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Not So Different After All

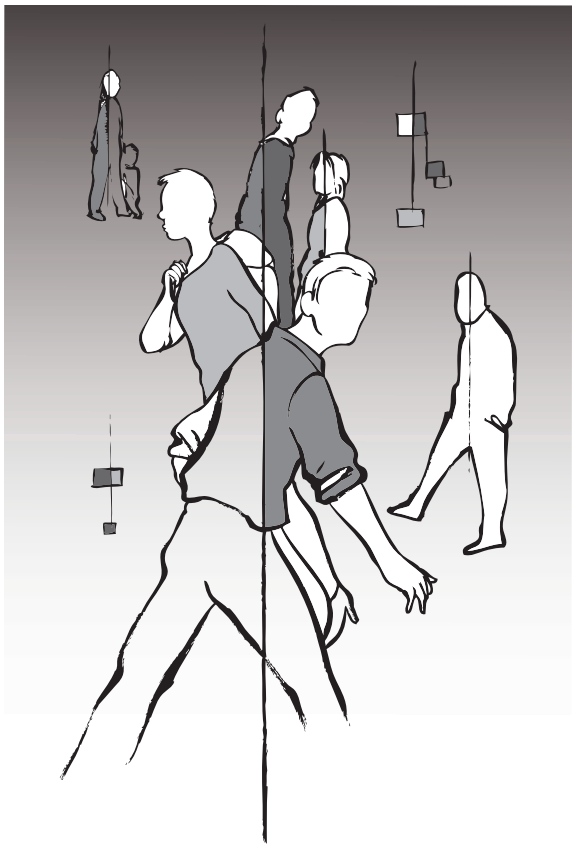
The striking commonality between (some) Americans and (some) Canadians.

Edward Grabb

Dispersed Relations: Americans and Canadians in Upper North America
Reginald C. Stuart
Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press
457 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9780801887857

In recent years, a growing number of books have been written that consider the long-standing and often complex relationship between Canada and the United States. These volumes have ranged from more academic treatments, such as John McDougall's *Drifting Together: The Political Economy of Canada-U.S. Integration*, to more popular accounts, such as Jeffrey Simpson's *Star-Spangled Canadians: Canadians Living the American Dream* or Michael Adams's *Fire and Ice: The United States and Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*. In his new work, *Dispersed Relations: Americans and Canadians in Upper North America*, Reginald C. Stuart has made a significant contribution to this literature. This is a detailed and thoroughly researched monograph that will be of interest to both academics and the public at large. Professor Stuart draws on materials from many disciplines, including history, political science, economics and sociology. In addition, he incorporates many popular sources to be found in newspapers, magazines and the electronic media, all of which lend an immediacy and topicality that should make the book appealing and accessible to a wider, non-academic readership.

Stuart's approach to solving the fascinating puzzle of the Canadian-American relationship is to focus his attention on four interconnected "realms" of analysis: the cultural, the social, the economic and the political. The first of these deals mainly with the values and beliefs of the two peoples and considers related topics such as popular culture, consumer tastes and exposure to various forms of mass media. The second realm is about patterns of social interaction, both within and between the societies, and the consequent ideological views and political attitudes that Canadians and Americans have developed about one another. Included for discussion here and elsewhere is the well-known and recurring penchant for anti-Americanism among some Canadians. In Part III, economic and business connections are addressed, especially our closely overlapping consumer markets and production systems and the trend toward increased fiscal integration. Finally, there is the political realm, in which Stuart assesses the governmental relations, tensions, accommodations and priorities that have variously united and divided the two leaderships, as well as the two populations, over the years.



