

Re-Thinking Struggle: Starting From Story

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Philosophy looks at the nature of things. In this article, I try to critique those characteristics of the contemporary indigenous struggle which I find troublesome from the perspective of a person involved for 40 years in the struggle to regain control over our lives, lands and resources. I propose to do this through a summary of my personal, and political formation from 1977-2014 and my current thinking on representations of the indigenous movement as influenced by my philosophical studies at Kwantlen Polytechnic University since 2014. I will provide a critique of the following four emerging features I consider problematic in our struggle: “us-them” dynamics, [militant] identity politics, allies, and indigenous scholarship. Finally, I propose the philosophical re-grounding of the indigenous struggle to draw upon indigenous metaphysics, language and stories as the primary source of anchoring the strategic and logistical aspects of engaging in the struggle of resistance, revolution and resurgence.

Personal Formation and Perspectives

I ground my approach to understanding the struggle in the question: “Who am I.” Remembering my identity allows me to re-embrace what was loved in our language, creation, culture, world view and ways of being human and what was loved about our own selves. One of the perks of becoming a 60-year-old indigenous person is the honour of seeing the world change. Seeing change can give one the experience of “feeling on the right side of history” when one witnesses a re-emergence of a people one has dedicated his life supporting. Growing older offers a place of finally being at the cusp of a “thought” that can articulate a thing or two life has taught. Aging provides, for all of us, an ability to transition away from action to reflection.

It was in the spirit of not taking myself too seriously and sensing that I have something to say that I started philosophical studies at age 57. The issue of “taking back our lives” (which means identity) has served at the heart of my understanding of our struggle as a life-long project. I am better at understanding

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at 60 years old than I was at 40; *there is an experience of peace and a sense of “arrival” at who I am and what I need to say, but I am not there yet!*” These realizations are central to the question of “who am I” in all philosophical traditions. So, to pursue this question in relation to the indigenous struggle to be ourselves (which is a taking back of all that was loved in our traditions), I wish to research and write about an indigenous based philosophical grounding of our movement so that it remains culturally authentic, sustainable on a long-term basis and global in influence.

What is the nature of resistance, revolution and resurgence *within* the question of “who am I”? I think that what lies at the heart of the indigenous struggle is the regaining of who we understand we are and – in part – having the ability to “be ourselves” in the Canadian nation-state. It is a “love for a denied cultural existence”, whose search lasts our whole lifetime. The struggle for social justice in *the diversity of struggles* is about the right to be ourselves. I include the struggle of the mainstream to reposition themselves, to take back their identity which many perceive as lost and finding new ways to live that identity in the awakening of a society that seeks to balance the dignity and rights of all in a framework of substantive, and not just legal, equality.

This aspect of struggle – a fight to be ourselves – as a common feature is not an argument for a relativist position, which would only reduce the importance of specific experiences of struggle, but rather an acknowledgement that each struggle is unique and yet within the diversity of struggle, the nature of struggle binds all. As an example, Black Lives Matter both shares and contrasts with the Indigenous struggle. Black Lives Matter stood with us at Standing Rock and we share many values of community, collectivity and so forth. However, to put both of our struggles under the label of “Human Lives Matter” would be a conceptual minimization and perhaps invalidation of what is being said by Black Lives Matter or the American Indian Movement in the light of distinct human experience as lived by Black and Indigenous peoples. All our struggles for justice recognize or ought to recognize that we generally acknowledge that the specific experiences of Black people, our own people, the GLBTQ+ community and others are all forms of acknowledging that “human lives matter” and that the experience of life is unique, yet the concepts of struggle are complimentary.

1970s: Small “I” liberalism

The indigenous struggle that I “signed up for” in the 1970s was a struggle that was limited to seeking justice within the Canadian system. Justice

was considered to be legal and status equality and sameness with other Canadians. As I look back, I note that two books represented the two opposite poles of the conversation in the 1970s. On the one side, small “I” liberal concepts were discussed by Pierre Elliot Trudeau (PET) in his book (co-written with Thomas Axworthy) *Towards a Just Society*. The aboriginal alternative to Trudeau’s concept was articulated by Cree lawyer Harold Cardinal. *The Unjust Society* responded directly to the arguments presented by Trudeau and Axworthy.

