
Stormy weather: cyclones, Harold Innis, and Port Alberni, BC

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Abstract. This paper uses the work of the Canadian economic historian, Harold Innis, to reflect on the nature of resource economies and the single-industry towns that form their backbone. For Innis resource or staple economies are subject to extreme spatial and temporal disruptions that are both creative and destructive. Single-industry towns are on the front line of both that creativity and that destructiveness. They enjoy rapid growth when a new resource is found, but are equally hastily abandoned when resources run out, or prices fall. Innis used the metaphor of the cyclone to depict this pattern of staples accumulation and consequent crisis. This paper will, first, elaborate on Innis's general cyclonic scheme that joins space, time, and staples production, and second, provide a case study of the forest-industry town of Port Alberni, British Columbia, to exemplify his argument.

Introduction

In many ways, this paper is a sermon on the texts of Harold Adams Innis (1894–1951), the Canadian economic historian who wrote extensively about space and time in the first half of the 20th century (Innis, 1950; 1951), and is generally credited as the patron saint of Canadian social science (Watson, 1981). Certainly, Innis was a preacher by inclination, albeit not by ability. He was by all accounts an atrocious speaker who, as even his friend Arthur Lower put it, managed to “kill every audience” by his mumbling and fractured sentences (quoted in Stamps, 1995, page 42). Innis, however, was trained as a Baptist minister, attending McMaster University until he graduated in 1916. Motivated by both religious and colonial convictions he joined the Canadian army to fight in World War I. It was a pivotal decision. The horrific experience of trench warfare, especially at the battle of Vimy Ridge where he was severely wounded, convinced him, first, that there was no beneficent caring God and, second, that given the snobbishness, callousness, and dense stupidity of British high command to which Canadian troops were subject, there was no beneficent, caring empire of King and country either. Returning to Canada as an agnostic and a nationalist, he began preaching from the pulpit of the University of Toronto where he held a position in the Department of Political Economy. He preached not about original sin and the redemptive power of Christ, but about the sins attending economic dependence and the redemptive power of theory from the margin.

The first purpose of the paper is to review Innis's preaching and, following the theme of this issue, to make the argument that they are relevant for understanding some of the spatial and temporal economic processes occurring now at the turn of the millennium. Our claim is that spatial and temporal processes cannot be theorized in

the abstract, but must be set within the context of particular kinds of economies, institutions, commodities, and places. This is Innis's project in his staples theory. His conception of space and time is intimately informed by his case at hand, an investigation of staples production in Canada. In particular, Innis's contention is that the peculiar space–time relations produced within staples production can be temporarily controlled by noneconomic institutions, permitting stability and prosperity. But it never lasts. Sooner rather than later, space and time burst asunder, creating economic disruption of whirlwind ferocity and contributing to the staple region's dependency. Innis thought that to contest that dependency, to redeem the staples region, requires marginal theory, theory devised in the margin to explain the margin, and which itself is sensitive to nuances of space and time.

We follow Innis in another way. Innis was constitutionally unable to theorize in the abstract; his orientation was unflaggingly concrete. At one point he even called himself a “dirt economist” so grounded did he feel himself in empirical detail (Innis, 1936, page 26). As a result, and the second purpose of the paper, we illustrate Innis's theoretical argument by focusing on one particular “dirt economy”, British Columbia, Canada, and one of its single-industry towns associated with the forest economy, Port Alberni, on the west coast of Vancouver Island (figure 1). One of the oldest forest communities in the province, Port Alberni historically shared in both the good and the bad times that have marked BC's staples economy, and which reflect a century of shifting space–time relations and institutional transformation. Most recently, times have become very bad. Since 1980 because of restructuring well over three thousand workers were either permanently laid off or were not replaced after retirement from the integrated complex of wood-processing operations including plywood, pulp and paper, shake and shingle, paperboard, and sawmills found at Port Alberni

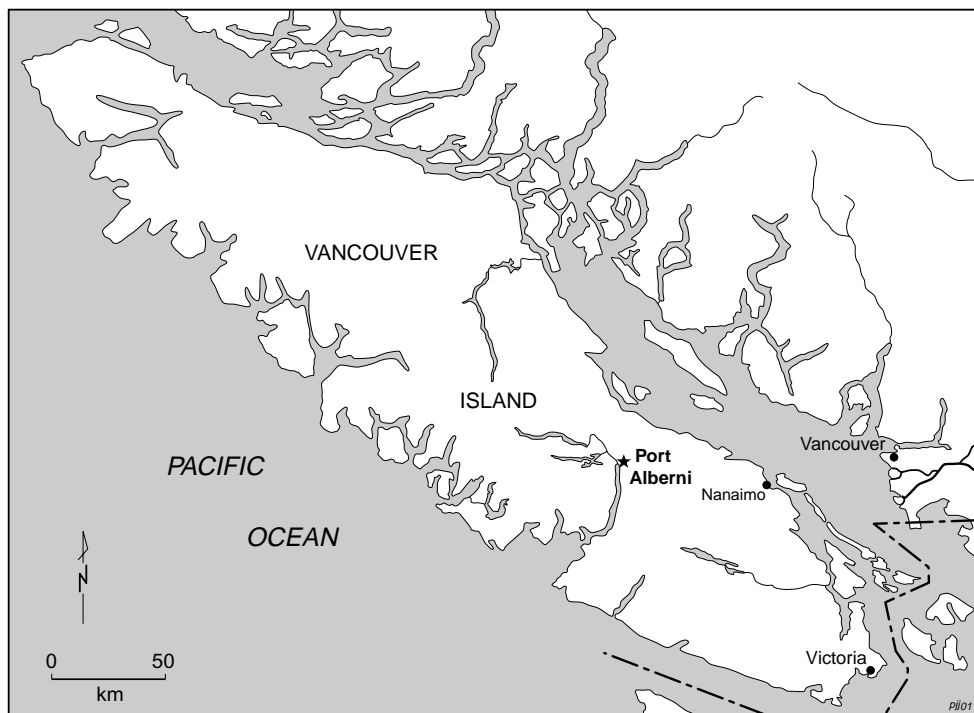


Figure 1. Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, BC.

(see table 1). On the one hand, the consequences were devastating to those who lost their jobs: life savings were used up, homes were repossessed, couples separated, and tragic personal struggles unfolded. On the other hand, the community itself changed as it tried to remake itself by adopting a new entrepreneurial culture by means of a flurry of retraining schemes, small-business initiatives, and various kinds of interinstitutional collaborations involving different levels of government, unions, community organizations, and business. But the makeover is partial at best, and Port Alberni remains a pallid version of its former vigorous self of twenty years ago.

Our ends is using the story of Port Alberni are thus twofold. The first is to illustrate Innis’s model of geographical and temporal change. We argue that Port Alberni closely follows the more general scheme of resource development proposed by Innis. It grows initially with tumultuous rapidity at the beginning of the 20th century and, in concert with a distinctive conjunction of institutional support associated with postwar Fordism, it enjoys a thirty-year period of stability. But from the early 1980s prevailing space–time relations rupture, resulting in an equally tumultuous decline and fall. The second is to exemplify Innis’s preaching about the evils of dependence. Here we will use some historical photographs documenting work in the mills as well as interviews with laid-off workers carried out in 1990.

