

# Globalisation et culture. Le cas de Canada et d'Etats-Unis d'Amérique

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**Résumé :** Avec une culture politique libérale qui se caractérise par un gouvernement limité, l'internationalisme et une société ouverte, le Canada se situe quelque part entre la France et les États-Unis dans son degré de protectionnisme culturel et d'intensité globale de la politique culturelle. Les États-Unis peuvent se permettre d'avoir une «politique culturelle des portes ouvertes» parce qu'ils ont peu à craindre de la concurrence étrangère. Pour le Canada, cependant, la culture

de libre-échange fait surgir le spectre de l'incapacité de se protéger contre les forces de l'annexion culturelle américaine. Cet article enquête le débat sur l'impérialisme culturel américain et les préoccupations du Canada pour sa souveraineté culturelle avec une référence particulière aux accords de commerce international de la dernière décennie.

**Mots-clés :** impérialisme, hégémonie, colonialité, relations asymétriques

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## *Globalization and Culture: the Case of Canada and the United States*

**Abstract:** With a liberal political culture that is characterized by limited government, internationalism and an open society, Canada stands somewhere between France and the United States in its degree of cultural protectionism and overall intensity of cultural politics. The United States,

of course, is the great cultural exception with a regnant popular culture that is able to indemnify its production costs over a populous and prosperous society which is largely immune to cultural expressions that do not project an American sensibility. In effect, the United

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States can afford to have a “cultural open-door policy” because it has little to fear from foreign competition. For Canada, however, cultural free-trade raises the specter of standing unprotected against the forces of American cultural annexation. This discussion will survey the debate

over U.S. cultural imperialism and Canadian concerns for its cultural sovereignty with particular reference to the international trade agreements of the past decade.

**Keywords:** imperialism, hegemony, coloniality, asymmetrical relations

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## **Introduction**

Canada and the United States, like most nations, engage in a variety of bilateral and multilateral activities that promote international cultural cooperation. While cultural relations admittedly do not have the same resonance in Canadian-American relations as do security; environmental safety; and economic growth, Canadian-American cultural relations represent an interesting case of the political adage that “where you sit determines where you stand.” For the United States, culture is judged generally to be a sidebar in the spectrum of politics among nations, as cultural expression is more often considered to be a commodity than a value of identity. For Canada, culture is a much more central concern in its bilateral relations with the United States given this asymmetrical relationship. Consequently, there can be an argument for “cultural border defenses” to regulate globalization’s impact on Canadian political sovereignty.

## **Information**

### *Cultural Hegemony*

In some sense, culture is a peculiar issue—both odd and unique. Though Canada is certainly not a nation that would be typically judged as a victim of “coloniality” by a “hegemonic power,” Canadians are necessarily aware that the relentless expansion of the American entertainment business results in ever-greater “integration” or homogenization of the cultural identities of the two nations. (Lipset, 1985) As a business model, economic integration is a good thing; however, from the Canadian perspective, it could be viewed as cultural annexation. Accordingly, a “particularistic” argument is deeply embedded in Canada’s reaction to American cultural imperialism. Moreover, it is this concern with the maintenance of a unique cultural identity that gave Canada a major role in developing the overwhelming

international consensus about the importance of cultural diversity. The United States, unsurprisingly, sees particularism as protectionism and rejects the equation of integration with annexation.

Fundamentally, Canadian-U.S. cultural relations involve maintaining identity in the face of asymmetrical relations between a hegemonic power and a smaller neighbor with linguistic commonality as well as virtually adjacent populations given the geographic configuration of Canada's demography. For many, especially in the political, intellectual and cultural milieu, this means that Canadian culture exists in a state of dependency on the United States.

As is often the case, where a small nation has a big neighbor, geographic propinquity can create awkward, even difficult, cultural relations. (de la Garde, Gilsdorf, and Wechselmann, 1993) None of this is to suggest a loss of Canadian political sovereignty. Yet, Canada has had to grapple with a persistent stereotype of being the "fifty-first American state." As such, coloniality (the cultural dominance of a stronger power over another) persists in its post-colonial era: moreover, there is a significant question about whether political sovereignty can be sustained without cultural independence and the concomitant value of individual identity. In sum, how can a distinct Canadian identity thrive in the face of a hegemonic American culture?

