

## TIME TO FIGHT BACK

Research grants have lately become the target of attacks from politicians and members of the media. A certain reform M.P. has decided to start awarding his own "golden fleece" award. The *Ottawa Sun*, a populist paper, has been only too willing to follow suit, and has denounced grants to scientists once, and to humanists and social scientists twice (see the latest instalment on the right). Although I have not conducted a scientific survey of Canadian newspapers, I doubt this is an isolated case. The most disturbing aspect of these attacks is not their existence, but the wilful ignorance and intense parochialism they seem to reveal. The *Sun* could not get SSHRC's name right! In his attack on scientific grants, their journalist admitted he based his judgment on the title of the projects only, adding that, had he cared to learn more about the content of a particular project, he might have found it worthwhile, but he had not bothered. Research grants are "doled out" like welfare payments. Any topic which is not part of the immediate experience of the media people or of politicians is "esoteric" and investigating "esoteric" subjects is idle curiosity satisfied at taxpayers' expense. And finally, public money should fund only Canadian topics. The importance of research in general, and of our own in particular, is so self-evident to us that we tend to believe anyone willing to take a closer look at what we are doing will agree with us. The problem is that our attackers are not willing to take a closer look. It is time we grab them by the neck and force them to do so. It is also time we undercut them: media people and politicians attack us because they think they can get away with it; they think we do not have popular support among voters and readers.

What can we do to remedy the situation?

First: Make sure politicians know we are ready to defend what we are doing. Any

time we get a SSHRC or other public grant, we should write to our MP, MLA and MNA to inform them, and explain why this research matters. This will not convert anyone, but at least it will send a message to them.

In passing, it would not hurt to tell them how the money will be spent; I have a suspicion they believe it goes straight into our bank accounts. We should point out to them that the bulk goes to students (we are job creators!). Some is spent on hardware, and it would not be a bad idea to mention the fact that academics are probably the only salaried professionals not provided with computers by their employers.

Second: Enlist your students. We use the results -- and even the material -- from our research in undergraduate classes; but some of us are a bit too modest about explaining from where the material comes. And when this research is funded we should mention it. Students should become aware of the fact their courses are interesting because their profs are not rehashing twenty-year old books! They should also be aware of the fact that some of this fascinating material would not exist without grants. Eventually, they will become decision makers, and we want to make sure they are on our side.

Third: Take your research out. We should all, recipients of SSHRC or not, identify a non-academic audience likely to be interested in our research. It can be a local historical society, a social club, a professional association, the local high schools, etc... Share your research with them (workshops, public lectures, etc...) Besides Brownie points and great homemade cookies, you might get some additional information out of the exercise. If there are enough groups out there who think "their" historian is a great person

with fascinating stories to tell, it will be harder for others to depict us as parasites.

Fourth: Write for non-academic audiences. See if a local weekly would be interested in short articles on local history derived from your work. At the end, mention how the research was funded. Even "esoteric" topics may interest local

### SCHOLARS TAKE US FOR GRANTED

by Robert Fife, *The Ottawa Sun*,  
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Canadian scholars were handed \$34.6 million in federal grants this year to study video games, lesbian literature and social change in Iron Age Cameroon.

The Social Sciences and Humanitarian Research Council provided a list of 567 grants it doled out to university profs for 1995-96. Although some grants deal with Canadian subjects, many don't and others are fairly esoteric.

Calgary scholar Alison MacEachren received \$183,610 to for an archaeological study of social change in Iron Age northern Cameroon.

Another \$100,000 went to a B.C. academic to study video games and \$97,000 to examine Idolatry and religious practice in colonial Peru.

Other grants include:

■ \$62,000: Shrimp mariculture and the pauperization of peasant households in Thailand.

■ \$56,000: Visibility, motivity and sovereignty: the organization of perception, movement and space in Heian Japan.

■ \$34,131: The representation of lesbians in French literature since 1890.

■ \$29,500: Li Po the poet as a multifaceted cultural icon in the visual arts of China.

newspapers. The editor may think that an article about a local resident digging out really neat stuff in Northern Cameroon is worth printing! Do not overlook the *Beaver* either. And if you know local people actually watch the stuff, think community cable TV.

In both cases (presentations and writing) this means looking at our research through non-academic eyes: what have we found that an ordinary, reasonably educated and normally curious person would find worth

knowing? (It may be something entertaining; it may be something perceived as useful by the target audience; or it may be something which helps us understand a larger issue.)

