
The ‘Eskimo Problem’: Legitimizing Canadian Arctic Administration, 1960-1975¹

Pamela Stern
(Simon Fraser University, Canada)
pstern@sfu.ca

Contemporary anthropologists do not often acknowledge our debt to Max Weber. Yet, in the same ways that the insights of Marx and Freud are woven into the fabric of contemporary social thought, Weber’s descriptions of the modern state are integral to our understandings of the modern world. His conceptions of the state have so permeated anthropologists’ schemas of modernity that they have become part of our taken-for-granted understandings of the way the world works. As an anthropologist driven to understand the distinct, often local, situations through which individuals make their relationships to the Canadian state, I am a bit embarrassed to realize that I have treated the state as given. It is in this context that I welcome the opportunity to reflect on Weber’s work on the legitimizing practices of the state via the contributions in the book edited by Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* (hereafter, *Legitimacy*).

While the idea of legitimacy is present in my ethnographic work, the term is not. Instead, in my work on governance and citizenship in Canada, I examined the hegemony of Eurocanadian bureaucratic sensibilities for Inuit (Stern 2003; 2005), the persistence of settler colonialism within progressive urban planning (Stern 2017), and the moral economy of proposal making (Stern and Hall 2015). Legitimacy in the Weberian sense of the state’s authority to rule, nonetheless, underpins those analyses, and the ethnographic evidence provided by the contributors to *Legitimacy* has analogies in my ethnography. For example, Peter Hall and I found that municipal officials in the former silver mining town of Cobalt, Ontario learned to use neoliberal era grants for tourism development to manage shortfalls in general operating funds. Officials of the local state legitimately (and legally) employed moneys awarded to create mining heritage tourism venues to repair and replace local infrastructure such as sidewalks, streetlamps, and the roof of the town hall by recognizing these expenditures as contributing to heritage tourism development. Tourists, when (if) they came, would need well-built sidewalks, the new streetlamps were in a vintage style and the town hall was a heritage building from the early mining era. The public spending practices also were regarded as legitimate in another way. Though Cobalters are proud of their predecessors’ contributions to Canadian mining history, we found many of them skeptical of mining heritage tourism as a development strategy. Yet, because the heritage development funds were spent in ways that

¹ My research on the history of Inuit ethnography in Canada was funded by a bridging grant from Simon Fraser University and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada ((#435-2017-0708). Thank you to Peter V. Hall for vigorously debating ideas and to Sandy Ervin for sharing his story of Arctic fieldwork. Any errors and omissions are mine.

directly benefitted residents as well as potential tourists, the efforts to promote heritage tourism remained legitimate in the eyes of those residents.

I am also provoked to think about legitimacy in the context of my current research documenting the recruitment of ethnographers to the governmental project of administering Canadian Inuit lands and communities in the 1960s and 1970s. Before the 1960s, most Inuit in Canada lived in self-organized and largely self-governing camps. Although Canada has claimed sovereignty over the arctic islands since 1880, it paid little attention to those lands or the people — Inuit — who lived there until after the Second World War. Up till that time, administration of Inuit was left largely to the Hudson's Bay Company and the Catholic and Anglican churches, with the occasional dog sled patrol by a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Administration of Inuit lands and communities changed in 1953 when the government of Liberal prime minister Louis St. Laurent reorganized cabinet ministries to create the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources (DNANR). The new department's primary purpose was to advance development of mineral resources on federal (in other words, outside of the provinces) lands of the Yukon and Northwest Territories. The federal state's relationship with Inuit was confined to one paragraph in the prime minister's speech to Parliament initiating the new department, yet, these Canadians were very quickly understood to lie within the new department's mandate 'to develop knowledge of the problems in the north and the means for dealing with them through scientific investigations and technological research' (St. Laurent 1953). It fell to the newly established Northern Co-ordination and Research Centre (NCRC) of the DNANR to make the problem of Inuit (as well as the problems posed by Inuit) legible to the government so that they might be addressed.

A former northern research officer for NCRC assessed that the government swung from a near total lack of concern for Inuit to over-concern (Lotz 1969: 56). My research suggests that the government officials had concerns beyond that of Inuit welfare. It was the case, however, that almost overnight Canada created permanent settlements for Inuit complete with social housing and other benefits of Canadian civilization all under the control of Eurocanadian settlement managers. Inuit were expected to conform to Canadian forms of citizenship consonant with the Keynesian state. These citizenship forms included nuclear family households with male wage earners, sobriety, thrift and other practices assumed to produce good health and security. When Inuit had difficulty complying, the NCRC employed anthropologists and geographers to provide the government with information it needed to solve what was referred to at the time as 'the Eskimo problem'. There was, of course, no single 'Eskimo problem' framed as an object upon which the problem-solving powers of the state could be legitimately exercised, but instead different definitions of 'the problem' were continuously contested within state bureaucracies (Stevenson 2012, Tester 2006).

