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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of policy discourse as it concerns Indigenous labour market development in Northern Alberta. In the process, the authors unearth the manner in which current federal and provincial government policy obscures a long history of attempted colonial domination with respect to Indigenous peoples in Canada more generally. Typically, economic booms are spoken of as an opportunity to democratize labour opportunities, through the discourse of "partnership" and "social inclusion" in particular. Ignored in this discourse is the reality that the exploitation of natural resources always takes place in particular political, social, cultural and historical contexts. Critical discourse analysis serves to expose these contexts and, in so doing, uncovers the critical role played by institutions, ideologies, and processes in constructing and maintaining existing inequalities. In the process of digging up the roots of current Aboriginal labour market development policy discourse, unveiled are the concealed power structures, misrepresented inequities, historical injustices, and biases of development.

Introduction

> Programs need to help people who have traditionally been under-represented in the workforce. Aboriginal Canadians, older workers and persons with disabilities are three groups facing unique challenges to participating in the workforce (Department of Finance 2006).

This statement by the federal government typifies much of the current social policy discourse in Canada. Aboriginal Canadians in particular, are the focus of an array of "socially inclusive" policy initiatives (Abu-Laban, 2007) such as those meant to bring their employment rates in line with other, supposedly more industrious Canadians. In this article, we endeavour to emphasize some of the difficulties in applying the concept of "social inclusion"[1] to the case of Indigenous[2] peoples' labour by highlighting linkages to a long history of attempts to integrate Indigenous peoples into the existing structures of Canadian society. In doing so, we emphasize that the advent and development of colonialism, couched in representations of Indigenous peoples as primitive and inferior (Francis 1997), produced specific practices that facilitated the management and control of Native lives and the possession of native lands (Asch 1997). We also hope to render visible Indigenous peoples' own collective, local struggles for cultural identity and sovereign nationhood.

The recent economic boom in Northern Alberta up to 2008 would seem to have been the perfect storm for democratizing labour opportunities in keeping with the tenets of social inclusion. However, an examination of labour market development policy discourse reveals not only the limitations of the social inclusion discourse, but also how it corresponds with historic views of Indigenous peoples as inherently deficient with respect to labour (Lutz, 2008). Any notion of the Indigenous workforce as requiring special social programs, that, at the same time, ignores the decades-long paternalistic policy making and structural exclusion that marks Indigenous–state relations,[3] effectively lays the blame for historic legacies of racism at the door of Indigenous individuals and collectives. The normative policy assumptions at the heart of recent labour market development, such as the notion of Indigenous peoples as having "unique challenges" in the realm of work (Department of Finance 2006), not only cover over a colonial and racist past, but obscure current global influences that perpetuate oppressive relations of power. These historical and contemporary influences, in turn, serve as a multi-faceted attack on the life projects, and very existence, of Indigenous peoples.

As we will argue, employment inequalities in the context of a crash program of oil sands development in Northern Alberta have long-standing ideological[4] and political origins that are linked to colonial power structures, racialized inequities, historical injustices, and biases of development. Referencing Peter Hall (1993), we hope to elucidate the manner in which current Aboriginal labour market development policy in Canada emanates from

> within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing. Like a Gestalt, this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole (279).

Our efforts are meant to explain the origins of the ongoing construction of Indigenous peoples as deficient in the realm of work, and the limitations of a policy framework (of social inclusion) based upon this very idea.

Background

The past forty years have seen the traditional lands of Cree, Dene, and Métis peoples in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo become, increasingly, folded into global economic systems and state structures. The socio-cultural changes wrought in this context, not only by recent resource development but by a century plus of colonialism, have had complex outcomes for Indigenous peoples in the region. As we have outlined elsewhere (Taylor and Friedel 2011), it is imperative to situate contemporary First Nation and Métis labour market development within the vagaries of neoliberal globalization and related hierarchies of power relations involving governments, corporations, and Indigenous groups. In this paper, we are interested in establishing a more explicit understanding of the role that discourse plays in policy processes—a fundamental part of ongoing colonial relations[5] and how this continues to influence practice in relation to Canada's Indigenous peoples (*cf*. Abu-Laban 2007).

The concept of "social inclusion" referred to by the Department of Finance in the quote at the start of this paper guides policy experts in how they make sense of inequities in the social realm. In turn, they develop policies that are meant to address problems deemed most imperative such as rates of labour participation. Pushed to the side, or perhaps papered over entirely, are the underlying power relations at play. A critical discourse analysis[6] of labour market development policy—drawn from policy documents, our earlier empirical research in Wood Buffalo[7] (in particular, emphasizing the words of an industry representative), and archival records—reveals that when it comes to conceptions of Indigenous labour, the past certainly does seem to live on in the present. In particular, the commonplace notion of Native people as being economically unproductive,[8] or as seemingly suited to "unskilled" work,[9] has deep roots in Canada, and has served to legitimate appropriation of Native land and economic resources, in keeping with the notion of *terra nullius*.[10]

The histories that policies have made continue to influence the structuring of contemporary relationships in the region. In the meta-narrative of nationhood and economic progress that plays out in Canada's North, Indigenous peoples' historic contributions have largely been obscured, leaving us with the historic image of the "indolent," "primitive[11]," non-productive Native. Post-war state welfare programs have continued in this vein, constructing Indigenous people as little more than consumers of government services (Bednasek and Godlewska, 2009). The current discourse of empowerment through labour market development responds to this image, in turn legitimating the current policy approaches offered by various levels of government. By tracing the representations within labour market development policy over time, we intend to uncover both their ideological construction and the agentic responses of Indigenous peoples themselves who, as individuals and nations, have been contending with imperialist forces for well over two centuries in Wood Buffalo.

