Are You a Settler?

written by Brian Ward | January 11, 2020



> Everything in U.S. history is about the land. Who oversaw and cultivated it, fished its waters, maintained its wildlife; who invaded and stole it; how it became a commodity ("real estate") broken into pieces, to be bought and sold on the market.
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> —Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
> *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*

The politics of solidarity on display during the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline have raised the issue of Indigenous liberation more and more sharply to people on the left. Activists have started to recognize that their struggles against ecological destruction, imperialism, and colonization are linked to the fight for Native self-determination that has gone on now for decades, even centuries. The recent struggles Standing Rock and Keystone XL stand in the tradition of organizations like Black Hills Alliance in the 1980s that brought together Natives and non-natives in the Black Hills in South Dakota to try to stop uranium mining.

A whole new generation of activists has learned the long history of the United States continually breaking treaties with the Indigenous Nations—stomping upon their self-determination any time the government and corporations demand access to Native lands to extract energy and raw materials. The climate justice movement is coming to an understanding that treaties must be upheld and extended, as demanded by Indigenous Nations, based on their traditional territories. We have an urgent need to bring the fight against Native oppression into all the economic and social struggles of today. And that means grasping, as clearly and firmly as possible, that the struggle for Native liberation means keeping the question of land rights central.

In this essay I will demonstrate how settler-colonialism was and is vital to the development and maintenance of capitalism by using historical examples. Understanding the history and ongoing process of Settler-colonialism adds to our understanding of capitalism, while ignoring it perpetuates the erasure from history of Native peoples and their resistance to that process. I will do my best to use actual Indigenous Nation names such as the Lakota/Dakota/Nakota (Oceti Sakowin) or Ojibwe

(Anishinaabe) or the Dine (Navajo) but will also use the words “Indigenous,” “Native,” “Native American,” “American Indian,” and “Indian” when appropriate, such as in quotations. I will often lump the United States and Canada together because their experience with Indigenous people are very similar.

Among Indigenous people, the common name for the continent of North America—and the one I will use accordingly—is Turtle Island.

Hundreds of different social organizations existed on Turtle Island prior to the arrival of capitalist markets, but one common feature was that most Indigenous Nations treated the land as something held in common. The idea of nonhuman life being someone’s “private property” was almost literally unthinkable. Many Indigenous theorists now consider “modes of relationship” a more useful concept than “modes of production” when talking about what Winona LaDuke, a citizen of the White Earth Ojibwe Nation, has called the co-evolution of Indigenous peoples and their environment and surroundings. Material conditions required Nations to develop relationships with human and nonhuman life in order to thrive. Indigenous people didn’t pursue a sustainable existence out of some mystical nobility but because reality demanded it.

Writing in the Communist Manifesto in 1848, Karl Marx said, “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” From an Indigenous perspective, that expanding market transformed abundance into scarcity.

Exploitation, expropriation, and extraction of the land’s riches created wealth for those colonizing land and enforcing their claim to it by violence. Marx’s term for this process as it had occurred in Europe is usually called “primitive accumulation,” although it might be better translated as “primary” or “original” accumulation.

As Glen Coulthard, a citizen of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, argues in his book Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition:

> Marx most thoroughly links the totalizing power of capital with that of colonialism by way of this theory of “primitive accumulation.” … It was this horrific process that established the two necessary preconditions underwriting the capital relation itself: It forcefully opened up what were once collectively held territories and resources to privatization (dispossession and enclosure), which, over time, came to produce a “class” of workers compelled to enter the exploitative realm of the labor market for their survival (proletarianization). The historical process of primitive accumulation thus refers to the violent transformation of noncapitalist forms of life into capitalist ones.

The process was underway on Turtle Island well before the U.S. Constitution was written, extension of the British colonies into Indigenous land being one of the “rights” fought for in the Revolutionary War. By 1787, the Congress of the Confederation of the United States—as the young republic was then called—passed the Northwest Ordinance, laying the foundation for the eventual incorporation of places known today as Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and parts of Minnesota. The ordinance (reconfirmed when the Constitution was ratified two years later) promoted the settlement of these areas by people of European decent, involving

a three-stage method for admitting a new state to the Union—with a congressionally appointed governor, secretary, and three judges to rule in the first phase; an elected assembly and one nonvoting delegate to Congress to be elected in the second phase, when the population of the

territory reached “five thousand free male inhabitants of full age” (i.e., white men); and a state constitution to be drafted and membership to the Union to be requested in the third phase when the population reached 60,000.[1]

Often, we hear of this push across the continent as “expansion,” as if nothing was there beforehand. For Indigenous people, their displacement can only be described as invasion, occupation, and genocide. It was a prolonged process, met with organized resistance all along the way, from the Pueblo Revolt in 1680 through the Dakota Uprising in 1862, the Metis Uprising in 1885, and many more.

