

Response to the Round Table on *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849*

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Résumé de l'article

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ROBERT C.H. SWEENY

Abstract

Author Robert C.H. Sweeny responds to comments on his award-winning book, Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849.

Résumé

L'auteur Robert C.H. Sweeny répond aux commentaires de son livre récompensé, Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849.

Thank you everyone for your comments, they are greatly appreciated. I will address the three criticisms common to all four commentaries before responding to Ian McKay's more pointed criticisms.

Kate McPherson emphasizes the importance of the unusual form of the book to a critical understanding of its contents. The parallel she draws to “breaking the fourth wall” in film, when an actor such as Ryan Gosling in *The Big Short* speaks directly to the audience, is revealing and one I had not thought of. The narrative structure of the book, as both Bettina Bradbury and Magda Fahrni underscore, is provided not by its ostensible subject matter, but rather by my own many-decade-long journey of discovery.

I was able to propose a qualitatively new answer to why we chose to industrialise, because I started from the recognition that we are all in history. We are all engaged in conversations between our troubled present and our myriad pasts. I structured the book to emphasize this relationship because of the urgency of this particular conversation: I believe understanding why we chose to industrialise is vital to our species even having a future.

The unity of form and content does not, however, derive from this urgency; it stems from my epistemological stance.

My approach places a self-reflective awareness of these conversations between present and past at the heart of historical theory and method. Building on John Berger's insight that if we can see the present clearly enough, we will know what questions to ask of the past,²⁷ I attribute an epistemological centrality to those very questions. If our questions engage the historical processes that gave rise to a particular source, what I call its historical logic, then we can use the evidence it contains to test our explanations of change. If not, then this evidence should best be used for descriptive purposes.

This source-based distinction between explanation and description, and its dialectical relationship to the questions we ask is as fundamental to the book's discourse of proof as it is foreign to all our discipline's accepted ways of knowing. It also highlights the temporally relative nature of knowledge, what Walter Benjamin called the "now of knowability." There are issues in the past which are clearer to us now precisely because of the character of our present. It is neo-liberalism, the silently killing mantra of our time, that allows us to grasp more fully the rupture liberalism caused when it really was new.

Fully recognizing our being in history is a humbling process. Very little in academic life teaches us to be humble, and so it is perhaps not surprising that it took a privileged, petit-bourgeois, alienated male intellectual like myself so long to understand the error of our ways. Decades ago Kate and Bettina were all too often on the receiving end of my arrogant certainties, so I am especially grateful to both for the generosity of spirit that animates their critical engagements with my more recent work. They are also quite correct in stressing the incomplete nature of my conversion. There is much more I should have done on social reproduction and, perhaps, would have done had I understood the importance of intersectionality earlier.

My journey of discovery was lived firmly in the present, hence the importance of those moments when, as Kate observed, I broke the fourth wall. Here form served content by frankly

assessing how my being in history impeded not only answering key questions, but understanding the very nature of processes I thought I knew well. Undoubtedly, younger readers will face their own differing issues and debates, but I hope this didactic aspect of the relationship between form and content will resonate across generations as it speaks to people working on quite different topics. The acuity of Magda's synthesis, as well as the engagement by other younger scholars with the work support me in this hope.

I turn now to the question of choice, who makes it and what does it mean? The first-person plural in my title refers to our species. We have been on this planet for more than 100,000 years, but we only chose to industrialise during the past 250. It was a momentous decision on a par with choosing to develop settled agriculture. It has fundamentally changed the planet, ushering in the Anthropocene. When the issue is so large, how can one talk about choice and who can be said to have made those choices? As Gilles Lauzon, who shared considerable parts of the journey with me, observed: "Ce n'est pas comme si Monsieur et Madame Untel ont chosi de le faire assis autour de leur table de cuisine." Indeed, it is the very scale of the processes involved that fuels both Ian's ridicule and Magda's scepticism.

My answer, not surprisingly, involves both form and content. What I thought to be the most innovative formal aspect of the book was noted by Magda. I systematically use the specific to explain the general. The experiences of tens of thousands of people in Montréal during the second quarter of the nineteenth century are used to understand the circumstances and choices faced by millions of people in the handful of North Atlantic societies that first industrialised and by billions around the world since then. I chose this form precisely because it challenged the supra-human scale Ian clearly prefers. I did so for both ethical (more on that later) and practical reasons; I consider supra-human explanations of causality as simply beyond our ken.

