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# THE 1993 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS—POPULATION, CONSUMPTION AND CULTURE

*Russel Lawrence Barsh\**

## III. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' PERSPECTIVES ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Efforts to slow the adverse impact of humanity on the planetary environment have increasingly targetted population growth. While the justification for this approach seems clear in the sprawling slums of Third World cities, “developing” countries, where the greatest growth in population is occurring, contend that the “population crisis” is a ploy to distract attention from the vastly greater impacts of wealthy countries’ profligate consumption of energy and materials. The single point on which virtually all governments seem to agree,<sup>1</sup> has been that women should enjoy greater freedom of reproductive choice. While this would unquestionably reduce family sizes and slow population growth in many countries, there is no reason to believe that the effect would be sufficient to bring population into balance with available resources.

While the socio-economic emancipation of women and free access to family planning methods may be urgently needed in many countries, and would be legitimate objectives in their own right, they can only serve as interim measures for effective population management.

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<sup>1</sup> See the conclusions of the first preparatory meeting for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, U.N. Doc. E/1993/69, ¶¶ 21–22 and 31–35.

Based on the traditions and experience of indigenous peoples, longer-term solutions must involve changing consumption patterns and the role of consumption in contemporary world cultures.

### A. *Two Views of Population Dynamics*

The current international political debate on population centers on two competing management models. One model approaches the problem from the side of family planning. It assumes that if women know about safe methods of preventing or terminating pregnancies, and are free to make their own reproductive choices, they will have fewer children, on average. This model has been refined, in recent years, by recognizing the value of reducing infant mortality, and increasing the educational levels and economic status of women. When women have alternatives to childbearing as a means of attaining social status, and recognize that most of their children will survive, the incentive for raising a large family is minimized. Or so the argument goes.

The opposing view stresses consumption patterns. The evil we are trying to prevent—irreversible environmental change—is a function of the overall *rate of consumption* of resources, and not of the number of people, as such.<sup>2</sup> At any given level of technology, we can accommodate more people by reducing our *per capita* rate of consumption. Likewise, any increase in *per capita* consumption must be offset by reductions in population, unless new and more resource-efficient technologies quickly come to our rescue. As a simple model, sustainability is achieved if the rate of total consumption,  $C$ , equals the rate of resource renewal,  $R$  (outputs balance inputs).<sup>3</sup> Let “ $c$ ” be *per capita* consumption and “ $P$ ” be total population, so that  $R=C=cP$ .

This view draws attention to the vast inequalities in consumption between rich and poor countries, and between the rich and poor within each country. If one European-American consumes resources fifty times faster than one Bangladeshi, every additional European-American child displaces fifty potential Bangladeshi children. (Or perhaps two African-American children.) How do we decide whether the resource-space which is now available is allocated to Bangladeshi or European children? In the final analysis, it is a matter of *relative*

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to stress the use of consumption *rates* rather than *total* consumption. Much of what we consume is renewable or recyclable (such as air, water, wood, fiber and most of our food), so the problem is one of drawing down these resources faster than they are replaced.

<sup>3</sup> Since some resources are neither renewable nor fully recyclable, of course, sustainability in the strictest sense is only possible when we develop technologies to meet our needs from renewable resources alone.

*power*. The wealthy can protect their standard of living through their ownership of resources. The poor may have the power to produce more children, but only at the risk of decreased levels of *per capita* well-being. The global debate on population has indeed often resembled a game of "chicken," in which poor countries threaten to produce more children, and consume more of their remaining resources, unless rich countries share their wealth.

If the standards of living of poor countries (and poorer sections of each country's population) are to be increased, it will have to be at the expense of the consumption rates of the rich. This will reduce high-end standards of living, at least until significant improvements in the efficiency of productive technologies permit us to eke greater human well-being from our stock of resources. This is the real reason why the international debate on population consistently avoids issues of consumption. It is easier for wealthy nations to agree on spending more foreign-aid dollars on women's education and contraception—which may simply entail the re-programming of existing aid allocations—than to agree to a significant redistribution of global wealth among states and peoples, with a commensurate short-term impact on their own living standards. Even environmental and population-action organizations are reluctant to bring this bad news to their rich-country subscribers and funders.

Is there a connection between *per capita* consumption, inequality, and population growth rates? It is one thing to recognize the reality that wealthy industrial societies have a greater *per capita* impact on the planetary environment than poor "developing" countries. But does this explain why poor countries have higher fertility, or why greater equity in the global distribution of wealth should result in a slowing of world population growth?