With a wider perspective, we see that what the textbooks recall as Manifest Destiny was really capitalist accumulation through colonial expansion—taking the particular form of the settler republic. (Other examples include Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Israel.) The process was militarized from the start. In the United States, the army and its forts pushed deep into Indian Country to protect settlers and were paired with important pieces of legislation, such as the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Pacific Railroad Act of the same year. The Army post was “created in order to serve and protect colonizers from Indigenous people,” writes Manu Karuka in Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad (University of California Press, 2019), adding, “The infrastructure of war and occupation actually establishes preconditions for settlement.”

Let’s take a closer look at the Homestead Act of 1862: [E]nacted during the Civil War, [it] provided that any adult citizen, or intended citizen, who had never borne arms against the U.S. government could claim 160 acres of surveyed government land. Claimants were required to “improve” the plot by building a dwelling and cultivating the land. After 5 years on the land, the original filer was entitled to the property, free and clear, except for a small registration fee. Title could also be acquired after only a 6-month residency and trivial improvements, provided the claimant paid the government $1.25 per acre. After the Civil War, Union soldiers could deduct the time they had served from the residency requirements.2 This is the very definition of settler-colonialism. It formed a major plank of the Republican Party platform during the Civil War. And it passed in the same year that Lincoln oversaw the largest mass execution in U.S. history: the hanging of 38 men from the Dakota Nation following the Dakota uprising in Minnesota. The 1873 stock market crash ignited more and more interest in land out west, leading to more railroads, mining, and homesteading. One response to this “progress” came at the Battle at Greasy Grass (Little Big Horn) in 1876, where the United States faced the largest military defeat at that time by the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho. But then settler-republican cunning unleashed one of the most devastating pieces of legislation against Indigenous Nations. The Dawes Act of 1887 brought Indigenous Nations into the capitalist economy by breaking up communal ownership and “giving” individual plots of land to heads of households on the reservation.

Any surplus land was then opened up to settlers. Not until 1934 was this policy overturned with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, which is the reason why so many Indian reservations are checkerboards with individual plots. Karuka’s book Empire’s Tracks, cited earlier, analyzes capital’s role as the driving force for settlement: Land grants, and the willful misreading of treaties as real estate transactions, to paraphrase Vine Deloria, were central to the growth of the United States as a continental and then global imperial power, central to waging war at ever-greater scales. Lenin noted, “The capital exporting countries have divided the world among themselves in the figurative sense of the term. But finance capital has also led to the actual division of the world.” Before this could happen, in North America, finance capital led to the division of the continent itself, and the transcontinental railroad was a key instrument of the division. Settlers are a tool, but capital is the system that drives this process and ultimately benefits. This is an important point to clarify, for capitalism is always ready to abandon a tool when it has served its purpose and create a new one, as

need be.

Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, is a co-founder of the Red Nation. The Red Nation is an Indigenous-led, revolutionary-socialist organization that fights for Indigenous liberation and an end to capitalism and settler-colonialism. In his recent book *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, Estes defines settler-colonialism as the specific form of colonialism whereby an imperial power seizes Native territory, eliminates the original people by force, and resettles the land with a foreign, invading population. Unlike other forms of colonialism in which the colonizers rule from afar and sometimes leave, settler colonialism attempts to permanently and completely replace Natives with a settler population. The process is never complete, and the colonial state's methods for gaining access to new territories change over time, evolving from a program of outright extermination to one of making Indigenous peoples "racial minorities" and "domestic dependent nations" within their own lands, and of sacrificing Indigenous lands for resource extraction.

Let's break this down a little bit. In the United States, treaty-making was unilaterally ended by the government in 1871. Indigenous people would be henceforth treated as a racial minority. Only in 1924 did Native Americans become U.S. citizens, and it took until 1961 for them to gain full voting rights. When Estes says "domestic dependent nations" he is referring to the "trust" relationship between Indigenous Nations and the federal government, which still technically owns the land entrusted to these nations with limited sovereignty. As treaties are broken and resources are extracted on Indigenous land, it's important to know that two-thirds of uranium, one-third of low-sulfur coal, as well as major hydroelectric, oil, and natural gas reserves are located in Indigenous communities. These facts are important to the debate on the left about whether the United States is still a settler-colony or not. Some theorists put forward the idea that a settler-colony is a system where the non-Native population has an interest in displacing Indigenous people and therefore have no interest in standing up for Indigenous rights. This is without a doubt true for the United States throughout its existence up until the mid to late 1800s and early 1900s, as exemplified by the Homestead and Dawes acts.

Estes looks at settler-colonialism in what I consider a more nuanced way, recognizing that the system's beneficiaries have changed in the course of history. In the nineteenth century, the individual settler benefited from the displacement of Indigenous people, while in the twenty-first century that role is mainly played by a corporation like Energy Transfer LP that pushed through Dakota Access Pipeline. However, individual settlers still own land from the systematic process of land theft. Estes says, "According to a 2002 report by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), white settlers own 96 percent of private agricultural lands in the United States, and 98 percent of all U.S. private lands overall." This process of settler-colonialism is alive and well, and descendants of settlers have an ideological choice to reject this system in favor of their material interest and liberation.

