

Disrobing Assumptions: A Review

By David Orton

Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation, by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, McGill-Queen's University Press 2008, 330 pages, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-7735-3421-6.

"Solving aboriginal problems today requires that the cultural gap existing between the neolithic stage and late capitalism be acknowledged. It is this gap, not the Aboriginal Industry's lamentations about 'cultural loss,' that is at the root of aboriginal dependency and related social problems in Canada and throughout the industrialized world." p. 13

"The political left has uncritically supported land claims and self-government initiatives, abandoning all analysis to political conservatives. This has meant that some of the material that we have had to rely upon has come from right-wing commentators...we strongly oppose conservative proposals for solving aboriginal problems. Our own political perspective is consistent with the theoretical framework known as historical materialism." p. 14

"An absolute priority for the environmental and green movement, and Canadian society itself, must be to try and sort out the appropriate relationship with Indigenous peoples in Canada. This is a vision quest all of us who have any environmental and social justice sentiment need to embark on. It is a matter of urgency." David Orton, "Rethinking Environmental-First Nations Relationships", **Canadian Dimension**, February-March 1995.

OVERVIEW

I obtained this book on the strength of hearing one of the authors, Frances Widdowson, discussing it on the CBC radio program The Current. After reading it, I decided to write a review. I found it a very difficult review to write, not because of a lack of interest in the topic, but because of the extremely polarized views, and self-righteousness, among those who pay attention to how aboriginals are fairing in Canada. Whatever one's point of view, some will find the view offensive.

Apart from the index, acknowledgements and extensive footnotes, the headings for this book are:

A STORY

Introduction: Discovering the Emperor's Nudity

PART ONE ORIGINS

- 1 The Aboriginal Industry: Weavers of Illusory Silk
- 2 Denying the Development Gap: Preserving Culture in a Jar

PART TWO TABOOS, FABRICATIONS AND SOPHISTRY

- 3 Land Claims: Dreaming Aboriginal Economic Development
- 4 Self-Government: An Inherent Right to Tribal Dictatorships
- 5 Justice: Rewarding Friends and Punishing Enemies
- 6 Child Welfare: Strengthening the Abusive Circle
- 7 Health Care: A Superstitious Alternative
- 8 Education: Honouring the Ignorance of Our Ancestors
- 9 Environmental Management: The Spiritual Sell-Out of 'Mother Earth'

PART THREE SPHERES OF DECEPTION

- 10 Traditional Knowledge: Listening to the Silence

Conclusion: What Is to Be Done?

Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural

Preservation, by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, has an unnecessary jarring and didactic tone, even for those, like myself, who are sympathetic to much of what is being said. The Aboriginal Industry is defined as first clergy, then consultants, lawyers, anthropologists, linguists, accountants, and "other occupations that thrive on aboriginal dependency." The strategy of this Industry, say the authors, is "reverting to the past for solutions to present problems." (p. 20) Although the authors deny that the aboriginal leadership itself is a component of this Industry, they do speak of "an entrenched comprador element" (p. 23) in the aboriginal population. My reading of the text is, however, that the aboriginal leadership is cast, or at least some of it, as part of the Aboriginal Industry. The authors foolishly call traditional knowledge "junk science" (p. 242) and aboriginal traditional health practices, "quackery." (p. 177)

An example: the Canadian (originally from England) non-aboriginal naturalist, wilderness and wildlife advocate Archie Belaney, who took the name and persona of "Grey Owl" and who died in 1938, whatever his personal shortcomings, had his life's work summarily dismissed as "Canada's great fraud" (p. 223). The language is often unnecessarily provocative, e.g. "Lies the Ethnobotany Industry Told Us" (p. 183) or the various chapter headings. There are many examples of language put-downs, e.g. "jejune platitudes" (p. 4) which convey a know-it-all attitude and undermine the important ideas and messages in this book. The favourite term by far used by the authors is "neolithic", to describe aboriginal cultures and defined to include "undisciplined work habits, animistic beliefs, and difficulties in developing abstract reasoning." (p. 13) No matter how tweaked, this carries negative connotations and denotes an inferior status compared to the contemporary cultures of industrial capitalism. The term "quislings" (p. 10), used for aboriginal leaders in thrall to the Aboriginal Industry is over-the-top demeaning

language from the Second World War. (Quisling is a word that has come to be associated with being both a traitor and a collaborator with an occupying power.)

