

From Standing Rock to Resistance in Context: Towards Anarchism against Settler Colonialism

Written by Adam Lewis

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ADAM LEWIS, FEB 1 2017

The direct action at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline has captured a wide range of political imaginations under the #NODAPL banner. People from over 100 Indigenous nations, as well as non-Indigenous/settler allies/accomplices, have travelled to the site where the US Army Corps of Engineers has attempted to place the pipeline under the Mni Sose (Missouri River), and right through Oceti Sakowin (The Great Sioux Nation lands). The resistance at Standing Rock has included a range of camps and tactics, as well as heavy handed police/security responses. Though the Army Corps of Engineers decided to withhold the easement permit for the last stage of the pipeline in December 2016, pending an environmental assessment, few see this as the end of the resistance. Many pointed out that this is not a commitment to stop the pipeline as a whole, but rather an attempt to seek out other means of ensuring its completion. Donald Trump recently signed executive orders to revive both the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipeline projects, prompting renewed calls for resistance.

This article asks how events like the resistance at Standing Rock relate to broader struggles of Indigenous autonomy and decolonization, and how such events are seen by, and interact with, radical anarchist politics. I consider how an anti-colonial perspective within anarchism could be further developed in particular local contexts with specific reference to structures of settler colonialism and ongoing histories of Indigenous resistance. This article details and expands upon some of my previous work on anarchism and its relationship to settler colonialism and Indigenous struggles (see Lewis 2016a, 2016b, 2015).

By 'anarchist' I mean those people, theories and movements committed to the destruction of the state, capitalism and all forms of oppression. Anarchist politics seeks to end domination through direct action and militant or revolutionary struggle, while also working to 'build a new world in the shell of the old' here and now. Anarchists aspire to create anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical and direct-democratic forms of relating. Anarchism as a movement began in late 1800s Europe, but has since spread and developed through a range of actors, spawning a variety of tendencies and perspectives around the globe (for a good introduction to anarchism see Milstein, 2010, also Dixon 2014). For my purposes here, I speak to those movements who call the settler states of Canada or the United States home, and who tend to be dominated by non-Indigenous peoples, and often white settlers.

I begin first by laying out the settler colonial context that is crucial for understanding all struggles in North America. I then move to a discussion of how anarchists, and all those interested in transformative radical futures more broadly, can incorporate such a context into their own resistance and put the creation of alternatives into conversation with projects of Indigenous resurgence and decolonization. How can radical futures be imagined given the context of both continued structures of settler colonialism, as well as Indigenous resurgence that is intimately and directly tied up in relationships to land?

Settler colonialism can generally be defined, following those such as Patrick Wolfe (1999, 2006) and Lorenzo Veracini (2010), as a form of colonialism where newcomers travel to new lands with the intent to stay and replicate the societies they left. In this sense, settlers come to new lands with the express purpose of taking them for themselves via the dispossession and ultimately the disappearance of Indigenous peoples. As Arvin, Tuck and Morrill (2013, 12) argue:

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Settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formulation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous that are there. Within settler colonialism, it is exploitation of land that yields supreme value. In order for settlers to usurp the land and extract its value, Indigenous peoples must be destroyed, removed and made into ghosts.

They suggest further that settler colonialism also importantly intersects with structures of heteropatriarchy that have mobilized gendered violence and forced gender binaries on Indigenous communities. In the context of Canada and the United States this has been the process of settlement and it is fundamental to the context of resistance. This is not to say that Canada and the US do not have their own particular contexts, as the ways in which settler colonial governments have engaged with Indigenous peoples have been different and complex, but an underlying structure of settler colonial violence is shared.

Settler colonialism is one of the founding logics in both Canada and the United States (or a key pillar upholding white supremacy according to Andrea Smith [2006], alongside capitalism/slavery and orientalism/war). As I have argued, following the work of Joel Olson (2009) on white supremacy, settler colonialism can be understood as 'strategically central' to the context of resistance in Canada and the US (Lewis, 2015). As Coulthard reminds us, any future visions of decolonization on Indigenous lands "must account for the complex ways that capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the state interact with one another to form the constellation of power relations that sustain colonial patterns of behavior, structures, and relationships." This calls for an analysis of settler colonialism alongside and in intersection with all forms of oppression and domination and how they operate in particular contexts.

