

Shifting Continental Divides: The USA and Canada

by Marjorie Ferguson

This article offers a short account of historical differences in the evolution of American and Canadian national identities, noting that both countries present textbook cases of the familiar theoretical concepts of constructed identities, invented traditions and imagined communities. It then takes a brief look at cross-border cultural politics, policy and media trade practices, before finally examining aspects of the economic and political relations between Quebec and the Rest of Canada in the context of the 1995 Referendum.

When we talk about cultural boundaries, communication and identity in northern North America, we need not tarry long over questions of McDonaldization, Disneyfication or other forms of so-called 'Americanization'. For reasons of geography, economy, demography, technology and language, Canada experienced these forms of cultural and economic influence first. Like Siamese twins joined along the hip of a 4000 mile continent, when one twin is ten times the size and weight of the other, co-existence is often less than comfortable.

Here Friedman's (1992) notion of 'positionality' is apt: 'History and discourse about the making of history is positional, that is, it is dependent upon where one is located in social reality, within society, and within global process' (Friedman 1992, p.194). And where 30 million Canadians are located, four fifths of them English speakers, is next to a neighbour whose \$3.1 trillion economy is the world's largest and whose audiovisual industry exported \$5.1 billion of films, television and music in 1995.

The global-local dialectic, continentalism and economic nationalism

The evidence supplied by news headlines and scholars alike refutes the notion that processes of globalization sweep all before them. Nations and nationalisms, like ethnicities and tribalisms, are not dissolving in the wake of impersonal economic or technological forces. Indeed most have rarely been as visible or dynamic as they are now. Nations still comprise the nexus for complex intersections of political, economic, technological, cultural and social relations within and across systems of symbolic meaning and institutional power. In northern North America, globalism and localism coexist inside an often uncomfortable juxtapositioning that varies from one country or region to another.

So when we talk about shifting divides in North America we must remember the dialectical interchange between global market forces and local responses where the nation represents the contextually local and where cross-border culture and trade exchange can either mesh or clash. All such dialectical relations are modified by the positional elements of history, and the relative powers - economic, political and media - of the parties in the present. In the US and Canada cases, the general maxim that global market rhetorics speak of cultural universalism but the realpolitik is economic nationalism carries particular force, especially when 'competitive economic nationalism focused on information and cultural industries is a principal motor driving global capitalism into the 21st century' (Ferguson, 1995: 440).

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the current media and telecommunication wars being waged across the 49th parallel. Headlines such as 'US accuses Canada of 'unfair' cultural barriers', 'Canada blocks US book chain on cultural grounds', 'US challenges Canada over magazine tax' are increasingly common, with Canada taken to the World Trade Organization over the latter. Such media trade confrontations, it should be noted, occur under a de jure NAFTA umbrella that concedes Canada's right to cultural protection, but de facto subjects it to repeated challenge. And all that is before we consider the separatist ambitions of the Bloc and Parti Québécois and their playing of 'the culture card' inside Canada itself.

Economic nationalism expressed as continentalism has been a feature of US foreign policy from the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 to the signing of NAFTA in 1993. It seems that questions of collective identity and state-culture relations north, and south, of the Rio Grande are immutably tied to the destiny and aspirations of the world's largest economy and exporter of popular culture. At various times Canada has seemed on the brink of becoming the 49th, 50th or 51st state. So in one sense the propensity to shifting continental divides has always been present, in another sense, those shifts are perhaps only beginning.

Almost a century ago, a British journalist who advocated 'the Americanization of the world' wrote:

What Americans think on the question of the future of Canada is not difficult to discern. One and all would disclaim any attempt to annex Canada against her will; but one and all regard absorption as her inevitable destiny, and while they would not hasten the hour when the frontier-line disappears, they would rejoice to see the Union Jack disappear from the Western Continent (Stead, 1902 [1972:48]).

In September, 1996, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) addressed this theme in a television series called 'What Border? The Americanization of Canada'. Increasingly it seems it is no longer possible to shrug off the latest round of media and culture wars across the border and inside Canada as *plus ça change*. The substance of recent policy manoeuvres in Ottawa and Washington, and Ottawa and Quebec - let us call this Canada's 'second front' - indicate everything is changing, but this time things may not remain the same.

