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Native Wage Labour and Independent Production during the 'Era of Irrelevance'

Steven High

THE DEBATE over the inherent right of native self-government has been largely confined to the concept of political autonomy.¹ As University of Lethbridge sociologist Menno Boldt reminds us in *Surviving as Indians*, meaningful political autonomy can only be realized once the economic dependence of native peoples on welfare has been addressed.² The historical origins of this dependency have remained obscure because the study of Amerindian history is a relatively recent phenomenon in Canada. Pioneered by anthropologists, the study of native peoples' has been joined by many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Research has tended to focus upon the early contact period, the central role of the Amerindian in the fur trade, and the evolution of relations between Amerindians and the state. Until recently, historians have assumed that the importance of natives in the New World economy did not survive the decline of the fur trade in the mid 19th century. Consequently, there has been little interest among historians in exploring the nature and extent of Amerindian participation in the emerging capitalist economy. As J.R. Miller so aptly observed in *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, only in World War II did Amerindians begin "to move out of an 'era of irrelevance' in which they had been cast by the majority population in the nineteenth century."³ Unfortunately, the perceived irrelevance of native peoples in the post fur-trade era has extended to the historiography itself. As a result, the experience of Amerindians, during a

¹With respect to the use of a general name for First Nation peoples, I have decided to use "Amerindian" and "native" as my principal terms of preference. Both of these terms are widely used in the literature and the latter has gained popular acceptance.

²Menno Boldt, *Surviving as Indians: The Challenge of Self-Government* (Toronto 1993), 235.

³J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto 1989), 221.

Steven High, "Native Wage Labour and Independent Production during the 'Era of Irrelevance'," *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 243-64.

period of tremendous social and economic change in Canada, remains largely unexplored.

Despite the inadequacies of the historiography, a growing number of anthropologists, economists, geographers, sociologists, and historians have taken an interest in native wage earners and independent producers since the publication of Rolf Knight's *Indians at Work* in 1978. This paper will discuss the existing literature (as it relates to our understanding of native labour history), the various methodological approaches involved, the changing nature of sources, and some of the opportunities for research. In doing so, I will demonstrate that there is an emerging consensus that aboriginal peoples not only participated in the capitalist economy during this so-called "era of irrelevance," but did so selectively in order to strengthen their traditional way of life. Native efforts to incorporate aspects of the capitalist economy into their seasonal round and their resistance to the government's assimilation policy laid the foundation for the future construction of the non-proletarian Amerindian worker.

"Those Who Exist On the Margins of Many Fields"

ONE OF THE MAJOR REASONS why Amerindian participation in the wage labour economy has remained largely unexplored is due to the fragmentation of the social sciences and the historical profession. Whereas anthropologists have concentrated on the reconstruction of so-called "authentic" aboriginal cultures in pre-history, the study of Amerindian participation in the capitalist economy has been at the margins of native and labour sub-disciplines within history. Similarly, ethnic studies and sociology have found it difficult to incorporate the experience of Amerindian wage earners and independent producers into their research. This section will explore how well these academic fields have investigated Amerindian participation in the capitalist economy.

As "the main impulses for the serious study of native history have come initially from anthropology," a historiographical paper involving Amerindians should commence with this discipline.⁴ Because anthropologists have long been interested in the reconstruction of traditional aboriginal cultures, the disappearance of 'primitive' societies has prompted an identity crisis within the discipline — a crisis which has been further exacerbated by new ethical questions about the study of aboriginal societies. According to Hugh Brody, "the accumulation of knowledge about colonial or tribal societies is often a facet of control and exploitation — even when the researchers firmly believe otherwise. To be neglected by science, therefore, might well be a blessing."⁵ This damning critique of Brody's own profession

⁴Bruce G. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing From Charlevoix to the Present," in Robin Fisher and Kenneth Coates, eds., *Out of the Background: Readings in Canadian Native History* (Toronto 1988), 25.

⁵Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams: Indians and the British Columbia Frontier* (Vancouver 1981), xiii.

attests to the degree of autocriticism occurring within anthropology. In a much more optimistic fashion, Noel Dyck counters that the discipline has improved enormously with the formation of new working relationships with Amerindian communities, the adoption of historical methodologies, and growing cooperation with native historians.⁶ Moreover, Dyck credits anthropological leadership in native studies for: documenting the importance of hunting, fishing, and trapping in the native way of life; establishing the importance of native-state relations; and for creating a balance between material and cultural causation.⁷

Certainly, anthropology has had a profound influence in the writing of native history in Canada. According to Bruce Trigger, a prominent Canadian historical anthropologist, the emergence of the new field of ethnohistory during the 1960s has acted "to free mainstream North American history from its legacy of a colonial ideology."⁸ By using such anthropological sources as oral tradition, archaeology, and ethnographic data, ethnohistorians have attempted to reconstruct native history without depending on traditional Euro-Canadian sources. This has resulted in a direct challenge to the "materialist" interpretation of Harold Innis, Arthur Ray, and Robin Fisher. While "materialists" argue that native actions resulted from 'rational' decisions based on their material needs, "cultural idealists," such as Calvin Martin, suggest instead that the native world view shaped these actions.⁹ Although this debate has largely occurred in relation to the fur trade, there seem to be echoes in some of the literature surveyed in this paper.

There remains considerable skepticism, however, within the historical profession about the advisability of merging with anthropology. For instance, Ian McKay is highly critical of the anthropologist's static representations of Amerindian cultures.¹⁰ Anthropologists "tend to work with abstractions," McKay observed, "which homogenize and neutralize history. These abstractions must be analyzed with great care before they are generally adopted, because there may well be something wrong with their conceptual foundation."¹¹ As a consequence, anthropologists tend to disregard the adaptive ability of Amerindian cultures. Their desire to reconstruct 'authentic' aboriginal cultures has also meant that, only rarely, have they explored the Amerindian experience in the post fur trade era. Hence, native participation in the capitalist economy is usually mentioned in the context of the abandonment of their traditional way of life.

⁶Noel Dyck, "Cultures and Claims: Anthropology and Native Studies in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 22 (1990), 43.

⁷*Ibid.*, 45-6.

⁸Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 36.

⁹Ralph T. Pastore, "Native History in the Atlantic Region During the Colonial Period," *Acadiensis*, 20 (1990), 201-2.

