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Nunavut: Rethinking Political Culture (review)

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Nunavut: Rethinking Political Culture

by Ailsa Henderson. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2007.

Ailsa Henderson is currently senior lecturer at the School of Social and Political Studies at the University of Edinburgh (UK). In this book she explores very carefully the emergence of a political culture in Nunavut, a new territory in the Canadian Arctic that was created in 1999. Nunavut, "our land" in Inuktitut, is a huge region stretching from Greenland to the Northwest Territories populated by about 30,000 residents, 85 percent of whom are Inuit beneficiaries of the Nunavut Land claim.

In her study, Henderson uses the notion of culture in a rather broad perspective. It includes the various contemporary discourses, the norms of political behaviour, and political values, but also the institutions that structure political relationships within the territory. In this perspective, social practices play a secondary role, more space being given to ideologies. But her approach is solid and well grounded. Far from starting with the first elections of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly in 1999, Henderson takes into account many elements from the past, assuming rightly that political culture in Nunavut bears the marks of three important cultural influences that contain different approaches to political life: "a traditional Inuit approach to resource distribution and social control, a liberal Canadian political culture into which Inuit were integrated, and the institutional development of the Northwest Territories" (p. 215). Henderson argues that the federal culture has been more dominant than the other two cultures, the less influential factor being traditional Inuit approaches to social control and decision making.

The book is divided into ten chapters grouped in two parts. After a short introduction, Part 1 deals with the various influences that played a part in shaping contemporary Nunavut political culture. Chapter 2 offers a general, historical, and institutional presentation of Nunavut as well as its social and economic environment. The reader will appre-

ciate the careful but too-brief discussion on the role of residential schools in shaping Nunavut political culture. Chapter 3 identifies the traditional approaches to power, leadership, and social control in both contact and post-contact Inuit society. Using interviews with elders from the Igloolik oral history project, Henderson explores the notion of social control and governance in the shamanic and socioeconomic domains. She introduces a distinction between spiritual and temporal agents of social control and evaluates the impact of Christianization on those agents. The reasoning is thorough, but the idea that Inuit lost a significant element of their culture when they adopted Christianity might be too quickly accepted and also part of an ideological discourse. Following the paradigm of indigenization, one could argue that Inuit incorporated these new ideas in their own way and that Christianity thus enriched their traditions. Western societies always emphasize their enrichment when they adopt foreign features, and so why should the Inuit lose something? It is also a pity that Henderson does not point out the crucial role of middlemen and half-breed people who, very early during the whaling and trading periods, played an important role in facilitating the adoption of new ideas and practices from the outside. In Chapter 4 Henderson analyzes the process by which the Inuit were integrated into the Canadian political system in the 1960s and 1970s, underlining the fact that they were either excluded and isolated or courted and encouraged to participate in various elections. It is true that the federal government tended either to assimilate the Inuit or to integrate them. Chapter 5 provides an original analysis of government decisions regarding the institutions structuring political life in the Canadian Arctic. In some sort of an archaeological perspective, Henderson identifies the distinct visions of institutional design in the Northwest Territories as well as the conflicting views of the federal, territorial, and Inuit actors about political development.

The second part of the book is less historical and devoted to the understanding of the constituent elements of contemporary political culture in Nunavut. In Chapter 6, Henderson addresses consensus

politics, tracking its origins and impact on the behaviours of legislators. She also explores the absence of political parties, the emergence of political elites, and relations between the public and the legislature. This chapter is rich and detailed, which is also the case of Chapter 7 where she analyzes the behaviour of voters focusing on voter turnout in federal and territorial elections. Many tables are well presented and commented upon to support the argument. Taking the example of political competition, Henderson suggests that it took less than ten years for the political class in Nunavut to resemble political classes in southern Canada. Chapter 8 not only provides an interesting analysis of political attitudes in Nunavut but also explores the demographic foundations for political cleavages and the ideological clusters that can be found in this territory. Geographic, ethnic, generational, and spiritual cleavages are examined. Using the method of attitudinal clusters, Henderson identifies “five ideologically coherent groups”: (a) small community modernists, (b) frustrated Iqaluit-based young workers, (c) politically satisfied materialists, (d) cynical spectators, and (e) postmaterialist traditionalists. The discussion that follows is of great interest, not only for political scientists but also for other specialists in social sciences doing research on northern issues as well as for the Inuit. But such a typology remains tricky, and raises many questions. I am not convinced by the notion of postmaterialism that is brought in, but the author herself remains cautious in her conclusion. Chapter 9 focuses on the effort to transform political culture in Nunavut through the promotion and implementation of Inuit *qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ). This new concept refers to “the traditions of the past that are considered still useful today” and expresses the wish many Inuit and non-Inuit share to give more space to Inuit views, values, and practices within Nunavut institutions. Using official reports released by the Nunavut government, Henderson provides a brief history of that concept, but she leaves out too many key references authored by Inuit, geographers, and anthropologists. Similarly she does not discuss enough the notion of resilience that seems to me so crucial to understanding Inuit

qaujimajatuqangit. It would have been worthwhile here to go beyond the various discourses to discuss, for instance, the many conflicts still taking place when Inuit, well supported by Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated and other organizations, have to face Western views, rules, and values: see the question of respecting hunting quotas for bears or belugas, the ongoing conflict over the dog killings committed by the RCMP in the 1960s, and the problems in following the Canadian justice system or Western education parameters. The last part of that final chapter explores the various expectations and impacts of Nunavut on northern residents.

Henderson's contribution is rich but much oriented toward ideological discourses and institutions. Practices, orality and local conflicts are excluded from her analysis, and so the study remains incomplete. If we integrate this practical level, Inuit resilience appears much more salient. Beyond the adoption of Western views and institutional models, there is a dynamic of indigenization and conflict that is not discussed in this book. Regarding the sources, it is surprising to find so many important books missing from the list of references such as M. Mitchell's contribution, *From Talking Chiefs to a Native Corporate Elite: The Birth of Class and Nationalism among Canadian Inuit* (1996), W. Rasing's *Too Many People: Order and Non-conformity in Iglulingmiut Social Process* (1994), a few books published by the Nunavut Arctic College in different series such as *Perspectives on Traditional Law* (2001), or the books published in the Life Stories of Northern Leaders series to mention only some of them.

This being said, this book is well written and innovative. It provides an interesting contribution to the understanding of political culture in Nunavut by exploring new topics and raising new questions. I consider it an original and stimulating contribution to northern studies that should be read by scholars, students, and northern residents.

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