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**Introduction**

The figure of the “Indian” is a recurring theme in social, literary and historical studies. Friend or foe? Noble or ignoble? Spiritualist or charlatan? Wise or misguided? What is indeed the true nature of this perennial Other who has consistently and in so many different ways challenged and disturbed the Euro-Canadian social imaginary?

Considering the long list of writers and scholars who have tried to account for his enduring presence<sup>1</sup> one would think that there is hardly anything left to say about the topic. We should have by now a pretty good idea of what it entails. Yet more books and articles, scholarly and otherwise, continue to be written. In a way, this bears witness to the fact that the very existence of Indigenous peoples disrupts the liberal image mainstream Canadians have of themselves and their country. It forces them into a rather uncomfortable reassessment of the foundational notions of state and nation they hold dear, of the core values by which they define themselves. No doubt many are thrown off balance by the increasing centrality in the public arena of Aboriginal socio-political claims that call into question their hegemonic position. Similarly, the sub-standard socio-economic circumstances in which too many Indigenous people are still constrained to live unsettle their self-perception as a just and fair group. Some readily submit to this reassessment in the name of democratic enhancement and social justice; many more will simply recoil at the very thought of it (interestingly, also in the name of democracy and equity). In other words, the figure of the Indian mystifies. Mainstream Canadians' handling of it rests on a deep-seated collective anxiety—usually unacknowledged, like some shameful condition—that cries out to be exorcised somehow. Writing about “what to make of the Indian” has certainly been one consistent way of dealing with this anxiety.

*Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, and *A Fair Country* by John Ralston Saul offer a case in point. Both works have been the object of much public notice and debate since their release. Each suggests a contrasting approach for non-Aboriginal Canadians to confront their angst over Indigenous peoples. While Widdowson and Howard insist that there is hardly anything meaningful or worth preserving in Aboriginal cultures, Saul presses fellow citizens to embrace unreservedly what he sees as Canada's formative Métis nature. These two books reveal the duality of the Canadian collective psyche with respect to Indigenous peoples. The fact that they were published recently, stirring both significant interest and concern, indicates that Indigenous peoples are very much on Canadians' minds. It is not clear, though, whether these newest attempts at making sense of Aboriginal reality succeed to resolve, or better still, move beyond that duality.

### **Denying the Other, Shedding the Angst**

As any psychologist will confirm, the common ways of handling the anxiety created by any given unpleasant situation include simply ignoring it, refusing to believe it exists at all or rearranging it mentally so as to make it more emotionally manageable. When it comes to Indigenous peoples, Euro-Canadians are no strangers to such self-protective psychological stratagems. By the turn of the nineteenth century, as European settlers felt confident they had finally gotten a handle on the challenges of living in the New World, the use-value of the various Indigenous peoples they had hitherto considered as military and political allies, trading partners or advisors diminished significantly. From then on, no effort was spared to dismiss their socio-political relevance, infantilize them, and even obliterate them, both symbolically and physically. As they were perceived as obstacles to the economic, social and territorial development of the country settlers envisioned, the Euro-Canadian social imaginary was steered into conveniently believing Indians were a "vanishing race" and had for all intents and purposes ceased to exist (Miller).

*Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* is the latest expression of this deep-seated ideological view. Its authors, Frances Widdowson, a faculty member in the Department of Policy Studies at Mount Royal College in Calgary, and Albert Howard, an independent scholar and former consultant in the area of Aboriginal affairs, claim to build on their own past experience with Aboriginal communities in Northern Canada to denounce what they present as a cadre of lawyers, experts, government

officials and local political elite who allegedly draw extensive personal benefits from the ruinous situation of downtrodden Aboriginal groups and individuals. Widdowson and Howard argue that agents of this “Aboriginal industry” operate on the basis of untenable assumptions originating in obsolete, premodern Aboriginal values and cultures: the normative foundations of their actions and political claims are flawed and guide Aboriginal communities as a result into harmful policy and lifestyle choices that only worsen the latter’s socio-economic condition and widen the divide with the rest of the Canadian population.

Widdowson and Howard develop their argument through a detailed examination of key policy issues concerning Indigenous peoples. Using an approach reminiscent of Reform and Conservative Party political advisor and University of Calgary political scientist Tom Flanagan’s *First Nations? Second Thoughts* (2000), they undertake to debunk what they see as the falsehoods upon which the Aboriginal industry has gained prominence. They fire a number of salvos at the current Aboriginal policy framework and at the postmodernist cultural relativism of some segments of the Canadian public, all too willing in their view to accept Aboriginal claims unquestioningly.

