Social Assistance and the Colonial Destruction of Mi'kmaw Livelihood in Nova Scotia

Declan Cullen, Heather Castleden, and Fred Wien start their study referencing the "most recent First Nations Regional Health Survey," conducted on reserve by the Union of Nova Scotia Indians" in 2013, a survey that found that "52% of adults said that they received at least a portion of their income in 2007 from social assistance."[1] The authors note that "despite the prevalence of social assistance and related programs in Mi'kmaq communities, and in First Nations communities in Canada more generally, little research has been carried out on the subject," something they rectify by conducting research (drawing on federal and provincial archival sources) that "contributes to the task of understanding the historical roots of social assistance policy through situating its origins in the colonial destruction of the Mi'kmaw Indigenous economy."[2]

Cullen, Castleden, and Wien report that "under the Constitution Act, 1867, social assistance is a provincial responsibility," but as a "legacy of the Indian Act, 1876, however, First Nations living on reserve receive last-resort support from the federal government."[3] "This study's impetus," the authors explain, "lies in the federal government's attempt to have social assistance policy on reserves exactly mirror monetary rates that are used in the provinces," an attempt Mi'kmaq leadership have rejected," arguing instead that "given the distinctiveness of reserve communities, it is both situationally and culturally inappropriate."[4] Moreover, "Mi'kmaq leadership, led by the Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative (Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn) in Nova Scotia," have undertaken the negotiation of a "sectoral (self-government) agreement in the social policy area allowing greater control and design of policy."[5] Cullen, Castleden, and Wien wish to "contribute" to "greater control and design of policy by the Mi'kmaq" through detailing how the need for social assistance policy on reserve has emerged historically and why historical failures indicate a new path forward is necessary." [6]

"The administration of social assistance programs," the authors explain, had been "further complicated by the various names that have been given to it, depending on jurisdiction and time period."[7] During the "early years of contact with settlers in Nova Scotia, for example, in the context of Treaties of Peace and Friendship, assistance was part of a diplomatic exchange relationship and took the form of presents or gifts," and "subsequently, terms such as charity, relief, rations, and welfare were used as the relationship between the Mi'kmaq and European colonists changed."[8] Such shifts in "social assistance leads to an important question regarding its role in Mi'kmaw livelihoods: How has the need for social assistance emerged historically?"[9] To answer

that question, Cullen, Castleden, and Wien turn to "social assistance policy's origins," relying on "dependency and dependency theory."[10]

"A growing body of literature has begun to address the colonial histories of social welfare policy in Canada," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien report, research that shows that "social assistance policy's origins can be traced to paternalistic and 'civilizing' colonial relationships," and even "contemporary social service provision … remains 'circumscribed by logics of conquest, extraction, apprehension, management, and pacification that advance the settler project and seek to secure settler futurity'."[11] The stereotype of the Indigenous peoples as "dependent, lazy, and non-working" animated "policy intervention and colonial control," leading the authors to conclude that "social assistance policy, both present and past, then, is inextricably linked to the history of settler colonialism in Canada."[12] More specifically, attention has been focused on the "contested significance of the term 'dependence'," a term which has been used to "stigmatize and discipline social assistance recipients and undermine Indigenous sovereignty."[13] Cullen, Castleden, and Wien ask: "how did this situation of economic dependence emerge? And what kind of relationship, precisely, does dependence suggest? To answer this question, we engage dependency theory as a means to frame the emergence of social assistance."[14]

The authors note that dependency theory was formulated in the 1960s by "scholars working on or in Latin America and Africa," initially defined as the dependence of certain countries' economies on the development and expansion of other countries' economies, the former becoming dependent upon the latter.[15] Dependence denotes "reliance, but a reliance produced by uneven incorporation into the global capitalist economy, not by some primordial lack of development."[16] Despite the differences in time and place, Cullen, Castleden, and Wien think this theory might "help us understand the historical emergence of social assistance among the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia?"[17] Apparently others have attempted to "apply dependency theory to Indigenous Peoples in North America," emphasizing the significance of "market relations and dispossession in undermining Indigenous economic systems."[18] They point out that "settler dominance was not solely achieved by force," but by "market relations and the insidious logic of exchange," the authors arguing that these "took effect long before colonial military dominance had been established."[19]" They note that "Indigenous societies, like the Mi'kmaq, who had once easily been able to provide for themselves, saw their environmental, social, and economic structures deteriorate as trade relations deepened," adding that "the impact of epidemics, growing European settlement, and land pressure, saw Indigenous Peoples lose power over the key issues of what was to be exchanged, and how it was to be received and used."[20] They assert: "Dependency theory, then, brings a historical sensibility to the question of economic

