

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEPENDENCY AND NATIVE PEOPLES: AN ESSAY ON THE FUTURE OF NATIVE/NON-NATIVE RELATIONS IN CANADA

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Abstract / Resume

Many of the apparent goals of Aboriginal people, such as self-government, economic development and so on, are actually defined by non-Aboriginal people. Even Aboriginal leaders define and apply these in non-Aboriginal terms to the hundreds of Aboriginal communities in Canada. This is a consequence of what the author calls “epistemological dependency.”

Bien des objectifs évidents des autochtones, tels que l'autonomie, le développement économique, sont en réalité définis par des non-autochtones. Même les leaders autochtones définissent et appliquent ces objectifs en termes non-autochtones aux centaines de communautés autochtones du Canada. Cela est une conséquence de ce que l'auteur appelle “dépendance épistémologique.”

Introduction

The lives of Native peoples in Canada have been analyzed and criticized from a variety of positions. In terms of economic development, Native peoples have been described as emerging from a “culture of poverty.” In terms of cultural and linguistic development, Native peoples have been considered as having an under-developed sense of their own language and culture. In terms of political development, the term “indigenous” or “aboriginal” has been applied to a population that is far from homogeneous. While political, social and cultural transformation has left many scars on the land and the people, it has, in some cases, been replaced by a new respect for Native cultures and traditions among Canadian academics. The language of self-determination has become a major part of the discourse expressing Native legal and political interests. However, the terms of reference that Native peoples use to describe their cultural and political uniqueness are still influenced by the rapidly advancing developments in a variety of “expert” disciplines which follow very well formed epistemological patterns. For example, when Native peoples set out to describe their terms of reference for any number of political, social and economic actions and enterprises, they do so usually in English, the language of the dominant society, and according to the logic of the English-dominated social sciences. This alone may explain the inability of successive attempts by non-Native Canadian academics to define self-determination and self-government for Native peoples. It is simply not ours to define. Our definitions and actions come under the rubric of what George Grant once called “English-speaking justice.” In submitting land claims, in defining the territorial and institutional boundaries of self-government, Native peoples are most often dependent on Euro-Canadian jurisprudence and its accoutrements for “justification.”

Any future analysis or commentary on the past, present or future of Native peoples in Canada and around our world should consider the impact of what can be called “epistemological dependency.” By this I mean a dependency on the very terms of reference and expression that are required in order to participate in the Euro-Canadian political and social system. This kind of dependency is so basic and subtle that it is built on the presumption of universal political, social and economic experiences. It is a dependency that justifies the positions of Native peoples in relation to the dominant societies and shapes the context in which their statements are made. In this essay, I will attempt to navigate three such positions as they relate to the struggle for recognition for self-determination and self-government.

The positions of Native peoples in relation to the study of economy,

culture and public administration are presented here as an ensemble of expert knowledge that animates the discourse of Native self-determination and self-government in Canada. Each depends on the other for reinforcing the urgency of realizing self-determined political and social advances for Native peoples. In other words, political self-determination rests on the ability of Native peoples to realize their meaningful participation and control over their economies, their cultures and their administrations, but not necessarily in that order. I begin with the economy, because it is the “traditional” area for a discussion of dependency.

Economy

It is appropriate to begin with a short discussion of dependency theory, because it is believed that Native economies must be released from dependency on non-Native controlled systems of economic behaviour and on their accompanying institutional baggage. Briefly, dependency theory was formulated in response to the development models applied to the underdeveloped economies in what used to be called the third world. While development models presumed that the answer to underdevelopment was to establish a capitalist mode of production, dependency models emphasize the relation between developed nations and underdeveloped nations as essentially colonial. This relationship continues, for the most part as *developing* countries became *less developed* countries and are now often referred to in the context of emerging economic regions of an integrated global economy.

In this context, many comparisons have been made between the fates of emerging nations and Native peoples in Canada. The essentially colonial, assimilative practices of Crown representatives have given way to a new respect for the contribution of Native economies to the “global” economy of Canada.

Indeed, the evaluation of Native economies has taken two distinct directions. On the one hand, the lands of Native peoples have traditionally been exploited for their renewable and non-renewable resources. The extraction of base metal ores, oil and gas follows the well formed pattern that managed the development of the rest of the Canadian economies. In fact, the “movement” of Native peoples in Canada over the last one-hundred years has been precipitated by development initiatives. Native peoples are now participating in this non-Native development, not without controversy. Assimilation takes many forms.

