

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

RAYMOND BRETON, NORBERT J. HARTMANN, JOS L. LENNARDS and PAUL REED. *A Fragile Social Fabric? Fairness, Trust, and Commitment in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, 312 p.

How strong is Canada's "social and normative infrastructure"? Most measures of the "performance" of a society tend to be economic – GDP growth, unemployment rate, and the like. As a corrective to this bias, the well-known authors of this book provide an alternative view, favouring "community over the economy" (5). Their research is based on a double premise: that markets have eroded common social norms and values and that this is a growing social concern, deserving the detailed empirical and analytical treatment provided in the book. This is similar to the recent upsurge in studies of the decline of social capital, social cohesion, and related measures of civic ties, especially in the United States.

Evidence is drawn from a nationally representative survey of 2,014 people conducted in 1997. Each chapter dissects a particular dimension or combination of dimensions of Canada's normative fabric as they emerge from the data. The tone is not academic, and the book is accordingly very accessible, with short chapters that go directly to the point. The most significant of these points is that while we seem to enjoy a fairly high level of fairness, sense of belonging, compassion, and recognition we suffer from a much lower level of trust, and a number of weaknesses in our social fabric (class continues to be associated with measures of social fragility, for one).

Among other interesting findings is the somewhat startling proportion of people who consider that self-interest is a threat to social stability. A full 90% of respondents believe people are too preoccupied with what they can get from the system rather than what they can contribute to it. By which they must of course mean the other, freeloading, 10% of the population. In addition, both vertical and horizontal levels of trust are low, with confidence in political and institutional elites remarkably weak. This may stem from the discrepancy between the stated priorities of these elites and the general public.

The second half of the book focuses on differences between particular groups (gender, provincial differences, etc.). Some of the lines of fragmentation are to be expected: women experiencing employment

discrimination, for instance. The clustering of low evaluation of fairness and recognition in Quebec is also not surprising but a clear source of concern that would deserve further exploration.

From this mass of evidence the authors draw one major, and unproblematic, conclusion: it is unfairness of treatment and especially lack of *perceived* fairness that poses the greatest challenge to our social fabric, rather than more structural causes. They argue, in other words that socioeconomic differences can, and in many cases should remain, provided recognition, participation, and perceived fairness prevail. Preserving diversity of course means refraining from leveling differences, but surely not all socioeconomic inequalities can be defused provided they are perceived to be fair. The book ends with a series of recommendations to strengthen social ties, which amounts to a solid agenda for strengthening social cohesion (encouraging civic entrepreneurship, eliminating instituted unfairness, etc.).

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