

The Critical Role of Social Workers in the Colonial State

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Critical Essay

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## **Introduction**

Social work has been intricately tied to settler colonial efforts since the implementation of the first Indian Act in 1864 (Tobias, 1991). Today, it is even more present than ever before, continuing on the legacy of residential schools even after their closure in 1996 (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019). In the past, the work of social workers has contributed to colonial efforts to assimilate the Indigenous populations of Canada into Euro-Canadian society (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). To do so, the Indian Act enacted several different tactics and strategies, most notably of which is residential schools where they attempted to “remove the Indian from the child” by forcibly removing the child from their family and community, therefore also removing them from their culture and language (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019; Tobias, 1991). Furthermore, when the residential schools began closing in the mid-XX century, the federal government found another way to “remove the Indian from the child” and to also remove them from their families, communities, cultures, and languages, through the use of social workers (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019). This event is known as the Sixties Scoop. Finally, through the use of social workers today, Indigenous children are still being removed from their homes due to unsafe living conditions that were created by the consequences of residential schools and other assimilation tactics and strategies, such as intergenerational trauma, the poverty cycle, poor housing and infrastructure due to the near-unlivable environmental conditions of reserves and where they are situated geographically, and poor social services available on reserves compared to other non-Indigenous Canadian communities, among many other factors. It is through the exploration of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and modern-day social work practices that social work was and still is implicated in the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### **Settler Colonialism and the Key Role Played by Residential Schools**

To understand the critical role that residential schools played in the Indian Act and its goal of assimilation, one must first understand the key concept of settler colonialism and how it differs from colonialism. Colonialism can be defined as the “practices related to the transformation of conquered territories into colonies, most often by sending settlers from the imperial power within the colony” (Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, 2015, p. 14). To understand this complex concept, one can break down the more general concept of colonialism into two different types: internal and external (Côté, 2019). External colonialism is based on the expropriation of natural and human resources from Indigenous peoples on their land in order to export them back to the colonizer’s country of origin, therefore only benefitting the colonizers and their country (*ibid.*). These colonies are known as colonies of occupation because the colonizers return back to their country of origin once they have either finished extracting their resources or the Indigenous peoples succeed in expunging them from their land (Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, 2015). An example of this type of colonialism would include India; British officials set up posts in India to extract approximately \$47 trillion of resources from the country and export back to Great Britain, but they never intended to settle in India and assimilate the population (Coburn, 2021; Shipley, 2020). This type of colonialism was designed primarily for economic exploitation and also happened in Spanish America and the Dutch East Indies (Shipley, 2020).

Internal colonialism, on the other hand, can be explained as the exploitation of the colonized (i.e. Indigenous peoples) and of natural resources by colonial authorities who are occupying the territory (Côté, 2019). In this type of colonialism, more popularly known as settler colonialism, the colonial populations come to this new territory to settle and to assimilate the Indigenous population (Coburn, 2021; Côté, 2019; Matsunaga, 2021a). Examples of this type of

colonialism outside of British and French North America include French Algeria and Portuguese Brazil (Shipley, 2020). In sum, settler colonialism can be explained as a permanent project where colonial settlers have the intention of staying in the “new” territory and forming a new society based upon the ones found in their countries of origin (Côté, 2019; Matsunaga, 2021a).

Furthermore, another important aspect of settler colonialism is land and who controls it (*ibid.*). The occupation of territory by colonizers cannot happen without political, social, and economic structures in place in order to allow for the “liberation” of land for colonizers to settle (Côté, 2019). In Canada, one can see this liberalization played out through the suppression and marginalization of Indigenous voices through the creation of Canada’s false history and also through the creation of vast systems of control, such as the residential school system and reserves, all to erase Indigenous peoples and their cultures (Côté, 2019; Matsunaga, 2021a). By erasing Indigenous peoples from the popular narrative and by placing them firmly in the Canadian past, it allows for the easier settlement of colonizers onto the land in terms of political, economic, social, and legal structures.

Finally, settler colonialism is an ongoing structure, it is an institution (Matsunaga, 2021a). One within which social work is built into and helps support. In 2019, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) released a report detailing their apology and acknowledgement of the key role they played in the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and the ongoing practice of placing Indigenous children who are in the foster care system in non-Indigenous homes outside of their communities, which can be compared to a continuation of the residential school system because it removes children from their communities, culture, and language (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019).

The residential school system was enacted in 1876 with the first Indian Act, which incorporated all of the protective features written into earlier legislation but also established much more strict requirements for settler use of Indigenous lands and for their alienation (Tobias, 1991). Overall, the first Indian Act was enacted in order to further the goals of civilization and assimilation of Canada's Indigenous populations (*ibid.*). The federal government wanted to establish the residential school system and require the attendance of Indigenous children because they saw the education of Indigenous children as a keystone in the civilization process (*ibid.*). Residential schools and education in general were used to dispossess the knowledge, beliefs, and ways of life of Indigenous children in order to disconnect them from their families, communities, culture, and languages (Matsunaga, 2021b). Furthermore, children suffered emotional, mental, physical, and sexual abuse at these schools at the hands of priests, nun, teachers, and employees, and did not always survive or return to their families and communities due to shame, language erasure, or simply not being able to remember where their communities or families were (Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, 2015). These experiences have led to intergenerational trauma among survivors, which in turn leads to poverty, increased risk of alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence, among many other things (*ibid.*). Overall, These schools were used as a method of socialisation in order to control and assimilate Indigenous children to Euro-Canadian society by removing them from their families, communities, and cultures (Matsunaga, 2021b).

