

Glen Coulthard: For Our Nations to Live, Capitalism Must Die

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There is a significant and to my mind problematic limitation that is increasingly being placed on Indigenous efforts to defend our rights and our lands. This constraint involves the type of tactics that are being represented as morally legitimate in our efforts to defend our land and rights as Indigenous peoples on the one hand, and those which are viewed as morally illegitimate because of their disruptive and extra-legal character on the other.

With respect to those approaches deemed “legitimate” in defending our rights, emphasis is often placed on formal “negotiations” – usually carried out between “official” Aboriginal leadership (usually men) and representatives of the Crown (also usually men) – and if need be coupled with largely symbolic acts of peaceful, non-disruptive protest that must abide by Canada’s “rule of law.”

Then there are those approaches increasingly deemed “illegitimate.” These include but are not limited to forms of protest and direct action that seek to influence power through less mediated and sometimes more disruptive measures, like the slowing of traffic for the purpose of leafleting and solidarity-building, temporarily blocking access to Indigenous territories with the aim of impeding the exploitation of First Nations’ land and resources, or in rarer cases still, the re-occupation of a portion of Indigenous land (rural or urban)

through the establishment of reclamation sites that also serve to disrupt, if not entirely block, access to Indigenous territories by state and capital for prolonged periods of time.

Regardless of their diversity and specificity, however, most of these activities tend to get branded in the media in a wholly negative manner: as reactionary, threatening, and disruptive.

Blockades and beyond

What the recent actions of the Mi'kmaq land and water defenders at Elsipogtog demonstrate is that direct actions in the form of Indigenous blockades are both a negation and an affirmation. They are a crucial act of negation insofar as they seek to impede or block the flow of resources currently being transported from oil and gas fields, refineries, lumber mills, mining operations, and hydro-electric facilities located on the dispossessed lands of Indigenous nations to international markets. These forms of direct action, in other words, seek to negatively impact the economic infrastructure that is core to the colonial accumulation of capital in settler political economies like Canada's. Blocking access to this critical infrastructure has historically been quite effective in forging short-term gains for Indigenous communities. Over the last couple of decades, however, state and corporate powers have also become quite skilled at recuperating the losses incurred as a result of Indigenous peoples' resistance by drawing our leaders off the land and into negotiations where the terms are always set by and in the interests of settler capital.

What tends to get ignored by many self-styled pundits is that these actions are also an affirmative gesture of Indigenous resurgence insofar as they embody an enactment of Indigenous law and the obligations such laws place on Indigenous peoples to uphold the relations of reciprocity that shape our engagements with the human and non-human world - the land. The question I want to explore here, albeit very briefly, is this: how might we begin to scale-up these often localized, resurgent land-based direct actions to produce a transformation in the colonial economy more generally? Said slightly differently, how might we move beyond a resurgent Indigenous politics that seeks to inhibit the destructive effects of capital to one that strives to create Indigenous alternatives to it?

Rebuilding our nations

In her [recent interview](#) with Naomi Klein, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson hints at what such an alternative or alternatives might entail for Indigenous nations. "People within the Idle No More movement who are talking about Indigenous nationhood are talking about a massive transformation, a massive decolonization"; they are calling for a "resurgence of Indigenous political thought" that is "land-based and very much tied to that intimate and close relationship to the land, which to me means a revitalization of sustainable local Indigenous

economies.”

Without such a massive transformation in the political economy of contemporary settler-colonialism, any efforts to rebuild our nations will remain parasitic on capitalism, and thus on the perpetual exploitation of our lands and labour. Consider, for example, an approach to resurgence that would see Indigenous people begin to reconnect with their lands and land-based practices on either an individual or small-scale collective basis. This could take the form of “walking the land” in an effort to re-familiarize ourselves with the landscapes and places that give our histories, languages, and cultures shape and content; to revitalizing and engaging in land-based harvesting practices like hunting, fishing, and gathering, and/or cultural production activities like hide-tanning and carving, all of which also serve to assert our sovereign presence on our territories in ways that can be profoundly educational and empowering; to the re-occupation of sacred places for the purposes of relearning and practicing our ceremonial activities.

Although all of these place-based practices are crucial to our well-being and offer profound insights into life-ways that provide frameworks for thinking about alternatives to an economy predicated on the perpetual exploitation of the human and non-human world, at the micro-political level that these practices tend to operate they still require that we have access to a mode of subsistence detached from the practices themselves. In other words, they require that we have access to a very specific form of work – which, in our present economy depends on the expropriation of our labour and the theft of our time for the profit of others – in order to generate the cash required to spend this regenerative time on the land.

