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Indigenous movement

The International Indigenous Movement for Self-Determination

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In North America, gaining Indigenous autonomy from the colonial powers of the United States (US) and Canada has involved efforts at state-formation, that is, tribal governance. For decades, Indigenous activists and organizers in North America have worked tirelessly to assert the validity of treaties and establish the sovereignty of tribal nations. These nations seek to gain control over their social and political institutions without compromising what they consider unique and essential cultural markers.

In Latin America, Indigenous efforts to combat colonialism have taken a different strategy. These peoples have organized into movements against racialized social hierarchies, and have agitated for increased rights. They have overtly challenged the state and contemporary capitalism, drawing upon an ethical reading of Marxism that calls for improved social rights and economic justice.

Within international discourse, new Indigenous alliances have found resonance in Indigenous claims against the states that act as their colonizers. In response to Indigenous movements around the world, even the United Nations (UN) has been compelled to formally recognize Indigenous rights. The UN Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) has provided Indigenous peoples with legal grounds from which to argue for increased autonomy and recognition of their social, cultural, and political practices in places where they have been historically exploited and marginalized.

As long as they are located on other continents, the North American Left is usually comfortable with Indigenous politics. However, when Indigenous movements are located closer to home, people on the Left tend to have more difficulty accepting the politics of self-determination. The function of tribal governments is considered to be problematic. Often, twin emphases on class struggle and environmentalism prevents appreciation of how tribal state-making efforts are part of a larger struggle against US imperialism and militarism in the service of capitalism. In general, the Marxian lack of emphasis or interest in land and land-based peoples is a blindspot, a deficit in imagined futures.

For example, the work of environmental justice organizations in the Southwestern US, where the Navajo Nation is located, largely challenges tribal development policies for being exploitative of the natural environment. Sometimes they do this through characterizations of these governments as a form of neocolonialism. There is little to no recognition of progressive reforms won through struggle during the second half of the 20th century that have ensured greater degrees of control and self-determination for these tribal governments.

It is useful to analyze the differences and commonalities among Indigenous movements in order to gain a better understanding of the complex and contradictory processes of self-determination. In this way we can learn where Indigenous emancipatory projects conflict in approach but converge in meaning. Ultimately, we suggest that more attention should be given to the potentials of Indigenous socialisms of various kinds in global struggles against imperialism and capitalist accumulation.

Self-Determination in Latin America: A Long History of Struggle

Following the 2005 election of the first Indigenous president of any country in the Americas — Evo Morales in

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Bolivia — we commented on the fact that many were taken by surprise by this seemingly sudden occurrence out of nowhere. This is because they had not been paying attention to the development of the international Indigenous movement over the previous three decades. We called attention to the Indigenous mass movements in the Americas during the 1960s and 1970s that gave rise to the international Indigenous movement. This movement, in turn, brought pressure to bear on the UN that led to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Our story starts even further back, in the 1920s, with the work of Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui. Mariátegui made the case that the Indigenous peoples of the Andes are nationalities that have the right to self-determination, including independence from the dominant state — although Mariátegui argued that a separate Andean state would not be feasible to achieve.

During that time, the Soviet Union-led Comintern promoted the right to self-determination — including independence — of all nationalities and proposed that an Andean Indian Republic be formed in South America, as well as Black Republics in the United States and in South Africa. However, Mariátegui believed that liberation and socialism — Indigenous socialism — would come not from state formation, but from struggles of the Indigenous nationalities, Mestizo peasants, and urban workers in unison. He was certain that a century of independent state formation in Latin America would not lend itself to separatist movements, nor would such movements lead to authentic liberation. In fact, since that time, even the most militant Andean leaders and organizations have not proposed separate Indigenous republics, but rather plurinational state formations.

However, the dream of self-determination was not to be achieved in Mariátegui's time. The Cold War affected peoples' movements in every corner of the world, no less the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. By the 1950s, Marxist-inspired movements were under heavy attack, ideologically, as well as physically. As mild a democratic reform government as that in Guatemala was overthrown in 1954 by the US Central Intelligence Agency, and following the Cuban Revolution, any social movement demanding land reform or workers' rights was labeled communist. Missionary intervention and assistance in Indigenous movements, particularly following Vatican II, largely replaced the weakened socialist movements.

Following decades of defeats for Indigenous peoples in Latin America, our story jumps ahead to 1989, sixteen years before Evo Morales' election, in the Andean state of Ecuador. There, Indigenous peoples rose up and paralyzed the country for a week. The protesters blocked highways, halting all traffic in the country, and then massed in the streets of Quito, the capital, presenting sixteen demands focused on land, culture, and political rights.

The pan-Indigenous organization, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), founded in 1986, provided both leadership and an ideological frame for the future of Indigenous movements in that country, including the extraordinary role of women's leadership and participation. From its founding, CONAIE had been actively participating in the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, established in 1981. Since 1990, the Ecuadorian government has included Indigenous representatives in its delegations to the UN, although the Indigenous organizations remain active and wary of the national government.

