

(E)very state holds a conversation with its subjects as to the legitimacy of its existence. In this conversation, the state is engaged in self-justification, in making the case for the loyalty of its citizens. Some states may have so weak a franchise without the use of force or fiction that the creation and propagation of a narrative of legitimacy is all-consuming, pervasive, and devastatingly revealing of the regime. Even in democratic societies, however, the necessity for generating and maintaining a narrative of community is a universal occupation. What is important is that these ideas and images are part of every state's definition. Governments are virtually compelled to generate or favour images that reinforce the relationship between their subjects and themselves. The state may claim to intervene in the market-place of ideas out of defence of its culture, a valid and relevant ground for intervention, or, more ambitiously, to encourage a world outlook that extends its dominion. National identity, so theatrical and compelling a concept, becomes, as I have argued, the often elegant collection of images that the government (or a series of interest groups) manufactures or encourages to keep itself in power.

Starowicz' proposals address the processes of competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation that go on in informal fashion in all contemporary democratic societies. When they are pursued in a tolerant, understanding manner, they exemplify the ideal of a working democracy in which the role of government is minimal. But Starowicz writes as though the ideal always is adhered to and as if the state does not exist -- or, at least, that it exists only when it is needed to expedite the process. But the state does exist, needs to legitimate itself, and, as Price makes abundantly clear, is consumed with issues of support and self-preservation. Moreover, the ideal of peaceful subgroup competition is frequently violated and, when it is, state intervention may be required. There are no guarantees that the many groups that comprise today's socially heterogeneous countries will always work out their differences peacefully and there are no stateless societies. Even if governments were not self-interested, they are compelled to monitor the ongoing competition for dominance and control and, frequently, to intervene in order to keep the peace. Moreover, as Price also makes clear, the invention and promotion of myths can be preferable to force as the mode of intervention. This places the state in the position of promoting some particular culture and identity, not the vague undefined process of accepting an ongoing competition with forever shifting outcomes that Starowicz suggests as adequate.

Neither Starowicz nor Price is ignorant or naive; their differences reflect the dilemma of all contemporary countries -- people trying to exercise democracy and states struggling to maintain stable conditions in which they can do so. The result is an ongoing dialectic, a continuous movement between polarities of minimal intervention and group competition in an uncontrolled market, on the one hand, and state intervention to reestablish and maintain these conditions, on the other. All the while there is a continuous need on the part of the state to maintain itself with popular support and to legitimate its right to intervene when it does. Canada exemplifies everything that both Starowicz and Price discuss -- different groups engaged in a sometimes friendly, sometimes acrimonious ongoing competition for cultural dominance, a state with a strong franchise that has been allowed to grow weak, and a state that needs to generate and maintain a narrative of community. In these circumstances, there is no ideal role for the state with respect to the media. We are likely to see more of the same.

ENDNOTES

1. These and other available data sets also might provide material needed to examine the second and fourth propositions.