

Review of Decolonizing Employment in American Indian Culture and Research Journal. 2016. 40:4 P. 14-146. By David Newhouse, Trent University.

Decolonizing Employment: Aboriginal Inclusion in Canada's Labour Market. By Shauna MacKinnon. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015. 224 pages. \$31.95 paper; \$70.00 electronic.

MacKinnon's book *Decolonizing Employment* analyzes the impact of 1990s Canadian neoliberal economic policies upon aboriginal participation in the labor market. Based on case studies of aboriginal labor market development programs in Manitoba, she concludes that an approach that focuses exclusively on training is unlikely to produce any improvement. What is needed, she argues, based upon the evidence of her case studies, is a broader approach, which, since it mixes training with cultural reclamation and resurgence activities, she labels a decolonizing pedagogical approach.

In the 1980s I was a public servant in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in Canada. My task was to modernize the Indian housing policy through the creation of an Indian on-reserve market. I learned firsthand the complexity of such an undertaking and argued that this initiative would take at least a generation, as it involved massive social change and the development of market institutions. I argued that market-based approaches required concomitant efforts to improve the ability of indigenous peoples to participate more effectively in the labor market. At the time, I reasoned that increasing participation rates required improving individual skill levels so that one could obtain a better job and hence improve both security and level of income, thus enabling sufficient income to pay for housing. Then, as a public servant with a business education background engaged in the development of Indian housing policy, I would have benefited from MacKinnon's excellent and insightful book; indeed, I would have advocated for a broader approach to labor market development along the lines she has found to be useful. At the time, however, a decolonizing pedagogical approach was not conceived of.

The book is in two parts: the first is a two-chapter analysis of neoliberal labor market policy; the second is a five-chapter study of its effects and impact upon the Aboriginal population of Manitoba. At the center of this second part is an analysis of labor development programs implemented by aboriginal organizations. The book concludes with a "lessons learned" section intended to serve as guide for future labor market policy-makers. The writing is clear; the narrative style is highly appropriate for what could have been a dry, technical tome; and it is enjoyable to read. Her analysis is comprehensive, coherent, and sharp. She includes a chapter dedicated to aboriginal voices.

Because aboriginal peoples continue to have a weak attachment to the labor market, she questions policies which posit that low participation by individuals is a product of a lack or low levels of skills and therefore focus their interventions exclusively on individual training. Recent research indicates that low levels of participation are explained by a variety of factors: colonialism, discrimination, prejudice, and social exclusion, among others. Her analysis of labor market policy is clear and readable while demonstrating insight into its underlying assumptions and how these assumptions prevent it from addressing the central questions about aboriginal labor market participation. Nowhere in the analysis undertaken by policy makers is there a recognition of colonialism and its impact upon aboriginal peoples. Colonialism simply is not a factor—or if it was thought about, it has happened in the past and is not relevant to the contemporary situation.

The heart of the book is the analysis of labor market intervention programs in Manitoba and the aboriginal programs that developed in response to government

policy. It starts with an analysis of the evolving policy environment in Manitoba as policy-makers grapple with the issue of stubbornly high levels of aboriginal unemployment and the challenges facing aboriginal leaders who argue for a broader approach MacKinnon describes as “decolonizing.” She characterizes these approaches as (1) short-term neoliberal training programs focused exclusively on improving the individual skills to meet immediate market need; (2) long-term programs not linked directly to immediate need but that provide degrees or certificates designed to improve the quality of participation; and (3) long-term programs that attempt to link supply and demand through targeted employment and training efforts and an economic development approach.

Her analysis demonstrates the wrongheadedness and folly of a narrow, short-term, training-exclusive approach. While supply-side training programs and demand-side measures such as employment equity measures are an important element in improving labor market participation, they are not sufficient in and of themselves. What is more important is the development of larger efforts that integrate demand- and supply-side interventions coupled with what MacKinnon calls “decolonizing pedagogies.” These are educational measures that focus on healing from the effects of colonization: “For Aboriginal people who have been intentionally taught to believe that being Aboriginal is to be “inferior” the reclaiming of cultures through a process of decolonization is not a frivolous option, but rather a requisite to health, social well-being, and inclusion, and ultimately, improved economic outcomes” (72). It is also important that indigenous labor-force participation should also occur in ways that contribute to overall quality-of-life goals that aboriginal people are pursuing.

As I was reading, I was reminded of an earlier work on indigenous labor: *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia 1858–1930* (1998). Rolf Knight claims that Indians in British Columbia (with some additional sparse data on other groups across the country) had been involved in local economies as wage laborers for more than a century and that such participation was not inconsistent with traditional Indian and Metis identities. He argues that Indian participation in the labor market was slowly improving, but that it was the arrival of the Great Depression in the 1930s that was the real culprit: “last in, first out” appears to have been the operative method. As the labor market improved, indigenous participation did not: “first out” did not result in “first in,” but rather “last in.” The decline is real, regardless of its reasons. The aboriginal histories written since Knight’s 1998 book have uncovered governmental efforts aimed at exclusion that were not known at the time. Subsequent research by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) demonstrate devastating effects by government policy and action upon indigenous lands, waters, identities, and cultures. The argument for decolonizing pedagogy education measures is made stronger, as these studies lend support for MacKinnon’s main conclusions.

MacKinnon’s contribution to the dialogue on indigenous labor is to clearly demonstrate the limits of the adoption of a neoliberal approach to improving the participation of indigenous people in the labor market. Sustained improvement will require a broad approach: one that couples training and education along with cultural reclamation programs that are directed at healing the many effects of what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls “cultural genocide.” MacKinnon’s findings support the recommendation by the Indian Tribes of Manitoba’s 1971 position paper, *Whabung: Our Tomorrows*, which called for a similar broad approach to the question of how to improve Indian labor market participation. Had MacKinnon’s book been available to me in the 1980s, it would have made my policy-development task more complex, but ultimately would have led to better public policy.