

## Colonization, Racism and the Health of Indian People

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**Abstract.** This article explores the impact that colonization has had, and indeed continues to have, on Indian people in Canada, specifically western Canada. In particular, it examines race-based legislation and policies, many of which are encompassed in the Indian Act 1876. It argues that the attempt (and failure) of the Canadian federal government to assimilate Indian people caused inter-generational impacts, particularly with regard to health. Race was the justification for these policies; however, it was not the motivating factor in the federal government's decision to implement an assimilation policy or, as it is often referred to, "cultural genocide." The concept of race was merely a convenient justification for the actions of the federal government: the driving force behind the race-based policies was the need to develop the west as an investment frontier or, in the dominant discourse, to "settle" it. The real driving force was capital accumulation.

**SOMMAIRE.** Le présent article examine l'impact que la colonisation a eu, et continue d'avoir, sur les Autochtones du Canada, et plus particulièrement ceux de l'ouest. Il se penche sur la législation et les politiques de race, dont beaucoup sont comprises dans la Loi sur les Indiens de 1876. Il y est suggéré que la tentative (et l'échec) du gouvernement fédéral pour assimiler les Indiens a causé des impacts entre les générations, surtout en ce qui concerne la santé. La race a servi de justification; ce n'était cependant pas la motivation derrière la décision du gouvernement fédéral de mettre en oeuvre une politique d'assimilation ou, comme on dit souvent, de "génocide culturel." Le concept de race n'était qu'une excuse pour les actions du gouvernement fédéral: la poussée véritable provenait du besoin de développer l'ouest comme frontière d'investissement ou, dans le parler majoritaire, de le "coloniser." La véritable motivation était l'accumulation de capital.

### Introduction

Indian people, for the purposes of this article, are those who are defined under the Indian Act (1876) and are considered to have "status" according to the Canadian federal government. Indian<sup>1</sup> people in Canada are recognized in Section 35.1 of the Canadian Constitution (1982) as one of the three groups of "Aboriginal People"—Metis and Inuit make up the other two groups. Atypically, Canada is a country that formally defines its Indigenous people in its Constitution. However, it is not alone in using the concept of "race" to exert dominance over a particular category of people and to simultaneously legitimize its actions.

The significance here is that the Canadian state not only defined who was and who was not an Indian historically, but continues to do so today and, in doing so, continues to exert a measure of control over First Nations (Indian) people. The effects of colonial policies still linger and still have a devastating impact on Indian people and their well-being. In fact, First Nations (Indian) people continue to be marginalized today.

A brief historical account of the impact that the national policy had on Western Canada illustrates how specific policies were implemented to remove barriers to the success of the region's makeover as an investment frontier. One of the barriers was Indian people. An assimilation policy was adopted well before the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867; however, it intensified after Confederation.<sup>2</sup> Note that although I assert that colonization had similar impacts to Metis people, it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the impacts on Metis—that will be saved for another discussion.

Today, First Nations people face a multitude of health and well-being challenges. Their average income and educational levels continue to be well below those of the non-Aboriginal population. Their rates of chronic diseases (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes, arthritis, and cancer) tend to be much higher than for the rest of Canada's population. While their rates of infliction with infectious diseases has improved since World War II, the rates are still troublesome; and some diseases such as AIDS have increased remarkably in the Aboriginal population. The suicide rate for First Nations people, especially First Nations youth, is many times higher than for the Canadian population generally.

It is safe to say that many Canadians, regardless of their race, face similar living conditions, but these are magnified amongst the First Nations population. While the explanation is no doubt complex, the central methodological theme of this article is that important causes will be found through an historical analysis. Certainly today First Nations people, like the population generally, die of heart disease, are diagnosed with cancer, become infected with AIDS, commit suicide, and so forth. These maladies are an outcome of a web of causal relations that involve poverty, poor housing, unemployment, low education, and high levels of alienation and frustration. But the deeper reasons for the higher rates of these maladies among First Nations people lie in part in their history of colonization. In other words, their ill health is embedded in a social structure that has deep colonial roots. This article will illustrate the thesis that the ideology of race connects this colonial history with the current reality of ill health for First Nations people.

### **The Rise of Capitalism and the Origins of Race**

The concept of race is not, as some would argue, a matter of human nature. It is not inevitable and it is not rooted in science. It is a tool, a weapon, and it is a construction. Race can be defined as a social construction; an arbitrary classification of persons into categories based upon real or imagined characteristics. The concept "race" has no empirical validity or scientific merit. It is a concept used to manipulate people and "reinforce unequal relations between dominant and subordinate groups" (Fleras, et al., 2003: 386).

The concept of race permeates our political, economic and social structures. It is found in our institutions: the state, justice, business, work, education, and others. It reinforces what some refer to as "white privilege." Peggy McIntosh coins this term when she compares the concept of male privilege to white privilege, and notes that "whites" are taught not to recognize their "unearned" privileges (McIntosh, 1988: 23–26). Whether one welcomes such privilege or not, there is little choice because it is a societal norm and is reinforced daily by societal structures.

Race is a modern concept. It arose not only out of a need to exert control over people, lands and resources, but also to justify such actions. With the collapse of

the feudal system in Europe in the late 15th century and the rise of the secular and individualistic notions ingrained in the budding capitalist political economy, there became a need to exert dominance at all levels—individual, local, national and international. European countries were fiercely competitive—that was the nature of capitalism. There was great competition in exploring and conquering peoples and lands in the “New World.”

