

# Marxism, Indigenous Struggles, and the Tragedy of “Stagism”

Thursday 8 December 2011, by [KEEFER Tom](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2010).

## Contents

- [The Colonialists’ Old Clothes](#)
- [Liberal Materialism and \(...\)](#)
- [Marxism and “Archaic Communism](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

The 2008 publication of Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard’s *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* ignited a firestorm of controversy. The *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, and the *Ottawa Citizen* all published glowing reviews of the book, while Indigenous scholars and activists have been scathing in their critiques. [1] This in itself is nothing out of the ordinary, given the polarized nature of debates on Canadian Aboriginal policy. What is significant about this controversy is that Widdowson and Howard are self-avowed Marxists and that they arrived at conclusions remarkably similar to those of neo-conservative specialists on Canadian Aboriginal policy such as Tom Flanagan. [2] Widdowson and Howard argue that notions of Aboriginal sovereignty are politically unfeasible and socially regressive, and that Aboriginals would be better off integrated within the Canadian working class with their Indian status terminated. Their book prompted right-wing National Post columnist Jonathan Kay to write, “I don’t usually use this space to praise the work of Marxists. But in the case of Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, I’ll make an exception. *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry...* is the most important Canadian policy book I’ve read in the last decade.” [3]

In recent months, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* has impacted on-the-ground organizing. Anti-Native activists Gary McHale and Mark Vandermaas have promoted the book and its ideas in their campaign against Six Nations land struggles and are now working directly with Widdowson, who has invited them to speak with Tom Flanagan at a conference she is organizing on Aboriginal issues in Calgary. [4] Disturbing as these developments are, radical leftists should be equally concerned that *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* claims to base its political conclusions on a Marxist or historical materialist methodology. To be sure, these claims may not seem particularly shocking to many non-Marxists who (especially since the publication of Ward Churchill’s edited collection *Marxism and Native Americans*) have come to see little difference between Marxism and other Enlightenment ideologies in their treatment of indigeneity. However, they do raise serious concerns for anti-colonial activists who think that Marxism offers indispensable tools for both understanding and transforming settler capitalist societies like Canada. Most of the critiques of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* have focused on the contemptuous anti-Native tone and racist assumptions that pervade the book; however few have touched on the broader question of whether or not Marxism itself can contribute to understanding Indigenous reality and struggles for self-emancipation. I will argue that Widdowson and Howard’s “Marxist” model of development is in fact an outgrowth of liberal political economy and that, while this “liberal materialism” has produced certain insights, as a political or methodological approach it is neither consistent with the development of Marx’s own thought, nor capable of offering an emancipatory political program for Indigenous people.

## **The Colonialists' Old Clothes**

Widdowson and Howard frame their argument by restating the well-known facts of hardship and disadvantage faced by Aboriginal people within the Canadian state. Rates of poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, and suicide are far higher than those experienced by non-Aboriginal Canadians, and Indigenous people are marginalized according to every significant socio-economic indicator. However, Widdowson and Howard differ from the standard left discourse in their insistence that these problems are maintained and aggravated by Canadian government policies that fail to recognize the "developmental differences" between traditional Aboriginal cultures and those of modern capitalism. They argue that the cultural features of traditional Aboriginal societies - while well-suited to a "Neolithic" hunting and gathering existence - hold back Indigenous participation in "modern" Canadian society. Indeed, this "isolation from economic processes has meant that a number of Neolithic cultural features, including undisciplined work habits, tribal forms of political identification, animistic beliefs, and difficulties in developing abstract reasoning, persist despite hundreds of years of contact." [5]

Widdowson and Howard argue that these cultural traits would have died out if not for the fact that Aboriginal people have been encouraged to cling to them by a so-called "Aboriginal industry" comprised of non-Native lawyers, academics, consultants, and government bureaucrats. According to Widdowson and Howard, these special interests have advanced a "parallelism" conception of Native and non-Native relations in which the two fundamentally different societies should operate side-by-side according to their own cultural and social logics, as described by the principles of the "Two Row Wampum." [6] Widdowson and Howard seem oblivious to the fact that the "Two Row" notion of non-interference between autonomous social systems was not invented by the non-Native "Aboriginal industry," but has been a central feature of Indigenous diplomacy and resistance to European colonization going back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Two major oversights in Widdowson and Howard's work betray the unconscious racism and ideological biases pervading their argument. First, their text does not analyze British or Canadian colonialism as a central factor in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the development of capitalism in North America. The systematic breaking of treaties, the establishment of illegal white settlements on Native lands, the laws against Native people hiring legal representation for the litigation of land claims and the fulfillment of treaty obligations, etc., are never recognized as crucial aspects of a colonial process. Even such projects of cultural genocide and terror as the residential school system - where Indigenous youth from the age of five and up were forcibly taken from their families and physically punished for speaking their own language or showing affection to their siblings and friends; where tuberculosis and other communicable diseases killed an average of 40 percent of enrolled students, [7] and where sexually and physically abusive priests were instructed to "kill the Indian to save the child" - are glossed over with indifference by Widdowson and Howard.

