

FROM RED POWER TO RESURGENCE

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The audience for this talk was mainly made up of people who were seasoned veteran activists and senior scholars of radical social and political movements – leftists, socialists, and anarchists. The conference focused on the history and transformation of political activism generally in North America since the watershed years of the late 1960s. For my part, being asked to reflect on Indigenous movements in that era, I decided to trace the heritage of rooted resistance by Indigenous people in North America and show how Indigenous politics had always been an expression of our people's determination to preserve our independent Nationhood and traditional cultures and recover our lost lands. Heavy on my mind as I delivered this talk was the realization that this struggle has been abandoned by many within our Nations. Since the design of the reconciliation agenda by the Canadian government in the 1990s, we have been living through an historical moment where the goals of our ancestral struggle have been undermined by the emergence of an entire strata of comprador Indigenous elites within institutions of higher education, the legal

profession, national and regional Indigenous organizations, and even many community governments, who are not committed to struggle or sacrifice in any form, and for whom advancing colonial goals and the assimilation of our people culturally, politically, and spiritually into the Canadian mainstream is a personal commitment and political objective. I used the opportunity of being among comrades to show how this era is an aberration, and to tell them about the alternative to cooptation: the liberatory and transformational potential of Indigenous Resurgence.



What is it to be in struggle as an Indigenous person in Canada? It's much more than just following a chronology of the development of the Indigenous movement. What is really important is defining what it is that we're trying to achieve as Indigenous Peoples. We have many transformational visions of society – utopian visions, socialist visions, anarchist visions. I'd like to add to the conversation a unique element in outlining the Indigenous vision of what it is to be in struggle, and the Indigenous vision going forward.

I'm also interested in the linkage between how other visions, other movements have been enriched by engagement with Indigenous communities and Indigenous struggles. In this moment of resistance to the Trans Mountain pipeline there is allyship, but if you go back a decade or more, you find not only lack of connection but also some animosity and some conflict between environmental movements and Indigenous movements.¹ In 1998 I gave a talk in Australia about Indigenous ethics at a conference on environmental ethics. Arne Næss² was sitting in the front row, and when I mentioned that Indigenous Peoples were at odds with environmental movements because those movements

didn't take into account Indigenous rights and sovereignty, he literally jumped out of a seat and ran toward me. Now I'm a bigger guy and he's a smaller guy, but he came at me and banged on my chest to make the emphatic point in front of a whole conference that this was not environmentalism – not in the way that deep ecologists know it. They know and I know that if it's ever going to mean anything, environmentalism has to take into account Indigenous rights and Indigenous sovereignty. And so right there I knew we had something to build on.

You can look at the really strong transformations that have taken place in regard to connections and building a movement – when we come together and respect the true roots of resistance in this land, there is transformational potential of all of the movements. It's taken us a long time to get here. Everybody has their own issues and concerns – war, nuclear threats, suppression of women's rights – all of these battles have been fought and movements have been organized to fight these battles. But transforming Canada from a settler-colonial state to a country that is good for everyone is going to take the coming together of all these movements. The rootedness of these movements going forward is through Indigenous philosophies and Indigenous principles of resistance and ways of life. That's the commitment that I hold and bring to this work. In the past I've shared different commitments – toward Nationhood, toward resistance, toward a lot of different things. But like many other people I've come to recognize the power in this coming together, as we've learned more from our own people, and as we have re-rooted into the powers of Indigenous teachings. And so in tracing this history, I'm

tracing a historical trajectory of the development not only of a powerful movement in Canada and its potential but also a coming to the realization that as Onkwehónweh, the Original People, we have our own power rooted in our own philosophies and ways of existence.

To describe this history of struggle and the vision going forward I'm going to talk about "the Four Rs" – Revolution and Resistance, which are more historical; Reconciliation, which is the contemporary condition; and Indigenous Resurgence, which is the future.