I think those two classics provide a good overview of how we saw the struggle in the 1970s. We thought, under this liberalism, that we needed to be included in the life of the state. Like the liberal feminism exemplified by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which holds that the patriarchal system was not necessarily the problem, and that if more women were in the system, the system itself will work out for women. This we no longer subscribed to. It was precisely this small “I” liberalism of Pierre Trudeau that many of us subscribed to in the 1970s. Today, I do not believe that if we have more Indigenous people in the Legislative Assemblies across the country nor the Parliament of Canada that the fundamental nature of the Canadian nation-state will change to a just treatment of our people.

1980-90s: The System Itself Rejected

In the 1980s and 1990s, I moved from the small “I” liberal position, to a position that the system itself IS the problem. The system – with its imperialist goals, western philosophical arguments (i.e. Locke’s labour theory of property, etc.), colonial history and commitments to consumption, consumerism, capitalism and the market system, led many indigenous activists to conclude that the system itself was the problem. Our people began to think that the neo-imperialist objectives of Canada to maintain a dispossessed indigenous population controlled by purse string management of “income-tax dollars” versus royalties would not change anytime soon.

What had survived of my small “I” liberal 1970s thinking to this day was developed in my experiential reflections of the time. We began to see and understand that the imperialist system in which colonization is embedded is problematic. I began to understand the imperialist nature of Canada. While we understood that freeing ourselves from neo-imperialism is a long-term goal of resistance, revolution and resurgence, we also saw that we could take on short or medium term projects; i.e. reducing aboriginal incarceration rates, personal and

infrastructural poverty on reserves, language and educational re-empowerment, health indicators as incremental steps towards liberation.

In the 1990s, I drew upon the thinking of the 1970s when I began to think about how we could *measure success* in those days and indeed in 2017. Our measure of medium term success would attempt to bring the average statistics of Indigenous people to the same rates as the average Canadian and that would indeed be a success that both Canadians and ourselves could celebrate. Then in a consistent manner with the “*just society*” vision of the 1970s, we could further raise those standards. Equality as “sameness” lost its appeal in this period for me; sameness does not mean equality but elimination of relevant differences. Of course, legal equality is important, but only as a precondition of self-determination.

Another lesson in my perspective formation in the 1980-90s was that Canadians too, are products and victims of the neo-colonial system; it is a system that does not work even for them, and we see this in the increasing class divides. Colonialism, which exists in “neo” forms today, is about concentrating power in the hands of a few at the expense of the majority. We see this in corporations who hire new psychologists every five or so years to ensure that they (and their marketing strategies) relate to the latest research in cognitive processes to remain competitive and wealthy in a global economy.

Mainstream Canadians (and the middle class) are struggling to come to terms with an increasingly multicultural nation-state, trying to address the sense of loss of the “Canadian way” as well as the need for re-worked resurgence of mainstream tradition. Resurgence of all Canadians takes on an increased importance as nations are selling out their sovereignty to the economic system. Many mainstream and New Canadians, along with our people, are again being left aside and outside of this global reality of neo-colonialism.

The Struggle Today: A Description of My Understanding

There is a sense of urgency in today’s world about things such as climate change and the destruction of a live-able planet and for many this is the justification for militant action; we have no other choice they believe. There is no time for “due process”. Immediate action is the call shared by many, not all, indigenous peoples in today’s movement.

In terms of strategic and logistical expressions, today’s movement seems to use the approach of martial arts which does not provide resistance to stop aggressiveness, but it “pulls in” the dynamics of an aggression to self-defeat.

The use of “allies” and western political schools of thought (liberalism, socialism, “left” and “right”) has provided a synergy which has helped in gaining the movement impressive “wins”, but, I ask, at what cost?

My core purpose in the struggle today is to advocate for the value of Indigenous knowledge to the global problem of survival and a *matured human species*. I base advocacy on the re-grounding of our struggle to articulate our metaphysics, speak our languages and tell the stories. Work in re-grounding is the task ahead for the remainder of my generation’s time. Our generation (5th or 6th) were successful in keeping our people’s voice alive through our forms of resistance and we now “pass the torch” onto the 7th generation leadership and are now entering into a time of reflection and thought to help emerging leaders.

