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Fighting for Socialism on Great Turtle Island— The Struggle Against Settler Colonialism

by Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro

The U.S. and Canada are settler colonial dictatorships. This is hardly a revelation. Yet most anti-capitalist leftist radicals seem unaware of or indifferent to this truth, a fact that is well illustrated by the paucity of concern expressed in socialist publications and other outlets with decolonization struggles on Great Turtle Island (the name some Native Peoples give to what is often called “North America”). This struggle should, however, be understood as fundamental to bringing about the demise of U.S. imperialism and building a post-capitalist alternative. There has, of course, always been verbal acknowledgment of this and even a few efforts among socialists to recognize and act upon settler colonialism. Still, it has rarely figured prominently or centrally in any socialist platform in this part of the world, nor have the contradictions inherent in a Eurocentric socialism (in which I include anarchism) been systematically confronted—at least not without less than flattering results (see for example the book edited by Ward Churchill, number 7 on our list of readings below).

It is disconcerting that most socialists, especially in the U.S., still cannot grasp what should be most obvious: The decolonization of Great Turtle Island would mean the end of U.S. imperialism everywhere—and with it a likely fatal weakening of all U.S.-supported institutions of repression worldwide. This is even more reason for considering the matter to be of some urgency. The recurring, intertwined social and environmental catastrophes generated through the capitalist mode of production are most clearly expressed in the genocides perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples. To put the matter succinctly, capitalist environmental degradation (not just global warming) is threatening or has already destroyed lives and livelihoods worldwide, with or without U.S. imperialism, and largely at the expense of the least powerful. Meanwhile, catastrophes are used to deflect attention away from capitalism as the root cause of those very same catastrophes. Indigenous Peoples have played and continue to play a pivotal role in the struggle against the capitalist mode of production and against any attempt to obscure the causes of worldwide environmental devastation.

We should, of course, acknowledge that any expectation of a unified perspective and/or action developing among socialists and revolutionaries (now a small, often marginalized if not persecuted political fraction of mainstream settler colonial society) and all Indigenous Peoples of Great Turtle Island, or even of the Indigenous communities themselves, would be unrealistic. Indigenous societies, for many reasons (some traceable to pre-invasion histories) are internally fractured, if not at times even mutually hostile. Some are even openly supportive of colonial governments. And socialists are similarly divided and politically diverse. But such difficulties can be no excuse for the continuing indifference of most socialists towards the settler colonial dictatorships on which the modern industrial living standards (shared, for the most part by these groups of radicals themselves) are based.

A counter-trend might be developing with recent collaboration and expressions of affinity among some Indigenous and socialist activists, especially in Canada (see works 1, 3, 11 and 14 on the list below). With the tendency worldwide for Indigenous Peoples to play a central role in resisting further capitalist encroachments and ecological destruction, such linkages could not be more opportune, as noted by Hugo Blanco (again see list of readings).

Indigenous Peoples on Great Turtle Island do not need socialists to carry on with their struggles. Major capitalist assaults on livelihoods and ecosystems have been successfully repelled through alliances between Indigenous communities and parts of the rural working class in places like Wisconsin, to cite one example, while most socialists, especially Marxists, have largely missed the boat. Arguably, this is due to several assumptions that are both long-standing and foundational. Then let us add: completely Eurocentric. Such assumptions must be shed once and for all—which will also, of course, mean major shifts in political organizing practices and programmatic objectives. But if an ecologically sensible socialist current (or really any socialist current) is to flourish and challenge the status-quo in Great Turtle Island such a paradigm shift is essential. These Eurocentric assumptions include inter-related notions of 1) stage-based social change, with one “mode of production” giving way logically and inevitably to another, socialism becoming possible only based on the productive forces generated by capitalism (which Marx himself began rethinking, even if extremely late in his life, thanks to Vera Zasulich); 2) the working class as the only revolutionary subject within capitalist society; and 3) the state as the primary vehicle for revolutionary change. (See also, from this last point of view, reading 5 below.)

The first assumption remains common to most left-wing groups which, among other things, persist in their belief that progress is tied to integrating masses of people into a single polity (with democratic central planning) and increasing the level of technology (now of an environmentally friendly variety). If we start with these assumptions, the claims for land restitution raised by Indigenous Peoples, and their reticence to accept any assimilation, immediately become obstacles to “progress.” Further, there is no room for Indigenous traditional life-ways in this worldview, because these stand in the way of resource extraction for the sake of the (not so) general good. The second assumption makes it necessary to explain away actual revolutionary subjects that do not live up to Marxist preconceptions, such as peasants in the Russian, Mexican, and Chinese revolutions, and Indigenous Peoples who are countering both settler colonialism (capitalist expansionism) and environmental devastation simultaneously.

