Globalism, Primitive Accumulation and Nishnawbe-Aski Territory: The Strategic Denial of Place-Based Community

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My research focuses on changing contexts for the expression of territorial autonomy by First Nations in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation region of northern Ontario, Canada. The region encompasses almost two-thirds of modern Ontario, and while it is home to forty-five individual First Nation settlements, it is isolated, materially, from the transportation networks of the rest of the province and country. At the same time, Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory is also integrated into the province, the nation, other Indigenous territories, and internationally, through economic links, government programs that support certain services in the region, through enterprises and companies, and through the media. This region is at once isolated from and integrated into other organizations, structures, economic circuits, and cultural webs. Its integration into worldwide, national, and regional networks has had an important bearing on what both community and autonomy mean in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation region.

Taken together, isolation and linkages create a continuously changing context for the expression and local understanding of autonomy. Changes in this context during the past decade mirror those that are common elsewhere in the world, and constitute what analysts would refer to as aspects of economic globalization. These include the privatization of services (in this case, electricity), cuts to social spending, and privatization of the land base in order to make its resources available to enterprises that can access the investment capital to extract and process them. Since 1995 the Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory has been the focus of an unprecedented rush to develop resources in the wake of changes to Provincial legislation through the Lands for Life regime. The new access to these territories afforded by these changes has been especially attractive to the mining sector. Taken together, the changes create both new pressures to accommodate globalization and new opportunities for the region's First Nations to attempt to benefit from these changes. Most important to my research, economic globalization has opened new frontiers for conflict as enterprise presses into the region to extract resources. In these conflicts, other aspects of globalization are evident as well. In particular, environmental protection groups are also demonstrating interest in the region, especially in conserving the region's boreal forest and associated waterways. It is in this context that the region's territorial autonomy is being renewed and challenged.

The territorial autonomy that is the focus of my research has evolved out of earlier social and economic practices within the territory — practices through which the region's Indigenous populations engaged in complex and often power-imbalanced relationships with international and national fur trading companies, missionary societies, and government bodies. Within these relationships, Indigenous communities formed around the settlements associated with fur trading and missionary posts, while their own sphere of influence extended far beyond the boundaries of the settlement, incorporating a large territory. As both fur trade and missionary activity waned during the twentieth century, these settlements became sites for the expression of self-determination for Indigenous communities when the institutions associated with these settlements came under local control. This is most obviously true of institutions like schools, but Band administrations and elected local governments also took up and initiated new roles, such as economic and community development,

within the settlement and territory. These institutions identify, represent, and act on the interests of the First Nations communities in the region.

Inclusive of the physical space of these settlements, extensive and intensive use of the land base remains a dominant characteristic of the regional economy. The regional economy is mixed, a blended form in which each household income is made up of a combination of land-based resources (food, fuel, water, medicines, and materials for manufacture of household items) and cash, derived from wage work and state subsidies. The regional cash economy is dominated by service providers based in the industrial centres of Canada, primarily in Ontario but also in Manitoba and Quebec. The nature of the mixed economy is such that it has both localizing effects and extra local features. While land-based pursuits concentrate human energy and social and cultural meaning densely within a broad territory used by each community for harvesting and social and cultural activities, cash relationships also tend to draw the region into (largely uneven) ties with the "mainstream" economy.

My research proceeds from the understanding that both the development of settlements as sites for self-determination and the development of a mixed economy have afforded practical autonomy for the region's communities. That is, day-to-day life is defined by efforts to achieve highly localized social cohesion and coexistence within the region and with the rest of the province and country. Just as important, harvesting land-based resources produces the direct and immediate experience of being responsible for the stewardship or managed use of the land and its important resources. This practical autonomy, in turn, has created, and supports the reproduction of, highly localized forms of community, expressed in the cultural, moral, and ideological expressions of what community is and how it works from within such place-based communities.

The research I conducted was directed to understanding the status of the autonomy of place-based community under current globalizing conditions. My research found that a new flood of interest in the region has encouraged the rapid multiplication of different kinds of community at sometimes new scales, including the regional, national, transnational, and truly global. These include the regional government representing First Nations, international Indigenous solidarity organizations supporting the region's First Nations, a variety of environmental protection groups, and multinational and national mining companies. These different communities are all produced and reproduced simultaneously, and each scale interacts with and competes for legitimacy with others. However, my research found that current conditions tend to reinforce and even elevate the status of some of these forms of community over others. For example, environmentalist campaigns based on protecting parts of the territory from mining operations have been more successful in garnering resources to mount their own self-directed campaigns than have individual First Nation communities or their members who would be affected by the same mining development. Similarly, companies with interest in the region have been able to mobilize resources, sometimes internationally, for investigation and investment in the newly opened territory. Like the environmentalists, these companies represent kinds of community based on communication, mobility, and imagination. That is, like environmentalist campaigns, companies can create virtual communities based on assigning new meanings to places, representing them variously as an "unspoiled wilderness" or a source of new and untapped wealth. These types of community, based especially on controlling and having access to means of modern communication, take advantage of the capacity of individuals to choose to belong to any particular community, the new ways in which community can be delinked from place, and the new, modern communications technologies that most often facilitate these kinds of community making projects.

Conversely, the communities that have been of most interest in my research, those communities built through embedded and localized processes, have long maintained their autonomy through ties to

place, rather than by delinking from places. Similarly, these ties to place are simultaneously ties to a community of people explicitly conscious of their linkages on a day-to-day, continual, and immediate basis. The autonomy and capacity for self-determination that these communities have achieved have largely been based on such immediate experiences of "community building" and "land use." They are also based largely in the absence of competition for access to the land, or competition to tie community directly to place (that is, to define community). As I found in my research, these are conflicts over both access to the land itself and over the power to pose a legitimate meaning of the land's value as the basis of community.

The central conclusions of my research are that despite the apparent novelty of globalization, current trends at work owe a great deal to older forms of integration, especially those driven by colonial influence. In particular, understanding how such places were already integrated, and the manners in which these communities had achieved and negotiated their own hard-won forms of autonomy is crucial to understanding the challenges and conflicts posed today. These challenges, are, however, unique to the current moment, in that more so than in any earlier period of integration, the very basis of "community," as "place," is under renegotiation and re-imagination. Processes of change owed a great deal to the ways in which communications technologies and new forms of community (based on self-identification, choice, and ability to marshal communications technology) can be used by agents of globalization. In this, "place-based" communities might now find their claims of being a community and their claims to territory in competition with other claims. Further, this competition has profound impacts for communities that have sustained their autonomy through direct and immediate attachment to place. Globalization, hence, poses challenges to our understanding not just of what community is, but how it can be tied to place which may simultaneously be awarded many different meanings. My research concludes that the crucial challenge for understanding community under conditions of globalization is recognizing how people excluded from virtual community both sustain and re-embed community within place.
