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AGAINST RACISM IN THE WORLD
THE INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ MOVEMENT: A SITE OF ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLE AGAINST CAPITALISM

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY AND RACIALISED DISPOSSESSION

In 1982, the government of Spain and the Holy See (the Vatican, which is a non-voting state member of the United Nations) proposed to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly that the year 1992 be commemorated in the UN as an ‘encounter’ between Europe and the indigenous peoples of the Americas, honouring Europeans for having brought the gifts of civilisation and Christianity. To the dismay and irritation of the North Atlantic states that supported Spain’s resolution (including the US and Canada), the entire African delegation walked out of the meeting – the chairperson of the meeting, a European ambassador, querying into the still-live microphone, ‘What does Columbus have to do with Africa?’ The African delegation, the largest bloc of member states of the UN, returned with an impassioned statement explaining the relevance, condemning a proposal to celebrate the onset of European colonialism and the onset of the transatlantic slave trade in the UN, which was established, as they pointed out, for the purpose of ending colonialism.¹
The Doctrine of Discovery had reared its head in the wrong place. According to the centuries-old Doctrine of Discovery, European nations acquired title to the lands they ‘discovered’, and indigenous inhabitants lost their natural right to that land after Europeans had arrived and claimed it (Robertson 2005; Watson 2012). Under this legalistic cover for theft, Euro-American wars of conquest and colonisation, especially settler colonialism, devastated indigenous nations and communities, ripping their territories away from them and transforming the land into private property, and in the US, real estate – the basis of accumulation of capital. Despite the cant of democracy and free land to settlers, most of that appropriated land ended up in the hands of land speculators and agribusiness operations (for example, slave-worked cotton plantations). Arcane as it may seem, the Doctrine of Discovery, articulated in Medieval European papal law, remains the basis for nation-states not recognising the territorial rights of indigenous peoples, while in the US, federal laws still in effect control indigenous peoples’ lives and destinies. The era that Columbus’s voyage symbolises remains a contemporary reality to indigenous peoples.

From the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, most of the non-European world was colonised under the Doctrine of Discovery, one of the first principles of international law that Christian European monarchies promulgated to legitimise investigating, mapping and claiming lands belonging to peoples outside of Europe. It originated in a papal bull issued in 1455 that permitted the Portuguese monarchy to seize West Africa for exploitation of resources, including enslaving human bodies. This marked the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, initially between West Africa and Lisbon and other European slave markets. Following Columbus’s infamous exploratory voyage in 1492, sponsored by the king and queen of the emerging Spanish state, another papal bull extended similar permission to Spain in the western hemisphere. Disputes between the Portuguese and Spanish monarchies led to the papal-initiated Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), which, besides dividing the globe equally between the two Iberian empires, clarified that only non-Christian lands fell under the Doctrine of Discovery (Miller 2011).²

This doctrine upon which all European states relied to justify land theft, genocide and chattel slavery thus originated with the arbitrary and unilateral establishment of the Iberian monarchies’ exclusive rights, under Christian canon law, to colonise foreign peoples. This right was later adopted by other European monarchical colonising projects, including Protestant Christian ones. But, not only monarchies initiated colonisation of non-European
peoples and territories, so did the nineteenth-century republics that rejected monarchical control. The French Republic used this legalistic instrument for its nineteenth- and twentieth-century settler colonialist projects in North Africa, South-East Asia and the South Pacific, as did the newly independent US when it continued the colonisation of North America that was started by the British. A few decades later, the colonies of Central and South America fought wars of liberation to free themselves from Spanish control, even outlawing slavery – unlike the US – but still proceeded to claim indigenous territories under the Doctrine of Discovery. Indeed, the populist settler colonialism of those republics proved to be the most insidious, including genocidal policies in the case of Anglo-colonised North America, Australia and New Zealand.