We are in all fields of knowledge in the very early stages of understanding how the world works. Given our woefully inadequate knowledge of the past — when we know so little about

either pre-modern or non-European societies, or about women, racialized minorities, working people, youth and the elderly in our own, let alone the rest of nature — we require humility not hubris before the vastness of our ignorance. By the mid-1990s, I had concluded our best guide to understanding the past lay in fully recognizing the dialectic of agency and constraint.

I want to be clear here. I am not saying there are no larger processes at work or that the dialectic of agency and constraint explains everything. Indeed, I am saying exactly the opposite. Not only can we not explain everything; we actually know so very little about that which we should be able to explain. This sad state of affairs stems from our discipline's singular failure to develop the necessary theoretical and methodological tools to engage in anything other than bourgeois history. Hence, the need for new forms to allow us to explore content anew, starting with what we can explain: the interaction between the day-to-day choices people make in light of existing constraints, created by and through past choices, and how their choices create both new opportunities and new constraints for themselves and others.

In asking specifically why we chose to industrialise in Montréal, there are numerous processes constituted by this dialectic of agency and constraint that are outside our view plane, but important and, I believe, fundamental processes are revealed. Two of these processes stressed in the book are the fundamental shift in the millennium-old gender balance of the household economy and the reconceptualization of our relationship with the rest of nature.

I trace the change in the relative values of moveable and immoveable property back to the widespread use of unfree labour to produce commodities in the early-modern world. This “root cause” is not, however, the subject of this book, because what I argue is fundamental to understanding our choice to industrialise is how and why we reacted to those changed values in such a way that we undermined the political economy of household production while transforming our relationship to the rest of nature.

Nothing supra-human required a devaluing of women's labour simply because the value of movable property declined relative to immovable property, yet in accordance with the values of a moral economy that is how people chose to respond. Similarly, nothing supra-human required either a sea-change in how people thought of socially-acquired rights to property or forced them to treat real property as a commodity to be exchanged rather than as something held in stewardship for future generations. Nevertheless, I demonstrate that in the space of little over a generation, these fundamental transformations are visible in and through the choices Montrealers made in how they lived their lives.

There is nothing to suggest in my book that I consider these changes to be the result of either isolated individual choice, or that differing people in this society faced similar constraints, let alone that everyone made the same choices. I always stress the social nature of these historical processes and the systemic inequality that marked this conquered colony of settlement. I do so, however, in a manner that never loses sight of the active role people of all social classes and conditions played in the making of their own histories.

I did not privilege national, ethnic, or linguistic identities in understanding these complex histories, precisely because these identities are being shaped through their choices. For example, I argue it was their experience in this conquered colony of settlement that resulted in some people thinking of themselves for the first time as British. Furthermore, it was the presumed naturalness of such national identities, so effectively mobilized by both church and state, that I was interested in understanding historically.

I wrote the draft of this manuscript in Bolivia over a three-month period in 2009. Bolivia is one of only two majority Indigenous countries left in the Americas and Evo Morales, its first Indigenous President, was mid-way through his first term. We chose to go there because I wanted, while writing, to be reminded every day that I was talking about a European colony of settlement with a complex history and the challenge this consti-

tutes in the present. I am glad, and somewhat encouraged, to see that eight years on all four critics think I should have done more. I agree and a more salient example of our being in history would be difficult to imagine. Recent work on the Mohawk, Abenaki, and Wendat communities of Lower Canada has revealed qualitatively new aspects of the important roles they played.²⁸ More significantly, however, as I discuss in the opening of my chapter on historical epistemology to which Bettina referred, as historians trained in a Euro-centric worldview, we all have much to learn from Indigenous conceptions of time and space.

When I was asked for advice on who should be invited to this round table, I had only one specific request: Ian McKay. He has not disappointed, but I must admit to being overwhelmed by his commentary. Naively, I had assumed he would respond to the carefully worded critique of his Liberal Order Framework, which occupies a quarter of my conclusion, but of which he says not a word.

