

# The Tradition of Resistance

An Interview with Gord Hill

Tom Keefer, Gord Hill

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## **Could you please introduce yourself?**

My name is Gord Hill and I'm from the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation on the North-West coast. I've been involved in native resistance since about 1990 when I started working on Oka solidarity. I was involved in the 500 Years of Resistance campaign in 1992, and in the mid-1990s I started working with the Native Youth Movement (NYM). Today, I publish *Warrior Publications*, which puts out magazines and booklets about native struggles. In addition to organizing, I also do artwork and graphic design, and I write.

## **What's your take on the June 29 Day of Action called by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in 2007? Was it a successful action? What do you think it says about the current state of indigenous resistance?**

The Day of Action was an example of political maneuvering on the part of the AFN, on the one hand, to try to bolster their credibility at the grassroots and then, on the other hand, to win concessions from the government. In terms of winning concessions, I think they were successful. The government did reform the Indian Claims Commission, and Terrance Nelson, who initiated the AFN resolution back in September of 2006, got 75 acres of land for his people. So it was successful in those terms, although I think the Canadian government was also playing into the other objective of the AFN, which was to bolster their credibility with grassroots activists. When the government made these concessions, the AFN looked as if it had successfully mobilized to fight for our rights. The AFN claims that the Day of Action was a huge success and that over 100,000 people participated. I think they were really exaggerating the turnout. Not only that, but most of the people participating in the actions, protests, and rallies were non-native, which speaks to the AFN's inability to mobilize their people despite all the resources they have. Myself and others called for a boycott of the Day of Action because we believed it added to the confusion among our people and among non-native people about the goal of the AFN. We wanted to try to make it clear that they don't represent our people and that, when they talk about solutions, their long-term goal is actually assimilation.

## **For those not familiar with the AFN, could you provide more detail about your analysis and critique of the organization?**

The AFN is comprised of all the Indian Act band council chiefs across the country, so it's a national organization representing those chiefs. The Indian Act was imposed by the federal

government in 1876 as a way of controlling indigenous people in Canada. It has three main components: the reserve system, where natives are to be concentrated; Indian status, which determines who is or is not “native”; and the band council system, which provides a local governing structure to implement the Act. It is through these three structures that Canada has historically imposed control over indigenous people, and it is how they have maintained control to this day. The band council system works as an arm of the federal government, which funds it. Its mandate is to implement the policies of the federal government at the local reserve community level. This is why we oppose the AFN: it’s working in the interests of the government and big business.

**Are the Native Friendship Centres co-opted like the AFN?**

In the early 1970s, when the indigenous movement was emerging and was on the upswing, people were self-organizing and setting up their own groups, and one of the things they did was set up social centres like the Friendship Centres. Consequently, the government came along and started funding all these different groups and agencies in order to co-opt them. They started pumping all this money in as a form of pacification and now Friendship Centres are a state-run institution and basically serve the same function as the AFN. They are generally very conservative, very hostile to activism, and always try to claim that they’re apolitical, even though they’re really a very politicized institution that’s government-funded and delivering government programs.

However, Friendship Centres do serve a purpose and meet real needs in the community. But they meet those needs because people have been so controlled that they’re unable to self-organize. And now people don’t think of organizing things like Friendship Centres because they’re already being funded by the government. They present a facade of being almost like grassroots institutions. It’s the same with a lot of different organizations: most social spaces like Friendship Centres, youth drop-in centres, and sports activities are controlled by different government agencies or through band councils. One of the reasons that they do this is to contain and limit the grassroots movement. If they don’t, grassroots organizers are going to step in, which is why they originally started funding these organizations back in the early 1970s.

**What about indigenous movements that don’t operate within the framework of AFN? Are there other national organizations that people can relate to as alternatives?**

No, I would say there aren’t. There’s a grassroots movement of people across the country, but no central organization. In the 1960s and early 1970s, we had the Red Power Movement – including the American Indian Movement and the Canadian Alliance for Red Power, which was based in Vancouver. In the 1970s, we had an attempt to set up national organizations, but, owing to the lack of political resources, the grassroots movement didn’t establish a strong national structure. This was the case partly because Canada is so big and our population centres and reserves are so spread out, which makes it very hard to organize at the national level. To a certain degree, the AFN can have a national structure because of the large amount of money it gets from the government. I was working with the Native Youth Movement for quite a few years, and it had some limited success. But overall it wasn’t that successful in establishing a national network. It’s something we work on all the time as we try to establish links and meet with people in different areas, but I wouldn’t claim one exists right now.

