'Idle No More'

Indigenous People's Coordinated Reaction to the Twin Forces of Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism in Canada

Ryan Duplassie

Canada's Idle No More continues a centuries old Indigenous political and social reaction against the twin forces of globalized economic imperialism and nation-state colonialism. In December 2012, Aboriginal Canadians initiated through cellular and online communications a massive national response to the strategy of Canada's majority Federal Conservative government to further entrench Canada as a raw resource colony serving the transnational, globalizing cadre of corporations and cartels, financiers, bureaucrats, and the militaries, militias, and police forces hired to safeguard exploitative capital. Indigenous people have long been challenging and resisting industrial and environmental exploitation and pollution in response to their respective local situations and continue to do so in accordance with their limited means. Global communication tools such as the Internet, however, have revolutionized the means of resistance. Cellular networks, email listservs, facebook, youtube and twitter allow news, stories, and histories to be disseminated widely by Indigenous people, generating a volume of dialogue and information-sharing only possible in the twenty-first century. These communication systems also allow for the spontaneous planning of solidarity-building Aboriginal round dances and Indigenous-led rallies, protests, conferences, teach-ins, and information sessions. With so much information shared, respective local resistances and Indigenous cultural restorative initiatives are able to be contextualized for all Canadians as responses to the twin realities of nation-state colonialism and global economic and resource imperialism.¹

Opposition to such formidable systems entails a cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians that resembles the spirit of treaty between nations of sovereign peoples. Treaties are therefore summoned

1 Indigenous peoples from colonized or formerly countries worldwide also showed their affinities with for Idle No More by disseminating over the internet photos of group or individual support. Idle No More was also shown early support by activist groups from former imperial centers such as Great Britain, France, and Germany.

in Idle No More discussions as legal, constitutional, historical, and ethical agreements that embody the potential of true partnership between peoples. That said, no formal alliances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians have resulted from Idle No More. There are no recognized “leaders” of the “movement.” Indigenous people who are asked to engage radio, television, and Internet journalists tend to be lawyers, academics, and experienced politicos and negotiators, but these individuals refuse to be acknowledged as leaders. There are no formal institutions or memberships for Idle No More, no political parties. There are no universal declarations made. Rather, Idle No More is a catchy twitter hashtag first shared in December 2012 that has come to serve as a identifying call for Indigenous activists and academics and their non-Indigenous allies to rally for the ethical implementation of treaty, and concomitantly for equitable, sustainable social economies that support environmental protection measures. Not all resistance initiatives fly under a physical or nominal “Idle No More” banner. That said, it is understood implicitly that all forms of resistance are supported by the Idle No More platform generally. This paper outlines how Idle No More serves as a platform for organization, activism, and information-sharing that incorporates and expresses the totality of Indigenous concerns in Canada. It addresses the social, political, legal, and historical complex surrounding the opposition to global capital and the Canadian state as facilitator. The ultimate purpose of Idle No More is to rally for sustainable economies. In order to achieve such economies, a revolution in thinking and economic practice is necessary. To generate support for revolutionary acts, Idle No More participants encourage historical, political, and economic truth-telling. It is hoped that truth will lead to the ethical understanding and implementation of treaty and support for Indigenous cultural revitalization efforts that require stringent environmental safeguards stewarded in partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. Details of the situation in the community of Grassy Narrows First Nation illustrate how a localized context speaks to the intersecting local-regional-national-global complex.

The Federal Conservative “Economic Action Plan” and the Beginning of Idle No More

Idle No More began in late 2012 when a highly controversial tactic to facilitate globalized, neo-colonial exploitation of Canada’s resources was aggressively and unilaterally passed by the Federal Conservatives, encapsulated in an

impactful set of federal budget bills, Bills C-38² and C-45.³ Taken together, these budget bills facilitate the Conservatives' "Economic Action Plan."⁴ The Economic Action Plan relies on mainstream Canadians' senses of residually racist entitlement to resources and a high material standard of living. The Conservatives promise jobs to Canadians by way of expanded industrial growth through state and provincial support of accelerated resource extraction by multinational corporations. Investment is encouraged by these bills by a drastic reduction in Canada's environmental regulations and through corporate tax breaks, which undermine Canadian civil rights and human rights through tax extortion, and threaten the sustainability of Canada's environmental regenerative capacities and clean water supplies. To attain this, Bill C-45 undermines several Aboriginal land rights, and First Nations' abilities to administer their "reserves" in self-determining ways that could limit "development" and "economic growth" for the governments, corporations, and their workers and shareholders.⁵

Saliently, most of Canada's resource extraction takes place on territories protected by historical treaties between the federal Crown and First Nations.