relations and social assistance."[21] Given dependency theory's transportability – in terms of place and time - "historical sensibility" seems an extra, not intrinsic to it.

Cullen, Castleden, and Wien combine the two by returning to pre-contact time, telling us that "people lived in extended family groups and community leaders allocated hunting territories and resources," that "community well-being was the overriding concern and extended families 'ensured that each nuclear family could call on a sizable group of closely knit kin in the event of misfortune'," meaning that "providing aid in times of stress was considered a communal responsibility."[22] They cite "early colonists such as [Jesuit priest] Pierre Biard and Marc Lescarbot [who] noted this social structure," Biard recording that the "Mi'kmaq shared everything: 'No one would dare to refuse the request of another, nor to eat without giving him a part of what he has'."[23] Lescarbot testified to "Mi'kmaq society's 'mutual charity,' 'hospitality,' and acceptance of strangers in 'their commonality of life'," while "others noted how 'the support of widows and orphans was assumed by the best hunters'," creating a "chain of benevolence and gratitude [that] sustained this harmony and balance among living things."[24] Such "sharing of gifts was also central to social relations, and it accompanied commercial and treaty arrangements," so that a "person will share their home and goods with a visitor in need, who, in turn, would express gratitude by reciprocating in kind at a later date."[25] The conclusion: "Sharing was not just one relation among many; it was the basis of all relations," and the "Mi'kmaq call this social support system Tpitnewey."[26]

"These aspects of society were put under severe pressure by the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien continue, adding that: "One of the immediate consequences of extended contact with Europeans was deepening trade relations," one consequence of which was that "Mi'kmaw traditional economic activities were gradually undermined."[27] As the Mi'kmaw "became entangled in the European-based market system," not only "hunting" but "social oriented activities" as well were refocused from "subsistence" to "market exchange."[28] In particular, the "fur trade exposed the Mi'kmaq to market vulnerability."[29] During periods of high demand, the "demand for furs and more destructive hunting technologies seriously depleted animal stocks."[30] Moreover, "as the fur trade expanded, the Mi'kmaq altered their seasonal cycle in response to its demands," meaning that a "longer period of the year was spent hunting in the interior and, consequently, less time in the summer was available to support traditional coastal subsistence activities."[31] Affected where "Mi'kmaq diets, clothing, settlement patterns, belief systems, and divisions of labour."[32]

The "new settlers took the best lands for agriculture, fishing, and lumber," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien point out, "placing increased pressure on resources."[33]

Over time, "these activities replaced the declining fur trade," and the "Mi'kmaq, as a result, largely became regarded as an obstacle to settlement," in effect, losing "their economic and strategic value as traders and warriors."[34] Predictably, "colonial policy now explicitly viewed them as a social problem," a view aggravated during times of "scarcity" when the "colonial government began to issue small amounts of supplies, called relief, to destitute Mi'kmaw families."[35] Since settlers arrived, then, the "topography of Mi'kmaq livelihoods had changed dramatically."[36] By the eighteenth century, the Mi'kmaq had already begun to incorporate gift-giving, fur trading, and farming into their seasonal rounds," evidence that "European colonization had, thus, permanently altered the economic conditions under which the Mi'kmaq could remain self-reliant," and so "selective engagement with changing economic opportunities became a key aspect of Mi'kmaq survival."[37]