**Is the Native Youth Movement still a political force?**

Like any movement, it comes and goes. Right now, there are a few NYM chapters still active in the Southern interior of BC, but it is not super active.

**What about groups like Wasasé? What’s your take on them?**

I'm not involved with them. My understanding is that they're more of a university student-oriented group. They have an annual gathering over in Victoria, which is where Taiaiake Alfred (a University of Victoria professor who wrote a book called *Wasasé* upon which this movement is built) is based. I myself don't have much interaction with them, and I'm critical of some of their analysis and strategy for change, such as their reliance on Gandhi. We communicate with each other, and I'm aware of what their positions are on things. On the AFN Day of Action they came out and were critical of what they called the AFN's half-hearted steps and its militant posturing.

**How would you suggest non-native allies relate to native movements if there isn't a national radical anti-colonial indigenous network for people to connect with?**

A lot of the struggles that occur are local and based on what's happening in specific communities. So when a struggle is coming from grassroots community people, I think this is where you should lend support. It doesn't need to involve linking up with a national organization; one doesn't exist and is not organizing or coordinating these actions. Non-natives can support whatever local struggle is going on in their area because it's the grassroots people who are doing the work. In terms of the AFN and the Day of Action, you could see that a lot of well-intentioned but naïve non-native people wanted to help out and responded to the call for a Day of Action. They assumed that the AFN was a legitimate representative of native people and they wanted to rush out and support the call. But they don't understand the history of Canadian colonialism and the way it created the band council system and the Assembly of First Nations. Non-natives should support local struggles that are going on in their area and educate themselves about the history of the system and how it's organized. Then we wouldn't have people running around and going out to support those who are actually a major obstacle to us organizing and having self-determination.

**Do local struggles have a significant impact? Have people on the West Coast, for example, been following what's been happening with Six Nations or with other struggles like those in Grassy Narrows?**

Six Nations is a really big and important conflict. In Vancouver there was a big mobilization of 500 people in support of Six Nations that blocked the Lion's Gate Bridge for an hour and it really mobilized a lot of people. These kinds of actions show people the potential for resistance. So yes, they're very important. That's the thing with a lot of struggles like Ipperwash, Gustafson Lake, and Oka: they were local struggles but they had a very important impact across the country.

**What obstacles exist within local native communities to developing radical anti-colonial politics?**

There are many different factors that limit the capacity of resistance to take root and grow. One of the most significant obstacles is the legacy of colonialism itself. A high level of social dysfunction exists within our communities, and things like alcohol and drug addiction and imprisonment are really weakening our ability to organize our people and our movements. Another major factor is the assimilation that the AFN and band councils are pushing by bringing capitalist ideology into communities and pushing people to think like white people and to act like individual entrepreneurs.

We also have the brainwashing that's carried out through the telecommunications network and the educational system. Even the most remote communities up in the far North have satellite dishes, and kids there watch the most depraved and demoralizing forms of pop culture that Babylon is putting out. It's so debilitating because it implants capitalism and capitalist values into their minds. Generally, our problem is a lack of education and awareness about what colonialism is

and how it functions. We also lack resources within our movement. Once a movement gets mass support, it has resources coming from the people, and people are the most important resource you can have. But, at this stage, we don't have a lot of support from our population. So we have the problem of trying to expand while lacking resources. Those are some of the main obstacles we face outside of the system of the AFN and band councils, which of course contributes a lot to our inability to self-organize.

**Are there specific groups in non-native society that can act as reliable allies in native struggles?**

Within non-native society, we certainly have always had a level of support from diverse social sectors, but I wouldn't identify any one of them as the main source of support. Certainly, within Canadian society in general, there are specific elements that do a lot of work around indigenous sovereignty, and you could say that overall there is a high level of underlying support for native peoples' struggles, as you can see in opinion polls. A lot of people supported the call for a Day of Action even if they didn't understand what the AFN was.