- 2 Bill C-38 is also known as the "Jobs, Growth, and Long-Term Prosperity Act." The mesmerizing list of its tabled laws and amendments can be viewed on the website of the Parliament of Canada. <<http://parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&DocId=5697420>>, visited on 9 August 2013.
- 3 Bill C-45 is also known as the "Jobs and Growth Act." It contains amendments to portions of Bill C-38 and well as new legislation. Its laws and amendments can be viewed on the website of the Parliament of Canada. <<http://parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&DocId=5942521>>, visited on 9 August 2013.
- 4 Canada's Economic Action Plan is detailed at <http://actionplan.gc.ca/en>.
- 5 The bills within omnibus Bill C-45 affecting portions of 'Indian Act' – the federal Act that outlines rules, regulations, and responsibilities for First Nations – are as follows: Bill C-27 First Nations Financial Transparency Act, The First Nations Private Property Ownership Act (Proposed), Bill S-2 Family Homes on Reserve and Matrimonial Interests or Right Act, Bill S-6 First Nations Elections Act, Bill S-8 Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act, Bill C-428 Indian Act Amendment and Replacement Act, Bill S-207 An Act to amend the Interpretation Act, Bill S-212 First Nations Self-Government Recognition Bill. Opposition to these bills by Aboriginal people lies in the fact that though they are given innocuous titles that appear to benefit Aboriginal people and communities, it is felt that their implementation will do the opposite. These bills were not given adequate consultation and input from First Nations, but were rammed through hastily into legislation as part of the omnibus package. To view an Indigenous lawyer's criticism of these bills, see Pamela Palmater's discussion, starting at minute 57:00, in the following youtube video that went viral, as an educational piece, on social media. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3tj8cCDc98>>.

According to Canada's Aboriginal people, the treaties are meant to legislate the sharing of lands by reserving viable portions of First Nations territories for Indigenous survival and cultural continuance.⁶ However, Canada's Federal and Provincial governments have historically and continually assumed ultimate authority to make resource-based decisions for all lands and waters without consistent, meaningful consultation and negotiation with First Nations concerned. The federal Economic Action Plan is therefore by nature ensconced in the historical project of global economic imperialism through Canadian colonialism, and flagrantly trounces constitutionally protected Aboriginal rights and treaty rights. The Conservative agenda also ensures the continuance of destructive and unsustainable, polluting industrial extractive processes as its economic mainstay.⁷

Legislative threats to Canada's water protection measures were the immediate impetus for the #idlenomore twitter hashtag in December 2012. The health of Canada's waters and waterways are a concern shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians alike, evidenced by their integrated presence at protests and demonstrations against oil and gas pipelines in Western Canada; protests that preceded Idle No More.⁸ Integrated activism around water continues

6 On territory where treaties were never negotiated, there are dozens of Indigenous land claims in the court system that seek to maintain inherent Indigenous rights to respective territories. These land claims, when resolved, are known generally as modern-day treaties.

7 The terms 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are often used interchangeably, though 'Indigenous' can be equated with 'First Nations' specifically. The term 'Aboriginal' includes First Nations, Inuit, and Metis together. 'Native' is a term that has become rather out of vogue. Canada's Indigenous peoples are still officially recognized by the state as 'Indians', and are governed, for example, by the state-drafted Indian Act. Some Indigenous people refer to themselves as Indians after generations of dealing with state authorities, though they are of course cognizant of the term as a colonial misnomer.

8 Oil and gas pipelines are highly controversial as they corrode easily, and are known to rupture and spill with disconcerting frequency. The remoteness of spill locations, and inadequate emergency and clean-up response infrastructure adds to concerns over environmental and financial costs, ultimately shouldered largely by First Nations and citizen tax-payers. There has been sustained Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cooperation in opposing the Northern Gateway pipeline, proposed by the multi-national Enbridge energy corporation, to transport bitumen (oil sand) from the large multi-national oil sands operations in northern Alberta across the Rocky Mountains to the west coast of British Columbia. Its proposed passage traverses several dozens of lakes and rivers, many of which flow through unceded [ie. disputed areas undergoing Indigenous land claims processes] First Nations territories and protected areas. Moreover, once the bitumen reaches the coast, it is meant to be transported by sea-going oil tankers through a notoriously treacherous and unpredictable route past island channels, eventually to reach the open Pacific where it will be transported to

to occur in public spaces in Canada, from shopping malls to city parks to Parliamentary and Legislative buildings, impressively invigorated by the Idle No More impetus.⁹ To wit, one of the more egregious of the legislative amendments packaged with Bill C-45 is a severe alteration of the country's Navigable Waters Protection Act (1882) – Canada's oldest environmental protections Act. It has been rearranged to the Navigation Protection Act (NPA, 2012). In the government's words, "[t]his initiative is in line with the Government of Canada's commitment to returning to balanced budgets, streamlining the regulatory process, eliminating red tape and encouraging long-term economic growth and job creation."¹⁰ Here, economic growth is sold to Canadians by promises of job creation but at the expense of water safeguards and meaningful liability for polluting multi-national corporations. Direct and robust protection of the vast majority of Canada's waterways is removed, as indicated in the removal of "Waters" protection from the Act's title. Instead, the new Act protects the rights of corporate 'navigation' on Canada's waters for their extractive and processing purposes. Informed critics observe that "[t]he NPA would exclude 99.7 per cent of Canada's lakes and more than 99.9 per cent of Canada's rivers from federal oversight...It is estimated that Canada contains over 2.25 million rivers, [only] 62 of which are protected under the NPA." Rivers excluded from remaining protections are those planned to be traversed by cross-country oil and gas

international markets, particularly in China. For more on the Northern Gateway pipeline opposition, see, for example: <<http://www.vancouversun.com/technology/First+Nations+want+Northern+Gateway+pipeline+project+killed/8949876/story.html>>. There is also coordinated Canada-U.S. opposition to the proposed Keystone XL pipeline which proposes to transport bitumen from northern Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico for purposes of multi-national tanker transport. See, for example, <http://business.financialpost.com/2013/08/16/anti-keystone-xl-bandwagon-grows-as-distant-towns-groups-join-opposition/?__lsa=1980-8e60>.