¹⁰Ian McKay, "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture," *Labour/Le Travail*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981-2), 206.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 211.

The limitations of the existing literature are also illustrated by a brief survey of some recent works in the field of Canadian native history. In *Canada's First Nations*, Olive Patricia Dickason provides a thoughtful analysis of native history from the "earliest times." While three of the four sections in the general text examine native experiences during the pre-Confederation era, the final section virtually skips over the period 1870-1939 except to discuss the policies of the Department of Indian Affairs and armed resistance to western settlement. Similarly, Miller's *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens* ignores the myriad of informal economic and social relations between Amerindians and Euro-Canadians in favour of an examination of the formal relationship between status Indians and the state. Further limitations in the existing historical literature are reflected in Robin Fisher and Kenneth Coates' *Out of the Background* and Miller's *Sweet Promises*. Neither include any discussion whatsoever of Amerindian economic activities in the post fur trade era. "There is still much more work and more energetic debate on the early contact and fur trading period than there is on the later phase of settlement and dispossession," admit Fisher and Coates.¹²

Similarly, historiographic essays by Harold McGee (1979), Toby Morantz (1988) and Ralph T. Pastore (1990) published in *Acadiensis*, indicate that the central theme of Euro-Canadian control and domination permeates the writing of native history. In the process, the Amerindian has sometimes appeared as a helpless victim of forces outside of his or her control. As Morantz suggests, "implicit in this focus is the belief that the significant native history is in fact these peoples' relations with the Canadian government."¹³ While a considerable body of literature on the relationship between the state and native peoples has been generated, Morantz believes it has served to further marginalize the issue of wage labour in the sub-discipline of native history. This has been achieved, according to Menno Boldt, by diverting attention from political, cultural, and economic imperialism. In an even harsher critique of the racism paradigm, J.R. Miller scoffs at the tendency to treat the aims and results of 19th century assimilative legislation as synonymous.¹⁴ For Miller, natives during the late 19th and early 20th centuries "were actors who pursued their interests and struggled to preserve their identity. They resisted, evaded, and defied efforts to control their decision making"¹⁵ In robbing

¹²Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples From Earliest Times* (Toronto 1992); J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers*; Fisher and Coates, eds., *Out of the Background*, 1-2; J.R. Miller, ed., *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto 1991).

¹³Toby Morantz, "Recent Literature on Native Peoples: A Measure of Canada's Values and Goals," *Acadiensis*, 18 (1988), 238.

¹⁴J.R. Miller, "Owen Glendower, Hotspur, and Canadian Indian Policy," in Miller, ed., *Sweet Promises*, 323.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 340-1.

Amerindians of their agency, these authors argue that the racism paradigm effectively "undermines their historical and moral claims to self-determination."¹⁶

Critics of the racism paradigm, however, have met considerable resistance from those who suggest that agency has been employed without adequate consideration of oppressive forces. Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm argue that several recent historical studies of residential schools and the anti-Potlatch law have, due to their emphasis on native agency, neglected to recognize the full impact of colonialism. According to Brownlie and Kelm, this "trend in scholarly writing thus carries within it an insidious tendency to turn Native agency into colonialist alibi."¹⁷ Instead, the authors argue that even if government was not always able to fully enforce racist laws and institutions, the threat of enforcement had an enormous impact on Amerindians. Moreover, by minimizing the effect of colonialism on native peoples, critics of the racism paradigm have inadvertently diminished the significance of native resistance. In doing so, Brownlie and Kelm warn the historian of native history to be cognizant of the political consequences of his or her research. By stressing native agency, some historians have by implication diminished the responsibility of the state for past injustices. Although native agency is "virtually undisputed" in the historical literature relating to the fur trade, agency has generally been conceived of within the racism paradigm when considering native wage earners and independent producers.

In addition to the work of native historians, labour history has the most direct affinity with native participation in the capitalist economy. In their introduction to *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History*, Gregory Kealey and Peter Warrian inaugurate the 'new' labour history as "an attempt to bring back ordinary working people from their long exile on the margins of Canadian history."¹⁸ This new generation of historians repudiated the work of the pioneers of labour history for being too concerned with labour institutions and the 20th century. Perhaps, because of their focus on the process of industrialization in the late 19th century (which has had a decidedly urban bias), natives have rarely been incorporated into the new labour history.¹⁹ With the notable exception of Rolf Knight's pioneering effort, natives have not fit comfortably into this interpretative framework. Even the growing integration of ethnicity into labour history has not yet encompassed aboriginal peoples.

Although ethnic studies emerged as a discipline during the 1970s, there has been little contact with the historical profession outside of the immigration and

¹⁶Boldt, *Surviving as Indians*, xv.

¹⁷Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi," *Canadian Historical Review*, 75, 4 (1994), 545.

¹⁸Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 7.

¹⁹James Naylor, "Working-Class History in English Canada in the 1980s: An Assessment," *Acadiensis*, 19 (1989), 159.

migration sub-disciplines.²⁰ A brief survey of *Canadian Ethnic Studies* reveal only a handful of journal articles dealing with native peoples. This suggests an implicit understanding that Amerindians are somehow outside the conception of 'ethnicity.' For instance, the *Compact Dictionary of Canadian English* defines 'ethnicity' as related "to the culture of naturalized citizens as it reflects the traditions of their home countries."²¹ Conversely, the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* detects considerably more ambiguity behind the various meanings of ethnicity. From its biological origins, the concept of ethnicity has expanded to include socially constructed identities.²² Despite the general acceptance of ethnicity as a social construct, historians have been slow to explore its meaning. They have been even slower to locate Amerindian peoples within its boundaries. As Bruno Ramirez concludes:

Very seldom has ethnicity been treated as a historical process, in order to capture its concrete manifestations within that complex and multidimensional scenario that is the historical past. Perhaps its elusiveness as a dynamic and transforming element is due to a failure to link it properly to the historicity of social and cultural processes and to an inability to apply to it a truly dialectical analysis in order to perceive it and account for it.²³

Ethnic studies has, therefore, not yet become a major player in the study of aboriginal peoples.

