Canada and the United States are often—rightly—considered “most similar cases.” Yet in some important respects, the two societies diverged markedly in recent years. This is obvious in high profile public policy areas such as the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gasses and legislation legalizing gay marriage. But no less important—because, I shall argue, as it helps to explain the public policy divergence—is the growing difference in the level of union organization and in the level and character of religiosity in the two countries.

In the mid-1950s, about the same share of Canadians and Americans (35 percent) were union members; at the same time, about 60 percent of Canadians and 50 percent of Americans told pollsters that they went to church each Sunday. By the dawn of the 21st century, U.S. “union density” had fallen to about 12 percent, less than half the Canadian level (about 35 percent), while regular churchgoing in Canada had fallen to 22 percent, about half of the U.S. level (42 percent) (Adams, 50).

What explains these divergences? To what degree do differences in national political cultures contribute to these divergent trends? These are among the central concerns of the three books under review. All three argue (or assume) that differences in national political cultures explain differences in the level and character of civil society organization, and in public policy. All three books rely mainly on large-scale national surveys to map the contours of these cultures, and to argue for connections between culture, organization, and policy. However, our authors disagree on what aspects of national cultures are most important, on how large differences in these areas are, and on whether these differences are growing or shrinking over time! Lipset and Meltz assert that the core political values of each country are fundamentally different and that this difference has not changed over the last quarter century, or indeed, for the past two centuries. Inglehart et al. argue that Canadian and American political values were not very different in 1981 and had become even more similar by 1990. Adams holds that there were major differences in national cultures in 1992, and that some of these had grown substantially by 2000.

In this review, I argue that national culture arguments contribute little to an explanation of diverging union density and religiosity in these two countries. We are better off, I think, looking at differences in the goals and the power of different factions within the labor movements and the religious communities of each country. These differences explain diverging levels of membership, political power, and political goals in labor and religious organizations in the two countries. Such an analysis suggests that the two trends are causally related as well—that is, it is no coincidence that levels of union density are much lower, while levels of religiosity are much higher, in the United States than in Canada.
Let's begin with the labor piece of the puzzle. As its subtitle suggests, the main focus of *The Paradox of American Unionism* is Canada-U.S. union density divergence from the mid-1960s to the present. Canada and the United States had identical levels of union organization (about 35 percent) in the mid-1950s, but by 1983 Canada had about twice the union density of the United States (40 versus 20 percent). Since then, union density declined in both countries, but the 2:1 ratio of Canadian to U.S. density remained remarkably stable. In *Paradox*, Lipset and Meltz pull together a wealth of data, helping to situate the North American cases in the wider context of union density trends in the OECD countries. But their most important contribution is the large, bi-national survey they mounted in 1996. This survey discovered that when unorganized workers were asked whether they would personally prefer to belong to a union, the same share in each country (39 percent) responded positively. A different way of asking the question yielded somewhat different responses: 33 percent of non-union members in Canada, and 48 percent in the United States, said they would vote for a union in their workplace if given the chance. This is the highest positive response in the United States since this question has been asked; in 1984, only 34 percent responded positively (Lipset 1996, 104).

The 1996 results imply that if everyone who wanted to be in a union belonged to one—and no one was forced to belong—union density would be about 49 percent in Canada (almost 65 percent above its actual level in 1996), and 54 percent in the United States (about 286 percent above its 1996 level). Thus, by 1996 there was enormous unsatisfied worker demand for unions—implying a corresponding failure by governments to protect workers’ freedom of association rights—in both countries. In the United States, however, the problem was four to five times larger than in Canada.

Since first tackling the puzzle of Canada-U.S. union density divergence in 1986, Lipset has argued that a difference in core national political cultures—a more communitarian Canada versus a more individualistic America—is the root cause (Lipset 1986). Greater Canadian communitarianism is supposed to result in greater sympathy for unions and their objectives, hence greater worker demand for unions, hence higher union density levels (Lipset 1996, 96–106).

The Lipset and Meltz survey results undercut this argument in two important ways. First, they suggest that many workers, particularly in the United States, do not get anything like the level of union representation that they desire. Second, they demonstrate that U.S. worker demand for unions is at least as high as Canadian worker demand. This implies one (or both) of two things: Lipset’s individualist/communitarian distinction does not map well onto the political cultures of these two countries; and/or this kind of cultural difference, insofar as it exists, is irrelevant to workers’ desire to join unions.

