

**THE HIGH COST OF AVOIDING POLITICAL ECONOMY
A BELATED REVIEW OF ROLF KNIGHT'S
"INDIANS AT WORK"**

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Knight, Rolf: *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*. Vancouver, New Star Books, 1978, 320 pp. \$13.95 cloth, \$6.50 paper.

Had this book been written with the breezy ideological perspective of a Pierre Berton it would have been a Canadian bestseller. Certainly the makings of a bestseller are there - everything from Iroquois and Ojibwa heading up the Nile for the relief of Gordon at Khartoum to stories of multi-racial fishermen's strikes on the West Coast, tales of organizations like the "Progressive Sons and Daughters of the Squamish Band," and fascinating anecdotes of Indians working in the "ethnographic trade" and the wild west shows. For serious academic historians too the book is a gold mine of fresh data, just one step removed from the primary sources, on the more prosaic matters of Indians making a living in the period between the decline of the fur trade and the 1930's - the period that has been the great lacuna in Canadian economic history. But in spite of these clear virtues such an important pioneering work has been virtually ignored in both academic and popular circles. At first I assumed this was because Knight's pro-working perspective had piqued the tort' guardians of fur trade history or that his concentration on work as such was beneath the purview of ethnographers interested in the more exotic elements of culture. Those two things may be part of the story but I think the reasons for putting Knight's book in limbo are more complex than simple ideological prejudice. These reasons have to do with (a) the tunnel vision effects of academic specialization; (b) the Canadian exceptionalism which consistently ignores parallels between Canadian native peoples and nationalities in the

"Third World"; and (c) the lassitude of Canadian intellectuals who seem afraid to make a serious examination of the great issues of social progress and cultural diversity lest they run afoul of the secretary of state and the leadership of the mainstream native organizations. Let me deal with these three points as I outline the book for you.

First of all, this is not the first time anthropologists, sociologists and historians have failed to face up to the fact that Indians too have a political economy. It is almost exactly five decades ago that Harold Innis, our most celebrated political economist, pointed out in *The Fur Trade in Canada* that Indian trappers/hunters/fishermen were essentially in the same structural economic binds as other non-Indian farmers and fishermen. This insight has never been fully developed by scholars in the fields we normally associate with native studies and mores the pity for there is a great deal that James Bay Cree and Mackenzie Basin Dene could learn from the history of prairie farmers' struggles for survival. 1

In the same broad tradition, Professor RX Dunning wrote an article at the tale end of the McCarthy era in which he suggested that some Ojibwa people in northern Ontario had lost many of their kinship practices etc. and were perhaps socially rather similar to poor white people. For daring to challenge the orthodoxy of the "cultural" causation of Indian poverty, Dunning became persona non grata in those territories so firmly controlled in the recent past by the church - Bay - R.C.M.P. axis. So Knight follows in that minority stream who keep prodding native studies scholars to drop the blinkers of their academic specialization and look at political economy before they apply pat and intellectually lazy cultural/national explanations to all phenomena of native history.

His main thesis is that Indians have done and can do anything they set their minds to, and there is nothing in the culture of the buffalo/seal hunt that stops them. Rather, there were factors in the broader Canadian political economy which severely cut back native active participation in the economy in the 30's depression and after World War II. Certainly he acknowledges the "specificity" of Indian culture, the existence of racism etc. but he asks us to consider other things before leaping to "cultural" explanations. For example, he documents very active farming, with the most modern equipment available, by Indians in B.C., the prairies and Ontario at the turn of

the century and through the 1920's. He argues that the factors which destroyed so many non-white farmers in the 30's and after World War II can also explain the decline of Indian farms and orchards and cottage industries. Indeed the lack of credit for new farm equipment, the dictatorship of the Indian Agent who could veto farm sales and inhibit other facets of reserve business can flesh out the picture quite well without resorting to cultural theories. Certainly people on the prairies should be well aware that farm size has increased eight fold or more from the 160 acres of the great 1896-1914 immigration. We certainly don't have to look at the kinship or religion of prairie farmers to figure out why. (Indeed let me be bold enough to suggest that future research may show that the ratio of surviving Indian farm operations is not far off the general average.) Knight applies the same argument and documentation to the many Indian small businesses, cottage industries and handicraft producers:

"Methlakatla [a church mission-directed enterprise] showed that it was possible to effectively transmit the skills and technology of cottage industries to Indian people. It also showed that the economies of these industries remained equally unviable in competition with mass produced goods regardless of whether Indian or European producers were involved. Cottage enterprises rapidly declined, with some exceptions which provided a supplemental income, such as Cowichan knitting. (The latter an imported adaptation from Scotland.-D.D.) p. 183.

