

Decolonizing Borders

Written by Liam Midzain-Gobin

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LIAM MIDZAIN-GOBIN, JAN 12 2019

This past week saw the Royal Canadian Mounted Police break down a checkpoint on the territory of the Gidimt'en clan of the Wet'suwet'en nation in northern British Columbia, Canada, while arresting many of those maintaining the checkpoint. The RCMP forcibly upheld a court injunction, allowing the construction of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline opposed by the community. This opposition has resulted in a longstanding decolonial action camp, the Unist'ot'en Action Camp, being set up in 2010 by members of the community. Originally intended to oppose the construction of this and other LNG pipelines across their territory, the Camp now focuses on decolonial education and healing within the community. The organizers cite the 1997 ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada in the Delgamuuk case as recognition by Canada of their traditional authority. The case found that the Wet'suwet'en never surrendered their lands, and thus hold title to them. The breaching of the checkpoint on Gidimt'en territory – described before it happened as a potential “act of war” by organizers – as well as the other, much-publicized checkpoint at the main Camp itself, both represent a puzzle for scholars of International Relations (IR). That is, they are spoken about as concrete manifestations of the borders of Wet'suwet'en territory intended to maintain Wet'suwet'en sovereignty over their lands.

One of the core assumptions of modern politics is that we live within a system of independent, sovereign nation states. IR has long understood this, and has understood these states to be organized through the imposition and operation of borders, which are used by states as a tool to establish the inside/outside dichotomy that produces sovereign authority (Agnew, 1994). Indeed, this has been central to the discipline's understanding of itself, in that sovereign authority exists *within* the borders of a state, with anarchy reigning outside of it. This inter-state system as a particular form of organizing authority is especially important for contemporary settler colonial states such as Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, Canada and the United States. Indeed, this distribution of authority in the world has allowed these settler states to establish their own legitimacy through the imposition of state borders on top of the existing national boundaries maintained by Indigenous nations. What I aim to do here is trouble the way in which we accept the sovereign authority produced by the inter-state system at face value, using the Camp as an example of Indigenous nations complicating this view. Taking up more recent understandings of borders as a productive tool, I argue that in the case of what is today Canada,^[i] instead of reifying settler coloniality, Indigenous communities are using borders (and bordering practices more broadly) to deconstruct norms of settler sovereignty and claims to authority. In this way, instead of being tools used in service of building a colonial state, borders are being used to create the kind of decolonial futures imagined by Indigenous theorists, and which rest on a refusal of contemporary settler coloniality instead of an acceptance of it.

Producing Meaning

While I spoke of borders as productive – and not simply a product – of settler coloniality above, my engagement with them here is on the ontological level. That is, following Salter (2012: 737) I understand borders as “a way of structuring the condition of possibility for authority at all” and not merely reflective of an existing spatial organization of power. As we read them today, borders have made possible the organization of the world into the separate, independent states we understand as the container for a particular kind of modern politics, including in the settler world analyzed here. Indeed, we would have no North America, let alone distinct settler states of Canada, the United States of America and Mexico if Turtle Island had not been colonized by Europeans who deliberately sought to undo Indigenous political organization. This is done in part through traditional means of border control, or a sovereign

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enactment of authority to determine who and what is allowed inside the borders of a state. More applicable here though is an understanding of “borders as diffuse and proliferating social spaces, enacted well beyond the territorial line” (Frowd 2014: 227). In this reading, borders are more than simply a line on the ground demarcating which governments have authority over which territory, but as ‘sites of development’ (Frowd, 2014) productive of society itself (Paasi, 1998).