Table 1. Employment levels in MacMillan Bloedel’s/Weyerhaeuser’s Port Alberni forest complex (source: MacMillan Bloedel and Weyerhaeuser).

	1980	1986	1991	1996	2001
Woodlands	1700	1090	1060	835	521
Somas Sawmill	1064	588	509	450	350
APD Sawmill	650	533	476	541	505
Plywood mill	450	377	0	0	0
Pulp and paper ^a	1522	1316	1340	958	860

Note: The figures from 1980 to 1996 are for MacMillan Bloedel, and for 2001 for Weyerhaeuser. The figures for 1980–1996 are taken at the end of December for each of the respective years, and on 1 July for 2001. Employment levels are for full-time workers.

^a The pulp and paper mill owned by MacMillan Bloedel was spun off and became an independent company in 1999, and is now known as Pacifica.

Innis and political economy

The sins of dependence are more easily explained than the redemptive power of marginal theory. For Innis dependence was intimately bound with staples production. Indeed, he conceived the history of Canada as one “damn” staple after another. The blasphemy is justified because Innis thought that staples bode no good; they turn Canada into a dependent state. The dependence is bound up with shifting space–time relations that mark staples production, and which are central to Innis’s theory.

That theory, while drawing upon the tradition of political economy, and concerned with making broad claims about the operation of capitalism and its propensity toward uneven development, is fundamentally directed to a local end: to understand staples development within the particular social formulation of Canada. There is an interesting overlap here with Walker’s (2001) recent theoretical and empirical work on California’s early resource-based growth. While also developing a model based on political economy to explain that growth, Walker recognises the need to incorporate the geographical and historical specificity of California itself, or, in his terms, to recognise the “deep-seated origins of geographical difference” (2001, page 171). This is Innis’s project, too. Starting with general political economic principles, he amends,

modifies, and changes them in accordance with the geographical and historical case at hand, Canada and its peculiar space–time constitution. There is no foolproof method for success in such a project. There is a lot of trial and error, rubbing out and starting again, making Innis’s writings messy and difficult to read. But that’s life on the staples margin.

2.1 Staples and dependency

Innis’s argument is that Canada is on the margin because its economy is based upon the export to metropolitan powers of a series of minimally processed primary resources, staples, such as furs, fish, and forestry products. The very nature of staples growth, he argues, produces halting and incomplete industrial development, ensnaring it in a ‘staples trap’. That is, industrial diversification is blocked for such reasons as an export mentality among producers, the domination of the economy by a few, large and often foreign-owned multinational corporations, and a truncated industrial branch-plant structure that minimizes the development of higher order control and research functions. The result, to use Innis’s terminology, is that staples-producing regions become part of the global economic ‘margin’, their fates tied strongly to events in more powerful foreign metropolises.

Cyclonics

Innis’s model of staples development, and attendant dependency, is based on the metaphor of the cyclone. Staples-producing areas are “storm centres to the modern international economy” (Stamps, 1995, footnote 63, page 59). Because the metropolises of capitalism require a continual source of raw materials, there is an incessant search for new and profitable sources of raw materials. Blowing across the economic landscape, global-cyclonic winds touch down at a few sites—single-industry towns—to create in a burst of frenetic energy the infrastructure and wherewithal of resource production. Although all single-industry towns are created from such maelstroms, the resulting resource communities are not identical. As Innis realized, indelibly stamping the character of each town is the peculiar nature of the specific staple itself, which shapes the form of production, the dominant social relations, the prevailing technology, and the relationship to the environment. As Kroker (1984, pages 107–108) puts it:

“[Innis’s] case studies of staple commodities, and thus of the roots of Canadian dependency, begins with an understanding of each *different staple*, with its own rhythm of economic development, with its own ‘timing’ in relationship to the spread of the centre empires, its own class structure, and a specific relationship to its socio-natural environment.”

Kroker’s suggestion is akin to Harvey’s (1985, chapter 6) notion of a ‘structured coherence’. Harvey uses that term to describe the close-knit relationships that develop “around a dominant technology of both production and consumption and a dominant set of class relations” (page 126). For Harvey there is something about the specific combination of such elements that at least for a period make the system an integrated, self-propelling entity. Similarly, in Innis’s staples approach, it is the staple itself that brings together and integrates diverse relationships within a place around technology, the physical environment, production and consumption, and institutions and social relations. The end result, like the structured coherence, is a temporarily stable and self-sustaining pattern of relations.

In Harvey’s work, structured coherences are manifest as an urban economy. Within the staples system, the equivalent is the single-industry town that serves as a fulcrum point between the resources themselves and the global metropolises that require them. For both Harvey and Innis there are periods when coherences cohere and stability reigns. Certainly, in single-industry towns when times are good they can be very,

very good. For Innis this is a result especially of achieving the right institutional mix, whereas for Harvey it is expressed more in terms of naked economic achievement, that is, attaining the right spatial fix to maximize profits. But the good times never last. Stability, as both Harvey and Innis make clear, is precarious, and when times turn bad, they can be horrid. In the case of single-industry towns, because of, say, resource depletion or poor markets, or because of changes in technology affecting demand or the production process itself, or because of institutional changes around resource firms as they are taken over, or go bankrupt because of high debt loads, or because of workers who resist changes at the workplace, or go on strike, the single-industry towns begin to waver. Over time, wavering can become tottering as towns plunge from one crisis to another, sometimes barely surviving, and sometimes not surviving at all. Concomitantly there is massive disruption of peoples' lives and livelihoods. The very worst face of dependency is revealed as the cyclone turns destructive: mills and mines are shut down, workers are laid off, businesses go belly up, home mortgages are foreclosed, families break up, and local governance is turned upside down. In this case, the institutional glue holding staples together loses its power of adhesion, resulting in dissolution, fragmentation, and chaos.

We should be clear that in drawing parallels between Innis and Harvey we are not suggesting that they provide the same theory, that Harvey's framework explains Canadian staples development as well as Innis's. It is true that both broach the common problem of uneven development under capitalism from some kind of political economic stance—Innis from institutional economics (Barnes, 1999), Harvey from Marxism. As a result, there are commonalities and the potential for mutual engagement. But there is also an important difference, and precisely around respecting those "deep-seated origins of geographical difference". Innis's model of the cyclone is devised to highlight the specificity of a particular kind of commodity production in a particular place. In contrast, the scheme that Harvey aspires to, as Walker (2001, page 171) writes, "comes with a curious diffidence towards the peculiarities of place". So, while Innisians will learn from Harvey and other theorists of uneven development, his and their work can only be a motivation for more theorization, more amending, modifying, and changing, to understand the peculiarities of staples in Canada.⁽¹⁾

Space and time

This is evident when we look at specific space–time relations. For Innis, understanding space and time are fundamental to understanding Canada's dependent status. He writes, "the warp and the woof [of] space and time, [are] woven in a very uneven fashion and producing distorted patterns" (Innis, 1951, page xvii). The critical question is the determinants of that warp and weave. For Innis space and time are made inside larger but geographically and historically specific social and economic systems defined by institutions, technology, and a given physical environment (for elaboration see, Barnes, 1996, chapter 8). Again, Harvey is also keen to claim that space and time are manufactured, which for him means within the logic of the wider capitalist system. In particular, Harvey (1989a) argues that space and time stem from inside the processes of accumulation and, in particular, as an imperative to "annihilate space by time". The important point here is that for Harvey that imperative applies everywhere because the logic of capitalism is found everywhere. But this is not the case for Innis. His view of space and time derive from the particularity of Canada's social formation and

⁽¹⁾ Innis was not the only one to amend, modify, and change in trying to understand dependency and its embeddedness within a set of peculiarly local circumstances, although he may have been one of the first. There is the Latin American dependency school associated especially with Frank's (1979) writings, and the lesser-known (Canadian) Maritimes school (Sacouman and Brym, 1979) writing in the 1970s.

its relation to staples production. The very constitution of Canada as a contingent conjunction of elements gives rise to a particular rather than universal space–time logic.