A Revolution in Consciousness

Looking at the Indigenous movement as we conceptualize it today is to think of it as a coherent thing that links Indigenous Peoples, but it is in itself a modern construction. Previous to colonization, previous to the contemporary era, before modernity, Indigenous Peoples were Nations in and of themselves. Like "Aboriginal issues," it's similar to how people think about Indigenous people or even Indigenous Nationhood as a single thing. We have to remind people that no, those things are made up of very distinct groups of people, distinct political, social, and cultural entities. Today we can speak about Indigeneity as a singularity because of colonization, because of the fact that we are in resistance to a force that affects us all in relatively the same way. But the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] found that before colonization there was great diversity: over sixty distinct groups of people living in the area of what is now Canada, groups that had unique languages, cultural practices, histories, and land bases. This multiplicity of Nations

is now simply referred to as Indigenous Peoples, Aboriginal Peoples, although within our communities, and anyone who studies these issues, we know that this diversity hasn't gone away. These Nations are still here, and they're still salient features of any discussion of politics or society or culture. But we also have to recognize that there is a commonality of experience and a focus to our purpose. And so over time the idea of being Indigenous has emerged, and it has become real.

Using the word *Indigenous* in the way that I'm using it now used to be contentious. In the 1990s when I talked about the concept of Indigeneity I remember getting shouted down by people of an older generation from Native communities and rightly so – they said, “You're attacking our Nations, you're undermining our Nations when you say that.” That degree of contention still exists intellectually over the value of framing the struggle as an Indigenous struggle, versus rooting yourself in your own Nationhood as a Mohawk or a Gitksan or a Mi'gmaq. So I don't want to give the impression that I'm blowing through these complexities and moving on to a new conception of Indigeneity. But my assertion is that clearly there is a consciousness, there is a set of political relationships and increasingly there is language, culture, kinship, and all of the makings of an ethnic national identity that you can identify at one level as being Indigenous. And so there's a coming together of Onkwehónweh.

I feel that my Onkwehónweh identity is a nested identity. In Kahnawà:ke, it's my family or clan. If I go to a conference in Buffalo, which is Haudenosaunee, I'm Mohawk. If I go to Trent University, I'm a Mohawk, no doubt about it, I'm Kahnawà:ke Mohawk. When I'm here in Vancouver, I'm a

Mohawk. If I go to Australia, I'm a Canadian Indigenous person. I am all of those things, and they are all just as real. "Indigenous" then, as part of my nested identity, exists at the level of the commonality of all these Nationhoods that are in struggle against colonization.

Thinking of our identities in this way is something that's really new for our people, although there were precedents and examples of activism at the international level. For example, in the 1920s Chief Deskaheh, a Haudenosaunee Cayuga Chief, went to the League of Nations to advocate for the recognition of our sovereignty as the Six Nations.³ There have been times when the struggles of the collectivity of our people have been represented in a unified way. But it wasn't until the 1960s and '70s that we really began to see the coming together of a consciousness of Indigeneity. This new shared awareness was also emerging in Latin America and Australia and New Zealand during the era of decolonization. It helped to radicalize people and remake identities on many different axes. Indigenous Peoples were reading newspapers and watching the TV like everyone else, and these events and ideas came into their lives.

My own political consciousness was awakened in 1973. At the time it was called an "Indian" consciousness – an *Indigenous* consciousness – and directly influenced by the civil rights movement in the United States, especially the Black Power element of the liberation struggle of African Americans. This directly influenced the development of not only a consciousness but also a strategy and a strategic vision on how to confront oppression in our societies. During this time of Indigenous consciousness and struggle an element of redefining and re-conceptualizing identity was at play.

Part of the colonization of our Peoples was in the creation of a negative self-image. Nowadays we're familiar with thinking about how colonization is constructed and implemented and maintained, and following the line taken by anti-colonial writers like Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, we realize that this negative self-conception is essential, it's the foundation of colonization, it's basic. Indigenous Peoples in this country had come to think of themselves in that way: the breaking of that notion of what it is to be an Indian, and the freeing of people to explore and to develop and to recreate themselves in their own languages, using their own culture on their own land, was a significant part of what we called Red Power in that era. If you go outside the Longhouse where Deskaheh is buried, there is a marker that explains what he was fighting for, and it's very simple – what we want is to be able to be free to live by our culture, to worship our gods in our own land. That's what we are in struggle for – to be ourselves, to be authentic. It's not only a struggle against the power put on top of us; it's the struggle to empower our authentic selves.