Historian Marc Becker, who has documented the Andean Indigenous movements in books and articles, observes that, following the 1990 uprising: "In a manner rarely seen in Latin America, Indigenous activism in Ecuador spawned an academic 'Generation of 1990' with numerous articles, books, and doctoral dissertations on the subject of Indigenous politics. Anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists analyzed the uprising and the ideological shifts engendered within the Indigenous world. Academics came to see the uprising, the organizational process leading to it, and the political negotiations following it as representing the birth of a new Indigenous ideology and organizational structure."

Now that socialism is back in the forefront of the Indigenous movement in Bolivia with Evo Morales's political party

MAS (Movement Toward Socialism), it is time for the Left to comprehend Indigenous struggles and aspirations.

When comparing American Indian communities in Anglo North American with indigenous communities in Latin America, it's immediately clear that the first order of difference is their legal-political status. In the United States and in Canada, settler societies have institutionalized formal boundaries, membership criteria, and even forms of government that are designed to give indigenous peoples a sense of social and cultural autonomy. These arrangements also benefit their settler societies in the sense that they partially pacify resentment toward colonialism.

In the United States the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 (IRA) initiated a series of political reforms that led to the emergence of formalized territorial boundaries, institutions, and hierarchal authority. Both the US and Canada have followed similar paths in this regard. Eventually these powers were organized into Tribal Councils (in Canada, Band Councils) that served as a form of government for tribal peoples. Although the amount of power these governments were granted vis-À-vis settler societies was limited, these arrangements gave indigenous peoples in Anglo North America a sense of control over their lands, cultures, and governing institutions.

In this article, we argue that indigenous struggles for autonomy against capitalist exploitation have taken unique, sometimes contradictory trajectories. In order to practice a politics of decolonization, it's important to understand the nature of state formation, economic development and neoliberalism. We look at the Navajo Nation as a case study of the contradictions of capitalist development in indigenous North America.

Resource extraction and the socially embedded nature of the Navajo welfare state

On many reservations, the drive toward large-scale economic development was derived from the natural mineral wealth of the community, and came with a high environmental cost. In the case of the Navajo Nation, tribal officials and some members celebrated the jobs and revenues these activities helped created. Although many questioned or outright opposed development's high cost on the environment, these mineral economies eventually became part of the social and political reality on the ground.

Mineral economies became embedded within the social and cultural landscape, especially near where extraction occurred. For example, coal mining on the western end of the Navajo Nation provided many jobs for people in the immediate vicinity.

But the mines also served as a source of revenue for tribal government as a whole. This activity ushered in a new sense of scale with respect to how Navajo thought about their family and community livelihoods, and development in general. It scaled up Navajo self-consciousness from the level of the community and family to the level of the nation. When community members transitioned from subsistence activities (such as sheep and cattle herding, small-scale farming, or arts and crafts activities) and into regimes of wage labour such as railroad work, mining, and other forms of construction, a new kind of social relation was embedded into the landscape—a social relation structured by alienation and hierarchy, and ideologically framed by Navajo nationalist discourse. The emergence of a new class consciousness has arguably led to a reframing of what Navajos consider to be legitimate forms of work. It also defines what the tribal government is expected to do in order to promote and continue these types of work.

Development and modernization

At the height of US post-war development, massive amounts of federal aid were funnelled into reservations. The objective was to modernize and develop tribal communities. This strategy was not only applied within reservations, but also became a part of a larger global postwar development policy. Within the Navajo Nation, revenues from extractive industries (e.g., oil, natural gas, uranium, and coal) helped to expand the size and scale of the tribal government at this time.

The 1960s proved to be the development decade for the Navajo Nation. This is when a number of new and large-scale projects were initiated on the reservation with a sense that a burgeoning new phase in Navajo history was just around the corner. There was a sense of optimism in these projects at this time.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, when neoliberalism turned its ugly head toward federal-Indian relations, these initiatives became entrenched within many Navajo communities. Returning to our example of coalmining in the western part of the Navajo reservation, it was during this period that two coal mines were opened in the 1960s, along with a regional power plant. Over their forty-year history, these industries have employed hundreds of Navajo and Hopi peoples from surrounding communities.

Starting in the 1980s, dependency on mining on the western end of the Navajo reservation and other natural resource development activities was exacerbated by federal austerity measures that led to reduced support for social programs. The tribal government was forced to rely more on revenue from industrial development to stay afloat and support needed programs.

Neoliberal turn and “alternative” development proposals

The increased reliance on natural resource development in turn led to greater unease and dissatisfaction among tribal members concerned about the physical transformations impacting their lands, forests, and sources of water. Within the Navajo Nation, a new brand of indigenous environmentalism emerged from tribal dependence on extractive industries. Newly established environmental justice organizations challenged a waste-incinerator project, continued logging within Navajo forests, and coalmining.

