Settler Colonial Pseudo-Solidarity: Indigenous Peoples and the Occupy Movement in Canada

By Evan MacDonald

As a reaction to neoliberalism, the Occupy movement in Canada presents a radical argument for a just economy. However, it does not engage in any meaningful way with decolonization. Through settler moves to innocence – equating the struggles of indigenous people within colonization with the plight of settlers – Occupy fails to support the cause of indigenous self-determination. Without both effectively centering decolonization within a social justice cause and including indigenous voices within decision-making processes, there can be no long-lasting solidarity created between progressive settlers and indigenous communities. Neoliberalism as a modern face of colonialism is a worthy target of social justice action, but the negation of settler history and treaties provide a roadblock to solidarity. The process of decolonization asks the settler to accept less, but the rhetoric of Occupy focuses on reclaiming wealth and resources that have been seized from their natural owners: working Canadians. The colonial attitudes of most Occupy camps in Canada have resulted in a breakdown in potential alliances, and provide a warning for the next universalizing social justice cause.

In 2011, during the recovery from the Great Recession, many Canadians joined in solidarity with their American neighbours and activists around the world to participate in the occupation of public space through the vessel of Occupy movements. Activists within these movements were concerned over neoliberal forces that “continue to [push people] out of jobs, lands, and homes in order to secure an economic model that seeks to commodify all social relations in a context of growing global inequality.” While the Occupy movement is justified in its resistance against neoliberal capitalism as a system built on dispossession, they ignore the complexities of their own actions. In Canada, Occupy largely claimed to bring awareness to the broken treaty relationship between indigenous peoples and the Crown, but it absorbed the concerns of indigenous communities within the movement without consent and without a respectful voice. The Occupy movement does not aid in resistance to colonization, but instead empowers

it through disengagement. The analysis that folks within Occupy have done has led them to the conclusion that the forces of neoliberal capitalism have marginalized workers of all stripes, and that through a retaking of land that should belong to their class, the plutocrats that run the country's affairs will be depowered. Like all meaningful critique, I posit that the Occupy movement had good intentions, but asked the wrong questions. Instead of asking why the richest in society do not share their wealth with everyone else, activists on the left should instead centre decolonization as a source of liberation for all. Not engaging with the source-point of Canada's wealth does not question its legitimacy, which leaves little to no space for valuable solidarity between this movement and Indigenous nations struggling against a settler-colonial state.

Chief Mawedopenais said during the third day of treaty negotiations with the Crown in 1873 that "We think where we are is our property ... we have a rich country." Indigenous communities are often characterized by progressive causes as simply protectors of the land, or noble beings who are disinterested in relationships of power, but this completely ignores efforts made by Indigenous communities to enter into renewed treaty relationships with the state. By including a pseudo-indigenous voice to a settler cause, decolonial efforts are undermined. The absence of a decolonial lens from progressive movements "reveal[s] the limitations to "solidarity," without the willingness to acknowledge stolen land and how stolen land benefits settlers." The wealth redistribution proposed by the Occupy movement is in some ways incongruous to a decolonial project that strives to give land, resources, and sovereignty to indigenous nations. By returning to a relationship based in treaties, a decolonial Canada "would impoverish, not enrich, the 99%+ settler population", which brings us to the importance of treaties. Without them being upheld, settlers like activists in Occupy can "co-opt the power of place: physical resources of minerals, timber, fertile land and conceptual power relationships with the land enacted through private property and the nation state." When progressives utilize their privilege while refusing to acknowledge that the land they occupy is only accessible to them through the act of treaty-making, solidarity becomes an incredibly tenuous concept. The resources that Occupy seeks to redistribute were exploited through colonial practices, and without returning those resources to the detriment of the settler, peaceful coexistence within a shared territory is impossible. Noted, there were some shifts in the work of Occupy due to indigenous activism from within, through #decolonise, but "many organisers felt that their interventions were only partially taken-up at #occupy". For true solidarity to emerge between indigenous peoples and anti-capitalist groups like Occupy, the frame of conversation must be moved away from simply being anti-neoliberal to being anti-colonial.

