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The settler colonialism of social work and the social work of settler colonialism

Craig Fortier^a and Edward Hon-Sing Wong^b

^aSocial Development Studies, Renison University College, Waterloo, ON, Canada; ^bSocial Work, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

The consolidation of the social work profession in Canada was critical to the settler colonial project. Parallel to the rise of the modern police force, the accounting bureaucracy, and the colonial legal apparatus, the social work profession is a foundational component to the creation, expansion, and adaptation of the settler state. Through a historical review of the origins of social work and its professionalization in Canada, this paper argues that contemporary social work and social service provision remain circumscribed by the logics of conquest, extraction, apprehension, management, and pacification that advance the settler project and seek to secure settler futurity. Given the incommensurabilities between social work practice and Indigenous processes of decolonization this paper explores potential pathways towards unsettling social work practice including disrupting dehistoricization (working towards the repatriation of Indigenous lands, children, and cultural traditions and the upholding of Indigenous sovereignty); working towards deinstitutionalization (challenging the institutionalization of service provision and re-focusing on mutual aid, treaty responsibilities, and settler complicity); and promoting deprofessionalization (the restructuring of the 'helping' practices of social work back under the control of communities themselves).

KEYWORDS

Social work; settler colonialism; Indian agent; unsettling; sixties scoop; racial extractivism; non-profit industrial complex

The missionary, the Indian agent, and the settler colonialism of social work

Starting points matter. And the most common starting point for publications on the history of social work in Canada is a time period dubbed the era of 'moral reform,' generally referring to social work and social welfare provision pre-1890, prior to the consolidation of the profession.¹ This ambiguous date of departure usually draws from research showing how industrialization in Europe created mass social upheaval resulting in the rise of charitable type organizations to support those people who were falling through the cracks of the rapidly proletarianizing society. For instance, the opening paragraph of the widely assigned textbook, Hick's *Social Work in Canada: An Introduction 3rd Edition*, reads: 'The immediate antecedents of Anglo-Canadian social work can be found in [the consolidation of the wage-labour system] in Britain

CONTACT Craig Fortier  craig.fortier@uwaterloo.ca  Social Development Studies, Renison University College, 240 Westmount Road N, Waterloo, Canada N2L 3G5

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and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.² From this historical starting point, we are then introduced to both the Charitable Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movement as the two core pathways to the professionalization of social work.

The problem with this history is not that it is inaccurate, but that it is incomplete. The omission of the settler colonial context in which social work consolidates into a modern profession in Canada is conspicuous in its absence. By avoiding or eliminating the antecedents of social work that contributed directly to the settler colonial project and continue to structure the profession today, the desire to frame social work as a rather positive reaction to the injustices wrought by the capitalist system can be easily accomplished. As Beenash Jafri astutely observes, 'settler/colonial desire is integral to the construction of settler subjectivities, to settler narratives, and to the project of erasure underlying the indigenizing efforts of settler projects'.³ A recent shift in this respect emerges in the publication of Ives et al.'s *Introduction to Social Work in Canada: Histories, Contexts, and Practices* and Hicks and Stokes' *Social Work in Canada: An Introduction 4th Edition*.⁴ Here, the editors of these volumes take great care to avoid falling into the trap that plagues past textbooks and other social work histories by focusing on the traditions of healing and helping among Indigenous communities and incorporating them into the origin stories of the social work profession in Canada. These textbooks are also far more critical of the practices of the social work profession within the white settler context and include a number of chapters and passages edited and written by respected Indigenous social workers and scholars. Nonetheless, when we do arrive at the section that discusses the emergence of social work in Canada, these texts continue to use the charitable organization societies and settlement house movement (and their French-Canadian equivalents) as a starting point for analysis. While these revisions signal an important shift, the texts still fail to accurately trace the lineage of the social work profession in Canada within settler colonialism – work that is only now being published by critical social work theorists.⁵ Our paper seeks to build on this work by situating the emergence of social work in Canada to its historical antecedents in the colonizing Christian missionary and the Indian agent. By situating the origins of the profession in these contexts, the roles and responsibilities of the charitable organization societies and settlement houses (as well as the Canadian Association of Social Workers and other contemporary social service associations) become more clear.

'Enough to keep them alive'⁶

The origins of social work in Canada were never solely a response to the harsh conditions of poverty faced by newcomers seeking to settle in the British and French colonies of North America. The initial responsibilities of social welfare provision and the paternalistic attempt to both Christianize and civilize as a condition for receiving such welfare can be traced to the authoritarian relationships imposed on Indigenous peoples by early traders and missionaries long before the mass migrations of white settler populations at the dawn of the long nineteenth century. While not explicitly 'social workers', traders with the Hudson's Bay Company, Christian missionaries, and subsequently, civil servants, were tasked by the Crown as early as the 1763 Royal Proclamation with the responsibility of easing 'the relentless pressure for land and ["managing"] the displacement of Indians'.⁷ These missionaries and traders were responsible for dispensing food relief and quelling

resistance to dispossession as a result of the ongoing military occupation of Indigenous territories.⁸

