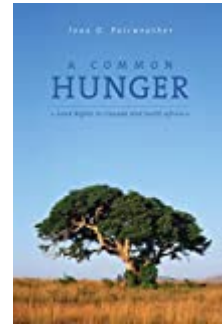




**Joan G. Fairweather.** *A Common Hunger: Land Rights in Canada and South Africa.* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006. xxi + 260 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55238-192-2.



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### **Common Imperialisms: Comparing South Africa and Canada**

This interesting and well-documented book attempts the difficult task of comparing the histories of European occupation and subsequent dispossession, oppression, and struggles for liberation of indigenous/Aboriginal peoples in Canada and South Africa (“indigenous” is more common in South Africa, while “Aboriginal” is the word of choice in Canada). Beyond the commonly understood similarities of the Indian Reserves in Canada and the Bantustans of Apartheid South Africa (although they are, in fact, quite different in origin and function), this is not an obvious comparison to make. How can you compare a country with a vast majority of indigenous peoples who won independence from former European colonialists with a country where the indigenous population is a tiny minority with no agenda to defeat the government, or a developing nation with a member of the G8?

However, by choosing to focus on land rights and their relationship to dignity, sovereignty, and human rights, the project proves useful for what it reveals about each case. It was also a good choice to restrict the book to only two cases: this allows for enough detail so as not to lose the unique historical narratives of each country,

while allowing the drawing out of an interesting selection of thematic points of comparison.

For me, as a Canadian who does research in southern Africa, the most important overall point was the reminder that Canadian history is a colonial history, not separate from the South African story or other histories of empire. It is a story of dispossession and racism, of cruel oppression and ongoing marginalization. For Joan Fairweather is dead right when she claims, in her conclusion, that Aboriginal peoples are not part of the dominant narrative of Canadian history, which is written as a story of the battle between the English, the French, and the emerging United States. We Canadians have been well schooled to write Aboriginal peoples out of our national identity, and to try hard to ignore the struggles going on right now for Aboriginal land rights and recognition.

The book is organized in three parts denoting the three major themes pursued: dispossession, reclaiming the land, and dealing with legacies. Within each theme similarities and differences between the two cases are exposed. The first section outlines the main historical processes on the two continents, which began with trad-

ing, but led to setting up permanent settlements and the claiming of land and resources. In both cases, European colonists assumed the right to impose governance structures where none (that they recognized) seemed to exist. However, how this was done differed. Two key differences in this early period are the issue of slaves and other labor relations, and the role of treaties in the land alienation processes. In the case of the Cape Colony, the Dutch were already involved in the slave trade when they arrived in the Cape, and they brought large numbers of slaves with them. This contributed to the shape of the race and labor hierarchy that emerged in the Cape, and subsequently played such a big role in the development of South Africa. In North America, by contrast, although there were some slaves in New France, there were never many and the economy did not require a large labor force.

In Canada, early relationships with Aboriginal peoples were primarily for trading purposes (the fur trade especially), and encroachment on their land was more gradual than in the Cape. In the Cape, the aggressive take-over of Khoikhoi cattle and land from 1652 was quickly followed by eastward expansion of the Dutch, who then met the Zulu and the Xhosa in the interior where violent wars of take-over were waged in the nineteenth century. While peace treaties were tried in the middle part of the nineteenth century, African chiefs were suspicious of them, nor did they serve the interests of the colonialists; they were put aside in 1848, when the colonial government claimed all land for the colony. A similar process occurred in the Boer Republics faced with large indigenous populations and scarce land. By contrast, in North America, treaties were used extensively and far more usefully, given the vastness of the land and the small numbers of indigenous peoples. Treaties typically granted Aboriginal peoples the rights to their hunting and fishing grounds and demarcated “reserves” for their perpetual use in exchange for land for white settlement. Treaties effectively avoided war, and after the War of 1812 (between Britain and the United States) when European settlement intensified in Upper and Lower Canada, treaties helped keep the peace. Aboriginal people were actively involved in treaty negotiations, seeing them as the best available means to protect their interests.