The cultural imperialism thesis generally addresses the process of cultural dominance and dependence among nations. As such, it is a corollary to dependency theory in which the hegemonic power imposes its culture on another nation (Brewer, 1980) In this sense, dependency theory argues that the free flow of information, mainly from the United States, promotes a system of American global domination instead of mutually beneficial development (Amin, 1976). Based on this perspective, the flow of mass media cultural products such as film, music, and television encourages an internalization of the superiority of an American world view at the expense of other value systems.

Influenced by the tenets of dependency theory, cultural-imperialism scholars have focused on the implications of the exploitative nature of the relationship between more powerful countries and less powerful countries. The core-state gains cultural dominance over the peripheral state through the economics of neo-liberalism and the transmission of consumer capitalism (Boyd-Barrett, 1995). The coloniality resulting from cultural domination effectively pressures the peripheral world into shaping its values to correspond with those of the hegemon. (Schiller, 1976) Overall, the asymmetrical flow of cultural products undermines the chances that less-powerful countries have for sustaining autonomous identities in the face of cultural hegemonization. (McQuail, 2003)

*Culture and Trade*

Cultural relations between Canada and the U.S. have been dominated by international trade agreements as these affect their respective cultural industries. To a degree that is highly unusual, considering the typically arcane provisions of such agreements, the details of understandings governing the cultural sector have been the subject of highly emotional political debates. These debates have been especially vocal among Canadian artists, intellectuals and culture workers and more engaged members of the general public. The demand for a cultural exemption as protection against the onslaught of U.S. “cultural imperialism,” is a staple subject of this discourse. On the other hand, it can certainly be argued that, even as the Canadian public is sensitive to concerns about cultural distinctiveness, there is little awareness of trade policies and their cultural industries.

The Americans have the exemption peculiar to hegemons of not having to be concerned about cultural competition. For Americans, these issues are not much noticed in domestic politics except by those in the entertainment industry and the trade negotiators in Washington. It also needs to be noted that Canada lacks the American uniqueness in having a regnant popular culture that is able to indemnify its costs over a populous and prosperous society before being exported internationally. This advantage is strengthened by the insular nature of American society which is largely immune to cultural expressions that do not project an American sensibility. For example, barely one percent of the movies that Americans watch are “foreign.” (Mulcahy, 2003) In effect, the United States can afford to have a “cultural open-door policy” because it has little to fear from foreign competition. For Canada, however, cultural free-trade raises the specter of standing unprotected against the forces of American cultural annexation.

Canada and the United States may be the most extreme case of the “small nation, big neighbor syndrome” noted earlier. The size and aggressiveness of American cultural industries has, “in various periods and among certain audiences, stimulated a strong sense of fear about the ‘Americanization’ of Canada” (Corse, 1997: 57). Some have argued that “the vastly larger and more aggressive society poised along Canada’s southern border threatened Canadian political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness from the beginning” (Corse, 1997: 35). There are, of course, other examples: Austria and Germany, in which the latter is ten times the size of its German-speaking cousin, and, for that matter, Denmark and Norway where the former exercised political and cultural sovereignty over the latter for five hundred years. There are Australia and New Zealand, China and Korea, Russian and Ukraine, India and Nepal. Arguably, Quebec stands in similar relation to anglophone Canada; as do Scotland, Wales, and Ireland to England; Catalonia to Spain; and, Puerto Rico to the United States. In each of these cases, there is a

hegemonic power that not only enjoys political and economic suzerainty, but cultural

predominance as well. This is not to suggest that the relationship cannot be benign; indeed, it may be symbiotic, but it is definitely not symmetrical.