In contrast, the theoretical models constructed by sociologists have informed historical research into the participation of marginalized groups in the capitalist economy. According to Tony Haddad and Michael Spivey, there have been two principal theoretical frameworks used by social scientists to analyze the relationship between native and non-native economic activity. One, the modernization theory, shaped interpretation until the early 1970s, while the second, the world systems/dependency model, has since come into favour. The modernization theory involves "idealistic notions of progress" which have influenced the government's native policy and determined how social scientists have approached Amerindian economic activity. Haddad and Spivey argue that the modernization theory has been disastrous for native peoples because it introduced exploitive relations into otherwise 'egalitarian' societies. Instead, they suggest that the dependency/world-

²⁰Bruno Ramirez, "Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987), 45.

²¹Thomas M. Paikeday, ed., *Compact Dictionary of Canadian English* (Toronto 1976), 221.

²²William Petersen, "Concepts of Ethnicity," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA 1980), 234-6. Petersen cites the example of Mexican census enumerators who still identify an "Indian" as someone who both speaks an Amerindian language and wears "Indian" clothing. Because the stereotypical Amerindian is unable to perform industrial work, factory workers in Mexico are not identified as Indians.

²³Ramirez, "Ethnic Studies," 48.

systems paradigm is a more appropriate theoretical model. According to this model, which resembles the metropolitan thesis of J.M.S. Careless, "the structural-historical realities of the periphery are the direct result of the expansion of core capitalism into the periphery, in search of raw materials."²⁴ When applied to the economic experiences of Amerindian peoples, the world systems approach enables the historian to overcome "the long-accepted proposition that Natives are in the condition they are in because of some inherent fault in their cultural ideals and institutional arrangements"²⁵ Although several authors discussed in this paper, such as Diamond Jenness and H.B. Hawthorn, adopt the modernization paradigm, only Menno Boldt has systematically applied the dependency/world systems model to native history.

The study of Amerindians has been undertaken by a wide variety of social scientists and historians. Yet, the historiography of native peoples after the fur trade era remains limited due to the peculiarities of multi-disciplinary research. Standing at the periphery of all of the disciplines and sub-disciplines discussed in this section, Amerindian wage earners and independent producers have been, until recently, overlooked. However, as Donna Gabaccia indicates in relation to another marginalized group (immigrant women):

Still, scholars in this field should recognize an opening: current distress about the fragmentation of disciplines is strong and opens unique opportunities. Those who exist on the margins of many fields are in the best theoretical position to discover new analytical approaches that challenge existing paradigms and thus lead the way toward a more broadly inclusive scholarship.²⁶

Native labour history is in an equally promising position. Moreover, it is a promise which is in the process of being realized by recent scholarship.

The "Irrelevant" Native in Scholarly Writing, 1932-1978

THIS SECTION will demonstrate that the role of Amerindians in the capitalist economy during the post fur trade era was considered largely irrelevant in the early historiography. Informed by the modernization theory, the literature dismisses native independent production and presumes native non-participation in the capitalist economy. The scholarship seems to fall into two categories: those who believed that Amerindians were unwilling to become wage earners, and those who argued that natives were excluded from the capitalist economy. That natives were

²⁴Tony Haddad and Michael Spivey, "All or Nothing: Modernization, Dependency and Wage Labour and Reserve in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 12, 2 (1992), 206.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 209.

²⁶Donna Gabaccia, "Immigrant Women: Nowhere At Home?" *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Summer 1991), 75.

irrelevant to Canada's capitalist economy after Confederation was, with the possible exception of Stuart Jamieson's work, accepted wisdom.

As the standard work in native history from 1932 until the mid-1960s, Diamond Jenness' *The Indians of Canada* has had enormous influence on our understanding of native history.²⁷ This anthropological study applied the modernization theory to native economic development. Due to the failure of the First Nations to maximize the use of the resources available to them, Jenness suggests that they "lagged behind the march of progress."²⁸ Amerindian peoples were apparently unable to adapt to the new social and economic realities. As Jenness laments,

Socially they are outcasts, economically they are inefficient and an encumbrance. Their old world has fallen in ruins, and helpless in the face of a catastrophe they cannot understand, they vainly seek refuge in its shattered foundations. The end of the century, it seems safe to predict, will see very few survivors.²⁹

While the prediction proved wrong, Jenness' illustration of the transition from self-sufficiency to dependency for native peoples across the country is compelling.

Similarly, the demise of 'primitive' aboriginal and Métis societies in the face of the westward flow of white 'civilization' provides the backdrop for George F.G. Stanley's *The Birth of Western Canada* (1936). Stanley suggests that Amerindians "were unfitted to compete with the whites in the competitive individualism of white civilization, or to share with them the duties and responsibilities of citizenship."³⁰ Hence, the birth of Western Canada as a white civilization was co-mittant with the death of an indigenous Amerindian society. The failed rebellion of 1885 was for Stanley its death knell. "Henceforth," Stanley declared, "the history of the Canadian West was to be that of the white man, not that of the red man or the bois brûlé."³¹ Natives were thought to be irrelevant in this brave new world.³²

The timing of the demise of the 'old' world, wherein the fur trade held a prominent position, has attracted considerable historical debate. In *Indians in the Fur Trade*, Arthur Ray (a geographer) found that there existed a symbiotic relationship of co-dependence between European traders and Amerindian trap-

²⁷ Morris Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto 1971), 305. The enduring influence of Diamond Jenness' anthropological study, *The Indians of Canada* (Ottawa 1934), was acknowledged by Morris Zaslow when he called it the most comprehensive study in native studies.

²⁸ Jenness, *The Indians of Canada*, 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

³⁰ George F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (Toronto 1963/1936), vii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

³² *Ibid.*, 378.

pers.³³ In exchange for European goods and technology, Amerindians supplied not only the fur but also provisions and labour. This emphasis upon native agency is also expressed by Robin Fisher who demonstrates that the Amerindian was at the centre of the fur trade economy in the New World.³⁴ Fisher goes on, nonetheless, to conclude that the Amerindian was reduced to irrelevance after the demise of the fur trade by the mid 19th century. However, Arthur Ray recently argues that the fur trade actually remained vibrant in many parts of Canada until the outbreak of World War II.³⁵ Thus, the continuing importance of trading furs as a source of income for native peoples challenges the often repeated claim that the native seasonal round was made untenable by the time of Confederation.³⁶ If viable subsistence economies endured (although certainly not unchanged) until World War II, independent production of furs was crucial to their survival.