However, by the mid-1800s, in an effort to address the increasing conflicts between settlers, the colonial governments, and Indigenous peoples, the British Colonial Office decided that the best course of action was to insulate Indigenous communities or remove Indigenous peoples from proximity with settler society and start upon a process of 'civilization'.⁹ Early relief administration and the rudimentary apparatus of service provision to Indigenous populations that would become the domain of social workers must be considered in this context. As Shewell explains, the policies set forth by the colonial administration and entrusted in both missionary and civilian agents, conceptualized relief within 'the prevailing European attitudes about deservedness, self-reliance, thrift, and the moral virtue of work ... As such it sprang from charitable and residual responses to need'.¹⁰ While some may attribute the charitable response as coming from a genuine humanitarian concern for the suffering of Indigenous peoples dealing with dispossession and starvation, this response was also informed by a liberal democratic belief in the need to promote work and industriousness to lessen Indigenous peoples' 'burden' on the settler state.¹¹

The responsibility for this acculturation, as Brownlie notes, was

divided between Christian missionaries and Indian agents (who were still called Indian superintendents in the mid-1800s). The latter were, for the most part, individuals associated with the military who had already been involved with First Nations, making Britain's annual gift distributions and reporting on conditions [on reservations].¹²

The responsibility of the missionaries and Indian agents in this case were twofold, they were to promote the 'habits of industry' among Indigenous peoples as a means of 'civilizing' and they were to distribute assistance in cases of severe need, which, as Brownlie emphasizes was an obligation that became entrenched in the *Indian Act* and a number of individual treaties following Canadian confederation. For their efforts in that matter, the Christian churches and missionaries were granted control over the education of Indigenous children.¹³ Thus, a separation of duties between the Indian agent (as social service provider) and the Christian missionaries (as educators in the Indian residential and day school systems) was delineated, though coordination and overlap between the two was vital to the settler states' colonial strategy.¹⁴

The powers and authority of Indian agents stretched well beyond service provision. The agents served as magistrates to settle disputes and to enforce provincial laws upon the Indigenous communities they oversaw.¹⁵ They also acted as accountants who administered funds and were charged with keeping financial records for monies or goods owed to Indigenous communities by the government.¹⁶ In this role, Indian agents and bureaucrats in the various departments in charge of Indian Affairs used a variety of accounting practices to translate legislation that sought to force Indigenous communities to adopt a farming lifestyle into practice.¹⁷ However, as Manuel and Posluns emphasize, 'what really made the agent more powerful than the chiefs was that he was now empowered to dispense welfare to anyone who could not make a living while their neck was within this noose woven by foreign laws'.¹⁸ The provision and denial of social welfare to Indigenous peoples under occupation became a core technology of the settler apparatus pushing for a radical transformation of the modes of production of Indigenous

communities in order to facilitate ongoing dispossession, as the Elizabethan Poor Laws had functioned in England.¹⁹

Paired with the physical force of the Northwest Mounted Police/RCMP and genocidal legislation that sought to contain Indigenous populations to particular plots of land, destroy languages, eliminate cultural traditions, and physically remove children from their communities, the Indian agent could use the dispensation of vital social welfare benefits (i.e. food, clothes, shelter, survival supplies) as a means of coercing Indigenous peoples to submit to the rule of the settler state. Social work, while still under the purview of the Indian agent, emerges as a technology of state control that enacts the seemingly contradictory social policy goals of the Canadian state and its provinces of creating a dependence among Indigenous peoples on the welfare of the settler state while placing a premium on self-reliance as a virtue of liberal capitalism.²⁰

Not coincidentally, charitable organization societies and settlement houses also preached self-reliance and used social welfare as a mechanism of control in a parallel fashion to manage and assimilate new immigrant settler populations, particularly those coming from non-Anglo Saxon countries.²¹ While these social service movements purported to deal with the social implications of poverty, they were operationalized in Canada (and the United States) for the purpose of settlement and colonization. As Lee and Ferrer argue, 'Whether the approach was charity-based (i.e. focus on individual defects of poor people) or settlement house based (i.e. focus on community organizing and solidarity building), both movements served an integral role in the colonial nation-building project.'²² The work of these movements, while seemingly disconnected to that of the Indian Agent, was also a vital component for achieving a central objective: the proliferation of the settler state and settler society in Canada and the United States through the dispossession and isolation of Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories. The processes of dispossession and settlement were facilitated by the offering and denial of social welfare to both Indigenous and settler populations in a way that created a social hierarchy that is embedded in and continues to inform social work practice. This includes an implicit belief in the superiority of being Anglo-Saxon and the creation and enforcement of racial hierarchy that promotes the assimilation of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants and Indigenous peoples alike.²³ As Lee and Ferrer emphasize, this social hierarchy was perpetuated and defended by even the most progressive practitioners of social welfare such as Jane Addams and leading social work publications and associations such as the CASW.²⁴

The decline of the Indian agent and the rise of the social worker

The repressive role of the Indian agent and the Department of Indian Affairs was repeatedly challenged by Indigenous communities through small acts of defiance, planned insurrections, assertions of sovereignty and practices of refusal.²⁵ Despite this ongoing resistance it was not until the late 1940s that cracks in the hegemonic power of Indian Agents began to arise. By the 1960s, a new political climate, which saw the development of Indigenous associations like the National Indian Brotherhood (Assembly of First Nations), made it possible for many communities to expel Indian agents for good.²⁶

With the influence and role of the Indian agent being resisted by Indigenous communities, the Canadian state was forced to reformulate its policies directed towards

Indigenous nations. The resultant policy shift of the federal government moved away from isolationist confinement on reservations in which the Indian agent played a central role towards an increased focus on the full assimilation of Indigenous peoples within the Canadian state and settler society, a policy that reached its apex with the 1969 White Paper.²⁷ To facilitate this policy shift, the Canadian government sought to divest the roles played by the Indian agent to other members of settler civil society in the lead up to major revisions of the *Indian Act* in 1951.