Across all four of these topic areas, the author maintains a consistent historical awareness and sensibility, enabling us to envision the sometimes intricate processes involved in shaping the Canadian-American relationship, from the earliest days to the present. Perhaps the major underlying theme running through the exposition is the author's firm view that although the Canada-U.S. border demarcates two distinct political entities, the boundary is generally not a "barrier that marks sharp differences" between the peoples, especially in cultural, social and economic terms. In other words, while it is true that Canadians and Americans retain discrete political identities and have divergent outlooks on some key international issues, the historical and contemporary evidence, at least in the vast majority of cases, reveals two countries and peoples that are "intertwined as a shared, transnational whole." He contends that the official boundary line has typically been of very little importance and notes that, at times, "Canadians and Americans shared cultural values and social systems in ways that reduced the border to irrelevance." This is not to suggest that Canadians and Americans are identical, for he also makes explicit that each nation is not a "photocopy" of the other and each has "developed varying degrees of integration" with the other, depending on the historical period and the particular realm that is being considered. Still, Stuart makes his own position clear in his statement that "shared democratic and human rights, faith in the rule of law, individualism flowing from constitutional provisions, balanced individual and community outlooks, and broad tolerance have produced two remarkably similar societies." Such similarities seem especially evident if the comparison is between the English-speaking segments of the two populations. Rather like de Tocqueville did long ago, the author often refers to the crucial role that the shared English language plays in linking Canada and the United States. More generally, though, while Canadians and Americans will continue to have different political identities and government allegiances, Stuart sees them as destined to be "members of a transnational culture, society, and economy," operating within a single "Upper North American arena."

The evidence that the author offers to support his position is extensive, well documented and entirely convincing. This will not be good news for those writers and observers who insist that we have seen, and will continue to see, an increasing divergence or dissimilarity separating the two countries and their populations, as we

Edward Grabb is a professor of sociology at the University of Western Ontario. His main areas of interest are in social inequality and comparative sociology, including comparisons of Canada and the United States. His books include *Theories of Social Inequality: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Harcourt, 2007), *Regions Apart: The Four Societies of Canada and the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2005), co-authored with James Curtis, and *Social Inequality in Canada: Patterns, Problems, Policies* (Pearson, 2004), co-edited with James Curtis and Neil Guppy.

move through the early stages of the 21st century. Stuart argues that the trajectories of the two nations "largely represent variations on themes, not national divergence." He also notes that the Canada-U.S. relationship has always been much more dispersed, complex and variegated than a simple divergence or convergence argument can accurately capture. Hence he rejects as "false dichotomies" those accounts that have emphasized only the divergent, or only the convergent, patterns of relationship to be found in the histories of the two nations, and remarks that these interpretations have just "confused and muddled rather than clarified how dispersed relations" have worked between us.

Obviously, Canadians and Americans do diverge at times over important issues. In too many cases, however, the magnitudes of these differences are seriously exaggerated. As Stuart indicates, one reason for this is the tendency for some writers to give disproportionate weight to disagreements that arise between our elites and to forget or ignore that these disputes generally have little or no impact on the enduring cultural, social and economic ties linking the two peoples. The sharp disagreements between Jean Chrétien and George W. Bush, which arose prior to and during the current Iraq war, are just the most recent illustrations of what Stuart refers to as occasional "president-prime minister breakdowns." We have seen similar rifts over the years, between John Kennedy and John Diefenbaker, and between Lyndon Johnson and Lester Pearson, to name just two. The problem is that "anyone who believes that Canadian-American relations are just about presidents and prime ministers has missed 98 percent of what goes on." I agree, and would note as well that the reverse problem can also occur. That is, some observers can pay too much attention to highly publicized instances of elite affinity, as, for example, in the friendship between Chrétien and Bill Clinton, or between Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan, and mistake these events as proof that there has been some wider trend toward increased similarity in the two populations. It should be evident that to identify such fundamental national shifts, toward either convergence or divergence, we require much better evidence than this.

Here I would add that we also require an attention span that covers more than a decade of Canadian and American history, something that some current observers also seem to forget. In collaboration with Jim Curtis, and with other noted scholars that include Doug Baer, Bob Andersen and William Johnston, my own research over the past 20 years has revealed consistently that Canadians and Americans are in fact very much alike on a broad spectrum of attitudes, values and behaviour. In our most recent and detailed work on this question, Jim Curtis and I analyzed close to 100 different attitudinal and behavioural measures from national sample surveys and conducted an extensive assessment of hundreds of other historical and contemporary analyses related to the topic. We found that Canadians and Americans regularly go through alternating periods of both convergence and divergence on important issues, but still sustain a fundamental and irrefutable similarity that has been evident for more than two centuries. Both our own work and Stuart's research suggest that this affinity is unlikely to change substantially in the foreseeable future.