One widely-studied connection between the distribution of wealth and fertility is economic security. Households with secure land tenure tend to produce fewer children, just as women with independent means of earning a livelihood tend to choose to have smaller families.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, households receiving public aid—a kind of economic security—arguably show the opposite response. The real issue therefore appears to be the status and identity which comes from certain kinds of work, rather than the income. An examination of

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., B.J. Feyisetan, *Postpartum Sexual Abstinence, Breastfeeding, and Childspacing among Yoruba Women in Urban Nigeria*, 37 Soc. Bio. 110 (1990); W.A. Schutjer, C.S. Stokes, and J.R. Poindexter, *Farm Size, Land Ownership, and Fertility in Rural Egypt*, 59 LAND ECON. 393 (1983).

indigenous peoples' experience confirms this, and takes the analysis a step further, from economic security to *cultural security*.

### B. Counter-trends Among Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples account today for roughly five percent of the world's population, or an estimated 300 million persons, nearly all of them in so-called "developing" countries. The largest concentrations of indigenous peoples are found in south and southeast Asia, followed by Latin America (chiefly Central America and the Andes), central Asia and eastern Russia, Africa's deserts and forests, the Pacific islands, small enclaves throughout the United States and Canada, and the Arctic or circumpolar region, where indigenous peoples remain a majority over a large geographical area.<sup>5</sup>

For thousands of years, indigenous peoples succeeded in keeping a rough balance between people and resources. The evidence for this can be found in the rapid ecological deterioration that usually follows an invasion of indigenous peoples' territory by settlers, whose levels of population growth and per capita consumption of raw materials greatly exceed those of the peoples they displace. How much of this is due to differences in technology, and how much to culture and values, will no doubt continue to be debated by non-indigenous scholars for many years to come.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous peoples themselves are convinced that the answer can be found in their preoccupation with building social relationships rather than accumulating goods.

Indigenous peoples today have a population problem, but it is not the same problem faced by other peoples. In most parts of the world, the numbers of indigenous peoples are shrinking, not growing. Only in "developed" or highly-industrialized countries are indigenous peoples experiencing a population explosion, with fertility rates much higher than other sectors of the national population.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the demographic patterns of indigenous peoples tend to be the *reverse* of the countries in which they live. Why should this be so?

The answer for "developing" countries is fairly clear: indigenous

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<sup>5</sup> For maps and population estimates, see TRANSNATIONAL INVESTMENTS AND OPERATIONS ON THE LANDS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, U.N. Docs. E/CN.4/ Sub.2/49 (1991).

<sup>6</sup> R.L. Barsh, *Indigenous Peoples' Role in Achieving Sustainability*, in GREEN GLOBE YEAR-BOOK 25-34 (1992).

<sup>7</sup> C.M. SNIPP, *THE FIRST OF THIS LAND* (1992); DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT (Canada), *Highlights of Aboriginal Conditions*, in PART I, DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS 1981-2000 (1989); R.L. Barsh, *Ecocide, Nutrition and the 'Vanishing Indian'*, in STATE VIOLENCE AND ETHNICITY (P. van den Berghe ed., 1990).

peoples continue to be displaced by settlers, loggers, miners, and dams resulting in environmental degradation, new contagious diseases, loss of subsistence and malnutrition, and frequently, military suppression. Their territories and resources are in fact being utilized as a safety valve for the overpopulation and poverty of other Third World peoples, just as the Americas were used as a safety valve for urbanizing areas of Europe in the 16th to 19th centuries.<sup>8</sup> By "opening" remote regions for unrestricted settlement and resource-extraction, governments delay addressing the unsustainability of their cities and towns. Indigenous peoples are therefore truly a barometer of world (un)sustainability.

What, then, is the significance of rapid population growth among the indigenous peoples of wealthy industrialized countries? They have relatively stable (albeit residual) land bases or resource-use rights, and financial aid from the state for public services, family welfare, and community development. Although they are poorer, on average, than other citizens, they appear to have similar lifestyles and many of the accoutrements of resource-intensive consumption such as motor vehicles and television. In most industrialized countries, indigenous peoples enjoy some degree of local self-government. Superficially, then, they share some of the marginalization and humiliation of "welfare mothers" yet with land rights and political autonomy as offsetting factors. As far as population dynamics are concerned, the offsetting factors do not appear to make a great difference.