On the other hand, in contrast to this tradition, the management and development of Native lands and economies has come into sharper focus

in recent years. The participation of Native peoples in the resource exploitation of their lands has been challenged by the revival of interest in “subsistence” economies. In many ways, the encouragement of traditional Native economic practices is a positive step in relieving the dependency of Native peoples caught in the shrinking net of social assistance and the boom and bust resource economies. More Native peoples, however, are living and thinking in urban contexts. It remains to be seen whether or not the settlement of Native land claims with the Canadian federal government will change anything, the process is so slow that one can actually witness the conditions of the agreement change as the ink dries on the paper.

As Native economies expand and contract, they do so within the logical context of non-Native evaluative methods. Often, the success or failure of Native economies is determined by accounting standards which are non-Native in origin. How could it be otherwise?

The persistence of hunting, trapping and fishing as components of Native economies in Canada reveals their importance to the preservation of Native cultures. The act of preservation, however, is fed by a non-Native impulse to classify and regulate the meaning of culture.

The economy of Canada is a “false economy” for two reasons. First, it is enmeshed in a discursive practice which understands its value in terms of production, and as such, cannot compete with more sophisticated economies and must rely on injections of capital for it to survive. In this sense, the condition of the Native economies is not only a part of the Canadian economy, it *is* the Canadian economy. The predicament of Canadian dependency on foreign investment is played out among Native peoples to a lesser degree but within the same discursive patterns.

The second reason for Canada's economy being a false one is that it has developed literally through the continual displacement of Native peoples.

Culture

In *Arctic Twilight*, Kevin McMahon argues that,

To listen to Inuit describe their life, then to read the libraries of anthropological reports, is to realize that, even in the fifties, we might as well have been living on different planets. This is a banality of course, but it is too easily overlooked. Everybody knows aboriginal people have a different relationship with their environment but none of the terms that trip easily out—a closeness, a bond—quite suffice. Intuitive processes operate that our science can't understand and our language can't explain. Details can be listed endlessly, but only a leap of

imagination, a leap *within*, can provide an inkling of a hunter's perception of being, a perception European culture submerged long ago. Life is life. Biological pathways, obviously, never vary. But consciousness makes all the difference (McMahon, 1988:21).

McMahon captures an essential characteristic of the relationship between Native and non-Native cultures; the Western or European language of survival is predicated on a recognition that we are in general conflict with Nature because the objects of Nature are in a constant state of potential scarcity. This conflict requires the ordering of our economic practices which allows us to predict their potential yield. In the end, profit from accumulation serves as insurance against an unpredictable economic future. This linear progression and definition of interests was not a part of Native peoples ways of life. The re-ordering of the priorities of Native peoples has required the re-wording of languages.

The creation of "new" words for Native languages signals the participation of Native peoples in their own development. For example, attempts are constantly made to adapt the ways of life of Native peoples to the requirements of non-Native institutions. Accordingly,

It is because aboriginal people live and work within non-aboriginal institutions that certain technical terms need to be developed. The challenge is not simply to develop better interpreter/translator systems, but also to allow aboriginal peoples to make these institutions their own...If native children/students are not taught or do not learn about the history of their people, their culture, traditional values and customs and their language, then they will never really know themselves or their potential as human beings (Howard, 1986).

Their potential as human beings rests in their ability to appropriate the correct words, in their own languages, that would allow them to freely participate in the larger Canadian community. This in turn will lead to the development of Native political and social institutions as well as to the creation of Native literatures. In other words, Native political histories in North America have developed to the point where Native peoples have realized that academic research could be useful to "foster an ethnic cultural renaissance." However, the proliferation of treatises on Native organizational behaviour, by non-Native academics, must be linked to the increasing appropriation of Native groups within the logic of Western scientific practice.

The authenticity of a particular culture corresponds to the ability of the ethnographer to reveal the historical continuities that have allowed it to remain alive. History, then, provides the circumstances for the nature of a culture to be understood and expressed. Continuity of practices that are

measured by the human sciences ensures cultural survival.