When European explorers “discovered” in these lands inhabitants who looked different from themselves, they questioned if these inhabitants were truly human. Why were they not mentioned in the Bible? Did they have souls worth saving? However, human souls were not the only thing at stake. Indeed, Europeans saw something much more important—land, resources, and potential slavery. The Europeans had a specific worldview that was needed to uphold and justify European plunder:

The expropriation of property, the denial of political rights, the introduction of slavery and other forms of coercive labor, as well as outright extermination, all presupposed a worldview which distinguished Europeans—Children of God, human beings, etc.—from “others.” Such a worldview was needed to explain why some should be free and others enslaved, why some had rights to land and property while others did not. Race and the interpretation of racial differences, was a central factor in that worldview. (Omi and Winant, 1988: 13–14)

Race represents a worldview composed of specific ideological components that ‘explain’ social differentiation in a society (Smedley, 1993), or more specifically modern societies. While concepts of patriotism, ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism existed prior to the rise of capitalism, the concept of race and the effects of this concept (i.e., racism, discrimination) did not exist. Dante Puzzo makes this point: “[race] is a modern conception, for prior to the sixteenth century, there was virtually nothing in the life and thought of the West that can be described as racist” (cited in Liggio, 1976:1).

In order to understand the implications of race, one must understand the difference between race and both ethno- and Eurocentrism. Ethnocentrism can be defined as a tendency to see reality from a person’s cultural perspective, and a belief in the superiority of one’s culture over other cultures. Eurocentrism can be defined as a belief in the moral superiority of European thoughts and practices, using them as the standard by which others are judged. These concepts existed prior to the rise of capitalism, but they were not based on skin color, height, brain size, and other elements common to the concept of “race.” This assertion is supported with examples from different societies.

Fyfe notes that slavery, both international and domestic, existed under the feudal structure and even before feudalism. He points out that although inhabitants on the African continent (many of whom had dark skin colors) were sold into European slavery, it was African people themselves conducting the sale. He argues that the transatlantic slave trade was just that—trade—and, at root, had little to do with race (Fyfe, 1994: 71).

Further, Cox points out that if one looks at ancient civilizations, people were not categorized by race. He argues that even the Hellenic Greeks had a cultural and *not* a racial standard of belonging. The Greeks classified people by dividing them into two groups: those who possessed Greek culture and language, and those

who did not. Those who did not were referred to as “barbarians.” However, Cox notes that the Greek people welcomed inter-marriage with barbarians, including other Europeans, Africans, and Western Asians: “We do not find race prejudice even in the great Hellenistic empire which extended deeper into the territories of colored people than any other European empire up to the end of the fifteenth century” (Cox, 2000:6).

One final important example is cited by Rob Nestor. He notes that the British solidified their attitudes towards race in their experience with the Irish. The clash between Ireland and England “went beyond rivalries between two emerging European states ... it was a clash between people who were nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists [Irish] and those who were settled on the land as farmers and cultivated a sedentary way of life [English] ... it was a conflict between two very different value systems...” (Nestor, 1988: 9). The treatment of Indian people in Canada was very similar to the treatment of the Irish. In fact, the British developed a hierarchical view of the world where the value of other societies was judged against the image of their own. Humans were seen as progressing through various regular and particular stages of development ranging from savagery to civilization. This was not only a social philosophy: it became a moral, Christian duty placed on the British to guide those “less civilized” humans to the pinnacle of civilization. By the middle of the nineteenth century, this became more than a social philosophy or even a moral duty: a theory of race (Nestor, 1988; Warnock, 2004). This theory asserted that, as a race, Indian people were “inferior due to inherited characteristics [and] this led to a shift in the approach to Indians—paternalism was no longer a trusteeship until maturity was reached, but a perpetual guardianship over ageless children” (Nestor, 1998: 12).

The concept of race is a necessary ideological part of the capitalist structure. It lends legitimacy to the actions of the dominant power. It allowed the dominant power, European colonizers in the case of Canada and its Indian people, to exert control over “other” racial groups. Race became a societal norm, and an unquestioned “reason” for privilege. Race has not only been a tool of domination, but also a weapon, one wielded with great acuity against Indian people in Canada.

### **The Need for Race-based Policy: An Analysis of the Canadian Case**

Innis has argued that the economic history of Canada was dominated by the “discrepancy between the centre and the margin of western civilization. Energy has been directed toward the exploitation of staple products and the tendency has been cumulative” (Innis, 1956: 385). Staple extraction became the primary economic goal of the British. Other sectors of the economy, industry, trade, transportation, finance, as well as government, and other social and political institutions, all became subordinate to staple production. Canada’s development is characterized by a sequence of staples: the Atlantic fishery beginning in the 1500s; furs rising to prominence by the 1700s; timber by the late 1700s and early 1800s; wheat, first in Canada West in the early 1800s, then in the Canadian Prairies beginning in the late 1800s; and subsequently industrial staples such as pulp, minerals, coal and petroleum, and others. Initially, Canada remained “British” and dependent upon the British economy, primarily because she remained an exporter of staples to her highly industrialized mother country. Eventually, Canada became a major exporter of staples to the United States, and was caught in another dependency cycle.

