The crisis of the 1930s, particularly in Alberta and Saskatchewan, spawned new political responses to living on the Plains. The ability of the market to deliver unalloyed progress seemed questionable wherever it had been applied, but nowhere more questionable than on the Plains in the 1930s. Yet in 1934, during the so-called Indian New Deal, when Franklin Roosevelt’s new commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier, safely shepherded through Congress the *Wheeler-Howard Act*—which, among other things, ended the process of land allotment in the United States—he was criticized as being too “Red,” a supporter of communism. Although these charges seem to have stemmed from pro-assimilationist Indian groups, especially the American Indian Federation (AIF), other Collier opponents were not loathe to use them, and Collier responded by tarring the AIF as fascists. As a result, both sides in this battle of reformers lost face, and the quarrel may have helped lead to the later policy of “Termination,” which was a disaster for those tribes—and most of the individuals—who were terminated. The Communist Party was active in both Canada and the United
States in trying to use agrarian discontent to its own purpose, but it was generally more effective in ethnic communities with a socialist background and in Canada than on the US Great Plains, and it had little effect on Collier or the Indians. The skirmish, however, indicates the fear that existed of any kind of collective development, a fear that still animates the Great Plains, especially in the United States in this year of the Tea Party.

In any important sense, “planning” preceded “settlement” on the Great Plains. The various peoples who entered, lived upon, or left the Great Plains before Coronado or the fur traders studied the land for subsistence. They moved, for the most part, incrementally, paying careful attention to available resources, such as buffalo and buffalo jumps, berries and root crops, water for domestic use and horticulture, shelter, sacred places, materials for home building, and all of the other inarticulable elements needed to make space into a homeplace. As they moved onto, across, and out of or permanently into the Great Plains, they ingeniously adjusted their behaviours to get the most out of the Big Sky grassland country. The Pawnees developed riverine corn villages, while the Lakotas specialized in highly mobile buffalo hunting. For Amer-Europeans, on the other hand, the land was literally already mapped out—into 160-acre plots intended for fee simple ownership by individual homesteaders who were to “improve” the land into commercial grain farms operating in a global market. The railway lands, held out of the homesteading process, had in a sense already been “improved” by the simple passage of the rails and the telegraph. As James C. Scott has eloquently demonstrated, the square survey (or cadastral survey) and individualized land ownership were part of the centralization of power by early modern European states that wanted to be able to calculate and thus tax and otherwise control the products of land and labour. Farmers and other small holders resisted the loss of the commons and the loss of informal systems of usufruct rights embedded in the older land systems, but gradually Europe was surveyed and parcelled out. On the Great Plains, however, the federal governments treated for land rights, pushed aside the inhabitants, and laid out the land in square fields that paid no more attention to topography than to the people already living there. Amer-Europeans, then, moved not onto a blank page but rather onto a colouring book created by an Etch-a-Sketch, where clear black lines
with square corners were superimposed on the bleached remains of a swirling and multi-coloured landscape that, no matter how blanched, could never quite be subsumed within the lines. Planning for Native people on the Great Plains has mostly meant ethnic cleansing and decollectivization, while planning for whitestream settlers has been more incremental but has still resulted in questionable gains for either humans or the environment. The two strands of planning continue to interweave and overlap.

As we have seen, in terms of the market economy, the Great Plains is a sparsely populated, resource-producing hinterland. If the purpose of the free market is to allocate resources most “efficiently” in terms of producing the greatest amount of wealth, regardless of where that wealth ends up or who benefits from it, then the proper role of the Great Plains is that of being an area of exploitation. In a sense, its deficiency is an asset. It should export its minerals, its agricultural products, and the best and brightest of its children. This is its inevitable economic destiny. In Scott’s terms, the Plains is an area where the laboratory experiment of huge-scale monocrops, easily controlled by governments, agronomists, and agribusinesses, worked better than they ever would anywhere else: “In a given historical and social setting—say wheat growing by farmers breaking new ground on the plains of Kansas—many elements of this faith [in monocrop technology] might have made sense,” Scott writes, but that sense was only temporary and partial. In the context of inevitable failure, Frank and Deborah Popper’s Buffalo Commons makes a good deal of sense. Frank Popper carefully studied a number of economic development plans for hinterland regions and concluded that they did not work. And so he developed the idea of Buffalo Commons, partly as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the flaws in economic development modelling and partly as an exercise in planning for the already occurring depopulation of a region with which he was not familiar. He noted, correctly, that population in most Great Plains counties had been decreasing since the end of World War I and concluded that the best thing to do would be to move most of the people out and to re-establish the buffalo herds. He could number crunch, unhampered by personal experience or sentiment that might contradict theory, to construct an un-development model for an impressive swathe of the United States. (Like most American scholars, he did not notice Canada.)
We have already looked in some detail at the successful ccf experiment in Saskatchewan. The purpose of this chapter is to examine economic development models in order to search for other ways of conceptualizing what happened on the Great Plains. Although twentieth-century economic development theory is useful in hindsight for telling us why people behaved as they did, it has little predictive force. Scott’s main point, in fact, is that the simplification implied by any linear theory that depends on breaking down incredibly complex interactions into a series of test tube experiments is always lacking because it cannot predict or even describe the myriad complexities and relationships of even a seemingly simple wheat field. Nor can it mimic the ongoing series of “gut” responses that an experienced animal, including a human, makes about real subsistence in a real environment.6

