

Quiet Canadian, ugly American: Does racism differ north of the border?

August 16 2017, by Melissa J. Gismondi



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the aftermath of Charlottesville, it's worth asking: Are Canadians really less racist than Americans?

A recent issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine —with a photo of a smiling Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the cover - asks: "[Why can't he be our](#)

[president?](#)" It's just the latest example of the global media's current fascination with Trudeau and Canada and their supposed stark contrast to Donald Trump and the United States.

As a Canadian scholar at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, I've watched with fascination for months as media pundits both abroad and back home have promoted the idea of "Canadian exceptionalism."

They argue that Canadians are especially tolerant, diverse and committed to multiculturalism. Many believe that Canada —with our self-described feminist prime minister and our compassionate approach to refugees —should show other countries how it's done.

In the [the Walrus](#), author Stephen Marche argued that Canada is the last defender of multiculturalism on Earth. Canadian novelist Charles Foran claimed that Canada is a "post-nationalist state."

"Call it post-nationalism, or just a new model of belonging," he wrote in [the Guardian](#). "Canada may yet be of help in what is guaranteed to be the difficult year to come."

More recently, Adam Gopnik wrote in [the New Yorker](#): "Canada is the model liberal country."

But pundits are forgetting that historical circumstances —rather than an exceptional tendency to be nicer or more tolerant —are what truly made Canada what it is today.

'Myopic gaze' from Americans

In Gopnik's *New Yorker* essay, "[We Could Have Been Canada](#)," he wonders why Canadians are not more similar to Americans. After all, both countries were settled by Europeans who relied on Indigenous

knowledge about the land. Indigenous peoples in both places also taught settlers how to live amid different cultures and identities. So why did multiculturalism and liberality supposedly take hold in one place, but not the other?

Some [writers](#) believe the key difference is the two different systems of government in Canada and the United States—a republic south of the border versus Canada's constitutional monarchy—and the circumstances in which those governments emerged and evolved. Americans birthed their nation-state out of violent disobedience; Canadians, out of a conference on Confederation.

Gopnik agrees. He blames the American Revolution for denying Americans the opportunity to end slavery "more peacefully, and sooner." Americans, he says, could have developed their country in an orderly and peaceful fashion, as Canada supposedly did.



Justin Trudeau appears on the cover of Rolling Stone. Credit: Martin

Schoeller/Rolling Stone

But historians know this is a simplistic narrative. In [Borelia](#), a blog about early Canadian history, Jerry Bannister, an associate professor of history at Dalhousie University, writes: "American liberals' gaze towards Canada may be rose-coloured, but more than anything it's myopic."

Gopnik assumes that without the American Revolution, slavery would have ended in 1833 when the House of Commons passed a bill to abolish slavery in the British Empire.

Perhaps so. But maybe not. And even if it did, that doesn't mean Canadians are any less racist.

Critical differences

It's a common myth that Canada didn't have slavery. It did. As historians like [Brett Rushforth](#), [Marcel Trudel](#) and [Charmaine Nelson](#) point out in their scholarship, thousands of Indigenous people and enslaved Africans were held captive in Canada by merchants, traders and settlers.

Canada had slavery. But because of the colder climate, it did not have the conditions to grow profitable crops that relied on slave labour, including sugar, rice, tobacco and cotton. Consequently, Canada never developed a slave system akin to the entrenched and all-encompassing institution that many Americans implemented and protected for so long.

As in Canada, white settlers in the U.S. invaded Indigenous lands. But unlike in Canada, those people then settled that land with a significant population of enslaved Africans and African-Americans. This is a critical difference between the two countries.

Even as slavery bolstered the American economy, founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson recognized that it would be difficult for future generations to create a multicultural nation from one founded on chattel slavery and settler colonialism.

Much of the white supremacy and xenophobia that Canadians deride in American culture, and overlook in our own, can be traced to the racism that developed alongside the federally protected slave system in the U.S. Given this history, it's not surprising that the overwhelming majority of white voters in former slave states voted for Trump.

As Joseph Crespino, a historian at Emory University, notes in his book [*In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*](#), white southerners have succeeded in shaping the United States based on their own values.

Canadians are also fortunate to have avoided trying to claim a mantle of exceptionalism, as Americans have done for so long. From the very beginning, Americans believed that they had a duty to spread, or impose, their values on others; many still do. Canada hasn't shared that belief.



Trudeau sent this tweet out on Sunday August 13 in the aftermath of Charlottesville racist violence.

Puritan piety

The idea of "American exceptionalism" can be traced to the arrival of Puritan settlers in Massachusetts in 1620 who promoted the idea of a white American settlement as the "city upon the hill." Puritans hoped that their piety would serve as an example to the supposedly corrupt, luxurious Europeans and "savage" Native Americans.

The 1776 Declaration of Independence, and America's victory in the War of Independence, further spurred American exceptionalism, as did key 19th-century concepts like the [Manifest Destiny](#), which declared that American colonization of North America was justified and inevitable.

But the hubris of American exceptionalism has rendered the country rife with hypocrisy. In the 20th century, critics noted that the self-described "leader of the free world" was defeating fascism in Europe while propping up racial segregation at home.

The idea that Americans needed to spread liberty and democracy around the world led the country into catastrophic conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq. At home, it helped promote the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in residential schools, which Canada also enacted.

As the counter-protests in Charlottesville and against Trump this week demonstrate, many Americans recognize their nation's racism and bigotry, and are working to show their skeptical countrymen that diversity is an asset.

Look inward

This kind of work only happens when Americans drop the self-congratulatory plaudits, look inward, and acknowledge their own flaws,

which is exactly what exceptionalism discourages. Instead of asking: "How can we be better?" exceptionalism asks: "How are we the best?"

Canadians know that Canada can be better. It's nonsensical to suggest that Canadians know compassion better than any country when international agencies like [Amnesty International](#) and the UN Human Rights Commission slam Canada for failing to alleviate the systematic discrimination of Indigenous peoples, and especially violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Canadians have a tendency not to be less racist than Americans, but less loud about it. As Charmaine Nelson, a professor of art history at McGill University, wrote recently in [the Walrus](#), Canadians are "more insidious and covert" in their racism. This is where the notion of exceptionalism fails.

There is much to celebrate about Canada, which undoubtedly remains more tolerant and just than many countries. But Canadian patriotism should be about gratitude, not hubris.

Gratitude appreciates good fortune and breaks down pride. By taking off the blinders and revealing our collective ugliness, of which there is a lot right now, a Canadian patriotism rooted in gratitude can help initiate progressive change —which is exactly what Canada, as wonderful a country as it is, still needs.

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