Looking inwards to our communities, I am grateful to see the politicization of frustration with status quo excuses for inaction. Canadian “authorities” are losing their old excuses for ignoring indigenous issues. At the same time, many in our communities no longer tolerate the exploitation of our people by our own leadership and their “allies” in Big Indian Business who rip off the average band member or the voiceless urban aboriginal person who is “managed via the client relationship” by highly funded aboriginal organizations. Some are tired of indigenous leadership that are more interested in cocktail parties in the guise of “networking” and “lobbying” when year after year the process only seems to unfold with no or little results. The people are tired of when money does finally get released to the communities only to see that consultants in the Big Indian Business are at the trough of funding from their buddies in the band council.

Critique of The Struggle Today

The four areas that I have chosen to critique in this article include “us-them” dynamics, [militant] identity politics, allies, and indigenous scholarship. My goal is to draw attention to worrisome trends, not dismiss other perspectives, but to invite conversation, critique, counter-arguments that will help me and others learn. My “arguments” are the lessons and world views reflected in our stories. I consider these sources to be the authoritative basis for the development of my ideas about resistance and resurgence.

The key trend that is problematic to our struggle today in my perception is the movement *away* from referring to our own sources of “truth” that come to us upon reflection of our language, creation, teaching, ethnic stories, legends and “myths” *towards* incorporating the colonial values behind

masked indigenous identity politics and other features of today's struggle. Notions of "our land", "our rights", coupled with victim identity politics and the politics of justified anger, of polarization and exclusion (indigenous-only spheres) are treated too often as clichés or rhetoric and used in ways that do not reflect the concepts as they should be represented in argument.

We must be able to explain concepts like "sovereignty" in relation to how we see the term "our land" not as property but as a relational responsibility, "our rights" as both natural – how we lived together before contact – and how we have been incorporated into the western system of international laws. People, including our own people, must remember that "aboriginal rights" are a non-indigenous construct required by British law. Even notions of terra nullius were developed (but applied wrongly) to be clear on what territory can and cannot be taken or claimed by a European nation-state.

Unlike some other perspectives in our movement, I believe that most Canadians support us in principle although they don't pretend to understand the complexity and multi-layered nature of what we are resisting, what we are fighting for, and perhaps the eventual show down we must have becoming liberated on a limited basis with neo-imperialism. The tactics of direct action, confrontation and "victim-based" arguments that are said to mainstream Canada in an accusing fashion are tired and I think are becoming ineffective. Too much loud confrontational yelling which only succeeds in deafening conversation, understanding and working together towards mutual objectives; in becoming more creative, diverse, inclusive in our strategies while fostering common interests as a basis for resistance, revolution and resurgence is the way forward.

Them-Us: My perception is that there is an increased emphasis on the dualistic construction of "them-us", ideological tribes and the dynamics that go with this separation. The "us" seems to be more and more based on some version of victimization that have no rationale or ground. There is no evidence for such claims of persecution and rumors of planned genocide. We also hear these patterns mirrored in the rhetoric that justifies "alt-right" claims by white supremacist groups, survivalists that the white race is marked for extinction. Once grounded as a marked group for extinction, membership and recruitment are more successful. Challenges to the existence of Indigenous peoples in Canada relate more to dispossession rather than genocide (although cultural genocide could be a result). Actual genocidal attempts were made on Native America by Washington, DC in the past but that does not establish that there are

further plans for all-out genocide. The myth making of persecution is necessary to create movements utilized by today's indigenous struggle it seems. Should we not be critical of the roles of group paranoia through over analyzes and imagination?

