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# Cultural Production and Social Cohesion amid the Decline of Coal and Steel: The Case of Cape Breton Island

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This chapter explores the intersection of cultural capital (especially the production of forms of artistic expression) and social cohesion in a locality renowned for both – Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. It ponders the contradictions of cultural production as a keystone of the “new economy.” It does so partly through an examination of song as cultural icon.

Cape Breton Island is an excellent venue to contemplate the contradictions of social cohesion. Dominated by coal mining, steelmaking, and fishing for the better part of the twentieth century, it was a setting for prodigious class conflict in the earlier part of that century as workers fought against exploitation and depredation and for unionization. In the later part of the century, it was a site where the “politics of productivity” (mentioned by the editor in the Introduction) distributed enough economic benefits to working-class families to buy some industrial and social peace. But that idyll was shattered at the turn of the twenty-first century by a calamitous crash of all three industrial mainstays of the economy. The struggles of the past, the constrained geography, and the shared cultural heritage and activity have produced a remarkable social cohesiveness in islanders. But this cohesion has contradictory results. It acts as a nucleus of resistance and as a palliative, as an energizer and as a tranquilizer.

Cape Breton Island, with just over 100,000 people, has produced more than anyone’s share of musical, literary, and other types of art and culture. From Natalie MacMaster, the Rankins, and Gordie Sampson in music, to Alistair Macleod, Sheldon Currie, and Hugh MacLennan in literature, to a burgeoning opus of film, to some of the “stars” of Canadian broadcasting, Cape Breton has long punched above its weight, culturally speaking.

Moreover, the tightness and strength of its communities are legendary. From the nurturing of generations of fiddlers in the Gaelic cocoon on its southwest to the monumental labour struggles of its ethnically diverse miners and steelworkers on its northeast, from the fierce pride of its Acadian communities at its other two corners to the solidarity of its Micmac people in

the centre, this is a place of robust and distinctive groups but with an equally cohesive island<sup>1</sup> identity.

I start with an iconic moment that almost preternaturally illustrates my topic. On Valentine's Day in 1999, 2,000 Cape Breton coal miners and supporters gathered in a hockey rink to protest the shutting down of a 300-year-old industry. Tears filled eyes as an eight-year-old girl, Aselin Debison, sang "The Island," by Kenzie MacNeil, an anthem of pride and resistance and a tribute to the caustic history of labour struggles in this embattled corner of North America.

I see the black pit-head,  
The coal wheels are turning,  
The smoke-stacks are belching  
And the blast furnace burning  
Aw, the sweat on the back is no joy to behold  
In the heat of the steelplant or mining the coal  
And the foreign-owned companies force us to fight  
For our survival and for our rights.<sup>2</sup>

People across the country saw the young singer on television and were captured by her voice and the emotion of the occasion. From that moment of despair, a new career was born. Ms. Debison, the daughter of a Sydney landscaper and hairdresser, was touted as a Canadian and international star. Not long after, she appeared in a CBC special, later aired in the United States, and signed a five-album deal with Sony. For jaded cosmopolitans, the story teeters on the edge of maudlin Hollywoodism. But for thousands of Atlantic Canadians and millions of others, it is as genuine as a country and western song and not to be disparaged.

### **Multiple Ironies**

Several paradoxes are worth noting in this story, all important to a discussion of social cohesion on the island and the mythmaking that is an essential part of it. First is the irony of a new talent "discovered" amid a catastrophic community loss. Yet audiences both on and off the island presumably responded precisely because her emotion and that in the song were so "genuine." Along with the decline of old sustaining industries and in peripheral economies, cultural products are emerging and find an audience hungry for stimulation in "the experience economy" (Pine and Gilmour 1999).

Despite the efforts of young Aselin and of miners who staged a sit-in and hunger strike, the last mine on the island closed a year later. The Sydney Steel works, another mainstay of the local economy, having existed for 100 years, closed about a year later. The two closures, coming so close together, not only added to the economic devastation of industrial Cape Breton but

were also a psychological blow to the communities that thrived or survived on steel and coal. Despite some struggle and protest about the closures, several commentators have noted the relative lack of social upheaval compared with the island's tumultuous labour history. Another powerful song lamented that quiescence, as will be seen below.

A second irony involves the angry allusion in "The Island" to the "foreign-owned companies." Even when the song was composed in the mid-1980s, both the mines and the steelworks had been under public ownership for a decade and a half. And even before the governments took over, ownership was not completely foreign.

It is arguable that public ownership of the mines and the steel mill was a prime factor in attenuating the struggle against their closure. It is also possible that this factor compromised the fight to clean up the residue of the poisonous coke ovens – in ex-steelworkers' lungs and in the infamous Sydney tar ponds.

A third paradox: Kenzie MacNeil, composer of those defiant anti-imperialist words twenty years earlier, ran for the rightist Conservative Party in the 2004 and 2006 federal elections in a riding embracing many of the ex-coal mines. Despite the long history of working-class struggle and the many grievances against the captains of politics and industry, the New Democratic Party (NDP) does not fare particularly well on Cape Breton Island, even in the working-class areas. The most successful party, both federally and provincially, is the Liberals (who beat MacNeil both times). On Cape Breton Island, culture often transcends class politics.<sup>3</sup>

Aselin Debison's appearance with the Men of the Deeps reveals a fourth irony, revolving around what might be called "coal mining mystique," the tension between the real and the imagined in coal mining culture. To be sure, coal mining is a dangerous and frightening occupation, its workers stolid, hard-working, and militant, its communities cohesive. But why so many songs, movies, books, and museums? Are other working-class occupations and their operatives not equally dangerous, noble, cohesive, and combative? Why are there no museums to slaughterhouse workers? Why no songs about stationary engineers? The only other occupation that even comes close is fishers. Could it be that coal mining culture is an example of where the simulation is more real than the simulated (Baudrillard 1998)? How closely do the songs, stories, and museums relate to the real lives of coal miners, especially in Cape Breton, where the mines have closed? Has the "symbol" of the coal miners taken over from whatever was real?