Here is where more recent readings of Marx's primitive accumulation can be quite useful (see also Coulthard, 2014). Primitive accumulation links capitalist expansion in settler colonial states directly to the dispossession of Indigenous lands. Capitalism continually seeks new areas to move into to promote expansion. As Coulthard points out, processes of accumulation are not reducible to the rise of capitalism at a particular time, but continue in order to expand the reach of capitalist accumulation into new areas.

In Canada and the US, where much of the land has already been taken via the multiple forms of transfer Veracini (2010) mentions, including open warfare, forced removal, treaty or land claims settlements (part of what Peter Kulchyski has called the 'violence of the letter' of legal and political processes of the state), Indigenous territories have been and continue to be targeted as potential spaces for increased capitalist accumulation. In particular, such lands are desired for the continuation of Canada's resource extractive industries, which increasingly include the expansion of pipeline and transportation infrastructures. "Indigenous peoples are primarily viewed and treated as physical obstacles standing in the way of resource capital," Pflug-Back and Kesīqnaeh note, "rather than as a source of exploitable labour, they are obstacles to be removed through violence, assimilation, criminalization, and other genocidal measures." The events at Standing Rock make this all the more clear. Settler colonialism and capitalism need to be seen as crucial structures if we are to understand processes of disposition in both the US and Canadian contexts.

This is an important point, in that we must refuse to see colonialism as a finished project. As Patrick Wolfe (1999, see also 2006) suggests, settler colonialism is a structure rather than an event. It is insufficient to look to specific points of contact as the moments from which settler colonialism or the suppression and domination of particular Indigenous nations emerge. Settler colonialism is ongoing and continues to play into the very fabric of contemporary society, and what this means for resistance becomes a crucial question for anarchists and all those who seek more radical liberatory visions of the future.

This is not to say that anarchists and other social movement radicals do not and have not declared their opposition to colonialism. As Chris Dixon (2014, 51) argues, this is a key point of influence for the broad spectrum of anti-authoritarian movements in North America. The difficulty, he argues, is that "colonial relations are still heavily obscured in the United States and, as a result, anti-colonial struggle remains fairly abstract for most non-Indigenous anti-authoritarians" (although this is less the case in Canada given more recent anti-Olympic and Idle No More influences). Colonialism is often included in a long list of things to be opposed but rarely goes beyond a simple declaration of opposition towards further action.

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Decolonization (or professed anti-colonialism) is not a metaphor, or a stand-in for general possibilities of resistance or social movement struggle (Tuck and Yang, 2012), but a fundamental reorientation of struggle into context in direct relation with Indigenous resurgence and resistance. This is the reorientation that all social movements must make.

Crucially, despite the structures of settler colonialism, a legacy of 500 years of Indigenous resistance continues (a key text on this account is Gord Hill's *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*). As Julian Brave NoiseCat and Anne Spice note this has well been the case at Standing Rock from the Battle of the Greasy Grass in 1876 to the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. Events like Standing Rock offer a glimpse of the ongoing efforts that are continually at play. In the words of Kelly Hayes, one of the many organizers involved in supporting the Standing Rock Resistance: "We are not simply here when you see us."

Indigenous peoples in particular point to a number of ways that radical future visions can be articulated. Such a resurgent Indigenous politics is explicitly embedded in the land that such nations call home. As Glen Coulthard argues: "Land is a relationship based on the obligations we have to other people and the other-than-human relations that constitute the land itself... I refer to this ethical orientation to land and others as 'grounded normativity' and it has served as the framework for many of our communities' struggles for self-determination." This is a crucial difference for those who have come to these lands more recently and who lack such connections. The context of Indigenous life and resistance is land.

The settler colonial state dictates the terms of how settlers and other newcomers arrive on these lands and how they ultimately engage in life upon them. There is a crucial distinction between Indigenous peoples as rooted in particular contexts and others who have come to these lands much later. For a more detailed discussion of the particularities and complexities of settler identity see Lowman and Barker (2015) and Tuck and Yang (2012). Anarchists and other radicals must consider the context of Indigenous connections to lands that are explicitly tied to (past/present/future) visions and governance processes before seeking to create new possibilities for future societies, no matter how radical.

