

# Normalizing Aboriginal Subsistence Economies in the Canadian North

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The traditional economies of Aboriginal peoples in northern Canada have changed dramatically over the past century. Once reliant solely on the procurement of wildfoods, Aboriginal peoples adjusted their residency, land use, and social organization according to the seasonal and spatial availability of foods harvested from the land. For Aboriginal peoples, their use of wildlife resources was nested within a cultural system, where food procurement encompassed a complex array of social, spiritual, ecological and economic dimensions. Soon following contact with Settler populations, the subsistence-based economies that long sustained the cultures and economies of Aboriginal peoples underwent irreversible change. While the intensity of these changes was experienced differently, by region and over time, the impacts on Aboriginal peoples have been very much the same, a slow yet consistent transition from subsistence-based to capitalistic-based forms of livelihood.

Accompanying this transition has been a notion of what constitutes the 'real' economy. In contrast to the so-called informal, or subsistence-based economy of Aboriginal peoples, the real economy involved capitalistic enterprises, market transactions, and a reliance on wage labour opportunities. Northern policy documents are replete with evolutionary characterizations of the transitioning northern economy, along with depictions of Aboriginal peoples as non-progressive, and requiring government assistance. Government assistance was justified on grounds that Aboriginal peoples required support to participate more fully in the real economy so they too could benefit from the economic and social transformation of the North.

While the Canadian government, and the various departments that assumed responsibility for the administration of Aboriginal affairs, can be most directly implicated in this transformative process, academics have also contributed by giving form and credibility to the 'real' economy. This includes suggestions of the inevitability and evolutionary supremacy of market-based activities. Perhaps well intentioned, the scholarship of some academics has unwittingly advanced the disembedding (Polanyi, 1957) of Aboriginal culture from economy, and in so doing helped set a trajectory of economic 'modernization' of northern Aboriginal economies. Guided by theoretical and empirical analyses, a plethora of public policies, program, and services were introduced to hasten the transformation of Aboriginal economies and to help Aboriginal peoples prepare for unprecedented economic change. Theories of acculturation and modernization in particular were advanced by leading scholars, and were then used by the Canadian Government to justify northern expansion of the real economy through extractive resource development. The notion of the real economy has become so ingrained in northern policy that natural resource development is now ubiquitous as the economic policy for the North. For northern communities to benefit directly from resource development, a better understand of how subsistence harvesting can be integrated into a more inclusive notion of the northern economy is needed.

In this paper I examine how subsistence economies have been treated by academics, and in

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particular how theories of acculturation and modernization have shaped government policies in ways that have proven detrimental to Aboriginal peoples to this day. I then critique the methods that have dominated the analysis of subsistence production, with their overemphasis on methodological individualism and their treatment of the household as an autonomous economic unity devoid of historical particularity. By way of conclusion I make a call for research into the normalization of subsistence-based economies and encouragement of equitable forms of public support for the subsistence-based livelihoods of Aboriginal peoples.

### **Defining Subsistence**

The term subsistence has received varied and uneven treatment by the social sciences. For some, subsistence has been characterized as the minimum resources necessary to support life (Lonner, 1986), and conceptualized as static, and minimalist in terms of material needs. This conception has in effect entrenched a belief that subsistence represents a meager economic existence, and a relic of the past (Wheeler and Thornton, 2005: 70). Yet Williamson (1997: iv) notes that subsistence is not simply an economic activity, but rather only a facet, albeit a central one, of a way of life laden with values that connect Aboriginal peoples to the lands they occupy. To the Nunatsiavutmiut, subsistence does not imply poverty, but rather its practice indicates wealth, freedom, and wholeness (Williamson 1997: iv). Encapsulating both economic and cultural attributes, Kishigami (2008) argues that subsistence involves a series of food-obtaining activities (harvesting, processing, sharing, consuming, disposing), that are informed by norms, social relationships, technology, worldview, identity, and environmental knowledge that are all embedded in food procurement systems. I too have emphasized the relational integration and complimentary unity of subsistence, where economic and social interactions elude dualistic representations (Natcher et al. 2015). In this way subsistence represents a seamless whole, where culture, economy and environment overlap, and boundaries become blurred.

