

The Development of Capitalism and the Subjugation of Native Women in Northern Canada

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The subject of this paper is the subjugation of native (Indian and Half-breed) women in northern and western Canada as a result of the institution of capitalism under the aegis of the fur trade. The racial, colonial and class divisions which were imposed upon native women resulted in a form of subjugation which needs to be differentiated from that affecting Euro-Canadian women.

In this paper I will deal with some of the historical background concerning native women and changes in their role during the development of capitalism in what is now considered northern Canada. I intend to establish the basis of class and racial divisions, together with colonial relations that resulted from the particular form of exploitation and oppression of native women within the fur trade of the Hudson's Bay basin.

The oppression of native women (Indian and Metis) can only be understood and dealt with if one first comes to terms with the historical development of their class, colonial and national (racial) status. It has been a common belief that the native population as a whole has somehow been isolated from the history of capitalism in this country and, hence, class relations, and, consequently, that their oppression is somehow the result of their being disadvantaged in relationship to the rest of society. In addition to this, there is a commonly held belief that the Indian Act as a piece of legislation has existed historically as a means of democratically defining for the benefit of Indian people who they are as a people; and that if it did not exist the people would have long ago become assimilated into the greater 'white' Canadian society. The Indian Act has never been, however, a guarantor of the Native heritage, and to focus almost exclusively on this piece of legislation in an analysis of the position of native women in contemporary Canadian society, as many women in the women's movement do, cannot give us any insight into the history of the struggle against racism and the struggle for emancipation from colonial, class and sexual oppression, nor the long standing resistance to assimilation mounted by native women.

Although northern native women have their own particular

history, their oppression is not something that is peculiar to their circumstances or territory. Rather, as with all women, they are, and have been for centuries, incorporated into a broader world system in which this oppression takes place. However, their subjugation, as differentiated from that of European and Euro-Canadian women, occurred under a condition of colonialism. This is an important difference even now since it has resulted in the existence of national or racial oppression. The oppression of women who have been living under a state of colonialism is different from that of those who are oppressed within colonizing societies. This is not a question of antagonism; but, rather, a difference that will probably force a self-determining or autonomous relationship to exist between native and Euro-Canadian women as the former become more organized.

First Contact

The penetration of British mercantilism into the Hudson's Bay basin during the 17th century heralded the beginning of the class/national struggle of the Indian peoples within that region. It also marked the creation of exploitable divisions between Indian men and women. Mercantilism was interested in only one thing, fur as a commodity for the European market. The resident Indian population did not prove, however, to be a source of labour that would produce or deliver that commodity in the consistent manner required by the merchant traders. Commodity production for exchange was no part of the economic activity of the non-capitalist hunting, gathering, and foraging societies of the Indian people of the Hudson's Bay basin. It was also impossible to introduce another source of labour into the territory; as fur production required the labour skills that the Indian

population had acquired over centuries. It was, therefore, incumbent upon mercantilism to alter the relations of production in the Indian societies.

As primitive communist societies, they were both classless and egalitarian. As classless societies, there existed no internal social division of labour beyond that of sex and age. There was no class/group of non-labourers existing solely to appropriate the surplus labour of labouring individuals or groups within the society. As a primitive communist society the appropriation of surplus labour was communal, but the productive mechanisms and social relations of production could be called backward or undeveloped. Indian societies were egalitarian in the sense that individuals (or groups) held power and influence over what and how goods were to be produced and where and how they were to be distributed. In this sense, individuals within their respective societies were able to control the conditions of their work and production for the communal use of the whole society. Although divisions of labour existed that were based upon sex, what women did, or women's work, was complementary to that of men. It was not deemed to be of lesser importance. The fact that women were able to control the conditions of their own work and production made, as Leacock says (1981:13-29, 133-182), for egalitarian relations with men. The form of egalitarian relations varied, of course, from group to group depending upon the objective conditions of natural environment and the level of development of the productive forces.

Economic Conquest

The process of transforming the Indian population into commodity producers involved imposing one mode of production upon another. In

order to accomplish this, it was necessary to alter or change the system of producing goods for their own internal use into the producing of goods for trade or barter. Internal social relations among the people were altered, inequalities were created between women and men, and unequal external relations were established between Indian and European. The imposition of a foreign economic system upon a national, in this case, an indigenous, group was the substance of colonial relations; it was also the way in which one people "conquered" another. In the case of the northern Indian people it was not military, but economic, conquest.