### *C. Gender Inequality and Population*

The central importance of cultural security and personal dignity emerges even more strongly when separated from the problem of gender. On the whole, indigenous societies have not marginalized women. Along with poverty, gender inequality among indigenous peoples has increased as a function of their recent integration into paternalistic immigrant societies. Even in highly-integrated countries such as Canada and the United States, however, indigenous women arguably enjoy higher status and more socio-economic equality, in their own communities, than other women.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, indigenous

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<sup>8</sup> For a case study, see R.L. Barsh, *The Substitution of Cattle for Bison on the Great Plains*, in *THE STRUGGLE FOR THE LAND* 103-126 (P.A. Olsen ed., 1990).

<sup>9</sup> *SEXUAL STRATIFICATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW* (A. Schlegel ed., 1977); *WOMEN AND COLONIZATION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES* (M. Etienne & E. Leacock eds., 1980); P. GUNN ALLEN, *THE SACRED HOOP* (1986).

peoples in wealthy countries offer examples of economic and cultural insecurity, comparable to many Third World nations, with a reverse twist on the issue of gender. The strongest examples can be found among the peoples I know best in North America.

Although the stereotypical North American Indian is a "warrior of the Plains," mounted hunting societies with their cult of masculinity were in actuality a relatively small and recent part of the indigenous cultural mosaic. The vast majority of the continent's original people were farmers or fishers and lived in large, relatively permanent towns and villages concentrated in the eastern woodlands, the Gulf Coast and the Pacific Northwest. In Algonkian and Iroquoian-speaking regions of the woodlands, moreover, the fundamental political institution was the matrilineal clan. To this day, matrilineal clans control property and choose leaders, formally or informally, among Haudenosaunee (Iroquois/ Six Nations), Wabanaki (Mi'kmaq, Malecite, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot) and Anishinawbe ("Ojibway" or "Chippewa"), often side-by-side with the electoral and bureaucratic institutions imposed on them by government.

These woodlands nations have been "matriarchal" in the sense that the most important political decisions must be made by the clans, and the clans are essentially groups of related women. Men belong to the clans of their mothers. They exercise political authority, and enjoy access to land and resources through their mothers, sisters, and to a lesser extent their wives. Among Haudenosaunee, this process is very formal, and can be seen in longhouse ceremonies. Among Mi'kmaq, it is entirely informal and almost invisible. Men seem to occupy all major positions of leadership; however, elder women organize everything and determine whether particular leaders and meetings are successful. Men talk, but their female kin arrange the feast and choose the guests.

This did not mean that women were dominant, in the same way that men dominate most non-indigenous societies. Nor are men and women in Algonkian and Iroquoian societies exactly equal, any more than all of the clans are exactly equal. On the contrary, indigenous cultures are usually governed by the principle of *complementarity*. In this system, every person, family, clan, gender, and species is considered unique, but capable of sharing responsibility with others through *kinship* and similar arrangements which involve *reciprocity* and a balance of power. The result is a society characterized by what Greek philosophers once described as "geometric" equality as opposed to "arithmetic" equality. It can be non-exploitative, so long as all relationships are genuinely reciprocal.

Family planning has always been practiced,<sup>10</sup> and has always been the responsibility of women, who not only had the right to leave a man who became demanding or abusive, but controlled the pharmacopeiae used traditionally to manage pregnancy through female doctors and midwives. Christianization, state control of marriage, and public education have eroded these rights and skills in much of North America. On the other hand, indigenous women today enjoy roughly the same educational levels and access to information as other North American women. They should, on balance, enjoy a comparable if not superior opportunity to practice family planning. Fertility remains very high, however, so the problem is not of women, as such, but of the societies to which they belong.

In global terms, North America's indigenous peoples are wealthy. They have income levels that the peasants and working people of most developing countries would envy. Within North America, however, they are poor, with income levels considerably lower than those enjoyed by other citizens.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous North Americans have little contact with people in developing countries, so they do not know that they would be considered relatively wealthy. Instead, they compare themselves to their white neighbors, who clearly have far greater wealth and power. They also cannot fail to be conscious of the low esteem in which they are held, and of the deliberate erosion of their cultures and identities which, through the mass media and public education, continues. Denied legitimacy, personal status, and self-esteem by their relationships with the state and non-indigenous society, they seek meaning in the one act over which they still have almost complete control: reproduction, and the enjoyment of children.

