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Imperialism and Hunting: From the Fur Trade to Colonial Activism

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Hunting is an essential part of socio-economic life for Indigenous peoples worldwide. For many, it allows for cultural continuity and is a source of partial or full income. This article intends to explore how hunting practices have been impacted by European imperial views of "progress" over the past 400 years, and how perceived progress can be destructive to some aspects of social life. To do this, the place of Indigenous hunting practices in global processes is examined. From the 17th century fur trade, to the fall of fur, recent anti-fur campaigns and environmental movements, 'Western' views on fur and hunting have grounded Indigenous practices in the global economy. This is seen through the application of world-systems and underdevelopment theory.

Introduction

Destruction and progress are not oppositional terms; they can be deeply intertwined. This paper focuses on how imperial and colonial 'progress' has had devastating effects on the social context of hunting for Indigenous peoples in Canada. I emphasise the economic context, and how European imperialism rooted Indigenous hunting in the global economy. I take a chronological approach, starting with the early fur traders and the fall of the fur trade, moving on to anti-fur campaigners and environmental activism that has targeted or inadvertently affected Indigenous peoples. I explain how imperialism has planted Indigenous hunting firmly in global processes through the lens of world systems theory and underdevelopment theory. While this paper is not meant to be strictly linear, it takes into account some of the main historical events related to hunting and Indigenous peoples.

First, I must outline my positionality in relation to this article. I am an Indigenous woman, specifically Inuk. My maternal family is from Nunatsiavut, and I was raised in Nunavut. Throughout this paper I occasionally use personal pronouns because some of the issues I outline undeniably affect my family and me. My family consists of fishers, hunters, and trappers. While Indigenous peoples are often 'Othered' in Western academic discourse[1], I see my writing about the issues that

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face my family and culture as a way of "writing back" to the colonial, racist and imperialist academy[2].

To clarify terminology, I use the term 'Indigenous' to encompass the three Indigenous groups in Canada: Inuit, First Nations, and Metis. I capitalize the word because it is a proper noun[3]. I also use the phrase 'Indigenous peoples in Canada', rather than the possessive 'Canada's Indigenous peoples' or 'Indigenous Canadians' because many Indigenous peoples do not recognize the Canadian state as legitimate or identify as Canadian.

Hunting's Cultural Importance

For Indigenous peoples, hunting is deeply embedded in cultural traditions. Hunting provides for every aspect of life, as seen through the example of the narwhal for Inuit. Narwhal skin (maktaaq), with some attached fat (uqsuq) is a staple food and delicacy[4]. Narwhal also provide raw materials, such as sinew used for waterproof seams[5]. More than providing essentials, hunting contributes to the creation of social structures and human relationships. As Wenzel writes, "the authority and decision making patterns that organize Inuit harvesting and sharing are synonymous with the kinship-based structural precepts that direct Inuit interpersonal, cross-generational, extended family and community social relations"[6]. Hunting determines social roles, and ensures a sense of self and purpose. Community events are focused around feasts and traditional foods, allowing for the construction of important connections.

The way hunting shapes values leads to deep respect and an appreciation of humility. Inuk elder Apphia Agalakti Awa cautions that if someone is abusive or disrespectful to wildlife, something bad will happen to them[7]. One should never

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[1] L.T. Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and Indigenous peoples* (London, 2005) 2.
[2] C. Smith in L. Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies,* 37.
[3] National Aboriginal Health Organization. 2017. *Overview of Inuit Health.* [online] Available at: <http://www.naho.ca/inuit/overview-of-inuit-health/> [Accessed 5 January 2017].
[4] D. Lee and G.W. Wenzel, 'Narwhal Hunting by Pond Inlet Inuit: An Analysis of Foraging Mode in the Floe-Edge Environment' (2004) 2 *Inuit Studies* 135. (henceforth, Lee and Wenzel, 'Narwhal hunting')
[5] Ibid., 136.
[6] G.W. Wenzel, 'Ningiqtuq: Inuit Resource Sharing and Generalized Reciprocity in Clyde River, Nunavut' (1995) 2 *Arctic Anthropology* 56.
[7] N. Wachowich, *Saqiyuq: stories from the lives of three Inuit women* (Montreal & Kingston, 2001), 125.

act proud or act like a human is more powerful than a polar bear or a walrus; otherwise the animals will know and hunt them instead. She says, "We should be humble. If we respect them, then the animals will come to us"[8]. So, while traditional Inuit food is thought to protect from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, beyond nutritional value, the harvesting, processing and consumption of traditional foods have social and cultural importance and are linked to community ethics and Inuit identity[9].

