

# **Society-Centered Approaches to Political Science Research in the Northwest Territories**

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Civil society is a significant driver of northern politics, yet it remains an understudied element of political life in the Northwest Territories (NWT). Political scientists have tended to prefer studies that explore formal political institutions, economic development, and Indigenous self-determination. To address this gap, I propose the adoption of a society-centered approach that conceptualizes civil society institutions and actors as the primary units of analysis. By focussing on these key pillars of democratic life, political scientists can provide new insights into northern political development, the emergence of Indigenous movements for self-determination, and the evolution of political and policy discourses within the territory. It is in examining the social and discursive connections among state institutions, the market, and the territory's publics that a deeper understanding of the NWT's political landscape can be drawn.

Broadly defined, civil society represents the space between the state and the privately ordered, capitalist economy (see Fraser, 1992; Smith, 2005; Young and Everitt, 2004; Vickers, 1997). Here, I use Cohen and Arato's definition of civil society as "a sphere of social interaction between [the] economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communications" (1992: ix). Civil society should be understood as a self-constituting and self-motivating sphere with its own actors, institutions, and spaces for discursive interaction (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Taylor, 1990).

This definition is complicated in the NWT by geographic, linguistic, and cultural divisions whose origins in the colonial history of the territory have produced a fractured civil society. For example, the division between settler-society communities, such as Yellowknife or Hay River, and their smaller and predominantly Indigenous counterparts is striking. The discursive connections between these communities are few, and these divisions are only heightened by language differences and uneven access to media and communications technologies. Also complicating this picture is the concentration of voluntary and nonprofit organizations, media outlets, and private associations in Yellowknife, the capital of the NWT. Here, a picture emerges of a robust civil society at the centre of the territory, with limited connections or input from those outside its immediate area.

Given these complicated lived realities, what would a society-centered approach recognize in the study of NWT politics? First, such an approach would acknowledge the state's role in constructing the territory's settler-society. Contemporary northern society has its origins in the

colonial project of the Canadian state. The social and political landscape of the North reflects both the colonial policy interventions of the Government of Canada and the mobilized resistance of Indigenous peoples across the provincial and territorial North. Starting at different times across the region, the state systematically dismantled Indigenous societies and supplanted them with settler societies that privileged the needs and purposes of the state over local peoples (Abele 1989, 2009b; Fumoleau 1973; Henderson 2007; Watkins, 1977). The roots of these new northern societies rest in patterns of development set down as early as the late nineteenth century. What seem today to be the defining characteristics of territorial society are, as Abele states, “in fact the result of yesterday’s purposes and decisions” (2009b: 19). Northern civil societies were neither fully planned nor accidental. Instead, the civil society of the NWT reflects the conflicts and discursive interactions among state and societal actors that produced the macro-historical structures and regularities that form their policy environments.

Second, a society-centered approach would recognize that the institutions of civil society, such as the voluntary and nonprofit sector, are subjects worthy of study. This research increases our knowledge of the social, political, and policy processes that have shaped the contemporary North. For example, there is little research on the effects of settler-society associations, such as unions or advocacy groups, on policy development in the NWT. Developing this understanding is necessary to building and maintaining robust northern civil societies. As Cameron and Simeon argue, a strong civil society is “essential to a healthy democratic politics, to building strong communities, and to innovation in public policy” (2009: 4).

Creating the conditions for a vibrant civil society is of pressing concern given the “transformation of epic proportions” currently underway in Canada’s northern regions (Abele et al., 2009b: 587). Changing domestic and economic circumstances, as well as geopolitical pressures, have created a “new northern policy universe” which both northerners and Canadians will have to confront (Abele et al., 2009b: 561). In their recent volume on the subject, *Northern Exposure: Peoples, Powers and Prospects in Canada’s North*, Abele et al. (2009b) identify key elements of this new universe and propose several strategies for addressing emerging policy issues across the North, including climate change, poor social conditions, and threats to Canadian sovereignty. Absent from their discussion, however, are the actors, institutions, and discursive spaces of northern civil society. Indeed, in this new policy environment, civil society will provide a key resource for building the policy capacity necessary to meet these challenges.

Finally, a society-centered approach would situate the traditional subjects studied by political scientists in the NWT—institutions, Indigenous self-government, and economic development—within their social and historical context. The approach would emphasize the changing dynamics of political life in the territory, including the rise of social media and increased global connections. At its heart, a society-centered approach would not conceptualize legislative politics as the centre of political life in the territory—although it is one of its most visible aspects—but as one part of a political system that includes civil society actors and institutions.

