

The Social Economy of Canada's Aboriginal North

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Abstract

Academic attention to Aboriginal social economies has come in and out of fashion. Today there exists considerable debate over the meaning and relevance of the social economy for Aboriginal communities and whether its organizing principles reflect the contemporary social and economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples. However, by identifying the economic activities of Aboriginal communities that have equally important social attributes, this paper argues that the social economy serves as a useful conceptual device for the reality it can capture. Embodying important economic attributes, the economies of northern Aboriginal communities also entail broader conceptions of social responsibility and account for an entirely different set of motivations that extend beyond economic rationality. This paper concludes by arguing that any attempt to develop effective northern policy in the future must account for the complexity and heterogeneity of northern Aboriginal communities and remain open to the plurality of forms Aboriginal social economies may take.

Introduction

In 1931, Kalervo Oberg, then a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago, conducted research with the Tlingit of southeast Alaska. Oberg's interests, and those of his graduate advisors (Edward Sapir and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown) were on the links between economics and social organization in societies that have no organized markets or official currencies. Conducted in considerable detail, Oberg's research examined Tlingit property rights, annual production cycles, organization of labor, distribution of wealth, trade, and resource consumption. During Oberg's research, he came to appreciate that although Tlingit economic institutions were central to the exchange of goods and services, the social aspects of those same institutions were so important that "to treat them solely as mechanisms of commodity transfer would be to miss their equally important social significance in Tlingit society" (1973: 93). Oberg concluded that in order to fully comprehend the Tlingit economy one must consider the distinctive nature of Tlingit culture and how social systems situate resource production and exchange activities. Oberg's doctoral dissertation, entitled the 'Social Economy of the Tlingit Indians of Alaska' (later published 1973) was the one of the first empirical studies to clearly show that the economies of Aboriginal peoples not only entail highly specialized modes of resource production, but also involve the transmission of social values – in essence, models of social economy.

Since Oberg's research, academic attention to Aboriginal social economies has come in and out of fashion or has been conducted under other thematic headings. Today there exists considerable debate over the meaning and relevance of the social economy for Aboriginal communities and whether its organizing principles reflect the contemporary social and economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples. For example, in 'Defining the Social Economy in Indigenous Communities', the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (2005) identifies 5 defining principles: 1) service to members of the community rather than generating profits; 2) autonomous management rather than government or market control; 3) democratic decision-making; 4) primacy of work and the individual over capital accumulation; and 5) participation premised on empowerment. However, these principles have been challenged on grounds that they fail to adequately reflect the heterogeneity of Aboriginal economies and misrepresent the realities inherent within contemporary Aboriginal communities (Corbiere, Johnston and Reyes, 2007).

Research conducted within a social economy framework has also been criticized for failing to question the imposition of colonial economic models that have long been used to inform public policy. Thus, beyond the rhetorical, the relevance of the social economy for Aboriginal communities has been called into question.

Notwithstanding the validity of these critiques, the social economy may still prove to be a useful conceptual device for the reality it can capture. For example, a social economy framework can be used to account for the multiplicity of institutions within Aboriginal communities that perform a blend of commercial (wages) and non-commercial (subsistence) activities as well as involve monetary (public transfers) and non-monetary transactions (sharing subsistence resources with others) (Restakis, 2006). Employed in this way, the social economy can be used to identify the economic activities of Aboriginal communities that have equally important social attributes. It is in this context that the Aboriginal social economy of northern Canada will be considered. Specifically, this paper examines the complex social, economic, and political interplay that takes place between subsistence and wage economies, sharing and reciprocity, and regulatory regimes that now mediate community access and use of wildlife resources. Far from being an inclusive review, this discussion leaves undeniable room for expansion. In fact, it is hoped that the areas overlooked in this paper foster greater interest among others to examine the social economy of Canada's Aboriginal north.

