

Insurgent Economics: Reflections on Community-Based Research and First Nations–Settler Entity Economic Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Last year *JAED* published a paper I wrote (Sommers, 2017) in which I made use of Kevin Bruyneel’s (2007) work on the “third space of sovereignty” to examine how Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation manages to both participate in capitalism (in Bruyneel’s words, “demand rights and resources from the liberal-democratic state”) and assert its sovereignty (“challenge the imposition of colonial rule”). I had written the paper in late 2015 for a class at the University of Alberta, and, four months later, in early 2016, a Community Service Learning (CSL) project prompted me to think further about the potential of Indigenous economic activity to advance Indigenous sovereignty and challenge the imposition of colonial rule.

In this article, I will borrow from Adam Gaudry’s principles of “insurgent research” (2011: 36), which I studied while completing my CSL project, to present my argument that

¹ My Native Studies education has taught me that transparency regarding “positionality” is important and, accordingly, here are the facts about who I am that are relevant to readers of this article: I am a white settler, born and raised in Canada; I am a designated accountant working for what-is-now-known-as Indigenous Services Canada; besides accounting, my academic background includes two religious studies programs (Bachelor of Arts, Taylor University College; Master of Arts, McGill University) both of which focused heavily on the role of worldviews in Ancient Near Eastern society and extant texts. Since 2015 I have been a part-time Master of Arts student at the Faculty of Native Studies, University of Alberta. My interactions with First Nations in Alberta through my work, my understanding of the importance of worldview through my prior academic study, and my economic awareness as an accountant, have made me interested in how economic and fiscal relationships between First Nations and settler entities (e.g., corporations, governments) can evolve in such a way that they further decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty.

First Nation–settler entity economic relationships² can become “insurgent economic relationships” — relationships that are mutually beneficial economically to First Nations and settler entities, but also serve to further Indigenous sovereignty and challenge the imposition of colonial rule. In the context of this paper, I will imagine the “insurgent” aspect of these insurgent economic relationships in terms of Shalene Jobin’s discussion of the Plains Cree nation; in other words, I will assume that the First Nation’s “aspirations” within an insurgent FNSEER are to fight “for space within colonial structures while re-establishing their own governing processes” (Jobin, 2013: 601–602). The purpose of this article is not necessarily to outline how a FNSEER should actually be negotiated in the “real world”, but rather to imagine hypothetically how a FNSEER might be used to further Indigenous sovereignty. I will conclude the paper with some comments regarding why settler corporations might be amenable to an insurgent FNSEER.

COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT AND COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH

Since my CSL project and studying community based research were the impetus for my thinking about insurgent FNSEERs, I will briefly discuss this background to the extent it is relevant.

My CSL project involved research in the area of Indigenous entrepreneurship. Among other things, I was exposed to Indigenous youth who were thinking and learning about entrepreneurship, and were positive about its potential to better themselves, their families, and their communities. I learned a lot from these youth and from the project in general, but I came away disappointed in two respects: (1) the extent to which Indigenous entrepreneurship as it was being framed would contribute to Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization; and (2) the extent to which I felt I had been able to “give back” to the “community” I was supposed to be contributing to.

On the first point, I want to be careful. Entrepreneurship, as generally understood, helps people achieve “personal economic independence” (Abele, 2005: 224); no doubt this is a worthy goal, and entrepreneurship in Indigenous communities is surely as beneficial to Indigenous people as entrepreneurship is to settlers in settler communities — maybe more so, given employment challenges in many Indigenous communities. In other words, I am sensitive to the fact that “the need for jobs and income is enormous” (Cornell & Kalt, 2005: 4) within Indigenous communities, and having individuals starting small businesses can be a way to address this need. Where my disappointment came in was that this is “all” entrepreneurship typically does. Again, providing economic independence is important and can be transformative, but entrepreneurship, at least as I was thinking about it, lacks *direct* political or decolonial ambition.³ It is not this paper’s intention to further discuss entrepreneurship,

² Since I will be using the term often, from here on out I will use the admittedly awkward acronym “FNSEERs” to refer to First Nations–settler entity relationships.