Despite nearly fifty years of research in the Western Arctic by political scientists and others, almost no studies exist which analyse the role of civil society in northern political and policy processes. This paper argues that, given the rapidly changing political, economic, and environmental circumstance of Canada’s northern regions, examining this role is key to

understanding past political trajectories and developing effective policy responses to emerging challenges. This paper identifies reasons for the absence of these studies, and proposes several approaches for mapping the relationship between civil society actors and state, capitalist economic, and Aboriginal institutions in the NWT. It presents a brief review of the political science literature on the NWT, and identifies three general approaches to the study of politics in the territory. These approaches include institutionalism, Aboriginal and postcolonial politics, and the politics of northern economic development. In doing so, this paper points to gaps in the literature and suggests how each approach would benefit from the use of a society-centered lens. Finally, this paper demonstrates three applications of society-centered approach across three time periods in the history of Yellowknife and the Great Slave Lake region of the NWT.

### A Society-Centered Approach

Developing a society-centered approach to the study of NWT politics has both descriptive and analytic goals. First, from a descriptive perspective, we should explore the size and scope of northern civil society. Identifying the central institutions of NWT civil society, their relationships with state and market institutions, and their relative influence in comparison to one another is an important first step. Second, from an analytic perspective, we also need to theorize the role of civil society institutions and actors as mechanisms for political and policy continuity or change within the territory. Beyond the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) and its bureaucracy, who are the major players that shape policy in the NWT? An emphasis on civil society can assist in producing a more nuanced understanding of territorial political and policy processes and, in the process, help to answer questions like this.

Before turning to a discussion of what a society-centered approach might explicate in the study of NWT politics, it is useful to flush out a definition of civil society and its constitutive elements. Civil society provides a critical space beyond the institutions of the state and capitalist economy for collective action by citizens. Contemporary civil society is largely self-constitutive, but it also relies on “institutionalized and generalized through laws, especially subjective rights, that stabilize social differentiation” (Cohen and Arato, 1992: ix). As such, Cohen and Arato (1992) caution that it would be a mistake to see civil society solely in opposition to the state and economy.

In Canada, for example, civil society has benefitted from a wide array of government programs designed to support its development and reproduction, especially in the areas of media and philanthropy. We should therefore conceptualize civil society as a mediating sphere that influences both policy and economic processes. Civil society, or “politicized society”, is an enabling framework for Canadian democracy, and as Cairns argues, it is “caught in webs of interdependence with the state, and we must think of the latter as an embedded state tied down by its multiple linkages with society” (Cairns, 1995: 33). This interdependent relationship in social, political, economic, and policy processes is the central concern of this paper, and what is largely missing from the northern political science literature to date.

Sievers (2010) identifies four basic institutional structures that underpin contemporary civil society: the practice of philanthropy, the rule of law, a tradition of private associations, and a system of free expression. Each of these structures exists in the NWT, but each is less problematically studied in the context of the territory’s settler-society communities than in its

Indigenous ones. While not a sharp dichotomy—there is overlap and points of interaction between the civil societies of both communities—there are two reasons for this. On the one hand, these concepts have been derived from a long history of Western thought and thus imposing them on Indigenous societies represents a form of what Smith (1999) calls “research through imperial eyes.” On the other hand, we do not currently have the empirical research that tests the applicability of these concepts in Indigenous societies and communities. For example, how does the Western concept of volunteering differ from the Dene concept of “helping out”? Expanding the use of society-centered research will assist in gaining this much needed knowledge.

The first two structures—philanthropy and private associations—have strong roots in the NWT. In Yellowknife, for example, there is evidence of widespread voluntary activity in its early history (see below). Amongst Indigenous societies, both Dene and Inuvialuit practiced “helping out”. Today, both communities seldom interact as part of the voluntary and nonprofit sector. Explanations within the grey literature of government and third sector reports include a lack of attractiveness or credibility of groups or activities for Aboriginal northerners, as well as volunteerism being a little known concept compared to the well-known and honoured concept of “helping-out” (Little, Auchterlonie, and Stephen, 2005).

Private associations, such as unions, religious organizations, service clubs, federal political parties, and advocacy groups, also have a long history within the territory. While no longer comfortably fitting into this category, early Indigenous rights groups, such as the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT, also find their origin in this category.

There are several reasons why Aboriginal organizations are not appropriately studied within a Western civil society framework. First, these organizations have followed a different political trajectory from their non-Aboriginal counterparts. While settler society organizations developed alongside the colonial institutions of the state and capitalist economy, Aboriginal organizations developed in reaction to colonial processes and as a tool of decolonization (Watkins, 1977). Comparisons between Aboriginal and settler organizations must recognize the opposing contexts in which both types of organizations have emerged.

Second, the concepts of volunteerism and nonprofit organizing reflect colonial understandings of community, cooperation, and production. Aboriginal organizations may undertake similar activities to settler organizations, but their political, social, and cultural purposes are quite different. Finally, Aboriginal and settler organizations have different meanings to their respective communities. For Indigenous communities, Aboriginal organizations represent sites of sovereignty, decolonization, as well as community revitalization and healing. Non-Aboriginal organizations do not hold the same significance in settler society. Recognizing these differences is central to understanding how the social economy functions and operates within and across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

The other significant institutional structure of civil society is a system of free expression. This includes public and private media outlets, as well as the rise of social media. The NWT has several major media outlets, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Northern News Services, Taiga Radio, and the Native Communications Society. The role these types of outlets have played in shaping political and policy debate in the territory is little understood. For

example, what role did the CBC play during the Berger Inquiry and how has the presence of a state-funded broadcaster influenced the Indigenous rights movement in the NWT? Moreover, how have state subsidies supported or hindered the development of independent media outlets within the territory? There are a number of questions about access, influence, and reach that have not been addressed. The final structure, the rule of law, falls outside the scope of this paper.