Estes examines what settler-colonialism looks like in the modern era by considering the Pick-Sloan Act, which built six dams on the Missouri River between 1946 and 1966. The project flooded Indigenous Nations' land without their consent and displaced many Indigenous people. Estes specifically points to the Oahe Dam, which created Lake Oahe where the battle at Standing Rock took place.Estes says, "The Oahe Dam, the most destructive, destroyed 160,889 acres of Standing Rock and Cheyenne River." Post-World War II growth gave a demand for more extraction and energy policies such as these dams. These infrastructure projects were connected to the newly established Termination policy, which aimed at forcing Indigenous people off reservations into cities and "the total liquidation of Indigenous political authority." The Bureau of Indian Affairs argued how the flooding of Indigenous land would speed up termination and force Indigenous people into the capitalist economy. They said that this would "force [Indians] into seeking cash income to make up

for a substantial portion of income now represented in their use of natural resources of their present environment." The Missouri River Basin Investigation, a two-year fact-finding mission begun in 1946, stated that most Indigenous communities in the area relied on the "free goods of Nature," such as hunting, trapping, and gathering. Forcing them to rely on a cash income is what Marxists, if not the Bureau of Indian Affairs, would call proletarianization.

This process is never complete, as Estes says, and the struggle continues today: The project of stealing indigenous land remains fundamental to the United States and its success. Settler-colonialism and its ideological companion of Manifest Destiny are baked into the development of the United States much like slavery and racism and cannot be extracted without completely overhauling the entire system. But the capitalist settler-state has met resistance every step of the way, and still does. Many Indigenous communities have gained back some of their land. For example, the Menominee Nation in northern Wisconsin, which lost its land and status as a nation in the 1950s during the Termination era, regained them in the 1970s during the Red Power era. At the same time, more and more descendants of settlers are having their land taken. We have seen the development of multiracial groups that are fighting the fossil fuel industry, most recently in the organization called the Cowboy-Indian Alliance, which brought together Indigenous people and settlers to fight the Keystone XL pipeline.

Chief Phil Lane, citizen of the Ihanktonwan Dakota and Chickasaw nations, reflected on some of the recent outrage of settlers' land being taken. Dina Gilio-Whitaker, a citizen of the Colville Confederated Tribes, in her book *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock*, quotes Lane reflecting on a meeting between Natives and nonnative farmers.

> Those ranchers came in and spoke to that council, and they shared their heart.… So finally we came back after the treaty signing … We had about ten or fifteen ranchers there, they all got up to speak…and one after another they got up and said they're infuriated. They said, … "How could this happen? How can people take our land? How can they do this to us?" And of course … we didn't see a smile but everybody knew what we was thinking about from our side. … So finally this last sister got up to speak and she just said, "I just am so infuriated, they're coming and taking our land. …They just can't do it without our consent.… This is our land that our families have lived in since … you know, how long they have been there." And said, "They're treating us just like … just like. …" and then one of the relatives said, "Just like the Indians." And all of the [sic] sudden there was this beautiful pause and everybody's like, "Yes!" And one of my relatives walked over to her and says, "Welcome to the tribe, welcome to the tribe."

Settlers often say, "If we give land back, they will do what we did to them." This is a colonized mindset. Indigenous liberation is about changing our relationship to land and labor to changing the profit system. I would argue that a future decolonized Turtle Island is looking toward a socialist society that puts forward Indigenous self-determination and liberation and counters racism, white supremacy, settler-colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. As Clayton Thomas Mueller, a citizen of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation and an Idle No More activist in Canada said, "imagine if the workers and First Nations actually joined forces in a meaningful coalition—the rightful owners of the land, side by side with the people working the mines and pipelines, coming together to demand another economic model."

Howard Adams, who is Metis from Canada, writes in his book *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View* says,

> The Indian and Metis movement must focus primarily on the destruction of imperialism and on the process of decolonization. There is no longer any question of where the native struggle

should pursue a capitalist or socialist path of development. Liberation can take place only within a true socialist society.

We will not succeed in slowing, let alone stopping, climate change and devastation, and in having clean air, water, and land unless we stand for Indigenous rights, sovereignty, and the enforcement of treaties. If we do not have a left that understands this and puts the question of land, imperialism, and conquest at its center we will perpetuate the same old song of class reductionism. Indigenous liberation is about liberation for all.

Notes

1. An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States North-West of the River Ohio, the Northwest Ordinance was passed on July 13, 1787
2. Homestead Act (1862).
3. Cole, Juan, “A New Red-Green Alliance: Why Workers should Join the Climate Fight.”