They contend that Aboriginal communities cannot be viable economic entities because of their isolation from global markets and their serious deficits in human and intellectual capital; injecting more money into those communities through the settlement of land claims in the hope of facilitating economic self-sufficiency is pointless, for they are not properly equipped to succeed. Similarly, granting self-government to communities that suffer from an important developmental gap and remain entrenched in tribal social relations and politics out of step with the requirements of democracy and modern citizenship will do little to ensure access to the basic resources needed for survival. Widdowson and Howard also question the emerging tendency to dispense justice in Aboriginal communities according to Aboriginal cultural guidelines. They believe that in the name of those guidelines communities too often turn a blind eye on violence against women and vulnerable individuals; they only serve to reproduce patterns of unequal access to local power. They express as well strong doubts about the ability of Aboriginal child welfare agencies to protect children under their care and prevent the spread of child abuse in Aboriginal communities: again, tribal loyalties and inadequate local leadership are important causes of that inability as they blur any sense that the well-being and safety of the children are a community’s first duties.

Widdowson and Howard are also particularly concerned that increasing devolution of health care responsibilities to Aboriginal organizations seems to be opening the door to the introduction of traditional Aboriginal healing practices, which they reject as totally unreliable and ineffective to treat the critical health problems that affect many communities. The same goes for education, they maintain. Greater community control over education often translates into undue curricular emphasis on the so-called “wisdom of the ancestors”, which, they argue, represents forms of knowledge that cannot adequately enable anyone to function properly in a modern and complex, technology-driven market society. In their estimation, Aboriginal educational methods promote illiteracy and hold Indigenous people back as they are more easily manipulated by the Aboriginal industry. Finally, Widdowson and Howard consider with deep suspicion the widespread notion that Indigenous peoples are good stewards of the land and that they possess a superior ecological conscience. Such a view, they argue, stems from an ill-advised tendency to romanticize Indigenous peoples and needs to be assessed critically. Granting more power over territorial management to Aboriginal communities on account of that notion without proper regulatory controls provides no guarantee against further ecological deterioration.

Upon its release, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* immediately triggered a howl of hostile indignation within anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist Aboriginal scholarly and activist circles<sup>2</sup>. Widdowson and Howard have been accused of a number of intellectual offences, from reliance on obsolete anthropological data and outmoded social theory to the more serious charges of racism and promotion of hatred. One commentator concluded that “[a]rguably the world would have been a better place” had the book not been published and its claims not been given a tribune (Tomsons 3)<sup>3</sup>.

Widdowson and Howard have replied to their critics in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association at the end of May, 2009. Deploring the virulence with which their book was received, they remained undeterred. They reiterated its central motif with renewed insistence: because of their forced historical isolation from the mainstream of Canadian society, Indigenous peoples today suffer from a developmental gap that makes them cling to neolithic cultural features that account for their undisciplined work habits, their tribal forms of political identification, their continued adherence to archaic traditional knowledge about the world and their general inability to function efficiently in a highly developed society like Canada.

To Widdowson and Howard, this argument is simply a statement of fact, scientifically and ethically defensible, rooted in a historical materialist and anti-relativist understanding of socio-cultural evolution. They are unshakeable in their conviction that modern, rationalist, western social and political forms are clearly more advanced than what Aboriginal cultures offer. It does not necessarily mean that the West is better, just further along on the evolutionary continuum. The point is to help Indigenous peoples to internalize western principles and move ahead on that continuum. Widdowson and Howard dismiss therefore any charge that their position is racist, countering that the racists are those who, on account of the assumed difference of Indigenous peoples, insist that they be allowed to exist in a separate self-governed social and civic sphere. Such a political goal, Widdowson and Howard assert, is not only delusive but is bound, if achieved, to preclude Indigenous peoples from enjoying the benefits of modernity like all other Canadians. Vowing to have the welfare of Indigenous peoples at heart, they are adamant that their position is progressive and primarily concerned with social justice.