To return to the issue of labor, as industrialization took off in the late nineteenth century in what became South Africa, the need for African labor intensified and the labor reserve system took shape, consisting of impoverished “reserves” for Africans and mechanisms such as a hut tax to force people to migrate to mines and industries to work. Aboriginal labor since the fur trade

has never been central to the economy of what became Canada, and native reserves were never “labor reserves” but places of separation, mostly reduced to areas inadequate to sustain traditional livelihood activities, and hence eventually places of profound poverty and unemployment. (Today the term “native” is widely accepted in Canada, whereas it assumed negative colonialist overtones in Africa, including South Africa, and is used in this review in the North American sense.) In both cases “reserves” were meant to separate indigenous peoples from Europeans. In South Africa, separation became an obsession under Apartheid from the 1940s, going to the extreme of calling “reserves” self-governed homelands for the various ethnic groups recognized (and to a large extent re-invented) by the Apartheid government. However, in North America, the vision was always for eventual assimilation into mainstream culture. Efforts to eradicate native languages and customs were intense, with the residential school system, through which native children were taken from their families and placed in schools, run mostly by churches being the largest and most culturally devastating practice.

Part 2 of the book traces efforts by indigenous peoples in both countries to reclaim the land. The history of treaties in the North American case is central to the shape of Aboriginal struggles to reclaim land and sovereignty. While the patchwork of treaties of different sorts with many different groups hampered collective struggles among Aboriginal peoples, the existence of the treaties has provided a legal base from which to claim land and resource rights in Canadian courts. By the late 1970s, there was also general legal recognition that Aboriginal rights stemmed from their original occupancy of the land, opening the door to comprehensive claims in cases where no treaties existed. Assimilation failed, and by the late twentieth century, protests and struggles of Aboriginal peoples became more visible and serious, such as in the Oka crisis in 1990. In the early twenty-first century, struggles continue, but with gathering steam to find a way to expeditiously deal with the hundreds of outstanding Aboriginal land claims. Land claims are usually also linked to the issue of self-government, with different models proposed on all sides, usually stopping short of complete independence. Most Aboriginal groups, or First Nations, are scattered around the country on isolated reserves, with many living in urban areas as well, complicating the implementation of self-government. A special case is Nunavut, which was established in 1999 under a comprehensive land claim by the Inuit. It is a northern jurisdiction covering 20 percent of Canada’s land-

mass, and home to 18,000 people, 85 percent of whom are Inuit. Nunavut has a “qualified” sovereignty, with extensive powers over mineral and land rights, but still some federal presence (and massive inflows of federal money).

In South Africa, there were few efforts before independence to reclaim land alienated by European colonists. However, this issue was central to the liberation war, and post-1994 has brought a number of mechanisms to support reclaiming land. The land restitution program is mandated to provide restitution to those dispossessed after 1913. Although fraught with complexities regarding lack of documentary evidence, competing claims, and bureaucratic difficulties, the program has had some success, especially in urban areas. The government also implemented a land redistribution program, which attempts to buy land from mostly white commercial farmers to redistribute to black farmers. This program is also painfully slow, given the reluctance of commercial farmers to sell land, and in cases where land has been redistributed, success is hampered by lack of follow-up support for new farmers. The land issue remains a contentious and divisively racialized issue in South Africa. In terms of “self-government,” the independence of South Africa is a clear victory for the indigenous people. The false “self-government” of the Bantustans, which gave powers to traditional leaders supported by the Apartheid government, complicates the new era, and the strong central government faces the difficult task of bringing in a modern rights-based governance system to unify the formerly profoundly divided country, while not alienating traditional leaders. Women’s rights are one area where contradictions between the modern and the traditional are emerging, an issue that has also run through the last half century of Aboriginal history in Canada.

The final part of the book, dealing with legacies, high-

lights efforts to confront and promote healing in relation to the more traumatic aspects of colonial occupation and rule. In the Canadian case, although there have been numerous inquiries, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples of 1991 to 1996 was particularly important in providing a forum for the articulation of the hurts suffered through conquest. The legacies of residential schools emerged as the most horrific on an individual and social level. People were subject to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as being taken away from their families, communities, languages, and cultures. Reparations through “healing funds,” and public apologies have followed. A strong critique of these processes is that they have sidelined the more fundamental issue of land claims and their relationship to the restoration of dignity and wholeness of Aboriginal peoples. In the South Africa case, Fairweather makes a comparison with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of 1995 to 1998. While the TRC did critical work in allowing the articulation of atrocities committed under the Apartheid regime and the naming of some of the perpetrators, critics have also pointed out that the focus on healing and reconciliation has failed to provide either justice for the victims, or a comprehensive reorganization of society and economy. In both the South African and the Canadian cases, efforts are incomplete in dealing with the underlying problem of alienation from land and livelihoods. Reconciliation between races and personal healing from trauma do not address these underlying structural issues.

Ultimately, although South Africa has won its independence, the majority of indigenous people there still live with the historical dispossession and impoverishment wrought by colonial conquest, as do Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This unifies the book, and reminds readers of important truths of colonial legacies both North and South.

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