

Montreal and *The Captive City*¹

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Figure 1
Montreal Premiere of *The Captive City* (1952). Courtesy of the Centre de recherche Lionel Groulx, Montreal. Fonds du Comité de moralité publique P47/S.5. Photographer unknown.

In the archives of the *Centre de recherche Lionel Groulx*, a research center devoted to the history of Québec, sits a photograph that serves as the point of departure for this essay. In this picture, nine men in business suits stand in the lobby of a cinema, in front of a movie poster that looms over their heads (Fig. 1). This photograph was taken at the Montreal premiere of the American film *The Captive City* (directed by Robert Wise, 1952). *Captive City* opened at Montreal's Orpheum Cinema on July 11, 1952 and concluded its week-long run on July 17. The men assembled in the photograph include most of the executive committee of Montreal's *Comité de moralité publique*, one of the municipal reform groups that had come together in 1951 to form the electorally-oriented *Ligue d'Action Civique*.

For those who study this period in Montreal history, the photograph of the *Captive City* premiere is a useful, hitherto ignored piece of historical evidence. It confirms the interest of Montreal-based municipal reformers in exploiting similarities between their own actions and movements for urban reform underway in the United States in the early 1950s. It is common to

understand the campaigns against vice and corruption in post-World War II Montreal as local in character and inspiration, part of that longer historical process by which Québec struggled to leave behind the *grande noirceur* of the Duplessis years and bring a modernizing transparency to public life (Straw 1992, 1997). Hidden within most accounts of that process, however, are the multiple forms of cultural and political expression that Montreal reformers shared with groups and individuals active in the waves of urban reform sweeping across the United States at the same time. The photograph of the *Captive City* premiere captures these affinities, condensing them within this punctual, staged event. Nevertheless, I will argue, this image cannot help but betray something of the unequal and one-sided character of this gesture of common purpose. As the key figures in Montreal's reform movement assemble before the camera, joining their crusade to one dramatized in a Hollywood film, the one-sided character of this gesture becomes clear.

Movements of municipal reform

The *Comité de moralité publique* had been launched in early 1950, under the leadership of Dr. Ruben Levesque, to convince the Québec Supreme Court to initiate a judicial probe into municipal vice and corruption in Montreal. At the far left of the photo of the *Captive City* opening we see Pierre DesMarais, later to serve for many years as President of the Montreal City Council. To his immediate right stands Pacifique "Pax" Plante, former director of the morality squad of the Montreal Police Department and, at the time of the photograph, legal counsel for the *Comité* in its representations before the judicial probe into municipal corruption. Continuing, from left to right, the photo shows us Félix-Adolphe Senécal, Sam Kunitsky (the Montreal manager of the United Artists film company), future Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau, Antoine Tremblay (president of the *Comité de moralité publique*), Lionel Vezeau, Jean-Robert Bonnier, and J.-Z-Léon Patenaude. The photo was published on page 1 of the August 1952 issue of *Action Civique*, the "organe officiel" of the *Comité de moralité publique*.

The presence of these men at the première of *The Captive City* seems easy to explain, a demonstration of affinities that tied the political project of the *Comité* to the explicitly reformist sensibilities behind the U.S.-made film. The description of vice-ridden cities as bodies held "captive" by criminal organizations was a recurrent rhetorical flourish in both U.S. and Québécois campaigns for municipal reform in the decade following World War II. A key event in the campaign against vice in Montreal was the 1950 publication of a book entitled *Montréal sous le régime de la pègre* (Plante); the sense, in this title, of a population dispossessed of its own city was a common motif in reformist discourse. A poster from the early 1950s publicizing the activities of the *Comité de moralité publique* bore the slogan "Libérons Montréal de la Pègre" and showed a captive woman bound in ropes on which were written the names of such vices as "pari organisé" and "prostitution" (Montreal Archives Portal — Chapter 11).