Resistance Rising

If you want to trace militant resistance on the part of Indigenous Peoples, you have to trace it through the rise of Warrior Societies.⁴ The main thrust of our activism and our politics was the organization of forces in order to confront the mechanics of colonization and the powers that were imposing colonization in our communities most directly. It was groups like the Warrior Societies and the American Indian Movement (AIM) that confronted the most present features

of colonization. I mentioned my own political awakening in 1973. At that time in Kahnawà:ke where I grew up there were a series of riots involving the Mohawk Warrior Society, which had been influenced by AIM. It had been trained by and directly took its inspiration directly from Black Power. My own family was involved and people throughout the community were involved in this Red Power sensibility of having to confront not only what it is to be an Indigenous person but also to confront in revolutionary ways, through resistance, those forces that were keeping so many of our people back in that colonial mentality, in that colonial set of existences. Band councils were burned, people were evicted, all kinds of tactics and strategies that we're all familiar with in all of these movements all over the world, were used. That was an agenda that was put forward.

This aspect of the movement, which began in the 1960s and continued on through the 1970s, reached a watershed moment for Canada in 1990 when the Mohawk Nation and Quebec confronted each other face-to-face during the Oka Crisis. I'm sharing my own experience because that's where I grew up and so that's what I remember the most, but there were occupations, land defenses and land-based activism throughout the period – the Mi'kmaw, the Anicinabe Park Occupation in Kenora in 1974 that included the Ojibway Warrior Society and AIM; the Gitksan and other Nations in northern British Columbia in the 1980s. There was resistance throughout the country. But the 1990 stand-off is the most representative moment of Indigenous resistance in Canada: even today we see the Mohawk Warrior flag at political actions. It's come to symbolize resistance against oppressive measures by the state, resistance to

illegal occupation, stolen lands, disregard of treaties, and so forth. All this can be traced to the resistance of the Warrior Societies to that most present feature of colonization, and an attempt to move that power away.

This hasn't ended, but energy shifts. The dominant experience moves over to new opportunities and develops. But even as we speak today, the Manuel sisters – George Manuel's granddaughters, Art Manuel's daughters – are the ones leading the resistance in Canada, both in terms of ideology and actual on-the-ground action, and this continues.⁵ There are people still doing it in this way. They're committed to that resistance mentality and resistance posture in relation to the Canadian state, as are many Indigenous Peoples.

The False Promises of Recognition

After Oka, which had such a huge impact across the country, major shifts started to occur, building on the momentum that had been developing since the 1960s. We see the development of an approach that attempts to resolve the disconnection between two incompatible ideas in Canada. On one hand, we have the fact of the continuing existence of Indigenous Peoples, the fact that Indigenous Peoples were here before Europeans arrived, the fact that we have Nations and culture and rights, and on the other hand, we have the idea of the Canadian state and Canadian settler civilization, the idea that the European occupation and control of this territory is legitimate. How do you reconcile these opposing ideas?

In the past the attempts to reconcile these two opposing realities were coercive: get rid of the Natives, move the

Natives, control the Natives. But beginning in 1970 with the Supreme Court of Canada's decision on the Calder case, Indigenous Peoples were now successfully challenging the Canadian state within its own judicial realm.⁶ And so starting in the 1970s, and especially into the 1980s and into the 1990s, there is a shift from on-the-ground resistance and political resistance to activism within the legal realm – you have legal activism. From 1982 on, with the repatriation of the Constitution you have a situation where for the first time, reluctantly, in Canadian law, in the highest law of the land, there is a recognition of the idea of Aboriginal rights and title to the land. The government's response to this legal activism was to create a framework for recognizing Aboriginal rights. The idea of legal recognition emerged, and the Canadian government developed an approach to reconciling Indigenous sovereignty with Canadian sovereignty. But underlying the court decisions and negotiations over self-government was the premise that the only place for Indigenous Peoples was *within* the governmental structure of Canada. Modern treaties like the Nisga'a treaty in British Columbia are emblematic of this approach.⁷

