

## Commentary

### Indigenous Women and Capitalist Exploitation: Ron Bourgeault Replies to Jesse Russell

What follows is a response to Jesse Russell's commentary in *Alternate Routes*, Vol.7 on my article "The Development of Capitalism and the Subjugation of Native Women in Northern Canada" (*AR*, Vol.6). I hope that this response will lead to an ongoing discussion, which would be useful in addressing certain "myths" that are constantly perpetrated against Indigenous (Indian and Metis) people.

I would like to begin by stating why I wrote the article and then address Russell's criticisms of my approach to culture and class. The article was written in response to a heated discussion between myself and a "white" feminist at a "Third World" benefit in Ottawa. The discussion centred on Indian women and the Indian Act. I argued then and continue to argue that the "dominant" white women's movement has to go beyond simple criticism of the Indian Act as obviously sexist legislation when dealing with Aboriginal women. To dwell only on the Indian Act is too convenient and too liberal. The realities facing Aboriginal women today (race, sex and class oppression) far exceeded the politics of the Indian Act. This reality is predicated on the fact that the subjugation of Indigenous women has occurred in a manner unlike that of white women, and the Indian Act serves only to exacerbate historic differences between Indian and Metis women. The white women's movement has not

really made an attempt to understand how Indigenous women have become oppressed, and especially to understand the nature of the similarities and differences which exist between themselves and other women. Recognizing that class differences do exist between women, manifest themselves within the women's movement and, at the same time, influence feminism as an ideology, I suggest that Aboriginal women (the majority of whom are working class) align themselves with white working class women on the basis that they do have a great deal in common.

Russell, in her critique of my paper and position, focuses on two points. First, according to Russell, I advocate that Indigenous women would benefit from participation in the white feminist movement. She adds that to do so would assimilate Aboriginal women into white culture, claiming that I advocate assimilation as a solution to the problems of Indigenous women. Second, Russell says that I argue the feminist movement should be a working-class movement that would echo the struggles of Indigenous women. Concerning the first point, Russell states that Aboriginal women are not ready to participate in the white women's movement primarily because of profound cultural differences. Whites, according to Russell, are homo-centric, which means they are divorced from nature and possess a world view based on individualism. Indians, on the other hand, are eco-centric. They live in harmony with nature and are not individualistic. On the second point, Russell maintains that the feminist movement does not seek class-based solutions. Finally,

Russell contends that I portray Indian women as apathetic, ignorant, and physically unaggressive.

In response I would first like to restate my argument, and then reply to Russell's major points of criticism. At the outset I would like to say that Russell has read opinions into my article that are absolutely not there. Since the 1600's northern Indians have been drawn into and deeply involved in capitalism as a system, which means their social organization, and culture, has been seriously altered over the centuries. Capitalism was imposed through colonial relations of domination. That is, there was the imposition of foreign cultural, social, economic and political relations and institutions for the express purpose of exploitation. Accordingly, the subjugation of Indian women, and later Metis women, is external in its origin and directly linked to the expansion of European capitalism. Today, women's oppression is a world-wide condition of the development and expansion of capitalism as a system, but with marked material differences between the developed and underdeveloped world. Nevertheless, women world-wide are all victims of the same system. In Canada Indigenous and white women meet in the same society under similar, but specific, conditions. White women can trace the roots of their oppression to the initial stages of capitalism in Europe. Indian and Metis women owe their subjugation to capitalism and its socio-economic structure as it unfolded in what is now North America. The main points of my article are the following:

1. The hunting-gathering (communal) societies of the north were in general egalitarian, which means Indian women held autonomy over their lives in terms of what they produced and distributed within the gender division of labour.
2. Capitalism, in the form of the fur trade, required that Indian societies be drastically altered so that production and exchange of the commodity fur could be undertaken.
3. The destruction of communalism meant the destruction of the communal family and the autonomy of Indian women. This destruction was a lengthy process associated with the development and expansion of capitalism.
4. The destruction of communalism was predicated on capital gaining access to and control over Indian labour for the purpose of exploitation.
5. The destruction of communal society could not be accomplished by imposing exploitative relationships just on Indian men, but required the destruction of Indian women's autonomous role within the respective communal societies. Indian men were caused to interfere with and later to dominate the labour tasks of Indian women. In short, Indian society was dominated, and in turn Indian men were caused to dominate Indian women.
6. As relations of exploitation were imposed, and continued to develop, northern Indians (women and men) were drawn into a class society and the international division of labour (capitalism as a world system).
7. The merchant bourgeoisie was not interested in totally destroying Indian "culture" (pre-capitalist relations of production). Their fundamental interest was in "cheap labour-power" in the commodity production of fur. The Indian's continued subsistence from the land allowed their labour-power to be obtained cheaply. Natural subsistence became a facilitating mechanism by which Indian labour was exploited. What appears to be the continuation of traditional Indian society (culture) is in fact the perpetuation of pre-capitalist relations of production in a distorted and altered form for the purpose of exploitation.
8. Indian women were caused to be exploited as support labour for Indian men, with the imposition of capitalist relations on their society by Europeans. Also, with the imposition of dependent relationships on European men, Indian women were exploited both sexually and as support labour. The birth of the Half-Breed stands as a direct symbol of the subjugation of the Indian and the sexual exploitation of Indian women.