Early studies of Amerindian participation in the wage labour economy emphasized "the cultural barriers to industrialization among so-called 'underdeveloped peoples.'"³⁷ The publication of *The Indians of British Columbia* in 1955, by H. B. Hawthorne, C. S. Belshaw, and Stuart Jamieson contained an enormous volume of data compiled by an inter-disciplinary group for the Minister of State and Immigration. This project established that natives were virtually absent from the wage labour economy in 1954-55. Those that did work were overwhelmingly concentrated in the primary resource sectors of the economy which were in close proximity to their reserves. The perceived backwardness of native communities was blamed on five factors: (1) the continued links to village and kin, (2) the absence of a status system based on wealth accumulation, (3) an intrinsic interest in outside and physical labour, (4) the seasonal way of life of native peoples, and (5) the strong Amerindian desire to maintain an independent status not reconcilable with the highly disciplined factory system.³⁸ According to the authors, these attitudes, traditions, and values have restricted natives to casual labour and condemned them to the 'poverty cycle.'³⁹ The intrinsic nature of the reasons given for native

³³ Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade, 1660-1870* (Toronto 1974), xi.

³⁴ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver 1978), 210.

³⁵ Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto 1990), xv.

³⁶ Charles A. Bishop, *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade: An Historical and Ecological Study* (Toronto 1974), 92-3. Ray's suggestion that the fur trade continued to play a prominent part in the lives of native peoples after the mid 19th century had already been demonstrated in Charles Bishop's anthropological study of the Northern Ojibwa at Osnaburgh House in Northwestern Ontario. Bishop suggests that even in 1905, the Hudson's Bay Company continued to dominate the economy of the area.

³⁷ Stuart Jamieson, "Native Indians and the Trade Union Movement," *Human Organization*, 20, 4 (Winter 1961-2), 220.

³⁸ H.B. Hawthorne, C.S. Belshaw, and Stuart Jamieson, *Indians of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1955), 232-6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 242-3.

non-participation is founded on the belief that natives had never embraced wage labour.

As an economist, Stuart Jamieson was not entirely satisfied with this explanation of why Amerindians in British Columbia abstained from wage labour. For instance, this did not satisfactorily explain the relative absence of Indian workers from the province's resource-based industries in the 1950s. Building on his earlier work, Jamieson suggests in the American journal of applied anthropology — *Human Organizations*, that the competing attractions of hunting and fishing further contributed to this under-representation. As a consequence, "all such factors serve to prevent them from accepting industrial employment as a permanent way of life, with all its disciplines, restrictions, responsibilities, and 'freedoms.'"⁴⁰ Hence, independent production was seen as a barrier to the integration of Amerindians into the wage labour force.

Although natives appeared ill-suited to industrial labour, Stuart Jamieson demonstrates that natives had once been a dominant source of labour in the commercial fishing, canning, and forestry industries. Stressing continuity over change, Jamieson suggests that these pursuits were merely variations to the old work patterns of the seasonal round. Nevertheless, native dominance in the fishery and canning industry ended in the 1920s due to technological change and the industry's increasing concentration in large urban centres. As large motorized fishing vessels displaced native men from the fisheries, concentration removed women's cannery jobs from the vicinity of native reserves along the Pacific coastline.⁴¹ The forest industry, on the other hand, was of secondary importance to natives. Jamieson concludes that their relative absence from the forest industry, except for bush operations, further revealed a native preference for seasonal outdoor work.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Jamieson's research is his discussion of the impact of the formalization of work on natives employed as longshoremen, stevedores, and in railway maintenance. He found that these occupations were attractive to natives because they enabled them to periodically leave the cities to hunt and fish. This acknowledgement of the continuing importance of independent production for native workers (even after World War I), suggests that participation in the capitalist economy did not necessarily mean the abandonment of their traditional way of life. The formalization of hiring practices due to unionization and mechanization after the turn of the century acted to exclude natives, however, from an important source of supplementary income. "When the seniority and rotation system was applied by the union," argues Jamieson, "Indians on leaving their jobs lost their seniority and were forced to enter again at the bottom of the list when they returned from fishing."⁴² The formalization process also acted to

⁴⁰Jamieson, "Native Indians," 220.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 222.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 224.

devalue day labour and diminish the status of the casual labourer in the eyes of the Euro-Canadian majority. The continued preference of Amerindians for casual work resulted in their own status being diminished, thereby generating the stereotype of the "shiftless" and "undependable" Indian. The interaction between this constructed image and the real hiring practices of employers has unfortunately not been fully explored by historians of the post-contact period.

The conviction that native peoples played no role in the capitalist economy beyond the fur trade era is also revealed in Martin Robin's economic history of British Columbia from 1871 until 1933, and an initial study of Northern Manitoba by historical anthropologist Peter Douglas Elias. "The British Columbia Indians were economically expropriated, politically disfranchised, legally duped, converted into wards of the government Indians were stripped bare of their possessions, herded into bleak reservations, and quickly forgotten," Martin asserts.⁴³ In *Metropolitan and Hinterland in Northern Manitoba* (1975), Elias suggests that there was almost a direct progression from a traditional native trapping economy to an underclass of permanent unemployment.⁴⁴ Exactly when this process of "pauperization" took place, however, is unclear as Elias, at once, stresses the significance of the 1821 merger of the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies in removing native control over the means of production, and admits that almost all natives in the region continued to hunt and trap until World War II.⁴⁵ In both works, natives are assumed to have been excluded from the capitalist economy. The principal distinction between the two appears to be Elias' belief that this "industrial reserve army" was still important to the capitalist economy; not as producers, but rather, as consumers.

An Emerging Consensus: Selective Participation in the Capitalist Economy

IN A STRONG REACTION to this antecedent, Rolf Knight argues in *Indians at Work* that "[n]ative Indian peoples in BC and elsewhere in Canada have a long history as wage workers and as independent producers."⁴⁶ Influenced by the emergence of the "new" labour history, Knight successfully challenges earlier suggestions that the economic importance of Amerindians ended with the fur trade. Emphasizing change over continuity, Knight demonstrates that natives in British Columbia have a long and substantial history as wage workers and as independent producers. Moreover, Amerindians were found to have adjusted quickly to the industrial world. In doing so, Knight roundly criticizes those who had hitherto assumed that

⁴³Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto 1972), 3.