The Captive City was released early in a cycle of Hollywood films of the 1950s that dealt with urban corruption and municipal reform move-

ments within the United States. It tells the story of a newspaper editor who, confronting criminality at all levels of government in his home town (the fictional small city of Kennington), seeks to expose and overthrow the corrupt local power structure. Facing threats on his life, the editor flees. In the film's final scene, he runs into a building in which a United States Senate Committee is holding hearings on municipal corruption. The film concludes with a direct address to the audience by Senator Estes Kefauver, Chairman of the Senate Commission on Interstate Commerce and Racketeering, calling on citizens to be vigilant about criminal control of their local governments.

In the text that accompanies the photograph of the *Captive City* opening in *Action Civique*, we are told that the management of the Orpheum Theatre had presented the directors of the *Comité de moralité publique* with the first copy of *Captive City* to be shown in Québec. Under agreement with United Artists, the company distributing the film, all versions to be shown in Québec would include the following message, added as text to the film's opening:

Le comité de moralité publique de la province du Québec félicite et remercie les réalisateurs et les distributeurs de 'Captive City'.

Il souhaite une très large diffusion de ce film et encourage les citoyens des grandes et petites villes à s'inspirer des leçons qui s'en dégagent pour combattre le vice organisé sous toutes ses formes: prostitution, jeu et pari.

Gardons en mémoire le mot du Sénateur Kefauver: 'Il n'y a pas de vice commercialisé sans corruption municipale.'

C'est un axiome universellement vrai, chez nous comme à l'étranger.

("Le cinéma contre la pègre!," 2)

The *Comité de moralité publique* frequently complained that Montreal had lagged behind other places in the world in completing its own investigation of vice and municipal corruption. The first issue of its bulletin, *Action civique*, listed other jurisdictions in which "vice probes" had already taken place: "Londres (1950), Ontario (1950), États-Unis (1950-51), New-York (1951), Argentine (1951), Italie (1952), France (1952)" ("La conspiration du silence"). The invocation of Senator Kefauver in the *Comité's* message to viewers of *The Captive City* serves as both a reference to the Senator's own, filmed contribution to the film and a reminder of Montreal's backwardness relative to reform efforts elsewhere.

Reviews of the film in Montreal newspapers varied in the extent to which they acknowledged the connections the *Comité* was anxious to promote. *Montréal Matin* suggested in a general fashion that "ce film expose ouvertement comment les villes modernes sont la proie de la pègre" ("Dans nos theatres"). *Le Devoir* offered a lightly retouched version of the *Comité's* own message inviting citizens to see the film and to promote its distribution

across Québec (“‘Captive City’ à l’Orpheum”). The *Montreal Star* went furthest, perhaps, in suggesting an applicability to local politics:

An excellent and thoughtful study of the duties of a citizen when confronted with corruption in local municipal politics is to be found in ‘The Captive City,’ at the Orpheum Theatre. It is the type of picture to which attendance should be made compulsory for every adult who is old enough to vote. (“Reviewing the Movies”)

Like the U.S. municipal reform movement, with its high-profile Senate investigation and local crime commissions in states and cities, Montreal had its own judicial body looking into racketeering and police corruption; this was the Caron Commission, which submitted its final report in 1954. In both Québec and the United States, a wave of print culture forms (from crime-oriented tabloid newspapers through investigative magazine articles) covered the panic over urban vice, adopting perspectives that ranged from the openly titillating to the earnestly amelioristic. As in *The Captive City*, a newspaper played a key role in exposing corruption in Montreal and pushing for the reform of municipal government.

Pacifique “Pax” Plante, present at the *The Captive City* premiere, was a lawyer who had served as Montreal’s City Sealer (*greffier*) in the 1930s before his appointment as Chief of the Morality Squad of the Montreal Police Department. Dismissed in 1948 for insubordination (in what was widely seen as an attempt to silence his calls for police reform), Plante wrote a series of articles for the newspaper *Le Devoir*, exposing corruption and racketeering in Montreal (collected in Plante). Plante then served as legal counsel for the *Comité de moralité publique*, alongside another lawyer, Jean Drapeau, who became the *Comité*’s candidate for mayor following its absorption within the *Ligue d’action civique*. Like the editor-hero of *The Captive City*, Pax Plante was the target of attacks and threats on his life, particularly after he resumed direction of the police Morality Squad following the *Ligue d’action civique*’s assumption of municipal power in the election of 1954. Shortly after the *Ligue* was defeated, in the 1957 election, Plante moved to Mexico, fearing for his own safety. He died there in 1976.