When we speak of national identity in the US and Canada it is important to recognize the strength of regional, provincial or state loyalties and identities that sometimes stop at borders and other times do not. Native Americans and Canada's First Nations developed tribal identities across lateral and horizontal positionalities prior to their political and later physical enclosure. The Hispanic and Latino presence along America's southern rim similarly illustrates the continental, spatial-geographic as well as economic and cultural variation in North American identities. These lines tend to run North-South more often than they do East-West making it possible to conceptualize these transborder complexities along three dimensions: the spatial, the political-economic and the social-cultural.

First, the spatial dimension. The postmodern notion that national boundaries and identities are outmoded by transborder trade and technologies is confounded by simple arithmetic and the rising demand for national recognition and status, generally by small-scale tribal or ethnic groups. In the US and Canada, where the latter is the world's largest landmass, and the other equally bi-coastal, the world's largest economy, the spatial dimension is importantly fourfold: horizontal, lateral, national and continental disjuncture as well as conjuncture, invite contradiction and conflict as much as concurrence. Such divides frequently follow transborder, continental rather than national lines; the possibilities for regional fragmentation exist far beyond Canada's Quebec. Although more of an apocalyptic notion than realpolitik probability, the suggestion that North America could comprise nine nations not three, each following continental, economic and cultural, not existing divides, is not without logic (Garreau (1981)). Today there is talk of Cascadia, as a cross-border cultural and economic union in the Pacific Northwest.

Second, the political-economic dimension. The historic imbalance of economic, military and political power between the US and Canada has accelerated under the opportunities NAFTA offers to wrap economic nationalism in the flag of 'free trade'. In a situation where Canada's economy is increasingly tied to that of the US its ability to defend its cultural policies is circumscribed.

Third, the socio-cultural dimension. The communication dimension is also related to the skewed continental distribution of political and economic power. Here the advent of television magnified earlier patterns of print media and radio cross-border penetration. Cable and satellite technology further enlarged anglophone Canada's consumption of US primetime, while producing rather different consequences in Quebec, as noted below. Yet, despite Canadians sharing the same broad heritage of prosperity, democracy and sit-com entertainment with Americans, there remains a remarkable divergence in social values, political history and institutions. Many modelled on those of Britain remain, for example the social safety net and universal health care, but others are eroding under the force of global market logics, federal deficit finance reform and a government willing to jettison electoral commitment to preserving a distinctive Canadian media presence in its haste to implement the 'information society'.

The 'melting pot' and the 'cultural mosaic'

Here the US and Canada present two different visions and versions of the concepts of hybridization and mixing so favoured by Latin American theorists (see, e.g. García Canclini, 1995; Martín-Barbero, 1993). Both countries have been multicultural, multilingual and multiracial for over five centuries. Both accord with Keating's (1996) concept of 'civic nationalism', that confers citizenship on all within its borders, regardless of ethnic, racial or linguistic heritage, while fluctuating from any common code of practice. For successive waves of new Americans and new Canadians the yawning spaces of the continent required traditions be invented and communities imagined to bind the parts and the peoples to the whole. From these continuous processes of construction and reconstruction came two nations, forged by different histories and institutions, with one divided by language, the other by race.

In countries peopled almost entirely by migrants and their descendents, collective identity is always multi-faceted, a mixture of old, new, regional, state or provincial loyalties that exist alongside and inside those of national citizenship. If a nation's political culture is what it remembers about itself, in countries made by migration, national identities reflect and incorporate many remembered selves. And that history is communicated via words, symbols, rituals, institutions, media and language, with the latter assuming greater or lesser importance in some contexts than others.

America. The Revolution demanded America create 'new nation' myths and symbols. Consequently many historians maintain America's collective identity is creedal, a secular religion of shared beliefs in American exceptionalism, uniqueness and individualism, grounded in liberty, democracy, free markets and constitutionalism (see, e.g. Woodward, 1988; Lipset, 1996). Today consensus about what America is and who Americans are is an elusive concept. What Gitlin (1995) regrets as the 'twilight' of commonality and shared dreams, Geyer (1995) states no longer exists, claiming Americans are 'no more'.