Starting in 1946, the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Indian Act received a number of joint submissions from the Canadian Welfare Council (CWC) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) proposing welfare policy reforms directed towards Indigenous communities that positioned their members as the logical recipients of the divested social welfare functions of the Indian agent.²⁸ This was not the first foray of organized social welfare organizations into policies relating to Indigenous peoples in Canada. In 1913, the Social Service Council of Canada had a standing committee on 'Indian Affairs' where a variety of Christian churches associated with the growing social work profession sought to gain influence in social service provision on reserves and support the residential school system.²⁹ While these earlier attempts to gain a foothold into social welfare policy related to Indigenous peoples were relatively meagre in terms of their effect, the lobbying by the CASW and CWC in the lead up to the 1951 revisions to the *Indian Act* would secure social workers a significant role in the shifting settler colonial landscape.

As Jennissen and Lundy note, the 1947 joint brief of the CWC and CASW to the Special Joint Committee appointed to examine the *Indian Act* advocated the full assimilation of Canada's Indigenous population while emphasizing the importance of nominal community autonomy but with the extension of settler-controlled provincial services including health and education into Indigenous communities.³⁰ Crucially, this brief stressed the importance of employing 'qualified personnel' [read social workers] in the provision and administration of services for Indigenous peoples, tasks usually administered by the Indian agent. Shewell explains, this submission strongly influenced the committee and its recommendations not because 'they were original but rather that they agreed with what was already becoming evident in federal Indian policy', the transition towards what would become the White Paper style of assimilationist policies.³¹ Playing a role that would become commonplace in the years to follow, the Canadian Association of Social Workers and the Canadian Welfare Council provided the state with the legitimation of their political intent under the guise of a more humane and professional provision of social welfare to Indigenous communities.

What were the specific policy shifts recommended by the joint CWC/CASW submission? To a large extent these recommendations were a reformulation of the same principles by which the Indian agent ruled over Indigenous communities. For instance, a submission from the Montreal branch of the CASW argued, 'we, as Canadians, should rid ourselves of the idea that Indians should remain dependent', while at the same time reinforcing the need to introduce social welfare programmes to support these very communities.³² Broadly speaking, the policy shifts advocated by the joint submission promoted a programme of assimilation spearheaded by social workers themselves under the guise of supporting greater Indigenous self-determination.

The transition of the social welfare roles of the Indian agent to professional social workers was seamless. As Jennissen and Lundy report, in 1949 'the CASW sent a letter

to the deputy minister of mines and resources, Mr. Keenleyside, requesting that social workers be appointed to assist the new superintendent of welfare for the Indian Affairs branch ...'.³³ A letter of response that same year to the CASW from Minister Keenleyside brought the news that these suggestions were accepted by the department and nine social worker positions had been created to assist in Indian welfare in offices across the country. The tasks and duties outlined for these social workers by the Minister matched those specified in the CASW letter of request.

The social work of settler colonialism

With the revisions to the *Indian Act* in 1951, social workers now occupied key responsibilities previously held by Indian agents, including: general welfare services, children and family welfare, recreation, and adult education.³⁴ From this point on, the profession of social work has become a central player in the settler colonial policies of Canada, adapting and reformulating its role in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their territories through a series of strategic shifts in policy and protocols, including in the most recent shift towards a politics of liberal recognition and reconciliation.³⁵ Despite this heightened role, the position of social workers in the settler colonial project remains provisional and contingent on the continued support of its membership. This support is being consistently challenged by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within and outside of the profession.³⁶ Nonetheless, as we will argue in this section, the social work profession remains circumscribed by three core responsibilities in the settler colonial process: (1) aiding in the dispossession and extraction of Indigenous peoples from their territories and communities; (2) supporting the (re)production of the settler state; and (3) acting as a buffer zone to contain and pacify Indigenous communities that are either engaged in direct confrontation with the settler state or are facing crises due to state and corporate practices of resource extraction and dispossession.

Social work as a technology of extraction

The social work of settler colonialism is not a specific historical event or a series of events. Social work as a settler colonial technology works to constantly produce the settler state as it contributes to, in the words of the late Patrick Wolfe, a structure of elimination, often under the guise of being 'helpful'.³⁷ In this regard, social work as a profession in Canada is not simply produced by the settler colonial context, but works in tangible and material ways to maintain it. One of the critical ways that social workers further the settler colonial project is by doing the work of extracting Indigenous peoples from their communities resulting in assimilation and proletarianization in order to facilitate their ongoing dispossession from their territories.

The removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities by social workers is intimately linked to the extraction of natural resources from Indigenous peoples' land bases for the purposes of capitalist accumulation. Preston coins the term 'racial extractivism' to describe how the processes of racialization and dispossession are central to extractivist projects under neoliberalism.³⁸ To justify such extraction, Preston argues that

land use and European liberal ideologies of property not only motivated the “resourcification” of Indigenous territories then and now, but also informed racialization of Indigenous peoples as wasteful, lazy and unable to be productive in the economy or in white settler society more generally.³⁹

As a technology of this racial extractivism, social workers serve a dual purpose: to delegitimize Indigenous practices of caring and social support through the imposition of a professional class of social service providers to ‘help’ the community adjust to the new economic context and as an agent of removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities under the guise of a humane (and perhaps benevolent) activity for those people who bear the brunt of the social consequences of increasing industrial development in their communities. These actions are often framed as a response to crises that Indigenous communities are facing due to dispossession and colonial violence, because their home territories are desired by Canada’s resource extraction industries.

Since 1951, the CASW has positioned social workers as the appropriate agents to oversee child welfare in Indigenous communities. Though there have been recent moves to bring child welfare under the direct control of First Nations, placing control of Indigenous child welfare under the care of Indigenous social workers, the profession remains committed to the process of assessing whether Indigenous children should be removed from their families and communities.⁴⁰ Despite this shift, even Indigenous-led child welfare is usually constrained by the settler state and assimilationist agenda. Indigenous child welfare agencies still need to conform to provincial rules in order to get their mandate, they suffer from lack of adequate resources, and still grapple with how to deal with the depth of inter-generational trauma that impacts the communities with whom they work.⁴¹

As Neu and Graham articulate, social workers as agents of the state colonial apparatus demonstrate how settler colonial governance works through the enabling and disabling of agency. The Sixties Scoop is the clearest example of how the process of delegitimizing Indigenous social networks enabled professional social workers and government agents to remove children from their families and communities.⁴² Drawing on the work of Raven Sinclair, Spencer shows how the Sixties Scoop consisted of two interrelated processes – extraction and pulverization – which were executed by social workers through the forced removal of children from their communities and the attempt to assimilate and reconstitute Indigenous children as neoliberal citizens in settler society.⁴³ These processes were both enabled by and funded through the changes to the Indian Act in 1951 that granted social workers both access to and authority over child welfare on Indian reservations. As one of the most notorious cases of extraction in Canada’s colonial history, the Sixties Scoop saw social workers in Canada’s Children’s Aid Societies ‘remove some 20,000 Indigenous children from their reserves under the auspices of “protecting” these children from neglect, and placing them in settler families’.⁴⁴ Despite the harmful consequences of this policy on Indigenous peoples and their communities and the apparent support by CASW to address this genocidal past, the involvement of the child welfare system in Indigenous communities has, in fact, seen a resurgence since the millennium – what Sinclair (citing Gilchrist) calls the ‘millennium scoop’.⁴⁵ Placing the current system in context of broader removals of Indigenous children from their communities, in this case through the residential school system, Blackstock et al. estimate that, in fact, three times as many Indigenous children are currently in the care of the state as were in residential

schools during peak enrolment.⁴⁶ Social workers have been able to mobilize the discursive trauma incurred by Indigenous children through this extraction to justify further state-sanctioned intervention into Indigenous families 'on the grounds of children's needs for "protection" and parents' needs for clinical intervention'.⁴⁷ And the Canadian state has engaged in active delegitimization of community-control of resources and social services, including the use of fiscal techniques to exercise power over communities like Attawapiskat in order to falsely frame the water and housing crises in that community as one of corrupt governance rather than under-resourcing and neglect.⁴⁸

Social work as a technology of (re)producing the settler state

Maintaining the settler project requires work. It requires ideological and intellectual work that creates and perpetuates myths like *terra nullius* and the 'doctrine of discovery' that underlie Canada's claims to Indigenous territory.⁴⁹ It requires physical and material work that includes the use of force and incarceration to apprehend and remove Indigenous peoples who resist or get in the way of Canada's political or economic goals.⁵⁰ It requires emotional and symbolic work to construct a culture of derision for Indigenous peoples (e.g. 'they don't pay taxes', 'they have problems with alcohol', etc.) while promoting a self-righteous conception of Canadian identity (e.g. 'we are a multicultural society', 'we are peacekeepers', 'we are a progressive society', etc.). Maintaining the settler colonial project also requires social work. This work includes the dispensations of social services and public assistance that help to support a burgeoning white settler population at the expense of Indigenous peoples and racialized communities.

Historic and contemporary social work practices work to maintain a racialized population that can be spatially managed to serve the needs (both land and labour) of white settler society in Canada. In this sense, the contemporary Indigenous social service provision sector has been created out of the trauma of dispossession rather than the practice of decolonization. Social workers are generally not engaged in work that centres repatriating land or following the lead of Indigenous communities as they rebuild structures of governance, instead they work with the more muted goals of alleviating the worst suffering while consciously or unconsciously supporting the ongoing process of dispossession.⁵¹ As Preston argues, 'while the structures that secure white access to land, cheap labour and capital change over time and in relation to regional politics and histories, the systemic channelling of assets to "exalted subjects" of white settler states remains uninterrupted'.⁵² Social work as a technology of (re)production of the settler state works to produce a notion of white civility within settler society that ensures its commitment to the process of settlement; mobilizes reconciliation as a pacifying discourse that assuages settler guilt and absolves state/settler society responsibility for real transformative change; and upholds the state's claims to property through a saviour complex that seeks to maintain settler control over Indigenous peoples and communities.

