

Development, Postmodernism and Aboriginal Policy: What Are We Afraid Of? ¹

Frances Widdowson (Department of Policy Studies, Mount Royal College)
& Albert Howard (Independent Researcher)

Proposed Paper for the Annual Meeting
of the Canadian Political Science Association
Carleton University, May 27-29, 2009

In October 2008, a storm of controversy was unleashed by our book, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*.² The book asserts that aboriginal cultures in North America at the time of contact were at an earlier developmental stage than the European societies that encountered them, and that incentives are being given to retain many of these features. The controversy largely focused on the comments of Margaret Wenté, a columnist with *The Globe and Mail*, who used the book to support the assertion of Dick Pound, a former Vice-President of the International Olympic Commission, that "400 years ago, Canada was a land of savages, with scarcely 10,000 inhabitants of European descent, while in China, we're talking about a 5,000-year-old civilization."³

Although we were dismayed that the book was being associated with the use of the word "savages" to refer to aboriginal peoples, rather than an historical period in human cultural development, questions about the validity of our argument concerning developmental differences remain. Wenté wrote in her infamous column: "Mr. Pound's choice of words was inflammatory, to say the least. But what about the underlying thought? Is it fair to say that the Canada of 1600 was not as "civilized" as China?"⁴

The case for the theory of developmental stages, extensively documented in the book, finds opposition on two different bases: first, it is maintained that the evolutionary assumptions are offensive because they classify aboriginal peoples as being "inferior" to Europeans, thus justifying the continued marginalization of the former; and second, there is the position that cultural evolutionary theories are outmoded and scientifically invalid, and that all cultures should be considered to be equally developed, just "different".

But the fallacious insistence that unevenness in development comprises value judgments as to whether certain groups are "superior" or "inferior" inhibits discussion of the second objection to our book – its scholarly merit. Against the threat of accusations of racism, debate about the argument in support of our ideas of cultural developmental differences is effectively silenced.

¹ We would like to thank David Marshall, Robin Fisher and Bruce Foster at Mount Royal College for making it possible to pursue this research. Although facing a great deal of political pressure, Mount Royal College has stood behind academic freedom and their actions provide a model for educational institutions around the world.

² Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

³ Margaret Wenté, "What Dick Pound said was really dumb – and also true", *The Globe and Mail*, October 25, 2008, p. A21.

⁴ Ibid.

This paper, through historical and materialist analysis, will show that the argument that cultures evolve at different rates is both scientifically and ethically defensible. It will be asserted that acknowledgment of the developmental gap between hunting and gathering/horticultural societies and modern civilization is necessary if the policy goal is to give aboriginal people the option of becoming equal participants in Canadian society. This position is progressive and concerned about achieving social justice. The opposition to the idea of development, on the other hand, has emerged out of the cultural and epistemological relativism of postmodernism – defined as "an intellectual current characterized by the more-or-less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a 'narration', a 'myth' or a social construction among many others".⁵ This romantic and reactionary philosophical tendency that has come to dominate the academy is actually racist because it contains the tacit assumption that the people in less developed cultures have inherent differences which are indicative of "inferiority".

THE ETHICAL ARGUMENT ABOUT ASSUMPTIONS OF CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

In examining the response to *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, the most common reaction is a refusal to engage with its arguments. Attempts to justify this refusal cite ethical grounds, maintaining that the book is so outrageous and offensive that it should not be publicly discussed. Some even assert that "arguably the world would have been a better place" if the book had not been written⁶ – an astonishing position in an academic environment. As a result, some political scientists take the position that it is best to deliberately omit the book from course outlines and seminar discussions since they believe it would give legitimacy to arguments that are harmful to the aboriginal population.⁷

The most prominent reason given for this reaction is that any assertions of cultural developmental differences are "racist". Taiaiake Alfred, the Director of the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria, for example, entitles his review of our book "Redressing Racist Academics, Or, Put Your Clothes Back On, Please!".⁸ Alfred's views are echoed by Rauna Kuokkanen, a professor in the Departments of Political Science and Native Studies at the University of Toronto. Kuokkanen asserts that our observations about the wide cultural gap that existed between aboriginal peoples and Europeans at the time of contact are indicative of "racist, eurocentric rhetoric".⁹ Kuokkanen then links this assertion about cultural developmental differences to Nazi ideology, a connection also made by the political scientist Kiera Ladner. According to Ladner, our views amount to a "fantasy of the master race," where

⁵ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador USA, 1998), p. 1.

⁶ Sandra Tomsons, "The Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy and Aboriginal rights", Paper presented for the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Carleton University, May 2009, p. 3.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 3-4.

⁸ www.taiaiake.com/42 (accessed May 2009).

⁹ Rauna Kuokkanen, "Savage Backlash", November 9, 2008, <http://rauna.wordpress.com/2008/11/09/savage-backlash/> (accessed December 2008)

the “civilized” ruled over “savages”.¹⁰ One media columnist even asserts that our book “sounds an awful lot like the KKK who [sic] insists they don’t want government to hate black people, but that government should love white people more”.¹¹

But it is necessary to acknowledge that culture and race are completely different aspects of human existence: race, while plausibly a social construct, is rooted in biology, and unchangeable. Culture, on the other hand, is learned behaviour and often shared by people of different racial backgrounds. These accusations of racism also are not consistent with the content of our book. They rely upon misrepresentation and selective interpretation. The lack of evidence provided indicates the purpose of these accusations - to stifle discussion and debate about aboriginal policy in Canada. It is a charge that has been honed by the Aboriginal Industry – the group of non-aboriginal lawyers and consultants who benefit from the continuation of the existing policy direction. As we pointed out in *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, this group maintains

that any criticism of aboriginal policy constitutes a denigration of native people themselves. Essentially, whenever a criticism is raised about the current policy of acquiring more and more funding with less accountability, the Aboriginal Industry sets to work attacking the credibility of the critic rather than answering the charges. And since most Canadians understandably want to avoid the label of being insensitive to the aspirations of the most deprived ethnic group in our society, virtually all criticism, let alone honest analysis of aboriginal policy, is effectively silenced.¹²

Exposing the interests behind these unsubstantiated accusations of racism, however, has had limited effect due to the entrenched media influence of the Aboriginal Industry and the privileged native leadership. It is even implied that any objection to the label “racist” is just a confirmation that one “protests too much” (to deny is to be *in denial*). Phil Fontaine, for example, remarks that critics like us “employ a by-now familiar tactic of intolerance: stating that the kind of ‘bold’ and ‘frank’ ideas they present will see them labelled [sic] as racist by some, but, verily, they must be discussed. When they are indeed called out as racists, they consider themselves vindicated. But, to paraphrase Freud, sometimes racism is just racism”.¹³

Peter Kulchyski, a Native Studies professor from the University of Manitoba, uses a similar tactic, claiming that we have attempted to “innoculate” [sic] ourselves from the charge of racism

¹⁰ Alexandra Shimo, “Tough critique, or hate speech?”, *Maclean’s*, February 25, 2009.

<http://www2.macleans.ca/2009/02/25/tough-critique-or-hate-speech/> (accessed April 2009). Although concerns have been raised about the accuracy of the reporting in this article – both Frances Widdowson and Barbara Arneil claim that they were misquoted, and Widdowson wrote a letter to *Maclean’s* disputing the views attributed to her (see the comments on the website referred to above) – an email was sent to Kiera Ladner on March 22, 2009 asking for confirmation of the following excerpt in *Maclean’s*: “She [Widdowson] implied Aboriginals were ‘a backwards people wandering aimlessly through the woods,’ says Kiera Ladner, Canada Research Chair in indigenous politics and governance at the University of Manitoba. Ladner says Widdowson perpetuates a ‘fantasy of the master race,’ where the ‘civilized’ ruled over ‘savages’—a view that’s ‘decades, possibly centuries,’ out of date”. In the email, Widdowson asked Ladner: “Do you think that this accurately reflects your views on the subject? I also would be happy to provide any additional comments that you would like to make”. The email, however, was received but not responded to.

¹¹ George T. Baker, “Ignorant ideas show savagery of columnist”, *Daily News*, November 6, 2008, p. 4.

¹² Widdowson and Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, pp. 9-10; see also p. 46.