A fifth irony resides in whether the young girl would reach the stardom for which she was touted. There are questions on the lips of those in the know about the music industry. Has Aselin been touted way beyond her potential? Will international success spoil something authentic? Will the

girl prodigy be able to build a sustainable career, especially as the bloom of extreme youth fades?

One problem with the cultural industries occurs in the management of the key resource – careers. Raw talent isn't enough. Good artistry isn't enough. An adoring audience isn't enough. Investment is necessary. But even the right investment at the right time does not guarantee success. A career needs to be managed in the sense that the product on offer has to be designed and pitched to the "right" audience. Aim too low and, if you're lucky, you poke along in the backwaters playing for a few dollars a night on the endless road trips. Aim too high or acquire too many bad habits (and they are easy to pick up in this business) and you can come crashing down. An example is fiddler Ashley MacIsaac, another Cape Breton "sensation," whose brief but high-flying career tumbled in a welter of bankruptcy and drug addiction (MacIsaac 2003). Even those who succeed face the dilemma of deracinating or diluting the originality of the original to gain broader appeal. The successes and failures in developing artistic careers can be seen as a microcosm of the problems of development in the Atlantic region, or any other peripheral region, as well.

#### **Problems of Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and Social Cohesion**

The concepts of social capital, cultural capital, and social cohesion (together we might call them the "tri-concepts") are both attractive and extremely problematic. They are enormously attractive concepts because they promise to help us explain or at least analyze many things we couldn't explain before, such as the full set of reasons for differences in economic prosperity that orthodox economics simply does not have the tools to deliver (Dayton-Johnson 2001, 22). The idea that the sum of relations among people, including love, trust, common goals, common ideas, and the drive to associate and work and play together (social capital), can be taken seriously in the political economy is very compelling. That the tightness and proliferation of those bonds (social cohesion) are recognized as making a difference in the relative success of communities and polities is gratifying to those who have always thought this to be the case. And to those who take the arts, communications, and shared customs and views of the world seriously, the idea that culture too can be a form of capital is confirmatory. With the spirits now out of Pandora's Box, treating the social and the cultural as forms of *capital* is too attractive to resist, if only as a "bunch of anecdotes, metaphors or heuristic devices" (Fine 2001, 199). Despite reservations, some of which are expressed below, I find the concepts too useful to forgo, especially given the beckoning closeness of both cultural capital and social cohesion in Cape Breton Island. The idea of individuals and their communities having various forms of capital – monetary, physical, human, social, and

cultural – helps to explain the struggle for economic self-determination against the forces of outside capital, as will be seen below.

That said, it is dangerous to ignore the “dark side” of the tri-concepts, as many do. For concepts that have taken the intellectual world by storm, they are notoriously vague theoretically and difficult to define. As Ben Fine has summarized, “social capital [has become] a sack of analytical potatoes ... Having established a sufficiently weighty presence, [social capital] has the logical capacity to absorb any criticism in the form of refinement by, for example, addition of another variable for consideration” (2001, 190).

A curious aspect of social capital is how strongly it appeals to both the right and the left of the political spectrum. It has been embraced not only by many progressives but also by the World Bank. But a more liberal fraction of capital has always insisted on the importance of community and social ties, if only because they increase general economic efficiency and reduce the need for the nanny state.

Thus, like some other beloved concepts, there is “our” social capital and “their” social capital, “our” concept of “community” and theirs. Eva Gamarikow and Tony Green (1999, 58-59) note the apparent paradox: “It is possible to identify a social capital continuum: at the progressive end there is a concern with citizenship, empowerment, pluralism and democratization. At the more conservative end social capital is located in commitment to traditional family structures and relationships and a collective moral order of ‘normative’ consensus around traditional values, duties and responsibilities.”

One of the attractions of the tri-concepts to some is precisely this ideological fuzziness. For those so inclined, it can appear as a unifying intellectual framework, neatly ravelling together left and right or removing the distinction altogether. This is one of the reasons that the tri-concepts have been so appealing to advocates of the political “Third Way,” among them the New Labour of Tony Blair.

Indeed, such a blurring of lines can be very dangerous, especially for those tackling questions of economic development and underdevelopment (as this chapter tries to do). Fine suggests that “the idea of building social capital as a development policy borders on the nonsensical” (2001, 199). He also suggests a much more sinister aspect to the whole thing, that social capital (and its sister concepts) are just another form of rational choice theory, merely an extension of the neoliberal idea of “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” transposed from the individual to the group: “It is the rich and powerful speculating on how to improve the lot of the poor through promoting their self-help and organization *without questioning the sources of their economic disadvantage*” (199; emphasis added). In other words, not only are the tri-concepts useful to the powers that be to hasten the exploitation of communities, but they can also *obscure* that exploitation in a particularly effective way by turning the responsibility for victimhood on the victims.

The economic development potential of the tri-concepts works best if one ignores or disregards the possibility that economic *underdevelopment* is not just something endemic to a region. If we try to transcend that kind of essentialist argument and consider that underdevelopment happens *to* a region, that there is an *agent* that promotes underdevelopment just as surely as there is an *object* of underdevelopment, then we can see that *self-help*, whether at the individual or at the collective level, is a debilitating concept. This is especially crucial in a country such as Canada, which, on the one hand, attempts to share financial resources between “have” regions and “have-not” ones and, on the other, thereby evokes the poisonous and divisive discourse of the “deserving” and the “undeserving.”<sup>4</sup> This is especially true in Cape Breton Island, a region that was long “developed” by heavy industry amid a larger region left mostly bereft by heavy industry and then arguably “underdeveloped” as soon as those industries were no longer as profitable.

Thus, I am tempted to conclude that the ideas inherent in the tri-concepts cut both ways, right and left, or, perhaps more accurately, they cut many ways – an always dangerous weapon. Another problem with the tri-concepts perhaps helps to explain their vagueness. The very act of exercising social cohesion by forming and sustaining groups implies the *exclusion* of other individuals and groups. Moreover, there is a complicated amalgam of groupings that people belong to *at the same time*.

