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Why #LandBack Will Not Save Us From Climate Crisis

Jay Lesoleil

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If you're moderately implicated in the world of North American lefty identitarianism, and you go online right now and make some kind of post calling for action on the climate crisis, there is a 100% chance that someone will drop a '#LandBack' in the comments. Very likely someone else will leave another comment going something like this: 'Indigenous people have stewarded and maintained this land since time immemorial. They know what is best for the land and how to keep it in balance, and don't need settlers to tell them what to do, especially since settler capitalism is what created this crisis in the first place. Indigenous people cannot do this important work of restoring the right relationship with the Earth without Land Back and decolonization. There can be no response to the climate crisis without Indigenous leadership.' Indigenous and non-Indigenous commenters alike will make statements in this vein.

For many people in our little leftist bubble, this is a compelling argument. The economic system that dominates the world today, and is the direct cause of global warming, was

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indeed birthed in Europe, home of globe-spanning settler colonialism and modern empire. Indigenous people weren't fracking for oil 500 years ago when Columbus showed up, and to this day many people from many First Nations and Inuit communities very sincerely pursue an explicitly articulated spiritual-cultural relationship with the land, which seems to be lacking from the broader North American meta-culture. Plus, it's clear that the treatment of Indigenous people in the Americas was pretty universally awful, and the various forms of ill-treatment, discrimination, dispossession and outright violence enacted against them constitute a huge historical wrong that has never been righted in any satisfactory way. Why not return stewardship of the land to its original custodians, who surely know better than us how to treat it, and kill two birds with one stone – deconstruct the cruelty of colonialism and fight the climate crisis at the same time?

For better or for worse, however, the idea that Land Back can be our primary tool in the global struggle against climate change is a poorly thought-out fantasy that only undermines the effectiveness of the Left in pursuing climate justice. This is because it relies on the notion that North American Indigenous people are, fundamentally, not like other human beings; that they exist somehow outside of history, are invulnerable to the normal range of human experience, and have mystical cultures which spring from some deep blood-, land-, or gene-based essence. Ideas like these – whether they are expressed by Indigenous or non-Indigenous people, whether they result in flattering or unflattering portrayals, and regardless of the self-image of the people holding them – are intrinsically racist, because they posit an essentialist quality to ethnicity and so reify and affirm the concept of race. This is possible because many people, including racialized people, hold racist ideas without being committed to the practice and ideology of racism; and many people, especially people who oppose the ideology and practice of racism, are easily seduced by racist ideas that sim-

and achievable post-capitalist goals. We need muscular, multi-racial green left populism, firmly rooted in reality, with a well-articulated vision for the future. We will not find that powerful, realistic political vision in the racist fantasizing of liberal identitarians.

More moderate articulations of the Land Back framing, which tend to be vague and nebulous in terms of what they actually call for, cannot explain how, even if Indigenous people were in possession of secret racial knowledge which could reverse climate change, that knowledge could be effectively mobilized in the current political environment. They also cannot explain how increased Indigenous sovereignty, in itself, would protect the environment. After all, if a pipeline project is successfully blocked from passing through unceded territory, that does not mean it cannot simply be rerouted. An oil spill is an oil spill no matter where it is. Further, even if every Indigenous nation were given ten billion dollars and had their territory quadrupled, there is absolutely nothing to stop half of them from simply investing that ten billion in oil and gas and selling the land to ranchers. They might not, but that isn't a given; political currents within their communities would determine those things, not a racial essence, and political currents within Indigenous communities are fractured, and subject to the same capitalist pressures, as those of other communities.

Ultimately, calls for policies of decolonization – honouring treaties with Indigenous nations, repairing historic mistreatment to the extent that it is possible, nurturing nation-to-nation relations between state governments and First Nations, land reform to expand Indigenous sovereignty, integrating Indigenous languages into official use, and so on, are all extremely important and realistic political goals which I support completely and which are important to me personally. But they must be pursued on their own merits, not because we believe that handing the keys over to some imagined Indigenous collective authority will magically reverse climate change for the entire planet, and certainly not because we are fantasizing about an impossible racial dictatorship to cleanse whites of our sinful ways. To fight the climate crisis we desperately need a mass politics capable of mobilizing hundreds of millions of people of all ethnicities around clear

ply recast essentialism in a flattering way. But at the end of the day, Indigenous people are, in fact, real people and full human beings, in exactly the same ways that whites and other settlers are real people and full human beings.

