

COMMENTARY



## Aboriginal Economic Development in the Shadow of the Borg

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My interest as an academic is to document, examine, and reflect on the transitions in Aboriginal society that I see going on around me. As a society, we are starting to move away from the time of great pain and to lay the foundations for what I have come to call “modern Aboriginal society.” Across the country, I see a strong desire to build Aboriginal communities on a foundation of Aboriginal tradition, custom, and ideas. Accomplishing this goal is difficult as a result of our position as Aboriginal peoples as a small minority within an environment dominated by western<sup>1</sup> ideas. The arena of Aboriginal economic development is an excellent example of the challenges facing us as we try to act upon our desire to use our ideas as the basis for collective public and community action.

In 1996, a small magazine started by Rolland Bellerose, a young man from Alberta, began to explore Aboriginal economic development. *aboriginaltimes* has grown from a small local publication to one that is now included as a monthly insert in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s national newspaper. The masthead says that *aboriginaltimes* is “a national business and news monthly magazine which explores the issues and experiences of Aboriginal People.”<sup>2</sup>

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Issue #2 from October 1996 says, "*Aboriginal Times* is produced with the spirit and intent of sharing and participating! (It is) A communication bridge that will link Aboriginals and Corporate Canada together in a meaningful and beneficial way ... we provide an unprecedented way to inform the public of information pertinent to the Aboriginal Business community."<sup>3</sup>

Since then, consistent with its mission, the magazine has evolved into an unabashed supporter of Aboriginal business and economic development. It contains columns on partnerships, business opportunities, training programs, movers and shakers, natural resources, upcoming events of all sorts, snippets of Aboriginal history, political commentary, education opportunities and advertisements from governments, businesses, services, government policy. Its editorial policy is optimistic, pro-development, pro-business, pro-Aboriginal. In tone, it differs little from other business magazines in other sectors of the Canadian economy. Three decades ago, such a magazine would have been unthinkable and undo-able.

In another part of the country, we see another example of something that also a few decades ago would similarly have been undo-able. A few years ago, I had an opportunity to undertake a case study of the development of the economy at Six Nations of the Grand River and to think about the challenges that this community was facing. I was struck by what I saw and heard. The economy itself was booming: new business startups were at an all time high, people were consuming. There was buzz within the community as this new entrepreneurial spirit began to affect it. The council was publicly musing about the need for zoning bylaws for commercial enterprises, particularly in view of a rather disastrous tire fire. Local small business people said: "we don't need regulations. We can regulate ourselves. Regulations will increase the cost of doing business. And we're not sure that as a Band Council you have the authority to regulate small business. More regulation will make it difficult to start new businesses or attract new ones to Six Nations." For economists, these statements ought to be very familiar.

I see these two situations as illustrative of the situation facing those of us working in the field of Aboriginal economic development: on the one hand, we want to be proponents of more of it, like those described in *aboriginaltimes*. On the other, we are somewhat taken aback when we

see the old, classical economic debates being replicated in front of our eyes. Aboriginal economic development, driven as it is by Aboriginal values, is expected to be different.

In several places around the county, we are starting to replicate the classical debates about regulation of private enterprise, the appropriate mix of public and private enterprise, the role of government in the economy, the influence of culture on development goals and practices and, in some cases, the goals of economic development itself. It is uplifting to see possibility of great improvement in the material life of Aboriginal people, but at the same time it is dispiriting to realize that we have not been able to escape the debates that will inevitably accompany this improvement.

With the history of Indian-White relations dancing in my head, I also began to wonder if economic development was the latest solution to the Indian problem: Instead of being in need of civilization, Indians were now in need of development. Were we, as individuals involved in the field, helping to reinforce a view of Indians as problems that needed to be solved? As we are all aware, there is a long history of European-Canadians<sup>4</sup> seeing Indians as problems. Much research has been done that defines the particular nature of the Indian problem and that influences public policy in an effort to solve the problem. "Indians are problems and Indians have problems" may serve as the simple summary of the status of Indians in Canadian society.

It should come as no surprise that, predominately, we see Aboriginal economic development through the lens of problem and deficiency: there isn't enough of it or it's of the wrong kind. We see it as secular manna: more of it will solve many problems within the Aboriginal community. Public policy officials, academics, both theoretical and applied, and politicians of all stripes and hues have turned their attention to the problem: The Harvard Project on American Indian Economies, headed by Professors Joseph Kalt and Stephen Cornell, has been exploring the conditions that make for successful economic development. The York University Project on strong Aboriginal communities, headed by Professor Cynthia Chataway, is also looking at successful communities and how they could be fostered. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples considered increasing the level of economic development for Aboriginal peoples to be part of its fundamental goals. Furthering eco-

conomic development has become the solution to the poverty of Indians. Sometimes the problem was that the state wasn't doing enough. Other times the state was doing too much. Which view dominates public policy depends on the political predilection of the viewer.