Policy Shifts in Economic and Labour Market Development

> The time has come to make Aboriginal peoples full and meaningful partners in the Canadian economy, both for the good of Aboriginal people and for the good of the country as a whole, for the economic success of Aboriginal Canadians benefits all Canadians. Opportunities do exist, even in the most remote communities, and wherever they exist they must be realized. Through effective partnerships with the private sector and with government, we can overcome historic economic isolation, and begin to lay the foundation for an economy that enriches the lives of all Aboriginal people. (INAC 2008, 7)

In order to contextualize the recent framing of economic development for Canada's Indigenous peoples by the federal government as stated above, particularly as this affects Northern Alberta, it is necessary to offer a brief but important review of economic history. Up until the 1930s, the economy of Alberta's north involved, among other things, trade in fur, freighting, forestry-related activities, and the harvesting of fish, birds, and game (Murphy 1924, 24). Over time, the economy changed so immensely that, by 2006, more than a dozen transnational corporations were active in oil sands development in the region. Despite industrial intensification, early signifiers of labour market benefits for

Indigenous groups were disappointing: "In 1977, an organizational memo suggested that 60% of Aboriginal people from northeastern Alberta who qualified for and wanted jobs at Syncrude did not meet the minimum educational requirements" (Voyageur 1997, 186).[12] More recent low levels of labour market participation could be seen as somewhat surprising, given the federal government's focus on labour market development over the past sixty years or so (Bohaker and Iacovetta, 2009; Abu-Laban, 2007; Altamirano-Jimenez, 2004). Perhaps it is not so surprising, however, if these efforts are understood in terms of social inclusion theorizing, policies focused on "reconciling the 'excluded' and 'included,' on the terms of those who are 'included,' by changing the excluded and integrating them into the pre-existing structures of society" (Galabuzi 2003, 82).

While there has been much talk of "partnership" in Wood Buffalo in recent times, particularly in the realm of labour market development, it should be understood as anything but a neutral term. In a literal sense, the term itself is conciliatory; it suggests means and ends that are mutually agreed upon. This interpretation seems particularly apt in an era of mandated resource consultation[13]—a way to distinguish current policy initiatives from past government programs aimed at "morally improving" and "civilizing" Canada's Status Indians.[14] It becomes much more problematic, however, when considered in the context of the massive economic and political clout wielded by Western colonial powers, and a long history of policy making that seeks to empower Indigenous peoples in exceedingly limited ways. Even with the move to "partnerships," employment rates for First Nation people continue to lag behind those for non-Indigenous peoples in Wood Buffalo (Statistics Canada 2008). Even more telling of the limitations to the current partnership approach is the uneven effect of the recent economic downturn on Alberta's Indigenous workers:

> Aboriginal people (aged 25–64) living in Alberta saw a considerable decline in their employment rate; it was 5.6 percentage points lower in 2009 than in 2008 (69.5% versus 75.1%). Employment rate declines in Alberta were more than twice as large for Aboriginal people as they were for non-Aboriginal people over this period. (Zietsma 2010, 13).[15]

This, despite recent proclamations from government and industry, such as the following:

> The Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP) initiative is helping to improve employment opportunities for Aboriginal people throughout Alberta by providing employability skills and occupational training in preparation for long-term employment in the oil sands industry.[16]

> Building solid relationships takes time and trust. Shell Canada and the joint-venture owners implemented the Good Neighbour Policy to develop a mutually prosperous, long-term partnership with people living in its operating area, particularly First Nations and Métis people living close to the Muskeg River mine.[17]

For many of the Indigenous groups in Wood Buffalo, there is the feeling that development will occur with or without Indigenous participation. Therefore, leaders in various communities are actively engaging in oil sands development, endeavoring to create economic self-dependence for their communities.[18] While there is also a hope that

their efforts will mean jobs will accrue to their members, a coordinator of labour market programs in a local First Nation community told us, "I have a lot of industries coming, saying, 'I want to hire this percentage of Aboriginal people,' and so I send them a whole whack of resumes and I don't hear back from them." Her counterpart in another community adds, "Sometimes, it feels like industry has given up on us. My niece is a grade 12 graduate. She got hired on to do computer analysis or something [with an oil and gas company] and then later on I heard that she was doing janitorial work." An educator explains things this way: "A lot of times, for our people, it's like, labour jobs first."

In an effort to understand the persistence of labour market challenges for Indigenous peoples in the region, we will attempt to peel back the ideological representations underlying how these groups are included in the policy discourse surrounding economic development. In doing so, the impediments that preclude Indigenous groups from securing their own labour interests in the region also become much more evident. We argue that efforts by government and industry to "partner" as neighbours with Indigenous peoples on matters of economic development in Canada are situated within a broader set of colonial relations, Western liberalism, and globalization, the language of which constructs First Nation and Métis peoples as perennially having lacked means of production (and also systems of governance).

The Construction of Indigenous Peoples as Non-Labour: The Roots of the "Lazy Indian"

A number of historians who have documented the labour of Native people since contact include Pentland (1981), who emphasizes that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "thousands of Canada's Indigenous peoples were, in some sense, members of the labour force even if, their patterns of behaviour were but slightly related to those that give shape and meaning to a European-style labour market" (61). Macleitch (2004) argues that, in the 1800s, the development of "a transatlantic trading empire depended in large part on the labor and exploitation of indigenous peoples, many of whom were enslaved. Accumulation also involved the forced expropriation of indigenous land and resources" (73).[19] In examining the history of the fur trade in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, McCormack (2010) describes the beginnings of a mixed economy (involvement in the fur trade combined with the pursuit of traditional livelihoods) and the flexibility this offered to Cree and Dene peoples in Alberta's north.[20]

Beyond the fur trade period, however, there is limited historical research examining Indigenous peoples' labour (Lutz 2008), contributing to the idea (articulated in our recent research stated below), that Canada's Indigenous people have a history of not being "comfortable working":

> … you can't take someone from a community who's maybe managed to get their GED (high school equivalency) and plunk them into a large industrial worksite and expect them to be successful. Part of what we try and get them to do is to have them work through contractors, maybe one of the Aboriginal contractors so they get comfortable working, and build those skills … (Industry representative in Wood Buffalo, interview, Spring 2008)

High (1996) has said that, until recently, historians have assumed that the importance of Indigenous participation in the New World economy did not survive the decline of the fur trade (243).[21] One historian who challenges this notion is Knight (1996) in his extensive examination of Indigenous peoples' work in the capitalist economy, including the migrations they undertook for work.[22] More recently, Parnaby (2006) has documented the involvement of First Nation lumbermen in Pan-Salish working class struggles[23] in British Columbia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He argues that while Salish workers preferred a life that combined wage work with other customary forms of support, such as hunting and fishing, this became near impossible to achieve in the early twentieth century:

> The terms of the post-strike settlement [in 1923], which reduced the earning power of the ILHA's [union] membership, coupled with the limits placed on other Aboriginal economic practices by the colonial state, made it difficult for [Indigenous males] to make ends meet without working on the docks, aboard a fishing vessel, or in the hop fields in a single year (75).

