

Cultural Genocide in Canada:  
Indian Residential Schools Obliterating a Culture

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There have been many groups historically and currently that have suffered the vices of more powerful and dominate groups. Often entire groups are destroyed or brought to near ruin at the expense of another group and its own egotistic mission. These undertakings can systematically destroy traditions, values, languages, and other elements, distinguishing one group from another. This is often considered Cultural Genocide. Scholars have argued that the Indian Residential School system in Canada is guilty of genocide to aboriginal culture. Supposing this claim to be relevant, arguments can be made to assert that residential schools were tools for cultural genocide. Indian Residential Schools in Canada were established for the intentional purpose of cultural genocide, and this has been denied by Canada for its own personal gain.

### **Literary Review**

When considering sociological issues as they relate to social inequality or injustices in Canadian society, one can find a comprehensive text illustrating social inequalities by Edward Grabb. His book, Theories of Inequality, addresses social inequalities in Canada and applies them to modern sociological theory. Grabb utilizes the works of classical theorists such as, Marx, Weber and Durkheim and applies their frameworks to current issues. Upon examining his work, this writer is particularly interested in exploitation of minority groups at the hands of a powerful and governing group. The relationship between Canada's aboriginal population and citizens of European decent as it relates to power relations became a center of focus. Of particular interest is Karl Marx's theory of superstructure as it relates to Indian Residential Schools in Canada, as mentioned by Grabb.

With further research on the issue of residential schools a book by Roland Chrisjohn, Sherri Young and Michael Maraun, The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada, was found to be ideal in advancing an understanding of the schools. This book exemplifies power relations and exploitations experienced by aboriginal peoples by European settlers. Reviewing the book reinforced the idea that aboriginal residential schools are tools used for the cultural genocide of the aboriginal population. This publication provides direct situations in which the theoretical ideas portrayed by Grabb can be applied.

### **Indian Residential School in Canada**

The origins of the residential school system grew largely from various religious organizations. The Federal Government became involved in the school system in 1874 and continued its involvement until the 1980's, to meet its obligation specified in the *Indian Act*. The government was responsible for providing schooling for aboriginal people, thereby, assisting their integration into Canadian society. The burden of educating aboriginal children was largely contracted out to the Catholic and Anglican churches.

The term "residential schools" commonly refers to a range of institutions, including: industrial schools, boarding schools, student residences, and residential schools. These institutions were located in every province and territory, except for New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. An estimated number of one hundred thousand native children attended these schools. First Nations children were removed, by law, from their homes and families and forced to attend these schools. Not all children were institutionalized for

a full twelve years. It was an unavoidable part of the “Indian experience” (Chrisjohn, Young, Mauran, 1997, p. 239). Today, there are many first hand accounts of the abuses students suffered through the actions of church officials. Conditions of residential school are often depicted in a negative light. Discipline would involve physical abuse and withholding food. Children were frequently beaten for speaking their native language, or for associating with students of the opposite sex. Education materials were often inferior, with inadequate health and living facilities, and nutrition standards were neglected. Sexual abuse is commonly claimed by survivors of residential schools.

Indian residential schools must be considered with the backdrop of a world where children were removed from home and family for extended periods of time, placed under penalty of law, and maintained, often at minimal levels of subsistence, with no possibility to rectify the situation (Chrisjohn et al, 1997, p. 253).

### **Genocide in Accordance with the Genocide Convention**

According to the General Assembly of the United Nations, in its motion in 1946, genocide is a crime under international law. It opposes the spirit and aims of the United Nations and is condemned by the civilized world. They recognize that during all periods of history, genocide has caused great losses on humankind (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1951). The Genocide Convention established the means by which genocide can be committed; with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, an ethnic, racial or religious group. Of the five ways in which genocide can be committed, in accordance to the Convention, four are relevant to Indian Residential Schools. Article II of the Convention, specifies that: (a) killing members of a group, (b) causing bodily or mental harm to members of the group, (c) deliberately inflicting on the

group conditions of the life calculated to bring about physical destruction in whole or in part, and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group, all constitute genocide (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1951). It is hard to argue that Indian Residential Schools were not tools for cultural genocide when each of the above was utilized in the schools. The following argument will continue to assert that Indian Residential Schools committed cultural genocide on the aboriginal population in Canada.