In *Paradox*, Lipset and Meltz opt for the second position. They argue that labor law differences are the main reason why U.S. workers who want union representation are much less likely than their Canadian counterparts to get it—a position that Lipset criticized in earlier work (Lipset 1986, 1996). But the alleged cultural difference in the strength of individualism is then invoked to explain why Canadian labor law is more union friendly. The obvious problem with this argument, Lipset and Meltz acknowledge, is that public opinion data show that Canadians have been less favorably disposed towards unions than Americans throughout the post-war period (Lipset & Meltz 2004, 2, 87–9). So why would Canadian governments pass more favorable labor laws? More deeply, why is the more communitarian culture, ex hypothesi, consistently associated with the less supportive public opinion towards unions— the very opposite of Lipset’s assumption?

Perhaps, Lipset and Meltz suggest, Canadian public opinion is more critical of unions because the Canadian labor movement is more powerful than its U.S. counterpart. Perhaps Canadians are more supportive of unions, other things being equal, but they become more critical as union power increases. The authors do not explicitly test this paradigm-salvaging hypothesis, and this failure is highly problematic given how much is at stake, and the relative ease with which it could be tested. For starters, the historical data presented earlier in their book bear on this question. They indicate that Canadian public opinion was less pro-union even in the years (1941–54) when Canadian union density was below U.S. levels, and in the years (1954–64)
when union density was about the same in the two countries (Lipset & Meltz 2004, 2).

The new hypothesis can also be tested with state and/or provincial cross-sectional data. There is a lot of variation in union density levels among American states and Canadian provinces and a lot of change over time. If Lipset and Meltz are right, there should be a strong negative correlation between union density and public support for unions within each country. I have not done a systematic analysis of available data, but a first cut, using a 1981 Canadian survey, shows no statistically significant correlation between provincial union density and the share of provincial respondents who believe that unions have too much power. There is, however, a statistically significant, positive correlation ($r = .675, p = .032$) between union density and the share of the population favoring a law banning the hiring of strike-breakers (Ornstein 1986, 66–7). Such a law would increase unions' collective bargaining power by increasing the credibility of the strike threat—just the opposite of what Lipset's hypothesis suggests voters want, other things being equal, in high union density jurisdictions.

Consistent with this finding, in 1977, Quebec passed the first anti-strikebreaker law in Canada. At that time, it had the second highest union density in the country (34 percent); by 1992, Quebec had the highest union density on the continent (38 percent), a position it retains today (Lipset & Meltz 2004, 107).

Unless supporters of Lipset's approach to political culture can provide convincing responses to these empirical challenges, we must conclude that their conception of national political cultures is (at best) unhelpful in explaining Canada–U.S. differences in labor law and union density. A better hypothesis, I think, is that differences in labor laws, union density, and public opinion concerning unions are all shaped by, at the same time as they affect, differences in labor movement political power. To explain union density or labor law differences or trends, we need to look at this whole causal nexus, understood as a dynamic system. Such a system of causal interdependence is complicated, and resistant to statistical analysis, but that's life and it does no good to pretend otherwise.

Could some alternative approach to national political culture help us to understand national differences in labor movement power levels and trends? Ronald Inglehart's theoretical distinction between materialist and post-materialist values might seem to offer such promise. The core idea, derived from West European theorists of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, is that the labor movement's political legitimacy—and hence, political power—is rooted in materialist values (i.e., a concern with increasing material wealth and enhancing material security through higher wages, a more extensive welfare state, and so on). By contrast, the legitimacy of the 'new social movements' (i.e., students, environment, peace, feminism) is rooted in post-materialist values that assign a higher priority to improvements in spiritual fulfillment and democratic political participation than to further increases in wealth and security. According to Inglehart, the balance between materialist and post-materialist values shifts toward the latter with each generation as they are born into increasingly wealthy societies.

To my knowledge, Inglehart never spells out what this cultural trajectory, if accurate, implies for labor movement political power. But a plausible extrapolation is that as a nation's population becomes more post-materialist, labor movements will see membership commitment and public support levels fall. This, in turn, reduces the movement's mobilization capacity, and so, its political power. On this analysis, we might account for the somewhat higher demand for union representation in the United States by arguing that levels of economic insecurity, and hence, levels of materialism, are higher in the United States. Given the weaker welfare state in that country—no national system of universal health insurance, weaker funding of pensions and unemployment insurance, inconsistent funding of public education, and so on—we would expect higher levels of economic insecurity and associated materialist values in the United States.

