ANTI-AMERICANISM
and the Canadian Mass Media

BY Mary Vipond

IT IS DIFFICULT TO DISCUSS THE CANADIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP THESE DAYS, AND PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT TO DO SO CRITICALLY. IN THE MONTHS SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, WE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO REFLECT UPON THE FACT THAT WE TOO ARE RESIDENTS OF A NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT NOT VIOLATED BY DIRECT ATTACK FROM ELSEWHERE FOR CENTURIES. ON SEPTEMBER 11, CANADIANS, LIKE AMERICANS, EXPERIENCED A SENSE OF VIOLATION, THE LOSS OF THE INNOCENCE OF FORTRESS NORTH AMERICA. WHILE THERE HAS BEEN AN EXPLOSION OF DEBATE AMONG CANADIANS ABOUT WHERE WE FIT INTO AMERICAN PLANS FOR AN EXTENDED WAR ON TERRORISM, IT HAS OFTEN BEEN EMOTIONAL, REACTIVE AND AMBIVALENT.

Two fundamentals underlie this debate. First, our relationship with the United States remains a major concern of Canadians, as it has been since the first English-speaking Canadians, the Loyalists, left there and headed here. Secondly, our connections with the US continue to be complexly intertwined with another of our major preoccupations, our seemingly perpetual search for a "Canadian identity." For the most part, English-speaking Canadians have historically attempted to define themselves not as "anti-American" but as "non-American." But the distinction, especially in the last few months, has not always been clear, or always heard.

We continue to wrestle with the questions: which is greater – our similarity or our difference? Should we continue to emphasize those things that make us different? Indeed can we continue to do so?

A sustained study of the history of Canadian attitudes towards the United States reveals much variety, depending on factors such class, occupation, region, age, ethnicity and language. Our attitudes have also changed over time. Over the years, there have been waves of anti-Americanism and pro-Americanism that have been strong enough to affect government policies and therefore to have had permanent impacts of various kinds. The pendulum has swung back and forth – in certain periods there was much anti-American rhetoric, much concern about the power and might of the US invading Canada in various ways; in other periods the issue more or less dropped off the agenda.

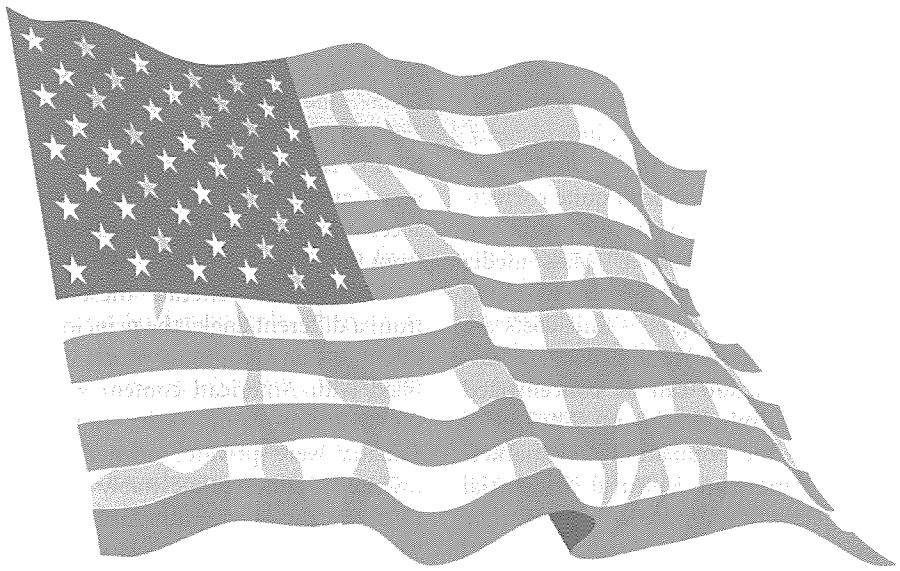
But I think that these waves of pro- and anti-Americanism have been what the Annales school of historians call rather dismissively *événements* – mere political comings and goings. Underneath the surface, at the level of structures and conjonctures, the tide has been moving inexorably in one direction – toward a greater and greater similarity between our two countries, socially, intellectually, politically, economically and culturally. As the events of recent months have shown us, our geographical position as part of a shared continent is basic to the relationship. So too are various historical developments, including a similar pattern of European settlement imposed on Aboriginal inhabitants, a common desire to exploit the resources of the continent, a shared liberal democratic heritage from our European forebears and substantial continuing immigration. Compared to these fundamental similarities, which have grown more and more intense as modern communications have increased our linkages and as the United States has grown in power and influence everywhere in the world, the little waves of pro- and anti-Americanism seem almost superficial.

