

The Industrial Handing Down of Culture

Claude Martin^{*}

The industrialization of cultural production has been one of the major changes in our society since the beginning of the twentieth century. What types of changes are we looking at and why is it so important? In 1962, now a long time ago, Edgar Morin evoked, in *L'esprit du temps*, a “second industrial revolution,” one that deals with “images, dreams and messages, [which] result in the industrialization of the mind.” One thinks one can hear a cantor of the “new economy,” a very recent notion. At that time, people were questioning the changes happening within capitalism. This is when ideas like “leisure society,” the knowledge-based economy and the so called “information society” were put forward.

Several well known phenomena can be found at the core of these changes, which were firstly, the consequences of the industrial revolution. Gains in productivity and accelerated urbanization modified social structures. Parliamentary democracy and, later, the welfare state succeeded in giving citizens a status that conformed with the ancient belief in human dignity. The first steps in this process were taken in parallel with the development of the printing press, and the industries of book and periodical publishing. What would the Enlightenment have been without books? And democracy without newspapers?

^{*} Université de Montréal.

Has the handing down of culture been endangered by this industrialization of intellectual production? Of course not. Looking back through time, one can see that it has been, on the contrary, greatly favoured. But, once industrialization was carried out, values changed and new occupations arose. To writing one adds the journalist, a professional with a well defined and limited task, harnessed to his typewriter, and supplying copy to the linotype machine and the rotating presses essential to a newspaper — but also to advertising, a major source of financing for that newspaper. The writer has not, however, disappeared. One can see him producing a literature described as “popular,” in part tied to the new beneficiaries of literacy, but which do not impinge on colleagues plotting some aesthetic revolutions which would please more restrained publics.

Put differently, society has changed; so have the ways values and cultures develop. When sound recording showed up, it changed music. Caruso became a star throughout the world. The microphone and the amplifier made it possible to sing with a weak voice. The radio became an amplifier of the record; television even more so. Music has changed and the values it brings have also been changing.

Our hypothesis is the following one. The building up of Québec as a society rests, among other things, on the power of the cultural industries, even if the latter are also a vehicle for forces that can dissolve a society within a larger world. However, that power could not have been implemented outside the stream of the industrialization of cultural production. That is what gives those industries the possibility of reaching, of informing, of disturbing, of pleasing, etc. This is why one can talk here of an industrial paradox. On the one hand, here are particularly efficient channels for contributing to the making up of a value system peculiar to certain groups of human beings (which can in some cases lead in not very honourable directions). On the other hand, here are excellent means for those accepting the values underlining publicity or Hollywood productions. It is almost impossible to divorce these two factors. Radio can make people move in unison, but the music it is playing may have originated elsewhere.

It is with the arrival of the first publishers of periodicals and books, in the nineteenth century, that the struggle for the industrial handing down of French Canadian culture began. The Librairie Beauchemin, the ancestor of the actual book publisher, was founded in 1842. *L'histoire du Canada* of François-Xavier Garneau had its first release in 1845. This book can be considered as one of, or even the first Québec best seller. Jacques Michon (1999) is of the opinion that the first industrial production of books in Québec began around 1880. Jean de Bonville (1988) suggests that the transformation of the Québec press into mass

media supported by advertising occurred between 1884 and 1914. Radio began to broadcast in French, in Montréal, in the early 1920s. Those changes are part of an overall economic and social transformation, out of which French Canada emerged as a modern society.

After the Second World War, this development accelerated. In 1952, radio was succeeded by television. Information programs and radio soaps put on new clothes. The *Famille Plouffe* showed the changing society. With *Point de mire*, René Lévesque opened windows on the world, which was also changing. The famous strike of the Radio-Canada television producers revealed the abyss between Montréal and Ottawa. Popular book publishing placed on the market new economic approaches and *Les insolences du frère Untel* (Desbiens, 1961) is a landmark of that time. One can also find outstanding developments in the worlds of recording and cinema. On private television, *Jeunesse d'aujourd'hui* became the crucible for a series of new stars of popular songs. By the end of the sixties, Québec society was the beneficiary of a whole set of cultural industries... and social and political questions to deal with.

Those same industries, at the same time, began supplying us with a plethora of imported productions. Westerns and detective stories filled the screens of our television sets. The radio station CJMS dismissed *La bonne chanson* in favour of a hit parade of new popular music. The yo-yo and rock'n'roll music asserted themselves. The French book publisher Robert Laffont sold American best sellers here, books that were first translated for distribution in France. But all this was not totally new. Between the two Wars, some people were scandalized by the depravity of American feature films. But, mostly, there were counterreactions to that. The Roman Catholic Church, at that time, tried to produce a national cinema, but its rural orientation resulted in limited success. During the same period, the creation of France Film is a more interesting example. This firm succeeded in importing several feature films from France. Several years later, it provided the financial basis for the first private French speaking television station: Télé-Métropole.

This example is a good way of introducing another aspect of that second industrial revolution. In the transformation from France Film to Télé-Métropole, there is a major change in orientation. The market sets up its own rules for choosing and valorizing work. The dialectic of distinction is replaced by the one of distribution. The judgements of academics are succeeded by those, more democratic, of the public, who vote by choosing how to spend their leisure time. There is no question here of being naïve and adopting the slogan that pretends that the consumer is right. The public makes choices from among the supply offered by organizations that mostly seek profit. But these organizations have no interest in deceiving their

public. As for authors, they produce works spurred by themes found in their society. However, we face other dialectics, those of the cultural industries and their publics, and of authors and their publics.

