

*The Killing of Political Economy:
How the Inclusion of “Aboriginal Perspectives” is
Murdering our Understanding of Canadian Development¹*

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“Science is the great antidote to the poison of
enthusiasm and superstition” -- Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

There is an increasing tendency in Canadian political economy, to argue that “Aboriginal perspectives” should be included in the field to improve our understanding of Canada's development. It is felt that accounts of Canadian development in political economy have been impoverished by failing to include aboriginal peoples' understanding of this process, and that “Indigenous thought” should be used to construct more legitimate theories of Canada's economic and political development.²

As well as improving our understanding of economic and political processes, advocates for incorporating “Aboriginal perspectives” into Canadian political economy claim that it will benefit the native population by providing a more positive interpretation of their historical circumstances. Traditional political economy, we hear, has either ignored aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations, or presented “distorted images of Aboriginal peoples...with terms such as underdevelopment, powerlessness, or disorganization”.³ Critics claim that this tendency is based on ethnocentric evolutionary theories that assume aboriginal peoples were irrelevant to Canadian development,⁴ justifying the dispossession of aboriginal peoples from their lands and the destruction of their political and cultural traditions.⁵ It is for this reason that Joyce Green concludes that “the inclusion of

¹ This title owes a debt to Keith Windschuttle, whose *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996), provided the inspiration for this paper. In addition, I would like to thank Albert Howard for his input.

² See, for example, Frances Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here: The Political Economy of Indigenous Peoples”, in Wallace Clement (ed) *Understanding Canada: Building on the New Canadian Political Economy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); and Terry Wotherspoon and Vic Satzewich, *First Nations: Race, Class and Gender Relations*, xxiii.

³ Terry Wotherspoon and Vic Satzewich, *First Nations: Race, Class and Gender Relations* (Scarborough: Nelson, 2000), p. xxiv.

⁴ Bruce G. Trigger, “The Historians' Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present”, *Canadian Historical Review* LXVII: 3 (1986), p. 325; Steven High, “Native Wage Labour and Independent Production during the ‘Era of Irrelevance’”, *Labour* 37 (Spring 1996), pp. 242-264.

⁵ Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, pp. 119, 123.

Aboriginal perspectives” in the Canadian political economy literature is one way for racism to be “challenged by all those who stand in solidarity against colonialism”.⁶

But before concluding that integrating “Indigenous thought” in Canadian political economy will have beneficial consequences, it is necessary to understand the character of these “Aboriginal perspectives” and how they will transform the field. In reviewing the literature, it appears that “Aboriginal perspectives” largely concern a particular approach to the discipline of history: Aboriginal peoples “understand history in a different way” and it is important to include such historical perspectives in conceptualizing the “centrality of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations to many of the key questions of Canadian development”.⁷

This paper attempts to shed some light on what it will mean for political economy to “understand history in a different way”. But contrary to the enthusiastic support such proposals have received, it will be shown that “Aboriginal perspectives” will not have a positive impact on the field. Political economy, with its focus on political and economic structures as historically evolving phenomena, strives for objectivity in attempting to understand the economic foundations of different societies and how they have changed over time.⁸ Subjective and spiritually-based aboriginal “conceptions of history”, on the other hand, deny the evolutionary character of Canada's development and humanity more generally, asserting that archaic economic and political forms are viable in the modern context. The concern is with promoting a reactionary political agenda aimed at maintaining aboriginal “difference” through parallel institutions, rather than elucidating the historical and material forces influencing Canada's trajectory. This prevents aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples from working together in developing a common understanding of their shared past, justifying the current marginalization and isolation of the native population from progressive political forces.

A Political Economy of Aboriginal Peoples or Aboriginal Political Economy?

Within political science, political economy is an approach that attempts to understand the linkages between economics and politics.⁹ Wallace Clement has characterized it as “a holistic approach to understanding society from a materialist perspective” that “connects the economic, political, and cultural/ideological moments of social life”.¹⁰ Rather than

⁶ Joyce Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada”, in Wallace Clement and Leah F. Vosko (eds), *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), p. 55.

⁷ Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, pp. 120, 124-5

⁸ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. ix.

⁹ Michael Howlett et al., *The Political Economy of Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1-2; Paul Phillips, *Inside Capitalism: An Introduction to Political Economy* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2003), pp. 1-5.

¹⁰ Clement defines “materialist” as “a perspective that begins with the assumption that the relations between people are fundamentally shaped by the way a society reproduces itself. How people make a living - for example, as use-value producers, commodity producers for sale, or wage earners - strongly influences how they are formed as social beings”. For a further discussion see Wallace Clement, “Introduction: “Whither

examining political institutions, cultural features and ideologies in abstraction, political economy attempts to explain these phenomena by indicating how they have historically emerged in association with the development of productive and distributive practices.

Political economy's recognition that various economic and political forms have existed at different times in humanity's development has resulted in the study of history being central to its analysis. A historical sequence of events is constructed and analyzed to determine a materialist chain of causes and effects. In opposition to idealist theories that perceive history as the outcome of a "clash of wills" that arise spontaneously and inexplicably, political economy asks how the ideas and actions of "great men" have been socially determined. This has led to the conclusion that "the will and the passions of men [can] be explained only by an investigation of the underlying driving forces of social development" and that "these driving forces are, in the last analysis, society's productive powers and the relationship of man to man in the process of obtaining the necessities of life".¹¹

A focus on the historical development of production and exchange has meant that studies of indigenous peoples in Canadian political economy have tended to concentrate on the fur trade era because aboriginal peoples were integral participants as fur harvesters and middlemen.¹² It also resulted in aboriginal peoples being largely ignored as a subject of Canadian political economy as the fur trade declined and Canada began to industrialize. Since aboriginal peoples were displaced from their traditional territories and contained in unviable areas of the country to facilitate development, they were not significant players in the production of value during this time, and as such, were deemed as "irrelevant" to Canada's political and economic development. It was assumed that because of the low productivity of subsistence practices and the simplicity of tribal cultures, aboriginal peoples would be gradually assimilated into the larger, more productive and complex society in which they were embedded.¹³

Because of this characterization, traditional political economy generally has been seen as inadequate for analyzing the circumstances aboriginal peoples.¹⁴ It is accused of failing to understand what is perceived as the flourishing and renewal of aboriginal cultures and the "political agency" that has enabled the native population to resist colonialism. There is criticism that aboriginal peoples are portrayed as an "historical relic" and that their societies are "dead or doomed".¹⁵ It is now asserted, to the contrary, that native economic, political and intellectual traditions are viable in the modern context and their

the New Canadian Political Economy?", in Wallace Clement (ed), *Understanding Canada: Building on the New Canadian Political Economy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), p.3

¹¹ Howard Selsam and Harry Martel, *Reader in Marxist Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 183.

¹² One of the founders of Canadian political economy, Harold Adams Innis, extensively studied aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations in his book *The Fur Trade in Canada*.

¹³ Trigger, "The Historians' Indian", p. 323-5.