¹³ Phil Fontaine, “Let us be who we are; The head of the Assembly of First Nations has a message for Canadians”, *National Post*, February 9, 2009, p. A12.

by “confronting it”.¹⁴ While the non-racist character of our work is at first accepted by Kulchyski (who concedes that our perspective is “technically ethnocentric rather than racist”), he goes on to claim that, at times, our “ethnocentrism does slide over into overt racism”. But the two pieces of evidence that Kulchyski uses to support this accusation are absurd. The first concerns our reference to the book *Why Cats Paint* in our chapter on “traditional knowledge”. Kulchyski claims that the use of this book is “effectively implying that elders have the same absence of ability to think as cats have to create art (shades of Sepulveda’s comparison of Indigenous peoples to monkeys back in the mid-sixteenth century, which is about where this book belongs)”. People who take the time to read our book will find that our use of *Why Cats Paint* is not as Kulchyski infers. The book is used to illustrate how distortions and fabrications can be used to support dubious arguments. As we explain, “the important message behind this clever parody [*Why Cats Paint*] is that even the most improbable idea can be made to seem possible when huge amounts of pseudoevidential infrastructure are deployed to support it”.¹⁵ What we are referring to are the various claims that the Aboriginal Industry is making about “traditional knowledge” vis-à-vis the scientific method, and the deception that it uses to support them.

Secondly, Kulchyski claims that pointing to the problems of alcoholism and sexual abuse among the native leadership is evidence of “pernicious racism” (he even claims to know that we do this “gleefully”). Kulchyski’s support for this assertion is that we did not link the social dysfunction of many aboriginal leaders to the residential school system, or mention Brian Mulroney or Conrad Black. But only a fraction of aboriginal people went to residential schools, and Mulroney and Black are not held up as representatives of non-aboriginal society (on the contrary, they are commonly ridiculed and disparaged as crooks). We fail to see how any of this is an indication of “racism”.¹⁶ Constantly demanding the recognition of colonialism, regardless of relevance, is more clearly an attempt to prevent our arguments from being taken seriously and examining the interests that are driving the current aboriginal policy direction.

A related argument to the racism accusation is that developmental arguments are informed by right-wing ideologies. Janet Conway, Canada Research Chair in Social Justice at Brock University, for example, maintains that the “Eurocentric theories” in our book “have been rightly rejected by indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world in their struggles for life and land - indeed for their very survival - in the face of modern forms of colonialism”.¹⁷ This accusation has hindered debate because most academics are like Conway and identify, at least to some extent, with notions of egalitarianism and social justice. Therefore, to label critics of

¹⁴ Peter Kulchyski, “The Emperor’s Old Clothes”, *Canadian Dimension*, March/April 2009.

¹⁵ Howard and Widdowson, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 232.

¹⁶ Similarly, Taiaiake Alfred is unable to provide any evidence that our book is racist. He claims that the book is racist because our “notion of culture is equated to ethnicity” and that our conception of the “‘Aboriginal industry’ includes and embodies just about every Indigenous writer and representative in the country”. This is in spite of the fact that we clearly separate culture and race, and maintain that the “Aboriginal Industry” is non-aboriginal. www.taiaiake.com/42 (accessed May 2009).

¹⁷ Janet Conway, “Colonialism at its worst”, *The Globe and Mail*, October 27, 2008, p. A14.

aboriginal policy as “right-wing” or “colonialist” prevents academics, otherwise uncomfortable with the existing policy direction, from entering into the debate.

The most extensive “right wing” accusation is made by Peter Kulchyski. Kulchyski is so intent on disproving us as historical materialists that he accuses us of intellectual dishonesty. As Kulchyski puts it: “I had previously written these authors off as ‘kooks’ from the far political right wing; but now they have been embraced by certain prominent left academics and have themselves started to gloss their opinions with Marxist rhetoric”.¹⁸

Robert McGhee, an archaeologist at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, in his response to Kulchyski’s review, “Should a tailor be asked to review a book on the Emperor’s clothing?”, notes that the “visceral reaction is usually a symptom that something other than intellectual disagreement is going on beneath the surface, and in this case it is fairly easy to trace the ganglia that lead straight to the intellectual midbrain of autonomic response rather than to the forebrain of critical thought and rational argument”.¹⁹ McGhee goes on to point out that

one of these distressing nerves is stimulated by Widdowson and Howard’s self-identification as Marxists, and their use of a Marxist perspective from which to criticize the cadres of government-funded lawyers and anthropologists who are employed in negotiating aboriginal treaties and self-government. In Kulchyski’s view such criticism derives naturally from right-wing politics, and is not as easily discredited when it comes from a socialist source. Rather than dealing with their critique, Kulchyski chooses to suggest that the authors are only pretending to be socialists. Unfortunately, any reading of the text indicates that such a claim is absurd.²⁰

The latest development in these unsupported accusations is the claim that the arguments in the book constitute “promotion of hatred”. Once again, this charge is made without being able to show how this is confirmed by the book’s content. Taiiaki Alfred is somewhat of an exception to this in that, while he maintains that our work indicates that we are expressing “hatred” towards aboriginal peoples, he recognizes that he must “provid[e] some evidence” of this before making the claim.²¹ The “evidence” that Alfred provides, however, consists of a misrepresentation of the book’s content. Although it is impossible to do full justice to Alfred’s distortion of our work in the body of this paper, we have provided a detailed response in the appendix at the end.¹

Accusations that the book constitutes “hate” are important, because they indicate that the opposition to our arguments is moving into a new phase. Unable to prevent these ideas from being discussed through the usual tactics - ridicule and character assassination - there is now an attempt to use the coercive arm of the state in an attempt to silence debate. This development began before the publication of the book, during a presentation made on “indigenous methodologies” at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA). During the presentation, one participant made the accusation that the paper indicated

¹⁸ The Emperor’s Old Clothes Peter Kulchyski *Canadian Dimension magazine*, March/April 2009, www.canadiandimension.com/articles/1710/ (accessed May 2009).

¹⁹ Robert McGhee, “Should a tailor be asked to review a book on the Emperor’s clothing?”, www.canadiandimension.com/articles/1710/ (accessed May 2009).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ www.taiiaki.com/42 (accessed May 2009).

that we “hated” aboriginal people, and as a result of this perception, some members of the Women’s Caucus of the CPSA discussed “whether [the presentation of our views] was ‘hate speech’ under the criminal code”.²²

The Women’s Caucus’ minutes of this discussion are notable for two reasons. First, no accuser is personally identified; it is only stated that “several members who attended the panel expressed serious concerns that overt and blatant racism was expressed during the panel” and that “other members reported similarly offensive behaviours at previous CPSA meetings”. In this cowardly way, serious accusations could be made without any individual having to stand behind them. Second, the summary of the discussion notes that “some aboriginal members were called ‘squaws’ and similar offensive language was used”, even though the word “squaw” was never uttered and the “similar offensive language” not specified. As a result, anonymous accusations about “overt and blatant racism” were substantiated by fabricated evidence and innuendo.

The Racist and Right-Wing Assumptions of Existing Aboriginal Policy

Strangely, the accusation of racism referred to above is often made under auspices that are actually racist. It is maintained, for example, that aboriginal people have particular “ways of life” and a “world view” that are connected to their ancestry. According to this viewpoint, the cultural problems that *some* aboriginal people have in entering into the workforce, retaining tribal forms of political organization, and developing abstract reasoning occur because of their race (ancestry). The historian Keith Windschuttle has pointed out that there is a tendency for the culturally relativist position to put forward “political perspectives that are the opposite of what they claim to be”. The culturally relativist position argues that rather than recognizing “all human beings as the same people with the same origins”, this racist perspective “supports the view that each native group is different and unique and that those who think they are biologically distinct are entitled to their belief”.²³ He goes on to point out that “the politics of relativism should be recognized as simply a mirror image of the racist ideologies that accompanied and justified Western imperialism in the colonial era: once it was the West that imagined it brought civilization to the heathen; today it is tribal cultures that are revered as humane, and imperial cultures that are condemned as brutish”.²⁴

The “right-wing” accusation contains a similar irony. Although this accusation is supported by pointing out that some proponents of classical liberal ideology, such as Jonathan Kay (and the *National Post*), Gordon Gibson (and the Fraser Institute) and Tom Flanagan (and the Conservative Party), espouse developmental theories, this does not mean that the idea of cultural development itself is right-wing. Classical liberals, in fact, argue for the protection of individual rights – a more progressive position than the neotribal capitalism advocated by many aboriginal organizations.²⁵ Although individualism is often dismissed in discussions of self-government

²² “Annual luncheon/meeting and Women’s Caucus Dinner”, June 6, 2008, UBC, Vancouver, <http://www.cpsawomen.ca/luncheon/index.htm> (accessed April 2009).

²³ Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996), p. 304.

²⁴ Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 308.

