

The Political Economy of Indigenous Development: Addressing continued Indigenous reliance on government assistance in Canada

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Introduction

Throughout history, Indigenous peoples in Canada have developed a vast array of governmental systems in which they utilized to conduct their affairs, especially with regards to their way of life and mode of production and subsistence. However, with the advent of colonization came a marginalization of the peoples and their systems of self-governance, limiting the possibilities of practicing these systems of governance and economies in today's society. The contemporary reality facing Indigenous people in Canada today is that the "existing Indigenous self-government structures and models are largely grounded on the principles of global capitalism" (Kuokkanen, 2011, 275)– A global capitalism that is very much defined by an economic development based on large-scale resource extraction, privatization and commodification of land. Moreover, because of systematic and institutionalized racism and marginalization, the barriers to entry into the formal economy are aplenty and as a result, the political economy of Indigenous development in Canada is very much one characterized by high rates of unemployment and poverty which causes a near total reliance on government assistance.

A major root of this problem can be traced back to the Indian Act and its restrictive land regime, inadequate implementation of the treaties and systematic exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the economic system (Indian Act, 1876). The Indian act has led to an overrepresentation of Indigenous people in low paying jobs, which consequently leads to lower educational attainment and inevitably, higher unemployment rates. Compared to the Non-Indigenous population, Indigenous people in Canada are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods with bad infrastructures which averts potential investors and are impediments to attracting and retaining businesses. According to the Indigenous Economic Progress Report of 2019, as of 2015, the gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous employment rates was at 8.4% and for university completion rate as of 2016, the gap has been at 18.8% (Indigenous Economic Progress Report, 2019). The gap in the average income between Inuit individuals and non-indigenous individuals as at 2015 was at 21%, for the first nations it was 34%, and for the metis, 12% (Ibid). A major theme that therefore runs through the entirety of my paper is a discussion on the apparent contradictions between embracing the capitalist economic model for Indigenous development, and the detrimental force of this market economy on Indigenous societies. In light of these issues, my primary research question is, "what is the best way to address the continued reliance of the Indigenous population on government assistance?" **This question is also the main research question for all three articles** I will be addressing in the paper. It is built on an even more specific question addressed by Kuokkanen which is:

If the global market economy historically played a significant role in the loss of the political and economic autonomy of indigenous societies, how meaningful or sustainable is it to seek to rebuild contemporary Indigenous governance on the very economic model that was largely responsible for undermining it in the first place? (Kuokkanen ,2011, 275)

It is important to focus on Indigenous reliance on government assistance because it is symptomatic of the current political economy of Indigenous development in Canada. The Indigenous Economic Development report asserts that if Canada addressed the issue of

Indigenous reliance, Canada's economy will be boosted by \$27.7 billion annually (Indigenous Economic Progress Report, 2019). As it stands, Indigenous economic development is "a powerful untapped resource to drive Canada's future economic growth" (ibid). My argument is that it is not sustainable to seek to rebuild contemporary Indigenous governance on the current capitalist economic model practiced in Canada, rather the political economy of Canada will benefit from the government "implementing the rights of Indigenous people to self-determination and self-government, effecting a more just distribution of lands and the wealth those lands generate, and developing economic policies to revitalize Indigenous societies and enhance self-reliance" (Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

To expand on my argument, this paper will critically analyze three articles (one published online article, one university thesis, and one book):

1. "Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: the deception behind Indigenous cultural preservation" by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard
2. "What is Radical Imagination? Indigenous Struggles in Canada" by Taiiaki Alfred
3. "The recognition of Indigenous Rights during the Red Power Movement" by Miranda Lynn Dyck

There is a general consensus among these three articles that to address Indigenous reliance, the strategies for change must be rooted in an understanding of the forces that created the economic marginalization in the first place i.e. history. However, there is a debate among these three articles with regards to which aspect of history is most important. Widdowson and Howard argue that the aspect of history that is most important is the Indigenous peoples' relationship to production, while Taiiaki and Lynn Dyck argue that the history of colonization of the Indigenous people of Canada is what is most important. Their conclusions have important consequences for the political economy of Indigenous development moving forward because if the strategies for change are to be rooted in Indigenous relationship to production, the implication is for Indigenous development to embrace the capitalist economic model.

"Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: the deception behind Indigenous cultural preservation" by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard

Introduction

The above book as mentioned, is one which argues that the strategies for change, when it comes to Indigenous reliance on government assistance, must be one rooted in addressing Indigenous peoples' relationship to production. Here, as highlighted earlier, **the issue of Indigenous reliance is addressed through a re-examination of history and what the authors termed, "a deceptive network known as aboriginal cultural preservation in Canada."** They critically analyzed the history of indigenous peoples' relationship to production in relation to education, social work, health, environmental and wildlife resource management, and governance structures, and concluded that there exists a "neolithic gap" in Indigenous communities— one which they argue is at the root of continued Indigenous reliance on government assistance (Widdowson and Albert, 2008).

Summary/findings of book

The authors contend that an examination of the cultural requirements for the development of farming and labor in the capitalist context reveals the historical and material roots of Indigenous reliance. The fur trade era is an important starting point in the analysis of this history because it was a vast commercial enterprise in Canada that was at its peak for nearly 250 years (ibid, 60). The fur trade played a formative role in the creation and development of Canada, and Indigenous peoples were seen as important partners in the growing fur trade economy. This, according to the authors, was because the mercantilist¹ period of capitalism development which the fur trade era embodied was consistent with Indigenous peoples'

¹ Mercantilism is a system of capitalism where profit is acquired, not through the productive process but in the circulation of commodities, where goods are bought cheaply and sold dear see

hunting and gathering mode of production. However, mercantilism eventually gave way to industrial capitalism when the European demand for felt hats fell and agriculture and industrial development became increasingly important because they were seen as more profitable. A major feature of industrial capitalism is the increase in productivity for the maximization of profit. This conflicted with the cultural features of hunting and gathering practiced by the Indigenous people.

Industrial capitalism demanded year-round supply of labor and because the subsistence lifestyle of Indigenous people “before European contact did not provide the cultural prerequisites to engage easily in wage labor and intensive agriculture” (ibid, 22), a large development gap occurred. The authors argue that Indigenous peoples’ mode of production did not have the “same degree of forethought, discipline and cooperative labor necessary in more complex and productive economic systems”, and rather than be taught, it was more profitable for the government to warehouse them on reserves than it was to provide them with resources necessary for their development (ibid, 27).

The authors also contend that contemporary reality dictates that “when cultures at vastly different levels of development come together, more components of the relatively simpler culture have to be discarded in comparison to those of the more complex” (ibid, 26). They further stated that were it not for residential schools that educated and socialized them, indigenous people would have been even more marginalised than they are today. Finally, they conclude that Indigenous communities cannot be viable economic entities because they are isolated from the global markets and have serious deficits in human and intellectual capacity owing to the huge developmental gap between them and the non-Indigenous population. The authors question the benefit of self-governance and recommend instead that to overcome Indigenous reliance, two things must occur.

1. Indigenous people must acquire education, skills and attitudes to participate across the full spectrum of wage labor
2. There must be a gradual depopulation of Indigenous communities that are unviable so that Indigenous people can work in occupations necessary for the functioning of wider societies.

Strengths and weaknesses of Albert and Widdowson’s book

The strength of Albert and Widdowson’s book lies in its push for a re-examination of history in order to critically engage in the other side of the argument regarding poverty, rights vs responsibility and various other forms of abuse. Their approach draws out relevant considerations that may supplement and flesh out theory (one of these is the issue of justice which will be addressed in the subsequent papers). This being said however, there are a number of weaknesses in the various arguments presented by the co-authors. Because of the scope of this paper however, I will only be focusing only on one of these weaknesses- the implication of the book that contemporary western culture represents the pinnacle of evolutionary achievement.

