

Indigenous Perspectives on International Relations Theory

Written by Jeff Cortassel and Marc Woons

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JEFF CORNTASSEL AND MARC WOONS, JAN 23 2018

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Being Indigenous is about honouring and renewing complex relationships between humans and also with the natural world. The United Nations offers a multifaceted working definition of what it means to be a member of one of the thousands of Indigenous nations living around the world. It includes factors like self-identification, historical continuity and a place-based existence that links to a particular territory. The definition also speaks to distinct governance systems, languages, historical experiences, cultures and ways of knowing. Importantly, it additionally describes communities that seek to maintain their territories and assert themselves as distinct peoples – despite their existence within a state (usually against their wishes). States, on the other hand are constructed around different principles of territorial sovereignty and legally recognised governmental systems and have historically sought to control, coerce, and even eliminate Indigenous peoples from the landscape. The existing, dominant framework of inter-state relations roots itself in state sovereignty. From an Indigenous perspective this has been established through violence, broken treaties and other unjust assertions of power over Indigenous peoples and their lands. This undermines, downplays, excludes and ultimately provokes Indigenous worldviews and counter-arguments that seek to push the state-centric model beyond its narrow confines. By exploring Indigenous perspectives and complex relationships we can more clearly see the problems that come from the many assumptions at the heart of International Relations and its family of theories.

The basics of Indigenous perspectives

The current dominant global political and legal order, invented in Europe, is state-centric and has since spread everywhere to create the discrete borders that mark the geopolitical world map most use today. Putting an end to decades of brutal violence and endemic conflict throughout Europe, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia cemented the totalising and enduring notion of state sovereignty. Europe’s response to anarchy, conflict and disorder among nations (or peoples) was thus the creation of a system of inter-state relations bolstered by states mutually recognising one another’s sovereign authority. Indigenous understandings of international relations differ from inter-state approaches, particularly when it comes to the ways that Indigenous peoples renew and act on their sacred commitments and interdependencies with the natural world. Assertions of Indigenous resurgence, which entails reclaiming and regenerating relationships with lands, cultures and communities, promote positive, alternative visions of the international that challenge the dominant inter-state model.

The concept of state sovereignty fuelled modern state-building strategies and, almost without exception, led to the destruction of Indigenous nations. Each state tries to build a vision of a common people sharing a culture, values, history, language, currency (and so on) through education, military conquest and other state-driven initiatives. This is often called a national identity, and is associated with ideas like patriotism and nationalism. Indigenous encounters with European empires saw them time and again face a stark choice (if the choice was even put to them at all): assimilate to the new settler colonial order being imposed over them and their lands or face dislocation – even genocide. As George Manuel and Michael Posluns (1974, 60) point out, the colonial system is always a way of

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gaining control over another people for the sake of what the colonial power has determined to be 'the common good.' People can only become convinced of the common good when their own capacity to imagine ways in which they can govern themselves has been destroyed.

Speaking to Indigenous battles over state-building efforts that alienate Indigenous peoples from their lands and resources, Manuela Picq (2015) suggests that Indigenous perspectives offer three specific challenges to the state-centric perspective. First, they challenge the state's ultimate authority by asserting their authority over their nations, lands/waters, and the natural world. Second, they expose the colonial foundations of the state-centric system by highlighting Indigenous views that both challenge and sit outside the dominant system. In other words, states as we know them owe their existence to processes of colonisation and settlement rooted in cultural imperialism, violence, destruction, genocide and ultimately the eradication of Indigenous identities and relationships to the land if not the eradication of the peoples themselves. Third, Indigenous peoples' worldviews and practices challenge us to imagine what it might be like to share power within and think beyond state borders and the prevailing global state system.

The principle of self-determination has provided stateless Indigenous nations with ways to attempt to (re)assert and (re)claim their authority. Self-determination provides an avenue for Indigenous peoples to create political entities that can be recognised by the international community. The process is based on the idea that people should be free to form their own governments and control their own affairs – something central to the ethics and legality underpinning the United Nations. Indigenous claims of this nature have gained significant traction over the past century, especially post-1945 when decolonisation became a key international process. The sources of self-determining authority are admittedly a source of contention. For Indigenous nations it emanates from complex relationships with their homelands, waters, sacred living histories, animal nations, plant nations, ceremonies, languages and the natural world. The sources of self-determining authority for states are much different, originating from colonial policies. For instance, the Doctrine of Discovery, dating back to the fifteenth century, espouses that land occupied by non-Christians could be legally 'discovered' and claimed as territory owned by the Crown. Other invented political and legal constructs have also become embedded within state legal histories and practices, shaping international practices that deny alternative Indigenous conceptions of relations between nations.

