

# Canada and the U.S.: What Makes Us Different? A Response to Seymour Martin Lipset

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# Canada and the U.S.: What Makes Us Different?

## A Response to Seymour Martin Lipset

J.F. Conway

Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge 1990).

Seymour Martin Lipset, *North American Cultures: Values and Institutions in Canada and the United States* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine, the Canadian-American Center 1990).

Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century* (San Francisco: ILS Press 1986).

EVER SINCE THE 1950 publication of *Agrarian Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth in Saskatchewan*, Lipset has maintained a lively interest in things Canadian, particularly focusing on a comparative understanding of why agrarian and social democratic third parties flourished in Canada while they expired in the United States. In recent years, as reflected in the three volumes examined here, Lipset has striven toward a more complete comparative study of the two societies, trying to assess their similarities as well as those things which make them distinctive.

Not surprisingly, Lipset continues to subject us to the usual functionalist menu of consequence posing as cause and becoming again cause and consequence — the usual series of tautologies and words about words about words that those of us in sociology graduate programs had to plough through in efforts to emerge from North American functionalism reasonably intellectually unscathed. Lipset's thesis is simplistic: the basic organizing principles in Canada and the United States led to variations in behaviour, institutions and values which in turn reflect those basic organizing principles. And so description — often useful and perceptive description — becomes analysis, and characterization becomes explanation. Having described something — in this case, the things that distinguish Canada and the United States, often in eloquent and incisive prose — should not be a comfort to those who search for social scientific explanations. But too often much of social

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science, especially functionalist social science, remains descriptions of descriptions, and summaries of those descriptions.

Do not get me wrong. I am neither rejecting Lipset's central insistence on the importance of cultural elements, in this case elements of political culture, as key analytical and causal factors in explaining and predicting human social behaviour. Nor am I positing some mechanical structural approach. But I am saying that a wise approach to social scientific analysis combines the two viewpoints judiciously, always taking care to address the chicken-egg problem.

No one can deny that a received and established political culture is both cause and consequence. Thus one can say, with some surety, that this or that political behaviour derives from a certain political culture. But political culture is both cause and consequence. Therefore to understand how a particular political culture is itself a consequence of prior social, political and economic developments seems to me rather important. Surely we know the world better when we come to know the cause of the cause. But I will not subject you to a long lesson on the theoretical failures of functionalism. Rather, with these comments in mind, let me address myself to Lipset's latest pronouncements.

IN THE 1986 VOLUME of edited writings Lipset attempts to provide a comprehensive, comparative assessment of trade unions in Canada and the US. Having assembled 16 excellent chapters by experts and trade unionists on both sides of the border, who carefully try to explain why the US has the weakest trade union movement in the industrialized world, while Canada ranks among the more organized, it is a tribute to the zeal with which Lipset holds to his basic functionalist position that he is able largely to ignore the analyses and merrily to present his views as the last word on the matter.

The articles cogently and convincingly present and analyze the constellation of reasons for lower union density in the US and the contrasting higher density in Canada. These include differences in the social and economic structure, in the "legal environment" (i.e., is the state permissive or repressive?), in employer policies regarding both responses to organizing drives and efforts at decertification, and in the political context, particularly in the relation of forces between capital and labour. Despite this weight of argument and evidence, Lipset insists the key variable is the difference between Canadian and American values. Presaging his 1990 work, Lipset insists that Canada is "a more elitist, communitarian, statist, and particularistic (group oriented) society," while US society, rooted as it is in "an egalitarian, individualistic revolution," is characterized by "anti-statism, individualism and [a] competitive meritocracy" (442-4).

But having marshalled such a weight of contrary evidence, Lipset must somehow deal with it. He does so rather badly. He admits that there was a big growth in union density in the US from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, followed by a dramatic fall thereafter. Further, as Lipset says, "Strong left state third parties and

organized social democratic factions within major parties have disappeared," accompanied by the undisputed triumph in the popular mind of free enterprise ideology (447). This has occurred, according to Lipset, because the "social democratic tinge" in US politics "introduced during the 1930s declined under the impetus of the postwar economic miracle" (445-6).