Merchant capital did not necessarily totally destroy non-capitalist societies, supplanting them with the capitalist mode of production. As in Europe, a free labour market was required in the interest of capital accumulation. Merchant capital was quite compatible with different non-capitalist modes of production, as long as it could gain control of them and alter their productive mechanisms to what was required (Marx, 1977b:326-27).[1] I would argue that there is a parallel to be considered between the establishment of feudal production in Latin America (as explained by Laclau, 1971) and what was established during the dominant presence of mercantilism in northern Canada. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that the situation today is exactly the same. Laclau argues that the exploitation of Latin America peasantry increased along with demands by the world market and this is certainly the case with the Indians of northern Canada.[2]

With the advent of capitalism, the Indian came to be bound to particular outposts, harvesting wildlife no longer for personal consumption but as a commodity to be exchanged. In the course of becoming a commodity producer, the Indian adopted from the merchant

capitalists new instruments of work such as the gun, traps, knives, and axes. Although they owned their means of production, purchasing them with the money they received for their furs, they did not control them. The Indians were kept from reproducing or repairing their own tools of work, tasks which remained in the hands of the merchant capitalists. In this manner, the production of the Indians was ultimately controlled. They did not, then, act as totally independent producers. Land became a subject of their labour process - the working of the land for what existed naturally - in the production of fur (Marx, 1977a:174-76; Meillassoux, 1972:103). The manner in which the surplus labour of the Indian was extracted in the production of fur determined all relations of existence. The social structure that emerged, the restructured nature of relationships between Indian women and men, the form of colonialism that developed and the nature and form of the state that emerged within the fur trade, all were dependent upon the mode of extraction of the surplus labour (Marx, 1977b:791; Marx, 1977a:209).

Since merchant capital was not interested in completely altering Indian society, much of what appeared to be the 'traditional' economy or subsistence economy remained intact. The reason for this was that merchant capital was not interested in assuming the costs of the reproduction of the labour force. In this manner, the subsistence economy of the Indian, and that included internal social relations of production (women's egalitarian inter-relationships with men), continued to meet the costs of social reproduction of the labour force. Hence, much of what was primitive communism, now no longer independent, was allowed to reproduce itself and became a facilitating mechanism by which Indian labour was exploited.

Indian Women Within Egalitarian Society

There are many ongoing debates concerning women's actual status within primitive communism or egalitarian society (see, for eg. Leacock, 1981; Reed, 1975; Godelier, 1978) and whether or not men did hold power and influence over women's lives. Some maintain that men dominated women and that this domination has its roots within innate characteristics of both men and women. Quite frankly, there is not much to suggest that there is anything innate within the human species that predetermines their social behaviour. - If, in fact, within different stages or forms of primitive communism, men did hold decision making power over women (in relation to certain tasks), then, like the issue of female autonomy, male dominated inter-relationships must be considered within the context of the nature of the egalitarian society. In other words, if we reject the idea of domination as being innate, we would attempt to explain it in its social context. Why did men play a predominant role in certain tasks? Male domination of women in these cases may or may not have been more significant than in situations in which domination did not occur or those in which women held decision making powers.

This article is not, however, concerned with sorting out the nature of egalitarian society and the autonomous role of women. Its intent is to reflect upon the way in which Indian women were in fact conquered and drawn into a class society and how male domination assumed a form that did not exist before the penetration of capitalism. Now perhaps the question of male dominance in primitive communism could lead to another question. Was it necessary for conquest to occur and male domination to be established that women's autonomy be exploited and then destroyed, or was it necessary just to establish the

conquering procedure through the use of males, with the result being the disintegration of primitive communism and the ensuing subjugation of women? If either was the case, what does it mean today in terms of strategy and tactics within the Native Movement?

The egalitarian nature of northern Indian society existed to the extent that all adults, both men and women, were mutually engaged in the socially necessary labour required for the reproduction of their society. As well, all adults participated equally in the distribution and consumption of the necessities of life. The autonomy of Indian women existed to the extent that they had control over the conditions of their own work and over the distribution of what they produced within their society. Women held power over what they produced and the work that women did was deemed to be as socially important as that of men. Men did not have decision making powers over the work activities of women. Women's social and economic power was held to be as valuable as that of men, even though they were engaged in sharing socially necessary labour (Leacock, 1975:34).

Within the egalitarian society, Indian women also enjoyed, as did men, sexual autonomy. Women made decisions about their labour, and they held the same decision making power over their bodies. Since they were not individually bound to nor dependent upon men, men did not hold any decision making powers over women's sexual lives. To have sexual relationships with different men, before and after 'marriage,' was not seen as being out of the ordinary. Parentage of children was not perceived as being all that important since children were considered to be the responsibility of the collective society.

Within egalitarian Indian society, all individuals were as dependent upon the larger collective society as upon the varied forms

of family units. Unlike the situation in class societies, where the family functions as an individual unit of production, the family in traditional Indian society functioned as an integral part of the collective. The family as an economic unit of the collective society did not demand monogamy and, accordingly, women were not restricted through 'marriage.' Relationships of 'marriage' between women and men were formed for the most part out of mutual domestic convenience. And, as the ensuing family formations, children for instance, existed as a unit in support of the greater collective society, they were not individual units responsible for their own individual livelihood (Leacock, 1975:33). Since women held mutual decision making powers with men over work and production within the collective society, they and their children were not economically or socially bound nor dependent upon men.