Social work plays a vital role in the production of a settler society that was and continues to be committed to the process of settlement. Social work in many respects functions to promote a concept of white civility that stands as a benchmark of assimilation and exclusion for all other non-white peoples including Black people, people of colour and Indigenous peoples. As Greensmith shows, white settler colonial institutions like professional social work produce and re-produce Indigenous peoples and other non-white

communities as having 'deficits', 'problems', and/or 'pathologies' that require correction and support through processes that 'help' these communities integrate into white settler society (though this process is never fully realizable).⁵³ This is not a recent phenomenon. Johnstone explains that the goal of assimilation or Canadianisation as well as the adoption of a 'scientific' system of distinguishing between ethnic groups of people was central to the discourse of white civility within the social work profession as early as the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ By the 1960s, Indigenous community workers hired by the federal government were forced into positions where they had to decide whether they wanted to sell their communities on the solutions for which the government wanted to find acceptance or whether they wanted to serve their communities in ways that affirmed their sovereignty.⁵⁵ Similarly, Greensmith's study of LGBTQ service provision for Indigenous peoples in Toronto shows that in the contemporary era, Two Spirit and queer Indigenous folks who are unwilling to assimilate or accept the white settler colonial conditions placed upon their lives are marked as disruptive, angry, or labelled with tropes used to delegitimize Indigenous ways of being.⁵⁶

This work is present even when social workers seek to engage in processes of reconciliation, recognition, and inclusion. Since social workers have tended to situate the harms of their settler colonial practices in the past, the bulk of reconciliatory efforts focus on repairing what Coulthard calls 'the injurious legacy left in the way of history', not the colonial relationship itself.⁵⁷ As Coulthard argues, reconciliation in this context remains a pacifying discourse 'that functions to assuage settler guilt, on the one hand, and absolve the federal government's responsibility to transform the colonial relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations, on the other'.⁵⁸ This raises the question of how non-Indigenous social service providers can work with Indigenous peoples without individualizing their experiences of trauma and erasing their colonial trauma and the multigenerational loss.⁵⁹ Given that most social workers are motivated by discourses of saving or helping (and a quick poll of our classrooms suggests that an overwhelming number of students studying to become social workers are drawn to the profession with these explicit intentions), disrupting a settler colonial politics of care requires that we recognize the way in which social work acts as a technology of containment, management, and pacification to maintain the status quo.

Social work as a technology of containment and pacification

To understand how and why social workers have become the frontline agents of containing and pacifying Indigenous communities actively resisting colonization, we need to situate the work of the profession within the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). Rodríguez describes the non-profit industrial complex as the medium by which the state asserts its influence over communities who assert their sovereignty or resist racist state policies by keeping them 'fundamentally tethered to the state through extended structures of financial and political accountability'.⁶⁰ As Pasternak argues, this is especially true in the case of Indigenous communities.⁶¹

Within neoliberalism, the role of social service non-profit agencies is increasingly to take responsibility for people who are in the throes of state abandonment or to quell the resistance of communities in outright rebellion.⁶² As individuals and communities lose access to government run social service programmes, social workers and other social service

providers act as what Kivel calls 'a buffer zone' that seeks to alleviate the worst sufferings resulting from capitalism, ableism, settler colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, etc., while also delegitimizing the tangible solutions put forward by communities asserting their sovereignty and autonomy from the state.⁶³

Professional designations like those bestowed by the Canadian Association of Social Workers are used as a tool to monopolize state funds in the hands of people constrained by the limits of their professional code of conduct – even if these codes of conduct uphold the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their territories, cultures, and communities. See, for example, the social worker engagement with non-profit social service agencies set up in the Alberta tar sands to facilitate the displacement of Indigenous communities.⁶⁴ Given the onerous conditions of incorporation, board governance, and the emphasis placed on professional post-secondary social work education programmes, grassroots community initiatives stand little chance to access funding that would allow them to work directly with members of their community to address issues of trauma, conflict, poverty, etc. Moreover, the transition from state-provided social services that at least have the potential for public oversight through elections to private not-for-profit professional organization who are only accountable to their boards and funders, creates a context where agencies compete for funds and where it is in their interests to delegitimize grassroots community-based initiatives. Neoliberal social service models funnel state funds away from Indigenous peoples, who are described as being incapable of showing the type of leadership that would warrant their sovereignty and autonomy over the social welfare of their own communities (see Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau's recent statement as one example of this).⁶⁵

As part of the non-profit industrial complex, social workers are key collaborators with law enforcement to quell rebellion in Indigenous communities – including the production and fabrication of 'social order' that is amenable to resource extraction.⁶⁶ In their role as front-line workers in the prison industrial complex, social service providers exchange intelligence with the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police targeting specific individuals, groups, and communities who aim to assert their sovereignty.⁶⁷ Social workers are also key players in what Sangster calls the 'censuring process' – distinguishing the immoral from the moral through the production of discourses based on gendered, racialized and economic power relations.⁶⁸ In her study of the incarceration of Indigenous women in Canada, Sangster argues that the more rebellious Aboriginal women in communities or those who refuse to abide by settler colonial expectations and incite their communities to fight back have been incarcerated at a higher rate both historically and in our contemporary era.⁶⁹ This is often after they have rejected the 'help' offered by social workers and psychologists seeking to 'diagnose' their problems through individualized and decontextualized methods – a central feature of the neoliberal state.

