

Howard Adams. *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization*. Penticton: Theytus Books, 1995. 219 pp. \$12.95.

review by Neal McLeod

Howard Adams represents an important and powerful voice in the emerging discourse of Aboriginal self-description. His present work *A Tortured People* echoes many of the points of his earlier work *A Prison of Grass*, but at the same time new material is woven into the body of the text such as references to contemporary politics and also his discussion of Indian slavery. The new book seems to be inculcated more with Marxist references than the older book, but the imagination and vision of the older book remains.

Howard Adams represents a different generation of Aboriginal scholars than myself. He belongs to the generation growing up in grinding poverty that experienced the ugliness of racism in rural Saskatchewan without the possibility of escape to the urban centre. While racism and poverty are still with us, younger Aboriginal people are more confident and more aggressive than the older generations. This might be ultimately to our own detriment, but our struggle for self-description has been inspired by thinkers and politicians such as Howard Adams. His work has helped to open the doors of the Academy, which two generations ago, was far less inviting to Aboriginal presence.

A Tortured People must be situated in the context of a large dialectic of Aboriginal self-description. When Aboriginal people were first entering the university, anger was needed in order for us to carve a place for ourselves. In order to define themselves, many, including Adams filled their speeches and writing with a combative, angry tone. Now, the dialectic of self-description has shifted. It is not only important to engage the mainstream society with this anger, but we must engage in critical self-reflection. Adams does this by launching a strong attack on the emerging Aboriginal elite.

Many Aboriginal thinkers today, fail to critically examine the existence of classism which has emerged in our own communities. While there is a constant tension in the book, between crude essentialism to a nuanced analysis of the emergence of classism within Aboriginal communities, Adams makes several erudite and challenging points. He describes the class of Aboriginal bureaucrats: "They prefer the security afforded on the monopoly on their exclusive occupations within their segregated Aboriginal organizations and programs. This particular class is notorious for their inefficiency and corruption in the management of their organizations and

institutions" (p. 137). Often times I have heard people give soliloquies about justice, but then use the fact that they are Aboriginal people to stab a non-Aboriginal person in the back. Also, I have seen this in another way. I have seen people with status cards attack Métis people and "Bill C31" people as not being authentic Aboriginals. Adams writes: "Status Indians have further distanced themselves as separate from other Aboriginals by using the term First Nations. For these reasons, it is extremely important that all Aboriginal groups make a concentrated effort to work in solidarity" (p. 174). In this way, I would concur with Adams, that the Aboriginal mind has been colonized with such conceptions of identity which stem out of the Indian Act.

Howard Adams does not cover up and mask the brutality that the Canadian state has inflicted upon Aboriginal people. Instead, he documents and articulates the real threat of violence against us which has the effect of curtailing our actions. He mentions one example of the manner in which violence can be used to destroy the search for freedom: "The mysterious deaths of our people blanketed many Natives with a sense of fear and terror that was inclined to paralyze liberation activities" (p. 84). In response to the brutality of the Canadian state, he sees armed resistance as a noble enterprise such as that of 1885. He writes of Wandering Spirit, the War Chief of Big Bear's band: "He has always been my hero" (p. 8). There is a certain pride and dignity in resisting the violence of the state.

For instance, some of my ancestors were at Batoche- the Vandals. Because of their decision to fight, they affirmed their pride in their Aboriginality. This had been passed on through the generations and I know that it has formed part of my own outlook. I am very proud that my people choose to fight the British to maintain their dignity and pride. It was better to do that than to die a slow and passive death on the reserves. Yet, despite this, there is an emerging discourse wherein "loyalty to the Queen" is somehow a value to uphold.

