

Rethinking Canada: Canadian Studies and Study Abroad

Richard Beach

Plattsburgh State University of New York

George Sherman

Plattsburgh State University of New York

Introduction

Canada is certainly among the least understood of the numerous countries on the “shopping list” of American students planning to study abroad. For this reason, it is often passed over by students who might choose otherwise if they were better informed. Students thinking about an international experience may know little if anything about most countries under consideration—this they will freely admit. But most people believe they know Canada cold: “It’s just like the United States.” And it is not really “abroad,” not even in the sense that Mexico can be considered “abroad” because of the stark cultural contrast that exists between Mexico and the United States.

For years, academics and teachers on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border have sought to identify and explain the differences between Canada and the United States—between Canadians and Americans. In Canada, often the general public was engaged in the search. In fact, the exercise became a cottage industry, even a national obsession, and thus, in itself the most defining characteristic of the Canadian identity. Columnist Peter Black commented recently: “It has always been what has defined us as a nation: the fact that we are not Americans.”¹

For the two generations born after World War II, the distinctions were relatively easy to discern—even if many of them were something of a stretch and remained a secret to most Americans. To wit: Canada gained

its independence as a nation through a process of evolution, not revolution; Canada had no “wild west”; Canada had a parliamentary system of government, and a monarch, to boot; Canadian cities were more clean and more civil; Canada was bilingual and bicultural, its “Frenchness” a fact adding distinctiveness to Canadian culture.

More differences emerged during the 1960s. America fought in Vietnam; Canadians were critical of the war and welcomed American dissidents and resisters with open arms. While some American cities burned, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver thrived, attracting and charming tourists from all over the world. While American racism was displayed daily on television sets across the continent, Canadians watched from the sidelines, absent black-white conflicts in their own country.

Still, while significant in their own right, and while making some Canadians feel better about themselves, these differences were easy to miss by short-term visitors to Canada such as “study abroad” students. Even when noted, they did not succeed in changing the perception of most Americans that, when compared to most other countries, Canada really was “pretty much like the United States.”

Globalization: Implications for International Programs and for Rethinking Canada as a Study-Abroad Destination

Some people have yet to catch on, but thirty years later, all of the above seems ancient history, and largely irrelevant. The last twenty years have witnessed major change in North America, energized by post-Cold War globalization. Canada has profoundly changed, as has the United States, and the world.

Thomas L. Friedman’s latest book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (revised, 2000) should be required reading for everyone involved in international relations, especially those responsible for the education of today’s students. Friedman argues that the end of the Cold War and the explosive rise of the Internet and other technologies set in motion a series of events, occurring at unprecedented speed, that have changed the world in ways we are just beginning to fathom. Already clear is that the walls between nations have come crashing down. In the realms of finance, communication and culture, national borders have virtually

disappeared. Much of his book focuses on the financial implications of all of this, both for nations and individuals, but the tension represented by the book's title is all about culture. Nations who resist globalization (the embrace of free markets and high-technology epitomized in this account by a robotized Lexus automobile plant in Japan) by trying to protect their command economies, traditions, language and culture (represented by the olive tree), do so at their own economic peril.

The implications for international programs and study abroad should be clear. The rationale for, and execution of, these programs need to tack with the winds of change that are blowing at hurricane speed across the globe. The goals and importance of a study-in-Berlin program, for example, during the days of the Cold War were obvious. The cultural experience alone, important to any world citizen, especially a potential future diplomat, was rich and exotic. Today, the political, economic and cultural life in most world-class cities is increasingly similar, though it certainly is not homogenized. Once the very center of their nation's culture, today's large cities are the centers of a culture that is increasingly global: cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, eclectic, cross-cultural and wired. Music, foods, fashion and fads from almost every nation where American students are most likely to travel, are accessible in, and have an audience in, every other country in the "developed world." Increasingly, English is spoken everywhere, and if it is not already, it almost certainly soon will be the international language of the world's movers and shakers.

