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Canadians and Culture; or, Taxes, Money, Prestige, Ordinary Folk, Subsidized Whiners, and All the Rest

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IN THE MIDST OF THE RECENTLY-HELD FEDERAL ELECTION campaign, the *Hamilton Spectator* published an editorial cartoon (24 September 2008) commenting on the debate generated by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to cut \$45 million in funding to the arts. The cartoon shows an artist wearing a white smock sitting in front of a nearly completed canvas, paintbrush poised to add the finishing touches to what we recognize as Tom Thomson's iconic *The Jack Pine* (1916–17). He looks over his shoulder toward us in surprise, suddenly realizing that he has been exposed to the scrutiny of *Spec's* readers; to his right standing beside his canvas, we find NDP leader Jack Layton, whose speech bubble looms over the painting: "Think of how much better your stuff could've been if only you had champions of federal funding for the arts there to support you."

The cartoon makes what appears to be a simple enough assertion: government funding for culture—here imagined mainly as money directed toward individual artists—has no relation to the quality or value of the culture that is produced. The very idea that activities like painting should receive federal funds (always imagined in the form of tax dollars, that is, as money you are supposed to envision as siphoned directly out of your pocket) is seen as ludicrous—an idea that only the money-wasting left

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(or the NDP, which might not be the same thing) could possibly support. Government funds are better spent on other, more important things. Tom Thomson didn't need cash from Ottawa to help him get his dots and strokes down on canvas, and yet he still managed to leave a significant body of work for subsequent generations to gaze at and admire.

It doesn't take much work to complicate and question this easy appeal to Canadian thriftiness and the assumptions on which it is premised. Where to start? There is, first, the interesting connection made between money and value. If money corrupts, it would seem that government money corrupts absolutely. Since artists have to eat, too, the point must be that only *private* funds can produce real aesthetic or cultural value, although one suspects that the cartoon is pushing the more radical claim that art and money should never mix: artists gain in spiritual growth what they lose from their bank accounts—or their waistlines. It is clear as well that aesthetic value is imagined as an objective characteristic that adheres to cultural objects and, which once so established, does so for time immemorial. The idea that value is produced by a whole apparatus of cultural institutions (museums and universities, critics and adjudicators of state funding programs—all government supported) and is thus an historical and cultural characteristic rather than an ontological one is bound to exceed the explanatory sophistication of an argument that starts from the assumption that money can't do a thing for the arts. If these points might seem too highfalutin to pose in a cartoon, then one could fall back on more empirical claims. The purchase of an early Thomson painting by the National Gallery of Canada in 1914 played an essential role in convincing the artist to continue his work: no government cash, then perhaps no droopy pine trees. And the place of his work in the national historical art canon cannot be disassociated from the decisions made by government-funded museums and galleries to collect his work and to make it available for public viewing, discussions of his work by government-funded art historians, the publications of books about early twentieth-century Canadian art with the help of government subventions ... you get the point.

In the wake of the 2008 federal election, this Readers' Forum explores the multiple ways in which we talk about the role and function of the arts and culture in Canada, especially how we talk about them publicly and in relation to the role of governments in providing support for them. The latest Canadian variant of the "culture wars" proved incredibly frustrating, mainly because it seemed to travel the same old path to nowhere. For some, the vitriolic reaction to the cuts on the part of cultural critics, writers, artists, and academics (the "champions of federal funding for the

arts” knowingly referenced in the cartoon) merely confirmed what they already knew: the arts community was a special-interest group intent on holding onto their particular (undeserved, unjustified) piece of the government pie at any cost. For those arguing against the Harper government’s announced cuts, there was the frustration of having to once again explain, “why extremely wealthy nations should pay for the development and promotion of non-commercial art” or to argue for “the value of advanced intellectual inquiry that may not appeal to large numbers of people but which may well last for centuries” (Smith). We’d all been here before: right versus left, neocons versus social democrats, “ordinary, working people” versus an ivory tower, culture elite which Harper characterized as “government subsidized whiners” (Cheadle). The rhetorical energy which the cuts generated created very little new insight into culture in Canada, except perhaps to highlight the confusing and conflicted understanding that Canadians across the political spectrum have of the current configuration of culture, class, and power in this country.