Central to Adams' project is to articulate a basis for Aboriginal pride and this involves dismantling what he calls "false consciousness" (p. 33). This "false consciousness" is the manner in which as Aboriginal people we have absorbed self-hatred in light of the scorn of the mainstream society. Adams writes: "The colonizer's falsified stories have become universal truths to mainstream society, and have reduced Aboriginal culture to a caricature" (p. 1). In this context, he brings up the writings of Thomas Flanagan. He characterizes them as "racist interpretations of Aboriginal history" (p. 96). Far from being objective, they "serve a specific political agenda" (p. 96). Flanagan after all has done work for the Reform party.

Throughout the book, important questions are raised about objectivity and the nature of truth in historical discourse. Our own self-description has to be the basis for our own political liberation. We have to engage government documents with a hermeneutics of suspicion and at the same time, we have to validate and record our own oral accounts of the events which have transpired. I don't think that we have to wait to be patted on the head by scholars from the mainstream society. Rather, we have to go ahead anyway and to fight for our freedom with self-description. Adams characterizes this struggle: "If the ruling power gave us freedom, they could take it back whenever they wanted. To truly obtain freedom one has to own it, and our people could only own their freedom if they fought and seized it" (p. 79). While some of our ancestors attempted to do this with guns, we can do it with words now.

Adams is attempting to articulate an ontology for Aboriginal freedom primarily along Marxist lines. Historically, the importation of class analysis into the liberation of minorities has encountered some difficulties. For instance, do we always have a mass which organizes and structures itself, or is an elite in every group necessary to organize the people? While some of his criticism of Indian/Métis elites is interesting, it does not necessarily follow that because there is an existence of such a class that they are necessarily part of the "colonizers" plan.

The rhetoric of "colonizer" wears rather thin after awhile, and his explanation of Aboriginal history becomes one-dimensional. If Adams would adopt a multi-perspective analysis, then his book would be enriched. The situation of Aboriginal people today cannot be understood strictly in the context of oppression by the colonizer. For instance, his interpretation of the Fur Trade as an exploitation of Indian/Métis labour is a rather simplistic explanation. Far from being passive participants, Indigenous people benefited from the Fur Trade in some respects. For example, the Cree and Saulteaux/Ojibway people greatly expanded their territory and economic and political power through involvement in the trade.

While he attacks older historians such as Stanley for their rather one dimensional interpretations of the events of 1885, he does the same, but through different means. He distorts the events as well, by utilizing what some would call a European methodology, Marxism, which brings with it much baggage. He portrays the Aboriginal people of this time as lacking class consciousness: "There was, however, a lack of class consciousness and cohesion within it to sustain a revolutionary force" (p. 118). Were the events of 1885 a matter of class consciousness or were they more of a matter of Aboriginal nationalism?

Adams offers an inaccurate portrayal of the Crees: "Many reserve Indians constituted the majority of warriors in the 1885 struggle. Indian warriors who captured the reserve headquarters at Frog Lake, Fort Pitt and North Battleford were representative of the colonized" (p. 118). Actually, a more direct explanation of the events would be hunger as the people were starving. Quinn, Indian Agent at Frog Lake, refused at gun point to give Wandering Spirit and others food. Adams goes on to disparage the Indian people: "However having being confined to a tribal enclave for sometime, they had not developed a class consciousness" (p. 118). He makes it sound that because they had a tribal identity, they were somewhat oblivious to their position of subordination. Rather, their tribal identity was the source of inspiration for resistance.

It is telling that nowhere in his book does he mention Big Bear by name, but he attacks the leadership at the time: "... it lacked enlightened leadership and organization by individuals who had well developed class understanding, and a high political awareness of the colonial situation" (p. 118). Because of his Marxist dogmatism, he is unable to see the struggle for what it was ... a nationalistic struggle, not a class struggle. The Métis and Indian leaders were very cognizant of their oppression. Rather, than distorting their consciousness, the tribalism and nationalism of the people at the time fueled their struggle for political liberation.