This century-old paradox remains unsolved by those many economic development experts hired by Indian Affairs and the "parent" native organizations. I suspect that Knight's reminders make them rather nervous and resentful.

Knight's examination of the wider political economy upturns many other elements of Canadian mythology like the idealist notion that the decline in the fashionability of beaver hats was the "cause" of the big shift in British capital from fur-trade mercantilism to the more profitable industrialization and agricultural settlement of John A. McDonald's national policy. He shows how air transport obviated the need for employing "home Indians" to provision the northern and Hudsons Bay Company outposts; how rail transport displaced hundreds of Indian teamsters, carters, and Indian crews of the old

sternwheeler steamboats. He describes how the general trend to "de-casualization" of resource industry labour excluded more and more Indians from the "traditional" round of fishing/hunting/trapping/wage labour. He discusses how most non-Indian workers also made much use of the "jack of all trades" system with gardens, gathering (and even hunting) as subsistence backups to intermittent wage labour. Indeed Knight's earlier work *A Very Ordinary Life* points out the importance of suburban gardens (at the end of the tram lines) to German urban workers in the 1930's.²

Knight also demolishes as nonsense the romantic notions that there is some sort of "cultural" continuity between Iroquois highsteel riggers and fleet footed hunters with no fear of heights; or between early fishing and working on a cannery assembly line; or sealing in a dugout canoe and working in the engine room of a trawler.

The sheer bulk of Knight's evidence seems enough to prove once and for all that Indians have done and can do all sorts of work while remaining essentially "Indian." He does not argue that Indian workers were "proletarianized" in the past. Indeed he states that "self identification and articulate feelings about being members of a broader working class were probably quite rare" (p.18). But the strongly implicit message throughout his book is that the government officials, academics and spokesmen in the native movement who argue that Indians cannot do "white" work are making excuses for a great historic failure to provide a decent living for native people. To those who denounce his message as "assimilationist" let me quote the footnote that could well have been the frontispiece of his work: "Some who would assist Indian people to 'resist proletarianization' apparently have an image of working people as an amorphous homogeneous mass - the mythical abyss. Naturally, Indian workers were not and are not like that. Neither is anyone else." (p. 271) To which I would add that the middle class prejudice inherent in such classism is fully as discriminatory as racism.

The question of middle class perspective brings us to our next major point - Canadian exceptionalism and the question of neocolonialism. Throughout his work Knight refers repeatedly to the present situation of natives in Canada as "neo-colonial" though he does not neatly capsulize this idea anywhere. Surely it is time for Canadian scholars to test this hypothesis against all the Third World

data we have on colonialism. Is there not here, as in Africa and Asia, a transition from direct rule (the Indian Agent) to indirect rule (state funded native organizations); the continued ownership of the major resources by multinational corporations, the growth of a new native middle class and "state elite"? And even the growth of a particular type of nationalist ideology that (like "African socialism," *inter alia*) uses the pre-class history of the nationality to hide the present growth of classes? "It would be surprising if the ideology of this stratum were not some form of ethnic nationalism. It holds that no classes or different interests exist among Indian people; further, that conflicts are exclusively inter-ethnic conflicts. It assumes that there is some mysterious racial-cultural spirit always involved in the Indian condition which only other Indians (i.e. themselves) could possibly understand or cope with." (p. 203)

If Knight has the courage to apply the rich lessons of worldwide neo-colonialism to Canada, will others dare to follow? They will certainly find themselves in more difficult relations with some of the government agencies and some of the native leaders if they do. And even this difficulty would be par for the course for social scientists attempting to do honest analysis in the neo-colonial setting!