The Fur Trade's Imperialism in the Pursuit of Progress

In the 17th century, the fur trade emerged in the place now known as Canada to serve European demand for hats made of beaver fur[10]. This international demand launched Indigenous peoples into a global market. Beaver hats remained in demand for nearly 200 years; therefore, what happened in the European market had effects on the primary market, shaping how and how much Indigenous peoples hunted for furs[11]. The fur trade was an integrating force between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. It required a partnership, but it was an unequal partnership[12], as I will show below.

The fur trade is explicitly linked to the creation of the Canadian state and colonisation. The Hudson's Bay Company (The Bay) was the largest and most successful trading company. It was created in 1670 through a royal charter proclamation, and the company was given exclusive trading rights in the vast region traversed by rivers flowing into the Hudson Bay. Due to its extensive land ownership, The Bay was the central colonising force in much of Canada. Indigenous peoples travelled to the Bay's trading posts to barter furs for goods such as tools, guns, textiles and food[13]. Often Indigenous peoples were middlemen,

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[8] Ibid., 126.

[9] Chan et al., 'Food Security in Nunavut, Canada: Barriers and Recommendations' (2006) 5 International Journal of Circumpolar Health 417.

[10] Ray, A.J. 2009. *Hudson's Bay Company.* [online] Available at: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hudsons-bay-company/> [Accessed 14 November 2016]; A.M. Carlos and F.D. Lewis, 'Property rights, competition, and depletion in the eighteenth-century Canadian fur trade: the role of the European market' (1991) 3 Canadian Journal of Economics 705-706. (Henceforth, Carlos and Lewis, 'Eighteenth-century Canadian fur trade').

[11] Carlos and Lewis, 'Eighteenth-century Canadian fur trade', 705-706.

[12] A.J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their role as trappers, hunters, and middlemen n the lands southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto, 2005) xxxi.

[13] Ray, A.J. 2009. *Hudson's Bay Company.* [online] Available at: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hudsons-bay-company/> [Accessed 14 November 2016].

bringing fur from various communities further inland. Participation in this global market had massive effects on traditional lifestyles and economy, as Indigenous peoples became reliant on European-manufactured goods for survival[14].
As Ray notes above, participation in the fur trade was unequal. Many Indigenous peoples were mistreated, as Apphia Agalakti Awa recalls:

> They never told us how much all the foxes were worth. They just counted them and pressed some buttons…Maybe they thought it was useless to let us know how much they cost because we wouldn't understand anyways, they thought we didn't know the value of money[15].

Based on this, it is safe to assume that, at times, The Bay treated Indigenous peoples in an exploitative manner. They acted paternalistically and made assumptions about people's intelligence levels, while taking advantage of their labor and destroying cultural traditions in order to feed a global desire for fur.

Imagery and cultural products created in Europe during this time, and of this time, also served the colonial purpose of progressing imperial aims. Edward Said writes that, "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically, innocent"[16]. This is evident in literature that sees Indigenous peoples as primitive, or as 'noble savages'. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that the white European in America was superior in intelligence, power, and enjoyment. Below the white European were the 'Negro' and 'Indian'. He wrote, "The Indians had only the alternative of war or civilization; in other words, they must either destroy the Europeans or become their equals"[17]. Cultural products such as de Tocqueville's literature can be analyzed in terms of the 'Other'. While not specifically alluding to Indigenous peoples in Canada, Young refers to Said's Orientalism, in which Orientalism is seen as an attempt to contain and control the Otherness of the Orient[18]. However, this approach can be applied to the fur-trade era colonialism,

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[14] Ibid.
[15] N. Wachowich, *Saqiyuq: stories from the lives of three Inuit women*, 123.
[16] E. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003), 27.
[17] De Tocqueville, A. n.d. Chapter 18: The Present and Probably Future Condition of the Three Races That Inhabit the Territory of the United States. [online] Available at: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/detoc/1_ch18.htm> [Accessed 14 November 2016].
[18] L. Young, 'Imperial Culture: The primitive, the savage and white civilization' in L. Back and J. Solomos (eds.), *Theories of race and racism: a reader* (London, 2000), 268. (henceforth, Young, 'Imperial Culture').

as "Both Orientalism and colonialism denied subject peoples' human agency and resistance and constructed explanatory models to account for the alterity of those subjects"[19].