³ Of course, I can imagine that a thriving culture of Indigenous-owned small business may in fact *indirectly* have significant political and decolonial impacts; on the other hand, I can also imagine how it could do the opposite: economic “development has the potential to either advance or disrupt the process of decolonization” (Abele, 2005: 225). Although thinking this through interests me, I am bracketing this question for now.

but it was this disappointment that prompted me to further think about economic activity's decolonial potential.

As to the second point, I need to provide some more background. The CSL course I took in the winter 2016 semester was my first opportunity to do CSL in a formal way. My only exposure to community based research concepts before the class was through Joan Ryan's *Doing Things the Right Way: Dene Traditional Justice in Lac La Martre, N.W.T.* (1995), which I studied in an undergraduate Athabasca University Indigenous Studies course. Ryan conducted participatory action research in the Dene community of Lac La Martre as a way to document traditional justice. The research involved community members in a significant way, including serving as "Community Advisory Committee" members (1995: 6), coming up with interview questions (1995: 15), transcribing and translating interviews (1995: 13–14), and so on. The book also includes seven pages translated into Dogrib, the traditional language of Lac La Martre.⁴ While Ryan's book was certainly interesting, and I can clearly see how in some ways the research benefited the community,⁵ ultimately the research came across to me as more "extractive"⁶ than "insurgent," to borrow phrasing from Adam Gaudry (2011: 114, 117). And "extractive" is how my own CSL project felt as well. While I think/hope I avoided the most egregious colonial/elitist stereotyping and assumptions, it would be ludicrous to describe my work as insurgent or "emancipatory" (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008: 589).

For Gaudry, insurgent research "embodies four key principles" (2011: 117):

1. Research is grounded in, respects, and ultimately seeks to validate Indigenous worldviews.
2. Research output is geared toward use by Indigenous peoples and in Indigenous communities.
3. Research processes and final products are ultimately responsible to Indigenous communities, meaning that Indigenous communities are the final judges of the validity and effectiveness of insurgent research.
4. Research is action oriented and works as a motivating factor for practical and direct action among Indigenous peoples and in Indigenous communities.

In a similar vein, Eric Sheffield suggests "radicalizing" CSL (2015, 46–47) and Jill Grant, Geoffrey Nelson, and Terry Mitchell talk about research that has as its goals "emancipation, empowerment ... and the illumination of social problems" (2008: 589). All of this sounded wonderful to me as I wrapped up my own CSL project that lacked any radical implications whatsoever, but I remain skeptical that research coming out of academic institutions — community based or otherwise — has as much potential to contribute to decolonization, emancipation, insurgency, and so on, as these authors suggest. The very idea of researchers thinking

⁴ Use of bilingual texts "in all the stages in the research process" is advised as a way to "decolonize research methodologies," according to Bagele Chilisa (2012: 156); of course, I should point out that *Doing Things the Right Way* is 140 plus pages long, so seven pages represents less than 5 percent.

⁵ For example, there were (limited) skills training and employment opportunities created (Ryan, 1995: 6, 13–15).

⁶ Ryan convinced me that the research had potential to contribute to a "taking back of Dene justice" (1995: 110), but I do not see how the research project in itself did much more than provide information useful to researchers. To be fair, I have not looked into what lasting impact the project may have had in the community over the more than two decades since the book's publication.

of themselves in these terms (i.e., “emancipators,” “empower-ers,” and “insurgents”) strikes me as remarkably arrogant, even delusional.

As I think about how academic institutions have historically had significant social impact, I think about, first, radical student movements, which, if anything, tend to be in opposition to the academic institutions they come out of; and, second, a much slower process of ideas being nurtured and massaged within academia before slowly gaining purchase within a large enough segment of lay society that change occurred. I may be right or wrong in this analysis (and, in any case, even if this is how it worked historically, it does not necessarily mean it has to continue this way), but, regardless, it indicates my cynicism regarding the idea of professors and graduate students simply employing a nicely termed method that suddenly transforms them from mere researchers into agents of radical change.⁷

As I reflected on this pattern that I see in Indigenous research (i.e., researchers continuing a pattern of “extracting” more than “emancipating” or “empowering,” even as they label their research “participatory action research” or “community service learning”), it interested me that the word “extractive” also happens to be very applicable to many FNSEERs. Of course, settler corporations and governments are rarely intent on accessing traditional Indigenous knowledge or having original research published in peer reviewed periodicals, and certainly they are not worried about securing a tenured career; they often are, however, interested in *extracting* natural resources from land or water over which First Nations have some level of sovereignty. Gaudry suggests that researcher–researched relationships should be less extractive and more insurgent; can it also make sense to talk about FNSEERs in this way? In fact, do FNSEERs have potential to be even more decolonial, insurgent, emancipatory, radical, and empowering than university research?