The fact that the US quickly grew to world economic dominance, followed by political and military dominance, the application of the Doctrine of Discovery in this ‘nation of laws’ and the anti-colonial resistance of the indigenous peoples in North America are particularly important to understanding the development of capitalism as it exists in the world today – what historian Cedric Robinson termed ‘racial capitalism’ (Kelley 2017).

Indicating the intentions of the newly independent US, in 1792, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson asserted that the Doctrine of Discovery developed by European states was international law applicable to the new US government as well. The US Supreme Court issued the noteworthy decision in Johnson v. McIntosh, thus codifying the Doctrine of Discovery as domestic law in 1823. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John Marshall held that the Doctrine of Discovery had been an established principle of European law and of English law in effect in Britain’s North American colonies and was also the law of the US. The court defined the exclusive property rights that a European country acquired by dint of discovery: ‘Discovery gave title to the government by whose subjects, or by whose authority, it was made, against all other European governments, which title might be consummated by possession.’

Therefore, European and Euro-American ‘discoverers’ had gained property rights in the lands of indigenous peoples by merely planting a flag. Of course, they were met with resistance by the peoples they claimed to have conquered, which is a major theme of this book. Indigenous rights were, in the court’s words, ‘in no instance, entirely disregarded; but were necessarily, to a considerable extent, impaired’. The court further held that indigenous ‘rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations, were necessarily diminished’. Indigenous people could continue to live on the land, but title resided with the
discovering power, the US, which had total control to remove the indigenous inhabitants at will. The decision concluded that native nations were ‘domestic, dependent nations’. Soon, it emerged that the indigenous nation in question, the Cherokee, were not allowed to remain in its territory. Cherokee citizens were deported, walking a thousand miles surrounded by armed troops in the harsh winter on the Trail of Tears, which killed half the population. Before the Cherokee were force-marched to Indian Territory (today, Oklahoma state), the large agricultural nations of the Muskogee peoples were removed, followed by other indigenous peoples east of the Mississippi. Any indigenous person or group that evaded deportation, and there where many, were stripped of all territorial rights and identity.5

The Doctrine of Discovery is so taken for granted that it is rarely mentioned in historical or legal texts used in US public schools or universities, including law schools, or in any of the other states where indigenous communities exist. Arguably, only in the US is it the codified legal basis upon which the government controls indigenous nations under a continuing colonial system. The doctrine was again invoked and validated unanimously as recently as the 2005 US Supreme Court case, City of Sherrill v. Oneida Nation of Indians, in which the 1820s’ Supreme Court decisions were cited as precedent for denying the Oneida nation land claims. Significantly, despite a reactionary split among the nine Supreme Court justices, the most liberal of them, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, wrote the unanimous decision. The United Nations’ 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples specifically repudiates the Doctrine of Discovery, and most of the liberal US Protestant churches, as well as the World Council of Churches, have called for its nullification.

THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ ALTERNATIVE

Since the 1982 Columbus incident at the UN, the indigenous peoples of the Americas non-governmental conference at the UN Geneva headquarters, five years later, proposed that 1992 be made the UN ‘year of mourning’ for the onset of colonialism, African slavery and genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and that 12 October be designated as the UN International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples. As the time drew near to the Columbus quincentennial, Spain, although no longer proposing a UN celebration, took the lead, along with the Vatican, in lobbying against indigenous peoples’ attempts
to secure 12 October as a UN day. Spain and the Vatican also spent years and large sums of money preparing for their own celebrations of Columbus, successfully enlisting the support of all of the countries of the western hemisphere, except Cuba, which refused (and paid for this action in withdrawn Spanish financial investments). In the US, the George H.W. Bush administration cooperated with the project and produced its own series of events. In the end, compromise won at the UN: indigenous peoples garnered a Decade for the World’s Indigenous Peoples, which officially began in 1993 but was inaugurated at UN headquarters in New York in December 1992. August 9, not 12 October, was designated as the annual UN International Day for the World’s Indigenous Peoples. The Nobel Peace Prize went to Guatemalan Mayan leader Rigoberta Menchú, which was announced in Oslo on 12 October 1992, a decision that infuriated the Spanish government and the Vatican. The organised celebrations of Columbus flopped, thanks to multiple, highly visible protests by indigenous peoples and their allies. Particularly, support grew for the work of indigenous peoples at the UN to develop new international law standards.