Also in the eighteenth century – in 1768 specifically - "Britain gave responsibility for local affairs, including the Mi'kmaq, to Nova Scotia's colonial government but, Cullen, Castleden, and Wien note, "local control, however, did little to focus more attention on the Mi'kmaq's needs," resulting in what "would endure for much of the 19th century," namely: "In summer, Mi'kmaq families would camp near a village to sell their handcrafts and wares. In winter, the people would return to the forest to hunt."[38] At first, "ad hoc policies aimed at addressing Mi'kmaq problems focused on promoting agriculture, rather than granting relief, which, colonial administrators complained, only intensified 'the worst traits of the Indian character, indolence and drunkenness'," but later, "after 1800, a piecemeal approach emerged where lands were occasionally set aside for the Mi'kmaq, a practice which set a precedent for the establishment of a formal reserve system."[39] But "neither agriculture nor sporadic relief funding … were sufficient for dealing with the perennial subsistence crises facing the Mi'kmaq."[40] Next, Cullen, Castleden, and Wien cite the 1842 "Act for the Instruction and Permanent Settlement of Indians" – giving "rise to the formal reserve system" – as "dramatically alter[ing] Mi'kmaw life."[41] Most of the 20,050 acres set aside as reserves "were 'sterile and comparatively valueless,' and where there was valuable land, its quantity had been 'diminished by the encroachment of the whites'," as the "colonial government" – while "charged with providing permanent lands for settlement" - "rarely protected [it] from the continued invasion of colonists."[42] Moreover, neither "farming" nor the "reserve system" protected the Mi'kmaq from exploitation, as "relief payments" and "mobility" were limited - "monitoring" and "control" were not.[43]

"From the post-Confederation period through to World War II," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien report, "two broad processes greatly impacted Mi'kmaq livelihoods: Confederation, including the federal assumption of responsibility for Indian Affairs, and industrial developments in Nova Scotia."[44] They postulate that "it was here at the intersections between independent production, wage labour, and the

long arm of the federal state that modern social assistance policy emerged."[45] "Confederation transferred jurisdiction of Indian Affairs from Nova Scotia to the new federal government," and "early directives reaffirmed the colonial status quo: The Mi'kmaq were expected to be self-sufficient, growing, where possible, their own food. Indian agents were tasked with maintaining this situation by monitoring each reserve's affairs and revenue, documenting its activities, encouraging agriculture, and granting relief to those in great distress."[46] The authors report that "most Department of Indian Affairs administrators saw relief as a form of charity necessitated by the perceived Mi'kmaq inability to modernize and become farmers, and to their supposed 'indifference about the future'," and Mi'kmaq "mobility was still seen as a persistent problem to agents' civilizing mission."[47] For example, "in 1876, the agent at Grand Narrows reported that, instead of farming, the Mi'kmaq 'prefer to be migrating, with quivering muscles, from one place to another, begging their livelihood'," and, in fact, numerous "reports reinforced the idea that Indigenous people experienced poverty because of their 'indolence' and predisposition to mobility, a strategy that sought to delegitimize the historical and contemporary importance of migratory movement to Indigenous political and economic autonomy."[48]

Referencing "Mi'kmaq resilience in an Industrializing economy," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien summarize: "the 19th century could be characterized by the dramatic aftereffects of the decline of the fur trade, growing European settlement, the emergence of the reserve system, and the failure of agricultural policy."[49] Over the century, "emerging industrialization created coal, iron, and steel sectors whose development, though vulnerable to periodic global downturns, created expanding opportunities for wage labour," the result of which was that the "Nova Scotian labour force underwent dramatic sectoral shifts."[50] For example, "agriculture, hunting, and fishing, which made up 75% of the labour force in 1871, declined to 20% by 1940," and so "Nova Scotia transitioned from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy, and the Mi'kmaq joined this industrial labour force."[51] Indeed, "wage earning became a significant part of Mi'kmaq subsistence strategies, a fact reflected in its inclusion as a category in Indian agents' reports to the Department of Indian Affairs."[52] By 1920, "annual reported wages earned by the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia were valued at $83,380, which is half of their estimated total income.[53]

