

THE METIS AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES¹

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During the commemoration of the North West Rebellion of 1885, much public and academic attention focussed on the Metis people, our history and aspirations. At a number of conferences and symposia, historians, social scientists and specialists in law presented data and perspectives lacking from previous academic accounts of the experience of the Metis people in Canada. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing academic debate on the position of the Metis in Canadian society and polity through a brief review of the treatment of the Metis in the social sciences to date and though an explanation of the dynamics of Metis nationalism which are essential to an understanding of the evolution of our people.

Before the political resurgence of the Metis people in the 1960s and 1970s, Canada's academic establishment and national cultural institutions ignored the Metis. For historians, the Metis had played a pivotal role in the development of western Canada but, with military defeat at Batoche and the execution of Riel, they had largely disappeared, a footnote to the larger conflict between English and French. For social scientists, the Metis loomed as an undefinable, marginal element living on the fringes of aboriginal and Euro-Canadian societies, hardly worth the attention paid to groups they considered to be more cohesive. The few studies on Metis during this period tended to be anthropological and focussed on the subsistence activities of Metis in remote communities.

In effect, the thinking (or lack of it) on the part of academia with respect to the Metis both reflected and reinforced a long standing policy of the federal government to deny recognition to the Metis as a distinct people, particularly as a people with a claim to special status within the Canadian federation. This policy of non-recognition developed as a response of Ottawa to Metis nationalist demands in the nineteenth century. When the Metis

organized a provisional government in 1869 under Riel at the Red River Settlement, Sir John A. Macdonald's government was forced to acquiesce to Manitoba's admission into Confederation as a province with special guarantees for the land rights, French-language rights, and denominational school rights of the new province's Metis majority. However, with the defeat of Riel's second provisional government in Saskatchewan in 1885, Macdonald felt free to implement his "final solution." In the House of Commons, he declared that his government would henceforth deal with the Metis either as Indians or as Whites but not as a distinct people as he had been forced to deal with them in Manitoba fifteen years earlier.

This policy of non-recognition culminated in the Metis being taken out of the census as a distinct people in 1941. Like dominant socio-cultural groups in other countries, English-Canadians had dealt with a restive minority nationality by defining it out of existence. The academic establishment and cultural institutions joined in what amounted to a national conspiracy of silence by pretending in their studies and exhibitions the Metis did not exist.

All this time, the Metis people fought to keep their cultural and political identity alive. Metis historical societies strove to correct what they believed to be a deliberate distortion of the history of the Metis Nation. After decades of research and interviews with the Metis of Red River and Batoche, the Union Nationale Metisse of Manitoba in 1935 published its history of the Metis Nation. Cultural societies promoted the preservation and development of Metis music, dance and other traditions. Each year hundreds of Metis gathered at Batoche to commemorate the historic Metis struggles and to celebrate Metis culture.

The Metis also perpetuated the political consciousness or nationalism which had shaped their earlier struggles for justice and rights. Metis political associations were formed in Alberta in 1932 and in Saskatchewan in 1938 to press historic claims and to seek a Metis land base and political autonomy within the Canadian federation. Metis political theorists, such as Malcolm Norris, Jim

Brady and later Howard Adams, advocated a strategy of national liberation of the Metis as an oppressed colonized people.

When a few social scientists finally began to address the situation of the Metis in the 1950s, it was through studies sponsored by the provincial governments on the social and economic conditions of Metis communities on the prairies. Those studies, with a focus on traditional subsistence activities, presumed the static nature of Metis communities and their inherent inability to change on their own without government stimulus and direction. Other studies focussed on the marginalism of the Metis and the difficulties this posed for government departments trying to remedy socio-economic problems. These studies did not take into account the dynamics of Metis society--the common history, culture and political will--which had enabled the Metis to survive the formidable assaults on their identity by state and Euro-Canadian society alike and to persist in the quest for autonomy. Instead they promoted the prevailing biases of their disciplines which rationalized the dependency of the Metis on new community development programs.

The 1960s witnessed a revitalization of Metis political associations on the prairies and Metis nationalist thought. Among the factors contributing to this revival were the global movement towards self-determination through decolonization, the liberalization of North American society and its new emphasis on human rights, and the upsurge of nationalism in Quebec. The federal government responded by finally recognizing the Metis as a distinct socio-cultural group through its new multiculturalism policy. During the 1970s, Metis political associations pressed historic land claims and in 1982 the Metis were recognized as one of the aboriginal peoples of Canada in the patriated constitution. Since then, the Metis people, through the Metis National Council, have pursued a land base and self-government in three constitutional conferences with the First Ministers of Canada.