*"Labeling the missionaries' efforts as "genocide," however, obscures the fact that "obliterating" various traditions is essential to human survival. Conservation of obsolete customs deters development, and cultural evolution is a process that overcomes these obstacles. Many of the activities held as destructive to Aboriginal peoples - the teaching of English, the discouraging of animistic superstitions, and encouraging of self-discipline - were positive measures intended to overcome the social isolation and economic dependency that was (and continues to be) so debilitating to the native population."* [8]

Widdowson and Howard's argument to the contrary, capitalist settler societies did not destroy Indigenous ways of life in order to replace them with a "more progressive" mode of production aimed at improving the lot of Indigenous people. The Canadian government confined Indigenous

people to reservations while Canadian capital and its state looked to a flood of new immigrants – dispossessed in their own homelands and already disciplined to the rigours of wage labour – to work in Canada’s fields, lumber camps, mines, and factories. With meaningful access to their traditional means of subsistence deliberately cut off, Aboriginal communities faced extreme hardship and did not enjoy an easy transition toward a “civilized” life of petty-commodity production. The agricultural supplies that Canadian and American governments made available for the purposes of “civilization” were often substandard or inadequate to the task at hand and, in many instances Aboriginal people were not even allowed to sell their produce in competition with local white farmers. [9] These dynamics arose from a planned process of dispossession through which the capitalist state sought the destruction of Indigenous people and their way of life as part and parcel of creating the conditions for capital accumulation.

The second glaring fault in Widdowson and Howard’s framework is their refusal to consider the capacity of Indigenous people to identify their own needs and develop their own political strategies for resisting Canadian colonialism and the imposition of capitalism. In their dismissal of “backwards” Indigenous cultures, Widdowson and Howard demonstrate their ignorance of the wide variety of ways in which Native people have confronted European settlement and adapted their own modes of social and economic organization. For example, for over 200 years the Haudenosaunee Confederacy employed a sophisticated diplomatic strategy to play off French, Dutch, British, and American interests (as well as the interests of a host of Indigenous nations) in order to maintain a balance of power that worked in their favour. [10] For their part, the Mi’kmaq (on the lands of what is now Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) created the first independent Catholic republic in North America in order to safeguard their political autonomy. Their formal concordat with the Holy See in 1610 kept the French (and all other Catholic states) from interfering in their internal affairs until the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia reduced the Holy See’s power in international relations. [11] Many other examples – from the efforts of Joseph Brant to merge Mohawk nationalism with British culture, to the attempts of Louis Riel to carve out a Métis province within Canadian confederation – show not only how Indigenous people have directly resisted colonialism but also how they have adapted particular political, social, and technological innovations borrowed from Europeans to improve their own capacity for self-determination. Ignoring this rich and complex legacy of resistance, Widdowson and Howard present the replacement of Indigenous economies and polities by Canadian capitalism as unidirectional and inevitable, rather than as a contradictory process contingent upon a range of contested and unstable political and social configurations.

Due to a variety of factors – such as the significant percentage of the Indigenous population located outside urban areas, the unintended ways in which the Indian Act and the reserve system constrained capitalist social relations on reserves, and the successful efforts of Indigenous traditionalists to maintain their culture and way of life – many Indigenous people in Canada have not been fully assimilated into the Canadian mainstream. [12] Widdowson and Howard argue that this “failure” to be assimilated accounts for the low self-esteem, anomie, and high suicide rates in Indigenous communities. In contrast to pro-capitalist conservative thinkers like Tom Flanagan who advocate the privatization of communal Indigenous lands and the immediate introduction of market forces on reserves, [13] Widdowson and Howard advance a social democratic solution to the “Indian problem”: extensive education, job training, and gradual integration into the capitalist system. Either way, the end results are the same. Aboriginal peoples should cease to exist as distinct peoples, give up any claim to political independence or sovereignty, and become wage-labouring and tax-paying Canadian citizens with all the rights and responsibilities this entails. Indigenous contributions to the fight for economic and social justice, for women’s rights, and eventually even for socialism, are therefore imagined to occur wholly within the unions, social movements, and political parties of a broad and unified left-wing movement.