There are challenges for political scientists in adopting a society-centered approach to research in the territorial North. First, understanding civil society requires community-based research, which is expensive and time consuming. Only so much information can be gathered about northern discourses by those located in southern universities. Second, civil society networks are elusive—there is no directory laying out the connections, interactions, and partnerships among the various actors and institutions of NWT civil society. Finally, both civil society actors and institutions are transient and changing. They are not statutorily enshrined, but instead shape themselves to reflect changes in the wider society. Thus, research on northern civil society requires constant updating—the organizations that led at the turn of the century could be quite different from those ten years later. Ultimately, as the study of northern politics matures, along with the institutions it studies, so too should the focus of its students.

#### Civil Society and Northern Political Science

Prior to the early 1960s, almost all research undertaken in the territories was by federal government researchers in support of federal policy initiatives (Nixon, 1989). This research focused primarily on economic development, as well as the social and living conditions of northern Aboriginal peoples. The research, conducted by public servants, complemented the “aspiration of federal politicians regarding the exploitation of northern resources” and “the need to address the hardships being endured by northern Native peoples” (Abele, 1989: 314). Research by public servants and academics expanded rapidly after the creation of the Northern Co-ordination and Research Centre in the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources (Nixon, 1989: 37).<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1970s, research by historians, anthropologists, economists, and physical scientists was growing, as was southern Canadian interest in the region. In particular, political scientists were hired to study the political development of the North and its inhabitants.

The political science literature examining NWT politics can be characterized in four ways.<sup>2</sup> First, beyond the pre-division and post-division categories developed above, the literature can be sliced into two other significant periods: 1977-1990 and 1990-present. The first wave of literature

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<sup>1</sup> The Centre was created in 1954, but did not begin funding outside research until the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> There are several interrelated challenges in defining which research should be included in a review of “NWT political science.” Prior to 1999, northern political science dealt with a unified NWT, stretching from the Yukon border in the west to Baffin Island in the east. Conversely, the scope of this paper only includes research that was conducted within the contemporary borders of the NWT. Since the creation of Nunavut in 1999, it is much easier to identify this relevant research in the literature. As such, the literature should be divided between pre-division and post-division periods. The second challenge is geographic. In the pre-division literature, distinctions were frequently made between the Western and Eastern Arctic, as well as among Inuit and First Nation traditional territories. For the purposes of this paper, only pre-division literature dealing with Aboriginal peoples in the Western Arctic, including the Inuvialuit, was considered. The final challenge is the lack of specificity in much of the literature. Many studies examine “the territorial north,” and study political and policy questions in the pre-division period for both the Yukon and NWT, or for all three territories in the post-division period. For the purposes of this paper, these books, chapters, and articles were included in the literature review.

reflects several changes in the research environment, including an increase in federal funding for northern research; the launch of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in 1974 (Page, 1989); the rise of Indigenous activism across northern Canada (Watkins, 1977); and popular concern over Arctic sovereignty (Dosman, 1976). This interest led to a decade and a half of intense research, which eventually waned in the early 1990s. Interest in northern research did not increase again until the creation of Nunavut in 1999 (Timpson, 2006), and a renewed public interest in the North stemming from increasing public awareness of climate change and the potential opening of the Northwest Passage (Byers 2007; Griffiths, 2009).

Second, research on the politics of the NWT is almost always placed within its federal context—NWT politics are rarely examined in and of themselves. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, the federal context reflects the constitutional status of the NWT, as well as its fiscal relationship with the federal government (Abele, 2009a).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, this may also reflect the biases of researchers (Nixon, 1989). There is no university located in the NWT, and the vast majority of academic researchers reside in southern Canada. The use of a federal lens to study NWT politics may reflect this distance from the territory.

Third, the literature is interdisciplinary in nature. Very few political scientists study the politics of the NWT. It was necessary to construct this literature review by moving beyond the works written by those academics housed in Political Science departments to those in History (Coates, 1985, 1989; Fumoleau, 1974), Public Administration (Abele, 1989, 2009a, 2009b), Anthropology (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009; Kulchyski, 2005), and Economics (Stabler, 1985; Slack, 2007; Watson, 1985).

Finally, the literature is quite small. Between 1960 and 2009, only fifty-two articles have been written about the politics of the NWT.<sup>4</sup> Again, this reflects constraints on the ability of researchers to gain access to the NWT, including the lack of a university, the high cost of travel and accommodation in the territory, and its geographic and cultural distance from southern Canada.

