

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEFFREY CORMIER, *The Canadianization Movement: Emergence, Survival, and Success*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 380 pp.

I retired from Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1997, and after a stint as chair of a University committee, I retired completely, staying as far as possible from anything academic. I did not know, therefore, that Jeffrey Cormier had published the results of his work on Canadianization, and I was unaware of his untimely death until I saw, on the Internet, some of his colleagues' tributes. I knew Jeffrey Cormier only from some lengthy telephone calls, but I would like to add my condolences to his family and friends.

Cormier has given us a well-written and readable account of an important piece of Canadian history. Unfortunately, the skill of the writing often disguises distortions of the events described. The first two distortions are common, and as far as I am aware, unavoidable problems of historical research and writing. I have had some experience of this kind of thing, but this is the first time I have been one of the people written about rather than being the writer, a salutary but daunting experience.

One sort of distortion occurs because the writer is forced to ascribe a kind of order and connectedness to events that was not necessarily there – or, more charitably, was not necessarily visible – when the events took place. To the historical writer, everything he or she writes about is in the past, while to the actor events happen in the present. The writer can see a sequence over time that the actor could not possibly see because much of it had not happened yet. To the writer – and doubly so to the reader – events take on an air of inevitability. The impression is created that things the author describes could not have happened any other way.

A second and related distortion is caused by the simple fact that to the writer the subject being written about is always in the foreground, and with the best will in the world, he or she cannot help but leave the impression that the same is true of the actors written about. In fact, the very word “context” suggests that the subject chosen by the author is paramount, and all else is merely background. In reality, as Dorothy Parker is often quoted as saying, “Life is just one damn thing after another.” Most people live their lives in a bewildering welter of happenings, thoughts, conversations, overheard remarks, newspapers, magazines, television, and a thousand other things. What is in the foreground at any given moment to the actor is not necessarily the subject chosen by the writer.

But when a writer is not just describing events, but is applying, as Cormier does, a “theoretical framework” to them, he or she runs the risk of distorting “what really happened” even further. Every theory involves concepts, of course, and the application of them can be a mere translation of real events into complicated terminology. I am reminded of the account, probably apocryphal, of someone who, having undoubtedly read too much Talcott Parsons, described one of the many unpleasant incidents of a coal-mining disaster which trapped several men for several days in the following words: “The consumption of urine was instrumentally positive but affectively negative.” The unnecessarily complex verbiage was translated back into a deliberately crude form of English by an irreverent reader as “Drinking their own piss may have helped them to survive, but they didn’t like doing it.”

Cormier himself provides us with an example from his own work, less crude but perhaps more telling. He quotes Snow and Benford (34) as “arguing that ‘the mobilization potency of movement framing is partly contingent on the extent to which they [the social action frames] have empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity.’” Cormier then immediately translates this verbal mumbo-jumbo into something more readily understandable: “In other words, social movement action frames that appeal to the everyday life experiences of individuals, that are engaging, and that make intuitive sense, will more often than not be effective in attracting large-scale support.”

Unfortunately, he does not allow this sort of insight to prevent him from referring to “social movement action frames” and making full use throughout his book of what his colleague and reviewer, Roberta Garner (in a December, 2004, online review, in *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*) terms “social-movement-organization theory” with “concepts such as frame resonance, social networks, mobilizing structures, identity formation, strategy and tactics....”

The use of a “theoretical framework” requires the adoption of terminology and connections. It also may require a selective approach to history and a bit of “fudging” to make “real events” fit. For example, Cormier refers to Mathews and Steele throughout his book as “movement entrepreneurs,” starting as early as page 11. It is not until page 57 that the rather innocuous “theoretical framework” meaning for the term is quoted, but by that time the damage has been done. “Entrepreneur” in modern parlance carries with it hints of personal gain, and readers are left with the impression that Mathews and Steele somehow gained from their efforts. Very subtly, the motives of the actors are identified with the demands of the framework. Cormier says on page 47 that a “major task” before Mathews and Steele “was to frame the Canadianization issue in terms of an ‘absolute crisis’ situation,” but it is not the actors who say this is a “major task,” it is the “theoretical framework.” Could the actors not simply believe what they are saying? Do speakers not tailor their speeches to what they think will be effective with the audience at hand? Do people not seek support for their beliefs? Do people with strong beliefs not attempt to convince others? Do we really need a “theoretical framework” to tell us all this?

Cormier (91) says that in 1972 “the Canadianization movement went through a significant process of transformation” when it received the support of the CSAA.

Some of us who were involved at the time didn't think we were carrying on the Canadianization Movement. Joining it, maybe. We probably had been influenced by the efforts of Mathews and Steele and by Walter Gordon and others as reported in the news media, but some of us had never met them and never attended any sort of public function where they spoke. In a way which may seem arrogant now, we began to think about our own situation and in the process probably re-invented several wheels. But this may be simply one of the unavoidable distortions of historical writing. After all, Cormier's subject is the whole Canadianization movement in the universities, and he may well see as a transformation what some of the actors saw as a discovery. What follows in chapter three is less easy to excuse.