The good "us" that reigns in the indigenous narrative perpetuates elements of the Noble Savage myth, which reflect victimization in a one-sided colonization process. Colonization was a highly destructive process, obviously, but indigenous peoples were not only and exclusively passive victims. All peoples affected each other. Our peoples benefited in history through military alliances with the English, Dutch or French. The "us" narrative is dismissive of the partnerships between indigenous peoples and their ability to adopt white (French) settlers into their communities. The En Derouine Trade and Metissage of the people (country marriage) showcased a reality that highlights arrangements of mutual benefit to both peoples (Devine, 2014, 332-3). These facts are a part of the colonial past, and should be included in the assessment of our struggle. The biased accounting of a one-sided colonial account expressed in interpretations of historical facts that are sometimes exploited, out of context, and managed to satisfy the arguments of today is something that we need to be self-critical about as indigenous thinkers. In the "us" dynamic *colonization* is minimized to a noun, a fact. Colonization becomes the answer to and for all our troubles, which is an over-simplified statement.

The politics of "us-them" (and the politics of anger, politics of revenge, polarization, etc.) is dividing people within our community and the encampment of ideological tribes that make no room for "the middle", make no room for incremental or even band-aide solutions that for the short term are better than nothing, make no room for compromise and the meeting of ideas. There seems to be a resistance to exploring ideas without labelling them left, center or right; this is dangerous because once a community stops talking then the signal for the self-destruction of that community *has been sounded*.

Identity Politics and Militant Enforcement: The dynamics of "us-them" trend has either spawned "identity politics" or is a product of "identity politics". The notion of "identity politics" is a reasonable concept. It holds that many of us (not all) who experience life from a certain ethnic perspective (indigenous) share many common experiences, experiences that could be unique to our membership in a group. Identity politics simply tries to reinsert our experiential knowledge as a factor in how we see and experience reality and how we see and experience minority status.

The problem, however, is the tendency to “box-in” a set of political beliefs or positions as characteristic of identity even when these universal claims do not apply to each individual indigenous person. Most people understand that the contribution of experience as a way of naming personal and group identity can be a general guideline but not a universally applicable and infallible boundary of identity. The danger in “boxing in” too tightly the characteristics common to the experience of indigenous people are claims that disallow for counter-arguments or indigenous people who do not share what is claimed as core to a political identity. Extremists then try to reinforce these political positions, narratives that draw sympathy to a political position by negative means. If you don’t agree with their view of what constitutes our identity, they will find ways to “shut you down.” Therein lies the confrontation with long-term or traditional thinking in our communities based on language and story.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes identity politics as “a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017). While I find this to be a good definition, some of the “activity” and “theorizing” that goes on in the name of claiming and defining our own identity leads to the *betrayal of traditional indigenous thinking* in regards to human relationships. Identity politics, when created is a boundary that tries to explain and articulate a set of political characteristics based on our common experience, become an obstacle to the struggle. The common experience used as an identity boundary is the negative experience of colonial history. It is a reading of history that is too black and white, not a realistic interpretation of life nor history. If anything, most of us would see life and history as grey, we cannot be limited to dualistic thinking. And, if life is grey, then our politics (and identity) should be more flexible and creative than binding our political realities in a box.

Instead of one-sided ideological histories, we need to have the courage to follow the Socratic maxim that “a life unexamined is a life not worth living.” Indeed, I would go so far as to say that we risk our own cultural vitality if being indigenous people comes at the cost of self-expression, diversity, engaging different ideas, and evolving new ideas and emerging models. Perhaps the seeds of a self-imposed genocide are not yet perceived in the new interpretation of our struggle as indigenous peoples, but I sense those seeds as present.

As a coalition of indigenous peoples, we must maintain and nurture a healthy self-respect that incorporates the ability to critique and rethink our own

idea as the times change. It is ironic to me that I must be very intentional in inviting critique; it is almost a fight for the right to have my ideas critiqued in a professional manner that allows me to improve my clarity and/or delve deeper into a question or issue. I am being denied, via politically correct sensitivity on the part of the mainstream, to grow intellectually, I don't sense all the time that I am being taken seriously and that my premises based on indigenous metaphysics and my epistemological sources and methods of establishing those ontologies are dismissed by academia as an example.