Notwithstanding this broader and more holistic view, subsistence is, more often than not, characterized in the literature and public policy as purely an economic activity, and a means of household provisioning. This rather myopic view of subsistence is found for example, in comprehensive land claims agreements, where subsistence is characterized as “the non-commercial means of providing food and other household necessities from the land (LILCA, 2004: 161) or simply as “the taking of wildlife into possession, and includes hunting, trapping, fishing, netting, egging, picking, collecting, gathering, spearing, killing, capturing or taking [wildlife] by any means” (Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, 1993). While these definitions were agreed to by Aboriginal negotiators, and ultimately ratified by Aboriginal peoples themselves, these definition nonetheless fail to capture the cultural dimensions of wildlife harvesting. It is this definition, and variations thereof, that more often than not reflects how Aboriginal subsistence economies have come to be treated in research and northern public policy.

### Theorizing Subsistence

Prior to the Second World War, the consensus among academics, if not the general Canadian public, was that the traditional cultures of Aboriginal peoples had been irrevocably changed, with any remnants being disadvantageous to their adaption to the changing North. Like other indigenous populations of the world, Aboriginal peoples in the Arctic and sub-Arctic were seen as victims of progress (Bodley, 1975), and if unable to assimilate into Canadian society, would simply disappear (Buchanan, 2006: 93). The general treatises on economic development in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century condemned hunters and gatherers as bad examples for their adherence to traditional ways and their devotion to subsistence-based economies (Sahlins, 1971). The need to assimilate, or risk cultural extermination, was advanced in large part through social theories of acculturation and modernization. Acculturation—or changes that occurs from sustained contact between cultures—and modernization—processes by which cultures are forced to accept the traits of others—dominated the social sciences during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stemming from these theoretical frameworks, an era of scholarship emerged that concentrated on how social and cultural patterns inhibit economic change and the conditions that could best foster economic assimilation. In this regard, anthropologists and other social scientists in Canada began to play an influential role.

As early as the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the Government of Canada played a significant role in shaping academic traditions. Serving as virtually the sole source of research funding at the time, the Canadian Government was in the position to shape the intellectual content of anthropological research and implant its own political interests. Being intellectually and professionally beholding to political administrations, some have even accused the discipline of anthropology of being complicit in government's desire to eradicate Aboriginal culture in Canada (see Avrith-Wakeam, 1993). Whether or not this criticism is justified, it is true that during this period the professional goals of anthropology, and other social sciences, were defined to a large extent by the interests of government rather than the intellectual quest to conduct 'pure' research. It was during this time that social scientists were employed by the federal government, for example by the National Museum of Canada, to carry out ethnographic analyses of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the results of which were to inform the policies of Indian Affairs in Ottawa. As noted by Dyck (2006: 81) it was in the first of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that anthropologists first began step outside the relative safety of their disciplinary confines and began offering actual advice to policy makers concerning the future prospects of Aboriginal populations, who at the time were considered to be on the verge of demographic extinction. Policy makers were particularly interested in the economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples and relied on the informed research of social scientists to gain this perspective (Hedican 1995: 116-117). It was during this period that practitioners of 'salvage anthropology' set out to document the fleeting subsistence lifestyles of Aboriginal peoples, before those systems were lost completely to the inescapable wave of modernization. While a wealth of knowledge was generated from their efforts, their conclusions gave credence to the acculturation theories that were openly embraced by the Canadian government. While examples abound, the reports of Tanner

(1966) are indicative of the general findings of the time, which concluded that the traditional lifestyles, namely hunting, fishing, and trapping activities of Aboriginal peoples, had all but been supplanted by the lure of the city and the quick money to be made through other vocations. Preference for wage labour was further motivated by “the harsh life on the land, and the loss skills that have made traditional pursuits unattractive (Tanner 1966). Lotz (1970: 92-93) similarly suggested that as a result of economic change, Yukon Indian peoples have a greater propensity for wage labour and even more so for the welfare payments that could be found in settlement areas.<sup>1</sup>