That logic is represented by Innis's central metaphor of the cyclone, and concomitant implications of speed, instability, energy, and unpredictability. More specifically, with respect to the woof of time, Innis thought that staples commodities carry with them the seeds of their own temporal instability and disequilibria. In particular, staples precisely because they are staples are sensitive to changes in: price, because of their high elasticity; transportation routes and technology, because they are typically bulky and require transportation from where they are extracted; physical environmental factors such as climate, topography, and size of resource stock; production technology, because it affects demand for the staple, as well as its ability to be extracted; and institutional structure and regulation, because, as Innis made clear, given the large overhead costs usually associated with staples production only particular kinds of institutional and regulatory arrangements are feasible. As these factors change, which inevitably they must, instability is necessarily produced. Existing resource sites close down, and new sites open up. But the transition is not easy. As Innis (1950, pages 5–6) writes:

“Each staple in its turn le[aves] its stamp, and the shift to new staples invariably produce[s] periods of crises in which adjustments in the old structure [are] painfully made and a new pattern created in relation to a new staple.”

The important point is that such ‘painful’ changes are inherent within the very structure of Canadian staples production.

Also inherent, and this goes to the warp of space, is a particular kind of geographical relation between the local site of its production and the wider metropole. From the moment of its creation, a single-industry town is locked into a set of global relations that determine its fate, and which are manifest as the worldwide markets in which the staple is sold and the often-international ownership and control of the firm undertaking the production process. By beginning with staple commodities, Innis is thus necessarily led to discussion of local–global relations; they are intrinsic to his framework and derive from his beginning point of the staples commodity itself. Innis argues, however, that this geographical relationship is always unequal, producing dependency. Power and decisionmaking are always vested in the metropole, and the consequence is that the local resource sites over which that power is wielded necessarily become the margin. The result, as Stamps (1995, pages 56–57) writes and again drawing upon the cyclonic metaphor, is that Innis

“saw instead of the happy road to global integration, a vortex—an industrial core with a spatializing momentum that drove it constantly to exploit its own surroundings as sources of staples and marginal outlets for its own factories. He saw instead of the Enlightenment road to progress, violence He saw an entire livelihood caught in the orbit of a relation of dependence that could not determine much of Canada's subsequent—or lack of subsequent—development. For Innis the story of Canada was the story of the staple, and it could not be told in the standard language of commodity obsessed economics.”

In sum, for Innis the cyclonic nature of staples production in Canada gives rise to a particular form of space–time relations. There are periods of stability in specific places when structured coherences cohere, and different elements work together facilitated by the right institutional combination. But it is never permanent. Destruction and bedlam are always waiting in the wings as space and time turn nasty.

Marginal theory

But can that nastiness be avoided or contested? Innis thought so, but it would involve making Canadians think very differently about their place in their world. Specifically, it would necessitate them turning away from a metropole conception of staples to a homegrown perspective, that is, a view from the margin.

Innis was keenly aware throughout his life of the intellectual dependency perpetrated on the margins by metropole powers. “Colonial powers ... seek to create not only economic and political clients, but intellectual clients as well”, as Carey (1975, page 28), a student of Innis, puts it. Combating such intellectual colonialisation marked all of Innis’s work. As Innis once said, “I had to decide whether to go into politics or to go into the university, and I decided to go into politics” (quoted in Watson, 1977, page 45). Specifically, Innis strenuously argued against orthodox economic theories that he thought reflected the interests of imperial commerce, the application of which kept Canada stuck in the groove of staples. Specifically, such theories couched in terms of the efficient free working of commodity markets, presumed progress and equilibrium, justified staples production in Canada as natural and beneficent. But the disjunctive between such a theory and the reality of Canada made Innis think that such a theory was “a new form of exploitation with dangerous consequences” (1956, page 3). Rather, for him because of geography and history, space and time, Canada was always more than an equilibrium market outcome, and the staple always more than a simple commodity. Let us elaborate on both points.

First, Innis thought that the conceit of standard orthodox economic theory is its assertion that through the free movement of price, an outcome of shifts in supply and demand, markets would autonomously organize to produce the best of all possible worlds. In contrast, as Drache (1992, page 4) writes,

“like Polanyi ... Innis approached liberal economics from the perspective that markets had to be organized and economic space defined. Culture was a key determinant because markets reflected historical practice, geography, technological change, and social custom. This made structures and institutions the powerful foundation of economics rather than the abstract laws of supply and demand.”

The recognition by Innis of the centrality of cultural institutions, we would argue, is a direct outcome of his location on the margin. Given the cyclonic regime of staples production found in Canada, it became obvious to him that in order to function markets require buttressing and maintaining by all kinds of nonmarket institutions. For example, the state was necessary to subsidize the massive infrastructure costs required for staples production; firms needed to be large to pay for the high sunk and fixed costs associated with resource production and processing; banks, the origins of which are in profits earned by staples merchants, favoured lending to staples producers over manufacturers [the so-called Naylor–Clement thesis (Drache, 1976)]; and domestic household culture needed to be resilient to inevitable movement and change. Such institutional forms were recognised by Innis, in part, because his location on the margin made the discrepancy between the neoclassical ideal of the market and its instantiation within the Canadian resource economy so stark and clear. Like Polanyi, an economic historian and anthropologist, Innis did not believe that markets somehow antedate themselves, that Adam Smith’s invisible hand was always with us. Canada was never a primordial market in waiting. Rather, its markets emerged from a web of historical and cultural contingencies, and not from generalized, law-like movements of supply and demand. Furthermore, as Innis subsequently recognized, all market economies were embedded in nonmarket institutions, even those operating at the heart of Empire. It was just in Canada that they were more visible because of the circumstances of staples production. In particular, as we suggested earlier, the very

spatiotemporal constitution of staples accumulation characterized by a fickle nature, vast distances separating production from control and from consumers, and unstable prices, investment patterns, and market demand, was viable only with obvious support from nonmarket institutions. It is in this sense that the spatial and temporal relations of staples production are written into Innis's very institutional approach, showing that there is nothing natural about the market or its consequences.