On a theoretical level, one can see the entire settlement of the Great Plains as a reaction to the revolutions of 1848 in Europe and the enormous fear of communism that developed in the middle classes. Although there was certainly a public demand for “free land” and for the removal of Indigenous peoples from any land deemed suitable for agriculture long before 1848, the monomaniacal tone of insistence on private property came, in part, from a fear of the revolutionists and a fear that they might be correct—that a perfectly workable market society could exist without the concentration of power required by monopoly capitalism. According to Scott, European governments had spent the last century perfecting their control with things like land surveys and systematized surnames. Canada and the United States simply copied France and Britain—Francis La Flesche tells how boys coming to the Presbyterian mission school on the Omaha Reservation were named for American statesmen and generals, and later, at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States would even sponsor a project for the systematic “renaming” of the Indians.7 The revolutions of 1848, however, also sent exiles to North America who would be significant in forming a critique of nineteenth-century monopoly capitalism, influencing such writers as Edward Bellamy, whose 1888 novel Looking Backward would become an important source for the Social Gospel movement that flourished across the continent but, on the Great Plains, particularly in Winnipeg. In Bellamy’s novel, the monopolies are the agents of their own
downfall, expanding until they form a seamless web that then becomes the basis for a planned society affording comfort to all.

One way, then, to understand the Great Plains is to look at it as that part of North America that was settled and formed into a free market hinterland as a kind of trope of the discussion between the two sides of the debate over the meaning of 1848 and, more generally, controlled economies. This is certainly an implicit part of its intellectual history. But Plains people are not just ciphers without agency of their own in a national debate, and agrarian discontent and regional revolt have certainly occurred. The Grange, the Populists, the Farm Holidays, and so on have marked the history of the American Great Plains, although they have mostly been forgotten in terms of content and remembered only as a kind of resentment of government and used to fuel movements like the militias of the sort that seem to have animated Timothy McVey in his part in the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. Similarly, the Prairie Provinces, in their resentment of the National Policy, railroad and elevator rates, and particularly their lack of control over their own public lands before 1930, led to numerous protest movements, from the United Grain Growers and the Wheat Pool to the Social Credit party and the Co-operative Commonwealth Foundation. More recently, protest, as in the United States, has turned to the right, as we see with the Reform, Saskatchewan, and Wild Rose parties. In the United States, public lands have remained with the federal government except in the original thirteen states and Texas. This led to the Sagebrush Rebellion of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when conservative western states legislators—primarily in the mountain and desert West, rather than in the Great Plains, where most federal land had passed into private hands—mounted an attempt to get control over energy-rich lands for the states. Since Congress had just passed a law entitling local governments to payments in lieu of taxes for federal landholdings, the land stayed in federal hands.8

One must pay attention to the explicit intellectual history of the region as well as the implicit one. Regional economic development theory turns out to be an effective tool for this discussion. Regional planning is a paradoxical field, for one can only plan effectively for things that will continue on more or less as they are, and, as Scott points out, only on the basis of a very
simplified version of how those things work. Most massive planning experiments have also been massive failures. The Land Ordinance and the various Homestead Acts were not failures in that sense, though they certainly caused harm to the land and the people who lived upon it, but even their successes were somewhat different than their proponents had intended. Planning can, however, solve specific problems. Thus, if the Canadian Plains are expected to be a wheat-producing region, agricultural scientists can develop a new, rust-resistant, short-season wheat—Marquis—and make it widely available to farmers. Or one can breed milo for areas of Nebraska too dry for dryland corn and without cost-effective means of irrigation. Or one can develop an oil seed that is low in acid and high in heart-healthy properties, give it a catchy name such as canola (instead of an unfortunate one like rape seed) and have a new crop capable of replacing wheat as a “king” crop. One can plan dams and irrigation works, and the utilization of new technologies such as center pivots and the older reapers and headers and combines, or specially constructed technologies such as the Noble blade. One can also plan for freight rates, crop insurance, support payments, and tariff, tax, and other government policies that affect agriculture. Soil conservation measures such as contour ploughing, shelter belts, trash mulching, or even various no-till options are plannable. Even genetically modified organisms (GMOs), from Roundup Ready seed (which withstands herbicide) to far more exotic variations, are fairly easily planned.

