

THE DISCOURSE OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

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This manuscript is part of a longer discussion on the way that Tsimshian feasts and other First Nations public ceremonies and institutions have been important sites of resistance in colonial and neo-colonial contexts¹. The section below follows the discussion of feasts *per se*, and brings the argument back to the original starting point of official government political discourse, for a consideration of the "silences and denials" surrounding white privilege (McIntosh 1989:12).

The Tsimshian feast system and the public, collective institutions of other First Nations have sustained resistance to dominant society attacks for generations; the conflict has been between modernist notions of singular History and individual rights versus situated grounded histories and collective autonomies. This analysis of feasts suggests that they were contexts for the exchanging and recording of information, primarily concerning rights in property (of various sorts). In that oral society they effectively filled the several functions of Parliament, various registry offices, courts, the CBC, Globe and Mail, and miscellaneous bureaucracies including the DIAND, with the added benefit of generous institutional patronage of all the arts. The feasts and other ceremonies were outlawed for almost a century. The anti-potlatch laws were justified on the grounds that the ceremonies were wasteful, and were supported by missionaries who found that they could not successfully proselytize while the potlatch system continued. The public and collective aspect of the feasts was denigrated. Even recent publications continue to carry assumptions from the anti-potlatch era.

The Pacific Coast peoples had little political consciousness. Their main interest lay not in government but in social activities, in ceremonies and potlatches, in pomp and display, and in the acquisition of wealth to advance themselves and their families one more rung upon the social ladder. (E. Jenness 1970:72)

The fact that the feast or potlatch complex was an expensive institution, and particularly that it sometimes included incidents of 'ostentatious' wealth destruction has been observed by various outside interests since it was first encountered. Feasts have generally been seen as 'frothing' more than cake, and in an implicit equation balancing cost with observers' calculations of benefits, feasts have been deemed extravagant. The value of the various functions alluded to here, or the comparative cost of meeting them in other ways, has never been computed in that implicit equation. It is not clear that the feast complex consumed a larger proportion of the Tsimshian "gross national product" than those institutions do in our society.

Because of the opulence of some feasts and the implicit equation used to evaluate them, analysts who understand their value within First Nations have focused heavily on explaining their rationality as exchange and redistribution systems, moving goods to people or people to goods (c.f. Suttles 1960; Adams 1973). Suttles (1960:304) summarizes his study of the Coast Salish potlatch system:

The potlatch is a part of a larger socio-economic system that enables the whole social network, consisting of a number of communities, to maintain a high level of food production and to equalize its food consumption both within and among communities. The system is thus adaptive in an environment characterized by the features indicated before – spatial and temporal variation and fluctuation in the availability of resources.

Adams, focusing on potlatch among the Gitksan, suggested that the system moved people to territories, rather than *vice versa*, but also highlighted the adaptive social-ecological nature of the institution. Both of these analyses illuminate important facets of the system. I would argue that an argument that emphasizes a wider notion of control, *the control over information* needed to validate a claim, justifies the expenditures more rationally than does the Suttles or the Adams argument alone. I have tried to show here that the feast complex was much more than a covert economic system: feasts in-formed (gave form to) the world, and gave it legitimacy by

continually bringing the past into the present. There has been considerable debate in the literature concerning the extent to which the environment of the coast fluctuated, and whether periods of scarcity were actually experienced by groups in the area, as many texts in the oral literature seem to suggest. This question may never be definitively decided. It is clear however that the most important "scarce resource" in the area was legitimated possession of territory. This was the resource that was most effectively managed in the potlatch system. The economy was in a very real sense based on information, not on resources (which were plentiful in general, occasional shortages or rumours of shortages notwithstanding); nor on technology or capital.

The Tsimshian villages now are in a situation where the threats to their territory are primarily from outsiders, specifically from the governments of British Columbia and Canada. The Tsimshian response to this situation is interesting; tentatively, but often with grace and humour, they are again using the feast system, bringing their past into the present, and including the outsiders in the event (McDonald 1990). The discourse of modern feasts is attuned in myriad ways to the modern context, but the illocutionary force of feasts is still "Putting on Record". The perlocutionary effect is within the Tsimshian community, and also continues to hold the land for the day when the "land claims" process will get a real hearing in contemporary political discourse.