On winter solstice in 2010, the UN General Assembly approved by consensus a resolution in which member states agreed to hold a special high-level meeting of the General Assembly,6 to be known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, on 22–23 September 2014.7 The conference was scheduled to mark the end of the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (2005–2014), with the intention of exchanging criteria for the fulfilment of the objectives of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the General Assembly passed in 2007.8 Some indigenous representatives were concerned that the member states of the UN called for such a significant meeting without consulting them. But it was President Evo Morales of Bolivia who proposed the conference from the podium of the General Assembly when it opened that autumn. It was an odd moment, when, in fact, an indigenous person, brought to the presidency of a country by a mass indigenous movement that he led, was in the position of making such a dramatic proposal. For the first time, the issue of indigenous peoples was brought from the human rights arena into the political centre of the UN.

**THE ROOTS OF STRUGGLE**

This may all sound like top-down graciousness on the part of the UN, bestowed upon oppressed peoples without a voice. But, on the contrary, the project was
born of fierce struggle and community organising. The indigenous peoples’ UN project was inaugurated when more than a hundred indigenous representatives from all over the western hemisphere gathered in Geneva for the officially titled ‘International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas – 1977’. However, three decades of renewed indigenous peoples’ struggles for land and self-determination preceded this event and made it possible and dynamic. In tandem with the African-American freedom movement post-Second World War, indigenous communities and nations rose up to resist the cold war US state security and congressional legislation that mandated the termination of all indigenous nations and their atrophied land bases. One argument for the 1953 Indian Termination Act was that the collective landholding of the indigenous nations that had fought long wars to maintain their existence and won much-reduced territories as reservations were socialistic and a threat to private property. But the proposal for privatising the land into allotments, which was government policy in the 1880s and continued into the 1930s, was no longer reducing the indigenous commons by three-fourths. Rather, the Termination Act would unilaterally dissolve the indigenous estates. Two decades of struggle were required to reverse termination, which gave birth to local, regional and national indigenous organisations, including the American Indian Movement, founded in 1968.9

With the Vietnam War still ongoing and the imminent re-election of Richard Nixon in November 1972, a coalition of eight indigenous organisations arranged the Trail of Broken Treaties (Smith and Warrior 1996). These included the American Indian Movement, the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada (later renamed Assembly of First Nations), the Native American Rights Fund, the National Indian Youth Council, the National American Indian Council, the National Council on Indian Work, National Indian Leadership Training, and the American Indian Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Armed with a ‘20-Point Position Paper’ that focused on the federal government’s responsibility to implement indigenous treaties and sovereignty, caravans set out in the autumn of 1972. The vehicles and numbers of participants multiplied at each stop, converging in Washington DC one week before the presidential election. Hanging a banner from the front of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building that proclaimed it to be the ‘Native American Embassy’, hundreds of protesters from 75 indigenous nations entered the building to sit in. BIA personnel, at the time largely non-indigenous, fled, and the Capitol police chain-locked the doors, announcing that the indigenous protesters were illegally occupying
the building. The protesters stayed for six days, enough time for them to read
damning federal documents that revealed gross mismanagement of the fed-
eral trust responsibility, which they boxed up and took with them. The Trail
of Broken Treaties solidified indigenous alliances, and the ‘20-Point Position
Paper’,10 the work mainly of Hank Adams, provided a template for the affinity of
hundreds of native organisations. Five years later, in 1977, the document would
be presented to the UN, forming the basis for the 2007 UN Declaration on the
Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Three months after the BIA building takeover, Oglala Lakota traditional
people at the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota invited the
American Indian Movement (AIM) to assist them in halting collusion between
their tribal government, formed under the terms of the Indian Reorganization
Act, and the federal government. The people opposed the increasingly authori-
tarian reign of the elected tribal chairperson, Richard Wilson. On 27 February
1973, long deliberations took place in the Pine Ridge Calico Hall between the
local people and AIM leaders, led by Russell Means, a citizen of Pine Ridge. The
AIM activists were well known following the Trail of Broken Treaties, and upon
AIM’s arrival, the FBI, tribal police, and the chairman’s armed special unit, the
Guardians of the Oglala Nation (they called themselves the ‘GOON squad’),
mobilised. The meeting ended with a decision to go to Wounded Knee in a
caravan to protest the chairperson’s misdeeds and the violence of his GOONs.
The law enforcement contingent followed and circled the protesters. Over the
following days, hundreds more armed men surrounded Wounded Knee, and so
began a two-and-a-half-month siege of protesters at the 1890 massacre site. The
late twentieth-century hamlet of Wounded Knee was made up of little more
than a trading post, a Catholic church and the mass grave of the hundreds of
Lakota people slaughtered in 1890. Now armed personnel carriers, Huey heli-
copters and military snipers surrounded the site, while supply teams of mostly
Lakota women made their way through the military lines and back out again
in the dark of night.

