

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

EDWARD GRABB and JAMES CURTIS, *Regions Apart: The Four Societies of Canada and the United States*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2005, xiv + 319 p., index.

It has been a common practice in Canadian sociology to try to understand Canada by comparing it to the United States. Sociologists Edward Grabb and the late James Curtis have made a great contribution to this intellectual tradition by pulling together, in an accessible and well-written book, many of the threads that run through the outstanding debates in this field of investigation. They proceed, quite logically, in presenting their argument in a three-part volume.

The first part introduces theoretical issues by focusing both on the European Founding Fragment Theory of Louis Hartz and on the thesis of Seymour Martin Lipset regarding the fundamental importance of the American Revolution. This first part of the volume also presents the alternative perspective of the authors, which is to use the Dahrendorf-inspired concept of deep structures to analyse Canada and the United States as four sub-societies. The deep structures idea means that both Canada and the United States, through their common origins as colonies of Britain, share not only a common language but also the significant organizing principles of liberty, legal equality, popular sovereignty, and pluralism. The four sub-societies that exist in North America are Quebec, English-Canada, the American North and the American South.

The second part reviews historical evidence from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, which is held to be the formative era for both countries. This review of historical evidence is intended to test a series of myths relating to assumed differences regarding issues such as liberty, individualism, and loyalism. It is also intended to inform the reader about the major socio-historical background of these two societies and their population in terms of class structure, economy, ethnic composition, religion, urbanization and politics.

The stage is then set for the third part of the volume that brings into the analysis the powerful weight of contemporary survey data. Through five chapters, a series of hypotheses about Canadian and American differences are tested and reanalyzed through the prism of the four-societies model. The scope of issues touched upon in this third part is impressive, ranging from moral issues (religion, family, and crime), to collectivism and statism,

to immigration and tolerance towards minorities, to political attitudes and behaviours, and finally voluntarism and activism.

In the concluding chapter, the deep-structures approach is reconsidered and a number of pitfalls are identified for future comparative research of Canada and the United States. More importantly, the volume ends by readdressing the important debate about a trend towards convergence or divergence between Canada and the United States.

Grabb and Curtis have brought together an enormous amount of information in this book and they have covered a very large range of key issues. Methodologically, the book is a masterpiece and demonstrates clearly how solid sociological thinking works: derive clear propositions (predictions) from existing theoretical perspectives, then test these statements with a variety of available evidence, and finally propose a new theoretical approach and argue how it better accounts for the evidence aforementioned. The thinking process followed by the authors will be illuminating for every graduate student reading this book, whether or not they have a passion for comparing Canada and the United States.

That being said, given the scope of this work, it is unavoidable that one will read it with a certain amount of dissatisfaction. For instance, it is annoying that the predominant focus on values, which is at the root of the deep-structures approach, is not better justified. One almost gets a sense of a geo-cultural determinism that seems to preside over the spread of the superior English values (or “English character” as Tocqueville called it) from Britain to the North American societies. While the authors specify (51) that they do not accept the view that the English enjoy an inherent superiority relative to other peoples, this is sometimes the impression the reader is left with in the first part of the book.

The second part of the volume is certainly entertaining as it takes the form of a demolition derby where received views and accepted theses (particularly anything written by Lipset) are smashed into pieces! So it seems that early Americans were not really individualistic; and that Loyalists were not numerous, not particularly adhering to Toryism, or even loyal to Britain for that matter. However, noticeably absent from the review of historical events covered in the second part of the book are details such as the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada and Confederation. These, we are to assume, had little influence on the formative years of Canada.

Being straightened out about the mythology of early Canada in Part II is only an appetizer for the main course that follows in Part III where the big guns of recent survey data analyses are employed to demonstrate that many of our current beliefs about Canada and the United States (and their differences) are largely illusions. True is the view that Americans are more religious than Canadians, but false is the notion that levels of criminality have tended to be significantly higher (except for homicide) in the United States. In general, the analyses presented in Part III show only small

differences between Canada and the United States. Even in terms of associative life the differences are small, except for the American tendency to join religious organizations while Canadians have a somewhat higher level of union membership. Where do the four societies stand in all that similarity? The exciting finding of the book is that they tend to line themselves up in a recurrent ranking, particularly on moral issues: “This pattern is one in which Quebec occupies one end of the continuum in question, the American South stands at the other end, and the other two regions [English Canada and the northern US] fall relatively close to one another and between the two extremes (244).”

The finding of this consistent pattern not only supports the view that analyzing Quebec and the American South as distinct sociological entities is justifiable, it also emphasizes that when this is done English Canada and the American North are remarkably similar to one another. Overall, the message of the book is that Lipset, his disciple Michael Adams, along with some Canadian politicians, journalists, and professors are wrong in exaggerating the differences between Canada and the United States and in arguing that the two countries are diverging in significant ways. Grabb and Curtis are partisans of the convergence thesis, albeit with some oscillation over time. I would argue that Grabb and Curtis reached this conclusion largely by focusing on attitudes (which are probably indeed converging) but that this convergence in values does not translate automatically into convergence in policies for a variety of reasons including, paradoxically, regionalism within Canada.

Region Apart is certain to stir some controversies and to provoke lively discussions among Canadian students and scholars. It is an essential tool to better our understanding of the part of the world we live in.

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