

Book Review

Gettler, Brian. *Colonialism's Currency: Money, State, and First Nations in Canada, 1820–1950*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 301 pages.

Émile Duchesne
Université de Montréal

Colonialism's Currency analyses how money was instrumental in shaping Canadian colonial politics towards First Nations from the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. The book focuses on three case studies chosen because of their different historical trajectories: the Wendat of Wendake who settled near the city of Quebec in 1697 and were already part of an urban network in the nineteenth century, the Innu of Mashteuiatsh who transitioned in the middle of the nineteenth century from a bush-centred economy to an economy dependent on wage work due to industrialization and a massive influx of settlers, and the Cree of Moose Factory who continued to live off the fur trade and other related activities until the middle of the twentieth century. In Gettler's account, money is a practice, an action, a process, as well as a thing. To approach the state, Gettler focuses on "the divergence between policy and practice, discourse and action" (15) and proposes its legitimacy as being "recursive [...] self-referential, [...] The state, here, is continuously emergent, as much a collection of relationships as of things" (16).

Chapter One proposes an overview of the broad history of money in Canada. People not aware of this history will learn that state centralization of currency was not a complete reality until the Second World War. Prior to this, multiple institutions or individuals issued different types of currencies in the form of bonds, notes, or cash. Gettler examines money's iconography, to bring to light its role in asserting money's value and the power of the institution issuing it. In Chapter Two, Gettler discusses the construction of the figure of the "improvident Indian," a motif that will shape Canadian colonial politics and appears recurrently in the book's arguments. From the 1820s, many voices

among Canadian authorities argued for or against the commutation of presents made to First Nations into gifts of money. Using money was seen as a way to lower the cost of diplomatic relations with Indigenous populations. Others argued that giving money would be irresponsible and would result in massive abuses of alcohol and more poverty. “Instead of underscoring alcohol as such, external commentators now argued that money was dangerous. This, in turn, justified the state’s project of involving itself in the everyday affairs of these communities while also laying the basis—still in place today—for pathologizing Indigenous peoples as inherently improvident” (85).

Chapter Three explains the emergence of the State in Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean and its impact on Innu livelihood. In the context of a rapid industrialization of the region and a massive influx of settlers, money became of generalized use and allowed the Innu to overturn the Hudson Bay Company’s (HBC) political and economic monopoly over their own livelihood. Prior to the generalization of money, Innu had to use the HBC’s money—a token called the “Made Beaver”—which was of use only in the company’s trading posts. The use of money by the Innu was not the result of a concerted action by the State, but rather a way for the Innu to improve their negotiating power with the HBC. Despite this, the emergence of money in the region ultimately came with the implementation of State authority over the region, which was basically absent prior to the mid-nineteenth century.

In contrast, Chapter Four explores how the replacement of HBC’s Made Beaver with state-backed money took a different path in Moose Factory. In James Bay, it was not the influx of settlers that generalized the use of money—the region remained poorly populated—but rather the combined effect of competition in the fur trade and the use of money in treaty-making. The arrival of the Revillon Frères in the region in 1902—and its use of cash in its transactions with the Cree—made the HBC abandon its Made Beaver currency by 1904–05. Moreover, in the summer of 1905, negotiators from the governments of Canada and Ontario came to Moose Factory to sign Treaty 9, thus offering a one-time payment of eight dollars to each Cree, followed by a recurrent annual payment of four dollars. Gettler adds that “Through money, then, the state marked James Bay’s ‘population,’ assigning legal status to individuals while anchoring them and their communities to precise points in space. Through this double maneuver, the state integrated the Cree into its administrative framework [...]. Thus, the significance of treaty payments was anything but purely economic” (128).

If precedent chapters are centred on the contribution of money in “Canada’s (re)territorialization,” Chapter Five is rather focused on “the contribution that money’s ability to confer political authority and fiscal control made to this larger process” (135). Thus, for the Department of Indian Affairs, the generalization of money among the “improvident indians” needed a response and resulted in undercutting “the authority of chiefs who lost their ability to collect and dispense money as they had done in the past. This move to assume control of finance, indicative of a shift in official perception of First Nations from autonomous communities to wards of the state” (135). This analysis is backed by two examples: the Innu petitions of the mid-nineteenth century and the Wendat management of timber on Quarante arpents, a piece of land given to the Wendat by the Jesuits.

Chapter Six deepens Gettler’s analysis of the role of money in the increasing control of Indian Affairs over Indigenous communities by focusing on the bureaucratization of Indigenous lives and the emergence of new welfare programs that substituted previous relief measures. This is done by the author by analyzing three cases: a state-issued bond for on-reserve retail in Wendake, the Indians Affairs’ control over other state funds (such as veterans’ pensions) and the implication of the state in the fur trade with the beaver sanctuary system. In all these cases, the state was able to co-opt and control various kinds of Indigenous people’s incomes, always acting to protect “improvident Indians” from the “threat of money.”

Colonialism’s Currency is a rigorous and accessible book that will be of interest to students as well as scholars interested in the history of Canadian colonialism. This book is an important contribution to the economic history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Although Gettler does not really bring forth the place of money, currencies, and values in Indigenous sociocosmologies, a fact that he himself acknowledges, the book certainly calls for promising dialogue and discussions with scholars interested in anthropological and symbolic analysis of Indigenous uses of money in historical and contemporary periods. There are indeed multiple connections left to think about between Indigenous uses of *wampums* and glass beads (Graeber 1996; Lainey 2004), Indigenous understanding of the fur trade and its regime of value (Francis and Morantz 1983), the gift and commodity dualism (Duchesne 2020) and other emerging uses of money. Gettler’s book is thus an important contribution for anyone interested by these questions.

References

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