I've spent so many talks and written so many pages criticizing the doctrine of Aboriginal rights and title that I'll just boil down my critique into a one-minute version, which is that – and I believe this reflects the consensus among Indigenous Peoples who are active politically and who are organized around this identity of Indigeneity – which is that the doctrine of Aboriginal rights and title does not allow for the full exercise of Indigenous Nationhood and culture. Canada recognizes Indigenous sovereignty, it recognizes Indigenous existences, and it recognizes Indigenous cultural practices

and so forth *only to the extent* that they don't fundamentally contradict core Canadian values. And of course, most Canadians support this and accept that notion. But from an Indigenous perspective, especially someone who is coming from an era of resistance, where the idea is to preserve your land, preserve your cultural practice, restore your Nationhood, and get control over your territory and future, the idea that you're going to get recognized to the extent that it doesn't contradict the ongoing colonial project is a bit disappointing. And so my critique is always centered on that. And I would say that boils down to what we're going to see coming forward.

Here's a bold prediction on my part: the Supreme Court decision, when applied to the Trans Mountain pipeline issue, means that Aboriginal rights and title may be infringed, even when they're proven to exist, if the courts find development is in the interest of the national economy and the society as a whole.⁸ It says that right in the major decision, the *Delgamuukw* decision, which has been brought forward many times in legal reasoning on other cases and is emblematic of the recognition framework approach.⁹ And so that's what is an Achilles' heel or a fatal flaw in the doctrine of Aboriginal rights and title: going to court is essentially a stalling tactic – it requires years of legal wrangling and millions of dollars to delay the inevitable, in the hopes that meanwhile politics shifts, economic changes, and so forth will make these things undesirable going forward. But as an Indigenous Nationhood principle, the idea of Aboriginal rights and title is severely limited. But that has been the thrust of our movement since at least the 1980s and into the 1990s, and it continues.

Like with the Resistance movement I mentioned before, we have the Manuel sisters who are still fighting hard on the ground. And with this Recognition-Reconciliation approach, we have an industry; we have a whole structure built around the ongoing project of recognizing Aboriginal rights and title. In Canada today that's where the bulk of activity takes place in regard to the relationship between the Indigenous Peoples and the Canadian state. You could point to that whole complex of negotiating self-government agreements, taxation agreements and basically taking the colonial structure and trying to reform it in a way that is minimally acceptable to the bulk of Aboriginal and Canadian people. And it's a huge project that's ongoing. That's recognition. And from this pursuit of legal *recognition* comes reconciliation, the current dominant political condition and approach.

Reconciliation with People, Not Nations

I trace the origins of the reconciliation discourse to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that was in place from 1992 to 1996. It was a large-scale rethinking of policy and law and history and offered an incredibly complex set of recommendations about the relationship between Canadian society and Onkwehónweh. The idea was *not* reconciliation in the sense of reconciling the existence of Indigenous Nations with the Canadian settler state. What emerged out of that process was an idea of finding a reconciliation pathway with those specific individuals who had been harmed by policies and programs of the Canadian state in the past. It was hard to identify at first because we were talking about

so many different things. But I think with historical perspective you begin to see more clearly that we had RCAP, followed by the Residential School Settlement Agreement, the Residential School apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008, and then you see the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and then the TRC report.¹⁰ You see a honing of the perspective that colonial injustice was an injustice done to *people*, not *Peoples*. And this is a key difference in legal language and political language.

People are individuals, *Peoples* are collectivities. Focus from the legal and the political perspective has been on the individual citizen. It resulted from the activism of individuals who had been harmed. There were people who had been harmed in residential school, who bore that shame for so many years, and who had the courage to stand up – at the Alberni Residential School, for example, and all over Canada – to stand up and say, this is the true history of Canada.¹¹ This is what we've endured. That psychological aspect was important in reconciliation, and that's why I will never stand up and broadly criticize reconciliation. Reconciliation is absolutely necessary because of the harm done to people. While harm to individuals needs to be addressed, it's not enough to simply focus on the individual experience. It is *Peoples*, collectivities, that we really need to talk about. Reconciliation needs to be more than a process to provide restitution for those people that suffered sexual, physical, emotional abuse from priests and nuns at residential school. It's also the loss of language. It's also the loss of culture. It's multigenerational. It was part of a larger-scale process to remove the original inhabitants from these territories so that capitalism could come in and exploit it. If you

don't talk about those things, then it's not reconciliation. It's recolonization.