²⁵ Neotribal capitalism is a term developed by Elizabeth Rata. According to Rata in which “traditional leaders of a revived communal tribe” enjoy privileged access to capitalized resources and compensation packages”. Elizabeth

because it is argued that aboriginal peoples “possess an irreducible core” that is threatened by the promotion of individual autonomy,²⁶ this argument obscures the progressive character of individual rights. Individualism, in fact, makes the notion of human rights possible because it recognizes that all people (individuals) are entitled to respect on the basis of their common humanity. As the scholar Elizabeth Rata explains, the “idea of the individual as someone who can be simultaneously attached and separated from the group makes possible the concept of a common universal humanity. This enables people to belong to and identify with non-kin groups as well as with members of their kin or ethnic group”. She goes on to point out that

the concept of a primary human identity that is universal to all people, regardless of how they live, where they live and how they think, is the justification for universal human rights. However closely involved the individual is in the private world of family and friends, in the public sphere the individual has rights because of his or her status as a citizen, whose political rights are derived not from kinship or ethnic group rights, but from universal human rights. These political rights are available to all individuals.²⁷

The current promotion of aboriginal rights is, in fact, the right-wing viewpoint, because it argues for entitlements based on ancestry rather than our common humanity (i.e. human rights). Aboriginal politics provides incentives to the native population to identify in terms of ethnicity rather than socioeconomic class, and thus is categorically divisive and reactionary. In fact, the isolation of aboriginal politics from any class basis means that privileged aboriginal leaders are often bought off and used as pawns by opportunistic capitalist enterprises. Members of the aboriginal movement tend to lack solidarity with working class struggles because they perceive themselves as aristocratic “landowners” who should benefit from the surpluses extracted from non-aboriginal labour. This viewpoint is articulated by Taiaiake Alfred, who maintains that “building Indigenous solidarity with the working class is impossible, as experience has shown. White workers are not and will never support indigenous liberation because of the racist foundations of Canadian culture and the environmental ethic inherent in our philosophies which contradicts the industrialism which white workers depend upon for their survival”.²⁸

Although there is common ground between classical liberal and historical materialist arguments because both accept the idea of historical progress and individual/human rights, this view differs in that the former sees progress as ending with capitalism, while the latter maintains that capitalism is sowing the seeds for a more cooperative and egalitarian social order. This common ground between liberalism and Marxism is different from the philosophy that drives the current direction in aboriginal policy – postmodernism. This relativistic philosophy rejects notions of progress as “Eurocentric”, and embraces a form of romanticism that sees a return to “tradition” as the way to address modern problems.

Rata, “Late Capitalism and Ethnic Revivalism,” *Anthropological Theory* 3, no. 1 (2003): 45; see also R. S. Ratner et al., “Wealth of Nations: Aboriginal Treaty Making in the Era of Globalization”, in John C. Torpey (ed), *Politics of the Past* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 241.

²⁶ Tim Schouls et al., “The Basic Dilemma”, in J. Bird et al. *Nation to Nation: Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Future of Canada* (2003), p. 17.

²⁷ Elizabeth Rata, “Rethinking biculturalism”, *Anthropological Theory* 5(3), 2005, pp. 272-3.

²⁸ Personal communication with Taiaiake Alfred, May 22, 2007.

Historical Materialism and Cultural Evolution

The left-wing character of theories of cultural evolution can be seen in their relationship to the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.²⁹ Marx and Engels' attempt to develop a materialist and all-encompassing understanding of history led to their interest in the work of the ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan, one of the founding fathers of scientific anthropology, resulting in a strong connection between Marxist political economy and theories of cultural evolution. Marx and Engels were trying to understand the development of productive processes that had led to the emergence of capitalism, and this influenced them to continuously stretch back their analysis further and further into the past. Already in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had briefly delineated the "various stages of development in the division of labour", arguing that "the existing stage in the division of labor determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument, and product of labor" and that these stages consisted of "many different forms of ownership". In this work, they proposed a transition from "tribal ownership" to "ancient, communal and State ownership" and then "feudal or estate-property" before the development of capitalism.³⁰ As Maurice Godelier explains, "for Marx in *The German Ideology*, had arrived at the same general hypothesis as Morgan...that is to say, that the social conditions of production of material life determine, in the final analysis, the content, form and evolution of society".³¹ Marx also attempted to conceptualize how relations whereby human beings owned the product of their labour were dissolved and transformed. As a result, both Marx and Engels found in Morgan's work the "data which opened up to view developments within the enormously long period represented by 'tribal' ownership, as well as material that illuminated the steps where private property emerged".³²

Marx and Engels' insights into the relationship between productive processes and cultural development influenced the field of anthropology, especially the works of V. Gordon Childe and Leslie A. White. These scholars were not known for their right-wing ideologies, but the opposite.³³ Childe, an archaeologist, and White, an anthropologist, were either communist sympathizers (Childe) or members of the Communist Party (White). They perceived no conflict between evolutionary assumptions and left-wing thought. In fact, they were persecuted or treated with suspicion by state authorities because of the association of evolutionary assumptions with left ideology.

This acceptance of cultural evolution can also be seen in the more recent historical materialist writings of George Novack and Evelyn Reed. Novack, in his book *Understanding History*, assumed the principles of cultural evolution in his elaboration and substantiation of Leon Trotsky's theory of "uneven and combined development". Trotsky's theory maintains that there

²⁹ This is discussed in detail in Widdowson's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "The Political Economy of Aboriginal Dependency: A Critique of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples", York University, 2006.

³⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The German Ideology", in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, volume 1, pp. 21-23.

³¹ Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 76.

³² Eleanor Leacock, "Introduction", in Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 11.

³³ Andrew Sherratt, "V. Gordon Childe: Archaeology and Intellectual History", *Past and Present*, 125 (November 1989), pp. 151-189; William H. Peace and David H. Price, "The Cold War Context of the FBI's Investigation of Leslie A. White", *American Anthropologist*, 103(1), March 2001, pp. 164-167.

are different rates of cultural evolution (unevenness) and that these various cultural features come together and influence one another throughout history (combination). According to Novack,

the unevenness of world historical development has seldom been more conspicuously exhibited than when the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas were first brought face to face with the white invaders from Europe. At this juncture, two completely separate routes of social evolution, the products of from ten to twenty thousand years of independent development in the two hemispheres, encountered each other. Both were forced to compare their rates of growth and measure their respective achievements. This was one of the sharpest confrontations of different cultures in all history.³⁴

Novack then goes on to note the differences in technology that were developed on each continent – the bow and arrow versus the musket and cannon, the digging stick versus the plough, the canoe versus the ship, human power versus the horse and the wheel, tribal collectivism versus private property and the state, and “production for immediate community consumption against a money economy and internationalist trade”.³⁵ It is concluded that, on the basis of these and other observations of culture, it is possible to determine a general developmental progression in history. According to Novack, “it does not take much penetration to see that the activities of food-gathering, foraging, hunting, fishing and fowling existing long before food-production in the forms of gardening or stock-breeding. Or that stone tools preceded metal; speech came before writing; cave-dwellings before house-building; camps before villages; the exchange of goods before money”.³⁶

Evelyn Reed, also a historical materialist, documents how this general sequence in history has come under attack in anthropology. In her 1957 article, Reed notes that there is a denial “that social institutions and culture are progressively transformed along with the economic bases of society”, and that “the successive social epochs can be delineated through the growth and development of the material forces of production”. This has resulted, not only in a separation of cultural development from technological advancements, but in a “flee altogether from any unified and comprehensive conception of historical evolution”.³⁷

Interestingly, Reed does not attribute this turn away from evolutionary anthropology to the opposition to colonialism, as occurs in many “left-wing” accounts today, but to a “fear of Marxism”. She notes that “in the field of anthropology, as in other fields, a consistently evolutionist and materialist method of thought has revolutionary implications”, and this is a threat to the existing capitalist system. Although it is pointed out that “the science of anthropology did not originate with the historical materialists”, it is noted that these theorists “drew upon the materials provided by the nineteenth century anthropologists to extend their own historical reach and substantiate their materialist interpretation of history”. According to Reed, “the real reason for the anti-materialism and anti-evolutionism of contemporary anthropologists”

³⁴ George Novack, “Uneven and Combined Development in World History”, *Understanding History: Marxist Essays* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), p. 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁷ Evelyn Reed, “Anthropology Today: The Flight from Materialism and Evolutionism”, *International Socialist Review*, 18(2), Spring 1957, pp. 54-60, www.marxists.org/archive/reed-evelyn/1957/anthropology.htm (accessed May 2009).

is that their reactionary ideas are consistent with “ruling class prejudices” and the “stamping out of the spread of revolutionary conclusions”.³⁸ This circumstance is reflected in the recent influence of postmodernism on “left-wing” thought more generally, and the turning away from class analysis to a focus on identity politics.