I have addressed certain elements of Ian's critique of my title already, but two remain: "1819–1849" and "industrialize." The period covered stretches from the publication of the first city directory in British North America to the Tory's torching the Canadian parliament; that is from the first commercial attempt to reconceptualise the city as a modern, bourgeois space by Thomas Doige in 1819 to spectacularly dramatic proof of the collective failure to achieve a stable bourgeois civic order by the spring and summer of 1849. Through a detailed examination of this specific time and place, I argue, we can see how people thought of themselves, their relationships to each other and to the rest of nature changed. These changes were so fundamental they made industrialisation possible.

I did *not* then go on to study industrialisation, instead I leapt forward thirty years to 1880 to test the validity of my analysis of late pre-industrial Montréal. Were the characteristic patterns of this now industrialised city consistent with the radically different understanding of what industrialisation would mean for people that had emerged from my earlier analysis of the choices made? Specifically, I asked: Was the society more polarized? Had occu-

pational segregation increased? Was the society more secular? Had opportunities for individuals increased?

Ian is right. There is a broad consensus in the historiography and this is precisely what I was attempting to overturn. Ever since Friedrich Engels' classic study of Manchester in the 1840s, people have consistently argued that industrialisation created a polarized society segregated along class lines that nevertheless offered greater opportunities for individual advancement because it was more secular. For Montréal, I found the opposite to be true on all four points. In arriving at these answers, I deliberately restricted myself to descriptive evidence from the standard sources used by mainstream historiography, because I did not want my refutation of established wisdom to be dependent upon people accepting my novel distinction between phenomenal and epiphenomenal evidence. I wanted it to be clear that historically understanding the past depends on the questions we ask in the present.

Ian cites approvingly my comparative historiographical essay from 2006 that contrasted Newfoundland as the first capitalist society with the last feudal society: the New French colony of settlement known as Canada. I assume it was my use of a structuralist shorthand to define these contrasting modes — capitalist appropriation of surplus value created by waged labour vs feudal appropriation of surplus through extra-economic means — that explains his approbation. In any case, what Ian does not discuss is, I think, even more revealing. In both societies, I argued, it was the choices that working people made that resulted in Newfoundland reverting to a much older, household-based form of production within which they would eventually develop community-based controls to prevent resource depletion, while in Québec their choices led to one of the earliest democracies in the Americas, with equitable town/country relations and eventually a singularly decentralized form of capitalism.

This idea of history, wherein the interplay of agency and constraint over time tends to undo structuralist expectations, is problematic for Ian precisely because he accords such a primacy to social relations of production. Here lies the nub of our con-

trasting understandings of historical materialism. The point at contention is both historical and ethical.

To consider ideas as second order phenomena that merely sanction existing social relations and forces of production²⁹ is to be caught in an economistic prism that denies us the possibility of historically understanding modes of production. For this epistemological stance presumes the autonomy accorded economic processes in mature capitalism to be operative in earlier modes, but no previous mode accorded anything like the autonomy — indeed often blind faith — to economic processes that characterises capitalism. If we cannot understand earlier modes, then we are unlikely to be able to see what makes capitalism different, let alone engage in the urgent intellectual work of conceiving viable alternatives.³⁰

Furthermore, a structuralist epistemology impedes historical understandings of how capitalism itself works. The primacy structuralism accords to production flowed from a discovery Marx made concerning the economy of nineteenth-century Britain: the appropriation of surplus value created in production by waged workers had become key to capital accumulation. This variation on Ricardo's labour theory of value privileged certain types of social relations, while relegating others to secondary roles when not ignoring them altogether. The informal economy, unpaid labour, reproduction, and our relationship with the rest of nature when considered were reduced to a merely linear, derivative role: new social relations of production required new relations of reproduction and as result we transformed our relations with the natural world.

As problematic as this structuralist vision is for our understanding the past, its greatest danger concerns our ability to conceive a different future. Repeatedly, when engaged in the building of an alternative mode of production to capitalism, according such primacy to the social relations of production has resulted in revolutionary regimes taking the fateful step to conclude that by dramatically changing social relations they could transform the whole of society. This way of conceiving historical change resulted in some of the greatest crimes against humanity

of the twentieth century.³¹ This is the ethical issue that divides us. To advocate historical materialism while failing to think through the theoretical implications of this horrific legacy is, however unwittingly, to sanction it.