Parallel predictions were made for Inuit where a perceived breakdown of traditional institutions was cast as inevitable change in the wake of modernization. Perhaps most noteworthy is the work of Diamond Jenness who, in *The Economic Situation of the Eskimo*, stated that the “economic prosperity ... of an Eskimo community today is roughly proportional to the amount of wage employment it obtains, and not, as formerly, to the wildlife resources that exist in its neighborhood” (Jenness 1978: 144). Jenness further concluded that those ‘Eskimos’ that failed to reorient their forms of economy would ultimately lose their dignity and any measure of independence. Having been demoralized through their contact with Europeans, Jenness argued that the only remaining option was to assume appropriate wage labour occupations (in Buchanan 2006: 97). However, Jenness also cautioned that Aboriginal peoples would in the early stages of their acculturation be inefficient and unreliable wage labourers, and would likely demonstrate little aptitude for new economic activities. Notwithstanding the challenges, Jenness was adamant that the Canadian government should take all necessary steps to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into the national society through their education in the modern economic world, in so far as features of their traditional culture would not interfere with their economic progress. Therefore the ultimate goal of all Indian policy should be assimilation, with the ultimate objective being the preparation of Aboriginal peoples to contribute to the social and economic institutions of the modern Canadian state. Due to his scholarly expertise on northern and indigenous affairs, the recommendations of Jenness were treated as informed testimony on the economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples and proved influential in setting the future direction of public policy in northern Canada.

While the Government of Canada sponsored numerous studies on economic change of northern Aboriginal peoples, Canadian universities were also promoting research programs of their own to aid in the social and economic development of Aboriginal peoples. Illustrative of this agenda is the 1968 Statement of Purpose of the Arctic Institute of North American at the University of Calgary, which reads: “The Northern Indians and Eskimos are faced already with adaption to a strange way of living which eventually will absorb them and extinguish their own cultures. Research is needed on how best to ease their problems in becoming adapted to conditions that require them to work in time controlled, wage

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that each of these scholars has made important contributions to scholarship and public policy. Tanner in particular is regarded as one of Canada’s most eminent anthropologists and his commitment to advancing Aboriginal rights in Canada could never be called into question.

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earning economy, and to accept life in a developed community.” This statement is indicative of much of the research that was being done in northern Canada at this time. A noteworthy example can be found in the Cree Development Change Project, directed by Professor Norman Chance, and funded by the Canadian Department of Forestry and Rural Development (1966-1969). The goals of Cree Development Change Project were to increase the understanding of the process of economic, social, and political change among the Cree of James Bay and then arrive at a formula that could accelerate the social and economic development of Cree communities (Chance, 1968: 3). The lessons learned could then be applied to other Aboriginal communities that were also in need of social and economic advancement. Theories that guided the project were firmly grounded in acculturation and modernization and were premised on the belief that the effective development of the Cree “requires the adoption of modern attitudes and values such as self-reliance and need-achievement, a willingness to accept new ideas, a readiness to express opinions, and future time-orientation that involved greater concern for planning, organization and efficiency” (Chance, 1968: 6). A key finding of the Cree Development Project was that “it is necessary to increase income and standard of living to a point whereby family members can maintain a sense of self-respect between generations, among peers, and in their contacts with outsiders” (Chance 1968: 29). Furthermore, this income should be of sufficient duration to sustain generational change. Only when enough steady income gained from regular wage earning employment is achieved will there be incentive enough for Aboriginal people to choose training in skilled professions over other traditional vocations (Chance 1968). However, it was also recognized that the Cree, as well as other Aboriginal peoples for that matter, should not be expected to make these changes willingly or on their own. But rather “will depend on the ability of others to assist [them] in maintaining a sense of self-respect” (Chance 1968: 29). To achieve these outcomes the Cree would need to be appropriately motivated and enticed “to behave in more modern ways” (Weiner, 1966: 13).