One example of the tension between state sovereignty and Indigenous self-determination can be seen in the story of Cayuga chief Deskaheh's European visit, first to the United Kingdom in 1921 and then to the League of Nations in 1923. In his capacity as the Speaker of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, he felt compelled to make the long trans-Atlantic journey as conflicts between the Haudenosaunee and Canadian peoples had reached an impasse. He felt it unjust that his people were being imprisoned for protesting the Canadian state's imposition of its self-declared sovereignty over their lands, claiming it to be tantamount to an invasion and stating that 'we are determined to live the free people that we were born' (League of Nations 1923, 3). The lands were, and still are, subject to treaties expressing an alternative vision of shared authority over shared lands and mutual respect between peoples as equal nations cooperatively governing the same territory – an idea that is largely antithetical to the Westphalian vision of exclusive territorial authority by one people. However, Chief Deskaheh's appeals fell on deaf ears in both London and Geneva as the states concerned refused to interfere in the domestic affairs of one of their peers, namely Canada (Corntassel 2008). He eventually left Europe empty-handed, dying soon after in 1925 in New York state, exiled from his homeland that had by then been all but overrun by the Canadian settler state.

Some progress has been made since Chief Deskaheh's time and now appears in prominent places. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) urges states to recognise that 'Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development' (United Nations General Assembly 2007: 3). There is also momentum within the United Nations to support what many consider the heart of self-determination – namely, an Indigenous veto over all matters affecting them, their communities and their territories. On the surface, the Declaration seems to secure for Indigenous nations powers previously extended only to states. As White Face (2013) points out, conspiring states refused to adopt it until it included limiting language that eventually made its way into Article 46, which states that 'nothing in this declaration may be interpreted ... or construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent states' (United Nations General Assembly 2007: 14). Article 46 can be seen as

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perpetuating the above-mentioned Doctrine of Discovery or at least its impacts despite its formal repudiation in 2012. Unfortunately, the legal fictions of the Doctrine of Discovery via Article 46 of the UNDRIP as well as other inter-state legal instruments continue to impact Indigenous nations in profound and destructive ways that undermine their self-determining authority (Miller et al. 2010; Special Rapporteur 2010).

Indigenous self-determination should not be confused with the self-determination efforts of non-state nations like Québec, Catalonia, Palestine or Kurdistan. Hoping to achieve the successes of East Timor or South Sudan, these national movements desire a state of their own so that they can be included as fully-fledged members within the inter-state system as it currently exists. Indigenous self-determination movements, on the other hand, mount a more robust and fundamental challenge to the system itself. Even if most Indigenous nations do not seek its wholesale elimination, they strive for ways of being included on their own terms that tend to reject the Westphalian idea of state sovereignty. Given that there are approximately 5,000 Indigenous nations throughout the world, there are many ways of asserting self-determining authority. Many Indigenous alternatives even reject the very idea that there should be a robust set of overarching principles that govern relations between peoples, arguing that we should be tolerant of a plurality of approaches to promoting peace among peoples and with the environments that sustain us.

Indigenous perspectives and the Buffalo Treaty

There is an emerging scholarship on Indigenous international relations that challenges state-centric expressions of sovereignty and self-determination. As Anishinaabe scholar Hayden King (2015, 181) states, 'in our political worldviews the state and sovereignty melt away'. Indigenous nations have expressed solidarity with one another through the establishment of new confederacies, treaties and agreements that promote peace, friendship and new strategic alliances. Indigenous international relations are enduring and sacred, and making treaties with foreign countries has not prevented Indigenous nations from continuing their own diplomatic relations with one another. For example, the Treaty of Peace, Respect, and Responsibility between the Heiltsuk Nation and the Haida Nation (Crist 2014) was the first peace treaty between these two nations since the 1850s and was premised on the assumption that 'there are greater troubles facing our lands and waters and depletion of resources generated from forces outside of our nations'. The Treaty was enacted between the two Indigenous nations through a potlatch ceremony and sought to challenge a common threat posed by the state-sanctioned commercial herring fishery in Heiltsuk waters.