9 An example of a public round dance attended by the author and his children in a Winnipeg shopping mall, see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ7wEClvYyU>>. The author was also engaged in Winnipeg's Idle No More-inspired "Water Wednesdays" initiative at Memorial Park across from the provincial Legislature whenever possible throughout the summer of 2013, disseminating pamphlet information and concern around water policy. For an example of local news video coverage of an Idle No More rally at the Manitoba provincial Legislature, see <<http://metronews.ca/news/winnipeg/472574/idle-no-more-protestors-rally-in-winnipeg/>>. For coverage of this same event by the Canada's national public media outlet, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), see <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/over-800-attend-idle-no-more-rally-at-manitoba-legislature-1.1402199>>.

10 For the federal government's full explanation of the Navigation Water Act, see <<http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/mediaroom/backgrounders-npa-691.htm>>.

pipelines.¹¹ In other words, the new legislation in practice prioritizes the rights of multinational corporations to “navigate” the waters as required for their water-intensive production, processing, refining, and waste-storage procedures. Activists identifying with Idle No More rally against state catering to neo-colonial industrial expansion and pollution by global corporations.

One way that Indigenous activists are gaining non-Indigenous supporters through Idle No More information-sharing is to appeal to their concern for the public purse. Tax dollars are used for the majority of industrial cleanup costs. Moreover, “investment incentives” to multinational corporations are offered by Federal and Provincial governments in the form of very attractive and profitable corporate tax deductions. Governments also use the public purse to build roads and infrastructure on behalf of industry. On all counts, governments are subsidizing corporations by transferring tax-payers’ heavy income and consumer taxes directly to corporate shareholders who enjoy tax breaks and increase shareholder profits. Environmentally and financially, it is a system of public risk for private gain. There are few penalties under the new Act for violators. Extraction corporations and their subsidiaries – many profiting millions of dollars annually – are issued these penalties under the Act’s amendments: proposed amendments to the Navigable Waters Protection Act establish an administrative monetary penalty scheme. Under this scheme the *maximum penalty* for violation is \$5,000 in the case of an individual, and \$40,000 in any other case. Under the proposed amendments, non-compliance with certain provisions may constitute an offence under the Act. Persons found guilty of committing an offence may be liable on summary conviction to a term of imprisonment of *not more than* six months, or to a fine of *not more than* \$50,000 or both. (*italics mine*)¹²

Idle No More serves to awaken and inspire complacent Canadians. They are being extorted while Canada’s collective waters are being abused, threatening survival in a very real sense.¹³ Already, many First Nations residing downstream from toxic industrial effluent are reeling from increased cancers and other

11 This quote, within a most thorough and important critique of the Navigation Protection Act is found at <http://www.ecojustice.ca/files/nwpa_legal_backgrounder_october-2012/>.

12 This quotation is extracted from a media notice published in 2012 on the Federal Government website. <<http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/mediaroom/backgrounders-npa-6911.htm>>.

13 As an example of the state acting as facilitator to global capital interests, the Federal Conservative government is aggressively seeking a trade deal with the European Union that may include the privatization of water resources for profit, open to powerful European water management, bottling, and distributing corporations. See the slideshow at the bottom of this article. <http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/10/19/ceta-canada-eu-free-trade-deal_n_4124867.html>.

ailments due to contamination.¹⁴ It is well known to Canadians that close to one-third of First Nations "reserve" communities experience long-standing, chronic lack of access to clean drinking water. Many are situated on polluted lakes or rivers and the governments fail to upkeep sanitation and filtration facilities. Since the advent of Idle No More, awareness of the complexity of Indigenous water-related health problems across Canada has spread even more widely through social media and teach-ins. The author observes that increasing numbers of non-Indigenous Canadians refer to First Nations illnesses in their vocal disaffection with the federal Conservative government and globalizing corporations engaged in resource extraction industries. Non-Aboriginal Canadians are hereby becoming aware that their own safe drinking water and access to nourishing food cannot be taken for granted. Beginning with shared protests over oil and gas pipelines and sustained through the auspices of Idle No More, solidarity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens is increasingly evident in Canada. This is points to some success for the Idle No More platform.

It has become clear that growing numbers of non-Aboriginal commentators are better educated than they were a year ago. They are quicker to articulate the links between land and water degradation, the abuse of the Canadian taxpayer, and the abuse of First Nations tied spiritually, culturally, and economically to Canada's exploited lands and waters. Aboriginal people are more visible at general civic municipal meetings and urban 'town hall' events, and non-Aboriginal organizers are more frequently calling on their Aboriginal fellows to sit on discussion panels and make public presentations at universities and municipal council rooms. In short, one of the more obvious results of Idle No More in the past eleven months has been a coming together for co-presentations between concerned Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian citizens, academics, activists, scientists, and even economists.