The intention here is not to recite the history of the development of the Canadian political economy in all of its complexity, but rather to identify those aspects that, it is my contention, have particular causal significance toward the current ill health of Indian people. Canada's unique trajectory of development has resulted from the sequence of staples production that it followed. In each period, particular and unique class interests have emerged. In addition, during the "reign" of some staples, race was used to legitimate, control and manipulate class interests. Particularly the fur trade, the wheat economy, and the creation of regions in Canada have had drastic impacts on Indian people of the West. Consequently, three aspects of development where race served class interests will be briefly outlined: the fur trade, the national policy, and regionalism.

### *The Fur Trade*

Canada developed in its own unique way. Furs were a very important staple product, and remained so for hundreds of years. The fur trade also played a key role in establishing boundaries. As Innis points out, present-day Canadian borders are based on its unique resilience in the northern part of the North American continent: indeed, the significance of the fur trade lies in its "determination of the geographic framework [of Canada]" (Innis, 1956: 393).

The fur trade involved the extraction of a staple at the expense of the original inhabitants, in this case Indian people. However, it is important to note that the staple extraction occurred differently in Canada than it did in Central and South America. While the Portuguese and Spaniards were extracting timber and gold and using slaves, the French and British would take different approaches in the Northern territories. Although slavery did exist to some extent in Canada, the slave trade itself was not central to its development as it was in other parts of the colonized world. The French, for example, inter-married with Indian people. A unique and distinct group emerged—the Métis—with their own language (Michif) and their own culture. Indeed, the fur trade relied on the productive knowledge and skill, and the organizational abilities of the Indian and Metis peoples. The significance of the Metis is different from the United States, where "the half-breed has never assumed such importance" (Innis, 1956: 392).

Initially, the fur trade was controlled by Indian people. They only traded if and when it was convenient to do so—basically, when they happened to be near a trading post. Traditionally, Plains Indians practiced "seasonal" or "traditional" rounds—traveling in a circular pattern harvesting animals and plants at different times of the year. Nor were they well versed in canoe building or keen to make the hazardous trip to the trading post on Hudson's Bay (Easterbrook and Aitken, 1988: 114). The demand for furs in Europe—primarily beaver pelts—was so great that the two main trading companies, the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company (French- and British-based respectively) had to find new ways to increase the amount of furs being traded.

Commonly, the Metis were called upon to travel by canoe further and further into the interior to conduct trade with Indian people. The Northwest Company was able to do this much more efficiently than the Hudson's Bay Company. In fact, the Northwest Company traders were considered to be aggressive by nature, and continued to expand their share of the market by continuously seeking new tribes of Indian people to trade with, while the Hudson's Bay Company remained reluctant

to penetrate the interior until much later in the fur trade, after the French had established key routes. The French were able to overcome many of the obstacles that the British were reluctant to address. For example, the French learned traditional Indian methods of survival through inter-marriage, and together with their offspring, the Metis, were able to put this knowledge to good use. As Innis points out,

The development of transportation was based primarily on Indian cultural growth. The birch-bark canoe was borrowed and modified to suit the demands of the trade. Again, without Indian agriculture, Indian corn and dependence on Indian methods of capturing buffalo and making pemmican, no extended organization of transport to the interior would have been possible in the early period. (Innis, 1956: 389)

Over time, Indian people developed a dependency on the new technologies and food stuffs introduced by European traders. With the rapid expansion of the fur trade, the indigenous food supply was also drastically reduced. Gradually, this brought greater penetration of European organizations and institutions into the interior. The British now dealt with Indian people by implementing an assimilation policy—one that was formally introduced in 1876 with the passing of the Indian Act. As Wotherspoon and Satzewich note:

The policy of assimilation did not mean the physical annihilation of Indian people, rather it referred to the cultural and behavioral change of Indians such that they would be culturally indistinguishable from other Canadians. The charge of “cultural genocide,” while serious in its implications, is not inappropriate. (2000: 28)

“The Indian Act would be the tool of assimilation used by the new Dominion government.” The intent was to absorb Indian people into the body politic of Canada so that there would be no “Indian problem” and, in the words of Sir John A. Macdonald, “to wean them by slow degrees from their nomadic habits, which have become almost an instinct, and by slow degrees absorb them on the land” (cited in Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 2000: 28–29). One may remember that the Macdonald government banned the potlatch of the Northwest coast Indians. Indeed, race was a well-developed ideology of governments of the time.

While the British North America Act of 1867 outlined that Indians and lands reserved for Indians would be the responsibility of the federal government, implementation of the Indian Act passed in 1876 would carry out the required cultural and behavioral change. The Indian Act had three central goals. These were to:

- (1) define who Indians were and were not;
- (2) manage and protect Indian lands;
- (3) Concentrate authority over Indian people (Indians were to be civilized and Christianized). (Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 2000: 30; Laliberte et al., 1999: 498–511)

A central element of the Act would advance the government’s assimilation policy through the process of enfranchisement or losing one’s Indian status under the Act. For example, under Section 12(1)(b) of the Act, Indian women could lose their status if they married a non-Indian man. Women could not own property, and once a woman left the reserve to marry she could not return because non-Indians could not reside on the reserve. This also applied to her children. However, if an

Indian man married a non-Indian woman, he not only retained his Indian status, but the non-Indian woman would gain status under the Act and so would their children. This legislation stood until 1985, when revisions to the Act occurred as a result of the repatriated Canadian Constitution and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender. There were other ways for Indian people to lose their status—for example, if they received a university or college education, became clergy, or acquired any professional designation, lived outside of the country for five years or more, or if they wanted to vote.