It should be noted here that current high fertility levels among indigenous North Americans could be interpreted as a "rebound" from the catastrophic population decline of a century ago. According to official census statistics, the number of "Indians" in the United States fell until about 1910, then began to grow. In Canada, the turnaround began a decade later. Numbers remain far below 15th-

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., W. EBELING, *HANDBOOK OF INDIAN FOODS AND FIBERS OF ARID AMERICA* (1986); V.J. VOGEL, *AMERICAN INDIAN MEDICINE* (1970); H. de Laszlo & P.S. Henshaw, *Plant Materials Used by Primitive Peoples to Affect Fertility*, 119 *SCI.* 626 (1954); C. Hudson, *Cherokee Concepts of Natural Balance*, 3 *IND. HIST.* 51 (1970); G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Cosmology as Ecological Analysis: A View from the Rain Forest*, 11 *MAN* 307 (1976).

<sup>11</sup> Compare the statistics in UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME, *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 1992* 160 (1992) with DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT (CANADA), *Highlights of Aboriginal Conditions*, in Part III, *Economic Conditions* (1989), and with C.M. Snipp and G.D. Sandefur, *Earnings of American Indians and Alaska Natives: The Effects of Residence and Migration*, 66 *SOC. FORCES* 994 (1988).



century levels, although there is an order-of-magnitude difference in various estimates of the shortfall.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Indians retain less than five percent of their original resource base. While it is impossible to say what the Indian population *should* be, or *would* now have been had Europeans not intervened, it is reasonable to suppose that the "rebound" has long exceeded the resources remaining.

#### *D. Culture, Ecology, and Sustainability*

Let me return to the woodlands, and in particular to the "people of the dawn," the Mi'kmaq of Atlantic Canada. Prior to the influx of Europeans, which began in the 15th century with Basque and Portuguese fishermen, there were an estimated quarter-million Mi'kmaq. Fishing, large-game hunting, and trade provided most of their livelihood.<sup>13</sup> The European invasion, territorial wars, introduced diseases, and finally the starvation caused by the Europeans' commercial over-harvesting of fish and wildlife, reduced the Mi'kmaq by 1900 to about 4,000.<sup>14</sup> The number now stands at about 30,000, and is increasing at a rate comparable to the "developing" countries of Asia, although there are some signs of a slowing. Mi'kmaq who are now in their fifties or older raised families of six to twelve children, while their children are raising families of about half that size, with somewhat higher survival. Even so, the rate of growth is problematic.

Mi'kmaq today retain about one-tenth of a percent of the resource base they controlled in 1500, and have rebounded to about one-tenth of their 1500 population level. That leaves a significant shortfall in resources, which can not be offset completely by imported technologies.

This has been happening in a community that is relatively but not

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<sup>12</sup> Estimates also depend on varying definitions of who, today, should be classified as "Indian," and range (for the two countries) from two to four million. Estimates of pre-invasion numbers range from five to fifteen million, with more recent studies favoring the higher part of this range. The best review of the literature is *THE NATIVE POPULATION OF THE AMERICAS IN 1492* (W.M. Deneven ed., 1976).

<sup>13</sup> V.P. Miller, *Aboriginal Micmac Population: A Review of the Evidence*, 23 *ETHNOHISTORY* 117 (1976); R. J. Nash and V. P. Miller, *Model Building and the Case of the Micmac Economy*, 34 *MAN IN THE NORTHEAST* 41 (1987). For data on European settlers, see S. J. Hornsby, *Staple Trades, Subsistence Agriculture, and Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Island*, 79 *ANNALS OF THE ASSOC. OF AMER. GEOGRAPHERS* 411 (1989).

<sup>14</sup> This, despite their compensatory adoption of agriculture in the 18th century using indigenous crops and European technology. Although this helped eventually restore self-sufficiency, further displacement under the Canadian government's "centralization" program in the 1940s led to the collapse of the Mi'kmaq agrarian economy and dependence on seasonal labor and public aid. F. WIEN, *REBUILDING NATIVE COMMUNITIES IN NOVA SCOTIA* (1986).

absolutely poor, has (for better or for worse) been receiving standard Canadian public education for more than twenty years, and has a strong matrifocal clan tradition. Mi'kmaq have viewed themselves as Catholic since the early 1600s, but I believe that there is more involved than imported beliefs about contraception and fruitfulness. To explain this, I must first go back to the traditional Mi'kmaq population-management system, which was built on values that have suffered more from public schools and television than from the preachings of the Vatican.