¹⁴ Wotherspoon and Satzewich, *First Nations*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Frances Abele and Daiva Stasiulis, "Canada as a 'White Settler Colony': What about Natives and Immigrants", in Wallace Clement and Glen Williams (eds), *The New Canadian Political Economy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), pp. 254, 269.

promotion will benefit aboriginal peoples and society more generally.¹⁶ The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, for example, maintains that “[aboriginal communities] are not the dead artifacts of history, of value only to those who choose to study the past. Rather, they speak to the origins of cultural patterns that find (or seek to find) expression in contemporary times, in contemporary forms”.¹⁷ This leads the Royal Commission to conclude that “distinctively Aboriginal ways of apprehending reality and governing collective and individual behaviour are relevant to the demands of survival in a post-industrial society” and therefore “this heritage must be made more accessible to all Canadians”.¹⁸

These assertions have initiated a shift in Canadian political economy. Instead of perceiving the task of political economy as developing a general theory to explain “what happened” in history and how current economic and political structures emerged, and incorporating previously ignored evidence to enhance this understanding, it is now asserted that the field should incorporate aboriginal “conceptions of history”. This will require a transformation of political economy itself because, as Frances Abele points out, “the reality of history itself, as an enterprise, is conceived differently by historians of at least some Indigenous nations”. Therefore, “integrating the historical knowledge and analysis of...[aboriginal peoples] is not simply a matter of including the information they provide; it is a matter of understanding history in a different way and of finding some means to include a quite different view of the individual in society, and in history, from that now common [emphasis added]”.¹⁹ Such a transformation, it is maintained, will increase Canadians’ understanding of the past, as well as being consistent with the aspirations of aboriginal peoples.²⁰

But what does it mean to “[understand] history in a different way” and “include a quite different view of the individual...in history”, and what impact will this have on Canadian political economy? Although Abele does not provide specifics on what this would entail,²¹ such a view was articulated by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. It

¹⁶ Frances Abele, for example, approvingly quotes Kerry Abel “whose purpose in writing Dene history is explicitly practical and political”. As part of this “practical and political” agenda, Abel maintains that “small but dynamic aboriginal societies continue to exist among us; we need to recognize that fact and attempt to understand the aspirations of those who want to safeguard a future of continuing choices for their children”. Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), p. 269, in Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, p. 123-4.

¹⁷ *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [Final Report]* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1996), 1, p.46.

¹⁸ *Final Report*, 1, p. 616. For other references of the Royal Commission to the relevance of aboriginal traditions in the modern context see *Final Report*, 1, pp.3, 612, 617, 662-8.

¹⁹ Frances Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, pp. 124-5.

²⁰ Wotherspoon and Satzewich explain also maintain that “for an increasing number of scholars, expressing their voices as Aboriginal people is vital not only for making sense of a colonial past but also, and more importantly, as a critical precondition for developing effective strategies for a post-colonial world”. Wotherspoon and Satzewich, *First Nations*, p. xxiv.

²¹ Abele just refers to three sources – Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), George Blondin, *When the World Was New* (Yellowknife: Outcrop, 1991), and Charlie Snowshoe “A Trapper’s Life”, in Mel Watkins (ed) *Dene Nation: A Colony Within* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). Abele argues that she does “not mean to suggest that Indigenous ways of conceiving and communicating historical knowledge are homogenous, nor that they are totally different

asserted, in fact, that there are two “conceptions of history” – one espoused by aboriginal peoples and another by non-native Canadians.²² The main difference between the two, according to the Royal Commission, is that while non-aboriginal peoples see history as being "linear" in character, to Aboriginals it is "cyclical".²³ More specifically, the Royal Commission argues that these "conceptions of history" can be distinguished from each other in terms of four criteria: secularity, objectivity, conceptions of evolution/progress, and the sources that are used. In the non-Aboriginal historical tradition, the Royal Commission maintains,

the goal has been to come up with an account that best describes all the events under study. Moreover, underlying the western humanist intellectual tradition in the writing of history is a focus on human beings as the centrepiece of history, including the notion of the march of progress and the inevitability of societal evolution. This historical tradition is also secular and distinguishes what is scientific from what is religious or spiritual, on the assumption that these are two different and separable aspects of the human experience.²⁴

In contrast, the Royal Commission points out that the Aboriginal tradition in conceptualizing history "crosses the boundaries between physical and spiritual reality" and

is neither linear nor steeped in the same notions of social progress and evolution. Nor is it usually human-centred in the same way as the western scientific tradition, for it does not assume that human beings are anything more than one — and not necessarily the most important — element of the natural order of the universe. Moreover, the Aboriginal historical tradition is an oral one, involving legends, stories and accounts handed down through the generations in oral form.

from any traditions of other civilizations, such as the European or Asian ones. There are many degrees of overlap and continuity among all these civilizations at different times in their development. But certainly the approach to history practised by Blondin and by Cruikshank's three collaborators is quite different from the work of most historians practising in Canada today". Abele, "Understanding What Happened Here", note 32, p. 134.

²² The Royal Commission's analysis of these two different "Conceptions of History" is drawn from three sources: Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues", *The Canadian Historical Review* LXXV/3 (1994), pp.403-418; Anthony F.C. Wallace, "Overview: The Career of William N. Fenton and the Development of Iroquoian Studies", in Michael K. Foster et al (eds), *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); and Bruce G. Trigger, "Indian and White History: Two Worlds or One?", in *Extending the Rafters*, pp. 17-33. Although not cited in its "Conceptions of History" chapter, the Royal Commission also obtained three research reports on "History" - Ted Chamberlin and Hugh Brody, "Aboriginal History: Workshop Report; Lorraine Brooke, "An Inventory of Mapping Projects in Connection with Aboriginal Land and Resource Use in Canada"; and Julie Cruikshank, "Claiming Legitimacy: Oral Tradition and Oral History". All reports are available in *For Seven Generations: An Information Legacy of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, CD-ROM (Ottawa: Libraxis, 1997).

²³ The linear view envisions "time as an arrow moving from the past into the unknown future", where the present relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians "grows out of the past...and can be improved upon". The cyclical view of aboriginal peoples, on the other hand, perceives "time as a circle that returns on itself and repeats fundamental aspects of experience". *Final Report*, 1, pp. 35-6.

²⁴ *Final Report*, 1, p. 33.

It is less focused on establishing objective truth and assumes that the teller of the story is so much a part of the event being described that it would be arrogant to presume to classify or categorize the event exactly or for all time.²⁵

What has yet to be articulated by political economists, however, is that, with the exception of using oral accounts (which are, in fact, currently being used in “western” historiography),²⁶ incorporating the other three aspects of “native history” – spirituality, subjectivity, and anti-evolutionism - will not increase our understanding of the past. This is especially the case with the aboriginal readiness for “cross[ing] the boundaries between physical and spiritual reality” because, no matter how “legitimate” aboriginal spiritual beliefs may be, they cannot be considered “history”. It is one thing to say that aboriginal peoples think that their spiritual beliefs are important and that they should be “recognized” and “respected” as such, or that some things that they believe actually happened in the past; it is another to claim that these beliefs, in themselves, must be accepted as historical evidence. The discipline of history, which is distinguished from religion or theology, tries to document the past as accurately as is possible by relying on a wide range of concrete information that can be scrutinized by other historians.²⁷ Although it is true, as the Royal Commission points out, that history “is not an exact science” since “past events have been recorded by human beings who...have understood them through the filter of their own values, perceptions and general philosophies of life and society”,²⁸ this does not mean that all accounts of the past are equally valid.²⁹ As E.H.Carr points out, history is not “a child's box of letters with which we can spell any

²⁵ *Final Report*, 1, p.33.