⁴⁴Peter Douglas Elias, *Metropolitan and Hinterland in Northern Manitoba* (Winnipeg 1975), 7.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 9 and 111.

⁴⁶Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver 1978), 177.

natives "were expropriated and then bound to reserve irrelevance."⁴⁷ Thus, it was only after the Great Depression had devastated native independent producers and forced many natives out of the workforce that dependency became a feature of native life.⁴⁸ *Indians at Work* is a seminal work in native labour history because it establishes that Amerindians continued to play a significant role in the economic history of Canada beyond the fur trade. The assumed irrelevancy of native peoples in the post fur trade era was henceforth dislodged from its salient position in the historiography.⁴⁹ Unlike many of his imitators, however, Knight's analysis was not limited to native wage labour. A second point of entry for Amerindians into the capitalist economy was through independent production. A remarkable degree of initiative in native communities is uncovered by Knight in spite of restrictive laws and meddling government officials. Wage earnings and independent production were used by native families to supplement their increasingly curtailed subsistence economies.⁵⁰

Despite the continued importance of the seasonal round for native peoples, Knight's ambition to locate them into the mainstream of labour history leads him to deny any distinction between native and non-native workers.⁵¹ Those who believe "that Indian labour was in the world of industrial work but not of it" are dismissed as romantics.⁵² His efforts to re-fashion the image of Amerindians, incorporating them into Canada's working class, results in a misleading treatment of the bifurcated nature of native participation in the capitalist economy. In fact, the persistence of the seasonal round, the ascendancy of independent production, and the seasonal or occasional nature of wage labour (all of which are demonstrated in *Indian at Work*) undermine Knight's contention that natives joined the proletariat. If class is a relationship and not a thing, as E. P. Thompson suggests, the

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁹Mel Watkins, "The Staple Theory Revisited," in William H. Melody, Liora Salter, and Paul Heyer, eds., *Culture, Communication, and Dependency: The Tradition of H.A. Innis* (Norwood, NJ 1981), 63. The last gasp of the old conception of native non-participation in the capitalist economy was expressed by nationalist economist Mel Watkins. In his 1981 contribution to a collection of essays dedicated to the staples theory, Watkins suggests that natives were "swept aside" after the fur trade and were, in so doing, "made irrelevant." Informed by Elias' earlier study, Watkins also suggests that the separation of aboriginal peoples from the means of production reduced them to the status of an underclass or lumpen-proletariat. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether or not Watkins is responding directly to Knight when he dismisses independent commodity producers as a subordinate mode of production which only served to reinforce merchant capital against industrial capital. In any case, Watkins' analysis is out of step with the evolution of the historiography.

⁵⁰Knight, *Indians at Work*, 194.

⁵¹In his enthusiasm, however, Knight relies too much on anecdotal evidence in what sometimes degenerates into a celebration of native labour.

⁵²Knight, *Indians at Work*, 178.

relationships that native peoples had with the means of production differed from other workers. Regardless, the importance of Knight's monograph is two-fold: by challenging the presumed irrelevance of native peoples to capitalism, Knight causes a paradigm shift in native labour history; and through his formula of "wage workers and independent producers" Knight recognizes that farming, trapping, and other methods of independent production were also an integral part of the capitalist economy. "Indian workers," Knight concludes, "... did not become irrelevant upon the arrival of the steam engine and the disappearance of the fur trade, as some authors would have us believe."⁵³

The debate over the relationship between natives and wage labour has pitted culturalist and materialist viewpoints. In the case of the West Main Cree in Northeastern Ontario, Peter J. George and Richard J. Preston found that "there are fundamental cultural and psychological differences in Indian and European attitudes to work."⁵⁴ The West Main Cree valued work as a cultural experience which made it difficult for them to take on regular wage labour. In contrast, sociologist Thomas Dunk emphatically denies the existence of any cultural inhibitions to participate in the capitalist economy by the Ojibwa in the Robinson-Superior Treaty Area. "Contrary to the view that Indians are culturally predisposed against the demands of an industrial economy ... the native people of the region did participate in the economic development of the region," Dunk argues.⁵⁵ Similarly, James Burrows' study of the Southern Interior Plateau Indians of British Columbia between 1897 and 1910 confirms the importance of wage earnings to Amerindians. For example, in 1897 the single largest source of income (identified by the Department of Indian Affairs) for Amerindians in British Columbia was wage labour.⁵⁶ Yet, Burrows concludes that the failure of Amerindians to rise above labouring in the capitalist economy came as the result of decreased job opportunities from an increased white population and mechanization. Unfortunately, in assuming that a causal link existed between the act of "working" and the desire to work, these authors overlook alternative explanations such as the need to supplement income at a time of growing scarcity of fish and game. Moreover, because the focus of these studies is on wage earnings, the profound importance of independent production to aboriginal communities is lost. Hence, Knight's formula has only been partially taken up by George, Preston, Dunk, and Burrows.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁴Peter J. George and Richard J. Preston, *'Going in Between': The Impact of European Technology on the Work Patterns of the West Main Cree of Northern Ontario* (Thunder Bay 1986), 6.

⁵⁵Thomas Dunk, "Indian Participation in the Industrial Economy on the North Shore of Lake Superior, 1869 to 1940," *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records*, 15 (1987), 13.

⁵⁶James K. Burrows, "'A Much Needed Class of Labour': the Economy and Income of the Southern Interior Plateau Indians, 1897-1910," *BC Studies*, 71 (Autumn 1986), 32.

In a similar manner, Rennie Warburton and Stephen Scott identify the fur trade in British Columbia as a bridge between traditional Amerindian economic activities such as hunting and fishing, and wage earnings in the capitalist economy. These two Marxist sociologists found that the Hudson's Bay Company expanded into commodity production in the early 19th century, thereby drawing natives into wage labour. In addition to trapping, Amerindians provided labour for the company's agricultural, fishing, and lumbering operations.⁵⁷ As a pre-industrial introduction to wage labour, the fur trade cleared the way for an important Amerindian economic role beyond the fur trade era. Consequently, Warburton and Scott show the complexity of the fur trade and recognize its importance in the transition towards wage labour. They do so, however, without recognizing the continued importance of independent production.