We learn that the "Mi'kmaq diversified their economic base."[54] While "traditional hunting and fishing continued," these were "limited," and the "colonial administration encouraged livelihoods such as farming and coopering, which became part of their survival strategies."[55] Cullen, Castleden, and Wien conclude: "Through mobility and economic adaptation they retained a sense of autonomy."[56] How? "Despite continual government pressure 'they eschewed the stark set of choices laid out for them by the colonial (and later federal state) and European settlers—opting

instead to farm, utilize their 'customs,' and serve their 'maker' at one and the same time'," but from the "orthodox economic view of modernization … modern life had passed the Mi'kmaq by."[57] Such a view "rationalized the government's paternal attitudes and control of Indigenous affairs"; due to "this deliberate oversight of Mi'kmaq agency," by "1933, economic dependency was perceived as a permanently defining feature."[58] Indeed, characterizing the "Mi'kmaq as outside modern society and the economy was crucial to obscuring their economic agency."[59] And "when their economic engagement has been grudgingly acknowledged, that participation has been seen as an indication of their abandonment of a traditional way of life," as "wage labour, in this sense, has been perceived to function as an instrument of assimilation, like property ownership: a symbol of acceptance of Western society and values."[60]

Cullen, Castleden, and Wien contest this fact, asserting instead that "participation in wage labour and self-employment, or other off-reserve employment, did not represent an abandonment of traditional life."[61] They characterize "off reserve employment" as a "selective and complex adjustment to structural economic change and a form of resistance to an overbearing colonial administration."[62] That this was "adjustment" is obvious, but how it constitutes "resistance" isn't, unless "resistance" is conceived in terms of argument and attitude: "Paying attention to Mi'kmaq wage labour is crucial as it undermines the popular version of economic dependence as a timeless condition, and repositions it, according to dependency theory, as the result of a series of historical and structural changes in settler–Mi'kmaq relations."[63] The former is indicated by the Great Depression,[64] when "racialized hiring practices dictated that the Mi'kmaq suffered more than their White counterparts."[65] Not only were First Nations in Canada "disproportionately unemployed in the 1930s compared to the settler population," they also suffered "reduced relief scales," causing even more "suffering."[66] Under such "dire economic circumstances, relief became a necessity in most Mi'kmaq communities," prompting the Department of Indian Affairs Inspector to attribute the "relief problem" to "misplaced paternalism and the Mi'kmaq ability to exploit government resources."[67] We learn that the "federal government's response to the erosion of Mi'kmaq livelihoods was swift, misplaced, and guided by deep desire to reduce budget expenses."[68]

"As relief spending continued to rise," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien report, "officials began to revisit the idea of centralizing the 45 reserves in Nova Scotia," a project of "centralization"[69] that reduced reserves to "three central locations,"[70] selling off the others, aware that the Mi'kmaq 'appear to prefer their current mode of life and resent any form of paternalism, which might tend to restrict their liberty or repress their nomadic instincts'."[71] Despite Mi'kmaq preferences, the "idea of centralization continued to gather pace in the 1920s and 1930s as persistent reports normalized its logic," rationalized as a "direct response to increasing relief expenditure."[72] However,

the "promised benefits of centralization ... failed to materialize," as "the reserves were plagued by mismanagement, and a lack of materials, roads, and steady employment."[73] Moreover, "Mi'kmaw ability to rebound from the economic deprivations of the 1930s was severely obstructed,"[74] leading an observer to conclude that centralization "affected Indian life in the province more than any other post-Confederation event; today its social, economic, and political effects are still felt."[75] Prominent among these effect was "community feeling … destroyed by tension and competition between newcomers and original reserve residents."[76] But "self-sufficiency and pride in economic independence were also eroded by the new workfare regime on reserve … [as well as] trust in the institutions of governance and administration."[77]

"Mi'kmaq economic independence had been severely undermined by centralization," Cullen, Castleden, and Wien conclude, "which precipitated the expansion of the post-war welfare state into Mi'kmaq communities."[78] By mid-twentieth-century, "Canada [had] gradually put in place the universal social programs that are the hallmark of the modern welfare state— programs such as unemployment insurance, pensions of various kinds, social assistance, and universal health care."[79] The authors note that "First Nations persons living on reserve were often not initially included," and so they suffered "lower benefits and arbitrary administration."[80] Contextualizing this suffering historically, Cullen, Castleden, and Wien conclude:

