Introduction: Neoliberalism and Provincial Cultural Policy and Administration

Sabine Milz
University of Alberta

The three papers included in the special section of the Canadian Journal of Communication invite a critical and interdisciplinary conversation on neoliberalism and provincial cultural policy development. As a literary scholar specializing in Canadian literature, I have been working on an interdisciplinary research project that examines whether, and how, a neoliberal shift in Canadian economic policy has affected the production and dissemination of literature in Canada's Prairie provinces and, with this, the very notion of Canadian literature. As part of this project, I have conducted interviews with major book-industry players in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, including literary publishers, booksellers, writers, industry organizations, distributors, and people involved in cultural exchange on a policy level. The interviews indicate both a weakening of national consciousness and cultural nationalist idea(1)s of Canadian literature and a re-constitution of Canadian national literature as commercial enterprise in which small-scale regional literary activity is increasingly marginalized. Interviewees have, among other things, called attention to a cultural policy shift—both federal and provincial—in the engagement between cultural and economic policy objectives, between cultural production as sociocultural activity and commercial-industrial activity. More concretely, they have pointed to a policy and funding re-prioritization of the market- and consumer-based aspects of culture1 that, while showing some significant differences in the jurisdictions of the three Prairie provinces, suggests a degree of convergence that may be attributable to the impact of neoliberalism—as both ideology and approach to government2—on cultural governance.

This subsection of the Canadian Journal of Communication, themed “Neoliberalism and Provincial Cultural Policy and Administration,” is the outcome of an ACCUTE/CPSA/CCA joint session3 held at the 2008 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences that brought together interdisciplinary researchers critically examining the diverse impacts of neoliberalism on cultural policy and administration in the provincial jurisdictions of Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Québec, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. The goal of the joint session and this publication of session proceedings is to advance an area of research largely ignored in policy studies on neoliberalism: the provincial dimensions of the effects and articulations of neoliberal-
ism in Canada’s cultural policy domain. With the consequences of neoliberalism primarily examined from international and national perspectives, little critical attention has thus far been paid to subnational dimensions, and especially to cultural policy development and administration at the subnational or provincial level.

Each of the three articles that make up this CJC subsection summarizes and compares the cultural policy approaches of two provinces—Nova Scotia and British Columbia, Québec and Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan—and examines how these approaches conform with and depart from the premises of neoliberalism. In “The ‘Neoliberal Turn’ in Provincial Cultural Policy and Administration: The Case of Québec and Ontario,” which undertakes a comparative study of Canada’s largest and central provinces, Monica Gattinger and Diane Saint-Pierre delineate how Québec’s and Ontario’s historically different cultural policy approaches, one rooted in a relationship with France and the other with Great Britain, have lead to different hybridizations of the neo-liberal agenda. The authors emphasize that these processes have taken place at different times in Québec and Ontario, leading to different articulations that are shaped by specific historical and linguistic traditions, distinctive infrastructural contexts, and complex socio-political dynamics.

“Going with the Flow: Neoliberalism and Cultural Policy in Manitoba and Saskatchewan” by M. Sharon Jeannotte shows that a market-driven re-prioritization of culture and cultural spending and a devolution of the cultural sector have also occurred in Manitoba and Saskatchewan—though, again, the two provinces’ unique demographic, historical, political, and social contexts, including the legacy of the NDP in the two provinces, have led to different actions, outcomes, and timelines. In Manitoba, cultural policy decisions over the last two decades have been consistent with a professionalizing and Winnipeg-centred approach to cultural industry development, while in Saskatchewan cultural policy, with its roots in adult education and recreation, has remained community oriented. Like Gattinger and Saint-Pierre’s study of cultural policy in Ontario and Québec, Jeannotte’s study based in Manitoba and Saskatchewan suggests that in spite of an observable degree of neo-liberal activity in the cultural policy sector in the provinces, historical specificity remains key.

