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Lines of Force

Critiques of nationalism at the intersection of migrant justice and indigenous sovereignty

Indigenous feminist Andrea Smith writes that the crucial lens Native feminist theory brings to feminist politics is a "questioning [of]…the nation-state as the appropriate form of governance" (2005:128). Given that white settler nation-states are predicated on the genocide and colonization of Indigenous peoples, it is impossible to reconcile an understanding of colonialism with an acceptance of white settler nation-states. In full support of Smith's position, this paper is a substantiation of her call to question nation-states beyond a context of the white settler state generally, at the intersection of migrant justice and Indigenous sovereignty, prompted by my own inability to distinguish between exclusive nationalisms and Indigenous sovereignty movements. As sovereignty movements of colonized peoples in the global south have actualized as nation-states, as Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island struggle for sovereignty, how does Smith's call to question nation-states apply? More precisely, how do Indigenous notions of nationhood differ from, and how can they be realized in terms other than what I will discuss to be the problematic ideology harnessed by nation-states?

Importantly, as a non-Native person thinking about Indigenous sovereignty it is not my place to tell first peoples what I think sovereignty should look like. The point of this investigation, rather a weighing in on internal politics of Native communities, is an exercise directed towards myself, meant to determine whose leadership within Indigenous communities I wish to follow, how I wish to ally myself.

Beginning with examining the fetishization of nation-states, state control over a population relies on generating the common-sense idea that the state, despite being an elite white capitalist institution, rules for us. This perception is conjured through nationalist ideologies that imagine the diverse peoples within state borders as a unified homogenous community, a family. Anderson emphasizes that this community, because it is utterly imagined, is an ideological construct; as he writes, "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or ever hear of them" (1983:6). Facilitated by the exclusive belonging of nationalism, the state, with its power naturalized in the image of a father's authority over the family, then plays the role of "uphold[ing] and defend[ing] the space occupied by the nation" against the threat of foreign Others, patrolling on our behalf (Sharma 2006:143).

The imagined community of the nation can only be defined in relation to an Other; belonging and Othering are mutually reinforcing as subjects' allegiance to the national community in turn naturalizes the differential treatment of foreign Others through the denial of rights of citizenship. At first glimpse it may seem as though the nation-state acts as a container for the rights and privileges of its "proper subjects", however geographer Ed Soja explains that "space is not merely a 'container' for society or only a 'context' in which it exists but is, instead, a social structure created out of extant power relations" (in Sharma 2006:140). As such, the territorialisation of rights upheld by the current nation-state system creates zones of freedom for citizens, but also actively creates zones of unfreedom for foreigners, pathologizing movement and naturalizing a denial of rights to foreign Others which is central to maintaining capitalist forms of social relations. While in popular discourse the space of the nation-state belongs only to those with citizenship, border control practices are clearly ideological as it was never possible that every person would remain within their allocated container, especially while ongoing processes of imperial dispossession, military aggression, and exploitation constantly cause people to move. Indeed, international migration has increased at unprecedented rates

in the past thirty years with the U.N. Population Fund estimating that 175 million people cross national borders each year (2003). Most of these cross-border migrants are non-whites and from the global South (Sharma 2006).

As such, state borders do less to physically control the movement of people and in reality play a more important function of naturalizing the denial of rights, critical to maintaining an available and compliant unfree labour force; in Canada this is composed of undocumented migrants and the indentured labour of temporary workers in its Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program. Thus the rights afforded to citizens by the nation-state must simultaneously be understood as legislated unfreedom that facilitates the exploitation of non-citizens/foreign Others. The unfreedom of any worker is ultimately detrimental to all as the relative cheapness of any group of workers contributes to the vulnerability of all groups (Sharma 2006). A freedom that is compartmentalized will thus always be inadequate, yet rather than struggle for global commons, we have been rendered complacent by being allocated rights within certain spaces. Nationalizing freedom with citizenship therefore has had the powerful effect of (mis)aligning our allegiances with a fictive community, a contemporary reformulation of processes previously accomplished through race. Much as Du Bois describes the relative privilege afforded to white labourers as a "psychological wage" (in Croatoan 2012:6) which ensured their loyalty to a white elite in spite of their own low wages, the same formulations of logic operate today through nationalism. It is a subtle shift in the determining factor from skin to space, from bloodlines to place of birth.

Following this migrant-centered critique that traces links between state power and nationalist discourses, I am interested in examining the possibilities that Indigenous epistemologies offer for sovereignty movements to avoid actualization as simply another piece in a global puzzle of nation-states. While Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination is often equated with Western conceptions of sovereignty as absolute power (Smith 2005) and self-government, "decolonization" that occurs in the image of the very states that emerged from colonization, "the kind of self-government where we are merely granted the authority of administering our own misery" (Monture-Angus 1995:262), is utterly inadequate.

Andrea Smith explains that white supremacy targets communities of

colour through differing logics (slavery, colonialism, Orientalism) which overlap in often contradictory ways. As such, rather than trying to organize around a common oppression, we should be aiming to build "strategic alliances based on where each one of us is situated in the political economy" (Smith 2010). By considering how migrants who have been displaced by similar processes of capitalist imperialism are positioned in relation to Indigenous sovereignty movements, the goal is to develop considerations for decolonization. Following the preceding problematization of nationalism's Othering function, I now turn to the thought of Indigenous scholars on alternate foundations of identity to ground our political communities.