Subsistence and the Social Economy

Perhaps the most defining feature of the northern Aboriginal social economy is the harvest and use of wildfoods and resources. Having endured profound social and economic change, Aboriginal peoples throughout northern Canada have maintained a lasting connection with the environment through hunting, fishing, and gathering of resources from the land and sea¹. Today, Aboriginal peoples from across the north harvest, process, distribute, and consume considerable volumes of wildfoods annually. Collectively, these activities have come to be known as 'subsistence' and together comprise an essential component of northern Aboriginal cultures (Thornton, 1998). The term 'informal economy' has also been used to characterize subsistence

¹ Aboriginal peoples in Canada include Inuit, First Nation and Métis peoples.

activities. In fact, a review of the literature finds a plurality of terms that have been used to describe the harvesting activities of northern Aboriginal peoples, including non-observed, irregular, unofficial, hidden, shadow, non-structured, and unorganized. However, by being characterized as unorganized or irregular, the subsistence economy has to some extent been stigmatized with those participating in subsistence activities typified as non-progressive, backward, and resistant to change (Reimer, 2006), images that in some circles persist today. These characterizations have in turn invited ill-conceived policies derived from outdated theories of modernization that assume subsistence economies will be subsumed as development proceeds on national and global scales.

Despite the predictions of their eventual demise, subsistence economies continue to demonstrate considerable resilience and remain integral to the health and well-being of northern Aboriginal communities. Subsistence research, in the form of harvest studies (Priest and Usher, 2004) and Aboriginal land use mapping (Sherry and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, 1999), reveal that fishing, hunting and collecting wild resources remain integral to the economies of many, if not most, Aboriginal communities located across Canada's north. For example, the Arctic Monitoring Assessment Program (AMAP - 1998) estimates that individual consumption of wildfoods in the Northwest Territories is 232 kilograms annually. The Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS - 2001) found similar prevalence among Inuit households, with wildfoods, including caribou, whales, seals, ducks, arctic char, shellfish, and berries, among others, comprising more than half of the total dietary intake of 78% of Inuit households in Nunavik, 73% in Nunavut, 70% in Inuvialuit, and 56% in Nunatsiavut (Tait, 2001). Nearly half of all Inuit children in Nunavut, Nunavik and Inuvialuit eat wild meat five to seven days a week while in Nunatsiavut, 22% of Inuit children consume wild meat as often (Tait, 2001). There also exists considerable optimism for the continued use of wildfoods, with 70% of all Inuit adults believing that harvest levels for themselves and other members of their household would remain the same or even increase in the years to come (Tait, 2001). The main reason for their optimism was the growing number of community members who were taking part in hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering activities. That said, there are some generational disparities emerging among those taking part in the subsistence activities. As identified in the APS (2001), the highest producers of wildfoods among Inuit were men between the ages of 45 to 54 (90% participation), while only 65% of Inuit between 15 to 24 years of age were engaged in subsistence (74% for men and 55% for

women). This disparity can be attributed to a number of factors, including school attendance and involvement in wage earning employment, particularly in the industrial and public sectors. These and other factors no doubt detract from the time available to participate in harvesting of wildfoods. However, this trend may be countered by a reassertion of cultural values that often occurs as Inuit youth mature, assuming leadership roles in their own communities and taking on more prominent roles as providers of wildfoods in family sharing networks (Ford et al., 2008: 57).

With subsistence production representing a large component of the northern Aboriginal economy, considerable efforts have been made to quantify the monetary value of subsistence production. Whether used to inform public policy or to aid in impact mitigation and compensation efforts, it has generally been considered important to attach a numerical exchange value to the volume of wildfoods harvested from the land (i.e., 1 kg. of harvested caribou for 1 kg. of store-bought beef) (Natcher, 2001). For example, in Nunavut the dollar value of annual wildfood production is estimated to be \$30 million (Vail and Clinton, 2001). However, this figure does not include associated activities such as the sale or trade of seal skins or the use of natural resources for the production and sale of clothing and crafts (i.e., fur, ivory, soapstone). If these activities are considered, the total value of the land-based economy of Nunavut alone is estimated to be as high as \$60 million annually (Vail and Clinton, 2001). Other aspects of the subsistence economy that generally go unobserved are the associated health costs of eating less nutritious imported foods or the effects of not participating in harvesting activities and assuming a more sedentary lifestyle. It is safe to assume that, when considered together, the total monetary value of wildfood production far exceeds the exchange value alone.