Although the particular innovations may be unknown—Marquis was the usual mixture of trial and error, inspired guess, and sheer plod—the context, or paradigm, if you will, is perfectly clear. Once one accepts the basic premise of privately owned, monoculture, commercial agriculture, it is reasonably easy to see how it needs to be changed and to plan and innovate. Even less predictable innovations are easy to include, such as software to calculate exact profit and loss per acre, or online, real-time market quotations. Planning even accommodates changing the product stream to, say, pulses and sunflowers, or developing niche markets for buffalo or ostrich ranching, or switching to organic production, or encouraging ecotourism and farmstead bed and breakfasts. One can even plan, quite rationally, to take land out of production—either temporarily, as in soil banking or hedge-row habitats, or permanently, as in sales or gifts to private conservation
groups such as the Audubon Society or The Nature Conservancy. Yet in all cases, this is conservative planning. One cannot plan for economic paradigm shifts such as the sudden appearance of e-commerce—though one can accommodate them as they occur. This kind of cumulative planning also complements, rather than replaces, the experience of real farmers on the ground, at least when the farmers are whitestream, commercially minded farmers, if not necessarily organic farmers or Native-style horticulturalists.

Planning is far less effective when it tries to become social planning. Tommy Douglas, to his credit, completely abandoned his eugenicist theories when he came into government. More inspired versions of planning for humans, such as the Saskatchewan government’s attempt to implement the Carter Report in the 1970s and 1980s, and to provide meaningful legal aid founded on professional jealousies and the huge changes in society that meaningful social reform would entail. In 1972, the Saskatchewan Legal Aid Committee, headed by Roger Carter, looked at legal aid issues in Saskatchewan and came up with a plan that was “perhaps the most far-reaching in North America” to revamp legal aid so that it would move out of the traditional adversarial and individualistic legal practice and serve as a systematic way of advocating for the poor and for Aboriginal populations, who were proportionately most likely to be charged with crimes, in such a way as to redress social injustice. All of the western provinces embarked on Aboriginal justice inquiries, as did the Royal Commission for Aboriginal Peoples. All came up with intelligent, workable, thoughtfully articulated plans for truly re-forming the relationships between Native and non-Native society, but almost none of their suggestions have been implemented except in relatively small matters that do not involve reformulating Prairie (and Canadian) society. Even critically important social changes, such as the Canadian government’s apology to the survivors of the residential schools and the “Truth and Reconciliation Committee” approach to reparations, are still within the context of capitalist, whitestream society. We are not talking here of massive relocation and development schemes of the sort that Scott critiques in the Soviet Union, Tanzania, and other places, though the ethnic cleansing of Native peoples and their replacement with Amer-European agriculturalists is in many ways a forerunner of the twentieth-century projects.
The economic development theory that planners have developed—particularly the theory that comes from close observation and trial-and-error interactions with real people in a particular physical place (rather than theoretical economic units in a homogenized theoretical space)—turns out to be an extremely useful tool for analyzing past development. Of course, this exercise is also partly tautological because development theory is based on history as well as experience and because the idea of the frontier as a special case of regional development is pretty much a given for the theorists. And the planners envisage a very Turnerian frontier, with little sense of the cost of the frontier to Indigenous peoples and without much probing into the nature of economic development as it swept from the Alleghenies or the Shield across the Plains to the coast. Nevertheless, when one reads of a “developmentalist state” that uses power to increase production by “supportive private capital accumulation” and by establishing “state enterprises . . . on profit-making principles” and that claims to represent all people through national development, we see a particularly clear picture of John A. Macdonald, the Dominion Lands Act, and the CPR, and a slightly less clear vision of the early dreams of US transcontinental railroads, Manifest Destiny, and the Homestead Act. Similarly, when we read Joseph Schumpeter’s evaluation of the importance of entrepreneurship and of cumulative causation theory, it is easy to see why the destruction of the first generation of Cree entrepreneurs and the destruction of the distinctive entrepreneurial style of the Five Nations in Oklahoma had negative economic and social consequences that multiplied for generations.11

There is no dearth of literature on economic development theory, but boiling it down briefly to apply to the recent history of the Great Plains is not particularly easy, especially as much of the more recent anti-development theory, like Scott’s, deals with a far more authoritarian and grandiose compulsory development. Even though some of the theory was developed from bonanza-style farms on the Great Plains, the real mistakes in terms of massive relocation of people and destruction of place-specific knowledge that Scott describes did not occur for whitestream farmers on the Great Plains.

Let us start by looking at “dependence theory.” Although this is fore-shadowed in Marx, the classic statement comes from Gunnar Myrdal:
That there is a tendency inherent in the freeplay of market forces to create regional inequalities, and that this tendency becomes more dominant the poorer a country is, are two of the most important laws of economic development and underdevelopment under laissez-faire.\textsuperscript{12}

Both capital and labour are mobile, but capital is more mobile than labour because it has no attachments to home and family. Nor does capital require passports or visas to cross international borders. Once a region starts to develop, it attains its own momentum. Banks siphon off savings from poor regions and invest in rich ones, and small local industries and even farms cannot compete with the economies of scale (or in contemporary agriculture, the export subsidies) of the richer region. The money that flooded into the Prairies during the various pioneer booms was lent on extremely high interest rates, and one could argue that had Prairie farming been successful, the farmers would have lagged in gaining prosperity simply because it would have cost so much to pay off their loans. As we have seen in Voisey, it is precisely those farmers who did succeed and who did stay on the land who made less pure economic gain than the speculators who skipped out, with or without defaulting.

