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Canada's First Nations: A History of Resistance

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Much has been said recently in the media about the relationship between the inspiring expression of Indigenous resurgent activity informing the #IdleNoMore movement and the heightened decade of Native activism that led Canada to establish the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1991. I offer this short analysis of the historical context that led to RCAP in an effort to get a better sense of the transformative possibilities in our present moment of struggle.

The federal government was forced to launch RCAP in the wake of two national crises that erupted in the tumultuous "Indian summer" of 1990.

Elijah Harper's filibuster

The first involved the legislative stonewalling of the Meech Lake Accord by Cree Manitoba MLA Elijah Harper. The Meech Lake Accord was a failed constitutional amendment package negotiated in 1987 by then prime minister of Canada, Brian Mulroney, and the ten provincial premiers. The process was the federal government's attempt to bring Quebec "back in" to the constitutional fold in the wake of the province's refusal to accept the constitutional repatriation deal of 1981, which formed the basis of the The Constitution Act, 1982. Indigenous opposition to Meech Lake was staunch and vocal, in large part due to the fact that the privileged white men negotiating the agreement once again refused to recognize the political concerns and aspirations of First Nations. In a disruptive act of legislative protest, Elijah Harper initiated a filibuster in the days immediately leading up to the accord's ratification deadline, which ultimately prevented the province from endorsing the package. The agreement subsequently tanked because it failed to gain the required ratification of all ten provinces within three years of reaching a deal.

The Oka conflict

The second crisis involved a 78-day armed "standoff" beginning on July 11, 1990 between the Mohawk nation of Kanesatake, the Quebec provincial police (SQ), and the Canadian armed forces near the town of Oka, Quebec. On June 30, 1990 the municipality of Oka was granted a court injunction to dismantle a peaceful barricade erected by the people of Kanesatake in an effort to defend their sacred lands from further encroachment by non-Native developers. The territory in question was slotted for development by a local golf course, which planned on extending nine holes onto land the Mohawks had been fighting to have recognized as their own for almost 300 years. Eleven days later, on July 11, one hundred heavily armed members of the SQ stormed the community.

The police invasion culminated in a 24 second exchange of gunfire that killed SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay. In a display of solidarity, the neighbouring Mohawk nation of Kahnawake set up their own barricades, including one that blocked the Mercier Bridge leading into the greater Montreal area. Galvanized by the Mohawk resistance, Indigenous peoples from across the continent followed suit, engaging in a diverse array of solidarity actions that ranged from leafleting to the establishment of peace encampments to the erection of blockades on several major Canadian transport corridors, both road and rail.

Although polls conducted during the stand-off showed some support by non-Native Canadians outside of Quebec for the Mohawk cause, most received their information about the so-called "Oka Crisis" through the corporate media, which overwhelmingly represented the event as a "law and order" issue fundamentally undermined by Indigenous peoples' anger and resentment-fueled criminality.

For many Indigenous people and their supporters, however, these two national crises were seen as the inevitable culmination of a near decade-long escalation of Native frustration with a colonial state that steadfastly refused to uphold the rights that had been recently "recognized and affirmed" in section 35 (1) of the The Constitution Act, 1982. By the late 1980s, this frustration was clearly boiling over, resulting in a marked rise in First Nations' militancy and land-based direct action. The following are some well-documented examples from the time:

The Innu occupation and blockade of the Canadian Air Force/NATO base at Goose Bay, Labrador

The occupation was led largely by Innu women to challenge the further dispossession of their territories and the destruction of their land-based way of life by the military industrial complex's encroachment onto the Innu peoples' homeland of Nitassinan;

The Lubicon Cree struggle against oil and gas development on their traditional territories in present day Alberta

The Lubicon Cree have been struggling to protect a way of life threatened by intensified capitalist development on their homelands since at least 1939. Over the years, the community has engaged in a number of very public protests to get their message across, including a well-publicized boycott of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics and the associated Glenbow Museum exhibit, The Spirit Sings;

First Nations blockades in British Columbia

Throughout the 1980s, First Nations in B.C. grew extremely frustrated with the painfully slow pace of the federal government's comprehensive land claims process and the province's racist refusal to recognize Aboriginal title within its borders. The result was a decade's worth of very disruptive blockades, which at its height in 1990 were such a common occurrence that Vancouver newspapers felt the need to publish traffic advisories identifying delays caused by First Nation roadblocks in the province's interior. Many of the blockades were able to halt resource extraction on Native land for protracted periods of time;

The Algonquins of Barriere Lake

By 1989, the Algonquins of Barrier Lake were embroiled in a struggle to stop clear-cut logging within their traditional territories in present day Quebec because these practices threatened their land and way of life. Under the leadership of customary chief, Jean-Maurice Matchewan, the community used blockades to successfully impede clear-cutting activities affecting their community.

The Temagami First Nation blockades of 1988 and 1989 in present-day Ontario.

The Temagami blockades were set up to protect their nation's homeland from further encroachment by non-Native development. The blockades of 1988-89 were the most recent assertions of Temagami sovereignty in over a century-long struggle to protect the community's right to land and freedom from colonial settlement and development.