### **The Sixties Scoop and the CASW's Apology**

The Sixties Scoop “refers to the large-scale removal or ‘scooping’ of Indigenous children from their homes, communities and families of birth through the 1960s, and their subsequent adoption into predominantly non-Indigenous, middle-class families across the United States and

Canada”, and even farther internationally in Europe, Asia, and Africa in some cases (Sinclair & Dainard, 2016). Social workers were the main actors in this decade-long event and the CASW acknowledges having played a significant role in the events that led up to the Sixties Scoop and apologizes for the actions they either took or did not take (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019). The events leading up to the Sixties Scoop include the residential school system and also sustaining a vision of child welfare that was derived from discriminatory practices and policies, specifically the Indian Act, which were developed from the desire to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their lands (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, in the CASW’s acknowledgement and apology, they recognize four negative elements from its past that guided their actions or inactions in regards to the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019; Matsunaga, 2021b). First, their policies and actions fed off of a racist ideology and in itself also fed the racist ideology that presented Indigenous peoples as inferior human beings (*ibid.*). For example, in social workers’ child welfare reports, they often described and portrayed Indigenous parents “as neglectful and unable to provide what is in the ‘best interests of the child’” (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019, p. 7).

Second, the CASW acknowledges that they possessed a colonial mentality in both the language they used and the actions they either took or did not take (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019; Matsunaga, 2021b). In the past, their policies were used to excuse the false narrative that Indigenous peoples are more vulnerable to health and social issues, such as tuberculosis and poverty, to justify their control over the extraction and placement of Indigenous children in the child welfare system from their traditional communities into typically white communities (*ibid.*).

Third, in their acknowledgement and apology, they characterized their past behaviour as being a part of the white saviour complex because they strongly encouraged provinces and territories take over the social services offered to Indigenous peoples on reserve in order to improve Indigenous peoples education, health, and overall well-being on reserve (*ibid.*). However, at the same time as proposing this change, they proposed in the same breath that “the objective of a national program must be the full assimilation of the Indians into Canadian life” (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, under the guise of wanting to improve Indigenous peoples’ lives on reserves, they also did not believe that they had the capabilities to be self-governing and to actually maintain these services themselves.

Finally, the fourth negative element of the CASW is that they were determined to promote social work as a viable employment option and to recruit people into the field, but sadly, at the expense of Indigenous peoples (Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux, 2019; Matsunaga, 2021b). Agencies primarily recruited non-Indigenous social workers to work for them on Indigenous child and family welfare cases, however, these social workers were not properly educated about Indigenous ways of thinking or life in general and when they assessed risk in Indigenous families and communities to Indigenous children, they made negative assumptions based upon ‘superior’ Western approaches to living and family life (*ibid.*).

Overall, social workers in Canada played a key role in the removal and displacement of Indigenous children during the Sixties Scoop and their actions continue to have a lasting impact today, nearly as big as the ones left by residential schools. In all, no number of apologies will make up for the fact that young children were taken from their homes, families, and communities to be displaced across Canada or even in other countries with strangers who had zero connection to their cultures, traditions, heritage, or language. The actions of social workers during the Sixties Scoop

had real, lasting, negative impacts on the children and helped the federal government in trying to achieve their ultimate goal of assimilation and the erasure of Indigenous peoples.

### **Social Work Today: Picking Up Where Residential Schools Left Off?**

Although the practices and policies of social workers in Canada today have greatly improved since the Sixties Scoop, “the social work profession is a foundational component to the creation, expansion, and adaptation of the settler state,” and there is still lots of room for improvement (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019, p. 1). Indigenous children are still being taken from their homes, families, and communities and are being displaced across the country with non-Indigenous families who do not have any connection to their cultures, traditions, heritage, or languages. This treatment of Indigenous children and families and the effects this is having on these children and families is akin to the consequences of the residential school system. Indigenous children in residential schools had to suffer emotional, psychological, physical, sexual abuse at the hands of priests, nuns, teachers, and general employees who worked and lived at the school for years, and not all of them made it out alive and many never returned to their families or communities because they either could not remember where their communities were, they could no longer speak their Indigenous language, or they felt ashamed of what they had endured at the residential schools. Many similar things are still happening but under a different guise of the child welfare system. According to the Canadian 2016 census, Indigenous children make up 52.2% of children in the foster care system who are under the age of fourteen, and yet Indigenous children only make up 7.7% of all children in Canada under the age of fourteen (Canada, 2018). To break down this statistic further, this means that out of the 28,655 children under the age of fifteen who are in the foster care system who were placed in private homes at the time, 14,970 of them were Indigenous (*ibid.*). No social worker or politician can guarantee that every single home that these

Indigenous children are being placed in is a safe home, despite their many efforts that they are hopefully making, nor can they guarantee that these Indigenous children will maintain their connections to their cultures, heritages, and languages. Therefore, the current policies and actions of social workers and of the child welfare system in Canada is still propagating harmful assimilation policies on Indigenous communities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, social work was and still is being implicated in the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada through the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and modern-day social work practices of placing Indigenous children outside of their communities and therefore severing their connection to their cultures, traditions, heritages, and languages. Yes, one can acknowledge that the field of social work has improved a great deal since the turn of the millennium, however, there is still a long way to go in terms of their current practices and policies. Indigenous children are still being placed outside of their communities due to the living conditions on reserves that the federal government created through their assimilation tactics and strategies, such as poverty, poor housing and infrastructure, essentially non-existent social services, and domestic abuse, to name just a few. To improve social work policies and actions, further education and training is required so that social workers fully comprehend the situations that Indigenous families and communities are facing and how their actions could either improve or deteriorate the situation for Indigenous children even more.

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