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Professor Anne Gilbert is not a stranger to the subject of Franco-Ontarians and their struggle for linguistic survival in Ontario. She has published extensively on the subject of *la francophonie* and has collaborated with other cultural geographers in studying the place of the French language within Canada and North America¹. In her *Espaces franco-ontariens*, Anne Gilbert presents a comprehensive and insightful geographic analysis of Franco-Ontarians. The objective of her book is to portray the new geography of the Franco-Ontarians. Within this new geography, Anne Gilbert focuses her attention on the cultural/linguistic well-being of French-speaking Canadians within Ontario.



Across the span of seven chapters, Gilbert skillfully exposes the reader to the realities of the world of Franco-Ontarians at these three geographic levels. This reality is anchored in the new social context found in Ontario. Her analysis of this social context reflects a shift from traditional rural values to modern ones associated with urban centres. Gilbert's analysis is most penetrating at the regional and community levels. For example, while Ontario contains the largest number of francophones outside Québec, this fact reveals little about the place of Franco-Ontarians within Ontario. Over the past 25 years, economic and social forces have reoriented Ontario's population and its francophone members. Swept along by this powerful tide, Franco-Ontarians have migrated from rural settings to urban ones and then from the city to the suburbs. Added to these population shifts, advances in communication and transportation have reduced the friction of geography and created new challenges and opportunities for francophones living in different parts of Ontario. With most Franco-Ontarians now living in an urban setting, the traditional village centred on the church and other local institutions no longer plays a central role in the affairs of the Franco-Ontarian community and their life-style. Spread across Ontario, Franco-Ontarians exist in a fragmented cultural reality, which resembles a linguistic archipelago surrounded by an anglophone sea. Given this somewhat precarious geographic situation, a central theme in Gilbert's book is how to build linguistic/cultural bridges between these francophone islands.

Ontario's francophone population, as measured by mother tongue, has increased from 482 025 in 1971 to 502 713 in 1996. Over the same time period, Franco-Ontarians have lost ground because their share of the Ontario population has declined from 6.3 percent to 4.7 percent. What exactly do these figures mean? Gilbert turns to a regional analysis to interpret these population figures.

As a geographer, she focuses her attention on three geographic levels: the province, the regions and the communities. At the start of her book, Gilbert makes it very clear that Franco-Ontarians have their own francophone identity that is based on their historical experience of living and working in an English-speaking province. Within Ontario, Franco-Ontarians reside in five regions (L'Est, Le Nord, Le Centre, Le Sud and L'Ouest).

Of the five francophone regions, Gilbert points to the Ottawa region (L'Est) as the place where the well-being of the francophone community is most secure. The most threatened francophone community would be found in the Northwestern Ontario (L'Ouest). This geographic fact is illustrated by size and growth of the francophone population in the Ottawa region. In 1996, it formed 41.2 % of Ontario's French-speaking population while Northwestern Ontario has only 1.8 %. From 1971 to 1996, the francophone population in the Ottawa region has increased from 174 910 to 207 024. At the same time, urban life exerts considerable assimilation pressure on this rather large cluster of Franco-Ontarians. From this perspective, Gilbert examines two places — the town of Vanier and the suburb of Orléans. Her findings reveal that this pressure exists at this micro-level.

Anne Gilbert has written an outstanding account of the challenges and opportunities facing Franco-Ontarians. She has done this within a superb geographic analysis of the five regions of Ontario, demonstrating clearly a new geography for Franco-Ontarians. Two points could have added to her analysis and her idea of cultural bridges. They are the larger geographic situation of the Ottawa region and the federal presence in this region. My first point is, how do francophones in the Ottawa region benefit from the presence of the Québécois population and its institutions just across the Ottawa River? My second point is, what is the significance for Franco-Ontarians of the political effort to make Ottawa a bilingual city?

Note

- 1 GILBERT, Anne and MARSHALL, Joan (1995) Local Changes in Linguistic Balance in the Bilingual Zone: Francophones de l'Ontario et Anglophones du Québec. *Canadian Geographer/Géographe canadien*, 39 (3) : 194-218; GILBERT, Anne (Forthcoming) Les espaces de la francophonie ontarienne. In J.-Yvon Thériault (ed.) *Francophonies minoritaires au Canada: état des lieux*, Moncton. Éditions d'Acadie.

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