

The Three Rs of Relationship, Respect and Responsibility:
Contributions of Aboriginal Political Thought for Ecologism and Decolonization in Canada

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Introduction

Aboriginal conceptualizations of relationship, respect, and responsibility frame land use and tenure regimes, political relations and protocols, and expectations of individuals in community. Conceptually predisposed to values of balance and harmony, these views of relationship, respect and responsibility are inconsistent with the predatory practices of contemporary capitalism and with the cultural motifs derived from the monotheistic and liberal imperatives of male human domination of all for personal gain. However, these values contain wisdom and imply practices that may be essential if the ecosphere is to survive human practices of consumption and exploitation. Thus, “our best hope of protecting the Earth's biological (and cultural) diversity is to adapt and institutionalize those knowledge systems and technologies that have preserved diversity for millennia. These Indigenous knowledge systems embody the principle of sustainability” (Susskind 2006) They also are essential components of a decolonization programme for the Canadian state, in pursuit of a just and non-oppressive relationship between indigenous peoples and others. In this paper I explore the potential of these traditional indigenous ideas and practices, together with approaches in ecologist¹ and ecofeminist thought, to inform public policy, heal dysfunctional relationships, and mobilize a contemporary Canadian societal transformation.

From Philosophies to Practices

Aboriginal political thought has approached the problematic of relationship differently than have the canonical thinkers of liberalism. Relationship is understood in Aboriginal philosophies and cosmologies to be a multi-faceted affair, an always-in-process that is essentially a verb. Thus, relationship is sustained through practices, through ceremonies, and through repetition of acts of meaning and recognition. Narcisse Blood and Cynthia Chambers explain this relationship of all, with all; and the responsibility that attends relationship; and the knowledge that is created by and encoded in the practices that sustain relationship; in the context of *siksiktapiksi* (Blackfoot) relationships with specific sites in traditional territory,

¹Matthew Festenstein and Michael Kenny describe ecologism, or “green political ideology”, as “a distinctive, interlocking web of philosophical, moral, and political ideas linked with particular kinds of policy programme”. The ideology ranges from the pale or shallow green of accommodationist forms of green liberalism, through to the ecocentric or deep green forms which take a more integrated and holistic view of human and other relationships with and within the biosphere. *Political Ideologies*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005:327.

kitaowahsinnoon (2006). They make it clear that the responsibility of generations of *siksiktapiiksi* to attend and be in relationship with specific sites is vital to the health of the sites and of the people. Thus, responsibility is discharged through relational practices, which are framed by a cosmological value of respect. The Blood and Chambers paper is specific to the *siksiktapiiksi* community and worldview, but it is very recognizable to other indigenous communities. There are core values here that are shared generally by indigenous peoples in Canada and North America, the territory known as Turtle Island, and they have much to teach non-indigenous thinkers with whom they now involuntarily share their territories. Judith McKenzie warns against essentialism of Aboriginal peoples' philosophies, but also points to the commonalities: land has important non-economic meaning; and is "sacred geography", the location of spiritual practices tied to sacred sites; and human beings are a small part of a larger eco-order (2002:38-42). Susskind notes that "indigenous cultural values prioritize community cohesion over individual advancement, and emphasize reciprocity, balance, and integration with the natural world. These values ... offer a basis for policies that can support sustainable economic and environmental practices" (2006). The consensus here is that worldviews embodying values produce different approaches to the ecosphere, and thus, lead to practices that are consistent with these values.

Relationship is a perpetual process framed by another dominant motif, respect. Respect for others' views and autonomy, for other creatures, for the biosphere, for knowledge embodied in elders and for particular practices commended by traditions, is a precondition for relationship. And relationship is practised through a conception of personal and collective responsibility to each other, to the biosphere, and to a future in which one will not be present. This is referenced on the indigenous notion of responsibility of decision makes to those seven generations hence. Kulchyski writes: "If there is an Aboriginal environmentalism, ... it stems from this kind of social structural fact: in these communities there is a knowledge that great-grandchildren will see the impact on the land of decisions made today" (2005:78). Thus, government, economic agents, and individuals are understood to have responsibility to all facets of creation, and across generations, as is inferred in the indigenous invocation of "all my relations". This notion of responsibility extends far beyond electoral rotations and quarterly profit reports. Conceptualized thus, responsibility is a facet central to notions of relationship. Discharging that duty is a manifestation of respect for the wisdom entailed in it, and the communities sustained by it.