A reassessment of the rationale for, and execution of, international programs may well lead to a change in preferred destinations. This is where Canada comes in. Today, Canada (cited by the United Nations' Development Index as having the "highest quality of life" three years in a row) is the most international country in the world. Less than half of the country's inhabitants can trace their Canadian roots past a single generation. Its three largest cities are ranked 1, 2 and 15 in the world for quality of life. And while sharing the above listed characteristics of today's world-class cities, they retain very different characters from each other. Toronto is the largest and most culturally diverse, its variety of ethnic neighborhoods most clearly defined. Montreal has been the most successful in protecting its long history and French language, but it is slowly losing that battle as it becomes increasingly cosmopolitan. Three thousand

miles to the west, Vancouver thrives in its jeweled geographic setting, nestled between the western edge of the Canadian Rockies and the Pacific waters. Vancouver's large Asian population, and its booming economy, reflect its role as Canada's window on the Pacific Rim.

Defining the New Canadian Reality

During the past two decades—in a single generation—Canada has undergone profound change, change that has altered its character and identity to a degree not seen during any period since its Confederation in 1867. To be sure, the last 20 years have brought accelerated changes almost everywhere in the world—most, but not all of it, the result of technology and globalization. The changes in some places have been more dramatic and unsettling than in others, but the world still tends to ignore Canada (it most certainly would have paid attention had the separatism issue exploded and not merely smoldered). So Canada's significant transformation, undramatic in its unfolding, has occurred largely beneath the radar screen. That does not diminish the dimension of that transformation—still underway—nor its significance to the United States. Here it must be recognized that lessons learned about 19th- and 20th-century Canada—its people, culture, economy, politics, symbols and traditions—are today hopelessly out of date.

Changing Demographics

Fundamental to Canada's change of character are some significant demographic trends. Canada is no longer a bilingual-bicultural country. During the early years of official multiculturalism (the 70s and 80s), English and French dominated Canadian culture. This was partly due to sheer numbers, and partly because the beacons of Canadian culture and media shone brightest in central Canada—more precisely, in Toronto and Montreal. Today, Chinese may be Canada's second most-widely spoken language. In Quebec, the policies of its separatist-oriented *Parti Québécois* government have had the (not wholly unintended) effect of increasingly isolating the province from the rest of the country.

Montreal still has a vital French-speaking artistic community, but its impact on the larger Canadian culture, traditionally so important to

the country's identity, has become marginalized. In some cases, its French-Canadian culture has become more parochial and introspective; in other cases, it has become more eclectic, influenced by the recent dramatic increase in the number of immigrants to the city. In still other cases it has bypassed the Canadian audience in favor of making a *Québécois* statement on the world stage. Such has been the case of pop singer Celine Dion, playwrights Michel Tremblay and Robert Lepage, and *le Cirque du Soleil*. So while French remains Canada's other official language, the reality is otherwise. Traditions and cultural artifacts do not die easily, but they may die eventually. Canada's French character is on the wane.

Canada's population, and its economic center of gravity, also have shifted. The Atlantic provinces continue to lose people and, for the short term at least, economic import. Meanwhile Regina, Calgary, Edmonton and especially Vancouver grow and prosper, and today these places are very much a part of the country's cultural and economic mainstream. Federal government strategy during the Trudeau era (the 70s) to wean Canada from over-dependence on the United States by increasing trade and cultural relations with Europe has been rendered obsolete by the effects of NAFTA and the emergence of Asia as an economic giant.

Asia is even more accessible to Canada than Europe, but its access is enjoyed by Canada's Pacific coast. A generation ago, the perception of the Canadian identity in most international circles was of Canada as a member of the North Atlantic community whose heartbeat was located in the St. Lawrence/Great Lakes Lowlands. That perception has shifted—if not yet in the United States, then surely in the rest of the world where, today, most people whose thoughts turn to Canada conjure up images of Vancouver, or of ski trails winding through the Canadian Rockies.