Social work and the incommensurabilities of decolonization

Given these histories and the current functions of the profession, can social work be decolonized? Considering the intertwining of Canadian social work in the settler project, we argue that the remaking of the social work field as a force of decolonization, if at all possible, would require a radical transformation that renders social work unrecognizable. While

decolonial resistance and practices do occur within the context of social work, the entrenched logics discussed above mean that the social work profession is largely incommensurable with Indigenous processes of decolonization. Drawing from Indigenous theorists within and outside the field of social work, we suggest three aspects of incommensurability: detachment and erasure of history and complicity; individualization of issues and practices; and professionalization and narratives of expertise. Attached to each of these aspects of incommensurability are ideas for unsettling social work: deprofessionalization (the restructuring of the 'helping' practices of social work back under the control of communities themselves); deinstitutionalization (fighting against the non-profit industrial complex and re-focusing on mutual aid, treaty responsibilities, and settler complicity); and resisting settler extractivism (working towards the repatriation of land, children, and culture and the upholding of Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence).

Here, we are not seeking to provide a roadmap or model to see this transformation through. Indeed, as settlers, to unilaterally suggest a single pathway toward decolonization for social workers would be to reinforce the very colonial processes we are attempting to critique and challenge. As Baskin argues decolonizing social work,

[I]s more specifically about reclaiming Aboriginal helping practices and being supported by non-Aboriginal peoples through activism. We, as Aboriginal peoples, must be our own leaders in this process. Non-Aboriginal peoples must not be allowed to direct us in how to decolonize.⁷⁰

We affirm, then, that decolonization must be led by Indigenous peoples and the transformation of the field will require ongoing and constant conversations between Indigenous and settler communities.

Disrupting dehistoricization

Our first task is to identify the incommensurabilities between the dehistoricization prevalent in social work with the deep and long standing relationships Indigenous communities assert in their process of decolonization. Often we, as social workers, are quick to rush to practice without carefully considering the way in which our histories reverberate in the actions we take in the present. Tuck and Yang argue that we must recognize settler complicity in colonial violence, and they call on researchers to move away from, or refuse engagement in the commerce of Indigenous pain, what they call 'damage-centered studies, rescue research, and pain tourism'.⁷¹ Tuck and Yang's (2015) critique of these practices is that they often offer up stories of suffering and humiliation in a decontextualized fashion, lacking an analysis that centres complicity and underlying processes that brought about the suffering. In order to reject the exploitation of Indigenous communities and the resulting commerce in their stories of suffering to further one's academic career, Tuck and Yang suggest focusing on issues of power and complicity in colonial violence as an unsettling project. This proposition is highly applicable to the field of social work. Many social work careers are built on the treatment of Indigenous suffering, while framing ourselves as innocent helpers. Our role in creating Indigenous suffering, whether it is through the apprehension of Indigenous children or acting as a buffer zone to subdue rebellion is made invisible.

Indeed, a number of Indigenous social work theorists have made this specific argument. For example, Bennett, Zubrzycki, and Bacon argue that non-Indigenous social workers

should participate in decolonization through recognizing and addressing 'the powerful influences that the history of colonization and the ongoing nature of colonizing practices have'.⁷² Likewise, Baskin considers this recognition of complicity as an important component of a critical self-awareness.⁷³ Unfortunately, while there are times when the social work profession has considered its own settler colonial history, it is often done in a decontextualized fashion with little continuation or contemporary resonance.⁷⁴ That is, while the social work profession may acknowledge colonialism, it is seen as a historical wrong with little relevance to the present. For example, instead of working to disengage from the millenium scoop, whereby Indigenous children continue to be taken by the state in disproportionate numbers, the social work profession frames the Sixties Scoop as an exceptional event.⁷⁵

Alongside a recognition of complicity, Hiller argues for the need to centre our relationship to treaties as non-Indigenous peoples, contending that the presumptions that treaties protect special privileges for Indigenous people arising out of antiquated agreements must be challenged and replaced with acknowledgment that these treaties entail continued responsibility of settlers to uphold their contents – what Sehdev calls a decolonizing treaty consciousness.⁷⁶ For example, Corvin, a Euro-Canadian activist interviewed by Hiller, explains how an Indigenous mentor challenged him to recognize that treaty issues were not something to be exclusively considered by Indigenous people and that ignorance of treaty obligations were precisely an extension of settler complicity. This ignorance frames treaties in a paternalistic manner and 'disappears your own role in the process'.⁷⁷ As social workers we need to reconsider whether our roles in relation to Indigenous people are compatible with settler obligations to treaties agreed upon with Indigenous nations. This means being open to the fact that our work may be incommensurable with the intent of treaty relationships. Nonetheless, as Hiller suggests settlers must be attuned to and aware of the use of treaties as both a recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and the responsibilities of settlers to our relationships with the communities and the land on which we live and as a technology used by the settler state to further dispossession.⁷⁸