Idle No More: Building Solidarity with Mainstream Canadians

Idle No More is a social platform that allows Canada's Indigenous people to lead the discussion beyond the theoretical and practical research offered by

14 For example, read below of the increased cancers affecting residents of Fort Chipewyan First Nation in northern Alberta, downstream from the infamous oil sands extraction and manufacturing operations. <<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/emmapullman/2013/07/tar-sands-leave-legacy-cancer-and-polluted-water-aboriginal-peopl>>. Detailed later in this paper is Ontario's Grassy Narrows First Nation, a community still fighting for adequate compensation for mercury poisoning of their traditional waters beginning in the 1960s.

Occupy Wall Street's exposure of state-global collusion in financial graft and corruption. At Occupy Wall Street's zenith, Aboriginal activists and academics – as occupied, colonized people – presented Canadian and American participants of the Occupy movement with a more enriched and mature discussion of the implications behind the notion of "occupation." From the 17th-century imperial era to present, Aboriginal nations and their environments have been occupied, exploited and abused by actors in a globalizing colonial and neo-colonial system that operates locally in intimate, historical Indigenous ecological spaces. Non-Indigenous Occupy Wall Street protesters were therefore placed in the context of complicity in the exploitative historical process that has defined economies in North America for several centuries, beginning with the fur trade and on through the industrial revolution. Through education, many non-Indigenous protesters were at that time compelled to direct their energies to decolonization totally. In short, Indigenous people affiliated with Idle No More are creating movement beyond occupation, expressing their sovereignty in a dance of resistance that summons Indigenous cultural pride alongside the political and ecological exigencies inherent in the decolonization process. Indigenous activists are inviting their non-Aboriginal fellows to join in the dance of decolonization, as it is understood that the revolution in thinking and practice is not possible without mass empathy and participation. Education is required for the cultivation of the empathetic impetus.

The movement of brown bodies trip wires of erstwhile complacency in Canada. Sensitive and often near invisible are the colonial tripwires and booby-traps set wittingly by the state, and guarded often inadvertently by a mis- and under-educated Canadian mainstream suffering from the diseases of racism, entitlement, and entertainment and consumer distraction. Non-Indigenous activists in the Occupy movement exemplified how well-meaning and impressively informed critics of mainstream socio-economics can miss the decolonization imperative. Idle No More suggests an activism that is ensconced in mass education for the purpose of revolution embedded within a decolonizing praxis. Social media links blogs and other journalistic and historical sites popular and academic, mainstream and alternative allow for public education in a way unknown in previous eras of resistance.¹⁵ Change in mainstream consciousness is slow, but tangible.

15 For an example of a popular blog / resource site, see that of Chelsea Vowel, an Albertan Plains Cree-speaking Metis lawyer and educator living in Montreal. <<http://apihtawikosan.com/2012/12/16/canada-its-time-we-need-to-fix-this-in-our-generation/>>. For an example of the mainstream media's engagement with the omnibus bills, see Aaron Wherry's articles in Canada's popular national news magazine Maclean's <[Ryan Duplassie - 9789004282087
 Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 10:02:25AM
 via free access](http://www2</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

Social critique within anti-colonial theory is generated predominantly by academics. These views have long been disseminated in Native Studies departments at universities beginning with historical revisionism in the postwar era of human rights, and more recently of Aboriginal rights. Indigenous academics and a growing majority of their sympathetic non-Indigenous colleagues are taking deliberate steps to popularize anti-colonial theories and expositions alongside those directed for anti-globalization purposes. As academic material trickles to mainstream consciousness, a growing contingent of non-Indigenous critical thinkers are evidently awakening to the possibility of partnership with their Indigenous fellows in reaction against the Economic Action Plan as a colonial state strategy to entrench the globalizing system of exploitative capital.

Solidarity within the mainstream is essential for meaningful opposition. The overarching strategy of Indigenous people in the initial weeks of Idle No More was to promote partnership through the ethical understanding and implementation of Canada's treaties. The Idle No More ethos posits that relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians should be built on the mutual respect reflected in the spirit of Canada's historical treaties – at least from the Indigenous perspective – signed as nation-to-nation agreements between the federal Crown and signatory First Nations. Ethical understanding of treaty allows for the open and truthful dialogue necessary to foster and develop the responsible communities and sustainable economies anathema to the federal Economic Action Plan.

There are social, historical, legal, and constitutional reasons that treaties should embody respectful relationships in Canada. Section 35(1) of Canada's Constitution – officially repatriated from the British Crown in 1982 – recognizes and affirms Aboriginal rights and treaty rights.¹⁶ However, the precise nature and applicability of Aboriginal rights and treaty rights *in operation* remain legally undefined in provincial and Supreme Court legislatures. Notwithstanding, Idle No More sympathizers recognize that Aboriginal peoples hold inherent rights to their historic homelands and a generous hand in the development of sustainable resource management within those spaces.

.macleans.ca/2012/06/06/a-rough-guide-to-bill-c-38/>and <<http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/12/03/a-rough-guide-to-bill-c-45-the-second-budget-implementation-act/>>.

