

The utility as a relationship of forces

In this article, I examine Manitoba Hydro (MH)—a provincially owned electricity utility in Manitoba—in relation to the Canadian colonial project. Using Nicos Poulantzas’s theory of the relational state, I argue that MH’s role in the broader state is characterized by both change and continuity. In the 20th century, MH was at the vanguard of the colonial assault on First Nations in the province’s north. However, in recent years the corporation has adopted a new “partnership” approach to First Nations in Manitoba. While this has led to real change in the utility’s operations, I argue that despite this new orientation, MH is structurally unable to overcome the colonial relation in Manitoba.

For Poulantzas (2000), the state is neither a “thing” for the exclusive use of the dominant classes, nor a “subject” that follows its own internal logic. Instead, he argues that the state is the product of relations between the dominant (that is, capitalist) and dominated classes. However, because particular parts of the capitalist class (such as financial, extractive, and manufacturing industries) may have conflicting interests, the state functions as a mediator of these conflicts and creates the conditions required for capitalist accumulation in general. In Poulantzas’s view, this class conflict—both within the dominant class and between dominant and dominated classes—exists within and beyond the state and shapes the state’s action and institutional structure (2000, p. 132). Using this view of the state, I examine MH’s changing role in relation to the broader inscription of political struggle in the provincial state.

MH AND THE COLONIAL PROJECT

In the 20th century, MH was a leading force in colonial expansion across northern Manitoba. It forcibly relocated Indigenous communities and undermined land-based economies by flooding gathering and trapping areas, disrupting animal habitats, making waterways dangerous and unpredictable, and

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contaminating fish with mercury (see, e.g., Loney, 1987, 1995; Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018a; Martin & Hoffman, 2008; Robson, 1993). Indigenous residents of Fox Lake were subjected to racism and discrimination in the town of Gillam (MH’s northern logistics hub), and MH employees have been accused of sexual violence against Indigenous women with the complicity of the RCMP (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018a, p. 36; 2018b, p. 71). In this period, the effect of MH’s incursions had been to transform highly skilled hunters, trappers, fishers, and others engaged in land-based economies into general wage labourers. The corporation’s operations further undermined the ability of these communities to take part in traditional economic, political, and social practices.

These experiences demonstrate the particular character of social relations in the mid-20th century. At that time, the ability of Indigenous communities to assert their collective interests against and through the state was limited by the dominating force of MH and the larger Canadian state. Hydroelectric generation degraded non-human nature to such an extreme degree that the viability of land-based economies was threatened, and the gendered physical and sexual violence carried out by MH personnel asserted the settler project at the most intimate scale.

THE RELATIONAL STATE

In Poulantzas’s understanding of the relational state, the relations of production (that is, how production and distri-

bution are managed, who is exploited, who benefits from exploitation, etc.) are at the core of the state itself. These relations both shape the state and are a site of state intervention. While Poulantzas wrote about the capitalist state in general, in Canada one must account for the specificity of settler-colonial relations of production. These relations require the disappearance of Indigenous people and the appropriation of their lands and waters. Following from this, the state structure and its apparatuses necessarily reflect, in Patrick Wolfe’s (2006) formulation, an “eliminatory” colonial logic. However, as Poulantzas’s concept of the relational state demonstrates, the state is not static; it is both a site of and shaped by political struggle.

The resistance of Indigenous communities impacted by MH through legal challenges and protest—as well as the broader shifts in state–Indigenous relations that occurred throughout the later 20th century—led to the signing of the 1977 Northern Flood Agreement (NFA) (Dobrovolny, 2008, p. 174) between five hydro-affected First Nations, MH, and the provincial and federal governments. In contrast to its attempts at domination in the mid-20th century, in the contemporary period MH has now adopted a “partnership” approach with First Nations through its Wuskwatim and Keeyask projects. This change reflects the evolving balances of forces between the settler state and Indigenous people both in Manitoba and across Canada. However, as the framework of the relational state shows, it does not ultimately challenge the central colonial orientation of the Canadian state.

