

*Introduction*

## Indigenous Nations and Marxism: Notes on an Ambivalent Relationship

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The relationship between Marxism and Indigenous nations is an ambivalent one. For every story of a successful engagement we can find a story of a failed relationship. Neither has the track record of various Marxist, Socialist, or Social Democratic political parties been all that remarkable. Nonetheless, it does seem that the analytic reach of Marxist inspired theoretical concepts and frameworks should have some salience for navigating a path toward decolonization autonomy.

Marxism retains an incisive core that helps understand the dynamics of the world within which we live. Marxism points to the inherent contradictions of our social formations; it highlights the ways in which power is structured through ownership; it puts the spotlight on the function of states in the accumulation of capital and the redistribution of wealth from the many to the few.

Understanding how those with power operate is of critical importance and Marxism provides an analytic lens through which to examine how power operates. On the global scale it provides a way to tease out the linkages between media corporations, oil rig operators, and vested government officials. At the local level it gives one a clear understanding of how business works (not in the MBA cheerleading sense) and facilitates intervention and engagement with businesses desiring to develop and appropriate Indigenous land.

For all of this, it is the ambivalence of the relationship that predominates. Indigenous peoples have encountered many strangers and outsiders who have

arrived with offers of support, collaboration, and cooperation. Early European merchant traders arrived into Gitxaana's traditional territory in the late 1700's. They made promises and entered into agreements. For a while the relationship seemed beneficial and then the reality of disease and deception was revealed. In the early days of British Columbia's resource economy union organizers recruited Aboriginal peoples to the trade unions on the basis of a shared working class experience. Aboriginal peoples joined labour unions in fisheries, forestry, longshoring, and milling. Many became prominent leaders within the labour movement of the day and participated within the large social democratic and socialist milieu. Yet the issues of indigeneity—the difference that came from being a colonized people—would eventually rise up and become an obstacle in the path of cooperation as trade unions dominated by non-aboriginal newcomers struggled to accept the historical difference that made their union brothers and sisters different. In the last decades of the twentieth century environmental crusaders arrived on Indigenous land in BC. They forged alliances with Aboriginal peoples in their struggle to preserve sensitive ecosystems, valued animals, of special places. But when Indigenous communities didn't fall in line they found themselves being castigated for not being 'Indian' enough. Throughout most of the last two centuries entrepreneurs and government officials have also come calling with their own promises to similar effects. In this host of visitors Marxists theorists and political activist don't really look all that different.

It is, however, our contention that there is something different about a Marxist approach that merits the attention of Indigenous organizers, activists, and political leaders. First, Marxism provides a political analysis of the ways in which power in our contemporary (and historical) society is delayed and hidden in everyday interactions. Marxism also provides a theory of political action that has as its end goal the achievement of a society that respects difference, honours collective relations, and places a priority on humane relations between people. The papers collected in this special issue point to areas where Marxist theory can illuminate and advance the place of Indigenous peoples in our world.

In “Can the Sled Dog Sleep,” Frank Tester takes us into the workings of the colonial transformation of Canada’s north. He does this through the simultaneous critique and deployment of post-modern/colonial theories. Tester shows us how these supposedly liberatory theories ultimately fail: “the interrogations of postcolonial theorists do not offer us the liberation they seek precisely because the very thing they celebrate—the emergence of cultures and difference from the oppressive tracts of colonial enterprise—is what the new capitalism successfully cannibalizes in its consistent and omnipresent quest for capital, an *essential* category for social and cultural analysis.” It is a cruel irony for academic cultural theorists, who may see themselves engaged in an act of empowerment of Indigenous peoples, to have in fact participated in a new and deepened form of subjugation.

Kim Brown challenges another variant of post-modernist theory that plays fast and loose with notions of authenticity. Brown’s paper “Highliners and Moneymakers” documents through a careful ethnography the multiplicity of ways in which catching AND selling salmon is an integral aspect of being Sto:lo; both today and in the past. Brown’s paper is important for documenting that change does not mean the loss of destruction of culture; but more importantly she opens a space for understanding the ways in which social class is tied to notions of being Sto:lo in ways that anti-Marxist theoretic have overlooked. For some writers an authentic ‘Indian’ is one locked in an imaginary past in which the exchange of fish for benefit was not an ‘Indian’ practice.

Brown shows us how state regulation and Indigenous resistance create a space for the continuance of the Sto:lo as a people.

In “They Had a Deep Respect for the Earth” Dorothee Schreiber turns a critical eye to the problems of teaching about Indigenous peoples in university environments where her students, though well intentioned, enact and reinforce dominant racist practices. Drawing from the Marxist inspired tradition of anti-racist pedagogy Schreiber is trying to come to terms with whether it is actually possible to do the type of teaching she wants without eliciting naïve racism from her students: “How come they use guns if they *love nature*? Aren’t the traditional ways of life *disappearing*? Could we please have workshops on basket weaving, pit-cooking, and how to color wool with plant dyes? Why didn’t the Natives realize that the fur trade would lead to *the demise of their culture*? How can *urbanized* Natives claim to be *traditional*? Why are they so *messed up*?” This is not a new problem, but it is a vexing one for committed and concerned teachers—be they Indigenous or otherwise. The strength of Schreiber’s paper lies in revealing what goes on in the classroom. She is to be commended for her courage to persist.

Marxism emerges from the same cultural history as does the naïve and insensitive questions of Schreiber’s students, the post-modern theories that reject the Sto:lo-ness of commercial fishing, or the misguided approaches of post-colonialism that finds more of interest in the discursive play of sled dogs than in the reality of their slaughter in a colonial occupation. The difference, however, is that Marxist theory and practice emerged in opposition to these dominant society notions and ideologies.

This is, of course, not to say that the deployment of a Marxist framework is unproblematic. We have already discussed the ambivalence of the relation with Indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, Marxism has value and potential as an emancipatory framework and as an interpretive tool. In the struggle to take back what is rightfully ours Indigenous peoples have much to gain from appropriating a European intellectual tradition whose object is to transform and unsettle the power holders of that very society.