In order to understand why there is so much stagnation on the effort to meaningfully merge interests between Occupy-esque groups and decolonial efforts, I will explore how neoliberalism and colonialism operate on everyone in Canada. Neoliberalism is an economic and social doctrine that emerged in the 1980s as a response to the debt-immobilized welfare states of the post-World War II era. Neoliberalism is an ideology of isolation: collective strength is undone by union-busting and deregulatory economic policies, and it "redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency". Neoliberalism is a contemporary and often invisible face of colonialism that settler-Canadians in the Occupy movement recognize as a harmful force on Canada's social fabric, and therefore direct action against it through reoccupation of public spaces. They are correct in their contestation of the adverse effects of neoliberalism, but this critique is not rooted enough in place or history to attract worthy

participation of indigenous communities. Neoliberalism's adverse social effects are some of the biggest threats to endanger a decolonized future for this land, but the transformational work that needs to be done in the face of those effects is the key element to the strife between Occupy and indigenous peoples. This ideology's social impacts range from "epidemics of self-harm, eating disorders, depression, loneliness, performance anxiety and social phobia" to the false consciousness of "[t]he poor [beginning] to blame themselves for their failures, even when they can do little to change their circumstances." This results in a working class that is understandably less critical of the world around them, and too inwardly-focused to empathize with indigenous communities still struggling under a settler-colonial government. The crushing weight of this new form of capitalism on all workers serves to legitimize its oppressions by prioritizing the individual experience rather than allowing for a collective awareness of the struggle of working people. A crucial question that neoliberalism introduces into the attempted solidarity between Indigenous communities and settler-Canadians is which unjust system should be targeted: settlers can easily feel the impact of capitalism on their everyday lives, but doing the work to expand their lens to incorporate how resources have been extracted from indigenous lands, as well as the failure of the settler-colonial government to live up to its treaty obligations allows for a more robust conversation on the next economy; an economy that is not simply a reworked capitalism that still relies on colonial exploitation.

To explore these divides in practice, I turn to the experiences of indigenous activists analyzing the Occupy movement within Canada. There was only one Occupy group in Canada that "adopted a statement of unity that took indigenous sovereignty as foundational to its analysis", which was #OccupyWinnipeg, and very few others acknowledged colonialism through their online activities. Similar disengagements can be seen at other cities where Occupy was strong: in Oakland, CA the movement refused to change its name after critique by indigenous peoples, and in Montreal concerns over decolonization were considered supplemental to the overall goal of confronting neoliberalism. Occupy Montreal exhibits a particularly stagnating practice that many progressive movements undertake: recognition without action. After a diverse group of organizations created an enclave within Occupy Montreal for the purpose of indigenous solidarity, no further action was implemented by Occupy. This kind of placation that progressive causes undertake to seem anti-colonial is sinister: it undermines decolonial efforts while gaslighting decolonial activists into supporting their causes. Occupy Toronto became so fraught with tension that a group of indigenous scholars held a forum on their differences with the movement in the aftermath of resistance to indigenous leadership. In Occupy's attempt to universalize the struggle of workers under neoliberalism, it has disregarded the lens of decolonization in favour of one that best serves their narrative, and in doing so they have become proponents of the legitimization of the settler-colonial state.