Capitalism informs Canada’s neoliberal policies and agenda, which is underpinned by the idea that markets solve all problems in the society (Kuokannen, 2011 284). “In promoting privatization, restructuring and downsizing the government and its services, deregulating the economy and emphasizing individual responsibility and choice, neoliberal governance dismisses calls to address growing systematic socio-economic, gender and other inequalities” (ibid). Contemporary western culture is one that is based on conservative economics i.e. capitalism, and conservative economists assert that capitalism and private ownership lead to economic and political freedom as it means competition. They argue that because capitalism encourages competition, which generates efficiency and innovation; and which in turn produces economic well-being and growth, it should be heralded. Finally, conservative economists contend that profit motives lead to good outcomes for the society.

However, from an analysis of Indigenous development here in Canada, as well as the development trends in the so-called 'third worlds', what capitalism demonstrates is a glorification of selfish economic pursuits. This selfish pursuit is what has led to a state of massive inequality where the poor get poorer and the rich get richer— even though in many cases, it is the poor that work the most. As is the case in most capitalist economies, there is a large concentration of corporate power which overshadow traditional modes of governing for the public good. An example of this can be seen with Manitoba Hydro here in Canada, or large pharmaceutical companies in North America, whose influence on the government continues to shape policies to their benefit, and to the detriment of the common people (citizens). To thus infer that this is the gold standard that Indigenous people must be assimilated into in order to address their reliance on government assistance is not a very sound argument to make.

The case of Mikisew Cree first Nation can be used to further expand on my point. The Mikisew Cree first Nation is located near the oil sands in northeastern Alberta. In 1986, they reached a treaty agreement with the federal government and the province of Alberta for a portion of land and wealth to be designated to them. Following the agreement, the Mikisew leadership proceeded to engage in “capitalism with an Aboriginal face²” (Newhouse, 1993). Key institutions of governance and management were restructured to enhance economic development and a market-driven resource based economy was formed. Academics like Gabrielle Slowey argue that this restructuring opened the doors in Mikisew for the creation of unprecedented economic opportunities for Mikisew to manage its own affairs (Slowey, 2008, 17).

Slowey argues that the Mikisew Cree first Nation “has benefited from neoliberalism” because it has decreased its reliance on government assistance (ibid, 53). Also, the Nation’s “self-determination, together with its focus on increasing band responsibility for health, housing and welfare, fits comfortably in the free market philosophy of a minimal state and non-government provision of services (ibid, 15). What her argument fails to take into account is that while a reliance of the Mikisew on government assistance might have decreased to a considerable extent, the neoliberalism approach created a new dependency of the Mikisew people on the corporations exploiting their natural resources. In Mikisew government’s pursuit to be an active participant in the oil sand development projects being undertaken by the local oil sands corporation, the kinds of jobs and opportunities that were being offered by the corporation were arguably very limited (Kuokannen, 2011, 285). Social development in the nation has been uneven, and poverty still remains a serious concern (Timoney, 2007). This is evidenced in a speech given by Chief Rozanne Marcel of the Mikisew Cree Nation where he announced:

our message to both levels of governments, to Albertans, to Canadians and to the world who may depend on oil sands for their energy solutions, is that we can no longer be sacrificed (cited in Thomas-Muller, 2008,13).

The market-driven resource-based economy in Mikisew widened the gap between the indigenous elites and the rest of the peoples and as Slowey herself noted:

The increase of material wealth is not shared equally, dividing band members even further apart by accentuating already acute levels of financial disparity (Slowey, 2008, 6).

The case of Mikisew serves as a cautionary tale on the dangers of capitalism and the future of Indigenous development, were assimilation policies to be pushed on them. While an acceptance of assimilationist policies by the Indigenous people on the surface may appear to reduce Indigenous reliance on government assistance, what might simply occur is for the shift

² A phrase coined by David Newhouse in reference to economic development based on indigenous values and knowledge as well as principles of sustainability and conservation

in burden to be borne by the corporations that seek to exploit the natural resources from the lands of the indigenous peoples.