On the face of it, Widdowson and Howard's concerns about some of the apparent dysfunctions of the Aboriginal policy framework may not be totally unwarranted. A few Aboriginal opinion leaders have in recent years echoed similar sentiments, particularly with respect to the nature of local governance<sup>4</sup>. Are there lawyers and so-called experts who take advantage of some First Nations communities? It is not improbable. Are there community leaders and political leaders who are not as enlightened as one might wish? There is no reason to think that, like in any other society, it cannot be the case. Do Elders always give the right advice? They are only human; one may assume that they can also make mistakes. Are there aspects of Aboriginal traditional knowledge that can be unfit to address current socio-economic predicaments? Any knowledge, Aboriginal or otherwise, that was shaped in an earlier or different social, cultural, economic or environmental context, may have a limited shelf life and be made inadequate by the inner logic of an emerging new context. The problem with *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* is not that its authors raise these questions, as upsetting as some may find them, but that, in their attempt to address them, they err in so many ways as to discredit their own argument and discourage any engagement with it.

The most important failing of the book is the very notion that there exists an "Aboriginal industry". No compelling evidence of it is ever offered. The term conveys the image of an organized, well-structured lobby or interest group, with a well-defined agenda, established modus

operandi and key, clearly identified players well connected with the powers that be. Instead, except for the cursory description of a vague, generic group of lawyers, experts, officials and chiefs, Widdowson and Howard's "industry" is nebulous, inchoate, and appears, in the absence of convincing data, more like a figment of their imagination. There may well be such an industry, but the mere mention of it is insufficient to persuade the reader that it is indeed at work in shaping Aboriginal policy. We need to know how it emerged, in what circumstances, how it functions, who are the individuals or organizations who pull the strings, how personal ties affect its ideological orientation, how the connections between individuals and vested interests operate to maintain and reproduce its socio-political influence on the decision-making process regarding Aboriginal policy—all dimensions that Widdowson and Howard leave unaddressed. Given the abundance of literature in political science and sociology of solid elite and interest group studies from which they could have easily drawn theoretical and analytical inspiration, their decision not to emulate some of those studies is disappointing.

As their denunciation of cultural preservation and unrefined evolutionist views take center stage, Widdowson and Howard unwisely stress the so-called "developmental gap" from which Indigenous peoples supposedly suffer. Their decision to move their analysis in that direction is ill-advised for two reasons.

First, it pushes them into inaccurate generalizations with respect to the isolation of Indigenous peoples from capitalist social relations and their ensuing inability to cope with the demands of capitalist modernity. Recent scholarship indicates that First Nations communities have long been involved in wage labour relationships as agricultural and industrial labourers (Raibmon), and that successful Aboriginal capitalist enterprises have emerged and continue to do so in many regions of Canada (Newhouse; Tada; Wuttunee). Rather than "lagging behind," Indigenous peoples have adapted to the imperatives of a capitalist economy while often maintaining cultural practices that did not readily agree with the social norms of capitalism, demonstrating in the process their ability to negotiate the tensions and cultural pressures of capitalist modernity on their own terms.

Second, Marxist historians and sociologists have compellingly shown that the developmental, stage-like evolution through which Widdowson and Howard see social change (and understand Indigenous peoples' socio-cultural reality) does not unfold as mechanistically or as neatly as



they suggest. Marxist analyses of the social and political underpinnings of capitalist development have acknowledged for some time that *ancien régime* features will continue to have relevance in the transition to capitalism and can shape the ideological and socio-institutional makeup of liberal capitalist societies<sup>5</sup>. Widdowson and Howard are therefore out of step with intellectual developments within their chosen analytical paradigm and misunderstand socio-cultural change. Like socio-economic change, it does not necessarily follow tidy patterns of transformation. The fact that a society reaches or not a given spot on some purely heuristic axis of socio-cultural change does not make it more or less developed or advanced. The transformation or permanency of socio-cultural configurations are phenomena that must be understood in and of themselves, as contingent upon the combined action of a host of factors including technological change, exposure to outside influences, the degree of resistance to those influences and most of all the socio-political resilience of hegemonic groups.

Widdowson and Howard pay virtually no heed to such considerations (much to the detriment of their own credibility as historical materialists). Had they done so they could see that the movement for Aboriginal cultural preservation that they castigate reflects a long-standing practice of resistance and re-empowerment, a strategy of political affirmation against power structures that marginalize and oppress Indigenous peoples. As they allow their narrative to turn into a facile conspiracy theory rant—nasty profiteers bent on keeping poor, destitute Indians in dire straits use all possible subterfuges to advance their unsavoury agenda—they shut themselves analytically to the very real possibility that First Nations communities deliberately choose cultural preservation not because they are manipulated into doing so by the Aboriginal industry, but because they have consciously identified it—like scores of identity-based and nationalistic liberation movements around the world—as the best way to avoid disappearing, let their claims be known, and maintain their relevance.