Long isolated from the rest of Canada by great distance and the Rocky Mountains, British Columbia historically had been Canada's backwater. Today, it is Canada's window on the Asian world. Its location has allowed Canada to become a major player in the Pacific Rim economy. Its moderate coastal climate and spectacular scenery make Vancouver the ideal North American base for Asian and multinational corporations.

Even Quebec has experienced a major economic and social transformation. Although the province was ruled by its most nationalist political party during the final years of the 20th century, with preservation of French language and culture at the top of its agenda, the Quebec dike is

leaking like a sieve. Globalization, massive immigration (especially from Asia, the Caribbean, South America and North Africa) and the infiltration of American pop culture have overwhelmed the very substantial efforts of the *Parti Québécois* to shield its *pure laine habitants* from the contaminating influence of anything not French. In the meantime, the traditional keeper of the flame, the Roman Catholic church, has dramatically declined in influence in all but the most rural outposts of the province. A little more than a generation ago, weekly church attendance among Catholics, then an overwhelming majority in Quebec, was greater than 80 percent. Today it is one fourth of that. Their once high birthrate, encouraged by both church and government policy, is also a thing of the past. Quebec's birthrate today is among the lowest in the Americas.

Canada's New Economy

Before attempting to understand the new Canadian economy, it is necessary to deconstruct some of the myths surrounding the old one. The high profile of such national institutions as the Canadian health care system, the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), Canadian National Railroad and PetroCan has created for some Americans the impression that having Canada as a neighbor is akin to having Sweden on their doorstep, and that has led to the suspicion that Canadians suffer under a meddling government that stifles entrepreneurship, individual initiative and competition while enforcing burdensome regulations and wildly redistributing the nation's wealth from rich to poor. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Canada has always been, and today remains, fiercely capitalistic. Huge fortunes have been made, kept and passed on for generations, hardly diminished by taxes. As was the case in 19th-century America, the government of Canada has been the best friend a business could have, providing free land, transportation networks, subsidies and protective tariffs, and venturing only into enterprises—such as the transcontinental railroad—that, given Canada's geographic reality, no sensible capitalist would ever tackle. PetroCan and the CBC are possible exceptions, but there were uniquely Canadian imperatives behind both projects, and by the year 2000, both had become increasingly, if not wholly, privatized and independent.

In fact, most business owners in the United States historically would have found Canada's business climate more to their liking than the one in their own country. Until very late in the 20th century, Canada very much resembled the United States during its business heyday, the so-called Gilded Age. In the United States, with government as their ally, daring entrepreneurs, often ruthlessly cornered the market in a tiny sector of the economy, constructing trusts and monopolies, and building huge personal fortunes. Then came the Sherman Antitrust Act, followed by the Progressive Era. These economic policies helped put the brakes on the excesses of the industrial revolution through federal legislation.

Canada's history has no equivalent to the Progressive Era. Antitrust legislation and laws to protect the interests of workers and the environment have been pursued with much less vigor in Canada than in the United States. The grossly-skewed distribution of wealth that gave the Gilded Age its name was even more skewed in Canada during the same period, and Canada's Gilded Age lasted much longer. Peter C. Newman, one of Canada's premier journalists and historians, has written that during the 1890s, the residents of a short stretch of Sherbrooke Street in Montreal—called the "golden mile"—controlled fully 90 percent of Canada's wealth.²

Canada's earliest entrepreneurs made their fortunes by extracting resources from the land. They carved their niche and their wealth expanded with considerable support from the Canadian government, which was anxious for the country to develop. In the process, huge family fortunes were created and passed on, along with control of the business, to three, four, even five generations. The 20th century saw fortunes built in publishing, manufacturing, retailing, brewing, shipping and finance. All the while, government remained an ally, allowing the concentration of power and fortune to remain in the hands of a well-connected, insulated, protected elite—titans, as Newman calls them. How to soften the edges of this capitalism run amok? A generous social safety net was created, eventually including universal health insurance, paid for by government. Canada's social safety net notwithstanding, it should be clear by now that the day of the titan is past, left in the dust kicked up by NAFTA and globalization.

