

The Idea of Progress and the First Nations

Clive Doucet

The basic premise on which this book is constructed is that human beings exist wholly within nature as part of the natural order in every respect.

—Jane Jacobs, *The Nature of Economies*

*When I raise my eyes to the morning sun.
Let me not forget my Grandmother Mi'kmaq.
Let me not forget that all the bruises,
defeats and humiliations of the Mi'kmaq people are my
defeats,
my humiliations, that I wear them like rags around my soul.
Let me not forget that all her grace, her beauty, her courage
are also mine.
Let me not forget to honour the memory of my
Grandmother Mi'kmaq.
Let me not forget that without her I am nothing
but the movement of the wind that brushes the earth.
Let me not forget to honour her in the conduct of my days.*

—“Grandmother Mi'kmaq's Spirit Song”
from *Soul Stones*, an unpublished manuscript

My city like many others is named after a First Nation, the Ottawa, which is an English corruption of an Algonquin word “adawa” meaning trader. When the Europeans arrived the Ottawa people controlled the north-south movement of trade goods in the northeast as the Mandan people controlled the north-south trade in the center of the North American continent. From their headquarters on Manitoulin Island in Georgian Bay, the traders traveled each year over a vast territory stretching from present day Lake Michigan to Montreal. Every summer and fall, flotillas of traders' canoes would glide eastwards through Algonquin territory on the Ottawa River. When the French asked the Algonquin what the name of “their” river was, they were told “adawa” after the people who used it for trade. In English “adawa” became Ottawa.

The Ottawa people showed an amazing resilience in the face of the European onslaught. Unlike the Iroquois who were essentially based in towns and agriculture and the Algonquin who were organized around strongly defined hunting territories, the Ottawa cared less about ownership of a territory. They were used to adapting to the quirks of other nations and at the same time remaining resolutely independent. They met the French and began trading with them as they did with others, treating them no differently, and for the French also the Ottawa people quickly became synonymous with trade.

The Ottawa first stepped into the European's awareness in the summer of 1660 when 300 Ottawa traders came paddling down the Ottawa River in a flotilla of 60 canoes laden with a king's ransom in furs. It was valued at 200,000 French livres or about one million dollars. It was this Ottawa flotilla that ignited French interest in the immense wealth of the Canadian interior. The Ottawa themselves, though shrewd and successful at trading among First Nations, had no idea of the immense value Europeans would put on their cargos of furs and literally gave them away for interesting trinkets.

The French used the Ottawa to teach them trade routes and to make the connections that they needed to participate in fur trading directly, and the two peoples became trusted allies each of the other. But towards the end of the 17th century, the traditional trade routes became increasingly difficult to use for the Ottawa. Armed by the British, the Iroquois

had begun a long, genocidal war against their traditional Algonquin and Huron enemies. Travel on the old trade routes became perilous. Then, for reasons that remain clouded by the passage of time, the Ottawa decided to abandon not just their trading routes but their villages on Manitoulin Island.

The Ottawa established new communities on the Blanchard River southwest of Detroit, on the shores of Lake Huron and Lake Erie and in northern Ohio where they switched from being traders to becoming successful farmers, but their journeys were not over. The Ottawa left their name in at least three places, Ottawa, Canada, Ottawa, Ohio and Ottawa, Kansas and have two universities named after them.

In 1830 the Ottawa were forced to leave their land on the Blanchard River. The new settlers from Europe wanted it, and the United States federal government forced them to move west where the land had not yet been appropriated by Europeans. The government promised them land on the Marais de Cynes River in Kansas.

On September 19, 1882, an advance group of 72 men, women and children began the trek by pony and on foot, taking their worldly goods with them. Dogged at first by white traders who wanted their tents and ponies for liquor, they refused the “deal” and stubbornly kept going. It would take two and a half months. It is around 750 miles from Ottawa, Ohio to Ottawa, Kansas.

Happily the Ottawa people discovered that the land assigned them was verdant, the valleys wooded and alive with deer, turkeys and quail. Five years later, another group from Ot-

tawa, Ohio, joined them, and for 22 years they made a successful home in Kansas. Another group seems to have returned to Manitoulin Island.

The Ottawa were successful as farmers in Kansas also, but were forced out again when more Europeans caught up with them. Their reservation was appropriated and part of it renamed Ottawa, Kansas. But before they left they struck a “deal” for 20,000 of their reservation acres: Ottawa University promised their children free tuition.

This arrangement still stands.

This time, the Ottawa people moved just over the Kansas state boundary into what was then Indian territory and is now Oklahoma. There, they founded another town called Miami, and this place remains the home of the Ottawas of Oklahoma to this day.