The municipal vice probe and popular culture

The novelistic trajectory of Plante’s career, from frustrated reformer to daring crusader, then exotic fugitive, has given Montreal’s post-war reform movement a dramatic richness it otherwise seemed to lack. That movement’s image has suffered, in particular, when set against the richly colorful worlds of nocturnal vice and entertainment which that movement sought to eradicate. Pax Plante’s *Le Devoir* articles of the late 1940s were often based on visits to illegal drinking or gambling establishments, whose undisturbed operation he was determined to expose, but the knowing tone of these articles enhanced both Pax’s own reputation as urban adventurer and the tantalizing character of the places about which he wrote. In the early 1950s, impatience with the slow pace of official hearings into vice in Québec

led the *Comité de moralité publique* to undertake its own “enquêtes maison,” investigations of Montreal night-life and criminality. In page after page of reports held within the *Comité’s* archives, its members list nightclubs that have stayed open past official closing hours, or describe suspicious forms of sexual interaction transpiring on the streets outside bars or upon their premises. Intended to strengthen the push for municipal reform, these reports now stand as useful cartographies of post-war Montreal nightlife, with few other local sources describing this nightlife with such precision.

In the United States, the so-called “vice round-up,” or report on localized violations of morality codes, was more commonly a feature of the dozens of exposé magazines published during the 1950s. Titles like *Brief* or *Exposed!* offered up multi-page photographic reports on red light districts and entertainment strips in a wide range of U.S. and foreign cities, including Montreal (Straw 1997). These commercial publications flourished at the edge of more mainstream journalistic or judicial rhetoric about municipal corruption in “captive” or “wide-open” cities. The campaigns to combat vice and reduce criminality in Montreal had their own popular cultural “edges” in the post-World War II period, though these took distinct form in Québec. Well into the 1950s, Québec publishers issued pamphlet-sized detective novels (the so-called *romans en fascicule*), modeled closely on similar artifacts published in France but cherished for the extent to which they featured characters developed and located in Québec, like “Albert Brien, détective national des Canadiens français” or secret agent “Ixe-13” (Nadeau 1983). These *fascicule* rarely dealt with vice and corruption in Montreal, but in their lurid cover imagery and low production values they added to the sense of semi-illicit sensation that characterized a great deal of Québec print culture during the 1950s. In France, the *roman en fascicule* was well into its decline at the time its Québec counterpart climbed in popularity, adding to the slightly archaic air of the latter.

The Montreal-based French-language weekly *Police Journal* (published by les Éditions Police Journal, a major publisher of *romans en fascicule*) crystallizes the shifts in Montreal’s crime-oriented print culture that marked the period following World War II. Like the nineteenth-century Police Gazettes published in the United Kingdom, *Police Journal* combined pulpish forms of crime fiction with factual narratives of crime that sometimes claimed official provenance as police reports. The balance between the fictional and quasi-journalistic in *Police Journal* shifted markedly in favor of the latter during the 1940s, as public interest in the exposure of vice and corruption appeared to grow. This interest would fuel the enormous growth of *journaux jaunes* (lurid “yellow” newspapers of scandal and gossip) that occurred in Québec in the 1950s. Publications like *Nouvelles polices et judiciaires* or *Ici Montréal* have, as their closest models, sensational weekly newspapers published in Mexico or France, in which coverage of crime, public morality and political corruption was interwoven. (The weekly, national U.S. tabloid newspaper would not arrive as a significant cultural force until the end of the 1950s, with the launch of the *National Enquirer*.)