INSURGENT ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS

If we look again at Gaudry’s principles, adapting where applicable, I suggest principles of insurgent economic relationships could be as follows. In my mind these principles could be applied to any FNSEERs, but I will outline them to specifically fit the context of an economic relationship between a relatively large settler corporation interested in extraction of natural resources and a Plains Cree First Nation that has adhered to Treaty 6.

1. *Insurgent FNSEERs are grounded in, respect, and ultimately seek to validate both settler and Indigenous worldviews.*

Since most FNSEERs operate within contexts in which settler worldviews are assumed/taken for granted, an insurgent FNSEER would require explicit respect/validation of Indigenous worldviews. Ultimately, however, the idea would be that the FNSEER demonstrates awareness of differences in worldview and particular awareness of where there might be worldview conflicts. This principle would represent a marked change in most FNSEERs. In my experience, there is typically very little (if any) acknowledgement of differences in

⁷ My tone here may be overly bitter and cynical; I should emphasize that I do appreciate the attempts in academia to make research less extractive, less colonial, less elitist, more relevant and accountable to communities, more immediately beneficial (e.g., offering employment and skills training) to communities and community members, and, ultimately, more self-aware and reflective.

worldview, let alone any attempt to ground the relationship in, or respect or validate, Indigenous worldviews.

2. *Economic benefit is geared toward both the settler entity/ies and the Indigenous community/ies.*

This principle is more typical of how FNSEERs work currently. Impact benefit agreements, joint ventures, etc., generally attempt to ensure First Nations receive economic benefits for participating in the relationship, and obviously no settler corporation enters a relationship without an expectation of economic benefit. Nonetheless, it is also true that FNSEERs frequently do not provide First Nations with as much economic benefit as is initially promised; and clearly, within the context of insurgent economic relationships, there would need to be a better assurance of significant economic benefit to the Indigenous community.

3. *Economic processes and final products are ultimately responsible to both the settler entity/ies and Indigenous community/ies.*
4. *Both the settler entity/ies and Indigenous community/ies are the final judges of the validity and effectiveness of the relationship.*

For Gaudry this was a single principle, but I have split it into two to emphasize two different points. First, the economic activity itself (e.g., natural resource extraction process) and the final products of the economic activity (e.g., the natural resources) should be acceptable, respectful, beneficial, and responsive to both parties of the relationship. For example, if the First Nation sees ceremony as an important part of extracting resources from the land,⁸ then that should be part of the process. Obviously, this principle goes hand in hand with respect for worldviews.

Second, there need to be opportunities for the relationship to be reviewed and renegotiated if the relationship is not considered effective by either party. Again, my observation is that FNSEERs do not always benefit First Nations to the extent they have been led to expect, so the ability to renegotiate the relationship when it is not effective is a must.

5. *An insurgent FNSEER works as a motivating factor for practical and direct action among Indigenous peoples and the Indigenous community/ies.*

This principle encompasses what I see as the main goal of an insurgent FNSEER. The insurgent FNSEER will result in economic benefit to the First Nation, which in and of itself will provide resources allowing for assertions of sovereignty and challenges to colonialism.⁹ But insurgent FNSEERs need to do more than simply provide economic benefits. To be truly insurgent, the FNSEER has to contribute in more direct ways to decolonization. This contri-

⁸ Jobin deduces that “the type of protocol or ceremony around trade depended on the material being traded” (2013: 619). I do not pretend to know what protocol or ceremony is appropriate (if any) to, say, the extraction of natural resources such as bitumen, but this is simply an example of how an insurgent FNSEER could involve processes more reflective of Indigenous practices/worldview than is typically the case in FNSEERs.

⁹ It does, after all, take money to fight the federal government in court, pay for communications staff, deliver services to the community, etc.

bution to decolonization need not come at a great cost to the settler entity, but it must be of benefit to the First Nation and, possibly, to the general cause of decolonization in Canada.