Human capital follows financial capital. Soon many of the best and the brightest young people from the poorer region begin to migrate to the richer region, leaving the poorer region even less competitive and with a social structure that disproportionately includes older people and very young families. The market thus creates and perpetuates the economic and political dependency of the poorer region, and the outflow of people cannot keep up with the outflow of capital. Thus, the market cannot cure regional development disparities. If one wants, for political or sentimental reasons, to promote development of hinterlands, the market must be tampered with. But dependency theory holds that the economic elites, most of which are the former colonial powers, do not want the economic development of the dependent regions, most of which are former colonies: they need to have them in a dependent position in order to be able to continue to exploit their resources as if they were still a colony. The metropolises expropriate the “economic surplus” of the hinterland for their own life. This theory can also apply to internal colonies, such as the Great Plains.\textsuperscript{13}
A less ideological statement of similar principles is the theory of cumulative causation. Growth starts somewhere—perhaps because of rich and accessible resources, perhaps because of a particularly inventive entrepreneur, perhaps because there are a lot of people and nothing clearly exploitable and people have to live somehow. Once started, it keeps going. Similarly, decay is cumulative, as one can see by looking at many small towns in the Great Plains. Loss of business on Main Street means the loss of population, which results in the closing of the school, which brings about more loss, and so on. This process has been happening on the Plains since the end of World War I. According to classical economic theory, this population loss is a good thing. As Empire of Dust shows us, southern Alberta, like many parts of the Great Plains, was grossly overpopulated in terms of any conceivable kind of crop agriculture. Even had the short growing season allowed high-intensity truck gardening, there were no urban markets to support it. It is at this point, as the Poppers propose, that traditional economic planning would suggest the management of an orderly depopulation and the return of the land to Buffalo Commons. Although the Poppers’ work addresses only the US side of the Great Plains, it applies even more to the Canadian Plains, where the shorter growing season makes agriculture even more problematic.

One of the problems with all economic development theory is that it tends to deal in terms of space rather than place. Scott suggests that this has in part to do with the nature of scientific research, which must narrow down the variables to be examined and thus is more effective in a generic laboratory than in a specific field on a specific farm with specific weather conditions. Theoretical location is only relative, and concerns tend to be couched in terms of transportation costs and distribution issues across uniform and undefined space. But the Great Plains is a place gifted with certain distributions of soil, moisture, and climate as well as certain histories. The current basic theory of economic growth centres on the “growth pole,” a place where economic activity takes off and that then defines the economic activity of the region. As usual, that theory is not terribly useful for examining the Great Plains because most of the theorists require a city of at least 300,000 to serve as a growth pole, and most Plains cities of this size are only on the fringes of the Great Plains. During the last fifteen years,
Calgary has, for a number of reasons we shall discuss later, become one of the growth poles on the Great Plains. Wichita, Kansas, during and after World War II, became a growth pole because of the aerospace industry that located there. Similarly, most western growth poles took off thanks to government spending, particularly during and after World War II. Seattle and San Diego are particular examples. Canadian Plains cities are justified in feeling that they were overlooked to favour sites in Central Canada. The revolt caused by awarding the CF-18 contracts to Bombardier and the province of Quebec instead of to Winnipeg in 1986 is a particular focus of western Canadian discontent. Peter Newman and others regard it as the proximate cause of the creation of the Reform Party, which was intended to register the West’s outrage at being passed over (yet again) for Quebec.\textsuperscript{14} Even Vancouver has not fared as well in defence contracting as West Coast cities in the United States, even taking into account Canada’s smaller total defence spending.