While important in analytical terms, the valuation of subsistence production does run the risk of misrepresenting and devaluing the cultural significance of subsistence activities. For example, Wein and Freeman (1992) found that, for many Arctic residents, consuming wildfoods is fundamentally important for personal and cultural well-being. When one loses access to wildfoods, a subsequent effect is the loss in personal identity and a deterioration in one's overall sense of self (Wein and Freeman, 1992). Because Aboriginal cultures of northern Canada are rooted in the landscape and cultural values are perpetuated through continued land use activities, the cultural significance of subsistence pursuits cannot be quantified exclusively in economic terms. Nuttall and his colleagues (2005: 654), for example, have argued that the harvesting of

wildlife resources is not done to simply satisfy economic or nutritional needs, but rather to provide a fundamental basis for the social identity, cultural survival, and spiritual life of northern Aboriginal peoples. In this way, wildlife harvesting is as much an economic pursuit as it is an expression and perpetuation of cultural values. For the Innu of Labrador, the value of hunting caribou extends well beyond personal sustenance. As a right of passage, the killing of one's first caribou serves as an important indicator as to whether a young man is prepared to assume responsibility as a family provider. In a cultural context, caribou hunting remains a defining factor for young Innu men entering adulthood. The same is true for seal hunting among young Inuit (Wenzel, 1991) or moose hunting among the Cree (Nelson, Natcher and Hickey, 2005). Considered in this context, the procurement of wildfoods is of fundamental importance to not only an individual's economic wellbeing but also the social vitality of northern Aboriginal communities.

Reciprocity and the Social Economy

A further expression of the social vitality of wildfood production is exemplified through food sharing and the norms of reciprocity that are associated with harvesting activities. Prior to entering into a more sedentary lifestyle, it was necessary for northern Aboriginal peoples to adapt to the temporal and spatial variations in resource availability, for instance the annual migration of caribou or waterfowl. Under these conditions, food sharing helped to minimize the impacts of misfortune affecting an individual or a single household and reduced the consequences of environmental and economic strain (Nelson, Natcher and Hickey, 2008). Oberg (1931-32) distinguished seven traditional forms of exchange common among the Tlingit, including barter, gift exchange, the food gift, the feast, the ceremonial exchange of labor, and the ceremonial gift (1973: 93). Each of these forms of exchange occurred along a continuum of formality – some derived through agreements between trading partners and others from long-standing norms of reciprocity between families and clans.

Today, Aboriginal peoples must still adapt to fluctuations in wildlife populations but must also cope with a variety of new influences, such as the need for income to support subsistence activities, population change, and constraints imposed by industrial development and wildlife regulations. As in the past, the basic purpose of sharing wildfoods has generally remained the

same—to maximize the overall wellbeing of the community. In Aboriginal communities across the Canadian north, food sharing remains an important and widely-practiced tradition. Tait (2001), for example, found that food sharing takes place among 96% of all Inuit households. The exchange of wildfoods, and more recently equipment, unites families, communities, and regions on economic, social, and ideological grounds (Wheelerburg, 2008: 171). This form of reciprocity not only facilitates the distribution of food as an economic resource, but also affirms personal relationships and the social networks that support them. Thus, by embodying both social and economic attributes, food sharing continues to represent a defining feature of the northern Aboriginal social economy.

“Reciprocity is the social mechanism that makes associational life possible. When reciprocity finds economic expression for the provision of goods and services to people and communities it is the social economy that results” (Restakis, 2006: 1)

While participating in the production and distribution of wildfoods establishes a sense of social relatedness within communities, equally important is the fact that the sharing of wildfoods instills a moral framework between people and the non-human world (Fienup-Riorden, 1991). For many Aboriginal peoples, their relationship with animals is based on reciprocal transactions. In these exchanges, animals give themselves to hunters in exchange for the hunters’ respectful treatment of them as non-human persons (Feit, 2007). Encompassing an important spiritual dimension, food sharing and norms of reciprocity entail broader conceptions of social responsibility and account for an entirely different set of motivations that extend beyond economic rationality.

