of the ‘Great Darkness’ and Quebec’s entrance into modernity. [...] Quebec was industrializing and urbanizing at the same rate as other North American societies from the start of the twentieth century. In addition, francophone society comprises a diverse social structure and is marked by a strong liberal current. It has thus long been sensitive to the forces resulting from the industrial process and has integrated North American influences into its development."

\(^{4}\) Jacques Rouillard, "La Révolution tranquille," 44.
\(^{6}\) A social sciences graduate from the Université Laval, Jean Marchand (1918-88) was Secretary General of the Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada (CTCC, Catholic Workers Confederation of Canada) from 1948 to 1961. He played a major role in the asbestos strike of 1949. With Pierre Elliott Trudeau, he joined the Liberal Party of Canada in 1965. His roles included minister for citizenship and, later, minister for regional development.
Gérard Pelletier, Fernand Dumont, Marcel Rioux, and Pierre Vadeboncœur. Another Great Darkness embraces the whole of the Duplessist period, extending as far as the entire period of the Catholic Church’s institutionalization in French Canada, from 1910 to 1960. Finally, in rarer cases, the Great Darkness covers an even longer period, from the defeat of the Patriotes in 1839 to the 1960s; while some even see the entire British colonial period as a long darkness. Each of these periodizations clearly presents its own metahistory.

Beyond the function of periodization, the collective period formed by the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution in fact assumes “the same importance and value, and thus the same

(1) A Christian very close to the thinking of Emmanuel Mounier, founder of the journal *Cité Libre*, Gérard Pelletier (1919-97) worked as a journalist for various newspapers before becoming editor-in-chief of the newspaper *La Presse* from 1961 to 1965. He left this post to work in federal politics within the Liberal Party, alongside his friends Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Jean Marchand. They were nicknamed the “three doves” or “three wise men.” He became minister for communications and, later, the Canadian ambassador to France.

(2) Fernand Dumont (1927-97) was the leading sociologist of the Laval school from the 1950s until his death in 1997. A Christian socialist, he was a leader and weighty intellectual among left-leaning Catholics. His influence went beyond religious circles, as he is considered to be one of the great thinkers of Quebec nationalism. In 1976-77, he was one of the developers of the Quebec cultural policy, which resulted in the adoption of Bill 101 on the protection and emphasis of the French nature of Quebec.

(3) Marcel Rioux (1919-92) was a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Montreal from 1961 to 1984. He published various articles in *Cité Libre*, in which he denounced the isolation of French Canada and the Duplessis regime. A confirmed socialist, he taught critical sociology to more than one generation.

(4) A union activist and childhood friend of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Pierre Vadeboncœur (1920-2010) wrote several articles in the journal *Cité Libre*. A fierce opponent of the Union Nationale regime, he wrote numerous works that confirmed him as one of the most talented essayists of his generation.


(9) In fall 2013, following debate surrounding the promotion of the Quebec Charter of Values (a proposed bill enshrining secularism and banning the wearing of overtly religious symbols in the public sector, while sparing certain heritage symbols), several individuals from the political and academic spheres supported their position by recalling the agonies of the Great Darkness, or even threatening the possibility of its return.
fact, every reminder of an element of the myth regalvanizes the “effect of attraction and conforming of identity,”¹ like a ritual commemoration that takes place “in order to perpetuate [it] and relaunch [it] [... while] recharging it.”² The issue of memory is key, and it “does not heal everywhere at the same rate or in the same way.”³ In the eyes of many, the memory of the Great Darkness is a shameful one. They see it as the result of a past that is not free from questioning, and that a majority do not hesitate to believe traumatic. This sociohistorical phenomenon recalls other constructions of memory in troubled periods. Consensus building, mobilizing dissension, a logic of appeasement and forgetting, and memorial one-upmanship: the whole register of memorial mobilization has been used here;⁴ and as elsewhere, the historians and sociologists of Quebec have tried to gradually restore an abandoned part of the collective memory.

At the end of the 1990s, a new discourse emerged, called the Nouvelle Sensibilité Historique [New Historical Sensibility].⁵ It was marked by feelings similar to those described by Michal Kopeček as Ostalgia, which designates that reflective and, he insists, non-restorative nostalgia for a past era (for him, that of communism).⁶ This “Ostalgia” is fed by a fundamental ambivalence between a confirmed desire to belong and a bittersweet irony in regard to the tyrannies of the past. The members of the Nouvelle Sensibilité Historique, primarily young historians and sociologists who had not experienced the torments of the Great Darkness,⁷ did not seek to revise history, but to revisit it in order to extract a new meaning. This is why they re-examine in particular the contribution made by certain institutions to the transformation of clerical French Canada into Quebec as a state. Among these historians and sociologists there is a generational view that breaks, in a sense, with the baby boom generation of intellectuals, who were strongly influenced by the modernist creation of the narrative of Quebec. The Nouvelle Sensibilité reconnected with a history closer to the intention of thinkers and creators of the reforms, as proposed by Max Weber, who placed the motivations of actors at the heart of social change.⁸ The work of this new school “takes up the broken thread of a history of which the inopportune criticism of the 1960s left us orphaned.”⁹ In the manner of the thinking of Alexis de Tocqueville, the idea of rupture gives way to the study of continuities, for