In 2014, another historic treaty was initiated between Indigenous nations living along the medicine line (the United States-Canada border). Iiniwa, which is the Blackfoot name for bison, have a deep, longstanding relationship with the land, people and cultural practices of prairie ecosystems. When discussing the role of the bison on their homelands, Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2014) pointed out that

[a]cting as a natural bio-engineer in prairie landscapes, they shaped plant communities, transported and recycled nutrients, created habitat variability that benefited grassland birds, insects and small mammals, and provided abundant food resources for grizzly bears, wolves and humans.

Unfortunately, the widespread slaughter of bison in the nineteenth century led to the deterioration of the prairie ecosystems and with this the health and wellbeing of Blackfoot people. The decimation of the bison also impacted the cultural practices of the region's Indigenous peoples, which has prompted the need for community-led action to restore the iiniwa to Indigenous homelands.

On 23 September 2014, eight Indigenous nations (the Blackfoot Nation, Blood Tribe, Siksika Nation, Piikani Nation, the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes of Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of Fort Peck Indian Reservation, the Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Indian Reservation, and the Tsuu T'ina Nation) gathered in Blackfoot territory near Browning, Montana to sign the historic Buffalo Treaty. It involved Indigenous nations on both sides of the medicine line and called for the return of iiniwa to the prairie ecosystems. Given that it was the first cross-border Indigenous treaty signed in over 150 years, the Buffalo Treaty was also a way of renewing and regenerating old alliances. It outlined several community-led goals, including engaging tribes and First Nations in continuing dialogue on iiniwa conservation; uniting the political power of the tribes and First Nations of the Northern Great Plains; advancing an international call for the restoration of the iiniwa;

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engaging youth in the treaty process and strengthening and renewing ancient cultural and spiritual relationships with iiniwa and grasslands in the Northern Great Plains.

As an example of Indigenous international relations, the above-mentioned treaty provisions demonstrate the sacred nature of treaty-making as a way for Indigenous nations 'to extend their relationships of connection to all of the different peoples of the world' (Williams 1997, 50). In addition to having Indigenous nations as signatories, the Buffalo Treaty also outlines a vision for the involvement of federal, state and provincial governments, as well as farmers, ranchers and conservation groups in the restoration of iiniwa to Indigenous homelands. As individual Indigenous nations, these communities would have a limited ability to promote iiniwa restoration. However, with a unified vision, they collectively exerted their self-determining authority to facilitate the return of iiniwa to some 6.3 million acres of their homelands.

The Buffalo Treaty is also a living document that requires periodic renewal and re-interpretation. Two years after the Treaty was signed, the number of signatories had gone from eight to 21. In September 2016, signatories held a pipe ceremony in Banff National Park to honour the planned reintroduction of sixteen iiniwa to the area. In addition to restoring the buffalo population, signatories called on the Government of Alberta in Canada to change the name of Tunnel Mountain in Banff to Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain. The vision for the regeneration and perpetuation of iiniwa also entails changing the landscape to reflect the places where the iiniwa live. New forms of Indigenous treaty-making reflect the complex diplomacies and spiritual re-awakenings that constitute Indigenous inter-national relations.

Conclusion

A power imbalance, and differences in worldviews, between states and Indigenous nations remains in our international system. Developments and critiques within the discipline of IR, and how it is theorised, highlight the struggle of Indigenous peoples to maintain their place-based existence so that their lands, cultures, communities and relationships will flourish for generations to come. Indigenous understandings of international relations come in many forms, whether through reinvigorating treaties with the natural world, (re)establishing alliances between Indigenous peoples or Indigenous advocacy in diplomatic activities within global forums. These efforts challenge the dominant state-centric system to include their different ways of understanding and structuring relations not just between peoples, but with the natural world and the planet. More specifically, they challenge the Westphalian notion of ultimate state sovereignty and seek ways of restoring self-determining authority regarding their relationships to their homelands and nations.

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About the author:

Jeff Corntassel is an Associate Professor and Director of Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria, Canada. He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation.

Marc Woons is a Doctoral Fellow with the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen (Research Foundation – Flanders) and the Research in Political Philosophy Leuven (RIPPLE) Institute at the University of Leuven in Belgium.

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