Making it Better

Colonialism and the Economic Development of First Nations in Canada

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> Economic development is much more than individuals trying to maximize incomes and prestige, as many economist and sociologist are inclined to describe it. It is also about maintaining and developing culture and identity.[1]

Though much of the discourse surrounding development is orientated primarily to the third world, recent events at the Kashechewan reservation highlight that development issues are not solely a third world problem. Canada is in a very unique position in terms of development in that there is a duality of development. One part of Canadian society is considered part of the first world, while simultaneously, reserves within Canada are often without running water or electricity, and exemplify conditions closer to that of the third world. This paradox of development in Canada allows for a unique perspective on the interactions between a government still reliant on colonial foundations and First People. Namely, conceptualizing development in a dichotomy between developed and underdeveloped creates an underlying colonial discourse, defining progress and development in a particular manner. Thus, much of the discourse surrounding First Nations people has

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been centered on the pretext that economic development must occur for the betterment of this population. In reality, this conceptualization acts more as a tool for the de/reculturation of First Nations people, acting to create a homogenized Canada in the image of the colonial West. This paper will argue that conceptualizing development as teleology, through an evolutionary model and prioritizing expertise, enables the development process to become a tool for the continued colonization of First Nations people.

Development Teleology

In order to mobilize development as a tool for colonialism, the model for development is first constructed teleologically, asserting that there is a perfect design for progression with an assumed ideal end. The development teleology has a historical basis—the fundamental structures of Western thought as driven by enlightenment's idea of progress based upon Christian monotheistic ideals.

> Progress is one of the most important ideas of our modern age and one that we hold unconsciously and usually unquestioningly. Progress implies that there is a pattern of change in human history; that we can know this pattern, and that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction and this change in direction is permanent, and moves from a less desirable state to a more desirable state of affairs.[2]

Working alongside this model of progress is the colonial "mentality of the 'one right way' inherent in the monotheistic traditions."[3] As such, the story of the colonial power, and the colonial developed end, becomes the imagined end of development.

Cultural Evolution

The development teleology ensures that the scale of measurement is embedded within the Western colonial paradigm, and the units are colonized accordingly. In other words, development status is relative to the Western ideal. This scaling of development facilitates a relativist propagating a categorization of peoples based upon an anthropological notion of cultural evolution and thus, facilitating the measurement of one people against another. The Western biblical story commences with Cain and Abel, two agriculturalists, and thus, from the very roots of Western thought, the hunter-gatherer society has been placed outside of the narrative, ensuring that the discursive space is occupied by only

one history, the Western history, and the economic evolutionary structure commences from that fundamental model. In this way, teleology is the framework substantiated by cultural evolution and anthropology as the scale.

In the last thirty years especially, "the manner in which anthropology constructs and undertakes its basic project has come under scrutiny. This reassessment has revealed, for example with respect to our role in support of colonialism, a less than heroic side to our discipline."[4] Increasing recognition that the act of study itself impacts and changes the experiment has raised questions regarding the extent to which anthropology actually contextualizes information according to a particular knowledge framework, making it a tool of development rather than an analytical method for passive understanding. "Ethnology… is situated within the particular relation that the Western ratio established with all other cultures; and from that starting-point it avoids the representations that men in any civilization may give themselves of themselves."[5] Thus, the body of knowledge as well as the framework of progress, is that of the Western industrial ideal.

The labeling and ordering of "things," in this case people, allows for the creation of a recognizable and readable world. By ordering and categorizing different societies, they can be made useful, and in this case, they have been categorized for the expediency of the colonial government. This creation of an order takes on a particularly Foucauldian feel when explored in terms of the hierarchical structure implicit in the act of naming. In order to justify the presence of the colonial governments in Canada and the United States, the indigenous peoples who lived on the land before European settlement must be categorized in such a manner that they may not legitimately hold land in the Western understanding of ownership. In effect, not only are First Nations peoples constructed in negative opposition to the colonial government, but they are also constructed as a lower form of a hierarchical order. The popular model of cultural ecology is an evolutionary structure, which by necessity ranks societies in relation with one another. According to Foucault, implicit in the act of naming is the simultaneous act of ordering and creating a hierarchy. Thus, the very practice that anthropologists undertake in attempting to study with the goal of labeling contributes to the denigration of First Nations societies. Anthropology's creation of an evolutionary hierarchy creates a means through which indigenous peoples may be labeled and organized.

Labeling is problematic as a single label cannot recognize the whole and thus dissociates and compartmentalizes what is being observed. When applied to the indigenous population, this ultimately

dehumanizes them. The labeling and hierarchy is entirely reflective of the location from which it was articulated, without any input from the outside perspectives. Contingent upon and implicit in this act of naming is the act of "othering", or the constitution of a self in opposition to an outside other. Though the self/other dichotomy need not be a negative relationship, such as, "I am not you therefore I am me", this negative relation is the most expedient. For Canada, the colonizer/colonized relation has been one constructed negatively, in which the First Nations society was savage, primitive and animalistic in opposition to the civilized and technologically advanced western colonizer.