Although Frank Tough continues to associate independent production solely with the fur trade economy, he recognizes that aspects of this older economy persisted with the new wage labour economy. Yet, Tough questions the commitment of Amerindians to the fur trade in Northern Manitoba between 1870 and 1900. Using the records of the Hudson's Bay Company during this period, Tough suggests that Indians voluntarily turned away from the fur trade in favour of lumber and fishing activity.⁵⁸ As a result, the period saw "an improvement in the economic conditions of the Indians."⁵⁹ Exactly how was this "improvement" achieved? Clearly, Tough believes that the shift from independent production to wage earnings was responsible for this "improvement." This transformation of the regional economy was, according to Tough, accelerated after 1900 by the economic strategy of the Department of Indian Affairs, the commercialization of new resources, and the stagnation of the fur trade. However, Tough also allows for the continuing reliance of native peoples on independent production and subsistence activity. "Although the Native economy appears to be a diversified economy and one that became increasingly commercialized," Tough observes, "it was still very much a natural economy influenced by the seasons."⁶⁰ By acknowledging the movement towards a diversified economy (which included wage income and independent production), Tough takes a tentative step towards the formula conceived by Rolf Knight.

Confronting what he considers to be an artificial distinction between "traditional" independent production and "non-traditional" wage labour, Peter Douglas Elias embraces Knight's contention that both have long been important to native

⁵⁷Rennie Warburton and Stephen Scott, "The Fur Trade and Early Capitalist Development in British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 5, 1 (1985), 27.

⁵⁸Frank Tough, "Changes to the Native Economy of Northern Manitoba in the Post-Treaty Period, 1870-1900," *Native Studies Review*, 1 (1985), 57.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 58.

peoples.⁶¹ Discussion of Amerindian "traditional" economic systems becomes problematic, however, when assumptions from a later period are applied. Peter Elias tries to clarify the legal status of tradition in relation to wage labour. During the 1980s, the supreme court made several important decisions based on the assumption that wage labour is inherently non-native. "Courts see the extent to which an individual or group engages in wage labour as an indication of the extent to which Aboriginal traditions have been abandoned," Elias comments.⁶² He sets out to challenge this static representation of "traditional" native economic activity by establishing that native participation in wage labour is longstanding. Using the Hudson's Bay Company records for the post at Rapid River, Saskatchewan, he shows that from 1865 until 1900 native labour was crucial to the operation of the post. "Wage labour was only one component in a dynamic and complex regional economy that also included a market component and a domestic production component."⁶³ The accounting ledgers of the post reveal that natives were largely responsible for food production, fuel production, transportation, and fabrication. Elias' study therefore supports the hypothesis that the traditional native economy was diversified and adaptive to change. Furthermore, native independent production and wage labour have long been a feature of the capitalist economy.

Recently seizing the historical leadership, John Lutz has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the extent of Amerindian participation in the capitalist economy. In a paper presented to the 1992 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Lutz suggests that thousands of Amerindians migrated every summer to Victoria during the 1850s to hire themselves out as wage workers.⁶⁴ Amerindians in British Columbia were found to work on farms, public works, in mining and forestry operations, as domestic servants, and were even credited with being among the first factory workers. "The incorporation of aboriginal people into the capitalist labour force was a spatially discontinuous process that did not affect all aboriginal groups simultaneously or in the same way," Lutz cautions.⁶⁵ Regional discontinuities were further accentuated by generational and gender variations. Nevertheless, Lutz concludes that seasonal wage labour and

⁶¹The evolution in Peter Douglas Elias' analysis between 1975 and 1990 is striking. Clearly, his earlier assumption of native non-participation in the capitalist economy underwent a transformation. One can only assume that the publication of Knight's monograph contributed to this change.

⁶²Peter Douglas Elias, "Wage Labour, Aboriginal Rights and the Cree of the Churchill River Basin, Saskatchewan," *Native Studies Review*, 6, 2 (1990), 43.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁴John Lutz, "British Columbia's Aboriginal People Meet the Industrial Frontier, 1849-90," unpublished paper presented to the 1992 Canadian Historical Association Meeting, Charlottetown, 8.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 84.

independent production were essential to native communities throughout British Columbia during the so-called "era of irrelevance."

In a second, much more important contribution to the historiography, Lutz reconsiders Hawthorne's hypothesis that natives were disinclined to become employed in the wage labour economy because they had no status system based on wealth accumulation. Although Knight demonstrates the importance of native wage labour and independent production in British Columbia, he never provides an adequate explanation for this participation. Lutz produces such an explanation. In his opinion, the potlatch drew the aboriginal peoples of the coastal areas of British Columbia into the capitalist economy. "The potlatch was a central feature of the lives and economy of, especially, the coastal Indians. It was only through potlatches that one's hereditary status and rights to resources, property (including songs and dances), and names could be claimed and maintained," Lutz observes.⁶⁶ As a prestige economy, the potlatch provided incentives for aboriginal people to accumulate wealth by earning wages to enhance their status.⁶⁷

At the 1994 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Lutz went well beyond his earlier efforts to establish the centrality of native labour to the BC economy by illustrating how legislation constructed the image of the 'Indian.' "Not only did a myriad of federal and provincial laws and policies limit the types of occupations Indians could participate in," Lutz argues, "these laws effectively created the category of Indians as 'outside the economy' and over time, defined Indians as 'dependent on the state.'"⁶⁸ This racialization process involved the criminalization of such behaviour as drinking alcohol, the prohibition of native land ownership (thereby leaving natives no collateral for bank loans), the alienation of control over resources, provincial government efforts to limit native reserve allotments, grazing and water rights, and the exclusion of natives from acquiring fishing, timber, or trapping licences.⁶⁹ Hence, natives "found themselves in a 'civic cell' shared with children, felons and the insane."⁷⁰ While the striking image of the 'civic cell' captures the enormity of the oppressive forces ranged against native peoples, Lutz fails to discuss how Amerindians responded to this confinement. Did

⁶⁶John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: the Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-90," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1992), 87.

⁶⁷There is a danger, however, that the concentration of studies on British Columbia within the historiography exaggerates the degree of native participation in the wage labour economy elsewhere in Canada. Cultural diversity among native peoples in Canada precludes any suggestion that there was a common response to the emerging hegemony of capitalism. Finally, the consequences of the anti-potlatch law on native participation in the capitalist economy have yet to be explored.