Thus, my questioning of structuralism was based on the growing realisation of how much this approach could never adequately explain and upon some difficult ethical reflection, but it was also rooted in history. My study of the creation of a market in real estate in Montréal in the second quarter of the nineteenth century revealed that the unprecedented autonomy accorded to economics by liberalism allowed for the first time the labour-free creation of value by and through markets. This discovery led me to the heretical conclusion that what distinguishes capitalism from all previous modes of production is not the labour theory value, but the possibility of large-scale value creation that actually required no labour at all.

In the 1970s, when I was first introduced to Marxism by George Rudé, I lived in a commune in downtown Montreal. The triplex was sold out from under us for \$13,000; it is currently evaluated at \$1.6 million. There have, of course, been some renovations, but nothing that justifies this 120-fold increase in the value of the property. Neo-liberal capitalism has resulted in an even greater growth in world financial markets, from \$200 billion annually under Bretton Woods to in excess of a quadrillion dollars (that is a 1 followed by fifteen zeros) today. Now, one could attribute this to the metabolism of capital, or one could do the necessary work to establish who made what decisions where, when, and why. And, more importantly, ask how and why have we changed our own lives so that this unprecedented growth in systemic inequality now appears normal. I know which approach I prefer, and I thank my colleagues for their criticisms that will help me do this vital work even more effectively.

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Endnotes

- 1 Robert C.H. Sweeny, “What Difference Does a Mode Make? A Comparison of Two Seventeenth-Century Colonies: Canada and Newfoundland,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series (58, 2), April 2006, 300.
- 2 E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors* (London: Merlin Press, 1978; reprinted 1995).
- 3 The context of this quotation is a discussion of the cubism of Braque and Picasso, and it may be the author misspeaks — that he rather meant to say, “definitively, finally and conclusively represent reality.” Can Picasso’s *Guernica* be said to proceed on the basis of the *impossibility* of representing the sufferings of the Spanish Civil War?
- 4 Yet, this has the feeling to me of a *non sequitur*. The state cruelties which Sweeny rightly condemns were often justified with highly voluntarist and irrational arguments, and among many of their victims were those who sought to counsel communist regimes to respect the social-structural complexity and ambiguities of the societies in which they had emerged. How, exactly, does drawing upon the ideas of Gramsci negate or deny the sufferings of the victims of Stalinism?
- 5 Yet, to take the example of global climate change: does a working framework (contestable, fallible, a work in progress, etc.) that suggests

- patterns of resource exploitation characteristic of industrial capitalism, commit anyone to a belief in “supra-human processes?”
- 6 Thus, here we find a “capitalism” endowed with the capacity of being “remarkably good at creating inequality” (p. 328) and a “neo-liberalism” with the capacity to deny “the importance of both time and place” (p. 326) — personifications of structures which, even as forgivable short-cuts, seem question-begging.
 - 7 Sweeny refers to “qualitative evidence vs quantitative evidence, phenomenal evidence vs epiphenomenal evidence, men vs women, popular classes vs dominant classes, pre-industrial society vs industrial society, revolutionary path vs non-revolutionary path, internal economy vs external economy, moral economy vs liberal economy, informal economy vs formal economy, cubism vs perspective, analytical vs narrative, invisible lines of property vs visible lines of segregation, and, underpinning the entire work, bourgeois history vs historical materialism” (p. 329).
 - 8 See *Le liberté du pauvre: Crime et pauvreté au XIXe siècle Montréal, de la fin du XCVIe-siècle à 1840* (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 2004), now available in English translation by Peter Feldstein as *The Pauper's Freedom: Crime and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Quebec* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).
 - 9 The Brenner Thesis is not explicitly discussed in the text itself, but it is mentioned in the Bibliography.
 - 10 See p. 312, for the claim that Marx argues in *Capital* that the “revolutionary path” — i.e., artisans rising to become capitalists — is the “democratic path.”
 - 11 It is striking that Holland and Portugal are omitted.
 - 12 See Gerald Tulchinsky, *The River Barons: Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation, 1837–53* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
 - 13 “I found this [the ‘lazy history’ of ‘essentialist reasoning’] approach deeply repugnant and so I categorically refused to carry out any ethnic or linguistic analysis of my data,” 52.
 - 14 Granted that two left historians in Canada might record completely different itineraries, I was struck by the almost complete absence here of any discussion of the Naylor-Teeple Thesis, a grand hypothesis from the 1970s about Canadian capitalism's supposedly permanent mercantile bias that all loyal members of my own Dalhousie School were sworn to oppose, and which one would have thought would have impinged directly on Sweeny's own emergent sense of a Marxist's historical agenda.
 - 15 Jean-Marie Fecteau, *Un nouvel ordre des choses: la pauvreté, le crime, l'État au Québec, de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à 1840* (Outremont, VLB Éditeur, coll. “Études québécoises,” 1989).