### *Approaches*

Three general approaches can be identified in the political science literature on the politics of the NWT. None of these approaches are discrete, and researchers borrow from each in the construction of their analyses. What unifies each of these approaches is their general neglect of three of the four institutional structures of civil society laid out above—that is, philanthropy, private associations, and media. Below, I consider each approach to northern politics and consider what a society-centered focus might add.

The *institutional approach* focuses on the development and functioning of formal political institutions, including legislatures and the bureaucracy. It differs from the new institutionalisms

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<sup>3</sup> According to Abele (2009a), federal transfers account for 69% of territorial expenditures in the NWT.

<sup>4</sup> I used the following method to search the political science literature. First, I conducted an initial search of the literature using keywords such as “Northwest Territories,” “Yellowknife,” and “Dene.” Following this initial search, I used the bibliographies of the found literature to identify other key materials. Finally, I conducted a search of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *Canadian Public Administration*, and *Canadian Public Policy*, for relevant articles. In all, I identified fifty-two journal articles, chapters, and books about the politics of the NWT dating from 1960 and 2009.

discussed above, and does not present a unified approach to institutional development and change. Instead, it represents a diversity of perspectives and frameworks that are concerned with federal-territorial relations, elite political relationships, the role of Aboriginal peoples in colonial political institutions, and the distinct political development of the territory. More recent uses of the approach have examined the design and implementation of the institutions of Aboriginal self-government. The largest body of research on the politics of the NWT can be divided into two areas: federal-territorial relations and territorial political institutions. Political actors and Aboriginal peoples are visible throughout this literature to varying degrees.

The earliest book-length study of the federal government's role in shaping the political and institutional environment of the NWT is Rae's (1968) *The Political Economy of the Canadian North*. The book details the geographic and institutional context of the territories, and examines both the publicly and privately sponsored activities undertaken across the territorial north. Rae was the first to articulate that federal initiatives, such as investment in infrastructure and the implementation of welfare state institutions, have "fundamentally altered" the economic, political, and social environment of the territory for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples (1968: 231). As such, Rae identified both the economic and state processes which served as the foundation of the territory, and laid the groundwork for later explorations of the federal-territorial dynamic.

Research examining the federal-territorial relationship runs along two lines: 1) the federal role in politically and economically managing the territory, and 2) the role of the federal government in the constitutional and political development of the territories. The earlier line of inquiry examined the capacity of the federal government to effectively manage the NWT and Yukon politically, economically, and socially. Research in this area prompted such questions as "who are the managers of Canada's North" (Moore and Vanderhaden, 1984: 182)? The answer generally was the federal government, with territorial councils and governments in distant second place. Moreover, Aboriginal peoples were not yet taken seriously in this area of the literature (Moore and Vanderhaden, 1984). This literature was largely abandoned by the mid-1980s as the GNWT developed sufficiently to manage the territory without direct oversight from Ottawa (Abele 2009a).

The second line of inquiry demonstrates a discursive shift from the federal government as "manager" of the territories, to the federal government as "partner" in the constitutional and political development of both territories. The origin of shift is difficult to pinpoint and the mechanisms through which these ideas changed is uncertain. The move towards "partner" is defined in the literature as "the ability to perform the political functions" of government (Dacks, 1981: 89). For example, Dacks (1981, 1990) conceptualizes the NWT's status as a territory, without the sovereignty afforded provinces, as a barrier to full political development. Other constraints include the fiscal relationship between the federal government and the NWT (Dean, 1981), and the devolution of natural resource revenues to the territory (Fehan, 2009). This federal-territorial relationship is dealt with sporadically throughout the literature; however, no comprehensive examination of the government-to-government relationship exists.

Researchers using the institutional approach also examine the formal politics of the NWT, including the architecture of territorial political institutions such as the Legislative Assembly

(Cameron and White, 1995; McArthur, 2009; White, 1991). Here, the role of Aboriginal peoples in shaping and participating in political institutions is very well developed, but the literature remains focused on elite level politics. The role of other social movements, media, and the voluntary and nonprofit sector is left unexplored.

Research in this area also examines the unique institutions and newly emerging constitutional arrangements that are remaking northern governance (McArthur, 2009; White, 1991). For example, in his study of the NWT Legislative Assembly, White argues that “parliamentary government, as practiced in the NWT, represents a distinctive variation on the traditional Westminster model, a variation which reflects the distinctiveness of northern society, in particular the native majority in the NWT and in the Assembly” (1991: 500). Whether there is also a distinctive role for the actors and institutions of civil society is not examined in the literature.

Thus, absent from this area of the literature is the function of civil society in shaping institutions and political processes. What role does a vibrant civil society play in the politics of a small municipality in the NWT? How do civil society actors access political elites, and what linkages exist among these actors? Perhaps most importantly, does an adequately robust public sphere exist to criticize government decision-making and hold the government to account? The literature lacks an illustration of the relationships among the state, markets, and society, as well as how civil society actors influence the political and policy processes of the territory.

