

THE MEANING OF "POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT" IN THE NORTH

Thomas A. Morehouse
Institute of Social and Economic Research
University of Alaska Anchorage
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, Alaska 99508
(907) 786-7710
(907) 786-7739 (FAX)

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Thomas A. Morehouse
Institute of Social and Economic Research
University of Alaska, Anchorage

Politics concerns questions of who controls and who benefits. The focus is on the distribution of power and of rewards and penalties within a political system. The political system comprises all of the actors, processes, and institutions involved in making and carrying out public policy and in pursuing collective goals. "Political development" refers to the increasing capability of a political system to adapt to change, to cope with new problems and demands, and to select and attain collective goals (Coleman, 1968).

"Development" implies advancement, improvement, or progress. A political system might also stagnate or decay, and it may be difficult to determine which condition prevails. I will use the term "development" both in the positive, evolutionary sense and in the neutral sense of "change" in the political system. The context should make clear the shifts between these uses.

Modern political development in the north--Alaska, the Canadian north, Greenland, the northern cap of Scandanavia, and the Soviet north--has occurred largely in response to incursions from the south. These southern-based incursions, particularly for the exploitation of the north's natural resources, have precipitated a series of political conflicts over locus of control, distribution of

costs and benefits, and choice of goals. Political systems in the north (and elsewhere) develop as they incorporate and respond to such conflicts.

Three groups of actors have been involved in the most significant political conflicts in the north: indigenous people; immigrants to the north; and people, institutions, and interests based elsewhere. I will focus in this paper on conflicts in Alaska between Natives and non-Native immigrants, institutions, and interests and refer briefly to other conflicts in Alaska and in other northern areas. The Alaska case primarily involves conflicts over control of land and natural resources and over the general issue of Native autonomy within the dominant political system. Thus, the concept of political development can be used to refer to both subsystem and system-wide political change as well as to relationships between the two levels.

The following discussion makes three main points about the meaning of political development in the north: First, political development involves basic conflicts between values of community and stability on the one hand and economic growth and change on the other. Second, the most important unresolved issues of political development in the north are the degree to which natives will control their own futures and the mix of indigenous community and Western economic values that they pursue. Third, political development does not necessarily mean that native people, in seeking

effective forms of group and institutional integration, must inevitably accept assimilation into the dominant society as well.¹

Political Development Theory

Formulated by leading American political scientists after World War II, mainstream political development theory reflects modern revisionist notions of democracy, which rationalize elite control and downplay popular participation, and the theory's cold war origins. The theory thus took on a distinctly conservative hue and became associated with United States foreign policy objectives of steering vulnerable Third World countries through dangerous times toward capitalist development and stable, Western-oriented governments (Gendzier, 1985; Chilcote, 1984).

The theory tended to emphasize certain political development problems and remedies. One problem was that socioeconomic and political change might occur unevenly or too fast, with masses making unrealistic, disruptive demands on elites. The proposed remedy was to strengthen elite-controlled, centralized political institutions that might more effectively manage and direct the course of change. A related problem was that the masses lacked the proper attitudes, beliefs, and values needed to support either democracy or capitalism. The proposed remedy lay in appropriate forms of socialization and education. All of this suggests social and political engineering on a very grand scale.

This conservative, cold war version of political development provoked a strong counter-development reaction among Third World and other political scientists. Essentially, they argued that the established theory was an instrument of capitalistic expansion or imperialism and that development really meant systematic "underdevelopment" and continuing dominance of world metropolitan centers over dependent peripheries (Chilcote, 1984). Some of these critics also saw the political economy of capitalism as relentlessly destructive of traditional societies and cultures. There are parallels here with the Alaska case, where some observers have seen Native Alaska as a domestic "Fourth World."