Another aspect of growth pole theory that confuses its application to the Great Plains is that the important growth poles are often outside the region. This is implied in the metropolis-hinterland theory of Canadian economic growth as articulated by Harold Innis, Donald Creighton, and J.M.S. Careless. American historian William Cronon relied upon these Canadian models in his \textit{Nature’s Metropolis}, which focusses on Chicago but explains the economic growth of the Great Plains, one of Chicago’s hinterlands, and Cronon, like Scott, points out the distortions of a bland, undefined “space” that does not consider the specifics of a given “place.” A growth pole outside the region also distorts the theory by introducing variables of transportation and communication into the mix. Growth pole theory, as applied to regional development worldwide during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, for the most part gave regional development a bad name. Growth pole theory relies heavily on increasing exports while reducing dependence on imports. Thus began the practice of plopping factories down in Lesser Developed Regions to manufacture products for export or products to replace imports. In most cases, these initiatives were failures. I remember hearing in the late 1970s the story of how a light industry in snelling fish hooks—putting the short filament leader onto the hook so the fisher could attach it to the end of the line—was set up on the stunningly
impoverished Pine Ridge Oglala Reservation in South Dakota. It employed a few women and went out of business as soon as the federal economic development subsidy ran out. It was the classic case of an enclave development. Oglalas, unlike, say Wahpeton or Sisseton people, have had until recently no tradition of fishing, no sport-fishing resources on the reservation, and little contact with the nearest sport-fishing opportunities as a minor tourist occupation in the nearby Black Hills. Pine Ridge thus offered neither a local market nor a local source of knowledgeable and enthusiastic workers whose involvement with the sport would bestow meaning on the repetitive task of joining hook to snell. If the hook factory had no existing connection to the reservation community, it had even less possibility of growing in the context of the community. Neither the hooks themselves nor the filament could be produced anywhere near Pine Ridge. There was no facility for printing the cardboard on which the hooks were packaged nor for developing associated products such as lures, bobbers, or even sinkers. The snelling enterprise is a perfect example of what not to do in economic development. Pine Ridge was also the home to other short-term manufacturing attempts, including an arrow factory. One woman who had worked there said she had to quit because not only was she bored by making two thousand arrows per day, but the glue was giving her increasingly severe asthma attacks. Eventually, many of these operations were moved to Mexico or other countries.15

Failures and successes, however, have refined the notions of economic development over the last forty years, and these more complex theories are useful for understanding what has and hasn’t worked—and to some extent why and what to do about it—over the market history of the Great Plains. The most important effect of the fur trade on the American Great Plains was the Osage assumption of the crucial middleman role during the period of French and Spanish claims to sovereignty and the early years following the Louisiana Purchase. The northern US Plains were more a region that American trappers crossed to get to the beaver in mountain streams. As we have seen, American mountain men tended to trap beaver for themselves instead of trading with Indigenous trappers, and even the role of Indigenous women in curing furs was largely eliminated by the mountain men, thus providing relatively little room for Indigenous middlemen. On
the Canadian Plains, however, the Cree and Assiniboine long played the middleman role, and when pemmican became the fuel for the Athabasca brigades, buffalo hunting became adjunct to the fur trade. Thus, the Canadian Plains indirectly entered the market economy as a staples producer—of pemmican, if not fur directly.16 So far, the history fits nicely with traditional economic theory—the staples theory is a version of export-base theory (which underlay the hook snelling, creating an export commodity) and fits with the growth pole theory, the European metropolis driving hinterland growth. Import replacement—facilities for making things like guns and iron kettles—were not at this point a possibility. Trade with the metropolis would provide such goods.

Euro–North American settlement of the Great Plains adds more complications. Economic development theory, as Higgins and Savoie discuss it, indicates what was mistaken from an economic (never mind a human) point of view in the “development” of Indigenous peoples. Some current dependency theorists maintain that growth can occur in Less Developed Regions only under a socialist framework—in complete opposition to the free market beliefs of Henry Dawes and Hayter Reed and their contemporaries; Higgins and Savoie, however, argue from experience in numerous societies around the world that development can happen “whatever the socio-cultural framework” and without the enormous human cost of social and cultural disruption that Scott describes so accurately for the Soviet Union, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, Ferguson for Lesotho, and Patel for parts of India, Mexico, and Central America.

Allotment was a political and ideological decision that unnecessarily devastated the Indians to satisfy the land hunger of Euro-American pioneers. It was “justified” by the overly enthusiastic embrace of technology and the elite theory that both the people and the land were deficient without Amer-European management and markets. But development could have proceeded successfully without allotment. Pleasant Porter was right; development in the context of Creek and other Five Nations traditions made just as good economic sense and considerably better human sense than allotment in severity. The elites of the Five Nations were certainly committed to development, and their success in twice rising from the ashes of profound disruption is proof positive of their ability. Nor do non-market
“peasants” need to go slowly in embracing technology, as Hayter Reed contended, to the great disadvantage of the Prairie Cree. Savoie and Higgins instance a group of Malay fishermen who had to make the transition to motorized boats. They chose to go all the way to inboard motors, not to make the transition by degrees, starting with small, less-expensive craft powered by outboard motors. They astutely recognized that in the long run, the intermediate step was simply a waste of time and money that might hamper their eventual use of the most efficient technology.17