From the vantage point of the colonial state, by the time the 78-day standoff at Kanesatake had begun things were already out of control in Indian Country. If settler-state stability and authority are required to ensure "certainty" over lands and resources to create a climate friendly for expanded capitalist accumulation, then the barrage of Indigenous practices of disruptive counter-sovereignty that emerged with increased frequency in the 1980s was an embarrassing demonstration that Canada no longer had its shit together with respect to managing the so-called "Indian Problem." On top of this, the material form that these expressions of Indigenous sovereignty took on the ground — the blockade, explicitly erected to impede constituted flows of racialized capital and state power from entering and/or leaving Indigenous territories — must have been particularly troubling to the settler-colonial elite.

All of this activity was an indication that Indigenous people and communities were no longer willing to wait for Canada (or even their own leaders) to negotiate a just relationship with them in good faith. There was also growing concern that Indigenous youth in particular were no longer willing to play by Canada's rules — especially regarding the potential use of political violence — when it came to advancing their communities' rights and interests. As then national chief of the Assembly of the First Nations, Georges Erasmus, warned in 1988: "Canada, if you do not deal with this generation of leaders, then we cannot promise that you are going to like the kind of violent political action that we can just about guarantee the next generation is going to bring to you." Consider this "a warning," Erasmus continued: "We want to let you know that you're playing with fire. We may be the last generation of leaders that are prepared to sit down and peacefully negotiate our concerns with you."

In the wake of having to engage in one of the largest military operations since the Korean War, the federal government announced on Aug. 23, 1991 that a royal commission would be established with a sprawling 16-point mandate to investigate the abusive relationship that had clearly developed between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state. Published two years behind schedule in Nov. 1996, the 58 million dollar, five-volume, approximately 4,000 page Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples includes 440 recommendations which call for a renewed relationship based on the core principles of "mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing and mutual responsibility." The material conditions that informed the decade of Indigenous protest that led to the resistance at Kanesatake created the political context that RCAP's call for recognition and reconciliation was supposed to pacify — namely, the righteous anger and resentment of the colonized transformed into an insurgent reclamation of Indigenous difference that threatened to unsettle settler-colonialism's sovereign claim over Indigenous people and lands.

The power of economic disruption

With respect to the emergent #IdleNoMore movement, although many of the conditions that compelled the state to undertake the most expensive public inquiry in Canadian history are still in place, a couple of important ones are not. The first condition that appears to be absent is the clear threat of political violence that was present in the years leading to the resistance at Kanesatake. #IdleNoMore is an explicitly non-violent movement, which accounts for its relatively wide spectrum of both Native and non-Native support at the moment.

However, if the life of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence continues to be recklessly put in jeopardy by a prime minister who negligently refuses to capitulate to her reasonable demands, I predict that the spectre of political violence will re-emerge in Indigenous peoples' collective conversations about what to do next. The responsibility for this rests solely on the state.

The second condition that differentiates #IdleNoMore from the decade of Indigenous activism that led to RCAP is the absence (so far) of widespread economic disruption unleashed by Indigenous direct action. If history has shown us anything, it is this: if you want those in power to respond swiftly to Indigenous peoples' political struggles, start by placing Indigenous bodies (with a few logs and tires thrown in for good measure) between settlers and their money, which in colonial contexts is generated by the ongoing theft and exploitation of our land and resource base. If this is true, then the long term efficacy of the #IdleNoMore movement would appear to hinge on its protest actions being distributed more evenly between the shopping malls and front lawns of legislatures on the one hand, and the logging roads, thoroughfares, and railways that are central to the accumulation of colonial capital on the other. For better and for worse, it was our peoples' challenge to these two pillars of colonial sovereignty that led to the recommendations of RCAP: the Canadian state's claim to hold a legitimate monopoly on use of violence and the conditions required for the ongoing accumulation of capital.

In stating this I don't mean to offer an unqualified endorsement of these two approaches, but rather a diagnosis of our present situation based on an ongoing critical conversation about how these differences and similarities ought to inform our current struggle.

Postscript

On January 4, 2013, the Prime Minister's Office issued an official statement saying that Prime Minister Stephen Harper, along with Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan, have agreed to participate "in a working meeting with a delegation of First Nations leaders coordinated by the Assembly of First Nations on January 11, 2013." "This working meeting," the statement continued, will focus on two areas emphasized in the "historic" meeting between First Nations and the Crown last January 11: "the treaty relationship and aboriginal rights, and economic development." Although the PMO statement doesn't explicitly indicate that Harper's decision came as a direct result of pressure placed on his administration by the explosion of activism associated with #IdleNoMore and Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike, it clearly indicates a change of direction in the federal government's approach to managing the fallout of these events.

My prediction is that this ostensible gesture of inclusion and dialogue is too little and too late. In the ever delicate balancing act of having to ensure that one's social conservative contempt for First Nations doesn't overwhelm one's neoconservative love of the market, the Prime Minister erred by letting the former outstrip his commitment to the latter. This is a novice mistake that Liberals like Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin learned how to manage decades ago. As a result, the federal government has invigorated a struggle for Indigenous self-determination that will continue to challenge both colonial racism and free-market fundamentalism in a way that will not be easily co-opted by offering scraps of recognition and the cheap gift of inclusion.

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