There are two problems with this form of the national political culture argument. First, it does not explain why the gap between what workers want and what they actually get is so substantial. Second, it does not appear that, as a matter of fact, Americans are more materialist than their Canadian counterparts, at least not as this concept is measured by Inglehart and his colleagues.
In their comparative study of Canada, the United States, and Mexico, The North American Trajectory, Inglehart and his co-authors use the 1981 and 1990 waves of the World Values Survey (WVS) to map the three countries of North America (along with many other countries) on a two-dimensional space. The first axis that defines this space locates people on the materialist/post-materialist spectrum; the second axis locates them on a spectrum of attitudes towards religious (as opposed to secular) authority. It turns out that Canada and the United States are virtually identical in their location on the first axis. It is on the second that the two countries are significantly different, with Canada considerably more secular than the United States, and secularizing more rapidly. The 1981 WVS survey showed that only 31 percent of Canadians, compared with 48 percent of Americans, say that God is very important in their lives, that they get strength and comfort from religion, and that they sometimes pray (Inglehart’s measure of “religiosity”). By 1990, 26 percent of Canadians versus 46 percent of Americans answered these questions the same way (Inglehart et al. 1996, 77–81).

It is because of the gap on this second axis that Canada is closer to the U.K. and Belgium than it is to the United States, though no country is closer to the U.S. than Canada (Inglehart et al. 1996, 19). Could these national differences regarding religiosity and authority underpin a national culture account Canada-U.S. union density divergence? More recent analysis by Inglehart, working with Pippa Norris, suggests that the causation may well run in the opposite direction. Their multi-country statistical analysis indicates that the prevalence of religiosity—though not “spirituality,” which they define as a search for meaning in life, something that continues in secular societies—is inversely related to material and psychological security. Religiosity is much higher in poor rural counties than in rich urban ones, and among the poor people than among the rich in every country. In the United States, for example, 66 percent of the lowest-income decile report that they are very religious, as opposed to 47 percent of the highest decile (Norris & Inglehart 2004, 108–110).

Though the authors do not make this case, their focus on material insecurity fits the facts of U.S. economic evolution in the neoliberal era: though GDP increased significantly since 1980 (and this is normally associated with improved security), neoliberal restructuring has resulted in growing material and psychological insecurity for a growing share of the population. Perhaps, then, the relative weakness of the American welfare state contributes to the unusually high levels of religiosity in this country, and the erosion of an already weak U.S. welfare state after 1980 helps to explain the (modest) revival of religiosity that we find in the data for the 1990s. Canada’s welfare state also eroded in these years, moved in this direction, albeit to a lesser extent, more cautiously and from a pre-neoliberal era baseline that provided more security to its citizens. The survey data on religiosity indicate that the share of the population for whom religion is important increased slightly, in both Canada and the United States, between the 1990 and 2001 waves of the World Values Survey (Norris & Inglehart 2004, 90–1) — a reversal of the long-term secularization trend apparent in both countries in earlier decades (Inglehart et al., 1996, 77–81).

Perhaps, then, we have a causal dynamic in which (1) relatively low and declining political power of the U.S. labor movement resulting in (2) a relatively weak and shrinking welfare state, which results in (3) growing material insecurity for a growing share of the population, which results in (4) the growth of a conservative, anti-labor type of religiosity among working and middle-class Americans, which then (5) further expands its political power at the expense of politicians aligned with the labor movement. The key here is the character of religiosity, for not all forms of religion have been—or are today—hostile to labor movement power and the expanded welfare state that labor movements generally seek.

Has American religiosity been moving in an anti-welfare state, anti-union direction? If so, why? Nothing in Inglehart’s work on religion compares the character of organized religion in the two countries. However, in Fire and Ice, Michael Adams presents evidence bearing on this question. Drawing on surveys conducted in both countries in 1992, 1996, and 2000, Adams finds “an extremely strong correlation between deference to authority and religiosity among Americans,” with both strongly correlated to support for a patriarchal conception of the family; in Canada, the

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correlations among these values are much weaker (Adams 2003, 41, 174, 186). Adams's data on patriarchy (measured by the response to the statement: “The father of the family must be master in his own house”) are a striking indicator of the size of these differences. Between 1992 and 2000, the share of Americans agreeing with this statement increased from 42 to 48 percent, while the share of Canadians agreeing fell from 26 to 18 percent (Adams 2003, 50–1).

The higher baseline support for patriarchal beliefs in the United States probably reflects the higher percentage of American believers who are conservative evangelicals or conservative Catholics. In 1996, 15 percent of Canadians fell in the first category; the figure was 33 percent in the United States. There are no figures on the share of Catholics in each country who are social conservatives, but the Catholic Church has taken a much higher profile in anti-abortion politics in the United States than in Canada, despite the fact that Catholics represent a larger share of the religious in Canada. This suggests that the conservative wing of the Catholic Church is stronger in the U.S. than in Canada.