⁶⁸John Lutz, "The 'White Problem' — State Racism and the Decline of Aboriginal Employment in 20th Century British Columbia," paper presented to the 1994 Canadian Historical Association Meeting, 5.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 7.

they passively accept this process of racialization, or did they resist? If native people did resist, what avenues did they pursue? To what degree were they successful? Whatever the case, Lutz firmly establishes that the provincial and federal governments undermined native efforts to avoid dependency through seasonal wage earnings and independent production.

In a paper presented to the same meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Anthony G. Gulig compares how Amerindians in Wisconsin and the Treaty 10 area in Northern Saskatchewan tried to "retain and protect their traditional patterns of resource use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."⁷¹ Whereas Lutz focuses on how racist laws 'imprisoned' native people, Gulig explores native resistance to government policies. In a similar situation to what occurred in British Columbia, the Wisconsin Conservation Commission tried to interfere in the annual cycle of Chippewa hunting and fishing activity. Using arrest records, Gulig shows that Amerindians expressed their continued defiance by hunting and fishing out of season.⁷² Similarly, natives in Treaty 10 "made it clear that they had no interest in seeing their way of life destroyed by outside pressures and interference."⁷³ As a result, Gulig's description of the concerted actions of native peoples to defend their seasonal round contrasts sharply with Lutz's demonstration of how government legislation constrained native participation in the capitalist economy.⁷⁴ The continued importance of independent production to aboriginal peoples, in spite of the efforts of state officials to curtail these activities, represents a profound expression of native resistance.

As a historian of technology, Diane Newell argues in *Tangled Webs of History* that British Columbia's native peoples lost control of the fisheries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries due to government policies and regulations.⁷⁵ Albeit greatly influenced by the work of Rolf Knight, Newell believes that cultural (in addition to economic) considerations led to the incorporation of "fishing and cannery work into the existing web of familial and seasonal activities."⁷⁶ This balance between independent production and seasonal wage earnings in the fishery, however, was shaken after "Indians lost effective control of the salmon resources and of their labour to the rapidly growing fish-processing industry [by the early 20th century]."⁷⁷ One of the most interesting aspects of Newell's work is the

⁷¹Anthony G. Gulig, "Rights and Resources: A Comparison of Native/Government Resource Relations in the Treaty Ten and Lake Superior Chippewa Ceded Territory," paper presented at the 1994 Canadian Historical Association Meeting, 2.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 6.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁴Gulig's use of native sources, and their absence in Lutz's work, further accentuates the differences between the approaches of these two historians.

⁷⁵Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto 1993), 96.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 96.

discovery that during "the 1920s and again in the 1940s, Indians benefited from being located above the Japanese in the racial hierarchy."⁷⁸ Tension between aboriginal and Japanese fishery workers further complicates the "racialization" process as conceptualized by Lutz.

In their study of the population geography of British Columbia in 1881, historical geographers Robert Galois and Cole Harris make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the full spectrum of native responses to white (and Chinese) settlement. Although the spatial distribution of native peoples generally reflected the pre-contact pattern, the authors found considerable change within the various regions of the province. By comparing three regions: (1) Lower Skeena and Naas where there was an overwhelming native majority, (2) Southwestern Plateau where natives still constituted a majority of the population, and (3) the Strait of Georgia where natives had already been reduced to a minority, Galois and Harris demonstrate that native seasonal rounds survived best in isolated parts of the province. The authors contend that where "non-native settlement was significant natives' access to their traditional resources was restricted, and they often had little choice but to take up new occupations — while pursuing more elements of former economies than the census indicates."⁷⁹ Moreover, Galois and Harris found evidence of native migration into towns and cities as early as 1881. There is some doubt, however, as to whether or not this reflected a nationwide trend towards urbanization. In a recent study of the Robinson-Superior Treaty Area, situated on the North shore of Lake Superior, Steve High found no evidence that natives migrated (even seasonally) to the cities of Port Arthur or Fort William prior to 1914. High argues that in "the context of the threat to their traditional economic system the Ojibwa were compelled by circumstance to expand their wage earnings in order to support their hunting and fishing activities."⁸⁰ This expansion, however, was limited to casual and seasonal work in close proximity to native reservations.

The traditional interpretation that Amerindian unwillingness to farm resulted in the collapse of reserve agriculture has recently been challenged by Sarah Carter in *Lost Harvests* and in an article by Leo G. Waisberg and Tim E. Holzkamm. In her study of the agricultural program in the Prairies, Carter concludes that the federal government sabotaged its own program in the economic interests of Euro-Canadian settlers. Far from being unwilling, natives actively encouraged the government to assist them in setting up farms. Similarly, Waisberg and Holzkamm believe that agriculture was an integral part of the traditional Ojibwa economy in Northwestern Ontario. They also blame the disappearance of reserve agriculture

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁹Robert Galois and Cole Harris, "Recalibrating Society: The Population Geography of British Columbia in 1881," *The Canadian Geographer*, 38, 1 (1994), 44.

⁸⁰Steven High, "Responding to White Encroachment: The Robinson-Superior Ojibwa and the Capitalist Labour Economy, 1880-1914," *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records*, 22 (1994), 33.

on the government in general and, in particular, on an 1881 federal regulation prohibiting unregulated commercial sale of agricultural products to non-Indians.⁸¹ Native resistance to this law took the form of evasion as the Ojibwa abandoned this particular form of independent production. While the adaptability of native economies is stressed in both studies, Carter, Waisberg, and Holzkamm agree that governmental action led to the exclusion of natives from agriculture. Native independent agricultural production, in direct competition with white farmers, was deemed unacceptable by the government.

While the abuses of the residential school system have been well documented in the past ten years, the economic implications of "educating" native children have been largely ignored. An exception to this statement is Miller's *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens* which explores the nature of the relationship between the two peoples and the efforts of natives to determine their own futures.⁸² Most native peoples initially welcomed the formation of educational institutions, since they would "enable them to cope economically with the changes about them"⁸³ It was, in fact, Wilfrid Laurier's government which turned away from training Indian children for a trade in industrial schools (in much the same manner as it sabotaged the agricultural program) out of fear of a Euro-Canadian backlash.⁸⁴ For Miller, the initial enthusiasm of natives for a formal education suggests that natives "recognized the inevitability of change and sought only to control it so that it would not prove destructive to their identity and social cohesion."⁸⁵ This willingness on the part of native peoples to learn a trade once again reflects the bifurcated nature of the native economy during the "era of irrelevance."