As Scott notes, “traditional” peoples are not static but extremely adaptive, quick to pick up the knack of any crop, product, or method that proves or even promises to be useful.18 Thus, economic development theory bears out the conclusions of historians like Angie Debo, Sarah Carter, and Russel Barsh. All of the Plains tribes had Indigenous elites of one sort or another, from the Pleasant Porters and John Rosses of the Five Southeast Tribes, to the La Flesches among the Omahas, to Lakotas such as Black Elk who developed cattle herds, to Blackfoot, Cree, and Dakota farmers and herdsmen. Allotment was not necessary and it created enormous and completely avoidable human suffering, as did the similar villagization of Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s. Hayter Reed’s insistence on obsolete farm machinery—a warped variation on the value of technology (headers are too complex for any but the “civilized” to use them)—delayed the adaptation to the most useful machinery and left Indian-owned farms fatally behind their neighbours’ farms in terms of economic takeoff. Throughout the Great Plains, official Indian policy worked to discourage and demoralize Indigenous entrepreneurs. Only those most willing to assimilate completely survived economically in Oklahoma, while the destruction of the cadre of first-generation economic entrepreneurs on the northern Plains of the United States and Canada crash-landed their economic takeoff. It also virtually guaranteed, through cumulative causation, the continuing economic failure of reserves and reservations and the cumulative demoralization of the people—and this without even considering the disheartening effects of residential and boarding schools, and the prohibition of culturally important practices such as the Sun Dance and the giveaways.

Although Euro–North Americans benefited in the short run by gaining title to Indian land and shielding themselves from Indian economic
competition, the net loss to society as a whole was far greater. Even putting any human decency or humanitarianism aside, the creation of a demoralized, dependent, and rapidly growing population is a poor economic choice. What’s more, as economic development theory teaches us, innovation does not necessarily come to the most “favoured” areas. Singapore is a relatively small and resource-poor island that has constructed wealth based on the ingenuity of its people. Higgins and Savoie note that non-irrigated areas in India tend to be more innovative than the more favoured irrigated areas. It makes sense—as Scott points out, a fisherman living by a river that always serves up plenty of fish in the accustomed places is less likely to innovate than the fisherman whose river demands the utmost in wile to land a steady catch. Reservations on the US Great Plains were almost always set on parcels of land that Euro-Americans deemed least useful for farming, including the South Dakota Badlands and the Missouri Breaks and Coteau, land in most cases prized by the reserves, who cherished its diversity and opportunities for subsistence hunting and gathering. Although under the numbered treaties, Canadian bands had the right to choose their own reserve land, this was not always honoured in practice, and the small size of the reserves hampered their economic viability. Nonetheless, in both countries, the squalor and extreme poverty most North Americans today associate with reserves and reservations are not the result of the inadequacy of the land or the inability of the people to adapt to “civilized” economic and social behaviour. Instead, they are the result of the determined squelching of all successful entrepreneurial behaviour. Judging by the successes of the Five Nations in Oklahoma before allotment and of individual and small groups of Cree, Omaha, Lakota, Dakota, Osage, Blackfoot, Kiowa, and other peoples in the first reserve/reservation generation, the reserves and reservations could have been village-sized growth poles, innovative adaptations of introduced economic behaviour to an intimately understood place that newcomers persistently regarded as deficient. Unlike the projects that Scott describes that were doomed by an excess zeal for technology and mechanization at the expense of practical, place-centred knowledge, however, reserves and reservations were tacitly expected to fail by the white governments and negotiators who set them up. They were supposed to vanish, like the Vanishing American they housed, and not to flourish. That this idea of
the economic success and even exemplary counter-narrative of the reserves and reservations seems romantic or nostalgic is merely an indication of how strongly what is conditions our idea of what could have been, and how much contemporary society has bought into just one tidy, technocratic idea of “success.”

If theory suggests an unimaginable alternative to history, it also spawns explanations of success. As we have seen, the theory of the developmentalist state exactly describes Canada at Confederation. The National Policy of Macdonald’s Tories, whether conceptualized in the nineteenth century or imposed on the actions of the past by twentieth-century scholars, fits perfectly with how one would establish a state. In both Canada and the United States, federal support of a transcontinental railway led to a government “trapped between the possibility of a legitimation crisis and a fiscal crisis.” As we have seen in the United States, this led to the Credit Mobilier scandal. Because the government had to be accountable for the costs, the railroad was too undercapitalized to succeed. Only by sweetening the pot through an elaborate kickback scheme could financiers gain a rate of return commensurate with the risk involved in this colossal and premature enterprise. Given Canada’s small population and imposing landmass, most development is premature, thus demanding more government support and a much narrower margin of error. As we have seen, the CPR was on the verge of bankruptcy when the Northwest Resistance gave it the legitimacy it needed to raise more capital.

In both countries, the railroads were examples of “spatial integration” to improve transport and communication, and to increase capital by reducing transfer costs for merchandise. Compare the speed of shipment by rail to the old fur trade routes that required a year out and a year back for there to be any return on capital! Or look at what Cronon has to say about the cost of slow return to merchants and farmers alike when all consumer goods and all crops were shipped by water instead of by rail! The railroads allowed the commodification of agriculture (and the commodification of land) by providing the farmer with reasonable access to the world market. According to Gore, “Part of state policy in developmentalist states is thus directed toward inventing a nation.” Although he is speaking primarily about nations with arbitrary boundary lines created by the withdrawals of colonial powers in
Asia and Africa, the statement applies perfectly to Canada and to the nation building that incorporated the Prairies into Confederation. Even in the United States, the transcontinental railroads and the quick western settlement that those railroads allowed were a crucial part of reinventing and repairing the nation after the Civil War. The epic of “The Last Spike,” then, is a function less of human imagination and courage than of the demands of economic development in an international market system.