The Fall of Fur and Destruction of Culture

"Greenpeace has really ruined our native way of life, man. They really ruined our traditional way, the way we used to be" –Young Inuk Man[20]

While Indigenous peoples were brought into a global system of capitalism through the fur trade, its collapse and recent anti-fur activism has had detrimental effects on the industry, resulting in devastating consequences on Indigenous livelihoods and cultures. I posit that anti-fur animal rights activists behavior is colonial, as it results in the decimation of the cultural traditions and lifestyles of Indigenous peoples. It is necessary for these organizations to assess their tactics and consider their impact on already-marginalized peoples. The European Union's (EU) ban on sealskin is an example of the harm that colonial activism can have on communities that rely on hunting for sustenance and economy.

Seal hunt protests rapidly grew in 1967 after the "Save the Seals" campaign was created and ultimately developed into the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). The campaign drew support from environmentally concerned individuals and organizations in the United States and Western Europe[21]. Intensity increased against the seal hunt in the 1970s, led by IFAW and Greenpeace, with protest strategies including an appeal to international news media in order to put pressure on local hunters and the Canadian government[22]. The activism has been successful in raising awareness of the animal rights perspective of the hunt, however, "Lost within the strident tones of southern protest and counterprotest was the impact a highly emotional and politicized anti-sealing campaign would have on aboriginal, especially Inuit, access and use of ringed seals"[23]. Due to the efforts of activists, ringed seal skins went from having a value of $16 CAD/pelt in 1973-74 to prices of

[19] Ibid., 268.
[20] R.G. Condon, P. Collings, and G. Wenzel, 'The Best Part of Life: Subsistence Hunting, Ethnicity, and Economic Adaptation among Young Adult Inuit Males' (1995) 1 *Arctic* 44.
[21] G. Wenzel, '"I Was Once Independent": The Southern Seal Protest and Inuit' (1987) 2 *Anthropologica* 199.
[22] Ibid., 199-200.
[23] Ibid., 200.

around $2.50 CAD/pelt or a completely non-existent outside market in some Inuit communities in 1977[24].

In 1983 the Council of the European Economic Community forbade the importation of commercially hunted sealskins and products manufactured by them into any part of the European community. The ban was meant to take a stand against behavior that European citizens supposedly saw as inhumane and immoral[25]. However, for Inuit, the ban represented not only the loss of an industrial market, but also the loss of a practice that allowed them to maintain their culture in an ever-changing world in which many other cultural traditions were being lost[26]. The general consensus of sealing as cruel, ecologically imprudent, and immoral did not allow Inuit perspectives to be taken into consideration. While the ban was focused on the southern Canadian hunt, it crashed the entire market[27]. Now, the market is only 5-10% of what it was before the bans[28]. While there is an exemption for Inuit-hunted sealskins, Inuit believe it is of no use, as the market has been ruined for all sealskin products.

There are colonial undertones to opposing the seal hunt, as it positions Inuit as "frozen in time"[29]. Activists see Inuit as primitive, entirely self-sufficient, and separate from the global capitalist economy. However, Inuit culture is dynamic, and has been affected by global processes. Inuit sealers believe that they should have the right to make a profit just like everyone else[30]. Furthermore, Julia Emberley writes that utilitarian values are often ascribed to Indigenous peoples, which conforms to a type of primitivism, in a similar way to Said's concept of Orientalism[31]. Fur is seen to be utilitarian, rather than having symbolic cultural value. This reveals a Eurocentric bias that links practical value with an earlier part of history (as a chronological line is drawn from practical to symbolic)[32]. This

[24] Ibid., 200.
[25] G. W. Wenzel, *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, economy and ideology in the Canadian Arctic* (London, 1991) 1.
[26] Ibid., 2.
[27] Arnaquq-Baril, A. 2016. *'Angry Inuk' argues anti-seal hunt campaign hurts Canadian Inuit life.* Interviewed by Anna Maria Tremonti. [radio] CBC Radio. 4 May 2016. (henceforth, Arnaquq-Baril, Angry Inuk Interview)

[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] J. Emberley, *Venus and Furs: the cultural politics of fur* (London, 1998) 181.
[32] Ibid., 181.