9. The labour of Indian and Metis women, and men, has been exploited over the centuries in different capacities by different forms of capital. The breakdown of pre-capitalist relations has culminated, in the present period of imperialism, in their incorporation into the universal wage labour force. Presently, as historically, the majority of Indian and Metis women are members of the working class. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a racial and gender division of labour today that manifests itself in the marginalization and under-employment of Indian and Metis women.

Now, I will return to Russell's criticism and her insinuation that I am naive. To suggest that I was advocating assimilation as a solution to Indigenous women's problems is in fact her own misinterpretation and misconception of what I was saying. What I suggested was a semi-autonomous alliance between working-class Indigenous women, and working-class white women on the basis of their common interests, so that they can deal more effectively with what divides them. I should add that such an alliance should also include ethnic and immigrant women. Class, race and gender divisions have been intentionally imposed, viciously and effectively, on people for economic reasons.

To call for an alliance between people who are being discriminated against is not advocating assimilation. Russell seems to believe that if Aboriginal and white people were to have a democratic relationship with each other it would automatically lead to the assimilation of Aboriginals into "white society". Such a conclusion is not only superficial, it is also irresponsible. Besides, I do not believe Aboriginals are being assimilated into "white" Canadian society. Assimilation cannot take place so long as there are serious divisions based on race.

I would argue instead that, since the Second World War, there has been a process of homogenization of people through the universalization of the wage-labour market. In Canada, since WWII, Indian and Metis men and women have been drawn into the wage-labour market, but without proportional jobs. In this sense, the capitalist socialization process is becoming complete, but with inequalities.

Concerning culture, I do not believe that what separates Indigenous and white people today is a question of cultural differences, including the illusion of different "mind sets". What separates Indigenous and white women today is historically-based differences in the nature of their oppression. Aboriginal women are subject to racism and national oppression. This is not the case for white women. It is important to note that racism operates in the women's movement, as a broad movement, just as it operates in the trade-union movement. In the women's movement, middle-class women are only interested in seeing Aboriginal women as "our sisters in culture". I do not believe culturalism to be the case with working-class women. Racism and its institutionalization, including a racial division of labour, which is more obvious and distinct in some areas of the country than in others, is dividing people, especially the broad working class.

To simply ascribe cultural difference to Indigenous women is nothing more than a poor excuse to prevent understanding of the historic and current basis for their oppression. In a society

where racism is very profound, Russell would do well to understand the differences between culturalism and racialism, since the former is often used to justify the latter. What Russell alludes to in terms of culture and living in harmony with nature, albeit rationalized as Indianness, is a current misrepresentation of communalism. Culture must be seen in terms of present material reality.

Indian culture today is not the homogeneous and autonomous culture which existed as an expression of communalism. Communalism is dead, class and exploitation are alive. Now, before I am misinterpreted again, I am not advocating the total destruction of culture to be replaced by assimilation. Indian culture, and Metis for that matter, must be liberated from the conditions of its distortion, just as the people must be liberated from the conditions of their oppression and exploitation.

My response to Russell's second point of criticism will be brief, since part of my response is contained in the above reply. Russell contends that the feminist movement does not contain class struggle. I think that close examination will show there are differences in the conditions and issues affecting working class women and middle class women, although gender (and race) discrimination and oppression does cut across class lines. Women are not a class unto themselves but, at the same time, they are not classless. Women belong to classes. The women's movement does have as its basis class, and feminism as an ideology is

influenced by class. There is a great deal of information which shows that Indigenous women, for over three hundred years, have been involved in and exploited through class relationships. All classes have a tendency to see the world in their own image, the middle class being no exception. Perhaps this is why Russell sees cultural differences being a reason for not having relationships between Indigenous and white working-class women, and views the white feminist movement as being a coalition of individual women against sexist discrimination and oppression.

I agree with Elanor Leacock when she states that the women's movement has historically been middle-class and oriented toward parity with middle-class men in the capitalist system. I think Russell has been caught by these contradictions, which operate in the women's movement. I anticipate that, in the future, working-class women of all races will exert themselves and establish hegemony over the women's movement, and direct it towards the transformation of the system.

In response to Russell's final point of criticism, I admit I did not deal explicitly with the resistance of Indian women to the conquest. The intention of the article was to show how class, race and gender relationships were created in the early period of capitalism. I agree with Russell that Indian women have not been, at any time, passive. As I stated above, communal society could not be conquered without destroying women's role within their respective societies. In other words, there were systematic acts of aggression directed against Indian women in

order to destroy communalism. I think that Russell's criticism is more applicable to Arthur Ray, Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown, who portray Indians (women and men) as succumbing to the exigencies of trade, with the passive acceptance of material dependency (economism). I repeat, Indian women were not passive, and to portray their resistance in terms of assimilation is erroneous.

If debate arises at all from this exchange, I would prefer to see it directed at how class, race and gender divisions have been created as a consequence (dialectical outgrowth) of the development and expansion of capitalism globally. I am posing this position against what I consider to be the Eurocentrist nature of Western feminism, which assumes the subjugation of women to be universal, based on the manner in which it occurred within Western capitalism, and not as a consequence of the global spread of capitalism. I think any debate based on cultural differences addressed to inequalities is fruitless.