As Janine Brodie points out, region is as much a political as a physical designation, and the term “region” has no particular meaning except in relation to nation, or province, or city, or whatever. One can explain the relative lack of economic development in the Great Plains as opposed to Central Canada or to the East and West Coasts of the United States in a great many ways, from the use of tariffs, to the destruction of an Indigenous entrepreneurial class, to the lack of federal defence spending, to dependency theory/cumulative causation and the basic operation of a free market economy on a resource region, but it is always easier to explain why something did happen than why something did not.

As we have seen with Scott’s Seeing Like a State, more recent works have criticized the whole “development” model in general. James Ferguson’s 1990 Anti-Politics Machine looks at the context of development in Lesotho, a tiny, landlocked country entirely within South Africa that supports a huge, internationally funded development “machine” that continues to sponsor projects congenitally unsuitable to the land and the people. In Stuffed and Starved, Raj Patel, in examining the global food system in which the Great Plains region competes, details the ways in which it damages both farmers and consumers. He points out that food processing is more profitable than food production and that the processing and wholesaling bottlenecks now built into the global food chain keep farm prices disastrously low, while failing to produce comparable savings for consumers. He notes that the first phase of the Green Revolution in India did raise yields, but only by raising costs for seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides to farmers at rates that could not be repaid by harvests. The new farming structure also substituted monocultures for a biological diversity that had developed to fit various niches in growing areas and that had produced a well-balanced diet. The Green Revolution itself depended upon a kind of deficiency theory—the
plants and tillage practices of people like small farmers in the Punjab were deficient, something Scott explores in considerable detail. People could not raise enough food to feed themselves, resulting in endemic malnutrition and periodic famines. But Patel points out that the deficiency was not in the plants or the tillage, but in the method of distribution of the products. By the time of the Green Revolution, India had spent more than a century under indirect or direct British rule. The old feudal system, which required landlords to put aside enough grain to feed all the people in time of want, had been deliberately replaced by a market system that required surpluses to be exported—mostly to Britain, to keep its food prices low and to stave off social unrest. It was politically more expedient to the Raj for poor Indians than for poor Britons to starve.23

Of specific relevance to the Great Plains are Patel’s sections on food aid, wheat, and soybeans. Commodity distribution to Native Americans, though not something Patel discusses, is certainly a Great Plains issue. As reservation land was expropriated and Indians stubbornly refused to “vanish,” the US Department of Agriculture introduced commodity distribution, which not only provided an outlet for food surpluses of grains, dairy, and other products, supporting overproducing farmers, but also dampened social unrest by feeding people who had lost their subsistence hunting-and-gathering grounds but had not acquired agricultural acreage or employment opportunities to replace them. Commodities and other cheap foodstuffs available in cash-poor and increasingly welfare-dependent reservation communities included large proportions of processed grains, sugars, fats, and dairy products, all unfamiliar in North American ancestral diets. Diabetes, which was literally unknown in American Indian populations in the 1940s, is now endemic in these same populations at rates several times those in any other North American demographic. Patel points out that the same sort of thing happened in the rest of the world—wheat imports in the 1950s and 1960s left recipients, mostly in the Global South, “hooked on the most expensive grain.” His solution is disarmingly simple: instead of providing cheap food for poor people, development should instead focus on economies that allow everyone to purchase good and diverse foodstuffs.24 Patel is particularly critical of the international politics of soybeans and corn, major Great Plains crops in the United States, if not in Canada.
After World War II, American soy growers had virtually cornered the market, controlling more than 90 percent of the world’s soybeans in the 1960s. Brazil, however, embracing a positivist model of development, entered into soy production and, after a brief 1973 embargo by the Nixon administration, emerged as a serious competitor to the United States, moving soy production into the cerrado, which is, like the Great Plains, a grasslands ecosystem underlain by a huge freshwater aquifer. Patel sees hope for a more sustainable development model in Brazil through progressive, democratic co-operatives of landless rural workers and Indigenous people whose land is being invaded and destroyed. Meanwhile, back on the Great Plains, he points out that the soy farmers try to compete by talking about seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, and other inputs of corporate farming—as one can see by looking through the glossy advertisements in any farm magazine or by counting the seed and herbicide commercials on local television. But, quoting activist Emelie Peine, Patel notes that Great Plains soy farmers “are talking about ways to become more competitive but not about why we’re having the race.”

Corn, Patel shows, is even more insidious in its results than soybeans. High fructose corn syrup provides a market for corn that rewards processors and does not interfere with US tariff protections for domestic sugar. It appears in everything from soft drinks to spaghetti sauce and helps account for the obesity epidemic in North America. Worse, Mexican economists, educated in the United States and believing in market and developmental models, included food—most notably corn—in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) despite US officials’ concerns that “the economic impacts of free trade on farmers would cause such poverty that it might destabilize the Mexican countryside.” In fact, farmers did fail in large numbers, and while prices fell for the Mexican food processors and wholesalers, they rose for consumers.