### **Cultural Capital and Social Cohesion in Cape Breton Island**

Cape Breton Island is the size of Jamaica but has a population that by some definitions might not even constitute a city. Yet the blooming of music, art, and literature amid the struggle for industrial survival is nothing new. For the past quarter-century, a literal explosion of cultural activity has spread from here around the world, much of it explicitly connected to the decline or demise of the three great industries that defined the region: coal mining, steelmaking, and groundfish harvesting. Many new careers have been born. But are those good careers? Can there be enough new careers to replace old careers? For every Aselin Debison who might win the talent-and-luck lottery, how many others will not?

Many of these new jobs are highly precarious, in great need of capital infusion, and rife with exploitive and self-exploitive relations. Can economic events that threaten to tear apart community and citizenship be transformed by new economic and sociocultural trends?

Cape Breton Island is clearly a beautiful and magnetic attraction. In 2004, the *National Geographic* Traveller Destination Scoreboard ranked the island second in the world for destination stewardship and sustainable tourism. A poll of *Condé Nast* magazine readers named it “the most scenic island in the world,” and *National Geographic* magazine has called it one of “the places of a lifetime” (Mingo 2003). But can the entire island community adapt itself

into a cultural/touristic workshop, enough to replace the failed industries of the past?

To understand the depth of the challenge, a few figures will suffice. At its height, in the 1920s, coal mining employed 12,000 people. By 1961, 24 percent of the island's workforce was employed in either coal or steel. Today that number has been reduced to zero, as both industries have closed. Over the past three decades, approximately 7,000 jobs have been lost in the coal and steel industries, and an estimated 2,300 people have been impacted by the collapse of the groundfish<sup>5</sup> harvest (Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation 2003).

The loss and decline in these industries have had a tremendous impact on the economy of the island. In 1971, the population of the island was 170,000; by 2001, it was down to 147,500 – a drop of 14 percent (and still dropping), compared with a rise of 10 percent for the Province of Nova Scotia. Unemployment between 1976 and 2002 hovered between 14 percent and 26 percent, consistently about twice the Canadian rate and 1.5 times the Nova Scotia rate. Average income in 2000 was \$20,766, 16 percent below that of Nova Scotia and 30 percent below that of Canada (Locke and Tomblin 2003).

Cape Breton Island is a place with strong, distinctive, and plentiful cultural activity. It is also a place with a strong sense of identity, a “tight” community with a high degree of “social cohesion.” There is doubtless a connection between the two. But there is no simple causality. Certainly the strong sense of place and community helps to produce the “cultural capital.” But the social capital is also nurtured by music and songs, stories, comedy, and visual art.

One of the legendary qualities of the island is the way it acts as an incubator (some would say a veritable manufactory) of musical talent. This is especially noteworthy among many of the “Celtic” artists of recent years. For example, Natalie MacMaster, Ashley MacIsaac, and the Rankins were among many young people who learned to play the fiddle, piano, and other instruments amid strong family networks. They developed their techniques in home parties and small venues among family and friends. They honed their playing in church halls and ceilidhs all across the island.<sup>6</sup> There was a ready audience for their performances on the island and in larger Nova Scotia, and all made independent recordings that they sold in abundance from the stage well before they signed with record labels. There are few more nurturing communities for budding artists than Cape Breton Island.

Even those whose work is not in the “Celtic” idiom find the island community a fertile home. Folk, rock, jazz, and mainstream artists find a ready audience for their music from Cape Bretoners both domestic and émigré. One musician hailing from the Annapolis Valley found that his new group had an instant fan club in Halifax among Cape Breton expatriates there just

because several band members were from the island (MacNeill 2004). Island celebrities Rita MacNeil and the Men of the Deeps choir have regularly toured Canada together for the past fifteen years, with expatriate islanders forming the core audiences. One such tour was sponsored by an economic development agency specifically to encourage native sons and daughters to return to the island upon retirement.

Indeed, culture has dual momentums. It is not only a place of economic development but also a battleground: it has the power to disturb and to comfort, to rouse and to anaesthetize. Images and symbols can be transformative – they can be enormously radical by transforming reality or enormously conservative in preserving it. And in Cape Breton culture does both. Those who single-mindedly celebrate island culture ignore its anodyne nature. Those who disparage it ignore its powerful cohesive potential.

### **The Dual Momentums of Culture**

Another iconic Cape Breton song illustrates this dual movement. J.P. Cormier, a gifted songwriter and instrumentalist, has built a solid career singing about the island. In addition to the epic and the pastoral, several songs have a hard and bitter edge to them. They talk of workers' struggles with the exigencies of the elements, especially fishers and miners or "ordinary people." Cormier composed one of his most powerful songs, "Now That the Work Is Done," amid an association with singer/songwriter Rita MacNeil and the Men of the Deeps at the time of the closing of the last mine. It is a deep, angry song – full of dismay. Echoing "The Island" anthem, it alludes to the gargantuan Cape Breton labour battles of yesteryear and compares them to the response to the final pit closure in 2001.

In the 1920s, the coal bosses cut wages by a third, launching a bitter struggle. The deployment of provincial police and federal troops became a virtual armed occupation as fully one-half of Canadian soldiers were deployed in Cape Breton coalfields.<sup>7</sup> The red flag flew over the coalfields as well, and the miners' leader, J.B. McLachlan, was an unabashed communist. The dispute was suppressed by collusion among the employer, the federal and provincial governments, and the US-based union under the leadership of John L. Lewis, which deposed the entire union executive, took away the district's autonomy, and suspended strike funds. Yet the Cape Breton miners eventually won their struggle (Frank 1999).