Clearly, race and gender were two powerful ideologies that legitimated government policy. *Wotherspoon and Satzewich* summarize the thinking behind the Act:

- (1) Indians and their land were to be assimilated;
- (2) Indians were not capable of making rational decisions for their own welfare and this had to be done by the department on their behalf;
- (3) Indian women should be subject to their husbands as were other women. Their children were his children alone in law. It was inconceivable that an Indian woman should be able to own and transmit property rights to her children. (*Wotherspoon and Satzewich*, 2000: 31)

To summarize, the fur trade was a very important stage in the development of the Canadian political economy. Both Indian and Metis people played important roles in the advancement of the trade. British colonizers, traders and merchants used race to define these groups of people (this particularly applied to Indian people, as Métis were excluded from the Act) and to assert dominance over them. Although the Indian Act was introduced at the end of the fur trade, it drew from racial ideology constructed during that era. During the era to come, Indian people would be forced into pre-determined roles in the new economy, on the basis of the government's view that they were a lesser race of people.

### *The National Policy*

Although the government of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald was given credit for the creation of the national policy, it really evolved out of British colonial rule, beginning with the penetration of explorers in the 16th century. Further, the British North America Act, 1867 set the immediate stage for the national policy. By uniting Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia under a single confederation, and necessarily outlining federal economic development powers, it left to the provinces those powers of local interest. Particularly important to my argument, it gave the federal government control over the lands and resources of the Prairie provinces (Phillips, 1982: 59–60). In fact, Confederation was based upon an idea of regions where not all regions were equal. Certainly the new regions of the West were not equal to central Canada. The Prairies were to provide a frontier for central Canadian investment, produce a staple, wheat, for international export by St. Lawrence merchants and banks, and a market for manufacturers.

The National Policy was actually a family of related federal policies that had three fundamental thrusts: "settlement" of the Prairie region as an agricultural hinterland populated with family farmers; building a transcontinental rail system to facilitate the export of the staple and to make the West a "home market" for central Canadian manufacturers; and protecting that home market with tariffs. It envisaged a Prairie region that was vastly different from the political economy of

the fur trade. Wheat required a very different set of institutions and organizations, ones where Indian people and the Indian way of life were quite irrelevant.

Clearly, the "Indian problem" of the West had to be dealt with in order for settlement to occur, the railway to be built, and capital accumulation to ensue. This was accomplished in the first instance by gaining control of Rupert's Land as "property," and then through the treaty signing process which began in 1871. Of course, the Indian Act 1876 had already asserted federal responsibility over Indian people, referring to them as "wards of the state."<sup>11</sup> The structures put in place by these two policies, the Indian Act and the treaties/reservations policy, complemented one another in removing Aboriginal title to land (Green, 1995: 91). The goals of the national policy were thus pursued unimpeded by Indian people. Indians were to be forced into the capitalist economy in Canada and the Prairies of the 20th century. Their way of life based in the fur trade, upon which they had become thoroughly dependent, would be fundamentally transformed and the "Indian problem" vanquished.

The ideology of race appeared starkly in the government's approach to Indian agriculture. For example, when other homesteaders were using steam machinery, Indian people were still using hand implements. The underlying rationale was that they had to "evolve" through certain stages and should not progress too quickly. As Sarah Carter notes:

Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed announced in 1889 that a new approved system of farming was to be adopted on western Indian reserves. Indian farmers were to emulate peasants of various countries who kept their operations small and their implements rudimentary. (Carter, 1989: 27)

Indeed, agriculture was not well established on reserves. Reed's policies of serfalty (land that is held in a person's own right without being joined in interest with one another) and peasant farming, which were approved by Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs Edgar Dewdney and Superintendent of Indian Affairs/Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, were intended to assist Indian reserves in becoming self-sufficient. Reed's policy apparently intended not only to encourage self-sufficiency, but by sub-dividing Indian lands it would promote the idea of individually operated farms (a notion that is inherent in the national policy) as well as "make lands available for settlers while at the same time removing responsibility for Indians from government officials to Indians" (Nestor, 1998: 48).

Further, the Indian Act 1876 was amended to include the Permit System whereby the federal government could regulate the sale, barter, exchange or gift of any grain, roots or other produce grown on reserves. If Indians wanted to sell their crop in town, the entire monetary transaction went through the hands of the Indian Agent, who acted on behalf of the Crown. These policies were justified using the concept of race. The government insisted that they were acting in the best interests of Indian people because these needed to learn how to handle their money and become "respectable Canadian citizens."<sup>12</sup> However, according to Carter, it was an excuse to "effectively eliminate the Indians from effective competition [with settlers]" (Carter, 1989: 37).