²⁶ See, for example, Alexander von Gernet, *Oral Narratives and Aboriginal Past: An Interdisciplinary Review of the Literature on Oral Traditions and Oral Histories*, A report submitted to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, April 1996.

²⁷ E.H. Carr makes a similar point when he rejects both mystical and cynical views of history and instead sees history as a “constructive outlook over the past”. Carr rejects mysticism because “a serious historian may believe in a God who has ordered, and given meaning to, the course of history as a whole, though he cannot believe in the Old Testament kind of God who intervenes to slaughter the Amalekites, or cheats on the calendar by extending the hours of daylight for the benefit of Joshua's army. Nor can he invoke God as an explanation of particular events”. For a further discussion of these points, see E.H. Carr, *What is History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp.74, 109.

²⁸ *Final Report*, 1, p.32. This view also appears in a report provided by Ted Chamberlin and Hugh Brody, “Aboriginal History: Workshop Report”, *For Seven Generations*. In this report, it is maintained that “good science has usually acknowledged the arbitrariness of its findings, and admitted that its discoveries are always in some sense inventions. Science finds (or does not find) what it is looking for, neither more nor less; and it misses (or does not realize that it is missing) all sorts of other, no less interesting, realities that are not identifiable--that quite literally do not exist--within its theoretical framework”.

²⁹ This point, however, seems to be evaded by Chamberlin and Brody, who argue that “many of these issues [about historical interpretation?] cannot--indeed must not--be resolved. They represent contradictions and paradoxes and problems that lie at the heart of history, and also of relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples in Canada. These tensions--or more positively, the dialogues they generate--need to be sustained, just as we need to maintain the uncertainty entrenched in a memorable story...about whether a geological core sample--or any other piece of evidence that carries with it the prestige of science, or the privileges of written documentation--verifies aboriginal oral history, or whether oral history verifies the core sample, or the journal entry of some more or less itinerant European, or the other routinely privileged non-aboriginal forms of evidence”. Chamberlin and Brody, “Aboriginal History”, *For Seven Generations*.

word as we please";³⁰ in order to write meaningful history the historian must both ensure the accuracy of the evidence used and "bring into the picture all known or knowable facts relevant, in one sense or another, to the theme on which he is engaged and to the interpretation proposed".³¹ The historian Keith Windschuttle also notes that

while it is true that historians often come to the task of writing history with the aim of pushing a certain kind of theory, of establishing a certain point, or of solving a certain problem, one of the most common experiences is that the evidence they find leads them to modify their original approach. When they go looking for evidence, they do not simply find the one thing they are looking for. Most will find many others that they had not anticipated. The result, more often than not, is that this unexpected evidence will suggest alternative arguments, interpretations and conclusions, and different problems to pursue. In other words, the evidence often makes historians change their minds, quite contrary to the claims of those who assert that the reverse is true. Although theories or values might inspire the origins of an historic project, in the end it is the evidence itself that determines what case it is possible to make.³²

History, by necessity, therefore, is both "secular" and "objective" – two characteristics that are contrary to the "Aboriginal historical tradition". Whether or not historians and political economists think the past is "linear" or "cyclical" will depend upon their interpretation of all the evidence that is available, not on preconceived and unverifiable spiritual beliefs. This means that all the references that aboriginal peoples make to "The Creator", "prophecies" or "spiritual reality" to support their "cyclical conception of history" cannot properly be considered "history". On the contrary, many "aboriginal perspectives" would more accurately be characterized as "myth" or "legend".

The purpose of incorporating such "Aboriginal perspectives" into political economy, in fact, is not to increase our understanding of the past, but to defeat one theory of history that is supported by a wide array of evidence. This is the fourth element of western "conceptions of history" that "Aboriginal perspectives" oppose - "the notion of...progress and...societal evolution". As will be shown below, this opposition to societal/cultural evolution and historical progress is not based on an analysis of the evidence, but is an attempt to justify a political strategy known as "parallelism". Parallelism is the view that aboriginal cultures can exist autonomously from historical and material imperatives, indefinitely reproducing their distinctive economies, political systems and "world views".³³ Such a conception is opposed to the idea that cultural

³⁰ E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, p.26. Carr draws this statement from A. Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, p.21.

³¹ Carr, *What is History?*, p.28.

³² Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 220.

³³ For a discussion of parallelism see Alan Cairns, *Citizens Plus* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), pp.70-1, 73, 117, 132. Cairns notes that this viewpoint permeates the Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. It is drawn from the assertions of a number of aboriginal organizations who maintain that at the time of contact aboriginal peoples assumed that their "territories were to be shared" but "parallel paths of European and indigenous cultures were to be followed in a peaceful and mutually beneficial way". This vision, also known as the "Two Row Wampum" model, is

osmosis and horizontal evolution³⁴ will eventually lead aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples to become part of a larger integrated whole; it is assumed that "individuals are born into [distinct] cultures, and they secure their personal identity through the group into which they are born. This is their birthright, and it demands the recognition and respect of all Canadians and the protection of the state".³⁵ It is maintained that aboriginal traditions can be restored and co-exist alongside modern economic processes and political institutions, but this requires that the evolutionary assumptions that underpin traditional political economy be silenced. Political economists cannot put forward evolutionary perspectives because this would mean ignoring or "disrespecting" the beliefs of "aboriginal historians".

Advocates for incorporating "Aboriginal perspectives" into Canadian political economy, in fact, strongly object to theories that assume that there is such a thing as historical progress. The Royal Commission, for example, vehemently rejects theories assuming the "evolutionary development of human beings from lesser to greater states of civilization"³⁶ on the grounds that they are "false" and insulting to aboriginal peoples.³⁷ Recent overviews of political economy and aboriginal peoples raise similar concerns; Joyce Green refers to ideas envisioning "human development [as] an ineluctable trajectory of beneficial improvement correlated with 'our' mastery and exploitation of nature" as the "shared myth of liberalism and socialism",³⁸ while Daiva Stasiulis and Frances Abele conclude that "there is no particular virtue in seeking a replication of European stages in the evolution of social formations everywhere...".³⁹ Peter Usher even offers the

based on the metaphor of "two parallel rows of purple wampum [that] represent two vessels traveling upon the river", where "the river is large enough for the two vessels to travel together". It is maintained that one metaphorical vessel (usually a canoe) will contain aboriginal peoples, and the other Europeans, each with different "laws, traditions, customs, language and spiritual beliefs". With this parallel development, "neither...shall intersect or interfere with the lives of the other. Neither side shall attempt to impose their laws, traditions, customs, language or spirituality on the people in the other vessel. Such shall be the agreement of mutual respect accorded in the Two Row Wampum". Such a view assumes that aboriginal peoples and Europeans or "white people" will always remain separate from one another with different laws, beliefs and "ways". Edward J. Cross, Chairman, Kanien'kehaka Raotitiohkwa Cultural Centre, Kahnawake, Quebec, 5 May 1993, cited in *Final Report*, 4, p. 120; Haudenosaunee Confederacy, oral presentation, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Special Committee on Indian Self-Government, issue 31 (31 May-1 June 1983), p. 13, cited in *Final Report*, 1, p.103; and House of Commons, Special Committee on Indian Self-Government, *Indian Self-Government in Canada, Report of the Special Committee* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1983), back cover, cited in *Final Report*, 1, p. 123; See also *Final Report*, 1, pp. 178 and 694 for a discussion of this separateness.