The view that some all-powerful Aboriginal industry is abusively deciding the fate of First Nations communities implies that they do not understand what their best interest is and are at a loss to exercise any form of agency. This flies in the face of substantial evidence from a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities showing multiple examples of Aboriginal communities and individuals struggling, many with appreciable measures of success, to retain or regain control over their lives<sup>6</sup>. Like any strategy, cultural preservation may have its flaws



and its limitations; it may fail or prove to be misguided. That, ultimately, is for communities and individuals to determine through the travails of tensions, negotiations and resistance within and outside their socio-institutional boundaries. Widdowson and Howard's unswerving belief that it reveals the developmental gap and psycho-cultural shortcomings of Indigenous peoples misses the very political complexity and the dynamics of power of which this strategy partakes. Theirs is a one-dimensional picture that largely misrepresents the reality of Aboriginal communities. One expects from scholarly work significantly more than the very simplistic framework in which they cast Aboriginal politics in Canada. Explaining what social processes make the dysfunctions they discuss possible, why some people gain from them, what empowers them to maintain such dysfunctions would have made for a far more valuable contribution to the literature on Indigenous peoples/state relations. At the end of the day, the absence of theoretical and analytical sophistication in their approach does a major disservice to their enterprise and the sincerity of their intent. Contrary to what Widdowson and Howard pretend they are trying to achieve, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* falls seriously short of providing the much needed dispassionate ground for a cold-headed discussion of the challenges and issues faced by Aboriginal communities in Canada today.

### **Confronting the Angst: "Going Native" as Myth Making**

In essence, Widdowson and Howard's disquisition is but a variation on the old liberal, universalistic, integrative creed—we're all the same, the West is best, let's all follow its lead. Since the ill-fated White Paper proposed in 1969 by the Trudeau government<sup>7</sup>, though, this creed had rarely surfaced as glaringly in Canadian policy discourse. The increasing pervasiveness of rights-based claims and identity politics in the Canadian political landscape largely overshadowed its occasional manifestations. The seemingly declining political purchase of the creed coupled with the intellectual inadequacies of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* emboldened critics to write its authors off. Then again, as a growing number of recent works have shown, mainstream Canada's endorsement of ethnocultural diversity and social pluralism has never been as strong as it is generally portrayed to be, and the patience of many Euro-Canadians with politically charged public expressions of difference has been wearing thin<sup>8</sup>. The overall message of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, its Marxist vocabulary notwithstanding, has resonated much more positively with the general population than critics would like. Published by a

leading Canadian university press following the standard peer review process, it was praised by high-profile columnists of major national newspapers and independent think tanks<sup>9</sup>. It was debated on TV Ontario's flagship current affairs program *The Agenda*, as well as on a number of other public discussion panels, and it received a nod of approval from the policy community when it was shortlisted for the prestigious and lucrative award of the Donner Foundation for best book of the year on Canadian public policy.

The fact is, despite the repeated efforts of anti-colonialist and anti-racist academics to educate the population about the dynamics of social power, cultural hegemony and racism in Canada, those who are unfamiliar or unconcerned with the political and institutional stakes of Indigenous peoples/settler state relations remain more often than not perplexed by the Aboriginal policy framework. They cannot fathom why the injection of considerable amounts of public money into programs ostensibly devoted to the improvement and empowerment of Aboriginal communities fails in the end to change things in any tangible and sustainable way. They are uncomfortable with any claim to difference that contradicts the commitment to formal equality that pervades Canada's political culture and informs most Canadians' understanding of democracy. *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* addresses issues, raises questions and proposes answers to which they can relate.

John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* puts forward a surprising response to such concerns. Saul, one of Canada's foremost public intellectuals, encourages Canadians to see things Aboriginal with a more inclusive and more solicitous eye. They should accept that the Aboriginal mindset and cultures form a central and defining part of their identity rather than regard them with suspicion and scepticism. This is a virtuous book, but it is not without its drawbacks.