THE INTELLECTUAL OPPOSITION TO CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The historical materialist version of humanity’s development still faces a rough road because it deals with culture, which has a number of political implications today. Although biological evolution was vehemently opposed by religiously inspired interests in the 19th and 20th Centuries, this battle has largely run its course and the theory is now firmly ensconced (albeit with a few hiccups) in the modern educational curriculum. The theory of cultural evolution, on the other hand, threatens a much larger array of interests. This has resulted in a great deal of social pressure being placed on academics sympathetic to the idea that there is development in culture.

Although the response to our book largely has been emotional and ad hominem, and opposition to the theory of developmental stages is so strong that it is often maintained that it does not merit a response,³⁹ a number of academics have deployed some intellectual arguments against our position. The first is that, since our book is based on anthropology developed over a century ago, it is “out of date”. This response was even being made 50 years ago, and a similar reaction to the cultural evolutionary ideas of Marx, Engels, Childe, White, Novack and Reed continues to this day. The fact that these ideas are not the most recently developed is used as evidence to claim that they have been “repudiated”, since popularity is often mistaken for validity.⁴⁰

But arguments that ideas were developed in the 19th or mid-20th Centuries, and are therefore invalid, does not make sense. This claim, after all, could also apply to the theories of Darwin, Mendel and Galileo. Although Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection has been added to and refined by a number of scientists, and debates still go on about the nature of this process, no one argues that the theory of evolution itself is “out of date”. The *Origin of Species* is still widely read as the formative text in evolutionary theory even though it was first published in 1859.

What is ignored in this knee-jerk rejection of cultural evolution is the extent to which the historical materialist version of this theory forms the basic outlines of our current knowledge about human development on this planet. The three-age system in archaeology, for example

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Generally, critics just state that our work is based on a “long-discredited theory”, but there is no elaboration of the arguments made against it. Kathy Buddle, an anthropologist from the University of Manitoba, even maintains that “It is not possible to conduct a rigorous analysis of the painfully inept political rant their assertions represent. The “argument” is so fatally flawed as to defy serious treatment”. She goes on to state that “what these snake-oil salespersons would have us swallow are not facts, but ideologies masquerading as scientific theories that can neither be invalidated nor seriously debated because of their complete divorce from anything resembling empirical reality. It’s like trying to debate the argument that ‘the blue unicorn is actually green.’ Huh?”. Kathy Buddle, “Traacherous Political Path: Look at ‘Aboriginal Industry’ and Inept Rant”, *Winnipeg Free Press*, January 25, 2009, p. 6

⁴⁰ For an example of this logic, see Ibid.

(shown in Figure 1 below), is now “widely accepted”,⁴¹ and this system is the one that forms the basis of the historical materialism of Morgan, Marx, Engels, Childe, White, Novack and Reed. Although there have been some objections to applying this system outside the Middle East and the Mediterranean,⁴² dividing humanity into “three ages” forms the basis of museum exhibits around the world.

Cultural evolutionary ideas also have been incorporated into books such as Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel*. This book, which won the Pulitzer Prize, was lauded for providing insights into the development of humanity.⁴³ Most of Diamond’s views, however, were first outlined by Lewis Henry Morgan – ideas that form the basis of our own theoretical framework. As we explain in *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, “Morgan’s arguments about the ‘enlargement of the sources of subsistence,’ have been recently elaborated upon by Jared Diamond, who in *Guns, Germs and Steel* identifies the availability of plants and animals for domestication as the significant determinant in the developmental differences between the Old and New Worlds. Diamond, however, also makes an important contribution to Morgan’s theory by discussing the impact of the alignment of the different continents on ‘enlarging the sources of subsistence’”.⁴⁴

In addition to the characterization of theories of cultural evolution as “out of date”, there is also the response that if one were to adopt a developmental framework, it would be the Europeans, not aboriginal peoples, at the time of contact that would be shown to be primitive. In this view, words like “civilized” and “civilization” are not given the meanings developed in evolutionary anthropology,⁴⁵ which are linked to forms of social relations.⁴⁶ Instead, words like “savagery” and “barbarism” are seen as indicating that people are violent and cruel. How could Europeans be “civilized”, it is asked, when “400 years ago, judicial torture, burning at the stake and inhumane warfare were widespread...”⁴⁷ and “they went about murdering, raping and pillaging in the name of God and gold?”⁴⁸

⁴¹For a discussion of the development of the three-age system see Peter Rowley-Conwy, *From Genesis to Prehistory: The Archaeological Three Age System and its Contested Reception in Denmark, Britain, and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1-20

⁴² The opposition is two-fold. The first is that sometimes developmental stages are skipped, and so areas of Africa went from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. The second is that there does not seem to be a correlation between the “age” and other technological developments in areas like South America. With respect to the first objection, this can be explained by the introduction of Iron Age technology from outside; this technology would never have been developed without this intervention, because bronze has a lower melting point and thus this discovery is needed in the progression to Iron Age technology (which requires very hot furnaces, only made possible with the use of bellows). The second objection will be overcome, we assert, through a reexamination of the evidence from South America. As is explained in *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, we are skeptical of the claim that advanced mathematics and wheels existed in the context of this relatively low level of technological development.

⁴³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (New York: W. B. Norton and Co, 1999), pp. 176-214.

⁴⁴ Widdowson and Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, footnote 12, p. 272.

⁴⁵ In Morgan’s work, the use of the word civilization was closely associated with what he called the transition from *societas* to *civitas*, or groups organized according to kinship versus those that had developed laws and a state.

⁴⁶ For a discussion see Widdowson and Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ James Bartleman, “The bad and the ugly”, *The Globe and Mail*, October 27, 2008 p. A14.

⁴⁸ Armand Garnet Ruffo, “Un pays de sauvages”, *The Globe and Mail*, October 28, 2008, p. A20.

Figure 1: The Three-Age System⁴⁹

| Age | Period | Tools | Mode of Production | Mode of Habitation | Political Organization | Spiritual Beliefs |
|--------|--------------|---|---|---|------------------------|--|
| Stone | Palaeolithic | Chipped stone tools - e.g. hand axe | Hunting and gathering | Nomadic lifestyle – caves, huts, or hovels, mostly located by water | Bands | Belief in the afterlife first appears in the Upper Palaeolithic, marked by the appearance of burial rituals and ancestor worship |
| | Mesolithic | Chipped stone tools and more complex implements – e.g. bow and arrow | | | Tribes and bands | |
| | Neolithic | Polished stone tools and associated complex technology – e.g. pottery | Neolithic Revolution - transition to plant and animal domestication | Villages | Tribes and Chiefdoms | |
| Bronze | | Bronze tools/ weapons and associated complex technology – e.g. wheels | Agriculture, stock–breeding, manufacture, trade | | | |
| Iron | | Iron tools/ weapons – e.g. swords | | Cities | States | |

⁴⁹ Adapted from Peter Rowley-Conwy, *From Genesis to Prehistory: The Archaeological Three Age System and its Contested Reception in Denmark, Britain, and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

It is important to point out that historical materialist conceptions of cultural evolution do not use these terms in this way. One culture is not perceived as being morally “superior” or “inferior” to another. As we have pointed out in response to the Wente column, “Cultural development is a fact, not a value judgment. It occurs by accident, as a result of environmental, not biological, factors. No person would argue that a child’s obvious progression through developmental stages is an indication of their “inferiority,” and so why would this argument hold with respect to culture?”⁵⁰

Although most of the arguments against our characterization of the developmental gap mistakenly assume that we are making a claim about cultural inferiority and/or superiority, some commentators have opposed the actual content of the historical materialist claims present in the book, maintaining that it is incorrect to characterize pre-contact aboriginal societies as less economically, politically and scientifically developed than the European societies at this time. Hayden King, a Native Studies professor at McMaster University, for example, makes the astonishing claim that “a brief survey of the original peoples of this continent illustrates an array of accomplishments that rival civilizations around the globe, including those in Western Europe”.⁵¹ In a column written in response to the Wente piece, King refers to the Huron development of corn as “genetic engineering”, maintains that the Maya “chart[ed] the movement of the stars...[and created] a calendar within seconds of modern-day atomic clocks”, discusses Haudenosaunee “democracy” and its influence on the American Constitution, and celebrates the importance of “traditional ecological knowledge”⁵² for its contributions to modern medicine. King even maintains that pre-contact indigenous cultures in the Americas “lived in cities larger than those in contemporary Europe, had greater populations, taller buildings, sophisticated governance structures, varied art forms, tested scientific knowledge and on, and on”.

