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‘so much does one thing depend upon another here’: An examination of the bush and post economies of Canadian fur trade, c.1821-70

Harold Innis’ staple thesis, a subtle critique of extractive economies, was largely formulated from his seminal study of the fur trade in Canada (1930). More recently, historians and ethnohistorians have focused on the relationship of Indigenous peoples (i.e. Natives) to the fur trade. In contrast with the history of mercantilism elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere, the Canadian fur trade is often understood as a pleasant partnership between Indigenous peoples and European trading interests. The active engagement of Indigenous peoples with the fur trade, based on pre-existing knowledge and skills, along with a noncoercive, autonomous production system, has tended to support the view that very little disruptive social change occurred. Similarly, by this reasoning, the fur trade should not to be conflated with colonialism. As trade expanded spatially and deepened socially, a fur trade society developed. A hybrid economy emerged based upon two closely interconnected economic sectors: (1) domestic/subsistence (i.e., use value); and (2) commercial (exchange value). The commercial dimensions of Indigenous livelihoods included: local provisioning of posts (hunting and fishing), trapping fur bearers; production of dried buffalo meat (pemmican), a key input for the successful operations of trading companies; skilled and unskilled wage labour; and contracted cart and Yorkboat transport services. Both qualitative and quantitative data from the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives will be deployed to demonstrate some of the economic intricacies of a specialized system driven to produce furs and provisions in order to consume a wide variety of overseas goods. As a world class archive of the mercantile era, the HBC business records captured considerable details of life at the local (or micro scale). Correspondence and daily journals provide extensive narratives, but above all else, the largely under-appreciated accounting records provide solid insights into the commercial nexus between the bush and post. Similarly, the shift from self-sufficiency to an incremental commodification of life can be appreciated from this archival record. The erroneous view that the fur trade was primitive and haphazard tends to obscure the participation of Indigenous peoples in a commodity chain that supplied the London market. And in turn they were furnished with worldly goods (e.g., metal tools, cotton clothing and wool blankets, tobacco, tea, sugar, etc.). This paper will reconstruct the local post economies in order (1) to provide insights on the relationship between the production of fur in the bush and the trade post; and (2) situate post economies within HBC transportation networks. In so doing, the empirical deficiencies and conceptual fallacies of the partnership thesis will be revealed. As an unintended consequence, the economic history of the northern fur trade can uniquely inform processes concerning the judicial recognition of Indigenous livelihood rights, which in turn, relate to contemporary corporate decisions about the conduct of resource development projects.