The greater strength of conservative religiosity in the United States would explain why the correlation between religiosity and support for patriarchal authority is so much stronger in the United States. The slight growth in the share of Americans endorsing patriarchal beliefs between 1992 and 2000, contrasted with the rapid decline in Canada, speaks to which religious tendency reaped the gains from the rising material and psychological insecurity of the last decade. (It also implies that growing religiosity stimulated by neoliberal restructuring need not take a conservative form.) If we treat patriarchal beliefs as a rough proxy for the strength of conservative religiosity, the national differences are dramatic. In 2000, the share of Canadian respondents who agreed that the father of the family must be the “master of his own house” ranged from 15 percent (Quebec) to 21 percent (Alberta). In the United States, it ranged from 29 percent (New England) to 71 percent (Deep South) (Adams 2004, 89).

To the greater share of the population who are religious conservatives we must add the higher level of political organization and influence that conservative evangelicals and Catholics have achieved in the United States over the last 30 years: “Christian conservatives now hold a majority of the seats in 36 percent of all Republican Party state committees (or 18 of 50 states), plus large minorities in 81 percent of the rest, double their strength from a decade before. They are weak in just six states (plus D.C.), all northeastern” (Conger & Green 2002). There is nothing remotely comparable to this level of political power, by any Canadian religious tendency or coalition, in any of Canada’s major political parties, in any region of the country.

Why have neoliberalism’s insecurities stimulated the growth of the religious right in the United States but not in Canada? How—and for how long—has this growth reconfigured the balance of political power in the United States? A close comparison of the U.S. and Canadian cases raises these questions, but none of the books considered here offer any purchase on them. What we can say is that the Canadian labor movement has not had to deal with a parallel challenge to the effectiveness of its economic justice frame with its white working-class members and Canadian voters. This helped to make the Canadian labor movement stronger, and that greater strength is one of the principal reasons why Canada has more pro-union labor laws and more extensive public sector. More obviously, the weakness of the religious right also explains Canada’s very different policies on issues such as abortion and gay marriage.

The comparisons explored here suggest that the most useful way to incorporate culture into an analysis of the causes of national differences in civil society dynamics or public policy outcomes is not to treat culture as an independent variable, rooted in long-past founding moments or imagined teleologies of modernization. Nor does national culture measured by aggregating individual attitudes and assigning average national scores, explain very much. It is better to understand culture as the beliefs and ideals that animate rival factions within civil society (e.g., rival religious and labor organizations and rival factions of capital) and the state, shaping what they do and with whom they ally. The balance of power among coalitions of such collective actors determines the degree to which they are able to realize their rival visions in public and private policy.
The negative side of what has been a blossoming of poverty research in the past few decades of American sociology is that it is often not too difficult to wonder about whether there is much more to say about the topic. Various structure-versus-agency arguments and frameworks have been brought to analyses of the social dynamics associated with socio-economic deprivation. Today, such claims are familiar not only to sociologists who study urban poverty, but also to the broader social science community as well. All such parties are also aware of the significance attributed to various social institutions, organizations, and structures (e.g., schools, the family, peer groups, labor market sectors, etc.) for producing or proliferating, if not remedying or mitigating, poverty outcomes in America. Consequently, although there is enough to merit continued attention to certain issues, it may seem that many of the big questions have been answered (e.g., people do go to work when good jobs are available, they do go to school if they are provided with the means to afford doing so, they do materially and emotionally support their children when mechanisms are in place to allow them to do so). Hence, it is all the more novel and exciting when some smaller questions get raised that often remain hidden underneath some of the bigger picture issues and circumstances. In The Cost of Being Poor: A Comparative Study of Life in Poor Urban Neighborhoods in Gary, Indiana, Purdue University sociologist Sandra L. Barnes provides some answers to a seemingly small, but critically important, question.

The title of this book conveys quite explicitly what Professor Barnes is up to here. That is, she aims to document the material (and some related psychological and social) costs of being poor. She does so by looking at the structural arrangement of shopping opportunities in the city of Gary and nearby suburban regions, and the social practices pursued by a selection of residents as they go about acquiring the resources needed for everyday living. In short, this is a book about the amount and quality of retail options available to low-income residents in and near Gary, Indiana, how they choose to make use of these options, and what they believe to be the risks, threats, and discomforts associated with such choice-making.

In a mostly jargon-free and straightforward manner, the pages of The Cost of Being Poor deliver information not only about the types of stores located in the focal region of this book, but also the prices of staple food (milk, eggs, cheese, fruit, canned goods, and meat) and clothing items. For the sake of comparison, Barnes also documents the

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