> First Nations communities continued to suffer from a historical legacy of dispossession, displacement and assimilation, and federal policy choices that were at best misguided and at worst deeply damaging, such as implementing residential schools and centralization. In this and other ways, their experience was not unique. Stephen Cornell, one of the principals of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, puts this in a wider context, commenting on the individualizing effects of government policy. He notes that governments in the CANZUS countries (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) see Indigenous people as a persistent policy problem.[81]

A "persistent policy problem" alright, and not only for the non-Indigenous, as a "defining characteristic of social policy on reserve has been the fact that First Nations themselves have had very little say in how programs, such as social assistance, are designed and delivered."[82] For the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia, however, a door was opened in 2016 when a new government in Ottawa indicated it was prepared to consider a new approach to social assistance that is determined in large measure by the Mi'kmaq themselves."[83]

References

Cullen, Declan, Castleden, Heather, and Wien, Fred. 2021. Historical Roots of Social Assistance: An Inadequate Response to the Colonial Destruction of Mi'kmaw livelihood in Nova Scotia. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, *12* (3), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2021.12.3.10202

Dickason, Olive Patricia and Newbigging, William. 2010. *A Concise History of Canada's First Nations*. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press.

Lusztig, Michael. 2008. Native Peoples. In *Canadian Studies in the New Millennium*, edited by Patrick James and Mark Kasoff (100-124). University of Toronto Press.

Endnotes

[1] 2021, 1.

[2] Ibid. Not only Indigenous livelihood was destroyed, so were the Indigenous peoples themselves: "The Mi'kmaq," Dickason and Newbigging (2010, 55) report, "who might have numbered as many as 35,000 at the time of contact, dropped to 3,000," with "Jesuit priest Pierre Biard [recording] that more than half the population of Cap de la Hève died of disease in 1612." By 1705, the "Amerindian nations, who, although once numerous, were not reduced to "almost nothing" (quoted in 2010, 55). "In Nova Scotia, the 1838 census cited 1,425 Mi'kmaq, in wretched condition and declining so rapidly they were expected to disappear in about 40 years" (2010, 156-157).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. Terminology may have changed, but settler appropriation of Indigenous land did not: "When the British founded Halifax in 1749 in a district the Mi'kmaq called Segepenegatig, they once more failed to consult the Amerindians" (Dickason and Newbigging 2010, 97).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] 2021, 2.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] 2021, 3.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] 2021, 4.
[23] Ibid. In fact, "far from being subjects of the French, the Mi'kmaq," Dickason and Newbigging (2010, 54) tell us, "had welcomed them as friends and allies." After their defeat of the French, the English found that many Indigenous peoples, "particularly" the Mi'kmaq, had been converted to Catholicism (Ibid.). "The Mi'kmaq soon learned to play the English off against the French, and, eventually, to force the French to reorganize and increase their 'gift' distributions tools and equipment, guns, weapons, and ammunition, food, clothing" (2010, 55).
[24] Ibid. Strangers may have been accepted but apparently not always liked: Dickason and Newbigging (2010, 56) note that the Mi'kmaq disliked the Abenaki. Concerning the Abenaki, see: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/abenaki
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] 2021, 5. "The coastal Mi'kmaq," Dickason and Newbigging (2010, 52) report, "quickly found advantage in the European presence. This relationship began with the fisheries, which had first attracted European attention to the region…. The pattern soon reversed itself, however, as the Mi'kmaq adapted to the fur trade."
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] 2021, 5-6.
[39] 2021, 6.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] 2021, 7.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] 2021, 8.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

[52] 2021, 9.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] 2021, 10.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/great-depression
[65] 2021, 12.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] 2021, 13.
[71] 2021, 12. The fact that many Indigenous peoples have been nomadic has persuaded some that "North American Indians never enjoyed sovereign control over land on which … they were nomadic" (Lusztig 2008, 117).
[72] 2021, 13.
[73] 2021, 14.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Quoted in 2021, 14.
[76] 2021, 14.
[77] Ibid.
[78] 2021, 15.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.