Divorce, for whatever reason, was arrived at through mutual recognition between women and men. Abortion was considered to be a socially responsible act, with women having the right to self-administer if prospective children were seen as being an economic burden. The following description was written by an Officer of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1771; it is part of a general report on the social conditions of the Indians during the fur trade:

They have a very strange maxim of policy which is, obliging their women to procure frequent abortions by the use of a certain herb in this country, in order to ease themselves of the heavy burthen of a helples family (HBCA, E2/7,7.9).[3]

What does all this mean in the everyday practical operation of egalitarian Indian society? Both men and women did in fact have particular tasks which they were required to execute for the general maintenance of the society. Men did the majority of the hunting for

food and trapping for clothing, but women made clothes and prepared food. Neither of these two 'types' of work was seen as being more important than the other. One did not hold a particular status at the expense of the other.

As well, what was produced by particular people or individuals within the society was done for the use of the society as a whole. No individual, because of his or her skills, produced a good or a service and then exchanged it for something else that they might have needed. The fact that fur was eventually produced for exchange made that item a commodity and it was considered to be the private property of the person who produced it. That was entirely different than producing fur for the use of individuals within the collective society.

Women and the Development of Class Society

The subjugation of Indian women began when the collective economy in which they exercised their autonomy was changed. This change resulted from foreign domination which led to the undermining or outright conquest of Indian societies. The change in the collective economy was signified by the specialisation of labour and the replacement of communal appropriation with individual production of goods or commodities for exchange. Once this process is begun, the revenue from production of commodities becomes the private property of individuals. No longer does labour produce goods or services to be collectively used. Eventually, individuals begin to lose control over the production, distribution, and use of the goods they produce. The existing division of labour within the collective society slowly becomes a part of the new productive process. Since men were the primary producers of fur in the first place, as commodity production developed

they slowly assumed control over the production process. Women, no longer utilizing the fur harvest for clothes or food, then began to lose control over the production process. Their role became more that of support in the production of the exchange commodity. Inevitably, the mutual relationship of men and women within the egalitarian society started to crumble, as did the egalitarian society itself (Engels, 1975:233).

With the crumbling of collective society, the family no longer functioned as a productive unit of the egalitarian society. Rather, it slowly became an independent economic unit in the production of commodities for exchange. As women's power diminished in relation to that of men, their developing dependent relationship as support workers eventually carried over to a dependent role within the family. This was facilitated by the development of the family as the primary unit of production under mercantile capitalism. As Engels suggested (1975:221) women's socially necessary labour and their control over it, no longer was of equal value to that of men. It became exploitable and secondary to commodity production for exchange.

The Impact of Mercantilism: Economic Conquest and the Creation and Imposition of Class Society on Northern Indian Women

The reality of merchant capital's first contact with the Indian people around the coast of Hudson's Bay meant that the autonomous role of Indian women was destroyed. The intent of merchant capital was the establishment of commodity production in which men worked for exchange and this necessitated destruction of the reciprocal relationship between women and men.

With the development of colonial relations and the increasing

dependency of Indian women upon men, some women considered it to be in their interest to advance themselves in relationships with European men. The European colonizers were only too willing to avail themselves of the Indian women, especially since their position of equality with men provided the mercantilists with the opportunity to penetrate the communal society. Indian women became a valuable commodity, exploited both politically and sexually in the conquest of Indian society. The colonial subjugation of both Indian men and women meant then, a double subjugation for Indian women.

In the early 1700's, the British wanted to move northward from York Factory (where they had established themselves in the late 1600's) to establish trade relations with the Dene-Chipewyan people. The British, through trading with the Cree, captured a Chipewyan woman whom they referred to as 'the Slave woman.' Their strategy was to familiarise the Slave woman with the value of British goods and, once accomplished, use her as a means of penetrating and developing initial trade relations with the Chipewyans. Towards this end, the Slave woman was deliberately kept within York Factory for one year in order that she might comprehend the system of commodity trade goods and absorb the philosophy of private property. The Slave woman was then sent throughout the interior where she organized four hundred Chipewyan people for the first trade meeting. One hundred sixty of these were men who were present to conduct the trade negotiations. She organized and brought back to York Factory some people to be trained in the selection and preparation of furs which were of value for trade. As well, she arranged for men to be trained in the use of the rifle and other tools of work. The Slave woman was so committed to the idea of developing trade between the Chipewyan and the European that she made a solemn promise that she would not rest until

the whole of the interior Dene people were delivered into a trade relationship with the British. So well did she understand the process of commodity production that was to be developed that, in return for her work, she requested only to be rewarded with a position for her brother — that he be made a trade captain.

The following quotes are from the journal of the Chief Officer at York Factory in 1716-17. The journal was kept as a means of recording how the British developed initial trading with the Chipewyan people. It included as well comments on the death of the Slave woman in 1717. The quotes serve to show the process of conquest and the utilisation of the power of women within Indian society in order to facilitate that process:

...but these Poor people have none but are forced to live by the bows and arrows and they cannot live a great many together, because they have nothing to subsist on but what they hunt...but if please God when I have settled a trade amongst them and can bring what I am working upon to pass I will stop the trade with those Indians for a year or two and lett them make ? on them and drive the Dogg's to the Devill....

...the northern Slave woman departed her life after about seven weeks illness. The misfortune in loosing her will be very prejudicial to the Company's interests....