Saul reiterates here a well-worn theme developed in some of his earlier, highly successful works<sup>10</sup>, notably that our modern civilization is largely determined by the greedy and narrow-minded technocratic managerial rationality of inconsiderate and self-serving elites. Canada is not without its share of this particular social group, which he holds responsible for squandering Canadian assets, charges with subservience to American power brokers, accuses of stifling public discussion, and chastises for their inability to question the colonial mythologies upon which the country is founded. But it is not for these views, with which many readers will be familiar<sup>11</sup>, that the book has garnered attention. The

central argument of *A Fair Country* rests on the idea that because of the attitude of their elites who distort the past and are corrupting the future, because of some of the objectionable values with which the latter have managed to instil the Canadian psyche, Canadians have lost touch with their fundamental essence as a Métis nation. They fail to recognize that many of the tenets by which they identify and characterize themselves, such as ethnocultural diversity, egalitarianism, pacifism and social solidarity, have their roots in Aboriginal notions. That, for Saul, is a truly unfortunate situation, for he strongly believes that only by reconnecting with its Aboriginal foundations will Canada re-emerge as a strengthened and relevant nation.

The strategic elements by which Canadians imagine themselves, suggests Saul, owe considerably more to Aboriginal influences than to European ones:

Our obsession with egalitarianism. Our desire to maintain a balance between individuals and groups. The delight we take in playing with our non-monolithic idea of society—a delight in complexity. Our tendency to try to run society as an ongoing negotiation, which must be related to our distaste for resolving complexities. Our preference, behind a relatively violent language of public debate, for consensus—again an expression of society as a balance of complexity, a sort of equilibrium. Our intuition that behind the formal written and technical face of society lies something more important, which we try to get at through the oral and through complex relationships. Our sense that the clear resolution of differences will lead to injustice and even violence. And related to that our preference for something that the law now calls *minimal impairment*, which means the obligation of those with authority to do as little damage as possible to people and to rights when exercising that authority.” (54-55)

All of these fine features, which, Saul believes, typify the Canadian mindset, come from Canadians’ long history of contact with Indigenous peoples, from the commingling of early settlers with the various First Nations communities they encountered.

What Canadians are today is intelligible only if we consider the matter outside the Western, rationalist, Judeo-Christian tradition and its underlying “obsession with clarity, fear of social complexity, horror of overlap, constant confusing of moral rectitude and power, conviction that the individual must dominate the place, [and] tendency to remove obstacles, such as minorities, minority ideas or minority languages”

(280). To Saul, the linearity of this approach “makes no sense, given what Canada is” (280); the Aboriginal ideal of society as a great circle works much better. “It is a mechanism of inclusion that absorbs new members, adjusting as it does so. It explains how we function. It explains why we seek balance rather than clarity”, why we seek “broader harmony” and accept the multidimensionality of social life. Hence while the concept of *welfare* may have European origins, Canada’s sense of it has emerged as “an expression of the idea of the great circle”, as a result of “a constantly evolving mix of people learning how to live together, with as their guidance the non-European, non-linear, non-racial concepts of this place” (280). It is imperative for Saul that in order to be true to this particular, positive sense of self and identity, Canadians recognize, adopt and adapt the Aboriginal elements of their past, construct a new intercultural language, more apt to describe and identify what they really are.

*A Fair Country* earned much praise in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal milieus alike<sup>12</sup>. It is not difficult to guess why. Not only is its author not shy to malign increasingly reviled Canadian political and business elites—a sure crowd pleaser—but at last one of the few well-known public voices that tend to make more of a difference than most puts forward an understanding of Canada’s past and Canadian identity that gives pride of place to Indigenous peoples<sup>13</sup>. To Euro-Canadians, Saul offers a convenient way out of the collective guilt they have been and are still made to feel, particularly in the wake of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, the horrid history of the residential schools system and regular news reports on the sorry socio-economic conditions in too many Aboriginal communities. As well, as one reviewer put it, “the more the Canadian government wants to lay claim to Arctic sovereignty, the more we need to reinvent our sad history with the Aboriginal peoples” (Dyrkton), which is what *A Fair Country* is about ultimately—an imaginative exercise in reconfiguring Canadian national mythology and identity.

On the face of it there is of course nothing wrong with such an intellectual project. The problem, though, is that as with any imaginative enterprise, the line between reality and fantasy is easily blurred. And Saul does tend to take enormous liberties with reality. His depiction of Canada as an inclusive, non-racial, social-democratic dreamland thanks to Aboriginal influences is problematic on at least two counts.