Due to the increasing importance of money in the northern economy, some have suggested that divisions and social tensions have arisen in ways that have challenged traditional sharing practices. For example, Ford and his colleagues (2008) have found that the sharing of hunting equipment between family members has come under increasing stress, with some younger family members reluctant to share equipment with others or requesting payment before sharing occurs. In such cases, access to money is proving critical in the ability to effectively harvest wildfoods while the rising cost of equipment (particularly fuel) is proving prohibitive to

full-time hunters and youth who may have limited income earning opportunities (Ford et al., 2008: 54). These conditions have made the demand for wage income even more pronounced and have contributed to the complexity of the northern social economy

The Northern Mixed-Economy

It has been suggested that, due to the importance of money in the north, divisions within communities have emerged in ways that have weakened social networks and contributed to the loss of traditional cultural values (Ford et al., 2008). Owing to the incompatibility of subsistence and 'modern' wage economies, Inuit family structure, values, and expectations have been altered to the point where traditional forms of socialization are being devalued (Hund, 2004: 1). As a result "[t]he functioning of social networks have been affected by a decrease in importance of the extended family unit and the emergence of inter-generational segregation, a decline in the practice of traditional cultural values, a concentration of resources in fewer hands, and the emergence of social conflict" (Ford et al., 2008: 54).

Despite the increasing commodification of northern resources and the irreversible importance of cash in Aboriginal communities, others have argued that the contemporary mixed economy of northern Aboriginal peoples continues to reflect the customary social relationships long inherent within subsistence-oriented systems (Wenzel et al., 2000: 2). Kruse (1991), for example, notes that the cultural values associated with subsistence production have not been diminished by the wage economy, but rather that wage earning has actually allowed for the continuation of harvesting activities and has, in some cases, strengthened the social networks supporting them. Rather than subverting subsistence production, the wage economy provides an economic basis for wildlife harvesting, thereby invigorating social institutions and perpetuating traditional values among communities (Wheelerburg, 2008: 170).

While the importance of wages in the northern economy has likely influenced the social structure of some Aboriginal communities, Hart (2006: 22) attributes much of the ongoing debate to the compartmentalization of subsistence and wage economies into distinct 'sectors', as if subsistence and wage economies function in different places, like agriculture and manufacturing or western and traditional. While the distinction between subsistence and wage economies may be useful in analytical terms, Aboriginal involvement in subsistence and wage economies is best

seen as occurring along a continuum with participation occurring at varying points on the scale. The economic makeup of most Aboriginal households is quite heterogeneous, including a blend of economic activities. Some household members may participate in subsistence harvesting, others may produce and sell commercially-modified products harvested from the land (fur, carvings), some may receive government transfer payments (employment insurance, social assistance, pensions), and others may be involved in full or seasonal wage-earning labour. Rather than choosing to participate in any one activity, most households attempt to find a balance with household incomes being derived from multiple sources. Depending on a range of circumstances, community members move along this continuum with most households participating simultaneously in multiple activities. Nuttall and his colleagues (2005: 673) suggest that, due to the complimentary nature of subsistence and wageearning, the northern mixed-economy is perhaps best characterized as an optimal economy.

In mixed economy households, wage labour is often used to support the harvesting activities of other family members. In fact, households with the greatest access to wage income, and thereby the financial means to purchase the necessary equipment to harvest effectively, tend to produce, consume and distribute significantly more wildfoods than households with limited or no access to wage earning opportunities (Wheelersburg, 2008: 171). Rarely a means in itself, cash in the northern mixed economy most often facilitates the subsistence harvest (Fienup-Riorden, 1986). For example, a father may receive money from his daughter who is employed in the community day care facility. With the money, the father purchases fuel and supplies to fish for Arctic char. Of the 500 pounds of char caught, 100 pounds are sold for \$1.75 per pound. This \$175.00 is returned to the daughter for her initial investment and the remaining 400 pounds of char – with an exchange value in the local Co-op or Northern Store of \$2,000 – is distributed and consumed by friends and family (scenario adapted from Simpson, nd). In this process, the relationship between subsistence and wage earning activities represent a process of integration with each end of the economic continuum dynamically linked within a social network (Chen, 2006). Thus, by optimizing a range of economic activities, northern Aboriginal peoples have successfully incorporated wage earning into an overall livelihood strategy.