Despite the ideological controversy, political development theory has provided some useful perspective on the meaning of political development in the north and elsewhere. In its evolutionary version, it directs our attention to the open-ended capacity of humans to cope, invent, and strive to increase their power--their capacity to shape their futures--and their freedom--their range of choice (Coleman, 1968; Boulding, 1981). These normative standards unfortunately have not been accompanied by convenient empirical measures of the extent to which a given political system has developed its capabilities to cope with systemic problems of political change, including changes in the larger, external environment of the system under study.²

Political Development in Northern Areas

Arctic and subarctic development results primarily from incursions into the north from the south for reasons of economics and strategy (Armstrong, 1978, p. 3). When northern resources are known or merely speculative, when the transport technology is available, and when the incentives exist, individuals, corporations, and governments in the south have always moved into the north to exploit what may be there. The north's natural defenses against such incursions have always been its remoteness and rigorous environment (Sugden, 1982, pp. 196-198). The unbalanced nature of these north-south encounters has, in recent times, also provoked political reactions by indigenous northern peoples. Thus arise familiar "center-periphery" problems involving tensions between the "paramount power and its northern subjects" (Armstrong, Rogers, and Rowley, 1978, p. 5).

In the Canadian north in recent years, southern interests have invaded the areas of indigenous peoples in the quest for oil and gas. This has provoked an indigenous political reaction and the displacement of territorial councils by Native political organizations as the premier institutions of Native political representation and action. In Greenland, an indigenous home-rule movement has emerged, in which control and development of natural resources have been both a stimulus and a future key to the political effectiveness of native Greenlanders. In the Soviet north, although our information is limited, we know that

institutions for development of resources are controlled from the metropolitan south and that the northern peoples are now minorities in their own lands (Armstrong et al., 1978).

The north-south tensions arising from these incursions have existed not only between indigenous peoples and non-Native intruders but also between the north's immigrant white population and the institutions and interests that they left behind in the south. The outstanding case is the Alaska statehood movement, which was the reaction of white immigrants to their colonial status under the control of distant corporate managers, federal bureaucrats, and Congressional committees (Rogers, 1962, ch. 5).

The State of Alaska

With statehood, internal Alaska tensions and conflicts have emerged over basic issues of community and environmental preservation on the one hand and economic growth on the other (Weeden, 1978; Morehouse, 1984). These conflicts have also been forces for the continuing development of the state's political system. The state's political institutions and processes are continuously being reshaped in response to the political confrontation and struggle between competing visions of Alaska's present and future. This also takes the form of a struggle for control of policy-making institutions by competing political factions (Morehouse, 1984, ch. 7; 1985).

The political development question is whether the state's political system has been positively adapting and maturing in response to pressures and challenges, or whether it has been overloaded and subject to periodic breakdowns. During the recent period of rapid growth in population and economic activity stimulated by petroleum development and major increases in state spending, the policy-making and -executing capabilities of state government may well have decreased relative to the demands placed upon them (McBeath and Morehouse, forthcoming). Some studies suggest that the State of Alaska has experienced, at least in the short term, political decay rather than political development (Fineberg, 1982). The experience of the early 1980s in Alaska also suggests that the rate of change is a critical factor affecting the planning, regulatory, and distributive capabilities of government and that this rate has outpaced government's ability to respond (Weeden, 1978, ch. 9)

The Alaska political system since statehood has evolved largely in response to conflicts over the extent to which its institutions should be used as instruments for promoting economic growth and capturing its benefits or as means of protecting and preserving community and environmental values. Federal authorities continue to be involved in these conflicts because of federal land and resource ownership in Alaska, and this complicates the pattern of Alaska political development. But statehood fundamentally altered the terms of Alaska's relationship with the nation, and, in relative

terms, basic problems of sovereignty and political legitimacy are no longer at issue (Rogers, 1962).

Alaska Native Political Development

This is not so in Native Alaska. There, the question of sovereignty, or subsystem autonomy, remains open, and it encompasses conflicts between Western-style development and indigenous community values. The more familiar terminology for this larger conflict is assimilation versus autonomy, a long-standing issue in U.S. government-Native American relations.

Berger (1985) recently assessed the effects of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 as an issue of assimilation versus autonomy. Under the act, Natives became shareholders and businessmen within relatively large-scale, centralized, corporate organizations. The disruptive politics of the Native land claims movement were blunted and contained within a new set of American business institutions. A classic problem of political development--a destabilizing level of political demand--was resolved through an attempt at large-scale political and social engineering.