The ongoing siege at Wounded Knee in 1973 elicited some rare journalistic
probing into the 1890 army massacre. In 1970, university librarian Dee Brown
had written Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, which documented and told
the 1890 Wounded Knee story, among many other nineteenth-century anti-
Indian crimes and tragedies. The book was a surprise best-seller, so the name
Wounded Knee resonated with the broader public by 1973. During the siege,
on the front page of one newspaper, editors placed two photographs side by
side, each of a pile of bloody, mutilated bodies in a ditch. One was from My Lai in Vietnam in 1968, the other from the Wounded Knee army massacre of the Lakota in 1890. Had they not been captioned, it would have been impossible to tell the difference in time and place.

Wounded Knee galvanised indigenous peoples in North America as well as national and global attention and support. The chief demand of the hundreds of occupiers concerned the Sioux–US treaty of 1868, which guaranteed Sioux sovereignty over a large contiguous land base that had since been reduced to small, separate reservations by illegal federal annexations, along with an erosion of Sioux government sovereignty.

The leadership that was formed there, along with a number of international law specialists guided by Sioux attorney and best-selling author Vine Deloria Jnr, formulated a set of demands that called on the international community to intervene and international law to be applied. The following year, 1974, 5,000 indigenous representatives from many parts of the world and representing more than 90 indigenous communities founded the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) (Dunbar-Ortiz [1974] 2013). The Declaration of Continuing Independence of June 1974, by the First IITC at Standing Rock Indian Country, highlighted the historical injustices of the US, particularly its genocidal violence and unilateral undermining of treaty rights of indigenous people; sought recognition of treaty rights of indigenous peoples, through legal, diplomatic and political engagement, to affirm the right to land and sovereignty; confronted the exclusion of indigenous peoples from the UN system; and affirmed the importance of collective institutional indigenous leadership through the establishment of the IITC.

The year 1974 marked the founding of both the IITC and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) (Crossen 2014), an initiative of the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada. The two organisations were mutually distrustful. AIM eschewed any governmental funding and the very existence of the tribal governments established under the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. The WCIP, on the other hand, from its inception, was funded by the Canadian, Norwegian and US governments, the latter through the National Congress of American Indians, which is a federally funded federation of federally recognised tribal governments. The IITC identified and allied with the Non-Aligned Movement and African, Asian, Latin American and Caribbean national liberation movements, particularly Puerto Rico, while the WCIP looked to European governments for support. The 1977 Geneva conference was organised by the
IITC, the Haudenosaunee and the Indian Council of South America, based in La Paz. Although a few members of the WCIP attended as individuals, including the founder and head, George Manuel, the WCIP was not involved in organising the conference. The 1981 follow-up conference on global indigenous peoples was arranged by the same organisations four years later, but the WCIP was fully involved (Dunbar-Ortiz 1984, 2015; Willensem-Díaz 2009).

