

All Our Relations (of Production): Losing and finding Marx in the field of Indian materialism[†]

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This paper developed from a talk given in a panel entitled “Indigenous Marxism”, as part of the Historical Materialism conference held in late April of this year at New York University. Yet my goal in writing this is not a consideration of Marxism as it is adopted or deployed by indigenous people living under settler colonial regimes around the world—rather, I would like to consider the idea of Marx, as it appears to Indian peoples engaged in the struggle for decolonization and national liberation in the Americas.

Neither materialism, nor Marxism, nor indeed the historical Marx who lived, died, and rests in Highgate, is the object at hand, but precisely the idea of Marx. This is in a certain way an attempt to invert the critical but essentialist and, in the final account, Euro-supremacist optic turned towards the indigene of this continent so long ago by Marx himself, when he first encountered accounts of life and politics among the Haudenosaunee produced by early anthropologists and colonial scholars and administrators. By limiting Marx’s presence to that of a specter approached only obliquely, I hope to essay a critical rhetorical method for aboriginal American philosophy to engage with the European intellectual tradition. As Europeans have historically only circuitously approached a constructed indigeneity in their theorizing of political right and ethics in this continent—remaining all the while solidly in their own traditions, their own ideologies, and their own discourses of power—so I hope that approaching Marx, or a certain ghost of Marx, may help Indians better engage politically and intellectually with one another.

The field of critical aboriginal thought remains largely hidden from view: we are a transnational intellectual community twice negated and living in a moment of twilight. First, the specificity of Indian nations is denied by the European dream of the monolithic Indian. Then, the depth and breadth of Indian thought is denied by the legends surrounding the Indian history of ideas, particularly Indian metaphysics, religion, and theology. And Indians are always already spiritual beings—never political, never philosophical; our thought simply melts into air.

Vine Deloria, Jr., in an essay on the relationship between Indian humor and militancy, remarked that, for Indian people, “Columbus and Custer jokes are the best for penetrating to the heart of the matter.” Perhaps, then, a theoretical conceit at Marx’s expense may help in finding our way to the heart of Indian materialism. One may take this short sketch as support of a claim to Indian sovereignty over Karl Marx, and over the terrain of historical materialism itself, like the coyote or raccoon that sneaks into the camp of modernity like a tired trope, and takes the cowboys’ dinner out of their hands as the fire is dying and evening approaches.

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How would we, you or I, locate the thought of Marx in the context of an Indian philosophy of material processes? One could not begin to describe, even rudimentarily, the landscape in which such a thought would find itself embedded, without first confronting the position of Native People in relation to Marx and Marxism: perpetual analysands, silent objects, black and white photographs framed by the discourses of “middle savagery” of eighteenth century ethnology and of “becoming-nomad” of twenty-first century post-postmodernism. Indians themselves are so over-determined in their subjugation that no possible place may be found for Marx in a critical Native American philosophy because, until relatively recently, no such philosophy was thought to exist, let alone be capable of contributing to studies on Marx and historical materialist theory. Yet, despite ethnology, residential schools, etc., in whatever field, be it radical ecology, feminism, or responses to austerity, the aboriginal and tribal perspectives that allow Native people to navigate the settler colonial regime in defense of their humanity and nationhood continue to be predicated on traditional, autochthonous, rigorous, and well developed intellectual and theoretical insights. The question is not one of the persistence of aboriginal memory, but of an insistence upon it, of a necessary affirmation of aboriginal specificity and sovereignty in every domain—be it political or philosophical. The four brief sketches that follow are structured around the notion of the Four Directions, a widespread figure of fundamental importance to the metaphysical theories of many aboriginal people of North America, from Manitoba to Guatemala. The conceptualizations of each cardinal direction follow their formulation in classic Mexican philosophy, as presented in the extant works of fifteenth and sixteenth century priests and scholars, and interpreted by contemporary researchers.

The East: Traditionalism and perpetual beginnings

At every moment, activists and organizers generally uphold the widely held tradition that the greatest scholars and doctors among Indian people are the communities’ elders, whose access to knowledge and authority surpass academic degrees and lists of publications in importance. The elders serve as the link between a community and its ancestors, and constitute a primary connection of memory and flesh between the indigenous individual, the nation, the land, and the spirit of the world.

The east, as the place of sunrise, is a sign of beginning, but also of repetition, like the elder who must forget how often she tells the same story in order for the young to remember to learn it. This is also a thought of our elders: every beginning is an application of force, a cosmic event that instantiates the space of the human by enacting time, and the systematicity of a chronology that may endure forever, even through its own destruction. The northern highlands Totonacs explain that Indian children are born with birthmarks on our lower backs, medically known as dermal melanocytosis, because Natsi’itn’i, the mother-gods who inhabit the eastern heavens, send each Indian child into the world by a great blow whose force is enough to take us from the world of spirits to this world of matter. These birthmarks are a sign of our thrownness into this world, and a reminder of the mystery of Natsi’itn’i (Ichon 1973).