"utilitarian function attributed to fur clothing works to situate the Paleolithic/primitive as an originary movement, used by the museum to represent a causal and teleological development from the 'primitive' to the 'civilized'"[33]. From these examples, we can see how Eurocentric anti-fur activism has placed Indigenous peoples in a societal box, labeling our hunting practices as backwards and unnecessary in a progressive 'modern' world, while ignoring the strong cultural reasons for the continuation of these practices.

The colonial animal rights movement has, through their impact on seal hunting, redefined Inuit culture[34]. Inuit consider hunting to be part of the essence of being Inuk. As Wenzel writes:

> Hunting as a right, has, for Inuit, its foundations in their customary and consistent acknowledgement of the environment as an active element of their day-to-day lives. This acknowledgement embodies within in the belief that animals also possess rights – the right to refuse Inuit hunters, to be treated with respect, to be hunted and used wisely.[35]

Colonialism has made sealskins a part of the northern economy, but could not accept the contemporary realities of Inuit and their concerns[36]. This has lead to numerous cultural changes. At the same time as the first protests (1950s and 1960s), Inuit were forced off the land, and away from nomadic lifestyles, to join a cash economy[37]. After the ban in 1983, people had no choice but to move into towns and make money by carving or doing unrelated work. The ability to sell sealskins[38], which had previously allowed Inuit to continue living nomadically while supplementing subsistence hunting with an income, was no longer present.

[33] Ibid., 182.
[34] Wenzel, *Animal Rights, Human Rights*, 5.
[35] Ibid., 4-5.
[36] Ibid., 4.
[37] Arnaquq-Baril, Angry Inuk Interview.
[38] Ibid.

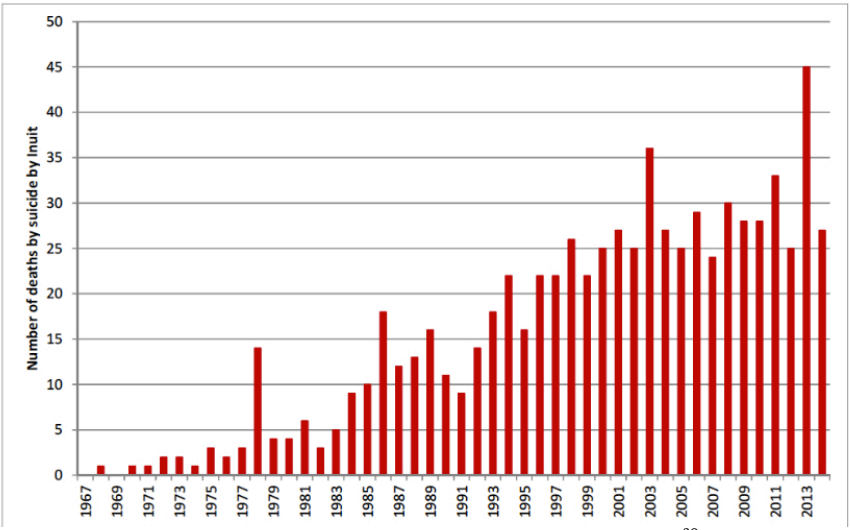

Figure 1: Deaths by Suicide by Nunavut Inuit, by year, 1967-2014[39]

More than culturally devastating – the activism has been deadly. Suicide rates spiked after the ban. As seen in Table 1, in 1978, the year after prices dropped, the suicide rate jumped drastically. Due to the EU ban and inability to make money, people went without food[40]. While it might be imprudent to blame all suicides on the ban, it was certainly part of a number of intense societal changes during this time. There are also more unintended consequences. The collapse of the commercial seal hunt has forced Inuit to turn to the mining and gas industry for economic opportunities[41]. This means that Inuit have been forced to shift their support from a renewable, sustainable industry to one that is non-renewable and environmentally degrading. Economic options are limited in northern Canada, as it is nearly impossible to manufacture products due to shipping costs; therefore raw materials (such as sealskins) are some of the only things that can be produced on a large scale[42]. It should be noted that, despite challenges, Indigenous peoples are

[39] Hicks, J. 2015. *Statistical data on death by suicide by Nunavut Inuit, 1920 to 2014.* [online] Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. Available at: <http://www.tunngavik.com/files/2015/09/2015-09-14-Statistical-Historical-Suicide-Date-Eng.pdf> [Accessed 21 December 2016]. Pg. 7.