In anthropology, the move to ranking peoples comes primarily through the use of language. Adjectives and categorizations such as "primitive" and "indigenous", and terms such as "tribe, band, and foragers", are frequently used throughout anthropology texts. Thus, while anthropology has become the method to describe, understand and create knowledge about other peoples, the language itself creates an inherent classification system. The entire anthropological knowledge sphere is entrenched within a formative space of Western Industrial societies. Accordingly, the vocabulary used is reflective of this locus, and biased towards that particular ontological framework.

Anthropological framing and categorization uses culture, communication, political systems, religion, and most especially adaptive strategies to rank organized society higher than primitive or indigenous society. The use of one term automatically activates a series of others in the anthropological classification. Labeling a group of people as a band mobilizes a series of other terms, such as foragers, hunter-gatherers, and informal social structure, all located within the particular framework established by anthropology for studying culture. Anthropology is a discipline, like many others, that was formulated, and continues to exist almost exclusively within the Western colonial paradigm. Thus, the anthropological language becomes a reflection of the space in which it was formulated, complete with ethnocentrism and racism inherent in the framework of the language.

Creation of the Expert

While development teleology creates a presumed end, and anthropology ranks societies according to that teleology, it is the creation of an expert that ultimately moves development into a active tool for colonialism. In effect, colonialism as development becomes a practice of the politics of knowledge. The colonial politics of knowledge prioritizes a certain system and practice of knowing, enshrining knowledge in a

particular way of seeing the world, and discursively eliminating all other views, most especially that of the indigenous population. "A central goal, therefore, of colonial discourse theory is to identify the assumptions and representations inherent in colonial culture—in the binary of civilization/savagery, in the erasures of Aboriginal knowledge of time and space."[6]

The colonial power/knowledge system is reproduced in the form of experts, who are embedded within the colonial paradigm. The power to evaluate was "concentrated in the hands of the experts, economists, demographers, educators… They conducted their observations, prepared their theories, assessments and their programs on an institutional basis that was not part of the local indigenous community."[7] In this manner, the location of evaluation is within the colonial knowledge structure, and the system of signification and mode of seeing remain that of the colonizer. Maintaining the location of the signification system within the colonial system maintains the structure of power. This ensures the continued precedence setting of the colonizer's knowledge, and indigenous forms of knowledge are ignored in favour of those who have been deemed experts.

> Accounting has been a powerful tool of colonialism whose weight continues to be felt disproportionately by Aboriginal communities and organizations. It remains a potent means of maintaining the status quo and assimilating Aboriginal economic development to mainstream standards precisely because it is a power that remains hidden to most.[8]

As such, development becomes an ethnocentric and technocratic process in which cultural difference is quantifiable and statistical according to the teleological structure already in place.

In Canada, the politics of knowledge is constructed, firstly, around the expert evaluating the need for economic development. The common belief that "instead of being in need of civilization, Indians were now in need of development,"[9] is based upon the postulation that indigenous people lived in a Hobbesian state of nature—"a nasty, brutish and short" life — pre European contact. The common conception of Aboriginal life is that there is no indigenous economic system, and that is the root cause of underdevelopment. This construction of the economic development of First Nations people is based upon a fundamental fallacy in information, formulated through a colonial understanding of the relationship between First Nations people and the rest of Canada, to the ultimate benefit of the colonizer.

> Most contemporary historians do not see the fur trade as a system and means for creating wealth, or that the amassing of wealth by Europeans had any relevance for Native producers. For them, European objectives or purposes had very little effect on Native communities… Apparently the fur trade did not modify the 'core' of Indian culture.[10]

This assertion ignores the presence of economic systems before contact, and thus does not acknowledge the changes that occurred as a result of colonization. For example "the spatial mobility of Native people was reduced as trade was fixed at a post… Trapping favoured specialization, and the flexibility of the Aboriginal economy was eroded."[11] The restriction of First Nations people from owning land also excluded them from the Canadian agricultural revolution.

Secondly, the expert has the ability to decide what can be considered "development."

> Although mainstream accounting is typically associated with objectivity and independence, it is a "social technology" that has powerfully shaped people's understandings of opportunities and choices, successes and failures, but that has communicated some stories while overlooking or obscuring others.[12]

However, the method of evaluating and accounting for development, only acts to further embed First Nations within the colonial process. In this manner, development becomes more than an economic endeavour, but a transformative process in which the image of the colonized becomes the end goal.

Often this means that the economic development of this First Nations population is not coherent with the cultural practices of land use and sustainability. Instead, development has changed the cultural practices of the First Nations people to suit the Western industrial ideal.

> We are beginning to replicate classical debates about the regulation of private enterprise... about the role of government in the economy, and the influence of culture on developmental goals and practices, and in some cases we begin to question the goals of economic development itself.[13]

Thus, it is the reproduction of the Western ideal of development into Aboriginal circumstances that has limited the manner that First Nations are understood and examined. "If Aboriginal economic development projects often proceed faster than treaty and land claims nego-

tiations, it remains difficult to define those projects according to Aboriginal values and criteria without succumbing to the economic rationality of mainstream business discourse."[14] This restricts the possibilities of First Nations people opening up their own space for growth and change and limits the possibility of progress in new ways.

