

Gateway special supplement

Trying to stop the flow of oil, industry and prejudice

BY MICHAEL ASCH

Michael Asch is a professor with the department of anthropology at the U of A who presented a testimony to the Berger Inquiry criticizing the reports of industry on the feasibility and effects of a pipeline through the Mackenzie Valley. Space prevents running the entire testimony, however a brief summary of excerpts follows. Dr. Asch spent three years researching the economic history of the Slavey region and spent seven years learning about the social life of the Dene people at Fort Wrigley.

Industry says the economic and social situation in the North today is characterized by the problems of high unemployment, high welfare, alcoholism, poor housing, racial tensions, and that these problems cannot be solved through the traditional way of life, for this is either dead or dying. The construction and maintenance of a gas pipeline as well as attendant development will provide employment and thus help in some respects to alleviate the immediate social and economic plight of the people.

Therefore, it concludes that the social and economic impact of the pipeline on balance will be beneficial and that the pipeline thus should proceed as quickly as possible.

The intent of my presentation is to provide an alternative analysis of the social and economic situation in the North today and to offer a different conclusion regarding the potential impact of the pipeline and its attendant development.

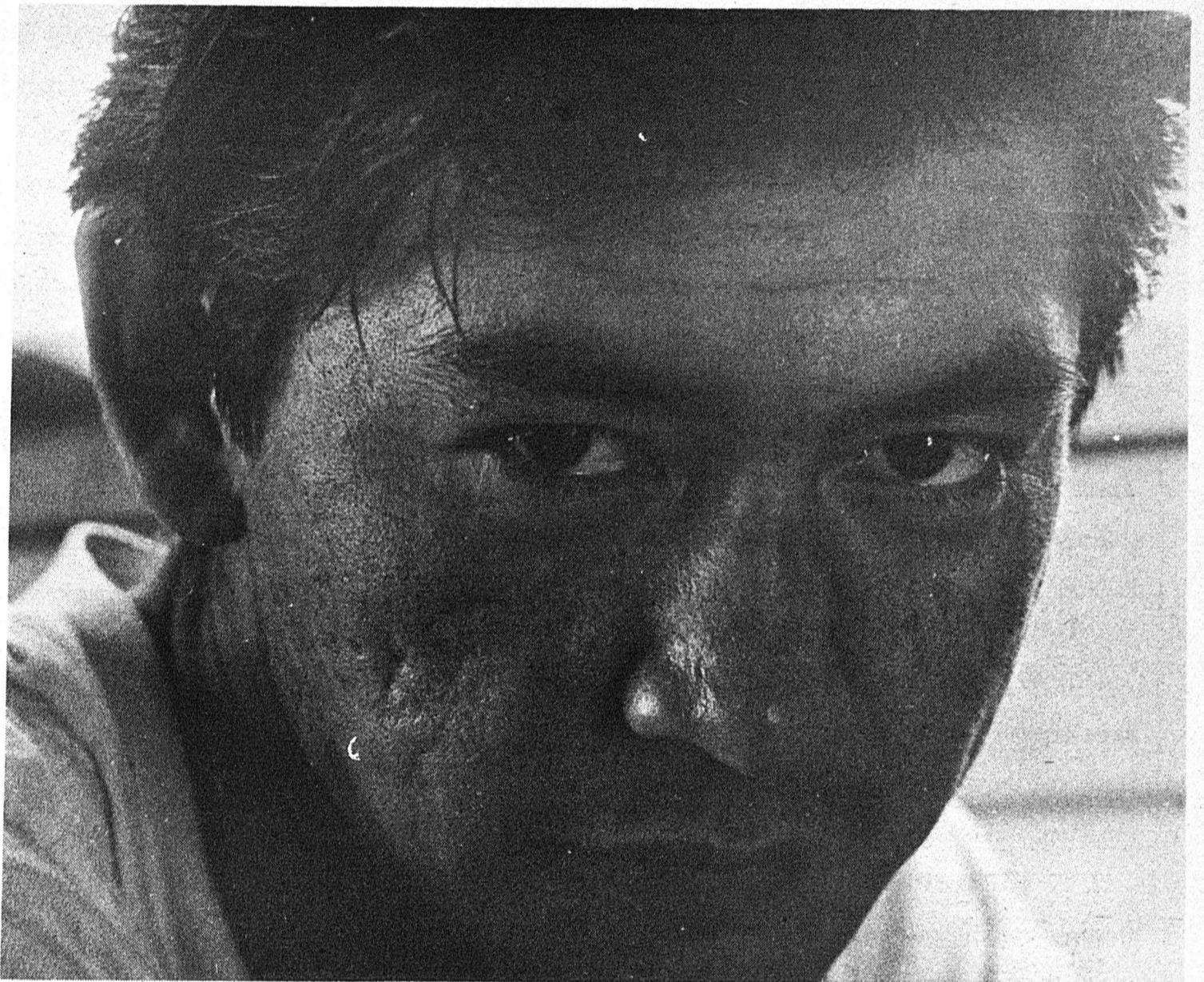
While I agree with the industry-sponsored studies that the North faces many problems, the developments proposed by the petroleum corporations, will not help in solving these problems and, indeed, will almost certainly exacerbate them.