First, it largely ignores the variety of social formations that existed among Aboriginal communities and cultures. Saul extrapolates from

isolated examples to assume that all Aboriginal societies were egalitarian, based on sharing and a deep concern for fostering peaceful coexistence with others. Admittedly, there is reliable anthropological evidence to suggest that collectivistic streaks ran through many Aboriginal communities, but compelling studies have shown as well the existence in quite a few others of complex social stratification and economic hierarchies, and significant power differentials between individuals<sup>14</sup>. In other words, the notion that there is one overarching, necessarily egalitarian, Aboriginal pattern of social relations, as Saul's analysis intimates, idealizes the nature of social dynamics in Aboriginal communities. Not only does it not render the full diversity of Aboriginal social experience and configurations, but it mischaracterizes indigeneity and, in the process, misconstrues its meaningfulness in Canadian history.

Second, Saul's image of Canadian society has never held sway and never quite materialized to the extent he suggests. It may have been partially true in the 1960s and 1970s when most of the ideals it evokes emerged on the policy agenda, but the neo-liberal policy choices of the following decades certainly limited their full deployment. As for Canada's history before the postwar period, very little in it ever conformed to the picture of the benevolent, egalitarian society Saul likes to project. Until the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Canada has consistently been a society characterized by almost immutable class, ethnic, racial, gender and regional hierarchies at the top of which central Canadian Eurodescendant Christian men wielded considerable socio-economic power, purposely limited upward social mobility for others and determined the criteria of citizenship. In this context, the egalitarian spirit—Aboriginal or otherwise—could not have informed the Canadian social ethos all that much. Whatever measure of egalitarianism, openness to difference or sense of inclusiveness Canadian society eventually developed came much more from the daily grind of working-class struggles, social movements' protests and taking to the streets of cities and towns than from some fount of Aboriginal *sagesse* presumably flowing from the recesses of the Canadian psyche.

This is not to deny that Indigenous peoples had any sort of impact on Canadian culture and identity. In any history of contact between two different socio-cultural groups there is bound to be some elements of each culture that will rub off on the other. But Saul's interculturalism glides all too blithely over one incontrovertible fact: except perhaps for the early years and the days of the *coureurs des bois*, the relationship of Indigenous peoples with European settlers has always been a basically unequal one, marked by repeated and largely successful attempts on

the part of settlers at imposing their social and cultural hegemony over Indigenous peoples. The occasional borrowings of Aboriginal practices, traditions or ideas by settlers were always milled through the grindstone of their Western norms and value set. Settlers did not immerse themselves in or reproduce Aboriginal ways; they westernized whatever Aboriginal cultural traits they might have found useful, intent on showing off in the end how Western ways were superior (Poulter 270). In fact, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Euro-Canadians took great pain to erase the traces of the country's Aboriginal past. Saul's insistence on Canada's presumed constitutive indigeneity implies a deliberate fusion of antithetical cultural horizons, which never took place in reality. His representation of Canada as a Métis nation is not only overblown, it is largely inaccurate.

One could perhaps forgive Saul for twisting socio-historical reality in this way. The central concern of *A Fair Country* after all is to provide Canadians with new intellectual guideposts to orient public actions that are more in line with the way they like to imagine themselves. From that perspective, Saul's interpretative licence with history is meant to act as a rhetorical device, which serves a dual purpose: it allows to right the moral wrong committed by the near total historical erasure of Indigenous peoples and cultures in Canada (absolving at least symbolically those with whom his argument resonates from the pangs of conscience this erasure might elicit); and it offers a new vocabulary for Canadians to name and describe who they really are—or who Saul thinks they ought to be. But herein lays the main, indeed critical, flaw of the book: despite Saul's obvious good will and humanistic sense of inclusiveness, despite his resolve to give back Indigenous peoples their rightful place in the history of Canada, he perpetuates a vision of the country that in the end is all and only about Euro-Canadians, their feelings, their ethos, their sense of self—about how they can finally be the great nation they have long aspired to be.

