THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIVERSITY
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INTRODUCTION
Recasting Canadian and European History
in a Pluralist Perspective

Christiane Harzig and Danielle Juteau

No longer an abnormality, disruptive of societies and individuals, “difference” has become a right to be asserted.¹ The erosion of discourses legitimizing homogeneity has not gone unobserved, as indicated by recent works in sociology, history, anthropology, and philosophy, as well as in feminist and cultural studies. Focusing on multicultural lives and pluralistic societies, on mobile and hybrid individuals freed from homogenizing forces, recent studies have sought to understand and, quite often, to defend, the pluralist option. As such, they contribute to the definition and consolidation of a new master narrative that is not yet clearly marked, theoretically and normatively. Rather it oscillates between venturing into new forms of nation building and posing fundamental challenges to the concept of the nation-state.

Diversity and difference as signifiers of the polity are not new, are not reflections of recent developments. Historians, who a century ago were influential in discursively constructing homogeneous national entities, writing cultural difference out of history, have now taken up new responsibilities. Rather than exclude diverging historical traditions from the master narrative, the master narrative is recast to reflect that diversity. This should be done not so much by just adding on “other” people’s stories but by making them constitutive elements of historical development, challenging our interpretative frameworks and reference points of analysis. Examples of this new scholarship have been brought together in The Historical Practice of Diversity, edited by Hoerder et al.² The Social Construction of Diversity picks up where this book leaves off.

Unlike in the United States, slavery with its far-reaching impact on social relations has not become the all-penetrating signifier for race in Europe