Since the 1960s, Aboriginal peoples have had the attention of the development apparatus of the state, have been the objects of effort by the development community and its cadre of professionals, and have launched development efforts themselves. Yet the problems of low income, inadequate housing, and poor labour force participation continue to persist. Each decade since the 1960s, a new generation of policy researchers and analysts prepares a new set of solutions. The latest view, expressed by Cornell and Kalt, in "What can Tribes Do?" sees economic development as requiring the support of appropriate governing institutions, and the latest efforts are focused on improving the governance of Aboriginal communities.

The 1996 RCAP final report explained the Aboriginal economic development problem and proposed the latest set of solutions: more land, more capital, improved education and training, more development institutions, sectoral strategies, and better governance. Yet in essence it differs little from the solutions proposed in the early 1970s. The RCAP solution is more sophisticated, more nuanced, better researched, and based upon Aboriginal experience, ideas and desires. Yet I am starting to question not the solution but the production of the solution and the ideas behind it. I am starting to see that there is a complexity of ideas that drive the production of solutions. The solutions being proposed for Aboriginal economic development come out of the international development community which, for the last 50 years, has been working hard in other parts of the world to solve some problems faced by Africans and other parts of the "Third World." Many of these efforts have also been remarkably unsuccessful.

As Aboriginal peoples living in Canada, we inhabit a society dominated by the ideas of capitalism and the market. There are strong connections and interdependencies between economy, governance, law, and social order. The connection between development and democracy is often invisible: we discuss economic development in the context of governance, never in the context of democracy. We work in a sea of western ideas about the economy and its development,

government and its role, economic and social institutions and social order. And for the most part, these ideas have become part of the fabric of everyday lives, and they define what we see as the natural order of things.

We also encounter a concept that MacPherson calls "Possessive Individualism." This notion conceives of "the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as moral whole nor as part of a larger social whole but as an owner of himself."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, "the individual ... is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange."<sup>6</sup>

MacPherson's idea leads us to the conception of society based on the notion of exchange, with the polity as the means by which exchanges can occur in an orderly fashion, and by which property is protected. The idea of an exchange society becomes our market society. MacPherson's conception of society is at odds with some Aboriginal ideas of society and the sense of community and interdependence that is present in traditional thought.

We also encounter the idea of "progress," arguably one of the most important ideas of the modern age, and an idea that we hold, usually unconsciously and unquestioning. Progress implies that there is a pattern of change in human history, that we can know this pattern and that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction. This direction is towards improvement from a less to a more desirable state of affairs. The path towards improvement is generally that which the West has followed.

These are the ideas that animate our actions as economic developers working in the context of early 21st century capitalism in Canada. These are the ideas that the education system has brought to the table and presented to us as the ideas to be followed. Aboriginal ideas about the nature of economies have not been part of the educational effort of our children nor of European-Canadian children. Aboriginal ideas

have been absent and considered unworthy of serious discussion except within of the realms of anthropology.

Over the last 50 years, Canadians, and I would dare say Aboriginal people, have come to see market society and capitalism as offering the best option for improving human welfare. Since the end of the second World War, we have also adopted grand strategies for fostering its adoption as the fundamental solution to the problem of poverty. As Aboriginal peoples, we have also come to believe in the idea of progress as postulated by the West, although there is a healthy discussion about what progress entails, and a strong desire to create a more holistic definition, one that does not define progress entirely in the material.

The ideas that have animated Aboriginal economic development efforts have been used in other areas of the world. A 1949 economic mission of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development to Columbia described its mission as:

We have interpreted our terms of reference as calling for a comprehensive and internally consistent program.... The relationships among various sectors of Columbian economy are very complex and intensive analysis of these relationships has been necessary to develop a consistent picture.... This, then, is the reason and justification for an overall program of development. Piecemeal and sporadic efforts are apt to make little impression on the general picture. Only through a generalized attack throughout the whole economy on education, health, housing, food and productivity can the vicious cycle of poverty, ignorance, ill health and low productivity be decisively broken. But once the break is made, the process of economic development can become self-generating. (International Bank, 1950, xv).

The report called for improvements and reforms in all aspects of the Columbian economy. The representation of the country's social and economic reality was new and radical. The approach to development was comprehensive, integrated, and planned. The report outlined development goals, quantifiable targets, investment needs, design criteria, methodologies and time frames, and sequences for activities.