16 The text of Section 35 of the Constitution Act, as well as historical context around Aboriginal spokespeoples' struggle to have Aboriginal rights and treaty rights recognized and affirmed in the Constitution, is provided here by the Arts faculty at the University of British Columbia (UBC). <<http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/?id=1050>>, visited on 9 August 2013.

Treaties are presented as viable historical, legal, constitutionally protected entities that can forward equity and reconciliation in Canada. Addressing the federal Economic Action Plan as a violation of Canada's Constitution is a viable legal option for Indigenous people. Support by non-Aboriginal activists and academics for such a constitutional challenge is being sought and the author observes that the support is growing among enlightened non-Indigenous individuals and groups.

Residual Racism and Colonialism: Challenges to Mainstream Solidarity-Building

It is conceded, however, that despite the ramping up of public education efforts since Idle No More began, mainstream Canada is still quickly polarized when acts of resistance hit their pocketbooks; for example, when actions force work stoppages or block transportation and supply routes. Indigenous resisters employ such tactics as a last resort, only after repeated attempts at open and truthful dialogue are rebuffed. Tried and tested Machiavellian strategies of divide-and-conquer allow government-influenced corporate media – particularly conservative national print and television media – to undermine any form of resistance. Criticisms of Canada's resource-intensive practices are presented as an attack on Canada's economy generally, and the use of force to quell environmentalist/Indigenous activism is presented necessary for 'national security'.¹⁷

State force leveled against Indigenous activism is still supported by much of the mainstream, though with more information and analysis shared, general sentiment is visibly shifting. The crux of the polarization lies in the fact that most Canadians are dependent on extractive industry for employment and material comfort, whether in the primary extractive and manufacturing sectors, secondary distribution and retail sectors, or the multitudes of peripheral service businesses whose requisite cash flow is dependent ultimately on the above. Racist entitlement is built intrinsically into the colonial economic paradigm and Canada's non-Indigenous population has shown itself historically to be covertly and overtly disparaging towards Aboriginal people.¹⁸ Under attack,

17 For example, see <<http://www.ctvnews.ca/greenpeace-aboriginal-groups-seen-as-extremist-threats-1.769418>>.

18 The comments section in any online mainstream news story on Idle No More reveals racist and mis-educated vitriol by the public. As an example, see comments below this national news article about Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's decision to end her

therefore, are the Indigenous cultures tied to Canada's lands and waters, and the Aboriginal rights and treaty rights meant to safeguard Aboriginal cultural continuance and cultural and economic self-determination. Mainstream settler/worker populations and their sundry institutions do not escape complicity in these violent takeovers. The average working Canadian engaging with Idle No More is placed in the difficult position of deciding whether it is worth upending their daily employments and jeopardizing their personal financial commitments for the sake of supporting the environment and concomitant Aboriginal rights and treaty rights to viable lands and waters. Idle No More is thus challenged then to engage the mainstream in revolutionary-type discourse without alarming the status quo. It is a difficult venture that requires time and patience.

From the Aboriginal perspective, treaties honour and acknowledge the possibility of positive relations with non-Aboriginal partners within respective treaty territories. Idle No More induces meaningful partnership by reminding Canadians of the country's collective colonial situation, and how mending our economies is not only a fiscal and environmental concern, but is a project ensconced inherently in the cultural and social politics of reconciliation as well.

It is a challenge to compel a mis- and under-educated Canadian mainstream, working under the auspices of globalizing multi-national corporations, to understand Aboriginal protest as anything other than a threat to their financial security. A systemic revolution in social and economic relations is difficult to achieve but Idle No More activists are making strident efforts to remind Canadians that without ecological integrity within a respectful social landscape, no sustainable economy is possible. We as Canadians will not be able to take care of our lands and water, and each other, unless the exploitative ethos is mitigated and until Indigenous peoples take their place as respected treaty partners.

The Indigenous World View: An Aside Towards a Different Economic and Social Paradigm

Indigenous people have been compelled to defend their "rights" in the colonial courts of law. However, when given the chance they have articulated their own understandings of law not as a set of rights but as matrices of obligations and

hunger strike during the heat of the Idle No More flare-up. <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/chief-theresa-spence-to-end-hunger-strike-today-1.1341571>>.

responsibilities to their relations – rocks, waters, soils, sky, trees, animals, ancestors, and future generations. It is epistemologically understood that respect for the cosmological set of relations is necessary for humanity's survival, as all humans are biologically reliant on the abundance offered by clean lands, waters, and skies. Deep knowledge about sustainable living has been generated over several generations by this ontological set of mores and daily praxes. In his book, *Sacred Ecology*, social anthropologist Fikret Berkes notes about "traditional ecological knowledge" after years of living on the land with Canadian Aboriginal groups, that

when the Inuit participants in a 1995 conference were asked to describe traditional knowledge, there was consensus on the following meanings: practical common sense; teachings and experience passed through generations; knowing the country; being rooted in spiritual health; a way of life; an authority system of rules for resource use; respect; obligation to share; wisdom in using knowledge; using heart and head together¹⁹... Implied in the concept is a component of local and empirical knowledge of species and other environmental phenomena. [Yet] there is also a component of practice in the *way* people carry out their agriculture, hunting and fishing, and other livelihood activities. Further, there is a component of belief in peoples' perceptions of their role within ecosystems and how they interact with natural processes...purely ecological aspects of tradition cannot be divorced from the social and spiritual²⁰... Traditional knowledge systems tend to have a large moral and ethical context; there is no separation between nature and culture. In many traditional cultures nature is imbued with sacredness...this is "sacred ecology."²¹

Idle No More is a platform that seeks acknowledgment of and respect for Indigenous knowledge and what it lends to respectful economic praxes. It situates that knowledge not of the past, but as a set of epistemological and practical tools to help enable ethical and sustainable livelihood for Canadians in the present. Spokespeople affiliated with Idle No More beseech people to allow the truths of ultimate biological interdependency found in Western ecological sciences to corroborate Indigenous knowledge of the same. In this way

19 Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.

