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ESC: English Studies in Canada, Volume 33, Issue 3, September 2007, pp.
16-19 (Article)

Published by Association of Canadian College and University Teachers
of English

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.0.0069>



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The Imagination's Subsidies: Whiners, Elites, Ordinary People, and the Economy

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MARGARET ATWOOD'S MUCH CIRCULATED RESPONSE to Stephen Harper's massive and pointedly directed budget cuts to the arts just prior to the last election emphasizes the economic shortsightedness of Harper's move. While Atwood rightly notes that artists are ordinary people, that many ordinary people go to concerts and art galleries, buy CDs, read books, and perhaps even attend or perform opera, and that artists contribute to the economy to the tune of \$46 billion, in my mind there is a deeper question to be asked. That question is: What *is* the relationship of the arts to the economy? If some of us believe that government ought to redirect private gains to fund the arts (that is, taxes on profits or income), we ought also to ask why we should allow our imaginations to support an economic system that privileges the greed of banks and other financial institutions against the interests of ordinary people. We tell ourselves a tale of economic progress and the rising value of property, and through deeper fictions about options, puts, futures, and derivatives, we make that progress happen—until the logic of the story collapses on itself, with dire material consequences. With all the shenanigans going on in Parliament to fix or not fix that particular fiction using taxpayers' dollars, how many of us ever stop to consider why we agree to imagine the economy

as the centre of national life rather than see it as something that ought to serve the life of a national community? Should the arts be valued, in other words, just because they contribute \$46 billion to the economy, or should we understand economic support for the arts as what one arena of public life should return to another in recognition of the extreme power that we, as citizens, through an extraordinary act of imagination give it: money equals not just time but objects, land, work, and ideas.

This moment, when the material consequences of that act of imagination are being felt acutely, strikes me as a good one to reopen our agreement to it, or, at the very least, to re-open the form that agreement takes. It matters because our lives are enmeshed with the story of the economy. Thank goodness not all arts funding has been pulled—though with the knockout punch to TradeRoute and PromArts, much of that which allows Canadian artists to converse with artists and audiences internationally has. There are enough artists still around to ask about our relationships to the economy, although it always boggles me why some of the most successful artists and writers I know live in such poverty, while the academics, civil servants, and corporate folk around me do not. What if we were to stop thinking about artists as the disposable excess of our society and begin to imagine them at its centre? How much different would our lives be if the economy served the arts instead of the other way around?

At the very least, the spin that imagines Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* depriving Mary of her junior league hockey uniform or Tommy of his flute lesson has got to go. The painting may be boring, but I'd rather spend half a day on hold with Telus than listen to another facetious critique. Put Martin Gero's *Young People Fucking*, or just the name of the band Holy Fuck in place of *Voice of Fire*, and I'll throw myself in front of an Office Depot truck speeding down the 401. Seriously. Do people still spend entire Christmas dinners voluntarily having these conversations? The point is that using *Voice of Fire* or *Young People Fucking* as representative stand-ins for the arts in general ridiculously oversimplifies what artists do. It says a lot more about the speaker's anxieties about a) formalism and b) sex than it does about art.

The choice of one or two pieces as usurpers of children's education disingenuously stupefies both the speaker and the arts. This was Atwood's critique. Typical attacks on government funding for the arts assume that ordinary people don't play or listen to music, make or watch movies, or read or write poems, short stories, and novels. To rage against the ways in which our children's education is being limited is justified, but to suggest that artists do the deprivation is absurd. It's a classic divide and

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conquer argument, and we do ourselves a disservice by repeating such an unimaginative and transparent fiction. Harper is no more interested in little Tommy or little Mary than he is in the ballet or *Voice of Fire*, Everyman sweater and childhood piano lessons notwithstanding. He just doesn't want Tommy and Mary fucking. Or thinking. The cuts to arts—particularly those aspects which allow it to be communicated to large or international audiences or the parts that allow it to be preserved for later consideration—seem to me directed at reshaping our imaginations for us, by steering us away from the capacity to make challenging art work, of course, but, more pointedly, by limiting our opportunities to see or hear it if and when it is made and, therefore, to have a consciousness about the world that is larger than the story about hard work, God, and the economy by which he would like us all to live. (This, by the way, dear flamers, is not a “bad” story, but it is a narrow one.) If our imaginations do not work, then neoliberal ideology does not have to dictate what we do; rather it infects us like a virus and we speak the old, oppressive story as though we believe it and it alone, without recognizing that it lies at the root of our privations. This is not censorship; it is a much more insidious and subtle form of social control. Too many of us run in fear of Big Brother, while failing to take notice of the soma being piped into the water.

What remains to be unpacked is the question of taxpayer dollars and the notion that we as individual citizens pay for art that we don't want, we don't like, or by which we are offended. The subsidized whiner stereotype has to be jettisoned as nothing other than a conservative fabrication. I have never in my life met an artist or writer who wasn't incredibly grateful and proud to receive the grant monies for which she or he has competed. And for the record, artists stretch the dollars they receive as far as any working-class immigrant I know. The notion of the artist as lazy, like the notion of immigrants as a drain on the system, is another fabrication of the corporate lapdogs.

However, the concern about taxes going to things we don't want is worth considering, as is the notion that if the art is “good” it will be competitive on the free market. I think it is important to note, first of all, that the free market is a fiction that cannot be actualized because full knowledge of its workings is not possible from the point of view of any one participant. When we tell ourselves that the free market is a desirable ideal, we empower those with the quickest and most comprehensive access to information—prime ministers and CEOs. Even if they are not corrupt (hello, Mr Mulroney!) the market is still not free. Further, subsidies and other ways of channeling money in the direction of social and

private interests have structured our economy for a very long time. The auto industry, the oil and gas industry, and the inflated housing market wouldn't exist without it. Neither would schools, hospitals, the police, or the army. Farming might exist—if you can still call farms those massive, cruel, and polluting meat factories and fields of genetically modified wheat, soy, and corn. (Unless, of course, you took away the funding for science research, too!) As individuals, not all of us agree to all of these things, but when we enter into a social contract called citizenship we agree to let those who know something about transportation, housing, education, health care, public safety, and international justice make decisions as our representatives or as employees of our representatives. If we don't like their decisions, of course we should protest them. In a strong democracy, we would protest from a place of knowledge, compassion, and careful thinking. The current crisis in democracy exists because those very areas of life that show us how to think and feel are under attack.

We have subsidized corporate ideology by sacrificing our imaginations for too long. At this turning point in the unfree market, as the political winds of our continent begin to change, this might be a moment for all of us to exercise our artistic capacity to dream about how our relationship to national and international communities might be better. Some countries invest in the arts because it is good for business. Wouldn't we prefer to invest in it because it was good for our imaginations?