He likes these two juxtaposed phrases so much that they appear word for word in the 1990 volumes. But juxtaposition does not a causal sequence make. Nothing whatever is said about McCarthyist, anti-communist repression which went after everyone and every idea left of Shirley Temple, and the resulting Cold War domestic political consensus finally successfully imposed in the US.

Canada, thanks to Tory collectivism, retained not only a viable social democratic party, but a tradition of independent labour political action, both of which encouraged trade unionism and its growth. And, Lipset concedes in the 1986 volume, "Canadian unionists ... have remained to the left of their American counterparts down to the present." Why? The noblesse oblige of Toryism and the reaction of workers to the "Tory counter-revolutionary ethos," is his explanation (450, 443). Having presented the evidence, however, even Lipset cannot ignore it completely. He finally concedes, "The greater strength of the Canadian unions is linked to a more union friendly legal environment, more co-operative politicians, less hostile employers ..." But he cannot resist a Weberian cancellation clause to conclude the sentence, "... but more important than these, to the greater propensity of workers to join than in the United States" (451). Again tautology poses as explanation. Indeed, it is self-evident that in order to have trade unions there must be workers willing to join. Lipset delivers the *coup de grâce* with his last 1986 thought on the matter: "The American social structure and values foster the free market and competitive individualism, an orientation which is not congruent with class consciousness, support for socialist or social democratic parties, or a strong trade union movement" (452). Why? you might ask. Why, indeed. The explanation is there in the description, right where it belongs in functionalist social science. Lipset leaves his consideration of comparative differences in trade union success in Canada and the US clearly armed with a few basic, simple ideas that he proceeds to stretch to book length in 1990. Here he intends to do nothing less than provide a panoramic explanation of the central differences and convergences between Canada and the United States on all key questions.

LIPSET, LIKE MANY OF MY COLLEAGUES in Canada, makes a great deal of Canada's Tory legacy — Canada's counter-revolutionary roots, Canadians' alleged deference to authority, and so on — and how that legacy set the stage for Canada's differences from the brash, revolutionary republic to the south. Indeed, Canada's Toryism is important, and did provoke a series of historical events that helped shape Canada's particular political culture. And, further, these events were, of course, both cause and consequence and became, in turn, cause and consequence. The point

is that political cultures are shaped by real events, most importantly by real victories and defeats reflecting the changing relations of power among contending social forces.

Due to space constraints, I will deal very briefly with just seven of Lipset's areas of difference between Canada and the US and suggest some tentative alternative explanations about why those differences — reflected in values, institutions and political cultures — might have emerged and persisted.

*Founding events and the myths they inspired.*

LIPSET ALLEGES that the US has a very clear self-conception as a result of its dramatic founding events and subsequent myths: the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. The American identity is therefore very much one of winners. Canada, in contrast, has an unclear self-conception rooted in counter-revolutionary opposition to the American Revolution. The Canadian identity therefore was one of losers. There is indeed some truth to this. Yes, it is true that Canada did not support the American Revolution. And yes, it is true that the first big batch of Anglo-Canadians was the United Empire Loyalists, the counter-revolutionary losers from the south. And, further, it is true that the Canadian Rebels were defeated in 1837-38 — more losers. And lots of losers composed historical groups in the founding of Canada: the French on the Plains of Abraham, the defeated Rebels, the defeated counter-revolutionaries, the Scots running away from highland enclosures, the English running away from the anti-Jacobin repression ... and so on.

