

Introduction

Indigenous Peoples, Marxism and Late Capitalism

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The relationship between indigenous peoples and Marxism has long been ambiguous. Marx himself, as a 19th century philosopher influenced by social Darwinism, assumed that “tribal” peoples represented simple forms of productive relations and were destined to disappear (Marx 1887:51). For him, tribal peoples represented the beginning of social evolution, as expressed in *The German Ideology*: “The first form of ownership is tribal [*Stammeigentum*] ownership. It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which a people lives by hunting and fishing, by the rearing of beasts or, in the highest stage, agriculture” (Marx and Engels 1965:33). Indigenous people have sometimes been equally dismissive of Marx. Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko, for example, thought that Marxism and indigenous rights were incompatible because Marxism, like capitalism, requires the exploitation of natural resources and industrial development that conflicts with indigenous ideas about the sacred nature of the Earth (Teale 1998).

Undeniably, however, the result of more than four centuries of imperialism and colonialism has ensnared indigenous peoples in the traps of the capitalist world system (Bodley 2008). Around the world, indigenous lands are expropriated by states and capitalist corporations, in order to channel natural resources from above and below ground into ever-widening streams of capital accumulation. Indigenous labour is appropriated by capitalist firms in multinational systems of production that transform indigenous people into members of the

proletariat. The expansion of this system alters indigenous communities, creating elite groups and new identities in its wake, with the result of accelerating the entire process of capitalist incorporation. Canadian geographer and ecological philosopher William T. Hipwell argues that socialism and capitalism alike destroy the environment and the human spirit in an overarching system he calls “*Industria*” (Hipwell 2004:370). Regardless of what one may think of Marxism as a political project, however, the intellectual contribution of Marxism to the anthropological study of capitalism remains relevant. If we use Marxist concepts as part of a larger set of methodological tools, rather than Marxism as a blueprint to yet another form of industrial society, our studies may contribute to even wider goals of social justice.

The contributing authors of this special issue of *New Proposals* originally delivered the research presented here in the November 2010 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, as part of a panel on “Indigenous Peoples and the Circulation of Labour” sponsored by the Society for the Anthropology of Work. In papers discussing cases from Alaska, Canada, Taiwan, Laos, and New Zealand, these papers all explore the ways in which the capitalist world system expropriates land, natural resources, and labour from indigenous communities. All four papers, in spite of the obvious differences between them, attempt to use Marxist concepts to understand the situation of indigenous peoples in late capitalism. All four papers are based on an understanding that capitalism exploits indigenous peoples

and lands, that a shift toward indigenous self-determination and social justice is desirable, and that anthropology can contribute to positive change by providing ethnographically grounded analysis of dynamics in various local circumstances. All of them avoid the teleological assumptions and economic determinism that has characterized some Marxist thinking in the past.

Ian Baird, in a particularly rich ethnography of Laos, demonstrates the ongoing utility of the Marxist concept of “primitive accumulation.” It is useful that he does this in a nominally socialist country, because it makes us reflect on how Capitalism and Marxism in practice have both led to the destruction of nature and of subsistence-based societies. Having collected data for over fifteen years, and serving as Executive Director of the non-governmental organization Global Association for People and the Environment, Baird testifies to the acceleration of “violent capitalist accumulation by dispossession.” Lands once used by indigenous people for swidden agriculture are transformed into rubber plantations, with rubber destined to be sold on export markets.

Baird makes a strong connection between the expropriation of land and the creation of a new proletariat. As indigenous people lose access to their subsistence resources, they are increasingly forced to work on the capitalist labour market. This process is often violent; indigenous people report they have been forced to move when their property and crops are destroyed to make room for plantations. In spite of, or perhaps *because of*, the country’s Marxist-Leninist ideology, the government has facilitated the expropriation of lands formerly used by ethnic minorities for swidden agriculture. In fact, officials call this process “development” in the belief, inspired by their interpretations of Marxism, that they are merely shepherding backwards people through the inevitable historical stages to industrialization. These officials describe land expropriation as a necessary strategy to get indigenous people to move out of their subsistence lifestyles and join modern labour markets. Baird reminds us that they can do this even more efficiently than western capitalists, since they are not obliged to respond to political opposition. When Capitalism and Marxism converge on a similar

destruction of the environment and local cultures, a new word is needed to describe them both. *Industria* seems to fit the bill nicely.

