Brian Thom
Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, British Columbia V8W 2Y2, Canada (bthom@uvic.ca). 25 IV 12

Can Anarchism Be a Useful Model Today?

In *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Vine Deloria Jr. famously cautioned against anthropologists "studying Indians" for the sake of developing their own models and cultural theories (Deloria 1969). His stinging critique recalls the potential dangers of simplified conclusions drawn by governments and bureaucracies based on simplistic misreadings of theoretically driven research in American Indian communities and instead implores us to collaboratively develop research agendas that can be of practical use in tribal communities today. Angelbeck and Grier's use of anarchist theory to reframe the long-term development of Coast Salish sociopolitical organization raises both the specter of Deloria's sharp rebuke and the possibility of openings that could inform both future research and contemporary indigenous self-government.

It is easy to imagine that Angelbeck and Grier's characterization of stridently independent households in a perpetual state of anarchistic resistance to institutionalization and inequality could be misread in the contemporary political and legal climate. In Canada, for instance, court-defined common-law tests demand that First Nations characterize their communities as "organized societies" that can trace their cultural practices back to a time before contact in order to secure the recognition of constitutionally protected Aboriginal rights (Bell and Asch 1997; Slattery 1992). Given the abundant cultural baggage that has come to be associated with anarchism, Angelbeck and Grier could be easily misread to suggest that a society in anarchy is not an organized society at all. While they provide some caution against such a misinterpretation, reminding us that anarchic societies are not ungoverned but self-governed, this risk is the unfortunate consequence of mobilizing social theory that draws on more than 150 years of European intellectual history in the context of describing indigenous sociopolitical systems. It is precisely the kind of theorization that contemporary indigenous scholars have demanded be framed in indigenous theoretical terms (Atleo 2005).

While Angelbeck and Grier have pointed to the inadequacy of a Marxist theoretical framework to account for Coast Salish social and political structures, they continue to focus their model on the development of social classes and the resistance of the commoner minority to form the inverted-pear population of nouveau riche. One of the key insights of recent ethnography of Coast Salish social and political structures has been to show the importance of both networks of extended kin and local residence groups in the political economy of the region (Kennedy 2007; Thom 2009). Could the famously vibrant Marpole Period be better understood as a time of the establishment of power and dominance of property-owning local residence groups, whether these residence groups are single-household Stselax at Musqueam, local villages like Quamichan or Tsawwassen, or the larger named regional village groups like Quw'utsun' or Chilliwack? Could the regional social and political changes described by Angelbeck and Grier for the transition to the Late Period be explained as an eventual resistance of this centralization of local group power by networks of property-owning extended kin? While data beyond their small sample of cranial deformation would be needed to address these questions, Angelbeck and Grier inspire further archaeological work to explore the nature and extent of regional kin networks and local groups over time.

Angelbeck and Grier fare better with Deloria's second concern, that anthropology should be useful to the indigenous community itself. Thirty years after Deloria, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has shown that successful self-government is the best predictor for success of indigenous communities in the Americas (Cornell and Kalt 1998). Real decision-making power, capable institutions, and leadership that acts in the Nations' best interests are important elements of successful self-government, but also essential is the goodness of fit between the self-governance political structure and the political culture of the community. It strikes me that the reading of the archaeological record that Angelbeck and Grier are pursuing may offer helpful insights for these contemporary efforts. They provide a framework for seeing the deep roots of an indigenous political culture where over a period of thousands of years autonomous local groups have resisted centralization through an extended network economy. Their model suggests that this decentralized, nontotalitarian sociopolitical system was achieved through individual and local autonomy and expression, voluntary association, mutual aid, network organization, consensual decision making, and justified authority. With some notable yet fragile exceptions, there continues to be significant reluctance in contemporary Coast Salish governance building to submit to centralized authority, in spite of very significant pressure and incentives from state governments to coalesce as aggregated regional nations (Thom 2010). Many of the values identified by Angelbeck and Grier continue to be vibrant elements of Coast Salish political culture. Provocative labels of anarchistic self-governance aside, the Coast Salish resistance to centralization has deep roots and can provide the foundation for rethinking alternatives to the state's push for aggregated, centralized self-government.

Reply

We wish to thank our colleagues for taking time to carefully consider our contribution and for crafting a set of very insightful and important comments. In our original article, we