The second major approach, which I call the *Aboriginal and post-colonial politics approach*, adopts a post-colonial framework to examine the relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples in the NWT, as well as Aboriginal claims to self-determination and sovereignty. While some of the early literature can be characterized as advocacy, more recent uses of this approach emphasize treaty processes, comprehensive claim agreement negotiations, and the development and implementation of Aboriginal self-government.

The appearance of an Aboriginal politics approach in political science on the territorial North began with the release of Fumoleau’s (1973) *As Long As this Land Shall Last: A History of Treaty 8 and Treaty 11*. Not only did it reflect and encourage the Indigenous activism that was already occurring among Dene, but it also publicized the injustice of the colonial system of territorial governance beyond the borders of the NWT. It was followed in 1977 by Watkin’s *Dene Nation: The Colony Within*, whose collection of essays expounded the relationship of Dene to the political system (Barnaby et al., 1977), the effect of colonialism in Aboriginal communities (Bean, 1977), the colonial structure of the territorial government (Puxley, 1977), as well as the constitutional relationship to the Crown to the Dene Nation (Russell, 1977).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the literature methodical in its approach, documenting first the negotiation of land claims, and then the negotiation of comprehensive agreements (Cassidy, 1990; Irlbacher-Fox, 2009; Morrison, 1989). The field not only examined the place of Aboriginal peoples in the territory, but also explored their agency in changing the political and economic structures of the territorial government and their relationship to the state (Dacks, 1981, 1990; Dickerson, 1992).



Later research examines both the design and implementation of self-government, and ultimately self-determination (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009; Irlbacher-Fox and Mills, 2009; White, 2009). Here, institutional approaches overlap, and we can see research that not only documents these processes, but also critically examines the structures of these emerging governments. Absent from this literature is a vision of the relationship between Aboriginal self-governments and the territorial and federal governments, once they are in place. In particular, emerging political, legal, and fiscal relationships between the three orders of government are absent from the literature.

The Aboriginal politics approach is the only area in the literature in which civil society organizations are discussed at length. In particular, the role of Aboriginal organizations such as the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT (now the Dene Nation) and the Native Women's Association in pressuring the government for recognition of the Aboriginal right to self-determination is well-documented and explored (Abele and Dickerson, 1985; Barnaby, 1977; Puxely, 1977).

Questions still remain, however. What is the relationship between settler-society organizations, such as the YWCA in Yellowknife and the Aboriginal community? How do Aboriginal media outlets cover territorial politics, and are there substantial differences in the coverage from such non-Aboriginal outlets as the CBC and *The Yellowknifer*? Finally, what is the emerging relationship between civil society organizations and Aboriginal self-governments, and how do they differ from more traditional state-society relationships? Mapping the linkages between civil society and Aboriginal institutions will open up new directions in research and bring a greater understanding of the hidden networks between civil society actors, the territorial government, and newly emerging Aboriginal institutions.

Finally, the *politics of northern economic development approach* can be characterized in two ways. Early research using this approach was concerned with resource extraction, economic development, and job creation in the territory for Indigenous northerners and others. In this literature, however, Aboriginal peoples were understood as a ready pool of labour, instead of full partners in development. By contrast, more recent scholarship using this approach has examined the role of Aboriginal peoples designing and implementing economic opportunities that are ecologically and culturally sustaining.

As argued above, the economic development of the NWT has always been a central concern in the literature. This approach, however, has two very distinct bodies of research. The first in the literature is concerned with the strict economic development of the territory, often through the exploitation of mineral, gas, and other natural resources such as diamonds (Sivertz, 1960). It is not particularly concerned with the participation of Aboriginal peoples in the steering of this activity, but instead views Aboriginal employment as a positive externality of this economic development. The high-water mark for this approach was the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada in 1985. In particular, two studies by Stabler (1985) and Watson (1985) saw the opening of the territory to exploration, along with the retrenchment of the state in favour of market forces, as their recommended economic plan for the territory. Aboriginal peoples as nations have no role in this development. This perspective is certainly reflective of the failure of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline eight years earlier (Page,

1989). What is striking, however, is the complete disregard for the context of northern life and the role Aboriginal peoples could play in shaping the economic development of the NWT (see also, Stabler and Howe, 1990).

The second approach embraces the role of Aboriginal peoples in directing economic development on their lands in environmentally and culturally sustainable ways. Abele argues that the “best way to find out what people need is to ask them” (1988: vii). In her book, *Gathering Strength*, Abele examines the NWT’s job training programs, and advocates for opening up the territory’s exclusive economic system to Aboriginal peoples on their own terms. Cain et al. (2007) turn to researchers as means for creating the critical distance necessary to renegotiate the position of Aboriginal peoples in the territory’s economic order. Deep concern for the environment, and the ability of future generations of Aboriginal peoples to live off the land, is also a strong current in this literature.