THE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

MH’s Wuskwatim and Keeyask generating stations (completed in 2012 and 2021, respectively) are the first dams in a new series of “partnership” developments between MH and First Nations

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in northern Manitoba. Wuskwatim was jointly developed by MH (67 percent) and Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) (33 percent) (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, n.d.). The Keeyask project was jointly developed by MH (75 percent) and four First Nations (25 percent): Fox Lake Cree Nation, Tataskweyak Cree Nation, War Lake First Nation, and York Factory First Nation (Joint Keeyask Development Agreement, 2009). Because the governance of each project is associated with ownership stake, MH retains an absolute majority of voting members on both project boards. Governance agreements also allow the boards to continue business as usual if partner First Nations are unable to fill their board seats.

Both the Keeyask and Wuskwatim projects promised the creation of meaningful employment for members of partner First Nations. However, the type of employment created in these projects is of a short-term, high-turnover character, which “would barely indicate a gain of any sort for the employee, in terms of income or work experience” (Buckland & O’Gorman, 2017, pp. 84–85). While the Keeyask project has created employment opportunities for northern Indigenous people, a workplace audit of the project found that the “highest concentration” of Indigenous workers work in hospitality services, and “Indigenous employees were perceived as not receiving advancement or training opportunities” (D. Carriere & Associates, 2017, pp. 5, 27). As Buckland and O’Gorman note, “supervisory positions are also explicitly excluded from the [Keeyask project] agreement” for Indigenous employment (2017, p. 85). Indigenous workers account for only 12 percent and 14 percent of hires in the job category encompassing “managerial and supervisory staff (both Contractor and Manitoba Hydro)” at Wuskwatim and Keeyask, respectively (Keeyask Hydropower Limited Partnership, 2019, p. 27; Wuskwatim Power Limited Partnership, 2013, p. 37). Furthermore, an audit of the Keeyask worksite highlighted workplace discrimination,

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harassment, and racism toward Indigenous workers (D. Carriere & Associates, 2017).

THE LIMITATIONS OF PARTNERSHIP

The stability of these partnership agreements clearly benefits MH, but they also present risks to partner First Nations. Community revenues from projects can be threatened by changing global economic dynamics (see, e.g., Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, n.d.). The “partnership” process can present challenges to communities. The Keeyask project agreement requires only that a simple majority (by band population) of partner First Nations approve the agreement. By the time York Factory First Nation (a relatively small community) conducted a referendum on the agreement, two other First Nations had already voted to approve the project, meaning that it would proceed with or without York Factory’s support (York Factory First Nation, 2012, p. 24).

In response to Indigenous political struggle, the Canadian state has been forced to offer First Nations real concessions in order to protect the general interests of the dominant classes. While MH’s partnership model limits the negative impact of hydroelectric dams and provides some financial benefits, it does not give partner communities any significant degree of control and limits the ability of partner communities to assert

autonomy from MH through large debt loads and restrictive contracts. Northern hydroelectric projects still undermine Indigenous communities’ autonomy and economies and serve to impose a capitalist wage economy on the region. Furthermore, these projects are premised on the state having the sole claim to waters and lands in northern Manitoba. As Poulantzas argues, “the capitalist State is constituted by a negative general limit . . . [of] non-intervention in the ‘hard core’ of capitalist relations of production” (2000, p. 191). This means that the Canadian state is unable to affect the specific settler-colonial relations of production that characterize it. Therefore, the issues and power imbalances in the Wuskwatim and Keeyask projects cannot be seen as the result of poor planning or policy, but rather are in-built features of MH as a state apparatus.

In this way, the framework of the relational state offers a way of understanding both the change and continuity that characterize MH’s history. The continuity can be explained by the Canadian state’s structural inability to transform the basic character of its settler-colonial relations of production. Despite changes in strategy, the Canadian state will necessarily reflect this orientation, unless these relations of production are altered. 🍁

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