Second, a related point can be made about the staple itself. The staple is not any old commodity; indeed, no commodity is any old commodity. But again, Innis's location on the global margin of Canada made that obvious. Watson (1981, page 234) writes, "Innis never used the staple as anything more than a focusing point about which to examine the interplay of cultures and empires." The staple is a crystallization point for both a set of external forces of colonization, and a set of internal forces of internal institutional formation. If for William Blake the world is seen in a grain of sand, then for Innis the colonial status of Canada is seen in the staple, be it the codfish, beaver pelt, or 2×4 . The study of each good is not an end in itself, but an entry point for a wider discussion. Clearly, there are links here to Marx's idea of commodity fetishism. Just as for Marx the form of the commodity buries a set of social relations that must be disinterred, so for Innis treating the staple as a commodity like any other covers up all the interesting entailments around empire and dependency. As before, then, what makes a commodity so interesting for Innis are the spatial and temporal relations submerged within it. The project is to work outwards from the commodity to delineate such relations. Just as Marx pulls away the veil of the commodity to reveal its social constituents, Innis carries out the same maneuver to expose the multifarious and twisted threads of its far-reaching geography and history. Again, the broader point is that there is nothing natural about staples.

That Innis could see through naturalistic, market-based and commodity-based justifications of staples is partly a result of his own marginal location.⁽²⁾ This is now a well-known argument and made, for example, by feminist theorists (hooks, 1990), by literary critics (Culler, 1997), and most germane, by those in development studies (Esteva, 1992). They each argue that being both figuratively and literally on the margin allows them both to understand better and to criticize more effectively the kinds of assumptions made in defining what is 'normal'. The same goes for Innis. Being on the margin was a source of strength. It enabled him to expose the assumptions, as well as the gaps, in metropole theory, and to imagine a better political future for the margin itself. Stamps (1995, page 21) characterizes Innis's intellectual stance as "negative dialectics" by which she means Innis's strategy of critically juxtaposing the experience of the margin against prevailing metropole norms. Such a strategy calls into question such norms, raising the issue of a single system-wide cause or essence, and elevating the margin as "a new centre for cultural fluorescence" (Watson, 1981, page 16).

The problem in being a marginal thinker, however, is getting anyone to listen, especially those in the metropole. As Watson (1981, page 43) writes, Innis reluctantly realized that within the sociology of the academy "academic reputations are made by adapting derivative methodologies to Canadian content, or by becoming recognized internationally for intellectual contributions which made no claim to a distinctively Canadian perspective." Within this context Innis became increasingly anxious about

⁽²⁾ One of the referees suggested that no one who lived in Toronto, as Innis did for all of his professional life, should be considered as living on the margin. While some Torontonians may believe that their city is at the centre of the universe, it is in fact untrue! In any case, Innis did not grow up in Toronto, but on a farm in rural Ontario, and even during the period Innis lived in Toronto, Montreal was Canada's largest city. Furthermore, in this discussion 'margin' means Canada. For Innis Canada's semi-industrial status, which conferred its peripheral standing, was a direct result of its staples economy.

his failing efforts to be heard. This was not only a personal rebuff, but for him a national one. As again Watson (1981, page 44) puts it: "In tracing the life and thought of Innis, we are describing at the individual level the failed potential of the country as a whole." What we would like to do now in a very small way is to try to redeem Innis by making use of his marginal theory to understand a place that sits on the margin of a margin, Port Alberni, British Columbia.

Port Alberni and forestry in British Columbia

The history of British Columbia since the first sustained European settlement in the middle of the 19th century is of one economic storm after another that both creates and destroys. Vancouver, for the most part, served as the local metropole, but it too periodically caught the edges of the various economic gales that ripped through the province (figure 1). BC's single-industry towns are at the centre of those storms. Because of the diversity of resources found in the province, the single-industry towns have taken various forms, each associated with a different staple: around fishing, such as in Prince Rupert on BC's central coast, around mining and smelting such as in Trail in the province's southern interior, around natural oil and gas such as in Fort Nelson in northeast BC, around fruit and market gardening such as in the Mediterranean-like Southern Okanagan Valley, and most spectacularly around the forest products industry, found in different forms throughout the whole province (Hayter, 2000; Marchak, 1983). The result is that on a per capita basis BC leads the nation in the number of single-industry towns (Bradbury, 1987). In Randall and Ironside's (1996) analysis of the largest 220 Canadian single industry towns, 45 are from BC, which is second only to Quebec's total of 58, but which as a province has almost twice the population of BC.

In particular, the prominence of forestry-based resource communities in BC represents the historical culmination of a 300-year process that first systematically began in Canada's eastern Maritime Provinces (Wynn, 1981). As the historian Lower (1938; 1973) argues, 'the assault' on Canada's forests was rooted in the demands of the metropolitan powers that exclusively meant the United Kingdom until Canadian Confederation in 1867, and then to an increasing degree for the next 100 years or so the United States. During the 19th century, and well beyond, the typical method of assault was 'to cut and run', thereby progressively eliminating forests as they became accessible. Thus, the exploitation of the pine forests of New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario, which in turn set the stage for a westward shift in logging, and the creation finally of the lumber industry in the temperate rainforests of British Columbia from the middle of the 19th century, and hence also the establishment of forest-based communities such as Port Alberni.

Rise and climb

Port Alberni was one of the earliest single-industry forestry towns in the province. Located at the head of the Alberni Inlet on Vancouver Island, it was first settled by Europeans in 1861. That very same year, the first sawmill was established by a British company, Anderson, Anderson & Co. (figure 2, see over), that sold cut lumber both locally and to Washington State. It was successful for three years after which it abruptly closed because of limitations in timber supply. In 1905 a second mill was erected on the site, and owned by Barclay Sound Cedar Co. This one was more lucrative and sold lumber both domestically and to the USA. It was so successful that in 1936 it was taken over by one of the larger BC-owned companies at the time, H. R. MacMillan Export Co., which added plywood and cedar shingle production to the original sawmill operations (becoming the Alberni Pacific Division). A year before the MacMillan purchase another firm, Bloedel, Stewart and Welch, had also seen the potential at

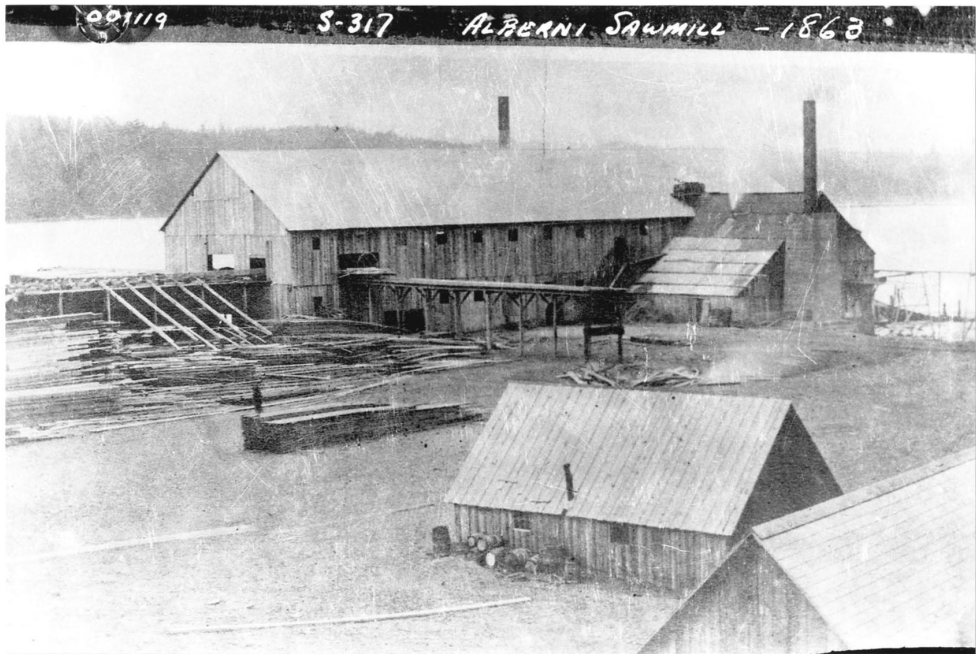


Figure 2. The earliest mill at Port Alberni—Anderson & Anderson Co., 1863 (from the H R MacMillan photo collection, Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, BC 1930/117).