As a result of these developments, the Metis are now attracting the attention of academics from the fields of political science and law who are focussing on Metis political objectives

and how these can be accommodated within Canadian federalism. Academics from the fields of anthropology and sociology appear to be less equipped to deal with Metis issues because of certain conceptual "hang-ups" on Metis identity and culture. These "hang-ups" arise from the tendency of these disciplines in the past to view the symptoms of systematic displacement, dispossession and domination--such as marginalism or exclusion from the mainstream economy--as somehow being inherent or essential to Metis identity. Starting with this premise and ignoring the century-old struggle of the Metis for recognition as a distinct nationality, the academic and cultural establishment ends up confirming their own stereotypes.

A case in point is the continuing treatment of the Metis by national cultural institutions. More than one researcher into Metis culture has been denied assistance by the Museum of Man in Ottawa on the grounds that Metis are an ethnic rather than a "Native" group. When directed to multiculturalism agencies, the same researchers are referred back to the Museum on the grounds that Metis are an aboriginal rather than ethnic group. This treatment illustrates one of the root causes of so-called marginalism, the refusal of those who define and project Canadian culture to accept us for who we are.

With Metis people proudly reasserting their identity and aspirations today, it is unconscionable that Canada's national cultural institutions continue to deny our reality. If those responsible for projecting national cultural images would visit Metis communities and cultural events, such as Batoche '85, they would experience the unique forms of Metis culture and traditions which have been passed on from generation to generation since the genesis of the Metis as a new nation in the latter part of the eighteenth century. We call on the Canadian Ethnology Society and other academic bodies to join us in calling for an end to the discriminatory treatment of the Metis by the National Museum and other national cultural institutions. We would also like to commend Julia Harrison and the Glenbow-Alberta Institute for their exhibition on the Metis, which captures both the diversity

and distinctiveness of Metis culture, and hope that other cultural institutions will follow in their footsteps.

Another area in which conceptual "hang-ups" from the past obstruct an understanding of the Metis people and their aspirations by anthropologists is lifestyle. As in the case of identity, there is an assumption on the part of some observers of the Metis that the conditions resulting from our historic dispossession and dispersion, namely our fringe position in the mainstream economy, are inherent or essential to our culture. There is a tendency on the part of some anthropologists to focus on "pre-industrial" aspects of our lifestyle, such as hunting, fishing and trapping, and to view these traditional subsistence activities as the basis of development strategies.

This gives rise to calls for "culturally supportive economies" or the "dual economy" approach to land claims agreements, with the traditional renewable resource sector of the economy reserved for "Natives" and the modern resource development sector reserved for governments and multinational corporations. The "dual economy" has been built into the James Bay Agreement, with the Inuit and Cree given exclusive hunting, fishing and trapping rights but denied a share of the ownership and directorship of massive hydro projects. It is also built into the Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement agreement with the Inuit of the western Arctic who have been given exclusive renewable resource rights but denied any lands with proven oil and gas reserves. Taken to its extreme, the "dual economy" becomes a blueprint for a "human zoo" in which the "Natives" are sequestered from the polluting influence of industrial society on isolated pockets of land where they may pursue traditional subsistence activities.

The Metis people and Metis political associations reject the assumption that we require protection from industrial society by governments. Our ancestors were the agents of political and economic change in western Canada throughout the nineteenth century, forming the backbone of the fur trade economy both as middlemen and labourers, challenging the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company in our battles for free trade and expanded markets,

and establishing provisional governments to bring responsible government to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Today, we continue to seek full and equal participation both in the polity and mainstream economy. Accordingly, we are attempting to negotiate a land base and a form of self-government within the Canadian federation, autonomous institutions for our people who choose to remain off a land base, guaranteed parliamentary representation for Metis people, and an equity interest in resource and industrial development in our homeland.

In our quest for self-determination and self-government as a distinct aboriginal people and nation, we seek the support of the academic community which can influence the thinking of the public and policy-makers in government. We ask those engaged in social studies to discard those antiquated tenets which militate against the aspirations of the Metis and other aboriginal peoples. It is now recognized that anthropologists and missionaries were once instrumental in justifying colonialism around the world through their presentation of colonized societies as static and incapable of change on their own. It is now imperative for those engaged in the study of Canada's aboriginal peoples not to become apologists for a neo-colonialist regime which will perpetuate alienation and dependency.

NOTES

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