- 16 On these parish registers, see, e.g., Allan Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 11–12.
- 17 It is interesting to contrast the use of the “we” in the title of Robert Sweeny’s book to the use of the “we” in Patrice Groulx’s fascinating book on the mythology surrounding Dollard des Ormeaux. In Groulx’s book, the “we” refers explicitly to non-Indigenous people in Québec, and probably more specifically to Quebeckers of French-Canadian descent. Patrice Groulx, *Pièges de la mémoire. Dollard des Ormeaux, les Amérindiens et nous* (Hull: Éditions Vents d’ouest, 1998).
- 18 For one example among many, see Andrée Lévesque, “Essai d’égo-histoire,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 96, No. 1 (mars 2015): 91–108.
- 19 See the description of this project here: <http://www.celat.ulaval.ca/cycle-de-conferences-les-historiennes-par-eux-memes/>
- 20 Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Brian Young, *Patrician Families and the Making of Quebec: The Taschereaus and McCords* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), p. 4.
- 21 We might think here of the classic works of each of these three historians: Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au dix-septième siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1973); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963); George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).
- 22 It is interesting to read *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?* in parallel with Sherry Olson’s and Patricia Thornton’s own take on nineteenth-century Montreal, *Peopling the North American City: Montreal, 1840–1900* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011).
- 23 Eveyln Fox-Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* San Francisco : W.H. Freeman, c1983, and Sara Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion* New York : Routledge, 2004.
- 24 Deborah Jones, *Women’s Studies Int. Quart.*, 1980, Vol. 3, pp. 194.
- 25 Sara Howdle, personal communication, York University, 2014, and Dan Rueck, “Commons, Enclosure, and Resistance in Kahnawá:ke Mohawk Territory, 1850–1900” *The Canadian Historical Review*, 95, 3 (September, 2014): 352-381.
- 26 Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, c1988.
- 27 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC Publications, 1972), 16.
- 28 Brian Gettler, «En espèce ou en nature? Les présents, l’imprévoyance et l’évolution idéologique de la politique indienne pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle. » *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française*, 65, 4 (2012) 409-37. Daniel Rück et Eve-Marie Lampron, « OÙ tout le monde

- est propriétaire et où personne ne l'est » : droits d'usage et gestion foncière à Kahnawake, 1815-1880. » *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 70, 1-2, (2016) 31-52. Isabelle Bouchard. « Des systèmes politiques en quête de légitimité: terres « seigneuriales », pouvoirs et enjeux locaux dans les communautés autochtones de la vallée du Saint-Laurent ». Thèse de doctorat en histoire, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2017.
- 29 “Unless we fundamentally change how we make our living, and with that the ideologies that sanction those ways of living, these phenomena [climate change and thermonuclear war] cannot be meaningfully addressed, let alone transformed.”
- 30 This is why the transition from feudalism to capitalism is such a touchstone in not just my book (pp. 53-60, 71-76, 105-10) but my whole oeuvre. Indeed, the article comparing early modern Newfoundland and Canada that Ian liked was an important part of this intellectual journey, as was my 1991 article in *Sociologie et sociétés* explaining why the revolutionary path led to democracy and my later analyses of how this affected the nature of capital markets in Canada. None of which, I might add, owed anything to Brenner.
- 31 Soviet collectivisation caused the death of between two and three million people in the Ukraine alone and China's Great Leap Forward is now reliably estimated to have cost the lives of thirty million people, while I doubt we will ever know the proportionally much greater cost wrought by the Khmer Rouge's failed transformation of Cambodia.