To motivate such change, the Federal and territorial governments prioritized a number of intensive job training programs across the North in order create a skilled Aboriginal workforce. In their review of these training programs, Young and McDermott (1988: 201) found that most were implemented first and foremost to induce rapid cultural change among Aboriginal trainees, and ultimately among all northern Aboriginal peoples. These programs, informed in part by the conclusions of leading scholars of the day, were also based on government’s own objectives to modernize the North, which initiated an era of profound social change for Aboriginal peoples (Kulchyski and Tester 2008). The most overt expression of government’s modernizing efforts was the actual relocation of some Aboriginal communities. The relocations were justified on the basis of education and the need to provide better training opportunities for 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” which in turn would transform Aboriginal peoples into passive workers in a modern capitalist economy (Sandlos, 2007: 239). Most government sponsored training programs

were delivered in such a way as to stimulate rapid acculturation, through extended periods of relocation, the exclusive use of English, and adherence to fixed schedules (Young and McDermott, 1988: 195). Hobart (1982: 54) also found that “[v]irtually every feature of northern training programs was designed to enhance the socialization of trainees: they were cut off from the role models, the reference group, and the significant others which sustain their distinctive patterns of motivation, interest, and activities.” The explicit goal of the training programs was to induce acculturation (Young and McDermott, 1988) where no allowances for the inclusion of Aboriginal culture would be made (Hobart 1982).

Peter Usher (1993: 104) notes that sole paradigm for understanding government’s propagation of the social and economic change of Aboriginal peoples was based on flawed theories of acculturation and modernization. Wheeler and Thornton (2005) echo Usher’s conclusions and suggest that the evolutionary perspective of social and economic development were readily embraced by government in order to advance large-scale resource development projects under the guise of Aboriginal social development. Used in this way the social welfare of Aboriginal peoples was conjoined to modernization and the industrialization of the North. From this perspective the development of an industrial northern economy could take precedence over other forms of livelihood as part of the natural evolution of society and Canada’s northern economy (Hedican 1995: 117). In this way the conclusions of scholars served as powerful impetus for government interventions that invited development schemes aimed at improving the economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples—often with disastrous effects and at the cost of traditional subsistence-based economies.

### **Researching Subsistence**

In many ways the subsistence research conducted in the North can be classified into two general groupings, theoretical and applied studies. The more theoretical grouping includes those studies that utilize subsistence data to advance social theory, for instance the theories of acculturation and modernization that were discussed above. Other noteworthy contributions include a number of small-scale theoretical studies carried out by Chabot (2003) and Gombay (2010) in Nunavik, and Dombrowski (2007) and Thornton (2001) in Alaska. These and other similar studies provide important insights on the cultural and political changes occurring in Aboriginal economies as seen through the lens of subsistence. Wenzel’s (1991; 2005) research in Clyde River, Nunavut is particularly illustrative of this type of research, yet is unique in that it offers a detailed and longitudinal account of the social organization of Inuit subsistence harvesting over time (Harder and Wenzel, 2012).

General nutrition studies that address the food habits and nutrition of Aboriginal peoples in the North have long been conducted (Wein and Freeman 1995; Duhaime et al 2002; Kuhnlein 2009) and more recently traditional ecological knowledge studies that include subsistence and environmental monitoring data have become increasingly common (Gilchrist, G., M. Mallory and F. Merkel 2005; Ferguson, Michael and Francois Messier, 1997). A more recent emergence in the area of subsistence studies can be found in the food

security literature. Here the works of Duhaime and Bernard (2008), Furgal et al. (2012), and Ford et al. (2009) are representative of this important research. A comprehensive review of Aboriginal food security in northern Canada can be found in the Canadian Council of Academies Report on the *State of Aboriginal Food Security in the Canadian North* (2014).

The second category, or 'applied subsistence studies', includes close-range studies of food procurement in regions, communities, or for specific species. This category includes harvest studies that are designed to estimate the harvest of fish, wildlife and plants by Aboriginal peoples. Perhaps the most significant contribution to this area is the research conducted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence. Since the 1980s the Division of Subsistence has carried out research on the economic aspects of subsistence hunting and fishing by Alaska Natives. As noted by Fall (1990), the Division of Subsistence has focused its efforts on understanding the who, what, when, where, how, and how much of wildlife harvesting. For example, research conducted by the Division of Subsistence found that 75% to 98% of all Alaska Native households harvest wildfoods (Fall 2014). Collectively this harvest results in an annual consumption of approximately 52,114,490 pounds of wildfoods by Alaska Native households (Fall 2014).

In Canada, one of the earliest harvest studies was conducted in Nunavik. In September 1975, the Northern Quebec Inuit Association initiated a seven-year study entitled *Research to Establish Present Levels of Native Harvesting*. The study set out to determine the extent of Inuit harvesting, the results of which would be used to establish a best estimate of harvest levels by species and community (JBNQRMC, 1988: v). The objective of the harvest study was to provide data needed to establish guaranteed harvesting levels for Inuit households.