...she was one of a very high spirit and of the firmest resolution that ever I see anybody in my days and of great courage and forecast also (endued) with an extraordinary vivacity of apprehension. Readily taking anything right as was proposed to he and presently give her opinion whether it would doo or not. And I am sure the death of her was a very considerable loss to the Company for the wintering here allmost 2 years with us and going one year to make the peace and being Chief promoter and acter in it which has caus'd respect to her and carry'd also a Great sway among the Indians....

As I have been writing about the Slave woman [deceas'd] it will not be amiss to mention one thing. Last June she gave away a little kettle as I had given her to carry with her when she went back into her Country again. I (tax'd) her about it she said she had not gave it away. I sent to the Indian as had it and fetched it away and show'd it her. She told me was a lyer for he had stole it for she did not give it to him and said that her Indians should kill me when I come to Churchill River and did rise in such a passion as I never did see the like before and I

cuff'd her Ears for her but the next morning she came and cry'd to me and said she was a fool and mad and told me that I was a father to them all and that she and all her Indians would love me and I should never come to any harm. She had been very good ever since in giving me any information and always speaking in our praise to these Indians and her own. We buried her ab't 4 a clock... (HBCA, B239/a/2,3,f.28-30,23).

The journal clearly reveals the power and status that the Slave woman had within Chipewyan society. Although the interpretation given by the writer hints that she may have been exceptional, her exceptionality is really a natural outgrowth of egalitarian society. Individualism and exceptionalism existed, but within the context of collectivism.

Making use of the Slave woman, or any other person for that matter, to develop contacts to facilitate commodity exchange was not sufficient for conquest. A form of subservience and personalized property had to be created; hence the strategy of first developing trade, then, once dependency was established, stopping trade "and drive the Dogg's to the Devill." This destroyed any notion of mutuality in trading and provided the basis for the development of a situation not unlike the lord-peasant relationship of feudalism.[4] In the situation of the Slave woman, the kettle was symbolic of whether or not she was going to accept the idea of private property and ties to the European trader or whether she would cling to the notion of communal property. Her being hit was symbolic of her new domination by a man and a European.

As well as being exploited politically by the European, Indian women were also exploited sexually. At no time throughout the mercantile fur trade were European women allowed into the fur trade territory of Rupert's Land and the ensuing shortage of women made Indian women a valuable sexual commodity to the European colonizers. It was a

common practice for the resident officers to have permanent, or even just casual, sexual relationships with influential Indian women as a means of developing and maintaining trade relations with the surrounding Indian groups. The following was an officer's comment in 1743 at Moose Factory concerning the importance of a particular Indian woman to the continuation of trade at that post. She apparently lived for a period of time with the officer within the fort and had a child by him:

Ausiskashagan came in here hawling his sick wife on a Sledge, relieved them with provisions...she having been brought up at Albany & used to these comforts, as being of ye blood Royal & has a child by Mr. Adams, is very industrious in catching Martins, I having had above two hundred from her husband already & must use them with tenderness on acc't of ye comp'ys interest (HBCA, B135/a/14,f.63-65).

In addition, women were taken possession of as a form of concubine by the officers as a privilege of their class. The same privilege was, however, denied the European servant class. It was a privilege that was taken in much the same manner as a feudal lord would exhibit towards peasant women in Europe. The following description of the relationship between Indian women and the European resident merchant traders around the different posts was written around 1771 by an Officer of the Company who himself engaged in the same practices:

No European women are allowed to be brought to Hudson's Bay, and no person is allowed to have any correspondence with the natives without the Chief's orders...However, the Factors for the most part at proper times allows an Officer to take in an Indian Lady to his apartment, but by no means or on any account whatever to harbour her within the Fort at night. However, the Factors keeps a bedfellow within the Fort at all times, and have carried several of their children home as before observed (Williams, 1969:248).

In order for commodity production to develop, it was important that the communal family be destroyed. The social interrelationships in which surplus labour was appropriated collectively had to be terminated or ruptured. Although the actual development and process of commodity

production contributed to its destruction, the communal family had to be dealt with directly by merchant capital.

The fur trade post displaced the communal society (hence the establishment of a form of feudal society) by arranging that individual families or family units become dependent upon and bound to each fur trade post for their existence. Arrangements were made for the care of dependent women and children while the men were induced to go out and hunt or trap for trade, making it clear that women were no longer considered to be making a contribution to a collective society. In return for their maintenance, women were induced to contribute their labour to the upkeep of their respective posts. So what began to unfold was production by individual family units for the respective posts to which they were increasingly attached. Women within these changing family units provided support work for the men and, at the same time, had their labour exploited in support work for each particular post. Less than ten years after the Chipewyan were drawn into fur production, the post of Prince of Wales was quite deliberately trying to displace the collective family:

The Indian which came here ye 22'd of last month went away with his wife in order to look for some deer, he leaving ? children by reason they would be a hindrance if he had taken them with him, he having been employed all this fall a making things necessary for our Men which Lay abroad this Winter. So I think to Entertain him he having a Small family for to hunt for us this Winter, also to knitt Snow shoes & making Indian Shoes & other things is wanting for ye Men in ye Winter time & itt being Usual to Entertain an Indian for ye same purpose (HBCA, B42/a/5,f.7).

