

Minorités linguistiques et société Linguistic Minorities and Society



Le “Moment 68” et la réinvention de l’Acadie, Belliveau, Joel
(2014). Ottawa: Presses de l’Université d’Ottawa, 311 p. ISBN :
9782760322042

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Number 7, 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036424ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036424ar>

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Publisher(s)

Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorités linguistiques / Canadian
Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities

ISSN

1927-8632 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hayday, M. (2016). Review of [*Le “Moment 68” et la réinvention de l’Acadie*,
Belliveau, Joel (2014). Ottawa: Presses de l’Université d’Ottawa, 311 p. ISBN :
9782760322042]. *Minorités linguistiques et société / Linguistic Minorities and
Society*, (7), 216–218. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036424ar>



Book Review

Le “Moment 68” et la réinvention de l’Acadie

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Around the world, 1968 was marked by vigorous social movement activity, protests, demonstrations and political turmoil as the baby boom generation and student organizations demanded full participation in the governance of their societies. In the Acadian community of New Brunswick, 1968 featured student strikes at the Université de Moncton and the now-infamous clash between students and anti-French Moncton mayor Leonard Jones. Most of the existing literature on Acadian nationalism and history has not considered the possible connections between these events. The Moncton incidents have been characterized as primarily borne out of local circumstances. Moreover, studies of Acadian student social movement activity have identified 1968 as the year when the student identity coalesced, doing so around neo-nationalist identity politics.

Challenging these assumptions in *Le Moment 68 et la réinvention de l’Acadie*, Joel Belliveau forces us to rethink both the timelines of Acadian nationalism’s evolution and the characteristics of the student movement. He makes a compelling case that there were transnational dimensions to the students’ activism and the ideologies they espoused. While not denying that the events in Moncton and throughout Acadie in 1968 had strong local dimensions, Belliveau convincingly argues that there was an international and transnational generational spirit that infused the student activists, which helps to explain the methods they used and the discourses that they espoused.

Belliveau traces the changing political culture of Acadia from the 1950s to the early 1970s. His research draws on student government records, student newspapers, mainstream media, materials from student societies and protest organizations, the archival fonds of key

nationalist and student leaders housed at the Centre d’études acadiennes, and the lengthy, detailed transcripts of the interviews conducted for the documentary *Acadie-Acadie*. While he did not conduct formal oral history interviews, his research base incorporates a broad cross-sampling of the opinions of student and nationalist leaders.

The book begins with an overview of Acadian society from 1945 to 1960, outlining the key elements of the “élite définitrice” (or defining elite) who were the main proponents of traditional Acadian identity. While post-secondary education expanded in this period, students did not have a distinctive identity apart from that of their elders. They were viewed as “empty shells” to be filled with traditional values, and their student organizations and newspapers were tightly controlled by a paternalistic university administration. The 1950s witnessed the emergence of a modernizing, liberal-oriented reformist branch of the élite, who questioned whether traditional identity discourses met the needs of the modern era, but this reformist wing remained the minority in this period.

In the 1960s, these technocratic, liberal, modernizing reformers, who sought participation in New Brunswick politics and a reworking of its political culture to promote equal opportunities for all individuals, came to power under Premier Louis Robichaud. Around 1963-64, Belliveau argues, a distinctive Acadian student identity also started to emerge. Student organizations engaged in joint protests with their Anglophone counterparts over issues related to university tuition, and the Moncton student union joined the Canadian Union of Students. A certain “bonne-ententisme” and willingness to work together with Anglophone New Brunswick students characterized the early ideology of these students, some of whom expressed frustration with the strategies, tone and procedures of the Société Nationale des Acadiens (SNA). Belliveau makes a strong case for how the developments in Acadian student life paralleled those in other jurisdictions, although it might have been useful to further engage with the issue of *how* this generational identity was being transmitted to the Acadian youth, and what role the mass media or other forces might have played in creating an international youth culture.

Belliveau demonstrates that from 1964-67 there was a distinctive Acadian student ideology. This was a participationist, liberal, modernizing ideology in line with the Robichaud reformers in government. Students had confidence in the role of the state and collaboration with the “Other” as ways to advance the rights of all New Brunswickers, conceived of as individuals. They rejected the established Acadian symbols, the religious orientation of traditional nationalism, and the leadership of “La Patente”, placing a fair degree of blame on the traditional, “servile” attitudes of Acadians themselves for their socio-economic underdevelopment. Belliveau shows how these students were very much a part of the global wave of student movements, with interests including the Vietnam war, “love-ins” and representation in university governance. In contrast to what Jean-Paul Hautecoeur has contended, this

was not a proto-neo-nationalist student ideology, but one closely aligned with the liberal, technocratic approach of the government.

While not the foundational moment of an Acadian student identity, Belliveau argues 1968 marked the shift of the predominant student ideology towards neonationalism. He shows that the nature of the protests and their ideological undercurrents (reconciling socialism and nationalism, the rejection of political liberalism, loss of faith in the reformist power of the state, for example) were influenced by the broader baby boom generational identity in the Western world. But the Acadian conflicts peaked before the famous summer of 1968, and local circumstances played key roles in their outbreak and the nationalist turn that they engendered. A combination of protests against rising tuition, conflict with Mayor Jones, and issues related to shared high school facilities for French and English students drove home the specificities of the Acadian students’ condition. This led them to espouse communitarian, collectivist solutions, owing to the structural problems faced by all Acadians. The lack of Anglophone student associations’ support for a province-wide student strike, the sense of a silent majority endorsing Jones’s positions, and sociological studies underlining the systemic problems facing Acadians all contributed to the communitarian and neo-nationalist turn of the student ideology. In the final chapter, Belliveau shows how this neo-nationalism became a key part of the campaign for separate, dualist institutions throughout the province, embraced by both moderate Acadian associations and separatist political parties alike, and ultimately enshrined as provincial policy under the Richard Hatfield government in the early 1980s.

Le “Moment 68” provides a compelling analysis of the evolution of Acadian nationalism in this transitional period, and highlights the key contributions made by university student leaders. Belliveau makes a strong case regarding the transnational dimensions of the students’ involvement – and the timing of key transitional points in student identity discourse, which line up with counterparts in other jurisdictions – and the revised periodization of their autonomous engagement with the politics of their society. Much like Sean Mills’ recent book *The Empire Within*, Belliveau is contributing to a growing body of literature that considers the impacts of broader transnational forces and social movements on Canadian history. His study will pave the way for additional work in this field given the questions he raises. How did Anglophone student organizations in the Maritimes compare to their Acadian brethren in terms of their engagement with the “68 Moment”? How did Acadian student leaders in the 1970s take up the torch of their 1960s forerunners? Why did the neo-nationalist discourse become so influential in the 1970s? Hopefully his work will inspire scholars to consider not only the important local dimensions of Acadian history, but their broader connections to transnational forces.

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