These two conferences were sponsored by human rights NGOs, led by the World Peace Council and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, with strong support from national liberation movements that held UN observer status – the African National Congress (ANC, South Africa), the South West Africa People's Organisation (Namibia) and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The conferences created a momentum that led to the establishment in 1981 of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), as a part of the Sub-Commission on Racism and Racial Discrimination, composed of a group of independent experts, and itself a subsidiary body of the UN Commission on Human Rights (reconstituted and renamed the UN Council on Human Rights in 2006) (Dunbar-Ortiz et al. 2015).

The first meeting of the WGIP took place in 1982, with only a handful of indigenous peoples’ representatives, although one was notably Menchú, reporting on genocide by the Guatemalan military dictatorship against the Mayan communities. The WGIP grew every year to become the largest single body meeting regularly at the UN. In the late 1980s, the WGIP focused on drafting a declaration, and, in 1993, submitted a draft to the Sub-Commission, and that year was declared the UN International Year of Indigenous Peoples. The following year, it was approved by the Sub-Commission and sent on to the Commission on Human Rights, which rather than approving it, established a working group to negotiate the final text. Thirteen arduous years of indigenous peoples’ insistence on maintaining the core elements of the declaration, notably self-determination, ensued before it was approved by the UN Council on Human Rights in 2006, and a year later by the UN General Assembly (Daes 2009; Eide 2009).13

Although global in scope, the Study of Treaties produced by the WGIP is especially important for the aspiration of indigenous peoples in North America and the Pacific. In 1987, Miguel Alfonso Martínez, international law professor at the University of Havana and later chair of the WGIP, was appointed as special rapporteur to investigate the status of treaties and agreements between indigenous nations and the original colonial powers and the
national governments that now claim authority over indigenous nations by virtue of those treaties. The treaty study, approved in 1999, is an essential tool for indigenous peoples in their continuing struggles for land restoration and sovereignty. The investigation concluded that these treaties have contemporary effective status, and furthermore that even in situations where indigenous land was taken without a formal treaty, implied treaties exist and have status as such.14

By the early 1990s, when the WGIP completed the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the approval process finally reached the UN member states of the Commission on Human Rights in 1995 for approval, before it could be submitted to the General Assembly, it stalled, mired in proposals for revisions from a number of countries. For several years, the indigenous peoples’ caucus had to struggle to simply keep the designation ‘Peoples’ in the Declaration, with many states insisting on people or populations, and with good reason. In international human rights and self-determination law that developed in the UN system, the term ‘peoples’ is interchangeable with ‘nations’, and triggers the right to self-determination, a collective right rather than an individual human right, as many governments, none more than the US, insisted on. At UN meetings in New York and Geneva, indigenous representatives and their allies demonstrated, carrying placards with simply ‘S’ written on them. And they won that designation, although the US government insisted on a footnote claiming that it did not indicate self-determination.

CHANGING GEOPOLITICS AND THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

World politics and alignments had changed vastly from 1990, and it is noteworthy that the indigenous peoples’ international work survived this rapidly transformed geopolitical reality. As the Soviet Union devolved into its constituent republics, as did Yugoslavia soon after, those re-formed states became allies of the Atlantic states, whereas before they had either supported the indigenous peoples’ work, as Yugoslavia actively did, or at least did not oppose it. These shifting alliances also negatively affected the leadership position in the work of the IITC and other indigenous groupings who had friendly relations with and support from the Non-Aligned Movement and particularly from several African states.
However, representatives of indigenous nations, communities and organisations persisted. In order to deal with suggested revisions in the Declaration, the Commission on Human Rights established an open-ended inter-sessional working group with full participation of indigenous representatives, and with a mandate to complete its work by 2004. This date had to be extended due to US insistence on ‘reforming’ the Commission on Human Rights, and its replacement with the Human Rights Council. With the demise of the Commission, the Sub-Commission on Racism, which the WGIP was a part of, was shut down. Some indigenous representatives from North America mused that the US was going to extremes to get rid of the WGIP, which had grown to be the largest working group in the history of the UN, and in the process kill the Draft Declaration. With persistence from the indigenous representatives, along with some supportive governments, and with several problematic revisions, the Draft Declaration was finalised and submitted to the General Assembly’s Third Committee. It stalled again in December 2006, with objections from a number of African states, which produced further revisions.