In pre-invasion Mi'kmaq culture, the family was the basic economic and political unit of society. Each family (or *wikamou*, which derives from the word for "house") was a corporate unit made up of one or more couples, together with some of their children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces and perhaps a few other related adults.<sup>15</sup> Like a corporation, a *wikamou* possessed its own capital, in the form of historical rights to the priority use of particular lands and resources. This priority was based on traditions relating the human family to the specific animals, trees and plants occupying the territory—a relationship periodically renewed through ceremonies of reconciliation. Your family has rights to utilize a particular river valley because your ancestors married or made compacts with the animals and plants there; you are all kinfolk. You stay there to live with your relatives, and cannot imagine selling or destroying the land because it would be like slavery or murder.<sup>16</sup>

What was of crucial importance here is the fact that each *wikamou* had a *fixed* quantity of capital at its disposal. It could improve its welfare by using the land more efficiently, for example through better technology or a superior understanding of the ecosystem, or by finding better ways of deploying its fund of labor. It could share a

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<sup>15</sup> In using the term *wikamou*, Mi'kmaq conceived of the humans, animals and plants together, as one family. There is some parallel in the old English legal concept of an *estate*, which could include both the land, the wildlife, and the peasants tilling the land. The English concept is strictly individual proprietorship, however, rather than collective sharing and reciprocity among all related species.

<sup>16</sup> This is also the basis for traditional proscriptions against waste or notions of "deference to the land," which helped to discourage any overutilization of resources. See, e.g., R.K. Nelson, *A Conservation Ethic and Environment: The Koyukon of Alaska*, in *RESOURCE MANAGERS: NORTH AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN HUNTER-GATHERERS* 221–228 (N.M. Williams & E.S. Hunn eds., 1982); H.S. Sharp, *Dry Meat and Gender: The Absence of Chipewyan Ritual for the Regulation of Hunting and Animal Numbers*, in *HUNTERS AND GATHERERS. 2. PROPERTY, POWER AND IDEOLOGY* 183–191 (T. Ingold, D. Riches & J. Woodburn eds., 1988); N. WILLIAMS, *THE YOLNGU AND THEIR LAND: A SYSTEM OF LAND TENURE AND THE FIGHT FOR ITS RECOGNITION* (1986). On the cultural foundations of consumption patterns, see generally *THE SOCIAL ECONOMY OF CONSUMPTION* (B.S. Orlove & H.J. Rutz eds., 1989).

surplus, in a good season, or rely on the generosity of other families in a bad one, but could not add to its allocation of land. Or, to explain this from a slightly different perspective, a *wikamou* could not add to the *quantity* of its land, but could maximize the *quality, or productivity*, of its land through wise management and modest use. The incentive for maintaining ecological integrity is high, since waste and carelessness condemn the entire family and its descendants to dependence on others, while good stewardship can bring relative wealth and status. Families that regularly produce a small surplus can, through feasts and gifts, achieve prestige and influence. Ecological integrity and social aims are therefore complementary and mutually-reinforcing.

Within this system, family size is a weak variable. There can be some leeway, from generation to generation, in the optimum size of the human population that can subsist comfortably from a given territory. Due to the unpredictable vagaries of natural forces, however, the best strategy is to maintain a fairly stable population, at a level that is somewhat below the *minimum* expected annual output of the land. Recent studies of North America's remaining hunting peoples, such as the Cree and Inuit, indicate that harvests fall below the "maximum sustainable yield" of prey species.<sup>17</sup> This necessarily requires consistent family planning. Among Mi'kmaq, like many other indigenous peoples, this was accomplished through birth-spacing rules and routine use of herbal contraceptives and abortives. A four-to-five year cycle was common in the woodlands, which translates into perhaps four children per couple. In response to some reduction of childhood mortality in the past fifty years, birth cycles should have lengthened, rather than grown shorter.

