

# Bringing It All Back Home: Anti-Globalization Activism Cannot Ignore Colonial Realities

by Aziz Choudry

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*"We are faced with a two-fold challenge, to struggle as best we can to deal with the immediate consequences of globalisation. Secondly, and more difficult, to contextualise those problems within the 500-year-and-more history of the culture of colonisation."*

--Moana Jackson, Ngati Kahungunu/Ngati Porou, lawyer and Maori sovereignty advocate

*"For us, as Indigenous Peoples, we have noticed an interesting thing happening in the last twenty years. We see the colonisation process has been redirected. It is now directed towards the non-Indigenous citizens. The companies are cannibalising their own settlers. Now, the shoe is on the other foot. Where do you go for help against the multinationals who are going to swallow up your jobs and your lifestyle? Indigenous Peoples are not really interested in keeping companies within Canadian control. These companies have been abusing our lands. What does it matter if the company is Canadian or American or German or Japanese owned? All these companies are abusing our lands and resources. Why should Indigenous Peoples help non-Indigenous People protect their jobs and security when these same people have been destroying our lands and waters? Globalisation for us is colonisation continued without any letup. The question is to the colonisers. What are the colonisers doing about addressing the issues of colonization and its continued oppression of Indigenous Peoples?"*

--Sharon Venne, Cree lawyer and scholar

Many on the left point out that opposition to free trade and the neoliberal agenda is not necessarily anti-capitalist. They're right, of course - it comprises a diverse range of organisations, movements, motivations, agendas and goals.

Among anti-globalisation networks there is widespread coinage of the terms "colonisation" or "recolonisation" to describe the current manifestations of globalisation. But does that mean that the mobilisations and activism against globalisation are anti-colonial? For the most part, I don't think so.

If those of us living in colonial settler states like New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the USA are prepared to take on transnational corporations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the neoliberal agenda we must also address Indigenous Peoples' struggles for decolonisation and self-determination.

There are relatively few anti-globalisation initiatives where the perspectives and struggles of Indigenous Peoples located in the "western democratic" colonial settler states have taken centre stage. Their analyses and challenges are all-too-often relegated to the anti-free trade movement's equivalent of a social clause or an environmental side agreement; side issues to be partitioned off into a different space from unity statements and conference declarations which tend to articulate noble-sounding demands about people power, taking back "our" country, regulating corporations, genuine participatory democracy, etc.

In his recent book, *Human Rights Horizons*, Richard Falk writes of the USA's "perpetual rediscovery of its own perceived innocence.... Despite the dispossession of the Indigenous Peoples of North America, despite slavery and its aftermath, despite Hiroshima and Vietnam, this self-proclaimed innocence remains untarnished". I've talked with activists from several countries about this kind of phenomenon as it impacts on the perspectives of "civil society" in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Many social justice campaigns, NGOs and activists in these countries operate from a state of colonial denial and refuse to make links between human rights abuses overseas, economic (in)justice, and the colonisation of the lands and peoples where they live.

The doomsday scenario of corporate rule, transnational plunder, environmental and social disaster which many opponents of the

global free market economy warn of has long been everyday reality for many Indigenous Peoples. Modern transnational corporations are after all the heirs to the Hudson Bay Company, the New Zealand Company, the East India Company - major players in earlier waves of colonisation and the commodification of peoples, lands and nature.

In our meetings, analyses, speeches and demonstrations we can talk about transnationals, the WTO, globalisation as recolonisation, and perhaps even the neoliberal agenda in the context of colonialism in the Third World. But to advocate Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination closer to home often seems a surefire way to fasttracking one to extremist or pariah status - even among social and environmental justice activists. It might "alienate" people, I've been told.

Many struggles against globalisation taking place in the South are connected to anti-imperialist, anti-colonial mass movements with long histories. However, the voices heard most loudly and insistently in the international media and at most major international gatherings opposing the neoliberal agenda and building alternatives are rarely those of grassroots community activists from the South, let alone Indigenous Peoples in the countries of the global North. Well-resourced NGOs and trade unions usually based in the West, tend to command considerable power to set the parameters of the debate and direction of the campaigns against corporate globalisation.

Far too many times have I heard the history of globalisation - and the resistance to it - compressed into the last two or three decades, and related in a way which downplays or ignores anti-imperialist movements in the South and especially the resistance of indigenous nations in territories claimed by Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the USA. In Canada and the USA I have shared platforms with North American speakers who curiously trace the history of globalisation back to the Trilateral Commission. Here in New Zealand, I have seen white environmentalists accuse Maori of "reverse racism" for daring to assert their rights to protect indigenous flora and fauna under threat from bioprospectors and the TRIPs agreement. At other international conferences on globalisation, activists have dismissed Indigenous Peoples' perspectives on globalisation as "narrow" and "nativistic", arguing that they do not attach enough importance to class analysis.