[40] Arnaquq-Baril, Angry Inuk Interview.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

resilient and still continue to hunt in order to use and/or sell their furs. In the Northwest Territories, on average 57 percent of Inuvialuit and 43 percent of Dene and Métis people continue to fish/hunt for subsistence and recreation[43].

'Clean' Energy as Colonial

Inuit in Canada are still experiencing the effects of the ban on sealskin, but yet another activist movement is having destructive effects on hunting practices. Environmentalists and governments often tout hydroelectricity as a 'clean' energy alternative to non-renewable fossil fuels. Advocates argue that it is a renewable technology because water supplies are replenished in the annual hydrologic cycle[44]. Renewable energy such as hydropower is considered relatively environmentally benign compared to fossil fuels because they do not involve a process of combustion. Hydropower also has distinct advantages over non-renewable technologies in regard to increasing concerns over global climate change[45]

However, Indigenous peoples in Canada have been negatively affected by 'clean' energy schemes. Most recently, the Make Muskrat Right campaign, in reference to the Muskrat Falls dam in Labrador, has drawn attention to this issue. The Nunatsiavut Government, the Labrador Inuit self-government, commissioned a report to investigate potential downstream impacts on Lake Melville and the surrounding Inuit population[46]. Harvard University scientists expect substantial negative effects of methylmercury concentrations in the lake's ecosystem and increased exposure of Inuit to it[47]. Methylmercury is a toxin that affects the central nervous system, and chronic exposure from consumption of aquatic foods has been associated with brain impairment in children[48]. This is linked to hunting among Indigenous peoples because Inuit rely on marine animals for food and cultural activities.

Unfortunately, when campaigning for their rights to hunt and fish, Indigenous peoples are often made to conform to essentialist ideas of their identities. An

[43] Government of Northwest Territories. 2015. *Trends in hunting and fishing in the NWT.* [online] Available at: <http://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/state-environment/182-trends-hunting-and-fishing-nwt> [Accessed 5 January 2017].

[44] G.W. Frey and D.M. Linke, 'Hydropower as a renewable and sustainable energy resource meeting global energy challenges in a reasonable way' (2002) 14 *Energy Policy* 1262.
[45] Ibid., 1262.
[46] Nunatsiavut Government, *Lake Melville: Avatiut, Kanuittailinnivut* (Nain, 2016) 3.
[47] Ibid., 3.
[48] Ibid., 10.

example of this is the James Bay Cree resistance to hydroelectric development[49]. The James Bay Cree argued that the hydroelectric development was not a 'clean' source of power, as it was being advertised. They highlighted the fact that it would damage the land they rely on by flooding massive land areas, destroying wildlife and habitats, threatening Cree society and ignoring Cree rights[50].
The James Bay Cree's cause was successful; they combined a complex political strategy with rich discursive strategies for presenting Cree hunting as a productive and protective activity, worthy of public concern and support[51]. Nevertheless, the way in which this discursive strategy managed to succeed was degrading. The James Bay Cree found that they needed to present the stereotype of 'Indians' as a noble and victimized people[52]. This imagery was critical in mobilizing support against hydroelectricity development: "The image of the noble indigene is widely circulated among a broad public and it conveys sympathetic concerns, but at the same time it is also associated with a negative and disempowering set of images"[53]. The disempowering image is that 'Indians' are noble, but also naïve and unchanging, devastated by modernity or inevitably becoming 'Westernized'. Similar to the aforementioned Othering present in Orientalist and colonialist art and media[54], this discourse is also used to justify claims of Euro-American and Canadian dominance[55].

Far too often Indigenous peoples are ignored by movements that we embody. We are animal rights activists, as we express deep respect for animals that give their lives for food, clothing and cultural activities. Indigenous peoples are also environmentalists, the original stewards of the land in the multitude of sovereign Indigenous nations that have been combined (often without consent) into Canada. However, Eurocentric activism has ignored this and instead promoted practices that harm us, rather than asking for our valuable input.