Since the completion of the Nunavik study, other land claims regions have carried out their own harvest assessments. The Inuvialuit Harvest Study was conducted from 1988 to 1997. The object of the IHS was to obtain a continuous, long-term record of Inuvialuit harvest levels for each of the six regional communities. Harvest data are to be used by co-management boards and other wildlife and fisheries agencies to determine and recommend subsistence quotas. Environmental screening and impact review boards also use harvest information to fulfill their role in dealing with resource development and for determining compensation in cases of loss or damage.

The Gwich'in Harvest Study (GHS) was a requirement of the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1992). The objective of the GHS was to record the number of animals, fish and birds harvested by Gwich'in within the Settlement Area. These harvest levels would then be used to calculate Gwich'in Minimum Need Levels for Gwich'in households and would inform the management efforts of the Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board (GRRB) and other government partners.

The Sahtu Settlement Harvest Study was required under the Sahtu Land Claim Agreement (1993). Administered by the Sahtu Renewable Resource Board, the Study recorded the total number of fish and wildlife harvested by Sahtu Dene and Métis between 1998 and 2003.



Those harvest estimates were then used to also establish the ‘minimum need levels’ of Sahtu Dene and Métis and were used for wildlife management purposes in the Sahtu region.

The Nunavut Wildlife Harvest Study (NWHS) was mandated by the Nunavut Lands Claim Agreement (NLCA) and carried out under the direction of the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB). Harvest data were collected monthly from Inuit hunters between June 1996 and May 2001. The purposes of the Harvest Study were to determine current harvesting levels and patterns of Inuit use of wildlife resources, aid in the management of wildlife resources of Nunavut, and once again to establish ‘basic needs levels’ (BNLs).

With the settlement of the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement (LILCA - 2005), Inuit of Nunatsiavut secured clearly defined rights to a 72,500km<sup>2</sup> land-base and a 48,690km<sup>2</sup> of coastal zone. Within the settlement region, Inuit residents have the right to harvest wildlife resources in order to meet their domestic needs or, as defined by the LILCA, Inuit Domestic Harvest Limits. Domestic need is defined as the amount of resources necessary to satisfy individual non-commercial use. The use of domestic harvest levels as a basis for wildlife harvesting policy was promoted by the federal and provincial governments for its ability to set clearly defined harvest limits and facilitate effective monitoring and enforcement capabilities. Since its settlement, the Nunatsiavut Government has implemented a community harvest study program that is establishing IDHLs for 138 different species and resources used by Inuit residing within the Nunatsiavut Settlement Region.

My reason for describing each of these harvest studies in relative detail is to demonstrate how subsistence has come to be characterized in land claims agreements – agreements that were designed in part to protect the harvesting rights and livelihood interests of Aboriginal peoples. In each of these cases, wildlife-harvesting studies have been designed to establish minimal need levels of subsistence resources for Aboriginal households. While satisfying the interests of federal, territorial and provincial governments, this approach reduces subsistence to a regulatory issue, where conservation of wildlife receives *a priori* concern. In each of these studies, household harvesting data are collected, probability statistics are run, replete with their confidence intervals and other factors of probability, and are then used to chart population dynamics for any given species in order to allocate harvesting rights to Aboriginal peoples. The seeming legitimacy of this process has been so compelling that Aboriginal peoples, who continue their struggle to regain control over their lands and resources, agree to participate, if not fully embrace this approach, even though they often times struggle with how such approaches can co-exist with their own understanding of subsistence as an overarching cultural system.

Admittedly our knowledge of subsistence economies has advanced considerably through the conduct of harvest studies. For example, through these studies we know that between 1976-1981 the Nunavik communities of Kangiqsualujjuaq, Inukjuaq, and Quaqtaq collectively harvested and consumed an estimated 2,019,064 kg of wildfood (JBNQRCM, 1988). We also know that between 1996-2001, communities in Nunavut harvested and

consumed an estimated 6,622,522 kg of wildfood (NWMB 2004). Based on these numbers it seems clear that wildlife harvesting remains critical to the health and well-being of these Inuit communities. However, these studies were designed to identify the number of species harvested during a defined period of time, which would then be used to determine minimum need levels. While useful for those purposes, these studies make no attempt to uncover how people's livelihood choices are embedded in culture and history, nor the economic and political settings at which subsistence now occurs. This has been one of the major shortcomings of previous subsistence studies in that they most often fail to acknowledge the structural barriers that influence the options available to Aboriginal harvesters. Lost in these studies is the fact that subsistence represents a cultural system, which cannot be reduced simply to an economic activity or regulatory process.