The titans have been replaced by a new generation of extremely successful global entrepreneurs (many of them only in their 20s) who are everything the titans were not: hungry, democratic, hardworking, inter-

national, innovative, hi-tech, risk takers. Compared to the titans, who were fiercely loyal to Canada (for obvious reasons), Canada's new entrepreneurs have different loyalties: their country is the world.

As the movers and shakers have changed, so have the products that drive the new Canadian economy. Canada is still a major exporter of lumber and minerals, but the resource sector is in decline as a percentage of the country's total exports because many of Canada's traditional markets, particularly in Asia, are finding sources closer to home. As synthetic materials and energy sources continue to be developed at accelerated rates during the 21st century, the products from nature's bounty will likely continue to lose value. Canada has already adapted. By the time the century turned, value-added products had exceeded raw materials as a portion of Canadian exports.

The country's newest entrepreneurs have concentrated on high technology products and the service sector. Thousands of firms—such as NorTel, JDS Uniphase and Bombardier—are blazing trails in communication technologies, aeronautical and land transportation systems, biotechnology, computer software and video production. Toronto has become a favorite locale for producing television programs and feature films for the North American and European markets. Western Canada is beefing up its tourism industry, every year luring hundreds of thousands of free-spending Asian and American tourists to enjoy its breathtaking scenery.

The economy of Quebec in the year 2001 bears little resemblance to the Quebec of a generation ago. The Province experienced a severe decline during the 70s, 80s and early 90s, caused by the near collapse of its heavy manufacturing sector and the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Anglophones and hundreds of businesses fleeing the political uncertainty of recent decades. The Quebec economy is now poised to return to its former position as an economic powerhouse (in biotechnology, telecommuting, computer software, air and ground transport, and mass transit) in North America. The earliest, most passionate supporter of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA, Quebec has been as aggressive as British Columbia in making its mark in the global economy. How Quebec's current government will reconcile its desire to be a major player in a world economy whose mother tongue is increasingly English, while restricting use of that language within its own borders, remains to be seen.

Political Fallout

The Canadian Confederation today, including the political institutions that support it, is very much a work in progress. The structure of Parliament, federal/provincial power-sharing, the number of viable political parties and their influence, may well be dramatically different by the end of this decade. Even the shape of Canada itself may change before then as a result of the Quebec separatist drama and other regional disputes.

The most obvious, most problematic, wave of change currently washing Canada's political landscape is the dramatic change in the country's political party structure. For nearly 50 years, federal politics in post-WWII Canada were dominated by the same three national political parties; two of them were large and the third was quite small but it usually had a feisty, popular leader and a representation in the House of Commons too large to ignore. Today, there are five national parties that enjoy enough support to place delegations in the House of Commons of sufficient size potentially to prevent the formation of a majority government. There is a danger that, were this to become a common occurrence, it could lead to political paralysis. Equally troubling is the fact that Canada's fractious politics divide less along economic or ideological lines than along lines of regional self-interest. This situation makes secession a tempting option for disgruntled losers in the national political competition.

From east to west, Canadian politics reflect the regional diversity of the country's geography and culture. In Atlantic Canada, the Liberal Party historically has been the most popular, largely because that party has been most consistent in its support of the federal government taking an active role through equalization payments to temper the economic disparities between the country's various regions. Atlantic Canada, the poorest region, would be the biggest loser in any decentralization of power in Canada, or in any move towards a more *laissez faire* economy. In the western provinces, frustration with what is perceived as Ottawa's preoccupation with central Canada, especially Quebec, has found its voice in the new Canadian Alliance party (formerly the Reform party), the most conservative of Canada's five national political parties. Its members oppose the policy of official bilingualism and have urged cutbacks in social welfare spending and greater provincial autonomy. The party has also been at the forefront of the movement to relax Canada's very restrictive gun-control laws.

