

Let's save humanity from extinction

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This essay is aimed at clarifying for revolutionaries in the core countries of the capitalist system the importance of indigenous movements and their leading role in the anti-capitalist struggle. Humanity has undeniably gained many benefits from the progress of civilization. But today, the attack on nature by the neoliberal capitalist system in the name of “development” is leading our species toward extinction. It's time for an assessment of the price we are paying at the altar of “progress.” Current generations have the responsibility of securing the survival of our species without losing the benefits of civilization.

Attack on Nature

I speak of humans as an endangered species in light of the ferocious attack unleashed upon nature in general—and, thereby, humanity—by the ruling neoliberal capitalist system. The sole motivation of the large transnational corporations currently ruling the world is to obey their sacred commandment: “Gain the most amount of money in the least amount of time.” In fulfilling this mandate, they are willing to sacrifice everything, even their future descendants. The system's logic does not depend on any single individual's conscious choices. Although the love someone has for their future offspring might make them decide against building a factory that could damage the environment, chances are that someone else will come along and build it. So it's not about putting an end to powerful capitalists, it's about ending the system that makes them the rulers of the world.

Attacks against nature are varied and increasing with every day. Plant and animal species are being exterminated. The most serious attack is the global warming of the atmosphere induced by ever-growing greenhouse gas emissions. With the rulers of the world no longer able to deny global warming's existence, the UN has sponsored high-level summits between the world's largest polluters. But they never agree to do anything about stopping global warming; instead, they talk about how they might profit from it. Meanwhile, the icecaps are melting along with glaciers, streams have dried up and rivers are thinning out. Rising sea-levels means islands are disappearing and coastal areas are flooding. The warming of the world has destabilized the climate. Winters are colder, summers are hotter, and hurricanes like Katrina and Sandy are stronger. But the media—beholden as it is to the system—continues to call these “natural” disasters. They are many things, but “natural” is not one of them. They are the result of the global warming being caused by the owners of the world.

The massive attack on jungles and forests is driving the warming of the globe through the deforestation of carbon-absorbing vegetation. The crime is committed in the interest of mines, fossil fuel extraction, highways, or agribusiness, which among other things converts the denuded landscapes into biofuels, transgenic crops, and cattle ranches.

Open-pit mines constitute another major attack, one which developed countries rarely practice on their own turf, preferring to heave the heavy burden onto the backs of their colonies—the so-called “third world” or “developing countries.” Amid dwindling mineral deposits, they explode four tons of rock and earth to extract a single gram of gold, chemically poisoning vast fresh water reserves in the process. The move is noxious for nature and criminal when done at the source of watersheds such as Peru's Conga mine, a life-destroying project that stands to poison five river valleys whose waters feed into both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

Agribusiness and the food industry have exacted their own assault. Their monoculture plantations are poisoning soils with chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides, while the transgenic foods they serve up means our bodies are subject to similar treatment. Agribusiness companies use cutting-edge technology not for the benefit of consumers, but for the benefit of their bottom-line at the cost of consumers' health. They give cattle a hormone to produce more milk, and the milk, in turn, produces cancer. But all the companies care about is making more profits.

Rivers, meanwhile, are under attack from hydroelectric dams, which sap water from the streams used by small-scale farmers who grow nutritious foods and flood the homes and crops of both peasant farmers and indigenous peoples. Highways are also preying on nature, leveling entire jungles in countries like Bolivia and Peru. In Europe, the train line set to link Turin and

Lyon has sparked the “No TAV” movement in northern Italy. I could go on: the tars and in Canada and hopes of its pipeline through the United States, deep-sea oil exploration, bottom-trawl fishing, factory pollution, the ozone hole, nuclear energy, the threat of nuclear war, etc.

Indigenous Peoples

The endgame we’re facing means that it’s imperative for us to critically reflect on the trajectory of our human existence; we must evaluate what aspects of humanity’s advance are positive and which ones are leading our species towards a shallow grave. We should begin by examining our origins. Fortunately, in many parts of the world, we still have autochthonous, indigenous peoples, so-called “wild” peoples. If we drop the pejorative baggage associated with this word, it correctly signals that which is not domesticated by civilization, that which is natural. Despite receiving the least of civilization’s benefits, indigenous people have been at the receiving end of its fiercest attacks.

