

Westman charges that Widdowson and Howard “have provided the intellectual and political cover” for right-wing critiques of Aboriginal policy based on what they believe to be race, reflected in culture, which Westman properly points out is actually racism. Racism is not a biological construct but an ideological judgment about the inferiority of some more or less identifiable group of peoples without reference to their variable characteristics or historical experience. Whether acknowledged or not, such racism cannot help but colour purportedly scientific interpretations.

The work of Widdowson and Howard has not arisen in a vacuum. The contemporary Canadian press is full of similar denials of First Nations capacities to define their own destinies within the same modernity that affects Canadian society as a whole. Widdowson and Howard are particularly dismissive of postmodernism, which they take to be a four-letter word that they proceed to apply without nuance to those they criticize. As Westman properly notes, a scholarly demonstration that Boas was the first postmodernist would be interesting but complex, especially given that the term and the constellation of features to which it refers were not defined during Boas’ lifetime. My own scholarship has argued that Boas’ emphasis on accessing “the native point of view” through texts in Aboriginal languages recorded by their native speakers indeed foreshadowed the standpoint-based positions of contemporary social science; but he was also a scientist who sought empirical generalizations across the variety of cultures and worldviews. Cultural relativism was not a refusal of science but a mantra of tolerance, of understanding things in their own terms before judging them on the basis of universals postulated from one’s own culture of origin. This was then and is still good science.

As for Marxism and evolutionary theory, and even science itself, Widdowson and Howard do nothing to clarify the complexity of these labels. There are all kinds of Marxists and Marxism does not provide a seamless interpretation of the “Aboriginal industry,” if indeed such a thing exists. As for the evolutionists, those cited are not credible in contemporary anthropological theory. Rationalism and science are attributed exclusively to those supporting the authors’ own positions, and there the critique from intellectual history stops in its tracks. In contrast, Westman emphasizes the need for evidence-based research on such topics as race and racism, assimilation and the experience and standpoint of the observer.

One of the primary responsibilities of the scholar, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, is to clarify their relationship to the study. Westman makes much of the undeclared biases of both authors and reviewers. The astute reader will take these into account in reading the book and its critics. Absolute objectivity remains an unobtainable goal and an indispensable aspiration. All anthropologists no more agree than do all Native peoples. The discrediting in the courts of oral history and the traditional knowledge it transmits, for example, are based in self-interest. Undeclared self-interest may be seen as conflict of interest. Our responsibility is to

demonstrate the validity, reliability and policy utility of qualitative research based on long-term fieldwork, and often on collaborative research with particular Native communities and organizations.

What, then, would we really like to come out of the self-examination occasioned by Widdowson and Howard’s book? I believe that anthropologists are well situated to counter their claims because of our commitment to spending time in Native communities and learning about their standpoints. We too aspire to influence policy. Our most important potential contribution may well be to insist that policy requires understanding of and respect for Aboriginal points of view. Social justice requires that ordinary Canadians and politicians alike learn to stand, figuratively at least, in the other guy’s moccasins. Widdowson and Howard do not do this because they assume they already know the answers.

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## Response

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It is rather difficult to write a review of a book for which one has little esteem. My first thought on reading it was how did this manuscript ever pass through the rather rigorous review process of an academic press? I have had the privilege of being on the University of Toronto Press editorial board for over ten years and in my experience the external reviewers would have been so critical of this book that it would have made my work rather easy: the manuscript would not have passed. Why? Simply because there are so many errors of fact and history. This alone should have raised red flags for the reviewers for McGill/Queens Press.