But perhaps there is a more sensible explanation of the lack of clarity in Canada's self-conception. After the defeat of the Rebels in 1837-38, Canada's colonial elite found its vision of a commercial empire firmly protected by British mercantilism shredded by the British government's move to free trade in the 1840s. Accordingly, Canada's elite was forced not only to devise a new strategy for Canada, but to begin to implement responsible government. Hence, Canada's elite of the 1840s, fresh victors of a civil conflict, was forced reluctantly to implement the major portion of the Rebels' program, and under the stern gaze of a Tory British government at that ! After toying with various options — reciprocity with the US, annexation, protection, free trade in the context of federation — the colonial elites of the British colonies in North America moved with some considerable hesitation to Confederation, which was enthusiastically endorsed only by Canada West and London. Confederation, a reluctant and peaceful process, went forward through often tedious negotiation. These were after all separate and distinct colonies, wanting to preserve their distinctiveness if not their separateness in any federation. As a result the provinces had to be granted considerable local powers, especially over education, civil rights, property, and land and resources, to placate their fears.

The Canadian myth was thereby born and our identity has been firmly rooted ever since. Canada and Canadians seek ways to muddle through, to seek reconcil-

iation and compromise through endless talk, and to accept and even celebrate our divided loyalties. That is how Canada came about, how it has endured and how it will continue. The lack of a clear self-conception is the price we pay, if we consider it a price paid. But we do have a very clear identity, contrary to Lipset. We agree not to have a clear identity.

Furthermore, the victory of the colonial elite in 1837 and the irony of that elite being compelled to implement the revolutionary program in the 1840s, has given Canada a very distinctively conservative character. Those forced to do something with which they profoundly disagree will never do it with celebration and joy. Hence, Canada's conservative elite implemented most of the Rebels' program while retaining counter-revolutionary myths and symbols and insisting on the exclusion, as far as possible, of the progressive and democratic forces. Inevitably, the exclusion of such forces increased the historical necessity in Canada for popular movements to continue their struggles for reform against the Family Compact oligarchy and its political and economic descendants. This further confused the Canadian identity.

### *The Centre-Periphery Conundrum.*

BOTH CANADA AND THE US as federal systems have ended up being the opposite of their founders' intentions: Canada has strong provinces and a weak centre, while the US has weak states and a strong centre. This centre-periphery relationship in Canada is vital to Canada's political culture and a key aspect of the distinctiveness between Canada and the US. Lipset gives us a lot of description of the difference, but precious little explanation of how it came about.

Clearly, in Canada a weak centre and strong provinces, even though Sir John A. Macdonald thought otherwise at the time, resulted from the very design of Confederation. Confederation required that very separate colonial regimes be convinced to embrace the Canadian project. That was hard enough. But also Canada East, to become Quebec in Confederation, contained a different nation. Therefore, key powers had to be granted to the provinces, particularly Quebec, to give them the political tools seen as necessary to protect their distinctiveness. Not only were endless negotiations required to convince provinces to join Confederation, but constant re-negotiations were necessary to keep the provinces in Confederation. Since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s such efforts have proven endlessly necessary to retain Quebec in the federation. But other provinces and regions at different times have been fractious: post-Confederation Maritime provinces, British Columbia in the mid-1870s, and from time to time the Prairie West. This was, and continues to be, inevitable in a nation founded on the principle of the acceptability of divided loyalties, indeed, in a nation that has institutionalized divided loyalties.

The US solved the problem of divided loyalties once and for all with its Civil War, to which Lipset alludes in *Continental Divide* as a "civil war to free the slaves"

(56). Of course, as Lipset almost but never quite concedes later, the most basic issue in the Civil War was states' rights, most importantly the right to secession. If the key to Canada's political culture is the institutionalization and celebration of divided loyalties between centre and periphery, the key to America's much more violent political culture is the Civil War with its implacable and bloody imposition of an undivided loyalty on all Americans and a glorification of violence as the final arbiter of internal political disagreements.

### *Equality.*

LIPSET QUITE CORRECTLY NOTES that both Canada and the US are rhetorically committed to notions of equality, the US more extravagantly. The two societies however contrast quite markedly on various dimensions of equality. The US has higher rates of poverty, lower levels of welfare support, and a greater inequality in income distribution. As a society, the US is more fulsomely committed to notions of meritocracy, competitive struggle and equality of opportunity. Canada, though having a higher degree of wealth concentration, is more committed to redistributive ideals and tends to more class consciousness, muddying up the equality of opportunity waters. Why such differences? Lipset's answer in *Continental Divide*: Canada is a "socialist monarchy" and "a deferential welfare state" (226).