Port Alberni and constructed a second competing sawmill, the Somass sawmill. To that sawmill was added a pulp mill in 1947 that created one of the first integrated sawmill – pulp operations in North America, selling the resulting products worldwide. In 1951 all these different operations at Port Alberni were joined when MacMillan and Bloedel merged to create both BC’s first corporate giant, MacMillan & Bloedel Ltd (later named MacMillan Bloedel), and a version of Fordism within BC’s staples economy (for the details, see Hayter, 2000; Hayter and Barnes, 1997).

Under the auspices of the new corporate entity, MacMillan Bloedel, capital investment immediately increased, and to the existing operations at Port Alberni were added newsprint and paperboard plants. By 1960 Port Alberni was one of the largest, most diversified, low-cost sites for wood processing in the province (Hardwick, 1964). Its population also burgeoned: 6391 in 1941, 11 168 in 1951, and 16 000 in 1961 (figure 3).

The 1960s and 1970s were the heydays of success for Port Alberni. In 1975 Port Alberni’s per capita income was third highest for any Canadian city, and again fourth highest in 1978. In addition, as an export site it was second only to Vancouver. Behind prosperity lay a particular configuration of institutions and social relations, which formed a structured coherence. Following Innis’s (and Harvey’s) lead, we will argue that those institutions and social relations allowed staples production to occur; that is, they supported and shaped the market in such a way that it operated more or less smoothly, and was at least temporarily sustainable. Those institutions and relations were around the production process itself; the nature of single-industry community life; and the different forms of managerialism. Our argument will be that once those institutions and relations were forced to change from the early 1980s onwards because of alterations in the “warp and the woof of space and time”, the structured coherence of Port Alberni began to destruct, resulting in economic and social incoherency.



Figure 3. Port Alberni integrated sawmill, pulp and paper operations, 1957 (from the H R MacMillan photo collection, Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, BC 1930/395/4).

The first set of institutions and relations are around Fordism, the particular version of which found in Canada is called by Jenson (1989, page 78) “permeable Fordism”. She uses that term because she believes that “since 1945 the Canadian economy has been permeated by an international—or more exactly, continental—effect. Its Fordism was designed domestically but always with an eye to the continental economy”. So, while BC’s forest resource towns such as Port Alberni took on all the characteristics of Fordism more generally, they were also marked by a dependency on the wider international and, in particular, continental economy for capital, technology, and markets.

In particular, the permeable Fordist postwar BC forestry sector is characterized by: mass production of standardized products—the three most important were kraft pulp, plywood, and construction-grade lumber all of which were produced at Port Alberni (figure 4, see over); mass markets, the principal one was the USA; the use of archetypical production-line methods to maximize economies of scale by workers who were organized along classical Taylorist principles; a predominantly male workforce (although in the case of Port Alberni there was an important exception described below) that was unionized, and split between one of two major unions in the province, the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and the Canadian Paperworkers Union (CPU); a large workforce employed at the plant—at its peak close to 6000 full-time workers were employed at the Macmillan Bloedel operation (part-time work in the mills was rare), and more generally over 50% of all employment in the town was directly connected to forestry; the reliance on imported technology and capital machinery for production (Hayter, 2000); and finally, the corporate, frequently multinational, character, of the resource firms themselves. Within postwar BC forestry, the principal employers were often US-owned multinational corporations such as Weyerhaeuser, Scott Paper, or Crown Zellerbach. In the case of Port Alberni, though, the facilities were owned by MacMillan Bloedel, which was Canadian owned until 1999 when it too became American when taken over by Weyerhaeuser.

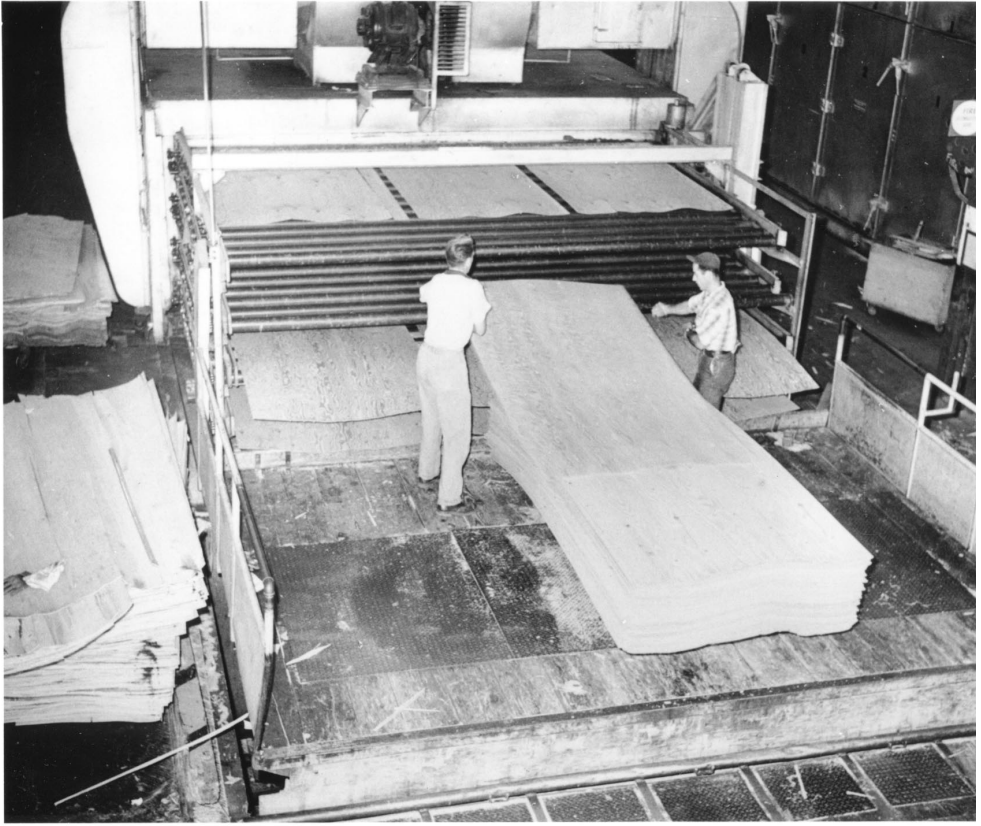


Figure 4. Fordism at the Port Albernie Plywood mill (gluing plywood veneer) (from the H R MacMillan photo collection, Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, BC 1930/100).