The 'Eskimo problem' was most readily understood to refer to the questions of how to govern Inuit in ways that enabled them to take up their identities as Canadian citizens, a status officially-declared by the state. In the Cold War era of the 1960s, there was, of course, another meaning of the phrase. It was that the problems of Inuit — problems caused in large part by

Canadian administration — threatened the legitimacy of Canada’s military and extractive activities in the Arctic. The government found that in order ‘to “deal with” the populations living inconveniently in an area between and coveted by the [United States and the Soviet Union]’ it needed to know about the indigenous occupants (Graburn 2006: 247). In order to be seen as a state, Canada needed to see like a state (Scott 1998). Ironically, or perhaps by design, one result of the ethnographic research supported by the NCRC was that the ‘Eskimo problem’ ceased to be an obstacle to northern sovereignty, and instead provided an opportunity to demonstrate Canadian statecraft. Research initiated to make sense of a new and uncertain governing terrain, soon became justification to extend the state’s reach; provided, of course, that the research framed and investigated the ‘Eskimo problem’ within approved parameters. It is here where the strengths of ethnography to situate individual lives within their complex social context soon ran up against the limits of state actors’ abilities to accept more critical accounts.

The chapters by Nathalie Boucher and by Jerome and Kathryn Kruse in *Legitimacy* are especially relevant to thinking about where the Canadian state’s claims to govern legitimately Inuit lives and territories succeeded and where they failed, and where knowledge obtained through ethnography supported or contradicted state action. Kruse and Kruse (2019) observe that legitimacy to govern depends on public officials’ ability to maintain the trust of the governed. With respect to the governance of Inuit, government actions suggest that it was most concerned with maintaining the trust, not of Inuit, but of non-Indigenous Canadians who had no firsthand knowledge of Inuit or of living conditions in Arctic towns and villages. In closed door meetings officials discussed the ‘Eskimo problem’, while simultaneously presenting the Canadian public with a story of successful tutelage. The public was meant to trust in a benevolent government, a government that cared for its most vulnerable citizens. As one example, the DNANR produced a public information booklet entitled *The Changing Eskimos* in which it reported that Canadian Inuit were maintaining their hunting traditions while simultaneously enacting modern ways and attitudes. In the section on employment the booklet asserted:

‘Eskimos work in a variety of fields, skilled and unskilled. They work like other Canadians, for government departments, and on the DEW line. They are miners, carpenters, mechanics, tractor operators and oil drillers. An Eskimo manages the CBC radio station in Inuvik; an Eskimo girl edits an Eskimo-language magazine. Others work as interpreters, nursing assistants, secretaries and clerks’ (DNANR c.1965: 16).

While possibly true in the very narrowest sense, the facts reported to the public bore little relation to ethnographic data collected through the government’s own research programs. Boucher (2019) points out that anthropologically derived knowledge — even when it is part of the strategy government employs to legitimate its rule — may not compete with politically, morally, or traditionally framed ways of knowing. For my current project I have been interviewing former NCRC researchers, many of whom were eager, idealistic and inexpensive graduate students. Part of what I have been learning is about the subtle, and sometimes not so

subtle, ways the government acted to shape the students' reports to reflect the pre-determined conceptions of the 'Eskimo problem'.

Alexander Ervin was a 23-year old anthropology graduate student when he was hired by NCRC to examine the social conditions of Inuit in the Mackenzie Delta region. Ervin spent the summer and fall of 1966 in Inuvik and was stunned by the racist abuse that government and non-government authorities visited upon Inuit and other Indigenous peoples. Quite in contrast to the story told to the public, Ervin documented the processes and discourses among northern administrators that confined Indigenous residents to menial jobs and substandard housing. Most shocking was the treatment Inuit received from members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who would regularly come into the bar where Inuit were drinking and beat people with flashlights. In an interview, Ervin recounted a conversation with an elderly woman, a member of a group bush residents who had come into Inuvik to purchase supplies:

'I went to Kendall Island and spent a week with some people that were still living off the land in the old style... [Later] the three extended families came into town to buy supplies or sell furs... One of these sweet old ladies was having just one beer for the night, and the Mounties came in[to the bar]. And she said to me, "you know what we call them?" I said no, ... "*Amaqut*," which means wolves. So, they see the Mounties, rather than benefactors, as coming in and preying upon them. Oh man! The racial divide stuff was so fantastically extreme.' (interview, 2 April 2016)

While Ervin wrote about the differential treatment Indigenous and non-Indigenous drinkers and the racialized way that housing was assigned (Ervin 1968), he learned to self-censor, to omit references to government agents as the source of the 'Eskimo problem'. He described having to 'mute' his findings.