In studying these populations, wherever they live, we find that they share some common traits. The shared characteristics are not tied to ethnicity, but to a cultural primitiveness unsullied by the deformations of civilization. The indigenous Nunga of Australia, the Dongria Kondh of India, the Bosquimano in Africa, the Sami in Scandinavia, the Attawapiskat of Canada, the Navajo in the United States, the Maya in Mexico, the Nasa in Colombia, the Mapuche in Chile, the Quechua in Peru, they all have some shared beliefs:

- Nature is our mother, we must respect, love, and care for her—these days it’s called “environmentalism.”
- Decisions of importance to society should be decided by society, not by a single individual or a group of individuals—today, this collectivist spirit is described by various names: socialism, communism, anarchism.
- Happiness consists of being able to live well (what some of us call *buen vivir*, collective well-being). Indigenous peoples do not share the main principle of consumerist society, which holds that happiness is achieved by money and what money can buy.
- Indigenous peoples have a profound sense of solidarity.
- Indigenous peoples respect difference; they accept that some people talk or dress differently. Indigenous groups realize differences among themselves and that difference is respected.
- Knowledge is passed on to children and youth from one generation to the next; education is not a business, it’s done by adults and elders.
- Medicine, as a gift from nature, is not a business; individual health is a collective undertaking.

The most primitive, the wildest indigenous peoples, those least contaminated by civilization, are those who most vigorously uphold these principles.

In Peru, the differences between the purer, jungle-dwelling indigenous groups and the more contaminated, highland Quechua and Aymara is notorious. Some examples:

- Highland indigenous peoples grow potatoes, corn, or beans.
- Jungle-dwellers do not grow a set crop. They make a small clearing in the forest and plant various species together, imitating nature—inherently an environmentally friendly system that today goes by the name “permaculture.”
- In the jungle, when an indigenous person hunts a large animal, they don’t salt it for storage. Neighbors are called over and they collectively enjoy the spoils of the individual.

An indigenous Quechua person once told me that the *chunchos*—a pejorative term for jungle dwellers dating back to the Incas—are simply lazy, shoring up his claim with the following anecdote: A rich landowner asked a jungle dweller to clear a stand of forest in exchange for a machete. The landowner was astonished at how well and quickly the native did the job. The rich man handed over the machete in payment and said, “I’ve got a deal for you. Clear another fourth of what you just did, and I’ll give you another machete.” Leaving, the perplexed native responded, “I only have one right hand. What would I use a second machete for?” He did not want progress; he just wanted to live. The Quechua narrator of the story interpreted this as laziness.

A few years ago, Peru's diverse jungle-based indigenous groups joined together from the north, south, and center of the country into a single struggle to defend nature. In the highlands, we are just two groups—Quechuas and Aymaras—but have been unable to do the same. The Amazon's uncontaminated indigenous peoples have no idea if it's Sunday or Monday, nor do they care. They leave home with a bow and arrow. If they find something worth hunting, they hunt it; if they find wild fruits, they harvest them. Passing by their garden patch, they might pick some vegetables or make repairs. They go back home not caring about the time. An outside observer would have no clue if it was just a stroll or work. It was life.

Just because the Amazon's indigenous are less contaminated than us Quechuas does not mean we have lost our love of nature, of our collectivist spirit embodied in the peasant community or the *ayllu* (a kin-based indigenous rural community), of our sense of *buen vivir*, or of human solidarity, etc. Fortunately, indigenous Quechua still rotate their crops—one year beans, the next year potatoes—and sometimes complement these with corn and legumes. The driving motivation is not the size of the harvest, but its diversity, the number of species and varieties being grown.

I felt proud when I found out that the magazine of the Greens in France is called *Pachamama* (meaning “Mother Earth” in Quechua), which I took as sign of respect for our love and struggle for nature. I have heard our word is also commonly used in Catalonia and I also heard it used on Earth Day in São Paulo, Brazil.

Community of Communities

The communitarian spirit can irradiate well beyond the small scale of community. Although I'm sure there are more, I know of three good examples of a “community of communities.” Last year, I was invited to the 40th anniversary celebration of the Cauca Regional Indigenous Council (CRIC) in southwest Colombia (write to prensa@cric-colombia.org for their newsletter). Despite being victimized by the country's internal armed conflict, the CRIC remains strong and enjoys constitutional recognition. The CRIC is made up of 115 local Councils with 11 Council Associations representing several indigenous ethnicities—Totoró, Guanaco, Coconuco, Nasa, Guambiano, Yanacona, Inga, and Eperara—grouped into nine distinct zones, each one with a delegate on the CRIC's executive council. The council has no president or secretary, so each of the nine delegates has equal power. After two years, all the representatives are changed; there is no reelection since “everyone has a head on their shoulders, and no one is indispensable.”