A lot of people sympathize with and understand the plight of indigenous peoples. Even if it's not always expressed, there's certainly underlying support for indigenous people and a lot of potential to mobilize for indigenous resistance and other kinds of broader social resistance. Here in Vancouver, we've been organizing against the 2010 Olympics and, at this point, have found the anti-poverty activists to be most helpful. But one of the things about Canada and a lot of colonial systems is that the apartheid system creates two separate worlds. The one world is really ignorant and oblivious to the condition of the other, and that's a big problem. But again, that comes back to education and becoming more knowledgeable about the world and the country that we live in.

**Since indigenous people make up approximately 5% of the total population in Canada, how do you think that they can be successful in achieving what they are fighting for? Does there have to be widespread active support within**

**Canadian society or can native people create enough of a crisis within Canada to get their needs met?**

I would say that in any national liberation struggle there is always a diverse range of tactics that people use; there is no one way to advance our movement. As Frantz Fanon said, for anti-colonial activists the international situation is very important because it affects the ability of the nation state to impose its will on the people it is oppressing. With the growing potential for ecological, economic, and military crises around the world right now, international issues can have a major impact on the social conditions of our lives. But it can be difficult to organize under these social conditions, partly because we're living in a G7 country. Even though native people are the most impoverished and oppressed class in this society, a lot of material wealth and resources have come into indigenous communities. The chiefs are a good example of this – a lot of them out here are multi-millionaires who are running their own businesses.

If we look at the international situation, we can see the effects that wars, economic depression, and competition between capitalist powers have on our local conditions. If we look to the future, we can see great potential for resistance because these conditions have steadily declined. Governments are acutely aware of this, and they're putting in place police states everywhere. They are looking into the future and have an even better understanding of what the future holds because they're the ones who are enabling it and using it to their advantage. But they still know that the future holds more social conflict across what is now a truly globalized system.

**Are there particular struggles happening in different parts of the world that inspire you or that you perceive as being helpful in understanding what could be accomplished here?**

A lot of the indigenous movements in Central and South America are very inspiring, especially in their ability to mobilize so many of their people and to carry out real actions – for example by blocking highways and shutting down the entire economic system, as they did in Ecuador and Bolivia. Their level of community self-organization is really high and they are very inspiring. Another inspiring example is the Zapatistas in Chiapas and what they've been able to achieve despite being so poor and lacking so many resources. I was down there in January. They're proud of not taking government money even though they are extremely poor. In many of their communities they have organized their own health clinics and schools. It's really only in the areas where they have their own autonomous self-government that health levels and literacy rates have increased. Also, when I look at other countries, I'm inspired by the Palestinians who continue to resist one of the most modern and high-tech military forces in the world.

Up here we have our own band council chiefs telling us the solution is more capitalism and throwing more money at the problem. But of course that's one of the major causes of the problem. It's the capitalist system that is breaking down communities and destroying traditional territories and rendering people unable to understand themselves in a traditional way.

**Are there non-native thinkers from particular intellectual traditions that you think are useful for native people in terms of understanding current struggles?**

There are a lot of insights in the writings of anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon. I would also recommend Mao, since he was a brilliant strategic and tactical thinker. He was able to organize a large mass of people to fight successfully for quite a long time in China.

**What do you think about Howard Adams' attempt to adapt a Marxist analysis to native struggles or Ward Churchill's talk of anarcho-indigenism? Does this seem useful or are they bringing in political traditions that don't connect to native people?**

I think it's useful. In order to change the present society you have to have an understanding of it. These are tools that we can use to do that because Marxism and anarchism as movements developed very strongly in resistance to the rise of capitalism. One of the main problems we're dealing with today is the capitalist system. So using analyses that came from those movements can be very helpful. We cannot adequately resist or liberate territory for people just by organizing with our traditional means because those means can't answer questions about the capitalist society we now live in. We need to understand how the system functions and operates, and that's one thing Marxism and anarchism can help us with.

This is especially useful in understanding things like class, which we didn't have to deal with before because our societies were largely classless, egalitarian, and communal. We were communist and now they're trying to turn us into super capitalists! Marx and Engels actually got a lot of analysis on what communism could look like by examining indigenous communities and their structures of government. We can learn a lot from them, and Marxists and anarchists can learn from us. Because we're living in a modern industrialized nation, Marxism and anarchism can help unite native and non-native people. They help us understand we have a common enemy at some point down the road: the capitalist ruling class.