As Parnaby has noted, Indigenous peoples' concomitant interest in maintaining family, community, and the well-being of their nation in the face of expanding capitalism in the early twentieth century was constrained by the workings of colonial capitalism.[24] As time went on, Indigenous labour increasingly came to be constructed as *outsider* in the national imagination, a development evident in a report given by then-Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Thomas G. Murphy who, in 1932, wrote that evidence of mixed farming practices taken up by Alberta's Indians "are all distinctive factors in the gradual breaking down of the barriers between indolence and useful industry" (Department of Indian Affairs 1932, 8).

A conception of Indigenous people as being uncomfortable with labour was further cemented following the Great Depression and most particularly through post-World War II citizenship programs that promoted the assimilation of both Status Indians and immigrants to the Canadian working class (*cf.* Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009). Basic vocational training became normalized policy in a context where First Nation youth and adults were conceived of as being best suited to unskilled work, an assumption based on the idea that they come from "a classless society where acquisitiveness and personal ambition aren't considered virtues" (cited in Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009, 448). This notion of Native people as naturally lacking ambition helps to explain why, until 1961, the small number of status Indians achieving post-secondary education were deemed enfranchised by Indian Affairs and removed altogether from the register (Government of Canada, 1886).[25]

As Lutz (2008) argues, the various laws and policies creating the image of Indians as "outside of the economy"[26] in the early twentieth century are couched in eighteenth-century ideas that persist today. Representations of Indigenous labour as "Other," as "lazy," and as "dependent on the state" (4) covers over the fact that Canada's formation as a nation is couched in racially-based distinctions, assumptions, laws, and activities (Asch 1997), all of which served to constrain Indigenous peoples' rights to property, governance, education, employment, religious and spiritual expression, access to services, amongst other things.

In Wood Buffalo, it is possible to see the concrete historical "work" that racism has accomplished as a set of economic, political and ideological practices tied to colonialism (Hall 1980; Abu-Laban 2007). The effects of these practices are evident not only in the

personal experiences voiced by First Nation and Métis people in the region,[27] but also in statistics comparing Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal educational attainment, employment, income, and so on. (e.g., Wilson and Macdonald 2010). Endeavouring to better understand these social inequities means laying settler colonialism bare, including its practices of controlling Native lives, subsuming traditional Native lands, and legislating control over natural resources. It also means exposing a long trajectory of community underdevelopment (McCormack 1984) that has worked hand-in-hand with these projects.

In Northern Alberta, federal and provincial regulations served to restrict traditional Native land use practices: for example, the Unorganized Territories Game Act, 1896 (Canada) prohibited the hunting of wood bison, and the Game Act, 1907 (Alberta) introduced closed seasons for hunting and trapping. Despite the existence of a signed treaty by 1899, such regulations enforced by the RCMP caused major disruption to Native economies. Legislation prior to the Great Depression was also particularly harmful to Native economies; the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement, 1930 (Canada), much like the Crown's perception of treaties on the Prairies, was about removing Indigenous ownership of resources and transforming this into private property (Tough 1997). While enshrining the right to fish and hunt, reliance on such a narrow range of economic activity severely limited Native sovereignty, especially given the decline in these resources during this era.[28]

The implementation of treaty and scrip,[29] processes that remain highly contested today because of how these were levied by the federal government and the very limited Native rights to land and resources that have resulted, "imposed upon Indigenous peoples in the region formal distinctions that played important roles in structuring social, economic, and political relations throughout the twentieth century" (Mackenzie 1984). With the growing thirst for natural resources, beginning in the 1920s, Indigenous peoples in the territories encompassing Treaty 8 lobbied government to aid them in preserving their own life projects (Titley 1988, 55), but did so to a bureaucracy that held firmly to the idea that Native people have a "hatred of work [that was] proverbial" (Duncan Campbell Scott, cited in Titley 1988, 34). McCormack (1984) makes the case that, in the years following World War II, many Indigenous peoples left the community of Fort Chipewyan to look for work: "Some went as far as the beet fields of southern Alberta, others went to Great Slave Lake to work at commercial fishing, and many went to the mines at the east end of Lake Athabasca" (1984). She adds that First Nation and Métis people who stayed in Fort Chipewyan were "stuck with poorly paid labouring jobs" and "saw the richness of their region being used to benefit other people, not themselves" (1984).

With the prospect of enhanced resource development in Canada's North after World War II, the federal government moved to expand the residential school system at the same time as it put in place regulations that coerced school attendance in exchange for Mother's Allowance. This tactic forced Native parents to choose between their pursuance of traditional industries and a less economically flexible existence living close to towns or villages. Federal programs in this era also encouraged members of reserve communities to access employment off-reserve in lower-skilled positions (Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009; Titley 1988).

While the labour agency of Indigenous peoples was greatly diminished by a variety of factors, the image that proliferates today is one of Indigenous labour as unnatural (Lutz 2008; Knight 1996). Based upon discussions we had with a key industry informant, this representation has come to be reflected not only in government discourse, but in industry talk as well:

> I guess, probably not unpredictably, [we] found that there were quite a huge number of barriers to [Aboriginal] employment … one of my pet peeves is around the work that needs to be done to integrate or blend cultures (Industry representative in Wood Buffalo, interview, Spring 2008).