As tools used to produce the social life of a nation, borders are effective at constructing an ‘us’ on the inside, which is bound together through a collective narrative to the exclusion of ‘them’ outside. We may or may not hold kin relationships with those outside of our national collective, but the ‘us’ and ‘them’ of modern sovereignty means that our identities and responsibilities are given meaning through nationalistic, state-based narratives (Paasi, 1998). If we take seriously Salter’s (2012) concept of the suture to describe the effects of the border, we can see the way that subjects are ‘stitched in’ to the national narrative written by the state. This framing is important in that it extends the meaning of borders well past their physical existence as lines on the ground, and into the realm of social practice constitutive of the nation itself. It also helps to us understand the way that Indigenous peoples and communities have been brought into the folds of state sovereignty. This takes place not only in having contemporary state borders built on top of existing national boundaries, but also in using internal bordering practices such as identity cards and travel passes to forcibly localize Indigenous peoples to specific territories – primarily First Nation reserves in the case of Canada – defined by the settler state.

This move opens the legal space for the rest of the territory to be imagined as Canadian (Morgensen, 2011; Rifkin, 2009). Indigenous peoples and territory continue to exist as ‘peculiar’ within settler legal systems (Rifkin, 2009) in that they both a part of settler sovereignty, but apart from the settler political imaginary. This allows for what Borrows (1999) has called the ‘alchemy’ required to assume the unproblematic existence of liberal democratic sovereignty within colonial borders. What we see then is that borders as they are traditionally read in IR serve to enable Indigenous dispossession, as colonial borders organize political authority through settler sovereignty, rather than the sovereign authority of Indigenous nations whose territories are bisected and boundaries ignored through the imposition of settler borders.

Making Canada

If borders are used to delimit not only the territory over which the settler state has authority, but also to bring to life a settler population, where do Indigenous peoples exist within this? The short answer is that Indigenous peoples belong either on the territory the government has ‘set aside’ for them, or they can be just like any other Canadian outside of those lands. This creates a ‘relationship of ban’ (Rifkin, 2009) wherein Indigenous peoples are localized to the spaces defined for them by the settler state, which are then stitched into settler coloniality through the settler legal apparatus. Described as ‘lawfare’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2007), national governance philosophies, mechanisms and institutions are made illegal, such as with the potlatch ban in the Pacific Northwest, or simply considered not to exist (see here and here). This enabled the extension of settler political traditions across Turtle Island, subject to the new borders established by the corporations and governments that claimed the ‘newly open’ territory. What we see then is that *indigeneity* as an alternative mode of being is explicitly erased within settler coloniality (Wolfe, 2006), with settler legal systems becoming the origin point of politics, borders establishing the boundaries of legitimate governance and sovereignty, and a “settler society [built] on top of the prior social organization and distinctive cultures of peoples on that land” (Crosby & Monaghan, 2012: 426) all within the borders of settler states.

Importantly, settler coloniality is not a fixed phenomenon which has been realized, but rather is a structured process which is continually needing to be (re)produced (Wolfe, 1999). Contemporary colonialism then is less organized towards the direct genocide of Indigenous peoples as bodies, and more centred around the elimination of Indigenous peoples “as *peoples* through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self” (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005: 598). In the Canadian context this is done through what has been termed ‘aboriginalism’ (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005) in which all Indigenous nations and peoples are homogenized into one general category defined by the settler imaginary, instead of being understood through their own national identities. Further to this, lawfare is put into practice through the legal definition of Indigenous peoples as Status Indians or beneficiaries of a land claim, who are primarily Inuit. These designations are important, as they

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outline the responsibilities that the Canadian Crown has to Indigenous peoples and communities. However, it is the Canadian government – and the settler legal system – who defines these categories. These designations are explicitly written to override existing treaty relationships, which outline not only a different, non-hierarchical relation between Indigenous nations and settler authorities, but also articulate Indigenous conceptions of being and relationality to land. These categories reinforce that it is *indigeneity* which the settler sovereignty seeks to eliminate.

