

## REMEMBERING SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET

Seymour Martin Lipset died on December 31, 2006, in his 84th year. During an exceptionally productive career he taught at the University of Toronto, Columbia, Berkeley, Harvard, Stanford, and George Mason universities; held the presidencies of the American Sociological Association, the American Political Science Association, the International Society of Political Psychology, and the World Association for Public Opinion Research; and received numerous awards for his work, including the Gold Medal from the International Council for Canadian Studies.

Lipset had a profound influence on sociology and political science world-wide, producing widely read and cited works, translated into multiple languages. His interests ranged over topics including, but not restricted to, voting behaviour, public opinion, trade unions, social stratification, American Jewry, student movements, and the conditions for democracy. Venues for his interests extended from the United States to Canada, Latin America, Japan, and Europe. He took inspiration from theorists as varied as Werner Sombart, Robert Michels, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Talcott Parsons to make his own theoretical contributions. The resulting theories evolved from a strong appreciation of history, empirical research, and comparative analysis.

What came to be a major methodological directive to all his students was Lipset's view that one could not understand a single society without a comparative framework. Lipset first experienced the value of such comparisons when, seeking to explain the uniqueness of the United States, a subject that would engage him throughout his career, he came to study Canada. That began a lifelong interest in and attachment to Canada and Canadians.

Lipset's ties with Canada reflect basic personal and intellectual characteristics, in which an infinite curiosity that kept his mind fresh and productive over decades combined with persisting attachments not only to themes and people but also to countries. By doing his doctoral research in Saskatchewan, Lipset found the ideal milieu for the two themes that would continue to underlie, in some fashion, virtually all his work. As he reported in his memoir, published in the *Annual Review of Sociology* in 1996, he came as a graduate student to Columbia University prepared to study both the CCF and the International Typographical Workers Union. The first choice was motivated by concern with reasons for the absence of a viable urban-based socialist or labor party in the United States; the second, with factors that give rise to and sustain democracy, whether in organizations or nations.

His selection of Canada was premised on an expectation that it was very similar to the United States yet was able, in the 1930s, to create and sustain a social democratic party. Although he would later change his views to emphasize differences between the two countries, the study of Saskatchewan that resulted in *Agrarian Socialism* remains an unmatched contribution to understanding why social democracy could take root among prairie wheat farmers. Lipset demonstrated how the interactions among the immediate conditions of farmers, the social organizations they developed, their place in the world economy, and the ideas and values they brought with them when they moved to Saskatchewan all contributed to social democratic ideals and the making of a participatory party organization.

Saskatchewan has changed greatly since Lipset's research in the 1940s and the CCF itself has been transformed into the NDP. When Lipset wrote a new introduction to *Agrarian Socialism* in 1967 he considered some of those changes and acknowledged how he should have broadened his analysis. A new opportunity to reassess that volume will be held at the 2007 annual meeting of the Canadian

Political Science Association, to be held in Saskatoon, in two roundtables, one with academics, including myself, and another with NDP politicians.

After *Agrarian Socialism*, Lipset's next major work was *Union Democracy*, a case study of a trade union that had not followed an inevitable path to oligarchy. The explanation, he argued, lay in the fact that the union organization had been able to foster the equivalent of two competitive political parties. While *Union Democracy* stands out as a close reading of how democracy is sustained, it should also be remembered that it was not his first exploration of the topic--democracy was also an important theme in his study of the CCF. In fact, his first publication dealt with the relation between voluntary associations and the conditions for democracy and appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* in 1947.

As Lipset proceeded, in the 1960s, working on the puzzle of what he saw to be U.S. exceptionalism, he continued to juxtapose it with the experiences of Canada but now with greater emphasis on differences between the two countries. The basis of those differences was exemplified in his essay, "Revolution and Counterrevolution: the United States and Canada." While he had put most weight in that work on the lasting impact of historical experiences, the structures that resulted were already coming to appear to him as less relevant than the impact of cultural values. That intellectual journey would be most sharply articulated in *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*, published in 1990, where the American Revolution was presented as the source of lasting value differences between the two countries. His conclusion has been widely debated and continues to engage the attention of many of those writing about Canadian society.