Critics of the temporality of anthropological discourse have acknowledged the relationship between the collection of anthropological knowledge and the power to define the "other" as an object of scientific inquiry. By universalizing a western conception of time, anthropological discourse produces the attributes of other cultures. The political nature of anthropological fieldwork, and the pursuant collection and classification of "data," produces the truth of other cultures. The value of this practice is determined wholly within the gaze of western science (Clifford, 1988; Martin, 1987).

The collection of Native cultural objects in Canada is designed to preserve Native heritages, and a number of problems occur when "objects are removed [from local communities] and become inaccessible to most of the residents" (Janes and Arnold, 1989:46). In light of the objection to such exhibitions as *The Spirit Sings* during the Calgary Olympics in 1988, one can recognize this as a fundamental injustice to Native communities, as collections of artifacts are removed from various work sites for storage and analysis at archaeological museums and depositories. Local residents often express anger and frustration over their loss of identity. In response, however, to suggestions that artifacts simply be returned to their rightful owners, leading museologists have argued that "returning collections to communities that have no resources or commitment to care for them, for the sake of political appeasement, is unacceptable. Even community interest and commitment are not enough..." (Janes and Arnold, 1989:47).

It is clear that some experts are concerned with the practice of Archaeological and anthropological sciences in relation to Native peoples, concerned enough to advocate the active participation of Native peoples in the process of extraction and evaluation of artifacts. But returning these artifacts to their rightful owners can only be accomplished if the right kinds of facilities are present to guarantee their safekeeping. This represents an apparent contradiction in their logic. Not only must archaeological study be cognizant of the need to include the education of Native peoples in the practice of archaeology, but archaeological knowledge and artifacts must remain within the carefully planned structures of the discipline. Not only is this a double standard, but more importantly it demonstrates how the collection of archaeological knowledge constitutes a form of power. The empowerment of Native peoples in the collection of archaeological data is achieved through their inclusion in the process. Nowhere, however, is the process itself called into question. In this process, says one expert,

We are attempting to participate in the cultural enfranchisement of [northern] native cultures. This process of cultural enfranchisement will only be complete when the aboriginal peoples [of the NWT] have assumed a full and equal role in

the preservation and interpretation of their cultural traditions (Janes, 1987:37).

In this sense, cultural enfranchisement translates as political enfranchisement. Native peoples must take control of their past in order to understand their future. Native peoples, then, occupy sites of political struggles to represent themselves through a complex of cultural regularities which are fundamentally different from those adduced among non-Native Canadians. The conditioning of these regularities takes place within the view of the human sciences, but the practical activity of collection and classification is performed by Native peoples themselves. The cultural enfranchisement of Native peoples is a necessary corollary to their political awareness and to their survival.

As one Canadian anthropologist has argued,

...the expressed needs of [Native] northerners conflict with prevailing norms for academic behaviour. We scientists, who have traditionally not been accountable to northerners for work being done in the North, have not yet assimilated two facts. One is that we are ignorant of the skills necessary to participate in cross-cultural contexts, particularly when technical information is communicated. The second fact, perhaps more important for this discussion, is that the changing social context of science may effect the practice of our disciplines, and perhaps even the theoretical foundations of our scientific interpretations, at least in the social sciences. How, then, do we participate in, learn from, and contribute to northern science which responds to human needs as well as to the needs of our own scientific quest for knowledge? (Bielawski, 1984:2).

Given this context of doubt about the voracity of science to illustrate and identify the culture of Native peoples, we should consider a discussion of the terminology which has been used to describe Native peoples as "indigenous," "native" or "aboriginal." These are Western terms which allow us to position, in our minds, groups of people in specific areas. As such, they were created to describe "other" experiences of the world. They are compact significations which have the power to invoke certain images of how these people live, closer somehow to Nature than us. They also seem to share with the words "savage" and "primitive" a kind of historical situation. They remind us of our past and are almost representations of ourselves in some kind of original form. As Stanley Diamond pointed out, there was no reason to abandon the word "primitive" because of alleged pejorative overtones. Rather, he argued, the words "primitive" (from the Latin *primitivus* meaning "in the first place") and "savage" (from the Latin *siluaticus* meaning "living in the woods") simply refer to first experiences with nature

(Diamond, 1974:124-125). As such, Diamond continued, they represent an historical difference, a simplicity which was unfettered by technological language and "civilization."