Putting it all together, imagine the following (necessarily simplistic) scenario that adheres to the insurgent economic relationship principles I have outlined:

The large settler energy corporation is interested in oil extraction in the Cold Lake oil sands.¹⁰ This corporation negotiates a relationship with the six to seven Plains Cree First Nations in the area.¹¹ In a way, there is an “insurgent” element to the very fact that these negotiations are taking place: the act of engaging “in trade and diplomacy [is] one method ... nations ... [use to] exercise their authority and jurisdiction (Jobin, 2013: 604).

Principle 1:¹² The negotiations are conducted and the agreement is drawn up in a way that Plains Cree worldviews are acknowledged and validated. For example, the negotiation meetings are opened with smudging by an Elder, and the written agreement is translated into Cree.¹³

Principle 2: The agreement includes training, employment, contracting, and other economic benefits typical to FNSEERs as they are often negotiated. But because this FNSEER is insurgent, it also includes direct payments to the First Nations described in terms such as “taxes,” or “tariffs,” or “duties.” Collection of such payments is consistent with how the Cree nation historically “exerted jurisdiction over a defined territory and ... expected payment for using the resources of their land” (Jobin, 2013: 621). An example of an additional economic benefit consistent with the idea of combatting disruption of features of peoplehood could be sponsorship of Cree language classes at First Nations schools.

Principles 3 and 4: A committee is formed with representatives from both parties (perhaps including corporation management, labour union representation, Cree Elders, Cree politicians, and Cree youth), to allow for regular evaluation of how the economic activity is being conducted; what the final products of the economic activity are; and whether or not the relationship is operating as negotiated. The agreement includes options for renegotiating or terminating the agreement if one party so desires.

¹⁰ Located roughly in the traditional territory of the Plains Cree First Nations in what is now eastern Alberta and western Saskatchewan who adhered to Treaty 6.

¹¹ This could be done individually (i.e., each First Nation could negotiate individual relationships) or collectively (i.e., all six to seven First Nations could negotiate with the corporation together), or a combination of individual and collective agreements could be created. I will assume one agreement has been negotiated in my imagined scenario, although I am well aware that the current realities are such that this would be unlikely to be successful.

¹² Obviously, the principles are interrelated, and in ensuring a single principle is fulfilled the FNSEER may fulfil others.

¹³ This is once again in line with Chilisa’s argument about decolonized research, including bilingual texts (2012: 156). It is also consistent with the need to counter colonialism’s disruption of the Cree language — language being one of the four features of peoplehood (Jobin, 2013: 606). The need to translate the agreement will also provide a contract to a (presumably Cree) translator and generally contribute to encouragement of Cree language skills.

Principle 5: Finally, to make the FNSEER explicitly insurgent, the agreement includes provisions for a Cree environmental officer or team of environmental officers to monitor the activity of the settler corporation.¹⁴ This provision contributes to the First Nations, in Jobin’s words, “re-establishing their own governance processes,” as it builds environmental monitoring capacity; it also contributes to the First Nations “fighting for space within colonial structures” (2013: 601), as it provides an opportunity to assert jurisdiction over what is generally understood within Canada to be the jurisdiction of provincial governments. To further aid in re-establishing Cree governance over the land, the agreement could include an annual scholarship provided to a First Nations member to pursue environmental science education at a post-secondary institution.¹⁵

WHY WOULD A SETTLER ENTITY ENTER SUCH A RELATIONSHIP?

Presumably it is apparent that an insurgent FNSEER may be beneficial from a First Nation’s perspective. Less obvious is why a settler entity would see the “insurgent” piece of the insurgent FNSEER as desirable. Of course, a successful insurgent FNSEER requires both parties to be cooperative and motivated, and I admit that “insurgent” is a word that corporate Canada is not likely to be attracted to. However, while my proposal above is not necessarily meant to be a template for how such an idea would be presented to a corporation’s board, management, or negotiators, I do think a relationship that follows the principles could be palatable to a settler corporation given the right conditions.

The goal of every capitalist corporation comes down to one single proposition: “creating shareholder value.” In order to persuade a corporation to do something, it must in some way contribute to this goal. An insurgent FNSEER could be sold to a corporation as a way to create shareholder value in at least two different ways.