To return to a point I made above: despite this impetus towards elimination of Indigenous peoples (and indigeneity more broadly) continuing to be put into practice, it remains incomplete. This testifies to the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples and communities, and is encapsulated by Smith's (2014) concept of a 'politics of refusal.' Instead of centring settler actions and illustrating the way that Indigenous peoples resist against their logic of elimination, a politics of refusal highlights the ways in which Indigenous nations have continued to exist and put into practice traditional governance protocols and philosophies. When coupled with the 'resurgence' in Indigenous tradition and language that is also ongoing (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2011) there is a pathway forward to a decolonial future that is more than a mere metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Taking Back Territory Through Bordering

To many, this future outside of metaphor may seem imprecise and unclear. However, in my reading it is comprised of two key elements: the return (or reoccupation) of land and the reinvestment of legitimacy into Indigenous governance. With this in mind, we can look to the Unist'ot'en Action Camp at Talbits Kwah as a concrete example of this in action. To return to my central argument from above, the Camp has been built on traditional Wet'suwet'en territory in the middle of what is today British Columbia. In building the Camp and outlining its specific space, the Wet'suwet'en and their allies are using borders and bordering practices in support of its decolonial agenda, taking them from tools in service of a settler colonial agenda to tools useful for undoing that very agenda.

The most obvious manifestation of this decolonial work is the checkpoint that has been built on a bridge crossing the Wedzin Kwah (Morice River). The checkpoint serves to close off the territory to those who do not gain the permission of the Camp's leaders. Importantly, entry to the territory is contingent upon individuals answering questions that the Wet'suwet'en have asked visitors to their territory for thousands of years. The questions—which centre around the purpose of the visit, a person's history working for government and industry associated with the 'development' they are seeking to block, and what skills the individual has to share with the Wet'suwet'en—are intended to allow the Wet'suwet'en to "keep the integrity of the land," as they have been tasked with since time immemorial. Not only does the checkpoint satisfy contemporary principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, but in resting on traditional Wet'suwet'en diplomatic and inter-national practices it serves to make concrete these practices within the context of contemporary governance.

Another example of Wet'suwet'en governance being practiced into the 21st century is the way in which trespassers are caught and held. Not only are they detained as one might be for crossing a state border, but upon their detention by the Wet'suwet'en and their allies they are issued an eagle feather to mark them as a trespasser, as trespassers on Witsuwit'en territory have been marked for generations. The practice of these kinds of bordering practices can in one way be read as reproducing the types of practices that settler governments have effectively used to create contemporary states. However, this reading fundamentally misunderstands the way that the Camp is premised upon Wet'suwet'en tradition and authority through a type of self-generation that is explicitly decolonial. Not only does the Camp centre national—in this case Wet'suwet'en and notably not 'Aboriginal' or some other settler-derived—tradition, but in doing so it is explicitly intended to reaffirm Wet'suwet'en responsibility over their own territory. This serves to unsettle the assumed smoothness of settler sovereignty through refusal. In this way, the Camp doesn't require the recognition of settler authorities, but through the building of borders and the enactment of bordering practices, reifies continued Wet'suwet'en sovereignty that has never been forcibly taken or willingly extinguished. Such an analysis turns the traditional account of borders on its head. Instead of being productive of settler coloniality and a settler nation, the Camp illustrates how borders can be used towards decolonial ends: to repossess and reclaim territory with the very tools which IR as a discipline assumes to be productive of modern politics. Such a framing has much to add to IR theory. It takes us outside of the traditional scope and expands the scope of analysis, while simultaneously undermining the Western assumptions which underpin much of what we

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understand as IR.

Notes

[i] Thanks to Dr. Damien Lee for this formulation, which is intended to open rhetorical space for the imagining of new organizations of power and ways of being which do not depend upon settler coloniality for their meaning.

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Cassell, 1999.

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Liam Midzain-Gobin is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University. Working from an International Relations focus, his research engages with settler colonialism and post-colonial theory to study the effects of data collection on Indigenous communities within contemporary North America. In his dissertation Liam seeks to advance an understanding of the way data collection can serve to (re)produce settler sovereignty through a community-based lens.