A quantitative approach to aboriginal participation in the capitalist economy has been attempted by Frank Tough, James Burrows, and Arthur Ray. "Indians, as wards of the government, were one of the most monitored groups in Canada," Tough observes.⁸⁶ Accessing the annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs, Tough analyzes the sources of income for native peoples (agriculture, wages, fishing, hunting, and other) in order to determine the aggregate income for the natives of Northern Manitoba. In doing so, he discovers that the general trend for wages was upwards until the 1920s, after which it declined substantially. While Burrows uses the income data over a thirteen year period to confirm that Amerindians were not predisposed against wage labour, Arthur Ray illustrates in *The Fur Trade in the Industrial Era* that between 1922 and 1938 native overall incomes

⁸¹Leo G. Waisberg and Tim E. Holzkamm, "'A Tendency to Discourage Them From Cultivating': Ojibwa Agriculture and Indian Affairs Administration in Northwestern Ontario," *Ethnohistory*, 4, 2 (Spring 1993), 175.

⁸²Miller, *Skyscrapers*, ix.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 197-8.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 277.

⁸⁶Frank Tough, "Regional Analysis of Indian Aggregate Income, Northern Manitoba: 1896-1935," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 12, 1 (1992), 97.

declined sharply. "Although this source of information has not been used extensively," Tough asserts, "the reliability and validity of this data has not been considered by most historians seeking to revise Native History."⁸⁷ Perhaps, it is time that historians took a closer look at this potentially invaluable source.

Although the annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs are a potentially useful source of data with respect to the relative importance of wage earnings and independent production to Amerindians, they pose a number of problems for the historian. For instance, historians have no idea of the guidelines used in compiling this data by the Department.⁸⁸ The accuracy of the statistics can be reasonably ascertained, according to Tough, by plotting the data onto line graphs. Accordingly, if the results are not erratic the data can be assumed to be useful in determining economic trends. While this sounds reasonable enough, there remain substantive methodological problems with Tough's study. The income data is not only compiled by non-natives under the auspices of an institution committed to the assimilation of native peoples, but there are practical difficulties in its compilation. How does an Indian Agent take into account the monetary value of subsistence hunting and fishing activities? How can a local agent accurately determine the sources of income for thousands of Amerindians living on far-flung reserves? The statistics are consequently no more than a general estimate at best, and at worst wishful thinking. Wishful thinking may very well have been involved because the department's self-interest undoubtedly acted to minimize traditional activities and to exaggerate the importance of subsistence agriculture. These methodological concerns may have, therefore, led many historians to ignore the Department of Indian Affairs' statistical data.

Conclusion

WHILE THE ADEQUACY OF SOURCES has been a persistent question in the study of Amerindians, the historian of the native experience between 1867 and World War II is in the advantageous position of having available additional sources of information. If the statistical data of the Department of Indian Affairs is of dubious value, the internal correspondence within the department, letterbooks of local Indian Agents, census manuscripts, municipal assessment rolls, newspapers, published works, diaries and correspondence of Amerindians themselves, and the use of taped interviews, provide the historian with a variety of potential sources for the most part unavailable to historians of an earlier era. There is no reason for functioning as though native peoples' perspectives concerning their own economic position cannot be integrated into the historical equation. Unfortunately, most of the studies discussed in this historiographic paper have failed to go much beyond the records of the Department of Indian Affairs and the Hudson's Bay Company. We are, therefore, left with little conception of Amerindian attitudes towards wage

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

labour and independent production. What did natives perceive their role to be in the capitalist economy? Why did they overwhelmingly opt for casual or seasonal work? How did wage labour alter gender relations within the Amerindian family? Did employment introduce new class distinctions within the native community? Although we can be reasonably certain that Amerindians fashioned a bifurcated economy based on independent production and selective wage labour, the underlying reasons for this innovation have yet to be explored. As Calvin Martin has observed, "we presume to document and interpret the history of a people whose perception of the world for the most part eludes us, whose behavior, as a result, is enigmatic."⁸⁹

What is the legacy of native efforts to fashion a diversified economy based on seasonal wage earnings and independent production? Despite the efforts of the state to assimilate native peoples, and the effect of Euro-Canadian encroachment on fish and game, independent production survived as the cornerstone of the Amerindian economy. According to Hugh Brody's classic study of reserve life in Northeastern British Columbia during the 1970s, natives had avoided becoming proletarianized. Euro-Canadian dreams of unlimited exploitation of resources did, of course, clash with native cultural and economic systems. The importance of Brody's pioneering ethnographic effort lies in the confirmation that independent production did not wither away as once assumed. In *Maps and Dreams*, the Amerindians of Northeastern British Columbia exhibit a "readiness to adapt to new environments, to use different resources, and to seize new technological advantages"⁹⁰ The seasonal round appropriated aspects of the capitalist economy to strengthen the whole. Hence, the native economy involved not only hunting, fishing, and trapping activities but also included seasonal and occasional wage labour.⁹¹ Native participation in the wage labour economy must, therefore, be seen in relation to the resiliency of aboriginal societies.

A consensus has emerged among those who study native labour history that aboriginal peoples not only participated in the capitalist economy (as wage earners and independent producers) during the so-called "era of irrelevance," but did so selectively in order to strengthen their traditional way of life. The endurance of independent production as a central feature of native life, in spite of endemic racism and official opposition, is an often overlooked sphere of native resistance. This tradition of resistance laid the foundation for the future construction of the non-proletarian worker. In Rolf Knight's *Indians at Work*, Amerindians were finally recognized as wage earners and independent producers. Although not imitated at first, this formula has become increasingly credible as historians realize that the selective nature of native participation in the capitalist economy was unique. Unlike

⁸⁹ Calvin Martin, "The Metaphysics of Writing Indian-White History," in Calvin Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York 1987), 27.

⁹⁰ Brody, *Maps and Dreams*, 86.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

the majority of non-natives, native workers have generally relied on wage earnings and independent production. The implications of this selective participation on the development of capitalism (especially in the provincial norths, the Northwest, and Yukon Territories) have yet to be explored. Ultimately, our traditional conception of labour history as the history of wage earners needs revision if we are going to locate native labour history within the larger working class experience.

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