Again, the role of civil society in directing economic development in the territory is not explored. What is the role of unions in shaping economic activity in the territory? How do environmental organizations affect policy processes around economic development and sustainability? Finally, what role do Aboriginal and other organizations play in enabling Aboriginal peoples to participate fully in the territory’s economy? The linkages between civil society and the capitalist economy are not well understood, nor is the role of civic institutions in shaping ideas about how economic development should unfold in the territories.

There has been some significant movement towards introducing society-centered research in the last three years. Under the direction of the Social Economy Research Network of Northern Canada, based at Yukon College, researchers are now examining the role of the “social economy” in the provincial and territorial North. The social economy refers to “the part of the social productive system that lies outside the direct ambit of government programs and large businesses” (Abele, 2009a: 38). Occupying the space between the public and private sectors, the social economy consists of a diverse set of community-based voluntary and nonprofit organizations, as well as small businesses, cooperatives, and traditional productive activities (Ninacs, 2002; Painter, 2006). Organizations operating within this economy capitalize upon community strengths and resources to provide social, cultural, economic, health, and other services to individuals and communities. Here, as an analytic tool, the social economy also describes “a strategy to develop and enhance both the vitality and social and educational capital of Northern communities through organizations that are more directly controlled by the communities themselves” (Southcott, 2009: 4).<sup>5</sup> The social economy approach takes a broad view and considers all voluntary and nonprofit organizations as related, with a shared set of needs, opportunities, and challenges.

#### Applying the Civil Society Approach in Northern Political Science: Examples from the NWT

Adopting a society-centered approach in the study of NWT politics presents an opportunity to reexamine forgotten histories, as well as to provide new insights into contemporary challenges.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2009, *The Northern Review* published a special collection of essays on the social economy in Northern Canada. Topics included the state and the social economy, the northern cooperative movement, traditional production and the social economy.

This section briefly outlines three applications of the society-centered approach introduced above. The examples are drawn from three distinct periods in the history of Yellowknife and the Great Slave Lake region of the NWT. As none of these examples are documented in the literature, I have brought together materials to construct these examples using archival research, key informant interviews, the use of grey literature, and publicly available information. Each of these examples demonstrates a different feature of civil society, including philanthropy, the role of private associations in political life, and the state's role in fostering civic engagement. The goal of this section is to highlight the utility of using society-centered approaches to examine the NWT and to imagine how this gap in the literature might be filled.

### *1938: Public Toilets in Yellowknife, NWT*

There remain few accounts of early colonial life in the territory (see Fumoleau, 1974; Price, 1967; Zaslow, 1988). The processes through which settlers organized communities, established services, and interacted with local Indigenous peoples has not been explored in detail. Even in places where whites settled in greater numbers, state institutions were slow in establishing themselves across the NWT before World War II. This does not signal, however, that the nascent institutions of settler civil society did not assist in producing and regularizing social and political practices and activities among early settlers. The period following the founding of Yellowknife demonstrates the capacity for the institutions and actors of civil society to direct settlement life and provide services, even in the absence of state institutions.

Prospectors seeking gold and other mineral deposits settled Yellowknife in 1937, following a rush at Great Bear Lake in the early 1930s. Until 1940, Yellowknife remained an unincorporated settlement with no local government and minimal state oversight except for the occasional RCMP officer. By early 1938, the five hundred residents of Yellowknife had erected over one hundred buildings and the population consisted primarily of prospectors, trades people, and their families. Transients and drifters were also attracted to Yellowknife with the promise of gold and the community's relative isolation from southern Canada. Many of these individuals could not afford the material and construction costs of proper housing, and therefore lived in tents and on boats in Yellowknife Bay. As such, they did not have access to toilet facilities, and over the course of 1938, sanitation in the community was a concern.

Between July 1938 and September 1939, the only discursive space within the community was Yellowknife's newspaper, *The Prospector*, which was published twice weekly. It is clear from the record that the *Prospector* served as a political space in which community needs could be discussed and action organized. Indeed, it served as the primary organ of Yellowknife's public sphere. The newspaper instigated a call for public toilets on July 23, 1938, and stated it would continue to "gather subscriptions" to build the toilets on August 3, 1938.<sup>6</sup> It also published letters from the public on the subject, including this anonymous letter to the editor on August 6, 1938:

'Good for you, 'Prospector,' your campaign for public toilets ought to get some action! Stay with it until we get them. This situation might be alright [sic] in a mining camp, but it's no good in a growing town.

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<sup>6</sup>*The Prospector* published at least three other editorials on the subject on August 10, 1938; September 10, 1938; and September 21, 1938.

I would suggest that some arrangement be made to keep them clean. Perhaps a box could be nailed on the back of the doors for contributions from grateful users. Somebody could be paid to clean them by taking the change left in the box. It would probably amount to something, particularly in summer.

I hope you will be able to get together sufficient money to have them put up next week. I am enclosing my bit.

Best of luck,

Another Prospector.

*The Prospector* published three other editorials on the subject over the summer of 1938, and by September 1938, the community had organized itself to ensure the donation of wood and labour to construct the public toilets.