### **Forced Assimilation -- Genocide**

Residential schools were a means in which to bring about the advantages of Christian civilization to the aboriginal population. In other words, the schools were formed to assimilate aboriginals into Eurocanadian society and culture. The difference between genocide and assimilation is frequently indistinguishable when considering the consequences of the initiatives rather than the objectives (Fleuras & Elliott, 2002, p. 11). Assimilation is genocide (Chrisjohn, Young, Maraun, 1997, p. 43). The Convention includes an implied statement prohibiting cultural genocide (destruction of the specific characteristics of a group). Permitting forcible assimilation seems to be in conflict with Article II (b). How does forcible assimilation occur without causing serious bodily or mental harm? Chrisjohn et al., answer this question:

“We consider forcing the members of a group to abandon their form of life, to be, inflicting serious harm on members of a group, whether or not the forcing is accomplished by starvation, beating, threats, or other physical or psychological means...” (1997, p. 44).

Forced assimilation was preformed in the establishment of residential schools through forcibly removing aboriginal children from their families. According to Article II (e) of the Genocide Convention, removing children from a group represents genocidal action. The Royal Commission by the Anglican Church of Canada describes assimilation. It says that,

“Assimilation, like medicine, might be intrusive and unpleasant, might even hurt a great deal, but in the long run it was for the people’s good” (1994, p.4).

The church and state wanted to civilize and christianize aboriginals to fit them into the lower rank of the new economic order (Titely, 1994, p.55). Titely argues that residential schools were deliberately located away from reserves so that parental influences would be minimal (1994, p. 55). The destruction of children’s links to their ancestral culture and their assimilation into the dominant society (Miller, 1990, p. 396) were clearly the main objectives of residential schools. To educate and colonize people against their will is forced assimilation. To obliterate a group’s way of life as is the reality of residential schools and can be referred to as forced assimilation, therefore, it can also be confirmed as cultural genocide by the Genocide Convention.

### **Awareness of the Outcomes**

Creators of the residential school system in Canada knew what the outcomes that such institutions would have on the aboriginal population. Residential schools were not a unique phenomenon. This tactic has a long history of use before being applied to the aboriginals in Canada. They had already been found to be successful in bringing about particular results. Residential schools followed a time-tested method of obliterating

indigenous people's cultures (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p.4). The English had been using education as a tool for colonization for years prior to the implementation of residential schools in Canada. The first to suffer from the domineering ambitions of the English were the indigenous Celtic tribes, the Welsh, Irish and Scots (Morton, 1939, p.255). Religious education was imposed on them, especially on their children, that focused on suppressing native languages and traditional practices. The destruction of these tribal societies is a history exceptionally successful in being suppressed (Morton, 1939, p. 265). Many of the descendents of the Scots, who were shot, starved, and beaten out of their land, have no idea why there are so many Scots living today in Canada (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 64). Fleuras and Elliott argue that, genocide begins with the exploitation of differences between groups (2002, p. 10). The privileged stop at nothing to maintain power, achieve advantage, and secure political hold up (Ignatieff, 1995, cited in Fleuras & Elliott, 2002, p.10). Considering that residential schools had been used historically, it is safe to say that the purpose of these institutions was intentional -- cultural genocide of aboriginal people in Canada.

### **Canada: Blissfully Unconscious Under Its Superstructure**

Canada has continued to deny that the purpose of residential schools was to eliminate aboriginal culture by means of genocide. The Standard Account is a popular and widely accepted belief that neatly disposes all problems associated with Indian residential schools (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 2). The Standard Account is designed to manage how people are to interpret the abuse that occurred in the schools. It aims to dictate such things as who should be held responsible, consequences, and actions to be taken (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 28). False assertions of the past are the basis of the

Standard Account; genocide is ignored, racism and oppression are explained away, and motives are elevated (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 77). Chrisjohn et al. believe that the Standard Account leaves out vital information. It moves Canadians in a direction away from clarity and understanding toward blissful ignorance and allows them to continue their oppression (1997, p. 62). The Standard Account focuses attention away from the true nature of residential schools, and denies the willing participation in cultural genocide.