³⁴ Freeman Dyson notes that, unlike biological evolution, "cultures spread through horizontal transfer of ideas more than genetic inheritance", which has led cultural evolution to progress "a thousand times faster than Darwinian evolution, taking us to a new era of interdependence we call globalization". By "horizontal", he means that evolution can occur synchronically (between different peoples at the same time), instead of diachronically from one generation to another (as occurs biologically). For a further discussion, see Freeman Dyson, "The Darwinian Interlude", *Technologyreview.com*, March 2005, p. 1. www.technologyreview.com/articles/05/03/issue/megaphone.asp.

³⁵ *Final Report*, 1, p. xxiii-xxiv.

³⁶ *Final Report*, 1, p. 188.

³⁷ These theories are, according to the Royal Commission, inherently "racist", "ethnocentric", "intolerant", "contemptuous", "self-serving", "unflattering", and "demeaning". *Final Report*, 1, pp.188, 260, 600, 695.

³⁸ Joyce Green, "Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada", p.55

³⁹ Abele and Stasiulis, "Canada as a 'White Settler Colony'", p. 250.

following caricature of the “deeply rooted notions about hunting peoples” to show how evolutionary theories are misguided:

[hunting peoples], after all, supposed to be at the other end of man’s evolutionary scale, living a primitive, barbaric, and unpleasant life that we of European ancestry abandoned thousands of years ago. Since the long march to civilization has allegedly brought us wealth, security, and ease, it follows that peoples so unfortunate as to remain hunters in the twentieth century must lead lives of poverty, insecurity, and hardship, as indeed the very word subsistence implies. We imagine the northern hunter to be balanced precariously at the top of the food chain, entirely at the mercy of biological cycles, migration changes, and climatic catastrophes. In his primitive state, he must resort to infanticide and forced marches to avoid starvation, yet given the least advantage over his prey, like a rifle or a fishnet, he will destroy his balance with nature, by overexploiting the very resources on which his life depends. The hunter exists in a classic Malthusian trap, from which only a civilized political economy can save him. Hunting, fishing, and trapping are thought to produce such meager returns for such strenuous and unremitting effort as to be akin to the task of Sisyphus. Constantly stalked by hunger, the hunter, during his nasty, short, and brutish life, is condemned to spend his every waking moment scrabbling for his next mouthful; he has no civilization because he has no leisure time to develop it. Moreover, the hunter experiences such personal discomfort, risk, and unpleasantness that he must be only too ready to seize the first opportunity to escape his predicament of grinding poverty and hardship.⁴⁰

Usher concludes that such developmental assumptions are based on an “underlying mythology that has contributed to our ‘scientific’ misconceptions about the Native economy of the North, to say nothing of the ideological justification for removing hunting peoples from the path of industrial development”.⁴¹

It is important to note, however, that political economists criticizing evolutionary conceptions of history make no attempt to evaluate its logic and evidence (they just dismiss the theory as a “myth”, which is ironic when one considers the actual mythological character of aboriginal “conceptions of history”). Instead, their objection is *political* – they maintain that evolutionary theories are demeaning to the native population and delegitimize their parallel aspirations. This *political objection* is then used to claim that such theories must be *scientifically invalid* (i.e. “false”). No distinction is made between facts and values, since it is assumed that no “metanarrative” in history can be objectively determined.⁴² On the contrary, the claim that there are different “conceptions of history” is to assert that views of the past are culturally relative and so it is the responsibility of political economists to “[emphasize] the salience of Native ways

⁴⁰ Peter J. Usher, “Staple Production and Ideology in Northern Canada” in William H. Melody et al., *Culture, Communication, and Dependency* (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1981), p. 181.

⁴¹ Usher, “Staple Production and Ideology in Northern Canada”, p. 181.

⁴² Windschuttle defines the “metanarrative” in history as “the narrative of what really happened irrespective of whether the participants were aware of it or not”. Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 281.

of being”.⁴³ Attempting to “understand the reality of differing perceptions [of aboriginal peoples]”, in fact, is seen by one Canadian political economist as being “basic to the development of healthy political institutions for resolving the problems of the present”.⁴⁴

Concern with incorporating “Native ways of being” and the “differing perceptions” of aboriginal peoples has led Canadian political economy to move away from analyzing aboriginal peoples in the context of “the actions of capitalism and the state” since this “fails to account for the ability of aboriginal peoples to respond creatively to the challenges to their ways of life and their determination to struggle to maintain autonomy against pressures to assimilate them into a national norm”.⁴⁵ As a result, aboriginal cultures have been abstracted from their economic foundations, justifying the argument that any “way of life” can be retained even if inconsistent with current social requirements. There is now an emphasis on aboriginal “political agency” that can operate in isolation from wider economic and political forces; the past is romanticized and aboriginal cultural development exaggerated to give credence to the political agenda of parallelism. And while this transformation of political economy is celebrated under the guise that it will instill “cultural pride” within the native population, thereby helping them to overcome their marginalization, the effects actually will be the opposite. This is because the promotion of archaic cultural features as “viable” and “socially relevant” keeps aboriginal peoples isolated from the wider society and discourages them from acquiring the skills, values and attitudes necessary for real emancipation today.

Wither the New Canadian Political Economy?

In her article “Understanding What Happened Here: The Political Economy of Indigenous Peoples”, Frances Abele notes that the “great, complex question of Canadian history”, and consequently the new Canadian political economy, is

how did the northern part of North America pass from the control of Indigenous nations possessing several languages, that farmed, fished, hunted and gathered in relative environmental balance, that were allied, federated, and sometimes at war, and that were internally organized in a variety of ways, to become a modern nation-state, in which a majority population, dominated by the languages and traditions of Europe, farmed and built factories, highways, and huge cities while they entirely reorganized the political map of the continent – literally as well as ideologically pushing the original landholders to the margins?⁴⁶

The way the question is worded, however, reveals the two major problems that have resulted from attempts to incorporate “Aboriginal perspectives” into Canadian political

⁴³ Abele and Stasiulis, “Canada as a ‘White Settler Colony’”, p. 251. This is related to arguments claiming that political economists should “marshal evidence and explanation so as to ‘help to mobilize forces of change’” through “disruption” and “seek[ing] to trouble conventional social science and traditional political economy”. Wallace Clement and Leah F. Vosko (eds), *Changing Canada*, pp. xii, xv.

⁴⁴ Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Michael Asch, “Native Peoples”, in Daniel Drache & Wallace Clement (eds), *The New Practical Guide to Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto: James Lorimar & Company, 1985), p. 152.