One interesting wrinkle around Port Alberni's version of Fordism relates to gender. During the Second World War because of labour shortages among men, women were employed in the Alberni mills, and especially in the plywood mill where they were known as "Plywood Girls" (figure 5). After the war ended, some of the women stayed on (despite protests from men), making up 30% of the workers employed in the mill during the 1950s. Numbers dwindled during the 1960s following MacMillan Bloedel's union-approved "informal but effective policy to stop hiring women" (Egan and Klausen, 1998, page 24), but increased in the early 1970s when there was a local labour shortage of male workers. The result was that when the downturn came, women were as affected as men.

The second set of institutions and relations were around the single-industry towns themselves, and relate to various household norms and expectations about employment, consumption levels, and service provision. Because of historical reasons around the sequence of European settlement, geographical reasons around accessibility, and biophysical reasons around the nature of the resource itself, the first forestry communities were located on BC's coast such as Port Alberni. Although the early history of such communities was marked by instability, as was the case at Port Alberni, once the forestry industry became corporatized in the postwar period under Fordism, and subject to its concomitant institutions and social relations, those communities grew and matured, forming a structured coherence and becoming stable. Such an evolution



Figure 5. “Plywood girls”, Port Alberni (ca. 1946) (from the H R MacMillan photo collection, Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, BC 1930/144).

is well captured by Lucas’s (1971) four-stage model of single-industry community development. Although his first three stages—construction, recruitment, and transition—could be hesitant and wavering—that is, the warp and woof of space time were not yet regularized—the last one, maturity, is characterized by stable population levels, work, and social relations, and linkages with the outside world. In this mature stage, temporal instability is more or less contained. Certainly, there continued to be recessions when employees were laid off, and the town suffered, but under a Fordist staples regime layoffs were temporary and accomplished by well-defined seniority rules worked out between unions and management. The norm was prosperity. The consequence, as Marshall and Tucker (1992, page 8) put it in discussing workers within Fordist industries more generally:

“workers with no more than an eighth grade education and little in the way of technical skills could end up with pay checks that enabled them to have two cars, a vacation cottage as well as a principal residence and maybe a boat for fishing and water-skiing. The system worked for everyone.”

Again, this is not to deny the continuing dependency of Port Alberni on the metropole, and its local–global relation. It is just that during this period of stability, the key institutions of the state, corporations, and unions worked together to ensure everyone directly involved in Fordism materially benefited.

The continuing force of dependency can be better seen by turning to the final set of institutions which are around what we will call managerialism, which in this context means the economic dependence of forest communities on the decisions of external institutions, principally various levels of government and resource firms. Local municipal governance was simply a matter of administering services. Much more important was the role of the local state, the provincial government. In BC the province owns more than 95% of the forestry resource, and accordingly leases those rights to private

firms in exchange for stumpage fees. Both the distribution of the cutting rights themselves, as well as the administration and setting of the stumpage fees, was guaranteed by the local state to benefit the largest forestry corporations even at the expense of provincial revenues. In addition, the provincial government, especially under Premier W A C Bennett's Social Credit government that held power continuously from the early 1950s to 1972, provided massive infrastructure investment required for forest exploitation, including provision of roads, railway line, dams for hydro electric provision, and even new resource towns when required. The principal contribution of the federal government was to offer unemployment insurance to workers during temporary downturns. More generally, government decisionmaking and control, if not directly affecting single-industry-town residents, was always in the background, setting the ground rules for continued maintenance and growth. Whatever else it was, the market was not free, but embedded in a set of complex state institutions of control and management.

Another form of this institutional complexity is in the dominant role played by the large corporations within the towns, which affected the possibility of other forms of local economic development emerging. Specifically, because of the narrow economic base created by the presence of the one resource company, along with an accompanying paternalistic culture resting on taking orders rather than giving them, an independent and diversified entrepreneurial class was effectively discouraged. Typically, corporate managerial decisionmaking was taken in head offices, sometimes located thousands of kilometres away from the location of the community. While contributing to an efficient international division of labour for the corporation, it simultaneously constrained local autonomy and local development potentials. In the case of Port Alberni, the corporate head offices of MacMillan Bloedel were relatively close, about a three-hour drive and hour-and-a-half ferryride away in Vancouver. Also the Port Alberni operations, because of their importance for MacMillan Bloedel, included a large number of local managers, as many as 700 at one point.

In summary, the first part of Port Alberni's history accords well with Innis's staples thesis, and his more general analysis of space and time. Port Alberni's very creation was a result of a new local–global relation (a British-owned firm in part selling its product to the USA), albeit one that was initially unstable. As new institutions evolved and coalesced around the site, instability began to be tamed, and a structured coherence emerged. In Port Alberni's case, it was associated with investment from larger firms, and in part a response to buoyant markets particularly in the USA and eastern Canada. The culmination was the installation of Fordism from the late 1940s onward. While the local–global relation became even more firmly entrenched, the various institutions and social relations associated with Fordism around production, community life, and managerialism dampened the forces of instability, and also ensured reasonable prosperity even for those living in the margin.

Decline and fall

A some point around the mid-1970s, the space–time weave that held during the postwar BC staples economy began to unravel, and as it did so various forces of destruction were set loose. The institutions and social relations that had sustained the structured coherence of many BC resource towns, including Port Alberni, gave way resulting in structural incoherence as the cyclone of staples dependency turned first inclement and then downright mean.

As Innis theorized, lying behind the destructive forces were space–time changes, in this case around markets and competition. In the case of the BC forest industry, there was both a geographical shift in markets towards Asia-Pacific and away from the United States (Hayter and Edgington, 1997), and an alteration in the type of products

that were demanded. In both cases this required a fundamental restructuring in production technology and work methods (Hayter and Barnes, 1997). Heightened competition came from low-cost producers both in the USA and in Europe. As a result, there was a need to lower costs of production both for labour [BC labour costs in forestry were the highest in North America (Binkley, 1997)] and for management. Further, the move to a leaner, lower cost production was also complemented by a move to leaner government at both federal and provincial levels, prompted by political shifts to various forms of neoliberalism. The emphasis was increasingly placed on bottom-up initiatives rather than top-down management and financial largesse (Barnes and Hayter, 1994). The upshot was that the former institutions and relations of Fordism could no longer cope and, as they gave way, towns like Port Alberni began to decline and fall.

The first change was around the production process. The market increasingly demanded specialized and differentiated wood products, for example, particular kinds and dimensions of lumber for the Japanese construction industry, or 'hi-brite' paper for US and European magazines and advertising supplements. These could only be produced economically by reconfiguring at the mill level the very organization of production. Among other things this involved: shutting down old Fordist facilities; constructing new ones; introducing new flexible, computer-assisted machines in situ; and training new flexible workers.

