



Learning Circle

A Different Economy

Things were changing quickly in Europe during the 1400s and 1500s. There was a Renaissance. Artists discovered perspective painting. Michelangelo sculpted the David. Economies were shifting from an agricultural base to include more trade and manufactured goods. A growing middle class of merchants, trades and other businesses were growing in towns. Trade was becoming global with new shipping routes. Galileo proposed a Sun centered universe. The printing press was invented and Luther posted 95 theses in Wittenberg and set the Protestant Reformation in motion.

Europeans arriving in North America came from either crowded cities or country-sides that were cultivated or worked to the margins – there was no ‘empty land’ that no-one owned. At the very least, if it looked empty – like a mountain, it was probably ‘owned’ by the ruler of that area. When Europeans looked around in North America, they saw what seemed to them to be empty land. Yes, there were North Americans living in small settlements but the Europeans didn’t see what they were used to – permanent communities with roads between them and cultivated or managed (‘productive’) lands around those communities. Oh, and no ‘sovereign’ or authorities to deal with! This made the land appear empty and not being put to “productive use” which they took to mean they could use it. Since the field of Anthropology had not yet been invented, there was no one to explain these misconceptions – that the land was indeed being used productively, just not in a manner that they recognized or understood.

The eastern seaboard of North America and in areas such as modern Quebec, Ontario and New York state etc. the land was definitely settled and being used by Indigenous nations. Their economies were based on farming and the harvesting of naturally occurring local resources – both plant and animal. Over time, when the farmland became less productive and local resources became scarce, the community would pack up and move far enough away *within their traditional territory* to an area that had recovered from previous use and set up a new settlement. New land would be cleared and farmed and plant and animal resources could be harvested again. The area of the previous settlement would rejuvenate for future use. There is good evidence that forests were being managed with controlled fire to rejuvenate the understory and bring back plant and animal resources used by the Indigenous peoples. This meant that not all areas within traditional lands were ‘visibly being used’ (according to the European view) but that did not mean they were unclaimed. Neighbouring nations knew whose land was whose to use and there was conflict at times about access to certain areas as population pressures changed or resources ran out, territories we defined. In general, the land was able to sustain the existing populations with this economic model until the arrival of Europeans.

While the North Americans might not have been happy to have new settlers set up farms in their traditional territory, at first they probably weren’t seen as that much of a threat to their traditional way of life because the first communities were small. And they were permanent, these new people weren’t interested in moving (Europeans used fertilizers from domestic animals to keep land productive so did not need to move their farms to new places when productivity declined).

And if that was the only impact of settlement things might have been okay. But Europeans did not just farm. They also hunted – because here you could, the wild game did not belong to the nobility (or landowner) as it did in Europe. Europeans did not understand that not only did North Americans manage the land to encourage wildlife but also that they only harvested from the land what could be replenished season to season. No one took more than was needed to sustain life. There was no fur trade or need to create ‘products’ to ship to other places. Europeans hunted indiscriminately, as if the resources were infinite. These practices had an adverse impact on North American communities who ended up pushed to the limits of their traditional territories as access to the resources that sustained them for hundreds of generations diminished. And the Europeans kept coming.

When the first European settlers arrived and built their small communities they may or may not have had permission of the local inhabitants of that territory to do so (I don’t want to start talking about treaties here – that is another large topic). Sometimes there was conflict, but other times the Indigenous nations worked with or around these new people, after all, there was a lot of land.... And here is where we run into that another important difference between North Americans and Europeans – who had authority to give use of the land to these new people? The Creator created the land and everything in it including the people – how could people *own* the land? Land could not be bought – the concept of money (using a token to buy a good or service) did not exist. North American economies were not based on money. This is not something the early settlers understood – I am sure many early traders thought Indigenous peoples were naïve to be happy to accept ‘trade goods’ as a form of currency. Europeans could not understand a money-less society because they had not lived in one for thousands of years. They did not understand how the First Nations economies worked and made no attempt to find out what they did not know. Misunderstandings, on both sides, that would have unfortunate results, both then and now.

So how were goods and services exchanged in Indigenous cultures? All human cultures have exchanged things throughout human history. This happens because not everyone has the skills or abilities to create everything they need to survive to the same extent. Plus, we *like* pretty (and useful) things! Human society has always had an economic foundation. What those human economies look like has taken many forms over time.

For example, in small communities, everyone knows their neighbour. They know the needs, skills, abilities and responsibilities of each person. If I weave the prettiest and most tightly woven baskets in our village and you are best at making drums, I can let you know that my young son, who is not yet skilled enough to make a good drum on his own, would benefit from your teaching/assistance in either having or making a drum. You can let me know of your (or someone else’s) need of certain types of baskets if there is something you need from another person. There is a web of relationships in a small community.

Or, an elder might notice a child’s interest in a drum and a need will be met. In small communities, different age groups and genders had roles and responsibilities to each other. Someone who is good at healing might notice the interest a younger person has in medicine plants and encourage that interest – what we would term an apprenticeship – but would really be a reciprocal lifetime relationship of teaching, learning and material support. In exchange, the younger person would know to show the elder appreciation for the gift of their learning – what needs of the elder could they meet? No contracts, no impersonal use of money required.

These were reciprocal economies based on mutual support. If food was scarce everyone was hungry, if a deer was harvested by one hunter it was shared throughout the community. Your contribution to the community was what was valued, not your monetary worth. The only modern example of this that I think most people could relate to is the economic foundation of a family – there is no monetary value placed on the relationships and mutual support between the members and generations of the same family. Now extend that concept out to an entire community...

European settlers did not appreciate how the First Nations viewed and used the land they lived on. This had repercussions in conflicts and disputes over time that we are only now beginning to look at seriously in Canada. Settlers could not understand the rich cultural fabric of Indigenous societies because the economic foundations and social values of both cultures were so different. They did not understand each other then. I hope that we can begin to work towards improving that in the future and finding good ways to walk together.

Respectfully submitted
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