The ideological effects of the erasure of Indigenous peoples' histories as workers in Wood Buffalo, particularly from the middle of the twentieth century onward, and their contemporaneous construction as "immigrants too" (Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009), is replicated in recent social policy reports such as this one:

> Aboriginal success in Canada's labour market is, or should be, of great interest to all Canadians. Our interest stems not only from the value we place on equitable treatment of all our residents: It is also rooted in self-interest. Canada cannot have a high quality of life if there is a significant minority forming an impoverished underclass (Mendelson 2004, 1).[30]

Covered over in the language of "equitable treatment for all our residents" is the unequal treatment of Indigenous peoples throughout Canada's formation as a nation, making it appear as though First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people are devoid of the ability or desire to work.

Policy interventions meant to address the "problem" of Indigenous peoples as non-labour are not new. The language of residential schooling policy sought to make Indigenous people into workers, framing education as the ticket to social mobility, enfranchisement, and the achievement of equality[31]. Yet, as Lomawaima (1993) highlights, the paradox of these schools lies in the fact that:

> federal boarding schools did not train Indian youth to assimilate into the American "melting pot" but trained them to adopt the work discipline of the Protestant ethic and to accept their proper place in society as a marginal class. Indians were not being welcomed into American society, they were being systematically divested of their lands and other bases of an independent life (236).

Bednasek and Godlewska (2009) describe late 1800s era residential and industrial schools on the Canadian prairies as a key feature of "betterment discourses." In this instance, the model Indian was seen as "agriculturally productive with farm equipment, nice house and barn, good wife who keeps a clean house and looks after a fine vegetable and flower garden, doesn't owe money or take financial assistance from DIA [Department of Indian Affairs]" (453). The impacts associated with residential schooling are lasting and varied and includes the ideological work that framed this sort of education in the first place. Enacted within processes of nineteenth and twentieth-century state formation, these discursive projects, which brought government and Church together in partnership, sought to expand not only territory but also jurisdiction over Indigenous peoples, including control over the minds

and bodies of Native children. As gendered, "domesticizing spaces" (Lomawaima 1993), the intent of residential school policy was to destroy Native cultures and rebuild Indian children as working-class participants in the industrial economy (Miller 1996; Schissel and Wotherspoon 2003).

As an educational project, residential schools often failed in their mandate for a variety of reasons, including the academic deficiencies inherent in a "half-day system" (Miller 1996; Raptis and Bowker 2010).[32] Native children made to labour in the school, and the practice of hiring out students as domestic labour to neighboring homes and farms, meant that many students left these schools destined for low-paying jobs or no work at all (Miller 1996).[33] The resistance by Indigenous peoples to these schools encompassed not only a push back against the physical, sexual, emotional, and other mistreatment that occurred within (Lomawaima 1993), but was also a move to improve education as part of a larger process of taking back Indigenous sovereignty (Monture-Agnes 1999). In Northern Alberta in 1946, this resistance was manifest in Native peoples' testimony to the Special Joint Commission:

> By far, the number one recommendation from Aboriginal groups was to hire better teachers (56 or 43%). To most, better meant properly certified and trained (Canada 1946, 802) as it was no secret that more often than not the teachers hired for Native schools had little or no preparation for teaching (cited in Raptis and Bowker 2010, 7).

In Wood Buffalo, the quality of education for First Nation and Métis youth has long been a topic of grave concern (Taylor, Friedel, and Edge 2009). Performance indicators for schools outside of Fort McMurray (the jurisdiction of Northlands School Division) suggest that First Nation and Métis students are found to be significantly below the provincial average and are disproportionately represented in course streams that do not lead to post-secondary study and/or skilled work.[34] Many youth living on or near reserves lack access to high school education in their community, and many also lack support in their transitions from rural to town schools. As one principal in the region notes, "Town school's hard on [First Nation youth]. There's racism, it's hard for them to fit in. I really feel that they don't get the kind of education … I think it gets watered down for them because people assume they can't do it" (educator in Wood Buffalo, interview, October 2008).

The Auditor General of Canada recently reported that educational underachievement is a significant problem on First Nation reserves across the country:

> The proportion of high school graduates has risen steadily in the general population across Canada but not among First Nations students living on reserves. Based on census data from 2001 and 2006, the education gap is widening. The proportion of high school graduates over the age of 15 is 41 percent among First Nations members living on reserves, compared with 77 percent for Canadians as a whole. In 2004, we noted that at existing rates, it would take 28 years for First Nations communities to reach the national average. More recent trends suggest that the time needed may be still longer (Office of the Auditor General 2011, 13).

Critical connections between past and present social policies and practices, including the provision of poor quality education to Indigenous communities, obviously has detrimental implications for labour market participation (Zietsma 2010) and involvement with social assistance programs, among other things.

A Short History of Indigenous Welfare

> The majority of Aboriginal communities across Canada face bleak economic prospects with chronically higher rates of unemployment and social assistance receipt than most other Canadians (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 1999).

Statements about the intractability of Indigenous poverty, separated from an analysis of the intersecting stratum of power relations, makes it appear as though high rates of unemployment and receipt of social assistance[35] by Indigenous individuals are self-evident facts. To understand Indigenous reliance on social assistance programs, it is necessary to consider the larger processes inherent in the modern welfare state, processes which are, as Esping-Anderson (1990) describes, a "stratification system in its own right" (4). The welfare state has been instrumental in everything from the creation of rights and entitlements, to the provision of services, to the formation of job patterns. While First Nation people have a distinct, sovereign status in Canada, their lives in large part continue to be shaped by the state (Papillon and Cosentino 2004; Abu-Laban 2007). Thus, it is disingenuous to talk about Indigenous welfare rates without accounting for the historic and cultural role that Canada has played in reinforcing particular ideas about Indigenous peoples and their labour; in effect, making these into common sense narratives.