The story of the Ottawa experience with the European, including their great rebellion when they came closer than any other First Nation to driving the European flood back, is worth remembering because nations are composed of stories. Nations are nothing more than creations of the human imagination. The

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physical thing they most resemble is an iceberg. Eighty percent of the iceberg is below the surface forming the platform on which the iceberg stands. If the iceberg platform is not solid, the beautiful flutes of ice which rise towards the sky will turn over and disappear beneath the waves. If a nation's stories are not honest and true and inclusive of all the people that compose it, the national platform is immeasurably weakened. If a nation's platform contains more half truths and absences than

urban meltdown honest accounts, then like the iceberg's bold skyline, the nation will not last long before it turns over and disappears into the ocean of time.

Unfortunately, it is the European stories which have formed most of the platform on which Canada and the United States stand. One of the most potent stories was first told by the Scottish economist Adam Smith in the 18th century: that individual advantage should come before the collective advantage of aristocratic oligarchies. It was an idea born of its time and place and received a great welcome among both progressive thinkers and ordinary people struggling to make a living against the great estate owners of the day. Adam Smith's story is distinguished by its enduring nature. It has become one of "the" dominant stories of western nations. It is an uplifting story. In a nutshell it says that every individual should have as good a chance at the brass ring as the landed wealthy. Smith's story has become part of the civic and economic canon of western nations. It was this story that made it entirely reasonable for newcomers to simply appropriate aboriginal land, technology and knowledge as the native population was perceived to have an unreasonable share of the wealth of this vast continent.

Bill Gates has made billions not by appropriating Indian land but by appropriating ideas that were once in the public domain spawned by open, freewheeling nonprofits like the Home Brew Clubs in California. Gates realized it wasn't the product that mattered so much as controlling its distribution. His company has been built on controlling the access to and the distribution of software ideas ever since. Microsoft has become the Monsanto of the computer world.

As Gates appropriated Home Brew software ideas, corporations like Monsanto have appropriated "free" biological material from the universe by creating legal patents around

the material and then defending those patents in very expensive court cases. They thus control the distribution of what formerly belonged to us all.

Nothing has changed. Oligarchies of all kinds have always tried to limit personal opportunity by appropriating the capacity of individuals to make individual profits. The rich did it in the days of Adam Smith and they do it today. This part of the Smith story remains as true as ever: when individual opportunity becomes too restricted the progress of society itself is compromised.

Today Adam Smith would be arguing against Bill Gates and the Monsanto approach to controlling economies just as in the 18th century, he argued for removing the protective tariffs around corn which favored the largest landowners so that the ordinary tenant farmers would be able to compete on more equal terms. With a more equal competitive field, all of society would benefit from lower prices and more equitably shared profits. Smith was absolutely right in his time and place.

But it is a long jump from this sensible 18th-century idea of fair economic competition to the idea that corporations are also "individuals" and that governments should behave like private corporations. The landed gentry of the 20th and 21st century (the corporate aristocrats) have cleverly managed to use Smith's call for fair competition between individuals and tenant farmers to provide enormous advantage to corporations by putting them on the same legal footing as an individual. This quite brilliant sleight of hand eviscerates the intention of Smith's original idea and has mortally damaged every government's ability to govern by limiting its ability to tax and regulate. It's a very neat psychological reversal of Smith's original idea. It retains the original idea "competition must be as free as possible" while applying it differently and thus reversing its outcome, returning eco-

conomic and political power from individuals to corporate and political oligarchies.

The political disciples of this modern twist to Adam Smith's original story include Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, the Bush family père et fils, Stephen Harper, Mike Harris and Ralph Klein in Canada. Madame Thatcher summarized it most aggressively with her famous adage "there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals." This is nonsense: even bacteria need society. Humans are no different. The hallmark of successful societies and governments is efficient inclusivity: society gets what it needs at a reasonable cost. The hallmark of successful private corporate activity is efficient consumer exclusivity: you sell to those who can afford to buy. These social and consumer worldviews are radically different, operating from different paradigms.

In the social worldview, Athens made Socrates possible. That is why when he was exiled, Socrates considered it a death sentence. Athens could go on without Socrates, but Socrates

could not go on without Athens. Without the democratic, tolerant, productive society of Athens there was no stage for Socrates and his discussions, which were the staff of his life. Through the same view, Wayne Gretzky was made possible by Canadian municipal rinks. Cancer cures, radiation, chemotherapy, doctors, automobiles, the entire panoply of urban services and creative spirits possible in any middle-sized modern city are dependent on people thinking and acting together in a sociable, organized and occupational way.

In the consumer world vision, towns and cities are the result of wonderful individu-

als and families working hard for their daily bread in individual shops as their parents did, espousing supportive family values. In the consumer worldview, everything can be reduced to "consumer value" and thoughts like "did I get my money's worth?" at the store or from my tax dollar.