It is not an intellectually rigorous book. It purports to talk about Indian affairs objectively but its total lack of objectivity is too apparent in the language and phrasing used, nearly always damning Indigenous peoples. It is from the very start intentionally disrespectful in that any other group of people, let’s say Jews, Chinese or Somalis are conventionally written with a capital first letter; not so Aboriginal or First Nations in this book. One could ask naively why, but of course it is obvious that those labels are in lower case to diminish their value, to insist on their generic quality, and most important of all to deny any legitimacy to any suggestion of autonomy or separateness within the Canadian political landscape. This is, after all, the objective of the 260-odd pages of a rather stultifying text: to denigrate, diminish and ultimately to suggest as ludicrous the idea that Aboriginal peoples in Canada should have social autonomy. One might think this is a peculiar time for this to happen; so many indigenous groups across the world have received recognition, not the least in a charter of the United Nations. Worldwide the advances have been tortuous but critical in the democratic project of nation-making.

Lloyd Barber, a former Indian Claims Commissioner in the 1970s and later president of the University of Regina once posed the rhetorical question, how can we as a nation expect justice for ourselves if we deny it to any sector of our society?; here he was referring to indigenous peoples. Lloyd Barber was not from one of the usually ascribed “liberal” disciplines, rather he had taught in the Department of Commerce, an area which prides itself for being practical, logical, non-ideological and so on, but once immersed in Aboriginal matter, he could not come to any other conclusion except that indigenous issues were *sui generis*, that is different from any other on the Canadian landscape.

Widdowson and Howard take as their point of departure that considering indigenous problems as *sui generis* is wrong-headed. The authors insist that there is nothing about Indigenous Peoples, neither historically nor socially, that differentiates them from other ethnic immigrant groups. Hence, neither are their problems—high incarceration rates, suicide rates, social malaise, high rates of poverty, low educational achievement, high diabetes rates et cetera—constituted in particular ways that differentiate them as worthy of special attention. In sum, structuring indigenous concerns (economic, social, cultural, religious) as originating from a colonial context (one that is deemed to continue to this day) is, for the authors, the problem. It does not seem to bother the authors that First Nations peoples are not immigrants, and that this is a significant starting point to understanding the difference between ethnics (i.e., all of us immigrants) and First Nations peoples (those who were here for millennia before us).

There is so much that is dangerously wrong in this book. As if it were not enough that at its heart the text is anti-democratic, it is also racist. The authors deny this accusation but they cannot dispel it. In a particularly offensive passage, they lay out an exceedingly crude 19th-century evolutionist framing of indigenous peoples. They characterize Aboriginal peoples as existing in a stone-age state of savagery. This is in contrast to Western civilized society, which is defined as such because it has a legal system, complex social groupings and

governing institutions. This is just one of many instances where the authors are faulted for their lack of facticity. First Nations have laws, complex legal and adjudication systems, as well as complex systems of governance. To deny their existence is not acceptable. Denial may have served the colonialists who did not understand and then later refused to understand what was before them, but that is no longer tenable. As researchers, social scientists and lawyers, we now know what and how so much of what is Native society was rendered invisible by power politics. Ignorance is never a defense in a court of law, nor is it in the court of social justice.

However even more offensive is the authors’ contention that First Nations have “undisciplined work habits,” “difficulties in developing abstract reasoning” and “animistic beliefs” among a list of ascribed social and innate faults. The first is an outright lie. I don’t suppose either author has ever been on a trapline or hunted moose or hunted migrating fowl in the Hudson Bay lowlands or fished 90lb. sturgeon in a northern lake. If they had, they would then understand what true discipline is. As for abstract reasoning, that is risible; it is well known that First Nations’ people, probably because their language is verb based rather than noun based, understand Einsteinian physics more readily than the average non-Native. Viewing animistic beliefs as somehow problematic strikes at religious freedom and hardly deserves more comment.

There is an awful lot to critique in this work. However what I am most concerned about is its appearance at this point in time. It is worrisome that such a tract could appear at all. It is not a question of freedom of speech, for had the book contented itself to argue for assimilation, integration and urbanization, this would be a right-of-centre argument for how to deal with what is euphemistically called the “Native problem.” This book is substantially different: it is vitriolic, factually wrong, racist and fascist in its argumentation. Why is this permissible at all? That is my concern: what does the publication of this book say about us as citizens of Canada?