

## CANADIAN CURRICULUM IN CRISIS

In his abstract, Anton Birioukov-Brant reports that the article is split in two, the first part a statement from Paul Robinson (whose book Bowles is reviewing); it ends on p. 77. In that statement Robinson rues how the Canadian curriculum has been infiltrated by the U.S., resulting in insufficient curricular attention to life in Canada. Robinson documents this claim in his book by referencing curricular documents taught in several school subjects across the country. In the second part, Bowles – who is reviewing the book and whom we met in the preceding research brief – is (quoting Birioukov-Brant) “quite critical of the work, criticizing its lack of conceptual depth and the omissions of key curricular documents/resources.” Let’s return to Robinson.

“The amassed evidence clearly indicates,” Robinson writes, “that from primary school to postgraduate university study Canadian education amounts to little more than a foreign subsidiary,” the upshot of which is that “Canadian educators are toiling in a fiefdom of the American industrial estate.”<sup>1</sup> His emphasis on the curriculum, Robinson tells us, follows the fact it “influence[s] the understanding our students have of themselves as Canadians.”<sup>2</sup> Among the sources of his research were (1) the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1949-51), (2) the scholarship of Robin Mathews and James Steele, and (3) the findings of B. Hodgetts and his associates as reported in *What Culture? What Heritage? A Study of Civic Education in Canada*.<sup>3</sup> Robinson reiterates his conclusion: “At present Canada does not have a system of education which acquaints its youth with their heritage, an understanding of their environment, or an appreciation of ethnic/cultural/linguistic diversity.”<sup>4</sup>

Robinson’s motive for writing *After Survival*, he tells us, was “to challenge the conventional wisdom which frequently implies either that these inadequacies are more imaginary than real, or worse, that no significant improvement is possible,” adding ominously his grave concern that: “The future of Canada is in doubt.”<sup>5</sup>

What is to be done? He answers by invoking the classic twentieth-century concerns of North American curriculum theorists, e.g., the relations among curriculum, culture, politics, and citizenship.

Through education generally, and through the curriculum and learning materials specifically, the education system can, indeed must, play a leadership role in constructing links of mutual respect and trust among unique peoples living in a far-flung land. If this goal cannot be realized within the boundaries of a single state it is pointless to suggest that the chasms dividing the global community can be bridged.<sup>6</sup>

Note Robinson's acknowledgement of the centrality of the curriculum to education as well as his suggestion that nationalism is not necessarily self-enclosed or outwardly aggressive, that it can provide passages to internationalism.<sup>7</sup>

Robinson concludes his section of the article by making a curricular point concerning Canadian Studies,<sup>8</sup> namely that "if Canadian Studies are available in schools and universities at all (and that is by no means a certainty), typically they are construed in terms of history and literature," courses, he allows, that should not be rejected out-of-hand."<sup>9</sup> But, Robinson asserts, "that *each* curriculum subject must have a foundation in the Canadian experience," allowing "students ... the opportunity to grow in their understanding in a local, provincial, regional, national, and international perspective."<sup>10</sup>

Bowles starts skeptically, associating Robinson with "one of those who feels that Canada and Canadians are threatened by both internal and external forces," specifically proponents of Canadian Studies (one of whom Bowles had appeared to be: see research brief #56) who enlist such studies to "combat these forces, be they forces of imperialism, continentalism, regionalism, centralization, federalism or whatever."<sup>11</sup> Canadian Studies appears to be less an academic emphasis than a "campaign to protect what they perceive to be a fragile ... political, economic, cultural and academic sovereignty."<sup>12</sup> Robinson's book, Bowles admits, enables teachers to find "both quality Canadian materials (published by whatever source) and Canadian-owned publishing houses," thereby "help[ing] to defend our 'fragile, political, economic, cultural and academic sovereignty'."<sup>13</sup>

There are, Bowles continues, twenty-four chapters, "each dealing with the teaching of different school subjects, ranging from Art to Vocational Studies," and "each chapter contains two sections," one expressing

Robinson's views on what is wrong in the particular area of the curriculum and how it should be corrected; the second section offers a bibliography (some items are annotated) which presumably, if used properly by the teacher, will help correct the flaws the author has identified.<sup>14</sup>

Sounds appealing, even helpful to teachers, but Bowles is unimpressed, judging the book "a rather superficial treatment of many diverse topics held together only by the author's strong sense of indignation about the contemporary Canadian educational scene."<sup>15</sup>

After declaring "his criticisms are fast becoming outdated," Bowles does allow that Robinson's "are nonetheless comments worthy of note," namely:

Of Canadian materials, he says they are almost impossible to find translated into both official languages of Canada; they do not reflect the multicultural diversity that is Canada; they do not reflect the realities of Canadian society; they contain prejudices of various kinds; they are often unimaginative and pedestrian in

scope; they are often almost impossible to find; they are commonly published by multinational corporations which bury them in master lists of materials; and they frequently reflect a central Canadian view of Canada.<sup>16</sup>

It would seem more than understatement to say these are “concerns worthy of note.” The overused term “crisis” seems to me entirely apt.