As thrown creatures, then, Indians have never had much to hold on to in this world. A commonly held belief among Indians today is that the ancients who lived before European arrival had all the answers, and comported themselves to truth and the spirits in a

manner incomprehensible to us today. But there exist traditions within Indian thought that provide evidence to the contrary.

Shortly after the Mexicans left Aztlan and began their southward migration, the common people found themselves abandoned. One day the priests and the scholars took their books of signs and prayers, and disappeared. The Mexicans were left without a calendar, without their descriptions of the gods, without the corpora of their accumulated cultural knowledge. They too were thrown into a strange land without the traditions of their elders. So they made new ones. Through astronomic observations, they remade the calendar. Through contemplation and consultation with one another, they reconstructed the pantheon and reinstated the feast days and rites. And new scholars came out of the common people, to replace the old (Leon Portilla 1963). This is why the Mexicans call the sustaining mystery of the universe “The Ever Young” and “Enemy of Both Sides:” the path to truth for Indian people follows the ways of tradition, but a tradition that must always be ready to be destroyed completely.

Vine Deloria, Jr. (Yankton Dakota) and Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) make a similar case for what Warrior identifies as a strain of Indian pragmatist philosophy. Warrior (1995), following Deloria (2003), argues that our engagement with the traditions of the ancients must take into account that these traditions developed through a process of critical contemplation and experimentation, and that this direct relation with reality, and the great mystery that pervades that reality, continues today as long as contemporary Indians find the courage to critically engage a world and a land overrun with the enemy. The Mexican term for this is *toltecayotl*, or artisanship. The codices describe philosophers, artists, and doctors in similar terms:

The toltec: a disciple, abundant, multiple, restless. The true toltec, capable, practicing, skillful, maintains dialogue with his heart, meets things with his mind ... Whatever the toltec makes is an image of reality; he seeks its true appearance.

The true doctor is a scholar ... a tried specialist ... His remedies have been tested; he examines, he experiments ... he alleviates sickness ... he brings about reactions (Leon Portilla 1992, 72-85)

The task of national liberation in the Americas requires a critical approach to tradition and traditionalism. Marx identified the criticism of religion as the premise of all criticism. And indeed, even Slavoj Žižek may be rehabilitated, with his insistence on the need to combat materialist reductionism and scientific positivism with a strategic positing of materialist theological inquiry. Indian intellectuals engaged in the struggle for liberation ought to participate as fully as possible in their nations’ ceremonial and ritual life, both fully certain of their spiritual and material reality, and fully critical of them. Critical Indian materialism must be like the sign of the east, the reed that grows in the marshes—well-rooted and tough, but flexible. One might also keep in mind Walter Benjamin’s injunction that “historical materialism can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of theology” (Benjamin 1968, 253-265).

The North: Death and the fatalism of colonialism

“Nothing is real in this world, only songs, only flowers,” said the poet-kings of Texcoco. “We are here only briefly, only for a short while do we live in this world”. Even at the height of their glory, as the poets proclaimed the undying renown of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and all the cities of their empire, Mexicans still insisted,

It is not true, it is not true, that we come to this earth to live. We come only to sleep, only to dream ... Though it be jade, it breaks. Though it be gold, it is crushed. Though it be quetzal feathers, it shall not last. (Leon Portilla 1992, 178)

It is through the sign of the north—represented in the codices by the sign of a sacrificial flint knife—that we come to know our condition in this world. Keeping in mind the much-discussed “fatalism” of the ancients, we ought to re-read Engels’s “Working-Class Manchester” and his description of the filth and misery of everyday life in the capitalist world. How easily we can relate to the ancients, when juxtaposed with the greatest excesses of capitalist accumulation, we see the poverty of the colonial concentration camps today, and the misery and shame the invaders have brought to our country. What can Indian philosophy do for us, in this time and place of death? So why should we pray, why should we theorize, why should we, like the Idle No More activists in Canada and here in the United States, go to malls and street intersections, and simply dance, as if a round dance or a ghost dance could undo the deaths of our people?

Here we can look at Marx’s short description of the materialist method of history in *The German Ideology*, where he notes that the analysis of the process of production must begin with the analysis of the production of social life itself, and with the comprehension of “civil society as the basis of all history ... and all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc.” (Marx 1846). In order to understand the sacrificial duty we must carry out against the colonial system, we must understand that our call for sovereignty and national liberation must be a real movement that abolishes capitalism and imperial domination in Indian society itself. Thus, the activist tactics of Idle No More cannot be understood as “flash mobs” or “post-modern activism” and even less as “non-violence” engaged in consciousness-raising. Rather, we should try and perceive them in their radical immediacy, and in their instantiation of what I would like to call Indian refusal. An Indian dancing is nothing less than an Indian dancing, which is to say, an Indian refusing to die, and an Indian refusing to work.