Popular cultural treatments of the municipal reform movement in the United States in the early 1950s served to “nationalize” that movement, as

did the Senate hearings into racketeering, which moved around the country and received national coverage in newspapers and on television. The large number of cities subject to judicial or journalistic investigation allowed for a multiplication of city-centered features in exposé magazines and an ongoing series of Hollywood films pandering to public interest in municipal vice in different cities. The resources and national character of these media helped to maintain an air of dramatic intensity around the project of urban reform, typically through a magnification of its most lurid, sensational dimensions. In Québec, in contrast, the periodicals that actively exploited public interest in vice and corruption were typically low-budget newspapers or magazines which lacked the resources to publish large numbers of photographs or to sponsor detailed journalistic investigations. As a result, the resonance of Montreal's own "vice probes" within the popular culture of the city and province was minor compared to that observable in the United States.

Degradation and Ennoblement

My fascination with the photograph of the *Captive City* opening extends beyond its usefulness in reconstructing a history of Montreal municipal reform and its connections to popular cultural forms developed elsewhere. That fascination has much to do with the ways in which the photograph both ennobles and degrades the political project of municipal reform in which Drapeau and his colleagues were deeply implicated. Here, as in so many other instances of Canadian and Québécois culture, we witness the attempt to assert cultural communion or affinity with cultural artifacts produced south of the border. Much of the time (as with films or musical recordings that follow models born or popularized in the United States), this assertion of commonality is implicit, part of the broader transnational dissemination of cultural influences. In the photograph of the *Captive City* premiere, however, a more willful and specific affinity is proposed; we are invited to understand the activities of the *Comité de moralité publique* and *Ligue d'action civique* as taking their place alongside the broad mobilization of reformist energies depicted in this Hollywood film.

The film *The Captive City* ennobles the work of the *Comité de moralité publique*, first of all, by rescuing it from parochialism. Through their presence at the film's opening, the members of the *Comité* invite an understanding of their own crusade that lifts it out of the specific, messy context of struggles for political power within Montreal. The reformist activity of the *Comité* is offered here as the local version of a battle fought along several fronts — a battle given legitimacy it might be argued, through the attention it had garnered within American politics, journalism, and entertainment culture during this period. Symptomatically, as well, the *Comité's* campaigns are made to seem "sexier" through this association with American popular culture, as if these campaigns were the work of heroic, idealistic racket busters rather than puritanical, middle-aged men.

Minor or dominated cultures become ennobled when the raw material of their socio-historical experience is seen to lend itself to generic forms possessed of high dramatic scale or melodramatic drive. While the *Comité*

de moralité publique might have imagined its own crusades as appropriate material for a professionally made, commercial feature film, the state of development of a Québec popular cinema in 1952 clearly made this impossible. There is a certain poignancy in the image of Jean Drapeau and his colleagues at the premiere of an American film in a year which saw the release of only two feature films in Québec (*Le Rossignol et les Cloches* and *La Petite Aurore, l'enfant martyr*), neither of them dealing with this richly dramatic political context. Indeed, the forms of 1950s Québec popular culture which most enthusiastically took up the *Comité's* concern with municipal corruption were the *journaux jaunes*, which Drapeau and others saw as symptomatic of the same degraded public life that they struggled against. The molding of Montreal's post-World War II municipal reform movement into dramatic (or melodramatic) audiovisual form came only in 1992, with the near-simultaneous production of two *téléromans* set during this period, *Montréal, P.Q.* (1992-1995, Radio-Canada, 82 episodes) and *Montréal, Ville Ouverte* (1992, TVA, 13 episodes). By this point, as I have suggested elsewhere (Straw 1992), the images offered of a vice-ridden Montreal were a greater object of cultural fascination (and visual embellishment) than the earnest narratives of political reform that served as their pretext.