² Gérard Bouchard, “Pour une sociologie,” 72.


the genesis of the Revolution, quiet though it may have been, can also be seen as the culmination of a previously initiated process.\(^1\) The role and contribution of the Catholic Church are also re-examined closely in order to provide a less caricatured history, delivered, so to speak, from the taboos of the historicity of forgetting.\(^2\) Thus Catholicism is no longer solely considered as the place of traditionalism, but as the possible breeding ground for the modernity to come. It was from inside church circles themselves that the modernization leading to the Quiet Revolution began. As in Marcel Gauchet’s view,\(^3\) secularization and the inevitable disenchantment associated with it were energized by the approval of progressive Catholicism. From clerical French Canada to Quebec as a state, we can see the fragile continuity of a Catholic world framed nevertheless by a new mode of both modern and state social regulation. The exculturation of Catholicism from Quebec occurred much later, particularly during the 2000s, when school boards and religious courses stopped being faith-based and when the majority of indicators of Catholic religiosity (attending Sunday mass, religious identity, marriage, baptism, etc.) had increasingly become left to the older generations.\(^4\)

The sociologists and historians of the Nouvelle Sensibilité thus contributed to modifying the usual periodization of contemporary Quebec history, relativizing both the magnitude of the rupture of the 1960s and the darkness of the past, and thus in a small way redefining the edges of the future. While the enterprise as a whole has its virtues, the Nouvelle Sensibilité also quickly attracted the ire of the historians and sociologists who had forged the myth of the Great Darkness or were indebted to it in some way. Here, the fear of revisionism found its expression against a backdrop of tension and confusion. The matrix-like history of modern-day Quebec was at stake and with it, the place and status of Catholic French Canada in the history of the Quebecois nation. The demythologization of the Great Darkness, to use Rudolph Bultmann’s term,\(^5\) is a task that must be ceaselessly repeated, for what it succeeds in eroding reawakens the fear of its return.

### A Great Darkness in Shades of Grey?

While the myth of the Great Darkness fills an undeniable social function, this comes at a cost: an encumbered access to the past, and the difficulty of transmission and tracing lineage. To a certain extent, as noted by historian Éric Bédard, it “has made us strangers to ourselves.”\(^6\) “By overly equating the Great Darkness with the whole of the French-Canadian past, might we have sacrificed the meaning of our ancestors’ lives in favor of a Great Narrative, that of Quebec’s emergence into modernity?”\(^7\) The persistence of this dualist framework in our history thus compromises Quebec’s situation within a period of time, particularly as the happy and unhappy witnesses of the past pass away one by one. Although it was originally an “energizing” myth, it now has a

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depressive and inhibiting effect, according to Gérard Bouchard.\(^1\) When the Great Darkness swells to the point of becoming “our Berlin Wall,” when it serves the hegemony of a social class or a generation rather than as a foil for the identity of all Quebecois, we should not be surprised to see new discourses emerge that aim to replace one myth with another, such as that of a Quiet Revolution detrimental to the identity of a nation, for example. Having refused to reconcile the two extremes, a discourse refusing to give such credit to the Quiet Revolution polarizes the historical positions, opposing memory and utopia and, in the name of a scorned past, thus seeks, like the strongly conservative journal Égards, to “systematically undo the deadly work of the Quiet Revolution.”\(^2\)

Reifying the Great Darkness into the whole past and thus stunning collective memory seems as fruitless as denying the need for the Quiet Revolution and thus not being able to consider the socioeconomic aporia of French Canada in the face of the imperatives of Western modernity. “A fertile memory,” wrote Raymond Lemieux, “is that anchored in the quest for truth, and not only in the fantasies and choices that must be made today.”\(^3\) How then can we consider the history of Quebec and the role of the Great Darkness without reducing the past to the abject or the suffering of yesterday’s witnesses to pure folklore? Is a common memory possible? It follows from a desire to reconcile the society with itself, which is made possible by a democratic debate about the past, achieved by “the acknowledgment of plural memories \(, \text{ and also made possible by\} \)

a calm writing of history that leaves room for disagreement.”\(^4\)

The depth of the historical consciousness of the Quebecois here depends on a nuanced understanding that is able both to define the nature of the social change that occurred during the 1960s, and to comprehend the intentions and motivations of the thinkers and actors who sought to pull Quebec out of the Great Darkness.\(^5\)

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**Abstract**

More than a specific historic period (from the 1930s to the 1950s), the Grande Noirceur, or Great Darkness, is an era that serves as a foil. It is a period that has achieved quasi-mythical status in Quebec’s modern narrative. This constitutive myth is a means by which to understand the past, attempting to account for the period’s so-called authoritarian legacy. Representations of the Great Darkness, while often presented under the guise of scholarly history, in fact put forth a sort of “mythistory” that perpetuates a dominant narrative from generation to generation. This article examines both the discourse that created and propagated the idea of the Great Darkness, and the counter-discourse that has attempted to challenge its veracity and historical scope. Our goal is not to determine the degree of “darkness” of the period preceding the Quiet Revolution, but rather to explore the milestones leading up to the social and historical construction of the 1960s movement, and to better understand the more recent deconstruction of these mythologically burdened narratives.