Often attempts to refute the book’s developmental arguments point to what is perceived as our deficient scholarship. James Frideres, in a presentation made at Mount Royal College, for example, states that our book is “not an academic piece of work but an opinion piece that was cloaked in scholarly footnotes and academic jargon to make it look like a scholarly piece and thus be able to make outrageous claims under the guise of ‘scholarship’”.⁵³ But Frideres does not show how our claims are “outrageous” and fails to provide any evidence contrary to our claims. All he does is state that we used some newspaper articles as our primary research, that we do not capitalize the word “aboriginal” or use the term “First Nations”, and that the chapter

⁵⁰ Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, “Savage: What was written”, *The Globe and Mail*, November 1, 2008, p. A22.

⁵¹ Hayden King, “Indigenous cultures rivaled those of civilizations around the globe”, *The Globe and Mail*, October 29, 2008.

⁵² King also stated in the Toronto Star that “those who have actually investigated TEK can attest to examples among the Haudenosaunee in obstetrics/midwifery, the Menominee in forestry operations (they are the world’s only 100 per cent sustainable loggers), the Nisga’a in resource management with fishwheel technology, and so on”. Hayden King, “Book recycles paternalistic Native stereotypes”, *Toronto Star*, April 30, 2009.

⁵³ Frideres notes were written up and distributed over the internet. See J.S. Frideres, “Presentation at Mount Royal College, December 1, 2008”, www.knet.ca/documents/JS%20Frideres_critique_Disrobing%20the%20AB%20Industry%202008.pdf (accessed May 2009)

titles and subheadings of the book were “demeaning and derogatory” to the native population. Frideres’ own “scholarship” with respect to our book is also seriously deficient, in that it consists of misrepresenting its content. He maintains that we assert that “there is no Aboriginal culture”, when that is obviously not the case. He also asserts that we harbour a “mid 19th century philosophy that says ‘if you want to be part of Canada, then do what we say and be like us.’”, when what we are actually arguing for is integration, not assimilation. Finally, Frideres makes completely inaccurate claims about our work on traditional knowledge since we do not claim that it does not exist (we argue that it is a combination of local knowledge and spiritual beliefs). And although Frideres maintains that we did not discuss traditional knowledge with aboriginal people or review the literature on the subject, an unbiased examination of the introduction (“Discovering the Emperor’s Nudity”) and Chapter Ten (“Traditional Knowledge: Listening to the Silence”) will show that, not only is there an extensive examination of the traditional knowledge literature, but we also incorporate our direct experience in the field where we listened to and worked with aboriginal organizations. What Frideres is actually opposing is our refusal to accept the “existence of the invisible worlds” and what he calls “emanance” (“belief in and respect for spirits”) as aspects of “knowledge”.

Like Frideres, Taiiiake Alfred opines that our arguments can only be sustained by deficient research. According to Alfred, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* is “reminiscent of a nightmarish succession of under-researched, badly-written, unedited and emotion-laden undergraduate-level papers” and that “if you’re a person who rejects the notion of global warming and doesn’t believe that the Holocaust ever happened, you’ll really enjoy this book”. Alfred maintains that “it would be easy to refute [the many] derogatory and unsubstantiated attacks levelled by Widdowson and Howard, but serious engagement with the substance of such insulting slanders would dignify their book”. Alfred does, however, offer an alternative, proposing Charles Mann’s *1491*

as a corrective to Widdowson and Howard’s utterly ignorant views on Indigenous-European contact and pre-Colombian civilizations in the Americas. Needless to say, Mann’s comprehensive and authoritative survey of the current scientific literature will disabuse anyone of the notion of Widdowson and Howard possessing scholarly integrity. Indeed the scientific literature goes even further in debunking the authors’ central arguments as the scholarly consensus supports many of the Indigenous teachings and oral histories that Widdowson and Howard debase as mere superstition in their book.⁵⁴

Similarly, Rauna Kuokkanen, on the basis of Margaret Wentze’s column, characterizes our scholarship as “sloppy”, and states that our references (paraphrased by Wentze) to “the vast gulf between a relatively simple neolithic kinship-based culture and a vastly complex late-industrial capitalist culture” would “get a failing mark at any university level, including my third year undergrad class”. Although Kuokkanen points to a website and a few academics and journals to refute the existence of a developmental gap,⁵⁵ most of her references are, like Alfred’s, to the

⁵⁴ www.taiiiake.com/42 (accessed May 2009).

⁵⁵The website referred to is <http://www.kporterfield.com/aicttw/articles/lies.html>, which is used to state that the trial and error of “traditional knowledge” is the same as the scientific method. The scholars referred to are Ghislain Otis, “Elections, Traditional Aboriginal Governance and the Charter.”, in Gordon Christie (ed), *Aboriginality and Governance. A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus, 2006), pp. 217-38 ; J. R. Miller, *Lethal Legacy: Current Native Controversies in Canada*. 2004; Tim Schouls and John Olthuis. “The Basic Dilemma: Sovereignty or Assimilation.”, in John Bird (ed) *Nation to Nation. Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Future of*

journalist and television writer Charles C. Mann. In response to our assertion that “the kinship groups in which [aboriginal peoples] lived, were very small, simply organized and not very productive”, for example, Kuokkanen provides the following quote from Mann:

Anyone who traveled up the Mississippi in 1100 A.D. would have seen it looking in the distance: a four-level earthen mound bigger than the Great Pyramid of Giza. Around it like echoes were as many as 120 smaller mounds, some topped by tall wooden palisades, which were in turn ringed by a network of irrigation and transportation canals; carefully located fields of maize, and hundreds of red-and-white-plastered wood homes with high-peaked, deeply thatched roofs like those on traditional Japanese farms. Located near the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi Rivers, the Indian city of Cahokia was a busy port.

Although the use of Mann and the emotional and insulting tone of both Alfred and Kuokkanen’s critique indicate the questionable character of their own “scholarship”, Robert McGhee has made a more concerted effort in the *Literary Review of Canada*.⁵⁶ In response to our assertions about cultural evolution, McGhee has two reservations. The first is that our arguments can be refuted “simply by citing the many aboriginal individuals who have adapted successfully to mainstream society”.⁵⁷ Secondly, McGhee argues that we have exaggerated the developmental differences between European and pre-contact aboriginal societies. Most aboriginal peoples in what is now Canada, argues McGhee, were not small and nomadic bands of hunters and gatherers. They were either “farmers living in small towns” or more densely populated and socially complex groups of fisher folk. He also points out that both Europeans and aboriginal peoples at the time of contact were “far less sophisticated, socially and technologically, than their descendants of the present day”, and that, in the 17th Century, his own Irish and Scottish ancestors “were illiterate farmers scratching a bare living from rocky soils and the shellfish they collected from the local beach”. These Irish and Scottish farmers, according to McGhee, lived in “hovels meaner and more uncomfortable than those occupied by Inuit during the same century. Their way of life was much closer to that of 17th-century Native Canadians than it is to that of their present-day descendants”. As a result of these observations, McGhee concludes that the “problems of social adjustment are not so much the result of inherent differences between aboriginal and European societies as they are of our perceptions of these differences”. The fact that the developmental gap was insignificant, according to McGhee, is given credence by the fact that aboriginal cultures cultivated plants such as corn, potatoes, avocados and tomatoes, which contributed to the development of all humanity.⁵⁸

Canada (Concord, ON: Anansi Press, 1992), pp. 12-27; and John Borrows, *Recovering Canada. The Resurgence of Indigenous Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) Wendy Wickwire’s “To See Ourselves as the Other’s Other: Nlaka’pamux Contact Narratives” (1994), is used as evidence that oral histories “are an important and reliable historical record”.

⁵⁶ Robert McGhee, “Blowing the Whistle: Two academics take on the Canadian Elites who profit from aboriginal poverty”, *Literary Review of Canada*, March 2009, pp. 11-13.

⁵⁷ McGhee, “Blowing the Whistle”, p. 12.

⁵⁸ McGhee, “Blowing the Whistle”, p. 12.

DEFENDING THE IDEA OF THE EXISTENCE OF A DEVELOPMENTAL GAP

Despite the arguments of King, Frideres, Alfred, Kuokkanen and McGhee, there is a great deal of evidence to support the historical materialist position that there are developmental differences in culture between hunting and gathering/horticultural societies and modern nation-states. Even Robert McGhee, who is critical of the theory of cultural evolution elaborated upon in *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, notes that “four hundred years ago there certainly were significant differences in social complexity and technological attainment between Europeans and aboriginal North Americans”. This was not due, however, to “*inherent* differences between aboriginal and European societies [emphasis added]”, as McGhee asserts we claim in our book. Rather, it was due to the accidental environmental circumstances in the Old and the New Worlds – the distribution of plants and animals and the alignment of the continents.