Again, there are better answers. Popular movements in Canada won more victories than in the US and became more permanently successful. The social welfare system, medicare, unemployment insurance, etc., were won through social, political and economic struggles, not granted benignly. The working class had its General Strike at Winnipeg, its Trek on Ottawa, as well as a series of significant skirmishes in a fight for union rights. But the working class also organized itself effectively politically, regularly winning seats on city councils, in legislatures and in the House of Commons. Farmers similarly organized effectively, went into politics and formed provincial governments in Manitoba, Alberta, and Ontario, as well as winning the second largest bloc of seats in the House of Commons in 1921. Out of those small victories emerged a social democratic political alternative which has won power in Saskatchewan, BC, Manitoba and Ontario, maintained a significant presence in Ottawa and has become a real contender for federal power in the 1980s and 1990s.

Certainly this relative permanent success of popular movements is partly a result of the nature of the Canadian parliamentary and party systems, which have encouraged the emergence of third parties. Further, the significant powers of provincial governments have allowed popular movements to win power and actually to proceed to realize and test some proposals for reform. Perhaps of equal importance in helping to explain the relative strength of Canadian popular movements is the Toryism that Lipset makes so much of, and the consequent lack of empty democratic and revolutionary myths that so easily disarm the American people.

*The Government's Role in the Economy.*

LIPSET QUITE CORRECTLY POINTS to a key difference between the two political cultures: the state plays a much larger role in the economy in Canada than in the US. Lipset attributes this to Canada's Tory collectivist traditions. But surely that is only part of a satisfactory answer, since that tradition rarely lauded public entrepreneurship and enterprise even while insisting on the state's paternally benevolent responsibility for the downtrodden. The whole Confederation project was clearly state-sponsored — London and the political elite of Canada wanted it, despite deep popular opposition everywhere but in Canada West. The whole country was conceived, negotiated and founded on a state to state basis. Further, the lateness of Canada's establishment required speedy action and a firm central state apparatus. As well, significant and relatively autonomous powers were granted to the subordinate provinces in the federal state system.

These all set the stage for popular victories at the provincial level which led to successful experimentation in expanding the role of the state not only in areas of social policy but also in the economy through public enterprise. The success of state enterprise led to its growing acceptance as a useful if somewhat controversial tool in nation and province building. The level of state activity in Canada would never have reached its present level in the absence of three distinctly Canadian trends: the expansion of the powers of the provinces and their consolidation in areas that were to become key in the modern era (health, education, welfare, resources, and property); the coming to power for significant periods of time of popular movements willing to experiment with expanding the role of the state; and the political success and growing acceptance of these experiments in statism. In the end, then, this key difference had more to do with pragmatic successes in popular struggles than with founding myths and their ideological packages.

*The Treatment of Native People.*

LIPSET NOTES THAT CANADA has a record of more tolerant and better treatment of its native people than the US. Many Canadians smugly share this view, wrapping themselves in a cloak of nationalist moral superiority. I am sure I share with many native people a great deal of doubt about such views. While it may be true that Canada had more and better law enforcement in the West (thanks to a strong central state), this rarely turned out to favour the native people. And while it may be true that Canada did not go through bloody Indian wars to settle the West, Canadians and their state were not unwilling to do so had it proved necessary. To explain this in terms of the Tory legacy of respect for law and order, and an admiration of and deference to authority, in Canadian political culture seems to me to be reaching a bit. There are more parsimonious explanations.