In the compact disc liner notes, Cormier tersely but clearly explains the motivation for his song: "My tune for the miners. They have been strangely silent since their living has been recently taken away. I hope they don't stay that way." The song itself echoes the sentiment, as this excerpt shows:

Where have all the seasons gone?  
Buried by coal dust and clay

Where have all the reasons gone?  
 The wind has blown them away  
     I was up and gone before the sun  
 In darkness I had made my living  
 But it seems that now my race is run  
 An empty handshake I was given  
 Now that the work is done  
 If my dad could only see us now  
 And the empty mines he'd worked before  
 He'd find a way to live somehow  
 But he'd kick somebody's arse for sure  
 Now that the work is done.<sup>8</sup>

These potent words combined with a fine tune modulating between plaintive cry and rolling beat, Cormier's bittersweet baritone, the haunting accompaniment of Aeolian pipes, and female backup vocals all make for a song almost overwhelmingly evocative. Note, too, the deliberate irony in the words "my dad ... [would] kick somebody's arse for sure." That is, "my dad's" generation would have been angry enough to do something drastic about the situation, but "my generation" is not.

Yet, by the very act of appealing to a larger audience than the bereft islanders, the song also shows how culture can be an anaesthetic as well as a stimulant. Surely the song is nostalgia for an age in which there was a boss who was close and corporeal enough to be confronted. (The famous 1886 American painting *The Strike* by Robert Koehler comes to mind, with angry miners and their families marching the short distance from the mine to the owner's house.) The memory of such a time can be a call to action but also a gauzy soporific. The singer's imaginary dad would kick "somebody's" ass, but whose ass precisely would the singer kick? In the modern era of global capitalism, there is often no physical boss. So the song appeals to a more generalized postmodern ennui among islanders and urbanites alike.

With voices like those of Cormier and scores of others, can the old economy transform? There is much discussion of how, as the extracting and manufacturing economy (the old economy) goes into decline, the concept of "the new economy" has arisen. This term became famous in the 1990s with the growth of the knowledge industries, telecoms, and dot.coms. But with the inevitable burst of the telecom bubble, hope is being focused on the cultural industries – that new economies can be built through the patient development of knowledge, culture, and tourism.

### **The Cultural Economy**

A major guru of that hopefulness is Richard Florida (2002), now a superstar touting the idea that a "new creative class" exists that will transform the

economy through the production of knowledge and cultural products – and by living in beautiful places. He describes the building of a cultural economy in New Zealand (whose south island, where much of the spectacular scenery of the film *Lord of the Rings* was shot, not coincidentally tied with Cape Breton for second place in the *National Geographic Traveller Destination Scoreboard* competition): “[*Lord of the Rings* director Peter] Jackson has done something unlikely in Wellington, an exciting, cosmopolitan city of 900,000, but not one previously considered a world cultural capital. He has built a permanent facility there, perhaps the world’s most sophisticated filmmaking complex. He did it in New Zealand concertedly and by design. Jackson, a Wellington native, realized what many American cities discovered during the ’90s: Paradigm busting creative industries could single-handedly change the ways cities flourish and drive dynamic, widespread economic change” (2004).

Another work that tackles the transition from the old economy to the new economy is Thomas Michael Power’s *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: The Search for a Value of Place* (1996), in which the author suggests that we have been thinking in exactly the wrong way about what makes a place livable and what contributes to a sustainable economy. In the old or what he calls “folk” economics, the “extractive view” of a local economy held thrall. Extraction and industrial activity were the prime movers. In the new or “environmental” view, the qualities of a place and its people determine development potential. Concentrating on communities left high and dry by the demise of mining and heavy extraction processing, he posits the following extractive and environmental model of local economies (see Figure 6.1).

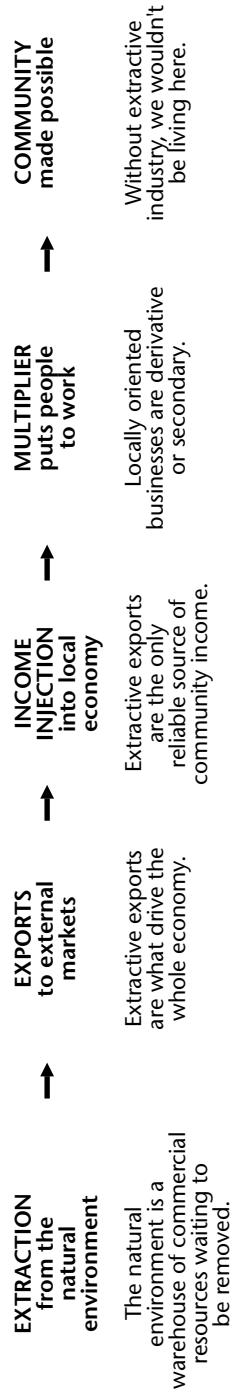
Ironically, the main problem with the development of artistic talent is similar to the problem of developing any resource: capital. Artists have much of value to offer to their own communities and to people in other communities. They offer sentiment (anger, tranquility, hope, sense of belonging), “authenticity,” nostalgia, spirituality, and entertainment, based on shared experiences both pleasant and unpleasant. However, as Jenny Toomey (2001) of the aptly named Future of Music Coalition suggests, the problem with artists participating in the market is one of threefold poverty: “Musicians are poor. They are cash poor, and they are time poor, and artistic labor is devalued. They barely have access to a living and they don’t have access to the capital needed to present their work to the widest possible public.”

Musicians, like many artists, are individual entrepreneurs, in competition with other entrepreneurs. Thus, the story of the self-made artist is stronger than the story of artists united. Because of these three problems, they tend to “align with a dominant force” (Toomey 2001). In the case of music, that force, until recently, has been a major record label. The dominant forces or patrons will attempt to secure intellectual monopolization privileges. As Toomey concludes, “so in this winner-take-all market, where

Figure 6.1

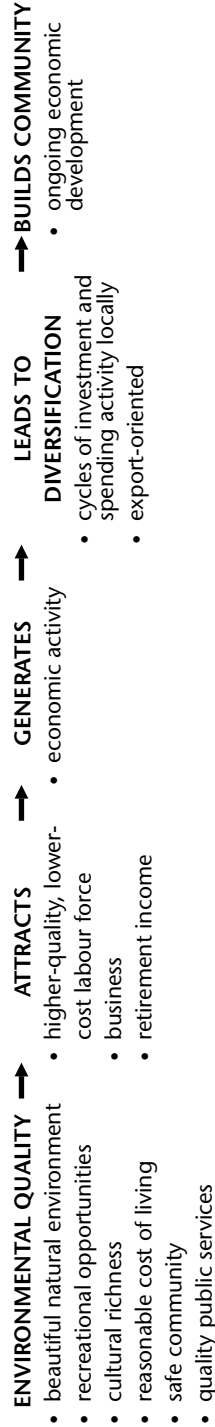
Extractive and environmental views of local economies

Extractive view of local economy: income from extraction and export make habitation possible.