Canada and the United State are traditionally said to enjoy a “special relationship” with an “undefended border, highly integrated economies, shared legacies of democratic institutions and similar (although not identical) political cultures” (Thompson and Randall, 1994: 241). However, living in the shadow of the United States makes for many greater problems in Canadian life than for Americans. (Lipsey, 1994: 70) Canadians and Americans may be loyal allies and good trading partners; however, it needs to be stressed that the relationship is unequal in how the actions of the larger nation affect the smaller. Pierre Trudeau observed as follows about Canada’s relations with the United States, “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant; no matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” (Feaver, 1993: 28)

#### *Cultural Dependency*

Fear of becoming a U.S. “vassal state” is a longtime concern of many Canadians (Cook, 1996: 184). “In economic, political and cultural life the proximity, scale, and vitality of the United States inhibit the establishment of a sense of common identity and significant difference in a much smaller neighbor (Robertson, 1994: 38) “In fact, some Canadians perceive the United States as the metropolitan power in relation to Canada, which they view as a hinterland region” (Litvak and Maule, 1974: 1). The omnipresence of American entertainment products has prompted a near crisis-mentality among some Canadians about the survivability of a national way of life that is not an American derivative.

Table 1 highlights some of the most frequently cited examples illustrating the dominance of Canadian cultural markets by foreign imports. These imports are overwhelmingly American although francophone Quebec consumes French cultural imports.

**Table 1:** *Foreign Share of Canadian Cultural Markets*

<b>Percent foreign</b>	<b>In these Canadian Markets</b>
95	Feature-films screened in theatres
70	Music on radio stations
84	Retail sales of sound recordings
69	French-language retail sales of sound recordings
60	English-language television programming
33	French-language television programming
85	Prime-time drama on English-language television
75	Prime-time drama on French language television
70	Book market
83	Newsstand market for magazines
81	English-language consumer magazines

Source: Acheson and Maule, 1999: 16.

With a virtual monopoly of prime time TV, books, magazines, audio visual products, Canada may simply be the most advanced case of American domination of another nations entertainment market. It should be noted that the American cultural imperium is strongest in the realm of feature-films with Hollywood movies accounting for 95 percent of the screen time. Of course, there is nothing unique about the domination of Hollywood in foreign film markets where between 80 and 90 percent of the movies screened are American. (Through extensive subsidy of its domestic film production, France keeps the American market share at about 70 percent (Riding, 1998).

What these data make clear is that so predominant an American media-presence can reasonably raise the specter of “cultural imperialism.” The argument that “Canadian voices need a public space in which to tell Canadian stories” reflects a deeply-held feeling that Canadians have lost the ability to define themselves culturally. This feeling also reflects a sense of resentment that not only are the instruments of representation owned by American corporations, but also portray American values as universal verities. Consequently, while the text of the arguments concerning Canadian-American cultural relations are usually objective and economic in tone, the subtext is decidedly subjective and political.

Whether Canada’s relationship with the United States should be termed “cultural colonialism” is highly debatable, but many Canadians are concerned about

a co-opted cultural identity (Corse, 1997: 35). For example, half of Canadians believe that Canadians and Americans are “essentially the same” (13%) or “mainly the same” (37%). For Americans, the belief in Canadian-American similarity is more striking as 24% see it as “essentially the same” and 46% see it as “mainly the same.” (Toronto *Globe & Mail*, 2008) This perception may explain why Americans have typically had a hard time taking seriously Canadian complaints about the intrusiveness of American entertainment-products. Not surprisingly, identity politics – “the conviction that Canada was to be understood on its own terms” (Smith, 1994: 103) – has acquired an increasing forcefulness in the discourse concerning the extent of the U.S. cultural presence in Canada.