Over the years, Indian women acted as support workers for their respective fur trading posts, making moccassins and snowshoes for the servants, preparing and drying meat and fish, etc. By the turn of the 19th century, Indian women were doing much the same support work as they

had been forced into one hundred years earlier. This would continue for another hundred years. A description of women's past work was given in an 1802 report to London:

We wish to remark that the women are deserving of some encouragement and indulgence from your Honors, they clean and put into a state of preservation all Beaver and Otter skins brought by the Indians undried and in bad condition. They prepare Line for snow shoes and knit them also without which your Honors servants could not give efficient opposition to the Canadian traders. They make Leather shoes for the men who are obliged to travel about in search of Indians and furs and are useful in a variety of other instances, in short they are virtually your Honors Servants... (HBCA, E239/b/79,f.39).

As the communal Indian society continued to break down under commodity production, Indian women gradually became more dependent upon men. The colonial situation presented an opportunity to some women seeking economic security or benefits from varied relationships with European men. If a woman was able to become a live-in companion or even a 'country wife' of a high officer or a living-out companion of any junior officers, the material benefits were considerably greater than that received as a peasant. The creation of the dependency conditions which forced women to seek these particular opportunities laid the basis for privileged positions and eventually class differences among Indian women. To the officer class, maintaining an Indian woman was considered a class privilege but, in reality, it was a hidden form of prostitution. As these same privileges were denied the servant or working class, the dependent relationship of Indian women with working class European men became a more overt form of prostitution. To Indian women, these relationships were, in part, an expression of their sexual autonomy but, within the colonial situation, it signified the creation of prostitution. The just-arrived officer reported in his journal at York Factory in 1762, "that the worst Brothel House in London is not so common a (Stew) as the mens House in this Factory was before I

put a stop to it" (HBCA, B139/a/50, f.3-7).

During the first one hundred years, mercantilism discouraged any formal family formations to arise around the posts outside of the Indian society. The reason was that mercantilism did not require any form of a free labour market to develop outside the Indian peasantry. In fact, that was one of the reasons why European women were not brought into the country. Family formations, either European or mixed, outside of the Indians would have meant the growth of a labour pool that was not needed and, as well, the existence of non-productive families was considered a burden upon the trade. The capitalist labour market was to remain in Europe while merchant capital exploited the Indians as simple commodity producers.

The Age of Mercantile Monopoly Competition: Indian Women and the
Creation of the Labour Market, 1760's to 1821

The 1760's until the turn of the 18th century was marked by the rapid inland penetration of mercantile capital through the aegis of the Hudson's Bay Company and the NorthWest Company. This was a continuation of the previous economic domination of what may be characterized as primitive communist societies. This monopoly period was characterized by the further internal development of class and racial divisions, as well as an intensification of colonial relations with the Indian population.

As a result of the inland penetration, the costs of maintaining the post infrastructure and increased importation of European labour became astronomical. What began to emerge out of the double necessity to decrease overhead expenses and to retain labour within the service was the creation of a potential wage labour supply from within the fur

trade territory. Inasmuch as mercantilism was in need of a cheaper internal source of wage labour, there was also a long range interest in developing a national elite that would assist in the implementation of colonial rule. In addition to this, whatever other labour was needed had to be provided from outside. This was accomplished through intermarriage, which then created radical changes. The required elite could not be recruited from the Indian population which was needed for commodity production.

An internal labour market was encouraged from which mercantilism could draw wage labour when it was needed and to which it could expel labour when it was no longer necessary. This labour market was separate from the Indian producers but was not intended to supplant them. Once the labour market was established, it would reproduce itself through formal individual family structures and 'marriage.'

The Company began to realize the benefits of relaxing strictures on relations between European men and Indian women. Previously, family units outside of the Indian community were not allowed and mixed-bloods born out of clandestine relationships between Europeans and Indian women were, as a matter of policy, to be treated as Indians. Now, however, male mixed-bloods were raised and recruited into the service of the Company, as workers if they were born of the servant class and as a rising petty bourgeois elite if they were born of fathers in the officer class. As workers, they were used as cheaper labour than that of Europeans and, as a petty elite, they were used in junior positions within the Company to facilitate trade relationships and inland penetration. The petty elites were not considered to have the same class position as their fathers since they were "nationals" and the running of the fur trade was not to be entrusted to them. Thus, there

was created a colonized Native elite and wage labour class, which for reasons of class and race, were no longer to be considered as Indians. Nor were they allowed to be English. They were, as their colonizers, called them "Half-Breeds."