Environmental view of local economy:

pursuit of high-quality environments causes shift in location of economic activity and stimulates local economic vitality.



Source: Power 1996, 10, 16.

only a small number of musicians are able to extract a fair market value for their labor, success is based less on some objective measure of talent and work and more on one's ability to get someone to invest massive resources into that talent and work."

One way of theorizing this is to see that cultural products, like any other resources, represent a potential future flow of wealth. However, to realize that flow, the resource must be developed. The resource can be developed only with an influx of capital – in several forms: money, knowledge, in-kind assistance, access to markets, and distribution to markets and consumers. That capital can come from several sources: from commercial investors, from lenders, from private sources, from public sources, importantly from community sources (social capital), and, of course, from a combination of all of the above.

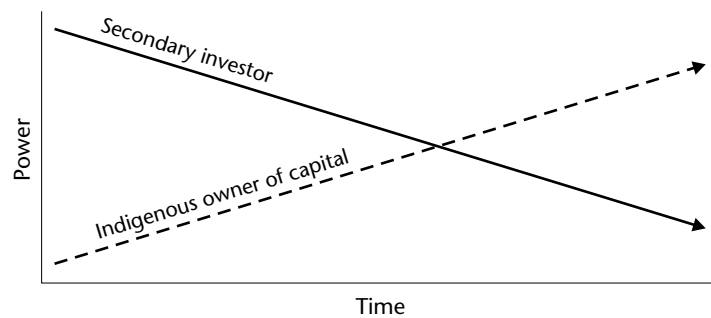
Thus, we have the calculus of power (see Figure 6.2) in the development of a resource between the indigenous owner of the resource and the outside source (see also Richards and Pratt 1979). Every resource has an indigenous owner or a set of indigenous owners. Given the prospect of a future flow of income, there are also external investors willing (more or less) to front capital required for the resource's development. (A community may be the resource owner or a source of external capital or, if the owner is willing, a kind of hybrid of both.)

At the beginning of the process, the indigenous owner of the resource lacks capital of all sorts. The owner has only the *potential* of future flows of

Figure 6.2

**The calculus of power in the development of a resource**

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Resource</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• potential future flow of income</li> </ul> | <p>Capital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• money</li> <li>• knowledge</li> <li>• assistance</li> <li>• access to markets</li> <li>• distribution to markets</li> </ul> | <p>Types of capital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• share capital</li> <li>• loan capital</li> <li>• social capital</li> <li>• human capital</li> </ul> |
|---|---|--|



wealth. At the beginning, the outside source of capital has all the capital. As time progresses, the indigenous owner will gain more knowledge, more access to its own capital, more confidence, and the balance changes. Given this changing calculus, it is crucial for the outside investor to strike a deal at or near the beginning when the power calculus is optimal. The best arrangement for the outside investor, in the measure that the flow of future income is a "sure thing," is for the owner to "sign over" ownership of the resource. Once the resource is signed over, the investor becomes the owner and is in control but also assumes all of the risk. In some circumstances, the investor may wish to bear only some of the risk. With other resources, the investor has a pretty good idea of the value of the commodity, so it can make a well-informed guess about potential wealth flows. With culture, it is much more difficult to make informed guesses because there is little certainty about how the cultural product will develop.

This calculus applies as much to the aggregate of community resources as it does to individual resources. To develop economically, you need investment or capitalization. When economic activity flourishes, surplus capital is generated. But where will that capital or investment come from, and where will the new capital generated go? It all depends on how the local economy interacts with the outside economy. If a community uses local capital, then the surplus generated redounds to the community. But local capital sources may be limited, or people may be too cautious in using their capital to invest in local economic activity. Another way to illustrate the dialectic between community and outside investment is to think of a "circuit of capital," as in Figure 6.3.

If the economic activities are attractive to outside investment, then capital will flow in from outside. But outside capital investment demands that the surplus capital generated go to the outside investors. Outside capital usually demands export-led development, and local politicians and business and community leaders tout it as the solution in a vicious circle. In this model, akin to Power's (1996) "extractive model," the local economy depends on outsiders to survive. It often has to distort its activities, sometimes in horrible ways, to please the outside capital. Nova Scotia has no shortage of excellent examples of this distortion. For example, the 1992 Westray mine explosion in Plymouth, which killed twelve miners, can largely be attributed to local politicians desperate for development at any cost (see Glasbeek and Tucker 1999).

Even if such life-and-death disasters can be avoided, it is difficult to avoid economic disaster. As soon as the outside investors grow weary or impatient or politically dissatisfied with the local economy, they pick up and depart, leaving the local economy devastated with unemployment and disillusionment. Thus, communities must find ways of economic development that are not totally dependent on outside investment.

