

Still Different: Canada and the United States

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Counter-Intuitive Differences

When my book on Canadian-American values divergence (Fire and Ice) was first published in 2003, I was amazed at the number of people who approached me to enumerate the similarities between the two societies. They pointed quite rightly to language (with the obvious exception of Québec), pop culture, commitment to democracy, seemingly identical suburbs, the ubiquity of McDonalds, and many other shared aspects of life in Canada and the United States. Some pointed to joint military projects of the past, or to the two countries' common European and Christian roots. These protestations surprised me not because I disagreed with them, but rather because the two countries' similarities are so plain and so numerous that I wondered how anyone might imagine I was contesting them.

The argument was and is that despite the many similarities between the two countries--from common British origins right through to a shared curiosity about who will win the Superbowl--Canadians and Americans are diverging on some very meaningful values.

The Importance of Values

Some have referred to these findings as evidence of “the narcissism of small differences”: a bunch of insecure Canadians trying desperately to show their specialness in the face of a richer, more powerful neighbour. The problem

with the narcissism of small differences argument is that the differences between Canada and the United States are not small. Canadians and Americans articulate different values in areas such as patriarchy, gender, family organization, religion, and openness to violence. These areas are anything but marginal to the way people live their lives.

Although Canadian acceptance of patriarchy and religion has registered a moderate increase during the past several years (driven primarily by the arrival of a quarter-million new immigrants a year, most of whom hail from countries with more traditional values than Canada) Canadians remain much less likely than Americans to attend religious services regularly, or to believe that "The father of the family must be master in his own house." (Agreement with this statement in Canada reached 21 percent in our last bi-national measure in 2004 whereas in the United States more than twice the proportion of Americans (52% that year) agreed that Dad should be boss.

The importance of family and religion in particular cannot be overstated: these are the crucibles of socialization, whose lessons--both explicit and implied--we carry with us throughout our lives in all of our various roles and relationships. These are widely acknowledged to be crucial values dimensions, and they are used in the study of societies all over the world--not just pored over by anxious Canadian narcissists.

Indeed, the differences in Canadian and American values are all the more remarkable in light of the similar linguistic, pop-cultural, and consumer environments Canadians and Americans navigate in their daily lives. The fact

that differences in worldview underlie two cultures that are superficially alike makes those differences *more* interesting--not less.

Moderation and Extremes

The roots of these differences may certainly be debated, but it is hard to dispute that the United States has been the nation that has--for better and worse--tended more toward extremes, while Canada has tended more toward moderation. From its revolutionary roots to its contemporary culture, where moral values rule election day and what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, America has not been known for timidity, hesitation, or going half-way. Canada has been spared some of the excesses of that culture--its murder rates are lower, its poor are less destitute, and its middle class less anxious but it has also been "spared" the prosperity, innovation, and global influence of its neighbour.

The rub of living in a nation where anything is possible is that the possibilities are not all good ones. Canadians, in their relatively stable--some would say mediocre--social and economic environment, have felt secure enough to become increasingly autonomous: they have moved away from traditional religion, questioned traditional family models, and generally become a less hierarchical, more flexible people. This "heterarchical" flexibility, I believe, is manifested in many ways, from the increased acceptance of flexible gender identities (including homosexuality, non-traditional employment roles for men and women, parity in expectations about childrearing and domestic labour, acceptance of immigrants and so on) to the changes in workplace dynamics and the management of human resources.

In the United States, risk is greater in many spheres of life: less generous social assistance in the event of unemployment, less certain health insurance in the event of illness (even among those with coverage), and more unforgiving punishment in the event of social or criminal transgression. In the last half-century Americans have tended to rely more heavily than Canadians on traditional institutions to provide security--whether social, financial, martial or existential.

The End of Difference?

Some will argue that as the Bush Administration slouches into exile (perhaps replaced by less hubristic Republicans, perhaps by Democrats of moderate or progressive strain) and as Canada's Conservative party continues to hold power (albeit in the form of a minority government), differences between Canada and the United States are palpably evaporating. It is true that at the political level, cross-border values differences are less obvious than they were when Chrétien's Liberals had a firm grip on Canadian government and the Bush Administration was at the height of its post 9/11 popularity. But even as the characters in each national capital change, the character of the two nations' values will not change overnight.

The federal Conservative victory in January 2006 did not mark a change in our values trajectory. If anything, it suggested that Canadians were sufficiently autonomous in their thinking to ignore the scaremongering that characterized two consecutive Liberal campaigns and to trust their own understanding of the

agenda a new Conservative government would pursue. Of course, there are those who are deeply dissatisfied with the progressive path Canada has traveled over the past several decades and remain ready to lash back. For most Canadians, however, in January 2006 it was time for a change--not a change in their values, a change in Ottawa. The Conservatives have spent the past year or so letting slide the legalization of same-sex marriage, welcoming immigrants to our shores, stroking Canada's ethnic minority communities and promoting multiculturalism, wooing the "nation" of Quebec, and generally behaving like Canadian governments do. For all the talk of "Canada's new government," the change has hardly been revolutionary.

The Persistence of Values

Americans may well elect a Democratic president in 2008. This will not imply a major change in Americans' underlying values either. Canadians and Americans remain on their own distinct trajectories in terms of their values, their outlook on world affairs, and their domestic policies. South of the border, a new person will occupy the Oval Office--and it is by no means a trivial thing that this person might be female or black--but that person will continue to serve a population with distinct values. (Recall that Hillary Clinton, although reviled by religious conservatives, has spent the past several years attending prayer breakfasts in Washington: just a part of life in the halls of power in a country where, according to the Pew Center, half the electorate say they would not vote for an atheist.) Health care reform is anything but a sure bet, immigration will remain as contentious as ever, same-sex marriage might not be constitutionally

banned but nor will it be promoted by any candidate who knows what's good for them. The economy and Iraq are a pair of nine-hundred-pound gorillas that the winning candidate will have to wrestle with every ounce of his or her strength, and only George W. Bush's God knows how either will turn out.

It is an uncertain world, and values are not immutable, but nor will they be undone in a day or even a decade on either side of the border--whatever the future might bring.