It may be a long time before the claims receive an unbiased hearing. The ruling by the B.C. Supreme Court in the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en case has shocked many observers by its ethnocentrism:

there is no doubt, to quote Hobbs [sic], that aboriginal life in the territory was, at best, 'nasty, brutish and short.' (Chief Justice Allan McEachern, cited in MacQueen 1991)

It is much more than ironic that McEachern quoted Hobbes (1588-1679) in his judgement.

Hobbes's philosophy dealt with the issues of the individual and state power. Not, however as McEachern's usage seems to suggest:

Leviathan... came out strongly in favour of absolute and undivided sovereignty, without the usual arguments from divine right. Indeed, Hobbes conceded popular representation, but, by an ingenious twisting of the social contract theory, showed that it logically implied the acceptance of undivided sovereignty... The contract theory was resorted to mainly by those who wanted to challenge the absolutist claims of monarchs, to uphold the claims of the common law, or to lay down some sort of moral limits on control and interference by the central executive. Hobbes's feat was to employ this model to demonstrate that absolutism is the only possible logical outcome of consistent concern for individual interests (p. 32)... because of his rather depressing estimate of human nature, he came to the somewhat gleeful conclusion -- highly displeasing to those who believed in government by consent -- that absolutism could be the only rationally defensible form of government (p. 42)². (R.S. Peters in Edwards 1967:32, 42)

Hobbes' was making a claim that it is a universal condition that the "life of man would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'". He argued from this to support total state power over citizens: "Since the acceptance of social rules is based only on the fear of death, it is only the fear of death that will ensure that these rules are obeyed" (ibid:40). McEachern has blended Hobbes' philosophy of universally nasty human nature mandating absolute state power with 19th century social evolutionism:

it would not be accurate to assume that even pre-contact existence in the territory was in the least bit idyllic... The plaintiff's ancestors had no written language, no horses or wheeled vehicles, slavery and starvation was not uncommon, wars with neighbouring peoples were common... many of the badges of civilization as we of European culture understand the term, were indeed absent. (McEachern in MacQueen).³

Despite attempts to characterize Native groups as insane, violent and anachronistic, aboriginal claims will continue to be put forward. Indeed, it has become clear to most Canadians now that what is needed is not to build a society on historical 'might-have-beens', but to begin to build a society in which History is not so blatantly distorted by the dominating society. For the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en, Nisga'a, and Tsimshian, for the Inuit who were internally exiled to the

High Arctic to plant the flag of Canada's sovereignty, for the Teme-Augama Anishnabai, for the Mohawks, Lubicon, and for all of the other First Nations whose land is now Canada, the past is not History and collectivities have histories and rights to autonomy that can be reconciled with individual rights and with the fact of Canada's existence on their land. I have presented here the details of the specifically Tsimshian way of contesting the modernist discourse of History and the Individual, but it should be noted that contestation of the issue has been clearly seen in numerous other areas.

The spectre of the destructive potential of the forces of nationalism has been raised by many commentators in Canada (always aimed as much at Québec as at First Nations)⁴. The images are usually of "unleashing" forces that cannot be controlled. The image is grossly misleading in the context of the First Nations.⁵ It is useful to remember that on the ground of First Nations such forces have been unleashed for centuries. Canadians who are not members of First Nations have in recent decades moved ahead of the government, and popular sentiment strongly supports moves to rectify blatant historical violations of First Nations' sovereign rights. Lumping the aspirations of First Nations in Canada with the destructive nationalism of the last century in Europe is a gross distortion. First Nations' histories clearly show that these are not expansionist groups -- they don't aspire to dominate other groups -- and their collective autonomy will not be a threat except to those who are already holding the reins of power, who will be "unleashed".

REWRITING HISTORY

The manuscript of which this discussion forms a part began with an examination of the embedding of modernist assumptions about History and Individualism in political discourse about Native land claims/rights, and then moved to consider the features the political institutions of

First Nations that have sustained their resistance to domination. It is important to explicitly bring the discussion back to the political discourse of the dominant society, because it is clear that that is the discourse that has been resisted, and that needs to be reformed. It is important that it be named and made visible.