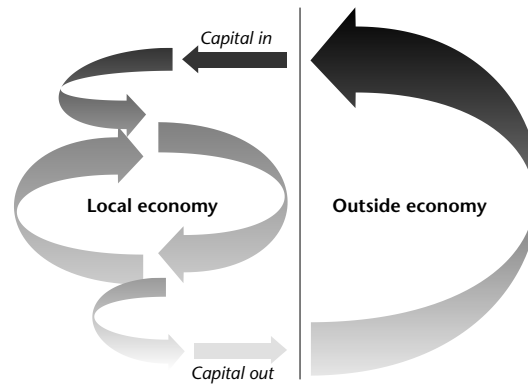
Figure 6.3

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**Circuits of capital**

Cultural production and economic development

- capitalization
- appropriation of surplus



One of the solutions, says Power (1996), lies in the following fact: as we move further into the twenty-first century, more and more of what has value in the world is not that which fulfills biological necessity; in the developed economies, all but the poorest of us have enough to eat, adequate shelter, et cetera. Only 10 percent of our economic activity provides us with those things necessary for biological survival, while 90 percent of what we produce is “discretionary”: products that enhance the “qualities” of our lives. In fact, Power suggests that the production of more and more tangible products such as cars and computers and weapons harm the Earth but that there is an emerging alternative: “While the extraction of materials from the earth and their return to the biosphere as waste are always disruptive, improving quality of life does not have to be. Because ‘qualities’ are not primary material, they can be limitlessly improved without burdening the natural world. *A more beautiful song, a more graceful athletic performance, a better designed home, greater knowledge, or honed professional skills do not necessarily require expanded material flows out of and into the natural world. A dynamic and efficient economy could increase access to valuable qualities while decreasing the material throughput of resources and goods*” (25; emphasis added).

Thus, the “postindustrial” economy is increasingly a “cultural” economy – with the very understanding of culture itself being appropriated by the enlarged provision of (and longing for) meaningful “experience.” Those who can provide meaningful experience for others hold the promise and the keys to the kingdom. Or do they?

**Mining Culture and the Mining of Culture**

Cultural production, once on the margins of economic activity, is coming more and more to occupy a major part of the industry of many countries and regions, especially those whose “hard” industries have declined or crashed. Indeed, like certain coniferous seeds germinating only in the conditions that follow a forest fire, cultural production often thrives in a post-industrial landscape. To take Atlantic Canada as an example, where once there were working coal mines, there are now miners’ museums, miners’ choirs, and plays and novels about miners. Where once there were thriving fishery and shipbuilding industries, there are now fishery and maritime museums, tall ships for tourists, and world-famous heritage towns kept in loving historical fidelity. Indeed, the painstaking restoration of the Fortress of Louisbourg occurred as a direct response to the impending demise of the Cape Breton coalfields and steel industry.

Industrial decline has not been a recent phenomenon in Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. That the coalfields were depleting was known before World War II. Indeed, only that war and the energy crisis of the early 1970s saved them from earlier demise. The writing was on the wall when Prime Minister John Diefenbaker assigned Mr. Justice Ivan Rand to investigate economic alternatives for the local economy upon closing the mines. Reporting in 1960, Rand predicted culture as a new engine of economy and proposed, among other things, the Louisbourg restoration. In a juridical eloquence now perhaps lost, he wrote that “what is proposed will be not only of economic benefit to the island; it will introduce elements to regenerate its life and outlook, dissolve the climate of drabness and let into human hearts and intelligence the light of new interests, hopes and ambitions. Mechanical industry remains uncertain, but there are pursuits of deeper purpose lying within the will and action of people and governments” (cited in Krause 1987).

Among the social adjustments were several other lasting initiatives, especially in Canada’s centennial year, 1967. One of the best examples is the Miner’s Museum in Glace Bay. Despite the Scottish and English roots for which Cape Breton is famous, “Industrial Cape Breton” (as the coal and steel region is called) has always had strong ethnic communities from outside the British Isles. The moving force behind the museum was Nina Cohen, a doctor’s wife and community booster, whose mother, as part of the Jewish community, helped the miners in the 1920s strikes. Unlike most industrial museums in North America, the Miner’s Museum wears its unabashedly pro-union heart on its sleeve. Prominent among the displays are pictures and documents relating to the “labour wars,” and several times a day the film *12,000 Men* is shown in the theatre. Released in 1978 by the National Film Board of Canada, the film consists mainly of interviews with veterans of the 1920s labour struggles (most likely long deceased), who make no

attempt to hide their commitment to the union and their contempt for their employer.

Another centennial project that has endured is a choir of working (now former working) miners, which has become the world famous Men of the Deeps. The choir has toured extensively, including outside the country, and has become a cultural icon, not only in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia but also across Canada. It is difficult to overemphasize the affection for the choir in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia and even throughout Canada.

The choir, like the museum, embraces the union aspect of miners' lives, but now, especially since the mine closures, that reference is definitely more nostalgic, a kind of palimpsest of its origins.<sup>9</sup> Another, more recent, National Film Board film documents the choir amid invaluable footage of the closing of the last mine. The deep emotions and close bonds among the miners and the abiding sense of community and social cohesion are well portrayed. Indeed, the bonds of affection among the men strike the audience deeply. In several lyrical scenes, the director, John Walker, caught this poignantly. Here is an example of a dialogue among the miners:

*Miner 1:* We went to work, 2 to 300 guys on a shift; we knew every one of them. You made it a point to know them. They had to be good guys because they're looking out for you, you know?

*Miner 2:* You've got to realize when you're three, four, five mile underground, who've you got to count on? Us three gentlemen are underground, ... and I use that term loose. If we're underground, I have these two guys to count on. Billy has Eldon and me, and Eldon has Billy and me. So I guess you could say you put your life in their hands.

*Miner 3:* You had to really care for your buddy. You had to really look out for –

*Miner 2:* It's a bond.

*Miner 4:* I don't know if it's atmospheric pressure or what, but life underground ... you say things you'd never get away with on the surface. You're in the dark ... You're going into the confession box and talking to the priest.

The choir has always contained managers as well as trade unionists, and it is conceivable that the camaraderie dulled the edge of class conflict, not only within the choir, but also because of its iconic status, the larger community from which it sprang. Or perhaps the opposite is also true – the choir merely reflected developments in that community. One of these managers was on the board of the Cape Breton Development Corporation (the owner of the mines) and was part of the decision to close the mines. His

presence and that of other managers in the choir was arguably a cause of the depoliticization of the shutdown. The choir formed a place perhaps of class collaboration, certainly of class truce, even as the songs they sang spoke of the tribulations underground.