BUT – and this is the big but – we *are* a separate polity, we do have a different history, we do see the world differently and have different responsibilities in it, we do have a different social mix, and certainly a different (and less advantageous) climate and geography. And so we continue to wrestle with the questions: which is greater – our similarity or our difference? Should we continue to emphasize those things that make us different? Indeed can we continue to do so?

I would like here to address these issues with respect to the aspect of Canadian/American interaction with which I am most familiar, that of culture, and more specifically, that of the cultural industries that became such a dominant part of modern life during the last century. There is no doubt that the cultural industries have been a vehicle for the "Americanization" of Canadian society especially in the last fifty years, but they have also been a site of contestation and resistance of considerable importance.

One would not be far wrong in coming to the deterministic conclusion that American ascendancy over continental popular culture was inevitable.

Culture, broadly defined by the sociologists and anthropologists, is the glue that holds a society together. It includes the knowledge, belief systems, art, morals, laws, customs and habits that characterize any given society. "Culture" is our common language, our common way of seeing the world; it is what forms or constructs our identity. But this culture is dependent upon communication among the members of a society. It is through communications of various sorts that they share and pass on their knowledge, beliefs, laws, customs and so on. Cultural identity is constructed by discourse. Moreover, communication is absolutely central to the formation and preservation of the modern



nation state. As scholars as diverse as Karl Deutsch and Benedict Anderson have argued, the nation state is an imagined community held together by a shared concept of a national identity created by communication. And at this point, much of our communication happens via the mass media. As Gene Youngblood put it: "The media for most people most of the time specify what's real and what's not (existence), what's important and what's not (priorities), what's good and what's bad (values) and what's related to what else and how (relations)."

What has been the significance of the simultaneous rise of popular culture "mediated" in the form of cultural-industrial products like newspapers, magazines, records, radio, film, TV and the Internet in both Canada and the United States? This is not the place to go through much of this history, but let me make a few pertinent points.

First, while there has been media flow in both directions, by far the most significant has been the flow from the United States into Canada. There are several reasons for this. To start with, while mass media constitute culture, they are also (except for a handful of public enterprises, of which more later) businesses seeking profits, indeed needing them to survive. As the late Quebec publisher Pierre Péladeau quite correctly put it: "If you don't have a profit, you don't have a newspaper." Mass media enterprises are most profitable when the local market is largest – unit costs are decreased, transportation costs are lessened, production can be concentrated more effectively, and so on. Thus, with ten times the population and marketplace, American cultural industrial products always have a comparative advantage over the Canadian. Add to that other less easily calculated factors – the creation of the new American nation one hundred years earlier than the Canadian; the dynamic popular culture of the United States, attributable in no small part to a certain mix of immigrants at a certain moment in early 20th century cities; the language duality in Canada that divides the cultural marketplace; the general social similarities between the two nations – and the domination of the whole North American cultural market by the United States is not surprising. These factors are so fundamental and so powerful that one would not be far wrong in coming to the deterministic conclusion that American ascendancy over continental popular culture was inevitable. And indeed, similar factors have led American mass media culture to flourish in much of the world; other countries struggle mightily to prevent what they call "Canadianization" from befalling them.

Secondly, and this is too often forgotten, this Americanization of Canada's popular culture has been happening much longer than most of us realize, in fact since the phenomenon of a mass-mediated culture was born. By the end of the 19th century, most of the popular middle-class magazines circulating in Canada were American; by the end of the 1920s we effectively had no indigenous film industry and our screens were almost completely filled with American movies. By that decade as well in a newer industry, radio, the musical content was largely American records and an untold but large number of Canadians listened directly to American programs on privately-owned commercial radio stations, both Canadian and American. Today nine of the top ten TV shows in Canada are American and even the NHL's "Hockey Night in Canada" is not very Canadian these days. The pace has accelerated, but the trend lines were laid from the start.

Thirdly, to reiterate these points from a different angle, the principal reason that Canadian mass media became filled with American content was that the distributors of media content in Canada were privately-owned profit-oriented businesses inevitably attracted to cheap content inputs. And that private ownership in turn was a consequence of our deeply-held (and shared) belief that free speech is essential to the functioning of democratic societies, and that "free" speech means "not controlled by the government." Thus the media must be in private hands, and governments should not interfere in their operation or content.