Finally, on 13 September 2007, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by a majority of 144 states in favour, four votes against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US) and eleven abstentions. In 2009, Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada, apparently embarrassed by their isolation as the only negative votes, reversed their positions. In April of that year, 182 member states reached consensus on a resolution that included an endorsement of the Declaration.

International law is inherent in the indigenous international project, which also includes instruments developed by the Organization of American States with its establishment of a WGIP, as well as the International Labour Organization and its treaty on indigenous and tribal peoples, and many other international bodies. The international indigenous work, community-based as it is, has enhanced the liberatory politics of indigenous peoples’ struggles and made these visible to the world (Anaya 2009; Erakat 2014; Graham and Wiessner 2011).

MARXISM AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ RIGHTS

In the process of struggle, a number of those involved (and in conversations with non-European Marxists) have gained provisional trust in Marxist
historical materialist analysis. This happened in a context in which European and Euro-American Marxist theory and practices were blind to racial oppression and completely ignorant of or had little interest in the existence of indigenous peoples’ histories, movements and aspirations.

Since the demise of the institutionalisation of state socialism with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc, accompanied by the triumphalism of capitalist ideologues claiming that ‘there is no alternative (TINA)’, Marxists the world over had to rethink while many abandoned the idea of a future socialism, opening a growing space for reviving the anarchist tradition, which at its root eschews the nation-state, all nationalisms and often Marxism itself. Since indigenous peoples’ involvement in the UN and other state-based bodies is largely based on their insistence on the right to self-determination, up to and including independent nation status, a contradiction arises. Many of the new generation(s) of indigenous intellectuals and organisers have moved away from Marxism as they claim it is not relevant to indigenous peoples’ futures.

In North America, half the indigenous population lives and works in cities, although they remain closely tied to their traditional lands, as well as moving back and forth. So, many native people are in fact also part of the working class, employed or unemployed, but cannot be reduced to that identity solely or even primarily, not even in the Andean region and in Central America, where the indigenous comprise the majority of the workforces of those settler states.

The engagement with Marxism among indigenous intellectuals and activists, in order to understand their communities and nations, has been happening since the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by the decolonisation movements in the peripheries of capitalism. During this period, Marxists concerned with indigenous peoples saw parallels with the concept of underdevelopment (that Europe had ‘underdeveloped’ the societies they colonised), embraced development theory (Frank 1967) and also adopted the concept of ‘internal colonies’ theorised by Mexican leftist sociologists and leading dependency theorists, Pablo González Cassanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen. In North America, Howard Adams was a native Marxist who adapted development theory to the study of the colonisation of indigenous peoples and mentored many native students. He obtained a doctorate from the University of California and became a professor and a leader in Métis politics in Saskatchewan. In his 1975 classic, _Prison of Grass_, Adams dissects the effects of colonialism on the individual psyche as well as the very existence of the people. In the US Southwest, non-indigenous Marxist development economist Philip Reno influenced a
generation of young Navajo students and politicians. Reno had been blacklisted during the second Red Scare in the US in the 1950s. Fired from his tenured professorship in economics at the University of Colorado, he moved to Guyana where he worked with the future Marxist president, Cheddi Jagan, in developing the project of CARECOM, the Caribbean Economic Community. Reno returned to the US and took residence at Taos Indian Pueblo in New Mexico, later working for many years at the Navajo Community College in Shiprock. When Navajo nationalist firebrand Peter McDonald was elected chairperson of the Navajo Nation in 1970, he invited Reno to create a development plan to declare economic self-determination (Reno 1980). Although the Navajo Council endorsed the plan for integrated economic development based on traditional Navajo socio-economic pursuits, McDonald moved increasingly to mineral resource export, founding the Council of Indian Resource Tribes. Reno continued to work with Navajo youth, many of them part of the coalition that elected Peterson Zah to head the Navajo Nation in 1982. He also co-founded a training programme for reservation economic planners established by Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico in 1978. For indigenous activists, the 1970s’ development perspective has been largely discredited, but the indigenous struggle against the continued, even accelerated, exploitation of their resources and wreckage of the land and ecology (for instance through fracking and oil pipelines), often in complicity with recognised tribal governments, remains a primary issue.