⁴⁶ Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, pp. 118-19.

economy. The first is to equate pre-contact “Indigenous nations” with the “modern nation-state” that Canada became, exaggerating and romanticizing aboriginal cultural development, thereby mystifying how the “majority population...entirely reorganized the political map of the continent...pushing the original landholders to the margins”. The second is to perceive the most significant political cleavage in Canadian history as being between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. This conception of history cuts across class lines, creating the impression that all non-aboriginals benefited equally from the marginalization of aboriginal peoples, and all Aboriginals were equally marginalized.⁴⁷ It focuses on the alleged violation of ancestral and/or legal rights,⁴⁸ rather than linking aboriginal marginalization to the most significant causal variable in political economy – the organization of labour. There is no interest in understanding how aboriginal peoples fit into Canada’s “historically developed class structures...and class struggles” – i.e. the “contradictory social relationship between producers and non-producers, entailing mutual dependence but also entailing mutual *power*”.⁴⁹ Legal arrangements developed hundreds of years ago are seen as being eternally existing “sacred covenants”⁵⁰ rather than a result of productive processes and “the specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct producers”.⁵¹

The assumption that the aboriginal-non-aboriginal cleavage trumps the development of society’s productive powers and class conflict as the driving force of history has led to the increasing prominence of the “internal colonial model” in Canadian political economy.⁵² This model compares aboriginal groups to colonized areas of the third world.⁵³ Aboriginal peoples, it is argued, were subject to the same processes of

⁴⁷For a discussion of this point see Wotherspoon and Satzewich, *First Nations*, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁸ Joyce Green, for example, maintains that “decolonization implies wealth sharing with those who had their lands and wealth appropriated”, where “wealth sharing” is to be derived from non-aboriginals and all Aboriginals are perceived as having their “lands and wealth appropriated”. Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada”, p. 54. See also Deborah Lee Simmons, “Against Capital: The Political Economy of Aboriginal Resistance in Canada”, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, York University, p. 43 for a discussion of this point.

⁴⁹ Leo Panitch, “Dependency and Class in Canadian Political Economy”, in Gordon Laxer (ed), *Perspectives on Canadian Economic Development: Class, Staples, Gender and Elites* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 273

⁵⁰ *Final Report*, 1, pp. 119-122, 130; 2(1), p. 18, 29-30, 75.

⁵¹ Marx, *Capital*, III (Moscow, 1959), p. 772, cited in Panitch, “Dependency and Class in Canadian Political Economy”, p. 273.

⁵² For examples of this approach see Mel Watkins, “Preface”, *Dene Nation*, p. xi; Gail Kellough, “From Colonialism to Economic Imperialism: The Experience of the Canadian Indian”, in J. Harp and J.R. Hufley (eds), *Structured Inequality in Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 343-373; Joyce A. Green, “Towards a Détente with History: Confronting Canada’s Colonial Legacy”, *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (Fall 1995), pp. 85-105; Norman Zlotkin and Donald R. Colborne, “Internal Canadian Imperialism and the Native People”, in John Saul and Craig Heron (eds), *Imperialism, Nationalism and Canada* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1977), pp. 161-185; and Rennie Warburton, “Status, Class and the Politics of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples”, *Studies in Political Economy* 54 (Fall 1997), pp. 119-141.

⁵³ John Loxley characterizes the northern areas inhabited mostly by aboriginal peoples as a “divergent economy”, which “like most underdeveloped national economies of the world...lacks internal linkages because what is produced locally is not consumed locally and what is consumed locally is not produced locally”. According to Loxley, imports constitute a large part of the native communities and there is a “high dependence...on state transfer payments from outside the region”. John Loxley, “The ‘Great Northern’ Plan”, *Studies in Canadian Political Economy* 6 (Autumn 1981), p.158.

domination that occurred in these areas. The only difference is that the native population remains “inside the boundaries of the state which colonized it”, and as a result, the colonizer cannot be expected to “go home”.⁵⁴

Using this model of “internal colonialism” for understanding aboriginal circumstances, however, fails to understand that, unlike a number of third world colonies, aboriginal peoples’ historical role was not as exploited labour, as is commonly asserted,⁵⁵ but as kinship oriented groups selling goods for exchange on “extremely disadvantageous terms”.⁵⁶ And because Canadian fur traders were able to use the practices, skills and knowledge that aboriginal peoples already possessed as hunters and gathers to realize large profits in Europe, it was obviously in the interest of British and French merchants to ‘co-operate’ with the native population. But when the profitability of the fur trade declined, and Canada was making the transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism, it was more profitable for the emerging Canadian state to import farmers and craftsmen from Europe, where the skills had been accumulated over a number of generations, than to spend the time and financial resources needed to provide Aboriginals with the cultural prerequisites for participation in disciplined and coordinated economic activity. The impracticality of plantation agriculture, as well as the sparse populations of aboriginal peoples in early Canadian history, also created conditions where they were “eliminated, assimilated or pushed into distant corners of the hinterland” since the lands that natives occupied, not their labour, was sought in the transition to monopoly capitalism.⁵⁷

These particular circumstances in Canada have been made clear by Erik Olin Wright when he makes the distinction between exploitative and non-exploitative oppression in his analysis of colonization. Wright notes that in the case of exploitative oppression, the exploiter needs the exploited for their effort (i.e. labour). He points out that this kind of colonization did not occur in the case of North American Indians, and policies of genocide or “displacement” often ensued because aboriginal labour was not required by European conquerors.⁵⁸

As a result of these circumstances, aboriginal peoples have not been integrated into the Canadian labour force, remaining marginalized from productive processes on unviable reserves and isolated northern communities. The lack of economic potential in these areas has meant that they are heavily subsidized by the Canadian state. Any “economic development” that occurs largely takes the form of a rentier economy, where royalties,

⁵⁴Jack Hicks, “On the Application of Theories of ‘Internal Colonialism’ to Inuit Societies”, Presentation for the Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association, Winnipeg, June 5, 2004, p. 1; Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada, p. 53.

⁵⁵ Ron Bourgeault, “Race and Class Under Mercantilism”, in B.S. Bolaria and P.S. Li (eds), *Racial Oppression in Canada* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988), p. 42; Abele and Stasiulis, “Canada as a ‘White Settler Colony’”, p. 252-3.

⁵⁶ H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimar and Company, 1981), p. 23.

⁵⁷P. Ehrensaft and W. Armstrong, “The Formation of Dominion Capitalism”, in A. Moscovitch and G. Drover (eds), *Inequality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 140-4.

⁵⁸ Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 11. For similar views see David Bedford and Dan Irving, *The Tragedy of Progress* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2001) p. 25; and Peter Kulchyski, “Socialism and Native Americans”, *Rabble*, December 11, 2003.

subsidies and various forms of welfare are distributed in traditional kinship networks.⁵⁹ The surpluses used to reproduce aboriginal communities are not generated internally, thereby making the native population perpetually dependent on the wider society for funds.