It is important to note that treaties can also be used as tools for dispossession that undermine self-governance and circumscribe political rights through coercion, what Hiller suggests is not an uncritical acceptance of state interpretations of treaties.⁷⁹ A treaty consciousness instead entails listening to Indigenous communities and upholding their interpretation of treaties. Indigenous activists have argued that treaties can be used strategically to emphasize Indigenous nationhood and the assumptions of sovereignty inherent to these treaties. This treaty consciousness also involves being critical of how 'fundamental principles and relations continue to be twisted, disparaged, or disregarded'.⁸⁰ It is this twisting that allows treaties to be used as a way to justify settler colonialism and violence and must be rejected.

Resisting extraction through deinstitutionalization

Anishinaabe scholar and activist Kimberly M. Blaeser argues that Western social work practice is at best ineffective for Indigenous communities, and at worst, continues the settler colonial process through its imposition and the discounting of Indigenous principles of helping and healing.⁸¹ She emphasizes,

The language of the social services [...] does not stem from or operate within the consciousness of interconnected and interdependent planes of reality. The institutions isolate and treat the 'problem' that, in a tribal view, is only a symptom of a more significant imbalance. Institutionalized words, 'white words' cannot initiate the kind of healing achieved through tribal rituals.⁸²

The focus on one-on-one case work, instead of anti-poverty work or community organizing can evade attempts to understand the problems Indigenous peoples are facing as the result of collective trauma that is rooted in the structures of settler colonialism.

Johnston and Tester describe how the Canadian social work profession emphasizes the 'individual [as] responsible for adjusting to and adapting to social conditions'.⁸³ As they suggest, this individualized framework for social work practice is guided by the logic that positions social disadvantages and social problems as issues that can be overcome through therapy, hard work, and integration into the Canadian economy. Baskin et al. speak to how individualized Western practices are spread through a university social work curriculum that fails to adequately include Indigenous approaches to practice.⁸⁴ As Ruth Koleszar-Green, a social work professor at York University, discusses in Baskin et al. (2008), Indigenous knowledge is kept out by gatekeepers within social work education institutions. Koleszar-Green draws on an example from her undergraduate education where she was prevented from choosing Indigenous social work as a topic for her assignment because the instructor believed it would be more fruitful to focus on 'mainstream social work theory'.⁸⁵

The use of the medicine wheel in Cree and other Plains nations is a prime example of how Indigenous practices of helping and healing emphasize interdependence. The medicine wheel considers all issues, including emotional or material, as linked to societal issues (e.g. social inequity). Social workers who attempt to address one without the other will fail at both. Similarly, Johnston and Tester argue that this contradicts a central tenant of Inuit belief, a belief that there is an obligation of the community to address individual issues and problems.⁸⁶ These beliefs are erased by the universalization of individualized social work, imposing 'Eurocentric social structures, and belief systems on the Indigenous peoples of North America'.⁸⁷ Drawing on the connections between the anarchist concept of mutual aid (the reciprocal and ongoing relationship of care between and across individuals and communities) and the principles of interdependence that exist within many Indigenous systems of governance, Alfred contends that relationships of solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people might be possible outside of the institutional frameworks that currently dominate our society.⁸⁸ In contrast to the current social work models, we suggest that a model of mutual aid challenges the individualized and ahistoric practices that predominate the Canadian social service sector and suggests a need for deinstitutionalization.

Deinstitutionalization would mean challenging the non-profit industrial complex and the settler colonial logics that are at the foundation of the social work profession's relationship with Indigenous peoples. Deinstitutionalizing social work also involves transforming the field so that it responds to oppressive power relations at both a structural and micro level, rooted in the knowledge and action of the communities most directly affected. Baskin proposes, as a response against Western imposition of social work practices, "that we look at survival, not as an end, but as a continuous process of resistance and healing".⁸⁹ Unsettling social work in this respect might involve an emphasis on collective approaches to problems, a combination of mutual aid, relational practices, and group work.

The expertise fallacy: the need for deprofessionalization

The professionalized relationships normally formed in a social work context tend to emphasize top-down, distant, and unidirectional ways of relating to Indigenous communities. Through formal streams of professionalization (including social work education or registration with the CASW), the relationships formed between social workers and the communities that they seek to 'help' are circumscribed by a set of principles that position the social worker as the provider of knowledge/services and Indigenous peoples as the recipient or beneficiary, a common settler colonial trope.