With forced colonialism and dependency, Indian women and increasing numbers of mixed-blood women found themselves in a position of having to take advantage of the system for their own individual benefit and well-being. Native women (Indian and Mixed-blood) gradually partook or engaged, as the system demanded, in formalized individual relationships or family formations (as 'country wives') with European men. Such relationships between Native women and European men, formed out of dependency and colonialism, further exacerbated class differences between native women. As well, the resident European officer class found it more fitting to their class position to take a mixed-blood woman as a companion rather than an Indian woman. The following quote is an example of the situation in 1783 of the mixed-blood wife of an officer who made a request to London that their child be educated in Britain. The correspondence also illuminates the strategy of creating a petty bourgeois elite through education:

...the request arises not from a sudden fit of affection from the infant but from a long-wished-for desire; from a duty I owe him, as well as from the affection I bare him, and I the more strongly wish it as his Mother is the daughter of an Englishman and has few or no Indian friends to protect the child should any accident happen to me (HBCA, A11/4,f.208).

Indian women and mixed-blood women born of the servant class were considered to be more suitable companions for the European working class. The distinction made between mixed-blood and Indian women, either as developing petty elites or within the small working class, now took on a class nature, but one overlaid with racial divisions.

Mixed-blood women were no longer, as was the case previously, to be considered as Indians. As dependent women, their new role and class in relationship with European males did not, however, prepare them for that. Like their 'brothers' they were no longer Indians nor were they considered to be English. So their new position as a native woman was that of a half-caste or half-breed. During the fur trade, then, there emerged a new and interwoven structure of race and class.

Nothing was so revealing of the racist transformation of mixed-blood women as the educational system that was developed around some of the bigger posts at the turn of the 19th century. Take as an example the instructions for education in 1807:

...Education & Religion should be imparted without distinction to the children of both Sexes & that the female youth in particular should experience that delicacy & attention to their person their peculiar situation requires. Native Women as attendant on these young persons seem improper their Society would keep alive the Indian language & with it its native superstitions which ought to be obliterated from the mind with all possible care. It is therefore, humbly suggested that a female from England of suitable ability & good moral character accompany the School master (HBCA, All/118,f.2).

Through education and the divorcing of mixed-blood women from their Indian roots arose the anticipated elite class of women that would function as colonial companions for the resident British mercantile officers. As with their brothers, some mixed-blood women were sent to Britain for higher level British education. The receiving of a British education prepared the Half-breed elites ideologically as a national petty bourgeois class loyal to British colonial policies. But as non-white colonial nationals they were never allowed to be the equal of their British masters. For Half-breed women, British education merely prepared them as class companions for the resident British colonial administrators.

The situation of Indian or Half-breed women within the forming working class was quite different. The labour of Native women within the mixed family units became exploitable either as support work for the European men or directly as labour in and around the different posts. In this sense, native women were not divorced from their labour skills as long as the family units kept themselves outside of peasant society and their social relations of production.

The Age of British Colonialism and Imperialism: 1821-1870

The period from 1821, when the two mercantile companies merged, until 1870, when Rupert's Land was annexed to Canada, was one in which formal British colonialism was established. The class formations and contradictions that developed during the era of monopoly competition started to crystallize after 1821, resulting in overt class/national struggles. The rise of national consciousness among the dominant Metis population grew out of the class oppression and racial hierarchy that formed within the mercantile system. The Hudson's Bay Company no longer exercised political power solely as an independent mercantile concern; but, rather, it came more closely under the control of the British parliament and Colonial Office. The Company, in effect, became more directly an agent of British Imperial interests. In turn, a political and state organization was created in Assiniboia to deal with the developing internal class formations and divisions of labour in the interest of maintaining Britain's imperial interests in the area.

We have seen that merchant capital, from the 1780's to the 1820's, resulted in the creation of an internal capitalist labour market. The non-capitalist mode was not, however, destroyed. At this time, with the rise of industrial capital within Britain, merchant

capital in general, was no longer an independent or even the dominant form of capital. Rather, it became a subordinate aspect of industrial capital within the developing capitalist mode of production. Because merchant capital does not develop the productive mechanisms of societies in which it operates, its constant presence serves only, as Marx pointed out (1977b:327-28), to underdevelop the society. Relations of production within the fur trade were not allowed to change as long as merchant capital remained as the dominant form within the fur trade territory, and this was true even when merchant capital became merely an agent of industrial capital.

As industrial capital continues to develop, the northern Indian people continue to 'underdevelop.' Whatever internal changes that came from the implementation of a capitalist mode of production and labour market - the formation of a wage labour class and petty bourgeoisie - did not serve to develop the society. Rather, the class formations only became underdeveloped classes in an overall underdeveloped society. As simply one aspect of the overall development of capital, merchant capital's previously high rate of profit was reduced correspondingly. In the fur trade this led to greater exploitation of the northern Indian population and the further erosion of their society, as the mercantile company needed to extract more of the resource for profit.

After 1821, there was further systematic development of the labour market with all operations of the fur trade being centralized in the Red River. Individual family units were deliberately encouraged and marriages became more rigidly controlled. No longer were servants (labourers) or officers allowed to intermarry with Indian women but, rather, only with Half-breed women as per directive by a Company official in 1811:

As the Colony is at length set on foot & there is a prospect of civilization diffusing itself among Us in a few years I would not advise you for the sake of the rising Generation to consent to either Officers or Men contracting matrimonial connections unless with the Daughters of Englishmen & then only with the previous concurrence of the Superintendent (HBCA, B239/b/82,f.9d).