Some Red Power activists, most of whom remain committed to indigenous peoples’ liberation, also adopted a Marxist perspective during the 1970s. In 1971, the Native Study Group was founded by Ray Bobb, Lee (Bobb) Maracle and other native youth in Vancouver, BC. In 1975, a sister study group was formed in San Francisco, of which this author was a member. The Marxism of the two groups was Maoist in orientation in privileging rural movements, but mainly inspired by revolutionary national liberation movements taking place in Africa, particularly the ANC in South Africa and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), led by Amilcar Cabral, who was trained in agronomy and a Marxist. Cabral, unlike any other national liberation thinker, privileged culture as the source of liberation, calling on the people to ‘return to the source’, where autonomous history left off under European colonialism, and to find the threads upon which the newly liberated society could be built.

At the same time in Latin America, Marxism was far more widespread. The roots of indigenous socialism in the Andes goes back to the days of
communist parties’ ascendency in the Americas. In Bolivia, Aymara intellectual and activist, Ramiro Reinaga, son of Fausto Reinaga who founded the influential Bolivian Indian Party, wrote extensively on Marxism, criticising Latin American Marxists for what he deemed as distortions of Marx. Reinaga argued that despite the fact that the majority of workers in Latin America were Indians and blacks, the class struggle could not destroy national oppression. He pointed out that communist parties formed in the 1920s to 1940s in the Americas fell apart in the 1950s and 1960s because they failed to create Indian involvement and leadership. Reinaga called for ‘nationalising’ Marxism, meaning Indianising Marxism, abandoning the European vision and accepting the American reality. He envisaged the Marxist–Indian revolution as something new; new in the sense of authenticity that could transform all of Latin America (Batalla 1981).

Two other Marxist studies of primitive accumulation under colonialism in indigenous territories also need to be noted. One is my own study of the history of land tenure in New Mexico, first published in 1980 and in a new and revised edition in 2007 (Dunbar-Ortiz 2007). The Spanish New Mexico settler colony occupied several native nations that had specific relationships to the land, the 98 city-states (reduced to 19) that the Spanish called ‘pueblos’ being the most numerous, and also having long practised irrigation agriculture. The pueblos were surrounded by and sometimes in conflictual relationships with the Athabascan (Apaches, the Navajos and Diné) hunting and trading groups that had migrated from the north before Spanish colonisation. By focusing on land tenure, several primitive accumulations of capital were identified, culminating in mercantile and full-blown capitalisation under the US following its annexation of the northern half of Mexico in 1948. This historical materialist approach could be useful for the study of a number of peoples who were subjected to multiple colonialisms in North America and the Arctic (French, British, Dutch, Russian), as well as for studying the pre-colonial interrelationships of neighbouring peoples with diverse cultures and economies. Marx’s concept of the mode of production is useful for analysis, but also relies on inaccurate historical information. Take the example of indigenous land tenure and mode of production of the city-states along the Río Grande River in New Mexico, in which irrigation was used for intensive hydraulic agriculture: Marx, having no knowledge of indigenous agriculturalists of the Americas, theorised that such a mode of production produced hierarchy, slave labour and patriarchal social orders (‘Oriental Despotism’). However, this was not the case in New Mexico, where a radically
egalitarian and matrilineal order, reliant on ritual and ceremony, prevailed for millennia and survived Spanish, Mexican and US colonialisms. Before making sweeping assumptions about indigenous social orders of the past, it is essential for each indigenous community and nation to research and study its own source. Marxism will be a useful tool in that endeavour, but also has its limitations.