In the consumer paradigm, cities are a product you purchase, and when that "product" — a city — isn't working out you move. This consumer model applies to neighborhoods as well as cities. When the neighborhood decays the solution under a consumer worldview is to move another part of the city where the grass is literally greener. And if this suburban edge also declines, you move on

out further where things are quieter, cleaner and more orderly. Ultimately the cleaner, more orderly parts of the city become so distant from the original city that the person has effectively changed cities entirely.

At the end of the day, nations and cities are just a collection of stories that people use to justify how they lead their lives. Nei-

ther the nation nor the city exists like a tree which pushes up from the ground as part of an inexorable biological round. In comparison, cities and nations are ephemeral. They are something we make and unmake together in the course of a few years. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don't. The glory that was classical Athens bloomed and faded and bloomed and faded again in the space of a few hundred years, never to emerge again.

Until recently, the great advantage of the human species was, because it was such a non-specialized competitor in so many different areas over such a broad range, there

***Justice will not
come to Athens
until those who are
not injured are as
indignant as those
who are.***

Thucydides (455 BCE)

seemed to be endless room to rock and roll. And nowhere were the horizons and the resources as rich or generous as they were in the “New World.” The only barriers to the riches of the New World were the “natives” who had, unfortunately for them, a very different vision of how to live together and how land should be used. Not surprisingly these First Nations were displaced quickly with as much aggression as was needed to push them into isolated, unwanted corners. Is this simplistic? Yes, but in its essentials it’s exactly what happened and is still happening. If you have any doubts about the historical record read Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*.¹

In the 21st century the targets may have changed but not the attitudes which prompted the US Seventh Cavalry to rake a campsite of Sioux tents with grapeshot and kill 300 unarmed men, women and children at Wounded Knee. The newcomer to North America is invited to bring the “right values,” i.e., work ethic, good health, an entrepreneurial spirit, loyalty to the new country and best of all, lots of money. Canada allows the very rich to jump the immigrant queue and has been especially successful in attracting rich Hong Kong entrepreneurs and financiers. And if international corporations want to “invest” in oil on lands of the Lubicon Cree in Alberta or harvest trees on lands of the Barrier Lake Cree in Quebec, they get the priority and the First Nations are displaced. Very little has changed.

This carnivorous philosophy can’t form the basis for a culture or a general population which creates sustainable communities based on careful husbandry of the commonwealth. This is what the original North American population could never understand in their long, sad meeting with Europeans. For although wars between aboriginal nations were as common as grass, the native nations themselves were organized internally on a cooperative model. Yes, plains Sioux warriors fought

woodland Cree people, the Iroquois fought the Algonquin-speaking peoples and so on. But these nations were not internally competitive. A Cree child adopted by the Sioux nation would have to learn a different language, a different culture and a different history from his birth nation, but the cooperative fundamentals on which the two societies were organized were similar. Historically no North American First Nation had any experience with a society that was organized to endlessly compete internally, among its own people down to the last buffalo, down to the last spring of water, down to the last fence line.² Even today traditional indigenous people retain these values.

In the aboriginal paradigm of a healthy society, it is impossible to conceive of the new zero tolerance law for welfare fraud that is presently in place in Ontario. This law resulted in a pregnant woman named Kimberly Rogers being placed under house arrest in a tiny apartment in Sudbury, Ontario. Her offence was receiving a student loan as well as home welfare, which she needed to go to school and house herself. The government found out and began to prosecute her for cheating: “zero tolerance.” In the heat and exhaustion of an August day, in a tiny apartment, Kimberly Rogers committed suicide.³

Incredibly, after 400 years the divide between the First Nations and the European vision of society remains as large as it ever was. Roger Jones, a councilor and elder for the Shawanaga First Nation near Sudbury not far from where the young woman died during the heat of that sweltering August day, says it better than I can. In a few words, he describes the fundamental difference between European-based constitutions and the aboriginal concept of society. This is what he said about Canada’s Constitution during the hearings of the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

You read the Constitution, it doesn’t talk

about love. It doesn't talk about sharing. It doesn't talk about kindness. It doesn't talk about honesty. It doesn't talk about truth. Where are the values of the people? So really it doesn't have life.⁴

A Cree Elder during the negotiations over lands, lakes and rivers for the James Bay Hydro Project with provincial and federal governments said, "will it take until there are no fish, no animals, no water for the white man to understand that you can't eat money?"⁵ The answer is yes, because that's the way the white man has always worked his consumer cycle: the richer the resource, the more violent and persistent the exploitation. The North American landscape is littered with the ghosts of extinct species. Carnivorous capitalism has just moved on from preying on living species like bison to insensate, particulate matter like forests, oil, natural gas, coal, tar sands and diamonds.