McGhee’s argument that a number of aboriginal peoples have integrated successfully into modern society is not a refutation of the existence of a developmental gap at the time of contact. As we stated in our book,

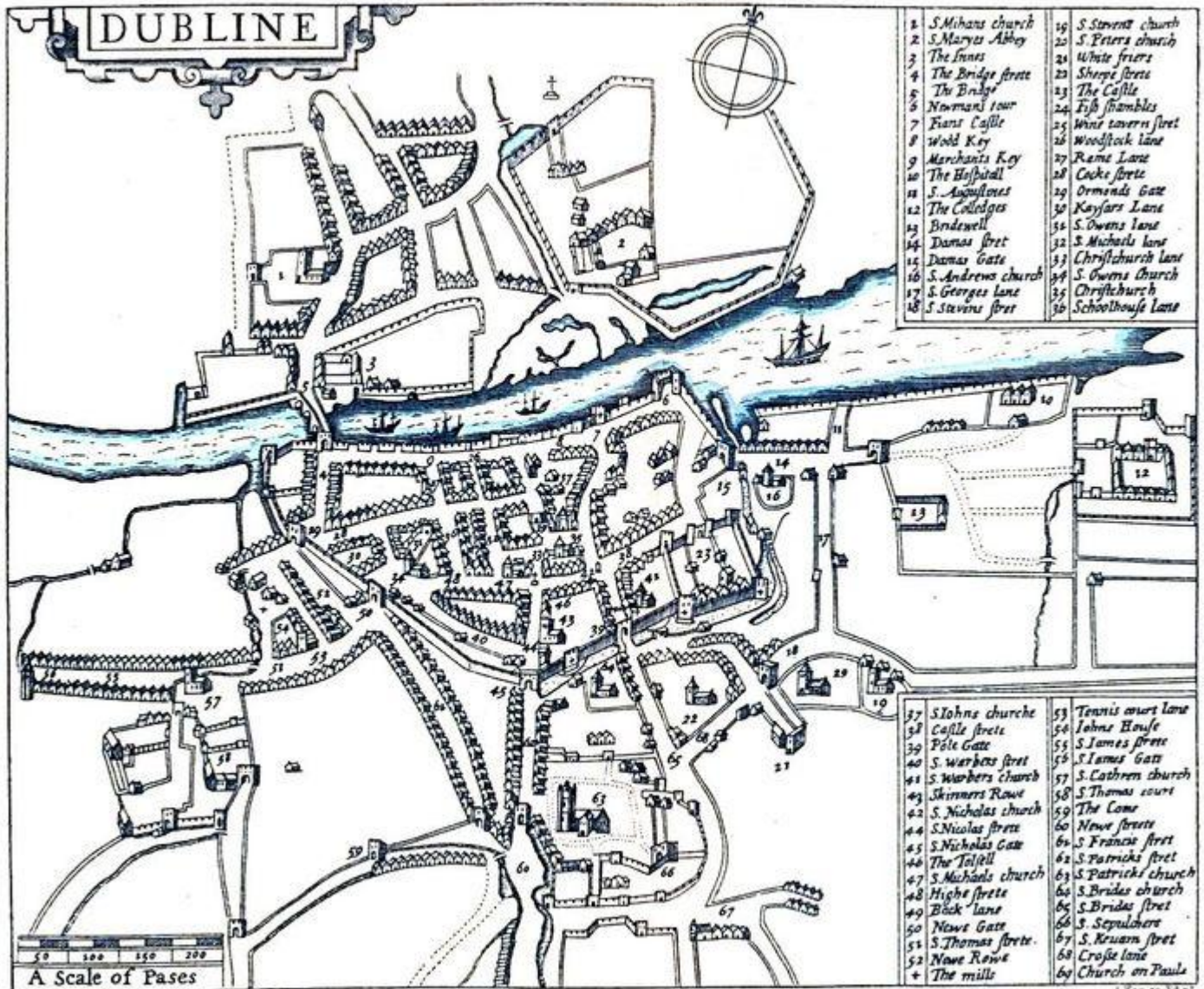
the perception that the term “neolithic” has a negative connotation is also related to the misconception that this must mean that aboriginal peoples are *currently* at this stage of development. This view is shown to be false by the number of aboriginal people who have successfully integrated into modern society. More importantly, it must be recognized that all aboriginal groups have been influenced by modernity, and therefore their cultural development is uneven. Native peoples in Canada have had the ministrations of the church for hundreds of years and have been schooled for generations; they also use modern technology such as computers, pickup trucks, and cell phones. However, much of the aboriginal participation in modern societies is as consumers, not producers. Isolation from economic processes has meant that a number of neolithic cultural features, including undisciplined work habits, tribal forms of political identification, animistic beliefs, and difficulties in developing abstract reasoning, persist despite hundreds of years of contact.⁵⁹

The successful integration to which McGhee refers is an example of Trotsky’s theory of uneven and combined development, which is the integration of unevenly developed cultural features into a larger social formation. Aboriginal people who have successfully integrated, in fact, have managed to escape primitive cultural influences (often by moving to urban centres). And although McGhee points to the peasants who were eking out an existence in Scotland and Ireland as support for his viewpoint on the similarities in development between aboriginal and Europeans at the time of first contact, it is important to point out that these individuals only comprised one segment of Irish and Scottish society, and these were not the individuals who initially colonized the New World. St. Andrews university, for example, was established in 1413 and the University of Edinburgh in 1582; the people attending these universities were obviously literate, while no writing existing in North America before contact. Although the development of universities in Ireland came later, substantial towns such as Dublin were in existence at this time. A map of Dublin from 1610 appears below, and as can be seen from Figure 2, Dublin at this time consisted of churches, a castle, a hospital, a mill, a bridge, colleges and an abbey.

⁵⁹ Widdowson and Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 13.

Dublin was a town of not less than 5,000 people in 1600, and reached 20,000 people in 1650.⁶⁰ Nothing of this magnitude obviously existed in what is now Canada in the 17th Century.

Figure 2: Map of Dublin in 1610⁶¹



Map of the City of Dublin, as published by John Speed, A.D. 1610.

⁶⁰ Michael Anderson, *British Population History: From Black Death to the present day* (Cambridge University 1996).

⁶¹ Reprinted from, <http://www.oldirishmaps.com/proddetail.php?prod=ulsterspeed1> (accessed May 2009)

One of the main sources of evidence used by Alfred and Kuokkanen, Charles C. Mann's book *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, is also not a convincing refutation of the existence of a developmental gap. In fact, this source makes many irrational assertions in support of denials of the cultural gap between indigenous peoples and the European invaders. Mann's book is devoted to refuting the factual realities of the pre-contact Americas, with the conviction of the doctors who diligently insist that the dangers of smoking are exaggerated. He is, at root, a commercial writer with experience in popular television drama, and his work is more sensational journalism than objective research. His audience is largely prepared to accept romanticized views of people who currently live in dire circumstances. Denial of the cultural gap implies that racism must be the reason for the deplorable circumstances of aboriginal people, and in the odious shadow of racism, any apparent effort to revise history is guiltily accepted. And Mann leans heavily on white guilt for his pretensions to scientific research.

Mann's writing style uses every device to entice the reader with warm and fuzzy conclusions that they want to hear. He makes no attempts at objective observation of the sites he visits – he is constantly “enthralled” and “amazed” at the discoveries claimed to refute the current scientific record.⁶² And of course, so is the reader, anticipating the vicarious experience of Mann's imminent discoveries. We may even be distracted from questioning the spurious assertions that he supports with reams of irrelevant information - information like the fact that the truck driver had a “pencil moustache”, including a picture of the truck driver as evidence.⁶³ One expects that if he rides a donkey to yet another incredible discovery in the Amazon jungle, a photo of the donkey will be there to prove it! In keeping with that dictum, Mann is always telling the reader what amazing feature he is about to experience. The unskeptical reader may then forget to question the “evidence” with which Mann supports his conclusions.