Bowles reports that Robinson worries also over the curricular marginalization of art, “ignor[ing] its potential for teaching Canadian young people about the country.”<sup>17</sup> Robinson also worries over the insufficient curricular acknowledgement of Canadian scientists and mathematicians; he notes the curricular distortion of First Peoples. The entire curriculum, Robinson alleges,

is dominated by foreign (that is, British and American) professors who have very little sympathy for or background in indigenous Canadian problems or themes; arbitrarily divides the curriculum into subject disciplines, often to the detriment of the child’s total learning; ignores or down-plays Canadian literature; climbs on educational bandwagons emanating from elsewhere; encourages winning rather than participating in physical education; reflects a central Canadian point of view; ignores the contributions made to Canadian history by women; reflects the point of view of the middle class; and is seldom used as a tool for social change.<sup>18</sup>

Such a comprehensive list of issues could constitute as a curricular agenda for a decade, but Bowles returns to matters of mood, telling us that it’s “the spirit of the book bothers me,” as “it comes very close to being a polemical tract.”<sup>19</sup> Polemics are never appropriate?

“Running through the whole work, Bowles explains, “there is an undercurrent of ideological commitment and a belief in a conspiratorial view of history which disturbs me,” leaving Bowles “with the impression that Paul Robinson’s ‘authorized’ Canadian Studies curriculum might be as biased in one way as he now claims with some justification that it is in another.”<sup>20</sup> Admitting that Robinson’s “position may be a useful corrective for today’s ills,” he worries that “if books like this continue to be published, I can foresee a whole thesis-antithesis Hegelian nightmare in Canadian Studies going on far into the twenty-first century,”<sup>21</sup> Bowles’ positions himself here obvious outside and maybe even at the end of history, but one must allow that it is a concern “worthy of note.”

## COMMENTARY

While “ideological commitment” resounds today as an almost taken-for-granted prerequisite for undertaking curriculum scholarship, but forty plus years ago this positioning represented a more controversial stance, certainly for Bowles. (Not so in France in mid-twentieth century, as Jean-Paul Sartre – among others – insisted on *littérature engagée* <https://www.britannica.com/art/litterature-engagee>, accessed December 16, 2020.) Except in science, assertions of non-bias or neutrality or even impartiality have become suspect in our era, as students and colleagues demand to know where the author is “coming from” (see Simpson 2002 for an analysis). Bowles does seem to succumb to his own “stance,” one of balance maybe (avoiding conflict he associates with Hegelian dialectics), certainly one of mood. At the time sharply critical of Robinson’s book, the review reads today like praise.

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> In Bowles 1978, 75.
- <sup>2</sup> In Bowles 1978, 75.
- <sup>3</sup> In Bowles 1978, 75.
- <sup>4</sup> In Bowles 1978, 76.
- <sup>5</sup> In Bowles 1978, 76. This was not Robinson's presentiment only; George Grant too foresaw the end of Canada: see Pinar 2019, 116, n. 56.
- <sup>6</sup> In Bowles 1978, 76.
- <sup>7</sup> Nationalism as a portal to internationalism is an idea that has appeared before in Canadian curriculum thought: see Pinar 2015, 47ff.
- <sup>8</sup> Recall the distinction between Canada Studies and Canadian studies Bowles draws: see research brief #56.
- <sup>9</sup> Bowles 1978, 77.
- <sup>10</sup> In Bowles 1978, 77. One wonders how, for instance, mathematics can be Canadian or American or Russian?
- <sup>11</sup> Bowles 1978, 78. If "one of those" didn't imply skepticism, certainly ending the list with "whatever" does.
- <sup>12</sup> Bowles 1978, 78.
- <sup>13</sup> See Bowles 1978, 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Bowles 1978.
- <sup>15</sup> Bowles 1978, 78. Bowles confesses he finds the situation "depressing" (1978, 78), a fact of interest to reader-response specialists but irrelevant to Robinson's argument or his assemblage of curricular materials. (For an early and definitive formulation of "reader-response" theory see Bleich 1978.)
- <sup>16</sup> Bowles 1978, 78. This list would seem to constitute much more than "comments worth of note," a patronizing phrase substituting for argument or evidence.
- <sup>17</sup> Bowles 1978, 79.
- <sup>18</sup> Bowles 1978, 79.
- <sup>19</sup> Bowles 1978, 79.
- <sup>20</sup> Bowles 1978, 79.
- <sup>21</sup> Bowles 1978, 79.