The Kuna on the islands of Panama won constitutional recognition of their autonomy through an armed rebellion in 1929. The Kuna's basic political institution is the *Onmaked Nega* (the peoples' house or Congress), a deliberative space where decisions are made. Community leaders called *Sailas* preside over but do not dominate the Congress. The Kuna's ancestral form of political organization has been strengthened through their community-level Local Congresses and their provincial-level (*conmarca*) General Congress. Through these organizations, the Kuna have maintained high levels of cohesion and decision-making power over their territories, helping defend their harmonious ties with nature.

The third case is the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. Unlike Colombia and Panama, the Mexican constitution does not legally recognize their forms of political organization. Nonetheless, this community of communities is led by their “Good Government Councils” (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*) and is protected from the “bad government” of the Mexican state by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). Zapatista communities are not governed by the EZLN, as is sometimes believed. They are governed by the resolutely civilian Good Government Councils. If a member of the EZLN wants to participate in a Council, they must first resign from the EZLN. They farm the land collectively. Members of the Councils do not receive a salary, and they do not need one, since they receive a portion of each harvest. When their stint in office ends, they simply go back to working the land and another campesino takes their place. On December 21, which their ancestors signaled as the start of a new era—and profiteers cast as the end of the world—more than 40,000 Zapatistas marched silently in the rain in a forceful show of their existence. These are local examples of eco-socialist governments.

I once read something congratulating indigenous peoples for their defense of nature, saying all that was needed was for someone to teach them socialism. On this point, I actually think we have much more to learn from them. Nonetheless, in South America we cannot use the

term “eco-socialist.” Let me explain. Undoubtedly, the rise of the current governments in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela constitute a huge step for liberation struggles in South America. They have challenged the power of North American imperialism and the rule of local oligarchies. However, these governments have so far been unable to delink from the system’s logic of production. Our countries are still positioned in the role of resource extraction sites for the north. They have yet to challenge the logic of “development,” which is pushing humanity toward the abyss. Under such conditions, these governments often end up in confrontations against their own indigenous populations.

These governments have branded themselves as leading the way for a “Socialism of the 21st Century.” In other words, if I say “eco-socialism” to an indigenous Venezuelan, Ecuadoran, or Bolivian, they would respond that they are actually fighting against “Socialism of the 21st Century.” Venezuela’s indigenous Yukpa are defending their ancestral lands from ranchers and the national army. Bolivia’s indigenous Yurakaré would say that Evo Morales is allied with a Brazilian company for the construction of the Tipinis highway, a project that would destroy their land, which lies within the boundaries of a national park. An indigenous Ecuadoran would describe their fierce struggle against Rafael Correa’s support for the predation of their lands by transnational oil companies. Moreover, if I tell Chile’s Mapuche that they are “eco-socialist,” then they would respond that they fought against the “socialist” government of Michelle Bachelet, who mobilized a Pinochet-era law against Mapuches for repressing their movement.

Repression

The most horrific repressions known to humanity have been those directed by “civilization” against indigenous peoples. The Americas have been the site of countless massacres. On an annual basis in colonial Peru and Bolivia, the Spanish would send a specific number of local indigenous peoples into the mines. The next year, they would send in a new round of people. What they established was a system worse than slavery given that slave owners at least had an interest in keeping their slaves alive. But in the mine and the hacienda system, it didn’t matter how many indigenous died. If the mine owner received 100 indigenous and 50 died, then he would still receive 100 more the next year along with the 50 replacements. In other words, the only way of leaving the mines was to die. Many, in fact, chose suicide over work in the mines and some mothers are known to have killed their children to prevent their prolonged suffering.

The carnage was one reason for the uprising led by Tupac Amaru, who was punished by being forced to watch the mutilation of his wife after which he was drawn and quartered. During Uruguay’s republican era, the Charrúas were amicably invited to their slaughter at the massacre of Salsipuedes. In the United States, resistance against the invaders was so strong that it became the atrocious plotline of cowboy movies. Argentina’s war against the natives was executed under President Sarmiento, who is known as the “Professor of the Americas” and there is still a monument celebrating the genocidal General Roca. The Mapuche in Chile managed to sign a treaty with the Spaniards who were forced into recognizing the natives’ territorial rights, but the new republican government quickly scrapped the treaty after independence. The Mapuche’s struggle thus continues. They don’t even consider themselves Chilean; they instead see themselves as an indigenous nation under attack by Chile. The rebelliousness of the natives in Cuba led to their extermination and replacement by enslaved Africans. Indeed, the enslavement of native Africans, the massacres in Asia and the Pacific are part of the same history of “civilized” repression.