If Prairie farmers experienced hardships during lean times and were subject to the fluctuations of the market place, Indian people were even more vulnerable. Unlike other Canadian citizens, Indian people could not leave the reserve to try

their luck elsewhere, nor could they lobby the government since they were considered non-citizens, wards of the state. In addition, Indians could not take out a homestead under the Act, nor could they raise outside investment capital unless they wanted to become enfranchised. However, enfranchisement meant assimilation: they were not allowed to return to the reserve to see their family, and they effectively ceased to be Indians in the eyes of the government.

But Indian people wanted to become integrated into the economy. They saw the value of the European method of education and realized that their traditional way of life would change forever. Treaties were not new concepts to them, and they set out to preserve what they could in terms of their cultures and languages while at the same time realizing that they were left with few options: they needed to learn the European's talk. Indeed, they negotiated during the treaty-making process for education (Treaty 4), health care (Treaty 6), and for agricultural implements and farm instructors; however, they were constantly impeded by government policy. Indian people wanted to farm communally, and this was frowned upon by the federal government. In fact, Indian Affairs was attempting to dismantle the tribal system and to promote individualism, which they saw as essential to the national policy and as something that was common sense on a capitalist frontier.

Sarah Carter notes that despite what was negotiated in the treaties, federal policy would inevitably negate those negotiations. For example, although rations were negotiated as part of the treaty process (after the collapse of the fur trade, the last buffalo was seen on the prairies in 1879 and Indian people were starving), the government, through the recommendations of Reed, instituted a work-for-rations policy. Reed noted that "the Indian was lazy, therefore he must have short rations" (Carter, 1989: 144). Reed would call Indians "parasites" and complained that they lived off the work of others. By introducing the concept of work, and by not tolerating idleness, they could be reformed. Reed would come to be known as "Ironheart" because of his refusal to issue provisions unless work was completed by each individual. This meant that the head of the family could not work for the rations of other members of the family, no matter how old or sick they might be. He adhered to the policy strictly and believed that "if a man would not work he should not eat" (Carter, 1989: 144).

Meager rations affected Indian health. Reed had reduced rations in the Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 areas. The Blackfoot in the area were suffering from malnutrition, and measles had spread through the reserves. The Indian Agent, Magnus Begg, reported to Ottawa that "a good many had died amongst the youngest ones ... of course that [cutting rations] has nothing to do with children having measles, but Indians do not look at it in that light" (Lux, 2000: 64-65). But there was a definite relationship between hunger, destitution and disease, and this relationship was strengthened by the government's policies surrounding rations: "Without the basic necessities for life—food, clothing, and shelter—the Native peoples of the plains could not escape the descent into illness and death" (Lux, 2000: 4).

Even before the treaty process formally began in 1871, the Blackfoot had lost between 12% and 16% of their population to smallpox in 1870. The same losses can be estimated for the Cree population in that year. In addition to smallpox, hunger was contributing to ill health and death amongst Indians on the Plains. By 1879, 1,000 Blackfoot Indians were on the verge of starvation. They were "out of desperation eating the flesh of poisoned wolves and dogs ... their people had been

forced to sell their horses and rifles and were eating dogs, gophers and mice" (Lux, 2000: 35). In the Touchwood area, Indians constantly made applications for relief to government officials in the spring of 1878; by the following summer, finding no relief, "a group of desperate Indians broke into the government stores at Fort Qu'Appelle, removing flour and other provisions left over from treaty payments" (Carter, 1989: 71).

By contrast, when the Dakota fled to Manitoba—they would later spread out and settle in other parts of the Canadian West—they were initially not brought under the Indian Act or officially considered "Indians." In fact, they adapted rather well: they were able to use their "labor, their knowledge and their customary way of doing things [and] they adapted these skills to the social and natural environment of the Canadian Northwest and went from there" (Elias, 2002: 221). While the Dakota also faced starvation and disease, they were able to eke out a subsistence lifestyle in the lean years, and would flourish as farmers and laborers in the good years. An important Dakota tradition was the giveaway, which ensured that food and possessions were distributed throughout the band, thus keeping everyone relatively equal, healthy and productive.

However, once the Dakota were assigned an Indian Agent they would begin to be impacted by the restrictions and control of the Indian Act. Elias summarizes the impact of the Act as part of the National policy:

Recent thought and debate on matters of aboriginal rights has been distilled into the rubric of "Indian self-government," by which is generally meant a people's right to manage and nurture their own lands, resources and people in ways that are culturally comfortable. The history of the Dakota is virtually a demonstration of the validity of this concept. No doubt, not every aspect of Dakota survival strategies was a success, but only when the Dakota were independent to act within the general framework of Canadian law were they able to flourish economically and culturally. When constrained by law, they faltered. (Elias, 2002: 224)

The Dakota example suggests that while racial ideology penetrated the thinking and actions of all of the classes forming in the West, its use in official state policies had the greatest impact on Prairie Indians. The Indian Act is sometimes not recognized as one of the policies in the broader national policy, but it belongs there, bringing its racial ideology along to colour the broader project.

Thus, while the national policy developed the Prairie provinces as a staple political economy rather than a diversified or complete political economy, so too was the development of Indian people restricted by policies under the Department of Indian Affairs—policies that did not directly impact the rest of the Western population. Indian people were removed from the market economy by being forced into peasant or subsistence farming, and this was justified using the argument of race. Even those groups, such as the Dakota, who had managed to find a place in the economy would eventually be forced to progress only at a rate deemed appropriate for them by the government. Indeed, the underlying theme to the policies developed by Reed and implemented by the government of the day were rooted in the theory of race and the progression of humankind from "savagery" to "civilization." But the consequences of the federal policies cannot be justified on the basis of race.