Advocates for atavism in aboriginal cultural life, like Rauna Kuokkanen and Taiiaki Alfred, disregard the hugely speculative content in Mann's writings. Take, for example, one of Mann's flights of imagination about life on the Mississippi in 1100 A.D., which Kuokkanen uses to “refute” the evidence-based view that pre-contact peoples lived in small kinship groups, were simply organized and relatively unproductive (in comparison to contemporary European societies). In this we marvel at the “city” of Cahokia with its “carefully located fields of maize; and hundreds of red-and-white plastered wood homes with high-peaked deeply thatched roofs like those on traditional Japanese farms.” The reader can almost see the canoes flitting “like hummingbirds across the waterfront.” Mann knows exactly what this virtual merchant navy transported: “copper and mother of pearl from faraway places”, and wood was ferried for “the ever-hungry cookfires”. At his most fanciful Mann tells us of “emissaries and soldiers in long vessels bristling with weaponry”.⁶⁴

Consider that Mann's claim that the population was at least fifteen thousand people who lived in wooden houses, painted and “deeply thatched”; what was the technology that allowed for such accommodation? We are informed that the maize was weeded with stone hoes, but how were the homes built without saws or nails? What about the red and white paint? His claims of these

⁶² Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

⁶³ Mann, *1491*, pp. 224-5

⁶⁴ Mann, *1491*, pp. 291-300.

fantastic developments include that “Cahokia was a busy port.” Then there is the indelicate question of human waste. A population of fifteen thousand would produce about seven and a half tons of excrement a day – to be disposed of with no draft animals and no wheels or running water.

It should at least be recognized that Mann’s speculations are exclusively based on the existence of large mounds of earth found at the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois and Mississippi rivers, the source of which is debated – either they were built (for no understandable reason), or they are natural formations. Citing such conjecture as evidence indicates Kuokkanen’s advocacy in lieu of scholarship. But Kuokkanen rails in reference to our book - “Have these folks (are they scholars or what?) done any reading or research at all?”⁶⁵ – as though Charles Mann’s made-for-TV fantasies constitute a legitimate research source.

Similar problems exist with respect to the claims about the Iroquois Confederacy’s influence on the American Constitution and the contribution of native plants to “Western medicine”. Although there is considerable doubt about both of these assertions, as we have documented in our book,⁶⁶ King, Alfred and Kuokkanen continue to uncritically accept these romanticized views of history.⁶⁷ Alfred even characterizes one of our sources, the respected anthropologist Elisabeth Tooker, as “a discredited racist ‘Iroquoianist’ scholar of mid-20th century vintage” without explaining how her research is flawed. He then points to our “failure to cite the fact that the Congress of the United States itself passed a concurrent resolution in 1988 acknowledging the vital contributions of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy to the United States’ form of government”.⁶⁸ Alfred, it seems, has no understanding of the difference between historical data and politically motivated “compensatory histories and anthropologies”.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Kuokkanen, “Savage Backlash”.

⁶⁶ See Widdowson and Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, pp. 121-28 and 183-189.

⁶⁷ King, for example, maintains that the Haudenosaunee did influence the U.S. Constitution. American “founding fathers,” including Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, explicitly recorded the first nation contribution. John Rutledge even articulated the structure of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and their “Great Law of Peace” to the drafting committee. (He spoke of a complex federalism whose leaders included executive, legislative and judicial branches — the latter of which were generally a group of elder women). The Haudenosaunee actually practise a 900-year-old democracy and the longest lasting peace between nations in recorded history”. Although we are unaware of what document King is referring to with respect to John Rutledge, the dubious influence of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson is known. As we point out in *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, Franklin referred to the Iroquois as “ignorant savages”, and was stating if they could form a union, the Americans should be able to do so as well. Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Rutledge that “the only condition on earth to be compared with ours is that of the Indians, where they still have less law than we.” As Philip A. Levy, “Exemplars of Taking Liberties: The Iroquois Influence Thesis and the Problem of Evidence”, *William and Mary Quarterly* 53(3), 1996, pp. 587-604 points out, in no way do either of these quotations show that the Iroquois influenced the American constitution.

⁶⁸ This was US Senate Resolution 76 (100th Congress), which, as Alfred points out, “acknowledges this vital Iroquois contribution to the very foundation of democracy upon which the United States is established”. www.taijake.com/42 (accessed May 2009).

⁶⁹ Lorna Roth defines these as research “that would empower [aboriginal peoples] as activists, fill in the gaps and highlight a range of experiences from multiple indigenous perspectives, and transform them from being positioned as ‘just part of the scenery’ to active political, social, and cultural agents”. Roth notes that this is part of a general movement to “ensure that all cultures *count* and *matter*”. Lorna Roth, *Something New in the Air*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), p. 17.

With respect to “ethnobotany”, Kuokkanen arrogantly suggests that we “should read a couple of issues of *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*...it’s an open access, peer-reviewed online journal that covers topics such as: ethnobotany, ethnomycology, ethnopharmacy, ethnomedicine, ethnoveterinary, traditional medicines and traditional healthcare”.⁷⁰ What she refuses to accept is that we have examined these journals and find that they do not provide evidence for the claim that the discovery of plants in the Americas has influenced the development of modern medicine. And although King notes that there have been a number of these plants that have had an impact - “essiac is a cancer treatment, evanta cures leprosy, foxglove aids heart care, kava reduces stress, and quinine treats malaria”⁷¹ - what is not mentioned is that these plants were originally used for very general ailments like stomach ache and fever. The fact that they became useful in treatments for cancer, leprosy, heart care, and malaria only became possible through scientific research.⁷² Besides, these constitute a miniscule number of the drugs that are now used in modern medicine. The thousands of drugs that are in existence today were specifically designed in laboratories with molecular knowledge of diseases and human biochemistry.

POSTMODERNISM AS A BACK-UP IDEOLOGY⁷³

As has been shown in this paper, there is little evidence provided by a number of critics of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* to sustain the assertion that aboriginal groups and European societies at the time of contact were at a similar level of cultural development. Although Frideres argues that we make a number of “outrageous claims”, he does not specify what these are or provide any argument in opposition to them. McGhee, who does provide a thoughtful and scholarly response to our work, essentially does not deny that there was a developmental gap at the time of contact, although he disagrees about its significance for aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations today. The “evidence” provided by Alfred, King and Kuokkanen, on the other hand, is not reflective of an academic approach; their opposition to our book is largely sustained by a combination of arrogance, emotion and wishful thinking. .

In response to the analysis developed in this paper, it is likely that one other argument will emerge. This is the postmodern position that there is really no such thing as development and so any evidence deployed for or against it is irrelevant. Postmodernists maintain that all notions of development are “Eurocentric” constructs and have no universal applicability. This viewpoint is criticized by McGhee, who explains it thusly: “intercontinental differences in social and technological complexity are of no relevance, because the history and culture of First Peoples are singular and not to be critiqued or even understood by those outside the magic circle”.⁷⁴

This opposition to pre-contact “intercontinental differences in social and technological complexity” is generally related to the postmodern attack on the scientific method itself. It is argued that the very concept of “evidence” is intrinsically incoherent because there are no objective (i.e. trans-cultural) standards of truth or justification. The Darwinian theory of biological evolution may be true *for us*, postmodernists claim, but aboriginal peoples’ creation

⁷⁰ Kuokkanen, “Savage Backlash”.

⁷¹ King, “Indigenous cultures rivaled those of civilizations around the globe”.

⁷² For a discussion of this, see *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 186.

⁷³ This insight into postmodernism was gleaned from a personal communication with Alan Sokal, January 21, 2007.

⁷⁴ McGhee, “Blowing the Whistle”, p. 12.

myths are just as valid *for them*. As the archaeologist Roger Anyon put it, "science is just one of many ways of knowing the world" and the world view of aboriginal groups is "just as valid as the archeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about."⁷⁵

This absurd argument confronts not only truth but reality. Such reasoning allows for the earth to be flat, or for two and two to be five, because some people may believe that to be so. More dangerously, it destructs the universal concepts that are the basis for human intellectual intercourse. Relativists might not intend to be staking out such treacherous philosophical territory; they might simply be using the phrases "true for us" and "true for them" as euphemisms for condescendingly pretending to accept beliefs as truth - in which case their assertions would change status from absurdities to truisms.⁷⁶ But if this latter notion is really what is meant, why do they not say so openly, rather than perverting the meaning of the word "true"? Indeed, authors who use the word "true" in this way are playing a double game with the reader: making claims that the reader will inevitably interpret in the *ordinary* sense of "true" (i.e. as factually accurate assertions about reality), while allowing themselves to fall back on this redefinition of "true" when their evidence is challenged.