One of the first conclusions that flows from this premise, the premise that Indigenous people are real people, is that like people from every other large racial, national, or ethnic category in the world, they do not possess internal homogeneity, whether politically, spiritually, philosophically or economically, and never have. Huge differences of opinion exist within and between Indigenous groups on any topic one might care to name. After five centuries of evangelism, proselytization, and forced conversions, many Indigenous people today are conservative Christians, while others maintain traditional or syncretic belief systems, and others are completely secular. In aggregate Indigenous people in North America tend to lean Liberal or Democrat, but many refuse to vote, many are right-wing or hold eclectic political opinions, and others hold radical left-wing views. Some people still practice some version of a very traditional lifestyle, but as a result of many factors – cultural disruption through forced assimilation, displacement from the most productive farmland and hunting grounds, the overall development of technology over the past 500 years – most do not and cannot. Traditional forms of political organization such as hereditary chiefs coexist uneasily with, or sometimes in direct opposition to, forms of electoral local government such as band councils, and a large and rapidly increasing number of Indigenous people live in urban environments far from their home communities in any case. Some communities have reaped comparatively large financial dividends as a result of negotiating with corporations and governments about resource extraction schemes on their land, and this has created huge incentives for other communities to follow suit, leading to major internal differences of opinion on the topic. Some nations have a great deal of autonomy and control quite large areas of land,

while some struggle for recognition or are confined to very small reservations. Indigenous people are not at all a monolithic group, and depending on how one counts, there are several hundred to over a thousand Indigenous nations in Canada, the US, and Mexico, numbering over 25 million people, speaking hundreds of languages and varying widely in almost every respect.

Right off the bat, then, we have to ask ourselves: when we are talking about Indigenous leadership of the climate justice movement, when we are proposing to return the stewardship of the land to First Nations and Inuit, when it is argued that Indigenous people understand inherently how to live in harmony with the land, who are we talking about exactly? Do we have any particular reason to suspect that aggressively Pentecostal leadership figures within the heavily evangelized Inuit population, who dream of a completely Christianized Inuit Nunangat under Church guidance, will concur with Nunavut's NDP Member of Parliament, or with young secular Inuit activists now growing up in southern Canadian cities, let alone with Mohawk leaders in New York State, let alone with Mayan guerrillas in the jungle in Chiapas? We know that the very high-profile struggle of Indigenous activists to block a pipeline project through traditional Wet'suwet'en territory in British Columbia is part of an internal power struggle – all 20 elected band councils along the pipeline's route signed agreements with Coastal GasLink. Similar struggles play out in Alberta, where Indigenous environmental activists opposed to resource development projects are frustrated by the willingness of people from their impoverished communities to sign lucrative agreements with oil and gas companies. And speaking of Mayan guerrillas, the Zapatista fighters who struggle for Indigenous sovereignty in southern Mexico have clashed with environmentalists (and local tribes) in the past over the heavy settlement of areas of previously remote jungle by Indigenous refugees from Central America, whom the

specifically to do just that. Traditional lifeways of Indigenous North Americans were not designed to dismantle a globe-spanning economic system enjoying universal support among the world's elites and backed by the most powerful militaries in history. They were not designed to replace ultra-high-tech highly automated production systems or planet-scale supply-chains. They were not designed to navigate the political environment of contemporary Canada, Mexico or the US. Even the most advanced international science available today struggles with the global scale of these issues, which are full of cascade effects and happen on immense scales. Traditional land-based lifeways are intensely local; that is the whole point. Imagining that they will save us from climate crisis is magical thinking, it is lazy, it lacks a material analysis, and most of all it is racist, casting as it does Indigenous people in the role of a semi-human race of mystical saviours. It passes on responsibility for dismantling this destructive system to the poorest, most marginalized, most criminalized, most rural, least educated, and least powerful collection of minority ethnicities in the continent.

There is one final major problem with the Land Back approach to climate change. At its most direct and strident, this rhetoric openly demands that all of North America be returned to Indigenous sovereignty. Though the next steps are rarely articulated, this would imply some sort of rigid ethnic hierarchy in which our governments are abolished and the continent is ruled over by a small racially-defined caste of people, necessarily by force since virtually no one would want that. I suppose conceivably it could also involve 4% of the population marching the other 96% into the sea at gunpoint. But if we want better conditions for Indigenous people, which we should, we need to live in reality. Calling for things that will never happen in any timeline is not helpful for anyone. Proclaiming that the world should work in a way in which it will never work is not politics, it is petulance, and will never bring us closer to any of our goals.

‘white race’, but instead the projects of certain elites among certain European states with both support and intense resistance from ordinary people, harmonious coexistence with nature and instinctive anti-capitalism has never been the coherent project of a unified Indigenous people.

What is more, there is no reason why traditional subsistence strategies have to be ecologically sustainable in the long run. It only matters that subsistence strategies work in the here and now for the people using them, and this is precisely why the industrial agriculture we use in the West today persists: it provides immense benefits in the short term because it can feed billions of people with a comparatively tiny amount of effort, even though we now know that it is causing huge damage down the line. In fact we know that ancient people all over the world, including on this continent, often destroyed their own means of subsistence through unsustainable practices. Areas that were the breadbasket of the Roman Empire are now desert, and it is widely understood by historians that the ancient Maya civilization in Mexico declined dramatically following the Classical period at least partly due to soil exhaustion from their system of intensive agriculture, which was feeding a population of as many as ten million people at its height in the 1st millennium CE. Major fluctuations in commodity markets can also completely destabilize ecological and political balance, regardless of, or sometimes even because of, anyone’s traditional subsistence methods. When European contact integrated the Americas into the trade networks of the Old World, Indigenous nations near the East Coast gained access to a virtually inexhaustible market for beaver, and proceeded to over-hunt the animal to such an extent that the population has never recovered. They were able to do this precisely because they understood the land very well and were very clever at catching beavers.