Naturally we feel outrage at security clampdowns against popular mobilisations in Auckland, Vancouver, Seattle, Melbourne, Quebec City, and Washington DC. But shock and surprise? Colonial governments have always used police and military as an army of occupation against Indigenous Peoples. State-sanctioned abuses against indigenous communities have long been a dime-a-dozen but have frequently failed to register with many folk.

I have heard the fairy story, told with passion, authority, and a touch of nostalgia, by non-indigenous New Zealanders, North Americans, and Australians who speak earnestly of the freedoms and democratic rights enjoyed in their countries. Apparently things were pretty good until the neoliberal ideologues and big business seized control, opened up the economy, started hocking everything off to the transnationals, and saw Joe and Jill Citizen dispossessed of things that they thought were theirs. So say dozens of activists, academics, and politicians as they state their opposition to the neoliberal agenda. This version of history begins when globalisation started impacting non-indigenous peoples. The words "democracy" and "sovereignty" crop up time and time again in their talks, and in anti-globalisation literature and campaigns in these countries. What do such appeals to democratic traditions, concepts, and values mean when they ignore past and present-day realities of colonisation in these countries?

While attending the 1997 Peoples Summit on APEC in Vancouver I remember being struck by how speaker after speaker attacked transnationals, and identified them as the driving force behind APEC, yet utterly ignored struggles like that of the Lubicon Cree Nation in Northern Alberta - the next province - against gas, oil, and timber transnationals invading their unceded territory with the complicity of the Canadian state. Nor did the fact that a "liberal democratic" government of Canada, like the one which through hosting APEC hoped to influence Asian trading partners with "Canadian values", had sent more armed forces against Mohawk people defending their lands in the 1990 standoff near Oka, Quebec than it sent to the Gulf War rate a mention. But then again, the Vancouver Peoples Summit itself was part-funded by the same NDP British Columbia provincial government which in 1995 initiated a massive military operation at Gustafsen Lake only a few hours drive away, against a small group of Indigenous Peoples defending their sacred lands.

Many critics of globalisation play down the role and relevance of the nation-state, attributing power almost solely to transnational corporations and international institutions like the Bretton Woods triplets. Yet this takes the focus away from the nature and power of the state and even romanticises it. Such global campaigns run the risk of distracting people's gaze from long-standing injustices underfoot. In delegitimising these global actors we must be very aware of the dangers in uncritically legitimising nation-states which are themselves based on the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. We cannot ignore the centuries of resistance by many indigenous nations against incorporation into the colonial state. We cannot ignore the colonial foundations of the countries in which we live.

To do so is to mask the true nature of our societies, and the extent to which they are built on colonisation and exploitation.

How can Indigenous Peoples be expected to validate, affirm and seek incorporation into national or international movements dominated by non-indigenous activists, organisations and agendas which are reluctant to address domestic issues of colonisation with the same vigour and commitment that they put into fighting transnational capital or the WTO?

Of course some important alliances have been forged between Indigenous Peoples and non-indigenous organisations confronting globalisation. Many (usually small, underresourced) activist groups struggle hard to draw the connections between corporate globalisation and colonisation, to support local indigenous sovereignty struggles and educate non-indigenous peoples about these issues.

Movements to expose and oppose corporate globalisation have a very real potential to mobilise support from non-indigenous people for meaningfully addressing the issues of colonisation in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the USA. We should be challenging the jurisdiction of these colonial settler state governments as they move to sign international trade and investment deals, in the light of their continued denial of Indigenous Peoples' rights, jurisdiction, and title.

The centuries-old culture of colonisation holds the key to understanding and defeating the current wave of globalisation. If we understand how "democratic" governments like Canada can sanction the ongoing assault on indigenous lands and communities it isn't hard to understand why such governments subscribe to freemarket international trade and investment policies.

In determining the values and foundations on which we build alternatives to the neoliberal agenda our movements must be prepared to examine our own propensity to oppress. We cannot build alternatives to globalisation on the rotten foundations of the denial of occupying indigenous lands and the ongoing suppression of Indigenous Peoples' rights. "The colonisers are always building rotten foundations and expecting us to step into a completed building" says Sharon Venne.

If anti-globalisation activists and organisations do not address these questions with some urgency then I fear that the growing resistance to neoliberalism in the global North risks being as inherently colonialist as the institutions and processes which it opposes. Our usage of the term colonisation will be little more than empty rhetoric if our analysis does not acknowledge the context in which corporate globalisation - and the worldwide opposition to it - is taking place.

Those of us active in anti-globalisation struggles in Canada, the USA, New Zealand, and Australia need to examine our role in the colonisation and globalisation of the earth. Only then can we seriously talk about liberation and real alternatives to the neoliberal agenda.

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