The focus on aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations as the primary cleavage in Canadian history, however, has prevented political economy from coming to terms with the unviability of these areas. The tendency to see the native population as having a completely distinct and separate identity from non-aboriginals has led political economists to assume that it must be possible to develop autonomous and self-reliant aboriginal economies and political systems. Attempts to understand the "material basis of the persistence of an aboriginal sense of collective identity",⁶⁰ in fact, has resulted in a large body of literature in political economy documenting what has been referred to as the "domestic mode of production", "mixed economy" or "dual economy" in native communities. Stemming from the works of Peter Usher,⁶¹ this research stresses the "continuing importance of Native land-based productive activity for northern Native survival".⁶² According to Usher, in the north there are two modes of production - "domestic" and "capitalist" where "the capitalist mode has been superimposed on the pre-existing domestic mode, but the latter survives in modified form. The two coexist not as isolated, unconnected enclaves, but rather as interrelated parts of a larger social formation, that of industrial capitalism on the frontier".⁶³ Usher maintains that while industrial capitalism is dominant, the domestic mode continues to reproduce itself and the distinctive character of aboriginal societies. As a result of this research, political economists point out that this kind of economy "has proved viable and relatively stable over several decades" since it is able "to make the best use of all available economic opportunities in areas where wage employment is scarce and unreliable...".⁶⁴ Melville Watkins even argues that the welfare component of these transfers has "hidden dimensions" that should be "appreciate[d]" since "it avoids integration into the wage

⁵⁹ In the case of aboriginal groups in the north, in fact, Mel Watkins notes that it is aboriginal land, not labour, that is sought since "non-native labour is generally readily available from the South" since it is "trained" and "disciplined" in comparison...". Watkins, "From Underdevelopment to Development", *Dene Nation*, pp. 88-91. He maintains that, in any event, this is not a significant problem since aboriginal peoples may not want to become wage labourers since this would "deny them their role as the land-owners who should be entitled to appropriate the rents from projects which they choose to let proceed on their land".

⁶⁰ Simmons, "Against Capital", p.151.

⁶¹ This work was largely initiated by Peter Usher. See for example, "Staple Production and Ideology in Northern Canada,"; "The Class System, Metropolitan dominance and Northern Development in Canada", *Antipode* 8:3 (1976); "The North: One Land, Two Ways of Life", in L.D. McCann (ed) *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada*; and Peter Usher et al., "Reclaiming the Land: Aboriginal Title, Treaty Rights and Land Claims in Canada", *Applied Geography* 12:2 (April 1992), pp. 109-32.

⁶² Abele and Stasiulis, "Canada as a 'White Settler Colony'", p. 254.

⁶³ Usher, "The North", p.491. See also Usher, "Evaluating Country Food", *Arctic* 29:2, pp. 105-20; Usher, "The Class System", pp. 28-32; Usher, "Staple Production"; and Watkins, "From Underdevelopment to Development", *Dene Nation*, p. 94.

⁶⁴ Abele, "Understanding What Happened Here", pp. 128-9.

economy, and is therefore a form of resistance [to capitalism]”.⁶⁵

But the “viable” and “stable” character of this kind of economy provides only food for the local population, which is a very small amount of what it costs to maintain native communities. Today aboriginal peoples expect all the amenities and infrastructure required to live a modern existence – running water and central heating, roads, schools, hospitals, recreation centres, and so forth. Even hunting and fishing must be subsidized because modern technology such as rifles, snowmobiles and powerboats are used to acquire the “country food” needed for aboriginal peoples’ “subsistence lifestyle”.⁶⁶ This “way of life”, therefore, cannot be considered to be “viable”, “stable” or even a “mode of production”. It is actually a form of distribution or “allocation”,⁶⁷ since it consumes far more than it produces and exists as a parasitical appendage on the wider society. As a result, it does not constitute “resistance” to capitalism because it is completely irrelevant to its existence.

The mystification of the inherent dependency of the “domestic mode of production”, caused by focusing on “rights” rather than productivity and class, is related to another problem in Canadian political economy. This is the exaggeration and romanticization of aboriginal cultural development that constantly occurs – a circumstance accelerated by the demands to include “Aboriginal perspectives” in the field. There is a general denial of the gap in productivity, scale and complexity that differentiates aboriginal groups from modern nation-states. It is not understood that the “domestic mode of production” essentially consists of the remnants of hunting and gathering practices that existed historically, for all cultures, in the context of Stone Age technology and the production of very small surpluses. Therefore, preserving such economies today means that they must rely on an external mode of production with much more efficient labour processes, preventing aboriginal communities from ever becoming “self-reliant”.

This denial of the developmental gap between traditional aboriginal societies and modern nation-states can be seen in Abele’s quotation provided at the beginning of this section. Abele notes that “Indigenous nations possessing several languages, that farmed, fished, hunted and gathered in relative environmental balance, that were allied, federated, and sometimes at war, and that were internally organized in a variety of ways” had lands in what is now Canada “pass from [their] control”. In this passage, Abele implies that the level of development present in North America before contact was similar to the

⁶⁵Watkins, “From Underdevelopment to Development”, *Dene Nation*, p. 92. See also Simmons, *Against Capital*, iv and Kulchyski, “Socialism and Native Americans” for a similar viewpoint.

⁶⁶For a discussion of the subsidization required, see Edmund Searles, “Fashioning selves and traditions: Case studies in personhood and experience in Nunavut”, *American Review of Canadian Studies* 31:1-2 (Spring-Summer, 2001), pp. 21-36 and George Wenzel, “Inuit Subsistence and Hunter Support in Nunavut”, in J. Dahl and J. Hicks (eds), *Nunavut: Inuit Regain Control of the their Land and Lives* (Copenhagen: International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2000), pp. 178-88.

⁶⁷Giacomo Luciani, in fact, calls states associated with this type of economy an “allocation” or “exoteric” (as opposed to “production”) state because these economies are “predominantly based on revenue accruing directly from abroad”. The circumstances that he describes are very similar to the dynamics of distribution that occur in aboriginal communities that lack an economic base. For a further discussion see Giacomo Luciani, “Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework”, in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds), *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 63-82.

European countries that settled the area, making it difficult to comprehend why Europeans “entirely reorganized the political map of the continent” and “push[ed] the original landholders to the margins”. But what is not made clear is that the features of “Indigenous nations” that Abele points to are indicative of the lower productivity, smaller scale and simple organization of aboriginal groups relative to European immigrants. The socially fragmented “several languages” that existed, for example, were indicative of the lack of political integration in North America (i.e. it consisted of several tribal groupings, not “Indigenous nations”),⁶⁸ while the “relative environmental balance” reflected the unproductive Stone Age technology and subsistence economies of hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists (who used less efficient slash and burn methods in comparison to the European system of field agriculture with draught animals and ploughs).⁶⁹ These differences in development, in conjunction with the exploitative character of capitalism, clearly explains why European governments were capable of “literally as well as ideologically pushing the original landholders to the margins”.

Abele’s efforts to evade these developmental differences is part of a wider trend in Canadian political economy that delinks political and ideological forms from their economic foundations. A focus on “political agency” rather than on “developments in productive forces” as the basis for historical change, means that any type of ideology or political structure can be associated with any mode of production. This has resulted in all sorts of claims about pre-contact aboriginal “governance”,⁷⁰ “legal systems”,⁷¹ and

⁶⁸ One work in political economy even maintains that “the depiction of indigenous peoples as preliterate has devalued the rich and varied forms of literacy that have long been central to many First Nations cultures”. Wotherspoon and Satzewich, *First Nations*, p. xxiv. The sources used to make this claim are (Battiste, 1986 [“Micmac Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation”, in J. Barman, Y. Hebert and D. McCaskill (eds), *Indian Education in Canada: Volume 1: The Legacy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), pp. 23-44]).