In addition to demonstrating the discursive interaction and organizing of Yellowknife's residents around an issue of concern, this example also highlights the class divisions present in Yellowknife's early history. A cartoon that appeared in the August 3, 1938 edition of the newspaper depicts a man in a suit who has locked his latrine, while in the background, the cartoon depicts a transient labourer in need of a toilet (See Appendix A). The representation of class and privilege is clear. In an earlier editorial, titled "A Matter of Importance," the editor commented that the construction of a public toilet "would also earn the undying gratitude of the large floating population who at present are unable to provide themselves with such facilities. Then it would no longer be an unquestioned mark of social distinction around here to own one and keep it locked." Examining this period in NWT civil society reveals a considerable amount about early social and political life in settler-society.

This practice of community organizing repeated itself several times between 1937 and 1940, including the founding of a small school and the hiring of a teacher. In a period where no government existed, society came together to provide services in the community. It is clear that the newspaper served as a critical discursive space in which debate and negotiation over the construction of the toilet occurred—indeed, *The Prospector* served as the treasurer on the project.

This example also highlights the importance of considering contemporary uses of media as spaces for interaction and organizing in NWT political life. For example, what role does media play in shaping both government activity and collective action by citizens? The advent and use of new communications technologies, along with social media, only creates further questions about the function of civil society in the political and policy processes of the territory. The voluntary and nonprofit sector has started utilizing social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to promote and recognize its activities and events. For example, Cinema Politica maintains an active Facebook group that keeps members up to date on the organization's activities and screening dates.<sup>7</sup> On Twitter, the "#yzf" and "#nwt" hash tags have been important sites for information dissemination about events occurring both in Yellowknife and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Cinema Politica Yellowknife" can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=62383935072>.

<sup>8</sup> For example, local sector leaders such as Mira Hall (@tundrabunny) and Nancy Zimmerman (@moneycoach) have both provided "live-blogging" of local and international sector events. For example, Hall reported from the United Nation's Forty-fourth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York City (March 1 - 12, 2010),

### *1970: The Company of Young Canadians*

A second example of the society-centered approach examines the role of the Company of Young Canadians (CYC) in supporting the early Indigenous political movement in the NWT. A government sponsored program, similar to the American Peace Corps, the CYC sent young people across the country to volunteer as community organizers (Daly, 1970; Hamilton, 1970). The CYC captured the energy and unrest of the 1960s social movements, and encouraged radical youth to turn their attention towards community development for a salary of \$35 a month (Brodhead et al., 1997).

The first CYC volunteer to arrive in Yellowknife was Steve Iveson in 1969. He was followed shortly thereafter by Caroline Pickles and Peter Puxley in 1970. These three volunteers quickly befriended local Dene youth, and began recruiting them into the organization. These young Dene included Georges Erasmus, Mona Jacobs, Ed Bird, and James Wah Shee. Activism proved difficult, however, as many Dene were suspicious of the national organization and its southern volunteers (Coates, 1985; Coates and Powell, 1989). The Dene members of the CYC went on to found the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT to continue their Indigenous activism and struggle for Aboriginal self-determination.

This example is significant for several reasons. First, it illustrates the linkages between the state and society organizations—CYC volunteers would not have been in Yellowknife had the federal government not provided funding. Second, it demonstrates the relationship between civil society organizations such as the CYC and the Indian Brotherhood. Finally, many of the individuals who started their political and activist careers within this civil society organization went on to become significant leaders both territorially and nationally. Mapping the relationships between civil society actors and state institutions is an unexplored area that could yield important insights into the political development of the territory.

### *2010: Alternatives North*

The final application of this approach examines the role of civil society actors in influencing policy processes through participation in policy communities. Alternatives North was founded in 1992 as an umbrella organization of Yellowknife unions, church groups, environmental organizations, and women's groups. It is a progressive advocacy organization dedicated to social justice in the NWT. When asked what the primary activities of the organization were, one member stated:

There are three: research, education, and advocacy. Research can go from meeting with Ministers to clarify what the intent behind their initiatives are—so clarifying policy decisions all the way to surveys. We've developed an approach of doing plain language summary as well. We did a mailing of one report to every household in the NWT on our submission to the Mackenzie Gas Project. We have the advantage of being in the north, and with a small population base it's possible to do that. We also do quite a few public

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the Aboriginal Languages Symposium in Yellowknife (March 29 to April 1, 2010), and myriad local events ranging from meetings on local food production to French-language education. Twitter was also used extensively during the 2011 Federal Election to track local candidates in the Western Arctic, but also to interact with them. Candidates Dennis Bevington, Joe Handley, and Eli Purchase all used Twitter extensively during their campaigns.

events to educate the public or interested parties about important social justice issues (Interview, July 16, 2009).

The organization is completely volunteer run, and only receives money in the form of intervenor status funding to comment on such government initiatives like the Mackenzie Gas Project.