Hunting and Global Processes

[49] H.A. Feit, 'Hunting, Nature, and Metaphor: Political and Discursive Strategies in James Bay Cree Resistance and Autonomy' In J.A. Grim (ed.) *Indigenous traditions and ecology: the interbeing of cosmology and community* (Cambridge, MA, 2001) 420. (henceforth, Feit, 'Hunting, Nature and Metaphor')
[50] Ibid., 418-419.
[51] Ibid., 420.
[52] Ibid., 423.
[53] Ibid., 423.
[54] Young, 'Imperial Culture', 267.
[55] Feit, 'Hunting, Nature, and Metaphor', 423.

Wallerstein's world-systems theory ties all of these historical events together. He writes that in a world-system, politics, economics, social structures and culture are intertwined, and cannot be dealt with separately[56]. The modern world-system has its origins in the 16th century, and has always been a capitalist world-economy[57]. A world-economy is "a large geographic area within which there is a division of labor and hence significant internal exchange of basic or essential goods as well as flows of capital and labor"[58]. According to Wallerstein, there are many political units in the world-economy, as well as many cultures and groups, and a common cultural pattern, geoculture[59]. He also asserts that a world-economy and a capitalist system go together[60]. Through world-systems theory we can see that the fur trade introduced Indigenous peoples in Canada to the capitalist world-system, and has transformed lives ever since. As Wenzel writes, "History 'proves' that fur traders and government services have transformed Inuit from an independent aboriginal people to consumers in a cold climate"[61]. The fur trade rocketed Indigenous peoples into the capitalist world-economy, and the crisis that collapsed the fur trade was determined by global factors, including the geographic background and industrial efficiency of England[62].

Another theory that can help to explain why Indigenous peoples have been greatly affected by world-systems is underdevelopment theory. While Canada as a whole is not an 'underdeveloped' nation, Indigenous peoples in the country far too often live in appalling conditions compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. The average lifespan for Inuit women is 14 years less than that of the average non-Indigenous woman in Canada, suicide rates in Nunavut are six times the national average, and the unemployment rate among Inuit is more than three times the Canadian average[63]. Underdevelopment theory attempts to account for the colonial past in current economic and social matters[64]. "Nations grow and develop, but some of their main characteristics remain closely connected with their original economic

[56] I. Wallerstein, *World-systems analysis: An introduction* (Durham & London, 2005) x.
[57] Ibid., 23.
[58] Ibid., 23.
[59] Ibid., 23.
[60] Ibid., 24.
[61] Wenzel, *Animal Rights, Human Rights*, 5.
[62] H.A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven, 1930) 390.
[63] National Aboriginal Health Organization. 2016. *Terminology*. [online] Available at: <http://www.naho.ca/publications/topics/terminology/> [Accessed 23 December 2016].
[64] C.S. Filho, *Monopolies and Underdevelopment: From colonial past to global reality* (Cheltenham, 2015) 1.

and social formation"[65]. Being a 'colony', or being colonised, created internal power structures that marked many aspects of development (or underdevelopment)[66]. These internal power structures still exist, as it has already been shown that Indigenous peoples can be deeply affected (culturally, socially, and economically) by challenges to our hunting practices.

Conclusion

It is possible to see, from an analysis of hunting's role in the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada, how imperialism and colonialism have had destructive effects on social lives. While hunting has and continues to have fundamental importance for many Indigenous peoples, the introduction of a global market created many devastating changes. The fur trade established a lasting relationship between Europeans and Indigenous peoples, and also established oppressive discourses that continue to this day. The 'fall of fur' revealed the negative effects of belonging to a global market, asserting that Eurocentric activism can harm Indigenous peoples' cultures and wellbeing. Even 'clean' energy can be destructive, as it damages the land and water essential to Indigenous cultural survival. But even countering the harmful effects of activism can result in Indigenous peoples having to embrace the oppressive stereotypes attributed to them. From the above-mentioned examples and a world systems and underdevelopment theory analysis, we can see that, unfortunately, the global community has not progressed from a colonial and imperial mindset towards Indigenous peoples and practices.

[65] Ibid., 1.
[66] Ibid., 1.

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