

# PRESERVING CANADIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

## AN EDUCATOR'S CONTEXT



**EN BREF** Le Canada et les États-Unis sont des sociétés qui se distinguent clairement, en partie en raison des différentes approches adoptées en matière d'éducation dans son sens large. Une question se pose : est-ce que le Canada maintiendra les différences sociétales favorisant une éducation publique innovatrice, complète et informée au palier local? La réponse réside dans les fondements mêmes de la société, que l'on peut explorer en fonction d'un cadre de développement humain. Les gens réagissent au défi du changement en cherchant l'équilibre, tablant parfois sur la raison et l'expérience pour s'adapter au changement (accommodation mature), se confortant parfois dans une référence figée à l'autorité et au passé (égo-gratification). La culture et l'éducation canadiennes ont généralement manifesté une accommodation mature, engendrant une société libérale et laïque qui contraste avec celle de son voisin du Sud, où la « pensée magique » remplace trop souvent la « réflexion critique ». Les pratiques canadiennes en éducation méritent d'être soulignées et les éducateurs canadiens doivent être conscients du rôle qu'ils jouent pour contribuer à les maintenir.

**AS AN EDUCATOR** in the later stages of my career, I have for more than five years had the opportunity to practice my profession in British Columbia. This change of venue follows three decades as a teacher, professor, and administrator in the United States. Although I have lived and worked a number of times in overseas assignments, this was my first experience as an alien in an English-speaking country. The opportunity to closely observe the relative functioning of two societies with respect to education and without a language barrier has been extremely informative.

My reflections have been given urgency by the drama of the Bush years in America, particularly due to that administration's policy on education, *No Child Left Behind*. This legislation caused what I perceived as the loss of rightful autonomy for professionals in the field and motivated me to become an 'educator refugee' in Canada. Recruiting young Americans into teaching in an NCLB world was not a job that I was willing to do. So, in coming to Simon Fraser University, I was in a state of hyper-attentiveness to the confluence of politics and culture that threatened to redefine my profession. Terms such as 'deregulation', 'decredentialed', and 'neoliberalism' are associated with those movements and they extend to fields beyond education, as we now are painfully aware each time we read the financial news.

Friends and colleagues tell me at times that my responses to the landscape of education here in British Columbia are too influenced by my experiences in the United States. In so many words they say, "It can't happen here." They suggest that infringements on the profession – such as school rankings published by Canwest newspapers in cooperation with The Fraser Institute – are minor. They tell me that public, resolute responses to such abuses are disproportionate to the significance of these acts. I am not assuaged by this confident talk. During my career I have seen the United States move from a grass roots and often progressive posture in education to centralized control for illiberal purposes. Along the way, educators have increasingly been marginalized in their own profession. The best of school districts in enlightened states have been forced into triage practices developed in backward states. The strong have emulated the weak in practices such as teacher testing and high stakes examinations. The advanced have modeled the

marginal, and many sound practices – often with local roots – have been suppressed. STARS, Nebraska's local assessment program, is an outstanding example of progress and reform denied. The attempted federal suppression of Reading Recovery funding is another.

Yet my hope is that Canada does have a different, unyielding character, often described as 'liberal', 'multicultural', 'social democratic', or 'European'. Future education policy may be one litmus test for this difference. I say this because for every voice that says Canada differs, there is one that says, "American trends eventually come here." Ontario pollster and author Michael Adams' research leads him to claim, "...the two countries that share so much are in fact headed in two significantly different trajectories in terms of the basic socio-cultural values that motivate their populations."<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, though, that this Canada/U.S. variance is on a continuum; it is not black and white. Politically, it takes only a few percentage points of voters in either country to tilt an election in the opposite directions.

And so we are left with the question: "Will Canada sustain the societal differences that allow innovative, comprehensive, and locally-informed public education to prosper?" The question invites us to move beyond education to look at the underpinnings of the larger societies.