“What is Radical Imagination? Indigenous Struggles in Canada” by Taiaiake Alfred

Introduction

The article above is one which argues that the most important aspect of history to take into consideration –when developing a strategy for change to address continued Indigenous reliance –is the history of colonialism, which saw Indigenous people’s inherent right to self-determination stripped away, and land treaties violated. Again, as with Albert’s and Widdowson’s book, **this article addresses the issue of Indigenous reliance through a re-examination of history** under the lenses of what the author terms “radical imagination”. In this paper, Alfred contends that “the unending commitment of non-indigenous people to the visions of their ancestors is at the root of indigenous reliance” today as it means rejecting the indigenous peoples’ cultural and spiritual ties to land and seeing land and everything on and in it as mere resources for a capitalist enterprise (Alfred, 2010, 5).

Summary/findings of article

In this article, Taiaiake Alfred analyzes the history of colonization and the loss of land sovereignty that came with it, coupled with an imposition of foreign sovereignties and laws, and asserts that until the problem of the “European imagination of Indigenous lands as terra nullius, a land empty of civilization, culture, law, governance and empty of people worthy of respect” is resolved, there will always be the issue of Indigenous over reliance on government assistance (ibid). He states the problem of colonialism as:

a continual living process of the renewal in the minds of Canadians and Americans of the ancestral fantasies of dispossession, domination and assimilation that were at the foundation of their forbears’ colonial enterprises (ibid, 6).

By this he contends that land is still being lost, indigenous authorities, laws and governments are still not respected, and the Canadian government and multinational corporations are still consuming in excess, everything in their path. He argues that assimilation is still very much pervasive in Canada today and states that the solution to Indigenous reliance is to focus on ‘developing’ indigenous cultures and economies on their land. By developing, he explicitly rejects the western idea of development rooted in consumerism and states that development from an indigenous perspective is simply for the government to make amends for the wrongs of colonialism by:

living up to the basic tenets of universal concepts of justice; respecting the original land treaties, and leaving behind “old visions of conquest and privileges of empire (ibid, 8)

Strengths and weaknesses of Alfred’s article

The major weakness of this article was in its brevity, which saw a lot of important points not expanded upon by current events. However, this does not take away from the strength of the arguments the author makes. One of the major strength of this article is in its call for justice. Alfred points out that essential to the self-reliance of the indigenous peoples is for the government of Canada to live up to universal concepts of justice. This prompts a critical examination as to what justice entails here. In her article, “From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a ‘post-socialist’ age, Nancy Fraser argues that both recognition (self-determination) and redistribution (of land and its resources) are essential to any lasting visions of justice (Fraser, 1995). So, the main question to ask and one which Fraser addresses is:

Under what circumstances can a politics of recognition help support a politics of redistribution? (ibid, 68)

Cultural Recognition and Economic Redistribution

The struggle for cultural recognition and economic redistribution is akin to a struggle for socioeconomic equality. It is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication; the consequence of which is that some groups get systematically disadvantaged over others. As can be illustrated by the plight of the Indigenous people of Canada, economic and cultural injustices overlap and reinforce each other, or as Fraser states:

Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination (ibid, 72)

In their book, Widdowson and Albert—critical of compensation-based policies like the land settlement agreements, argue that compensation policies will fail to address Indigenous reliance on government assistance because it is counterfactual i.e. it enhances indigenous reliance. This line of argument comes from a conception of redistribution and recognition that is based on an affirmative remedies viewpoint. The common concept of recognition claims is one seen as calling attention to “the putative specificity of some group and then affirming the value of that specificity” (ibid, 74). The implication of this is the promotion of group differentiation. Redistribution claims the opposite, calling for an abolishment of economic activities that reinforces group specificity. It would therefore seem that a claim for one must see a claim for the other forgone. However, to understand Taiaiake’s argument that Indigenous reliance cannot end until both recognition and redistribution happens, it is important to make a distinction between affirmative remedies and transformative remedies.

Affirmative remedies for injustices are “remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them” (ibid, 82). On the other hand, “transformative remedies are “remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (ibid). The latter is what Taiaiake was referring to in his article when he defined radical imagination (Alfred, 2010, 8).