Most of this reorganization directly impacted on labour. Workers in the old Fordist production facilities that were scrapped were laid off, and even parts of the production process converted to flexible production required a much smaller, core workforce than previously (for examples of the this process operating more generally during 1980s and 1990s in the Canadian pulp and paper sector, see the special issue of *The Canadian Geographer* 1997). At Port Alberni several of its Fordism operations closed altogether especially during the early 1990s. They included: Alberni Plywood in April 1991, Somass sawmill A in August 1991, and the Kraft pulp mill in March 1992. Furthermore, the paperboard mill (1981) and the shake and shingle operations (1982) had already been shut the previous decade. Apart from these direct closures, introduction of flexible production machines and work practices at both the sawmills and the pulp and paper mill further reduced the labour force.

Specifically, Port Alberni increasingly specialized in the flexible production of specialty papers, including extremely lightweight papers and telephone directory paper, and the (Alberni Pacific Division) sawmill increasingly produced specialized construction lumber for the Japanese market. In both cases a core set of now functionally flexible skilled workers were required, but in total fewer workers than before. In the pulp and paper division, which became the independently run Pacifica corporation in 1999 after Weyerhaeuser took over MacMillan Bloedel, employment dropped from over 1500 workers to just over 850 between 1980 and 2001, and in the Alberni Pacific Division the employment decline was just under 150 for the same period. Overall, both the mill closures and the move to flexible production resulted in an almost 60% decline of employment at the operations at Port Alberni over the period 1980–2001 (table 1).

The second change was around the move to what we will call more flexible resource communities. The irony is that just as Lucas (1971) was predicting the stability of single-industry towns following his relentlessly progressive typology, cyclonic forces were conspiring to undermine it. Since the early 1980s many coastal BC forestry communities have been in free-fall becoming emaciated, unstable, and in the worst case, losing the very industry that made them single-industry towns (figure 1). The precise form of the rearticulation occurring between mills and their associated communities takes

various forms, creating considerable diversity. But in every case, personal losses are considerable, with individuals sometimes devastated by their reversal of fortune.

This is certainly the case in Port Alberni. Following the various mill closures unemployment rates ballooned (14.4% in 1991, more than 4 percentage points higher than the provincial rate at that time), relative income fell [in 1980 per capita income was \$600 above the provincial average, but by 1990 it was more than \$200 below, and by 1996 close to \$2000 below (Egan and Klausen, 1996, page 46)], and the town lost population [1500 people between 1981 and 1991 (Egan and Klausen, 1996, page 40)]. This was clearly not what the 'mature' stage of resource-town evolution was supposed to be like. More generally, Port Alberni was being 'hollowed out', and with it the lives of some of its residents. Let us elaborate by using interview material that was collected in 1990, which involved written responses to a questionnaire by one of the paper's authors from a sample of 99 Port Alberni laid-off workers (and more fully reported in Hay, 1993, chapter 4).

The majority of respondents emphasized emotional impacts as the greatest problem of job loss. Several workers compared job loss to a death in the family, and emphasized the blow to self-esteem and a feeling of a lack of control. Laid-off workers made comments such as: "it gave me a total sense of helplessness", "it was the worst time in my life", and "it was truly a mind shattering experience and one from which none of us has yet completely recovered". In some cases, it led to various kinds of addictions and pathologies. One person said, "I turned to alcohol and eventually became an alcoholic and then to drugs", and another, "When I didn't work I drank more, got bitchier, fights happened". The wife of one of the laid-off workers perhaps summed it up best:

"You can't imagine the desperate feelings, the helplessness, the anxiety of each day ... You start to wonder if this hell-hole-of-a-town, or jobs you try to get is worth all the disappointments. You wonder how on earth you can keep going, trying to be in a somewhat decent frame of mind, if not for yourself then for your kids."

In fact, several of the interviews noted how the children became emotionally affected by the trauma, and four of six couples who divorced in the aftermath of the layoffs blamed their separation directly on the job loss.

Although in absolute terms the majority of workers laid off were men employed on the production line, white-collar managers and women were also let go. For managers, who were almost exclusively male, the indignity of layoff was compounded because it was selective and not influenced by seniority. Some managers were only on their thirties, others near retirement. All salaried managers interviewed expressed dissatisfaction, even bitterness, with how they had been laid off. All were called from their office without prior notice, given the news of termination, and either prohibited from returning to their office or escorted to their office to collect personal belongings.

Of the women, especially affected were the 53 female workers (of a total of 382) who were employed at the plywood mill that closed in April 1991. Like the men, there was sense of terrible shock, and one woman who had worked in the mill for thirty years likened her experience to

"... losing your country. That was your livelihood, your way of life, your routine. When that last sheet of plywood went through the green chain, in fact, I couldn't go to work ... I just wouldn't let them see me in tears. It was awful ... I was 53, I think. Too young to retire but too bloody old to work anywhere else" (quoted in Egan and Klausen, 1998, page 29).

Proportionally women were more badly affected by the mill layoffs than men, and during the second part of the 1980s and first part of the 1990s female unemployment rates in Port Alberni were extraordinarily high [reaching more than 21% at one point (Egan and Klausen, 1996, page 50)].

In addition to emotional scars, job loss imposed considerable financial burdens on individuals and families. These problems had immediate impacts on housing. One bank in Port Alberni repossessed 40% of the mortgages initiated in one six-month period (Hay, 1993, page 101). The courts were so backlogged that repossession took 18 months for processing and banks owned so many houses that they became reluctant to evict because they did not want more vacant dwellings. Many homeowners simply left and forfeited their equity. In the interview sample, which does not include workers who permanently left Port Alberni, 30% were forced to move home because of the layoff. On the other hand, homeownership is likely to have dissuaded many from leaving Port Alberni.

More generally, although the system is clearly still working for some, it is no longer working, as Marshall and Tucker once thought, for everyone. In particular, once the institutional structure that supported staples production on the margin began to unravel because of changed external demands and technological alterations in the production process, so did the lives of those living in the single-industry towns that were on the front line of that production.

Finally, there is a new local economic development ethos turning on entrepreneurialism as opposed to the old-style institution of managerialism. In large part this is because managerialism is not what it was. Canadian governments at various levels, because of ideological inclinations toward market-based solutions and as a strategy to curb burgeoning debts, were less willing to throw money and bureaucrats at the problems of individual communities. Likewise, the management structure of large corporations is now quite different. The middle-management bulge was severely trimmed. For example, MacMillan Bloedel's head-office staff was reduced between 1980 and 1996 from 1200 to 130. Fewer managers along with internationalization and fierce corporate competition, in turn, have meant that the old paternal, corporatist ethic around the single-industry community slipped. That vacuum was filled in some places by a shift to some kind of entrepreneurial culture, by which we mean very broadly initiatives coming from within the community. The results are diverse. There are traditional entrepreneurial initiatives of one kind and another turning on small-business formation, various forms of cooperation among federal, provincial, and community agencies, and between these agencies and private sector agencies and unions. In some places, nothing much has happened, in other places there is considerable transformation.