Indigenous social work scholars like Baskin have called on social workers to relinquish their status as experts.⁹⁰ Given that the professional role of social workers in the lives of Indigenous peoples is rooted in the CASW's advocacy to take on the social welfare functions of the Indian Agent, the professionalization of the field is achieved through a claim to a monopoly of specific skills related to providing social and management services of Indigenous communities. Johnston and Tester state, 'In order to be seen as a profession, social work has to lay claim to skills and forms of practice that distinguish it from other professions, and relationships and practices that occur in the "everyday world"'.⁹¹ These distinguishing characteristics and skillsets suggest a hierarchy of practices, based on Western thought, that should be imposed on Indigenous communities. Johnston and Tester show how this professionalism has conflicted with Inuit Qaujimagatuqanqit (Inuit traditional knowledge) since the 1953 attempt by the Canadian settler state to apply the Northwest Territories Child Welfare ordinance to Inuit people.⁹² This ordinance sent professional social workers from southern Canada to assess the welfare of Inuit children. This move has been criticized for leading to social provisioning that was 'aloof and impersonal and [...] bound to be or become bureaucratic, indifferent, dilatory and inefficient'.⁹³ Today, Nunavut's child welfare system continues to be guided by Western concepts of child welfare that fail to cede autonomy and authority to Inuit communities, and the incorporation of Inuit social workers, as Johnston and Tester suggest, is often seen as a token gesture.⁹⁴

The use of professional distance is one such technique used by non-Indigenous social workers to maintain 'expert' status. Professional distance involves social workers being task focused, creating social distance, and emphasizing formality. This focus on the establishment of an 'appropriate' client-worker relationship leads to challenges in connecting with the local community and achieving goals of community development due to the tendency towards managerialism over the practice of relationality. Managerialism entails an emphasis on bureaucratic procedures and policies, marked by a focus on competency-based practices and efficiency. Dominelli explains that managerialism creates

highly stressful and poorly resourced conditions. These realities are structural problems which cannot be dealt with by the competency based approach which presupposes that: what needs to be done in each situation is known and infallible; resources are adequate for the tasks at hand; and social work relationships operate in a social vacuum.⁹⁵

Competency-based social work, a bi-product of managerial relationships, fails to consider local contexts or address structural problems created by settler colonialism, a problem that also has significant impacts on non-Indigenous communities. Social work practices

de-emphasize relationship building in favour of efficiency, expediency, and expertise. Rather than meet its treaty and social obligations to Indigenous communities through land repatriation and the transfer of fiduciary responsibilities back under control of Indigenous communities that would go a long way towards addressing the acute issues faced by Indigenous peoples, the settler state focuses resources on monitoring and supervising people – the realm of the professional social worker.

Describing Western evidence-based practices as positioning social workers as experts applying scientific methods to service users, Crampton frames these practices as based on notions of permanence, whereby social work practices are understood as universal, without concern of local contexts.⁹⁶ Instead, Crampton advocates for approaches rooted in Indigenous concepts of impermanence. This shift in thinking allows for the rejection and disintegration of professionalism toward relationships informed by responsiveness and relationality. This requires not only a shift in how social work is practiced, but also how it is taught. And although Crampton falls short of arguing for full deprofessionalization of social work, she does suggest that social workers allow for ‘more breathing room and the possibility of break down in the process of realizing best practices not as universal but as local, not as permanent but as of the present’.⁹⁷ In this regard, challenging the concept of permanence is one way to make social work practices more equitable and potentially decolonizing.

However, if we are to take deprofessionalization as a serious step in the unsettling of social work we must reject the notion that social workers are experts. Indigenous scholars have called on social workers to become learners instead of teachers.⁹⁸ It is only through stepping back that we can address the ways in which the social work field ‘oppresses [Indigenous] ways of knowing and healing practices’.⁹⁹ In Bennett, Zubrzycki, and Bacon’s examination of the experiences of social workers working alongside Indigenous peoples in Australia, a number of interviewees speak to this issue. A non-Indigenous social worker states, ‘The best way to communicate with Aboriginal people is to keep your mouth shut ... to listen to what people are saying’.¹⁰⁰ An Indigenous social worker follows up, arguing that ‘the greatest thing about the use of silence for Aboriginal people is its absolute power in allowing people to say what they want to say’.¹⁰¹ This discussion emphasizes the need for social workers and other non-Indigenous peoples seeking to work with Indigenous communities to respectfully listen to Indigenous peoples and to build substantive relationships. And as for the how, while some scholars have argued that listening can happen in the context of professional relationships, we argue that given the effects of professionalization in delegitimizing and oppressing Indigenous perspectives and practices, deprofessionalization is a requirement for true listening.

Conclusion

In this paper we argue that social work as a profession in Canada functions as a technology of settler colonial expansion and if we are to imagine a decolonizing social work, we must be prepared to re-imagine the structure and foundations of the discipline. Despite the active work of organizations like the Canadian Association of Social Work Educators statement of complicity and commitment to change as a response to calls for reconciliation, we argue that the social, emotional, physical, and spiritual labour of social work can only be

decolonized through an abandonment of the professional and institutional framework in which it currently exists.¹⁰² Drawing on the work of Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, we must forefront the importance of refusal for communities seeking to evade and minimize academic or other interventions into their lives, including social work interventions.¹⁰³ Those seeking to seriously unsettle social services must challenge the supremacy and expert status given to social work as a profession in order to engage in meaningful and tangible work to disrupt settler colonialism and participate in the process of decolonization alongside Indigenous peoples and to respect their refusal of unsolicited help in their processes of resurgence.

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Notes on contributors

Craig Fortier is an Assistant Professor in Social Development Studies at Renison University College (an affiliated college of the University of Waterloo).

Edward Hon-Sing Wong is a PhD candidate in Social Work at York University.