A similar problem informs self-determination efforts that seek to ameliorate our poverty and economic dependency through resource revenue sharing, more comprehensive impact benefit agreements, and affirmative action employment strategies negotiated through the state and with industries tearing-up Indigenous territories. Even though the capital generated by such an approach could, in theory, be spent subsidizing the revitalization of certain cultural traditions and practices, in the end they would still remain dependent on a predatory economy that is entirely at odds with the deep reciprocity that forms the cultural core of many Indigenous peoples’ relationships with land.

Developing Indigenous political-economic alternatives

What forms might an Indigenous political-economic alternative to the intensification of capitalism on and within our territories take? For some communities, reinvigorating a mix of subsistence-based activities with more contemporary economic ventures is one alternative. In the 1970s, for example, the Dene Nation sought to curtail the negative environmental and cultural impacts of capitalist extractivism by proposing to establish an economy that would

apply traditional concepts of Dene governance – decentralized, regional political structures based on participatory, consensus decision-making – to the realm of the economy. At the time, this would have seen a revitalization of a bush mode of production, with emphasis placed on the harvesting and manufacturing of local renewable resources through traditional activities like hunting, fishing, and trapping, potentially combined with and partially subsidized by other economic activities on lands communally held and managed by the Dene Nation. Economic models discussed during the time thus included the democratic organization of production and distribution through Indigenous co-operatives and possibly worker-managed enterprises.

Revisiting Indigenous political-economic alternatives such as these could pose a real threat to the accumulation of capital on Indigenous lands in three ways. First, through mentorship and education these economies reconnect Indigenous people to land-based practices and forms of knowledge that emphasize radical sustainability. This form of grounded normativity is antithetical to capitalist accumulation. Second, these economic practices offer a means of subsistence that can over time help break our dependence on the capitalist market by cultivating self-sufficiency through the localized and sustainable production of core foods and life materials that we distribute and consume within our own communities on a regular basis. Third, through the application of Indigenous governance principles to non-traditional economic activities we open up a way of engaging in contemporary economic ventures in an Indigenous way that is better suited to foster sustainable economic decision-making, an equitable distribution of resources within and between Indigenous communities, Native women's political and economic emancipation, and empowerment for Indigenous citizens and workers who may or must pursue livelihoods in sectors of the economy outside of the bush. Why not critically apply the most egalitarian and participatory features of our traditional governance practices to all of our economic activities, regardless of whether they are undertaken in land-based or urban contexts? Cities are on Indigenous land too, and a hell of a lot of us currently live in them.

New alliances, new opportunities

The capacity of resurgent Indigenous economies to challenge the hegemony of settler-colonial capitalism in the long term can only happen if certain conditions are met, however. First, all of the colonial, racist, and patriarchal legal, political obstacles that have been used to block our access to land need to be confronted and removed. Of course capitalism continues to play a core role in dispossessing us of our lands and self-determining authority, but it only does so in concert with axes of exploitation and domination configured along racial, gender and state lines. Given the resilience of these equally devastating relations of power, our efforts to decolonize must directly confront more than just economic relations; they 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. Dismantling these oppressive structures will not be easy. It will require that we continue to assert our presence on all of our territories, coupled with an escalation of confrontations with the forces of colonization through the forms of direct action that are currently being undertaken by communities like Elsipogtog.

Second, we also have to acknowledge that the significant political leverage required to simultaneously block the economic exploitation of our people and homelands while constructing alternatives to capitalism will not be generated through our direct actions and resurgent economies alone. Settler-colonization has rendered our populations too small to affect this magnitude of change. This reality demands that we continue to remain open to, if not actively seek out and establish, relations of solidarity and networks of trade and mutual aid with national and transnational communities and organizations that are also struggling against the imposed effects of globalized capital, including other Indigenous nations and national confederacies; urban Indigenous people and organizations; the labour, women's, GBLTQ2S, and environmental movements; and, of course, those racial and ethnic communities that find themselves subject to their own distinct forms of economic, social and cultural marginalization. The initially rapid and relatively widespread support expressed both nationally and internationally for the Idle No More movement last spring, and the solidarity generated around the Elsipogtog anti-fracking resistance today, gives me hope that establishing such relations are indeed possible.

It's time for our communities to seize the unique political opportunities of the day. In the delicate balancing act of having to ensure that one's social conservative contempt for First Nations doesn't overwhelm one's neoconservative love of the market, Prime Minister Harper has erred by letting the racism and sexism of the former outstrip his belligerent commitment to the latter. This is a novice mistake that Liberals like Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin learned how to manage decades ago. As a result, the federal government has invigorated a struggle for Indigenous self-determination that must challenge the relationship between settler-colonization and free-market fundamentalism in ways that refuse to be co-opted by scraps of recognition, opportunistic apologies, and the **cheap gift of political and economic inclusion**. 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.