20 Berkes, 5–6.

21 Berkes, 11.

people can meet respectfully in the center. They can determine together their collective twenty-first century exigencies, and the ethical and economic ethos under which those exigencies need to be addressed for any possibility of success. It is clear that the modes of thinking and acting supported by mainstream global capitalist/consumer culture, as it is promoted by our so-called modern (Western) societies and governments, is exploitative, toxic, and unsustainable. Idle No More is a platform that calls for a social and economic revolution. What sets it apart from previous revolutionary calls is the foregrounding of Indigenous knowledge as an integral tool in resolving our collective environmental and economic challenges. We all operate locally. Indigenous knowledge is local knowledge and it must be respected.

Cultural Revitalization and Knowledge Transfer in Grassy Narrows First Nation, Treaty Three: an Example of Idle No More in Action

Andrew Keewatin is a respected Elder, trapper, hunter, outdoor educator and community addictions counselor in Grassy Narrows First Nation. He holds 'traditional ecological knowledge' of the forest, and of his community history, worth several PhDs. He is venerated locally for his tender efforts with youth, and his outdoor teaching skills. He volunteers at the high school and hosts land-skills workshops at the Grassy Narrows Trappers' Center in hopes to instill in young people a desire to engage with their territories, outdoors – to embrace the "sacred ecology" that is their inheritance as Anishinaabe. Like many First Nations, the youth in Grassy Narrows are without intimate knowledge of their customary lands and land-based practices. Decreased intergenerational passing of traditional skills and knowledge is one of the legacies of residential schools and state child foster programs. Moreover, generations of general harassment by police and state and provincial ministries have also taken their financial and psychological tolls. Ontario's provincial Ministry of Natural Resources, for example, for decades abrogated treaty by illegally and universally enforcing provincial hunting, fishing, and trapping restrictions on Aboriginal people using their own lands. Indigenous people who failed to satisfy "the law" faced crippling fines, confiscation of outdoor equipment, or incarceration. These realities have combined to compromise the people's willingness and ability to engage their lands outside and away from their small "reserves." Idle No More advocates for the re-engagement and indeed the re-occupation of traditional territories so that young Indigenous people can meaningful engage in the rightful environmental stewardship of their ancestral lands.

The Idle No More platform looks inwardly in this way, recognizing that Indigenous people have much restorative work to accomplish if they are to be contributing treaty partners. Andrew Keewatin is performing this work.

In the summer of 2013, Andrew and the author began an intensive, long-term project to facilitate the transfer of Anishinaabe land skills and cultural knowledge to a handful of teenage participants from Grassy Narrows. Our focal exercise in 2013 was camping out on site as Andrew taught us to build a large trapper's cabin. The cabin sits at the north end of beautiful "Indian Lake," roughly thirty minutes by motorboat from the village of Grassy Narrows. The cabin will be used as eventual host site within a small tourist enterprise, reinvigorating the tradition of guiding on the water, and of welcoming visitors. If the bulk of this paper is any indication, the area is ripe with interactive educational opportunities and the author is working to set up liaisons with regional colleges, and the universities to bring students to the site. This type of programming represents the spirit of sharing conceived of by Indigenous signatories of Treaty 3. The events and information around Idle No More disseminated via social media galvanized the participant youth from Grassy Narrows to sign up for the project. Several youth articulated to the author their renewed interest in their traditional lands and waters because of interaction with Idle No More activities online, and they articulated their wish to commiserate with non-Aboriginal tourists and students on their territories. Without Idle No More, young people in Grassy Narrows may not have been motivated to participate. Such are some of the incalculable but tangible ways that Idle No More inspires Indigenous people in Canada, especially youth.

This project is a localized response to the unfortunate loss of traditional land knowledge and ecological destruction experienced by Grassy Narrows. It is meant to engage the youth from the reserve with their non-Aboriginal treaty partners as well and visitors interested in how the land embodies treaty relationships. Such an ecotourism project sits within a growing movement of Indigenous-led ecotourism initiatives worldwide, each with their own respective goals and parameters, yet with these important commonalities distilled for us by Australian researcher Heather Zeppel:

- Tourism connected with Indigenous culture, values, and traditions
- Tourism products owned and operated by Indigenous people
- Tourism based on Indigenous land and cultural identity, controlled from within by Indigenous groups
- Tourism which includes Indigenous 'habitat, heritage, history, and handicrafts'
- Typically involves small tourism businesses owned by tribes and families

- Tourism focused on Indigenous knowledge of culture and nature²²
- Tourism that supports human rights and democratic movements²³

In Grassy Narrows each element falls in line with the overarching goal of the Idle No More platform: to support Indigenous rights, human rights, treaty rights, and sacred ecology within a rubric of real reconciliation in Canada based in an ethical understanding of treaty. Increasing numbers of Canadians are vocally questioning and challenging the unethical and illegal exploitation of people and their environment by rapacious multinational extraction industries. Idle No More is a vehicle wherein ideas for economic alternatives can be discussed between all Canadians, online or in personal meetings. Such projects allow for an organic, realistic venue for such discussion.