The West is also the last bastion of support, ebbing though it may be, for social democratic principles. The New Democratic Party (NDP) has its roots there, the seeds having been planted during the Great Depression. After briefly winning control of the government of Saskatchewan some 50 years ago, social democrats instituted the country's first provincial universal health care plan, which served as a model for the current national system, one of Canada's proudest achievements. The NDP still has strength in the West, mainly at the provincial level and especially in Saskatchewan and British Columbia. But with the "welfare state" in retreat around the globe, the future of the party that for years fancied itself as "the conscience of Canada" is very much in doubt.

In Quebec, the *Bloc Québécois*, formed in 1992 to take the case for Quebec independence to the House of Commons, won enough seats—only in Quebec—to make it, improbably, the official opposition party in the federal Parliament (the party dropped to third place in the 1997 elections, where the party remains after the 2000 federal elections). Provincially, Ontario, which elected the NDP to form its provincial government in 1990, has since returned to its more traditional Progressive Conservative roots. However, in the 1993 federal election, and again in 1997, Ontario voters returned not one member of that party to Parliament.

The Rising Profile of Canada's Native Population

After 500 years of being first forced off their land, then ignored, then patronized by a suddenly conscience-stricken federal government, Canada's Native peoples (the First Nations) have finally come into their own. In April 1999, following a local referendum and then approval by the federal government, the eastern half of the Northwest Territories became Nunavut, a largely self-governing territory of the native Inuit people. It was an historic transfer of land and government authority perhaps without world precedent. It is also a more than symbolic recognition that the First Nations are poised to move into the mainstream of Canadian life. They still have a very long way to go. Reservations remain across the country, and life on most of them remains a constant struggle. Alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide are alarmingly prevalent, especially among children and young adults. Communication and transportation improvements during the late-20th century brought the peoples of the

First Nations closer together and raised their consciousness. In turn, they have organized and mobilized to the point where their concerns and political voice can no longer be ignored anywhere in Canada—including in Quebec, whose government has so far been more insensitive than most other provincial governments to Native demands and sensibilities. The current Quebec government, for example, has already made it clear that when (if) Quebec becomes a separate country, the Native population and the land they inhabit will come with it. The Cree and Inuit people have made it equally clear that they want no part of that. Their reasoning is impeccable: they believe that if Canada is divisible, if a “distinct society” isolated in its own region can unilaterally declare its independence with a simple referendum, then that is what they, too, will do as soon as French Canadians in Quebec set the precedent. The fallout from that scenario would no doubt take a very long time to be resolved.

Looking Ahead

The cornerstone motto of Canada’s widely-admired society has been “peace, order and good government.” Given all that has occurred in Canada during the past several decades, it would appear that all three will be more difficult to maintain during the early years of the 21st century.

A source of pride among Canadians has been their self-proclaimed image of being a “cultural mosaic,” a place where people of all cultural backgrounds are welcomed. Canada, it is claimed, is the only country with a separate ministry for multiculturalism. However, Canada’s tolerance is now being tested as never before, as the relative size of the pieces that represent French or English in the Canadian mosaic grow smaller and smaller.

There is something about the dawn of a new century that moves people to take pause to review their past and contemplate their future. As this new century begins, Canadians have a lot to think about. With the provincial *Parti Québécois* under new, more radical leadership and promising still another sovereignty referendum, Canada’s immediate future remains uncertain. Many years ago, one of its Prime Ministers observed that Canada was “geographically ridiculous and politically impossible.” That is still true today. Perhaps this first decade of the 21st century will be the time when Canadians finally decide whether they will continue to savor the irony of that observation—or live out its prophecy.