#### *Cultural Commodification*

It may be fair to conclude that Canada’s cultural debate over the past hundred years “has, in part, been an attempt to nurture a distinctive culture” (Cook, 1996: 174). In a related sense, identity politics is the underlying cause of many of the difficulties in U.S.-Canadian cultural relations even when presented as technical questions of cultural exemptions to multilateral tariff agreements. If “Canada’s cultural concerns were invariably interpreted as masks for economic protectionism,” which they sometimes were, “Americans were seldom able to distinguish economic protectionism from genuine concerns about culture and nationality” (Thompson and Randall, 1994: 125). This clash of U.S.-Canadian perspectives “can be attributed largely to a fundamental value difference between how the two political systems valorize culture” (Sigler and Doran, 1994: 23).

Americans are generally acceptant of the market as the infallible determiner of cultural values (indeed of social values in general). In the United States, culture equivalent (basically) to entertainment, and is a good that is properly allocated by the market. In Canada (as in a large number of nations), culture is an expression of national identity and as such is to be promoted and protected as a public responsibility. To the degree to which culture for Americans is about the profit-making entertainment industry and for Canadians about the politics of national identity, there should be little doubt about the propensity for mutual misunderstanding concerning any exempt status for cultural industries in free-trade agreements.

As a public policy, Canada and the United States have very different perceptions about the nature of culture. “Culture, according to the American view, has been defined as a purely marketable commodity. Canadians admit to, and care about the commodity aspects of culture, but they also see culture as a social resource or public good” (Merrett, 1996: 233). Of course, entertainment is one of the chief exports of the U.S. and Canada is a large profit center. American entertainment and publishing executives have argued that Canadian protection of its cultural industries “represented a major impediment to (American) international commercial activities

and also set a bad example to other countries considering measures to protect their domestic cultural production” (Merrett, 1996: 227).

*Cultural Protection vs. Cultural Protectionism*

Throughout this essay, a deliberate effort has been made to use the term “protection,” rather than “protectionism.” This is not a syntactic exercise, but recognition of a real difference for cultural policy formulations. Protectionism has a reactive and defensive connotation: in effect, a nation building a moat around itself. Protection, on the other hand, suggests a proactive and positive stance: in effect, a nation building bridges to the international community to showcase its distinctive culture.

In this sense, the UNESCO “Accord on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expression” can be judged as a positive statement asserting the desire of the community of nations to come to terms with America’s hegemony in entertainment culture. Most important, this would be on their own terms and with the recognition of the need for symmetrical cultural relationships. To paraphrase a key element of the UNESCO Convention: cultural diversity is predicated on the equal dignity of all cultures.

As has been noted, Canada was in the forefront of the Diversity Convention if only because of its peculiar geographic and cultural position. Its physical closeness to a “powerful and exuberant neighbor” creates “very special problems for Canada’s culture and, hence, for cultural policy” (Fullman, 2005). On a psychological basis, Canadians have an understandable sense of resentment about being considered “little Americans” (as Ukrainians were deemed “little Russians”). It is sometimes argued that Canada is an American “sphere of cultural influence.” However, while Canadians recognize a special relationship with the United States, they do not wish to be reduced to a cultural subset of its larger neighbor.

As the Canadian Conference on the Arts put it, “Canadians must clearly establish our unfettered right to manage our cultural affairs as we best see fit without challenge or that of retaliation” (Siwek, 2004). Nevertheless, given the asymmetry of Canadian-American relations, there may be little choice but for Canada, like most other nations, to come to terms with the power of American entertainment culture. In this situation, policies enhancing cultural protection are a reasonable means for preventing Canadian voices from being suffocated by American competition. This is not to argue for an unconditional surrender to U.S. culture, but for an honest (if agonizing) reappraisal of the competitiveness of Canadian cultural products in an era of market-determined, mass culture.

The UNESCO Convention affirmed the right of sovereign states to develop policies for the promotion of their cultural vitality. Some of these might include:

- Providing public funding for expensive audio-visual projects and establishing a niche in less-expensive creative works such as documentaries;
- Supporting public institutions such as museums and concert halls as venues for the presentation and the preservation of national cultural heritages;
- Enhancing public broadcasting programming that provides alternatives to the market-based offerings of multi-national (usually American) conglomerates;
- Supporting artists, including those of indigenous background, to enhance a nation’s visibility on the international cultural scene. (Carnaghan, 2006: 1)

*Cultural Sovereignty*

Figure 1 schematizes these policy suggestions as a comparison between the goals of Canadian and American cultural expressions. Of course, as in any dichotomization, the extreme positions are arguable. Understandably, Canadians could find their cultural position as suggested herein unacceptable. The likelihood of these suggestions becoming policies is a matter for future discussion.