The word "indigenous" has received a more recent treatment in the work of Terry Goldie. Goldie argues that the "indigene is often used to present the possibility of nature in a human form. In the same way, the Indigene's closeness to nature is used to justify an emphasis on the indigene as the land. In the one, nature becomes human, in the other, human becomes nature" (Goldie, 1989:19). Goldie's study of the "images" of the indigene in the literature of Canada, Australia and New Zealand reveals a "semiological field," a field of study that empowers the researcher with the tools of analysis required to "reveal" the authenticity of the "other" culture. In other words, what Goldie has shown is that we can speak about the Indigenous, but we cannot speak the indigenous. We can "place" the Indigene in a semiological field which, in turn, acts as a form of power and "indigenizes" certain groups of people. This circular logic, I believe, comes into play when we use the terms "aboriginal" and "native."

The field in which these terms operate belies a certain linear conception of history. We can value the language of the Native speaker, we can appropriate it to explain our current historical condition, but, I believe, we cannot speak it without destroying its message. In 1973, Edmund Carpenter observed that,

Language is the principal tool with which the Eskimo make the natural world a human world. They use many "words" for snow which permit fine distinctions, not simply because they are concerned with snow, but because snow takes its form from the actions in which it participates: sledding, falling, igloo-building. Different kinds of snow are brought into existence by the Eskimo as they experience their environment and speak; words do not label things already there.

The environment encourages the Eskimo to think in this fashion. To Western minds the "monotony" of snow, ice and sky can often be depressing, even frightening. Nothing in particular stands out. There is no scenery in the sense in which we use the term. But the Eskimo does not see it this way. They're interested not in the scenery, but in action (Carpenter, 1973:44).

Carpenter was suggesting that the application of Western forms of logic to the situation of the Eskimo/Inuit is wrong. Theirs is a fundamentally different experience of the world that cannot be understood, but only watched. This sentiment was echoed by Hugh Brody in *The People's Land* and, more recently by Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams*. The Eskimo language, as

Carpenter observed, was always oriented toward some action. Moreover, as Lopez points out, "The Inuit language is seasonal—whole areas of the language are starting to disappear because they refer to activities no longer practised" (Lopez, 1988:248-249). The reason that Native languages have changed is because they are describing new actions, actions which are political, territorial, and ultimately administrative.

Administration

The administrative infrastructure in Canada which developed following World War II was meant to facilitate the claiming of new resource potential, and Native peoples were brought under closer scrutiny as inadequate participants in the capitalist oriented wage economy (Abele, 1987). The reform of Native peoples displaced by the economic imperatives of this economy involved the consolidation of Native policy in, for example, an Advisory Committee on Northern Development (1948), the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources (1954), and finally the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1966).

The general theme of most historical accounts of the political awakening of Native peoples can be characterized as one that acknowledges the need for guardianship, or as one scholar put it, "of bringing up children until they are old enough and mature enough to look after themselves" (Duffy, 1989). This guardianship is presented in the language that has developed around Native peoples in Canada since the days of Franz Boas and Kaj Birket-Smith; the Canadian environment is hostile to life, and so people there need protection and supervision according to the standards developed by scientific practice to control the peculiarities of a unique life-style.

Led by resource development, the national policy continued in a pattern of economic expansionism and the displacement of Native peoples all over Canada. This displacement was encouraged through the post-war physical relocation of nomadic and scattered Native societies and as a result, the population was brought together to facilitate delivery of educational, medical, and social services. Social welfare programmes, trap line registration, agricultural skills, and housekeeping skills for women, etc.—all were based on a perception that Native peoples were "disadvantaged."

The administration of the Native peoples occurs at two levels. First, the space that Native peoples occupy, even in urban areas, has been covered by institutionalized forms of power which are immediately recognizable. The complex of political and administrative authority in relation to Native peoples is characterized by the creation of laws, regulations and political practices which have been requirements of treaty obligations and the *Indian*

Act and the Constitution. At this level, the politics of power takes the form of a struggle to affirm the political and constitutional rights of Native peoples.

There is another level of administration in relation to Native peoples, one which meets the juridico-political level at various points, yet seems to have the capacity to operate on its own. I suggest that at the level of knowledge there is a form of administration which regulates the activity of the human sciences in relation to Native peoples. Here, another model of power must be invoked in order to give it a clearer expression.