The kind of future that Occupy envisions is a difficult one to coexist with a renewed treaty relationship. With an emphasis on "take back the commons" rhetoric, anti-neoliberal movements deny the existence of a treaty-relationship that should govern how Canadians interact with indigenous power structures and transverse indigenous lands. Occupy in Canada is governed by each city's General Assembly, but they have main themes and goals that are universal within the movement: what is most remembered now is how "activists came together to denounce how increased inequalities affect people's lives." To discover what Occupy's alternative economy would look like in practice, one can turn to their camps as an example. Bartering-esque trading could be found amongst occupiers as a projection of a desired end-state economy, but in terms of policy options to reverse the trend of growing inequality,

literature recommends “revisiting policy instruments such as government transfers to persons, investments in education and human capital as well as minimum wage legislation.” This kind of imagination could certainly ease the pain that many in our neoliberal economic system endure, but it is an appeal to colonial institutions instead of a rethinking of how our settler-colonial state is organized. The movement’s camps represented how neoliberal capitalism forces us out of public spaces, but the underlying assumption in that work is that working class settler-Canadians are the true owners of this territory, and it has been taken by the capitalist system. There is clearly truth in the assertion that business interests have transformed our interactions with public space, however, the rhetorical indigenizing of settlers to this land is a troubling thought. Tuck and Yang would call this method of combatting neoliberalism as a settler move to innocence, specifically reoccupation. They explain these moves as being “fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation” where settlers can imagine themselves as being equally oppressed to indigenous peoples through a misreading of their own history. It is an obfuscation that “has legitimized a set of practices with problematic relationships to land and to Indigenous sovereignty.” Although in some senses the Occupy movement attempted to produce its ideal society by having a form of direct democracy through their General Assemblies, Jessica Yee points out how this and other progressive causes fail the indigenous peoples of North America:

This is part of a much larger issue, and in fact there is so much nationalistic, patriotic language of imperialism wrapped up in [left causes] that it’s no wonder people can’t see the erasure of existence of the First Peoples of THIS territory that happens when we get all high and mighty with the pro-America agendas, and forget our OWN complicity and accountability to the way things are today.

Must the onus always fall to indigenous activists to push progressive causes into adopting a decolonial lens? Even when the predominantly-settler Occupy was encouraged by indigenous activists across Canada to centre decolonization in its efforts, the idea was rarely taken up. By trying to create a universally anti-imperialist movement with a faulty decolonial lens, it “is deceptively embrace and vague, its inference: ‘None of us are settlers.’” It is then easier in the Canadian imagination to envision a new society for settlers outside of capitalism than it is to envision a land of shared sovereignty with indigenous nations.

Neoliberal capitalism has activated Canadians who are startled by growing inequality to take on organizing efforts to “take back the commons.” When this claim is problematized, it becomes very clear who the commons need to be taken back for: Canadians. There is a belief expressed through the Occupy movement that neoliberalism has dispossessed workers of a public life in a manner not dissimilar from indigenous peoples and it is up to settler-Canadians burdened by economic inequality to remake the system for the benefit of all. When meaningful indigenous participation in the Occupy movement was present, it usually resulted in in-fighting or inaction from the camps. What the Occupy movement wants is not entirely congruous with indigenous decolonial efforts: a reorganization of the economy without decolonization at its centre does not address the historical and contemporary exploitation of resources that Canada has benefited from, and it does not establish a renewed nation-to-nation relationship between a post-capitalist Canada and sovereign indigenous nations. If anything, Occupy largely believes

that once capitalism ends the suffering that indigenous peoples endure through colonialism ends. Occupy desires to build a pan-interest group that targets their efforts towards reducing economic inequality, but when an analysis is introduced to these movements that shifts the focus of their work, they have largely not been well-received. Neoliberalism in Canada only exists because it is a settler-colonial state, and the relative silence from Occupy activism, or worse, the adoption of a pseudo-indigenous voice or interest within the movement itself, indicates that they are not seriously interested in the work of dismantling the current power structures that undermine indigenous self-determination. The project of decolonization is commensurable with making current conditions better, but through strengthening colonial institutions without dramatically reforming them and having the ability to remove participation in Canadian life through sovereignty efforts, Occupy does not reflect the goal of a decolonized land and it relies on the wealth accrued by the colonial process to power its efforts. If the Canadian left wishes to ally itself with indigenous peoples, it cannot unilaterally dictate the way forward, or proceed without objecting to and actively working against colonial power dynamic within their own movements.

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