## Liberal Materialism and “Stagism”

Widdowson and Howard’s argument rests on a nominally “Marxist” theoretical foundation that divides human existence into distinct socio-economic stages: savagery, barbarism, cultivation, and commerce. They trace the origins of this perspective to the nineteenth-century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan’s argument that historical progress is based on the “enlargement of the sources of subsistence” and that stages of economic development occur in a fixed historical sequence. [14] Seeking to absolve themselves of charges of racism, Widdowson and Howard stress that human beings in a state of “savagery” are no less intelligent than those in industrial societies. Nevertheless, these “Neolithic” cultures represent a less developed stage of human existence that is inevitably vulnerable to displacement by more advanced societies. [15] Widdowson and Howard claim that the stagist conception pioneered by Morgan is central to the Marxist approach, which envisions the replacement of capitalist economic development by a new and higher stage of world communism.

However, as Marxist historian George Comninel has convincingly argued, the stagist theory of development that Morgan relied upon finds its origins to not in Marxism but in bourgeois liberal historiography. While Marx did uncritically adopt some stagist assumptions in early writings like *The German Ideology*, he later transcended this approach through his critique of political economy and his later reflections on alternatives to capitalist development in Eastern Europe. [16] The stages theory of history was originally developed by eighteenth-century bourgeois political economists such as Adam Smith and A.R.J. Turgot, who argued that human societies had “naturally” progressed through hunting-gathering, pastoral, and agricultural stages, before culminating in a commercial or capitalist stage. As Ronald Meeks has shown, this perspective arose in a distinct social context – namely the moment of European contact with the Indigenous peoples of North America. [17]

The encounter between militarized, class-stratified Christian societies and Indigenous peoples living without state structures, private property, or biblical traditions was an ideologically destabilizing experience for European elites, since Indigenous ways of life called into question the “naturalness” of both the exploitative social order of European nations and the supposedly universal cosmology of Christianity. In the stateless and egalitarian Indigenous societies across the Atlantic, radical “levelling” forces in European society that opposed the “primitive accumulation” and enclosure movements of emerging capitalism saw evidence of what classless societies look like, even if they existed at a lower level of technological development. As Engels reflected on the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) confederacy:

*“No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, no lawsuits – and everything takes its orderly course. All quarrels and disputes are settled by the whole of the community affected.... The decisions are taken by those concerned, and in most cases everything has been already settled by the custom of centuries. There cannot be any poor or needy – the communal household and the gens know their responsibilities towards the old, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are equal and free – the women included.”* [18]

Early capitalist thinkers like John Locke developed their theories of private property in no small part to justify the colonization of “unimproved” Indigenous lands, while for others such as Adam Smith, the propertyless conditions of Indigenous North America “offered a suggestive state of simple humanity, stripped of civilization, from which social philosophers could deduce the first principles of human progress.” [19] Smith developed his “stages” theory not on the basis of a scientific inquiry into Indigenous life and its socio-economic context, but rather as a means of justifying the global spread of capitalism and the destruction of alternative economic systems that stood in its way. As Marx put it in his *Grundrisse*, “the so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous one as steps leading up to itself, and since

it is only rarely... able to criticize itself... it always conceives them one-sidedly.” [20] Locke and Smith both suggested that “in the beginning, all was America,” and that further stages of development then advanced logically and rationally as population growth, the division of labour, and utilitarian notions of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain acted as motors of an inevitable historical progression. On this basis, the rise of the bourgeoisie, its revolt against feudalism, and its conquest and settling of the globe were all part of a self-contained and teleological process: opposition to it was irrational and “backwards.” To this story, Morgan added a racial corollary: “the Aryan family represents the central stream of human progress, because it produced the highest type of mankind, and because it has proved its intrinsic superiority by gradually assuming the control of the earth.” [21] Such is the intellectual tradition – concerned principally with justifying colonialism – on which Widdowson and Howard base their argument.