In a more substantive sense, **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry** makes an important and daring contribution to our understanding. This book, with its focus on the Aboriginal Industry, does however build on books by other authors on the Right concerned with the same topic – like Melvin Smith **Our Home Or Native Land?** (1995), Tom Flanagan **First Nations? Second Thoughts** (2000), and the aboriginal writer Calvin Helin **Dances with Dependency: Out Of Poverty Through Self-Reliance** (2008). **Disrobing** will be guaranteed to bring hot water to its authors Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, because of the perspective they advance on aboriginal politics, and the claim that their perspective is being given in the name of the Left. According to a footnote in **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry**, Widdowson's Ph.D. thesis, "The Political Economy of Aboriginal Dependency", was a 2006 critique of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' Report.

I agree with a lot of what this book has to say, but I sharply disagree with some of the authors' "progress" and other human-centered assumptions, even if packaged as historical materialism, and with their overall view of what can be called traditional aboriginal cultures. This is not a book that the late John Livingston (associated with the university where Widdowson studied as a graduate student) or the late Stan Rowe, both major Canadian ecocentric philosophical and activist voices influenced by Arne Naess (the founder of deep ecology who died in 2009), would be happy with. As Naess told us: "The earth does not belong to humans." The authors of this book cannot comprehend this. They disparage the idea that a profound transformation is required in our relationship to the Earth, so that we become Earth-centric; and that this is not ultimately science-based but is spiritual and encompasses a re-sacralizing of Nature for all of us. To have any hope of living sustainably in the future, will mean a spiritual transformation both individually and socially – and that we need to come to see the Earth as alive and part of our "selves." The authors do not understand that ultimately our social world, upon which they concentrate their analysis, is subject to the dictates of the natural world.

Our egotistical selves need to become transformed into what Naess called our ecological Self, where the Earth becomes part of our personal identity and we identify with all living creatures. Aboriginals had relatively ecologically sustainable societies all over the world for many thousands of years – albeit with some important social disharmonies (see Metis historian Olive Dickason's book, **Canada's First Nations**) including wars, torture, cannibalism, the suppression of women, slavery etc. After initial blitzkrieg mega-fauna extinctions as they entered new lands, as in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia, they did form more sustainable relationships with their environments, from the perspective of the short-lived destructive legacy of industrial capitalism. Whatever their shortcomings, these long-lasting aboriginal societies have something to teach us. In my own writings, I have called aboriginal sustainable relationships with the land "deep stewardship." This is a position which ultimately is still human-centered, as we see in the "seventh generation" terminology in use in Canada. I have argued that deep ecology can build on this progressive long-term anthropocentrism and can move us all towards an

ecocentric path for post-industrial society, where the natural world will not just be viewed as a "resource" at humankind's disposal but as having intrinsic worth.

For Widdowson and Howard, who wrap themselves in the mantle of "science" and cultural "progress", there is seemingly nothing to learn from past aboriginal societies, in Canada or elsewhere, as they dismiss the "neolithic" and animistic thinking characteristic of such societies. For these authors, modern day "environmental deterioration" has "economic and political roots" but not, it seems, spiritual roots. (p. 224) Such neolithic thinking (caveats aside by the authors which are lost in the overall messaging of this book) is to be seen as an illustration of "a cultural gap", holding back aboriginals from full side-by-side participation with non-aboriginals in the contemporary industrial capitalist world.