Both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches became an integral part of the colonial structure. Church-sanctioned marriages guaranteed the formalization of individual families as the basic unit needed for the reproduction of labour within the internal labour market and, as well, to formalized individual family units of production that operated out of the labour pool. Native women outside of the peasantry became further subjugated in dependent relationships to men and further alienated from mutuality as the individual family increasingly became the basic unit of the developing class society. As well, more clearly demarcated class divisions among Indian peasantry women, Half-breed working class women, and petty bourgeois Half-breed women developed.

The Half-breed surplus labour pool established in the Red River provided the seasonal wage labourers needed to run the transportation boats (voyageurs) throughout the infrastructure, the seasonal and annual labourers to work around different posts within the interior and, as well, the plains buffalo hunters needed to produce surplus food (pemican) for distribution throughout the post infrastructure.[5] As with other forms of labour coming out of the Red River, the Metis buffalo hunters were well organized around individual family units of production. In all cases, it was the women who did the support work within these units. If they were attached to different posts throughout the interior, then their labour also went towards the support of their respective posts. For those women situated in the Red River, labour went into the small plots of land the families were allowed to squat on

as a means of supplementing their meagre wages. The buffalo hunt Half-breed women and Indian women, who were detached through marriage from their communal background, did the support work of stripping the buffalo carcass and preparing the pemican for trade.

After 1821, the fur trade moved in a more systematic manner up the McKenzie River into what is now the Northwest Territories. The same patterns of conquering and quasi-feudal relations of production developed one hundred and fifty years previously were again implemented. Slowly, Dene women saw their egalitarian society and relations of production transformed into a class society. The formation of individual family units slowly came into being as the development of class society proceeded.

The church and Christianization was not imposed upon the Indian population until around the 1840's. It was with Christianity that the intellectual conquering of the northern Indian finally took hold. As merchant capital became more an agent of industrial capital, its profits began to decrease and it was necessary to increase exploitation of the Indian population in the production of fur. Religion and the Church were then used as a means of further facilitating and controlling the Indian peasantry in the interests of a declining merchant capital. As well, the Church functioned on behalf of industrial capital by extending its political sovereignty over Rupert's Land. Within the Indian peasantry, individual units of production had to be further exploited in the quest for profits and market. The dependent position of women was worsened, as was their exploitation within these units of production in a system whose productive mechanisms were even more 'underdeveloped.' In short, the Church helped to define intellectually and to legitimate the existence of individual units of production within the Indian

population.

Within the central operations of the Red River, the Company intentionally situated and developed a native or Half-breed petty bourgeoisie in conjunction with the Selkirk Settlers and Colonial administrative officers of the Company. The Half-breed petty bourgeoisie became commercially active by being contracted out to certain enterprises that the Company considered to be too costly to manage themselves. They were established in such enterprises as transportation, fur trading and buffalo trading, with the Company determining the price of transportation contracts and the only market for the individual traders. What emerged through this colonial economy was the foreign exploitation of both a national petty bourgeoisie, small working class and a large peasantry. It was the petty bourgeoisie and working class that eventually came to see that their national oppression resulted from class exploitation by foreign elements.

In the 1840's the Metis petty bourgeoisie engaged in political and economic struggle against the monopoly of the fur trade. Their ultimate class intent was to displace the Hudson's Bay Company and to become, themselves, the bourgeois merchant capitalists. In 1849, an armed insurrection occurred against the Company's colonial rule. The response of the British was co-optive reprisals. Concessions were made but, at the same time, British troops were brought in to maintain law and order. What looked on the surface to be concessions actually amounted to nothing more than a deflection of the Metis class interests. Regardless of how the British responded, they still perceived it as a thrust against their class interests. Although this class confrontation was put down, it was an ongoing struggle against British colonialism and Imperialism that again emerged in 1869-70.

A parallel situation for petty bourgeois native women emerged in 1850 following the anti-colonial outbreak of 1849. It had to do with the social status and relations of petty bourgeois Half-breed women within the then colonialism of the Fur trade. A particular Half-breed woman who was the daughter of a British officer and a Half-breed woman, and who was the wife of the Governor of Assiniboia, became involved in a scandal. She was reputed to have had an affair with an officer of the British occupation forces. As she was a part of the colonial elite of native women in the Red River, her reputed actions elicited a reaction from the resident European ruling class. Her alleged immorality ultimately resulted in Assiniboia becoming racially/nationally divided between the European ruling elites and the native population.

European women at that time were slowly displacing Half-breed women within the elite enclaves of colonial Red River society. The actions of the wife of the Governor of Assiniboia were seen as unbecoming to a woman of such class position. Regardless of whether or not it occurred, the political reality was that native elite women were excluded from access to ruling circles through dependent relationships with European men in much the same manner as the Half-breed commercial petty bourgeoisie was prevented from having access to bourgeois capital. The ruling European class of the Red River was becoming a part of the new colonialism and imperialism of the British Empire and Half-breed women were no longer seen as being of any 'value' as companions. As industrial capital continued to displace merchant capital within the world system, the British ruling elites in Red River, although still administrators of merchant capital in the fur trade, had their profits from the trade invested in railroad and bank shares in Britain. Their allegiances were with the new rising industrial order and, accordingly,

alliances with European women were seen as being more appropriate to their class interests.