The Indian must cease to address herself to the colonizer on his terms; and to do this she must first sacrifice those terms in her own self-description. The round dance as a tactic of resistance serves to us as a reminder of our duty to the sacrificial knife of the north—decolonization will require us to give up the comfortable European lie of modernity, based in an idealist conception of history composed of stages of development and diachronic perfectibility, with clannish and superstitious Indians barbarism at one end, and enlightened, white scientific Marxism on the other. The time will come when we will have to sacrifice modernity, resource extraction, and secular neoliberalism in order to do away with private property and the wage system in aboriginal society. This is the Indian’s fatalism turned outward, a perverse ghost dance that signals the hope for an end to capital and occupation.

The West: Gender and critical pluralism

The ancients used to say that the West, which carries the sign of the house, was the dwelling place of the Sun, where he went every evening to rest after completing his journey. They also said that this was the place of women, for at the end of the world, only they would remain, and all men would pass away.

Historically, among Indians, women are the first to resist oppression and demand justice. Historically, they are also the last to receive it. Women's resilience, narrativized in the story of the Sun's female companion's, is evidenced in the gendered configuration of contemporary radical leadership in Indian country. Today we are lucky to have great Indian women at the forefront of our national liberation struggles, in the streets, the courts, the lecture halls, and the medicine lodges. This is a sign that we are gaining ground, and that the intellectual struggle of our elder women, involved in the traditionalist resurgence in our home communities and in intertribal political organizations of the 1970-1980s like the American Indian Movement, have taken root and have begun to expunge European patriarchy from our gender relations. We must now, then, turn our attention to Indian patriarchy, and to the question of essentialism and radical otherness.

When Waziyatawin, Andrea Smith, or J. Kehaulani Kauanui speak, Indians listen. Even whites listen. We must learn to listen better, but we must also learn to know when we are not being spoken to, and when, though we may hear, we may not understand. The European gender binary is a primary, but not unique, obstacle to critical thought at the superstructural level. Ideologies of biological reductionism are dangerous, and often decidedly genocidal, against those among us whose traditions and knowledges of the world are constituted by a multiplicity or even a radical undecidability of gender. And, to be clear, hetero- and cis-normativity among radical milieus is also a shibboleth whereby Indians can judge the capacity for a would-be revolutionist to truly face the other, and not have to turn away.

Marxists may be quick to uphold Wittgenstein's first postulate in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that the world is everything that is the case (1961). But the materialist method is not isomorphic with the ideology of scientific positivism, and the infantile disorder of class reductionism, which argues that all identities besides the orthodox interpretation of economic class, are either subsidiary identities collapsible to class, or are tantamount to forms of economic class themselves, and as such reducible to the same interpretations that have held sway for the past two centuries or so.

The increased visibility and activism of Two Spirit and third gender Indians in the national liberation movements is a heartening development, one which Indians from all directions must do their part to assist, and create a space for. Our current movements' adaptability to internal difference will serve as a testing ground for our capacity to encounter radical otherness and allow for its existence. Totonacs know that, as a particular blessing from the mystery of the world, each Indian is accompanied through life by one or several *takuxta*, or "spirit animals." Though we may never encounter them, it is enough to sustain our spirit to know that our companions are "out there," in the *qatk'i*, the deep forest, sharing an essence while remaining entirely other. In order to better heed the call made in 2006 by the General Command of the EZLN, to organize our national liberation struggles to create

“a world where many worlds may fit”, Marxists must learn the meaning of Wittgenstein’s last postulate: “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent” (1961, 189).

The South: Indian futurity in the field of vision

There is a saying in Latin America, “the South also exists.” It is a simple phrase, but one that bears repeating. The south, like sex, has always been a space of danger, and the unknown. It is the place of the left, because it is to the left of our lord the Sun as he completes his daily journey. For the ancient Mexicans, the south was the place of the color blue, of the first light of morning, and of the rabbit, whose next leap cannot be foretold by even the wisest scholar. The south, then, is the place of the future.

How are they, the Indians to come? Will they too look upon us as true Toltecs, as true humans who beheld the world and skillfully transformed it, who held dialogue with our heart? Our first duty as Indians should not be survival, and the warding away of sickness and starvation. Our duty is not to liberate the white working class, any more than it is to liberate the rest of the colonized world. That burden, the white man has already taken for himself. Rather, the true movement for national liberation entails simple tasks, like the cooking of a meal, the observance of a ritual, the rearing of a child.

As Indians still living in a time of catastrophe and occupation, we can only look to the future as immanent already in the present, as intimate as our own jugular vein, and as close to us as all our relations who visit us in this material world on *Niinín*, the Day of the Dead. The revolutionary thought Marx developed is certainly one of the greatest inheritances of Europe to the world, but that isn’t saying much. While Indians fighting for decolonization may find the shell of Marxism and Marxist revolution useful, it is not, and never will be, articulated in the first instance in the thought and the language of our peoples. Historical materialism is a modality of inquiry—it is a method. Aboriginal philosophy, like aboriginal politics, is still being tried for its strength and adaptability in a field of struggle largely obscured by the myths of the hegemonic order. Whether it is learning to tell the difference between a federally recognized tribal council and real communal leadership, or deploying an aboriginal materialist methodology not a failed replica of Eurocommunism, will require the development of a real movement across the land, and a reorientation of our own sovereign thought.

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