First of all, Cormier says that the CSAA, as well as the Canadianization Movement underwent a "radical transformation" (91ff.) in 1972, and attributes it to the efforts of Canadianizers, but in reality the CSAA had already been "transformed" if that is the correct word. In 1969, eight members of the Simon Fraser faculty were dismissed, and in 1970 the War Measures Act was invoked by the federal government. The CSAA Executive took action on both of these issues, and the Annual General Meetings backed them up with resolutions. It was a radical change indeed, from a staid and rather conservative scholarly organization to a body that took action and made comment on public events, but the transformation had nothing to do with Canadianization.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) was scheduled to meet in Toronto in the fall of 1972 as a result of an invitation which had been issued by the University's Anthropology Department in the mid-1960s, when the faculty was almost entirely different from what it was in 1972. I had become a member of both the Toronto Department of Anthropology and the CSAA Executive Committee, and early that year or in late 1971, I moved at a departmental meeting that the invitation be withdrawn. I have dealt with the resulting furore elsewhere (see my chapter in *Fragile Truths: 25 Years of Sociology and Anthropology in Canada*), so it will suffice here to note that the issue was hotly debated by a newly politicized CSAA Executive, and by members, with both Canadianists and anti-Canadianists – or people who became one or the other – supporting the withdrawal of the invitation. Some, on either side of the Canadianization debate later on, felt that Canadians should not be accepted as regular members of the AAA like people from California, say, but should be "foreign fellows" like Mexicans or Chinese. Some anthropologists began to promote the idea of a separate anthropology society, an idea that came to fruition a year later, but only after the CSAA Executive had discussed the matter thoroughly and the CSAA had sponsored a special "anthropology caucus" on the subject.

Cormier makes no mention of any of this. Following the dictates of his "theoretical framework," he says that the CSAA underwent its transformation in the spring of 1972, as a result of "bureaucratic insurgency" by Canadianists.... Hey, wait a minute! Us? Insurgents? Aren't they bad guys? Aren't the Taliban called insurgents? Aren't suicide bombers called insurgents? To make sure there is no misunderstanding, Cormier (91) quotes a definition of "bureaucratic insurgency." It is "an attempt by members [of an organization] to implement

goals or policy choices that have been explicitly denied (or considered but not acted upon) by the legitimate authority of the focal organization” (emphasis added). What? We’re illegitimate too? But I thought legitimacy was achieved by being elected! Who are these “legitimate authorities” anyway?

From then on, Cormier refers to the Canadianists in the CSAA as “insurgents,” even when they hold a majority of elected positions, and the membership moves more radical resolutions than we do. In this terminology, Canadianist “insurgents” are not elected to positions, they “infiltrate” them (98); they do not put forward a policy to be voted on, they “push [it] through” (149). Just the sort of thing you’d expect of insurgents. Legitimate authorities would never do anything like that.

Whatever the means, by the fall of 1972 Canadianization had become the official policy of the CSAA Executive, and we had an idea of the dimensions of what some of us thought of as a problem. We also thought that it was time we let others know what we had been doing. Some of us were naive enough to think that if others knew what we knew, they would be concerned, too. But we were also aware that we could not just tell people of our conclusions: we also had to tell them at least a little bit about how we reached those conclusions. So at the Executive meeting in December of 1972, we accepted some rather idealistic resolutions from the Canadianization Committee outlining what we thought might be emergency measures, and agreed that the President (the President Elect was Pierre Maranda) would write a rather delicate letter to department Heads. I don’t recall whether we said it in so many words, but most of us thought that, as usual, the President would draft a diplomatic letter and circulate it to members of the Executive. If they approved, they would say so: if they didn’t, they would make suggestions.

So it was with some surprise that we learned in early 1973 that 173 letters had gone out to “everyone from university president[s] to department chair[s]” (127). The letters consisted of a brief note from the President, and a copy of those three rather drastic resolutions from the Canadianization Committee. No diplomacy, no careful preparation, just what sounded like peremptory and presumptuous demands. Cormier (126 and elsewhere) calls this a “strategy” by the Canadianists drawn from our “everyday life and work experience” (133). I will not comment on what this says about Cormier’s idea of our lives or our work experience, but will merely say that he was wrong. It may have been an error, or it may have been a deliberate act to discredit the whole idea of Canadianization, but it certainly was not a “strategy” by the Canadianists.

Cormier (127) says that “whether the CSAA Executive had foreseen” the response “is not certain” but it would be difficult to imagine anything else than what occurred. The first intimation any of us had of the circulation of the letters was when they began to arrive at our home universities, and our reaction was one of profound shock. We were not surprised at all when some recipients reacted angrily: we would have done the same in their position. What was really surprising was that some recipients reacted positively.

We could do nothing about the letters, of course, so Kathleen Herman and I (134), along with other members of the Executive, helped Gillian Sankoff to draft a letter something like the one that should have been sent in the first place. Cormier calls this a “change in strategy” but we did not see it that way at all. We thought we were trying to undo some of the damage that the earlier letter had caused without withdrawing from our original position.

Much of the rest of Cormier’s chapter four and, indeed, much of the rest of the discussion, is predicated on what I regard as his misunderstanding of basic events. In the fifth chapter, I do not much like the concept of “abeyance” – it sounds too much like the scary military notion of “sleepers:” people who act “normal” for years until they are activated by orders from above. I am also troubled by his continuing suggestion (see page 170 ff.) that Canadianizers in the CSAA were part and parcel of a larger Canadianization Movement, and stood ready to revive it. It may have been narrowly parochial of us, but we didn’t think that way. We were concerned about our own disciplines, our own universities, and our own associations, and we took allies when they offered. If an American were appointed to an art gallery and somebody objected, we would applaud, but we would not have been the first at the barricades.

In general, I feel that Cormier’s use of “theoretical frameworks” adds nothing but confusion and distortion to what otherwise is (or could be) a competent and well-written piece of historiography. I realize that in saying this I am condemning what Cormier has been commended for (see the previous reference to Roberta Garner), but that may merely reflect a difference in perspective. Still, Cormier seems to half-way agree with me – though not about “theoretical frameworks.” In the last sentence of his book, he states that it is possible that the Canadianization Movement might occur again, but “the exact configuration...would be unique” (195). Right on! as we used to say. Every human happening is unique. “Theoretical frameworks” just get in the way.

Gordon B. Inglis, Memorial University of Newfoundland