The government of Canada has been excellent in obscuring the truth from its citizens about Indian residential schools. “Moralistic camouflage” of the true reason for Indian residential schools, has served, to both isolate historically the aims and achievements of the schools, and to contribute to systematic misunderstanding (Chrisjohn, 1997, p. 62). The government and all other institutions: education, law, health have created an unconscious society. The Canadian government was tactful in executing and concealing the reality of residential schools from the general population. The participation in genocide was assured by providing some members of society with assignments they could interpret as benefiting their victims, like missionaries and educators. When it comes to providing details of individual’s experiences in the residential schools, or drawing generalizations about the form and function of the situation, there is also official silence. The churches and government have produced no histories, incident reports, legal opinions, psychologies, or sociological frameworks surrounding the schools. There is uniform inattention to these details (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 27). At the time of residential school operations, the Canadian government portrayed to society a picture of a compassionate interference with backward, “ungrateful sub-humans, creatures who could no more own property than could bears or squirrels” (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 54), thus



insulating the bulk of the population from any thought of aboriginal history, rights or grievances. Cultural obliteration does not require “demons in human shape” to make it work; Eurocanadians’ obedience to a “pervasive, but unstated ideology” is enough to assure their participation in an assortment of ways and levels (Chrisjohn, 1997, p. 54). Christopher Simpson explains the institutionalization of thought in society,

“...it is the destruction inherent in any system of order, the institutionalized brutality whose existence is denied by the cheerleaders of the status quo at the very moment they feed its appetite for blood...not necessarily an evil conspiracy of insiders; it’s a structural dilemma that generates itself more or less consistently from place to place and from generation to generation” (1995, p. 286).

This statement by Simpson compliments the idea of Agency as illustrated by McMullin. Agency is a term to explain social life, in which actors resist being like puppets being maneuvered and controlled by social structures (McMullin, 2004, p. 106). Agency involves issues relating it to the purposive ness, or intentionality of process, its human accountability and unintended consequences (Giddens 1979, cited in McMullin, 2004, p. 107). Superstructure according to Karl Marx, is a set of ideas or beliefs that govern and guide the lives of people. The state and church are major components of superstructure (Marx, 1867, cited in Grabb, 2002, p. 29-30). Media and education are superstructures by which people learn ideas and acquire information. Marx believes that “dominant ideas in any historical epoch are the ideas that the dominant class in the epoch generates” (Marx & Engels, 1846, cited in Grabb, 2002, p. 31). These superstructures teach people how to think and discourage challenging authority. Therefore it is safe to say that those

who could lose the most admitting responsibility to cultural genocide also have the influence to manipulate the thought of the public through superstructure.

### **Resource Mobilization Theory**

Resource Mobilization Theory argues that ethnic minorities will unite to lay claim to rightful entitlement. Collective action is taken to minimize state interference into minority affairs (Fleuras & Elliott, 2003, p. 94). The Canadian government continues to deny cultural genocide as a result of Indian residential schools for many reasons. To admit to the wrongs they have done to aboriginals would constitute many negative consequences. The first, would be the loss of maintaining a particular international image. Canadians maintain “a particular image of themselves to themselves and it was not one of being thieves, liars and oppressors” (Chrisjohn, 1997, p. 54). Genocide accurately describes Canadian past and present policies concerning aboriginal people (Churchill, 1994, p. 94). The second consequence of admittance of cultural genocide is financial ramifications. Actions were taken to cover-up what was done to aboriginals in Indian residential schools, to avoid having to compensate, in the future, those whose property was stolen (Chrisjohn et al., 1997, p. 56). Officials eliminated evidence linking specific genocidal action taken against aboriginals through legal, political, economic and social life that conceived and implemented genocide (Chrisjohn, et al., 1997, p. 56). For Canada to admit to cultural genocide may generate aboriginal action as predicted by the Resource Mobilization Theory against Canada. The aboriginal population may seek compensation for the hardships suffered as a result of Indian residential schools.

Therefore, it is clear why Canada continues to deny the intended purpose of residential schools.

As a descendent of First Nations people it is of particular interest to this writer that the inhumanities committed against this group be acknowledged. In a just society, the wrongdoings would have been dealt with at the time of their commission. Instead, the truth was denied all together. Perhaps Resource Mobilization Theory is a possibility in seeking justification for those ancestors that were subjected to live in residential schools.

It is clear that Canada has reason to deny its participation in cultural genocide through Indian residential schools for its own selfish gains. Residential schools were established for the obliteration of aboriginal culture. According to the Genocide Convention, the schools fit four of the five categories that constitute genocide. Forcing a group to assimilate into a dominate culture results in cultural genocide. Residential schools were not a new concept when implemented in Canada, and Eurocanadians were well aware of the outcomes of such institutions. Canada even utilizes the power of structural influence to dictate to citizens what to think and believe about residential school. The reason for denial of cultural genocide is to avoid a negative reputation and financial ramifications. It is strongly believed that admittance may strike a movement described as Resource Mobilization Theory. With all the arguments in proving that Indian residential schools were cause for cultural genocide, it is clear that Canada does have reason to deny their involvement or implementation of such institutions.

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