In its last paragraph, the report comments on the emerging development approach:

One cannot escape the conclusion that reliance on natural forces has not produced the most happy results. Equally inescapable is the conclusion that with knowledge of the underlying facts and economic processes, good planning in setting objectives and allocating resources, and determination in carrying out a program for improvements and reforms, a great deal can be done to improve the economic environments by shaping economic policies to meet scientifically ascertained social requirements....

Columbia is presented with an opportunity unique in its long history. Its rich natural resources can be made tremendously productive through the application of modern techniques and efficient practices. Its favorable international debt and trade position enables it to obtain modern equipment and techniques from abroad. International and foreign national organizations have been established to aid underdeveloped areas technically and financially. All that is needed to usher [in] a period of rapid and wide-spread development is a determined effort by the Colombian people themselves. In making such an effort, Colombia would not only accomplish its own salvation but would at the same time furnish an inspiring example to all other underdeveloped areas of the world.

When we deconstruct this statement, we begin to see that it contains within it ideas that we can still see at play in our own work in economic development in Aboriginal communities today. The statement says that economic development/salvation is possible. It's a complex task but there are tools that have been created for such a task (planning, science, technology, development organizations, etc). These tools have worked in the west and are neutral and universally applicable. They are also desirable. Before development, there was only darkness and natural forces, which did not produce "the most happy result." Development brings light and the possibility of meeting "scientifically ascertained social requirements." Columbians need to wake up out of their lethargic sleep and follow the only road to salvation.

What began to occur here, in 1949, was the promotion of a development ideal, an ideal that was later to become seen as the normal course of evolution and progress. The ideal was expressed in language creating a discourse of development which, in turn, created a social reality.

Escobar, in the *Encounter with Development*, writes:

The system ... establishes a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory, or object to emerge and be named, analyzed and eventually transformed into a policy or a plan.

Development has dealt with a myriad of objects over the years: initially, poverty, insufficient technology and capital, rapid population growth, inadequate public services, then adding cultural attitudes and values, other racial, religious, geographic or ethnic factors which were believed to be associated with underdevelopment. These elements were brought to attention from a widening array of experts: development organizations, universities and research centres and local indigenous institutions. Over time, the entire cultural, economic and political geography of indigenous peoples was brought into the gaze of the expert.

However, we would be remiss if we ignored the role of power in the creation of objects for study. Power was concentrated in the hands of experts: economists, demographers, educators, experts in agriculture, public health, management, government; institutions such as the UN who have the moral, professional and legal authority to name subjects and define strategies; lending agencies who had power that came with capital. The experts, economists, demographers, educators, technicians in agriculture, public service, health, and law conducted their observations, prepared their theories, assessments and programs in institutional bases not part of the local indigenous community.

What we see emerging out of this discourse is a notion of diagnosis and prescription: a diagnosis of underdevelopment, an examination to find the type and level of underdevelopment and the prescription of a cure. All of this occurs through the observations of experts. What is missing from the discursive space is people, more particularly, the knowledge of local people.

We can begin to see that one of the effects of this discursive space has been the increasing institutionalization and professionalization of development and the establishment of the development industry: development becomes an

important process, too important to be left to those who know little about it. A huge research industry has also sprung up to provide the observational data for the diagnosis and prescription of problems and solutions. A politics of knowledges emerges which allows experts to classify problems and formulate policies, to pass judgement on entire social groups and forecast the future, in short, to produce a set of truth and norms about them. Knowledge becomes real and useful only when produced by experts. Local knowledge becomes displaced.

An African scholar, quoted by Escobar, says: "our own history, culture and practices, good or bad, are discovered and translated into the journals of the North and come back to us reconceptualized, couched in the languages and paradigms which make it all sound so new and novel."

The development discourse also sets the modern against the traditional. The traditional must be transformed into the modern. The traditional becomes an obstacle to the establishment of the modern. Development must always lead to the modern. This notion of transformation, present in the 1950s, is still present today. Somehow the indigenous must be transformed. Escobar comments:

Development was conceived as a top-down, ethnocentric and technocratic approach which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of 'progress.'

Development was conceived not as a cultural process (cultural was a residual variable, to disappear with the advance of modernization) but instead a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions designed to deliver some 'badly needed' goods to a 'target population.'

This is the development world that Aboriginal people encounter: a world of scientific modernism, of economic policy and instruments, strategic interventions, research, technology, technical assistance, human resources, capital resources, land and labour. The Borg of development threatens to absorb and transform us.