### **Culture as Artifact and the Attraction of Authenticity**

Critics of dominant cultures have argued vigorously that what we know as culture is socially constructed. Even “folk culture,” in fact often folk culture, is primarily an artifact manufactured or moulded by the elites for the purposes of maintaining their power or forestalling challenge from below. Eric Hobsbawm was among the first in a tradition of debunkers who have suggested that “tradition” is often invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). British historian Dave Harker, author of *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British “Folksong,” 1700 to the Present Day* (1985), contends that most of what we know as folk music is in fact constructed at the encouragement if not the behest of elites to pacify the urban masses.

In this vein, Canadian historian Ian McKay, in *The Quest of the Folk* (1994), casts a jaundiced eye at much of what we know as Nova Scotia culture and insists that it was largely a hegemonic project of the Maritime ruling classes. According to McKay, the Scottish aspect of the culture was constructed almost out of whole cloth. As exemplified by the ahistorical Nova Scotia tartan, the “tartanization” of Nova Scotia (inhabited primarily by English, not Scottish, descendants) and the glorification of rural and pastoral values were a reaction by provincial elites against industrialism, modernism, and communism, all of which were threatening a counterhegemonic revolt from the 1920s to the 1940s. These elite projects reflected a desire to harken back to a day of rural simplicity. The elites capitalized on “the ways in which urban cultural producers ... constructed the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life” (XX).

Nonetheless, despite the questionable history, and despite the fact that it is at least part invention, there is now a strong and established idea of East Coast culture, so strong that it acts as both social pacifier and social activator. The idea of East Coast culture appeals to the desire for authenticity and permanency amid a chaotic world – within the region but also in the metropolis. Typifying the appeal to a simpler life is one of the most popular songs to come out of the island, as this excerpt illustrates:

Out on the Mira on warm afternoons  
 Old men go fishing with black line and spoons  
 And if they catch nothing they'll never complain  
 I wish I was with them again

*Chorus*

Can you imagine a piece of the universe  
More fit for princes and kings?  
I'll give you ten of your cities  
For Marion Bridge and the pleasure it brings.<sup>10</sup>

Allister MacGillivray, an important Cape Breton bard and folklorist, explains the potent combination of the particular and the universal in "Song for the Mira":

I've just been watching in amazement as the song continues to be recorded over and over, and is translated into other languages.

I guess at first I thought that only Cape Bretoners would take an interest in [the song] but I've since discovered that there's a universal message involved – even for people who have no idea where the Mira or Marion Bridge are. You see, the song simply says that, when you need a break from the stresses of everyday life, there's a gentle "river" somewhere that can help you forget your troubles. All you have to do is get to that river and sit on its banks and listen to the happiness all around you ... And when you go far away, your river will stay with you in your heart till you can go home again. (1997, 152)

Ironically, the peripheral community-based cultural products find a ready audience in the metropolis, ever hungry for talented novelty and longing for a lost sense of community, connectedness, and "authenticity." Culture is also a key ingredient of tourism in these regions as "cultural tourism" plays an ever larger role – there is money to be made in helping people have meaningful experiences. Atlantic identity also has turned out to be commercially exploitable.

As well, there is a geographic tension. "Peripheral" has traditionally meant not only geographically remote from the metropolis but also out of the economic mainstream. Yet technological innovations have rendered this definition problematic, especially in the production of culture. Where once the recording and broadcasting of cultural services and artifacts were possible only in central locations, now decentralization is possible. Computerization, miniaturization, communications technology, all have put the production and dissemination of music, video, drama, art, and other art forms within the reach of geographically remote regions. Moreover, advances in transportation have brought tourism within easier reach.

However, the tension between core and periphery still exists, and cultural activity holds both promises and challenges for the communities involved. The nurturing of cultural activity requires the infusion of resources beyond

the ability of the single artist or performer. The model of single cultural producer toiling away in isolation, only to be “discovered,” financed, and promoted by corporate or independent wealthy patrons is, in fact, very limiting, often exploitive, and frequently false. There are other models of artists’ development, and many of them involve, indeed require, community and government commitment.

Many cultural enterprises emerge from strong communities, nourished within family, neighbourhood, co-operative, and communal networks, given exposure through locally based institutions, generating a devoted following among the wider regional community. Not to be ignored is the role of government institutions, both federal and provincial, in fostering cultural production. The National Film Board, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, regional development agencies, provincial departments of culture, all play an integral part in the development of culture.

The outside audience bears the promise of some sort of economic revival for peripheral communities. Be it through exporting to remote purchase, or through the advent of outsiders for cultural tourism, there is the potential for community economic renewal or at least economic development.

But, as with many realms of economic activity in the new economy, there is a tug-of-war over the capital necessary to finance the activity and the surplus generated from it. Will there be enough patient and loyal capital available in the community or from sources immediately beyond it? Or will the financing come from impatient capital “from away,” eager to invest but also eager to reap quick rewards and to suck the surplus up into the worldwide turbulence of speculative capital? Will cultural tourism contribute to good jobs and healthy communities, or will it be corrosive and produce dependency?

Two problems emerge for peripheral communities in this tug-of-war. If capital and control are exercised locally, will the cultural activities be able to blossom and attract a wider audience? But if investment comes from outside, will local control inevitably diminish? Is there surplus that can be ploughed back into the local community to develop new talent from other producers? Does the cultural product change, or how much does it change to suit the tastes and vagaries of the external market? Is there a danger that in so doing the product becomes watered down and divorced from the specificity that gave rise to it? To what extent is the sense of “authenticity” grounded in reality or artificially constructed to please outside consumers and regional elites?

How to calculate the economic impact of culture upon communities is a conundrum that has long bedevilled analysts and activists in the cultural industries. The traditional method has been to count the direct spending. But Jeff Dayton-Johnson and Emily King (2003) suggest that there are

justifiable criticisms of this method. In addition, they suggest that we look rather to less readily quantifiable, but surely just as tangible, measures of economic impact. These they have developed in a study of the successful Stan Rogers Folk Festival, held in Canso, Nova Scotia, a fishing town devastated by the demise of its key industry and a close mainland neighbour to the island.