Another element in the selective history of America's collective memory is a political culture centred on a dualism of difference where ideas of pluralism and *e pluribus unum* intersect and contradict, and where ethnicity and race, not class, still mark the deepest divides. Unlike other nations such as Britain, where class remains the text and subtext of social life, economic caste is a largely absent category in America's public, private and academic discourse.

Canada. History, position and location wrote a very different script for Canada. Conquest and empire loyalty, not revolution, authored Canada's collective and selective memory narratives. There, until very recently, traditions were not so much new and invented, as recycled, a mix of old and older. (And in Quebec, to a remarkable degree, still are.) The contrast in national psyches is typified by novelist Margaret Atwood's reputed remark that 'if Americans suffer from megalomania, Canadians suffer from paranoid schizophrenia.' Internally, Canada remains a country divided further by regional economic and cultural differences as well as language.

Lacking a common creed or pantheon of revolutionary heroes and symbols, Canada before and after Confederation in 1867 and the proactive federalism of Pierre Trudeau in the 1970s, remains a nation of 'Two Solitudes'.

The role of cultural/media policy

National media play an important role in small democratic societies such as those of western Europe. In countries the scale of the US and Canada, that role is infinitely more tenuous and problematic. To the extent that market restructuring and technological abundance foster audience fragmentation, there has been a commensurate decline in means of mass communication that permitted citizens to join symbolically in a national community through shared media rituals and messages. This concept of citizenship once fed national public broadcasting systems, now both the institutions and the concept are under threat. Historically, public broadcasters such as the CBC, as well as private networks such as ABC, CBS, or NBC (in their advertisements as well as programmes) provided continent-wide, shared national public spaces.

Canada. In Canada, the national broadcasting project is in retreat under pressures from competing technologies and services and declining audiences. But the coup de grâce comes from recent federal policy decisions, including the fiscal slash and burn directed at reducing the CBC to something closer to America's neutered PBS. These developments can be looked at in two ways. First it shows broadcasting and cultural policy being reconfigured as economic policy and rerouted as ancillary to information highway, information society politics (Ferguson, 1995). And where Canada was formerly a model Europe and other nations looked to for cultural defensive strategies, today all roads look increasingly alike. (For an in depth discussion of the European case, see Schlesinger and Doyle, 1995.)

Second, in Canada's case there appears to be a withering of public interest in and debate over such issues, especially amongst the elites, with the 'cultural' being shown its place by the 'financial' and 'political'. Canada is privatizing. Starting with the National Film Board and the CBC and moving on to book publishers grants, the federal government is intent on developing cultural industry exports in sound recordings, television and film. To quote the editor of the Canadian Journal of Communication 'If you want to be optimistic, you can say we are indeed beginning to break the hegemony of US cultural products. That's good. But the price we are paying is cultural articulation.' Partial success in breaking the US hegemony is a double-edged sword that exacts the price of reducing media produced by Canadians for Canadians.

On the print media side, the story is mixed. Given almost three quarters of books and magazines sold in Canada are 'foreign', without Bill C58 to protect the advertising base of Canadian periodicals it is certain that fewer would exist. Canada's news weekly, Macleans, has overtaken Time, and now sells over half a million copies with two and a half million readers per week. (Multiply by ten for approximate US figures.) In terms of democracy and press freedom to voice its citizens concerns, one applauds Macleans, whose editor explains:

Our readers tell us it is important for Canadians to have their own news magazine, to have a national magazine covering issues through the prism of their experiences. But for every Macleans there are five or six publications on the verge of extinction.

America. The record of successive administrations illuminates the extent of US protectionist measures at home and initiatives abroad fostered by decades of corporatist collusion between Washington and Hollywood that secured world screen and distribution dominance in the first place (see, e.g. Thompson, 1986). Now with countries worldwide reordering industrial priorities to qualify for information-society status, 'infotainment and telecom nationalism' appears poised to become an old-new favoured category of official support (Ferguson, 1995).