Ching-hsiu Lin and Scott Simon provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between capitalism and the Truku people of Taiwan. As can be seen in Lin’s paper, primitive accumulation on Truku territory began much earlier than in Laos. As early as the period of Japanese administration (1895–1945), the colonial government forced egalitarian communities of hunter-gatherers to permanently settle on reserve lands and adopt modern agriculture. After the transfer of Taiwan to the Republic of China, reserve land was privatized. Lin evokes how privatization of land led to the emergence of social stratification, as better educated and better informed individuals could gain access to prime land to be sold to state and industrial concerns. Over time, poorer people became landless because they had to sell land to pay debts. The process of accumulation and dispossession was thus led partly by members of the same community, leading to a social cleavage between elites and ordinary people. He categorizes the elites as (1) the “political” elite dependent on the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT); (2) the “intellectual” elite, e.g. pastors, who may be critical of the KMT; and (3) the offspring of these elites, who may live outside of the community.

Lin focuses on the symbolic meanings of the circulation of labour and money since the land privatization and “integration” of Truku workers into the labour market in the 1960s. Seemingly arguing against Marx, he argues that money is not alienating to indigenous workers. Instead, money earned as wages becomes a mechanism for maintaining social relations. When male workers reach marriageable age, they must, with support from wider kin networks, find ways to finance a wedding feast and expensive rituals of pig sacrifice. Previous marriage customs, which involved provision of brideservice and raising of pigs, have been replaced by a commodity economy in which the young men and their families must raise money to purchase pigs and hire professional banquet caterers. This is where Marx becomes relevant. Just as Marx predicted, primitive accumulation and integration into the labour market has led, even

in a previously egalitarian society, to social and economic stratification.

Scott Simon focuses even more closely on how capitalism has led to the creation of socio-economic stratification in Truku societies. Following in the footsteps of Hill Gates, one of the pioneers in the anthropology of Taiwan, he attempts a Marxist class analysis of Truku villages, but with the goal of better understanding the social and political dimensions of women's entrepreneurship. Descriptive statistics, as well as field work data from 18 months of field research, reveal the existence of a large "Lumpenproletariat." Like the indigenous people in Laos, they have been deprived of their former means of subsistence due to primitive accumulation, but rely on precarious day labour rather than becoming permanent members of a working class. Simon shows the social cleavages between these ordinary workers and the new village elite that was created at the time of land privatization. He focuses on what Lin calls the "political" elite dependent on the KMT.

Simon is primarily interested in the social production of class. He describes the small shops in the villages, demonstrating how women entrepreneurs, as part of the small petty bourgeoisie, use their small businesses as social space useful to KMT political control of the villages. These women shopkeepers, by asserting a place in the circulation of goods and ideas, can facilitate the entry of their family members or even themselves into the political elite. They thus contribute to the larger system of township and village politics, through which the state and capitalist firms gain legal access to land and natural resources that were previously managed as hunting territories by acephalous Truku bands.

Alexis Bunten, who bases her reflections on multi-sited research in Alaska and New Zealand, takes a different approach and is much more optimistic about the potential for capitalism(s) to empower indigenous peoples. Looking primarily at the Alaska Native Corporation Chenega and the Maori Ngai Tahu, she emphasizes the plurality of capitalisms. She argues that indigenous peoples have been forcibly incorporated into late capitalism, but maintain a large degree of agency and can even be empowered by new economic activities. Her paper leads the reader

to reflect on the double meaning of *incorporation*, as indigenous peoples are not merely objects incorporated into a system not of their own making, but also subjects incorporating their economic activities into share-holding legal entities that contribute to indigenous self-determination. She argues that these indigenous forms of capitalism are "rooted in local concepts of wealth, accumulation and distribution." Indigenous capitalisms, unlike non-indigenous corporations, are characterized by consciousness of the colonial relations that led to incorporation, an articulation of indigenous values and capitalist goals, and the dual possibility of both subsumption into capitalism and self-determination facilitated by new capital.