Saul missed a good opportunity with *A Fair Country* to give full substance to the view he began to develop in his 1997 *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, which acknowledges Indigenous peoples as one of the founding pillars of Canada (along with the French and the English). He could have laid the ground for the creation of a reconciliatory interface between Indigenous peoples and settlers by following suit on the oft-repeated call of Aboriginal scholars and activists to incorporate Aboriginal ways of thinking and doing things into the Canadian political ethos and mainstream social processes (Green)—to indigenize Canadian society as

it were—which entails considerably more than simply paying lip service to some idealized notion of Aboriginal contributions to Canada's past. Saul does not do that. In fairness, he does enjoin fellow non-Aboriginal Canadians to “accept that Aboriginal concepts of place and culture will be the determining factor in our success or failure” (300), but he never strays away from his Euro-settler comfort zone. In true liberal fashion, *A Fair Country* does not venture beyond the hackneyed rhetoric of recognition of difference and respect of otherness. As if simply endorsing that rhetoric was already quite an accomplishment, Saul is silent on actual solutions to implement it. He falls short in fact of committing to what would be the next logical, but politically demanding step of improving the lot of Indigenous peoples and recasting the dynamics of their relations with the state and settler Canadians along genuinely egalitarian lines. Although he seemingly writes from a position of moral sympathy with Indigenous peoples, his vision of Canada as a Métis nation is not primarily meant to advance their cause. He is not proposing a new narrative designed to question the social and institutional structures that oppress Indigenous peoples. Rather, he instrumentalizes indigeneity—a highly idealized view of it—for the sole purpose of refuelling Euro-Canadian identity with newfangled myths.

*A Fair Country* follows in that a long and ambiguous tradition, well documented in recent scholarship. Philip J. Deloria's *Playing Indian* has shown how emulating Aboriginal practices (real or invented) has been key in the historical quest of European Americans for identity and authenticity. Similarly, Shari Huhndorf's analysis of instances of “going Native” in nineteenth and twentieth century America demonstrates how “adopting some vision of Native life in a more permanent way is necessary to regenerate and to maintain European-American racial and national identities” (8). Closer to home, in a new study of sports clubs and recreational associations in mid-nineteenth century Montreal, Canadian historian Gillian Poulter reveals that the English-Canadian national identity was forged largely through the appropriation and mimicking of typical Aboriginal sports and activities. In the end, all instances of “playing Indian” or “going Native”, despite their underlying claim of goodwill toward Indigenous peoples, “reaffirm white dominance by making some (usually distorted) vision of Native life subservient to the needs of the colonizing culture” (Huhndorf 5).

John Ralston Saul will likely bristle at the suggestion that such a conclusion applies to his book. Unless he is prepared to think and operate outside the bounds of his inherently liberal sociological imagination,



where self-proclaimed openness to the Other's difference does not imply doing away with dominant expressions of hegemonic power, he will remain exposed to the possibility of such a view. Defining Canada as a Métis nation may be a nice gesture from a magnanimous hegemon, but it is largely insufficient and is likely to fall flat if the hegemon is not unequivocally committed to relinquish his power and engage in a thorough deconstruction of the structures and institutions that make his socio-political ascendancy possible. Indigenous peoples in Canada today need and want more than nice gestures.

## **Conclusion**

At first sight, everything seems to set apart *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* and *A Fair Country*—different epistemologies, different intellectual projects, and different underlying political intents. Some in fact will think that considering them in the same review essay is inappropriate so sharply divergent their outlooks on how to view Indigenous peoples appear to be. In truth, the two books are closely tied. Taken together they illustrate the ambivalence Euro-Canadians feel with the otherness of Indigenous peoples. They are two sides of a same coin. Though expressed differently they both reflect significant settler misunderstandings and impossible expectations about Aboriginal cultures and social realities. Widdowson and Howard misread the Aboriginal will of cultural preservation and their resulting repudiation of Aboriginal cultural claims follows a deep-rooted practice of settler rejection. Saul, for his part, proceeds to recast the meaning and nature of the Aboriginal experience since contact to reinvent it so as to suit his own purpose and fancy about Canada. Preferring the “imaginary Indian” he manages to engage in a transmutation of indigeneity that is no less problematic than Widdowson and Howard's denial of it. Both books are disconnected from the very people they paradoxically purport to champion and embrace.