First, in cases in which the negotiating position of the First Nation is particularly strong, the First Nation’s negotiators could simply demand that the corporation meet the principles (whether explicitly outlined or not). In this case, the corporation would be persuaded that this partnership with the First Nation will create shareholder value to the extent that it is worth entering into the relationship on insurgent terms. The insurgent principles do not, for the most part, necessarily come at a significant economic cost, so a corporation motivated to negotiate should have little problem with most of them. Nonetheless, the reality is that for many or most corporations, the ideas present in the principles — the very concept of “worldview”, for example — might be so far away from their comfort zone that they walk away from a relationship framed in this way. Unless a First Nation is in a strong enough position to hold out for these terms, this option may not succeed.

¹⁴ The extent to which this work would “have teeth” would need to be determined and could be contentious. But the very existence of First Nations environmental officers monitoring the work of a settler corporation — with or without teeth — should be understood as “insurgent”.

¹⁵ The cost of this provision would be minimal (~\$20,000–\$30,000 annually) to the corporation, and all the more so since the scholarship can be tax-deductible. The scholarship could be further designed to benefit the corporation if the scholarship recipient is asked to become a part-time employee or commit to a year’s service upon graduation.

A second, perhaps more likely, scenario in which a settler corporation sees an insurgent FNSEER as an attractive way to create shareholder value relies on the concept of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR). CSR is the term used to describe corporate initiatives designed to be of social or environmental benefit. Originally thought of “as a ‘donation’ from shareholders to stakeholders that reduces profits” (Flammer, 2015: 2554), CSR is better thought of as contributing to creating value for shareholders. Not all initiatives that are socially or environmentally responsible automatically create value for shareholders, but CSR has the potential to “significantly increase shareholder value” according to recent research in the area (Flammer, 2015: 2550). There could be numerous reasons for this, but one important element is simply that a corporation engaging in CSR is building a brand that is of greater appeal to stakeholders, especially clients. In the current political and social context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s *Final Report*, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and rhetoric such as “nation-to-nation” and “reconciliation”, the climate could be ideal for pitching the idea of an insurgent FNSEER as a CSR initiative. A corporation able to promote itself as contributing to reconciliation has potential to attract more clients, with more loyalty, and also possibly to draw investment from shareholders or creditors willing to be compensated at a lower rate of return. An insurgent FNSEER could be framed as doing just this. It would take some initial bravery, but a corporation willing to take this risk on could find itself in an enviable competitive position.

CONCLUSION

In this article, inspired by reflections on community based research and in particular a Community Service Learning project I completed, I adapted Gaudry’s principles of insurgent research to think through how economic relationships between First Nations and settler entities might become “insurgent.” Borrowing from Jobin’s presentation of Cree peoplehood, and the idea of “Indigenous peoples in Canada ... continually ... fighting for space within colonial structures while re-establishing their own governing processes” (2013: 601), I outlined what an insurgent FNSEER might look like. I concluded by discussing two reasons a settler corporation might be persuaded to become party to an insurgent FNSEER.

As disappointed as I was with the lack of “insurgence” in my CSL project, and as cynical as I am about the “emancipatory” and “radical” potential of community based research, I am in fact optimistic in the potential for Indigenous peoples in Canada to assert their sovereignty in the context of economic relationships. I am not, however, naïve; the principles I have outlined in this paper are unlikely to be of little practical use when it comes to “real life” negotiations between a First Nation and a settler entity. The very idea of “worldview” would probably scare off most corporate negotiators. But, thinking through the possibilities of how economic relationships can be of increasing benefit to First Nations interested in “fighting for space within colonial structures while re-establishing their own governing processes” is an important first step.

Ultimately I do think there will be more and more room for First Nations to make demands of settler entities that contribute to the decolonial cause — particularly in cases in which meeting the demands comes at minimal financial cost. I see two particular future research questions coming out of this article:

1. What might be the lowest cost, least risky ways FNSEERs can contribute to decolonization (since these are more likely to achieve buy-in from settler corporations)?
2. How can opportunities for a settler corporation to contribute to Indigenous sovereignty be framed in CSR terms, and has this been done or attempted in any contexts already?

Most of all, I look forward to seeing how these types of ideas might be tested and experimented with within the context of real, not hypothetical, economic relationships.

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