For its part, the Marxist project arose as a critique of the bourgeois political economy developed by Locke, Smith, and Turgot. One of Marx’s principal objectives was to show how the subsumption of labour to capital, the capitalist colonization of Indigenous lands, and the global spread of market relations were dynamics internal to capitalism and not products of a “natural” or inevitable progression through transhistorical “stages” of human evolution. Marx’s method emphasized the internal social relations of accumulation, and especially the ways in which economic surplus was “pumped out of the direct producers.” [22] As Comninel points out, contrast between Marx’s approach and that of bourgeois political economists is clear:

historical materialism, on the one hand, is based on criticism of political economy; it is rooted in a social conception of human existence, is historically specific in its analytical categories, and takes exploitative production as its starting point. Liberal materialism, on the other hand, takes a natural-technical approach to human existence, is prone to analytical anachronisms, and begins with ‘production in general’. [23]

Capitalism developed under particular historical conditions in England. Due to its technological dynamism and its need for constant growth, it rapidly expanded across the world. Nevertheless, its development occurred unevenly and it confronted a wide variety of competing modes of production. For example, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century North America, there simultaneously existed a feudal land tenure system in Lower Canada, the beginnings of industrial capitalism in Upper Canada and the Northern American states, chattel slavery in the American South, and Indigenous communities engaged in hunting and gathering. The later rise to dominance of capitalist social relations over all of North America was not an organic and “natural” process, but one that required decisive state intervention in the form of military conquest to destroy alternative modes of production. For example, the British conquest of Québec in 1759 undermined the French seigneurial system and encouraged the spread of capitalist social relations into what became Upper and Lower Canada, while the American Civil War was – in economic terms – a contest between a capitalist mode of production based on free wage labour and a rival social system based on chattel slavery. The Indian Wars carried out by the US government in “winning the west” similarly involved the destruction of Indigenous modes of production, most obviously through the deliberate slaughter of the buffalo.

In each of these contests between modes of production, history was made by the struggles of real people. While certain socio-economic and technological factors favoured particular outcomes, these were by no means pre-determined. If John Brown’s 1859 raid at Harper’s Ferry had been successful, the Civil War might have been precipitated by a slave revolt on the scale of the Haitian Revolution, with potentially far-reaching implications for African American liberation. Likewise, had the Haudenosaunee not backed the British in their conquest of New France, a French military victory could have resulted in the continued socio-economic development of French Canada and produced more breathing space for the autonomous development of the Indigenous nations of the North-East. While the victory of the industrial capitalist North over the slave-state confederacy in the Civil War



was supported by revolutionaries like Marx and Engels, the resulting transformation of former slaves into impoverished sharecroppers and destitute wage labourers was not an inevitable outcome of that struggle. In times of epochal conflict and transition between modes of production, the self-organization and political development of oppressed people and the seizing of opportunities for developing liberatory and egalitarian alternatives is a crucial, and fundamentally open, question. [24]

## **Marxism and “Archaic Communism”**

Towards the end of Marx’s life, a fierce debate arose in Russia over the nature of the self-organized “peasant communes” that formed a significant component of Russian agriculture. Some socialists claimed that, according to Marx’s approach in Capital, these communes were a reactionary obstacle to the inevitable and historically progressive process of capitalist accumulation. In a sharp rebuke to this perspective, Marx protested: “for [Mikhailovsky] it is absolutely necessary to change my sketch of the origin of capitalism in Western Europe into an historio-philosophical theory of universal progress, fatally imposed on all people, regardless of the historical circumstances in which they find themselves.” [25] In his famous letter of 1881 to Vera Zasulich, Marx further clarified his position by arguing, in direct opposition to a rigid stagist logic, that:

*“Theoretically speaking, then, the Russian “rural commune” can preserve itself by developing its basis, the common ownership of land, and by eliminating the principle of private property which it also implies; it can become a direct point of departure for the economic system towards which modern society tends; it can turn over a new leaf without beginning by committing suicide; it can gain possession of the fruits with which capitalist production has enriched mankind, without passing through the capitalist regime...”* [26]