In this sense it is a massive oversight for anarchist and other radical forms of prefiguration to be imagined without direct reference to the context of settler colonialism (I take this up in more detail in Lewis, 2016a, 2016b). As Taiaiake Alfred (2010) and Leanne Simpson (2011) suggest, Indigenous visions of alternative societies are alive and well. This imagination is embodied in community resurgence, but also larger points of confrontation like Standing Rock or the Idle No More Movement (See Coulthard, 2014, on INM specifically). In this sense it is crucial that anarchists and other social movement actors look to Indigenous nations' processes of governance and ways of relating to one another. It is Indigenous nations who must lead the way. Doing otherwise or creating a specific blueprint for a future society that comes from a settler standpoint does little more than re-entrench hierarchical forms of settler colonial domination over Indigenous nations.

These moments of contestation like the camps at Standing Rock, or in the Mohawk resistance at Kanehsatake in 1990, or in the Unis'tot'en camp that is continually resisting pipeline encroachment into territory in so-called British Columbia, all represent both direct action against further settler colonial imposition but also examples of alternative living, alternative governance and alternative forms of relation. These are moments that speak to the potential of Indigenous nations leading struggles against settler colonialism and towards radical future societies. These examples are part of a long tradition of continued resistance against settler colonialism, the state and capitalism.

Now it must be stated that each one of these examples comes with a large degree of complexity. With any experiment in alternative futures, there are many factors at play, and in the case of Standing Rock, there are many different actors involved. There is a grand diversity of perspectives on how resistance should move forward and what types of politics should be espoused. For example, there is a distinction between grassroots struggles linked to communities working towards resurgence and decolonization and efforts that have a more liberal form of engagement with corporations, the state or the non-profit industrial complex. This does not mean that non-Indigenous peoples should pass judgement over who are the more or less radical elements in a particular struggle, but we need to be clear about who we aim to support, and who we desire to be accomplices with in the creation of a new world. At Standing Rock, the Red Warrior Camp, in their late December communique, raised this precise point. They suggest

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they identify with direct action grassroots people on the ground maintaining a commitment to a diversity of tactics that includes militant forms of confrontation. As a result of what they refer to as 'peace policing', they have decided to change their engagement with the struggle. So anarchists, and indeed all non-Indigenous peoples, need to be clear about how their politics fit into these particular struggles as movements with anti-capitalist, anti-state and anti-authoritarian politics, and how they will support such struggles.

Anarchists also need to go beyond seeking to imagine how other struggles might relate to their politics, eschewing a centralization of anarchist politics and principles as a reference point with which to measure other struggles. Anarchism, after all, has a strong Eurocentric history that, while not exclusive, is still a major influence over the strongholds of anarchism in Western Europe and North America, and must itself be challenged if it is to move towards greater anti-colonial possibilities (Sloan-Morgan, 2016). Anarchists might consider how their politics need to develop and change depending on the particular context. This might specifically be the case within anarchist approaches to geography, which have the potential to contribute directly to anti-colonial struggles (on this point see Sloan-Morgan, 2016 and Lewis, 2016a).

The case of the Occupy Movement brings forth some crucial lessons on this account. While Occupy was not explicitly anarchist per se, it did have a significant anarchist core politics, according to Graeber. This includes the key element of desiring to create another world through prefigurative politics, building a future here and now, refusing to collaborate with state and capitalist processes, and seeking to pursue non-hierarchical forms of organization (see also Bray, 2013). Despite the radical potentials of such resistance and experimentation, some note Occupy's settler colonial implications (Grande, 2013; Barker, 2012).

As John Paul Montano explains, with regard to occupy and Indigenous lands:

I had hoped that you would address the centuries-long history that we indigenous peoples of this continent have endured being subject to the countless '-isms' of do-gooders claiming to be building a "more just society," a "better world," a "land of freedom" on top of our indigenous societies, on our indigenous lands, while destroying and/or ignoring our ways of life. I had hoped that you would acknowledge that, since you are settlers on indigenous land, you need and want our indigenous consent to your building anything on our land – never mind an entire society.

For example the name 'Occupy' itself, upholding the politics of occupation without context, does little more than reinscribe settler colonialism while rendering anti-capitalist politics effectively "pro-colonial" (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 23; see also Grande, 2013). By this I mean the exclusion of many Indigenous voices from the encampments, frustrating debates over the colonial politics of the movement and a refusal in many places to situate resistance alongside a decolonial analysis, meant that anti-colonial politics were often pushed aside in favor of much more broadly defined general opposition to the economic order.