Accepted as truths in the Canadian context, these narratives are reflected in everyday discourse in the region:

> There's just not a lot of [intra-] community mentoring or capacity building … maybe there's just not the interest to do it, and that leads to its own sort of problems in terms of becoming so amazingly reliant and also resentful of outside people coming in and doing programming. (Industry representative in Wood Buffalo, interview, May 2008)

For a better sense of economic reliance in the region, it is important to understand the role of the Great Depression in the decreased labour activity of Indigenous peoples in the period following World War II (Lutz 2008), and the correspondingly dramatic increase in welfare schemes rather than Indigenous industries in the years following (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995; Buckley 1992). While diminishing fur and fish resources adversely impacted Native economies, the institutionalization of a specific set of social relations between the federal government and First Nations peoples, such as accounting and funding technologies that serve to translate colonial objectives into concrete work practices, were equally instrumental in producing First Nations peoples as welfare recipients (Neu and Graham 2006).

In a materialist sense, then, current inequities are rooted in policies and practices of the past that were systematic in undermining the infrastructure needed to adapt to changing social and economic realities. Even in the context of a signed treaty (Treaty 8), Canada continues to mete out "relief" to First Nation people in Wood Buffalo as a charitable contribution, avoiding altogether larger questions of historic grievances based on Aboriginal rights and land and resource entitlement.

By the time of the Great Depression, Métis people in Alberta also faced inordinate hardship due to loss of land and diminishing natural resources. Unable to access either federal government or municipal relief programs, due to their not being status Indians and/or not having a permanent residence, the situation was so serious that in 1934 the province appointed a commission to look into the "Métis problem." The report of the Half-Breed Commission (later renamed Ewing Commission) resulted in the 1938 Métis Betterment Act that included lands for Métis settlement.[36]

Thus, what is hidden in the public discourse surrounding the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous poverty is a long history of structural domination that has, and continues to, permeate social and economic policy in Canada (*cf.* Abu-Laban 2007). Since World War II, the federal government has taken on more responsibility for social programs for those living on-reserve (and in some cases, off-reserve as well).[37] However, as discussed elsewhere (Taylor and Friedel 2011), this policy shift has been accompanied by a focus on terminating special status for First Nation groups and on devolving responsibility for Native programming to the provinces.

In recent times, the focus of the federal and provincial governments has been to make First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples into "productive" citizens:

> While a labour shortage grows, many Aboriginal people in Alberta struggle to find stable, meaningful work. I think we all know that Aboriginal people represent the largest untapped source of labour in the country. What many Canadians don't recognize, however, is that in the long run, much more than jobs are at stake. Canada's long-term prosperity is also on the line (speech by Minister Chuck Strahl, April 2008).[38]

Since the 1990s, federal and provincial Aboriginal labour market partnership programs have been a central focus of the state.[39] In large part, this constitutes yet another solution to the perceived problem of Indigenous peoples' "outsider" status in terms of labour market participation. The remedy proposed in this case is not so different from historic policy solutions – what has changed is the manner in which policy initiatives have been cloaked in the language of "partnerships"—the notion that Indigenous peoples should be brought into the modern era through an emphasis on mutually beneficial pro-capitalist social relations (Lutz 2008, 8). Yet, as Blaser, Feit, and McRae highlight,

> In the new [globalized] situation of asymmetry, the colonizers repeatedly impose their cultural forms on relations with Indigenous peoples. Thus, under the "custody" of the nation-states, Indigenous lands and resources, and even their children, have been susceptible to seizure either in the name of the greater good, for an abstract "all," or for their own presumed benefit (2004, 3).

The alienation of Native peoples from their lands is achieved not through capitalism alone, but through the normalizing of the colonial state's paternalized relations with Indigenous peoples through discourse. For example, in an interview we conducted in 2008, an industry representative in Fort McMurray understood the problems of a local First Nation as neither historic nor a product of current colonial relations. Rather, these problems were assigned to Indigenous peoples themselves: "Janvier is a particularly challenged community

… it's relatively remote but I think it's suffered under some pretty bad leadership for a very long time, where the resources just didn't go to the people to address the issues" (Industry representative in Wood Buffalo, interview, May 2008).

Talk of "partnership" proliferates in Wood Buffalo, part of a shift towards an emphasis on social inclusion in policy in general. Partnership discourse holds out that development of the oil sands is inevitable and that the fruits of cooperation are self-evident. Yet, Francis (1997) reminds us that the idea of partnership requires "forgetting that racism was at the heart of Canadian culture for generations" (12). Lutz (2008) argues that, in the historic unfolding of colonialism, violence was never very far below the surface. This is true in Wood Buffalo where an astonishing level of violence has been wreaked on both people and the environment (Nikiforuk 2008). The effects of oil sands development are all encompassing, and include large-scale water consumption, land disturbance, and cumulative impacts on wildlife, soil, plants, and humans. There are countless immediate impacts upon human beings, such as a shortage of affordable housing, lack of daycare facilities, increase in homelessness, lack of access to medical care, and increasing levels of drug and alcohol abuse (Alberta Government 2006; Archibald 2006; Nichols Applied Management 2006). The effects are in plain sight when community and nation development take a back seat to labour market development, reinforcing the claims by Manual and Posluns (1974), who articulate that attempts to develop local economies without community control amount to "another form of imperial conquest" (Manual and Posluns 1974, 151).

Indigenous Responses to the Onslaught of Colonialism and Globalization

> In June 2009, Minister Strahl announced the new Federal Framework for Aboriginal Economic Development. This new approach brings to bear a whole-of-government effort to address the unique circumstances of Aboriginal Canadians that limit their participation in the Canadian economy (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2010, 14)

Much has changed for First Nation and Métis people in Wood Buffalo over the past sixty or so years, since the start of the active pursuit of oil and gas reserves (*cf.* Bourgeault 1983). Today, the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands and struggles against colonialism are enmeshed in the processes of globalization[40] and Canada's desire to be competitive in the global economy. While not without agency, Blaser, Feit, and McRae (2004) point out that, for Indigenous people, their "struggles to pursue their own life projects take place in a field dominated by Western 'cultural underpinnings,' including the central idea of development" (4).