While **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry** is written from a self-identified Marxist and Trotskyist perspective, the two book cover endorsements are from people considered right-of-center. One is from Tom Flanagan, an academic and philosophical guru for Steven Harper, the neo-conservative prime minister of Canada. Flanagan's **First Nations? Second Thoughts** is an intelligent and thoughtful critique of "aboriginal orthodoxy" but from the Right. For him, individualism, private property, economic growth, and the market must rule for the "civilized" human condition, with minimal government interventions. Flanagan does not believe there are too many people in the world or that the Western lifestyle is unsustainable. He praises the "pro-capitalist" orientation of the 1996 **Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples**. [This massive human-centred five-volume Report, although very important for an overview of Canadian aboriginal issues, immodestly tells us that its proposals "will furnish the substance of political relations between Aboriginal people and Canadian society for the next two decades." (Vol.5, p.21)] The other endorsement is from John Richards, also an academic, a former left wing social democrat, but who is now associated with the C.D. Howe Institute, a right wing think tank. It is, however, one of the contradictions faced by any person of the Left writing on aboriginal issues, as the authors point out – and I agree – that much substantive critical analysis of aboriginals and the alleged Aboriginal Industry in Canada has come from the Right. The authors of **Disrobing** share some fundamental assumptions with the Right on the ecological side, with their embracing of industrial society, which undermines what they have to say on the social justice side. Basically, the authors' socialism or Marxism pays attention to social justice but not to ecology. Their book is about "the development of humanity" (p. 53) with Nature largely absent.

Canadian industrial society is ecologically unsustainable. New ecocentric and anti-capitalist cultures are needed, rooted in Earth respect and social justice. Acknowledgment of historical guilt for the way Canada has treated aboriginals, and of the absolutely wretched conditions of many on-reserve status aboriginals (about 600 bands across Canada), should not silence the needed contemporary critical analysis. It is with its critical analysis that this book makes a contribution, helping to bring about a needed public debate. I am sorry that the language used by the authors is often so off-putting that it undermines what they have to say. Presumably this is the authors' response to the arrogance and name-calling by aboriginal advocates against those who

dare to intellectually dissent from what passes as orthodoxy. Despite my misgivings about the tone, I recommend reading **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry** to fellow green and environmental activists and the interested public.

DISCUSSION

About Orthodoxy, Oral History, Traditional Knowledge, Science, and Advocacy

"All the talk about aboriginal nationhood and sovereignty are merely fallacious legal arguments made for the purpose of obtaining compensation from the government." p. 115

"My enthusiasm for science in general is gone. Like thousands of others, I have come to see the dark side of the scientific enterprise. " Arne Naess, **The Selected Works**, Volume Nine, p. 146

The authors of **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry**, say they have written it "to provide a realistic assessment of the current situation so that all Canadians including aboriginal peoples can make informed decisions about the future direction of aboriginal policy." (p. 255) I appreciate the examination of oral histories and traditional knowledge, and the discussion of all the problems associated with accepting their use. Also good is their critique of the constraints facing those who raise critical views. Widdowson and Howard raise a lot of good points about aboriginal orthodoxy and its stranglehold upon critical analysis. They assert that traditional knowledge assumes "all objects in the universe are governed by spiritual forces that cannot be seen by a white man." (p. 6) I have never come across such an exclusionist view. I would like to believe that it is not true, because it is race-based. Aboriginals who live on a land base and closely observe what they see around them, have a "knowledge" validity, even if it cannot be replicated in a "scientific" experiment. Traditional knowledge can be a supplement to contemporary science. But we also see it used to advance aboriginal self-interest, as in trying to obtain increased access to wildlife when restraint is in order.

I believe the authors have a reification or fixation on the scientific method as somehow defining for contemporary society. They conveniently argue to "delink" current environmental destruction from the scientific method. But has scientific research and its methodology, which has brought so many advances in knowledge, understanding, and benefits for humankind, been good for our planet? How do we balance all the scientific and technological advances, extended human life spans through health care, etc. with the extinctions which our "progress" has meant for so many non-human species and with the despoliation of this Earth? Does not our progress eventually, from a purely human perspective, come up against self-annihilation through over-population and global warming? The authors of **Disrobing** only see one side: "It is because of the scientific method that we know that problems like global warming exist." (p. 261)

An important discussion raised by Widdowson and Howard is that of non-aboriginal scholars and researchers who see themselves as surrogate aboriginal advocates. A footnote in **Disrobing**

speaks of UBC Press only allowing publication of aboriginal studies "if they have been approved by the community being studied." (p. 270, footnote 60) [This concern was something I had brought out in my critique of the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. There were more than 350 commissioned research studies for the Royal Commission. Those conducting research, had to agree to a document entitled "Ethical Guidelines for Research," which made it clear that research results must be seen as positive and not negative to the aboriginal communities, organizations, or individuals being researched. There was a "Research Advisory Committee" with people from various universities, as well as non-academics, to see that the researchers followed the stated ethical guidelines to represent "Aboriginal reality authentically." I myself would not have agreed to be bound by such guidelines which essentially turn the researcher into an aboriginal advocate. As I wrote in my critique, such guidelines can lead to having a bias against looking critically at aboriginal societies in the past or present; the promotion of social justices at the expense of wildlife and the ecology; and a research inclination reflecting ambivalence, and opportunism towards the Canadian state – one is critical but not too critical, so as not to interfere with federal funding. For example, the Royal Commission, appointed by the federal government, did not call for a repeal of the Indian Act in its recommendations.]