Equally problematic has been that with few exceptions (e.g., Wenzel, 1991; Harder and Wenzel, 2012; Collings, 2014) these studies have employed methodologies that are more or less consistent with what Halperin's (1994: 144) defines as 'householding.' While making some allowances for inter-household cooperation, this approach generally treats the household as an autonomous socio-economic unit that engages in a variety of capitalist and non-capitalist opportunities in different combinations. As valuable as this approach might be, it remains firmly grounded in methodological individualism, which focuses on the household or individuals rather than the structures or institutions that continue to influence the transformation of Aboriginal subsistence economies. Too often obscured are the historical, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape Aboriginal subsistence economies. Narrowly focused, researchers tend to concentrate on the methodological challenges—response/strategic bias, over and under reporting, memory recall, sampling strategies—rather than the structural conditions that shape and provide cultural meaning to subsistence production. By ignoring the context, and attaching the same assumptions to the behaviour of all individuals or households, the variability that exists between individuals, communities, and regions is impossible to discern. Failing to account for the complexity and the context in which subsistence harvesting now occurs, we are left to simply tabulate the number of species harvested over a period of time, and calculate the economic and nutritional contribution in ways that can inform future allocations (i.e., minimum need levels). The belief that individual productivity must be measured and quantified through harvest studies is the most obvious example of how subsistence is now treated in the North.

### **Normalizing Subsistence**

Nearly 40 years ago Justice Thomas Berger (1977: 123) stated that “[i]t is self-deception to believe that large-scale industrial development would end unemployment and under-employment of Native people in the North. In the first place, we have always overstated the extent to which Native people are unemployed and underemployed by understating their continued reliance on the land. Secondly, we have never fully recognized that industrial development has, in itself, contributed to social, economic, and geographical dislocation among Native peoples.” Despite the impact of the Berger Report (1977), these words seem to have been lost on the Government of Canada who remains steadfast in their

belief that the most expedient route for improving the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal communities in the North is through resource extraction. Such devotion is reflected in the Canada's 2009 Northern Strategy (Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future) (AAND 2009) where mining and other major resource development projects were identified as "the cornerstones of sustained economic activity in the North and the key to building prosperous Aboriginal and Northern communities." As of December 2013, there were over 30 major industrial projects underway or moving through the permitting processes across the three northern territories. With a Federal commitment of \$25 billion in capital investment, the number of industrial projects in the North is expected to double by 2020. To meet the human resource needs of these industries, the Federal Government has "committed to developing the skills, knowledge, and credentials of an Aboriginal workforce in order to keep pace with the North's "fast-changing economy" (AAND 2009).

One example of the North's fast-changing economy can be found in northern Quebec, where the Quebec government's *Plan Nord*, promises "the orderly, respectful, and socially-responsible development for Northern Québec's natural resources over the next 25 years" (Government of Quebec 2012). According to the Quebec government, an anticipated \$80 billion in public and private investments will be directed to mining projects that in return will bring about substantial economic and social developments for northern Quebec's Aboriginal communities. Notwithstanding government's optimism, *Plan Nord* has been met with considerable opposition by Inuit and Cree communities who have heard such promises before only to "toil for a couple of dollars a day like slaves to help mining companies get rich off the development of Inuit lands" (George 2011). As in the past, Canada's policies regarding economic development, and integration of Aboriginal communities into the 'real' northern economy, remain premised on modernization schemes that often fall short of the promises made, and fail to consider other viable and culturally relevant forms of economy that still exist.