Is this not a dramatic departure from the Eurocentric and determinist “Marxism” with which we are familiar? Marx himself refuted the dogmatic schema of stagism that his social democratic and Stalinist epigones would propound in his name and suggested that revolutionary processes would follow different trajectories based upon particular dynamics of capitalist accumulation and class struggle. Significantly, Marx also stressed that – if forms of “archaic communism” were to “appropriate [capitalism’s] positive acquisitions without experiencing all its frightful misfortunes” – they must not only lay claim to the technical and scientific knowledge produced by capitalism but also need to form alliances with the working-class revolutionary movements that had the capacity to overcome capitalism by replacing it with socialism. [27] Marx was not interested in reifying “traditional” societies or returning to some ideal pre-class society; instead, he recognized the synergetic contribution that “archaic communist” societies and proletarian class struggles could make in returning “modern societies to a superior form of an ‘archaic’ type of collective property and production.” [28]

Revolutionary movements have a curious habit of overstepping the bounds of what even the most committed revolutionaries consider possible. The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown that successful socialist movements have arisen in some of the most technologically “backward” parts of the world, in large part due to the fact that capitalist penetration of these societies has been incomplete and non-capitalist legacies survive. Indeed, if we use the historical materialist method elaborated by Marx, we can see that, from the beginning of capitalism, all mass struggles that have broken into open revolution – from the Diggers and Levellers of the 1649 English Revolution, to the Haitian revolution led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, to the Zapatistas of the Lacandon jungle – contain the germ of concrete socialist alternatives. These revolutionary possibilities are, of course, limited by their historical epoch and the quality of each revolution’s political leadership – and they are certainly

always doomed in the long term if they do not spark further change on an international level – but even in the most impoverished conditions, and even at the lowest levels of economic development, mass anti-capitalist struggles generate possibilities for establishing real and concrete alternatives to the status quo.

To apologists for capitalism and colonialism like Widdowson and Howard, capitalism is a historically progressive social force which has to sweep away all previous modes of production in order to produce an economically “pure” proletariat, which – at some point (always in the far distant future) – will lead the world to a classless, communist society. Any groups resisting capital’s “inevitable” processes of primitive accumulation and enclosure are thus counter-revolutionary obstacles to modernity. Ironically, the identification of this perspective with “Marxism” owes much to the peculiar development of the first successful socialist revolution in Russia, a country that in 1917 was made up overwhelmingly of peasants, not industrial workers. When revolution broke out in February of 1917, workers’, peasants’, and soldiers’ councils rapidly emerged to begin running society and pushed the revolutionary process in an increasingly socialist direction. Social democrats (like Marx’s literary executor Karl Kautsky) criticized the Russian revolutionaries for trying to “skip stages” by leading a socialist revolution. After the “premature” October revolution, Kautsky went so far as to demand that the Bolsheviks reopen the Russian economy to private enterprise in order to allow for “normal” capitalist economic development to resume.

Due to a combination of the political degeneracy of European social democracy and a spate of tactical and strategic errors by the Communist International, the Russian revolution failed to spread and began to degenerate. After Stalin came to power, the Soviet Union appropriated Kautsky’s stagist arguments to oppose the growth of revolutionary movements in China (and later in Yugoslavia, Cuba, India, South Africa, and elsewhere), arguing that communist movements in these countries should cooperate with progressive wings of the bourgeoisie opposed to feudal and imperialist forces, and postpone the struggle for socialism to the future. [29] Social democratic and Stalinist opportunism is thus largely to blame for the incorrect identifications of Marx’s legacy with the crude stagist notions that Widdowson and Howard propound.

## **Conclusion**

With the putatively “Marxist” foundations of Widdowson and Howard’s argument thus demolished, what remains of their work is an ahistorical apologia for Canadian colonialism and capitalist development that can be deservedly swept into the dustbin of history. However, the line of thinking developed here as a critique of Widdowson and Howard also raises a series of questions about the possible links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous anti-capitalist struggles. While this avenue of inquiry requires concrete investigation of particular dynamics within specific Indigenous communities and a broader renewal of Marxist analysis in the context of Indigenous politics in Canada – a project beyond the scope of this article – some general observations can be made by means of a conclusion.

As counterintuitive as it may seem in an advanced capitalist country like Canada, the transition to capitalism remains incomplete on Indigenous reserves, and the Indian Act – designed as a means to control and disenfranchise Indigenous populations destined for extinction – now acts as the primary blockage to the full penetration of capitalist social relations into these reserves. The land held on Native reserves is not private property that can be transformed into a financial asset, nor are most Indigenous people on reserves wage workers who pay income taxes. As industrial capitalism has steadily depleted the world’s natural resources, Indigenous territories in Canada stand as one of the few remaining “frontier” zones where key raw materials are available. With the Indigenous

population in Canada going through a demographic boom as the non-Native population ages rapidly, the incorporation of Indigenous labour and lands into circuits of capitalist accumulation has become an urgent priority for Canadian capital and its state and thus also has the potential to become a key site of anti-capitalist resistance.