Notwithstanding the dependency relationship between subsistence and wage economies, characterizations of Canada's northern economy continue to situate subsistence and wage earning activities into distinct economic sectors. This form of dualisms has, in effect, created a dialectic

between subsistence and wage economies, with participants in the former often depicted as less-advantaged (Chen, 2006: 84). In a northern policy context, such characterizations have been powerful impetus for government interventions and have invited regulatory actions and development schemes aimed at improving the economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples – often with disastrous effects.

Regulating the Northern Social Economy

As early as 1894 (passage of the Unorganized Territories Game Preservation Act), the subsistence economy of Canada's Aboriginal peoples was becoming increasingly regulated. Under the guise of wildlife conservation, government-imposed game regulations challenged the ability of Aboriginal peoples to secure a livelihood from the land. With a growing government interest and presence in the north, many of the activities associated with wildfood harvesting – fur trapping, seasonal mobility, communal hunting – were defined as criminal activities (Sandlos, 2007: 236). By the early 1900s, Aboriginal subsistence economies were being significantly impacted through the formation of parks and wildlife preserves, seasonal hunting closures, and, in several cases, hunting moratoriums on several key subsistence species (beaver, whales, caribou and muskox). For example, with the passage of the Migratory Birds Convention (MBC-1916), the Canadian government assumed responsibility for the protection of migratory birds within its national boundaries. While proving to be a significant advancement in terms of international wildlife conservation, the terms of the MBC failed to account for the subsistence needs of Canada's northern Aboriginal peoples. Specifically, by establishing seasonal closures, the MBC made it illegal for Aboriginal hunters to harvest waterfowl prior to September 1st. With most waterfowl species having already migrated south by this time, the MBC effectively denied Aboriginal access to a key subsistence resource. Similar regulatory restrictions were imposed on Inuit whalers following the passage of the 1931 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. Specifically, Article 3 placed severe limits on the means by which the Inuit could harvest whales. For example, Inuit hunters were only permitted to use canoes or other craft propelled exclusively by sail or oars, were not permitted to use or carry firearms during a hunt, and were restricted from delivering products of their harvest to any third person (Gambell, 1993). Whatever their justification, wildlife regulations such as these proved to have a major impact on

Aboriginal harvesters and exerted an enormous and lasting effect on Aboriginal subsistence economies.

In two recent publications, Sandlos (2007) and Kulchyski and Tester (2008) demonstrate in great detail how government-sponsored conservation schemes laid the groundwork for a period of intense government intervention in the lives of northern Aboriginal peoples. Beginning in the postwar period, government agents were sent north to not only monitor but ultimately curtail the hunting activities of Aboriginal peoples (Sandlos, 2007: 20). Frustrated by what they saw as an undermining of government efforts to conserve northern wildlife, federal policies of the 1950s took a particularly coercive, and ultimately devastating toll on Aboriginal peoples (Sandlos, 2007). These policies, based on government's own ideas of modernization, initiated an era of profound social change for Aboriginal peoples (Kulchyski and Tester, 2008). The most overt expression of social control was the relocation of Inuit communities away from interior caribou grounds. Defended on the basis of conservation, the relocation of Inuit communities was also done to educate and train Aboriginal peoples in ways that would facilitate their entrance into the modern industrial economy (Wynn, 2007: xix). By being relocated to more accessible regional centers, "Inuit could receive so-called rehabilitation and employment training that would in theory allow them to adopt modern livelihoods as miners, or market-oriented craft-producers" which in turn would transform Aboriginal peoples into passive workers in a modern capitalist economy (Sandlos, 2007: 239). Sandlos (2007: 235-236) argues convincingly that the federal government's early conservation policies were tied directly to colonial ambitions not only to assert control over northern wildlife populations but also to establish administrative control over Aboriginal peoples.