But, as suggested by the title of this colloquium, Québec is a small society. This is a huge handicap in the field of cultural industries. Cultural productions, generally speaking, are characterized by production requirements that have high fixed costs, and variable costs which, depending on the size of the public, are rather low. A small society finds it difficult to make this domain profitable. A large society can do it more easily and can sell its productions abroad, without having to take into consideration production costs, which constitutes unfair competition with enterprises in smaller societies.

Given that, one would think that smaller societies would be caught in a situation whereby they import almost all their cultural productions, notwithstanding language barriers. But this is far from the case in Québec. Except, notably, for cinema, Québec productions capture an enviable part of the cultural market. Its television is a case frequently discussed in academic circles. People wonder how such a small society, living in the shadow of the United States, has succeeded in supplying the essentials of a television menu, from information to drama, the latter being the flagship of Québec's cultural industries, as my colleague Roger de la Garde put it (1992). How to explain this phenomenon?

A number of conditions made this possible. The first was a collective will to assert Québec's identity. This showed up first in periodicals and books, but moved rapidly to the mass media. It often dealt with the theme of survival. It also favoured the emergence of the social movement which addressed the political sovereignty of Québec.

The second condition is based on the overall economic development of Québec and on the springing up of a class of Francophone entrepreneurs, who like others elsewhere sought to accumulate capital in the media. Economic development gave people a level of disposable income sufficient to buy cultural goods and services, to be consumed during leisure time. An average Québec family spends about \$1,000 a year for cultural goods and services, in the first place to acquire television sets and cable, but also for reading material, records and evenings outside the home. This is a good starting point. This relative level of wealth opens the door to consumer goods. Out of this, advertising has been developed, as a means of mass communication for massaging mass consumption, but also as an essential support for financing large mass media.

The third condition is the way the State intervenes in cultural development. This can take different forms. A set of cultural institutions can be an answer to several concerns, like small market size or the fear of being invaded by foreign cultural productions. Radio-Canada is the most important of these institutions. Moreover, through the years, an apparatus of financial and regulatory support can give cultural enterprises resources and protection. We can think here, among other things, about the regulation of foreign ownership and the quotas for national production. The federal and provincial governments have explicitly created cultural policies under the banner of cultural diversity.

In addition to these three pillars of the creation of a cultural identity, there are other factors to be considered; for example, the creativity of the authors of cultural products, the effects of the language barrier, the impact of the school system, and the ability of Québec's cultural sector to simultaneously accept influences from Europe and the United States.

In sum, the history of Québec's cultural industries illustrates how smaller societies can use the media to produce and disseminate culture. To ensure the handing down of culture, everything had to change. The culture that has been handed down is differently dressed now. It can sometimes be erudite or avant-garde. But most of the time, its clothing is mediatic and popular, in the sense of widespread consumption. This is especially the case with some television programs, which are viewed by more than a quarter of the population, and at times nearly half. Those new clothes have been multiplying themselves whereas society has been fragmenting into several cultural models.

On the other hand, cultural industries work more and more on an international basis, where the productions of unequal markets compete. Also, the development of capitalism in the world of cultural industries challenges at least two of the three pillars of Québec's cultural power. Local firms, searching for more profitable conditions, have to conquer a slice of the world market. Sometimes, they use strategies such as camouflaging the origins of production. Some question the necessity of protective systems which made it possible for them to develop. Others are tempted to sell themselves to the highest bidder, i.e., to international media conglomerates. These players are not keen on systems of cultural protection, and lobby to have them abolished.

There remains the first pillar, a collective willingness to assert one's identity. And what a fragile one! Listening to what the younger generation says it prefers among cultural products, we can be on the edge of

despair or cynicism. Is it because of their limited exposure to history? Or is there an irresistible trend to finding pleasure only in “international” productions? Will their tastes change when they’re more mature? Two hundred years ago, we couldn’t have been more full of hope. A small society, poor and isolated, profited from circumstances that give it the tools to explore its identity and opened it to the world. During the 1980s, the slice of the markets captured by Québec cultural productions fell in a number of domains (books, records, television). It was a dramatic shift, but we recovered. New creative forms have arrived. The State mobilized itself once again and cultural organizations have made adjustments in what they offer. Out of this crisis, Québec’s cultural industries have benefited from a new period of prosperity, which continues today. This does not mean that all artists are well paid. That is another question. Nor does it mean that we should be proud of all that is found on our pages, our loudspeakers or our screens. Again, another question. But the point is that those three pillars can still adapt themselves to new conditions.

REFERENCES

- De Bonville, Jean (1988), *La presse québécoise de 1884 à 1984. Genèse d'un média de masse*, Sainte-Foy, Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Desbiens, Jean-Paul (1961), *Les insolences du frère Untel*, Montréal, Les Éditions de l'Homme.
- De la Garde, Roger (1992), "The téléroman, Flagship of Québec's Television Industry," Université Laval, Roneo.
- Garneau, François-Xavier (1845-1852), *Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu'à nos jours*, Québec, Imprimerie de N. Aubin, 4 vol.
- Michon, Jacques, Ed. (1999), *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XXe siècle*, Volume 1, *La naissance de l'éditeur 1900-1959*, Montréal, Fides.
- Morin, Edgar (1962), *L'esprit du temps. Essai sur la culture de masse*, Paris, Grasset.

