Spring 2000

Review of *The Dynamics of Native Politics: The Alberta Metis Experience* by Joe Sawchuk

Chris Anderson

*University of Alberta*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch)

Part of the *Other International and Area Studies Commons*


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/508](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/508)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Since at least the 1960s, Canadian Aboriginal political activity has witnessed a startling increase in both its breadth and intensity. This activism has increasingly voiced the concerns and frustrations of Aboriginal people through political organizations whose explicit mandate was and remains to lobby the provincial and federal governments on behalf of their constituents. There is considerable debate, however, about the extent to which these organizations actually represent progressive social change for Aboriginals in Canada or simply owe their “resistance” to the heavy influence of federal and provincial government funding.

The not-so-simple answer is the central problematic explored in Joe Sawchuk’s The Dynamics of Native Politics: The Alberta Métis Experience. Sawchuk puts to effective use the considerable experience he gained through his employment at various Native political organizations during the 1970s and 1980s to draw a more complicated—and sophisticated—picture of Native political organizations in contemporary Canada. Using specific illustrations gained from his work as Director of Land Claims for the Métis Association (and later, Nation) of Alberta, he provides a portal into two characteristics generalizable to all Native political organizations in Canada. The first relates to the extent to which modern Native political organizations owe their existence to government “core-funding.” In other words, to what extent does this inescapable fact allow government agencies a hand in
shaping organizational goals and objectives? Sawchuk outlines the vigorous tacking involved in navigating Native organizations through the shoals of provincial and federal government objectives while attempting to maintain some vestige of independence from these sources.

The second facet, peculiar to Native political organizations, relates to the considerable—and often vicious—political maneuvering within these organizations, resulting from leaders’ machinations to gain and hold on to the political power sought by rivals. According to Sawchuk, this is exacerbated in an Aboriginal context because these political positions pay a lucrative salary not easily attained in a population otherwise characterized by high unemployment and low educational skills. (In a curiously unguarded metaphor, Sawchuk refers to these individuals as a new “breed” of politician.)

Sawchuk displays an obvious expertise in his subject, and his book contains breathtaking detail regarding the genesis and maintenance of Alberta Métis organizations. If there is something unsettling about the work, it is its attempt to force “traditional” Native principles onto “modern” Native political organizations functioning in a contemporary state framework. Sawchuk’s initial litmus test for “traditional” Métis organizational characteristics, for example, is to compare their similarity to the Métis buffalo hunt organization from the mid- to late-nineteenth century. This hardly seems fair, given the obvious fact that Métis people do not today live as they did then. Are the Métis allowed to change? If so, to what extent are they allowed to do so before they are no longer “traditional”? Rather than intending this as a criticism of Sawchuk (for he himself would point out the absurdity of straining traditional structures too far), I mention it to point to a larger tension in contemporary anthropological and sociological research regarding the authenticity of Aboriginal culture not deemed sufficiently “traditional.”

Ultimately, Sawchuk’s answer to the question of whether Aboriginal political organizations represent an Aboriginal point of view or that of the state is that they do both. Notwithstanding his repeated use of dated references, Sawchuk’s uncomplicated writing style and impressive empirical detail make this book all the more valuable in an area marked by blustery posturing and empty rhetoric. It would provide much food for thought in any advanced course focusing on Native political organizations in Canada.

Chris Andersen, Department of Sociology, University of Alberta.