The environmental movement at this time was framed in opposition to the development approach that the tribal government had relied on for many years. Now these projects were understood as unsustainable. Members of this movement simply opposed destructive development projects and called for a return to traditional forms of living instead.

But after two decades of neoliberalism on the Navajo Nation, new and emergent environmental justice organizations challenged extractive industries here in a fundamentally new way. They started to offer alternative development schemes aiming to fit within the logic of neoliberalism, instead of simply opposing existing approaches. In a larger sense this is because neoliberalism had become hegemonic in policy circles by this time. But this strategy was primarily a response to the embedded nature of resource extraction economies on the reservation. When environmental justice organizations worked in opposition to resource extraction projects, they were met with vitriolic denunciations from people who worked within these industries.

Because members of environmental justice organizations were seen as directly challenging the livelihoods of people

employed in these places, they had to offer something more than a permanent end to their jobs—they had to offer development alternatives. In an effort to take these peoples' concerns into consideration, environmental justice organizations tried to identify and propose types of work and activities that could replace environmentally damaging industries such as mining and coal-fired power generation.

Environmental justice groups have argued that the Navajo Nation should move away from coalmining and mineral extraction as sources of revenues and support small-scale businesses instead, drawing upon popular development rhetoric within this neoliberal milieu. They envision subsidies for small-scale business development such as solar installations or traditional forms of agriculture.

Although perhaps more sustainable in some ways than mining or logging, the neoliberal strategy fundamentally changes the intimate relationship Navajo people have with the items they produce and consume. In effect it extends capitalist processes further into reservation lands. Neoliberalism takes things that have been somewhat protected, made insular from capitalism, and brings them into capitalist processes. Capitalism erodes and upends subsistence practices, and subsumes them to its dehumanizing logic.

This presents us with a conundrum. Are indigenous nations faced with only the two choices that have been offered to us, either continuation of environmentally destructive industrial development or capitalist “sustainable” enterprises? Or is there a way we can move away from both forms of capitalism? Perhaps the answer points to a loose form of socialism—designed to protect the cultural autonomy of many Navajos in their subsistence practices, but also taking into account the reality of the Navajo Nation as a society produced out of many generations of self-government and large-scale economic development. In other words, does the socially embedded scale at which capitalist development has occurred so far across reservation lands lend itself to socialist alternatives?

Decolonization, self-determination, and “loose socialism”

Anthropologist Anna Tsing writes about the interactions between indigenous peoples and processes of global capitalism as a form of “friction,” producing movement, action, and effect. In the case of the Navajo Nation, the friction between the coal industry and environmental organizations exposes the contradictions of both within the space of global capitalism during this era of neoliberalism.

Today we have to understand how neoliberalism affects tribal communities, but also understand there is opportunity in it for articulating a socialist alternative. In a statement we circulated among Indigenous activists in the United States, arguing for a perspective and strategy of Indigenous socialism, we stated:

Indigenous peoples have well developed alternative ideas of social orders that can be incorporated into modern governments. Our historic forms of governance were tied to spiritual traditions and simpler subsistence practices but have broader applicability. To be responsive to the larger scale of political and economic activities, we take from western theoretical frameworks and models what we might find appropriate and applicable to our specific contexts and the cultural values Indigenous peoples hold. Given what we know of historic Indigenous social and political structures, we can preliminarily suggest that socialism is a better cultural fit for modern Indigenous political institutions.

What is more, the premises on which Marxism are built are consistent with Indigenous peoples' historic experiences. Therefore, because we accept that we must adopt political and economic theories of governance from the west alongside our own, historic traditions; and because we realize on preliminary analysis that socialism is more

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consistent with our values and past practices, we can conclude that we should develop texts and theories of governance and economic development that bridge Indigenous perspectives with ideological foundations of Marxism and socialism, or what some today are calling communism.

Although there is a lot of “friction” or contradiction between, the different economic orientations and scales of development of many tribal communities organized into governments, the seeds for a loose form of socialism are actually contained within the neoliberal alternatives described above. By “loose,” we mean flexible, contingent, adjusted to circumstance, and non-dogmatic. Although there is an immediate contradiction in the existing approach of environmental justice organizations, these things could end up much differently than they began.

With a little critique, prodding, and self-awareness, indigenous programs crafted in the spirit of sustainability, but harnessing the productive systems that have been forged in the history of capitalist development, can also be shaped into a unique form of socialist relations within tribal peoples that prevents the worst impacts of capitalism.

We are all well aware that global capitalism has brought us to the brink of planetary disaster, But indigenous forms of resistance provide for us an opportunity to think about new forms of socialism that emphasize existing relationships tribal people have with one another, and have historically had, in their subsistence ways of life. There are more specific ways we can describe the possibilities of socialism on the Navajo Nation. This requires that we think optimistically about the potential role that indigenous peoples can play in envisioning truly sustainable alternatives to capitalism.