

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Cormack, Patricia and James F. Cosgrave.** 2013. *Desiring Canada: CBC Contests, Hockey Violence, and Other Stately Pleasures*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 257 pp. \$27.95 Paperback (9781442613911).

**P**ierre Trudeau's famous late-sixties statement that "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation" turns out to be a performative contradiction. Indeed, it turns out to embody the central paradox of the liberal democratic state, that claims to *laissez faire* never really mean that the state will be absent, whether from the economy, from the bedroom, or from our imagination. It's not just that Trudeau was the first Canadian Prime Minister to be a sex symbol, nor that the Canadian state has continued to regulate, interfere with, and surveil the private lives of Canadians (cf. Kinsman and Gentile 2010). According to Patricia Cormack and James F. Cosgrave, there's more to the story. In *Desiring Canada*, they argue that Trudeau's assertion "signals more than the removal of the state: it also signals a new relation between the state and the pleasures of its citizens — a relation," they suggest, "that is rooted in the cultivation rather than the regulation of pleasures" (4). In a book rich in detailed and sophisticated analysis and observation of everyday life, Cormack and Cosgrave present a novel social entanglement of pleasure, identity, and the Canadian state, arguing that the state's new biopolitical mandate involves inciting rather than quelling the (quotidian) passions of its citizens.

Retracing their triangular framework of pleasure, identity, and the state, Cormack and Cosgrave offer three orientations to *Desiring Canada*. First, presupposing that desire is social and socially constructed rather than a mere artefact of individual personality (or natural national proclivity), *Desiring Canada* refers to the possibility of a peculiarly Canadian style of desire. As we might expect, this has something to do with the CBC, hockey, comedy, and drive-thru coffee. But as we might also expect, these stereotypically Canadian pleasures/desires turn out to have complex relationships to Canadian identity and the needs of the state.

From a second angle, *Desiring Canada* refers to the fact that "Canada, like all democratic modern nation-states, must be viewed as a desired object in the hearts and minds of its citizens" (9). Liberal democracies must appeal to the imaginations of their citizens (Anderson 1991),

even if only in preparation for elections. The state needs our desire, needs us to like being “Canadian.” Nationalism provides the primary means to this end, of course, and Cormack and Cosgrave offer a multi-sided study of an ambiguous nationalist identity and desire formed around: (Chapter 1) a state-mandated and institutionalized culture industry dedicated to paternalistically luring citizens to itself as an object of identification and desire (i.e., the literalness of the CBC slogan “Canada lives here”); (Chapter 2) a populist corporation peddling bad coffee, donuts, and commercials evoking sentimental nationalism while also serving as a lowbrow antidote to the highly managed offerings of the CBC and a pseudo-public sphere for political photo-ops; (Chapter 3) a national sport (hockey) which has institutionalized a national ritual of sacrificial “domestic violence”; (Chapter 4) a State-sponsored and regulated gambling industry that perversely generates social suffering (in the form of addictions) and tax revenue simultaneously; and (Chapter 5) a State-sponsored political comedian that skirts true political satire in favour of a deeply nationalistic form of self-sacrificing political parody.

Finally, *Desiring Canada* refers to the cultivation of citizens with a desire for desire, the formation of a national identity through celebrating and perpetuating an identity crisis, a permanent lack, “the pleasure of wanting” (12). Here *Desiring Canada* appears like a sequel to Kieran Keohane’s 1997 *Symptoms of Canada*, which argued that while there is no real Canada, we can still enjoy the peculiarly Canadian symptoms of its lack. Although Cormack and Cosgrave mute the Lacanian and Hegelian chords that reverberate throughout *Symptoms*, their key conceptual framework, the triangular network of identity, pleasure, and desire, owes something equally to Lacan and to Foucault, while resisting any too Hegelian dialectic or too expert a diagnosis. *Desiring Canada* provides something closer, in the end, to Adorno’s negative dialectic, in its searching reflection on the vicissitudes of nation-state/consumer society citizenship in which the bureaucratic CBC is enjoyed through resistance, and countered by the low-brow, anti-elite “feeling” consumer citizen who drinks Tim Hortons coffee or pays taxes via VLT.

What is so pleasing about this book is that its theoretical machinery works so smoothly, humming along in the background without drowning out the everyday materials which form the focus of attention. Their concluding injunction to “mind the gap” rather than, say, “enjoy your symptom,” refers readers back to citizenship as democratic engagement and away from expert and oracular pronouncements. Cormack and Cosgrave want their readers to think about what it means to be a citizen in a society where one’s everyday pleasures and democratic impulses are

tangled up in populism, commodity fetishism, myths of heroic sacrifice, and fantasies of freedom through lottery.

The fifth chapter, on gambling, gets to the heart of the matter. Gambling is seldom linked with Canadian identity, but turns out to illustrate some of the starkest contradictions between a state that needs our desire and self-sacrifice but doesn't want our democratic citizenship. Cormack and Cosgrave argue that the state's role as regulator needs to be understood alongside its role as *monopolist*, in which role it must manage the contradictions between the revenues it reaps and the social problems it generates. With gambling, the Canadian state does more than capitalize on the publicity afforded by the popularity of roll up the rim nationalism. Here, the state generates the commercial enterprise. Furthermore, whereas hockey implicitly advocates the sacrifice of the individual to the collective, gambling works on the premise that individuals are trying to escape their responsibility to the collective (e.g., as millionaire lottery winners), but also that, as they are freely choosing to gamble, any resulting personal problems are not the state's responsibility. This is an abject citizen, indeed.

If it is true, as some argue, that Émile Durkheim, the classical and still formidable theorist, a century on, of group-level identity and self-consciousness, never saw a collective representation he did not like, this may be in part because he never seriously contemplated commodification. He never fully appreciated the lineaments of the regulated infinity of capitalist consumerism. *Desiring Canada* does see them, critically reflecting on the tensions between democracy and the emergence and incoherence of commodified nationalism and consumer citizenship.

In calling their readers to reflect on the current ambiguities and contradictions of a nationalistic State that wants consumers more than it wants citizens, Cormack and Cosgrave offer reflections that may be usefully read alongside Sunera Thobani's *Exalted Subjects* (2007), particularly for those who suspect that much of the "lack" driving Canada's perpetual identity crisis concerns the floating signifier of whiteness that continues to "white-wash" Canadian nationhood. Cormack and Cosgrave may overstate, at a couple of points, the social constructionist position on desire, to understate, perhaps, the CBC's capacity for sentimental nationalism, and the writing could, occasionally, have been a bit more like Hemingway and a bit less like the writing in this review, but the one-line assessment has got to be positive: it was a pleasure.

REFERENCES

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