For neoliberals like Tom Flanagan, the solution to the “Indian Problem” is to abolish the Indian Act and complete the integration of Indigenous people within Canadian capitalism by enabling a regime of individual property rights on reserves, encouraging the development of an Indigenous capitalist class, and facilitating investment by multinational corporations. This “integration” was also the aim of the Trudeau government’s 1969 White Paper, which was ultimately defeated by the growth of a radical Indigenous movement in the 1970s. Today, the process envisioned by the White Paper is taking place, though it is happening through economic means as “elected band chiefs” and local business-people and their families are being transformed into an Indigenous capitalist class. Among many examples of this process is the 2008 trade mission undertaken by a group of 100 band council chiefs to China. The purpose of their trip was to encourage foreign investment in the exploitation of coal and timber in northern British Columbia, forest products in Manitoba, tar sands in Alberta, diamonds in the Northwest Territories, and potash in Saskatchewan. [30]

As with capitalism anywhere, the introduction of capitalist social relations on Native reserves will increase class stratification and produce handfuls of millionaires along with a requisite class of dispossessed wage labourers. It will accomplish this whether the class dynamics are produced endogenously through industries such as the cigarette trade or exogenously through alliances with off-reserve capital. While the creation of a waged Indigenous working class will increase standards of living on reserves and will encourage forms of class struggle familiar to wage workers elsewhere, the coming of capitalist social relations to Indian country – like the arrival of capitalism everywhere – will destroy traditional culture, pollute the environment, and exploit and alienate labour. This dynamic can be observed in the high level of economic, political, and cultural assimilation of Indigenous peoples living off reserve who have been incorporated to a much greater degree into the capitalist system.

The development of an Indigenous capitalist class on the reserves is the most promising avenue through which Canadian capitalism could finally resolve its “Indian Problem.” Instead of a full-frontal political attack on Indigenous rights, thinkers like Flanagan hope that home-grown Indigenous capitalists will open up a new frontier of capital accumulation. But the introduction of capitalist norms and property relations on reserves is not a foregone conclusion; it is opposed by many traditionalists within Indigenous communities who seek to maintain non-commodified social relations and a commons which can support their traditional economy. [31] When Indigenous struggles for land rights are waged collectively and militantly, and are aimed at redistributing wealth in communal and non-capitalistic ways, they can offer real alternatives to continued colonial and capitalist domination, thereby inspiring a whole range of potentially anti-capitalist struggles. [32]

With the coming of capitalist social relations to the reserves, Marxism – the best and most coherent critique of the capitalist mode of production – will become an increasingly relevant tool of analysis for Indigenous activists fighting capitalism. The kind of Marxism that will be useful to these struggles is one that can – as in Marx’s own observations on the Russian peasant communes – draw out the connections between movements resisting capitalism “from without” and working-class struggles seeking to overcome it “from within.” At the same time, the “combined and uneven” capitalist development taking place within reserves will pose the question of the collective redistribution of community resources in increasingly socialist terms. By focusing on this dialectic of resistance, both theoretical insights and concrete victories can be shared between Native and non-Native anti-capitalist movements. Our challenge as revolutionaries is to develop a Marxist approach



that understands Canadian colonial practices in their historical specificity, recognizes the inherent value of Indigenous struggles against colonialism and capitalism, and avoids the pitfalls of the reductionist stagist approaches popularized by Stalinism and social democracy. H

**Tom Keefer**

---

---

**P.S.**

\* From Upping the Anti Issue Number Ten, May 2010:

<http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/10-marxism-indigenous-struggles-and-the-tragedy-of-stagism>

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] Noted Mohawk scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred damned Widdowson and Howard for their “dog’s breakfast of outmoded communist ideology and rotten anthropological theories washed down with strong racial prejudices inherited from their own unexamined colonial upbringings.”  
<http://www.taiaiake.com/42>

[2] Flanagan was a key figure in the rise of the Reform Party and was Stephen Harper’s campaign manager in both his campaign for the leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada and the June 2004 federal election.