The photograph of the *Captive City* premiere may do little more than remind us that, in countries with more developed audio-visual industries, campaigns like those of the *Comité de moralité publique* would have nourished polished forms of mass entertainment. At the same time, of course, the gathering of these earnest men, in front of a poster that cannot acknowledge their presence, suggests something of the indifference and humiliation that so often mark moments of supposed cultural communion between Québec and the United States. No one associated with the production of the film has attended the opening so as to acknowledge the *Comité's* presence and validate its claims to political affinity. (Sam Kunitzky, manager of United Artists' Montreal office, was a regional executive who had moved to Montreal from the Maritimes.) Neither the film nor its advertising materials suggest an applicability of its themes and message beyond the context of the United States. Indeed, *The Captive City* was marketed in ways that blocked any easy associations between the urban reform movement in the U.S. and that in which the *Comité de moralité publique* was engaged. As Gareth Hedges (2008) has noted, Hollywood's urban reform film cycle of the 1950s, like the political investigations that nourished it, was fixated for the most part on cities of the American south, whose corruption and rampant criminality had come to seem emblematic of the failures of U.S. democracy. Typically, the advertising for urban corruption films of the early 1950s labored to suggest both the novel exoticism of these locations and the continuity of these films with the much older genre of the gangster film (itself undergoing a significant revival during this period). If the southern locations of so many of these films clearly discouraged any associations with Montreal — except in the more limited sense that both might be seen as continental backwaters — their invocation of the canonical traditions of the gangster genre bound them even more firmly to their American locales.

The main image in the poster for *The Captive City*, typical of those used in the publicity for films of the 1950s urban vice cycle, shows a gangster standing over a city that appears to be controlled by the puppeteer's strings he is holding in one hand. In the other hand, he wields a machine gun. The cityscape over which he towers in the poster is monumental and dense enough to suggest New York, though, as noted, *The Captive City* takes place in one of those mid-sized, southern cities that were the most common focus of films made within this cycle. At the same time, the film was a minor one; even its director Robert Wise claimed it "didn't cause any attention" in the United States (*AFI: Robert Wise — The Captive City*). While the 1950s cycle of American urban reform films had been launched with two high-budget movies from 1951, *The Racket* (directed by John Cromwell) and *The Enforcer* (Bretaigne Windust), by the time *The Captive City* opened that cycle had begun its descent into films marked by lower budgets and a more blatantly exploitative relationship to political events. Something of that film's ephemerality is confirmed by a circular insert, in the lower left of the poster, announcing that *The Captive City* was playing on a double bill with the science-fiction film *Red Planet Mars* (directed by Harry Horner). In Toronto, *The Captive City* was on the bottom of a double-bill, below the low-budget western *Brave Warrior* (Barris 6).

As Pierre Bourdieu has argued, it is common for photographs to offer little more than a group's image of its own integration; the taking of photographs consecrates the group in a "rituel de solennisation" (Bourdieu 48, 133). The photograph of the *Captive City* opening is an occasion for the members of the *Comité's* executive to manifest their solidarity one more time. In circular fashion, the assembling of so many men renders the event ceremonial, just as this ceremonial character serves, in turn, to endow the event with a significance which justifies these men's presence. As with so many family photographs, however, the image of commonality offered in this one is fragile, unsettled by the figure of the man in the poster who stands behind the members of the *Comité*. Towering over their heads, the American crusader can only diminish the stature of the *Comité*, undercutting any sense of its collective strength.

The luridly histrionic poster for *The Captive City* is displayed incongruously, in this photograph, behind a group of men known principally for their stern aversion to excess and lurid pleasures. This was, after all, the group that doggedly patrolled Montreal's nighttime streets for proof that drinking establishments were staying open beyond official closing hours, carefully cataloguing any instance of real or imagined sexual encounters in the city's urban entertainment world. The demeanor of the men in the photograph, serious for the most part, seems intended to give the event the character of a humorless gesture of political purpose rather than the festive, sociable air of a Hollywood premiere. Much of the photograph's curious character comes from the way in which it is unable to successfully suggest either of these. The men's attempts to exude dignity seem undermined by the inconsequentiality of the event — the Montreal premiere of a minor film whose title is barely legible — and by the narrow, obviously unceremonious space in which they have posed.

The cultural cringe

My response on first seeing this image was a version of the “cultural cringe,” that sense of embarrassment and humiliation with which those in culturally marginal places respond to unseemly attempts by their compatriots to garner the attention of those in places of greater cultural power or legitimacy. The idea of the “cultural cringe” has received its fullest development in relation to Australian culture, but it is acknowledged to have Canadian and Québec inflections. (Canada and Québec come up early in the Wikipedia article on the “cultural cringe.”) This cringe, according to Canadian writer Myrna Kostash, is the common reaction of “citizens of small cultures who live next door to a behemoth of wealth and power, and who fear both its displeasure and its indifference” (188). While the Québécois “cultural cringe” has, as a key constitutive impulse, the sense of colonial inferiority that originally marked Québec’s cultural relationship to France, it might be argued that the United States has displaced France as the “neighbor” with whom cultural transactions are the most fertile and anxious, just as “popular” has usurped “elite” culture as the terrain on which the cringe and efforts to vanquish it are most common.