This brings me to my final point - Knight's refusal to let sleeping dogs lie. Some of them are already waking up with quite a growl though most scholars are doing their best to ignore them. For example, Knight traces the two continuously opposed streams of Indian nationalism. One example is in the B.C. fishing industry where some Indian leaders consistently struggled for an alliance of Indian, Japanese and "white" fishermen in various unions, versus another stream which saw fishermen's organizations for Indians only, often engaging in strike breaking and even anti-Oriental campaigns. Dare I point out that similar struggles are unfolding with "white" Canadian, Spanish, French and Indians and Metis workers in the Uranium industry in Northern Saskatchewan?

Similarly Knight repeatedly points out examples of class and "proteclass" formations in Indian societies at the turn of the century, the existence of slavery, prostitution, pre-contact disease and so forth. He does this with a careful, scientific, methodical "both sidedness" to remind us that the difficult interrelations of social progress, "cultural relativity" and "cultural diversity" have

been abandoned to a barren but politically expedient theoretical banality. It would be much easier to go along with the reigning myth of a North American Eden before its destruction by Columbus and his followers. Once again, despite his great pains to avoid Euro-chauvinism and any "unilineal" notion of social evolution, his honesty earns him repeated epithets of assimilationism, ethnocentrism and so forth. A prophet in his own land is without honour and also without book sales.

Finally, there are other questions which we can only touch on here, like the theoretical problem of "socially necessary labour time" - the complex question of national identity, mass production versus small production and handicraft in a developed country like Canada, or indeed a serious re-examination of what is national culture; the difficult and complicated interrelations between international unions, conservative craft unions and the resource multinationals operating on Indian land with international migratory labour - all these are going to require our intellectuals to get into gear and look more broadly than Indian "ethnographic" studies. If Knight's book has this galvanizing effect then it will have served a role far more significant than the "informal history" that it is claimed to be. For all its faults in editing (there are rough edges, ideas that don't get fully developed, and an awkward "pacing" between historical minutiae and theoretical points), that is a worthy role indeed.

In closing, some may see this book as a challenge from the "left" to their proprietary relationship to the Indian movement. It would be far more profitable for Canadian intellectuals, Indian and non-Indian, to see it as an intellectual stimulus to the "big" questions Rolf Knight brings back to our attention.

FOOTNOTES

1. Similarly, at the risk of the blasphemy of the reigning orthodoxy in today's Indian cultural nationalism let me suggest that much of the response of Indians to the present situation is not uniquely Indian. It is also the common response of small producers everywhere responding to the monopoly capitalist pressure to "grow big or die." In the past decades we have seen this tendency play itself through amongst prairie farmers (see S.M. Lipset's *Agrarian Socialism*, the publications of the National Farmers' Union and so on). The ethic of the family farmers is that they do not want

to get big and rich, they do not want to cannibalize their neighbours, they do not want to hire labourers or become hired (propertyless) labourers themselves. In spite of all the hardships, the anxieties about nature and the ups and downs of the price of beef and wheat, they eulogize farm life as the best possible combination of independence (being one's own man) and co-operation (the co-ops, the barn raising "bees" and other forms of mutual aid in rural communities).

The closer the old ways come to disappearing the more romanticized they become in the eyes of those who have already left the farm for the cities, until the old family farm is sentimentalized as a virtual paradise! But despite all the sentiment, the special subsidies to farmers, the marketing boards, etc. -- the monopoly pressures to expansion and the cannibalism and displacement of small producers inexorably continue. The ideal of a rural community of hard working equals was real and sincere. But also real was the inability to go beyond a market economy based on profit and speculation, so we see the dream disappear along with the small family farm and the rural communities themselves.

Virtually every point in the above description of small farm communities on the prairies can be applied to the Indian reserves and fishing/trapping/hunting communities. Scholars who ignore these elementary dynamics of political economy end up obscuring the problems affecting not only Indians but small producers everywhere from B.C. fruitgrowers to Newfoundland fishermen. Only when these factors are given their due weight can we get a clear view of the cultural and national questions of Indian people. It may then turn out that the essence of Indian culture is not only in the songs or handicrafts but in a co-operative mode of production which has been seriously undermined first by 300 years of mercantilism and more recently a big dose of Chamber of Commerce style private development schemes.

2. This whole theory of the removal of working people from access to food and other things not bought or sold is brilliantly analyzed by Harry Braverman in *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, especially in his chapter "The Universal Market."

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