As a specialist in the anthropology of human rights, you have been conducting research into forms of discrimination based on the social construction of difference. What is it about human rights and discrimination that captivate you?

I am interested in the quest for dignity. In almost every kind of society there are human rights issues: people living without access to basic needs, those who are victims of violence, people living below the poverty line and individuals who are living in inhuman conditions. What is new is that in traditional cultures, for instance in India, Muslim societies or Aboriginal populations, we have people who are campaigning for their human rights.

Anthropologists who work with minorities and marginalised people are increasingly interested in human rights issues in their own societies and further afield – especially in relation to the consequences of globalisation and neoliberalist politics.

How successful have marginalised groups in Québec, Canada, been in campaigning for their rights over the last 50 years?

Most of the groups I work with, with the exception of LGBT, now have a kind of recognition by the UN and therefore access to tools with which to defend their rights. But the battle is not finished. People with disabilities have had particularly strong benefits in terms of deinstitutionalisation, social programmes and support for accessibility. Despite these relative successes, the situation is fragile due to the economic crisis and marginalised people are losing again.

The state thinks that the battle has been won, but it is a battle that must be constantly fought. For example, Canadian refugees gained a lot of ground in the 1980s, especially when they won the right to be listened to when explaining the context behind their claim for residency in Canada. However, these advancements have been hanging in the balance since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US.

For the social movements I work on, we can see positive evolution globally, but that evolution has always been somewhat temporary and there is a danger that tentative gains will be lost. Cataloguing progress in human rights – including the memory of the battles fought to achieve this progress and the reasons behind them – is extremely important in order to escape the danger of losing the advancements that were gained from so many struggles.

What happened when artists engaged with the five social groups you are focusing on?

Artists are key as they create references and markers in the collective social memory. Sometimes the public can more easily remember the state of women’s rights by reading Virginia Woolf, for example. This idea applies to Québec, too. Plays, songs, graphics, novels – they are all important to opening the eyes of the public to social justice issues and encouraging participation in social movements and grassroots organisations.

As part of your project, you are working with over 500 groups and civil societies. How did you create ties with these actors?

We worked with big organisations that are linked with each social movement. For instance, the Table de concertation au service des réfugiés et des immigrants incorporates around 150 groups. We have used a network of collaborators like these to identify the main actors in social movements to provide relevant testimonies. These people and organisations are of primary importance because they will be the main link for the dissemination of our work.

Specialist in anthropology of human rights, Professor Francine Saillant, is examining the progress that five social groups in Québec, Canada have made in the last 50 years. She argues that it is important to build a collective memory of their progress in order to make sure it is not lost.
HUMAN RIGHTS AND social movements are very much a feature of today’s society. Each community feels the impact of the local struggles for recognition of marginalised groups, and Québec in Canada is certainly no different.

Although many regions are typified by the groups of people who shout the loudest, a strong period of social change in Québec was the ‘Révolution tranquille’ or Quiet Revolution. This period of upheaval when Québécois largely abandoned Catholicism in favour of a more secular, civic society helped the region develop into a more empowered society.

For Professor Francine Saillant of the Department of Anthropology at Laval University, human rights and social movements — and the collective memory that stems from them — are as fascinating and important as ever. Her current research focuses on creating a collective memory of discussions that happened amongst different groups in Québecan society starting with the momentous period of 1960 (the beginning of the Quiet Revolution) through to 2012.

OVERCOMING DIFFERENCES

Saillant’s research is driven by the idea that discrimination is based on a social construction of differences. These perceived differences are as diverse as gender, country of origin and traits of the mind and body, to name but a few. In Saillant’s decades of experience in working with community-based organisations, she has come to find that these groups are key in marginalised people’s fights for social justice and for their claim to the same rights as the rest of society.

She has also found that too often these movements and the people behind them push for the rights of just one sector and that there is a need for inter-recognition between different marginalised groups. “Human rights are not segmented — they form a unified corpus, and it can be the same within civil society,” Saillant states passionately. “We are looking for the space to develop a strong vision of the conditions required to achieve this.”

Therefore, Saillant and her team (see Key Collaborators) have set themselves a momentous task of cataloguing testimonials from civil leaders — mainly of grassroots NGOs — that have been party to the various social movements in Québec society over the 50-year period she is examining. They have conducted 200 interviews with those able to highlight the circumstances of marginalised groups and the struggles, alliances, values and ideas they had.

Saillant’s team is also collecting and analysing various written sources, pictures, videos and other products of disparate social movements. They focus on five historically marginalised groups: women, immigrants and refugees, members of the LGBT community, people with disabilities and people with mental health problems.

Unusually, the team is also looking at creative work by the Québec community, including the work of artists who were key to the social movements of the period. “We are sure that artists involved directly or indirectly with social justice projects are helping to draw a larger audience for the causes,” says Saillant. “They use a different kind of language to the social organisations in order to sensitively represent the lack of justice in the community.”

MEMORIAL OR MONUMENT TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS?

Overall, Saillant and her team hope their work will help the Québec community see the historic contribution it has made to human rights accessibility and the recognition of different social groups and their social rights. Additionally, Saillant wants the results to make the collective memory of the turbulent movements of the groups she focuses on fully visible.

This latter aim will be realised by the book they expect to publish that features the testimonials, documents and images they have unearthed of Québec’s social revolutions. As well, Saillant and her research group have forged a link with the Ecomusée du fier monde in Montréal and they are preparing an exhibition for 2017 to showcase their results to the local and international community.

Sadly, through her work, Saillant has observed a decline of participation in traditional movements for both human and social rights in Canada. “While many young people are involved in movements where there is no particular leader — like the Occupy movement — fewer young people participate in traditional movements — like those of the 1960s. In some ways this is because by and large young people think that those movements, which fought for things like civil rights, have been won. In other ways, young people have different priorities and interests,” explains Saillant. “But, with human rights issues, the battle is never finished. All the small struggles that have brought us to our present society were overcome through collaboration between different categories of actors.”

Under the new Canadian Government, Saillant hopes that the fight for human rights will once again become part of the core values of the country. Saillant and her team’s work — culminating in the Montreal exhibition — will serve as a monument to those who have struggled for justice and a reminder that there are battles still to be fought.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN CANADA

OBJECTIVE

To chronicle and examine the progress, as well as the difficulties and blockages, that social groups in Québec, Canada, have made in the last 50 years.

KEY COLLABORATORS

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PARTNERS

L’IR des Femmes • La table de concertation des organismes travaillant auprès des réfugiés et des immigrants • Le regroupement des ressources alternatives en santé mentale • Le Centre Justice et Foi • Les Archives Gaies • Réseau international sur le Processus de production du handicap

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FRANCINE SAILLANT is a Canadian anthropologist and intellectual. She earned her PhD from McGill University in 1987 and has been a professor in the Department of Anthropology at Laval University since 1996. She serves as the Director of the Centre de recherches Cultures, Arts, Sociétés (CÉLAT). Saillant has directed the efforts of the journal Anthropologie et sociétés for more than 10 years. She was appointed in 2008 to be a member of the Royal Society of Canada. In 2013, she was co-chair of the 81st Congress of the Association francophone pour le savoir.