The '99% vs 1%' slogan is indicative of this, with broader exclusion taking precedent over a more complex, intersectional view of identities. As Tuck and Yang (2012, 23) suggest "the '99%' is invoked as a deserving supermajority, in contrast to the unearned wealth of the '1%'. It renders Indigenous peoples (a 0.9% 'super minority') completely invisible and absorbed, just an asterisk to be subsumed into the legion of occupiers."

While the experimental and prefigurative aims and practices of events like Occupy are needed to give participants a sense of creating a new world through alternative institutions (like 'people's libraries' or directly democratic general assemblies), they are often framed as coming from the starting point of a blank slate. They also do not necessarily imagine a new world outside of the context of settler colonial nation states themselves, as Barker (2012, 3) points out. They may be anti-capitalist, or radical in tone, but the scope of their imaginations is often limited.

For anarchists this may be slightly different, as the state is a consistent target of opposition and resistance. Even so, such prefiguring alternatives come into conflict with settler colonial realities. Seeking to destroy and build alternatives to the state and capitalism without direct attention to histories of colonialism does little more than recreate a settler colonial dynamic of terra nullius ('empty land'). They become radical experiments on lands emptied of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous nations and Indigenous histories. As I noted above, this is the foremost goal of settler

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colonialism, to make the reality of Indigeneity disappear for uncontested settlement. Creating radical visions on land where Indigenous nations have a specific relationship they are resurging, rebuilding and reinterpreting will do little more than impose a settler will and a set of ideas of what is radical and necessary for the future, while displacing communities with long-standing relationships to these lands and their own visions and alternatives. As Day (2010, 268) cautions, "it would appear that the resurgence of settler autonomy, our escape from the tyrannies we have foisted on ourselves, once again can only come on the backs of Indigenous peoples."

In the case of Standing Rock, much of the work and imagination must defer explicitly to the Great Sioux Nation upon whose land participants were on. Now this becomes difficult, as I suggested above, given the diversity of actors involved. Who would we defer to and what would such a process look like? Practically, what would that mean? These are difficult questions but ones I think we must raise if we want to properly contextualise our resistance. We need to talk about what new relationships look like beyond settler colonial dynamics that so often exclude and trample over Indigenous nations, their sovereignty and their explicit connections to their lands. How can we as anarchists, as Sloan-Morgan argues, understand the "nuances of place specific histories and colonial processes."

One option is to think about struggles like Standing Rock that exist in our own contexts. As Kelly Hayes suggests: "We don't need to be able to get to Standing Rock in order to be a part of the front line, as we think about it, because we can create front lines in cities around the country." This might be considered when supporting Standing Rock directly, but also in a much more expansive sense of supporting Indigenous struggles of resistance more broadly. There is no question that these larger points of confrontation need to be supported whether with funds, physical bodies, or solidarity action. Support sustains struggles and helps produce real material consequences and impacts. Movements need numbers in order to push back against institutionalized forms of power. At the same time, if we only concentrate on struggles from afar we miss out on the less high profile, more localized struggles close to our own communities.

As many Indigenous commentators continue to point out, resistance against colonialism has been ongoing for over 500 years and this will look different in different places. Not every struggle will be focused on direct action and the reoccupation of traditional lands. At every moment revitalization and resurgence of culture, language, governance, and forms of relating are also crucially important. Therefore, if we want to move towards radical futures and imagine possible places for non-Indigenous peoples on Indigenous territories, we need to find those people working on resurgence and prefiguring futures on the lands upon which we live, work and continually struggle in our many different ways.

In short, anarchists need to find and become accomplices with the struggles where they live. Specifically, this must include working with Indigenous peoples and communities who are already engaged in resistance to capitalism, colonialism and the state, and who are reimagining and reinvigorating community-based resurgence connected to land. Non-Indigenous peoples need to carefully consider their relations to lands and the other communities who also articulate relations to such lands. What are the implications for struggle? How does this change the way movements go about actualizing solidarity, complicity and support? What does this look like in different contexts? Are their similarities and differences or lessons to be learned that might apply elsewhere? I raise these questions as part of a continuing conversation that needs to occur within anarchism and within social movements seeking a better world more broadly. How can resisting in context, and against settler colonialism that is intimately connected to capitalism and the state, strengthen social movements and their ability to create radical futures here and now?

As Glen Coulthard argues: "For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die. And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to it." Such is the difficult task ahead for anarchists and all social movements struggling in the context of settler colonialism, and for Indigenous nations who are actively undertaking the creation of decolonizing alternatives to it.

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