The postmodern opposition to the idea of development, therefore, is disingenuous. Indigenous scholars do not argue that the matters that they discuss are true just for themselves; they are expecting everyone to accept their "world view", and those who do not are accused of racism, colonialism, hatred, etc. Alfred, King and Kuokkanen are claiming that there *is* universally acceptable evidence that shows that the Iroquois confederacy influenced the American Constitution, that plants discovered by aboriginal peoples have made great contributions to modern medicine, and that "the Indian city of Cahokia was a busy port" in 1100 A.D., among other things. These claims are used to buttress their argument that aboriginal groups were just as technologically, politically and scientifically developed as European societies at the time of contact. When convincing evidence is presented to the contrary, or the claims are shown not to be scientifically feasible, postmodern argument emerges, and the "different truths for different folks" mantra is employed. Postmodernism, therefore, becomes the back-up ideology; first, there is an attempt to win the argument based on evidence and logic, and then, when this attempt founders, the scientific method itself is brought into question.

Postmodern ideology, by eschewing objective reality for a subjective end, obstructs the pursuit of truth so as to give credence to a particular political agenda. In the case of the opposition to *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, the political agenda is what Alan Cairns has referred to as "parallelism".⁷⁷ Also called the "Two Row Wampum" approach, parallelism is the view that aboriginal cultures and the wider Canadian society should exist as legally separate entities, continuously reproducing distinctive economies, political systems and world views. As Michael Murphy points out, parallelism's "primary metaphor of a nation-to-nation relationship governed by treaties conjures up the image of a mini-international system of separate communities whose

⁷⁵ For a critical response to Anyon's comments, see Alan Sokal, *Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 108-110.

⁷⁶ Joseph A. Carroll, in fact, refers to this as the "truistic/radical shuffle". See Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), p. 56.

⁷⁷ Alan Cairns, *Citizens Plus*, pp. 70-3, 117, 132.

paths never converge".⁷⁸ Such a conception, therefore, is opposed to the idea that cultural osmosis will eventually lead to aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples becoming part of a larger, integrated, and species-oriented whole because it is believed that "individuals are born into [distinct] cultures, and they secure their personal identity through the group into which they are born. This is their birthright, and it demands the recognition and respect of all Canadians and the protection of the state".⁷⁹

The promotion of this parallelist political agenda is the overriding objective; it is supported by the pretext that it is beneficial to the native population, aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations, and even human existence as a whole. But how is it known that this political agenda will be beneficial? If it is true that developmental differences exist between aboriginal traditions and modern society, for example, parallelism will not be beneficial because it will necessitate the retention of obsolete cultural features in a more advanced economic and political context. Rather than supporting a "nation-to-nation relationship governed by treaties" in a "mini-international system", the encouragement of parallelism will act to justify the perpetual segregation and dependency of small, unproductive and uneducated tribal groupings within Canada and internationally. In order for aboriginal peoples to have fulfilling lives, they need to be able to contribute to the production of necessary goods and services, and this is impeded by artificial parallelist initiatives.

In addition, social cooperation requires a rejection of racist ideologies; parallelist assumptions about inherent (i.e. racial) aboriginal cultural differences do nothing to facilitate this process. As noted earlier, the promotion of aboriginal rights is inconsistent with notions of human rights since it is dependent upon the idea that people should receive entitlements based upon their ancestry, not their personhood. It is asserted that aboriginal peoples should have access to public lands and resources unavailable to others - a condition that would increase privilege, ethnic divisiveness and social conflict.

Assumptions that aboriginal people are "spiritual" and have insights exclusive to their ethnicity means that indigenous scholars are given a free reign to espouse their ideas without being challenged. The result is not only the creation of insufferable arrogance amongst the aboriginal intelligentsia; it also deprives indigenous scholars from offering any meaningful contribution to human understanding. By confusing condescension with left-wing activism, many supporters of parallelism are victimizing indigenous scholars with a feigned "recognition" and "respect".

Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry has provided an initial attempt to oppose this socially destructive segregationist agenda. By showing that ideas of development are both ethically justifiable and scientifically valid, it is hoped that the increasingly irrational and toxic environment in the academic world can be reoriented to more productive and socially positive pursuits. By opposing the racist arguments that are being put forward to justify the Aboriginal Industry's agenda, we can begin a dialogue that will be beneficial for all people - aboriginal and non-aboriginal - within Canada and around the world.

⁷⁸ Michael Murphy, *Canadian Review of Sociology* 25(4), Fall 2000, p. 517.

⁷⁹ *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [Final Report]* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1996), 1, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

ⁱ Appendix

Below is our response to the evidence Taiaiake Alfred provides with respect to his claim that the content from *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* indicates that we are “haters” of aboriginal people (“*Redressing Racist Academics, Or, Put Your Clothes Back On, Please! A Review of Widdowson and Howard’s, Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* (McGill Queen’s University Press, 2008)”, www.taiaiake.com/42 (accessed May 2009)). In this review, Alfred claims to show a list of “some of Widdowson and Howard’s views on Indigenous people, taken directly from the book”. Alfred’s review was posted on “CD’s Best of the Web”, and we responded, but both the review and response are no longer available on Canadian Dimension’s website. Taiaiake Alfred’s comments appear after “**Alfred:**” and our response after “**H and W:**”.

Alfred: [Widdowson and Howard argue that aboriginal peoples] have “not developed the skills, knowledge, or values to survive in the modern world” (9) and have “undisciplined work habits, tribal forms of political identification, animistic beliefs, and difficulties in developing abstract reasoning” (13)

H and W: This describes some characteristics of current aboriginal cultures, which we wholeheartedly confirm. How does this indicate “hate”?

Alfred: [Widdowson and Howard argue that aboriginal peoples] are “lazy” and unwilling to work (97) and “are unable to participate in wider society”. (105)

H and W: The “lazy” accusation that Alfred claims to exist on page 97 is obviously not our “view” to anyone actually *reading* the book, but a criticism. It describes a prejudice against the unemployed. Here is the quote: “People denied jobs because of their race are then thought lazy because they aren’t working.”

Alfred: [Widdowson and Howard argue that aboriginal] societies are characterized by “savagery” and “barbarism” (12), and residential schools were “positive” and “necessary.” (25)

H and W: The anthropological terms savagery and barbarism describe scientifically determined stages of cultural development without value judgments. They apply to the development of all human societies, not just those in pre-contact North America. Postmodern relativism, by rejecting this sound expression of scientific reality, concludes that prior stages are “inferior” – a level of reasoning that would find children “inferior” to adults. Even if the terms for the stages were successfully censored, they would be replaced by others because of the need to define those periods of human culture that correspond to stages of technological development. Suppression of the terms amounts to attempts to censor ideas.

Concerning the claim that page 25 of our book refers to residential schools as “positive” and “necessary”, Alfred’s intellectual dishonesty reaches glaring proportions. Once again we are referring *critically* to the prevailing attitudes of a certain time. Here is the full sentence revealing the shameless corruption that passes for scholarly criticism in Alfred’s mind:

“While in the past it was accepted that missionary involvement was a necessary (albeit poorly executed) attempt to give aboriginal children the skills, values, and attitudes for participation in modern society, current examinations of the subject conclude that these initiatives were part of a conscious racist strategy to exterminate aboriginal peoples.”

What we do believe to be positive elements of the residential school system are the teaching of English, the discouraging of animistic beliefs, and developing self-discipline.

Alfred: [Widdowson and Howard argue that] traditional land-based lifestyles do not require “forethought, discipline, and cooperative labour”. (22)

H and W: Alfred’s reference to page 22, where he maintains that we argue that “traditional land-based lifestyles do not require ‘forethought, discipline and cooperative labour’”, is a distortion. We assert that “they did not require the *same degree* of forethought...necessary in *more complex and productive economic systems*”. [Emphasis added.] This qualified statement is supported even by the observations of advocacy anthropologists like Hugh Brody. It is also noted that this was a problem that existed for Europeans making the transition to industrialization, as is documented by the British labour historian, E.P. Thompson.

Alfred: [Widdowson and Howard argue that] encountering [aboriginal] ancestors, who were ignorant (190) British explorers had never seen people “at such an early stage of economic and social development” (23)

H and W: The statement referred to on page 190, where we supposedly talk about British explorers “encountering our ancestors, who were ignorant”, is the title of the chapter: “Education: Honouring the Ignorance of Our Ancestors”. The title intentionally uses the possessive pronoun “our”, because it refers to all human beings in the past, not just aboriginal peoples’ ancestors. It is in recognition that all societies were once hunters and gatherers, and the knowledge that existed at this time, because of the use of neolithic technology and a lesser capacity to control nature, was relatively undeveloped. No hunting and gathering societies had developed literacy or numeracy, and this meant that these cultures did not have the technological base from which to develop science, mathematics or logic. The assertion on page 23 of our book, that the explorers had never encountered people “at such an early stage of economic and social development” is not just our “view”; it is patently obvious: Europeans with 2000 years of civilization confronted people without iron, writing, the wheel, draft animals, etc.. What’s Alfred’s point?