The authors suggest several social, and hence economic, benefits. First, there are values that “one places on continued existence of something, even if it will not be consumed. You may never attend a festival, but still value its continued existence for its own sake” (Dayton-Johnson and King 2003, ). “Option values” are those that “one places on something’s continued existence in the event that one might consume it in future.” “Bequest values” are those that “one places on something because it has value ... for the consumption of future generations. In the case of culture, this may also be interpreted as the value placed on maintaining cultural diversity, as opposed to just ‘culture’ of any kind, for future learning and enjoyment.”

Another whole range of economic impacts, according to Dayton-Johnson and King (2003), is comprised of “sociability effects” or social cohesion benefits arising from enhanced human interaction. The “content effect includes the creation of new and innovative content, of new models of discourse that are, in turn, spread through social networks.” There is a “conviviality effect” arising from a common experience of many people. Finally, there is the “collective-action effect,” summarizing the organizing lessons learned.

Such pioneering work is actively contributing to the solidification of the importance of culture as a socioeconomic phenomenon. Yet the idea of a “new cultural economy” is being pounced on like a famished person pounces on food. Across North America, regions left dispossessed by industry are falling over each other to declare themselves cultural centres. All of a sudden, anyone can reinvent himself or herself as a cultural producer. But this seeming frenzy of activity reveals a nasty downside. Cultural critic Angela McRobbie (2001) discusses these problems in an influential article, “‘Everyone Is Creative’: Artists as New Economy Pioneers?”: “The flexible, multi-task lives of creative people ... are celebrated by media and political cheerleaders as evidence of the liberating potential of the new cultural economy. But they are also part of a remorseless polarisation which glamourises its young meteors, and disciplines the rest. In a talent-led economy, the individual alone is to blame if the next script, film, book or show is not up to scratch ... It relies on impossible degrees of enthusiasm and willingness to self-exploit, and requires an unhealthy degree of belief in the self.” In other words, “the new economy” may pattern itself after the exploitive imperatives of the old capitalism, only with greater self-deception about who’s exploiting whom.

**Conclusion**

Yet hope springs eternal, especially in Cape Breton. A song that typifies this optimism is perhaps the greatest and most powerful song to emerge from the island. Written by Leon Dubinsky, the scion of Jewish immigrants to Sydney, it echoes one of the strongest themes of the Atlantic region, at once particular and universal – that from the ashes of the old a community will “rise again.”<sup>11</sup> The song has had broad appeal across the world in the twenty years since its composition.

Dubinsky explains that “‘Rise Again’ is about the cycles of immigration, the economic insecurity of living in Cape Breton, the power of the ocean, the meaning of children, and the strength of home given to us by our families, our friends, and our music” (MacGillivray 1997, 81).

When the waves roll on  
 Over the water  
 And the ocean cries  
 We look to our sons and daughters  
 To explain our lives  
 As if a child could tell us why  
 That as sure as the sunrise  
 As sure as the sea  
 As sure as the wind in the trees  
 We rise again  
 In the faces of our children  
 We rise again  
 In the voices of our song  
 We rise again  
 In the waves out on the ocean  
 And then we rise again.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the link between cultural capital and social cohesion remains evasive. We suspect intuitively that places with a high intensity of cultural production and consumption are more socially cohesive than those with low intensity, but few scholars have tackled the question. M. Sharon Jeannotte (2003), in a recent attempt, cites research showing a positive correlation between the production and consumption of “culture” (as in arts and culture) in a community on the one hand and the level of associational activity, and even economic regeneration, on the other. Cara Aitchison and Tom Evans (2003) illustrate a connection between culture and social cohesion by discussing a cultural project in South Wales that has helped to regenerate a community both emotionally and economically. But the conceptual and methodological challenges in linking cultural capital and social cohesion are legion. And it is less than clear which way causality runs or whether

a feedback mechanism is involved. Helen Gould lays out the problem this way: "Approaches to evaluating the impact of cultural capital remain in their infancy however. The outcomes of cultural activity are often highly personal, related to feelings of confidence and pride, attitudes to others and community relationships and capturing this data is a complex process" (2001, 74).

Most straightforwardly, we might think of cultural capital as the depth and proliferation of shared meanings and cultural artifacts that a grouping or community has at its disposal. Cape Bretoners have a store of "culture" on which they draw to reinforce their togetherness. But is this equal to the "solidarity" alluded to by the editor of this volume?

For while the social cohesion wrought of a shared culture can strengthen a sense of togetherness, it can also create tensions, both within the shared community and with the outside. When I identify myself as, say, a miner, at least temporarily I disidentify myself as a steelworker or an electrician or even a member of a more encompassing working class. If I identify myself as a Cape Bretoner, then at least temporarily I disidentify myself as a member of the Cape Breton working class, a Cape Breton miner, or an Atlantic Canadian. In the song "The Island," the anachronistic reference to an imagined foreign owner is employed to distinguish an "us" from a "them." But, as with the anachronistic foreign owners, the "them" by which "we" know ourselves as a collectivity is always, in large part, a work of fiction and myth.

The duality of cohesiveness is by no means new in social theory. For example, Frank Parkin (1979) and other neo-Weberians have refined the concept of social closure (i.e., the strategies that social groups use to increase their bargaining positions for scarce resources by demarcating themselves from rival groups). Parkin identifies two main closure strategies. "Exclusion" strategies are arrangements whereby some with power try to increase their share of resources by restricting access to a limited number of eligible people. "Usurpation" strategies consist of closure strategies employed more by groups that have been excluded by elites. Many groups that are neither at the top nor at the bottom of society employ "dual closure" (or perhaps we can call them "multiple closure") strategies. While challenging the excluders with usurpationary strategies, they may also exclude or subordinate those whom they feel do not belong.

Island social cohesion is just such a process of dual closure. While embracing the world and inviting "come from aways" to visit and consume island culture, Cape Breton is also engaged in a battle with the Nova Scotian mainland,<sup>13</sup> with the rest of Atlantic Canada (as a region especially hard hit by industrial decline), with Canada as a whole (in the context of the fiscal imbalance), and with the homogenizing forces of globalization.