#### **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AS A FRAME**

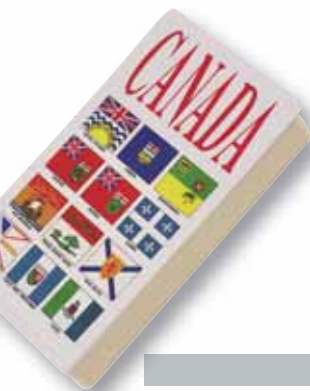
In this task, the academic tools available to me are classic and contemporary writers such as Rousseau, Dewey, Jung, Piaget, Erikson, and their interpreters. Drawing on these sources to interpret our two countries, I see narratives of human development played out on two societal stages. In other words, one can extrapolate from the field of lifespan developmental psychology to identify the norms of a society. Or to contrast two societies.

One key aspect of these pathways of maturation is the adaptation of the individual to the challenges of living among others. To use Piagetian language, an individual experiencing the give and take of the world, and responding to dilemmas that such new experience brings, makes this adaptation. The process is motivated by an innate drive toward psychological equilibrium – a process that seems simple in the abstract. Rousseau described it in *Émile* as



"learning from the discipline of natural consequences."<sup>2</sup> Dewey designed his "problem method" around it. The concept inspires some of our best pedagogy.

In practice, however, this method of instruction is fraught with challenge since natural consequences do not automatically lead to productive student reactions. Erikson described the problem in *Childhood and Society*: "The strength acquired at any stage is tested by the necessity to transcend it in such a way that the individual can take chances in the next stage with what was most vulnerably precious in the previous one."<sup>3</sup> In other words, even if the worldly context in which we find ourselves introduces an appropriate challenge, our prior disposition may tempt us to hunker down in denial and stasis, rather than to adapt. When events invite us to understand changes in society, we feel Erikson's tug of egoistic anxiety and resistance. In the United States, resistance has become the norm. Politically, this is the impulse Obama decried in his celebrated observation, "They cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them." It is also the impulse that Harper played to when he abandoned the principle of diminished culpability for youth and said, "When all is said and done, 'soft on crime' doesn't work. We are determined to crack down on crime, whether it is by youth or anybody else."<sup>4</sup> This strategy clearly damaged his party, especially in Quebec.



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Leaving societal interpretations and returning to the individual, clearly the guidance of trusted others, such as teachers, makes a difference in how we respond to challenges – whether by denial or by adaptation. Piaget describes how we stray from the course of development. When asked whether "school situations could lead a child to accommodate wrongly – that is, to change his ideas on the wrong basis," he replied: "...This is a big danger of school – false accommodation which satisfies a child because it agrees with a verbal formula he has been given. This is a false equilibrium which satisfies a child by accommodating to words – to authority and not to objects as they present themselves to him."<sup>5</sup>

Here we have what may be the heart of the divergence of our North American societies: the role of words and authority, as opposed to reason and experience, in guiding accommodation of individuals to their natural environment and their changing social order. An example might be a sectarian science lesson in which creationism/intelligent design is authoritatively provided as the explanation for life. The words may be based on authority (Genesis), or they may be based on reason (Darwin). They may be

received uncritically, or evaluated by experiment or analysis. That difference may help explain why Canada and the United States differ as they do. How deeply set in society's soil are the foundations of reason? Does authority or reason ultimately hold sway in the classroom?

#### **EDUCATING VOTERS**

What pushes one society toward authority and another toward reason? What societal influences lead individuals to develop – or fail to develop – critical thinking skills?

One answer may be the role of marketing, advertising, and public relations. During the past fifty years in the United States, politics has become the object of the same powerful psychological machinery of promotion that has driven commerce for the last century. Most notably, identity politics has shaped, to a remarkable degree, the results of recent elections. Voting in America has, for many, become an exercise in self-validation and identity formation rather than one of applying the power of citizens to direct the course of their government. One of the victims of this shift has been the concept of 'the common good' and education policy aimed at promoting it.

Canada, too, has been subject to the influence of marketing and public relations, although there is reason to believe their effects have been weaker. Evidence for this claim includes less individual and federal debt, as well as resistance to the 'politics of personal destruction' via television advertising and robo-calls. The popular negative reaction to the 1993 Chrétien attack ad by the Progressive Conservatives would be a case in point.