The American Study Abroad Experience in Canada

Americans have been studying “abroad” in Canada on a freelance basis for generations, and for many different reasons. Certain regions of Canada, for example, provide excellent, close-to-home opportunities to study French and/or to study in a French-speaking environment. Opportunities are available coast-to-coast for “foreign studies” in an English-speaking environment. Additionally, many students are interested in visiting cities or areas from which immediate family members or relatives emigrated to the United States.

Traditionally, many more Canadians have sought higher education degrees in the United States than the reverse. However, this is about to change. Tearing a creative page out of the American university admissions handbook, Canadian universities are aggressively recruiting in the United States with the up-front argument that a Canadian education is less expensive, and a more subtle argument that it is perhaps better.

Before they study in Canada, visiting students should know that education at all levels in the country is a rigidly-preserved provincial responsibility, and thus variations in curriculum, regulations, costs and the like are probably greater from province to province than from state to state. In Quebec, for example—language differences aside—high school graduates (after grade 11) wishing to attend university must first complete a two-year program at one of more than 50 heavily-subsidized institutions called CEGEPs (*Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel*), which are similar to community colleges, but which place a greater emphasis on technical and professional training than those in the United States. Upon graduation, students with appropriate credentials attend university for three more years.

Traditionally, it was common for colleges sponsoring study abroad programs, especially private colleges, to create enclaves in foreign countries where American, not native, professors taught the students the language, accompanied them on field trips, and basically directed the “semester abroad” experience. This practice is, thankfully, far less common today. This study abroad model has rarely been part of the Canadian study abroad experience. Students studying there are typically housed in residences with native and/or other foreign students and attend classes

taught by full-time professionals at a host university. However, even this does not ensure a total “immersion” experience. Cross-cultural understanding in the Canadian context is not necessarily a concomitant of the study abroad program. Structures must be in place that broaden students’ experience beyond the university campus.

Important as well are the reflective dimensions of students’ experience in Canada, particularly how they obtain a different interpretation or “take” on world events through the eyes of Canadian journalists and reporters. Generally, the Canadian media spend proportionately more time on world affairs and are much more outward-looking as a country and a people, reflecting the country’s greater cultural diversity and the fact that 40 percent of its trade is international, whereas U.S. international trade is just over 10 percent. American students must also adapt to or cope with a degree of anti-American bias on the part of their fellow students and professors, especially those who were a product of the Vietnam War era—a war strongly opposed by Canadians.

In conclusion, participating students are not the only beneficiaries of “study abroad” programs in Canada. For example, while the evidence is less systematic and more anecdotal, it is clear that the Canadian studies program at our university has and is changing as a result of our study abroad programs in Canada. Professors, administrators, and students in Canada have visited our campus as a result of contacts established by our students or because we have established contact while visiting our students. Due certainly to our proximity to Quebec and the preponderance of programs in that province, we have over the years placed a much greater emphasis on French language acquisition and upon an understanding of the distinctiveness of French Canadian culture. The impact has spilled over into the area of course offerings. As pre-departure preparation and/or as post-program follow up, such courses as Quebec Politics, Canadian Art, French Canadian History, among others, have been added to the Canadian studies curriculum. Returning students, regardless of their academic interests, have also stressed the importance of understanding how business is conducted in Canada. Thus, we now offer courses, for example, in comparative management, business practices and franchising—all with significant Canadian content.

Students overwhelmingly return from Canada filled with enthusiasm and often speaking French. They not only possess considerably

greater knowledge, but also have a multitude of new friends, different perspectives and a greater understanding of and appreciation for, and sometimes, even, a healthy skepticism about, the United States and the American way of life. *Vive la difference.*

Notes

1 Peter Black, in a speech to the Canada-United States Business Council: October 26, 1999.

2 Peter C. Newman, *Titans: How the New Canadian Establishment Seized Power*, Toronto: Viking (Penguin Books Canada, Ltd.), 1998.