There are currently many First Nation and Metis individuals thriving economically in Wood Buffalo. For those who are not, the patchwork of employment training policies and programs in the region may serve to alleviate the most pressing needs at an individual level. However, in the long run, this emphasis alone offers little to alter the reality of expanding control over Indigenous territories and life ways. The sustaining power of an historical representation of Native peoples as non-labour (or as low-skilled labour, circa the time of residential schooling policy) legitimates government policies in a variety of areas, which are then framed and carried out within the existing colonial capitalist system.

Also obscured in this policy approach is a failure to understand Indigenous ontologies, particularly the extent to which Western notions of progress run counter to Indigenous beliefs about land tenure. Underpinning these beliefs are a complex of values arising from, and invested in, historic Indigenous ties to territory, and the responsibility to maintain those territories as part of a collective community agenda.[41] The destruction of the commons in Northern Alberta means that traditional life ways like trapping are becoming virtually non-existent, as surface mining and activity associated with *in situ* production ramps up. In 2008, in response to the heated pace of development, Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) together called for a moratorium on oil sands development at the same time as they continue to work towards a broad transfer of political and economic power and resources back to these nations. In the meantime, in the win/lose atmosphere accompanying globalization, significant numbers of First Nation and Métis people in Wood Buffalo participate in the wage on oil sands development. In 2008, a little further to the south, the Chipewyan Prairie First Nation (CPFN) filed a legal claim against the Alberta government, alleging a breach of Alberta's constitutional duty to consult with the First Nation on a project in the Christina Lake region. In the transformation occurring throughout the region, Indigenous groups have also begun to join forces with other groups who actively struggle for greater attention to environmental issues.[42]

Surviving as Indigenous peoples in Canada in the face of liberal ideals and imperialist agendas requires strategies of economic development that are consistent with the goals of Indigenous nationhood and cultural survival. As one example, during our case study we met an individual who had taken a leave from his job with a large oil and gas corporation to work with high school youth at a cultural camp in one of the communities. Another participant, a Métis youth, balanced his work as a labourer with caring for his grandmother and engaging in traditional activities (fishing and trapping). He commented wryly, "There's a few of us still around that, you know, like to keep up our heritage." While such activities of First Nation and Métis individuals are likely to be delegitimized by mainstream discourses around productivity,[43] they display longstanding economic resourcefulness and deep commitment to family, community, and Indigenous nationhood. In fact, many individuals in Wood Buffalo are noteworthy for distinguishing themselves and their efforts from the state apparatus, working where they can and from within the context of longstanding Indigenous values to restore dignity to those who bear the brunt of centuries of colonialism and racism. As one post-secondary support worker offered,

> Our people need to learn, like I said, learn to know who they are, learn to love themselves, learn to appreciate who they are, learn to know that they have a lot of potential, learn to believe in themselves, right? (educator in Wood Buffalo, interview, May 2008)

Such talk showcases that, despite the work of historic racist ideologies and institutional processes, and talk of social inclusion that encapsulates Indigenous peoples today amid an expanding net of power relations stemming from globalization, many continue to resist constructed identities as they work towards fostering freedom from colonial domination.

Concluding Thoughts

A gnarled tangle of representations regarding Indigenous peoples continues to circulate in Canada today, much of it serving to maintain an image of people who are intrinsically incapable, "at-risk," "failing," and inherently "on the margins" of social and economic life in Canada. Such constructions can only be understood in the context of a more general erasure of Indigenous peoples' historic sovereignty in their homelands and the impact of government actions, whose major purpose has been to separate Native peoples from title to lands and resources.

This paper attempts to uncover how the current labour market development talk, as it implicates Indigenous peoples in Wood Buffalo, is couched in historic policy discourses central to industrial intensification and state building. By digging beneath the surface and stripping away the veneer of public relations campaigns focused on notions of equality, the ideological and political roots underlying the construction of Native labour in Canada are uncovered. Representations of Native peoples as non-labour, first produced in North America in the eighteenth century (Lutz 2008) and reinvigorated more recently through policy talk, has a long trajectory in Canada, linked as it is to past efforts of assimilation, such as residential schooling and other social policies whose goals were to integrate Native peoples economically into the lowest echelons of Canadian society. Residential schools as a manifestation of the power of the state, and by extension, the Church, were key to cementing in policy and practice an ideology concerning Indigenous peoples as non-labour.

The promise of democratization, or "social inclusion," in economic and labour market development via means of partnership papers over a protracted history of colonial control and a long struggle by Indigenous peoples for political and economic sovereignty. Despite constitutionally guaranteed Aboriginal rights, the existence of signed treaties, and international law, the Government of Canada continues to have a contradictory relationship with First Nation peoples that reflects the historical goals of alienation, marginalization, and forced assimilation. The discourse and parameters used to frame solutions to the problem of Indigenous unemployment uphold a representation of Indigenous peoples as deficient in a labour context and incapable in an economic sense. It also assures the privileged position of "benevolent patron" for the Canadian government today. But, as Henderson (2010) notes in the educational realm, government policy continues to be instrumental to the ongoing oppression of Canada's Indigenous peoples:

> Canadians are still far from seeing the constitutional rights to, and fundamental promises of, an enriched livelihood for Aboriginal people recognized and implemented in advanced education, training, and practice. Instead, Aboriginal peoples have been relegated to systemic poverty and are economically disadvantaged by all of the standard measures (7).

What is needed in Wood Buffalo and countless other areas in Canada are critical appraisals of social policy discourse, as it constructs Indigenous peoples, as well as comprehensive historiographies focused upon Native peoples' learning and work. Such narratives will assist with the work of dismantling the representations that prevail in contemporary public discourse, and which shape social policy. Indigenous peoples' own versions of the past often

confront dominant histories regarding themselves as non-labour, and can help Canadians to become more conscious of the processes, institutions, and ideologies that have shaped Indigenous lives. At the same time, it is possible that these narratives can open up space to imagine and practice subjectivity and relations differently in the future.