A further problem is the militant tendency to signal out people who disagree with the indigenous paradigm (i.e. Senator Beyak on the residential school system). As I understand her statement, she was saying only that some good things happened in a system so detrimental to indigenous culture, and for expressing this opinion there is the mass calling of her removal from her senate committee. Underlining this "calling out" of Beyak was based simply on the fact that some were offended that she did not support the indigenous narrative currently in vogue with regards to that tragic piece of history in Canada. Silencing or shaming of people with an opinion that is not consistent with the claims of indigenous activists runs counter to the notion of tricksters, people who march to a different drum beat and free spirits. Expressing an opinion – including the right to be delusional in one's opinion – should not be suppressed but applauded.

Those in our movement who take militant angles of identity politics are saying that the rest of us will be silenced if we espouse views that are different than the dogmatic canon of views held as sacred by our Indigenous guru's, academics and leaders. The misuse of the "consequence argument" and the "shutting down" of free thinkers really is a form of political bullying and is wrong and dangerous and runs counter to what our metaphysics, languages and stories talk about. Militancy can be good, when used sparingly and as a last resort, it has now become the opening punch in any new battle and a confrontation that has led to the result that even the militant option when necessary will become tired and ineffective.

Allies: The trend of allies in our contemporary struggle is a relationship that is so important, it is through these relationships that the indigenous struggle is finally having its voice heard in a manner that has planetary significance. The application of indigenous expression to planetary issues is part of the struggle I never would of envisioned in the 1970s; these effective partnerships (and the

collective voice which created a hybrid language) started to emerge – in my experience – during the 1980s.

At the same time, we need to be wary of certain dangers in these relationships with allies. I often wonder whose agenda is whose. I hear more and more indigenous activists parroting mainstream rhetoric on the environment when we ought to be thinking about these issues from our own stories, languages, and indigenous knowledge. If the Inuit can note that the earth's axis is moving via their seal hunting knowledge, there must be scientific value to our traditional knowledge that can contribute our own message in partnership with the messages of our eco-friendly allies.

Often environmentalists just assume our cooperation and speak on our behalf about fabricated indigenous eco-thinking. Our thinking traditionally – as I understand it – is take what you need, no more and then share it with your community. However, to the chagrin of our environmental brothers and sisters, we too had problems with our own values. The Metis often killed up to 25 buffalos for their family; the Blackfoot would often run buffalo over cliffs. So exploitation of animals is not a mainstream thing, it is a human frailty that hopefully at this stage in our evolution we have matured a bit (Devine, 2014, 328-355). It must be noted though that in the 1800s the destruction level of the animals despite these acts mentioned above did not have the environmental impact that our population does on the animals today even though we are limited in what we can fish, hunt or gather (harvest).

There is, for example, the notion that indigenous thinking is of pure eco-concern and really it is not. The idea that all indigenous peoples oppose pipelines, natural resource extraction, and so forth is not an accurate reflection of the diversity of opinion in our communities. We continue to be labelled, albeit nice labels, like we are conscious of the earth. We are, but the earth is tough and can take a lot, we can and must extract resources to live, whether that includes bow and arrows to kill moose, or current mining practices. The problem is consumerism and the capitalist way in which to harness these resources; the problem is that once resources are extracted they are not shared. The indigenous view would challenge unbridled extraction and distribution and environmental issues attached in the extraction of these resources.

The Role of Indigenous Scholarship: This staple of the struggle must also be examined if we are to understand the value and challenges of constructing knowledge through mainstream academia. Indigenous Studies departments were founded to push back on the external labelling of our people, our experiences

and our world views. We have been studied, talked about, described and so forth without being directly involved in the conversation about us. We wanted, through Indigenous Studies, to think about and work amongst our people to pull out the diversity of identity and experience that forms the richness of our cultures and world view.

The goal of Indigenous Studies seems side-tracked in that today's indigenous academics are now creating that box that allows me to define myself, a job that was exclusive until recently to the non-native academics. We are not only creating our own boxes, but we are telling non-indigenous people that they can't play in our sandbox. It is indigenous academics ourselves that are setting up boundaries that often lead to the narrow and strangling focus of indigenous identity politics and the militant reinforcement of those identity principles of so called experiential commonalities of members of a group.