The major difference between affirmative remedies and transformative remedies lie in deconstruction. In the case of cultural injustices, while affirmative remedies seek for the revaluation of culture while still maintaining the underlying cultural-valuation structure, transformative remedies seek to transform the underlying cultural valuation structure. Likewise with economic injustices, while affirmative remedies seek to address maldistribution, it does so in a way that leaves much of the underlying political-economic structure intact. Taiaiake argues that the conciliatory rhetoric that is dominant in Canada (in reference to indigenous people) is one of affirmation which still seeks to maintain the business as usual approach to things. So even though on the surface, it might appear that justice is being achieved, in reality, it is actually not.

A prime example of affirmative remedies in action is actually Canada’s current land claim and self-governance policy. This is because they are premised on the extinguishment of Indigenous rights and Indigenous titles in exchange for the rights included in the new settlement and agreement. The interest of the federal government seems still, as noted by Taiaiake, not rooted in justice but in further economic development that exploit the natural resources on Indigenous peoples’ territories. So as not to receive a massive backlash, this interest is covered up under the guise of affirmative remedies in the form of modern treaties and land claim agreements. The reality is that modern treaties and land claim agreements

create a stable investment environment that serves corporate interest and does not really address historical injustices (Kuokannen, 2011, 286). As observed by the Task Force to Review Comprehensive Claims Policy:

There has been a tendency to achieve a self-government agreement only when the federal government is eager to facilitate an economic development project (Coolican, 1986,13).

“The recognition of Indigenous Rights during the Red Power Movement” by Miranda Lynn Dyck

Introduction

This article, just like Taiaiake’s article, argue that the most important aspect of history to take into consideration –when developing a strategy for change to address continued Indigenous reliance –is the history of colonialism, which saw Indigenous people’s inherent right to self-determination stripped away, and land treaties violated. The primary research method conducted in this article was based on a critical review and engagement with debates around indigeneity and settler colonialism as well as more specific literature on the Canadian state. Again, as with Albert’s and Widdowson’s book, **this article addresses the issue of Indigenous reliance through a re-examination of history** but does it looking specifically at the period in which indigenous rights became recognized. The author’s arguments in this paper reflects on both arguments made by Taiaiake, and Widdowson and Albert, and builds on a majority of Taiaiake’s main points, asserting that:

Colonialism has indeed created a self-generating system where each successive generation seamlessly perpetuates the practices and processes of colonialism without being conscious them (Lynn Dyck, 2011, 13)

The red power movement, which came into force during the white paper era, according to the author, is representative of Canada’s on-going and capitalist intent in relation to its treatment of its Indigenous people. The paper concludes by stating that until this is addressed, Indigenous reliance will continue to be an issue (Ibid).

Summary/findings of article

In this article, Miranda Lynn Dyck examines the practical consequences of the modern treaties and argues that the land claims process is the newest in a long history of cultural dispossession. Central to her argument is the issue of rights, more specifically, the inherent rights of Indigenous people to self-determination. To this end, Lynn Dyck focuses on one of the many uprisings in Canadian history- the red power movement– and the significant changes it brought with it, which was primarily the ushering in of modern land claim treaties agreement. She argues that within the analysis of indigenous-state history, starting from the fur trade era, the primary purpose of European presence in Canada was capitalist and an analysis of the modern land claim treaties reflect that this is still the government’s objective today. Thus, she states:

While capitalist accumulation may no longer require the explicit dispossession of Indigenous communities from their land and resources, it does still demand that they be available for exploitation and capitalist development (ibid, 41).

In response to assertions by Albert and Widdowson, Lynn Dyck argues that the assimilationist policies that included the residential schools and reserve system was not to teach Indigenous people modes of production that could enable them to survive in the new state of Canada but rather; to facilitate their destruction (in identity, culture, family, gender roles, spirituality, economic wellbeing etc.) so as to lay claim on all their lands, resources and entitlement. Assimilationist policies she argues, were driven by ideologies of racial difference and inferiority which still underpins the neoliberal ones of today. She further contends that treaty making was

what effectively dispossessed indigenous people of their lands because the process was “tainted by coercion, and the language used in the treaty making was ambiguous at best, and sweetened with symbolic presentations of security, peace and well-being for all time” (ibid, 25). In stark contrast to the conceptual underpinnings of the original treaty process, what once was an agreement between sovereign nations became guided by practices of coercion within a relationship of racial inequality. She asserts that the modern claims agreement, which was the government’s response to Indigenous activism is simply just history repeating itself, stating that:

The government's intent with this new process was similar to its objectives in treaties past: minimize concessions to Indigenous peoples and guarantee a level of financial security for land development and resource extraction (ibid, 81).