Retribution

Non-aboriginals who dare to write about aboriginal politics, if they step out of line from what is considered orthodoxy, can expect verbal abuse from those who see themselves as aboriginal advocates, native or non-native. The authors' experience of retribution for their views – as supporters of historical materialism and having a critical analysis of indigenous cultural preservation – is not unique to them. As a Canadian left wing person and a left biocentrist, I have travelled a somewhat similar path. See my discussion papers on "Rethinking Environmental-First Nations Relationships", the subject of a panel discussion co-sponsored by the Society for Socialist Studies and the Environmental Studies Association of Canada, at the 1995 Learned Societies Conference at the University of Quebec in Montreal. For a discussion of the 1995 Learned's presentation, see the essay by Peter Harries-Jones, who was a panel participant, "Bargaining the Sacred: The Approach from 'Immanent Holism'" in the 1998 book **Sustainability: The Challenge**. Harries-Jones, a York academic, takes left biocentrism's examination of aboriginal issues in Canada seriously as a new perspective with something to contribute, unlike Widdowson's and Howard's perfunctory and dismissive characterization of left biocentrism as "banal" and "bizarre."

As an activist interested in theoretical questions and not based in the university, I have come to see that those academics who write about the aboriginal, environmental and green movements, and about the labour movement, have an intellectual existence which to a considerable extent is parasitical upon these movements. Academic theorists have the luxury of holding forth intellectually, without accountability to those in the trenches, and without suffering any major employment consequences for their declarations.

Marxism and Deep Ecology

"The economies of some traditional North American native cultures were superbly sustainable in a broad sense. It has been noted that the philosophical, religious, and mythological basis for these economies, and for their social relations in general, was expressed through sayings that are eminently consistent with the fundamental attitudes found in the deep ecology movement. Arne Naess, **Selected Works**, Volume Ten, p. 254

"Although Orton's work contains a number of bizarre notions – one being that animal and plant communities are 'nations' – it is difficult to see how his arguments are hateful towards aboriginal people. In fact, Orton is much less critical of the current claims about aboriginal people's innate environmentalism than a historical and materialist analysis warrants." p. 217

"While animal and plant 'nations' or 'communities' predate the arrival of humans, in Canada Aboriginal peoples can be considered the first or founding 'human' nations. In order for non-Native environmentalists and greens to enter into alliances with Aboriginal peoples, non-Native environmentalists themselves should have a realistic perspective or analysis of Aboriginal issues and their appropriate resolution." David Orton, "Rethinking Environmental First Nations Relationships", **Canadian Dimension**, February-March 1995.

The authors identify themselves as Marxists. As they say, there is a need for "socializing ownership so that goods and services are produced not to obtain profits but to satisfy human need." (p. 15) This is a good human-centered statement on the face of it, yet there is no ecological component. Human needs in a consumer-driven culture can turn out to be limitless. There is one planet. So an ecologically aware Marxism would rephrase the above to satisfy production for what Naess called "vital" human needs. But, most importantly, we also have to bear in mind the needs of the non-human life forms with which we share this planet. This would mean, for a biocentric Left position, retrenchment and the significant curbing of consumption, plus the redistribution of wealth globally so that all humans may have the same life opportunities. Population reductions are a necessary part of this discussion. There is no discussion of population in **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry**.