The emerging tendency for dualistic constructs that I am seeing as emerging in the indigenous academia is a worrisome dynamic. I have noticed more graduates of the university system (including those with a background in indigenous studies) tend to be very rhetorical, dogmatic, and dualistic in their arguments, which makes me wonder if the university world has taken on Freire's "banking concept" a pedagogical model that assumes an "empty mind" to be filled (Canon and Suserl, 2011, 275). The rhetoric I have heard from graduates does not seem to question premises and argument format and when pressed on this point, many graduates are insulted when their views are critiqued and especially when critiqued by non-native sources. In fact, when I have pushed students on their claims, they could not back their argument up and *took the position that they did not have to answer the question*; the assertion that a self-contained notion of colonialization as the problem is treated by some graduates as a *self-evident statement* which I of course question.

Re-Grounding: Indigenous Metaphysics, Language and Stories

When one takes a position or makes an argument, it can be said that there is an opposite argument or position that must be rejected. The text that I have created in this article with regards to my concerns about the contemporary indigenous struggle have oppositional implications. I sense that the movement towards using mainstream political schools of thought, strategical and logistical formats implies the movement away from indigenous sources that I argue to be our remembered and articulated metaphysical reality, the language that

expresses that reality and the culture and stories that facilitate our reflections and our learning on how to be human that survives in groups.

How do we develop our resistance away from mirroring mainstream left-wing (or emerging right wing mainstream politics) to re-ground resistance, revolution and resurgence on the philosophical foundation of our own “traditional stories”, legends, teaching stories, and so forth that we have as a people. While those stories differ from First Nation to First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities, I am comfortable in saying that the themes and lessons (as well as reflected thought on those stories) create some foundational principles in which to “take the indigenous struggle back”. The understanding of what our language and stories teach us must also be understood and within the context of the neo-imperialist agenda of Canada (to sustain the long-held policy of the dispossession of our people to our lands and the colonial relationship with our peoples by controlling purse strings) otherwise we are just being naïve and romantic in our self-assessment.

In the “them-us” paradigm, the trend towards defining the “us” in terms that are more western, including the western-based philosophies that are used to defend aboriginal rights to the land – needs to be carefully thought through. The “them-us” scenario runs against the notion of connectedness of all creation which makes our politics inconsistent with our truth statements. As an example, how do we reconcile the statement that “Indigenous peoples live in connectivity with all of creation – well except white people? We of course do not mean that statement literally, we are not against our Caucasian brothers and sisters, but we are against the destruction western metaphysics brings to all humanity and to the planet itself; that is a good basis in which to draw upon indigenous knowledge to contribute to the “network of philosophical traditions” which can then be applied to how we mature as a human species in the process of changing our destructive and disconnected ways; that is the white system we are against and white people are just as much victims as we are in this regard.

In reflecting on “identity politics” there is much danger in an over use of militancy disconnected from considerations of the long-term goals of our struggle. Again, we must look at what identity politics and the militant enforcement of those politics says and read them alongside the text of our stories. We must read militant identity political rhetoric against our stories about respect, about inter-connectivity of creation of which we, the human species, are only a player, that as Hinduism teaches us we are a small piece of the

Brahman energy in the universe, we are nothing, so why do we think we are so important?

These two examples are ways in which to reinsert traditional sources of text to our evaluation and critique of our movement to take back our lives, lands and resources through resistance, revolution and resurgence. The re-reading and insertion of traditional sources is a lifelong endeavor not just of one person but of a whole network of First Nations, Metis and Inuit community thinkers for many generations to come. The task of this article then can be said to be an exploratory set of thoughts that start to frame our questions for the future.

Conclusion

The indigenous struggle (2017) is a well thought out form of resistance and resurgence. We must nourish and maintain that struggle by acknowledging that no argument is perfect and our thinking must always be challenged by a healthy self-critical indigenous community. We need to park our indigenous ego at the door and consider the hearts of the people and the struggle. This means thinking about the divisive nature of our struggle being expressed through narratives of “them-us”; our narrowing of indigenous identity through extreme identity politics and it means understanding how we are currently constructing our knowledge through mainstream academia. We need – most of all – to transition back to the middle, a place of balancing of rights and interest, a place of connectivity with all creation including Caucasians, a place that anchors our struggle on our stories and language not on mirroring the various schools of thought in western political thought.

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