Ultimately, she concludes that the practical implication of the modern claims process is one that is heavily connected to the historical realities of colonization, dispossession and marginalization suffered by Indigenous people today. It is the mounting effects of these factors, particularly dispossession, that has created a “near psychological, physical and financial dependency” of indigenous people on the state (ibid, 40). To address this dependency, she states that a decolonization through deconstruction is what is needed. However, she states that

Decolonization cannot be limited to deconstructing the dominant story and revealing underlying texts, for none of that helps people improve their current conditions or prevents them from dying. (ibid, 42)

What is required is a support of Indigenous peoples’ specific claims to self-determination, land and resources.

Strengths and weaknesses of Lynn Dyck’s article

Lynn Dyck does an excellent job at a critical analysis of the history of colonization and its effect on the current state of Indigenous development in Canada today. There is little by way of weaknesses in her arguments as she pre-empts and responds to every possible rebuttal of her arguments. The article has many strengths, but again as a result of the scope of this paper, I can only concentrate on one- the modern land claims agreement. Explicitly drawing on the work of Taiaiake, Lynn Dyck astutely refers to a point which I mentioned earlier on with regards to the modern land claims agreement. She brings to focus exactly why the modern land claims agreement is inadequate in terms of addressing Indigenous reliance, out rightly stating that is still merely a cover for capitalist ventures and noting:

The modern claims process forces Indigenous peoples into conforming to the practices, values and customs of the Canadian state (ibid, 87)

She elaborates on this using the 1993 Nunavut land claim settlement that was signed by federal, territorial and Inuit leaders as an example. Just as was the case with the Mikisew Cree Nation in Alberta, in exchange for surrendering Indigenous title to the crown, the Inuit of Nunavut were granted a number of rights and benefits, including title to 350,000 sq. km of land and representational and economic rights, including a share of royalties from oil, gas and minerals (Ibid, 37). A key feature of the claims process which Lynn Dyck highlights is that all claims accepted for negotiation had to be settled in such a way that the claim could not arise again in the future.

By the strength of Lynn Dyck’s analysis on Modern treaties, there is the obvious realization that in these treaty agreements, the government is exchanging undefined Indigenous rights and benefits for concrete and finite rights and benefits. The certainty contained in this agreement allows for further exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources free of any legal ramifications. She also notes that while some element of self-governance may be included in

the agreement, it was never anything substantial because any Indigenous authority is inherently dominated by federal and provincial authorities. All these issues compound to reinforce Indigenous reliance.

Ultimately, as Lynn states, "the modern treaty process requires Indigenous people extinguish some of their rights and conform to Canadian politics, customs, laws and tradition" (ibid). This is assimilation, and one that disregards the racist ideologies that underpins the Canadian economy, leading to systematic and institutional barriers to entry for Indigenous people

Conclusion

The issue of Canada's Indigenous peoples near total reliance of government assistance cannot be properly addressed without a proper and critical analysis of Indigenous-state history, which I have conducted in my paper. The most important aspect of this history is in the colonization of the Indigenous people and the ripple effect that colonization had on their identity, culture, family, gender roles, spirituality, and economic wellbeing among other things. Embedded in the history is a perverse capitalist agenda that is very much at the root of Indigenous reliance. Colonial dispossession of Indigenous people from their land was done in part fulfillment of the capitalist agenda, and although outright dispossession is not the case today, a majority of the examples given in this paper shows that Indigenous land is still being exploited for capitalist gains. Neoliberal policies that dominate Canada's economy today have severely limited the choices of the Indigenous people in terms of practicing their own forms of governance and economy, as is evidenced in the Modern treaty land claim agreement. Either they assimilate and remain dependent on the state, or keep fighting for self-determination and economic justice, while still relying on the government in the meantime. A successful address of Indigenous reliance is dependent on deconstruction and adherence to the fundamental principles of justice.

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