⁶⁹ In subsistence and pre-market economies the surpluses produced are very small and consumed communally, which explains how aboriginal peoples alleged ecological sensitivity. For a further discussion of the unproductive nature of pre-contact aboriginal economies see Phillips, *Inside Capitalism*, p. 9. In comparison, Cipolla discusses a number of areas where productivity increased in Europe throughout the period from 1000-1700, and notes that “the main reason for productivity gains was technological progress...”. For a further discussion see Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution*, Third Edition (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 100-3.

⁷⁰ The most absurd discussion of aboriginal “governance” occurs in Kiera L. Ladner, “Governing Within an Ecological Context: Creating an AlterNative Understanding Blackfoot Governance”, *Studies in Political Economy* 70 (Spring 2003), pp. 125-152. In this article, Ladner argues that political economists can “come to an understanding of Blackfoot governance” by “observing a buffalo herd” because this is what aboriginal elders recommend, and that aboriginal peoples’ “relationship to Creation” is a key determinant of Indigenous political systems. There is virtually no attempt to link aboriginal peoples’ ideas and political systems to the material processes of production and reproduction, making it difficult to fathom how Ladner’s article can even be considered “political economy”.

⁷¹ There is tendency to refer to the kinship reciprocity within aboriginal groups as a system of “laws”, when what is being referred to would be more accurately characterized as “custom”. Laws are “administered by a determinate locus of power, whether by the sovereign itself or by a surrogate”, and as such, “law” is very different from “custom” – i.e. “any habitual or usual course of action” or “established practice”. Morton H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society* (New York: Random House, 1967), p.20; See also Leslie A. White, *The Evolution of Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), pp. 231-233 for a similar discussion of the difference between custom and law.

“sovereignty”,⁷² even though the low level of surplus produced meant that native groups were organized on the basis of kinship, not property relations and territory. It has also led to a number of arguments asserting the importance of the use of aboriginal “traditional knowledge” in the modern context⁷³ even though this “way of knowing” essentially consists of a combination of junk science and superstition.⁷⁴

The recognition of developmental differences between traditional aboriginal societies and European settlers generally has been avoided in Canadian political economy because it is assumed that it will be insulting to native groups. This is a result of confusing culture with race, and a lack of understanding that the difficulties that aboriginal peoples continue to experience in participating in the wider Canadian society are due to cultural, not racial, features. “Culture” refers to the collection of extrasomatic or learned attributes that are determined by the material conditions of existence,⁷⁵ not innate or genetic characteristics. This means that with the appropriate socialization processes, all aboriginal peoples have the capacity to develop and become full participants in modern life.

As well as conflating the concepts of culture and race, the shying away from developmental explanations is also the result of what Jared Diamond has called a tendency to “confuse an explanation of causes with a justification or acceptance of results”. As Diamond explains, “what use one makes of a historical explanation is a question separate from the explanation itself”. He also points out that

understanding is more often used to try to alter an outcome than to repeat or perpetuate it. That’s why psychologists try to understand the minds of murderers and rapists, why social historians try to understand genocide, and why physicians try to understand the causes of human disease. Those investigators do not seek to

⁷² Joyce Green, for example, refers to the “prior and preminent claims to...sovereignty” of aboriginal peoples. “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada”, p. 53. However, the exercise of sovereign authority requires an existence of the state, and “neither the concept [of sovereignty] nor the underlying institutions were part of the culture of...hunting-gathering societies”. For a further discussion of the inapplicability of the concept of “sovereignty” to aboriginal societies see Thomas Flanagan, “Native Sovereignty: Does Anyone Really Want an Aboriginal Archipelago?”, in Mark Charlton and Paul Barker (eds), *Crosscurrents: Contemporary Political Issues* (Scarborough: Thomson-Nelson, 2002), pp. 85-92.

⁷³ Abele, “Understanding What Happened Here”, p. 128-9.

⁷⁴ Without the references to spiritualism, practices and values, all that remains of traditional knowledge is what John E. Dodes, the president of the New York Chapter of the National Council Against Health Fraud, has referred to as “junk science”. According to Dodes, “junk science results when conclusions are drawn using low-quality data such as testimonials, anecdotes, and case reports rather than from randomized, controlled clinical experiments”. Although Dodes is largely concerned with exploring the negative effects of junk science on health care in the United States, he maintains that new regulations in American courts have made this form of “evidence” increasingly common. Dodes notes that junk science is generally used “in support of a political or legislative agenda”. This agenda is driven by interested parties who, like the “faith healing” lobby, stand to gain financially from suppressing reliable scientific evidence. John E. Dodes, “Junk Science and the Law”, *Skeptical Inquirer*, July/August 2001, p.31.

⁷⁵ V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London: Mentor Books, 1951), pp.20-36; Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society*, pp. 5-9; Thomas G. Harding et al., *Evolution and Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), pp. 8-9; and White, *The Evolution of Culture*, pp. 3-32.

justify murder, rape, genocide, and illness. Instead, they seek to use their understanding of a chain of causes to interrupt the chain.⁷⁶

It is the recognition of the gap in cultural development between hunter-gatherers and industrialized nation-states, in fact, that is necessary to “interrupt the chain” of aboriginal deprivation. This is because the aboriginal traditions that are currently being promoted were developed for life in smaller, less productive and simpler societies, and as a result, their retention is actually inhibiting native participation in modern educational systems and productive activities. What advocates for the “respect” and “recognition” of aboriginal traditions are actually doing is ignoring the problems that aboriginal peoples are currently experiencing in becoming full participants in Canadian life under the auspices that doing so will destroy "aboriginal identity" and "erode [their] self-worth". Political economists are being encouraged to condescend to aboriginal peoples to make it appear that the native population is more functional in the modern context than they really are. Rather than making aboriginal peoples feel better about themselves and giving them the confidence to overcome their "dependency and self-abuse", however, these proposals exacerbate these problems by preventing the native population from becoming active participants in the increasingly complex modern world.

Resuscitating Political Economy in Canada

The current proposals for incorporating “Aboriginal perspectives” into our understanding of Canadian development did not emerge out of the political economy tradition. As is shown by the quotation from Adam Smith at the beginning of this paper, scholars were originally drawn to political economy because of its scientific potential. This concern existed regardless of where political economists were situated on the political spectrum; Karl Marx, like Adam Smith, was concerned with developing a science of human development through a theoretical approach known as historical materialism.⁷⁷

The impetus for incorporating “Aboriginal perspectives” into political economy comes not from the theories of Smith or Marx, but a framework known as “identity politics”. Largely drawn from the works of the philosopher Charles Taylor, this approach dominates many discussions of aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations.⁷⁸ The approach assumes that “we owe equal respect to all cultures” since they “have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time” and therefore “have something important to say to all human beings”.⁷⁹ These cultures, “identity politics” proponents argue, can “suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them

⁷⁶ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 17.

⁷⁷ G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 27,

⁷⁸ See James Tully, “Aboriginal Peoples: Negotiating Reconciliation”, in James Bickerton and Alain-G. Gagnon (eds) *Canadian Politics*, 3rd Edition (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999), pp. 413-442 for an overview of some of this literature.