Once again there is a big BUT to this analysis, however. One great exception to the private-ownership pattern in Canada was the decision taken in the early 1930s to set up a public broadcasting organization owned by the federal government. This action – the creation of a state-owned national media institution – was unprecedented in North America and was obviously the product of a number of strong forces. One factor was certainly the recommendation of the Aird Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting in 1929 which concluded that radio was inevitably a monopoly, and that given the poverty of most Canadian private radio broadcasters at the time, it must be a government-owned monopoly. Aird, a banker, was typical of an older generation of Canadian businessmen, a mercantile capitalist whose economic interests were rooted in a conception of Canada as an east-west trading nation, and who therefore, although certainly no fan of government ownership, believed the state did have a role to play in facilitating Canadian "defensive expansionism." A second force was certainly lobbying – in this case not only the well-known lobbying of the Canadian Radio League, a loose coalition of many cultural, religious and social organizations of a nationalist bent, but also of newspaper editor Charles Bowman, another member of the Aird Commission, and one who had been for some years alarmed at the obliteration of the Canadian movie industry. A third was clearly political. Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett was convinced that politicians – and especially Prime Ministers – could make very effective use of a medium that could create an audience that stretched from sea to sea.

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But another reason, less well known, deserves mention as well. It is not often noted that the main task of the first public broadcaster, the CRBC (the predecessor to the CBC), was to set up a national network. It established only a handful of its own stations and expended most of its energy, time and money on running the national network – again an exercise in defensive expansionism in the sense that it was a preventive measure to keep the American networks from embracing the whole continent. Moreover, the national network comprised mainly affiliated stations, private stations that continued to exist as profit-making entities and were paid to carry CRBC programs. Not only did they receive cash for putting on the CRBC's programs a few hours each night, but they received the programs free, the Commission picking up the costs of wireline transmission as well. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the CRBC in fact subsidized the continued existence of a number of private broadcasting enterprises that might otherwise have gone bankrupt in the Depression. Canada's first public broadcaster, a bold new step that has not in fact been replicated on this continent, was certainly the product of a concern that Canadians needed to carve out their own space for the powerful new medium of radio in order to avoid being overwhelmed by American broadcasting. But it was also a major compromise that from the beginning necessitated that the public broadcaster share the field with the previously-established private enterprises. The present sorry state of the CBC as a significant public institution can be traced, in part, to that historic compromise.

Many Canadians, being good North Americans, question whether the state should be meddling in the free exchange of speech and ideas; many also object to being taxed to support cultural institutions when commercial alternatives financed by advertising are available.

And so it has been with most media. Different governments have cared sometimes more and sometimes less about how to ensure that our mass media remain Canadian in some real sense. Some, in fact many, of the governmental attempts to subsidize, quota-ize or otherwise aid Canadian cultural industries have been misconceived and ineffective. Mostly they have aided the industry – the business bottom line – rather than the development of Canadian culture – the content. So, for example, when it was decided in the 1960s that Canadian magazines desperately needed help, outright grants were seen to be dangerous, so the aid was given in the form of tax incentives for advertisers, a measure that initially helped subsidize those who advertised in Time and *Reader's Digest*. Similarly, postal rate subsidies for magazines did not distinguish by nation of production, only point of mailing. Again, despite the fact that quotas on movie screens have been successfully used in a number of countries to protect domestic products, the idea has never flown in Canada, in part because of lobbying from the film distributors and theatre owners (and, of course, from Jack Valenti!). Another consequence of the ambivalence Canadians – and their governments – have felt about state intervention in the cultural industries has been the willingness of successive regulators to allow the concentration of many of our media in very few hands. They may be Canadian hands, but they too are here to make profits, so they continue to deluge us with American content. But it should not be forgotten that our politicians believe they are responding to a genuine concern among the voters. Many Canadians, being good North Americans, question whether the state should be meddling in the free exchange of speech and ideas; many also object to being taxed to support cultural institutions when commercial alternatives financed by advertising are available.



And so, gradually and inexorably, our media have in fact become more Americanized, and so have we. The debate about our relationship to the United States now occurs within the context not only of Fortress North America but of CNN. There is not much room left any more for Canadian voices to discuss what it means to be "non-American."

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