

Of Elephants and Inner Americans: Notes on Canadian Cultural Policy

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Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant: No matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.

——Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, 1969

Inside every Canadian, whether she or he knows it or not, there is, in fact, an American.

——John Meisel, Chairman, Canadian Radio-Television and
Telecommunications Commission, 1986

Most Canadians live along an open, 6400-kilometer border with the United States. Canadians and Americans can pass more or less freely across this border. No visas are required; no passports or ID cards need be flashed. Andrew Malcolm tells the story of a Quebec woman whose house sits on the border: her kitchen is in the US and living room-bedroom in Canada. No one seems to care. Goods flow more or less freely, too. In fact, no taxes apply to products moving around the continent, making Canada, the US,

and Mexico the largest free trade zone in the world. American retail stores and service outlets (Sears, Walmart, Starbucks, MacDonald's) have, in fact, long made Canada their home, while American music, television, and movies have been an important part of Canadians' everyday lives for over half a century. Yet somehow, despite all this, something called Canadian culture exists. What is it? How has it been created and promoted? And what is its future?

There have always been alarms about American influence in Canada, especially for Canada's English-speaking majority. Many English Canadians believed they were preserving the British Empire, along with its political and cultural traditions, when they resisted the American Revolution in the late 18th century and settled in the north. Even though Canadians' identification with Britain has declined, the idea of resisting American ways remains strong today. While American invasion or annexation were grave concerns in Canada's early history, worries about the loss of Canadian identity and values occupy the minds of many people today. Distinctive ways of life, political traditions, and social values — not to mention the economically beneficial activities of writing and publishing, music and film production, and performing arts — are all endangered by American influence. Of course, a very broad definition of culture is presumed here, including not only the traditional arts (painting, literature, dance) but also a Canadian way of life and particular ideologies of Canadian political culture and social belonging. The importance of

control in this broad sphere of culture became clear early in the 20th century as new technologies transformed the social life of people in Canada and elsewhere. Indeed, beginning in the 1920s, with the rise of mass communication media, the Canadian government began to take a leading role in the promotion and protection of Canadian culture. Political leaders in Canada became convinced of the need for interventionist cultural policies. Common to the major cultural policies, according to Mike Gasher, were three themes: nationalism, anti-commercialism, and anti-Americanism (15). The Canadian government would intervene in the sphere of culture in order to ensure a strong Canadian national identity, to rescue artistic expression from the pressures of the commercial market, and to stem the tide of American cultural products in Canada.

The start of radio broadcasting in the US in the 1920s made clear the threats to what later Canadians would call cultural sovereignty. At that time, programming from American radio stations flooded across the border. In response, the Aird Commission on Radio Broadcasting, issuing its report in 1929, articulated the need for a national policy on mass media. The Broadcasting Act of 1936 established the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which began with only six hours of programs a day.

In the following decade, calls for state support of the arts were heard around the country. But the notion of opening the public purse for sustaining artistic expression was unpopular. War made it easier to see that taking hold of both art and the mass media was very important to projects of national concern. The Canadian

government commissioned artists to record the experience of the wars for posterity, and war was also the origin of a now famous film-making tradition in Canada. Known especially for its animation and documentary films, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) was created in 1939. British filmmaker John Grierson penned a report that led to the passing of the National Film Act and the establishment of a wartime propaganda office. Grierson headed the NFB from which it grew and recruited the brilliant Norman MacLaren to oversee the Board's renowned animation section. In 1950, the act was revised, direct government control of the NFB was abolished, and the NFB was charged with interpreting Canada to Canadians and the rest of the world. Eventually, the NFB separated into English and French production units, and through the 1970s the NFB widened its vision of Canada, including women, aboriginal and regional points of view in its productions. Meanwhile, the arrival of television in the 1940s put further financial strains on the CBC and the public purse. The CBC began television broadcasts in 1952. Unlike major American networks and even public broadcasters in the US, the CBC was and remains heavily subsidized by Canadians. Its mandate to serve the Canadian public is enshrined in the Broadcasting Act of 1991, creating uniquely Canadian programs, developing a national identity, reflecting regional and multicultural differences, and providing informative and entertaining broadcasts.

In the postwar era, the idea of government patronage of the arts gained acceptance. The single most important event in Canadian

cultural policy was the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts and Letters and Science, the Massey Commission, which issued its report in 1951. Canada, the report noted, had fared poorly in cultural achievement compared with other nations. It was a big, young country after all. That was the main cause. But then there was the problem of the country's reliance on a huge and generous neighbour"— meaning, of course, the United States. The report noted, for example, that funding for the arts in Canada had come primarily from the south of the border, a total of almost 20 million from the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations. Moreover, the report warned of a future American cultural invasion in the form of film, radio, and magazines. From the Commission came the National Library of Canada (1953) and the Canada Council (1957). Modeled in part on the British Arts Council, the Canada Council would encourage the development of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, specifically by providing scholarships to students, funding for musical events and composing, and publicizing Canada through tours of artists.

The last decades of the 20th century brought surprising successes and grave challenges to the cultural industries of Canada. The establishment of Telefilm Canada in the 1980s aided a homegrown movie and television production industry, which in the 90s brought American producers to Canada in record numbers to take advantage of skilled crews, tax incentives, and a lower Canadian dollar. The city of Vancouver earned the name Hollywood North because of its popularity for American TV and

film productions. Yet at the same time, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, institutions promoting Canadian culture suffered cuts in funding; and as Canada pursued closer economic ties with the US, many in Canada feared that its homegrown culture would disappear. The fiercest debate about American cultural influence in recent history attended the 1988 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the US and Canada, later to include Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Yet Canadians, it was argued, could rest assured that their culture was safe. According to defenders of the agreement, culture was to be exempt from free trade. That is, Canada's culture would not be exposed to the pressures of the open market. The state would continue its active role in the promotion and protection of indigenous cultural expression. The defence was simply untrue and the debate superficial.

If it was technology that had spurred the state's entry into the cultural sphere in the 1920s, it is technology again that is forcing Canadians to rethink the role of the state in the promotion and protection of national culture. Despite denials, American pressure on Canadian culture continues and arguments to bring it into the trading game are based on technological fiat. Canadians have for a long time believed that national culture can be removed from the pressures of the market, yet as cultural historian Graham Carr writes, American policy-makers attack the very definition of culture, tying it to political and economic concerns. More specifically, American negotiators insist that culture be considered as information and an aspect of the service industry,

asserting intellectual property rights at the same time as the US pushes its agenda of global free-flow of information. Television and radio networks such as the CBC have for decades followed Canadian content (CanCon) regulations, guidelines that ensure Canadian media professionals are employed and Canadian themes are available nationwide; and while CanCon has its own problems of definition, more serious is the fact that new communication technologies make such state regulation almost impossible. In this context, it is fair to say that the fate of Canadian culture mirrors that of other cultures around the world. Consider why trade negotiators continue to argue over cultural exemptions when foreign, especially US, control of Canadian cultural markets for magazines, music, movies and books range from 70% to 98%. Dominance is more or less complete, and Canadian national culture will remain in a struggle for survival. As Carr points out, the ongoing US-Canada debate about culture and trade will serve to set precedents in the larger global arena, in Europe and Asia. Meanwhile, Canadians continue their uneasy slumber with the elephant, dreaming American, sometimes Canadian.

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