Despite the significant political gains that have since been made by Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the colonial ambitions of government can still be found in some of the very institutions designed to empower them. For example, effective December 1, 2005, the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement (LILCA) was settled. Through this settlement, the Nunatsiavut Government secured clearly-defined rights to a 72,500^{km²} land base and 48,690^{km²} of coastal zone. Within the settlement region, Inuit residents have the right to harvest wildlife resources in order to meet their domestic harvesting needs. Defined as the amount of resources necessary to satisfy individual non-commercial use, domestic harvesting needs are based on historic harvesting levels derived from available data (i.e., harvest studies) and local knowledge. The use of domestic harvest levels

as a basis for wildlife harvesting policy was strongly advocated by the federal and provincial governments, and ultimately agreed to by the Nunatsiavut Government, for its ability to set clearly defined harvest limits and facilitate effective enforcement capabilities. However, by adopting a policy based on pre-determined harvest levels, the federal and provincial governments have effectively retained a significant degree of power over Inuit harvesting. As a result, many of the species that remain critical to the Inuit subsistence economy, such as caribou, seals, and salmon, remain, in large part, under the jurisdiction of distant government centres.

For the past century, the conservationist policies of government have to a large extent been unsympathetic to the subsistence needs of Aboriginal peoples. Today, decisions of where and when to hunt continue to be dictated not by Aboriginal harvesters but by bureaucrats and government regulators. Across the Canadian north, the subsistence economy of Aboriginal peoples falls under the authority of complex management regimes that have the ability to monitor and even restrict harvesting activities. What lies bare, both now and in the past, is the extent of government control over the subsistence economies of Aboriginal peoples.

Conclusion

In 1931, Kalervo Oberg offered one of the first critiques of an Aboriginal social economy. Working with the Tlingit in southeast Alaska, Oberg showed clearly that the Tlingit economy involved both social and economic attributes and that considering one set of attributes (economic) at the expense of the other (social) would profoundly misrepresent the Tlingit social-economy. Nearly 80 years later, the social economy of Canada's northern Aboriginal communities can still be characterized by the social systems that situate economic activities. Today, as in the past, the harvesting and distribution of wildlife resources not only fulfills important economic and nutritional needs but also strengthens and perpetuates social networks by linking individuals, households, communities and regions across the north. However, given the profound changes taking place in northern Canada, a revised set of assumptions concerning the northern Aboriginal social economy is required. This is particularly necessary given that Aboriginal communities are undeniably adjoined politically, economically, and socially to the national mainstream. As Doubleday (2007: 230) notes, in any given northern community one can find the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) facility under federal jurisdiction, education and health care facilities

run by territorial governments, and regional and municipal government offices offering support and employment services to community members in economic development, tourism, and wildlife management. These same communities are also inextricably tied to the global economy, some as producers of highly sought after carvings and prints (Doubleday, 2007), others through joint business ventures with international resource developers (Bielawski, 2004), and nearly all through the campaigns of international animals rights organizations (Wenzel, 1991). Yet all of these associations, each occurring at different scales of interaction, function alongside viable and resilient subsistence economies. While the lack of conceptual boundaries between these activities may make it difficult to capture the complexity of these interactions, Wenzel and his colleagues (2000) correctly advise that if we are to fully appreciate the Aboriginal social economy we must consider how external influences and material inputs from the industrial society are being incorporated into subsistence production systems and how subsistence production influence participation in the wage-earning economy.

Despite the interdependence between subsistence and wage economies, Canada's northern development policies have for more than a century characterized the northern economy as functioning between 'formal' and 'informal' spheres. Fueled by theoretical and empirical analyses, this dichotomy has been central to the collection and interpretation of statistical data, the formation and implementation of public policy, program and service delivery, and the setting economic development priorities. However, by characterizing the subsistence and wage economies as structured verses unstructured, simple verses complex, irregular verses predictable, policy interventions have often proven detrimental to northern Aboriginal peoples and the maintenance of mutually supportive social and economic activities. Any attempt to develop more effective northern policy in the future must begin to more accurately reflect the complexity inherent in the northern social economy and remain open to the plurality of potential forms local economies may take. Given that the subsistence economy is here to stay, and that subsistence and wage earning economies are intrinsically linked, more appropriate policies promoting equitable linkages between the two are required. This will be paramount if future policies are to strengthen rather than hinder the social economies of Canada's Aboriginal north.

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