### *Regionalism*

Certainly regionalism, the existence of geographic regions serving different economic functions in the national economy, having unequal opportunities for capital accumulation, development, employment and income, and presenting somewhat different institutional and organizational structures, political ideologies and cultures, is deeply rooted in the sequence of staples that shaped the Canadian political economy. So it is not surprising that regionalism prevailed in Canada during the twentieth century. Central Canada (particularly southern Ontario and Montreal) consolidated its hold on manufacturing and finance, while the regions produced various staples controlled by regional bourgeoisies (Phillips, 1982; Richards and Pratt, 1979).

In fact, from time to time the Prairie region has developed. However, it is clear that a staple-based economy is especially vulnerable to world market fluctuations. In addition, the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan were created in 1905 with what Richards and Pratt describe as "quasi-colonial status." The transfer of control of natural resources from the Dominion to Alberta and Saskatchewan did not occur until 1930, and there was a great deal of disgruntlement amongst the agrarian settlers, protesting that they were treated as "second-rate" citizens by virtue of the fact that the Western provinces had "second class" status, a disgruntlement that remains to this day (Richards and Pratt, 1979: 17).

In addition to the dependency of the staples-based economy in the West, the 20th century has seen several other important characteristics emerge in the Canadian political economy. One is the creation of large monopolies. Some had been previously created by state intervention or favouritism, for example, the Hudson's Bay Company under the Royal Charter of 1670, and the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s. Of course, Canada is famous for its few large banks. But forces of concentration inherent in capitalist economies now produced monopolies or oligopolies in several sectors including petroleum, pulp and paper, mining, hydro, communications, steel and some areas of manufacturing. Fowke argues that the support and creation of monopolies was not a new phenomenon in Canada; in fact, such practice was common in other parts of the Empire (Fowke, 1957: 58).

A second characteristic involves the growing American investment in Canadian industry, services and resources. Initially, American investors were able to "jump" the National Policy tariff wall and set up branch plants in Canada—primarily in the East. Canada is caught in another dependency trap—dependent upon staples production and dependent upon increasingly American, direct, foreign investment. This "dual dependency" is an important root of continuing regional disparities. Consistent with the dual dependency, there is a lack of technological development. Foreign, direct investment is unbalanced in favor of the more advanced, developed region (Phillips, 1982: 115). Manufacturing industry and finance became firmly rooted in central Canada. The "have-not" regions were hit harder when economic crisis occurred. For example, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, it was the Prairie farmers who suffered the most. Conway claims that:

the Depression struck hardest at farmers, farm workers, fishermen, lumbermen, and miners, less hard at those in protected Central Canadian industry, still less hard at those in the middle-class professions, while actually benefiting finance capitalists... . The impact of the Depression was so much greater in the West as a result of the West's over-dependence

on those industries that were the most immediately and hardest hit—resource industries. (Conway, 1994: 100)

Regional disparities continue to be problematic despite government interventions in the form of transfer payments which may slow down, but not reverse, the disparities that have been created over hundreds of years. Furthermore, the contradictions inherent in the capitalist structure prevent the government from looking for solutions in terms of economic diversification. Capitalism breeds centralism—it is an inherent requirement:

Canada's version of dependent capitalism decrees centralism and concentration. And centralism breeds further centralism, draining the hinterland regions of vitality, of education, of a financial base and the resources which could resist economic decline or help develop their own economic potential. (Phillips, 1982: 98)

Thus, the regionalism that was initiated over centuries of staple production and turned into Canadian policy by Confederation and the national policy, was consolidated and rigidified in the 20th century. What has been the impact on Indian people? First, it is important to examine impacts that underpin Indian well-being, in this case involving policies that would turn First Nations people toward the role of surplus labor as the regional economy of Canada consolidated and solidified.

Amendments to the Indian Act would occur in 1951, relaxing some control over the lives of Indian people. However the permit system would remain part of the Act until 1995, and although it was not used much beyond the 1930s it had already ensured that Indian people were turned to marginal and easily exploitable roles. In addition, residential schools ensured that Indian people would not have the education or skills to hold good jobs in the economy.

In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) contended that residential schools had the single greatest impact on First Nations people in Canada and continue to have inter-generational impacts (RCAP, 1996). Although missionaries had been working with Indian people since the 1790s, there was no official policy mandating the Christianizing of Indian people until the introduction of the Indian Act (Miller, 2001: 126). From 1830 onwards, it was evident that a move to residential schooling, as opposed to day schooling, was inevitable. From 1883 onward the federal government established industrial schools off the reserves, where Indian children from the ages of 4 to 16 would be educated and trained. Miller notes that the “residential schools were operated in uneasy tandem by government and the missionary societies of the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches... [These] schools aimed at the assimilation of Indian children” (Miller, 2001: 265). In 1920, the Indian Act was amended so that it was illegal for Indian children to stay home from school. Essentially the government would force parents to send their children to the residential schools.