In his 2010 book Murder City, Charles Bowden looks precisely at the horror of what the rural destabilization came to mean for Ciudad Juárez, a border city with a population somewhere between one and a half and two million people. And with the highest murder rate in the world, moving from an already stunning 48 murders in January 2008 steadily up to 324
murders in October 2009. And rising. Bowden’s analysis is even more chilling than his figures.

The trade agreement [NAFTA] crushed peasant agriculture in Mexico and sent millions of campesinos fleeing north into the United States in an effort to survive. The treaty failed to increase Mexican wages—the average wage in Juárez, for example, went from $4.50 a day to $3.70. The increased shipment of goods from Mexico to the United States created a perfect cover for the movement of drugs in the endless stream of semi trucks heading north.

American factories went to Mexico (and Asia) because they could pay slave wages, ignore environmental regulations, and say fuck you to unions. What Americans got in return were cheap prices at Wal-Mart, lower wages at home, and an explosion of illegal immigration into the United States. This result is global, but its most obvious consequence is the destruction of a nation with which we share a long border.

The main reason a US company moves to Juárez is to pay lower wages. The only reason people sell drugs and die is to earn higher wages.

Juárez, Bowden claims, is the logical future “of a religion called the global economy.”27

The warnings that Patel and Bowden give us, as well as Scott’s horror stories about forced rural relocation and devaluation of land knowledge, are closer to the removal of Native peoples from the Great Plains than the bland analysis of planning and economic theory. The model of the economy that Great Plains society, as a whole, has embraced is not serving anyone except for economic elites mostly outside the area. If none of the old methods of planning that serve to explain the past can work in the future, what might be a productive way for the Plains and the rest of the globe to visualize the economies in which we are all ensconced?

As we have seen, the Plains supported hunting-and-gathering economies, especially on the verges; a mounted buffalo-focused economy; and a commercial pemmican economy associated with the fur trade. At the point of Euro/Afro/North American settlement, it supported a speculative cattle economy and a speculative wheat economy underlain by women’s
subsistence work. In both countries, the “sodbusters” focussed primarily on wheat, with a large admixture of corn in the United States and a smaller admixture of barley in Canada—and with enough oats to support draught horses in both countries. As Voisey notes, although experts urged mixed farming and farmers agonized over taking their advice, it was not economically sensible.\textsuperscript{28} Wheat gave the best return and was the most easily portable crop, and the droughts of the Great Plains were so much more intense than the droughts of Ontario or Ohio that the pastures and ploughed fields alike dried up and were given over to gophers and grasshoppers in the scorching summer sun. More recently, federal support payments, especially in the United States, also helped focus farmers on wheat and other large commodity crops that were price supported. The high prices of oil in 2004–7 gave rise to a fervid boom in the ethanol industry and to planting corn “fence row to fence row,” but the depression and rapid energy price declines of 2008 quickly ended that boom, and the farmers and ethanol plants alike await a rebirth.

Available moisture and length of growing season are the two crucial variables on the Great Plains, and they are associated with microclimates. Frost pools, and crops at the top of even a modest slope may be untouched while only a few metres below in an almost imperceptible hollow, a killing frost may settle. Moisture also pools, and the hollows are wetter than the ridge tops, even as the change in altitude is slight. This is easily perceptible on the tallgrass prairie, where little bluestem and stypas typically grow on the upper slopes and southern exposures of gently rolling land while big bluestem, switchgrass, and Indian grass thrive on north-facing slopes or slightly further down the incline. Contour ploughing, terracing, and grass waterways serve not only to conserve water but also to define and provide distinctive uses for the microclimates for farmers willing to work with this kind of diversity—often a luxury, given the size of contemporary farm machinery. Plains agriculture has the potential for on-farm diversification that provides some of the flexibility that mixed farming did in more humid climes, but this diversification is more theoretical than practical, especially since ag experiment stations and seed companies have not worked to provide the niche seeds, and experimenters like Wes Jackson have mostly been laughed out of the industry. For the most part, diversification has involved
moving into other field crops such as canola, sunflowers, soybeans, and pulses. Or diversification has meant another kind of extraction from the land, particularly involving the oil and gas industry. Monocultures are still taken for granted. Even the Land Institute, which has consistently experimented with growing perennial grain crops that do not require annual ploughing and planting, can only work toward a diversity of a few mixtures of seeds and plants. When some of my colleagues at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln experimented with growing a traditional Omaha garden, their vari-coloured corn grew ten feet high, supported by beans and squash and watered by hand-built wooden pipes. This kind of diversity and polyculture does not seem to be in the cards, but its place-based systems are, at the least, worthy of serious study. We shall return to the concept of diverse sufficiency arguments in the last chapter, but first let us look at two twentieth-century planning efforts, for water and for oil, whose partial failures advance the tale.