It can be argued that the behaviour of pre-Confederation Canadians toward native people during the early eras of settlement — the 1600s, 1700s and early 1800s — in areas now encompassed by Atlantic Canada, Quebec and Ontario was



really not that much different from the behaviour in areas that were to become the US. The nastiness was on a smaller scale to some extent, but it was not dissimilar. It could even be monstrously brutal, as when one contemplates the extermination of Newfoundland's Beothuks for nothing more than land sport for European fishermen. Of course, restraints were imposed by the need for Indian allies during the period of conflict between France and England. Further constraints were imposed by the nature of the economic base. The fur trade required the active co-operation and support of native nations, thus making conflict unprofitable. The fur interest also resisted agricultural settlement, often placing it on side with natives. When policies turned to permanent agricultural settlement, the conflict between natives, who had to be pushed into the wilderness, and a settler state became inevitable. The fur trade, quite simply, lasted longer in Canada. But when economic policies shifted to those of permanent agricultural settlement — something delayed to some extent by the defeat of the 1837 Rebels — the treatment of native peoples became much less tolerant and commendable.

When Canada turned to westward expansion and settlement very late in the 19th century, there were further constraints on Canada's behaviour. The emptiness of the West in terms of European settlement, and the threat of the post-Civil War expansionist US, ensured that the Canadian state, with prodding from London, tried very hard to avoid open military conflict. As well, Canadians learned from the bloodletting in the Indian wars in the US. It had not been the best policy for ensuring orderly settlement. And it must be said that the native nations learned from what had happened to their defeated brothers and sisters to the south, making them reluctant to provoke a head-on confrontation. The two major open confrontations in the West, the Red River Rebellion of 1869-70 and the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, both led by Louis Riel, were deeply disturbing to the Canadian state because of the widespread support gathered by Riel from white, Indian and Metis alike. In other words, Canada's "better" record had little to do with the peculiarities of the Canadian psyche, or the inherent Toryism of Canada, and a great deal more to do with a political assessment of what was necessary to get the West successfully incorporated into Canada. Indeed, an objective examination of the records of Canada and the US after the settlement issue was resolved, and settlement was completed on European terms, might suggest that there is no difference of any significance. Indeed, some might even argue that on the whole the native nations which survived the initial confrontation have done better in the modern era in the US than in Canada.

### *Melting Pot versus Mosaic.*

LIPSET NOTES CANADA'S tolerance of, indeed official encouragement of, multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. The US, on the other hand, is committed to a myth of universal egalitarianism based on a single founding principle to establish a uniquely new identity: the American committed to Americanism. Lipset is quite

correct to note that Canada's greater tolerance of ethnic diversity had very much to do with the need to facilitate Quebec's fears regarding Confederation. Yet the reasons go somewhat further than that. Canada, at its founding and to the present day, has always been a tentative political experiment of basing a nation state on a recognition of diversity. Part of that diversity had to do with Quebec. But each of the unique British colonies had to be similarly re-assured about the willingness of the federal union to accept and permit diversity. Indeed, it can be safely said that Canada is a nation based on differences, differences that are celebrated and protected even when tensions and problems are thus created.

In the US, moreover, Americanism has become more of an official ideology than a reality for many. One only has to visit the major American cities to learn that ethnic groups in America guard their day-to-day distinctiveness just as jealously as those in Canada, even without official recognition and even while paying political lip service to the American way. For many Americans the melting pot too has remained a cruel hoax to cover the continuing reality of systemic ethnic and class discrimination. As a postcard sent to me from friends in the US said, "America is like a melting pot. The people at the bottom get burned and the scum floats to the top."

### *Canada's Lingering Identity Crisis.*

LIPSET MAKES MUCH OF CANADA'S identity crisis, rooted as it is in losing, counter-revolution, excessive diversity, and federal-provincial conflict. He is not alone. Many Canadian scholars moan and groan about Canada's lack of clarity on such matters. And it is the subject of countless jokes about Canada's confused political culture. But such a perspective ignores the very real fact that Canada's so-called identity crisis is part of the essence of what Canada is all about. It can be safely said that Canada's identity is in fact its continuing crisis of identity. Canada's identity is always evolving based on a constant process of compromise, concession and sheer muddling through. This is the secret of Canada's success and, if we can resist the temptation of those with authoritarian personalities to clarify the question once and for all, it will be the mark of Canada's future greatness as a unique political experiment. The fact is that Canada's identity is a constantly renewed search for identity, a never-ending search for reasons to stay together. Importantly, that search is always internal, we seek our identity, and the reasons for staying together, within ourselves.

