

# Book Review: Indigenous Economics

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Trosper, R. L. (2022). *Indigenous Economics: Sustaining Peoples and Their Lands*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press. 218 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8165-3345.

Relationality is at the core of Ronald Trosper’s *Indigenous Economics*, a book that investigates relationality and its effects on economics and economic analysis. There is a growing body of work on relationality, with scholars in multiple fields writing about it in connection with their respective disciplines (Chilisa, 2012; Gould et al., 2023; Kovach, 2009; Martinez et al., 2023; Tynan, 2021; Wilson, 2008). However, Trosper’s work offers a unique perspective by looking at economics through the lens of relationality. The first chapter explores the meaning of development for Indigenous peoples, which Trosper argues is “living well through relationships” (2022, p. 4) with both humans and nonhumans. This perspective offers an alternative to the definition embraced by international organizations after World War II. Instead of focusing on the production of commodities as an indicator of development, Trosper examines relational goods such as trust, cooperation, peace, well-being, and thriving lands and species, positioning them as the key outcomes of enhanced relationships with the natural world and other human beings. Of course, this is not to say that an increase in one’s material standard is not valued, only that it is not a primary measure of development. Drawing on the work of Indigenous scholars such as Dara Kelly (2017), Trosper goes on to define wealth as the strong relationships one has with all humans and nonhumans in a specific landscape, as opposed to the standard definition of wealth as one’s net worth. In this first chapter, Trosper offers five examples of successful relationship building in Indigenous communities and the benefits their different approaches provide.

The remaining chapters expand on Trosper’s understanding of Indigenous economic theory and relationality. Chapter 2 shows how a relational approach to economics, which focuses on the “subjective understanding and valuing of other persons” (Trosper, 2022, p. 28), contrasts with standard economics’ use of contracts to outline the nature of a relationship. Trosper suggests a subjective approach is needed because every person is uniquely shaped by the relationships formed during their life. Chapter 3 examines

how each person becomes a relational subject by cooperating with others to produce relational goods and how identity is shaped at the micro, meso, and macro levels (e.g., families, villages, and nations). Chapter 4 illustrates the role of land in the formation of Indigenous identity, as well the relationships among humans and nonhumans within Indigenous land tenure systems. Indigenous “people are not separated from their land; they live in relationship to it” (Trosper, 2022, p. 85). Trosper goes on to describe Indigenous territoriality systems and identifies common characteristics between them such as the “creation of relational goods for families, clans, and villages” as well as “the inclusion of nonhumans in those relationships” (2022, p. 109). Chapter 5 examines common pool and public goods. Trosper shows how good commons governance comes from prioritizing good relationships, while poor governance of common pool goods such as fisheries can lead to overharvesting and limited productivity. Trosper also investigates the conflict between individualism and the management of common pool and public goods: what happens when individuals focus on maximizing resources for themselves without coordinating with others who are pursuing those same resources? Trosper explores how good relationships can solve these types of social dilemmas and discusses strategies for creating such relationships, as well as the importance of the relational goods such as trust, identity, and equity that emerge from these relationships. Chapter 6 examines relational leadership amongst Indigenous leaders. Trosper argues that Indigenous conceptions of sustainability support the principles of relationality and the consciousness of all beings and that relational leaders embody these principles and support sustainability by maintaining strong relationships among all humans and nonhumans. Trosper supports these claims with examples of relational leaders whose actions have contributed to sustainability.

The last chapter of the book is worth discussing at length. Chapter 7 focuses on relational entrepreneurship and compares relationality to more individualistic entrepreneurial approaches. Trosper acknowledges that many relational organizational entities defy the “public/private dichotomy” and provides examples of entities that represent “a mixture of both public and private activities of individuals” (2022, p. 170). Trosper looks to Wanda Wuttunee (2004) and her book *Living Rhythms: Lessons in Economic Resilience and Vision*, which shares lessons learned from relational entrepreneurs in Indigenous communities and organizations in Canada and which builds on Sherry Salway Black’s (1994) definition of Indigenous economics and her “Elements of a Development Model.” Trosper further illustrates relational entrepreneurship with helpful examples from additional communities and scholars. This chapter offers new perspectives on entrepreneurship that could significantly contribute to future research. In particular, one question that arises is how relationality and Trosper’s definition of relational entrepreneurship can contribute to future research on Indigenous entrepreneurship, financial institutions, and economic development organizations?

Lastly, the afterword summarizes the key points from each chapter and reiterates how relationality creates a very different approach to economic analysis. It also proposes guidelines for further work in the field of Indigenous economic theory. This book is a testament to Indigenous worldviews, the concept of relationality, and their influence on economic analysis, Indigenous peoples, and their lands. It offers a

new way of looking at ourselves, our relationships, our communities, our environments, and our economies. Its theory of relational economics should fundamentally change how we view standard economics and traditional economic theory. And finally, it is a testament to Ronald Trosper's scholarship, impressive knowledge, and wisdom he has amassed throughout his career.

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