Among the First Nations of North America, whether you were a Sioux, a Cree or Mi'kmaq, the land, animals, plants, water and minerals were not consumer commodities that could be bought and sold to whomever had the most money and the best lawyers. At contact, the animating thought among the aboriginal community was that once the white man finally got things arranged to his satisfaction and treaties were duly signed, then the relationship between aboriginal people and the settlers would become something that both peoples could share and be a part of together. Reality never has matched that thought. In the 21st century, legal language may use new concepts like "co-management of resources" to describe appropriation, but the bottom line hasn't changed. For the European colonizers, "it's our way or the highway." In the end, the aboriginal nations remain not just conquered peoples but also a conquered philosophy.

Carnivorous capitalism and the aboriginal paradigm are not compatible and never will

be. The fundamentals of the aboriginal paradigm are based on community values and respect for the natural world. The natural world for the white man has the same status as a slave did in ancient Athens: the natural world is here to serve human needs and has no other function. Even Athens' greatest polymath Aristotle could not imagine a world without human slaves. Civilized, comfortable Athenian life required human slaves. The same logic is now applied to the earth. According to the consumer world-view, our planet is not a life system we share with others; it is a vast slave that is required for, and must be exploited ruthlessly to ensure, a comfortable, civilized human existence to be possible. To think any other way is outside the bounds of the "progress box."

The First Nations of North America lived successfully here for thousands of years. They were healthy. The land which sustained them was rich and fruitful. They were confident and had no fear of the future for their peoples. White society in a couple of centuries has managed to turn what was once the very richest, fairest part of the planet into a toxic chemical soup loaded with horror diseases (cancers of all kinds, auto-immune diseases, asthmas, new respiratory illnesses, new animal diseases) while the richest among us build gated communities and buy bottled water to protect themselves from the growing detritus of the trash cycle.

The extraordinary thing is that — in spite of the relentless physical and cultural assault on First Nations from the first contacts on the eastern seaboard with the Mi'kmaq across the continent to the west coast Haida and Salish peoples — so many have continued to resist, to refuse to swallow the western dictum that unremitting competition for wealth must be the dominant motor of society. Roger Jones, Shawanaga First Nations councilor and elder, said to the Canadian Royal Commission on

Aboriginal Peoples:

*In our teachings there are gifts that we are given. And the gift that we were given was kindness, honesty, truth, wisdom and knowledge, love, caring and sharing. And that's the way our people are. We have always shared with the newcomers. No matter how rough of a time they gave us we would turn around and share some more.*⁶

This is the kind of cooperative paradigm for organizing society which must be crushed to sustain the idea that private profit comes first. Or must it? Western science is beginning to catch up with the aboriginal paradigm. The recent emergence of “complexity science” is putting biology and physics behind the notion that successful evolutionary change both in the short and long term is dependent on complex interconnections of which competition is only a very small part and not the determining part.

The immensely complex network of relationships among organisms involves all imaginable patterns of interaction, and there is absolutely no point in focusing on competitive interactions, singling them out as the driving force of evolution.⁷

In this old conflict between the aboriginal paradigm and the “modern,” I belong to the aboriginal side. I don't believe human beings have the right to enforce their stories and their rules on other people's cultures or spiritual lives. I don't believe we have the right to send neighbors to the wall as the price of success. This is a moral issue for me. Carnivorous capitalism has become a cancer that is eating us all up — body and soul. And if we do not learn this lesson, we will one day extinguish not just the aboriginal people but also the modern. In the end, the conquistadors will feel the bite of the bullets that they have fired at others. The bullets will turn on them. This is the logical end of the eternally competitive system on which the Europeans have decided

to base their societies and their ideas of progress.

We will devour ourselves in a global swallowing that will leave nothing but the wrecks of communities, peoples and ecosystems, all extinguished in the service of relentless, carnivorous, consumer competition. For we are now destroying the shores on which we are standing, the air we breathe, the water we drink.

Endnotes

1. Dee Brown. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: an Indian History of the American West*. Bantam, 1970.

2. For more on the worldview of North American's First Nations, see *Selected References to Creation Stories/Legends and Historical Perspectives* from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Boyce Richardson. “People of Terra Nullius: Betrayal and Rebirth” in *Aboriginal Canada*. Douglas and McIntyre, 1993 and Clive Doucet. *Notes from Exile: On Being Acadian*. McClelland and Stewart, 1999, p. 106.

3. Headline: Ontario to maintain lifetime welfare ban. “The five-member panel investigating the death of Kimberly Rogers concluded yesterday that the zero-tolerance crackdown on welfare cheats was ‘devastating and detrimental’ and should be scrapped. But Community Services Minister Brenda Elliott immediately poured cold water on the finding....” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, December 20, 2002, p. A11.

4. Roger Jones. “Selected References to Creation Stories/Legends” and “Historical Perspectives.” *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Affairs* (RCAP) Hearings Infobase, page 73.

5. Personal recollection.

6. Roger Jones, op.cit.

7. Brian Goodwin. *How the Leopard Changed Its Spots: The Evolution of Complexity*. Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 181.

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