Who benefits from this misdirection of the voting public toward egocentric, antisocial purposes? Most likely, those who fund the mass media advertising that has so dominated modern political campaigns. In his book and documentary, *The Corporation*, Joel Bakan responds in this way: "Increasingly, corporations dictate the decisions of their supposed overseers in government and control domains of society once firmly embedded within the public sphere."<sup>6</sup> We might amplify his analysis to say that groups and individuals who stand to gain materially from their control of politics are wielding a massive tool in seeking power and wealth for themselves. The erosion of concepts such as 'the public sphere', community, and the common good is an inevitable outcome in societies where these marketing forces are allowed to hijack the political process.

Returning to our developmental analysis, my claim is that, through use of artful advertising and partisan mass media programming, monied interests manipulate voting so that it is a 'feel good' exercise rather than an act of prudent and selfless citizenship. These interests accomplish their purpose by introducing a steady stream of words and images that play to people's identifications rather than to their reason. That is, voters are invited to affirm their sense of self by supporting a political party or candidate. The relevant grounds for voting are not a rational analysis of individual or national interest, but the short-term gratification Piaget spoke of as a primitive response. In his words, "Considered in its social aspect, this distorting assimilation consists, as we have seen, in a sort of egocentrism of thought so that thought, still unsubmissive to the norms of intellectual reciprocity and logic, seeks satisfaction rather than truth and transforms reality into a function of personal affectivity."<sup>7</sup>



How, specifically, does this transformation occur? Language and images create a locus for voter identification in a political party. Voters are driven by race, as in the Willie Horton ad and in the South Carolina telephone campaign of 2000 alleging John McCain's 'black baby'. They are driven by gender and affectional preference, as with ballot initiatives aimed at banning gay marriage. 'Liberal', a term upon which North American democracy was founded, is converted into an epithet. Secular government, another foundation of North American government, is boldly elbowed aside by appeals to a narrow brand of Christianity. Sadly, while Canada hears voices like Bakan and Naomi Klein,<sup>8</sup> the American left raises few effective protests, recalling lines that are becoming cliché through their frequent, but apt, citation:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, religious feeling, a powerful subjective and tribal experience, has become confounded with the law, which aspires to universality and objectivity. Faith is displacing reason in the conduct of civil affairs in the United States, and religion is distorted by being pushed away from universal moral principles toward a role as shill for war and materialism. Karen Armstrong explains that compassion is the paramount value of great religions, but "Compassion is not a popular virtue, because it demands the laying aside of the ego that we identify with our deepest self; so people often prefer being right to being compassionate."<sup>10</sup>

Our mythology – in both Canada and the United States – asserts that voting should be employed to create national and individual advancement. Politics in the United States has instead been converted for many into a vehicle for deceiving voters into acting against patriotism or enlightened self-interest. This is accomplished by flattering their baser instincts, such as greed, and providing short-term ego-gratification. The mantra of tax reduction is the code-word for greed, while the disparagement of the other – whether gay, dark, foreign, or liberal – is a vehicle for inflating the voter's ego. This ego-gratification is the 'personal affectivity' of which Piaget spoke. In contrast, Canada's multilingual and multicultural commitments create significant resistance to this divisive approach, tilting it instead toward the mature alternative of compassion for and understanding of the other on the path to one's own self-realization.

#### PRESERVING THE DIFFERENCE THROUGH EDUCATION

If Canada is to follow the path of mature adaptation rather than the primitive responses of ego-gratification, its educators should recognize several factors.

Civility in mass media is a value worth preserving. Calling out incivility is a constructive act each listener and reader can practice. On these grounds, the reluctance of Canada to admit Fox News into its cable systems was justified. We are pliant beings, affected by our environment and influenced by the narratives we hear and see. Public shaming may be preferable to censorship, and it is a response best delivered by independent citizens and their organizations, including the professional organizations of educators. Advertising content in mass media matters, too, as do other repetitive messages imprinted on the public by con-



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## There is magical thinking and there is critical thinking, and Canada tilts more toward the latter than does the United States.



stant repetition. They should be critiqued, and such media awareness should be part of our curricula. There is value in non-commercial media alternatives, particularly on television, and these should be deliberately fostered.