For a few years I was very angry about this, and I thought reconciliation was a sell-out. But in dialoguing – and this is the currency of reconciliation, it is dialogue – and in taking it seriously in dialoguing with people in Canada, I have come to understand that there is still potential moving forward, even in the concept of reconciliation, because most people misunderstand it. There are very few people for whom reconciliation is an agenda, a way to limit justice for Indigenous Peoples. If this is the agenda, it's wrong. Powerful people benefiting from the land, usually ensconced in government or corporate positions, may have those agendas. But for a lot of people, it's just a mistake in understanding. If it's a mistake, we can continue to engage, we can educate, we can dialogue, and we can enhance people's understanding and expand the notion of what reconciliation is. If it's an agenda, then we defer to our other strategies of resistance. And so it's not either/or. For an Indigenous activist, for a person envisioning Indigenous resistance, we have to have a multiplicity of approaches because, as I've come to learn, there's no "monolith," no one thing to dismantle. I was joking this morning that I used to think it was *all* white people. As a Mohawk growing up, you're like, it's white people and that's it. And of course, I've learned in the job that I do, and the circles that I travel, and the friendships that I have, in the political activism that I've engaged in, that there is no monolith.

In outlining these three things – revolution, resistance, and reconciliation – and in particular looking at the fundamental critique of the current framework of reconciliation,

and in putting this vision of Indigenous Resurgence forward, I hope Indigenous activists going into the future can be more effective in understanding and navigating the particular locations, issues, and segments of society. What posture do I take? How do I relate to them? How am I most effective? Because it is an issue of justice, but it's also an issue of survival.

Resurgence Is Survival

How do we survive? Indigenous Peoples, more than any other in this land, are affected in a fundamental way. Not only is our individual survival affected in so many ways, but more profoundly, the existence of our cultures and our Nations and our languages is threatened. We have to acknowledge that. And so envisioning our future, it's really incumbent on the thinkers and the activists to put that profundity – the survival of Indigenous Peoples into the future – right at the core. This is the survival of the coming generations. If we don't figure out a way to defeat colonization, to address the injustices, there won't be a Mohawk Nation. It's not a matter of the quality of existence of the Mohawks there won't be any. And there won't be Gitksan and there won't be any Mi'kmaw. This is a qualitative difference in the struggles that we have here. If people recognize that aspect and take it on, especially in relation to environmental concerns, and the idea of the planet and its ability to sustain us, if we put that survival principal into our movements we will have a lot more ability to draw a lot more people to a lot more effective action.

One way is to reframe all of these things into a new conception of what it is to be in struggle. And here's where the resurgence comes in. This idea has grown out of these other three experiences of earlier struggle. We've been involved in resistance. We've been involved in governmental and legal activism. We've been involved in trying to do our best with the reconciliation framework. And to me, just like Oka is emblematic of the revolutionary strategy, and the *Delgamuukw* decision is emblematic of the legal strategy of recognition, and the TRC report is emblematic of reconciliation, Idle No More is really the emblem of Indigenous Resurgence so far because what it did is really show for this generation of activists and this generation of thinkers both its potential and its limits.

Idle No More showed how powerful we are, but it also showed the obstacles we face in our continuing empowerment and in making transformational change. Idle No More was a challenge, but it didn't transform the system in the way that we had hoped it would. And so when I talk about Resurgence, I'm talking about a present, but I'm also talking about a future vision. It's just developing. What are the elements of Indigenous Resurgence that distinguishes it from these other aspects: the focus on dialogue and creating a good relationship between Native people and Canadian society; reconciling the legal inconsistencies between Indigenous sovereignty; confronting the obvious injustices and oppressions, and so forth? It is really this: How do we re-root ourselves in our existence as Indigenous people so that we can regain our authenticity in our lives and pass that legacy on to the next generation?