⁷⁹ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 66-67.

mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves”.⁸⁰ With respect to aboriginal peoples, such an approach maintains that

people can be active and responsible members of their communities only if they have a sense of their own worth and the conviction that what they say and do in both the public and the private sphere can make a significant contribution. However, this sense of self-respect is based in part on society's recognition of the value of an individual's activities and goals. A multinational society that treats the culture of a member nation with derision or contempt may well undermine the self-respect of people belonging to that culture. Such treatment jeopardizes their ability to participate as active members of their communities and to function effectively as autonomous individuals in work and private life. The disastrous effects on Aboriginal societies of successive policies of cultural assimilation bear poignant witness to this message.⁸¹

But what is not understood is that real “respect” and “recognition” can only occur if aboriginal cultures offer something of value by contributing to the wider social fabric. If this is not demonstrated, then the promotion of cultural attributes is not, as Taylor himself points out, “a genuine expression of respect”, but amounts to “unsufferable patronizing”. As Taylor explains, “the supposed beneficiaries of the politics of recognition...know that they want respect, not condescension. Any theory that wipes out the distinction seems at least *prima facie* to be distorting crucial facets of the reality it purports to deal with”.⁸²

Advocates for incorporating “Aboriginal perspectives” into political economy, in fact, are guilty of offering “native historians” condescension, not respect. This is because these “perspectives”, to the extent to which they are specifically “Aboriginal”, have nothing to contribute to our understanding of history. This is not to say that people of aboriginal ancestry cannot become historians; it is just that it does not make sense to argue that aboriginal peoples, because of their ethnicity, have a “perspective” that cannot be evaluated by the same methods used by Canadian, German, Chinese, or African historians. To argue in favour of a methodologically distinct form of “Indigenous thought” is to discourage aboriginal peoples from actually participating in the development of a common historical understanding.

The promotion of “Aboriginal perspectives” also has had a disturbing effect on native political attitudes. Although a number of political economists lean to the romanticization of Native culture as a way of righting past wrongs, romanticization does not help the romanticized because it gives them an unrealistic assessment of their own abilities and place in the world. In fact, it is increasingly leading to the development of racist attitudes within the native population because romanticism focuses attention on the innate greed of the “white man”, rather than the wider economic and political imperatives of colonization. As Keith Windschuttle explains, current romantic conceptions of aboriginal peoples just present “a mirror image of the racist ideologies that accompanied and

⁸⁰Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, p. 25.

⁸¹ Final Report, 1, pp. 681, 683.

⁸² Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, pp. 69-70.

justified Western imperialism in the colonial era: once it was the West that imagined it brought civilization to the heathen; today it is tribal cultures that are revered as humane, and imperial cultures that are condemned as brutish”.⁸³ This does nothing to foster a common understanding between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples; all it does is propagate arrogance and feelings of racial superiority.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm has expressed his opposition to these current trends in history (and by association political economy), that blur the line between fact and fiction. According to Hobsbawm, “the ability to distinguish between the two is absolutely fundamental”,⁸⁴ because the confusion of the latter with the former can have disastrous political consequences. As Hobsbawm explains, “attempts to replace history by myth and invention are not merely bad intellectual jokes...Myth and invention are essential to the politics of identity by which groups of people today, defining themselves by ethnicity, religion or the past or present borders of states, try to find some certainty in an uncertain and shaking world by saying. ‘We are different from and better than the Others’”. It is for this reason that he encourages historians “to stand aside from the passions of identity politics” and to “resist the *formation* of national, ethnic and other myths as they are being formed”.⁸⁵

Incorporating “Aboriginal perspectives” in political economy, however, not only does not resist myth formation; it actively encourages it. Keith Windschuttle notes that the acceptance of this development has become common in the “postcolonial era” since

it has seemed natural to many brought up on liberal principles to go one step further than simple individual egalitarianism and to argue that it is not just all people that are equal but all cultures or meanings systems as well...However, this extension of the argument should be recognised as illegitimate. The liberal democratic notion that all people are equal means equal in a legal and political sense...It has never meant that all people have equality of knowledge, ability or understanding...The inference drawn...that the political liberation of colonial peoples should be accompanied by their epistemological liberation, does not follow. Indeed, those former colonies who want to expel Western thought in the way that they expelled Western imperialism should recognise that they would be throwing away the most valuable intellectual tools available to them.⁸⁶

The only way to mount a resistance to the formation of these myths, in fact, is to develop a scientific approach to understanding history – i.e. the “secularity” and “objectivity” that “Aboriginal perspectives” oppose. This is because, as Robin Fox points out, “science with its objectivity (however this might be compromised in certain instances) and its openness to validation and refutation, remains the one international language capable of providing objective knowledge of the world”. Scientific knowledge is a universal language, not confined to “Europeans” or “westerners”, because all people, regardless of

⁸³ Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 308.

⁸⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 2002), p. 7.

⁸⁵ Hobsbawm, *On History*, pp. 9-11.

⁸⁶ Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 280.

their cultural background, can use it, communicate their findings to others, and collectively learn from its results.⁸⁷

Fox and Windschuttle even argue that to deny aboriginal peoples access to science is a form of racism, because it limits their understanding of the world and their ability to make informed decisions.⁸⁸ Windschuttle's remarks on this topic are especially relevant to political economy because they concern one particular myth that is often put forward as a "conception of history" in Canada. This is the contention that aboriginal peoples were placed on their traditional territories by "The Creator" and they did not migrate to the Americas thousands of years ago. Such an "Aboriginal perspective", in fact, is often used to support aboriginal parallelist claims to land and self-government.⁸⁹ Although these arguments are put forward to support the political aspirations of native leaders, Windschuttle notes that

anyone who takes [these beliefs about separate origins] seriously is also committed to the position that the Aborigines did not evolve in Africa along with the rest of us and must therefore belong to a different species. Here we can see not only the disastrous intellectual consequences of this position but also political perspectives that are the opposite of what they claim to be. It is the universalism of...science that recognizes all human beings as the same people with the same origins. In opposition to this, cultural relativism supports the view that each native group is different and unique and that those who think they are biologically distinct are entitled to their belief. It is Western universalism that is anti-racist, not relativism.⁹⁰

It is with this insight that we come to the most damaging aspect of attempting to incorporate "Aboriginal perspectives" into Canadian political economy. This is the attempt to deny that we *can* reach a common understanding of human development. Serious problems exist in the world, which affect all people regardless of their ancestry, ethnicity or religion/spirituality. Developing a more accurate understanding of what happened in the past is one tool that human beings have for figuring out what has caused these problems and how to develop solutions. It is for just such a reason that a general historical analysis is so essential to political economy. But it is a common understanding of history that the inclusion of "Indigenous thought" is attempting to destroy. This will result in the killing of political economy, preventing us from "facing the truth of both our separate and our common histories [so] that we can best learn to live with one another".⁹¹

⁸⁷ Robin Fox, *The Challenge of Anthropology: Old Encounters and New Excursions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 367.

⁸⁸ Robin Fox, *The Challenge of Anthropology*, p. 367.

⁸⁹ Such a contention, in fact, can be found in the National Indian Brotherhood's (the precursor of the Assembly of First Nations) "Declaration of First Nations", developed in 1981, which maintains that "We the Original Peoples of this Land know the Creator put us here". Cited in Menno Boldt and Long (eds), *The Quest for Justice*, Appendix B, p.359.

⁹⁰ Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, pp. 303-4.

⁹¹ Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 281.