I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage... I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was of special provisions, maps, passports, visas, licenses, and bank checks.... Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the U.S. think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of colour... to redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. (McIntosh 1989:10-12)

One of the things in our collective knapsack is a history book, with many of the pages torn out and defaced. A Nation that has no story that it can tell itself about itself is bound to fall apart; in my English Canadian Mother's generation the schoolbook version of the Canadian story began with a victory on the Plains of Abraham and continued on to the "inevitable" disappearance of First Nations by assimilation and the progress of settlers west to "empty" lands. That tale has long since become embarrassing. A new version was fashioned during the Trudeau years, but many of the same fundamental contradictions riddled the multicultural vision. Difference was celebrated as long as it came without history and without claim. But the histories are there, and the claims are there, and Canadians still need a plausible story. It is not impossible to go back to the very beginnings of our story, pick up threads that were cut off there, and bring them forward to complete a pattern that will provide dignified places for First Nations and for non-natives in Canada. This will have to be done by the dominant society -- we cannot expect First Nations to give us their stories for our own. Lorretta Todd's "Notes on Appropriation" locates a definition of cultural appropriation, which

...originates in its inversion, cultural autonomy. Cultural autonomy signifies a right to cultural specificity, a right to one's origins and histories as told from within the culture and not as mediated from without. Appropriation occurs when someone else speaks for, tells, defines, describes, represents, uses or recruits the images, stories, experiences dreams of others for their own. (1990:24)

Canadians who are not members of First Nations will have to open up their knapsacks and acknowledge the racist and colonial history grounds of their place in Canada, and clear space for histories that challenge the privilege that their group membership gives them. If that is done then it may be possible to begin working on the agenda of acknowledging injustices (whether they were perpetrated 'legally' or not) and rectifying them. If this can be done, perhaps political discourse in Canada can finally deal with the roots of racism, and we can transcend both History and the myth of the Individual, and begin to solve the "white problem".

We need a country free of racism, but we do not need to struggle with white people on our backs to eradicate it. White people need this as well. They need to stop our continued robbery, to rectify colonialism in order to decolonize their lives and feel at home in this land. Racism has de-humanized us all. It once filled me with shame and nearly drove me to death. It separated me from my brothers, my sisters, and my beautiful mother. It keeps white people separated from each other. It keeps white people either feeling sorry for us or using us as a scapegoat for whatever frustrations this society creates in them.

In the process of struggling against racism white people will discover that their own lives have not been filled with joy or freedom. If they don't struggle with racism they will never be able to chart their own path to freedom. Their humanity will always be tainted, imprisoned by the horrific lie that at least my life is not as tragic as those 'others.' So long as the lives of white Canadians are riddled with racism they can never sit at our kitchen tables and reminisce about all the struggles, the trials we have been through together and laugh. (Maracle 1990:240-241)

Tsimshian Feasts as Political Resistance, mss. for a presentation at the annual congress of the Canadian Anthropology Society, Montreal, May 1992.

"Man, Hobbes argued, shuns death "by a certain impulsion of nature, no less than that whereby a stone moves downward." This is what saves man from anarchy and civilizes him, for if man were driven merely by his "concupiscible" part, there would be no society, and the life of man would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.".... Since the acceptance of social rules is based only on the fear of death, it is only the fear of death that will ensure that these rules are obeyed. Men therefore cannot have the peace they all desire unless they accept the sword of the sovereign that will make death the consequence of breaking the rules that are a necessary condition of peace. (R.S. Peters in Edwards 1967:40-41)

Although McEachern's judgement is appalling in its glib use of the social-evolutionary arguments presented by the federal and provincial defence, his judgement did clearly point to the need for a political rather than a judicial solution to the issue.

Carmen Lambert (1991) has developed an interesting analysis of the double messages by many English Canadian commentators whose discussions of the issues around Oka is often directed at Québec nationalism.

Lakoff and Kövecses (1987:195-221) discusses the power of images to guide thought in powerful ways; their example is the image of anger as a heated, contained fluid.

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