Attending to how the Indigenous identity of a sovereignty movement is constructed, a sovereignty that posits only those who can claim Indigenous identity as its proper subjects and disregards migratory experiences of colonialism is destined to reproduce the hierarchical and exclusionary forms of belonging exhibited by nation-state forms of governance. A "proper subject" of citizenship can only be actualized in the form of a patriarchal state that assumes the right to control its borders and determines who it governs. Such ethnic nationalist movements do not consider that Indigenous identity as a category was itself a primary means of colonial domination – as Fanon writes, "it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence" (Fanon 1963:79). Indigenous identity drew a line between settlers who "become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies" (Tuck 2012:6) and those denied self-determination.

The monolithic politico-legal definition of identity is problematic as it is based on an understanding of history "a meta-narrative of timeless cultural continuity" (Altamirano-Jiminéz 2011:113); these rigid definitions are vast oversimplifications that ignore that cultures are multifaceted and constantly shifting. Attempts to establish essentialized identity categories reproduce existing inequalities; as Altamirano-Jiménez writes, "who gets to tell stories about Indigeneity, what stories are remembered, in what forums they are told, and for what purposes – all of these abilities are linked to memory and power" (2010:114).

Furthermore, embedded in a state's patriarchal authority to control who are proper subjects via border control of a territory is the Western understanding of land as property, as a commodity to be controlled and owned. Indigenous sovereignty is not based on control, but responsibility for the land. (Monture-

Angus 1999) As Smith explains, "once land is not seen as property, then nationhood does not have to be based on exclusive control over territory. If sovereignty is more about being responsible for land, then nationhood can engage all those who fulfill responsibilities for land" (2011:60). Unfortunately Indigenous peoples seem forced to engage in a "politics of recognition" (Coulthard 2007:437) in attempts to resist the settler state: to defend land and to be recognized by the dominant legal system, Indigenous peoples must argue that the land is "theirs". This limited form of politics is utterly inadequate, as Indigenous peoples are unable to question a cultural relationship between peoples and land that is taken for granted as universal in the dominant legal system (Smith 2011). Glen Coulthard notes that in the last 30 years the dominant discourse of self-determination efforts of Indigenous peoples throughout Canada has been cast in the language of "recognition" (2007:437). Coulthard defines a "politics of recognition" as the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to reconcile Indigenous claims to nationhood with Crown sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the Canadian state. (Coulthard 2007:438)

A Native sovereignty movement that seeks recognition from the surrounding settler states will only be actualized in the colonizer's terms, as only Western understanding of sovereignty are legible to the state. As the terms of recognition will always be the property of those in power (Coulthard 2007:449), while recognition can facilitate the incorporation and elevation, of Indigenous identities into liberal pluralism, the actual structures of colonial power will remain unchallenged. As Fanon writes, the best the colonized can achieve within this politics is "white liberty and white justice; that is, values secreted by [their] masters" (in Coulthard 2007:449), thereby reproducing the very colonial power structures that Indigenous peoples have long sought to destroy. Indeed, to remain at the level of identity politics, "reaffirming their identities within existing hierarchies of power, is to work within a rigged zero-sum game for the liberation of a particular oppressed identity at the expense of others" (Croatoan 2012:12). Included in this "politics of recognition" are self-determination efforts through economic development that has created a new Aboriginal capitalist elite, self-government based on colonial models, and land claims processes grounded in notions of property (Coulthard 2007:452). Struggles for self-determination must not be predetermined by a need for

recognition, rather bell hooks writes that we should be "recognizing ourselves and then seeking to make contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner" (1990:22).

Returning to the preceding meditation on identity, rather than exclusionary forms of belonging that require patrolling of borders, many argue for an Indigenous identity that is not reified through apolitical legal biological definitions, but understands Indigeneity as a social process (Altamirano-Jiménez 2010, Sharma 2006, Smith 2011, Alfred 2005, Finley 2011). Alfred and other Indigenous scholars advocate for an Indigeneity that recreates relations between themselves and their landbase (Alfred 2004, Finley 2011). This is an inclusive vision that calls for, rather than rights upheld by the nation-state, a non-normative nationhood which recognizes our interrelatedness and is constituted by mutual responsibility between all beings, human and nonhuman (Smith 2011:58). This is a rejection of "transcendent" ideas of nationalism that create an imagined community and misdirect our solidarities, in favour of "imminent" relationships based in practices (Sharma 2006:153). Rather than a reified identity which rules out distinctions between colonizers and those forced to leave due to colonial oppression, this participatory form of belonging has the potential for solidarity between Indigenous peoples and migrants exploited by ongoing processes of capitalist imperialism. This exemplifies Patricia Monture-Angus's understanding of sovereignty as a Mohawk woman - as she writes, "self-government is really very simple to maintain. All it really requires is living your responsibilities to your relations" (1999:161).

This problematization of nationalist state discourses seems to be necessary and basic groundwork for a comprehensive struggle against empire - here is a very particular historical mode of relations that to many appears to be universal and eternal. As such, the jagged lines of national borders etched across continents must be recognized as crucial technologies of power in capitalist modernity, eclipsing solidarities borne of shared experience and struggle with an insubstantial fictive community. While we have witnessed many colonized populations' struggles for independence actualized in the form of nation-states, leading to what Fanon refers to as "the curse of [national] independence" (in Coulthard 2005:455), there are Native sovereignty struggles that reject rather than rely on logics of colonialism. Believing that Indigenous notions of self-determination can or must be equated to nation-state structures privileging Western ways of knowing, constitutes a form of epistemic violence

that blinds us of other possibilities. This paper has followed Fanon's imperative when he writes that, "The colonial world is a world divided into compartments… if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering, and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized" (1963:80). It is thus not only where the lines of force have been drawn that continues to bind us today, but the act of drawing the line itself that is the ultimate colonial act.

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