Of course, the cringe generated by examples of Québécois or Canadian culture is almost never rooted in fear of the neighbor’s displeasure, a fear that assumes that attention is being paid. More commonly, as with the photograph of the *Captive City* premiere, the cringe is a response to naïvely exuberant gestures of cultural affinity with the United States which are simply ignored, or to efforts on the part of creators to inhabit forms — such as the celebrity talk show, in the case of English-Canadian television — to which we bring insufficient levels of confidence, skill, celebrity or comfort. My own cringe was rooted in two very distinct reactions to the scene shown here. The first is that the efforts of Drapeau and his colleagues to insinuate themselves into the dramatic events of the American municipal reform movement could not help but appear as an unseemly act of over-reaching. The sense that municipal reform movements in Québec and the United States shared a common purpose was, typically, only of interest to those in Montreal. In the vast corpus of U.S. print culture covering municipal vice and urban reform during the 1950s, the only references to Montreal I have found came in articles which proffered Montreal’s eternally “sinful” character as the pretext for quasi-pornographic images and titillating exposé articles, many of them written by Montrealers all too eager to add their city to the long list of exotic “cities of sin” covered in this way (Straw 1992). Montreal reformers, on the other hand, were anxious to validate and universalize their own work by invoking comparable examples from the U.S. To counter the stereotypical image of Montreal, that of a city whose failures of governance were due to its own uniquely corrupt political culture, Montreal reformers sometimes pointed to widely publicized instances of municipal corruption in the U.S. in the early 1950s.

My second reaction involves the conviction that the *Comité de moralité publique* could not help but squander some of its own gravity by gathering together at the premiere of this cheap and relatively inconsequential film. The narrative of *The Captive City* dealt with a city much smaller and of

lesser historical importance than Montreal. The film's stars, John Forsyth and Joan Camden, were of secondary rank (Camden, in particular, having had a career of no consequence). While Robert Wise, the director of *The Captive City*, would go on to make such high-profile films as *The Sound of Music* and *West Side Story*, he had only recently graduated from making B-films as a contract director at RKO. If, at one level, the *Comité* showed an embarrassing audacity, in seeking to attach itself to an American film cycle that would return none of this recognition, it simultaneously demeaned itself by clutching onto one of the least consecrated or monumental examples of that cycle.

In its contradictions, the cringe generated by this photograph is like the multi-levelled response of Canadians to second-rate U.S. stars appearing in Canadian films: embarrassment for the Canadian actors whose own stature is diminished by their necessarily secondary status in relation to such debased figures, embarrassment for the U.S. performers who, we know, recognize the extent to which their Canadian work stands as a symptom of their diminished status; and, at a more general level, embarrassment at the humiliating cultural predicament which has made Canadians such savvy and cold-blooded interpreters of the complex intertwining of failure, ambition, and debasement which saturates every instance of cultural exchange between Canada and the United States.

The photograph of the Montreal premiere of *The Captive City* is doubly productive of the cultural cringe — firstly, though its expression of the inevitably unreciprocated desire by Montrealers to stand side-by-side with U.S. municipal reformers within a common crusade, and secondly, through the low cultural status of the one sideshow in that crusade (the premiere of a low-budget film) to which Montreal's reformers were able to attach themselves. Even as we might wish the *Comité* had attached itself to a more high profile, monumental event within the U.S. municipal reform movement, we know that our discomfort with the *Comité's* audacity would have been all the greater in such a case. We find ourselves grateful then that this gesture of unacknowledged solidarity took place so far outside any cultural limelight, making it easily forgotten, memorialized only in a photograph lingering in an archive slightly off the beaten scholarly path.

Notes

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