Thus, I will be recommending to you that, unless certain issues regarding control of and participation in development in the North are resolved first, these developments should not take place. Some might say our differences are purely political or merely represent reasonable scholarly disagreement on a subject. I would argue that the differences in our analyses and conclusions flow directly from fundamental differences in ways in which we approach the question of the analysis of socio-economic impact.

Although they have collectively amassed quite a bit of data, they include virtually no information on either historical or cultural factors. As a result, they are missing information essential to making a proper assessment of any development, and they are creating the impression that northern natives are fundamentally just "poor" people, who happen to be native, an impression which does injustice to the facts. Had they taken historical and cultural factors into account, I believe the other researchers would have either reached the same conclusion as I or, at least, would have moderated their recommendations concerning immediate development to include more native control. I will provide some of this missing cultural and historical information.

Economic History

In brief I will show that the post-



contact economic history of the region is characterized by an economic relationship in which native people receive immediate material well-being in exchange for long term economic dependency.

The pre-contact economy

If we define the term economy in its most basic sense — the production and circulation of goods — then it is clear that every society that survives in a material way from year to year must have an economy.

In the late pre-contact period, the economy of the region was characterized by the dominance of small self-sufficient groups of approximately 20 to 30 related persons called by anthropologists "local groups." In order to maintain themselves these groups relied on harvesting many kinds of bush resources, including a wide variety of fish; small game animals; big game such as moose, and woodland caribou; and a number of kinds of edible berries. They also relied on other products such as trees which were important in constructing shelters, in transportation, and fuel.

It is most likely the local groups camped in winter near the shores of larger lakes which dominate the region. Here, the small game and fish, which were the staple of the diet, could be found in most constant supply.

Within local groups labor was organized along age and sex lines with men primarily responsible for hunting big game and setting fish nets and women and children for the collection of small game. Women were also responsible for making clothing from local resources such as moose hide and rabbit skins.

The primary techniques used in collecting animal resources were snar-

ing with babiche and sinew snares and entrapment. Moose and other big game animals were hunted with bow and arrow, club, or spear when crossing water or open country. Fish were taken using fishnets made of woven willow bast or caribou babiche.

Given this type of technology, it is reasonable to conclude that most often large game capture required co-operative labor in hunting parties. Co-operation was also important for women's production tasks.

Transportation in winter relied on human labour. Yet, this form of transportation resulted in more group travel than in the later period when dogs were used in transportation. The reason for this is simple: without dog teams it would be easier to bring people to the game than the other way around. Hence, in winter people moved around more than in later periods and, may have travelled throughout the region in search of game, returning only occasionally to the fish lake base camp when the situation demanded it.

In summer, people travelled primarily by shallow drafted canoes. Travel at this time included a trip to one of the major lakes where an encampment of perhaps 200 persons would be formed around the times of the fish runs. Then, the people would return again to their small local groups.

It appears that within local groups bush resources were distributed on the basis of mutual sharing. All participated equally in the good fortune of the hunters and all suffered equally when their luck turned bad. Although the distribution system was basically informal, there was apparently some formality concerning the way in which certain animals were shared. Specific parts were

reserved for the hunter and persons closely related to his or her immediate family. Individual ability could be recognized, but not at the expense of the collective good.

An examination of the productive base of the land indicates that the region is not highly varied as to kinds of resources but is somewhat variable from year to year as to the actual distribution of these resources on the land. Hence, the primary problem of circulation probably concerned the creation of a balance in any one year between local groups which had resources surplus to their needs and those which did not have the minimum resources necessary for survival.

Given the nature of the technology as well as the kinship system as reported by early travellers, it appears this problem was solved by moving people to reserves. The principle of mutual sharing was extended beyond the local group to include all groups in the region. This was done through a kinship and marriage system which linked all people in the region into a single social unit and conveyed to all reciprocal rights and obligations.

Thus the regional economy in the late aboriginal period was a total economy both in terms of production and circulation of goods. The people of the region were wholly responsible for their own survival. They achieved this end by organizing themselves into self-sufficient local groups within which production and distribution were collective activities. On occasion local groups found themselves unable to maintain their self-sufficiency and they would join with other local groups lucky enough to be enjoying a surplus. Hence, the principle of co-operation and mutual

continued to p. 10