'There was a report on the beginning of Inuvik by Walter Boek and his wife. He was right there at the beginning, and he did a social impact, a real social impact and kinda made projections, and practically everything he said came true. And what happened was they didn't publish it ... And back when I had some controversies about stuff I was going put in my report, Moose Kerr who was the director [of the Mackenzie Delta Research Project], who nonetheless the very sympathetic to any kind of criticism of what was going on would tell me, "If you put that in we'd have to do what we had to do with the Boek and Boek report" which is to shelve it because it was too embarrassing. And being young and thinking that I was going to make myself a long time career in [applied anthropology] and that I was going to be a champion of the Native people blah, blah, blah, blah all that stuff young anthropologists think about, I figured ... well, I have to be patient and eventually when I get more credibility and build a career as an Arctic researcher then I can come out with stronger statements and so forth. There was kind of an implicit censorship.' (interview, 2 April 2016)

According to Clancy, the exclusion of Inuit from decision-making about their communities and their lands has meant that ‘the legitimacy of northern policy has often been problematic’ (1987: 92). Yet, what becomes clear from Ervin’s and others’ narratives, is that government was not concerned with its legitimacy in the eyes of Inuit. It was, nonetheless, essential that the federal government be presented to others as caring and benevolent in its dealings with Indigenous peoples. Despite the public claims that Inuit were becoming model Canadian citizens (Honigmann and Honigmann 1965), privately government officials saw Inuit as children (Paine 1977). The terrible social consequences of paternalism, of failing to involve Inuit in decisions about their lives, and especially of racism, were labeled unfortunate outcomes of the rapid change associated with modernization. In other words, the ‘Eskimo problem’ was not a failure of government, but a failure of Inuit to become fully modern (Irlbacher-Fox 2009).

What was the value of research sponsored by NCRC and its successor, the Northern Science Research Group? It was certainly not, as former NCRC northern research officer — Jim Lotz — asserted for the data collected in Inuvik, that it has ‘shown how research can serve the needs of the local peoples, and help them to identify and deal with their problems’ (1968: 293). The state did not, probably could not, recognize the absurdity of its project to get Inuit to adopt the attitudes and practices of working class Eurocanadians necessary for widespread mineral extraction in the North. Instead, it pursued a fairly limited research agenda aimed at describing Inuit social practices, an agenda that would provide cover to policymakers. The state needed an ‘Eskimo problem’ in order to exercise sovereignty over Inuit lives and territories. The social science legitimated Canadian interference in Inuit lives and communities, but it also legitimated decisions not to improve conditions or practices while research was underway.

References

- Boucher, N. 2019. Detachment and Commitment to Legitimacy: The Case of Viger Square in Montreal. In I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clancy, P. 1987. The Making of Eskimo Policy in Canada, 1952-62: The Life and Times of the Eskimo Affairs Committee. *Arctic*, 40 (3): 191-197.
- DNANR c.1965. *The Changing Eskimo*. Ottawa: Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources [Library and Archives Canada R11333, Vol 3, File 1].
- Ervin, A. 1968. *New Northern Townsmen in Inuvik*. Ottawa: Northern Science Research Group. Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.
- Graburn, N. H. H. 2006. Canadian Anthropology and the Cold War. In J. D. Harrison and R. Darnell (eds), *Historicizing Canadian Anthropology*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Honigmann, J. J. and I. Honigmann. 1965. How Baffin Island Eskimo Have Learned to Use Alcohol. *Social Forces*, 44 (1): 73-83.
- Irlbacher-Fox, S. 2009. *Finding Dahshaa: Self-Government, Social Suffering and Aboriginal Policy in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

-
- Krase, J. and Krase, K. 2019. Undermining Governmental Legitimacy at the Grass Roots: The Role of Inflated Expectations of Community Accountability. In I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lotz, J. 1968. Science Research and Northern Development. *Arctic*, 21 (4): 291-294.
- Lotz, J. 1969. The Future of the Eskimo. *Futures*, 1 (1): 54-65.
- Paine, R. 1977. The Nursery Game: Colonizer and Colonized in the Canadian Arctic. *Etudes/Inuit/Studies*, 1 (1): 5-32.
- Pardo, I. and Prato, G. B. 2019. *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- St. Laurent, L. (1953, Dec 8). Northern Affairs and National Resources. *Debates*. Canada, Parliament. House of Commons 22nd Parliament 1st Session. Retrieved from the Parliament of Canada website. Available at:
http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC2201_01
- Scott, J. C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Stern, P. 2003. Upside-Down and Backwards: Time Discipline in a Canadian Inuit Community. *Anthropologica*, 45 (1): 147-161.
- Stern, P. 2005. Wage Labor, Housing Policy and the Nucleation of Inuit Households in Holman, NWT Canada. *Arctic Anthropology*, 42 (2): 66-81.
- Stern, P. 2017. The Nature of Urban Heritage: The View from New Westminster, British Columbia. *Anthropologica*, 59 (2): 295-309.
- Stern, P. and Hall, P. V. 2015. *The Proposal Economy: Neoliberal Citizenship in 'Ontario's Most Historic Town'*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Stevenson, L. 2012. The Psychic Life of Biopolitics: Survival, Cooperation, and Inuit Community. *American Ethnologist*, 39 (2): 592-613.
- Tester, F. J. 2006. Iglu to Iglurjuaq. In P. Stern and L. Stevenson (eds), *Critical Inuit Studies*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Weber, M. 2009. Politics as Vocation. In H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.