Nor is relationship only with others from one's own community, with other humans, other nations, or a deity: relationship is simultaneously practices with all manifestations of creation and is more akin to stewardship than to ownership (RCAP 1995:9-14; see also Blood and Chambers 2006). Similarly, Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki write: "Traditional Waswanipi society tends to view the totality of nature through the same lens through which the Waswanipi people view themselves: the bonds of human kinship" (1995:56). Henderson, Benson and Findlay explain the Mi'kmaw worldview of the people and their territory as a "sacred order ... expressed as a sustaining relationship" (cited in Ladner 2005:938). This is a cosmological view of the world, in which politics is integrated with spiritual, cultural, social, and other forms of collective consciousness. Often termed "holistic", the relationship as described above has the capacity to involve others who are not part of particular nations. It has the

capacity to be with elements of creation that are not human. Ultimately, it is integrative in a balance maintained by particular practices, stories, and ceremonies. It is a thought system that places particular human beings in relation to everything in their territories, a particular part of the ecosphere, with a cosmological mandate to care for it so as to be cared for by it. On this view, humanity is no more and no less important than any other aspect of creation, and thus, the political economies and ecologies that emerge from this view are themselves holistic. This is a very different understanding of humanity's place in the ecosphere than the hierarchical and utilitarian relationship implied in liberalism's approaches, focused on the rational self-maximizing individual; and in the separation of human society from nature implied in the biblical dictum to hold dominion over everything.

Deloria (1973:75) proposes that fundamentally, settler and indigenous cosmologies differ in the way that land is conceptualized. "American Indians hold their lands – places – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind." Little Bear writes "The Earth cannot be separated from the actual being of Indians" (RCAP 1995:9). Land is not an object of ownership, but a part of the web of relationships structured by ceremonies – what Richard Daly (RCAP 1995:12) calls "reciprocal interaction – which make manifest the responsibilities that humans have to particular territories. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples captures the distinction. "(A)s stated by Chief Edward John, Aboriginal peoples understand Aboriginal title to refer to a set of inherent rights defining "our most basic sense of ourselves, and of our relationship to the Creator, our territory and the other peoples of the world." (RCAP 1995:46-47) This perspective is shared by culturally and geographically distinct indigenous nations. "Despite their many differences, what unites the social organization of the Blackfoot and Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples is the fact that both societies operate according to systems of land tenure that emphasize stewardship and harmony with the earth" (RCAP 1995:13). Tony Penikett writes, in respect of the British Columbia land claims and treaty making process: "First Nations often refer to stewardship of natural resources as a 'sacred trust,' and they view land, sea, and resources as fundamental components of modern treaties, not only for traditional reasons but also for the new economic opportunities these resources provide." (2006:116)

These last two writers make it clear that the sacred nature of relationship to and responsibility for land is a contemporary as well as a traditional view, and that it encompasses economic viability for human societies, through practices grounded in respect for the land and the ecosphere. Penikett is explicit on this score, arguing that the mechanism of contemporary treaties "can serve the ends of intersocietal accommodation, sustainable economies, and resource conservation" (ibid:123).

Peter Kulchyski argues that this relationship to land is pre-capitalist and is essentially conceptually different than the economic relationship that capitalism structures with land and then, with labour (2005). But he is careful to say that it is not developmentally inferior, in a state of becoming capitalist. This would be to impose the values of liberalism and capitalism on indigenous socio-political formation. Blood and Chambers point out that the severing of the Blackfoot from their territories and from practising relationship with particular sites through

repetition of ancient traditions is a consequence of capitalist imperatives expressed through particular political, corporate and civil agents and interests, in a process of colonialism. (2006).