The rise of development fosters a view of social life as a technical problem, as a matter of rational decision and management, to be entrusted to a group of people whose specialized knowledge equips them well for the task. The

development professional becomes a valued person. Development also assumes a teleology to the extent that it presumes that the underdeveloped will sooner or later be reformed. It reproduces the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the underdeveloped as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the dominant group. The development gaze aims not to simply discipline individuals but to transform the conditions of their lives—to create a productive, normalized, social environment.

What is also created is a relationship between the developers and the developing: it is a dance that locks both into a difficult and troubling relationship. The developer has the power, ideas, capital, technology; the developing, wishing for access to these things, needs to play the assigned role. Given this social and political reality, can development occur?

Certainly, there are some encouraging signs.

The development paradigm, despite its almost universal application, is showing some edgy willingness to accommodate other objectives. What are called alternative development theories are at least being discussed. A new category of development theories called “people centred theories” is starting to appear. The original development theories focused their attention on economic growth and economic transformation. The early theories did not attempt to explain the political and cultural changes that occur during the development process. Only recently have they come to include political and cultural considerations. There is also a rejection, in some places, of the universalist assumption.

The resistance of Aboriginal peoples to the universalism embedded in development is starting to be felt. The desire to use CED as a fundamental approach as well as the desire to use traditional knowledge as the basis of social action are all excellent indicators that the Borg is slowing a bit. The strong desire of Aboriginal peoples to maintain a distinct cultural identity and to have this identity reflected in and respected in the marketplace is also a strong indicator. The gathering up of power and capital through the land claims and treaty process is providing the means to do more than resist. The creation of Aboriginal institutions of research and advocacy is creating a strong Aboriginal technical presence to counter the presence of outside experts.

Yet, I think that this is not enough. The Borg is too powerful to resist in the usual fash-

ion. In the TV show *Star Trek, the Next Generation*, Picard never defeats the Borg but only keeps them at bay. He does that through clever resistance based on a strong understanding of self and a strong desire to survive. He is firm in his belief that humankind will survive.

In this case, the way forward is I think through traditional thought and knowledge. This thought and knowledge has been systematically excluded from the discursive world of development. Now is the time to put it into the system. Can we have improvements in our material lives without being absorbed? Are there ways to make the market society conform to indigenous ideas about society? How do we prevent the uneven distribution of wealth that we see around us? How do we create economies of respect and reciprocity?

The Department of Social and Economic Affairs of the United Nations in a 1951 report entitled *Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries* said this:

There is a sense in which rapid economic progress is impossible without painful adjustments. Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped: old social institutions have to disintegrated; bonds of caste, creed and race have to burst; and large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with progress have to have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated. Very few communities are willing to pay the full price of economic progress.

The report suggested that economic progress extracts a cost: the total transformation of a society. The development Borg is bent on creating this transformation and recreating us in its image. Is resistance futile? If not, then how does one resist?

I believe that we resist through stating and restating our own objectives as Aboriginal peoples for cultural distinctiveness, for societies based upon traditional ideas, values and customs, for sustainable development, for equitable distribution of wealth, for the idea of progress that is broad and multi-faceted, for communities that are more than markets, among other things.

We need, I believe, to develop a regime of understanding and practice that affirms, fosters, expands, and translates Aboriginal understandings of progress into individual and collective action; that works to create an economy that affirms Aboriginal cultural identities and the autonomy of Aboriginal cultures and that sanctions Aborig-

inal social structures and values. The hardest part is conceptualizing Aboriginal development in positive contributory terms, acting out of strongly held values and ideas about how society and economy ought to operate.

Traditional thought requires, first of all, an acknowledgment of strengths, of what can be contributed. It requires that one's actions are based on these strengths.

We can then return to *aboriginaltimes* and see it as the start of this acknowledgment. The danger is that in the struggle to overcome the time of great pain that we unconsciously accept the transformation presented by the Borg.

#### NOTES

1. I use the term "west," "western" to describe a suite of ideas emanating from the philosophical traditions of western Europe and North America, primarily those which arose after that historical period called by European historians "the Enlightenment."
2. *Aboriginaltimes*, 5(11) (October 2001). Cree-Ative Media, Calgary, Alberta
3. *Aboriginal times*, 2 (October 1996). Clicks and Bits Publishing, Calgary, Alberta.
4. I always have a problem in choosing a term to describe the collective of Canadians who are not of Aboriginal cultural or heritage. Since for the majority of time in the history of Canada, the cultural heritage of this group has been European, I've chosen the term "European Canadian." Sometimes I use the term "white" but those who would be called white don't like to have attention drawn to the colour of their skin, so out of respect, I use "European."
5. MacPherson, p. 3.
6. MacPherson, p. 3.

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