Despite the clear and singular identity of the US, Lipset notes that the US too is today going through an identity crisis. Again it is looking for answers to questions like "what is America?" and "what does America stand for?" I would suggest that this is not unique for the US, especially since the Civil War when the US resolved its internal identity once and for all in blood. However, America's search for identity has, since the Civil War, been an external search for identity, often an effort to export the American way to those who have yet to see the light. This was at the

root of the post-Civil War expansion of the American Empire into the Pacific Rim and Latin and Central America. After World War II during a brief period of apparent world hegemony, the US appointed itself the ideological policeman throughout the non-communist world, fighting major wars in Korea and Vietnam. The defeat in Vietnam led to a much too short and apparently incomplete internal self-examination, as the US once again thunders onto the world stage in Grenada, Panama and the Middle East, once again searching outside its soul for the meaning of Americanism.

Hence we are again into a dangerous time. As a small neighbour, Canada has every right to be concerned when the US begins noisily seeking its identity externally. When a little mouse like Canada thrashes around in an identity crisis, no one need worry and indeed it becomes an amusing and harmless spectacle. But when an elephant like the US thrashes around in search of an identity, its smaller neighbours need to be worried. Indeed, the world needs to be worried if the American psychological state becomes more like that of a rogue elephant crashing throughout the countryside.

LIPSET ALSO MAKES A GREAT DEAL of the many convergences between Canada and the US. And indeed there are many. But perhaps those areas in which Canada has decided to retain a distinctiveness are there for some rather conscious reasons. In many areas Canada wants to be like America. In many others Canada resists convergence. What has occurred is a process by which Canada has learned much from the US, but learns selectively in an effort to profit from US mistakes. Sometimes this process has been inadvertent, but instructive nevertheless.

Sir John A. Macdonald learned from the Civil War and while trying to avoid setting the stage for a similar conflict in Canada, inadvertently created constitutional conditions that made civil war unthinkable for Canadians. Canada learned from the US treatment of native people at least enough to avoid bloody Indian wars during settlement. Similarly Canada learned from the violent US frontier those measures necessary to introduce law and order at an early state of settlement. Farmers in Canadian farm movements learned a great deal from the US experience and avoided many errors of the US farm and populist movements, thus becoming more permanent and successful. Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms was designed quite deliberately to benefit from both the positive and negative results of the US Constitution. And Canada has certainly learned from the experience of the US free market, insisting on less regulation and more direct government intervention, including public enterprise.

The same is true for Canadian workers as they built socialist parties and trade unions. The lessons drawn from the divisions in the US Socialist Party were constantly cited by Canadian social democrats as they toiled to build the CCF and then the NDP. Even today NDP activists remind party members of the dire results of excessive ideological zeal and schisms.

In short, Canada has learned from the US experience. With the benefit of hindsight, given Canada's much later development, Canadians have been able to embrace the good things about the "American Way" while avoiding, more or less successfully for now, some of the bad things. We might paraphrase former Prime Minister Mackenzie King in an effort to capture the essence of Canada's ambivalence regarding the US, "Convergence if necessary but not necessarily convergence."

IN THE END, then, Lipset's recent work suffers from all the flaws of functionalism. Functionalism, at its best, does a good job of description, and Lipset has certainly done that, although he has left quite a bit out. But functionalism, even at its best, explains nothing and predicts nothing. Functionalism fails to tell us how we got here and how, having learned from that, we can go somewhere else we might want to go.

A good functionalist is like a dilettantish art critic, providing an eloquent and provocative description of the work of a great master. What is left out, of course, are the sweat and tears not only that created the artist who created the masterpiece, but also the specific efforts that went into the masterpiece itself. And that is precisely what we have to know in order fully to understand a work of art — or a society. Otherwise we are left with the illusion of understanding, a state often more dangerous than no understanding at all.

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