The anti-colonial struggle again emerged in 1869-70 under the leadership of Riel. In spite of what has been written by bourgeois historians concerning the events of 1869-70, Riel's main task was to establish bourgeois responsible government and to lead the people from under the historic yoke of colonial rule. His strategy was to gain access to capital through the establishment of a native liberal democratic state and a negotiated political relationship with the rest of Canada. His belief was that the oppression of the native population was the result of the colonial exploitation by mercantile capitalism. By acquiring access to capital on their own, the Metis could, he thought, establish new relations of production that would liberate the people from colonial oppression. This strategy was undermined and smashed by both London and Ottawa.

What this meant to native women was that whatever dependency relationships were established throughout exploitation by merchant capital, colonial relations and class formations were perpetuated within the developing Canadian nation-state. In the north, London's strategy was that the fur trade would continue under ever more backward and exploitative merchant capital. The relationship of Indian women to the means of production, also ever more backward, was perpetuated in an ever more exploitative manner. With very few internal changes, conditions remained the same until after the Second World War. It is then that profound changes started to occur.

Conclusion

With the conquering of communal egalitarian society came the

destruction of Indian women's egalitarian and mutual relationship with men. In its place was created a class society and the individual family as the basic unit of production within that society. As Indian women were transformed into what I suggest is an exploited peasantry, the family unit became the basis of their exploitation. The labour of Indian women, no longer existing in mutuality with men, became exploitable as support work either in relationship with Indian men or with European men.

The colonial relations that were imposed upon Indian women placed them in a position of being sexually exploited by European men. This sexual exploitation occurred with women being used by the Europeans to first conquer and then to develop trade relations with the Indian population. Early in the fur trade, Indian women were used as created class and racial differences within the Indian population, but in particular, within the population of Indian women as they were forced to develop dependent relationships with European men.

As a source of labour, Indian women were more or less always exploited as support labour. As merchant capital became more 'backward' in relation to the development of industrial capital, the units of production and relations of production in which they then found themselves also became more backward and heavily exploited.

With the influx of imperialism and the development of the market place after the Second World War, the relations of production (instituted during the fur trade) broke down. The historic colonial agents were correspondingly usurped by the Canadian state, the new agent of imperialism.

In the north today, the struggles are many. An anti-colonial struggle continues but is now directed against the Canadian state. At

the basis of all the struggles of class oppression and exploitation is the need of both women and men for jobs. But because of imperialism, the focus on capital intensive projects, resource extraction and the growing presence of the marketplace, the population is being thrown into a labour market that cannot be dealt with. 'Back to the land' projects and mentality cannot overcome these problems, as the labour power of the northern native is now in need of wage labour.

In the most general of solutions there must be developed a relationship between the native and the greater white working class. It is in this relationship, with the working class echoing the struggles of the native, that the solutions through struggle will emerge. In the same sense native women and white women must come together and work out a strategy, a class struggle strategy that comes to terms with the roots and commonality of their oppression. To focus only on the reform of the Indian Act is, obviously, to focus only on the tip of the iceberg.

NOTES

- [1] In the case of the plantation economies of the Caribbean it was necessary that the Indian population, since they were not willing to succumb to slavery, be exterminated in order that the slave mode of production could be established.
- [2] See also my soon to be published paper (fall of 1983?) in Studies in Political Economy, entitled "The Indians, Metis and the Fur Trade; Class, Colonialism and Sexism in the Transition from Communism to Capitalism."
- [3] Although this was written one hundred years after the conquest, the exercising of autonomy over birth control by women still existed. This was partly because the Indians were still responsible for their own social reproduction of labour and maintained some internal autonomous, i.e. egalitarian, relations. It is not until much later, (i.e. one hundred years) that Indian individual family formations as units of production came under greater control, by

capital through christianization that attempts would have been made to do away with the autonomy of women over abortion.

- [4] Although the relation between Indian and Trader was an instance of the penetration of capitalism, there were certain similarities to the feudal mode of production: the psychological aspect of colonial dependency and of being passive to exploitation at every turn. Certain gratis services were offered at the posts (eg. brandy) that served to enforce the developing servitude and, in return, Indians were expected to undertake certain donated duties and support work in recognition and acceptance of the 'new order of things.' This free labour also functioned as a form of tithe in recognition of the new owners of the land.
- [5] The production of surplus food from the buffalo had to be effective and complete. The plains Indians were still primitive-communist and more or less independent and, as such, would not produce the surplus required as a source of labour. It would have been necessary that they be conquered in a manner beyond economic domination, i.e. military. At that time, this was not feasible. Instead, an alternate source of labour was introduced. It was necessary that the disciplined labour that was needed come from within capitalism and so it did, with the Metis buffalo hunters.

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