### *E. Social Goods, Love, and Material*

The most important characteristic of the traditional Mi'kmaq way of thinking about population and economy is its preoccupation with the human heart, as opposed to the production of material. Even today, if you observe the daily routine in a Mi'kmaq household, children are the focus of attention. Everyone talks to them, and they are treated much the same as adults. They quickly acquire individual

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<sup>17</sup> H.A. Feit, *Waswanipi Cree Management of Land and Wildlife: Cree Ethno-ecology Revisited*, in *NATIVE PEOPLE, NATIVE LANDS* 75-91 (B.A. Cox ed., 1988). For parallel findings among farming peoples, see R. A. Rappoport, *The Flow of Energy in an Agricultural Society*, 225 *SCI. AM.* 117 (1971); S. Beckerman, *Swidden in Amazonia and the Amazon Rim*, in *COMPARATIVE FARMING SYSTEMS* 55-94 (B.L. Turner II & S.B. Brush eds., 1987).

reputations, and are the main topic of conversation throughout the community. Children are everywhere, and often seem to run everything—a real challenge in circumstances where a growing majority of the population is under the age of 16. This apparent surplus of children has not interfered with their centrality in Mi'kmaq life, any more than have the unquestionably disruptive cultural influences of television and public schools.

All of a child's experience is focused on the notion that social relationships are the most important thing in life, and that this can extend beyond human kinship to relationships with animals, plants, and forces of nature. The emphasis of upbringing is on how to treat other people, how to understand them, and how to enjoy their companionship. Material things such as televisions and automobiles are also used, and enjoyed, but only secondarily. No one is terribly upset when they are lost or destroyed. What is more important than the objects, moreover, is their utility in building social relationships. Children are told to give their toys to friends and visitors, and adults routinely share the use of tools, motor vehicles, and houses. It is not uncommon for people to travel from house to house at night, eating several dinners, while others cook for two or three times the number of people who live in their house. Money, food, and goods are constantly being reinvested in strengthening social relationships.<sup>18</sup>

This way of life is not aimed at the accumulation of things, but at the creation and renewal of what might best be described as *social capital*. People invest their time and resources in achieving personal respect and a secure social status. They work at maintaining a social order in which each one has an individual identity, defined by his/her relationships with the others. This is not simply a system of social security, in which the investment is repaid by reciprocity in times of need. It is not strictly an economic proposition. It is also a joy. It is what people do to feel good about themselves, to show that they are good people, and to know that they are Mi'kmaq.

This social system is rich. It is emotionally satisfying. It is also exhausting. It is incompatible with the kind of individuality or per-

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<sup>18</sup> Good studies of the role of sharing in social status and ecology include S.B. BRUSH, MOUNTAIN, FIELD, AND FAMILY: THE ECONOMY AND HUMAN ECOLOGY OF AN ANDEAN VALLEY (1977); F. CANCIAN, ECONOMICS AND PRESTIGE IN A MAYA COMMUNITY; THE RELIGIOUS CARGO SYSTEM IN ZINACANTAN (1965); S.R. CUSICANQUI, *Liberal Democracy and Ayllu Democracy in Bolivia: The Case of Northern Potosi*, 26 J. OF DEV. ST. 97 (1990); R.A. GOULD, *To Have and Have Not: The Ecology of Sharing Among Hunter-gatherers*, in RESOURCE MANAGERS: NORTH AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN HUNTER-GATHERERS 69-91 (N.M. Williams & E.S. Hunn eds., 1982); W. SUTTLES, COAST SALISH ESSAYS (1987).

sonal privacy that Western "liberal" culture values so highly. You have no privacy because there are always other people to attend to and children to be raised. It seems that every day there is an illness, a crisis, a death, or a wedding. There are always responsibilities, and no one is entirely free to go off and do things on their own. This is very important to bear in mind. A rich world of social relationships is time consuming, emotionally demanding and involves enormous amounts of personal responsibility. It is very hard work. But it is work put into the creation and maintenance of relationships, rather than goods. Physical capital and labor are used to produce social capital; goods are produced only as necessary for survival, or as an intermediate in the production of social capital.

#### *F. Culture, Alienation, and Population*

What, then, drives the Mi'kmaq population crisis? We asked people why everyone has been having so many children, and they answered, "What else is there to do?" The traditional economy has been shattered, with about ten times more people, in proportion to land and resources, than was the case when Europeans arrived. What lands remain are controlled by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development under the Indian Act, a system of bureaucratic discretion and fiat that provides Mi'kmaq with no economic security. Unemployment stands between forty and ninety percent, depending on how it is measured.

In these circumstances, the *only* way of asserting personal value and status is investing in children, and in the role children can play in building wider social relationships among families. People simply have no alternatives, and this is equally true of both men and women. All other ways of achieving satisfaction, security, and prestige have been stripped away by colonialism and external control. The effect of destroying the traditional economy has been an *increased* preoccupation with social capital, and with the production, upbringing, sharing, and enjoyment of children.