**You mention some of the contradictions involved in trying to go back to traditional roots. It seems that these can be really helpful for providing a sense of oppositional identity but can also hold back struggles or become a conservative force. What's your**

**approach to traditionalist cultural perspectives around native identity and native struggles?**

Traditionalist perspectives have limitations because they don't answer some of the problems we are now confronted with. For example, we need to really self-organize as people and movements so that we can gain autonomy and self determination. Some people advocate going back to the old hereditary chieftainship systems, which were dismantled under colonialism. The traditional leadership was based on a certain type of social organization and culture that has been largely eradicated by colonialism. It's not that useful simply to advocate that we adopt these hereditary systems when the people who would be filling those roles have been co-opted, corrupted, or traumatized by the colonial system and would thus be incapable of rebuilding these systems. We have to find a new way of organizing based on common sense and self-organization. Sometimes traditionalism can become extremely confusing and very conservative because people are looking at traditionalism as it existed before colonialism. It is conservative because it's not able to adapt to today's reality.

And yet, these traditions are key to our survival. In the future, traditional ways of living together as people and the traditional skills of hunting and gathering and living off the land will be necessary because this society is going to reach a point of self-destruction and future generations won't be able to survive. We have to maintain these traditions because, although they may not be the most important aspect of resisting and fighting today, they will be very important in the future in regards to survival.

**According to the current media spin, there is a new and heightened level of native activism and that things are really approaching the boiling point. Is this the case?**

It's not just the media and government saying that; it's also the AFN and the band chiefs who are always saying it's reaching a boiling point, that they won't be able to control the people any longer, and that there will be another Oka. They go on about that *ad nauseam*. They use it as political leverage to say that the government has to negotiate with them or it will have to deal with the young militants coming up. On the one hand, a lot of it is state propaganda to scare people so that they can shift their support to the moderates. But, on the other hand, there certainly is an element of truth to it because when you have oppression you'll always have resistance. So the state – along with its lackeys in the band councils – is always trying to maneuver its way around to co-opt or destroy the resistance movements. In my opinion, resistance is going to increase in the future because the coming generations are not going to have the same economic stability or security that the most recent generation has had.

In terms of flashpoints, I don't really know where they will happen because of the localized nature of so many struggles. From the outside, things look like they are spontaneous, but of course they often take years of organizing and struggle to achieve. But they do have a spontaneous element – when the community has had enough, they stand up and resist – so flashpoints could happen anywhere across the country.

**A recently leaked Defence Department document shows that the federal government sees the threat of “insurgency” emerging not only in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also from native struggles in Canada. How do you assess this statement?**

I think it's a real concern for them. During the Oka crisis, they had 4,500 soldiers deployed, which was a clear counter-insurgency operation. This is partly why the Canadian state funds the AFN and pumps \$9 billion a year into Indian Affairs: they are literally trying to buy off and pacify our population. They know the potential for explosion if they're not pumping that money in, and

that potential could increase as economic conditions decline. They won't have as much money, and they won't be able to buy people off, so levels of struggle are going to increase. During previous major standoffs, there was a low level of widespread protest, as well as occupations and sabotage of infrastructure across the country. They know that there's a very real potential for this kind of movement to arise because it has already happened in the past and because there are organizers out there who are constantly trying to advance the movement.

Insurgency is a revolt against established authority, and all anti-colonial rebellions or insurgencies involve as many people as they can, so it is definitely a concern for Canada. Internal security in a resource-based economy with infrastructure spread out all across the country is difficult. Rousseau River Band Chief Terrance Nelson talked about this in his recent rhetorical confrontation with the government when he pointed to the hundreds of miles of vulnerable railway lines and electrical power transmission lines across the country, and this registered as a very real concern for the government.

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*Gord Hill is an activist from the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation in British Columbia. A long time organizer for indigenous sovereignty, he organizes with the Native Youth Movement ( NYM) based in Vancouver and runs Warrior Publications. He is currently involved in the campaign against the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. In this interview with Tom Keefer, Hill explains why the NYM boycotted the Assembly of First Nations' Day of Action on June 29, 2007. He discusses how the AFN and band council system were formed as a means of government control and assimilation of indigenous communities and the cooptation of grassroots movements. Hill also talks about the role of non-native supporters in struggles for sovereignty and the importance of forming broader radical anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements within First Nations communities. This interview took place in July of 2007.*

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