For most socialists it remains too difficult to abandon these two foundational assumptions. But the third—the role of the state—probably raises the most tenacious resistance. And yet if we continue to insist on statist strategies in a context where states have been imposed on often previously egalitarian societies, it is tantamount to partaking in a reinforcement of the settler colonial dictatorship and in the complete annihilation of such egalitarian societies once and for all. This is not only a matter of subordinating questions related to Indigenous Peoples’ sovereignty to other “more central” struggles. In territories such as Great Turtle Island and northern Siberia, where states did not exist prior to colonizer invasions, projecting a centralized state as the key to creating a socialist society actively undermines Indigenous Peoples’ anti-colonial struggles and thereby any prospect of establishing ecologically sustainable egalitarian (i.e., ecosocialist) societies.

But even anarchist currents are not immune to criticism. Why, for example, have anarchists only recently paid close attention to settler colonialism? This includes even some Indigenous activist currents. Eurocentric anti-statism, such as Proudhon’s federalism or Landauer’s structural renewal, is just as counterproductive as the traditional Marxist approach. There is even the occasional proposal for “a radical rehabilitation of the state” coming from Indigenous communities themselves—for example in Canada. These are reminiscent of the reformist concept of “democratizing” the state, and not therefore likely to be of use. This is because the capitalist mode of production, which is inherently expansionistic, is based on the state as one of its main pillars. There is no confederacy or Indigenous-settler coexistence possible alongside a capitalist system of production, with its relentless pressure to ransack ecosystems everywhere for the endless accumulation of capital. The mere everyday bustling of

a capitalist society, with its incessant internal conflicts and violent repressions, necessitates ever-larger amounts of resources, often taken violently.

Anarchist appeals to a structural renewal strategy (building new social institutions alongside dominant ones) merely reinforces the colonizers' perspectives, since it precludes the possibility of settlers (including socialists) adopting or adapting to already-existing Indigenous social institutions. It helps even less if some anarchists claim that Great Turtle Island is a postcolonial reality when in fact Indigenous Peoples' movements continue to be summarily destroyed—through assassinations, military suppression, incarceration, infiltration, cooptation—especially when they pose a direct threat to settler colonial privileges. In such a context, even setting up “autonomous zones” can reinforce settler colonialism. One major reason for this is ignorance about the spiritual significance of specific places and their interconnections with other now-occupied spaces. Another is that resources, like piped water, which are used to enable such “autonomy,” may be reliant on ongoing colonialism elsewhere. More fundamental changes are, therefore, needed in socialist approaches themselves than what most socialists (including anarchists) currently appreciate—beyond sensitivity to coercive social relations, issues of spirituality, and (not really so) “unconscious spatial perceptions” (see reading 4).

A socialist anti-capitalism grounded in Indigenous understandings seems to me like a much more effective way of developing viable political strategies, at least on Great Turtle Island. The task before socialists is, therefore, as enormous as it is crucial. Engagement in class struggles within capitalist societies must at the same time overcome any tendency to dismiss Indigenous struggles (if not outright racism) or even indifference—things which for too long have pervaded socialist movements. This involves prioritizing the learning of cultures, histories, and the current internal complexities of and contradictions within Indigenous communities wherever one lives, without losing sight of world-scale processes. It entails rejecting what Fred Ho calls “manifest destiny Marxism,” a concept I would broaden to all socialist persuasions and suggest that we call “settler-colonial socialism” as an alternative. As Ho puts it: “The best way to ‘unlearn’ whiteness... is for people of European descent in the U.S.A. to give their all in exactly the same way as oppressed nationality freedom fighters: liberate stolen and occupied lands, return of resources and wealth, reparations, and to build a new society that will certainly mean the destruction of the U.S.A. as it has historically been constructed and construed, and the coming-into-being of voluntarily-associated liberated peoples and societies” (“Whiteness is Not Inevitable!,” reading 9 below).

These will not be easy tasks to achieve under colonial dictatorship, where even the existence of Indigenous Peoples is either ignored or de-emphasized unless it is convenient for propaganda purposes. (For example, in the case of Bolivia a usually-homogenized Indigenous movement is highlighted, in contrast to Venezuela, where most analyses say almost nothing about Indigenous Peoples' struggles.) But it will be an essential endeavor if we want to undermine the settler colonial order and thereby contribute to overcoming the capitalist mode of production.

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Further Reading:

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- 6) Blanco, H. 2006. Editorial. *Lucha Indígena* 1: 2.
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- 15) Wright, E.O. 2006. "Compass Points: Towards a Socialist Alternative." *New Left Review* 41: 93-124.