Canada’s cultural future may be with “hybridization,” that is, a fusion of global and local creative expressions. The key to the success of any hybrid culture is that its content be the choice of people within a nation, rather than one imposed externally by a hegemonic nation. This may require national policies of cultural protection against the United States’ neoliberal doctrine that sees various cultures as a commodity subject to the general rules of trade agreements.

<b>United States</b>	<b>Cultural Industry</b>	<b>Canada</b>
Action Movies	<i>Audiovisual</i>	Documentaries
Deregulated Media	<i>Broadcasting</i>	Expanded CBC Programming
Disneyworld	<i>Heritage</i>	Historic Sites
Market-determination & Private Philanthropy	<i>The Arts</i>	Publicly-subsidized Artistic Venues
Commercial Value	<i>Artists</i>	National Visibility

**Figure 1:** *A Schema of Canadian-American Cultural Expressions*

This hybridization may enable Canada to move from a position of cultural complaint that reacts defensively to the triumphalism of American popular culture to a more positive and self-assured national culture that is distinctive without being provincial or parochial. Although small in population, Canada is home to two major linguistic societies and may be ideally positioned to mediate a global cultural perspective that is an alternative to the hegemony of American entertainment. A hybrid Canadian culture, which is post-colonial, bi-lingual and multi-cultural, could serve as a model for other nations that seek to retain their heritage and identity without retreating into autarchy or dependency.

This chapter has been informed by the proposition that a fully formed civic identity is only possible when complemented by a comparably developed cultural identity. As a nation with a large and long-standing cultural region, the role of Quebec in shaping Canadian cultural policy is highly significant. (Mulcahy, 1995) Unlike Canada, the United States does not have such a distinct society, which accounts for about 22% of its population. Accordingly, Canadian commitment to multi-culturalism has had to accommodate both individual rights and collective rights. In the U.S., everyone is legally equal to be American. In Canada, one is guaranteed the right to be Canadian, as well as the right to retain one's ascriptive identity. In this sense, Canada has had significant experience with policies that protect cultural diversity. Canadian culture does not rest as heavily on American principles of assimilation and homogenization; rather, there is accommodation and heterogeneity. As a broad generalization, Canada is a cultural mosaic in contrast to the American melting pot.

At root, cultural policies have as a central goal the determination of which parties control the definition of their identity; that is by whom are a people told who they are. This requires having a voice that speaks to their own cultural distinctiveness. As Edward Said, the late Columbia University literary theorist observed, "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the major connections between them." (Said, 1979: xiii) In essence, the challenge is constructing both a unique public culture and a distinct political culture so that full sovereignty would be realized. In sum, there should be Canadian voices to tell Canadian stories.

Canada has had decided successes in addressing the challenges of orchestrating a choir that can vocalize its identity. First was the articulation of a post-Dominion identity. The Massey Commission Report of 1951 was a milestone for realizing this goal. Second, was the recognition of a post-Conquest Quebec as a full member of the national choir. This can be first marked by the "Quiet Revolution" of the Lesage government of the 1960s. Third was the manifestation of full sovereignty with the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 (admittedly, without Quebec's consent). Other manifestations of political sovereignty include the

adoption of “O Canada” as the national anthem in 1980 and the earlier recognition of the Maple Leaf flag in 1965. Fourth, the realization of a multi-cultural Canada was formalized in the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Fifth, the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity represented at least a symbolic success for Canadian diplomacy in giving international recognition to the principle that culture and identity were linked. All of these measures addressed what has been emphasized repeatedly: that the maintenance of political sovereignty requires the realization of cultural sovereignty.

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