Although the schools were to be modeled after European-style boarding schools, they were hardly that. Children were not allowed to have contact with their families except during their summer breaks, and they were not allowed to speak their language or practice their spiritual and cultural beliefs:

Cultural alienation was to be welcomed as the first step toward healthful living and long life ... meanwhile, the schools themselves offered scant salvation from physical illness and disease. In fact, rather than preserving

the bodies of the children who were entrusted to their care, the residential schools tended to further endanger them through exposure to disease, overwork, underfeeding and various forms of abuse. (Kelm, 2001: 57)

Indeed, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza and smallpox were rampant in the schools, and flourished due to unsanitary conditions and overcrowding. Residential schools would start to decline in the 1970s as the federal government attempted to integrate Indian children into the public school system; however, the last school did not officially close until 1996.

Indian wage labour was important to regional accumulation strategies in the twentieth century. During the first two decades, wages accounted for one-quarter of the income of Indian people. Across the country there are examples of Indian wage earners in many different industries. Mi'kmaq men and women from Nova Scotia were actively involved in wage labour both in Canada and the United States. They were employed in fruit, vegetable and grain production, fish processing, and in various other staple and manufacturing industries. They migrated seasonally to the United States to pick blueberries, potatoes and other cash crops. During the 1920s Mi'kmaq workers traveled as far as the Prairies to work on a seasonal basis in grain production (Laliberte, 1999: 69–70).

Indian people in British Columbia were an important part of that region's economy. Native men worked as manual wage laborers in the commercial fishery, canning, road construction, logging, milling, mining, and long-shoring industries. Some Native men also occupied skilled and supervisory positions. Women were employed as domestic servants, cannery workers, and seasonal agricultural workers (Knight, 1996: 19).

In the Prairie region, Indian people have been used as surplus labour for agriculture, a practice that continued well after the Indian Act revisions of 1951. For example, the federal government's National Employment Service recruited 100 Indian people from northern Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1952 to work on the sugar beet farms in Southern Alberta. Apparently the practice has continued. In 1990, the Canadian Sugar-Beet Producer's Association estimated that 85% of the 3,000 workers employed in the production of sugar beets were of Indian ancestry—again, mainly from northern Saskatchewan and Alberta. Laliberte refers to this as “Native proletarianization” and argues that the federal government used a combination of paternalistic and coercive measures to initially mobilize Native workers for the industry and to help farmers retain those workers for the duration of the season (Laliberte, 1999: 66–67).

This was, for the times, a remarkable exercise in exploitation: remuneration was meager; the promise of housing was written into sugar-beet contracts; and the size of the dwelling provided depended on the number of acres under contract and the number of workers required to handle the job. The houses were equipped with the basic essentials (stoves, beds and mattresses) but workers were expected to provide their own food, fuel, blankets, cooking utensils, dishes and tools. Once the workers arrived in the beet fields and signed a contract, they could also obtain an advance from their employer to purchase any needed essentials. Federal and provincial labor laws explicitly excluded agricultural workers from benefits normally enjoyed by other Canadian workers. Indian workers in the sugar beet industry basically had scant labour protection, and were therefore vulnerable to

exploitation. However, one of the most blatant forms of coercion by the federal government was its policy to recruit Indian workers by exercising its economic control over social assistance payments on reserves. In the late 1960s, the Indian Affairs Branch began to terminate welfare payments in Indian communities in order to get them to migrate to the beet fields and stay there during the peak May–June season. Non-Status Indians and Métis experienced similar treatment at the hands of provincial authorities (Laliberte, 1999: 76–79).

The importance of these examples is that Indian people were used as pools of readily available and often seasonal labor. The federal government continued its assimilation policy by forcing Indian people into low-paying jobs. For Indians to become like “Europeans” meant, in part, that they should engage in gender-appropriate labour and domestic activities. Indian males were to be prepared either to become farmers or to get accustomed to the discipline of wage labour, while Indian women were to become domestic servants and ideal-typical European mothers (Laliberte, 1999: 68–69). But this exploitation is not quite like European wage labour: the Indian labour force was mobilized by government coercion and paternalism, and Indians were sent back to their reserves when they were not needed. The racial ideology underpinning the Indian Act legitimated this practice.

Hence, as regionalism solidified during the 20th century, First Nations people have been routed into the role of surplus labour. This, coupled with the federal government’s formal assimilation policy (which was not abandoned until 1973) continues to have severe impacts on the health and well-being of First Nations people today. The differences between First Nations and non-First Nations populations can be attributed directly to the historical treatment of First Nations people—treatment that would continually be justified by race.

Using 2001 Canada Census data, one can see the continuing differences. Unemployment rates amongst First Nations people (approximately 27%) are nearly five times the national average. In fact, this is a combined average for on and off-reserve First Nations; on some reserves, unemployment rates hit 90% or more. In addition, First Nations average annual income (about \$12,731) is approximately half the general Canadian population income level. Of Aboriginal people (First Nations, Metis and Inuit combined), 44% have less than high school education versus only 22% of the non-Aboriginal population (Health Canada, 2004).

Indian diseases during the twentieth century hit their peak in the 1940s. After that, vaccines and improved living conditions began to control (though not eradicate) many diseases. Starting in the 1950s, chronic diseases began to replace infectious epidemics, and while mortality rates decreased, morbidity rates actually increased. Mortality rates are still higher amongst First Nations people (Waldram, Herring, Kue Young, 1997: 65).