Endnotes

1. For an in-depth discussion of the theory and practice of "social inclusion" in the EU context, see Armstrong (2010).

2. In the Canadian Constitution, Aboriginal peoples are defined as "Indian, Inuit and Métis" (Constitution Act 1982). We use the term "Aboriginal" in this paper only in reference to government programs or to explain current statistics; otherwise, we refer to Canada's Indigenous peoples as First Nation (in reference to both status and non-status individuals and groups), Inuit, and Métis.

3. See Manual and Posluns (1974) for an early discussion of paternalism for First Nations in Canada.

4. Following Hall (1986), we see ideology as "the ways in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a "material' force" (29).

5. Brayboy (2005) argues for seeing colonialism and racism as operating hand-in-hand. While not specifically targeting racism in Canada's Northwest, Stuart Hall's (1980) description of racism is useful for discursively exploring constructions of First Nation and Métis people in Wood Buffalo over the past two centuries. Hall describes this kind of racism as being based upon a floating signifier given meaning within specific discourses and practices.

6. In his discussion of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough (1995) posits that language is "imbricated" in social relations and that textual analysis must be considered within the wider practices within which discourses are embedded. See also Stuart Hall's (1996) discussion of the production of language.

7. The research involved analysis of documents, Census data, and school district statistics, as well as thematic analysis of sixty-five interviews involving ninety-one individuals, most of whom identify as belonging to a local First Nation or Métis community.

8. See Carter (1990/1993), who analyzes First Nation efforts on the Prairies to create an economy based on agriculture in the post-treaty period amid the vast challenges posed by government policy meant to undermine, rather than assist, Native peoples.

9. See Bohaker and Iacovetta (2009), who argue that "Indian Affairs encouraged the adoption of white middle-class cultural values but structured educational opportunities to ensure that these young people remained firmly in the working class and were best 'qualified' to work in essentially unskilled positions" (446-47). Miller (1996) emphasizes that residential schools, in keeping with notions of Indian children as inferior, focused on teaching boys to become labourers and girls to become domestic help (152). Bednasek and Godlewska (2009) similarly argue for an analysis of how policies of assimilation aimed at Indigenous peoples were meant to produce an unskilled workforce.

10. The notion of "vacant land," or territory "that was previously unoccupied or not recognized as belonging to another political entity" (Asch 2002, 24).

11. As Thomas G. Murphy, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, described it in 1932, "In the northern parts of the province the majority of the Indians continue to follow their primitive nomadic mode of life, and many of them still live in tents and tepees during the greater part of the Year" (Department of Indian Affairs 1932, 20-1). From the 1940s to 1960s, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration reportedly saw Aboriginal people as comparable to immigrants who needed to adopt "dominant middle-class Canadian social and moral codes and pro-capitalist values" (Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009, 427). However, unlike immigrants, Indigenous people were "not expected to aspire to the same level of modernity as white Europeans" (448).

12. Voyageur also makes mention of the fact that Canada required Syncrude to provide Aboriginal employment as a requirement of doing business in the region. By 1995, only 12.5% of Syncrude's Aboriginal employees were professionals, and no Aboriginal employees were in the top two occupational levels of management (1997, 186).

13. See the discussion in Issac and Knox (2003) on the duty to consult Aboriginal peoples.

14. See Francis (2005) for a discussion of nineteenth-century civilizing policy.

15. As a result of the sharper decline in the Aboriginal employment rate (youth and adults) relative to the non-Aboriginal rate between 2008 and 2009, the gap between the groups has widened.

16. See the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada website, http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/employment/aboriginal_training/projects/project_profiles/04-09/amw.shtml

17. See the Natural Resources Canada website, http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/mms-smm/abor-auto/eng-eng/tal-hyd-eng.htm

18. For instance, involvement by Métis Local 1935 has increased recently as industry undertakes procedural aspects of the Crown's duty to consult Aboriginal peoples in the context of economic development. The Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN), whose lawsuit helped to bring about the duty to consult provision in Canada, are actively involved in oil sands development through the Mikisew Energy Services Group. The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) owns and operates a business group that is active in oil sands development, and Fort McKay First Nation is in the process of preparing to mine oil sands through a joint venture agreement on land they received through the Treaty Land Entitlement process. Fort McKay First Nation already works extensively with oil sands companies through six limited companies–the Fort McKay Group of Companies.

19. In a study of Iroquois involvement in the eighteenth-century Atlantic economy, MacLeitch (2004) posits that, although aspects of Iroquois experiences were shared by the working-class in general, colonization made their experiences unique.

20. MacCormack (2010) highlights that while Métis in the region were prone to be involved as wage labour, they too tended to remain close to the means of production (45).

21. High (1996) states that, "to strengthen their traditional way of life, Native efforts to incorporate aspects of the capitalist economy into their seasonal round and their resistance to the government's assimilation policy laid the foundation for the future construction of the non-proletarian Amerindian worker" (244).

22. These migrations occurred despite the fact that Native peoples' movements were often restricted, making it difficult for many to respond to changing economies. Knight's (1996) research proposes that Indigenous communities showed great resilience in combining wage labour with their traditional life projects.

23. Pan-Salish labour activism was a response to changes in working conditions over time and also related to racial segregation in the workplace—"white waterfront workers tended to dominate general cargo, which was less dangerous and more lucrative than working the lumber" (Parnaby 2006, 64).

24. See also Browlie's (2008) discussion of colonial constraints in the case of Mohawk and Anishnabeg women's labour during the years 1920–1940 and Lutz's (2008) discussion of how federal and provincial laws and policies limited the types of occupations in which Indigenous peoples could participate in British Columbia.