[3] <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2009/02/02/jonathan-kay-on-Aboriginal-assimilation-and-the-best-canadian-policy-book-written-in-the-last-10-years.aspx>

[4] <http://voiceofcanada.wordpress.com/2009/12/23/canace-founders-to-participate-in-Aboriginal-policy-forum/>. This alliance developed after Widdowson, upon reading a series of columns by right-wing Globe and Mail columnist Christie Blatchford on the Chatwell-Brown lawsuit against the government of Ontario, suggested that the “unlawful” and “illegal” action of Six Nations protestors was the “logical extension of the irresponsible encouragement of the unrealizable rhetoric of ‘Aboriginal nationalism’ and ‘sovereignty’.” Widdowson’s statements on the Caledonia situation can be read at <http://blogs.mtroyal.ca/fwiddowson/2009/11/23/caledonia-a-glimpse-of-Aboriginal-self-government/> and <http://blogs.mtroyal.ca/fwiddowson/2009/12/02/support-for-mohawk-warriors-in-caledonia-and-the-pseudoleft/>.

[5] Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*, Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2008, p. 13.

[6] The “Two Row Wampum” was an agreement made between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch in 1613. It used the imagery of two separate vessels traveling down the same river to conceptualize Indigenous and settler relations. The essence of the agreement was that neither party would try to “steer the other’s vessel” and that peace and coexistence was possible between two different social systems.

[7] John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System*, University of Manitoba Press, 1999, p. 91.

[8] Frances Widdowson & Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 25.

[9] Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993.

[10] Timothy J. Shannon. *Iroquois Diplomacy on the Early American Frontier*. London: Viking, 2008.

[11] Bonita Lawrence, "Rewriting Histories of the Land," in Razack, *Race Space and the Law*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002. pp. 33-34.

[12] The large and growing proportion of Indigenous people living off-reserve and in urban areas obviously brings a layer of complexity into the argument developed below. Considering this important dimension of the issue is beyond the scope of this article.

[13] Thomas Flanagan, *First Nations, Second Thoughts*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001.

[14] Frances Widdowson & Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 53.

[15] Frances Widdowson & Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 54.

[16] George Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, London: Verso, 1987.

[17] Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

[18] Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, International Publishers, New York, 1942, p. 86.

[19] George Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, p. 67.

[20] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, quoted in Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, p. 137.

[21] Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Society*, pp. 553.

[http://books.google.ca/books?id=3iguAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=lewis+morgan+ancient+Society&source=gbs\\_book\\_other\\_versions#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.ca/books?id=3iguAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=lewis+morgan+ancient+Society&source=gbs_book_other_versions#v=onepage&q&f=false)

[22] Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. 3. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984. p. 791.

[23] George Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, pp. 149-150.

[24] Perhaps the archetypal example of the importance of political organization in transforming "objective" historical conditions is the Russian Revolution, where the well-organized Bolsheviks made the world's first socialist revolution.

[25] Quoted in Michael Lowy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*, London: Verso,

1982, p. 23.

[26] Karl Marx, Letter to Vera Zasulich, 1881.  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/03/zasulich1.htm>

[27] Karl Marx, Letter to Vera Zasulich, 1881.

[28] Karl Marx, Letter to Vera Zasulich, 1881.

[29] Michael Lowy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*, pp. 220-222.

[30] Joe Friesen, "Native leaders band together to broker direct investment deals with China," *The Globe and Mail*, September 29, 2008.  
<http://go.mobile.globeandmail.com/generated/archive/RTGAM/html/20080929/wnatives29.html>).

[31] Shiri Pasternak provides a good example in her account of the struggles of the Algonquin people of Barriere Lake to maintain their traditional economy, "They're Clear-cutting Our Way of Life: Algonquins Defend the Forest," in *Upping the Anti*, no. 8, May 2009, pp. 125-141.

[32] I have detailed elsewhere some of the ways in which the direct-action struggles of the Haudenosaunee of the Grand River territory have inspired working-class and environmental struggles in Brantford. This dynamic is even more apparent in the inspiration given to explicitly anti-capitalist groups by the reclamation of the Douglas Creek Estates. See Tom Keefer, "Declaring the Exception: Direct Action, Six Nations and the Struggle in Brantford," *Upping the Anti*, no. 7, October 2008, and "The Six Nations Land Reclamation" in *Upping the Anti* no. 3, November 2006.