The other study of capitalism and indigenous people is by Lawrence David Weiss (1984). Weiss employs the methodology developed by Lenin in his 1899 Marxian study of primitive accumulation in Russia, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. Weiss (1984: 13) uses Lenin’s study as ‘a theoretical guide and appropriate, suggestive methodology . . . Lenin’s work provides a different historical case which is useful as a heuristic device to better understand the particular development in the Navajo case . . . as a Marxist historical analysis of the development of a home market, and more generally capitalism, in a state making the historical transition from a natural economy to a predominately capitalist economy.’

Weiss is concerned centrally with a specific form of expropriation, that is, a capitalist/colonialist state’s use of mercantile capital to drain the resources of the country it has occupied or colonised. Since this was the case in most of North America, it provides a valuable model for better understanding how capitalism/colonialism worked. This itinerary and dialogue between a non-Eurocentric Marxism and indigenous radicalism is still relevant today, given the continued challenges facing indigenous sovereignty.

However, while there might be a generational difference about indigenous peoples’ sovereignty, there is a consensus among the new generation of indigenous activists and scholars that capitalism and the capitalist state (including those states that claim the brand ‘socialism’) are not the solution. This also requires a critical engagement with a non-Eurocentric Marxism. As Dene scholar, Glen Coulthard, who himself identifies with the anarchist tradition, writes in his influential text, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014: 8):

To my mind, then, for Indigenous peoples to reject or ignore the insights of Marx would be a mistake, especially if this amounts to a refusal on our part to critically engage his important critique of capitalist exploitation and his extensive writings on the entangled relationship between capitalism and colonialism . . . All of this is not to suggest, however,
that Marx’s contributions are without flaw; nor is it meant to suggest
that Marxism provides a ready-made tool for Indigenous peoples to
uncritically appropriate in their struggles for land and freedom . . .
Marx’s theoretical frame relevant to a comprehensive understanding
of settler-colonialism and Indigenous resistance requires that it be
transformed in conversation with the critical thought and practices of
Indigenous peoples themselves.

Coulthard (2014: 173) concludes, ‘For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism
must die. And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the con-
struction of Indigenous alternatives to it.’

NOTES
1 The author was present at the meeting as an observer.
2 See also Deloria (1971) and Newcomb (2008).
4 Johnson v. McIntosh, p. 574.
5 In the wake of indigenous peoples’ resurgence and demands during the US massive
Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the descendants of those indige-
nous communities, who remained in their homelands east of the Mississippi, have
battled and won, in most cases, acknowledgement of their indigenous nation status
along with some restored lands. They had never lost connection with those who
were removed to Indian Territory. It is a movement and process that remains active
in the twenty-first century.
6 UN Document A/RES/65.198.
August 2017).
August 2017).
10 ‘Trail of Broken Treaties 20-Point Position Paper’, American Indian Movement,
http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/trailofbrokentreaties.html (accessed 23 August
2017).
11 At the time, Deloria had published two best-sellers during the indigenous occupa-
(Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969) and We Talk, You Listen; New
Tribes, New Turf (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007);
he would go on to author or co-author 30 books on Indian sovereignty and cultures
and US colonial law.
12 See http://www.iitc.org/about-iitc/the-declaration-of-continuing-independence-


17 Stavenhagen was appointed by the UN as the first special rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2001, when the position was established. His six-year term ended in 2008 and subsequent appointments have gone to indigenous persons.

18 I was director of the programme. The project resulted in the publishing of a book of research articles, with a case study of the Navajo Nation (see Dunbar-Ortiz 1978).


21 See Manji and Fletcher (2013) and Cabral (1973).

22 See Becker (2008) and Dunbar-Ortiz (2009). A number of native individuals were also active in communist parties in Canada and the US, although there is little documentation. See also Balthaser (2014).

REFERENCES