The indigenous of the Americas were crushed, but they at least lived and died on the lands of their ancestors. Indigenous Africans, however, were ripped from their homelands and even lost their native tongues through miscegenation. Enslaved Africans unleashed hundreds of rebellions in the Americas. In Haiti, they led the first revolution of Independence in Latin America. Oppressors from the world over, including those struggling for independence in their own lands, isolated and/or attacked Haiti. Not even Simón Bolívar, who had received help from Haiti, reciprocated with aid. Today, by order of the rulers of the world, Haiti is under an occupation by the colonial armies of the UN, along with the embarrassing participation of troops sent by Bolivia’s indigenous president.

Slaves who managed to escape from captivity formed collective beacons of democracy and human solidarity. Outlining the crimes of “civilization”—old and new—against indigenous

peoples would take up far too much space. I personally suffered anti-indigenous repression for having been part of the struggle that abolished the feudal servitude of indigenous Peruvians. I was jailed and the courts twice tried sentencing me to death. But thanks to international solidarity I avoided the death penalty and I was subsequently freed. In the United States, Leonard Peltier is serving two consecutive life terms. I hope that U.S. eco-socialists will take up the duty of fighting for the liberation of jailed indigenous eco-socialists like him.

The struggle against the system is growing. In many Latin American countries, indigenous and non-indigenous peoples are staunchly struggling against oppressive extractive regimes led by transnational corporations and their subservient government allies. Fortunately, the surge of a more collectivist society has also hit the cities, as in the case of the recovered factories in Argentina, where in many places and for many years workers have managed the factories abandoned by their former bosses. The legal system has been forced into recognizing the right of workers to become worker-owners, who strictly manage their workplace through truly democratic and non-hierarchical means.

We have countless examples of rebellion against the inhuman impositions of the system. For instance, against the “food industry” and its attempt to convert human nutrition into site of voracious profits at the expense of human health, new deals have been forged between campesinos growing organic crops and consumers looking for healthier food alternatives. In Greece, a group of young people organized the direct sale of campesinos’ products to consumers, circumventing the mediation of grocery stores. Some groups in Mexico have even created their own currency for internal exchange. And the explosion of Arab peoples against their despotic regimes continues.

Since the system is also attacking people in developed countries—mainly, at the service of banks and financial companies—protests have also erupted in those countries. These democratic movements include *los indignados* in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in the United States, and the international protests that swept many European countries on November 14. Struggles in defense of nature have emerged in these countries as well, such as the “No TAV” movement in northern Italy, the human chain against nuclear energy in Germany, the successful referendum against nuclear energy and water privatization in Italy, and the resistance against fracking in the United States. Canada has critically important processes underway: Canadian environmental organizations led an international mobilization against the country’s global mining companies on August 1 (Pachamama Day). Last December, thousands of indigenous peoples and their supporters mobilized *en masse*. First Nations mobilized across Canadian cities under the banner “Idle No More.” Their struggle combines the fight against colonial oppression with a defense of the environment.

A Return to Our Ethical Roots

Humanity is faced with a dilemma: We can return to our primitive ethic that lives on in the indigenous peoples of the world or we can cease to exist. Going back to our primitive ethic means a return to an eco-socialist society of love and respect for Mother Nature and of political horizontalism in which government is a collective experience. We would thereby extinguish the consumerist society that equates happiness with the greedy accumulation of money. A profound sense of solidarity would return to humanity; the “Other” would cease to be seen as a rival and become “Another Me.” We would be different and celebrate our differences; machismo, racism, and all other forms of discrimination would disappear.

The reigning “food industry” is driven by the goal of making as much money as possible without a care about whether its products benefit our health. When the rule of capital comes to an end, the production of food will be driven by the goal of nourishing people with healthy foods. Today, the profit motive leads a vast amount of human energy to be wasted on “advertising,” urging everyone to “buy, buy, buy.” Energy will no longer be wasted in this way once use supplants exchange as the basis of production. The compulsion to “sell” as much as possible means that companies actually waste human energy in making their products have a short life so that buyers have to quickly dispose of what is no longer useful and buy more. The upshot is an enormous waste of human energy and the accumulation of contaminants and waste in the environment. When profit ceases to be the incentive, products will be made as durable as possible and with the least amount of waste as possible so as to not hurt the environment.

Returning to a primitive ethic does not mean returning to a primitive life. The scientist and technicians currently at the service of companies searching for profits will turn toward the service of humanity. They will be able to help us decide which benefits of civilization we can continue to enjoy without putting the life of our species at risk. Let's hope that humanity defeats the rulers of the world who are quickly driving our species toward extinction. Let's hope humanity takes its future into its own hands and harmoniously reintegrates itself with nature and saves itself.