But the neocorporatism found in the deregulation of media and culture industries is a transborder phenomenon. It is found in the 1996 US Telecommunications Act, promoted by industry and Congress alike as the route to greater consumer choice, faster technology and cheaper services. Whereas to date the Act's visible consequences are an accelerated trend to further media ownership concentration rather than rewards to consumers (see, e.g. Bogart 1996:15). Similar, if less easily spotted trends are evident in Canada, too. There the Chretien government among other corporate-friendly moves, granted Canadian citizenship to Seagrams-MCA, a major Hollywood player.

Culture, language and national identity: Canada's complexity

By law, multiculturalism and bilingualism are features of Canadian citizenship. In the US, both concepts are contested, multiculturalism is frequently decried and bilingualism countered by English First initiatives to legislate one official language. (In Quebec, language is an even more explosive issue, examined below. However, a major myth about Canada is that communication technologies have been causally connected to statehood and national identity; it is truer to say that Canada exists in spite of modern communications not because of the telegraph, radio, cable or satellites.

Canada's media dilemmas remain positional, the consequences of economy and technology as well as cultural and audience preferences, exacerbated by geographic proximity. Today many of the same cultural concerns are global, no longer local North (or South) American affairs. Previous policy efforts to maintain political and cultural distinctiveness through 'Canadian content' quotas and Telefilm Canada production subsidies are threatened as Canada's government moves rapidly to a commercial model in the cultural marketplace. Visibly lower on the policy agenda are high production and marketing costs in a small domestic market that carries the increased marginal costs of bilingualism and where economies of scale accrue only to foreign competitors.

The Separatists, the Federalists and the Quebec Referendum

A Vancouver talk show host called it the 'Neverendum'. This was the 1995 political event labelled an exercise in 'social democracy' by the Parti Québécois that sought to sever unconstitutionally, or if it proved more profitable, only partially sever, Quebec from the rest of the country. One of Canada's foremost political philosophers and a twelfth generation Quebecer explained 'Quebecers show they are Canadians by being Quebecers.' But the same caveat holds for Nova Scotians, or British Columbians, and given North America's vastness and multiple identities, 'being Canadian', like 'being American', is always a 'matter of the heart' as the separatists claimed for themselves. In countries peopled almost entirely by migrants and their descendents, collective identity is always multi-faceted, a mixture of old, new, regional, state or provincial loyalties that exist alongside and inside those of national citizenship.

If a nation's political culture is what it remembers about itself, in countries made by migration, national identities reflect and incorporate many remembered selves. And that history is communicated via words, symbols, rituals, institutions, media and language, with the latter assuming greater or lesser importance in some contexts than others. Here the idealist argument that nationality is shaped by a 'nationalism born out of [such] preoccupation with status' (Greenfeld, 1992:488) corresponds with Weber's observation about nation-state aspirations that the 'more power is emphasized, the closer appears to be the link between nation and state' (Weber, cited in Tiryakian & Nevitte, 1985: 64). Preoccupation with both status and power accords with the politics of separation in Quebec. This is manifest in the skill with which its proponents succeed in 'playing the culture card'. Here this can mean two things not unconnected: Either cultural policy is linked to the desire for cultural survival and development, or cultural difference is used as a political tool directed towards sovereignty.

Playing the culture card

Part of the different script history wrote for Canada compared with that of the US, is the story of what used to be known as French-Canada or Quebec. The narrative of separatism developed since the 1960s involves a juxtaposing, some might say demonizing, of the ROC (Rest of Canada) against a francophone Quebec. These alternative narratives or collective memories are constructed grounded in specific arenas of communication and identity: language policy, schoolbook history, popular culture and media production. Often obscured in the public articulation of these strategies is the extent to which the ROC picks up the price tag of cultural and social support.