Capitalism in its historic phases motivated imperialism, of which, in Canada and elsewhere, colonialism was a specific historical practice. The motivation was the quest for wealth and land – wealth from the incidents of the land – and the prerequisite was the appropriation of what was, after all, others’ land and hence, of others’ political and military capacity to withstand the appropriation. Subsequent to successful colonization, the task became the maintenance of settler dominance at the expense of the colonized, and this was done by bureaucratic, military and ideological means (Green 1995). The neophyte state developed political, economic and bureaucratic regimes designed for the benefit of the colonial (later the settler) society, particularly for their economic elites, as were the governing institutions. Memmi suggests that colonial processes make all newcomers complicit in the oppression of colonialism, “a collective responsibility by the fact of membership in a national oppressor group” (Memmi 1965:39). To recap, colonization in Canada was motivated by the search for *others’* land and wealth, legitimated by the facilitative fictions of colonial ideology, and implemented by state policy through the army, the cops, churches, and bureaucrats. These fictions framed the land and nature as adversaries to be conquered, subdued, and improved; the cultural markers sustaining these fictions are elsewhere, not here; and contemporary relational practices with indigenous peoples are framed by the great historical schism created by imperialism and colonialism.

The consequence was the divorce of indigenous peoples from their traditional territories, and from the relational practices deployed by particular nations with their territories. It resulted in other relational fracturing. Indigenous nations were split, nation from nation, band by band by reserve, status from Metis and non-status. Both the oppressive coercive nature of the colonial-indigenous relationship and the geographic and institutional segregation of communities ensured that indigenous peoples were relationally alienated from non-indigenous peoples, the beneficiaries of the colonial order. As Blood and Chambers write, “the ‘rez’ became the homeland while *napiikoaksi* [white people] occupied all of the remaining *kitaowahsinmoon* (2006:4). The knowledge of the maintenance of the land and of particular peoples through relationships with *each other*, was dismissed, romanticized, and in some cases, as in the suppression of the Sun Dance and Potlatch ceremonies, was legislatively prohibited.

The intelligencia have participated in the ideological formations that legitimate colonialism and the practices that are destructive to the ecosphere. In political science and economics, liberal philosophy, grounded on “the secularization of nature and the universalism of the category ‘man’” (Radford Reuther 1975:191) has been the cornerstone for a host of approaches to academic and policy matters. Chief among them is the modernization and development paradigm, dominant especially in American political science, and conceptually oblivious to the strengths of indigenous politico-economic and cultural paradigms. Advocates of modernization have developed a self-justifying set of assertions which ground the approach, and they rely on the proposition that ‘pre-modern’ or ‘traditional’ societies lacked not only technological capacity but philosophical capacity. As Coates et. al put it, “(the juxtaposition of the traditional/modern and the Western/non-Western are premised on the view that European

culture is the pinnacle, superior to the traditional (primitive) cultures” (2005:6). Modernization, the dominant and dominating paradigm of the past century, provided the logic for its dominance: it was the expression of the most advanced impulses in human civilization and thus, resistance was not only futile, but contrary and illogical. The values within indigenous paradigms were considered unnecessary to the political and economic models and practices of global capitalist expansion. It is precisely this hegemonic conception of human pre-eminence in creation and consequently, the dominating, exploitative logics of capitalism and western rationality that have led humanity to the edge of the abyss of eco-catastrophe.

There is some suggestion that shifts to post-materialist values, *pace* Inglehart and Giddens, are producing impulses toward “quality of life” priorities, including the environment and relationship (Coates et al. 2005:7-8) These impulses must be integrated culturally so that they are evident goods to which most will subscribe; and they must be integrated within the political practices of democracy so that they are chosen but are also sustained by the coercive arm of the state. While this political factor is an imperative part of transformation, it is a larger topic that can be accommodated in this paper. At minimum, traditional indigenous political processes encoded within cultural traditions are largely incompatible with western democratic and populist politics, focussed principally on individuals within communities that are effectively more economic than political in their bonds. Bridging the values and processes of the two is a major challenge for shifting political culture and thus creating space for useful political communication.