The error of equating elite relationships with more general relationships is a mistake that, unfortunately, has a long pedigree in comparisons of Canada and the United States. Because of Stuart's extensive knowledge of the historical literature, he is able to show again and again the disjuncture between elite values and popular beliefs. Following in part from some of his earlier research, the author demonstrates that, while members of Canada's cultural, intellectual and political elites have frequently sought to promote a distinctly pro-British and, more recently, pro-nationalist set of Canadian institutions and values, much of this effort was, and continues to be, lost on the wider Canadian populace. He notes, for example, that the War of 1812 was much more a "quarrel of governments" and not peoples, in part because of the many enduring ties of friendship, kinship and shared values linking the populations on either side of the official national boundary. A related feature of Stuart's assessment is his critique of the "gaggle of nationalists" and "ragtag anti-Americans" who at times have projected onto the rest of the population their own distorted vision of Canada as a country that is wholly distinct from—even the opposite of—the nation to the south. He makes a similar observation about some of Canada's "cultural support groups," including the "CBC, academics, intellectuals, and others," who "often disregard public interests and tastes" and are "rarely in touch with ordinary people." These tendencies within Canada's elite and intellectual circles can amount to a "tyranny" or "narcissism" of "marginalized differences," which does little to promote our understanding of the two countries and their peoples. In my own work, and in my reviews of other research, I have seen this pattern of small or non-existent national differences repeated in study after study on issues ranging from attitudes about individual responsibility or the virtues of competition to beliefs about personal assertiveness or the need for social change. In many instances, as well, there are Canada-U.S. differences that, while usually small, are precisely the opposite of what is commonly asserted or assumed, including the higher levels of political trust and respect for authority exhibited by Americans and the higher rates of non-violent criminal behaviour (e.g., burglary and automobile theft) perpetrated by Canadians.

Stuart notes that the Canada-U.S. relationship has always been much more complex and variegated than a simple divergence or convergence argument can accurately capture.

For me, one of the most valuable contributions that Stuart makes in this book is his insistence that we not overlook the very real cultural, social, economic and other differences within the two polities, differences that in many instances are much more significant than those between the countries. This is a particular problem for certain Canadian commentators, who seem to assume that Americans comprise a single homogeneous mass of people sharing the same values, goals and world views. In fact, however, Stuart shows that both countries have always been marked by tremendous internal diversity, a point that I and my colleagues have also stressed in much of our work. Thus, for example, he discusses the many "north-south" linkages that exist across the official national border and notes that these connections have often been more important than the east-west ties between the regions of either country. From this perspective, Upper North America amounts to a "patchwork quilt" of "regional clusters" running along the borderland "from the Atlantic Northeast to the Pacific Northwest."

Throughout his analysis, Stuart avoids taking sides on whether the continued similarities (and the notable differences) that mark Canada and the United States are fundamentally good or bad, especially for Canadians. Although I think that most readers will be left with the impression that our dispersed relations are, on balance, mutually beneficial, the author's principal purpose is to assess the connections as they actually exist and not to pass judgements about them. If he offers a recommendation, it seems to be that Canadians should be realistic, accepting that the Canada-U.S. relationship will continue to be one of proximity and interdependence, but also asymmetry. Given the "global Colossus" that the United States has become, Canadians will be junior partners in most joint ventures, "the quiet next-door regional power" that goes about its business. Canadians must also deal with the "asymmetry-of-attention principle," by which the author means that we are destined to be far more aware of and interested in the relationship than are the American public and its leadership. Still, the myriad historical, geographic, political, economic and cultural connections between us make it likely that Canadians are generally agreeable to taking the good with the bad in our relationship with the United States. Here Stuart cites former Social Credit leader Robert Thompson, who asserted years ago that Canadians and Americans seem fated to be best friends, whether they like it or not.

It will be apparent by now that I think this new book by Reginald Stuart is an impressive accomplishment. He has provided us with an important and insightful delineation of the multifaceted relations linking Canada with the United States, and has enhanced our understanding of the historical and contemporary processes at work in these relations. I find it difficult, in fact, to offer much in the way of critical commentary about *Dispersed Relations*. My own research in this area suggests that the book probably could have benefited from more discussion of the distinctiveness of Quebec and the southern United States within the larger upper North American whole that Stuart describes. Some more detailed assessment of how these two regions often tend to stand apart from the rest of upper North America would be a helpful addition to the analysis. I think, in particular, that this would make even clearer the strikingly close connections that exist between English Canada and the more contiguous northern and western regions of the United States. But this is a minor criticism. My recommendation is that anyone seeking both a deeper and a broader appreciation of how Canada and the United States have survived as friendly neighbours after all these years should definitely read this book.