One could leave it at that and be content with simply noting that this is merely par for the course: Euro-Canadians have never quite come to grips with the social and political challenges posed by the perennial presence of Indigenous peoples. And these two books are just further proof of it—though such proof is hardly needed. But there is more to it. At stake is the intellectual status of Indigenous peoples in Canada as focus of inquiry. Over the past decade or so, the best scholarship on issues related to Indigenous peoples has broken free from a long-standing tendency to regard them as anthropological curiosities, as objects of

(Western and colonial) knowledge. Increasingly, Indigenous peoples are seen and understood as thinking subjects, as agents of their own destiny with whom one must engage, through decolonizing methodologies, in a process of co-construction of knowledge and co-creation of solutions for meaningful change in Indigenous peoples/settlers relations<sup>15</sup>. Although *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* and *A Fair Country* are premised on the self-proclaimed solidarity of their authors with Indigenous peoples, they are both out of steps with this new socially transformative intellectual sensibility. Had Widdowson and Howard discussed their original intuition about the existence of an Aboriginal industry with the very people they contend are hurt by it, their picture of the situation would have been significantly more nuanced and more credible. Similarly, had Saul checked his vision of indigeneity against the reality of communities on the ground, he would have likely been more circumspect about his vision of Canada and his unidirectional emphasis on Euro-Canadian identity issues.

If solidarity with Indigenous peoples and, by extension, multiculturalism (or interculturalism as the Quebec variant would have it) openness to diversity and acceptance of otherness are notions that are to mean anything in Canada, if they are to be more than a vague moral framework for Euro-Canadians, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* and *A Fair Country* should stand as a reminder that we still have quite a long way to go before we actually make good on the promises these notions contain. The angst runs very deep indeed.

## Notes

1. Among some of the key works see Berkhofer; Bird; Clifton; Deloria; Francis; Garrouette; Huhndorf; Poulter.
2. For representative reviews see Alfred; Buddle; Conway; Kulchyski (The Emperor); Kuoakonnen; Simmons; Tomsons.
3. For a summary of the main critiques levelled at their book, see Widdowson and Howard (1-6).
4. They include Jean Allard, a Manitoba Métis activist, former member of the Manitoba legislative assembly and contributor to the Frontier Center for Public Policy, Calvin Helin, Tsimshian business man and author of *Dances with Dependency. Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance* (2006), and Patrick Brazeau, former National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and now senator.
5. See, among others, Mayer; Brenner; Anderson.
6. For some of these examples, see Adelson; Kulchyski (*Like the Sound*); Morantz; Niezen; Warry.

7. The White Paper was the "Statement of the government of Canada on Indian Policy". It proposed the termination of the Department of Indian Affairs, the abolition of the Indian Act and a number of measures that were meant to facilitate the insertion of Indigenous peoples on an equal footing into the mainstream of Canadian society. It was vehemently opposed by Aboriginal leaders who felt it spelled the disappearance of Indigenous peoples as distinct social entities. The government responded by shelving the proposal indefinitely. To this day, though, it remains portrayed as a key example of the Canadians state's and settlers' assimilationist intent and colonialist mindset.
8. See, among others, Bannerji; Day; Kernerman; Mackey; Thobani.
9. See, Foster; Wente. The Western Canada-based Frontier Center for Public Policy also came out in support of the book: see Quesnel. The Institute for Research on Public Policy has lent credence to Widdowson and Howard's views by publishing them some years ago in its public affairs magazine *Policy Options*. Other think tanks have taken positions with respect to Aboriginal policy that echo Widdowson and Howard's, among them the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, the Fraser Institute and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.
10. In particular *Voltaire's Bastards* (1992), *The Doubter's Companion* (1994), *The Unconscious Civilization* (1995).
11. The moral failure of Canadian elites is a theme that runs through Saul's 1997 bestseller, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*.
12. See, John Ralston Saul's website for a compilation of various reviews of his book: <[http://www.johnralstonsaul.com/SUM\\_AFC.html](http://www.johnralstonsaul.com/SUM_AFC.html)>.
13. Aboriginal scholars have insisted on and documented the contributions of Indigenous peoples to the making of Canada, but their work has had limited measurable impact beyond academic and specialized circles. See Newhouse, Voyageur and Beavon.
14. Communities of the Pacific Northwest in particular have been known to display remarkable examples of unequal social relations and enjoyment of social power, including slavery. See Donald; Ruyle; Ames; Haas; Wike.
15. Recent examples include work by Daly; Henderson; Kulchyski; Ladner; Kirmayer and Valaskakis; Slowey. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has recognized "the need to shift away from research on and for Aboriginal peoples, to research by and with Aboriginal peoples" and has put in place a funding program designed specifically to facilitate that shift. Similarly, DIALOG a network of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the *Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture* was created in 2002 for the main purpose of supporting and encouraging research initiatives with Indigenous peoples in a spirit of knowledge mobilization. See <<http://www.reseaudialog.qc.ca>>.

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