The third contribution, “Neoliberalism in Provincial Cultural Policy Narratives: Perspectives from Two Coasts,” advances a similar argument. Of the three articles, Jan Marontate and Catherine Murray’s comparative study of cultural policy development in Nova Scotia and British Columbia is most hesitant to establish a clear correlation between neoliberalism in action and recent provincial cultural policy, and it is most directly concerned with the challenges of conceptualizing a provincial cultural policy space and empirically assessing the impact of neo-liberal ideology on cultural policy formulation. Nova Scotia and British Columbia, Marontate and Murray point out, share a disaggregated approach to culture and a long-standing commitment to a business or entrepreneurial approach to cultural development; decentralization and an economic approach to culture predate the emergence and adoption of neoliberal ideology.

Fiscal restraint has been considered a key indicator of a neoliberal turn in state governance, and the articles in this collection show that it was clearly felt in federal cultural spending in the mid-1990s, although cutbacks in federal expenditures have
differed from province to province. The papers also suggest that, contrary to federal
cultural spending and neoliberal doctrine, provincial and municipal cultural spending
in the provinces has remained relatively stable over the past decades, and several
provinces have now surpassed federal cultural spending.

In their analyses of the effects of neoliberalism on provincial cultural policy and
administration in Canada, the three articles presented here necessarily engage with
conceptual and methodological issues. As Marontate and Murray conclude, more
empirical research on neoliberalism in action is needed, and this research must con-
front methodological challenges such as accounting for historical antecedents to con-
temporary trends as well as engaging in comparative research. Documenting the
resistances to neo-liberal ideology and differences within the provincial sector is cru-
cial. For instance, amateur or/cottage-industry grass-roots activities in many ways
continue to operate autonomously of cultural policy decisions—neoliberal or not—
and remain important to the cultural landscapes in all of Canada’s provinces. My own
research, which methodologically builds on interviews with people at the front lines
of the cultural industry of book publishing, emphasizes the importance of the
encounter and exchange of academic and non-academic understandings of culture,
cultural enterprise, neoliberalism, and their interrelations. It is only by engaging in
detailed examinations of how neoliberal doctrines are negotiated at the provincial and
other local levels that we can advance viable alternatives in discussions of cultural pol-
ICY. Offering precisely this kind of engagement is what makes the three articles in this
special CJC section important to the CJC readership.

Acknowledgments
I would like to gratefully acknowledge Joy Cohnstaedt for inspiring me to submit a call
for papers for what developed into this joint session and for giving me valuable advice
in the course of my organization of the session. Grateful acknowledgment also goes to
the SSHRC for enabling me to do this work.

Notes
1. On the federal plane, the 1982 report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee is commonly
considered the tipping point in a shift toward an economic strategy for culture as industry and toward
an economic, rather than national identity/unity, argument for government funding for culture. While
the tenet to subordinate industry strategies to cultural objectives can be found in several seminal cul-
tural-industries studies of the 1980s, such as Karl Siegler’s Avoiding the False Dialectic (1984) and the
Department of Communications’ Vital Links (Canada, 1987), it is, as both the interviews I conducted
and the articles in this collection indicate, rather reversed today.

2. Neoliberalism can be broadly defined as a political philosophy, traceable in particular to the mid-
twentieth-century liberal economic philosophy propagated by the Mont Perelin Society, and a politi-
cal-economic movement that, while highly varied from place to place and over time, culminated in
the 1980s and 1990s and de-emphasized Keynesian liberal doctrines for the sake of more classical lib-
eral methods, such as the deregulation of markets and the adjustment of the role of state governments
to that of enabler of a flexible system of regulation for the optimized flow of market forces.

3. The acronyms used here stand for the following associations: the Association of Canadian College
and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE), the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA), and
the Canadian Communications Association (CCA).

5. The most obvious exception here would be Alberta, where the funding envelope has significantly decreased.

**References**