This can be seen vividly in the government funded Aboriginal Digital Collections (ADC) program, which was

> set up to give Aboriginal Canadians access to an abundance of materials on the Information Highway… The ADC program has awarded contracts to Aboriginal Canadian firms to hire teams of youth 15 to 30 years of age to digitize text, images, audio and video materials, and incorporate this information in web sites.[15]

One of the sites in this project is titled "From the Bush to the Internet;" the title itself betrays the teleological evolutionary foundation. This site includes one page entitled "Native Business Portraits" which has two pictures and an informational quote stating that,

> for thousands of years, Aboriginal survival depended upon hunting, gathering and trading. In this century, our people have adapted to cultural and economic changes by exploiting opportunities such as excavation and pipeline construction in this James Bay Cree community. Extracting oil from the tarsands in Northern Alberta created the need for many supporting services including trucking, mechanical maintenance and construction.[16]

This use of land, and the environmental degradation resulting from this type of development is not at all consistent with (typically) Aboriginal beliefs of stewardship and care of the land, yet is used to exemplify "good" Aboriginal development because of the industry that it produces.

Colonialism also limits the discourses that are involved in the development conversation, by both rejecting indigenous knowledge, and homogenizing the aboriginal experience. "Indigenous knowledge offers Canada and other nation-states a chance to comprehend another view of humanity as they never have before."[17] However, the value of indigenous knowledge is ignored in favour of the colonial construction, and the current project of development chooses to, instead of embracing this difference, continue the colonial project of homogenization by creating a dichotomized relationship, such as settler/indigenous, primitive/civilized, so that the variety of experiences of First Nations people is homogenized.

> It is important to point out as well that there are no homogenous peoples or homogenous experiences with colonialism... We must be alert to these multiplicities and the location from which people speak, just as we should not use universals to categorize all Indigenous peoples. We are a diverse group and each of us speaks from many locations.[18]

The creation of this homogenous dichotomy limits the manner in which difference can be understood. This is particularly important when looking at the Canadian First Nations experience because of the diversity of First Nations within Canada. Each nation has experienced development in a different way. Additionally, development is experienced differently along gender, age and racial lines. There is "resistance by Aboriginal peoples to [the] universalism embedded in development,"[19] which limits the manner in which difference and diversity can be discussed, and more importantly, does not open space to different modes of development. Instead, it gives one universal prescription for development as conceptualized in a colonial ideal.

The construction of development as a teleology based upon anthropological substantiation along with the creation of the expert witness has furthered the colonial project of homogenization and cultural de/reconstruction. In fact, it has served to subvert and further ingrain the colonization deep into the Canadian consciousness. Not recognizing the colonial implications of development only further embeds the colonial legacy in Canadian history. Although there are examples of development across Canada which have taken into account indigenous knowledge and perspectives in the processes, without an understanding of the colonial legacy held in the very notion of development, the legacy will remain. In order to realize the economic development model as imagined in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), one must first deconstruct the notion of development itself, and if not eliminate, at least recognize the colonial legacy this conceptualization forwards. Hopefully, this will lead to the re-evaluation of the manner in which development has become an ethnocentric and technocratic application of colonialism, and eventually a change in the practice.

Notes

[1] Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*: Minister of Supply and Services: Canada, 1996. Vol. 2, 780.
[2] David Newhouse. "The challenges of Aboriginal Economic Development in the Shadow of the Borg" *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*. 4:1 (2004): 36-37.

[3] Taiaiake Alfred. *Wasase*. (Canada: Broadview Press, 2005), 109.
[4] Marc Pinkoski and Michael Asch. "Anthropology and Indigenous Rights in Canada and the United States: Implications in Steward's Theoretical Project" *Hunter-Gatherers in History, Archaeology, and Anthropology,* ed. Alan Barnard (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), 187.
[5] Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things*. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 412.
[6] Cole Harris, "How did Colonialism Dispossess" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers.* 94.1 (2004): 1.
[7] Newhouse, 38.
[8] Isobel M. Findlay and John D. Russell. "Aboriginal Economic Development and the Triple Bottom Line: Toward a Sustainable Future?" *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*. 4:2 (2005): 86.
[9] Newhouse, 35.
[10] Frank Tough. "From the 'Original Affluent Society' to the 'Unjust Society': A Review Essay on Native Economic History in Canada" *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*. 4:2 (2005): 53.
[11] Tough, 37.
[12] Findlay & Russell, 85-86.
[13] Newhouse, 35.
[14] Findlay and Russell, 85.
[15] Fred Cattroll. "About This Project" *From the Bush to the Internet*. Aboriginal Digital Collections. November 2005.
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/bush/about.htm>
[16] Cattroll "Native Business Portraits" *From the Bush to the Internet*
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/bush/nbp.htm>.
[17] Marie Battiste, "Respecting Postcolonial Standards of Indigenous Knowledge: Toward 'A Shared and Sustainable Future'" *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*. 4:1 (2004): 65.
[18] Battiste, 62.
[19] Newhouse, 39.