Language laws. The use of language laws to preserve linguistic purity and make Quebec monolingual, at least publicly, contravene national bilingual policy. Such laws, as Bill 22 in 1974 and Bill 101 in 1977, made French Quebec's one official language, outlawed public displays of English and created language watchdog bodies. Despite this denial of freedom of speech and expression to residents for whom French is not their first language, and a Supreme Court ruling

that such restrictions violate Canada's Charter of Human Rights, the language wars persist. By 1990 Quebec had four provincial agencies with an annual budget of \$24 million to guard linguistic purity (Richler 1993:). The persistence of this issue is demonstrated by the post-Referendum renewal of 'french only' initiatives, and a counter move by Quebec's anglophones, the Alliance Quebec, to regain some of their language rights.

Textbook Histories. Canada lacks America's rich symbols and media-reinforced mythology of Americanness, one reason it may be more vulnerable to selective history interpretations. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine possible outcomes when such a country's collective memories are constructed from two very different versions of the same stories, the one inclusive, the other exclusive. One study comparing francophone and anglophone history texts found the following differences. In terms of historical period emphasis, 80.5 per cent of French texts were devoted to pre 1760, 19.5 per cent to post 1760 (i.e. the last 235 years); English texts were about 50:50. In French texts, 98.1 per cent of heroes were French Canadian (1.9 per cent English); in English texts, 49.5 per cent French and 50.5 per cent English-Canadian (Richert, 1976, cited in Bell, 1992: 193). The children raised on these selective memories are Quebec's journalists, educators and politicians today.

Federal francophone cultural policy. Federal cultural support policies have been highly successful in Quebec, less so in the ROC. There are three reasons for this. Anglophone Canada is linguistically more open to US media products, Quebec's cultural industries have benefited from a longstanding higher ratio of federal cultural dollars, thirdly and equally significantly, Quebec's media and education policies are inward-directed. It is no accident of history that the founder of the Parti Québécois was a popular broadcaster on Radio-Canada, the french language arm of the CBC. The French network's role in the growth of Quebec nationalism is becoming clearer; the CBC's divided institutional structure as well as language played a part (see, e.g. Balthazar, 1997). In television particularly, as Bombardier (1985:178) stated a decade ago, 'unlike what happened in other developed societies where television became a window open to the world, in Quebec television has been first and foremost a window opened onto the distinctive culture of Quebec'. The political potential of audio-visual media under such conditions is considerable.

Media seperatism. This inner-directed, media seperatism is part of a federally-aided popular culture that only occasionally contributes a Céline Dion to Canada and the world. Richly nourished by grants, both provincial and federal, Quebec's artists and filmmakers are among the most subsidized anywhere. The series of Canadian Prime Ministers from Quebec who have governed for all but eighteen months of the past twenty eight years have preached federalism but practised provincialism, as seperatists have played the culture card and won.

The winnings are considerable. In 1992-93, Radio-Canada received 40 per cent of the CBC's countrywide budget, Quebec received 47 per cent of Telefilm Canada's and 51 per cent of Heritage Canada's countrywide budget (Riley, 1995: B8). In 1995, the federal government transferred from Ottawa to Quebec a total of \$38 billion, plus \$8 billion for welfare, health, social programmes, including nearly \$4 billion in equalization payments. As almost one third of Quebec's revenues, \$1,590 for each resident, this is 25 per cent above the per-capita national average (Montreal Gazette, 28 October 1995, p.A7). A one-way system of redistribution with

which other provinces grow restive.

Continental and other divides...to be continued...

Within the confines of a short article the complexities of North America's shifting continental divides with respect to cultural boundaries, communication and identity can only be sketched. In doing so, I have highlighted the significance and force of three variables, continental scale, regional loyalties and economic nationalism that coexist inside the rubrics of NAFTA and the global market. The continued vulnerability of Canada's national print and audiovisual media to those of its neighbour, the uniquely global power whose economy bestrides the continent, and its continued contestatory relations with Quebec's separatists illustrate but two of the complexities involved.

In countries as vast and heterogeneous, as multilingual, multiracial and multicultural as the US and Canada, perhaps it is something of a miracle that they cohere as nation-states at all. It merits reflection, therefore, that however rock-like America's collective identity appears alongside Canada's perpetual ferment, the cleavage potential based on ethnicity, language or region knows no national boundary. The legacies of history and processes of nation construction and reconstruction are still in play, in North America as elsewhere.

Notes

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