This is not to suggest that resources development is necessarily a bad thing. Nor is possible or even preferable to return to a purely subsistence-based livelihood. Rather, if the impacts and benefits are managed effectively and equitably in terms of Aboriginal interests, then resource extraction can prove positive and even supporting of subsistence harvesting. For northern communities to benefit from resource development however, we must not abandon the land-based economies of Aboriginal peoples by believing the only viable economic alternative for the North are vocations in the industrial economy. What I am calling for then is the normalization of subsistence, where Aboriginal peoples, if they choose, are provided the same support and opportunities as are being made available through resource extraction. The normalization of subsistence economies would necessarily involve a range of institutional support systems, alongside other forms of economy, that provide Aboriginal peoples the opportunity to exercise culturally acceptable norms and practices that can facilitate land-based livelihoods. The Hunter Support Programs (HSPs) that are used in some regions of the North are but one example. With funding provided by Aboriginal governments, and in some cases industry, HSPs aim to sustain local livelihoods, support the nutritional needs of community members, mitigate the costs associated with

accessing traditional lands and resources, and support culturally important land-based traditions that might otherwise be hard to maintain. In these cases Aboriginal governments have implemented HSPs to ensure the subsistence economy continues for economic reasons but equally so for maintaining the cultural values embodied in subsistence harvesting. In this way, the normalization of Aboriginal subsistence-based economies involves adapting to new economic conditions without having to abandon cultural and economic traditions. For too long Canada's northern policies have been directed to 'poor economic outcomes in lagging communities and regions' and have typically been undertaken in the absence of any consideration for the subsistence economies of Aboriginal communities. Yet it is the subsistence economy of Aboriginal peoples that could benefit most readily from government support. By normalizing subsistence economies, though HSPs or other institutional mechanisms, an economic basis could be provided that would invigorate local institutions and perpetuate the traditional values that have long been embedded in wildlife harvesting.

### **Conclusion**

As early as the 1940s, social scientists in Canada began to step outside their traditional ethnographic confines by offering government counsel on how best to transition Aboriginal peoples to more productive forms of economy in the face of demographic extinction (Dyck, 2006: 81). With few exceptions, early anthropological research assumed evolutionary undertones and employed theories of acculturation and modernization to explain the rapid changes occurring in Aboriginal society. The influential role of anthropology, as well as other social sciences, was further spurred by large-scale resource development projects, where concepts of modernization and industrialization were presented as synonymous. Yet by conceptualizing subsistence as merely food getting activities rather than an integral part of complex cultural systems, academics did much to advance the notion that the industrialization of the north was inevitable, and the expert advice of some social scientists was used by governments as endorsement that northern resource development was a 'natural' and inevitable alternative to subsistence production.

Fortunately the theories of acculturation and modernization that were once so influential have been rejected and more or less relegated to the past. However, other theories have stepped in, and are in many ways reminiscent of the social theory that once justified the intensive involvement of government in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. While I have made a similar argument elsewhere (see Haalboom and Natcher 2012), the more recent characterization of Aboriginal communities as vulnerable is a poignant example. Here researchers have suggested once again that some northern Aboriginal communities lack the capacity to adapt to the social, economic and environment changes occurring in the North due to their over-reliance on narrow economic bases and a general diminution of human resources. Remote northern communities that continue to pursue subsistence-based ways of life are considered particularly vulnerable, as are high consumers of traditional foods. The policy recommendations stemming from this body of scholarship include: 1) diversifying local economies and creating more wage earning opportunities; 2) securing

funding from government and other institutional support systems; 3) greater integration into the larger market economy; and 4) relocation of those communities deemed most vulnerable. To reverse the vulnerable conditions that northern Aboriginal communities are now experiencing, it is recommended that outside support and externally generated solutions are required. It should not escape the reader that these same recommendations were made nearly a century ago, and were informed by the theories of acculturation and modernization that we are so critical of today. For too long the conditions of Aboriginal subsistence economies has escaped critical critique, leaving theories of acculturation, modernization and more recent variations to go unchallenged. Yet the characterization of Aboriginal people and their livelihoods as 'real' or informal, vulnerable or adaptive, are not unproblematic typologies, but rather have very real implications. Rather than trying to locate Aboriginal economies in one place or another, we must strive to account for the complexity and hybridity of Aboriginal economies in their contemporary form and, when appropriate, and in cooperation with Aboriginal peoples themselves, offer direction to governments on how best to be supportive.

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