The only thing that can overcome the material conditions we find ourselves in today are material strategies designed

Zapatistas support, but whose presence has been denounced as destructive to the rain forest environment.

‘Indigenous people’ is a very broad category, and the disparate groups of people in that category are subject to politics in the same ways that everyone else is. Conflicting interests among different segments of the population, along the lines of class, religion, language, regionalism, party affiliation, the influence of charismatic leaders and so on, will always generate internal disagreements and different factions. It is not that non-Indigenous activists should ignore the needs and interests of Indigenous groups; quite the opposite. But all of us need to be aware that Indigenous groups are made up of real people and function the same way that other human groups do. One can and will encounter, among Indigenous people, people who oppose environmentalist activism and belong to well-funded groups supporting resource extraction schemes and working closely with governments and corporations. One will also encounter people who are ambivalent about this sort of thing, as well as people who agree with and take part in activism and land defence – but even they, of course, do not all agree on the most effective strategies or the most important goals.

Given that this is the case, everyone needs to be serious about the fact that actually, settler activists cannot pass the buck by simply pretending to ‘listen to Indigenous leadership’ as if there is some unified Indigenous stance echoing down through the racial aether. In fact, environmental activists need to treat Indigenous people as real human beings with a complex political reality and accept the necessity of having their own well-reasoned stance (which, yes, should be flexible to the degree that it can incorporate criticism when appropriate) and then working with Indigenous people and groups who most agree with that stance.

The other major conclusion which must flow from a non-racist position is the understanding that Indigenous people are formed by their social realities the same way that everyone else

is. Millions of Indigenous people grow up conditions which alienate them from the land, from their culture and from their traditions. An incarcerated Inuk man raised in a series of foster homes in overcrowded and dangerous conditions in an Arctic village and confusing and culturally alien conditions in Ottawa or Montreal, who never finished high school, is not fully literate in Inuktitut, French or English, has had an alcohol dependence since teenagehood and spent his adult life homeless in a southern Canadian city, does not know how to return harmony to the world. It would be not only delusional but actively racist to assume that he could somehow summon from within himself the solution to the global climate crisis, or that buried somewhere in his DNA lies a comprehensive understanding of ecology and ecosystem dynamics. Any reasonable person would agree that what this man needs is safety, material security, long-term therapy, easy access to robust social services in his first language, and a lifetime to grow into himself with dignity and regain what was taken away from him by poverty, addiction, and intergenerational trauma. What he does not need is for well-meaning leftists and liberals to cast him in a mystical saviour role they have created for him in their own minds.

Of course it is true that most people are not thinking of this man when they think of Indigenous leadership, but it is a fact that one of the most salient and tragic effects of colonization has been precisely the kind of cultural destruction and forced resettlement most likely to disrupt traditional knowledge and belief systems. The pre-colonial skill-sets, tool-kits, subsistence strategies, crop groups and so on encompassed in traditional knowledge systems are what people think about when they imagine Indigenous people restoring balance with nature. However, these forms of knowledge – both among Indigenous people in North America and also among everybody else in the entire industrialized world – have been severely interrupted, certainly by colonialism but also by the enormous social, economic and technological transformations brought

about by global capitalism. No one in Sweden is living on subsistence crops of rutabagas and mutton, and no one in Japan is a serf on a lord's wet-rice plantation anymore. Indigenous people, as real people who do not exist outside of history, have also been subject to these historical forces even apart from the violence of colonialism. People imagine a universal Indigenous access to a mystical and timeless traditional knowledge system which can restore the whole world to balance, but no such thing exists.

One reason no such thing exists for North American Indigenous people is that it doesn't exist for any people. Subsistence strategies are used because they help people survive, and as such they are continually evolving and changing to reflect reality: they are not mystical and timeless but material and historically specific. Ancient slash-and-burn techniques used to clear an area of jungle and grow a quick cassava crop in order to feed a few dozen people before moving on to the next area of forest tell us nothing about how to sequester carbon, harvest solar energy effectively, or organize politically to force an end to hyper-destructive monocropping. Likewise, someone could be the most effective kayak-based whaler in the world, knowing in incredible detail everything there is to know about hunting marine mammals with only the tools you can make with your hands, and still know not a single thing about global sea-level changes or how to slow them. These techniques are also not racial – globally, different groups from within the populations we unfortunately insist on calling 'races' have practiced wildly different strategies, and there is no particular common point of reference between the strategies employed by different pre-colonial groups across this continent, which included Arctic marine hunters, forest hunter-gatherers, semi-nomadic horticulturalists, settled farmers and blood-thirsty empire-builders living in gigantic cities, among others. In the same way that capitalism and colonialism have never been the coherent project of a unified