Berger found that the act institutionalized conflict among Alaska's Natives; jeopardized Native lands by making them vulnerable to corporate failure, takeover, and taxation; and threatened the very survival of the remaining subsistence culture. He describes ANCSA as a domestic version of Third World development theories that

ignore the values and strengths of indigenous cultures and seek to assimilate the traditional sector into the modern economy and society. Berger thus supports the Native tribal government movement and recommends that ANCSA corporate lands be transferred to these tribal entities to ensure against alienation and loss. He further recommends that Natives have full regulatory powers over hunting and fishing on ANCSA lands, and that Natives share control of state and federal lands.

There is an unanswered and perhaps unanswerable question about the strength and viability of Native cultures within a powerful and dynamic dominant society. From a political development point of view, however, this is not the critical question. The key political questions, as noted earlier, are who controls and who benefits. Thus, Berger summarizes Native demands for both autonomy and integration and their opposition to assimilation: "The Native peoples of Alaska want their own lands and their own forms of government, and they also want access to the social, economic, and political institutions of the dominant society" (1985, p. 177).

Regardless of the state of traditional Native cultures, the main issue is whether Natives--who are already a highly diverse constellation of people with a broad range of Western to indigenous lifestyles--might have both tribal autonomy and integration, that is, access to dominant institutions and their benefits. This is a political development question, and it is an open one.

The advocates of Native autonomy reject the mainstream, tutorial approach to development, which emphasizes the role of centralized elite-controlled institutions and socialization in conventional Western norms of individual success. As reported by Berger, they call instead for policies that will help instill self-worth, control over local communities, and protection of the subsistence economy (Berger, 1985, p. 181; Sackett, 1985). This is a demand for increased Native self-government within the dominant political system and a quest for increased power and freedom. This is also the fundamental goal of political development.

As noted earlier, it is difficult to measure changes in the development (or decay) of political systems. Nonetheless, there is at least some rough evidence that, particularly during Alaska's statehood period, Alaska Natives have made significant gains in the development of Native-controlled institutions, in political participation, and in their access to and influence over institutions in the larger society (McBeath and Morehouse, 1980). Those political gains have depended largely on the capabilities of an acculturated Native elite. Native leaders now face the challenge of reconciling new conflicts of Western and indigenous values associated with ANCSA and the tribal sovereignty reaction. This confrontation may represent the next stage of Native political development.

Conclusions

Political development occurs most clearly in a context of confrontation and conflict between opposing values and interests. As an empirical concept, it refers to either increases or decreases in control and capability. As a normative standard, political development refers to the increasing control that individuals or groups achieve over their futures--it refers to an increasing capacity for choice and an increasing range of choice.

Issues of political development in the north focus on the changing political status of indigenous peoples in confrontations with dominant societies. The prospect that Alaska Natives or indigenous peoples of any northern periphery will increase both their autonomy and their access depends on their political capabilities--of coping, bargaining, and gaining their ends--within the encompassing political system and according to its rules. Like other indigenous people, Alaska Natives may not be able to resist the tides of economic and social change, but they do have moral claims and political capabilities to shape the terms of their relationship to the dominant system.

ENDNOTES

1. I will use three related but distinctive terms in this paper: acculturation, integration, and assimilation. "Acculturation" refers to a process of socialization whereby an individual or group acquires cultural characteristics of another society through direct contact; this acquisition of traits may be limited and selective or comprehensive.

"Integration" refers to intergroup or interinstitutional coordination and mutual adjustment; ethnically or racially diverse groups have more or less equal access to a society's institutions, and they achieve a degree of harmony under a consistent body of normative standards, such as are comprised by laws.

"Assimilation" refers to the absorption of diverse groups into an embracing dominant culture; relative homogeneity results from the general acquisition of common habits, attitudes, and values.

2. Although there is no consensus on terminology, political scientists have referred to the "capabilities" of political systems as symbolic, regulative, responsive, extractive, and distributive. There are also a variety of labels for the "problems" to which these capabilities are a response: group identity, political legitimacy, institutional integration and penetration, participation, and distribution (Coleman, 1968; Riggs, 1984).

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