Like most academics, I was opposed to the announced cuts. And like many (I suspect), my opposition had less to do with the specific programs on the chopping block (about which I knew little except for PromArt), than with a general belief that governments should support a whole range of collective goods that market forces are unable to provide, due to the latter’s adherence to the logic of the bottom line and their championing of (that holiest of holies) individual consumer choice. What kind of collective goods and why one might have such a belief in the first place necessitates the creation and/or use of concepts of culture that might productively function in public debate and discussion to explain this position. Often enough, when it comes to the arts and culture, the appeal (in the last instance) for government funding is made on behalf of the innate significance of knowledge-for-knowledge sake (when it comes to the ivory tower crowd) or by highlighting the achievement of spiritual heights representing the best and brightest aspects of human experience (when it comes to the arts). In both instances, these are appeals to what lies at the heart of being human, which the market (despite our love of it) seems to bypass or obliterate. But such gestures make me uncomfortable, even if they are positions perhaps only occupied strategically—still powerful arguments (whether right or not) against a crass commercialism that Christmas movies remind us isn’t the end all and be all of life. Since I spend my days in the classroom pointing out the long association of just such appeals to human verities and virtues with the worst kinds of social injustices—the role, for instance, of cultural distinction and taste in the

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perpetuation of class differences or of “civilized” culture in the politics of imperialism and colonialism—to fall back on (a bad version of) Matthew Arnold when the going gets tough politically seems like the wrong move to make. And supporting any and all government funding for arts and culture also seems both politically specious and intellectually lazy. Two of the programs slated for cuts—PromArt and Trade Routes—supported the internationalization of Canadian culture. I have no problem with a band like Holy Fuck traveling the world—hell, I *love* the idea!—but wonder at my own apparent comfort and ease with a program that enacts the nationalist project of representing Canadian culture abroad. It shouldn't have to be all or nothing when we think about how the government funds arts and culture.

There are other ways to talk about government funding of arts and culture. The Massey Commission worried about the tiny amounts spent on the purchase of Canadian art and wondered how artists were able to feed and house themselves; little has changed in the intervening fifty years. What about a frank discussion of the hidden labour discount that structures work in the arts and cultural sector and the need to establish a living wage for cultural workers (linked, for instance, to a broader goal of a national minimum annual salary)? Instead of being pushed into the position of “subsidized whiners” always already opposed to know-nothing “rednecks” (a term Russell Smith uses alongside his arguments on behalf of government programs), why not discuss the ways in which cultural funding *already* supports far more than (supposedly elitist) art galleries, museums, symphonies, and theatre festivals—or the ways in which it potentially could do so through new programs linked not to the higher things but to the goal of creating a more vibrant public life? When a street is closed to traffic for a local literary or arts festival, a street fair or even a weekend farmer's market, and we see the eagerness with which people move and interact with one another at a different scale and speed, we see a social and cultural experience worthy of support. We need not always imagine culture in the guise of Gehry's Art Gallery of Ontario or Libeskind's Royal Ontario Museum, although we needn't disavow such places either (since where else can we see *The Jack Pine* live and in person?).

It's clear that the opposition between “working Canadians” and ivory tower elites no longer captures the true character of contemporary Canadian social life—if it ever did. On Canadian campus, ivory towers are more likely to be made of cinder blocks and to be in disrepair, and everyone who isn't a member of the ruling class *works*—maybe not in mines or on farms but in offices and in shops at the power centre. Yet when it comes to

culture, we still often talk as if we're living in the nineteenth century—and in Europe, not the northern part of North America. In Canada, cultural capital is more likely to come from being able to watch the hockey game from a private box than from developing class appropriate tastes for art and opera; Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* would need to be substantially rewritten to make sense of the valences of culture in this place. Hamilton is supposed to be full of exactly the kind of ordinary Canadians who would take offence at money being expended on culture when it could be put to use in so many other ways. How then to explain the fact that the NDP swept Hamilton (despite the leanings of the *Spectator* cartoonist)? Or how to explain the similar sweep of the Conservatives in Alberta, a province with the highest level of per capita spending on cultural goods in the country? We need to come up with new ways of thinking about culture—new concepts and discourses, new strategies for framing the case for government funding—which better explain where we are now. This Readers' Forum offers a start.

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