The conceptual approaches of eco-feminism² are compatible with indigenous decolonization priorities, though little work has been done at exploring their shared terrain. Ecofeminism re-introduces the element of spirituality, sustained by ritual, in relationship to land and between communities (Radford Reuther 1975; Daly 1973; Starhawk 1990). But ecofeminism also has a philosophically rigorous core, that both critiques liberalism and capitalism and provides alternatives in contemporary conditions (Plumwood 1997; Warren 1996, 1997) Like indigenous thought, ecofeminist thought posits a fundamental link between the immanent and the transcendent power of creation, maintained by relationship. Plumwood argues

²Karen Warren writes that “the promise and power of ecological feminism is that *it provides a distinctive framework both for reconceiving feminism and for developing an environmental ethic which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature.* [italics in original]. “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism”. *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Karen J. Warren, ed.). Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996:19.

that colonization, with its predatory practices and its Otherization of nature and indigenous peoples, relies on androcentric and anthropocentric views of [white] man in relation to nature, and also, of the similarity of the colonized [and of women] and nature in their essential homogenous wildness and deficiencies of civilization, thus requiring control (1997).

Fusing indigenous, postcolonial, and feminist approaches, Makere Stewart-Harawira proposes that “traditional Indigenous ontological principles provide a framework and context for the development of a socio/politico/economic ontology of the possible, while at the same time endeavouring to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism” (2007:126). Stewart-Harawira argues that decolonization “goes beyond the reclaiming of Indigenous self-determination to the reclaiming of the whole globe from the grip of insanity fuelled by ruthless greed and ambition”. She suggests that this is essentially a matter of rethinking and then acting on a “new political ontology for being together in the world” – that is, a formulation of relationship that “at the very least [tells us how to] honour the sacredness inherent in all things ... and to act in the world and towards each other appropriately” (Ibid:134).

The consequence of colonialism was the privatization and monetization of the land and the obliteration of the value of non-monetized activity that depends on land. The contemporary political order, characterized by the effective political, cultural and economic separation of indigenous peoples from the Canadian mainstream, is a result of the imposition of this order. It is an example of the consequence of relational fracturing, and of the poverty of ideological and philosophical regimes which cannot take account of an integrated and integrative cosmos. The emerging international human rights regime is moving toward protection of indigenous relationship with traditional territories: the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP), now abandoned by the Canadian government (Cosentino 2006) asserts: “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain their distinctive and profound relationship with their lands, territories and resources, which include the total environment of the land, waters, air and sea, which they have traditionally occupied or otherwise used” (Reproduced in Knudtson and Suzuki 1992:206).

There is a connection between exploitative practices like imperialism and colonialism, and the capitalism-motivated destruction of the ecosphere. They rely on the same view of the world and thus, changing that view is a precondition to changing the behaviours. Susskind writes: “Many of the policies that most threaten Indigenous Peoples also threaten the health of the planet itself, jeopardizing our collective future. One example is global warming, caused in large part by the unsustainable use of fossil fuels” (2006). Can indigenous conceptions of relationship, responsibility and respect save the planet from the consequences of this?

The ecocide currently in process, in which the earth’s climactic and related processes are being destroyed by human and especially capitalist productive activities, is a consequence of a way of thinking about human beings in relationship to land and to others who are not human. As the eco-catastrophe that modernity has created unfolds, social movements, philosophers, scientists, governments, academics and activists are increasingly articulating a view of being that

looks remarkably like indigenous cosmological models (Radford Reuther 1975; Knudtson and Suzuki 1992; Plumwood 1997; Blood and Chambers 2006) As traditional knowledge is reanimated and redeployed, relationships are repaired. If this process takes on a critical capacity – if enough people, governments, academics and others begin practicing and implementing and teaching about these processes – they allow people to begin to heal the earth, place by place. As Blood and Chambers argue, “the land is an animate being, a relation, and when treated as such, she offers gifts in return” (2006:4).

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