Some who disagree with Lipset do so by finding more similarities than differences during each country's formative period (e.g., Edward Grabb, James Curtis, Douglas Baer, "Defining Moments and Recurring Myths: Comparing Canadians and Americans after the American Revolution," 2000). Additionally, as both countries have undergone significant changes in values over time, in some cases diverging but in others converging, it is difficult to know how much significance should be attached to what are essentially relatively small differences (Christopher Boucher, "Canada-U.S. Values: Distinct, Inevitably Carbon Copy, or Narcissism of Small Differences?" 2004). Michael Carroll argues (in "Who Owns Democracy? Explaining the Long-running Debate over Canadian/American Value Differences," 2005) that persistence of the debate about value differences attests to its roots in an unrecognized ideological premise about whether the "best" democracy is the United States, a position he attributes to Lipset, or lies in its English roots, to which Canada adheres, reflected in the views of people like Grabb, Curtis, and Baer. Yet Lipset's own words make clear that he was fully aware of the shortcomings of the United States, implicit in the subtitle of *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, published in 1996. Nor did Lipset himself ever abandon the importance of structural explanations. That is clear even in *Continental Divide*, as it is in his last publication about Canada, co-authored with Noah Meltz, *The Paradox of American Unions: Why Americans Like Unions More than Canadians but Join Them Less*, published in 2004. If, as Carroll concludes, at least some of the criticism of Lipset's later work rested on ideological premises, then Lipset's own words about his feelings for Canada are the best counter to the belief that he had an ideological agenda. In paying tribute to his late wife Elsie, who accompanied him to Canada when he was "a scared graduate student," he writes that "She was an American who deeply loved her country, but some of that feeling carried over to Canada. I am glad that she was once able to tell Pierre Trudeau what his country and its hospitality meant to us." My own impression, gained from a number of conversations, was that Lipset valued Canada in its own terms. He used it as a mirror for the United States, to be sure, but the United States could also be a mirror for Canada.

Lipset was a big man, immediately noticeable in his stature. But he was also big in many more significant ways. He made that evident in his generosity of spirit, his curiosity about the world around him, and a remarkable capacity for work. Marty, as all of us called him, had a distinctive self-awareness in which an acknowledgment of his working class origins as the offspring of Jewish immigrants remained honoured in his identity and his work. It kept him remarkably free of pretension or of any display of false modesty. His openness to new ideas, apparent in the questions he asked students and acquaintances about their interests, was not bound by considerations of status. In a special session at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Lipset's honour, it was refreshing to learn how former students and junior colleagues appreciated his attention and how many became his friends.

I could certainly understand the reactions of Marty's former students even though I had not been one of them. I studied at Columbia after he went to Berkeley though I did my dissertation with one of his former students, Juan Linz. I became acquainted with Marty while teaching in Calgary and working on my dissertation. There a colleague, who was editing a book for which Marty had promised a contribution, asked me if I would help by working with Marty to complete the paper. Collaboration with Marty then began through the mail and, when we subsequently met, a warm and sustained friendship began, solidified by our mutual interests in Canada.

In 2001, while having heart valve surgery, Marty suffered a stroke and this once larger than life, intensely verbal man was reduced to immobility and reduced speech. His wife Sydnee ensured that he receive all possible therapeutic measures, including visits from friends. On the day when I last saw him, about a year ago, he was totally silent. Trying to keep in my mind the Marty I used to know, I talked to him about events in the academic world and my own activities. Although it was difficult to behave this way with him, Sydnee reported that he was aware of my presence.

In addition to Sydnee, Marty is survived by his children David, Donald, and Carola, offspring from his marriage to Elsie, who had predeceased him, and six grandchildren. He also leaves us a heritage that we would be wise to claim. It is one that values a cosmopolitan, historically and empirically grounded political sociology. It puts professionalism above ideological labels in judging scholarship. And it represents an intellectual openness and generosity that welcomes and encourages the insights and contributions of each new generation.

Mildred A. Schwartz  
Professor Emerita, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Visiting Scholar, New York University  
mildred@uic.edu

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/soceye/lipset.html>  
March 2007  
© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online