Organizations such as Alternatives North, which are dedicated to participating in the policy process of the territory, do influence the policy and political decision-making of the GNWT. This relationship, however, has remained unexplored in the literature. For example, what other organizations exist that influence policy development and implementation? In particular, understanding the relationships among civil society actors, state institutions, and businesses is important in a territory where the dominant employer outside of government is mining, also where a significant portion of the tax base is located. Left unexplored, both political scientists and policy practitioners will miss key aspects of the territory's policy processes.

#### Charting New Directions: Civil Society Research in the NWT

I propose three preliminary conclusions that may account for the absence of civil society perspectives in the political science literature about the NWT. First, there are very few scholars working in this area. Each has their own expertise and focus on institutions, public administration, or Indigenous self-government, amongst others, and there are bound to be gaps in the literature. This is compounded by the size and diversity of the territorial north, with many scholars working in all three territories. As political scientists, we cannot address every aspect of the political and policy processes of the North.

Second, the intellectual energy and interest of political scientists for the last thirty years has been dedicated to understanding the place of Aboriginal peoples within the constitutional, political, and economic structures of the territory. The creation of Nunavut and the emergence of Indigenous self-governments have drawn a considerable amount of attention and produced a large amount of needed and useful research.

Finally, civil society is difficult to access. Often operating through hidden networks, many civil society actors and organizations go unnoticed in the official record. Accessing civil society means being on the ground in places such as Yellowknife. Given the lack of a university and the high cost of research, however, conducting this type of research is not easily completed by those with ties to southern institutions. Despite the challenges, this area of inquiry would be a fruitful site for emerging young scholars in the field.

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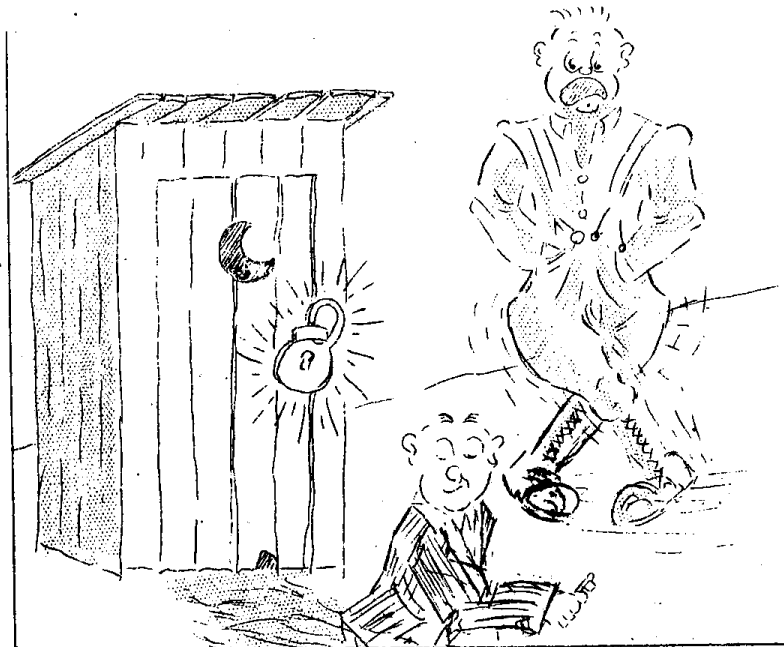
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# THE PROSPECTOR

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## WHEN A FELLER NEEDS A FRIEND

This unfortunate situation has continued in spite of the very gratifying support that greeted our editorial of last week. We feel that it is a good time to again take up the cudgel in aid of so urgent a public need. A little united effort and we could have a suitable "relief station" at both ends of town, rise in your common agony and demand it, the Prospector will help gather subscriptions.

## RUSSO-JAP CLASH THREATENS WAR

A Russo-Japanese clash of major proportions was imminent as Soviet troops moved up to attack on the Manchukuo frontier. A series of border incidents have brought the two nations to the verge of war several times but the situation is said to be the worst that has arisen since the scare in 1921.

A dispatch from Moscow is to the effect that the Red Army will repel any invasion of the border area, and with the state of unrest prevailing in the Japanese army such a situation may arise at any time.

(continued on page 6)

## HAIL STRIKES SOUTH CROPS

Serious hailstorms struck the Gleichen area and several other sections of southern Alberta yesterday. It is believed that the crop damage is relatively local and that the heavy crop forecast will not

## LOYALIST FORCES BEGIN NEW DRIVE

The Spanish Government forces have again taken the offensive in the long drawn out Civil war by commencing a determined press on Teruel, the strategic city held by the Insurgent forces for the past six months.

Loyalist forces captured Teruel last winter in the government's major offensive of the war only to lose it a few weeks later. Teruel is regarded as being a position of the greatest importance, as it commands a large portion of the plains of eastern Spain along the Mediterranean coast.

(continued on page 6)

## HORSE DISEASE SPREADS TO ALTA.

The mysterious horse disease which has been sweeping across Saskatchewan toward the neighboring province has already left a trail of stricken animals in its wake. It is feared that the loss suffered from