Animism was an attempt at individual and societal self-restraint in the human exploitation of Nature. This is its importance. But for the authors, animism, like Earth spirituality, is something to mock. They say it illustrates an absence of ecological understanding and a neolithic failure "to control nature." (p. 219) Although the authors do not use the comment by Marx about "rural idiocy", their anti-animism comments in **Disrobing** brought this to mind. "Rather than methods of 'managing' wildlife populations, taboos and rituals were simply attempts to increase the numbers of animals that could be killed and eaten." (p. 219)

The similarities between Widdowson and Howard, and the right wing critics of the Aboriginal Industry (using Flanagan as an example) seem to be more significant than their differences:

- Both support the existing industrial capitalist society and its basic priorities in Canada and want aboriginal entry into this and hence more economic 'development.' The Disrobing authors seem to accept the legitimacy of the environmental assessment process for a proposed Northern diamond mine. They do not consider, as did the late deep ecology inspired John Livingston, this process to be a "grandiloquent fraud" which is there to "anoint and bless the process of 'development.'" (See the 1981, **The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation**, p. 33.)
- Both express in their respective books, no understanding of the ecological limitations to economic growth.
- Both accept the legitimacy of the Canadian state and its claim to imposed land "ownership" in this country, backed ultimately by military force.
- Both have a view of contemporary Canadian industrial culture as being more "advanced" than traditional aboriginal cultures. Or, put in another way, that European civilization is superior to aboriginal cultures.
- Both share the same basic critique of the Aboriginal Industry.
- Both share a view of "mastery" over nature being seen as part of "progress" and leading to the betterment of life for humans.
- Both are totally human-centered and see species other than humans as "resources" for human and corporate use. There is no deferment to non-human living beings.
- Both oppose aboriginal spirituality or Earth spirituality, e.g., seeing the Earth as part of our "selves." Both would oppose the late Stan Rowe's view, who was himself a scientist, "We are Earthlings first, humans second." (**Earth Alive**, p. 21)
- Both do not consider current population numbers an ecological issue.

There are only a couple of brief references to deep ecology in **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry**. To be kind, one would say that the authors are in their own world when it comes to understanding deep ecology or left biocentrism. I have written quite a number of articles from a deep ecology and left biocentric perspective on issues relating to aboriginals and the environmental movement in Canada. They include rejecting the basic assumptions of the **Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples**, such as recreating the land base at first contact for aboriginals today; or the view that aboriginal Canadians have "rights" that flow from past historical status and that these should determine social and ecological factors at the present time. Left biocentrists seek social justice for aboriginals, as for all citizens of Canada, but within an ecocentric Earth-first philosophy, bearing in mind the state of today's greatly reduced ecological potential in Canada. I have read and reviewed authors which examine critically aboriginal claims that the past was some kind of golden period of eco-management, for example, Rod Preece's **Animals and Nature: Cultural Myths, Cultural Realities** and Shepard Krech's, **The Ecological Indian: Myth and History**. (Both available on the internet.)

I have no idea what the authors are talking about in the quotation below, although it does seem to fit their agenda of ridiculing spirituality:

"The argument that aboriginal people were assigned the position of environmental custodians or

stewards by the Creator is an attempt to give a 'deep ecology' twist to land claims and self-government demands. Flowing from this argument is the idea that the environmental crisis is a direct result of aboriginal peoples' loss of land and political autonomy. The expropriation of their lands has meant that they can no longer exercise their spiritually assigned role of managing the environment. Therefore, it is necessary to return control over development to aboriginal groups so that they can resume their spiritual role as environmental custodians." (p. 218)

CONCLUSION

There is a lot I like about **Disrobing The Aboriginal Industry**, by Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard. One always appreciates fearlessness and sharpness of analysis. I also liked their open anti-Zionism and the analogy between Norm Finkelstein's book **The Holocaust Industry** – which shows how the Holocaust has been used by Israel and the Zionists as a continual fund raiser – and how the Aboriginal Industry itself extorts funds from the federal government, using guilt about the past and the present shameful record of aboriginal oppression in Canada. The two writers have, however, unnecessarily shot themselves in their feet by their use of demeaning language. Non-aboriginals have a lot to learn, and we do not know it all. The language used in **Disrobing** unfortunately fosters negativity towards traditional aboriginal cultures.

The authors' Marxism is bereft of any ecological understanding and is totally human-centered. Their book is a good critique of the aboriginal status-quo, but it lacks an ecological perspective. Working with aboriginal Canadians on environmental issues can be complicated, but it is necessary and possible, in order to overcome the seductions of more capitalist economic growth, and consequent Earth destruction.

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