The success of this project benefits Grassy Narrows in several ways. As mentioned, it will offer a meeting place where sustained and intensive dialogue with students and recreational visitors can occur. Also, non-indigenous tourism operators in the region have witnessed a robust interest in experiencing the land with local First Nation guides. As yet the region is without a means to cultural access, physical infrastructure, or programming. Grassy Narrows' goal is to begin to provide such for the Treaty 3 region. For its leadership and service, sustainable dollars will be welcomed to the community. Of course, such an ecotourism and education enterprise is dependent on the integrity of the forests and waters. As such, the construction of host cabins throughout the territory could benefit the community by adding to the Supreme Court decision the legal teeth necessary to challenge the province's ability to issue logging licenses there. Most importantly, the teenage participants in the cabin-building project are beginning the journey of rediscovering what responsible stewardship of lands and waters feels like. Interaction with tourists and visiting students encourages communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Interaction can nurture the important personal relationships necessary for reconciliation and the honouring of treaty as a respectful political, economic, and environmental management partnership.

22 Heather Zeppel, *Indigenous Ecotourism: Sustainable Development and Management*. (Trowbridge, UK: Cromwell Press, 2006), 9. Zeppel's work is an excellent and thorough collation of most academic literature and recent conference presentations on Indigenous ecotourism until 2006, much of which emerges from Australia. Zeppel examines the distinctive local exigencies and experiences of several Indigenous ecotourism projects from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and distills for the reader in her introduction their respective similarities, as noted.

23 Zeppel, 15.

Opposition to the federal Economic Action Plan and concomitantly, opposition to the globalizing cadre of corporations intent on maintaining the *status quo*, is inherent in such revolutionary local partnerships between mainstream Canadians and their Aboriginal treaty partners.

Conclusion: A Didactic Farewell

It is impossible to ascertain in hard data the impact that Idle No More has made on Canada's social and political landscapes. But it is certain that the collective consciousness has been raised to a noticeable degree. Racism and financial poverty of have historically ensured Indigenous peoples' marginality on Canada's mainstream socio-political radar. However, the globalizing advent of internet and social media have proven to be great equalizers. Indigenous people now have equal means to mass vocalization at a time in Canada's experience when their voices are most required, and their Indigenous world-views, embodied in diverse notions of sacred ecology, are most relevant. Indigenous activists and academics, in solidarity with their non-Indigenous supporters, are persistent in their push for economic and ecological sustainability, only achievable through respectful social relations. As ecological threats are alarming increasing numbers of people, the Idle No More platform is gaining more credibility and Indigenous people are gaining more respect and support among the mainstream.

A revolution in thought and praxis is required to meaningfully oppose globalizing neo-colonial economic practices facilitated by colonial entities operating behind dubiously legitimized nation-statehood. To achieve revolutionary potential, it is necessary to work on all levels simultaneously: cultural, environmental, educational, economic, legal, and political. Mainstream Canadians must be engaged at each level in order to harness their collective power in numbers and clout. Idle No More spokespeople employ non-threatening dialogue to compel Canadians to see their role as complicit in the colonization and exploitation of Canada's lands and First Peoples; that their high material standards of living are fruits from stolen lands and the abuse of real people living among them.²⁴ To do so without raising their ire in self-defensiveness is no

24 It is beyond the purview of this paper to delve with deserving detail into the problem of missing and murdered Aboriginal girls and women in Canada. As part of Canada's colonial narrative, Indigenous modes of sexual conduct have been misunderstood and appropriated such that Aboriginal women are viewed as wanton and licentious. As such they are deemed less deserving of respect and have been exploited through rape, murder, and

mean feat. The currents of racist entitlement and complacency are still formidable in mainstream Canada. Canada's colonial education curricula normalize narratives of "white" superiority and the righteousness of European and Canadian conquest and 'progress'. Idle No More emanates counteractive ripples of re-education and ethical appeal that aim to create waves of action for the revolutionary cause.