25. Prior to 1951, funding for post-secondary education for Native people would have been scarce; when they did manage to arrange funding via the federal government, the price would have been loss of Indian status as well as treaty rights (corresponding with the Indian Act, 1886, Sec. 86).

26. Lutz (2008) makes the case that "Indigenous peoples defined as lazy and unproductive—a binary that simultaneously produces the industriousness of Europeans and their descendants and justifies taking control over Native land and resources—is couched in a 'labour theory of value,' crystallized by John Locke and Emmerich de Vattel in the mid-eighteenth century, which accorded ownership of land to those who removed it "from a state of nature' (improved it) … They also had to characterize the productive activities of indigenous civilizations as 'not labour' in order to declare America 'unowned' and available for the taking. So, aboriginal labour was framed as existing outside the economy" (34).

27. Experiences with racism were described by several participants in our recent case study examining pathways to work and learning for First Nation and Métis youth in the Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

28. A large-scale commercial fishery operated in Fort Chipewyan between approximately 1926 and 1970 but closed when fish stocks greatly diminished at least in part due to the opening of the Bennett dam (Mackenzie River Basin Board 2003).

29. "Half-breed scrip, although a recognition of Métis title, was quite different from the treaty recognition of Indian land title. The Métis interest in land was conceived of as an individual proprietary interest which could be exchanged for money or individual lots. Reserves were not obtainable under scrip procedures and policies were not discussed or negotiated. Although the Métis hunted, trapped and fished, and often had an economy indistinguishable from Treaty Indians, scrip policies provided no resource rights" (Usher, Tough, and Galois 1992, 120). See also Chartrand (1991) for a discussion of the problems created by scrip.

30. Mendelson has written extensively on the issue of Aboriginal labour market development, much of it supported by the private, non-profit Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

31. Vocational education and labour were thought to be the means to "raise up" the Indian from a savage to civilized state (Barman 1995; Miller 1996). In Fort Chipewyan, the Holy Angels Residential School was opened by the Grey Nuns in the 1860s, and stayed in operation for over one hundred years. An Anglican day school was opened in the 1870s.

32. US and Canadian policy regarding Indian education was closely aligned throughout the nineteenth century; for example, both incorporated a half-day of academic instruction and a half-day manual labour system (Miller 1996).

33. As noted earlier, citizenship programs for Indigenous peoples from the 1940s to 1960s were consistent with this earlier residential schooling policy focus, given its emphasis on training that would fit youth and adults for unskilled work, such as providing short courses in farm labour for boys and domestic labour for girls (Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009).

34. As described in a recent inquiry focused on Northlands School Division, "Student achievement results have been consistently lower than the rest of the province, particularly at the Grade 6 and Grade 9 levels. Similarly, high school completion rates are low and the performance of students who do reach the Grade 12 level is weak. Very few of these students complete four or more diploma examination subjects required to meet the entry requirements of most post- secondary institutions. The past five years have shown no improvement in student achievement results beyond some marginal gains at Grade 3" (Alberta Education 2010, 22).

35. As expressed by the Office of the Auditor General in 1994: "The high rate of dependency on social maintenance services among First Nations communities is not a recent phenomenon. Data from a 1994 departmental report showed that the social assistance dependency rates for on-reserve Indians averaged 38 percent, and ranged between 35 and 43 percent from 1981 to 1992. During the same period, the dependency rates for Canada, excluding on-reserve Indians, averaged 7 percent and ranged between 6 and 10 percent" (Office of the Auditor General 1994, ch 23, 9).

36. Changes to the Act in 1940 brought increased government bureaucracy and control, effectively reducing the power of Métis groups. Following longstanding practices of the federal government, the province retained the right to set conditions for occupation, land development, and use of the settlements resources, such as timber.

37. Such as the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), for example. This program has not been able to keep up with demand, owing to the two percent cap on growth that has been in place since 1996 (Canadian Federation of Students website, http://www.cfs-fcee.ca/aboriginal/english/campaigns.php). It is also important to note that Métis students have never had access to the PSSSP.

38. Notes For an Address by The Honourable Chuck Strahl, PC, MP, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-status Indians Canada's Aboriginal People–Helping to Grow our Labour Market. Speech given at Calgary Alberta, April 11, 2008. http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/mr/spch/2008/apr1108-eng.asp?p1=209557&p2=562502

39. In writing about shifts in Canadian social policy more generally, Saint-Martin (2007) suggests that recent government approaches, just as in the US and Europe, can be described as a shift from the post-war welfare state to a social investment state (SIS). Labour market partnerships can be thought of as fitting closely with the SIS approach, and described as altering the emphasis in social policy from that concerned with consumption and maintenance programs to programs that seek to invest in people and enhance their ability to participate in the productive economy. This approach is increasingly applied to the case of First Nation, Metis and Inuit peoples in Canada. Despite the fact that Indigenous-state relations have shifted over time according to changes in the welfare state and demands from Indigenous groups, external bureaucratic control remains deeply entrenched (Abelle 2007; Neu and Graham, 2006).

40. See Ladner's (2001) discussion of globalization's links to neo-colonialism.

41. As described by LaDuke (1994), "'Minobimaatisiiwin' or the 'good life,' is the basic objective of the Anishinabeg and Cree people who have historically, and to this day, occupied a great portion of the north-central region of the North American continent. An alternative interpretation of the word is 'continuous rebirth.' This is how we traditionally understand the world and how indigenous societies have come to live within natural law." (128) While labour market development has garnered most of the government attention in Wood Buffalo, resource extraction in the region has produced a number of other problems for Indigenous people: specifically, a federal government approach to lands claims that seeks to weaken the rights and interests of Indigenous groups vis-à-vis governments and industry (cf. Asch 1997). Further, the rapid increase in oil sands activity over the past few decades has also had severe environmental and health effects, and has drawn increased scrutiny by scientists and environmentalists (e.g., see Brooymans 2010).

42. Organizations such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, for example.

43. See Russell (2004), who describes how discourses by Cree from northern Quebec Cree politicize the poverty of the community today.

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