This happened, in turn, because the Europeans settling in Canada had already consumed so much of their own lands, they had to dip into those resources Mi'kmaq people had been carefully saving for a millennia. To borrow a phrase from Tagore's great 1910 essay, *On Nationalism*, the immigrants ate the indigenous peoples' future. They are still eating it consuming energy and raw materials several times faster than the average Mi'kmaq, drawing on the resources of other indigenous peoples as well—in James Bay, in the Arctic, and in Amazonia.

Mi'kmaq accordingly draw the same conclusion as most "developing" countries. The problem is not that there are too many Mi'kmaq people, but that every non-Mi'kmaq Canadian requires the resources, on average, of several Mi'kmaq. In other words, it is a *consumption* problem.

This returns us to the question of *what drives population*. Is it simply ignorance of family planning, and women's lack of reproductive choice? Or a more widespread phenomenon, affecting both men and women which reflects the human need for identity and meaning, and the choice between fulfilling this need through either family or material?

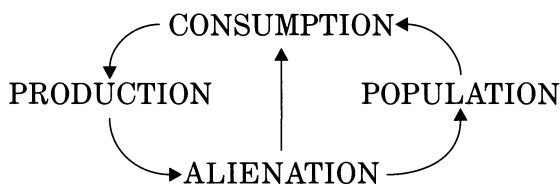
People deprived of identity, dignity, status, and self-esteem can respond in several ways, all of which are inimical to sustainability. They can seek relief in the selfish consumption of goods, or in self-destruction through violence, alcohol, and drugs—which often amounts to the same thing. Or they can seek meaning in the security of their own families and children. The result, in every case, is either more consumption or more population. When the women of a country have been subjected to domination by men, or an entire society has been stripped of its identity and self-respect, we should expect to see an increase in conspicuous consumption, self-destruction, violence, and population growth.

I believe this is a "contagious" process, which has been growing since the first episodes of mass destruction and subjugation in human history. Rome, for example, subjugated neighboring tribes so that it could tax their lands and increase Roman consumption. The victimized European tribes slowly grew more numerous and violent, destroyed Rome, and subjugated other continents and peoples to feed their own anguish and inflated appetites. The industrial revolution simply added to the total destructive power of each successive outbreak, accelerating the rate of displacement, abuse, loss of identity, and consumption of the planet's remaining resources. Can we break this cycle?

The root problem, then, is *what drives consumption*. Consumption is the natural consequence of organizing society to maximize material production: it creates itself. Efficiency entails breaking up social relationships, destroying a society's capacity for achieving personal meaning through social means. Families and communities are sacrificed to mobilize labor for production. The result is a crisis of personal alienation ("who am I?") and injustice ("why does s/he have more than me?"), as Western scholars such as Max Weber and Karl Marx recognized. Alienation and injustice create an emptiness which people try to fill with things. This in turn requires higher rates of production,

which requires the further reorganization and alienation of society, and so on. It is an endless cycle, driven by the social nature of production—that is, by the necessities of organizing people “scientifically” to increase the efficiency of their labor.

The model can be expressed graphically in this way, to illustrate its feedback characteristics:



Tribal societies were not very efficient in terms of production. They did not try to be. They were more concerned with enjoying people and minimizing the risk of starvation than with maximizing the output of goods. They utilize resources very slowly, to ensure that there is always enough to go around at a cost (in terms of labor) that does not interfere with the main business of life: kinship, love, and children. Industrialized societies push their resources to the limit, which can support a larger population, but only at a very high price: increased risktaking, greater inequality, and the creation of a society in which people must be mobile, interchangeable, and valued according to their productivity rather than their individuality. This transformation is virtually inescapable once a society accepts the belief that material is more satisfying than social relationships. Once people shift their priorities to the accumulation of material, they commit themselves to a spiral of alienation and consumption that may end only when they run completely out of resources—their own, and everyone else’s. Whoever first steps into this vortex creates a momentum that eventually draws all other societies with it.

The only complete and lasting remedy is cultural. It depends on restoring the relative importance of social relations, so that people can attain a greater proportion of their total satisfaction from each other, as opposed to things.

This central value is the crux of the difference between tribal cultures and industrial ones. When indigenous peoples see the vastly disproportionate appetite and output of their oppressors, they do not see progress, but merely a futile attempt to fill the terrible vacuum of loneliness that industrialization has created.