Basically, Bunten makes the argument that indigenous capitalisms are different than non-indigenous capitalisms because indigenous economic behaviour is embedded in indigenous cultural values, such as stewardship of nature and contribution to community. Indigenous capitalism is thus potentially empowering, at least to the extent to which it permits indigenous peoples to negotiate some of the terms of their incorporation into larger economic systems. At the end of the day, however, every compromise between capitalism and indigenous values was made by states and corporations with the ultimate goal of accessing natural resources on indigenous land. As Bunten notes, "non-Native corporate interests impatiently waited in the wings for land disputes to be settled so that they could access subsurface resources." States and corporations are willing to make some concessions to indigenous "autonomy," but largely because it provides new ways to get to natural resources.

Taken together, these four essays explore, to different extents, Marxist concepts of primitive accumulation, alienation, class, and capitalism, and their applicability to the studies of indigenous political economy. In all four articles, the authors document how indigenous peoples have been incorporated reluctantly into economics of resource exploitation. Whether this process happens through violent expropriation of land in Laos, through the creation of political opportunity structures and an indigenous political elite in Taiwan, or through the creation of indigenous capitalisms in Alaska and New Zealand, the objective is to gain access to natural resources,

land, and labour power for the economic benefit of outsiders. The indigenous peoples have a certain agency, and seek certain forms of autonomy, but only within the limits of an economic system created by others and imposed upon them.

The relationship between Marxism and indigenous peoples, like that between Marxism and anthropology, has long been tenuous. Many anthropologists working with indigenous peoples have eschewed materialist and class-based analyses in favour of cultural relativism and its postmodern variants. There are good reasons for a distrust of Marxism. As Ward Churchill discovered a generation ago, Marxists often relegated indigenous peoples to the evolutionary past and indigenous leaders often found Marxism irrelevant to their priorities of ecological stewardship and community. Churchill deplored this situation, saying that “No American theory can write the Indian off as irrelevant; the Indian’s is the first vision in this hemisphere, not only as a chronological fact, but because the Indian experience was and remains formative to this society’s psychological and material character” (Churchill 1983:11). This observation is certainly as applicable to indigenous situations in other cases as well, including those explored in this special issue.

Anthropologists working with indigenous peoples, including the four authors in this special issue, have moved beyond the ethnocentrism of earlier generations of Marxists. They have listened carefully to their research partners, and learned to appreciate the knowledge of indigenous people on a plane of epistemological and ontological parity. They know about expropriation of land, economic disparities, the creation of political elites, and the benefits of indigenous capitalisms, not because they read it in a dusty volume by Marx, but because they lived in indigenous communities for long periods of time and indigenous people shared these stories with them. Since capitalism has become part of our shared political and economic environment, this also counts as indigenous knowledge. For this reason, indigenous people and anthropologists alike have found it useful to use terms that resonate with Marx’s analysis of capitalism, even as they reject the ethnocentrism of 19th century evolutionism. This genre

of anthropology may even contribute to the construction of new relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people, as all peoples suffer from environmental degradation, resource expropriation, and elite formation at the expense of the majority. For the purpose of anthropology, some Marxist concepts, applied respectfully and wisely in the context of detailed ethnography, can help us understand indigenous situations in late capitalism. If combined with other forms of knowledge, moreover, especially indigenous knowledge of the environment, these concepts can also contribute to real indigenous autonomy and perhaps a better future for all of humanity.

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