I know that some readers will be uncomfortable with this agenda. After all, we have never been trained to talk to non-academics. We are also not accustomed to advertise and "sell" ourselves outside the academic world, and some probably think

we should not have to do so. But I am afraid we do not have a choice. If we do not start selling ourselves to the public as if our jobs and our research money depended on it, we may soon lose both, or be reduced to teaching higher high school. Besides, our attackers are right on at least one point: our research is paid, directly or indirectly, with public money, and the public should get something in return.

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## IL EST TEMPS DE SE REBIFFER

Les subventions de recherche commencent à être l'objet d'attaques. Un certain parlementaire du Reform Party a décidé de partir en guerre contre ce qu'il considère comme un gaspillage de fonds publics, et certains secteurs des media semblent disposés à emboîter le pas. Depuis le début de l'année, le *Sun* d'Ottawa, un journal populiste, a dénoncé les subventions scientifiques à une reprise, et les subventions en sciences humaines à deux reprises (voir l'article en page 18). Je n'ai pas effectué de survol scientifique du reste de la presse canadienne, mais je doute qu'il s'agisse d'un cas isolé.

L'aspect le plus inquiétant de ces incidents n'est pas leur existence, mais le parti pris d'ignorance et l'intense esprit de clocher qu'ils semblent révéler. Le *Sun* n'a pas été capable de donner le nom du CRSH. Le journaliste qui a attaqué les subventions scientifiques admettait dans son article que ses jugements se basaient exclusivement sur le titre des projets, et ajoutait qu'il aurait probablement pu obtenir des informations supplémentaires à leur propos s'il s'en était donné la peine - mais il ne s'en était pas donné la peine. Les subventions sont traitées comme des cadeaux immérités. Tout sujet qui n'entre pas dans l'expérience de vie immédiate d'un politicien ou d'un journaliste est considéré comme «ésotérique» et étudié

un sujet «ésotérique» revient à satisfaire une curiosité gratuite aux frais du contribuable. Finalement, l'argent des Canadiens ne devrait financer que des projets canadiens.

L'importance de la recherche en général (et de la nôtre en particulier) nous paraît si évidente que nous sommes trop facilement convaincu qu'un observateur tant soit peu attentif se rangera à notre point de vue. Mais nos attaquants ont décidé de ne pas être attentifs. Il est temps de les attraper par le collet, et de les obliger à l'être. Il est aussi plus que temps d'acquiescer un soutien populaire. Parlementaires et journalistes ne nous attaquent que parce qu'ils sont convaincus de pouvoir le faire avec impunité.

Comment pouvons-nous réagir?

En premier lieu, nous devrions nous assurer que les parlementaires sachent que nous sommes prêts à nous défendre. A chaque fois que nous obtenons une subvention du CRSH ou d'un autre organisme public, nous devrions écrire à nos députés fédéral et provincial pour les en informer, et leur expliquer pourquoi cette recherche est importante. Ceci ne convertira personne, mais au moins, cela attirera l'attention.

En passant, ce ne serait pas une mauvaise idée de leur expliquer comment l'argent va être dépensé; je soupçonne que beaucoup croient qu'il va directement dans notre compte en banque. Nous devrions attirer leur attention sur le fait que le gros de la subvention sert à payer des étudiants (nous sommes des créateurs d'emplois!). Une partie sert à acheter du matériel informatique, et ce ne serait pas une mauvaise idée de mentionner le fait que les universitaires sont probablement les seuls salariés qui doivent payer leur ordinateur de leur poche. En second lieu: Enrôlons nos étudiants. Nous utilisons les résultats de nos recherches - et même les données ou documents - dans nos cours pré-diplômés; mais certains d'entre nous sont un peu trop modestes et n'annoncent pas d'où vient le matériel. Et si la recherche est subventionnée, il faudrait le mentionner aussi. Les étudiants devraient se rendre compte que leurs cours sont intéressants parce que leurs profs ne leur servent pas du réchauffé vieux de vingt ans. Ils devraient aussi se rendre compte qu'une partie du matériel qui les intéresse n'existerait pas sans subventions de recherche. Dans l'avenir, nos étudiants seront les preneurs de décisions, et nous voulons qu'ils soient de notre côté.

En troisième lieu, sortons notre recherche de la tour d'ivoire. Nous devrions tous,