When we talk about what Indigenous Resurgence is right now, we're really talking about reframing a pathway for people to recover that Indigenous authenticity and then to act on it. It's community-based, it's land-based, and it's relationship-based. For me it harkens back to an old revolutionary Red Power type of spirit. I feel like we're getting it right, we're doing it more right than they did back in the 1960s and '70s. This isn't to say we're doing it all right – but we're getting better. We have to work on not being afraid to make mistakes, be bold, take chances, learn as we go – all those sorts of things in building a movement are important. That's how we can talk about what Indigenous Resurgence is now – we've tried, and we've made mistakes, and we've learned.

It's community-based, much more so than the routes of getting involved in legal struggles or occupying the offices of the BC Treaty Commission or things like that. It's re-rooting yourself in your own community, and that's where the activism is taking place, at the community level and the family level. And it's taking place at the relationship and at the personal level. It's taking the idea of colonization – and this is building off Indigenous feminist critiques and queer theory – to move the idea of what it is to be in struggle down to the root and the most intimate connections of colonialism to ourselves. This is a challenging and exciting time because it forces us to examine our very insides. It's easy to be revolutionary when you're looking outside, very difficult to be revolutionary emotionally when you're looking in the mirror. And so this is the moment we're in.

And it's land-based. It's really about land and water and here's where the connection to the environmental movement comes in. It's not about gaining governmental power. It's

not about retaking the Indian structures and making them our own as we envisioned in the past. It's about creating a healthy environment, protecting the lands and waters – and this is profoundly Indigenous – it is looking at *all* our relations in a serious way. If we look at our conception of who we are as Indigenous people, there's no distinction between human beings and other elements of the natural world. The animals, the waters, the land, the bugs, the trees, from an Indigenous sensibility, we are in a web of relationships that place us in no hierarchical position relative to anything else. You have a responsibility to do now, as an Indigenous person with the power that you have and the skills that you have, to do what those things did for our people for thousands of years. We were naked and vulnerable, and they provided us life with their own bodies and everything that they gave us. Now they're under threat. What's our responsibility? That's what we have to ask ourselves. And that's the thing that Indigenous Resurgence does: it is putting Indigenous teachings with contemporary intelligence and applying them again. It's transformational. It's family-centered, it's community-centered, it's relationship-centered, but it is oriented toward transformation of those relationships to reflect what anybody here, I think, would agree are terms of justice, and in that way it goes beyond Indigenous values and the Indigenous sense of what goodness is in terms of a relationship and the way people experience life.

That's probably the most difficult journey for a lot of us because the impacts of colonization have been so profound. And it's the decolonizing as well. So it doesn't let go of the spirit of resistance and it has and does these things that root us in this way of struggle. The difference between

a Resurgence attitude and, say, a resistance approach, is it doesn't seek to cause confrontation. What it does is it roots itself in a place. It lives Indigenously and defends itself from intrusions. That's where the decolonization comes in. It's a matter of focus. Do we structure our movement to go and confront, or do we do our Indigeneity on our land and pass it on to our future generations and resist when people come in to try to stop that? It's a subtle shift but a very important one because it puts the priority on reclaiming, renaming, and representing ourselves in our own land according to our own teachings. Idle No More was a strong reflection of that. But even in the five years that have passed since then, it's very different and I think much stronger. You have much stronger rootedness of this idea of reclaiming our own existence and redefining our own existence as Indigenous people and standing on that and developing political associations, relationships, movements, strategies, and tactics to make that real and to have other people respect that.

To stand on our own authentic Indigeneity and to demand respect is really what Indigenous Resurgence is all about. I think that it's a powerful movement. And I think that the more people inside Indigenous communities and outside of Indigenous communities, whoever is concerned with justice, know about it, the more they're drawn to it, because I don't think that Indigenous Peoples are the only ones who see limitations to reconciliation, recognition, and resistance. So I think that we have a really strong basis for moving together and working together to defeat those forces. And I look forward to the dialogue and continuing conversation and hopefully work in the political realm on the ground with anybody who's concerned with these issues as well.