

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 288 pp. \$27.95 paper (978-0-8020-9519-0), \$60.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9759-0)

As a boy growing up in Toronto and becoming a Maple Leafs fan watching the CBC's Hockey Night in Canada telecasts, I remember seeing bits of "rural" programs like *The Tommy Hunter Show* and *Don Messer's Jubilee* before the hockey game. At the time I could not make much sense of — much less enjoy — this country and western and folk music fare being offered by the CBC. Reading *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* has helped me to understand the CBC's "bizarre mixture of the cultured and the rustic" in late 1960s and early 1970s television programming, among many other Canadian curios.

The title of Ryan Edwardson's book, *Canadian Content*, is not only a direct reference to the controversial Canadian content rules for radio and television, but an allusion to the ongoing problem of Canadianness and what fills up this signifier. If it is often said that Canadians don't know who they are, but know who they're not, Edwardson pursues the issue of what is to be defined as Canadian, and through what projects of "Canadianization" this has occurred. Canadianization, in its various historical modes, names a method for defining and filling up Canadianness in various ways. The contents have been contested throughout the 20th century, and Edwardson does an exceptional job of articulating the three main historical Canadianization projects: Masseyism from the 1930s–1950s, supported by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (the Massey Commission, 1949), grounded on a conception of high culture that should serve as the basis of Canadian national identity; the new nationalism of the 1960s, defined by a rising cultural producer middle class and intelligentsia, fearful of American cultural imperialism; and finally, the era of "cultural industrialism," the still dominant mode formulated in the Trudeau era of the late 1960s.

The book is enjoyable to read, and rich in examples, offering not only compelling tales of Canadian cultural history, but many useful insights. The book will be of great interest to sociologists (as well as communication theorists, Canadian and cultural studies analysts, and historians) for its analysis of Canadian cultural developments, but also for its implicit

sociology and the Gramscian subtexts concerning the struggles of particular individuals, groups, and institutions (cultural nationalists, cultural producers, arts councils, industry profiteers, media outlets, politicians and parties, government bureaucrats, state agencies) to hegemonically define Canadian content and nationhood.

We learn about the place of the Group of Seven in the early Nationalist project, the rise of the National Film Board, and other significant cultural and institutional developments shaped by the moral agenda of cultural nationalists, animated by fears of cultural debasement through massification. In the second phase of Canadianization, we read about the problems faced by Canadian musicians to get radio airplay, and the phenomenon of “Maple Syrup Porn” — home grown soft-porn films that were the only really profitable films funded by the taxpayer through the Canadian Film Development Fund. We also learn about the debates concerning Canadian content in universities that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, referring to the hiring problems faced by Canadian academics, and the dearth of course offerings with a focus on Canadian issues. Sociologists will encounter some of their own Canadian history here, since the Canadian Sociological and Anthropological Association was a “hotbed for Canadianization,” and passed a recommendation at its 1973 meeting for departments to limit non-Canadian faculty hiring. There is much more. Along with the debates about Canadian content in television and radio, there are also discussions of the film industry, the publishing and periodicals industries, the Canadian music scene, and communications policy — Edwardson covers a lot of ground.

The emphasis on culture as measurable quantity, driven in the early stages by the implementation of quotas for Canadian television stations, produces some amusing results, beyond the very low quality programs, such as an abundance of cheap game shows. It should be pointed out, though, that there were huge differences in budgets between the American and Canadian offerings in many television genres. In the case of quiz shows for example, Edwardson tells us that a half-hour American show averaged \$28,250, a Canadian one only \$6,500. In the absence of any minimum spending requirements, the regulatory requirement that television stations air Canadian content produced efforts by profit-driven station owners to do the bare minimum to fulfill the quotas: televise a man playing the organ for a couple of hours (a Canadian man for sure, but was it Canadian music?); a station based in southern Ontario even counted the TV test-pattern as Canadian content.

Where do Canadians stand today? It is under the discursive power of cultural industrialism, the mode of Canadianization preferred by state bureaucrats, where the interest in industrial-strength “culture” has long

surpassed the high Masseyist concerns with cultural quality. Americanization and massification — held to be synonymous by the early cultural nationalists — are no longer the great threats they once were, at least not for the industrial model, where culture has imploded into economy, and where the desire to export made-in-Canada cultural products and performers globally has meant cultural commodification and partnerships with multinational corporations. Such a route to nationhood is, for Edwardson, deeply contradictory and problematic.

For the sociologist of culture, certain issues emerge from Edwardson's account and deserve comment. One is the democratization of culture theme, where the definition of culture, through the course of the Canadianization projects, moves from a high to a middle brow, to an "everything is culture" or culture as commodity conception. These changing definitions parallel the shift in usage of the culture concept in the social sciences, where the "high" definition has gone into hiding, eclipsed by postmodernized conceptions.

There are also the hegemony issues, but the quest for, and contests over nationhood through culture as recounted here really seem to invoke a Bourdieuan framing, especially since we read about the class-cultural positions and political and economic interests of those who sought to benefit from particular definitions of Canadian culture and nationhood. As such, there is a Canadian national-cultural field being articulated. The state emerges as the dominant actor here; Edwardson informs us that, early on, governments were largely opposed to stepping in to support culture, but beginning in the second, and especially in the latest phase of Canadianization, culture becomes not only industrialized, but statized. For Edwardson, federal bureaucrats have come to occupy a dominant position in the national-cultural field, especially since Trudeau's interest in mobilizing culture against antifederalism forces. For the bureaucrats, what counts is numbers: cultural productivity dollars and statistics. It is significant then that, where Vincent Massey wanted Canada to be recognized as a cultured civilization, the bureaucrats mark Canadian culture in terms of international sales for Canadian products and performers (while many of the biggest stars themselves skip country), pointing to a Canadian habitus that, for decades, has generated national self-esteem issues.

Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood is itself an important example of Canadian content and deserves to be read by scholars of Canadian culture, history, and communications. It will edify anybody interested in the development of Canadian national identity, and the ongoing question: What is this thing called, Canadian?

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