In *Discipline and Punish*, and in *Power/Knowledge*, Michel Foucault spoke at great length about Jeremy Bentham's invention of the Panopticon, a building which was conceived to maximize the surveillance of prisoners, and whose principles were applied in the construction of prisons, hospitals and other institutions which required surveillance in order to treat their subjects. The power of the Panopticon was that it provided an enlarged view for the "overseer." According to Foucault, this idea informs the character of the accumulation of knowledge in the 19th century. In *Power/Knowledge*, he argued that it constituted a new form of power.

One doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised. This seems to me to be the characteristic of the societies installed in the nineteenth century. Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. Certainly everyone doesn't occupy the same position; certain positions preponderate and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced (Foucault, 1980:156).

Both types of administration involving Native peoples in Canada are directed by a vision of the rights and obligations involved in Native/non-Native relations, and periodically they come together to solve one of the myriad of problems that characterized Native advancement. This does not mean that there is no direction to research in the human sciences or in the development of political institutions for Native peoples. Rather, it means that the direction is always experimental in nature and continues the theme that Native peoples occupy a kind of "living laboratory" or represent a "mirror to the nation" where ideas are being tested. The future of self-government initiatives will be discussed in this context, one that is wholly formed from a Euro-Canadian perspective, and in which, paraphrasing Foucault, no one is in charge.

That the traditional political culture of Native peoples was "consensus-oriented" and that their "traditional forms of local decision-making" were the

operational methods used in this political culture suggests a number of things. First, there is the recognition that the past experiences of Native peoples, even in the “precontact” period, have gained a new sense of legitimacy and awareness. Secondly, the notion of “native leadership,” eloquently and passionately expressed by a variety of Native and non-Native commentators, represents a unity of identity among Natives, or at least among different Native organizations. The nature of that identity follows the recognition of a well-travelled path, because identity and unity are based on similarity of culture, economic conditions and linguistic tradition.

This approach to self-government suggests the possibility of the creation of a hybrid type of administration that takes the form of non-Native institutions, and non-Native categories, but is filled with Native substance. The anomaly of this hybridization could be in the realization that the substance, to a large degree, depends on the form. For example, a Native justice system is still a justice system, a Native social policy is still a social policy, and so on. In other words, the non-Native or Euro-Canadian discourse informs the process, judges the successes and failures of its actors and suggests alternatives, all in the name of scholarship. We should remember that dominance is the Euro-Canadian way.

Conclusion

In “Inuit Art, the Past Twenty-Five Years: Aesthetics, Transformations and Categories,” Nelson Graburn attempted to understand how we non-Natives interpret the language of Inuit art. He invoked a distinction between those who see art as the satisfaction of a spiritual need and thoroughly non-commercial in orientation (Lewis Hyde) and those who see art as “a conceptual category restricted to stratified societies” (Jacques Maquet). The Inuit language has no word for “art,” rather they speak of what we call art as *inuit sanasimajanga* or “things made/done by Inuit”. In the end, Inuit art behaves in a certain way to reflect the expectations of Western middle class values which yearn for knowledge of the past. In reality, Inuit art is a functional part of the Inuit culture that has been appropriated as art by non-Native peoples. We should remember, as McLuhan explains, that the medium is the message. McLuhan quotes from the Balinese, who say, “We have no art, we do everything well.” Presumably, as societies become literate, art figures in their speech. Native peoples have been developing a series of languages that understand the non-Native preoccupation with the past, and that they sell in the form of art. More importantly, the study of the languages of Native peoples reveals comparative discontinuities with the non-Native languages.

As Peter Emberley has explained, the combination of “values and

technology” in the contemporary age of scientific practice is the result of the combination of “knowing and making.”

As a way of knowing, rather than simply an intermediary means, making is an experimental effort at disclosing reality. Each effort at knowing requires an appropriation, in the interests of clarity and certainty, inspired by an enthusiasm to reconstruct the ambivalence and ambiguity of appearance...A complex intertwining of the will-to-knowledge and the will-to-power ensues, permitting the human sciences to compose and re-compose their own objects and subjects (Emberley, 1989).

The ambiguity of experience among Native peoples in Canada is played out in the formulation and re-formulation of the projects directed by the human sciences. The will-to-know Native peoples has provided the context for the understanding of “indigenous” or “aboriginal.” The Native context becomes a kind of “willed human work” which acts on behalf of the emerging political reality in the organization of Native political cultures.

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