For those who stayed in Port Alberni the response to the restructuring at the mills, and the community as a whole, was slow to emerge. Partly this was a result of a changed political ideology that emphasized bottom-up individual initiative rather than top-down government intervention, and represented in BC during the 1980s by the increasingly right-wing Social Credit governments of first William Bennett Jnr, and later Bill Vander Zalm. Partly it was because MacMillan Bloedel moved away from its traditional paternalism. Although the corporation might have offered psychological counselling to laid-off workers, they did not offer retraining, and certainly not jobs. And partly it was because of a closed community mind-set, one that locals called 'valley vision'. Valley vision was an uncompromising attitude about what constituted appropriate work. According to Dave Haggard, then vice president of the Port Alberni branch of the International Woodworkers of America, unless it was unionized work at comparable rates of pay to MacMillan Bloedel, it was work not worth having. Unfortunately, that ruled out all jobs because, given Port Alberni's isolation from Vancouver and Victoria, no high-paying unionized firm would locate there.

The consequence was that community responses did not really appear until the troubles at Port Alberni became chronic and severe which was in the early 1990s.

There was never a centralized coordinating agency, however. As a result, the response was a ragbag collection of local economic strategies. To use Sjöholt's (1987) term, Port Alberni's entrepreneurialism was 'unruly', by which he means highly variegated in nature, outcome and social benefit.

In brief, one can recognize at least three different kinds of entrepreneurialism in the sense defined above occurring in Port Alberni.

(1) There are the attempts at offering entrepreneurial training and resources for business start-up. For example, the Alberni Enterprise Project (AEP) was created in 1986 and sought to stimulate local entrepreneurship. Sponsored by the Economic Development Council, the City of Port Alberni, Port Alberni Harbour Commission, and funded by the National Labour Market Innovations Programme, AEP was touted as "an experiment in community economic development in a single industry community grappling with economic instability" (Clague and Flavell, 1989, page 1). Composed of four main initiatives—entrepreneurial training, small-business incubating, capital seed funding, and management and networking—the results were mixed. The only successful component was entrepreneurial training: twenty-one people graduated at a cost of \$156 000 each, and twelve subsequently started their own businesses.

(2) There are various initiatives around promotion of tourism in part prompted by the fact that over 600 000 tourists annually pass through Port Alberni on their way to Vancouver Island's West Coast. One example is McLean Mill located 11 km from Port Alberni's town centre. On the site of a former sawmill, this open-air museum consists of a variety of buildings in various stages of renovation, including an operational steam engine. Involving collaboration among a variety of institutions and individuals, progress has been slow (the idea was first mooted in 1980). It opened officially in June 2000, but employment creation is modest: only four full-time jobs, and thirteen part-time ones (8.63 full-time equivalents). There are plans for expansion, including a salmon-enhancement project, but again it is limited. That said, the McLean Mill is one of the success stories in the area, representing a signature development for promoting tourism. But the work created by it will neither meet Haggard's criteria of 'real jobs', nor replace the positions lost at MacMillan Bloedel.

(3) Finally, there are nonmainstream organizations, not connected to private business, government, or the unions. An example here is the Alberni Valley Cottage Industry Society (AVCIS). Created in 1986 by Cecile McKinley, an active church and school board member upset by Port Alberni's social problems, she formed AVCIS to provide unemployed youth with job skills and experience. Without a business background herself, McKinley obtained premises by leasing an old fire hall from the municipality for \$1 a year, and attained modest funding from federal and provincial job-sponsoring programmes, notably Job Trac. The funding provided temporary, relatively low-wage employment typically for young people including aboriginals. About 200 individuals between 1987 and 1996 were provided by AVCIS with work experience, and skill development. Normally expertise was provided without cost by skilled workers, including IWA members, and MacMillan Bloedel also supplied some materials. Unfortunately, because of the termination of funds AVCIS closed in 1996.

Entrepreneurialism, as Harvey (1989b) notes more generally, is part and parcel of a wider shift in the economy, but it implies risk and speculation, and is certainly no guarantee of success. Such an assessment is borne out in Port Alberni. Entrepreneurialism brought about little diversification, and few new 'real' jobs were created. Perhaps this is not surprising. Because of their very nature as resource communities, single-industry towns, such as Port Alberni, which typically are isolated, have no history of an independent entrepreneurial culture, and lack appropriate institutional support, are not well equipped to face this brave new world.

Conclusion

In summary, the purposes of this paper were twofold. First, we wanted to make a theoretical argument. Our contention, following Innis, is that the kind of staples economy that once characterized all of BC, and even now still characterizes large portions of the province (Hayter, 2000), implies a particular kind of economic dependency, the consequences of which are most traumatic for single-industry towns. We further argued that Innis thought that conventional metropole theory was not up to the task of representing such dependency, and what was required was a theory from the margin: staples theory. Staples theory's emphasis on institutional regulation, accumulation, periodic instability and crisis, and dependency clearly also mark it as some kind of political economic approach, although it is no dyed-in-the-wool Marxism. Although sympathetic to Marx, Innis thought that Marxism itself was a theory of metropolitan powers, and what were required for Canada were, as he put it, "fresh interpretations and not the same interpretations" (letter to Irene Spry quoted in Parker, 1983, page 148).

That said, we suggested that there are useful comparisons to be made at least with Harvey's Marxism that emphasizes perhaps more than Marx himself the disrupting effects of time and space. But even here, Harvey's theory sometimes aspires too much for the "search for universals" (Walker, 2001, page 170), whereas Innis remains wedded to particular dirt economies. Harvey's notion of a structured coherence, however, is useful, and we used it to provide theoretically for the possibility of periods of stability and prosperity given an appropriate institutional presence. But such stability is only temporary. Forces of instability emanating from the very nature of staples production continually emerge, and as they build, institutions begin to buckle, unsettling existing spatial and temporal patterns, and eventually resulting in an explosion of malevolent change.

Second, we tried to apply Innis's approach to understanding the restructuring occurring in the forestry town of Port Alberni. Our argument was that, following initial growth in the first part of this century, a specific set of institutional forms and practices coalesced in the immediate postwar years (roughly 1950–80), providing Port Alberni with temporary shelter from the destructive storms of staples production. Storm clouds were always brewing, however, and from 1981 cyclonic forces battered and bruised the mills, the town, the institutions, and especially the people. Ameliorative measures were tried, but to little effect. It is as if staples production is written so deeply in the landscape that any alternative seems impossible.

But, as we said at the beginning of the paper, Innis was a preacher and believed in the hope of redemption. Throughout his life as a public intellectual, he tried to convince Canadians of all stripes from his university pulpit that there was another way to conceive of themselves and their economy. If they thought this was impossible, it was only because of powerful fixed habits of mind that ran along the rut of conventional thinking about staples. Here the possibilities of marginal theory are critical. As Wernick (1986, page 137) writes, theory from the margin "ma[kes] thinkable a dedogmatizing re-arrangement of the local intellectual field". Rorty (1999, page 236), the American pragmatist philosopher, has recently written about the necessary conditions for "social hope", which he thinks begin to be realized only when "oppressed groups ... develop new ways of talking in order to produce a new kind of self-knowledge". This is what Innis sought. His marginal theory was a "new way of talking", providing the possibility for social hope on the margin. Rorty (1999), though, recognizes that using a new vocabulary, and making it work, is difficult, taking a long time to succeed if it ever does. Certainly, time ran out for many living in Port Alberni. But this does not mean abandoning Innis's project. Rather, it only becomes ever more urgent and pressing.

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