Based on recent data, it is evident that chronic diseases are a major challenge for First Nations people. Cardiovascular disease (CVD), arthritis, obesity, and diabetes are the top four diseases afflicting First Nations people today, all with rates well above those for non-Aboriginals. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is 3.3 times greater in the Indian community as compared to the general Canadian population, while diabetes is 4.5 times the national rate. Arthritis and cancer are 1.7 times and 1.5 times the national rate respectively. Although life expectancy rates have slowly but steadily increased among the Indian population, Indian people can expect to live approximately seven years less than other Canadians. Mortality rates due to

CVD, cancer, and injuries and poisonings remain 1.5 times the national rate (Health Canada, 1999).

While chronic diseases plague First Nations people at higher rates than non-Aboriginal Canadians, infectious diseases continue to cause health problems in First Nations communities. For example, tuberculosis rates amongst First Nations people are 43/100,000 versus 1.5/100,000 amongst the non-Aboriginal Canadian population. Sexually transmitted diseases continue to increase—an estimated eight to ten times higher amongst First Nations populations—and are particularly prevalent amongst First Nations people 15 to 24 years of age. AIDS also continues to rise amongst First Nations populations—a 91% increase in those with AIDS from 1996 to 1999. Although suicide rates have declined 23% in the past 10 years, they remain high—three times the national average for all age groups and approximately six times the national rate for youth (Health Canada, 2003).

### Conclusion

Clearly, there is a strong connection between the colonized history of First Nations people and their current state of health and well-being. The policies that were implemented impacted First Nations people on several different levels. It attacked their economies, their cultures, languages and social structures. The federal government's attempt at the assimilation of First Nations people was disguised as "race science," but it was not about science, or race, or survival of the fittest: it was about capital accumulation. Simply put, the federal government used the ideology of racism in the service of capital accumulation.

The concept of race is a construction, a social construction, and it is a modern concept. It is a worldview that is composed of certain ideological components that "explain" difference; however, it is used to ensure that power remains in the hands of the few, and we are led to believe that this is the societal norm. Race is used to further divide people, well beyond ordinary class struggles. The federal government ensures this kind of division by its ever-changing definition of First Nations (Indian is still the *legal* term under the Act).

We have seen how the government, using for example the Indian Act, reservations policies, residential schools and surplus labor practices, not only created division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, but also amongst and between Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are entitled to rights, but not all Aboriginal people are so entitled. It is confusing and divisive, and is a remarkable example of the ideology of race.

Informed by their racial ideology, government officials assumed that First Nations people could not adjust to the market place after the eclipse of the fur trade. But, as we have seen, there are compelling counter-examples. First Nations played a crucial role in the economy, adjusting to the fur trade, agriculture, and wage labour. One counter-example is the experience of the Dakota. Another is the fact that, in places, First Nations agriculture in the era of the wheat economy did take hold. In the Prairies of the 20th century, First Nations people became low-paid, surplus labour on farms; and across the country, they have worked in fishing, logging, road building, processing, shipping, service, and other industries. The racial ideology that either excluded First Nations from the labour market or used them as low-paid, surplus labor was, and is, simply wrong.

We have looked at the fur trade, where Indian (and Métis) people were exploited for their knowledge of the land and its resources, and then set aside and characterized as uncivilized. We have looked at the wheat economy, where Indian people were forced onto reserves, frustrated in their efforts to become farmers and where “policies pursued by the Department of Indian Affairs beginning in the late 1880s were devised to divide Indian and white farmers into non-competing groups” (Carter, 1989: 193). And we have looked at the regionalism of the twentieth century, where First Nations became cheap labour. These policies and practices were all justified using racial ideology. But behind the ideology was capital accumulation, in various guises.

Nor is race dead as an ideology. The impacts of colonization continue in spite of the progress that is being made in First Nations health, community development and well-being. Race as an ideology was unleashed to legitimate the capital accumulation of the fur trade, reworked for the era of the wheat economy, and refined for the surplus labour needs of the 20th century. It is an ideology that serves the exploitative processes of accumulation well.

Elders say it will take time to heal from the impacts. Unfortunately, many non-Aboriginal Canadians who do not understand the history and dynamics of colonization and the role of racial ideology, continue to view First Nations (and other Aboriginal people) as a burden to society and, perhaps more importantly, to the economy. They do not realize that racism drives between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people wedges that impede the political, spiritual, cultural and economic development of *everyone*. If Aboriginal people are unhealthy, as Canadians we are *all* unhealthy. If one suffers, we *all* suffer.

The legacy of colonization is evident in the health and well-being issues facing First Nations people today. The root causes of their ill health lie in the legacy of Canada’s past. While the causes can be firmly located in the past, the solutions are in understanding the past and moving forward by re-building Canada’s relationship with its First Nations. A holistic approach is necessary: a healing of the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of our being is required. In the words of an Elder, Walter Lavallee, “*love is the greatest law and the greatest energy.*”

## Notes

1. “Indian” will be used historically where relevant, while “First Nations” will be used in a contemporary context. However, “Indian” is still the legal term in Canada.
2. Colonization had many similar impacts on Métis people, but that analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

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