While some of the passages are inspiring to a young Aboriginal scholar, one must carefully consider the ramifications of a Marxist analysis. While it is undoubtedly useful in conjunction with other tools, it is weak by itself. The foundations of Marxism overlap with an industrialized, scientific view of the earth and of history. Marxists regard their mode of interpreting reality and history as normative and a positivistic viewpoint embodies the world view of its adherents. Such a world view has the potential of being antithetical to Aboriginal interests and liberation because such ideas are diametrically opposed to our spirituality and conceptions of land. In fact, instead of framing the events of 1885 in the context of class consciousness, the struggle was about a conflict between competing world views. One is grounded in a industrialized conception of lived space, whereas the other saw the earth and the land as an inherent part of the worldview manifested both in action and thought. Thus, a Marxist analysis can actually backfire.

While his anger may have been necessary in the late sixties and seventies, it loses some of its efficacy for people of my generation. Sometimes people of my generation are accused of being more apathetic, but I do not think that this is the case. His anger and hatred for the colonizer

distorts his analysis. He creates simplistic either/ or dichotomies between the Aboriginal and the colonizer.

Throughout his book, he tries to portray himself as being of the people: "The majority of Indian and Métis writers are not necessarily highly educated, and that may be a good thing. . . ." (p. 130). Despite these comments, he does not honestly examine his position as a privileged minority scholar. How does his current position now interface with the struggles of his people? I ask this question of myself.

He is right that Aboriginal people must move towards the liberation of all of their people and not just a select minority: "Our liberation can be achieved only through political action, mass movement, and to some extent revolutionary action. The structures and institutions of imperialism have to be transformed or smashed" (p. 195). Instead of decisions being made by a small minority of Aboriginal politicians, "negotiations and final decisions have to be made by the majority of Métis people in a democratic decision-making process" (p. 179). Adams is right to note, I think, the manner in which some of the leadership has been subordinated by the Canadian state. He speaks of the leaders today: "Their authority to administer the indigenous population is derived from the state, not from the will of the people" (p. 183). Instead of listening to their own people, some politicians worry about not offending the hand that feeds them in Ottawa.

However, his suspicion of Aboriginals whom he calls "collaborators" becomes a bit simplistic. He constantly talks about the Aboriginal bourgeoisie who devote their time and energy to the Constitution (p. 139). He thinks that a push for constitutional recognition amounts to being a victim of colonialism. The constitutional meetings "gave the Aboriginal bourgeoisie leaders a temporary moment to bask in the sun of power . . ." (P. 139). He attacks the Charlottetown Accord, and says that it's failure "may have opened an opportune time and space for us to seize new opportunities to free ourselves from colonization" (p. 154). I disagree with Adams on this score because we do need legal protections if we are to survive as a people.

He attacks many Aboriginal ceremonies and thinks that their contemporary meaning is framed by colonialism: "Many Indian ceremonies and pow-wows have become cultural imperialist performance" (p. 134). While this may be possible, I think that Adams has lost touch with Aboriginal people over the last twenty years. In making a career out of radicalism, he has a vested interest in attacking "traitors and sell-outs." Anyone who has been to a pow-wow lately, will notice that it is a time of meeting friends and relatives.

The outrage and anger of Aboriginal people must never be forgotten. In

that way, Howard Adams' book serves a useful function. We must always attempt to search for an ontology of 1885 and the manner in which it fits into the dialectic of colonization. Adams is completely correct when he states: "The resistance struggle of the Indians and Métis at Batoche in 1885 was based on guerrilla warfare, and was a battle against imperialism in Aboriginal territory and for Indian-Métis nationalism. The spirit of that struggle never truly died" (p. 189). To survive as Aboriginal people we must embrace our history and articulate it in our own terms. We need to move beyond the paradigms of mainstream history/philosophy and articulate our stories in our own voices. Some of us have ancestors who fought at Batoche. The spirit of our ancestors lives on through us. The Cree word for the Rebellion is *ē-māyakamikahk* ("where it went wrong"). It is through us, through young people today, that we can attempt to fulfill our dreams which were not completely shattered at Batoche. In this way, Adams' book, despite bearing some unwanted burdens of Marxism, acts as an inspiration for those looking for freedom.