Canada's sense of community contrasts with an unenlightened, self-destructive brand of individualism in the United States. For me it has been moving to observe the outflow of concern and material aid from the people of British Columbia in the face of human suffering here or elsewhere. The immediate deployment of Vancouver's Urban Search and Rescue Team to Louisiana in the face of Katrina was one of many expressions of compassion for the suffering of others that Canadians have demonstrated. Peacekeeping, propagating democracy, challenging HIV/AIDS, and environmentalism are other endeavors the nation undertakes. On a professional level, the support and confidence expressed by the citizens of B.C. during the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) job action of 2005 was a heartening expression of solidarity with their teachers.

There is magical thinking and there is critical thinking, and Canada tilts more toward the latter than does the United States. For example, slogans are not arguments and *bon mots* make for laughs but not policy. Canada's political discourse has not thus far been reduced to catch phrases and put-downs such as 'compassionate conservative'; 'There you go again'; or 'Drill, baby, drill'. Nor are Canadians as prone accepting labels as substitutes for truly defining and evaluating programs. "Death tax", 'socialized medicine', 'ownership society', 'free market', 'the Clean Air Act', 'the Healthy Forests Initiative', or, indeed, 'No Child Left Behind', represent the apotheosis of the 'words that work' communication philosophy of Frank Luntz.<sup>11</sup> In Canada such sloganeering and labeling is normally followed by a pregnant pause, during which the audience awaits an explanation of the argument. In the United States, too often the label is the Orwellian argument.

Our educational practices in Canada deserve some credit for this difference in people's quality of cognition. Discipline in thought and argument are the result of challenging interactions, particularly in school settings where the curriculum is designed to elicit such development. Other contributing factors include the quality of the teacher's critical thinking, his or her perseverance in pressing analyses forward, an interactive and individualized classroom environment, and the habit of carefully listening to and accounting for the challenges of others. This last trait is one Americans notice in Canada: audiences here listen attentively and in silence. They show a striking openness to the words of the other that embodies a commitment to learning, even at the expense of some egoistic discomfort. Short-term pain for the ego can introduce long term gain for the self – the self being our higher order personality, called in spiritual terms the soul.

America, while demonizing the term 'liberal', has lost touch with the central message of liberalism – that human beings are perfectible through education and other salutary experiences. In place of a commitment to the elevation of all members of the society, average Americans have been led to believe that fulfillment comes to a lucky few – through material acquisition or in the afterlife, through exclusionary creeds. Play the lottery or be 'born again'. To serve their own narrow purposes, clever powerbrokers have kept enough of the voting public mired in such views to make those attitudes self-fulfilling. If they are allowed to take permanent root, there will not be enough of the world's goods for all, nor will there be the national unity or sense of community required to protect the vulnerable.

Faith in a flawed worldview, sold by methods that trigger emotional and unconscious responses, limits individual and societal maturation. One way to understand the difference between the two vast North American neighbors is to focus on the ways individual self-realization is defined and promoted in the two countries. In one, a flawed message is propagated for purposes of self-interest by the few. In the other a more communitarian vision still prevails and serves as a bond among average people and a vehicle for their political influence. By a slender thread, a non-commercial narrative holds sway in Canada and defines a set of values that protect the mass of citizens. Our teachers are vital to the telling of this story. If we are fortunate, the slender thread will hold and strengthen, and Canada's worldview will spread across North America. |

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### Notes

- 1 Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (Toronto: Penguin, 2003), 140.
- 2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile* (Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision Publications, 2007).
- 3 Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963), 263.
- 4 Andrew Mayeda, "Harper Urges Tougher Youth Sentencing," *The National Post*, 24 September 2008. Retrieved, 15 October 2008, from <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/canada/story.html?id=822109>
- 5 Eleanor Duckworth, "Piaget Rediscovered," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 2 (1964): 174.
- 6 Joel Bakan, *Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 5.
- 7 Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, trans. Margaret Cook (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955). Retrieved, 9 October 2008, from: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/piaget2.htm>
- 8 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).
- 9 William B Yeats, "The Second Coming," *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (London: Cuala Press, 1921). Retrieved, 16 October 2008, from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Second\\_Coming\\_\(poem\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming_(poem))
- 10 Karen Armstrong, *The History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 391.
- 11 Frank Luntz, *Words That Work* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).