It is not possible to predict how or if Idle No More will achieve its goal, but it is clear that a revolution must occur if Canadians – and indeed peoples worldwide – are to survive with any semblance of health and dignity. In the coming epoch of climate change, inundated coastlines, extreme pollution, drought, crop failure, water shortages, and famine, human societies will have two essential choices: to cooperate in order to minimize suffering and warfare, or to allow those with power and military means to dictate the terms of the lessers' demise. Globalization has normalized the exploitative power systems of neo-colonialism and unsustainable consumerism, assisted by colonial entities. Canada's governments have long served as eager hosts to these systems, elaborated by the federal Conservative Economic Action Plan. The bulk of the Canadian mainstream has proven stubbornly complacent, satiated by material excess, fleeting comfort, and promises of "jobs." However, there is a visible turning of the tide. Idle No More is playing an integral role in raising consciousness, and in

abduction into prostitution rings. Laterally, decades of residential school abuses normalized forms of sexual violence for many Aboriginal people, who were not permitted to be raised in traditional nurturing, functional family and social environments. Combined with alcoholism, sexual violence is an unfortunate problem within many First Nations communities. With roots in colonial modes of oppression and exploitation, the sexual targeting of Aboriginal women by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous men is problematic for many communities. In parallel, abuse of the environment is contextualized by Aboriginal women as violence against Mother Earth, directly associated with violence against girls and women. Several hundred girls and women are missing and murdered in Canada. It is not surprising that Canada's federal government refuses to conduct a full practical and theoretical inquiry into the issue, a refusal for which United Nations special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples, James Anaya, has taken them to task after his recent visit to Canada. See <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/un-human-rights-investigator-says-canada-needs-inquiry-into-missing-aboriginal-women/article14870214/>>. The problem is recognized internationally. To read on Amnesty International's 'No More Stolen Sisters' campaign, for example, see <<http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/indigenous-peoples/no-more-stolen-sisters>>. For an example of how social media is used to address the issue, and to help locate missing Aboriginal girls and women in Canada, see the facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Missing-Murdered-Aboriginal-Women-in-Canada/313160025391260>>.

emboldening multifarious forms of cooperative resistance to globalized systems of exploitation and destruction forwarded by the Economic Action Plan.

It is indeterminable what forms the socio-political revolution in Canada might take if successful. Intrinsic to treaty relationships, from the Indigenous perspective, is open dialogue and continual negotiation as developing conditions warrant. It is unknowable what will emerge from purposeful interchange between Indigenous knowledge holders, Western-trained scientists, infrastructure maintenance and delivery experts, and experienced politicians on all sides. What is certain is that a different form and ethos of structural planning is necessary. Ecologically, we must understand watershed science and the benefits of biodiversity so that we can mitigate the use of harmful chemicals and stop compromising our waters so that we can continue to grow and harvest healthful food. In terms of energy, we must use alternatives to fossil fuels so that our lands and waters remain vital and the effects of climate change are minimized. Socially and economically, we must re-learn to consume less, to recycle almost all materials with non-polluting technologies, and stop extracting resources that are not crucially required. We must shift our notion of “jobs” towards the fulfillment of useful “roles.” In short, we must embrace as a collective our sacred ecology so that we might in fact survive. En route to becoming more responsible for the materials we use for our daily living, our relationships and cooperative capacity will have grown and matured. It is understood that our environmental problems cannot be addressed without first correcting our social challenges. Canada’s economy, like many other colonial economies worldwide, is predicated on environmental racism. This must be arrested if humans have any hope of survival. The exploitative ethos must be curtailed and human energies redirected toward responsible relationships.

Such revolutionary change is anathema to the globalized system exploitation of lands, waters, and the Indigenous peoples tied culturally and economically to those sacred ecologies. Colonial and neo-colonial exploitation is so normalized by mainstream economic and social systems that revolution hardly seems possible. The challenges sometimes seem too numerous and run too deep, the systems too complex, the machinery too automatic. That said, Indigenous people the world over have shown themselves to be resilient, and, ultimately, optimistic. With dialogue and cooperation anything is possible. Canadians mustn’t be complacent. Canada’s Indigenous people are showing the rest of the population that the time to act is now. As “minorities,” Indigenous peoples the world over are reacting to the deleterious aspects of globalization. But by doing so, they are in fact working to generate a new wave of globalization predicated on concerted applications toward survival. This can only be accomplished by acknowledging the collective human family, and treating

each other as brothers and sisters. We are all kin in biological and historical reality. We must acknowledge these facts and honour our responsibilities to each other, to re-foster positive relationships with one another. The Idle No More platform is in fact providing for such performance. It may not be possible, but Indigenous people – Canada and worldwide – are acting, pleading, educating, and hoping. They are showing the globalized mainstream that we must, as a collective, be Idle No More.

Bibliography

- Berkes, Fikret. *EcologySacred*, 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Ecojustice* (e-magazine). "Bill C-45 and the Navigable Waters Protection Act (RSC 1985, C N- 22): Legal Backgrounder." (authors unknown). Last accessed October 22 2013: <http://www.ecojjustice.ca/files/nwpa_legal_backgrounder_october-2012/>.
- "Navigation Protection Act" Public Notice. Ministry of Transport website, Government of Canada, 2012: <<http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/mediaroom/backgrounders-npa-6911.htm>>.
- Zeppel, Heather. *Indigenous Ecotourism: Sustainable Development and Management*. Trowbridge, UK: Cromwell Press, 2006: <http://books.google.ca/books?id=noFNSuof6IC&pg=PA11&lpg=PA11&dq=indigenous+ecotourism+beck&source=bl&ots=khs1hOisIq&sig=CJbDV8CNUd57tnnSyoH2te4Xiyo&hl=en&sa=X&ei=vjhlUuGQLO_wyAH-2IDoDA&ved=oCC4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=indigenous%20ecotourism%20beck&f=false>.